



Schenectady County  
Historical  
Society

# Newsletter

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July-August 2014

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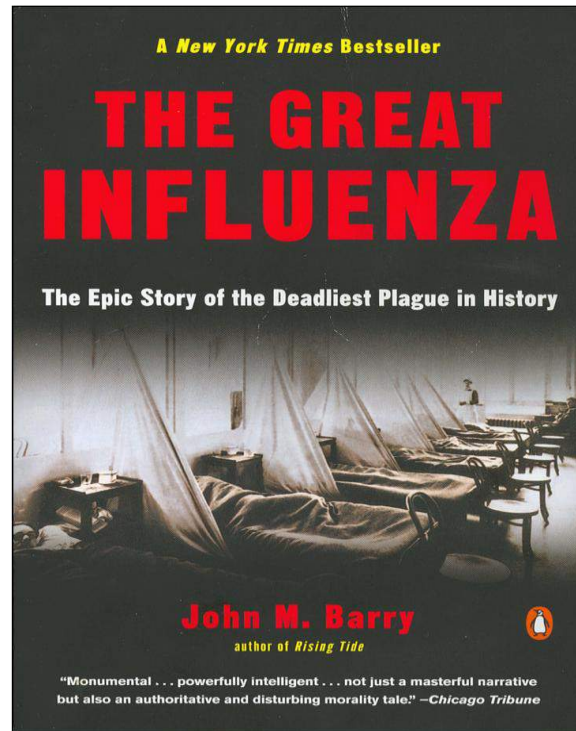
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## *Schenectady's Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918*

*by Dr. James Strosberg*

*We had just reached 100% enrollment in our school and the future never looked so promising, when rumors of the Spanish influenza came from eastern cities. Today the dreaded disease is with us. It came as a thief in the night. City officials have ordered schools closed indefinitely. We turn to the Sacred Heart in this dark hour and beg for St. Roch to intercede for us and our pupils."*

—The Chronicles of St. John the Evangelist Church, October 7, 1918

St. Roch was a 14<sup>th</sup> century hermit who cured himself as well as others (and their cattle) of a plague and thus became the patron saint of the plague-stricken. Six centuries later in Schenectady, in 1918, 15,000 of its 90,000 residents were stricken by an epidemic and 500 lost their lives. Why was this particular outbreak of influenza called the Spanish Flu? And how did our city respond to the challenge?

*continued on pages 4-5*

## *Letter from the President*

### **BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

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*ASSISTANT CURATOR*

**JENNA PETERSON**

*EDUCATOR*

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*OFFICE MANAGER*

### **HOURS**

**MUSEUM & LIBRARY**

**Monday-Friday 9-5**

**Saturday 10-2;**

**see page 6 for  
summer hours**

**MABEE FARM**

**Tuesday-SATURDAY**

**10 a.m. – 4 p.m.**



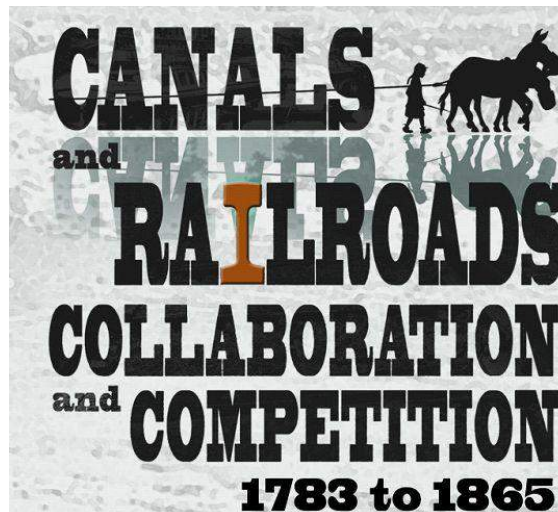
The past is ever present at the Society. We hosted the Revolutionary War and Living History weekend on June 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup>, complete with cannon and musket fire, redcoats, greencoats, and those of everyday colonial dress. BVMA (the Burning of the Valleys Military Association) presented life as it was, demonstrating all aspects of colonial life, from the making of bullets, yarn, and garments, and to the use of herbs for the practice of medicine. They emphasize living history – how the people of those times lived and passed time, not just the very popular re-enactment of battles. Visitors responded and spent some very enjoyable time asking questions and learning about our past. Thanks, BVMA!

