

Schenectady County Historical Society Newsletter

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CALENDAR

Saturday, March 8, 2003 1:30 Refreshments Program: Premier showing: Colonial Life in the Mohawk Valley
An Original Slide show presented by the Education Committee, Production by Bill Massoth

Wednesday, March 19, 2003

Time: 11:30 AM

Board of Trustees

Saturday, April 12, 2003

1:30 Refreshments

2:00 Program:

Annual Meeting

Wednesday, April 16, 2003

11:30 AM

Board of Trustees

Society Hours

Monday-Friday 1:00 to 5:00 PM

Saturday 9:00 AM to 12 Noon

Group tours by appointment

Phone (518) 374-0263

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

I made the mistake of being born in a house on the north side of the street. As a consequence all the street maps of my "old home town" seemed to be oriented upside down. I have a map dyslexia.

Among the several maps displayed around the reading area of the Society's Grems-Doolittle library is an 1875 lithograph of Schenectady by G. W. Lewis. I've found a soul mate. G. W. 's map is drawn with north at the bottom. This map provides a "birds-eye-view" of the city. Depending on which side of the street a building faces, one can see either its facade, side or back in addition to the roof configuration. The Stockade area is up close and featured. The perspective reduces the size and detail of the buildings in the outlying reaches of the city which extends only a few blocks beyond Nott Terrace. The lithograph includes the depiction of barges tied up along the Erie Canal. The one canal warehouse depicted resembles the Society's oil painting of "7 Dock Street" which was near the corner of State Street on Erie Boulevard.

There's a building depicted on the Society's site at 32 Washington Avenue. It's the house that predates our 1895 Dora Jackson house. You can see the stone retaining wall between our property and the building next door! The bridge to Scotia is shown at the end of Washington Avenue, and there is a tree growing on the "island" opposite Arthur's Market at the corner of Front, Ferry and Green where the statue of Lawrence now stands.

Some of the street names have changed. Broadway was named Centre (sic) Street. (A block of Center Street still exists north of Union Street.) The northern end of Jay was Fonda, and Barrett was Romeyn. I looked to see what was depicted on Seminary Place the short dead-end street near the end of Barrett which has no buildings on it. Since the back side of the block is formed by the raised embankment of a now abandoned railroad right-of-way, there is a large area which does not otherwise have access to a street. And in the middle of this space the Lewis map shows a few buildings. Was this a seminary? There were at least two seminaries in the city during the 19th century; the Female Seminary and the Young Ladies Seminary.

I asked Frank Taormina if he knew how this street got its name. Frank is researching the naming of Schenectady city streets for a pamphlet. Frank hadn't gotten to Seminary Place yet in his review. He did turn me onto the fire insurance maps which show layouts of city property lines, and building plan-views in great detail. The fire insurance map of 1889 shows several dwellings and two saloons on Seminary Place. The map for 1880 does not show these buildings. The street bordered a railroad track which cut diagonally across the block between Jay Street and Barrett. (Most of this street is now gone due to the elevating of the tracks to eliminate railroad crossings.) On the other side of the track were the buildings of the locomotive works. This probably explains the two saloons. (The same block on Barrett Street had four eating and drinking establishments. Luigi's and the Huron Grill are still there.)

Frank also mentioned the 1930 City Directory. (Why did they ever stop publishing city directories!) The 1930 directory was the first to contain listings by street addresses. The first of nine listings on Seminary Place was Catherine Snowstein at 102 Seminary Place. I then went looking for Snowsteins at 102 Seminary Place in the earlier City Directories, and got back to 1879 for a Lewis Snowstein. 1879 was pretty close to confirming "new" construction, since no buildings were shown on the 1880 fire insurance map. I also looked in the 1968 City Directory, the last in the Society's collection, and the owner's name was still that of a member of the Snowstein family. Still there's no indication of why this street was called Seminary Place. We'll have to wait for Frank's thesis on Schenectady City Street Names, and hope his further research resolves my quandary.

