

# Schenectady County Historical Society



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## Schenectady's Silent Witness to History

By Neil B. Yetwin

One of the most enduring and intriguing of Schenectady's many antiquities is the mounted cannon at the end of North Ferry Street in the Stockade's Riverside Park. For nearly a century this imposing piece of ordnance has stood watch eastward over the Mohawk River as if expecting momentarily to defend the city against any who threatened the peace and security of its inhabitants. Schenectady historian John J. Birch suggested in 1961 that the cannon's history is "a mystery which undoubtedly will never be solved." Yet physical clues and scattered anecdotal evidence might shed light upon those mysteries that have shrouded the cannon for more than two centuries and perhaps help restore it to its proper place in Schenectady's history.

It was once assumed that the cannon was cast in bronze, but it is in fact iron, weighing in excess of 2,300 pounds and measuring 7'9" from breech to muzzle. It was once mounted on an oak carriage twice its length (for balance) and fired a solid iron softball-size round shot weighing 9.1 pounds – thus its designation as a nine-pounder. The cannon had two trunnions, cylindrical projections near the barrel's center allowing it to be easily raised or lowered. Vestiges of those trunnions remain visible, as does the vent or touch-hole above the breech. Cascabel, two handles on which to attach ropes to reduce recoil, once graced its barrel. The cannon is of French manufacture; an embossed fleur-de-lis, symbol of the French monarchy, is still clearly visible above the muzzle despite the layers of protective paint.

The cannon may have been placed in Schenectady's Old Fort just prior to the French and Indian War; Schenectady's leaders reported to Governor James De Lancey on August 31, 1754 that the fort had "one Nine Pounder ..." E.Z. Carpenter speculated in 1872 that the cannon had belonged to Gen. Bradstreet's army during the French war and



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## VISIT

Library & Museum | M-F 9-5; Sat 10-2  
32 Washington Ave, Schenectady, NY

Mabee Farm | Tues-Sat, 10-4  
1100 Main St, Rotterdam Jct, NY

Brouwer House | by appointment  
14 N Church St, Schenectady, NY

## CONTACT

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

# President's Letter

*Democracy, the practice of self-government, is a covenant among free men to respect the rights and liberties of their fellows.*

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt

It's not unusual these days to hear people in the historical professions promoting the need for more tolerance, diversity, and equality among native born citizens and immigrants; blacks, browns, and whites; people of different faiths; rich and poor; straight and gay; young and old; men and women.

So it's perhaps not surprising that the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) and the National Council on Public History (NCPH) recently committed themselves to the creation of a website that would encourage "inclusive, equity-focused, and service-oriented practices" by historical organizations, community groups, museum professionals, educators, students, scholars, activists, preservationists, archivists, and others across the nation.

This free and open website, entitled *The Inclusive Historian's Handbook*, is scheduled to go live next month with informative, insightful, and practical articles written by nationally recognized professionals on such topics as heritage tourism, the Founding Fathers, and accessibility. I'm especially excited by this news, because...well...I'm one of the co-editors (along with Professors Will Walker of the Cooperstown Graduate Program and Modupe Labode of Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis).

What's the reason for this website now? It seems clear to us that while many well-intentioned history organizations and individual historians state publicly their desire to be more welcoming and democratic, they may lack the resources or the will to ensure inclusive, equity-focused, and service-oriented practices.

I'm happy to say that SCHS is determined to make sure that this will not be the case here. In our recently approved strategic plan, SCHS trustees announced a strong commitment to diversity, professionalism, and community engagement. This includes more inclusive programming and outreach efforts, certainly, but it also requires more active involvement by more diverse Schenectady residents at every level of governance and management (including the Board of Trustees itself, where we recently recognized that, currently, our Trustees are almost all white and over sixty, and that three out of five of us are males).

As historians, we know that change is inevitable. But it is never easy. It takes time and can't be rushed. And as historians, we also know that, whether we want it to be or not, Schenectady County—like America—is a far more diverse place than it was a hundred years ago.

So what are we going to do? We can choose to resist the changes that have made Schenectady what it is today, or we can choose to move in harmony with history and recognize that Schenectady's diversity is one of its greatest assets. By choosing, in effect, to be on the right side of history, we'll do more than assert a leadership role among New York's historical and cultural organizations: we'll be better citizens, and we'll help make our county a better, more prosperous place in which to live and work.

Robert Weible, President  
[PRESIDENT@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG](mailto:PRESIDENT@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG)

# From the Executive Director

Today the Mohawk River is thawed, which makes planning SCHS' summer a bit easier to envision. This winter has been a season of planning at SCHS. This is not uncommon. We take advantage of the winter's lull in events and visitations and look toward the year ahead.

Right now, we're making plans for events and exhibitions that will take us into 2020. We're writing our first ever Collections Development Plan, which identifies ways that SCHS can collect objects that are significant and meaningful to our community. Our other plans include strategies to bring more school-children to Mabee Farm, strategies to make our gardens greener, and strategies to increase the vibrance of the Brouwer House as a creative space for the arts.