Once again we want to thank our members and local businesses for their very generous response to our request for support of the Historic Building Drive. Thanks to you, we will begin painting the Headquarters at 32 Washington Avenue this summer and it will be returned to a condition that we can all be proud of. Our next targets will be the roof and work on the Mabee farmhouse and barn, with help from you and local businesses!

We are happy to report that the Win Bigelow Nature Trail was dedicated and opened on April 26<sup>th</sup>, thanks to our partners the Environmental Clearing House of Schenectady (ECOS), with whom we shared one terrific volunteer, Elwin Bigelow. ECOS, as the Society did last issue, offered its sincerest sympathy on his loss to his wife, Florence. Win would be proud to know that many children have already wandered the Trail this year to enjoy the diversity that nature provides along the fields and banks of the Mohawk River.

Although steeped in the past, SCHS is also proud to be a part of the future of Schenectady County, and nothing demonstrates that as well as our staff. Librarian Melissa Tacke is coordinating the installation of new compact rolling shelving, a much appreciated gift of Legere Restorations. Kaitlin Morton-Bentley is gearing up for late autumn Festival of Trees. Curator Mary Zawacki is pursuing several grants. Educator Jenna Peterson is working with the 4H and others to make sure the Farm produces vegetables come fall, and Mabee "Farmer" John Ackner is growing hops for fall brewing! Interns Carina Moschello and Mike Diana have reported to help us with summer workload, our many volunteers are keeping our worksites moving forward, and Office Manager Jennifer Hanson keeps our financial records in impeccable order. My sincere thanks to all of them!

*-Marianne*



### **Summer - Fall 2014**

A traveling exhibit developed by the Alco Technical and Historical Society, *Canals and Railroads, from Collaboration to Competition* explores the beginnings of the Canal Era and New York State's early railroads, which were built to enhance and complement—rather than compete with—the waterway system.

Presented at  
Schenectady County Historical Society  
32 Washington Ave  
Schenectady, NY 12305

## *Exhibits and Programs – July and August 2014*

For more information, please check our website, [www.schenectadyhistorical.org](http://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**

##### **Opening June 28 – *Canals & Railroads***

A traveling exhibit developed by the Alco Technical and Historical Society, *Canals and Railroads*, from Collaboration to Competition explores the beginnings of the Canal Era and New York State's early railroads, which were built to enhance and complement— rather than compete with— the waterway system.

#### **@ The Mabee Farm**

##### ***Nostalgia***

Irma Mastrean's artwork evokes in its viewers a sense of longing for the past, while also creating a sense of anticipation for what is yet to come. This exhibit, featuring approximately two dozen of Mastrean's paintings, offers visitors a chance to see the familiar through her eyes.

##### **Through October 31 – *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, July 12 – 7:00-9:00 p.m.**

##### ***Howlin' at the Moon Concert***

**Performers:** 13 Feet of Bluegrass

**Location:** Dutch Barn, Mabee Farm Historic Site

**Cost:** \$5.00

#### **Saturday, July 26 – 2:00 p.m.**

##### ***The Pieces Come Together ... At Last: The***

***Memoirs of an Adult Adoptee and Her Sister –***

***Book Talk and Signing***

**Speakers:** Arlene Loucks and Patricia Walsh

**Location:** 32 Washington Avenue

### *PROGRAMS, continued*

#### **Saturday, August 9 – 2:00 p.m.**

##### ***Leaning into the Storm: Perfectionism in Antebellum New York***

**Speaker:** Robert Arnold III

**Location:** 32 Washington Avenue

**Cost:** Free. Made possible through the New York Council for the Humanities Speakers in the Humanities program, with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

