

# Schenectady County Historical Society



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## Steinmetz Between Socialisms

by George Wise

"Dear Dr. Lunn," the 1910 letter began.

Thus Schenectady's two most famous socialists first made contact. Charles Proteus Steinmetz, General Electric's first socialist Chief Consulting Engineer, reached out to George Lunn, editor of the city's new newspaper, *The Citizen*, to obtain a subscription. Lunn was then known as a former minister of Schenectady's First Reformed Church, and would shortly be elected mayor of Schenectady (the city's first, and so far only, socialist mayor).

In the years 1910 and 1911, Steinmetz made the transition from an early version of socialism based on youthful idealism to a later form based on his experience as an engineer. The catalysts for this change were a well known political movement of the time called progressivism and a now nearly forgotten idea of 1910-1911 called the City Commission Plan.

What is socialism? In so far as socialism had any unifying meaning during Steinmetz's lifetime, it meant control of the means of production by the whole of society, rather than by the wealthy elite. In a phrase already used a century ago, this was control by the 99%, instead of by the 1%. Within that general definition, however, many versions of Socialism competed.

In Steinmetz's life, there were two such versions, one early and one late. Steinmetz was born in 1865 in the province of Silesia, then part of Germany, now part of Poland. In the 1880s,

*Continued on page 8*

# Letter from the President

Every now and then, I hear people talking nostalgically about “History’s Golden Age.”

University historians, for example, remember the good old days a half century ago when historians with PhD degrees could find jobs with relative ease. After gaining employment, they would produce narrowly focused publications for small groups of their peers, while earning money for their institutions by teaching undergraduates who were required to take their courses. Those days are long gone, however, and today’s university history departments are faced with declining enrollments and never-ending budget shortages—and they can’t afford to be as kind to their historians as they once were.

Likewise, there are some historians working outside the ivory tower who also look to the past for their Golden Age. They remember a time when history professionals were able to find jobs in museums and historical societies were made financially secure by big endowments, generous corporate support, and readily available government grants. Curators in historical institutions such as these often got to choose their own topics, collect artifacts which they themselves deemed significant, and produce exhibitions and programs that suited their own personal interests. But funding for this kind of this kind of thing has dried up, too.

There are plenty of reasons for these changes; too many to talk about here. The question today, though, is not whether there will ever be another Golden Age like the one some people remember; it’s whether or not historians will survive—or possibly even prosper—in an ever-evolving twenty-first century environment. The short answer, I think, is that our best days could very well lie just beyond the horizon. But first our historical organizations will have to recognize that they no longer have the luxury of thinking inwardly and working for small groups of privileged individuals and institutions. In today’s world, successful historical institutions are the ones that work with and for an increasingly diverse public. And any organization that wants to succeed recognizes its need to treat the people it once thought of as passive onlookers or listeners as active partners in all of its processes and operations.

I mention all of this because there is a reason why some historical organizations have fallen on hard times during this past year—a difficult one by any definition, thanks to the pandemic and the economic downturn it produced—and why the Schenectady County Historical Society has come through 2020 with our public presence enhanced, our audience bigger, and our financial security as intact as ever. Why us? A few years ago, we formally recognized that our organization owes its primary responsibility to everyone in

Schenectady County’s diversifying community rather than to just ourselves. This isn’t as simple as it sounds. It requires considerable skill and constant commitment. Cooperation, after all, is generally more challenging than control; listening is often harder than speaking. The alternative to such forward thinking, as F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, would be to “beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” That’s not the answer. Nope. In Schenectady at least, we’re realizing that our best bet is to employ a more democratic vision—one that is open to constant change—and seek a Golden Age that lies in front of us, not in some glorified past.

So as we approach the end of our fiscal year, I want to recognize and once again thank Executive Director, Mary Zawacki, her dedicated and innovative professional staff, and her wonderful volunteers for their outstanding work. I likewise want to recognize our fabulous Trustees for remaining calm under difficult circumstances and keeping the organization on its upwards course. And, in particular, I want to take a moment to note the many years of distinguished service rendered by the four Trustees who will be leaving the Board in April:

**Vice President Richard Lewis**, a truly dependable, smart, and gracious professional and a veteran of twenty-one years, who knows the ins and outs of SCHS better than anyone I know; **Ellen Fladger**, who for the past nine years has helped oversee and raise the standards of the Grems-Doolittle Library, while serving on numerous committees, including most recently as Chair of the Nominating Committee; **Marty Strosberg**, who has contributed considerable management skill and advice since 2015 and who currently heads up our Personnel Committee and does an exceptional job of writing for our newsletter; and **Robert Carney**, someone who understands the meaning of public service as well as anyone alive and who has, for the past ten years, been a source of sound historical insight and essential legal counsel. It will be difficult replacing any one of these four friends and professionals. Replacing all four at once will be a monumental challenge—one that I know we will nevertheless meet.



Robert Weible, SCHS President



*Image: Woman's Day Dress, SCHS Collection, c. 1901. Tailored jackets, long floor length skirts, and high heel ankle boots were typical of the Edwardian period. The focus was on modesty, usually covering the body from the neck down to the floor.*

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# Redesigning Fashion

by Susanna Fout, Collections & Exhibitions Manager

When was the last time you put on clothes and stopped to ask yourself, "Why am I wearing this shirt? Where did it come from and how did it end up in my closet?"

Behind every item of clothing placed on our bodies – from the lowly sock to the printed T-shirt – is a long and complex story, interweaving the economic, political, and social systems which surround us. Most people don't really think about the daily activity of dressing. We have become so accustomed to the process that it is now routine, a common place activity no longer questioned. For some, dressing is an act that is carefully considered, our ensembles chosen for a specific time, place, or event. Others may throw on the first set of clean clothes they can find. But rarely do we ask ourselves "why?"

Since the colonial period, our region has been influenced by fashion. The fashion-driven demand for fur fueled a trade network so great it spanned the globe and transformed a continent. Half a century ago, one million young people converged on a tiny New York town just sixty miles away for a music festival that is now considered a defining cultural moment of the 20th century. Dressed in psychedelic clothing – and some hardly dressed at all – the fashion displayed at Woodstock has been just as synonymous with resistance and rebellion as the music. Two years ago, SCHS featured a newsletter article on three wedding dresses that had recently been donated to the museum (Spring 2018, v.62, no. 2). The wedding dresses belonged to three generations of women in the Landreth family. The matriarch's olive green, high collared, long-sleeved Victorian gown was typical of the buttoned up styles of the era, while her daughter's knee length, satin sheath dress is illustrative of the new found freedom of the roaring twenties. The final dress, worn at the height of WWII, is a modest, all white, flowing gown made of synthetic silk and free of any metal, in keeping with ration mandates. The complex socio-economic and socio-psychological aspects of dress, which created the dynamics for the North American fur trade, are the same characteristics which influenced the production and creation of the Landreth family wedding dresses, the counterculture fashion of the 60s, and the very clothes you wear. The fashions may have changed, yet each is an understandable moment in time and can be interpreted to reveal characteristics of individuals, groups, and cultures.