We're also working on SCHS' very first Fund Development Plan. As a small non-profit, it's essential that SCHS continues to find new income streams and ensure long-term sustainability for the organization. Much of what we do is made possible by donations from our members. Every member is an essential part of SCHS' sustainability, and for that, I thank you.

Late last year we asked for your help in supporting the Library/Archives' HVAC upgrade. I'm pleased to announce that because of your overwhelming generosity, we have reached our goal. The new HVAC system will be installed later this year, ensuring proper climate control for our archival collections. Thanks to you, the photographs, documents, and maps that tell Schenectady County's story will be preserved for many future generations.

Looking further ahead, we recognize that there are always more preservation projects coming up. There's always more ways to connect to the community, or to inspire dialogue amongst our visitors. To that end, I ask you to consider SCHS in your own plans.

SCHS offers many planned giving opportunities, all of which can be tailored to meet your specific financial and estate-planning needs. A planned gift of funds, property, or collections offers many advantages, including the fulfillment of philanthropic goals and a reduction or elimination of estate tax liability.

SCHS' *1661 Society* recognizes those generous individuals who are leaving a future legacy to the Schenectady County Historical Society. We acknowledge a bequest intention or other planned gifts of any size with membership in the *1661 Society*.

If you've already included SCHS in your giving plans, thank you! We would be delighted to include you in our *1661 Society*. Kindly let us know your plans by contacting us at 518-374-0263x4.

Thank you again for supporting the Schenectady County Historical Society. Our strong financial foundation has been built by people like you; people who are passionate about local history, preservation, and education.

Mary Zawacki, Executive Director  
[DIRECTOR@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG](mailto:DIRECTOR@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG)



# Around the County

## Profile: Niskayuna Town Historian, Denis Brennan

By Martin Strosberg



In July 2018, Denis Brennan, PhD was appointed Niskayuna Town Historian, taking over from Don Cazer. For the past 15 years he has been on the faculty of the Union College History Department teaching such courses as The Age of Jackson, The History of Union College, and the History of Sports in

America. Prof. Brennan plans to retire from Union at the end of Spring Term, which he says will give him plenty of free time to devote to the duties of Town Historian. He has been a resident of Niskayuna since 1978.

The duties and responsibilities of the Niskayuna Town Historian are to preserve, collect, and disseminate local historical knowledge and to foster an interest and appreciation of Town history by the public. Additional duties are to call to the attention of local authorities any material or properties of local historical value, to build and maintain a working relationship between local authorities and the historical community, and to act as consultant on matters relevant to historical sites or objects.

Although New York State law requires every local government to have an historian, the State does not provide budgetary support for the position. The Town of Niskayuna has allocated \$500 for stipend and \$500 for supplies.

At a recent meeting with several town residents primarily centered on the need to develop a more comprehensive plan to collect and communicate information about the history of Niskayuna, Brennan's agenda began to take shape. Agreement was reached on several issues. First, and arguably most importantly, the town's history is vital to a full appreciation among the town's residents regarding the distinctive nature of Niskayuna's past as well as the past's contribution to the town's future. The current historical records need to be more systematically archived for more efficient access. Better use of the Niskayuna website should be developed; it will aid in communicating the town's history with the town residents and beyond. Finally, more active engagement with current town residents, especially long-term residents, about collecting, archiving, and storage of family, neighborhood, or organizational history related to the town should become a priority and actively pursued.

Above: Professor Denis Brennan.

Brennan certainly appreciates that these ideas are ambitious and, perhaps, should properly be considered part of a multi-year agenda. Additionally, in order to accomplish this agenda, Brennan hopes to formally revive and reinvigorate an active Niskayuna Historical Society. Nevertheless, he believes that making an effort to accomplish them are at the heart of the purpose of any town's history program: to collect, protect, and communicate local history, while developing within the community an appreciation for the community's past as we prepare for the community's future.

Denis Brennan is looking forward to collaborating with the Schenectady County Historical Society and meeting the historians of the other towns in Schenectady County. He can be contacted at DBRENNAN@NISKAYUNA.ORG or 518-783-0603.



Above: Mr. Reinhardt's blacksmith shop on a Niskayuna roadway (top) and trolley car and tracks by Troy-Schenectady Road (bottom). SCHS archives.

# From the Library

## Steinmetz Letter Book Index

When volunteering at the Gremms-Doolittle Library & Archives, sometimes you will get a project that takes months; other times a project will take years. This was the case with the Charles Steinmetz Letter Book Index. The project was started in 2016 by former library volunteer George Wise and continued by Schenectady City Historian, Chris Leonard.

We have a variety of materials from Charles Steinmetz in our collection, ranging from glass plate negatives to his research papers (see the Charles Steinmetz Papers Finding Aid on our website for a full list). Steinmetz's letter books are an interesting look into his personal and professional life.

