



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

Volume 56 Number 11-12

November-December, 2013

32 Washington Avenue, Schenectady, NY 12305

(518) 374-0263 FAX: (518) 688-2825

Web site: www.schenectadyhistorical.org

Email: Editor : rbergero@nycap.rr.com

Library: librarian@schenectadyhistorical.org

Museum: Curator@schenectadyhistorical.org

Office: office@schenectadyhistorical.org

Mabee Farm: (518) 887-5073 FAX: (518) 887-5746



*John Isaac DeGraff (1783-1848) 1846 portrait by Cornelius Van Patten
Donated to the Society by Donald and Carolyn Keefer in 1955*

SCHENECTADY'S FIRST ELECTED MAYOR

– by Jim Strosberg

"I like a man who is proud of his place, and I like a man who lives his life so his place could be proud of him."

–Abraham Lincoln

Which Schenectadian made the most important contribution to both our city and our nation? One candidate for this honor would certainly be John Isaac DeGraff, the fifth mayor of Schenectady but the first to be elected by vote of the people rather than by that of the City Council. Lincoln certainly could not have had DeGraff in mind. Honest Abe did not come to Congress from Illinois until a full decade after John Isaac completed his second term as Congressman from Schenectady. And though it is unlikely that the two ever met, DeGraff's lifetime demeanor and accomplishments earned him the pride of his city and made him the perfect exemplar of a man who lived his life in accord with Lincoln's maxim.

continued on pages 4-5

Letter from the President

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

MERRITT GLENNON
PRESIDENT

JAMES EIGNOR
VICE PRESIDENT

JOHN HALSTEAD
TREASURER

MARY TREANOR
ASSISTANT TREASURER
CYNTHIA SEACORD
SECRETARY

ANN ARONSON
RUTH BERGERON

MARIANNE BLANCHARD

ROBERT CARNEY

DEBORAH CROSBY

ELLEN FLADGER

JOHN GEARING

FRANK GILMORE

MICHAEL KARL

CAROLINA LAZZARI

CAROL LEWIS

RICHARD LEWIS

KIM MABEE

LAURA LEE LINDER

ROBERT PETITO

EDWIN REILLY

KATHLEEN SCHOOLCRAFT

JAMES STROSBERG

ROBERT SULLIVAN

FRANK TAORMINA

STAFF

MELISSA TACKE
LIBRARIAN-ARCHIVIST

Vacant

MUSEUM CURATOR

JENNA PETERSON

EDUCATOR

Vacant

MABEE FARM DIRECTOR
/ CURATOR

JENNIFER HANSON
OFFICE MANAGER

HOURS

MUSEUM & LIBRARY

Monday-Friday 9-5

Saturday 10-2

and Thursday 5-8
September-JUNE only

MABEE FARM
Tuesday-SATURDAY
10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

By the time you see this, the Ghosts and Goblins will have passed through and the season for giving thanks and celebration of gift giving will have arrived. This year the Society has had much to be thankful for because of our hard working staff, dedicated volunteers and demonstrators, and generous members and friends. Recently, our Librarian Melissa Tacke, using monies donated by Society members and community friends of Schenectady history, was successful in bidding for a colonial-era letter that was placed on the auction block in New York City (an image of a portion of the letter can be seen below). We extend a heartfelt **Thank You** to the very generous individuals who contributed toward effort. For more about the interesting letter and its content, and to see a list of the donors, please see page 6.

We have had a very successful School program this year. During the spring and the just concluded fall programs we have hosted 32 schools and 2,186 student visitors. We have also experienced more schools visiting 32 Washington Ave. Thank you staff, volunteers, and demonstrators for all of your dedication, and hard work. The Society has a very strong, dedicated cadre of volunteers. We are appreciative of all those who come forward to help make the Society a dynamic and successful organization. This year a grateful **Thank You** goes to Nancy Wasmund for her landscape beautification efforts at both the Mabee Farm and 32 Washington Avenue, and to Dianne Gade for her tireless efforts assisting in the Gremis-Doolittle Library.

