



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

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January-February 2014

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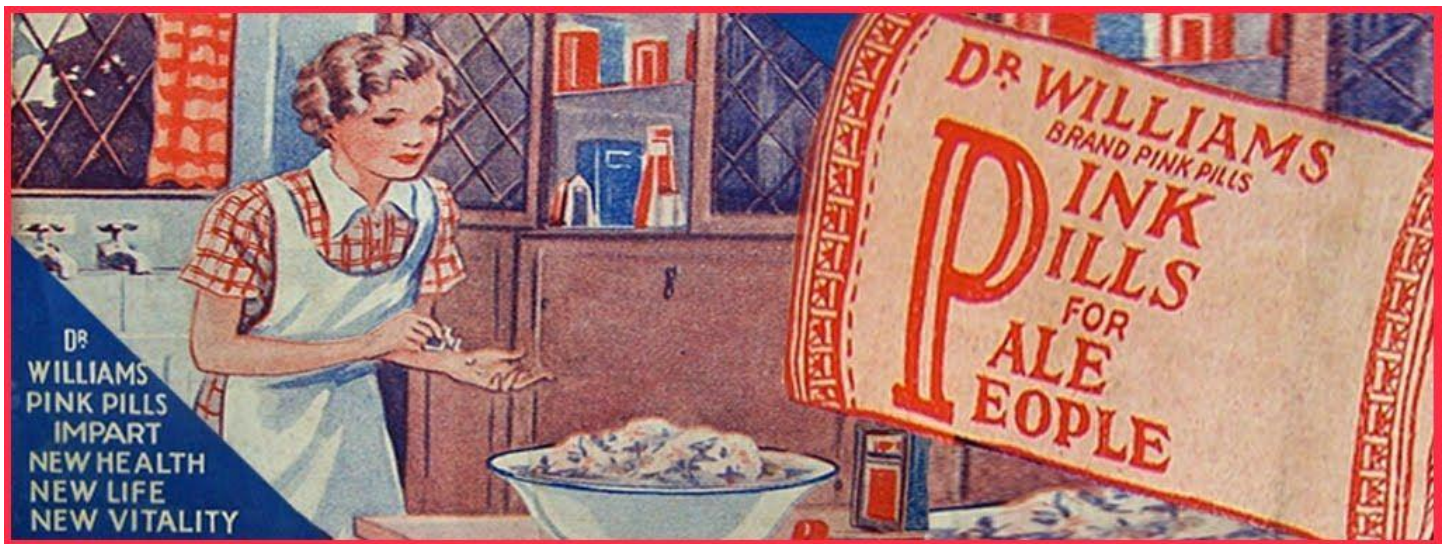
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PINK PILLS FOR PALE PEOPLE

—by Melissa Tacke

Patent medicines, packaged drugs with incompletely disclosed contents, were plentiful and profitable in the United States from the period directly following the Civil War through the early twentieth century. Before the first Pure Food and Drug Laws were passed, the manufacturers and promoters of patent medicines made millions of dollars from a credulous public eager for cures for a variety of ailments, and from many who were unable to afford the regular care of a doctor. One of the most popular patent medicines of this period was called “Dr. Williams’ Pink Pills for Pale People” even though there never was a “Dr. Williams” involved with them. But early on there was a certain Canadian physician, Dr. William Jackson, who was. In 1890 he sold the rights to his Pink Pills for Pale People, an alleged “fatigue remedy,” to entrepreneur George Taylor Fulford, also a Canadian. Soon after, this patent medicine would be manufactured, distributed, and marketed in part by Willis T. Hanson of Schenectady.

continued on pages 4-5

Letter from the President

Best wishes to all for a Happy, Healthy, and Prosperous New Year!

2014 provides us with many past events to commemorate. 200 years ago, the War of 1812 continued with the Battle of Plattsburgh, the British capture of Washington DC, the burning of the White House, and the flight of President James Madison. The War would formally end with the Treaty of Ghent on December 24th.

150 years ago the Civil War continued to rage on. General U.S. Grant would be appointed head of the Union Army, and General Sherman would begin his march to the sea. President Lincoln would be nominated and elected to his second term of office.