#### **Sunday, August 10 – 7:00-9:00 p.m.**

##### ***Howlin' at the Moon Concert***

**Performers:** Three Quarter North

**Location:** Dutch Barn, Mabee Farm Historic Site

**Cost:** \$5.00

#### **Saturday, August 16 – 2:00 p.m.**

##### ***The Search for the Underground Railroad in Upstate New York - Book Talk and Signing***

**Speaker:** Tom Calarco

**Location:** 32 Washington Avenue

#### **Saturday, August 23 – 10:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.**

##### ***11th Annual Arts & Crafts Festival***

**Location:** Mabee Farm Historic Site

**Cost:** \$5.00 for adults; Free for children

#### **Saturday, September 6 – 2:00 p.m.**

##### ***The Transportation Revolution in New York***

**Speaker:** David Hochfelder

**Location:** 32 Washington Avenue

#### **Monday, September 8 – 7:00-9:00 p.m.**

##### ***Howlin' at the Moon Concert***

**Performers:** Washington County Line

**Location:** Dutch Barn, Mabee Farm Historic Site

**Cost:** \$5.00

#### **Saturday, September 13 – 9:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.**

##### ***Canals and Railroads Bicycle Tour***

**Tour Leader:** Jenna Peterson

**Location:** Mabee Farm Historic Site





A 1918 Spanish Flu emergency in New York City

The term influenza (or “flu” for short) was first used by 19th century Italian physicians to describe the typical symptoms of myalgia, cough, and fever as *influenza de credo*—“influence of the cold.” The disease usually struck in early winter when people crowded together indoors to stay warm.

One of the first notables to contract the flu was King Alphonso XIII of Spain. He survived. World War I was on and neither side wanted the enemy to know about any illness in their armies. Spain was neutral and had nothing to hide, hence the name Spanish Flu. President Woodrow Wilson did not make even one public comment on this plague which took the lives of 675,000 Americans (equivalent to two million today) although he did condemn venereal disease amongst our troops. Wilson even ignored the pleas of the Surgeon General to quarantine our soldiers before putting them on ships, and thousands died on board on the way to Europe and were buried at sea.

Influenza virus usually causes a mild seasonal grippelike illness with muscle aches, cough and fever. The 1918 version was much worse. It caused a virulent immunological reaction in the lungs, which filled up with fluid that caused cyanosis and death, sometimes within hours, unlike all known previous flu epidemics. The November 1918 minutes of the Schenectady County Medical Society even questioned whether the “so called flu” was actually responsible for this previously unobserved morbidity and mortality. Our local physicians thought that flu could not possibly cause so many deaths, especially in healthy young adults. Previous epidemics had taken their heaviest toll on infants and the elderly

Schenectady in 1918 was one the most industrialized cities in New York State, with 20,000 workers at General Electric and 8,000 at the American Locomotive

Company. During World War I our factories operated around the clock to produce war materials, producing a housing shortage and overcrowding, conditions which enable the flu virus to spread. During the first three weeks of the epidemic, Schenectady suffered the same number of deaths as the less-industrialized Albany and Troy together, even though their combined population was twice that of ours.

The first death in the county was Mrs. J. Cominsky, a Rotterdam Junction mother, who had been suffering from a cold and was brought to Ellis Hospital. She died the next day on Sept 22. The *Schenectady Gazette* reported that there had been 50 cases of flu in Rotterdam Junction during the previous 2 weeks. On October 1, the Commander of the South Schenectady (Rotterdam) Army Warehouse reported that 40 of his men were sick and three had died. And from then on everything got worse. By October 7<sup>th</sup> there was an average of 15 deaths daily. Some people left for work in the morning and were dead by nightfall.