Blurring the line between necessity and art, clothing is unique within material culture. At its most basic level, clothing is used to protect the wearer from natural elements and to shield the naked body from human gaze. Yet it also confers personal choice and social acceptability. Dressing is one of the most complicated acts of daily existence, negotiating between the intensely personal and the constructed layers of the social. As the most readily visible

form of human communication, clothing has a long history throughout time and culture as being a reflection of social norms, societal tastes, and economic consumption. For the Western world, up until the early 19th century, fashion and style was largely determined by the upper classes. The process of producing textiles, dying cloth, and making garments was laborious and expensive. Those who had the means used clothing as a symbol of status and wealth, with popular styles trickling down to the everyday wearer.

As the Industrial Revolution spurred advancements in new technologies, factory techniques sped up the process of manufacture and replaced the role of artisan labor in the production of clothing. Urbanization created new consumer markets for the distribution and consumption of fashion; diverse class systems began to emerge and civil society grew in importance. Multiple global wars, economic upheaval, and the fracturing of traditional social, religious, and political structures became the defining characteristics of the 20th century. This massive flurry of change upended the trickle down system of taste making, inverting fashion to “trickle up” fads set by the newly wealthy and subcultures. Because of fashion's interconnection with class and status, clothing has historically served as both a system of social control and as a method of liberation from cultural constraints and subversion of cultural norms. We see this clearly in the release from constricting corsets and changing female silhouettes, the transition from dresses to trousers for women, the shortening of skirts, and the emergence of subculture fashions such as “mods, hippies, and punks” in the late 20th century. Clothing has become an expression of humanity, rather than just a reflection of it.

Traditional studies of dress have focused on clothing as objects, physical remnants of a bygone era, similar to a tool or piece of furniture. Museum curators have devoted years to the careful cataloguing of human apparel found within their collections. James Laver, a print curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum (1922-1959), spent decades dutifully describing and organizing the features and changing forms of dress. By doing this he was able to date prints in the museum's collection, as clothing is often the most obvious indicator of time period. While Laver's work has been instrumental for historians in identifying clothing types, even Laver found his methods to be lacking. However valuable his type of classificatory approach to clothing was, it only answered the “what and the when” of clothing. Questions such as “which influences make a particular style fashionable?” or “how and why do fashions change over time?” went unanswered. The more he studied, the more questions he had.

Over time, dress historians have begun to contextualize clothing trends in social, economic, and political terms. Today, fashion studies is an interdisciplinary field, pulling from anthropology, sociology, history, social psychology, and economics. By asking the larger questions of how and why, we begin to see the broader cultural context within which clothing becomes consumed as fashion. Clothing is not only an extension of the body, but dress and fashion is a living,

vibrant part of humanity and culture. So how do we study the changing meaning of fashion in our own community? How do we turn from fashion as collections representative of objects, to the dynamic interpretation of fashion-in-action?

SCHS has an extensive collection of historic garments and accessories – in particular women's clothing– from Schenectady County and New York State throughout the late 18th-20th centuries. Donated by various members of the community over the last century, the collection is a visual representation of changing customs and values in our community. This past fall, SCHS teamed up with students in the Fashion and Textiles program at SUNY Oneonta for an exciting new project unlike any we have taken on before. Students were given the opportunity to work hands on with the garments, studying the historic role dress and fashion have in society, and critically examining how those ideas have shifted or changed over time. Students researched a garment of their choosing from the SCHS collection, and based on that research, designed its modern counterpart. Using their gained knowledge, students evaluated how identity plays into modern fashion and used their own artistic and creative ability to interpret history in a unique and modern way.

The resulting exhibition will display the students' completed garments alongside their historic inspirations. Utilizing additional historic materials from SCHS' museum and library collections, we will explore the historical importance of women's clothing, and unravel the complex systems which surround the fashion of our region. By reevaluating our current understanding of the SCHS' garment collection, and placing it in this modern framework, we can provide the evidence and analysis needed to understand the role of clothing and fashion in expressing our own identities in the 21st century.

“Redesigning Fashion: Transgression and Identity in Women's Historic Dress” opens in May at the SCHS. The exhibition is made possible by a grant from Humanities New York.

*Image page 4: Design sketch, Alexa Riveria, Fashion and Textiles major, SUNY Oneonta. “To create a modern interpretation of my historic garment, I knew I wanted to give it a modern twist by changing up the silhouette... and making it a pair of shorts. This was something that women in the early 1900s could never have been seen in. Today, women wear pants every day without giving it a second thought.”*

## A Note from the Librarian

Winter was a busy season in the library. Three new volunteers joined us and started working on digitization, indexing, and collection descriptions. We've received a significant number of research requests, particularly from people looking for information on their homes. If you're feeling trapped inside due to bad weather or the pandemic, you might find some relief and excitement in researching your house's history or exploring your possessions to see what they reveal about your family history.

Marietta Carr, Librarian/Archivist

## Recent Blog Posts

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

### **Samuel Hayden Sexton, Schenectady's Artist**

**by Diane Leone | January 12, 2021**

Samuel Hayden Sexton, who lived and worked in Schenectady his entire life, was an untrained local artist often employed to capture the important people and places in the community. Over his fifty-seven year career, he produced portraits, as well as landscapes and historical paintings. Currently, about seventy works are known to exist, some unsigned but attributed to the artist. This blog provides an overview of Sexton's life and work.

### **African American Historical Records Project: Phase I**

**by Marietta Carr | February 23, 2021**

In this post, Marietta introduces a new public history project focused on Schenectady's African American history, a collaboration between SCHS and members of the community.

### **Mary Daly -- Radical Feminist Philosopher**

**by Gail Denisoff | March 9, 2021**

To celebrate Women's History Month, we took a look at Mary Daly, a fierce "radical lesbian feminist" who was one of the most influential feminist thinkers of the 20th century. Daly grew up in Schenectady.

*Image: 124 Front St., 1903. Betty Fabian Photo Collection, Grems-Doolittle Library.*

## How to Start Your House History Research

Start with the information you received when you moved into the house. Did you receive a property abstract or other paperwork? Did the realtor or sellers share any anecdotes or details? Do the neighbors have any anecdotes about the house or the neighborhood?

Look around your house and make notes about the architecture and materials used. Are there design elements or materials that are unique to a certain era? Write down the questions you'd like to answer through your research. Look around your neighborhood for similar buildings.

Start working on the paper trail: tax assessments, deeds, and building permits. The city, town, or county clerk's office is the place to start. Tax assessments and deeds, for example, are held by the county. As you read through these records, make notes about the names of the owners, how the property was conveyed (e.g. sale, inheritance), dates, boundary changes, and descriptive details.