100 years ago, 1914 would see assassinations in Serbia, which would set in motion events leading to war in Europe. President Wilson would declare US neutrality. The Panama Canal would officially be opened.

50 years ago, 1964, began with President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and ratification of the 24th Amendment prohibiting poll taxes, and later in the year the President signed into law the Civil Rights, Voting Rights, Economic Opportunities, and Wilderness Acts.

The calendar of events for the New Year will start with a program presenting the impact of the ALCO produced M7 Tank on the World War II North Africa Theater of action. The popular "Howlin' at the Moon" Bluegrass and American Roots music series will be continued, but indoors this year, coffee house style. The Broom Corn exhibit at the Franchere Center will run through the month of January and will then be replaced with an exhibit detailing the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) work of the 1930s. There will be a film and discussion series at the Franchere Center during February, four consecutive Saturdays that deal with slavery, abolition, civil rights, and the "Freedom Riders."

The History Museum at 32 Washington Avenue will feature portraits of famous Schenectadians from its collections. Late February will see the start of a four part series dealing with early Mohawk Valley Life presented by Marilyn Sassi. The Society Preservation Appeal Campaign will continue in hopes of raising sufficient funds for exterior painting and a new roof for 32 Washington Avenue. If you haven't made a contribution yet, please consider doing so in the New Year. To donate by credit card or through a recurring monthly gift, please call the Office Manager at 518 374-0263 x5. We are also seeking volunteers to assist with inventorying and accessioning our artifact collections at both headquarters and the Mabee Farm. If interested, please call the Assistant Curator at 518 887-5073.

As promised at the end of the cover story, what follows, special for this issue, is Ruth Bergeron's photo of the famous rosy pink Hanson family monument at Vale Cemetery.

—Merritt

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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.



Exhibits and Programs – January and February 2014

For more information, please check our website, www.schenectadyhistorical.org or call us at (518) 374-0263 and listen for the option describing Programs. Please call (518) 887-5073 regarding programs at the Mabee Farm or Franchere Education Center. EXHIBITS and PROGRAMS are free for Society members; a \$5.00 charge for non-members applies unless otherwise noted.

EXHIBITS

@ 32 Washington Avenue

Portraits of Schenectady

Twenty portraits of Schenectady citizens from the 19th and 20th centuries, chosen for their vibrancy and personality. Most have not been on display for many years. Works of local artists Ezra Ames, John Wilkie, and H. M. Mott-Smith are included, as well as four sets of husband and wife portraits and our newest addition, a portrait of Jacob Vandenberg Vrooman (1826-1904). This painting was recently donated by the William Vrooman II family.

@ The Mabee Farm

Through January 25 – *Romantic Landscapes:*

Regional Art by Deborah Angiletta

The paintings of Scotia artist Deborah Angiletta reveal her lasting connection to regional landscapes.

Through February 28 – *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? This exhibit introduces the history of the broom made from broomcorn, its importance in the Mohawk Valley, and its westward sweep across the nation.

Opening February 1 – *Jennifer Richard-Morrow*

Richard-Morrow has depicted everything from ships to landscapes, still-lives to religious iconography. The exhibit features some of the local artist's select works.

Opening March 8 – *The Story of Shoes: Walking, Working, and Dancing Through the Ages*

A bride steps into her satin heels on her wedding day, a farmer pulls on his wooden clogs to head out into the fields, a businessman laces up his shoes before going into the office. The *Story of Shoes* exhibit showcases the stories hidden in our soles.

PROGRAMS

Saturday, January 11 – 2:00 p.m.

"The City that Kept a Secret:" How ALCO's M7 Turned the Tide in North Africa

Speaker: Sarah Jones, Guilderland H.S. student

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Cost: Free and open to the public

Wednesday, January 15 – 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Winter Howlin' Concert

Location: Franchere Center **Cost:** \$5

Saturday, January 18 – 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Volunteer College: BVMA "Jumps" Sewing Workshop

Location: Franchere Center; free for interested volunteers

PROGRAMS, continued

Saturday, January 18 – 2:00 p.m.

Heritage Hops

Speaker: Dietrich Gehring

Location: Franchere Center

Saturday, February 1 – 2:00 p.m.

Created Equal: America's Civil Rights Struggle*

Film: "The Abolitionists" with Babette Faehmel

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Cost: Free and open to the public

Saturday, February 8 – 2:00 p.m.