Follow-up comments: So in spite of a prediction of subzero temperatures, my wife Ruth announced she wanted to go out for dinner. The list of possibilities included Luigi's on Barrett Street. There was no question in my mind. So I stood in Luigi's parking lot and reviewed, as best I could in the dark, what was out back. There were a couple of houses, one of which was built at a cocked angle to Barrett Street property lines. I'd found 102 Seminary Place!

The next day I went back to confirm my find. I parked in front of the Saw Mill tavern at Jay Street and South Avenue, and walked the short distance down Jay to the two abandoned houses behind the Saw Mill. The first had a Jay Street address. And the second -- the second had a jaded street sign on it: Seminary Place. It was 102 Seminary Place. Another sign announced that the city was going to auction off this property in February. (If anyone buys this property, they're going to have to buy a lot of window glass.)

The Society sells placemat size copies of the 1875 map if you'd like to buy one.

AROUND THE COUNTY

Princetown Tidbits -Irma Mastrean, Town Historian

An interesting sight in the early 1900's was John Levey's horse-drawn stagecoach. It left the Merchant's Hotel in Schenectady at 2:30 p.m. every day. The stage carried passengers and freight between the City and Mariaville. The passengers were traveling to the lake, which was a popular summer resort, and the freight was mainly destined for Peeke's Store. It was not uncommon for male passengers to get off the stage and walk up the "S" hill and other grades on Mariaville Road, allowing children and freight to remain on the coach. George Peeke relieved this situation by the use of a splendid pair of Percheron horses. They carried the heavy loads and

freight for years until finally sold to the Bradshaw brothers for use on their Mariaville Road farm. There was a spring-fed watering trough located below Rynex Corners on the bend of the road, where horses could stop for a drink.

MUSEUM NEWS -Jo Mordecai, Coordinator of Exhibits

A New Room

Surprise! Surprise! We have a change of the third floor of our house museum. What was once our Indian Room is now the architect map room. All the Indian artifacts are now at the Mabee Farm where under the guidance of Stan Lee they'll become part of the ongoing exhibit there. Our new room features framed architect paintings of some well-known buildings in Schenectady. All these were done by J. M. Ryder, architect, and show the designs of Schenectady Children's Home, Craig School, District 2 Niskayuna Van Antwerp school (proposed addition); Mont Pleasant High School, 1930, and New High School, Scotia, among others. Also now people can fully appreciate the two lovely old maps of New York that are mounted on the wall. The one I always have found fascinating is the chorographical map of the Province of New York in North America, made by Claude Joseph Sauthier, Esq., by order of His Excellency Major General William Tryon in London 1779. So many of the places we know today are there: Clifton Park, Niskayuna, a small Schenectady and many more; it is well worth studying. The other large map is of New York State by Simeon De Witt, made for the Surveyor General somewhat later than the 1779 map.

In the show case there is a selection of old surveyor tools. The sextant made by William Gurley in 1852 (Sextants were also used by sea captains); leveling rods, also by William Gurley 1855; and a surveying compass by J. Hanks, 1810-1830. Julius Hanks was a bellfounder and maker of survey compasses, scales and protractors. Another interesting feature standing by the door is an old water pipe unearthed at Wallace Avenue, Town of Rotterdam by contractors while installing a new water main for Water District No. 5, 1952. This old wooden pipe was probably a part of a system for watering stock which were brought in herds and placed in yards, generally near taverns.

Lastly we have a wonderful old "sun" weathervane, pre-Revolutionary, made of iron strips. It stands nearly six feet tall. This weathervane was formerly on a building in Albany occupied as a storehouse by the British before the Revolution, afterwards in the possession of the Van Rensselaer family.

It's a small room, but interesting: something new for you all to see. Hope to see you.

-Jo Mordecai-

From Your House to Our House

Donor: Barbara Hayward Clark Four pen-and-ink-with-wash sketches

Subjects: houses in the Stockade

Artist: Gertrude Clute Smith, wife of Commander Ronald H. Smith

Donor Dennis Heffron One box of eyeglasses made by Eveleigh

One Cook Book from Schenectady Vocational School

One Sales slip - Carl's Department Store Circa 1984

Donor Van der Bogert Shanklin Child's money bank. Late 19th Century.