.....”*there seems to be no abatement of the influenza epidemic in Schenectady, on the contrary every hour sees new cases reported, more calls for doctors who are already overworked, and many fatalities.*”

*Schenectady Gazette*, October 11

The epidemic had reached every neighborhood in the city. In October there were 364 deaths. Fourteen of our doctors and many nurses were overseas. People were dying so fast that our undertakers ran out of coffins. The late Ed Rossi, whose father founded Rossi’s Funeral Home on lower Union Street, reported that his dad worked day and night for a solid month. Schools and theaters were closed. Court proceedings and trials were canceled. Union College canceled its daily chapel exercises and football games. All public meetings were banned. Our city officials sprayed the downtown streets with Lysol in an attempt to kill the then unknown virus. Lysol had been compounded and named in 1889 by Dr. Gustave Raupenstrauch to help end a cholera epidemic in Germany, but it proved ineffective against influenza.

The Zion Lutheran Church on Nott Terrace lost five members to “Lungenentundung” in just three weeks, including their Founding Pastor of 38 years service, Ernst Carl. Ludwig Schulze, age 64. The congregation could not even conduct a public funeral.

A most tragic scene awaited the visiting nurse who called at the home of the Stein Family of 501 South Center Street. She discovered the baby of the family dead in his crib and a second infant close to death. Both parents and four older children were lying in their beds too sick to even move. The family was evacuated to Detention Hospital for care. Ellis Hospital put beds in the hallways and turned private rooms into doubles and

triples. Sun parlors were converted into wards. All elective medical and surgical admissions were cancelled. And still the hospital ran out of beds.

The defunct 30-bed Mercy Hospital was reopened at 404 Union Street near Jay Street. after the building underwent a cleaning by Schenectady Firemen. The Head Nurse of Ellis was put in charge and it was staffed with Albany Medical College students. An Albany physician who came to help died very soon after he arrived.

The Detention Hospital (once known as the “pest house”) on Altamont Avenue expanded its number of beds. The New York State Armory at Nott Terrace and State Street filled its drill shed with army cots and staffed it with as many volunteer nurses as could be recruited. Union College converted the Delta Upsilon Fraternity House to an infirmary and soon had 24 patients.

*“I would give \$50 for a chance to go home and sleep 12 hours. I have not had two hot meals in two days. I just grab a sandwich and a cup of coffee and jump into the machine and begin the weary round of sick, sicker, and sickest.”* —Dr. E. J. Senn after his 62nd call of the day.

General Electric and ALCO reported more than half their workers absent with flu. The General Manager of General Electric, Mr. Emmons, caught the flu and died. Both GE and ALCO probably would have closed were it not for the war effort. No section of our city was spared. Death was everywhere—Goose Hill, the Stockade, Bellevue, Union Street, the GE Plot, Broadway, and Union College.

Our biggest need was for visiting nurses. Fifteen thousand were sick in bed at home. The Red Cross advertised for volunteer nurses who would be sent into the field after as little as one day of training. Mayor Charles Simon encouraged all teachers to volunteer, as all city schools were closed. The Director of City Nursing Services pleaded in the *Schenectady Gazette* for volunteers. A local physician wrote *“I cannot say too much in the praise of these fine-souled women who are doing so much to help in this crisis....The hospitals need women workers, need them now as they never were needed before.”*

But how would these newly minted volunteer nurses travel to their patients? Schenectady Railway had 60 employees out sick and public transportation was erratic. To the rescue drove the Motor Corps of the Schenectady Chapter of the National League for Woman’s Service, which provided drivers. Twenty Schenectadians offered their private cars to the ladies of the Motor Corps. The League was founded in Washington DC in 1917 with a

goal of providing assistance to the Red Cross and other agencies.