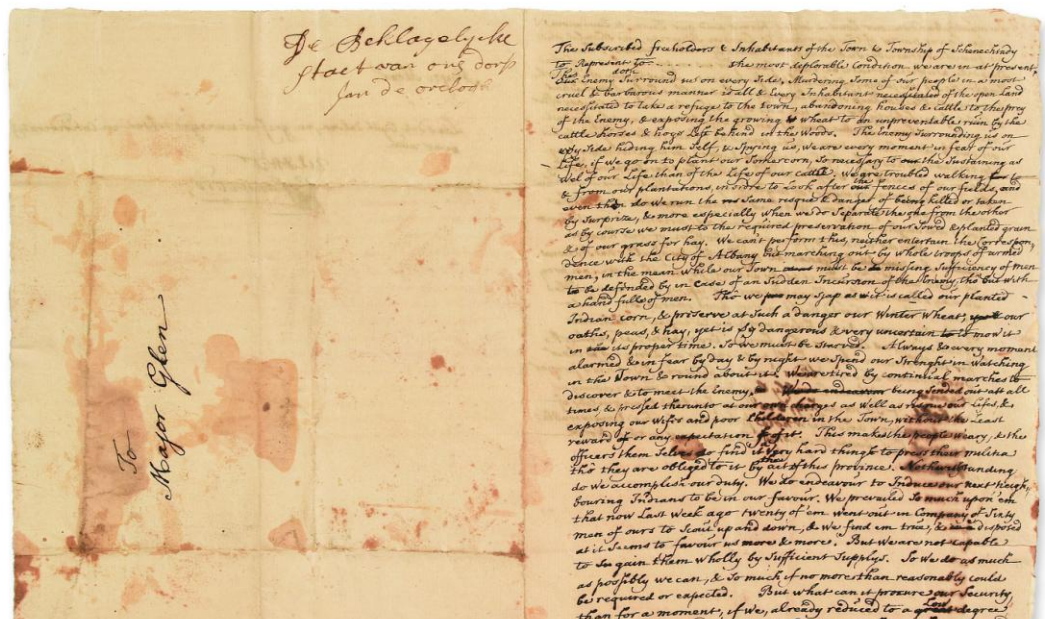
The Festival of Trees will once again be held beginning November 29th and running through December 15th with trees and decorations at both the Society and at the YWCA. Mark your calendars. Don't miss this event!

Director / Curator Ryan Mahoney has moved on to become the Executive Director of the Irish Heritage Museum in Albany. With his professionalism, enthusiasm, and work ethic, we know that Ryan will be successful in his new position and that that Museum will flourish under his leadership. Thank you Ryan for all that you did for us.

The Society's new web page, schenectadyhistorical.org, is up and running, providing current events, program information, a search feature, and detailed donor options. And don't miss the link to Melissa's fabulous history Blog.

I know it's a bit early, but our next issue won't be out until the New Year, so, Happy Thanksgiving and joyful later holidays to all!

—Merritt



Exhibits and Programs – November and December 2013

For more information about our events, see our website, www.schenectadyhistorical.org or call the Historical Society at (518) 374-0263 and listen for the option describing Programs. Please call (518) 887-5073 regarding programs at the Mabee Farm or at its George E. Franchere Education Center (FEC). All **EXHIBITS** and **PROGRAMS** are free for Society members and students, \$5 for non-members unless otherwise indicated.

EXHIBITS

@ 32 Washington Avenue

Seventh Annual Festival of Trees

In cooperation with the YWCA

November 29 – Dec 15

Locations: 32 & 44 Washington Avenue

Cost: \$5 adults, \$2 children, children 5 and under free. Purchase of a ticket covers admission to both display venues, SCHS and YWCA.

@ The Mabee Farm

Now through January – *Swept Away: The History & Culture of Brooms*

A broom is one of the most useful of household objects, always available when dirt or dust needs to be swept off the floor. How did brooms come to America and how were they traditionally made? The new broom making exhibit at the FEC introduces the history of the broom made from broomcorn, its importance in the Mohawk Valley, and its westward sweep across the nation.

November 6 through December 21 – *Romantic Landscapes: Regional Art by Deborah Angiletta*

The oil and acrylic paintings of Scotia artist Deborah Angiletta, on display in the Franchere Center, reveal her lasting connection to regional landscapes. Deborah paints “to reveal the grace and elegance of a landscape” hoping the resulting artwork will be beautiful and maybe even spiritual. Claims the artist, “Many times the final artwork is different from the scene that triggered it; my final painting may contain more remembrance and magic of that other place and time than resemblance to the actual scene.”