Painting Up-date

We have three more paintings back after being restored by Caroline Keck. They are:

Nicolaas Marselis, 1766-1848; merchant and boat builder

Machtelt Rosa Marselis, 1772-1852; his wife

Both painted by Samuel H. Sexton. These paintings are hanging in the Vrooman Room which is beginning to look like a true art gallery. Also, the painting of James Rosa, brother of Machtelt Marselis, painted by Sexton, is hanging in the music room. James Rosa was a merchant and the first superintendent of the railway. These paintings were restored through the generosity of Blaine Johnston and Donald Smith.

Adopt-a-Portrait Contributors

Thanks to the generosity of many members we now have twenty restored paintings and ten refurbished frames. Herewith a list of the most recent contributors.

Anonymous

Dr. & Mrs. Harold P Curran

Mrs. Rose Dixon

Mr. William A. Dimpelfeld

Mrs. Rose Fetter

Mr. Stanley R Fitzmorris

Mrs. Wayne Harvey

Mr. Blaine H Johnston

Mrs. Ann Karl

Mrs. Elliess Riemer

Mr. Donald Smith, Jr.

Mr. James D. J. Schmitt

Mrs. Sally Sutliff Lester

Mr. W. Brinson Weeks, Jr.

Mrs. Mary Janes Whitcomb

EDUCATION COMMITTEE REPORT

The Education committee of the Schenectady County Historical Society announces a new film program which is available for use. It is called "Colonial Life in the Mohawk Valley." The script was written by Sally van Schaick and the photos and tape were the work of William Massoth. For details regarding the program's availability, please contact committee chair, Elsie M Maddaus, 346-8981

THE STREET WHERE YOU LIVE . . . How did the street you live on get its name?

WHY BATTER STREET?

In the westernmost portion of Schenectady County lies the hill town of Duanesburgh, and in the northern portion of Duanesburgh lies the hamlet of Mariaville. Mariaville is nestled around the old mill pond that James Duane back in 1793. Duane named it Mariaville in honor of his eldest daughter. Mariaville became a booming industrial center in the early 19th century. It had no less than a grist mill, three sawmills, a molding mill, a broom handle mill, a cider mill, a trip hammer for making axe heads, a cheese factory, and the pioneer rural telephone company of Schenectady County. It also had a shop that built wagons and sleighs. Oh yes, it had its usual shoemaker, blacksmiths, and general stores as did all villages at that time. Also it had the usual churches and schools. I would say it was a rather complete community.

From the traffic light in Mariaville, county highway No. 94, better known as Batter Street meanders round the end of the old mill pond, now called Mariaville Lake. It proceeds west past Spook Woods Road for a distance of about 2 1/2 country miles, and intersects with Duanesburgh Churches Road. Near this intersection is a revolutionary war graveyard, containing the graves of Captain Elijah Herrick and other revolutionary war soldiers. At the east end of the graveyard stands Captain Herrick's house, still beautifully preserved. A bit further east was Captain Conklin's hotel which burned several years back. Also I have found reference to a meeting house referred to as the "White" meeting house being in this area. There was also a tannery which netted its owner Mr. Sherburne a sizable fortune. Where there was a tannery there had to be workers, and where there were workers there had to be homes. So it seems there was a small settlement at this place. Across from Captain Conklin's hotel was a training ground and during the war of 1812 soldiers trained at this area. It is also recorded that this training ground was used again during the Civil War.

But why Batter Street? Noted historian Warren Liddle thought it came out next to the grist mill in Mariaville which was famous for making buckwheat flour for pancake batter. One other person said that in the springtime the surface of the road was very muddy just the consistency of pancake batter. I too have a theory. Since there was a settlement at the west end of county highway 94, was that settlement called Batter Street? The term Street in the old days referred to a settlement rather than a thoroughfare. Minaville was called Yankee Street. Bremen's Corners in the town of Duanesburgh was called Parlor Street, and of course also in the town of Duanesburgh is the settlement of Quaker Street which still keeps its name in spite of everything the Post Office had tried. Indeed was our little settlement called Batter Street because it was named after somebody by the name of Batter? I found reference to one woman whose last name was Batter, but all she did was get married. Were there other Batters in the area, or perhaps Batterman, or even some other similar name? And so the question still remains: why Batter Street?