Maps, telephone books, city directories, censuses, photos, and newspapers can give you additional information about who lived in the house, how the neighborhood developed, and the events that happened in and around the house. Visit the library blog or Collections and Catalog page of our website for more information on the materials available in our collection and how to do research in the library.





# Around the County

with Bill Buell, County Historian

I'm not sure how we got here, but more than three and a half centuries after Arent Van Curler left his home on the Hudson River for a new one on the Mohawk, here we are. Was it splendid planning, location, happenstance, good luck or bad? Perhaps all of that and more.

Schenectady, city and county, has had numerous ups and downs, good times and bad, and for the last year life has been a struggle for many and even heartbreaking for others. Hopefully things will get better soon for all of us, and there are signs of hope.

So, as we look toward a better future, it's good to remember the past and honor it. While there are plenty of cities named Albany, Troy and Saratoga out there, there is only one Schenectady. Just one. And it already has a wonderful and appropriate nickname: The Electric City.

Anyway, that's what Caroline Bardwell thinks, and I agree with her. Of course, she is biased (and so am I), because at her store on Union Street, she sells things that are adorned with the words, "Electric City." "I don't think it's that easy to just snap your fingers and change a nickname," said Bardwell, who opened the Schenectady Trading Company back in September of 2019. "Schenectady has this identity as the Electric City. We have this history with General Electric and the Erie Canal, and we need to embrace the past, not erase it. Like I said on my Facebook page, cutting away the roots doesn't make the tree stronger."

While "Electric City" only refers to the past 125 years or so in Schenectady's history, Thomas Edison's decision to open up his Edison Electrical Works in the city in 1886 changed the course of our future. Yes, the American Locomotive Company was important, too, but it was General Electric that would make Schenectady County a major player on the worldwide stage throughout much of the 20th Century.

And while I am a fan of Metroplex and all that it's done for downtown, a new nickname for our fair city is unnecessary. And what would Bardwell do with all her store items.

"We have a t-shirt and a sweat-shirt that say 'Electric City,' and we have ornaments, buttons, bumper stickers, glasses and even all-natural, unscented Schenectady Chapstick," said Bardwell. "Two of my vendors have Electric City in the names of their business." And what about the Electric City Bombers, Electric City Comics, Electric City Riders and Electric City Barn. Let's keep those names and the names of dozens of others teams and businesses current and relevant.

Nicknames aren't usually created out of thin air. At least not

the good ones. They stick for a reason, such as "The City That Lights and Hauls the World," and "Old Dorp," two monikers also long associated with Schenectady. They may not necessarily still be entirely factual, and perhaps they've lost some of their relevance, but they still mean something to us.

I don't know that it's important for a city to have a nickname, but most of them, unlike counties, have one. Does Schenectady County need a nickname? I guess not. But the city does have one, and when you look at some of the nicknames for other cities in the greater Capital Region, ours is one of the real good ones.

Albany, while known as Beverwyck and Fort Orange in its early days, doesn't have a good nickname. In fact, the nicknames listed on its Wikipedia page are so unimpressive I won't even mention them. Troy is the Collar City; that's fine. Saratoga Springs has Spa City, which works to some degree, Amsterdam is the Carpet City or Rug City, which is OK, and Cohoes goes by the Spindle City, which also works. Mechanicville has no nickname listed on its Wikipedia page, but according to my scouts over in that section of Saratoga County, it used to be called the Paper City. Watervliet is the Arsenal City, which I am lukewarm to, and Glens Falls goes by Hometown USA, which sounds friendly but does little else to tell us about the place. There are thousands of hometowns across the USA.

As for our state, the nickname is Empire State, and our motto is Excelsior, a Latin term that means "ever upward." There doesn't seem to be a clear story as to how the term Empire State came about, but some historians point to George Washington's letter to James Duane, the founder of Duanesburg, and his reference to New York as "the seat of the empire." While New York's pivotal role in the American Revolution gives some credence to the nickname, Empire State, it's certainly not an endearing term to me.

Yes, "Electric City" is indeed a very good nickname. Let's leave it alone.



Image: Caroline Bardwell, owner of the Schenectady Trading Company on Union Street.



*All Images: Charles Proteus Steinmetz, from the SCHS Grems-Doolittle Library and Archives Collection.*

he studied philosophy and mathematics at his hometown University of Breslau. There he joined a student socialist club, devoted to the ideas of Ferdinand Lassalle, another native of Breslau and a rival of contemporary German socialist Karl Marx. Compared to Marx, Lassalle focused less on economics and revolution, and more on legal theory and the advocacy of universal manhood suffrage. Lassalle believed, however, that once those voters succeeded in establishing a socialist government, democracy could be dispensed with as superfluous.

In a photograph displayed proudly in a photographer's shop window, Steinmetz joined several others gathered around a bust of Lassalle. That picture made it easy for local police to identify the members of the Breslau student socialist club, and their interest encouraged Steinmetz to embark on a long odyssey; first across borders, then across the ocean. In 1894, that odyssey ended in Schenectady. By 1910, Steinmetz's courageous overcoming of physical disabilities by the exercise

of mental ability made him not merely one of the world's leading electrical engineers, but also a national celebrity.

Along the way, Steinmetz put socialism on the back burner. However, in 1910, while his socialism was dormant, Schenectady's was emerging. It was led by shop floor workers at the GE Works: machinists and toolmakers such as John Bellingham, Harvey Simmons, and William Turnbull. They began the process of organizing the GE plant under the banner of such craft unions as the International Association of Machinists and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. They also put Socialist candidates on the local ballot for alderman and even mayor, though without noticeable success.

No evidence before 1911 links Steinmetz to this local socialist movement. There is not a single mention of this local movement in Steinmetz's extensive letter books of 1910-1911. Of course, this absence of evidence is not evidence



of absence. There may be unknown socialist letter books yet to be found, a sort of 1910 equivalent of a personal e-mail server. Occasionally, Steinmetz would receive a letter addressed to "Dear Comrade." He would reply politely addressing his correspondent as "Dear Sir." For example, one of those comrades was a western farmer working a dry property. He had learned of a recently patented method for using electromagnetic circuits to find water. Could Comrade Steinmetz tell him how to make it work? Steinmetz replied that there was no way to make it work. The device was a fraud.

Further evidence of Steinmetz's disengagement with socialism can be found in his dealings with the workers who reported to him. In 1910, he managed a few dozen subordinates in the Consulting Engineering Department and the Steinmetz Lab (not to be confused with the larger GE Research Lab, which he founded, but no longer ran). When addressing this managerial role, he did not apply concepts of exploitation, commodification, or Marx's labor theory of value. Instead, he exhibited the same puzzlement as any capitalist boss seeking to be firm but fair to his workers. This echoes in a 1911 letter to the director of another GE lab. Steinmetz wrote, "Will you please let me know by return mail how much you pay to your first glass-blower. My glass blower has asked for an increase of pay, as he has not received an increase for many years, and claims that he gets less than good glass blowers get elsewhere. He is a very good man, doing considerably more than mere glass-blowing, and therefore appears to me entitled to receive an appropriate pay, and for this reason I should be very much obliged if you would let me know confidentially how much you pay your best glass blower."