Created Equal: America's Civil Rights Struggle*

Film: "Slavery By Another Name" with Ken Aslakson

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Cost: Free and open to the public

Friday, February 14 – 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Winter Howlin' Concert

Location: Franchere Center

Cost: \$5.00

Saturday, February 15 – 2:00 p.m.

Created Equal: America's Civil Rights Struggle*

Film: "The Loving Story" with Kori Graves

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Cost: Free and open to the public

Saturday, February 22 – 2:00 p.m.

Created Equal: America's Civil Rights Struggle*

Film: "Freedom Riders" with Ibram Kendi

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Cost: Free and open to the public

Tuesday, February 25 – 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Early Mohawk Valley Life: How Clothes, Arts, and Architecture Changed, 1750-1815. Part 1: The French & Indian Era

Speaker: Marilyn Sassi

Location: Franchere Center

Tuesday, March 4 – 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Early Mohawk Valley Life ... Part 2: Revolutionary War

Speaker: Marilyn Sassi

Location: Franchere Center

Saturday, March 8 – 3:00-5:00 p.m.

The Story of Shoes Exhibit Opening

Wear your fanciest, funniest, or best shoes!

Location: Franchere Center

* = *Created Equal: America's Civil Rights Struggle* film and discussion series is made possible with support and funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.



Willis Tracy Hanson (1858-1933) lived at 821 Union Street in Schenectady and also maintained a country estate in Niskayuna at "The Knolls," where the General Electric Global Research Center and the Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory are presently located. Hanson was prominent in Schenectady's business circles, as well as in civic affairs. In addition to operating a pharmacy at the corner of State Street and Broadway, Hanson also served as the first president of the Union National Bank, was president of the Board of Managers of Ellis Hospital and of Schenectady's Board of Trade, and was a trustee of Union College. In 1892, Hanson secured the sole distribution rights for Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People in the United States.

Hanson was at the center of three separate but seemingly connected companies: the W.T. Hanson Company, the Hanson-Fulford Company, and Dr. Williams' Medicine Company. The executive office, advertising department, factory, and shipping department of all three companies were located at 147 Centre Street (now Broadway). A number of prominent area men, including Edwin Conde of Schenectady and Dr. Alexander Duncan Langmuir of Albany, served on the Dr. Williams' Medicine Company's board of directors. Conde also served for a time as the publicity promoter for the company. At the turn of the century, the business of the Dr. Williams' Medicine Company was booming.

A 1901 *Omaha Daily News* article recounting a visit to the advertising department of Hanson's companies heralds the business as "an example of what can be

accomplished by young men in this twentieth century of keen business rivalry and ceaseless competition." It describes mail being sent out "in drays" from the office, as a "score of young women are kept busy addressing and mailing advertising matter. In another room, over 400 publications are on file and a force of experienced clerks is engaged in checking the Pink Pill advertisements." Conde, the advertising manager, is described as being like "a general, moving his troops across a battlefield." Advertisements for Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People could be found in newspapers from across the United States, as well as in the West Indies and in Central and South America.

The advertisements for Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People, like those for other patent medicines of the period, offered miraculous personal testimonies, crediting the Pink Pills with rescuing themselves or their children from the brink of death. Statements such as "I tried them and firmly believe that if I had not I should be in my grave right now" and "That Dr. Williams' Pink Pills saved my life is beyond doubt," were common. In one advertisement, the Pink Pills were even credited with completely curing paralysis after a child took the pills for four months. The packaging included with the Pink Pills claimed to cure a variety of physical and emotional ailments, including "lack of ambition," memory loss, chorea, heart problems, influenza, "pale and sallow complexions," impotence, dizziness, hysteria, rheumatism, neuralgia, St. Vitus' Dance, sciatica, "depression of spirits," and "all forms of Female Weakness."

In addition to newspaper advertisements, Dr. Williams' Medicine Company also created advertising novelties to stimulate sales. One that dates from 1896 was a black and pink "welcome harp." The strings were stretched across the harp in front of a sounding board, and on strings suspended by wires from the top of the harp were pink balls meant to represent the Pink Pills. The harps were to be distributed to drugstores, where each would be affixed inside the front door of the business. When a customer opened or shut the door, the "pills" would chime on the strings. Written across the length of the harp were the words "The Welcome Harp. It says, use Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People."