Do you know how your street or other streets in the city or town where you live got its name? Please include yourself in this project. Share your knowledge with us -- you'll be given credit for your contribution, and all of us will be richer for what you have told us. Contact Virginia Bolen at the Historical Society, 374-0263 or Frank Taormina at 374-9655.

WE GET LETTERS . . .

We received an especially nice letter from Kenneth and Thelma Lally telling us how pleased they were with the program we established at the Mabee farm for school children, and making a contribution of \$1,000 "in order to defray some of the expenses of the program." Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Lally. We hope when the weather is better that you may visit us and view the project for yourselves.

MABEE FARM

Ten-Year Update

In January of 1993, Historical Society President John van Schaick accepted a deed to the Farm in a ceremony in the Vrooman room. The value of the 9 1/2 acre farm with its three ancient houses was appraised at \$208,000, but there's more to the story. In February 1990 after a Saturday meeting, George Franchere of Dunedin, Florida, had observed to then-trustee van Schaick that he'd been trying to give the Mabee Farm to some group which would open it to the public for educational purposes in accordance with his mother's and aunt's wishes but he couldn't give it away. George was a direct descendant of Jan Pieterse Mabee and had inherited the Mabee Farm in the 1970's.

The Farm was on the National and State Registers of Historic Places, and George had offered the Farm to the State, but he couldn't afford their terms. They wanted him to endow it with a half million dollars. He also had

offered it to our Society but had been turned down. On query, it turned out his offer had come while the Society was immersed in the Grems-Doolittle library project. In 1990 that project was nearing completion.

Negotiations Bear Fruit

Ruth Ann Evans was President and she wanted to accept George's offer. The Society had turned down the Glen Sanders mansion in the 1970s and she regretted that. Now she was worried the Society couldn't even afford to run the new library, but nevertheless she asked the Trustee to follow up on George's offer anyway. Van Schaick and his wife Sally called on George in Dunedin where they worked out a deal that the Trustees could accept responsibly. George would put tax savings from his gift into a fund to give with the Farm so the Society would have no financial burden for at least three years, perhaps five. Reassured by the up-front cash, the Trustees voted to accept the Mabee Farm. In December of 1992 George donated furnishings and artifacts worth some \$14,500 plus \$17,500 in cash, and the Society paid the legal fees. Gift of the Farm followed in 1993.

Farm Operations Committee

To operate the Farm, President van Schaick appointed Chris Harter and Derek Sayers as co-chairs of a Mabee Farm committee and they started work on an historic structure report. After GE transferred Chris out of town, Kathy Johnson replaced her, securing a NYS Parks department \$50,000 preservation matching grant, a \$15,000 grant to fund printing of the historic structure report, and a gift of a Dutch barn located in Johnstown. In September 1997 Kathy had a job change, and John van Schaick replaced her "for a six month period." Emergency cash flowed in to complete the Parks department match, and on the advice of Bill Milton, Mary Kuykendall joined in to help with fund raising. In 1998 the Schenectady Foundation granted \$50,000 to help move the Nilsen's Dutch barn and then made a one-for-two challenge grant capped at \$100,000. By the time that three-year fund drive had ended in 2001, over \$267,000 more had come in.

Restoring the Barnyard

As received, the farm had lost all its barns by fire, and a dense thicket of sumac hid the debris. Volunteers and a crew from the County helped clear the area, so the Town could dispose of the clearings. Then, under architect Keith Cramer's direction, the Nilsen Dutch barn was disassembled and moved to the property, starting in 1998, and a grant from senator Farley paid for an authentic shake roof. Meanwhile volunteers under Everett Rau restored a small English barn on the County lands next door and with the help of a County bulldozer dragged it into position in the barnyard where in 2000 a work shed with public toilets was constructed. Newly-retired Stanley Lee helped restore a trolley shed moved from the Troy road and made himself so valuable he was soon co-chair of the Mabee Farm committee. At that stage of restoration the Farm opened on scheduled hours for the 2001 summer season.