This declining contact with both socialist theory and socialist practice was accompanied, however, by a growing interest in city politics. One piece of evidence for this was a subscription to Lunn's newspaper. Another was a series of letters to Schenectady's Water Commissioner seeking technical reports about a proposed expansion of Schenectady's water system.

In April 1911, Steinmetz was ready to go public with his emerging civic consciousness. The venue was far from socialist. It was the Schenectady Board of Trade, a meeting place of the city's capitalist elite. Members of the Board of Trade included successful local businessmen, such as Willis T. Hanson, a druggist and patent medicine entrepreneur-turned-banker, and Henry S. De Forest, a real estate agent and paving contractor-turned-Republican U.S. Congressman. It also included top GE executives such as Albert L. Rohrer and inheritors of wealth such as Weldon Stanford, nephew of Leland Stanford (a railroad baron and founder of Stanford University).

Speaking on April 7, 1911, to what a reporter described as the Board of Trade's "largest assemblage of the year," Steinmetz did not exactly wave the red flag of socialism. Instead, he chose the "Vitality of Schenectady" as his topic. "I have been a resident of this city for 17 years," he began, noting that in 1894, "Schenectady had a reputation at that time of being very similar to a cemetery." He went on, "I was very agreeably

disappointed to find that reputation undeserved ... and do not intend to live anywhere else." However, he said, "We have not kept step with the phenomenal growth of the city." Some things have been done well. He said, "We have an efficient board of health, board of education and police department." Other things have been done less well. Too many citizens were shopping in New York City and Albany instead of locally. The street railway system poorly served the rapidly growing work force. Street lighting was patchy and of poor quality. The solution to all this, he concluded "is up to the citizens. You must be willing to contribute more money."

This program for a better Schenectady was not mere boosterism. It was a local version of a national trend called progressivism. Like socialism, this program came in many flavors. Underlying them all was the concept of a constructive, professional approach to such urban problems as sanitation, schools, public transit, and public safety: those issues of health, education, policing, street railways, and street lighting highlighted in Steinmetz's speech.

Like streetlights and street railways, both of which GE sold (and to which Steinmetz had supplied inventions), progressivism was perfectly acceptable to GE. A short time after Steinmetz's speech, the manager of GE's Schenectady Works, George Emmons, entertained a delegation, including leaders of the Board of Trade. Led by Schenectady's mayor, they had come to protest the fact that GE was moving one of its newest businesses, the Transportation Department, from Schenectady to Erie, Pennsylvania. Not to worry, Emmons assured them. There was plenty of work for everyone. The key was progressivism. As the reporter covering the meeting put it, "Mr. Emmons, however, did strongly intimate that the company expected the city representatives to be at all times as progressive as the city desired the company to be."

Within two weeks, Steinmetz himself had accepted a second speaking engagement. This time his intended audience was a new group called the Progressive Republican Club of Schenectady. Steinmetz had registered as a Republican in past city elections, but had become disillusioned by that party's conservatism. Perhaps these new Progressive Republicans would do better.

Their club had a very definite meaning for progressivism: a new way of organizing cities called the Commission Plan. Pioneered in Galveston, TX, and Des Moines, IA, just a few years before, it had spread to some 100 cities. It was portrayed as a way to replace corruption, patronage, and political bossism with professional guidance and supervision. The way to do this was to change the composition of the city's governing body.

In 1911, most U.S. cities, including Schenectady, chose their city councilmen, then called aldermen, by elections in wards, areas slightly larger than a neighborhood. In Schenectady, each of these wards had definite economic, social, and ethnic characteristics. For example, the 1st Ward included the Stockade, still home of the city's old pre-GE elite. That group was consistently outvoted by the more densely populated

lower 1st Ward – the less reputable, working class Frog Alley neighborhood. The 3rd Ward, centered on Romeyn St. (today Barrett St.) was dominated by Irish immigrants and their descendants, and had recently seen an influx of Italian immigrants. Similarly, in the 9th and 10th Wards, which today are known as Hamilton Hill and Mt. Pleasant, the earlier and still numerically larger German American community was seeing an influx of Eastern Europeans. Steinmetz himself lived in the 11th Ward, newly created to encompass the GE Plot, home of that company's top executives, scientists, and engineers.

A Common Council, consisting of two aldermen from each of these wards, governed the city. To its advocates this method was democratic in its method of representation and responsive to the separate needs of each ward. To its opponents, including the Progressive Republican Club of Schenectady, this method was unwieldy, inefficient, and susceptible to corruption. Elections were highly partisan, and often distorted by vote buying or dominated by ward bosses. The meetings of the aldermen would be devoted to handing out patronage jobs and street paving contracts to loyal partisans, while appointing party hacks to head those public service departments.

The Progressive Republicans of Schenectady proposed the Commission Plan as a solution to the problems they saw. Under this method, the city would be governed by a council of five councilmen, all elected city wide on a non-partisan basis.

The small number would prevent gridlock. The odd number would avoid ties. One of the councilmen would be elected mayor. He would, however, be a presiding officer, not a strong chief executive. Collectively the council would hire experts, chosen from a nationwide pool on the basis of their expertise, to run city departments such as sanitation, education, and public safety. In short, the city would be governed by a small group of efficient executives, and operated by a team of professional specialists, much like an industrial corporation.

Steinmetz enthusiastically endorsed this Commission Plan. Fortunately for the historical record, he summarized his views in a letter that survives in the archives of the Schenectady County Historical Society. It is a snapshot of Steinmetz's political thinking, taken just at the moment he was making

that transition from his first to his second socialism. Steinmetz wrote:

"An unexpected business trip makes it impossible for me to be present at your meeting, and thereby makes it necessary for me to express in writing my agreement with the progressive aims of your organization. Now, where the Republican party of New York State has thrown away its former ambition of being the party of progress, and where all over the country forces are at work to tear down what little advance toward progress the nation has made in former administrations, I believe it is essential for all citizens, to energetically cooperate to restore the democratic government, which was the aim when the nation was founded, and more particularly: in municipal affairs to give us an efficient method of

administration, of which we may be proud of [sic]; In national affairs, to give us an organization, which will utilize the economic laws of the modern industrial development for the benefit of all the nation, instead of helplessly submitting or wantonly opposing economic laws which cannot be broken without national self destruction."

This vision of a government run by professional experts operating according to those laws of economics had an interesting electrical parallel. Steinmetz could not attend the meeting on the Commission Plan in Schenectady because he had been called to another important meeting in Chicago. Commonwealth Edison, Chicago's major electric utility, found that attempts

to operate its two newest power plants simultaneously were accompanied by system instabilities that were unsettling, and perhaps dangerous. Since General Electric had supplied the equipment, General Electric was called in to solve the problem. A report of that meeting survives in the Steinmetz letter books in the SCHS archives.