The letters range from the interesting to the more mundane aspects of Steinmetz's life. Many of the letters deal with his fame in the mathematics and engineering world. Requests for papers, speeches, appearances and headshots are frequent. Other more mundane letters include bill payments, receipts, and subscriptions. In one very personal letter we even find out Steinmetz's preferred underwear vendor: Ralph P. Jecklin of Schenectady.

You can get a good sense of Steinmetz's politics in these letters. One local issue that Steinmetz wanted to help solve was the lack of green space in the city. The parks plan that was proposed by Schenectady's Socialist government turned out to have quite a few detractors. In a letter, Steinmetz groups the detractors into three categories: "1) old fogeys who are opposed to anything their grandfathers did not pay for. 2) The influential politicians of the old parties who are against anything proposed by the socialists. 3) A considerable number of citizens, who, while in favor of parks, are afraid of entrusting the expenditure of a large Bond issue to the present administration."

Another letter to the mayor of Minneapolis depicts Steinmetz's vision of the future. By the end of the 1900s, he predicts that "we may have seen the last smoke belching chimney...the steam locomotive, the coal stove, and the gas flame will be known to the coming generations only from descriptions in the books of history...I hope to send you my congratulations by word of mouth through the wireless telephone across empty space."

This index is available in our library and online.

- Michael Maloney, Librarian/Archivist

## Blog Posts You May Have Missed

The Gremms-Doolittle Library Collections Blog ([www.GREMSDOOLITTLELIBRARY.BLOGSPOT.COM](http://www.GREMSDOOLITTLELIBRARY.BLOGSPOT.COM)) is a great resource for learning more about Schenectady County's rich history. Here are a few of the posts from the past couple months that you might have missed.

### The Smitleys: Giving Back to the Electric City

By Diane Leone – January 3, 2019

Joseph and Jane Smitley were part of Schenectady's upper class in the early 1900s but they also gave back to their community in some important ways.

### Back in my Day: Childhood, Play, and Schenectady

By the Librarian – January 22, 2019

Our current exhibit focuses on what it was like to be a kid in Schenectady County. We went through our photo archives to find images of kids playing throughout Schenectady's history.

### Fighting Fire in the Wintertime

By the Librarian – February 21, 2019

This post features photos of firefighters braving the cold to extinguish winter fires.

## Trivia from Your Childhood

At the Mabee Farm Historic Site

1950s & 60s  
July 10

1970s & 80s  
August 14

1990s &  
2000s  
Oct. 9

7 pm Wednesdays – Teams of 2-5  
\$5 - Free for SCHS Members  
Please Register 518-374-0263 ext. 3  
[librarian@schenectadyhistorical.org](mailto:librarian@schenectadyhistorical.org)





# What's Happening?

## EXHIBITS

### Rural Modern SNEAK PREVIEW

**Opens June @ Mabee Farm**

Rural life and farming – and with it, the hard work, the understanding of the land, and the stories of those who farm it – is at the heart of Schenectady County. Today, after centuries of fields and flocks, we have created a rural landscape that is fruitful, beautiful, and largely misunderstood by those who live in cities or suburbs. This exhibit explores the stories of Schenectady's rural farmers. The full exhibit opens in October.

### On and Off the Trail

**Through June @ Mabee Farm**

Schenectady scientist-turned-artist, Caroline Bardwell, just released her first book of original poetry and black and white photography inspired by Capital District landscapes. This exhibit displays her work, showcases the beauty of our local environment in all seasons, and uses a combination of words and images to offer the audience a deeper connection with “place-based art.”

### Back in my Day: Childhood, Play, and Schenectady

**Through November @ 32 W**

Are play and childhood toys a reflection of larger social, cultural, and technological developments? This exhibition examines that question, focusing primarily on cultural and social influences on childhood in the 20th & 21st century. The exhibit also integrates personal childhood experiences and memories from members of our community.

### A Dishonorable Trade:

#### Human Trafficking in the Dutch Atlantic World

**Through October @ Mabee Farm**

A traveling exhibit curated by NYS Department of Parks and Recreation. Divided into two parts, the exhibit examines the role that slavery played in the creation and maintenance of the Dutch trading empire, and delves into the lives and stories of the people affected by the trade.

### Beyond the Pines: Early Schenectady

**Ongoing @ 32 W**

Explore early Schenectady: its founding, its people, and what life was like for early Schenectadians.

### Mapping Schenectady

**Ongoing @ 32 W**

A selection of our most prominent and interesting maps are on permanent display in the Map Gallery.

## TOURS AND TRIPS

Pre-registration at [WWW.SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG](http://WWW.SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG) is required for trips, tours, and workshops.

### Bus Trip to the New York Botanical Garden

**Tuesday, May 21 • \$75**

Get lost in exotic gardens, take in fresh spring blooms, and enjoy a day in this oasis of greenery! Spring is the best time to visit the NYBG, with so much to see, smell, and smile about. And, with our bus trip, it couldn't be easier to get there! Join us for a day with the NYBG's endless array of plants and flowers that will activate all of your senses.