PROGRAMS

Saturday, November 9 10:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.

Holiday Fair

Location: Franchere Center

Cost: \$5 adults, children free

Saturday, November 9 10:30 a.m.

Discovering Schenectady’s Eastern European Roots

Speakers: Phyllis Budka and Bernice Izzo

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Cost: Free and open to the public

PROGRAMS, continued

Saturday, November 16 10:30 a.m. – 12:00 noon.

SCHS Volunteer College: Artifact Handling

Location: Franchere Center

Cost: Free to those interested in volunteering

Saturday, November 16, 2013 2:00 p.m.

Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North

Speaker: Melinda Lawson

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Thursday, November 21, 2013 6:00 p.m.

“A Major Target for Organization:” The Communist Party in Schenectady, 1930–1950s

Speaker: Gerald Zahavi

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Saturday, November 23 3:00 p.m.

Romantic Landscapes: Regional Art by Deborah Angiletta - Artist’s Reception

Location: Franchere Center

Saturday, December 14 2:00 p.m.

Movie Viewing: *Thirst: A Civil War Story*

Location: Franchere Center

Demonstration Classes at the Mabee Farm

To promote membership in the Schenectady County Historical Society and showcase a sampling of membership benefits, **members** may experience a **free** hour-long **Demonstration Class**. All classes will be taught on a *Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. in the kitchen area of the English Barn at the Mabee Farm* by Pam Bucci at no charge for the participants (except for the cost of materials). Here is a chance to get hands-on learning and gain new skills. Participants will also receive a free book by Larry Hart. **Registration is necessary**; call 518-887-5073, ext 102 to do so. The schedule is:

November 2 – Die cutter demonstration – using the vagabond, cuttlebug and the sizzixs big shop, using fabric, leather, and paper

November 16 – Making T-shirt and grocery bag yarn

December 7 – Introduction to knitting and crochet

Location: Mabee Farm – English Barn

DeGraff - continued from page 1.

John Isaac De Graff (October 2, 1783 – July 26, 1848) was a U.S. Representative from New York. Born in Schenectady, De Graff attended the common schools and Union College and engaged in mercantile pursuits and the practice of law in that city. He served in the War of 1812. He was elected as a Jacksonian Democrat to the Twentieth Congress (March 4, 1827–March 3, 1829). He served as mayor of Schenectady 1832 through 1834 and again in 1836, 1842, and 1845. De Graff was again elected as a Democrat to the Twenty-fifth Congress (March 4, 1837 – March 3, 1839). He was interested in the building of the Mohawk & Hudson Railroad. He engaged in banking until his death in Schenectady on July 26, 1848 and is interred in Vale Cemetery.

In early 1814 a British fleet appeared on Lake Champlain and we had no warships to defend our country. Our government sent a naval architect to Otter Creek to begin construction of the USS Saratoga (212 crew and 28 cannon) and USS Ticonderoga (112 crew and 17 cannon). But in August the British invaded Washington and burned the White House and the Capitol. Alas, the United States had neither capital nor credit to complete and equip our new fleet. To the rescue came John Isaac DeGraff, who put up \$100,000 in bonds to finance the job. When the bonds were redeemed John lost \$30,000.

On Sept 11 1814 Commodore Thomas Macdonough and the US Navy defeated the British fleet at Plattsburgh ending the invasion of the United States. Commodore Macdonough personally wrote a letter of thanks to DeGraff: "The aid I obtained through your influence and responsibility enabled me to get the fleet ready. When I go to Washington I shall not fail to report your kindness to the Secretary [of the Navy]."

If the British fleet had been victorious on Lake Champlain, their army might have been able to march to Albany, as General Burgoyne had planned before he was stopped on Bemis Heights. There were 10,000 British regulars at Plattsburgh, facing only 2,400 Americans, the majority of whom were militia. If Macdonough had not been successful, Schenectady (and Vermont) might now be part of Canada!

So who was this John Isaac DeGraff? And what motivated him to help his country, and just as important, help his City of Schenectady? A clue from one obituary reads "Kind, liberal and generous to a fault, knowing no guile, and always dealing most leniently with all with whom he had business transactions, he won many friends, and died without an enemy."