As the twentieth century dawned, patent medicines came under increased scrutiny. In an article in *Collier's* entitled "The Great American Fraud,"


Samuel Hopkins Adams took on the patent medicine industry. Adams listed Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People in a group of nostrums he referred to as "the most conspicuous of this kind now being foisted on the public," and noted the composition of the pills as "green vitriol, starch and sugar." Adams' articles led to the passage of the first Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906. The Act required more accurate labeling of medicines, and curbed some of the most misleading, overstated, or fraudulent claims that appeared on the labels of patent medicines.

In 1912, the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station conducted an analysis of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People. The author of a subsequent report could not resist commenting: "in using the pills the patient is directed first to purge the bowels, then take the pills, bathe frequently, keep the bowels regular, and partake of a nutritious diet. The thought occurs that perhaps the desired result might well be secured by following all of this treatment except the taking of the pills."

Dr. Pincus Rothberg, a chemist with the Bureau of Chemistry at the Port of New York, also analyzed the pills and found the composition of the pills to be more than 37 percent sugar, 13 percent iron sulphate, 11 percent potassium carbonate, 15 percent starch, and 17 percent vegetable substance, with traces of talc and a small quantity of strychnine. Rothberg's analysis was published in *The Composition of Certain Patent and Proprietary Medicines* in 1917. The examination of the Pink Pills led to a court battle, and in 1917, the Dr. Williams' Medicine Company was found guilty of misbranding its product.

Although the Dr. Williams' Medicine Company continued to exist in Schenectady through the late 1920s, it was surely in its decline as the tide turned away from the patent medicine era. In 1922, popular rhyming syndicated columnist Walt Mason singled out Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People in two different columns disparaging patent medicines. "And then at last we're ailing and getting worse each day, and pink pills, unavailing, seem made to throw away," he wrote in one, and "I take pink pills to cure my ills, my gout and flu and tetter; I swallow ten, and now and then I think I'm feeling better" in another. The terminology of the patent medicines began to be used as references to touted would-be panaceas that have little actual benefit; in 1926, a congressman derided a bill before the House of Representatives as being

"pink pills for pale people." As early as the 1930s, patent medicines, including Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People, were being exhibited as artifacts of a bygone era, a far cry from being promoted as a cure-all less than 30 years prior.



No girl should allow herself to become pale, bloodless and weak and thus lay the foundation for a lifetime of ill health and misery. Let every girl ask herself today 'if her blood is as pure and rich as it should be. Pale cheeks, lips and gums, shortness of breath on going up stairs and palpitation of the heart are some of the signs of bad blood. Dr. Williams' Pink Pills enrich the blood and this new blood carries health, nourishment and strength to every part of the body. As the blood improves the general health improves. The good results are soon felt throughout the body. Dr. Williams' Pink Pills are sold by all druggists at 50 cents per box or six boxes for \$2.50 or by the Dr. Williams Medicine Company, Schenectady, N. Y.

Advertisement ca. 1912 with drawing by Schenectady artist Margaret Curran-Smith

Willis T. Hanson died in 1933 at age 75 and is buried in Vale Cemetery. Appropriately, as shown on page 2, his headstone is a very lovely shade of pink.

New Materials in the Library

BOOKS

Agrarian Rioting in Albany County, New York: Tenants, Markets and Revolution in the Hudson Valley, 1751-1801 by Thomas J. Humphrey
Chinas: Dolls for Study and Admiration by Mona Borger, gift of **Deb Crosby**
Furniture in Upstate New York, 1760-1840: The Glensanders Collection by Anne Ricard Cassidy
The Involvement and Influence of Voluntary Community Organizations in the Development of a Community College: The Schenectady Community College by Erma Ruth Chestnut
Iroquois: People of the Longhouse by Michael G. Johnson, gift of **Daily Gazette**
The Momentum of Tradition: Dutch Society and Identity in Schenectady, 1660-1790 by Edward Henry Tebbenhoff
On the March: A History of the Schenectady Citadel Corps of the Salvation Army and the City in which it Ministers by Jeremy Allen, gift of **Jeremy Allen**
The Product of GE's Progress: Labor, Management, and Community Relations in Schenectady, New York, 1930-1960 by Lisa Ann Kannenberg
Schenectady High School Alumni Directory (2012), gift of **Gwen Sheldon**
Sweet Glory by Lisa Potocar
200 Years of Church Discipleship: A History of the Berne-Beaverdam Reformed Churches, gift of **Nancy Plamp**

HISTORIC DOCUMENTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Records of Schenectady Free Clinic, 1993-2013.