### Secret Stockade Saturdays

**First Saturdays, May-October - 10am @ 32 Washington • \$20**

The Stockade and its secrets come to life on this behind-the-scenes journey through the neighborhood. Join us for a morning of mysteries as our guides lead us from the museum, through the Stockade, and inside two Stockade homes, each with their own legends and lore. Refreshments will be served inside the Stockade's oldest home, the historic Brouwer House. This tour lasts three hours.

### Kayak Through History

**June 6, 8, 13, 15; July 10; Aug 7; Sept 28 • \$12, includes kayak rental,**

See Schenectady County from a different vantage point: the Mohawk River! Our popular kayak tours are back for another season, with expert guide Michael Diana paddling us through Schenectady's history. Kayak rentals are included in the price, though participants are welcome to BYOK. Time and location of launch TBD.

### Taste of Little Italy

**Saturday, June 22 & Wednesday, July 10 - 2pm @Municipal Lot on Warren Street • \$15**

Che Bello! Come explore Schenectady's Little Italy in the best way possible- through its foods! We'll be visiting some of the best restaurants around and see how history brought these unique flavors to our town. The sights, the smells, the tastes... mamma mia!

### African American History Tour

**Saturday, June 29 - 10am & Wednesday, July 17 - 6pm @ 32 W • \$10**

Schenectady's black heritage is rich and storied - especially in the Stockade. Join us for a walking tour as we explore the people and places that make Schenectady's black heritage so vibrant. From the Underground Railroad to the Great Migration and the Civil Rights movement, African Americans have created a proud and tangible legacy in Schenectady County's history!

### State and Jay Street Tour

**Thursdays, June 20 and July 18 - 6pm @ 422 Liberty Street • \$10**

Downtown Schenectady is alive with a brand new energy! You may know the awesome restaurants and storefronts that make these streets unique but do you know the history? Talk a walk with us as we see how the dusty “Road to Albany” became the heart of an American city.

## TALKS AND WORKSHOPS

### Where to Find the Historic Erie Canal w/ Kenneth Silber

**Saturday, April 13 - 2pm @ Mabee Farm • Free for members or \$5**

Kenneth Silber, author of *In DeWitt's Footsteps: Seeing History on the Erie Canal*, will present an illustrated talk on exploring Erie Canal historic sites, including remnants of the original Clinton's Ditch.

### Workshop: Hooked on Blacksmithing

**Sunday, April 28 - 9am @ Mabee Farm • \$150**

Join our resident blacksmith John Ackner as we learn to make hooks and adjustable fireplace trammels.

### The "Willigee Negroes" with Dan Weaver and SCHS Annual Meeting

**Saturday, April 27 - 1:30pm @ Mabee Farm • Free for members or \$5**

Following our annual meeting, Dan Weaver will discuss the settlers of the Willigee Patent, the first permanent settlement in the Mohawk Valley west of Schenectady. Weaver will also discuss the identity of the mysterious “Willigee Negroes” mentioned in Sir William Johnson's Papers. Weaver owns an antiquarian bookstore in Amsterdam, and writes a local history column for the *Amsterdam Recorder*. This presentation is part of the *Dishonorable Trade* exhibition and lecture series.

### “Schenectady's General Electric Realty Plot” Book Release Party with Chris Leonard, City Historian

**Tuesday, May 7 - 6pm @ 32 W • Free for members or \$5**

Celebrate the release of City Historian Chris Leonard's new book with us!

### “Those who make up a house”: the Genesis of the League of the Iroquois” with William A. Starna

**Thursday, May 23 - 6pm @ Mabee Farm • Free for members or \$5**

Presented as part of a series by the New Netherland Institute. Questions surrounding the genesis of the League of the Iroquois has produced a vast literature. Examined in this presentation are the insights provided by an 18th century missionary who recorded an account of the League's origins recalled by Sganarady, an elderly Mohawk man. The account associates the League's foundation with the arrival of the Dutch in 1609. The issues raised in this talk address methodologies, cross-cultural exchanges, and tensions between history and memory.

### Workshop: An Introduction to Plein Air Painting

**Saturday June 15 - 10am @ Mabee Farm • Price TBD**

Immerse yourself in the tranquility of nature and be inspired by the breathtaking beauty of Mabee Farm in this plein air workshop. Members of the Schenectady Art Society will guide and instruct participants in the technical aspects of outdoor painting. Open to all levels of artists. Full day, bring a lunch!

### Preserving Your Family Documents and Photos

**Saturday June 29 -2pm @ 32 W • Free for members or \$5**

Do you have old family photographs, letters, diaries, or other precious items that you would like to preserve? This presentation will discuss how to properly preserve your family's important documents and photos. It will also

provide tips on how to store, display, label, and handle these materials. Preserving these materials will assist family members, now or in the future, to retrace and reconstruct your family history.