John Isaac received patriotism from his father, Isaac DeGraff, a major during the Revolution who took his oath of office from General Lafayette. Isaac, the son of Daniel and Gazena Swits De Graff, was born in Schenectady on November 16, 1757. He was a man of prominence and a devoted patriot. After the close of the Revolutionary War

he returned to Schenectady, where he was appointed Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, holding that office during the greater part of his remaining years until he died on December 21, 1844. John's mother Susanna Van Epps DeGraff died in 1829. His only sibling, Jesse D. DeGraff, became a lawyer and moved to Albany.

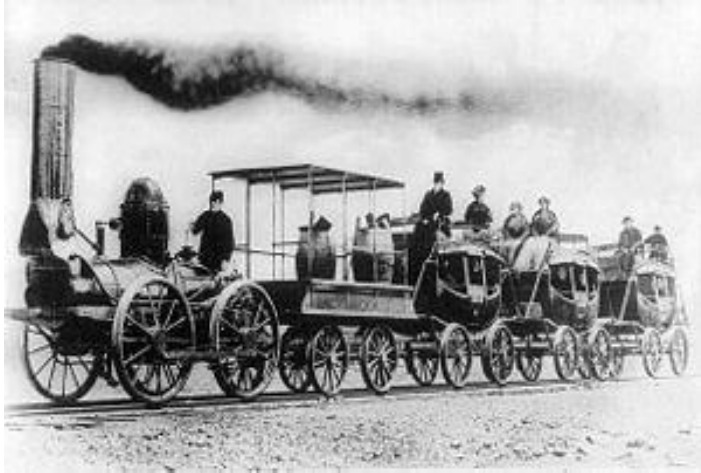


A grayscale excerpt from a color painting of the De Graff properties on Lower State Street in Schenectady. The tall building is the home and law office of Judge Isaac De Graff, and the house at the right is the law and mercantile office of his son, John Isaac De Graff. The painting, by Cornelius Van Patten, was donated to the Society in 1963 by Agnes Lansing Day..

Father Isaac and bachelor son John Isaac were very close. Both lawyers, they were next door neighbors on Lower State Street. Otherwise, the details of John's early life are sketchy. We know that he attended the Schenectady Academy sponsored by the Dutch Reformed Church. He is listed as a Phi Beta Kappa member of the Class of 1811 of Union College, which would seemingly have made him almost 28 years old at graduation. But his name also appears on a payroll roster of about 200 soldiers in 1805 when he was 22 years old. Apparently he served with the army before entering Union and possibly even after he graduated a year before the start of the War of 1812. His profession is listed as merchant with a warehouse on Washington Avenue, not far from the wharf on the Binnekil. He shipped his goods westward on the Mohawk River. The Western Inland Navigation Company, founded by Phillip Schuyler, built locks and canals at Little Falls and Wood Creek to facilitate navigation into the Great Lakes.

Schenectady BC (Before Canal) was a bustling port. There were as many as 100 Durham boats based here, some capable of carrying 20 tons of cargo. And there were over 300 wagoners employed in hauling goods over a stone-paved roadbed on the Albany-Schenectady Turnpike. In addition to Schenectady, John had offices in both Paris and London, and he accumulated wealth and property at an early age. Has also practiced law and served on the boards of several local banks. He was elected Mayor of Schenectady six times between 1832 and 1845, twice by unanimous vote of the City Council, and then became the first mayor elected by popular vote of the citizenry in 1834.

John Isaac DeGraff was the first president of the Hudson and Mohawk Railroad when it was chartered in 1826. In 1831, along with Erastus Corning and Thurlow Weed, he rode on the first train from Albany to Schenectady, a train hauled by the famous *Dewitt Clinton*. While still president of the railroad, he also purchased the right of way for the Saratoga and Schenectady Railroad.



The DeWitt Clinton, named for the sixth governor of New York State, was the first steam locomotive to operate in the State and only the fourth built in the United States.

However, when his railroad wanted to expand further into Schenectady while he was Mayor in 1832, he advised the City Council as to the disadvantages of that action and asked the Council to take measures to keep the public streets free of unnecessary obstructions and to make sure that cross streets are made safe for the public.

His greatest public service as Mayor came during the Cholera epidemic of 1832. Under his leadership, together with that of the medical profession, canal boats were inspected and quarantined, physicians hired to treat the poor, streets cleaned, and other public health measure taken, and a special cholera hospital was set up beyond the city limits. His initiative undoubtedly contributed to the City's lower cholera mortality rate relative to Albany,

Additionally, with Professor Chester Averill of Union College, John co-authored a monograph regarding the disinfectant powers of chlorine, with an explanation of the mode in which it operates. This chemical was effective against the cholera bacterium, but its use did not become widespread until after the epidemic had passed.