Includes minutes, copies of relevant legislation, publications, news clippings, photographs, citations and resolutions. Gift of **Voluntary Physicians Project of Schenectady, Inc.**

Additions to John Papp Photograph Collection, gift of **Estate of John Papp**

Materials compiled and created by former Schenectady mayor Frank Duci. The bulk of the collection comprises binders of news clippings, documents, and photographs on a variety of subjects compiled by Duci. Materials are generally local in scope, highlighting issues in local politics, commerce, and development. Gift of **Frank Duci**.

CHURCH RECORDS

St. Margaret of Cortona Church, Rotterdam Junction – Baptisms (1903-2010), Marriages (1904-2011), Burials (1926-2010)

Pastor's Ledger of Herbert B. Roberts of Berne-Beaverdam Reformed Churches and First Reformed Church of Scotia, gift of **Nancy Plamp**

YEARBOOKS

Scotia-Glenville Middle School (1975, 1979-1983, 1985-1987, 1991, 1994, 1996-1999, 2001-2008, 2011, gift of **Scotia-Glenville Middle School**)

PERIODICALS

19 microfilm reels of *G.E. Works News*, 1917-1931, 1953-1985, gift of **MiSci**

A New Portrait in Our Collection



Jacob Vandenburg Vrooman (1826-1904), descended from the original settlers of Schenectady County, was born in Schenectady and established his own hardware business at the corner of State and Ferry Streets in 1854, which he ran for 38 years. Jacob was the grandfather of John J. Vrooman. This portrait was most likely painted from a photograph and has been restored. It was very recently donated to the Society by Jacob's great-great-great-grandson, William T. Vrooman III, and can now be seen as part of the *Portraits of Schenectady* exhibit (see page 3).

Explore Our Website!

In October, the Schenectady County Historical Society unveiled our new, improved website:

www.schenectadyhistorical.org

On our site, you can keep informed about our upcoming programs, events, and exhibits; explore guides to our library collections; become a member or renew your membership; find visitor and researcher information, place requests for facility rentals, and shop in our online gift shop. The site also connects visitors to our social media links, and links to our Gremis-Doolittle Library Blog. Visit us online today!

Around the Society



Festival of Trees 2013



*Deborah and John Angilletta at
'Romantic Landscapes' reception*



*Jenna Peterson, Asst. Curator/Educator with
Deborah Angilletta at 'Romantic Landscapes'
reception.*



*For his Eagle project, Drake Rudolph (3rd from L.)
and members of Boy Scout Troop 67 improve path
to dock at the Mabee Farm.*



*Mabee Farm map painted by Deb Crosby and Rachel
Durland hangs on wall in the Franchere Center van
Schaick Lecture Hall, lower level.*



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Schenectady County Historical Society

WE WANT YOU! TO VOLUNTEER



Collections Management

Assist with processing and cataloging artifacts

Visitor Services & Administrative

Greet guests and assist staff with office tasks

Exhibit Research & Development

Assist with history research and exhibit design

PastPerfect Entry

Compile artifact data into cataloging software

To volunteer, contact Jenna at (518) 887-5073 or email educator@schec



Local antiquarian Marilyn Saassi will present a lecture series describing the changes that occurred in the material culture of the Mohawk Valley across different eras:

French & Indian Era - February 25th

Revolution - March 4th

Post-Revolution - March 11th

19th Century - March 19th

Time - Each lecture will be held at 7:00pm

Location - Mabee Farm Historic Site,
1100 Main Street, Rotterdam Junction

Cost - \$5.00, free to members of the Schenectady County Historical Society or the Burning of the Valleys Military Association

Sponsored by the Burning of the Valley Military Association
For more information, contact Jenna Peterson at (518) 887-5073 or email educator@schenectadyhistorical.org