The attendees included major executives of Commonwealth Edison and GE. Dominating the meeting, however, were Steinmetz and his protégé Ernst Berg, then chairman of the electrical engineering department of the University of Illinois. Their leadership was not due to their place in corporate hierarchies, which was relatively low. It was due to their command of the mathematical laws of alternating current electricity. In part of the meeting, Steinmetz spoke scientific

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for all citizens,  
to energetically  
cooperate to restore  
the democratic  
government, which  
was the aim when  
the nation was  
founded.”

truth to corporate power. When asked by a Commonwealth Edison executive about the current safety of the system, Steinmetz replied that "the safe performance so far owed more to luck than to good design."

Steinmetz and Berg proceeded to conduct a discussion, at times even constructively disagreeing with one another, to analyze the problem and present an answer. Their answer addressed the specifications for, and placement of, circuits of electrical components called reactances. The result was a technical solution to the instability problem (and also another order for GE).

Comparison of the Steinmetz letter with his meeting report suggests an analogy. Because the problems of power systems were best solved by application of scientific laws, a council of corporate executives should delegate solving electric power system problems to specialized electrical professionals. In the same way, because the problems of social systems were best solved by application of the "economic laws" mentioned in Steinmetz's letter, a council of city leaders should delegate solving urban problems to specialized economic and social science professionals.

Lest one think that this analogy between electricity and progressive reform was unique to Steinmetz, or a figment of the imagination of a later historian, consider a nationally syndicated article that appeared in the Schenectady *Daily Union* just three days after those Progressive Republican Club and Chicago utility meetings. In that article, a U.S. Senator from Iowa argued in favor of the Commission Plan. He illustrated his argument with his own version of the analogy. The old alderman-ward system, he said, was inefficient and unwieldy, a product of unscientific tinkering like the old method of powering factories with belts and pulleys driven by small steam engines. The Commission Plan, by contrast, was scientific, streamlined, and efficient, like the delivery of power via electricity in a modern factory.

By mid-1911, Steinmetz was an enthusiastic convert to progressivism and the Commission Plan. Why did he even retain the name "socialist" for this essentially technocratic, meritocratic, perhaps even elitist version of the future? Partly, perhaps, it was memories of his youth. Partly, it was his being swept along in the wake of a much more dynamic, charismatic politician who was making his own conversion to socialism. This temporary convert, who would switch to the Democratic Party in just five years, was George Lunn. Steinmetz had not remained in communication with Lunn after that first 1910 subscription request. Indeed, his only other letter to the future mayor in 1910- 1911 was one a week later, when he apologized for failing, due to typical absent mindedness, to include payment for the newspaper subscription in his first letter (and presumably enclosing the check this time).

For Lunn, 1910 progressivism was also a stepping stone to 1911 socialism. After sounding out the local Democrats and Republicans, Lunn determined that the most effective route to progressive reform would be through leadership

of the Socialist Party created by GE workers and initially concentrated in the 9th and 10th "German" wards. Lunn instantly turned that 'also-ran' party into a formidable citywide contender. By the end of 1911, he had earned a decisive electoral victory and had become Schenectady's Socialist mayor.

When it came time to cast a ballot in that mayoral election of 1911, Charles Proteus Steinmetz, formerly a registered Republican, briefly a Progressive Republican, and champion of the Commission Plan, was a registered Socialist. In the wake of his victory, Lunn put together a collection of experts to run his nominally Socialist city government in a manner not too different from the progressive Commission Plan. Steinmetz was one of the experts he called upon. This would begin a late career effort by Steinmetz at leading improvements to the schools and parks of Schenectady, and even presiding over the city council. It would also begin a longer term evolution of Schenectady city government from the older ward-based alderman system to a brief experiment in socialism, and to a city manager system followed by the current system, which combines the citywide council elections of the Commission Plan with a strong mayor. In the 21st century, some people are recommending, unsuccessfully so far, the improvement of democratic representation and responsiveness by adopting ward-based city council elections. This idea, if accepted, would represent an interesting closing of the political and historical circle.

In summary, the transition from Steinmetz's first socialism to his second took place under the influence of progressivism and the Commission Plan. It could very well have been expressed by following Theodore Roosevelt and his Progressive "Bull Moose" party. That might have happened if the Progressive Republican Party of Schenectady had been a little more dynamic and democratic. Instead, Steinmetz was swept up in the enthusiasm for the very dynamic, though only temporarily Socialist, George Lunn.

Steinmetz's second socialism, from 1912 until his death at age 58 in 1923, failed to confirm his core belief, expressed in that 1911 letter and later in his 1916 book, *America and the New Epoch*. He believed that for politics and economics, as for electricity, there are universally accepted scientific laws suitable for application by knowledgeable and dispassionate social engineers. If there are such laws, the world has yet to find them. What survives is not Steinmetz's overly optimistic science-based social vision. It is his fundamental humanity. In the preface of his 1916 book, he expressed gratitude for the advantages he personally possessed, but, for him, mere gratitude was not enough. It had to be combined with what he called a "divine discontent," empowering him to fight against the social, political, physical, and economic limitations that prevented other people from gaining the same advantages that he so fortunately enjoyed.



# Schenectady African American Historical Records Project – Phase 1

by Marietta Carr, Librarian/Archivist

African Americans have been part of the Schenectady community since colonial times. However, their lives and experiences are significantly underrepresented in the historical records available to the public in repositories like SCHS. According to the most recent census data, African Americans make up about 12% of Schenectady County's population. Failing to preserve the historical records created by African Americans will mean losing a significant amount of Schenectady's history. The African American Historical Records Project, a new collaboration coordinated by the Schenectady County Historical Society, is a new public history project focused on Schenectady's African American history. The project aims to identify and preserve primary sources created by the Black community in Schenectady, and it builds on the work of many individuals and groups such as the Schenectady Silhouettes, the Vale Cemetery African American Burial Ground, and historians Marcia Mortimore and Neil Yetwin who recognized the value of African American history and sought to record and preserve it.

County Historian Bill Buell, exclaims, "We have so much wonderful Black history! Talking to James Stamper and the Allen family was a thrill; it's a special opportunity whenever I've been able to talk to such brilliant people and look into Black history. Everyone should have that opportunity." Indeed, our goal is to enable future generations to engage with the community's historical records, creating a bridge between previous historians, current record creators and caregivers, and future researchers.

During the project, we will conduct an archival records survey and produce a catalog which will identify where historical collections are located, what condition they are in, and how researchers can access them. We expect the date span for the majority of the records to be 1880 to 2000; however, we are not limiting the survey or collection activities to those dates. We expect churches, faith-based organizations, and community service organizations will hold the majority of the historical records, but we plan to include records created by individuals and families as well. Sophia Delamar, a teacher and a member of the project's advisory committee, explains, "By reaching out to the people of Schenectady County to share their historical records, it may bring to light some of the lesser known stories of Schenectady. Students may find connections to their own family history which could spark a wider interest in local history in general."