Six years earlier, in 1826, John De Graff, a Jacksonian Democrat, was elected to the House of Representatives without opposition, and was elected to a second two-year term ten years later, by which time congressional district boundaries had changed to include Saratoga County. John, running against the incumbent Whig congressman who had been representing Saratoga, was accused of being a war profiteer who was too close to the Regency—the New York State Democratic political machine—but he

won handily. During both terms he was appointed to the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. In 1827 he sponsored a bill reimbursing American ship owners whose vessels were intentionally sunk by the Navy to blockade the port of Baltimore during the War of 1812. The personal financial losses John suffered during the War made him a natural ally of the ship owners.

The competition and rivalry between Albany and Schenectady goes back to the fur trade, when our geographic ancestors capitalized on the opportunity to purchase beaver pelts as they were transported east. This rivalry was also evident during the Erie Canal period when Mayor-Congressman John Isaac DeGraff was our champion. In 1836 while he was Mayor of Schenectady, the City of Albany tried to have the route of the Erie Canal changed so it would bypass Schenectady. John fought this with vigor, pointing out that this would increase land values in Albany County, decrease them in Schenectady, but do nothing at all to improve traffic on the Canal. He resigned his office in 1837 in order to begin his second term in congress and introduced legislation intended to keep the canal in Schenectady. This was a bit strange because the Erie Canal was operated by the State of New York, not the Federal Government. But, bill or no bill, State officials addressed his concern, the route of the canal was not changed, and the Erie Canal continued to be the principal engine driving the Schenectady economy.

John I. De Graff's personal integrity and financial acumen were so widely respected that President Martin Van Buren invited him to join his cabinet as Secretary of the Treasury. John declined due to pressure from private business. Although he never married and raised no children, he strongly supported public education. He served on the Board of the Schenectady Lyceum, a secondary school. Under his leadership as mayor, the City Council appropriated land for an African School on Jay Street.

John was very popular in Schenectady. He took a great interest in its inhabitants. He placed a book in his mayor's office on State Street, and any citizen could write a complaint that would be called to his attention. Although he did not need the income, John rented out his pastures to his neighbors so that they could graze their cows.

John Isaac DeGraff died on July 26, 1848 after a seven-week illness characterized as a "disorganization of the stomach." At the time of his death he was the fourth president of the Mohawk Bank. He was generous in his will, granting bequests to numerous friends, nieces and nephews, and even his tenants. The *Schenectady Reflector* of July 28, 1848 paid him this tribute: "In public, as well as in private life, he was esteemed for his kindness and generosity of character and the liberality of his views and opinions, and he was forgiving and charitable to a fault... All the latter years of his life have been devoted to the assistance of others. The death of no man in our city could create a greater void, or one more difficult to fill. He had the respect and esteem of all."

New Materials in the Library

BOOKS AND CHURCH RECORDS

The Angola Terror by Charity Vogel, gift of **Daily Gazette**

First Reformed Church of Glenville – Baptisms (1814-1955), Dismissals (1825-1908), Deaths (1826-1954), Memberships (1814-1955), Subscription Lists (1818-1899), gift of **Donald Keefer**

Genealogical Record of the Veeder Family by Vreeland Y. Leonard [CD], gift of **M.D. Horton**

Historic New York: Architectural Journeys in the Empire State by Olenick and Reisem, gift of **Landmark Society of Western New York**

Identifying American Architecture by John Blumenson, gift of **Marilyn Aldi-Rose**

Irish Passenger Lists, 1803-1806 by Brian Mitchell, gift of **Nancy Curran**

Key to the Northern Country: The Hudson River Valley in the American Revolution, ed. by James M. Johnson, et al., gift of **Daily Gazette**

To My Son: The Life and War Remembrances of Captain Mordecai Myers, 13th United States Infantry, 1812-1815, ed. by Neil B. Yetwin, gift of **Neil Yetwin**

New Netherland in a Nutshell by Firth Haring Fabend, gift of **Daily Gazette**

Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man by Walter Stahr, gift of **Ed Reilly**