## FOR KIDS

### Spring Camp at the Mabee Farm

**April 22-23 - 9am-4pm @ Mabee Farm • \$45/day or \$80 both days**

**Pre-Registration required, contact [rachelc@schenectadyjcc.org](mailto:rachelc@schenectadyjcc.org)**

We are excited to partner with the Schenectady JCC on this new initiative! Kids 5-12 are invited to spend the day at the Mabee Farm. In the morning, kids will explore the history and natural environment with Mabee Farm educators. In the afternoon, kids will enjoy classic camp activities with the professional counselors of the Jewish Community Center. Drop the kids off and we'll handle the rest!

## FOOD AND DRINK

### Drink the Seasons

**Thursday, June 27 - 6pm @ Brouwer House • \$25**

Led by historian John Gearing, we'll sample a variety of seasonal libations, made with locally grown ingredients. Get cozy in Schenectady's oldest home as we drink the seasons!

### Night at the Museum

**Friday, April 12 - 5pm @ 32 W • Free for members of \$5**

The museum is open late, and to celebrate, we'll have wine and cheese! Stop by with friends (or a date!) before a night on the town.

## MUSIC, FESTIVALS, & MORE!

### The Capital Region Grown-Up Easter Egg Hunt

**Saturday, April 27 - 11am @ Mabee Farm • \$20**

A "grown up" version of the childhood egg hunt, with prizes for adults. All proceeds for this event benefit the Melissa Daniels' Memorial Scholarship Fund (a component fund of the Community Foundation for the Greater Capital Region). Featuring food, beer, fun and games! Tickets at [HTTPS://BIT.LY/2F7RYPH](https://bit.ly/2F7RYPH).

### July 3 Celebration with Fireworks

**Wednesday, July 3 @ Mabee Farm • Time TBD, free**

Join us for a free, outdoor, riverside concert as we celebrate Independence Day! Fireworks will close the show. Food and alcoholic drinks will be available for sale, and crafters and vendors will be on site as well.

### Howlin' at the Moon

**Sponsored by Wolf Hollow Brewing Company**

Upcoming concerts at Mabee Farm include:

### The Nellies

**April 18 at 7pm • \$6**

### Peggy & the Delivery Boys

**June 18 at 7pm • \$6**

### Dyer Switch

**May 18 at 7pm • \$6**

### Banjo Bob

**July 16 at 7pm • \$6**



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# At the Yates Mansion

By Michael Diana



The mansion had an immutable grandeur to it; a stubborn beauty that might be tarnished with age and neglect but shines through the dust. The walls stand as strong and solid as ever, even as so many layers of wallpaper wrinkle and peel away. Beneath the surface, here revealed and there obscured, you'll find the original brickwork and hand-hewed beams. The mansion sits as cold as the winter air outside. And it is empty. After centuries of habitation, after so many generations and owners have come and gone, this house is populated only by ghosts and echoes of the past. This is the Yates Mansion in Glenville. And this, I think, is the beginning of something special for that town.

The Yates Mansion has been perched above Maple Avenue since at least the early 1800s. While often attributed to the famous Joseph Yates in 1734, no one is entirely certain when the house was built or by which member of that prolific family. The structure led several lives, being repurposed as a restaurant in the 1940s and finally being subdivided into apartments in the 1960s. By the 2010s, those apartments had deteriorated and were closed by the owner. Fortunately for history lovers, it was purchased by the town of Glenville in April 2017. It was an ambitious acquisition with a price tag of about \$100,000. But the Town Board was willing to pay the price to save this piece of Glenville history.

From the start, town supervisor Chris Koetzle knew there would be hard work and heavy expenses ahead as he and his team began the long process of restoration. Their plan is to turn the space into a community and history center for Glenville. I was fortunate to be able to tour the Mansion with Chris and see the progress they've made. Most of the work so far has dealt with removing the interior partitions of the former apartments. The town plans to do another \$150,000 in work this year, funded by grants from New York State. They don't yet have a date for when the Mansion will open to the public, but it will likely take some time.

Immediately to the east of the Yates mansion sits a recently built condo development. It's cute, and I'm sure it's a fine place to raise a family. Nevertheless, to me the condos represent a grim reminder: the constant threat that hangs over all historic structures. The money and effort required to keep old buildings suitable for modern generations is often hard to find, and so many structures are demolished in the face of suburban development. It's refreshing to see that such a fate will not befall the Yates Mansion. When the residents of a town are prepared to financially and emotionally invest themselves, they can hold on to their history.



# The Story of Betty Jane

By Susanna Fout

When we're children, toys unlock our imagination, opening up a world of innocent play, mystery, and adventure. As adults, toys recall that childhood when we hold, feel, or see a favorite plaything. For a museum, toys do all this and more. Like other artifacts of material culture, toys can tell us a great deal about changing social, cultural, and technological developments. SCHS' latest exhibit at the museum opens up this world of play for personal reflection and scholarly contemplation. "Back In My Day: Childhood, Play and Schenectady" uses our favorite toys and personal memories of childhood to examine social and cultural changes throughout the region in the past century.