Hamilton Hill Arts Center is one of the institutions we plan to survey. As the county's only organization dedicated to

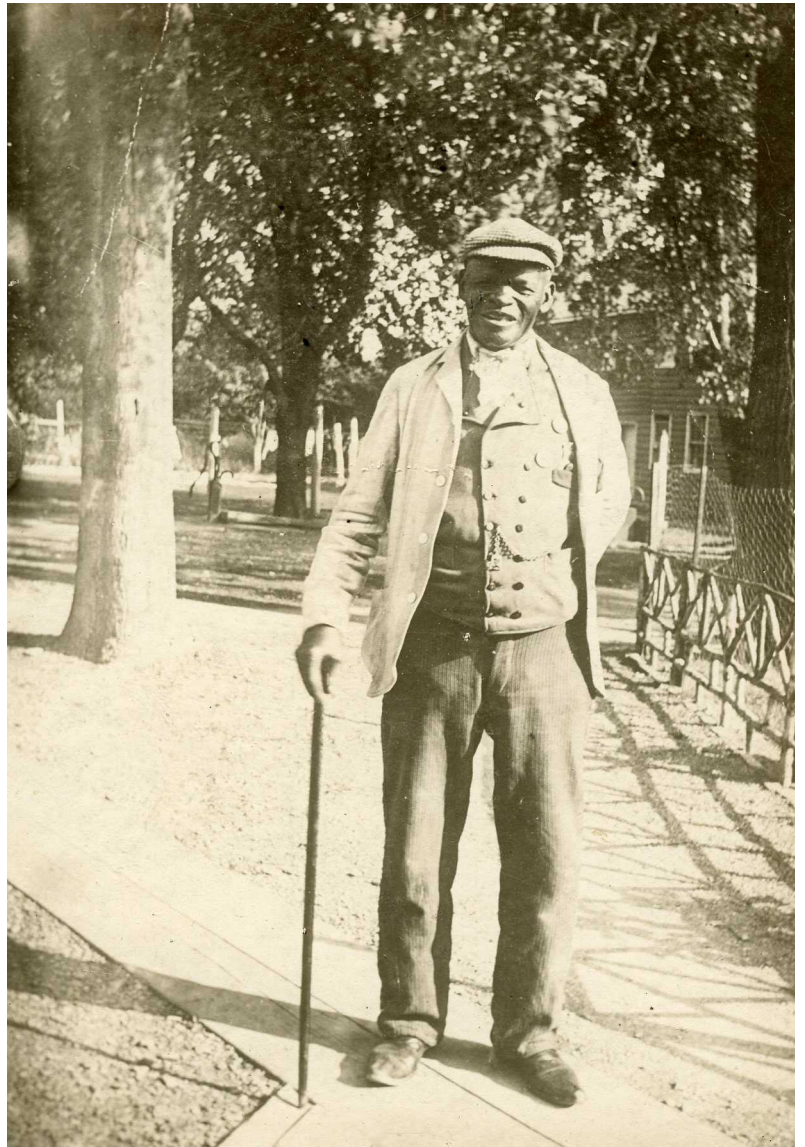
art of the African diaspora, HHAC connects Schenectady to the national and international community of the African diaspora. Established 50 years ago, HHAC has positively impacted generations of Schenectadians and is a mainstay in the city. According to Miki Conn, former director of HHAC and a member of this project's advisory committee, HHAC is the only community organization that has been consistently directed by African Americans. Its history, however, is not easily accessible.

The institution's historical records include photos, news clippings, business records, grant applications, and recordings of adults who attended HHAC as children. Other records may exist in private collections, or may be inaccessible due to changes in technology. Ms. Conn explains, "Margaret Cunningham, the founder of the Hamilton Hill Arts Center and my mother, wrote the history of the arts center from her memory. Unfortunately, they were in the early computer formats and we aren't able to open them. We have not had a designated historian for the organization."

Surveying the HHAC historical records provides an opportunity to bring light to the many people who have contributed to HHAC's success, and who have impacted the Black community in Schenectady or are widely known in the arts. "The white community in Schenectady remembers the names of people who are known for their accomplishments and contributions to Schenectady," Ms. Conn points out. "Similarly, Hamilton Hill has names of Black people who are remembered with pride although not known in the white community. We help make sure these names are not forgotten. Like George Chillas who went to jail and died young, but was known as an amazing master drummer. Like Benigh Ennous who was an incredible visual artist, who started as an 'Arts Center kid.'"

Anyone looking for information on the African American Historical Records Project or wishing to participate in the survey should contact Marietta Carr at SCHS at 518-374-0263, option 3, or email her at [librarian@schenectadyhistorical.org](mailto:librarian@schenectadyhistorical.org). Updates on the project will be shared on the Grems-Doolittle Library Blog.

*Images, clockwise from top left: Mr. Jackson Barber and unknown man. From the Barber Family Photo Collection, Grems-Doolittle Library; Mr. Bartlett Jackson. From the Jackson Family Photo Collection, Grems-Doolittle Library; Nannie Jackson, servant who cared for Marion Smith, wife of Wendell Putman. From the Putnam Family Photo Collection, Grems-Doolittle Library.*





# REVIEW: *Schenectady Genesis: Volume II: The Creation of an American City from an Anglo-Dutch Town, ca. 1760-1800*

by Martin Strosberg

Sixteen years after the publication of Susan Staffa's groundbreaking *Volume I: How a Dutch Colonial Village Became an American City, ca. 1661-1800*, we now have John Gearing's monumental *Volume II* – all 338 pages (11 by 9 inches), 26 chapters with over 100 images of maps, charts, paintings, and photographs. Both volumes of the Schenectady Genesis series were made possible by the Colonial History Project, Ltd.

There is so much to cover during this epic 40-year period of 1760-1800: the French and Indian War, the Dutch vs. the English, Schenectady vs. Albany, Sir William Johnson and the Iroquois, the fur trade, religion, education, slavery, the American Revolution, and the city charter of Schenectady. For each of these topics (only a very partial listing), Gearing addresses the important political, economic, and cultural factors influencing the course of events. Gearing not only paints a detailed picture of life in Schenectady and the Mohawk Valley, but also helps us understand the relevance of the larger geo-political situation on both sides of the Atlantic. And perhaps nowhere is the connection between international geo-politics and local history more apparent than in his account of the fur trade. Quite literally, the major contours of Schenectady history were shaped by the economic forces and national rivalries unleashed by the fur trade and the European fashion industry.