There also was a need for bed linen, blankets, and night clothing. And with thousands of mothers and housewives sick with the flu, there was no one to provide hot meals. The churches of Schenectady filled the void, including Emmanuel Baptist, First Methodist, Mt. Pleasant Reformed, Grace Methodist, Bellevue Reformed, and others. Thousands of meals and tons of clothing were delivered by the Motor Corps to needy families.

The severity of the epidemic seemed to lessen during November. Then, on Nov 11, the First World War ended. Schenectady received the news at 3:40 A.M. Fire trucks were dispatched with their sirens sounding to all sections of the city. Sleepy but happy sextons rang their church bells. There was a large spontaneous public gathering downtown, and a temporary increase in the number of cases resulted. Influenza gradually decreased until December when the last case occurred.

The President of the Ellis Hospital Board of Managers wrote in his Annual Report: *“In connection with the influenza epidemic of 1918....with our nursing force depleted by sickness, our doctors worn out with work, and ordinary help almost impossible to get, we were caring for 50% more than at any other time...may we never see the likes of it again*



*Camp Funston, Kansas, overcrowded with soldiers sick with Spanish Flu in 1918.*

*For those wishing to learn much, much more, please see [www.schenectadyhistory.org/health/morris/index.html](http://www.schenectadyhistory.org/health/morris/index.html) and read the wonderful article by Union College student Allan A. Morris, The Influenza Pandemic of 1918–19 and how it Affected the City of Schenectady, New York, his senior thesis for the College’s Department of History in 1986.*

## *New Materials in the Library*

### **BOOKS AND DVDS**

*Annals of New Netherland: Privatizing Colonization* by Charles Gehring, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*Divine Discontent: Charles Proteus Steinmetz* [DVD], gift of **Bruce Carlin**  
*Dutch Barns of New York* by Vincent Schaefer, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*Education in New Netherland and the Middle Colonies* by Charles Gehring, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*Ground Water Resources of Eastern Schenectady County* by John Durfee Winslow, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*History of New York State* by S.S. Randall, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*The Hopper Family Genealogy: Descendants of Andries Willemszen Hoppe(n)* by Maria Jean Pratt Hopper, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*The House on Seventh Avenue: The Tavoletti Family in Schenectady* by Gail Denisoff, gift of **Gail Denisoff**  
*The Legal and Judicial History of New York, vol. 1* by Alden Chester, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*Membership Roster of the Holland Society of New York, July 2008*, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*Native American Cultural Center, Rotterdam Junction* by Schenectady County Planning Department, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*New Netherland Project: A Translation Program Sponsored by the New York State Library*, gift of **Peter van Schaick**  
*Remembering the Town of Duanesburg, vol. 3* by Duanesburg Historical Society, gift of **Anne Christman**  
*Robert Livingston 1654-1728 and the Politics of Colonial New York* by Lawrence Leder, gift of **Peter van Schaick**

### **DOCUMENTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS**

Materials related to Civil War service of Clinton Churchill Brown, 134th NY Infantry, gift of **Barbara Tyrrell**  
Materials pertaining to Ellis Hospital, including photographs, scrapbooks, ledgers, and news clippings, gift of **Foundation for Ellis Medicine**  
Personal papers of John and Sally van Schaick.  
Includes materials pertaining to teaching careers; teachers' union activities; local political campaigns; activity with local environmental, health, civil rights, legal aid, religious, and historical organizations; genealogical information; information about the World War II service and memoir of John van Schaick. Gift of **Peter van Schaick**.