While many of the objects on display in the exhibition are part of the museum's extensive collection of antique toys, SCHS also received several new donations and loans of favorite play things. One such donation from Scotia resident, Susan Bogardus, includes a collection of toys belonging to her mother, Betty Jane Coleman Bogardus. The donation includes an early 20th century wooden pull toy, games, books, and several radio show "premiums" from popular children's shows of the era. More than just treasured memories, these toys help us weave an intimate story of growing up in Schenectady during the Great Depression.

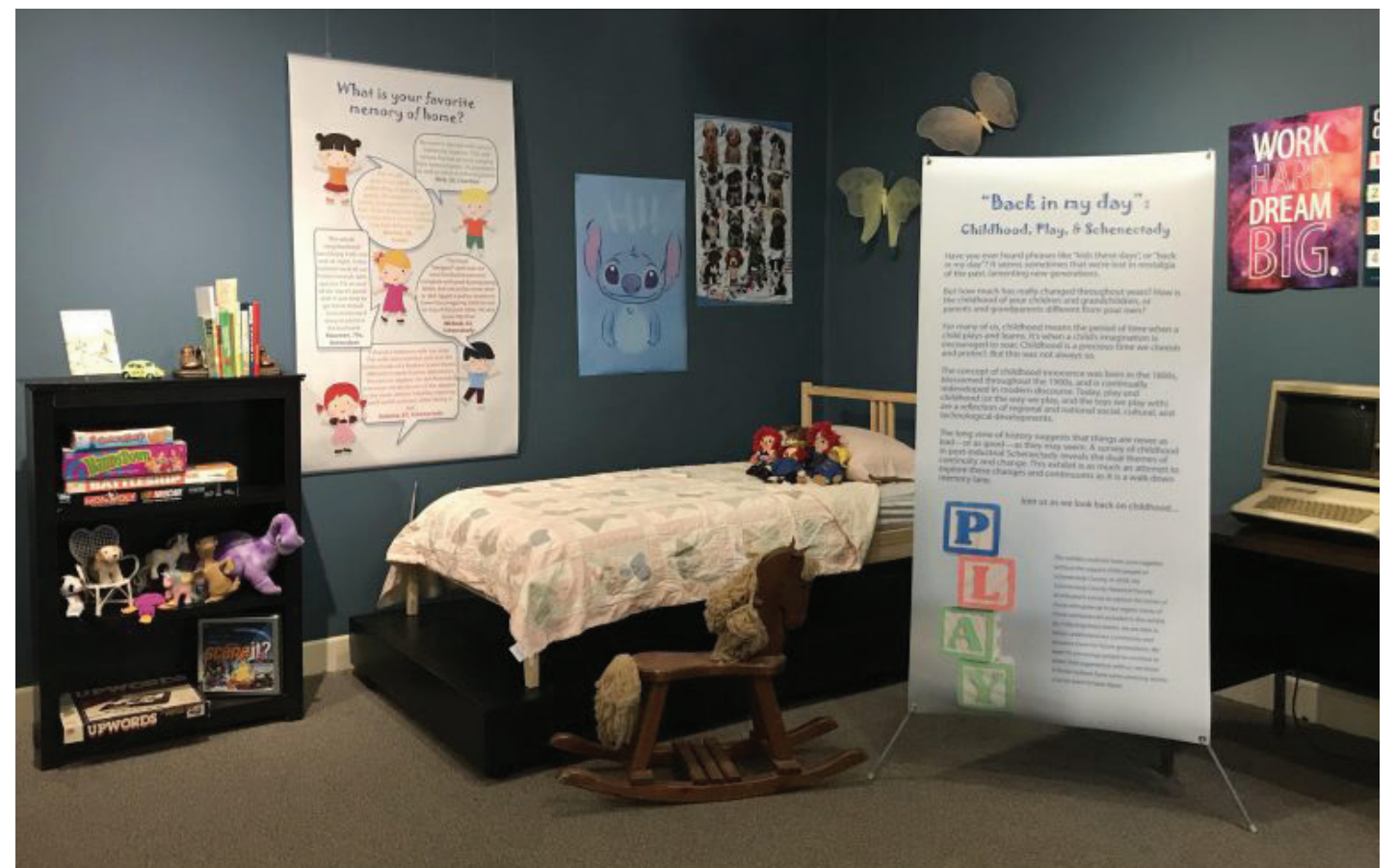
The 1920s were a prosperous time for the city of Schenectady. Business was booming, with ALCO and GE attracting growth and influencing innovation throughout the region. Charles and Stella Coleman had a comfortable life. Like many men in Schenectady, Charles worked for General Electric. He was a draftsman and began working for GE shortly after high school. The couple's home, located at trolley stop 7 on the Albany-Schenectady road (near what is now Mohawk Commons), was always full of life. Stella was an active member of the community and hosted many social events for local organizations in their home. The backyard, full of fragrant fruit trees, must have been a lovely setting for parties on warm summer nights. On February 6, 1925, the young couple welcomed Betty Jane, a beautiful baby girl, into their family.