Location, location, location, as they say. Indeed, Schenectady's position on the Mohawk as "Gateway to the West" made it a natural hub of the fur trade in the colonies. In the 1760s, after the French and Indian War, Schenectady merchants gained access to the Great Lakes and established a network of trading posts and agents centered in Detroit and other strategic waterway spots. The trade took place under the aegis, and accrued to the financial advantage of, Sir William Johnson, British Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Johnson made sure the Native Americans were treated fairly (and remained loyal to the British) as they traded beaver pelts and other animal furs in exchange for manufactured British goods.

Johnson, as Gearing explains, was enthusiastic about the

potential profitability of the fur trade. According to Johnson, one middle-sized bateau powered by three men could transport a load of goods for trade from Schenectady to Detroit in 26 days. The annual market for manufactured goods was substantial, including: 23,000 blankets, 40,000 shirts, 20 million pieces of black wampum, 60,000 awls, 10,000 looking glasses, 50,000 gallons of rum. Johnson asserted that a merchant could realize a 100% profit once the furs were sold on the London market. Under these conditions, Schenectady merchants and middlemen prospered; Gearing tells their stories well.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the pelts were made into warm, fashionable hats, muffs, and coats for the lucrative European market. On this side of the Atlantic, Gearing tells us that Native Americans, over many generations, became highly selective shoppers, demanding particular items of British cloth, which they added to their traditional outfits. The resulting style was known as "Indian Fashion."

On the downside, when the market for beaver hats slumped in Europe, the fur trade economy of Schenectady suffered. The American Revolution effectively brought to a close Schenectady's central role in the fur trade.

Readers who want to understand the broader context of the fur trade can turn to the book's appendix for an explanation of the economic theory of mercantilism and a description of how colonial trade was extensively regulated by London. We can readily see, in the run-up to the Revolution, how Parliament's punitive acts restricting colonial commerce were important factors in the road to independence.

Although its fur trade receded after the Revolution, Schenectady regained its commercial prominence with the construction of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, which improved shipping on the Mohawk, making it a key port. While the account of commerce and the fur trade serves as a leitmotif for a large part of the book, there is much, much more. The military and political history of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution receive extensive attention. Gearing also describes the legal intricacies and political intrigues of a 100 year-old dispute between a rival set of trustees over the disposition of a tract known as "Common Lands," presumably held for the benefit of the inhabitants. The ensuing standoff, which greatly impeded Schenectady's settlement and economic development, was not fully resolved until Schenectady was granted a city charter by New York State in 1798.

Gearing's multi-faceted narrative of this remarkable 40-year period, ably edited by City of Schenectady Historian Chris Leonard, is chock-full of references, chapter notes, and appendices. It is fascinating reading and no doubt will become an indispensable reference for historians.

The book can be ordered through the online bookstore of the Schenectady County Historical Society or purchased at the Open Door bookstore.





Image: Historian John Gearing at a signing of "Schenectady Genesis Volume II." Courtesy of the Daily Gazette.

## Q&A with John Gearing

**Q:** This was a huge project to undertake, considering the amount of research. Where did you start?

**A:** I started by trying to decide where to begin, timewise. The intention of *Volume I* had been to go to 1798, but [the author] was unable to complete it in time. After studying *Volume I*, there was a natural point where things had changed radically for Schenectady as a result of the French and Indian War; that would be a good starting point. What was Schenectady at that time? Who were the players? What was going on. And then, you start to think, do you tell a story chronologically, or break it down into discreet topics? With a straight timeline, you would have to revisit certain things...which might be confusing for readers. I kept trying to figure out ways to balance out the two approaches. Then, it's a matter of reading everything that had already been published, starting with general histories on American society, and then digging into archival documents and getting to original sources.

**Q:** What stories did you uncover in this book that people didn't really have knowledge of before?

**A:** One was the degree to which the control for common

lands dominated political discussion in Schenectady for more than fifty years, and how that stunted the growth of the town. It was surprising to find evidence of settlers bypassing Schenectady and going farther west. The SCHS was key since it had just accepted the Strong Collection (original source material relating to family history). That material, which earlier researchers had not had access to, had a tremendous wealth of never before seen information, like court orders. It really fleshed out what was going on politically. With regard to the Liberty Poles, there were riots in the street, and it was interesting to see the degree to which there was animosity and factions in town.

**Q:** Is there anything you wish you had a chance to dig into a little bit more?

**A:** The ethnic and religious diversity of the town really began to increase during this time period. It would have been great to have more information about, for example, the First Presbyterian Church. However, their records were destroyed in a fire. It also would have been nice to know more about the first Jewish residents of the town. And, in terms of the enslaved people, there is just bare bones information. We have some records about slaves being married or giving birth, but I wish I could have found more information.

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# What's Happening

## New Exhibitions

### Redesigning Fashion:

#### Transgression and Identity in Women's Historic Dress

**Virtual Exhibit Opening May 8 at 7pm**

**In-Person Viewing May 15 - November 13, 2021**

A partnership between SCHS and the Fashion & Textiles program at SUNY Oneonta in which students have been given the opportunity to research a historic garment from SCHS' collection, and based on that research, design its modern counterpart. The collaboration has resulted in an exhibition that explores the historical importance of women's clothing and fashion in the expression of cultural values and the creation of identity, and examines how those ideals change over time.

## Talks and Workshops

### Virtual Talk: Shaker Fashion: An Image of Controlled Conformity with Sarah Byrd

**May 8 at 7pm @ Online | \$5, free for members**

Join fashion historian Sarah Byrd as she discusses the dress of the Shakers and early religious sects from New York during the Great Awakening. We will discuss how clothing has been used by religious groups to conform and subvert to cultural norms.

### Workshop: Gourd Birdhouses

**May 29 at 11am @ Mabee Farm | \$25**

Spring has sprung! And that means lots of bird activity in our gardens. We will make and decorate our own birdhouses out of dried gourds grown at Mabee Farm. Pre-registration required.

## Tours and Trips

Pre-registration required. Walking Tours are free for members.

### Walking Tour: The Stockade Beyond the Pines

**May 12 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$11**

**May 15 at 4pm @ 32 Washington | \$11**

This walking tour takes us back to a land you may know but a world that's unrecognizable. In the 17th century, Schenectady sat at the crossroads of many competing empires, where European colonists met native American nations. Come see how our city's story began!

### Walking Tour: Revolutionary Schenectady

**May 19 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$11**

**May 22 at 4pm @ 32 Washington | \$11**

The American Revolution is, of course, a pivotal moment in the history of our city and our nation. And while the generation of '76 looms large in our memory, the complex issues of the day often get lost over time. Come explore a conflict that sundered families and communities alike. What does it mean to be a Patriot?

### Walking Tour: Canal Days

**May 26 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$11**

**May 29 at 4pm @ 32 Washington | \$11**

With the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, New York truly became the "Empire State." Once a sleepy farming town, Schenectady experienced a dramatic transformation of its own during the canal era.