### **YEARBOOKS**

Scotia-Glenville High School (1925, 1926, 1927, 1936 [photocopy], 1937 [photocopy], 1944, 1975) and Ellis Hospital School of Nursing (1960), gift of **Glenville History Center**  
Notre Dame-Bishop Gibbons High School (1995, 1999, 2002, 2007, 2011), gift of **Notre Dame-Bishop Gibbons High School**  
Schenectady High School (June 1916), gift of **Anne Christman**

## *Blue Star Museums Program for Active Military & Families*

Through August 30, all Schenectady County Historical Society sites are offering free admission to active duty military personnel -- including National Guard and Reserve -- and their families, as part of the Blue Star Museums program. The Blue Star Museums program is a national program coordinated by the National Endowment for the Arts, Blue Star Families, and the Department of Defense. Questions? Contact Librarian Melissa Tacke at 518-374-0263, option 3, or by email at [librarian@schenectadyhistorical.org](mailto:librarian@schenectadyhistorical.org).

## *Museum Seeking Volunteers*

Are you interested in helping to give tours at our downtown Schenectady museum or of the Stockade neighborhood? Our curatorial staff is currently seeking volunteers. Please contact Assistant Curator Kaitlin Morton-Bentley at 518-374-0263, option 4, or send an email to [exhibits@schenectadyhistorical.org](mailto:exhibits@schenectadyhistorical.org).

## *New Museum Hours*

The following museum hours go into effect **July 1**:

### Hours for Self-Guided Tours:

Monday-Friday, 10:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

### Hours for Guided Tours:

Monday-Friday at 11:00 a.m., 1:00 p.m., and 3:00 p.m.; Saturday continually from 10:00 a.m.-2 p.m.

Questions about tours? Contact Curator Mary Zawacki at [curator@schenectadyhistorical.org](mailto:curator@schenectadyhistorical.org) or by phone at 518-374-0263, option 4.

## *Summer Hours*

For July and August, Thursday evening hours are suspended for the Library and Museum. Thursday evening hours will resume on September 4.



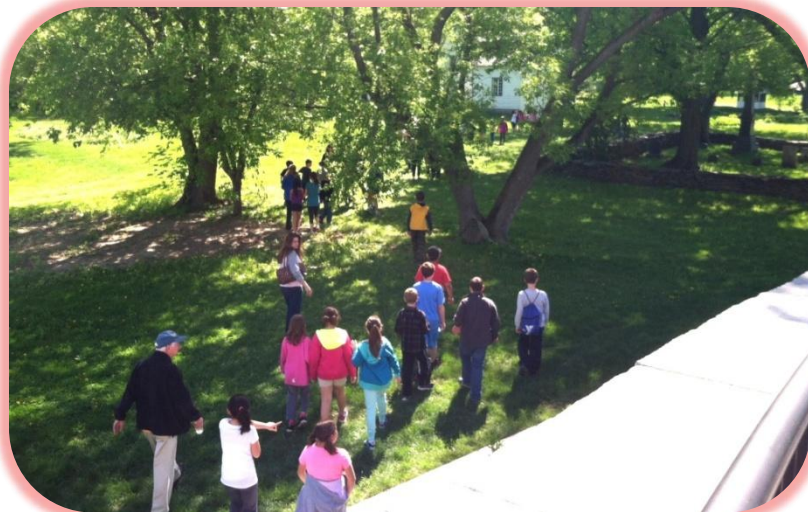
## *Around the Society*



*Neil Yetwin: Major Mordecai Myers  
program at 32 Washington Ave.*



*Howlin' at the Moon with the Hilltown Ramblers - Mabee Farm*



*Mabee Farm school program: on their way to class.*

*Revolutionary  
War Living  
History  
Weekend  
Mabee Farm*



*Photos: Ann Aronson*





Schenectady County Historical Society  
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## *Schenectady County Historical Society*

### **11TH ANNUAL ARTS & CRAFTS FESTIVAL MABEE FARM HISTORIC SITE**

Saturday August 23, 10am - 4pm

Featuring the best in area arts & crafts, including pottery, wood crafting, handwovens, candles, jewelry, fine arts, painted furniture and much more.

1100 Main Street, Rotterdam Junction, NY  
\$5.00 adults/kids free!

[www.schenectadyhistorical.org](http://www.schenectadyhistorical.org)

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