By the time little Betty Jane was old enough for school, the Golden Age of radio had come into full swing. Betty Jane must have loved listening to the family radio, eagerly awaiting each new episode of her favorite shows like Little Orphan Annie, Dick Tracy, and Tom Mix. How exciting it must have been for her to collect the required box tops and pennies to mail in for a special prize! The wait to receive the latest decoder pin or badge must have seemed like forever to a 9-year-old. But being the first of your friends to decode the secret message would have made the wait worth it. Radio premiums were American companies' first foray into the world of marketing for children. Programs advertised "souvenirs" which could be collected by sending the sponsors a proof of purchase for their product, such as a boxtop or jar's inner seal, or a small amount of money like a dime.

Charles and Stella had no way of knowing that Betty Jane

was born at the cusp of a dark period in American history. Like many industry-dependent cities in America, the Great Depression hit Schenectady hard. Many lost their jobs, businesses closed, and the growth of the city came to a sudden halt. Because Charles was able to continue working at GE throughout the Depression, the Coleman family weathered through the worst of the storm. Being secure in a home and able to put food on the table, the Colemans were also able purchase toys for Betty Jane that many other families could not afford. And Stella, the ever gracious host and caring mother, invited all the neighborhood kids over to play with Betty Jane and share in their good fortune. She always made sure Betty Jane's friends left their house with a full belly, knowing they did not get to eat much at home.

The 1930s marked a seminal decade in the history of America. Even though times were rough, new policies and changing public attitudes signaled positive changes for America's youth. Americans had been moving toward a new definition of childhood, one where education, play, and personal development were important. Betty Jane was part of a generation of young women who were the first in their families to go to college, to have both a family and a career, and have opportunities and choices that many who came before her did not. After graduating from Mont Pleasant High School, Betty Jane attended Russell Sage College and received a Masters degree in education from the University of Albany. She lived most of her life in Schenectady where she raised a family and taught physical education at Notre Dame/Bishop Gibbons High School for over 22 years. And through all of life's ups and downs, Betty Jane held on to a few precious childhood belongings, no doubt recalling with joy those special memories every time she saw them.



Top: Pull toy, horse drawn milk wagon, Sheffield Farms Co., early 20th century. A New York City based dairy company, Sheffield Farms become one of the largest dairy producers in the world. Companies have been using children's toys to build brand loyalty for decades. What's your favorite milk to drink? Why, Sheffield Farms, of course!

Bottom: The "Back In My Day: Childhood, Play and Schenectady" exhibition at SCHS.

Left: Brass decoder pin from the children's radio show "Little Orphan Annie." The decoder pins were used to decode a secret message at the end of each episode. On the back of the pin is a secret compartment to safely store your decoded message. Betty Jane must have drunk a lot of Ovaltine to collect enough box tops for her many decoder pins and Orphan Annie related souvenirs!





was left “on the Glenville flats not far from the Mohawk bridge” where it lay partly buried but visible for 20 years. There is some evidence that appears to substantiate Carpenter’s claim. In July 1758, Bradstreet’s army traveled 430 miles from Schenectady to Fort Frontenac (Kingston, Ontario), forced its surrender and confiscated its cannon. Bradstreet destroyed most, kept several of the best, and returned to Albany with stops at Oswego and Schenectady, where he may have left one nine-pounder. But it may also have come from the French surrender of Fort Carillon (Ticonderoga, July 19, 1759); Schenectady soldier George Staley was then engaged in bringing ammunition and cannon from Ticonderoga to Albany. Whatever the cannon’s place of origin, it was probably cast at Montreal’s Forges Du Saint Marie, which produced and tested iron cannon and delivered them to various forts, including Fort Frontenac.

In October 1763 Sir William Johnson was informed that “the cannon upon the Albany Hill were unfit for service.” The Albany Hill, located at the corner of State Street and Nott Terrace, was the highest accessible spot overlooking the city until the 1860s (the Taste of China Restaurant and adjoining lot now occupy the site). John Birch believed that one of those cannons was unearthed at that corner and was, according to Susan Staffa, the same cannon that can be seen in Riverside Park.

Nicholas Veeder (1761-1862), New York State’s last surviving soldier of the American Revolution, recalled

that Schenectady had two cannons set up in the streets to guard the main stockade gates leading to open country. Locals named them Lady Washington and the Long Nine Pounder; the latter may well be the restored Glenville flats (later Riverside Park) cannon. It was hauled back up to the Albany Hill “by some patriot on the occasion of the surrender of Burgoyne (October 17, 1777)” after which “it was probably discarded.” According to E.Z. Carpenter, that same cannon was dug up in 1778 for Schenectady’s initial celebration of the Declaration of Independence. It was then dragged on a sledge to the corner of State and Washington streets, and “mounted on a pile of logs. A soldier named Lindsey was assigned the duty of firing it off, and the gun being loaded just before sundown for a final salute and a cartridge box placed over the muzzle to increase the noise, the explosion blew it to pieces and Lindsey was killed.”