### Walking Tour: Schenectady's Golden Age

**June 2 at 6pm @ Washington Ave | \$11**

**June 5 at 4pm @ Washington Ave | \$11**

At the turn of the 20th century, Schenectady was a booming industrial power: the city that "Lights and Hauls the World." This tour explores this period, the figures and factories that made it so dynamic. We'll look beyond the nostalgia and seek differing perspectives on Schenectady's halcyon days.

### Walking Tour: Schenectady's Leading Ladies

**June 9 at 6pm @ Washington Ave | \$11**

**June 12 at 4pm @ Washington Ave | \$11**

Through the first three centuries of Schenectady's past, gender roles often hid women from historical memory. But a careful look reveals the real and remarkable ways women shaped our city. This tour introduces you to a few of Schenectady's foremost women.

### Kayak Through History

**June 19 and June 26 at 10am @ Mohawk Harbor | \$26**

Explore Schenectady from a different vantage point: the Mohawk River! Starting out from Mohawk Harbor, we'll paddle our way upstream to the Glen Sanders Mansion and back, passing under railroad bridges and around wild islands. The paddling will be done by you. The learning will come from an SCHS guide, who will discuss the history of the river and its surroundings.

## For Families

### Family Program: Mabee Young Farmer's Day

**April 24 & May 1 at 10am @ Mabee Farm | \$8/child**

It's time for the first planting of the year and we need all the help we can get! In this program we'll learn how generations of kids would help their parents grow the food they needed to survive. We'll start with seeds in our own garden and end with a baked treat to enjoy. A real farm to table experience!

### Family Program: Colonial Kids Saturdays

**May 22, June 5 & June 12 at 10am @ Mabee Farm | \$8/child**

On these special dates, the Mabee Farm will be open just for kids! Tour the entirety of our farm with special demonstrations of colonial crafts. Butter making, barn-building, blacksmithing and meeting the farm animals are just some of the activities available.

# HOWLIN' AT THE MOON

## AMERICANA MUSIC AT MABEE FARM

**June 24**  
**Three Quarter North**  
**with Everest Rising**

**July 22**  
**The Nellies**  
**with Everest Rising**

**August 19**  
**Running the River**  
**with Everest Rising**

**September 16**  
**TBA**  
**with Everest Rising**

**SHOWS START AT 7PM**  
**FREE ADMISSION**



*One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain.*  
*- Bob Marley*

With cautious optimism and a step towards normality, the [Howlin' at the Moon Concert Series](#) will return this summer for four shows at the Mabee Farm. These shows will be held in the Dutch Barn, outdoors, or under the pavilion, depending on the weather or health restrictions at the time.

In the spirit of friendship and support, the 2021 season will have no admission fee. Some of your favorite bands are returning this year, including Running the River, The Nellies

and Three Quarter North. In a change of format, the band Everest Rising will be hosting all four concerts in lieu of an opening act.

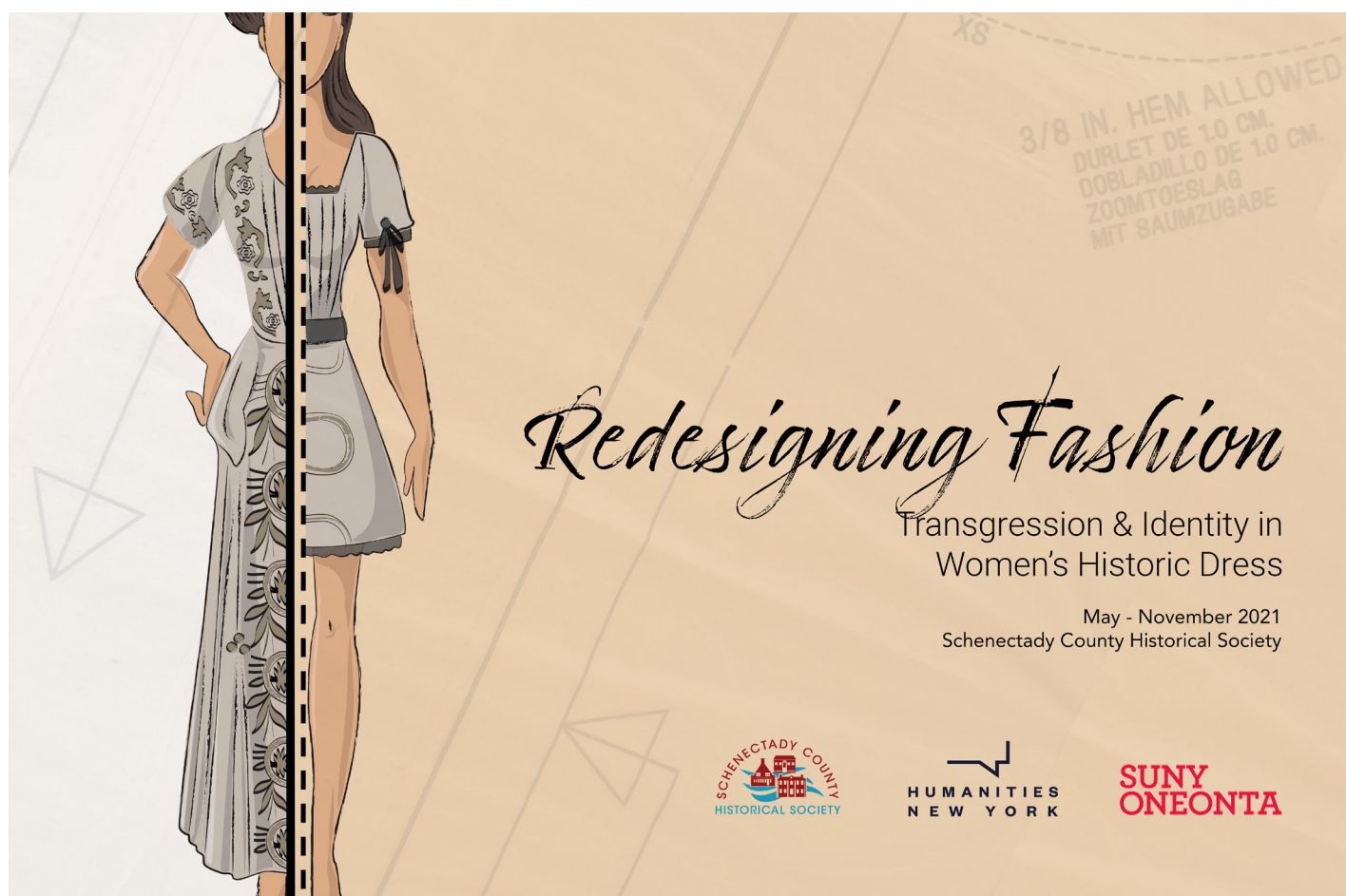
We warmly invite you to come out and enjoy the music and tranquil scenery. Mark your calendars and watch the SCHS website and Facebook page for more details.

**by Joan Wade-Keszey**

SCHENECTADY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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May - November 2021  
Schenectady County Historical Society