YEARBOOKS

Linton High School (1968, 1970, 1971, 1979, 1980), gift of **Herbert H. Dieck**

Nott Terrace High School (1938-1939), gift of **Elizabeth Morley Ehrcke**

DONALD KEEFER COLLECTION

Bible Records [5 vols.]; Demolition of the Parsonage of the 1st Ref. Church of Glenville in June 2007; 1st Pres. Church, Schenectady [misc. documents and photos]; 1st Reformed Church, Schenectady [misc. documents]; 1st Reformed Church, Scotia [misc. documents and photos]; 1st Reformed Church of Glenville Baptisms and Marriages, 1814-1876; Historical Sketchbook of the 1st Reformed Church of Glenville, 1812-1962; History of the 1st Ref. Church of Scotia, 1818-1968; Romeyn Family; Rev. Thomas Romeyn's Woestina Church Records, 1797-1814; Rothmyer Genealogy; Rothmyer & Kasten Families (2 vols.); Schenectady Cabinet [extracts, 1813-1819]; Schenectady Cabinet [extracts, 1813-1836]; Schenectady Newspaper Notices of Marriage and Death, 1824-1874; Rev. Peter Van Zant's Records, 1818-1822.

All above are gifts of **Donald Keefer**

HISTORIC DOCUMENTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Certificates and clippings related to Schenectady

Turnverein, gift of **Robert K. Sweet**

Photograph labeled Rotterdam High School (1903), gift of **Nancy Curran**

Schenectady telephone books (1954-1955 and 1963-1964), gift of **Marilyn Aldi-Rose**

A Valuable Piece of Schenectady's History Comes Home!

In October, a Colonial Era letter from Schenectady was put up for auction in New York City. (See image on page 2.) The letter, which vividly describes the danger and fear experienced by people living in the frontier settlement at Schenectady, appears to be a draft of a letter on behalf of the town's inhabitants, intended to be sent to the colonial government to plead for assistance and protection: "The enemy doth surround us on every side, murdering some of our people in a most cruel & barbarous manner," reads the letter. "We are every moment in fear of our life."

Swann Galleries, the venue that handled the auction, listed the document as being written around 1690, the year of the Stockade Massacre, but a closer reading of it seems to indicate that it was written in the 1740s. The letter is in English. A Dutch note at the end, in the same hand as the body of the letter, is signed C. Van Santvoord. We believe the letter was penned by clergyman Cornelius Van Santvoord, who was fluent in English, French, and Dutch. He came to Schenectady in 1740, where he served the First Reformed Church. He died in 1752.

The Library's modest acquisitions budget would not have allowed us to bid for the letter. Following coverage of the auction in local newspapers, we received calls from people eager to help us acquire this document. Thanks to the thoughtful contributions by several donors, we were able to place the winning bid. An important piece of Schenectady's history will soon be returned home and will be preserved and made available to scholars, researchers, educators, and the general public for generations to come.

The generous donors who contributed toward our bid for this letter are listed alphabetically. We extend our heartfelt thanks to them for their support in preserving our local history.

Anonymous
Marilyn Bisgrove
Julia Blackwelder
William Dimpelfeld
Deb Crosby
Phil Garvey

Guido Loyola
Susan Spring Meggs
Jim Strosberg
David Vrooman, Jr.
Cal Welch

Around the Society

Stockade Walkabout 2013



Frank Taormina a.k.a. Governor Yates



Viewing 'Underlying Structures' display.



Hugh Platt Garden Club

Mabee Farm - Revolutionary War Re-enactment.



Photos: Ann Aronson, Jennifer Hanson, David Seaver.



Creating a scarecrow.



Mabee Farm - Farm & Foliage Day



Building a barn.



Schenectady County Historical Society
32 Washington Avenue
Schenectady, New York 12305

Return Service Requested

Non-Profit Org.
US POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 862
Albany, NY

Schenectady County Historical Society

7th Annual Festival of Trees

**Presented by the Schenectady County Historical Society
and the YWCA Northeastern NY**

**November 29– December 15
Monday-Friday 9AM-5PM
Saturday-Sunday 10AM-4PM**

**\$5 Adults
\$2 Children
Children 5 and under are free**

**Schenectady County Historical Society
32 Washington Ave.**

**YWCA Northeastern NY
44 Washington Ave.**