When news reached Schenectady that the Revolution had ended in an American victory, schoolteacher and former soldier John Baptiste Clute and “a band of patriots....retrieved an old French cannon and dragged it through the streets of the town to an easterly summit [Albany Hill]... Clute and some others filled the cannon with powder, applied a spark and the ancient field piece roared its salute to peace.” Larry Hart suggested that the cannon in Riverside Park was the one “fired by Clute and his fellow celebrants.” The hill became known thereafter as Victory Hill, the name partially preserved today in Victory Avenue. The Victory Hill cannon was then used



for Independence Day celebrations. On July 4, 1832 the *Schenectady Cabinet* reported that it was fired at 9:00 PM, followed by a display of rockets on the river with music.

Throughout the 19th century, injuries and fatalities involving the firing of old cannon by patriotic but unskilled enthusiasts became increasingly common. Schenectady was no exception. In October 1852, Whig Presidential candidate General Winfield Scott made a brief whistle stop here, as reported in the *Schenectady Cabinet* of October 26, 1852:

“ACCIDENT – John Smith, and a young man named John Featherstone, were badly injured by the premature discharge of a cannon on Saturday afternoon last, while engaged in firing a salute on the occasion of Gen. Scott’s passing through this city. – Smith’s left arm below the elbow was badly burned, and the hand lacerated by splinters from the rammer; one of Featherstone’s arms was broken and otherwise much injured, but not so badly that amputation will be necessary.”

Yet the cannon continued to be used. Union College Professor Jonathan Pearson noted in his diary for July 4, 1855: “The usual bell-ringing and cannon-firing at sunrise.”

The cannon made its most dramatic appearance six years later when President-elect Abraham Lincoln stopped in Schenectady on February 18, 1861 on his inaugural journey from Springfield, Illinois to Washington, D.C.

“While crossing Union street,” reported the *Schenectady Weekly Republican* of February 22nd, “the glass of the car windows was very much shattered by the discharge of a cannon which was being fired in honor of the arrival.” One source reported that the concussion had broken three of the car windows “to atoms” and tore off the lock of the door; another stated that “an over-elated gunner fired his cannon point blank at the first car...but no one was hurt.” The incident was quickly forgotten, however, on July 5th 1861, the *Schenectady Evening Star and Times* proudly reported that on the previous morning, “the big gun hailed the dawn.”

In November 1919 the cannon was mounted, with well-deserved ceremony, in Riverside Park at the request of Stockade residents, probably to commemorate Armistice Day.

In 1961, Schenectady’s oldest citizen recalled that the cannon had been used as a hitching post at the corner of State and Centre Streets (now Broadway, near the entrance to Mexican Radio.) The muzzle part was in the air, with the other half buried in the ground. The Riverside Park cannon does appear slightly more corroded and pitted in parts, indicating that it may well have been buried in just that manner.

The Riverside Park cannon, a long-silent witness to history, has more than earned Schenectady’s respect as one of the city’s most esteemed historical artifacts.



# Volunteer Spotlight

By John Angilletta



There are volunteers and then there are super volunteers. **Mark Vermilyea** is this issue’s spotlight volunteer, and super is the best way to describe him.

Mark’s ties to SCHS have a family link; his grandmother volunteered at the Grems-Doolittle Library years ago, where she helped catalog historian Larry Hart’s “Old Dorp” newspaper columns.

Mark was born in Troy and grew up in Niskayuna. He attended college at Cornell, Stanford and finally RPI where he received his Masters Degree. He and his wife of 33 years, Kathleen, still live locally and are the proud parents of two daughters and a son.

Mark’s first project as a SCHS volunteer was completing research on the history of the Schenectady Armory. His research was so well done that he ended up leading a tour of the Armory for SCHS. Since then, Mark has worked on the “History of Beer” program and has helped prepare a Google Map of the locations of Schenectady’s old and forgotten breweries.

Mark is at home at all of the SCHS sites. In the last year, he has helped out with the Festival of Trees at 32 Washington Ave, and at Tavern Night at the Brouwer House. At the Mabee Farm, Mark has assisted with the Farm to Fork dinner, as well as many of our special events by providing indispensable help with parking. Mark plans to join our team of educators this spring, working with school children from local elementary schools.

Mark’s volunteerism goes far beyond his work with SCHS. He has been a valued volunteer at both the City Mission and the Men’s Homeless Shelter in Schenectady, giving his time and energy to the less fortunate. He is also a mentor at his church, and at the Zoller School in Schenectady. Amazingly, Mark has even made the time to coach soccer and start a running club at his children’s school.

In his free time (yes, he does have some), Mark cycles and hikes. He is a proud member of the Adirondack 46ers, and enjoys hiking through the Adirondack and Vermont high peaks in every season of the year. As if that weren’t enough, Mark sings in 90 Years Running, a local folk band.

# Around the Society

Clockwise, from top left: Kids enjoying the games in the "Back in My Day" exhibition at 32 Washington Ave; Tavern Night at the Brouwer House; A group of students from Union College on a visit to 32 Washington Ave; Participants at the Painted Plate workshop, led by Curator Suzy Fout; A packed house for our "Chilly Winter's Eve" program at Mabee Farm.





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