Other Restoration Work and Activities

The foundations of the brick house ("the slave quarters") and the chimney of the inn were restored on the NYS Parks department grant, and in 2002 a carriage shed was built and a blacksmith shop erected by students of a timber framing class under Everett Rau. Archaeologists Louise Basa and Ron Kingsley oversaw investigations at each stage of construction and taught students from the Community College on site. Lumber for restoring the foundations and flooring of the inn was ordered cut and was seasoned for use in the spring of 2003; a 20 by 20 foot utility shed will also go up this year. Meanwhile events have increased and attendance in 2002 rose to almost 3,000. A sixth "Forefathers Day" is scheduled for this June, and September will see another "Fall Festival." The re-enactors will return in May, and a flint-knapping event is scheduled for July. Children's displays funded by a \$15,000 T & K Lally grant became the focus for school class visits initiated in October of 2002 when 578 students attended. Family reunions, wedding events, dances, plays picnics, and breakfasts round out the activities.

For six years Scott Haefner occupied the farmhouse and seemed a fixture at the farm as the site manager, but after completing his college work, Scott moved on to Fort Johnson. Search for a full-time site manager to replace him is under way. Construction of a replica Mohawk river bateau for display on the riverfront will be completed in June.

The 2003-2006 Agenda

The next step in putting the Mabee Farm on the educational and tourist map of Schenectady County will get under way on April first with the start of a new three-year \$480,000 fund drive for construction of a Dutch-style Reception and Education Center building. Also containing a library, caretaker's flat, and document storage basement, the Center will rise on the southwest corner of the farm alongside Route 5S. Layouts and preliminary plans by architect Keith Cramer for the 4,000 square foot structure are now in progress with a possibility of ground breaking within the year.

A Mabee Farm Educational Publication

Ned Pratt's *Teaching the History of the Mabee Farm* is the heart of the Mabee Farm Project work in imparting regional history to fourth and seventh graders in Schenectady and adjacent counties. It starts with the "Historic Background," a nine-page sketch for the teacher, linking 17th century events in the Schenectady area with European exploration and describing the role the Dutch West India company played. It then narrows to the local scene, describing 17th and 18th century colonial life in some detail, and provides teachers a brief review of the colonial period making extra outside preparation unnecessary. A listing of the lesson plan section headings shows the scope of the study guide and how it ties in with our displays and school tours: Geography and Maps; The influence of Dutch rule and Culture; Archaeology at the Mabee Farm; The Mabees and their Farm; Life on the Farm; and Dutch Barns/Early Architecture." All these items are illustrative of the Mabee Farm and its exhibits. We congratulate the Lallys for funding this publication and the accompanying displays and Ned Pratt for his production of the displays and this one-of-a-kind workbook to help teach local students the history of their region and nation.

To Those Who Helped

Over the past ten years many persons, only a few of whom were named above, have contributed to the Society's work at the Mabee Farm with money, materials, ideas, and many work-years of volunteer time. Without their help, the Project could not have gone forward to achieve the success that it has. Without their continuing assistance the Project will grind to a halt. We know they won't let that happen and we thank them all for what they and we have accomplished together.

Stanley A. Lee and John van Schaick, Mabee Farm Committee Co-chairs

STROLLING THROUGH THE ARCHIVES ON A SNOWY AFTERNOON. . .

There we were cataloging a stack of old legal matters from Montgomery county that had wandered in from someone's attic, when a phrase in ancient script caught our eye: "Sessions Oct. 1799 The People vs. John T Ripsom otherwise called Han Tice Ripson Indict: for Seditious Words." "Tried and convicted. . . Fine \$50" That word "seditious" rang a bell. Wasn't there a groups of laws called "The Alien and Sedition Acts." The Encyclopedia American did not fail us; there it was on page 579. Our new little country was worried about encroachments by France; the Federalists in particular were alarmed. I quote the Encyclopedia: "Ostensibly intended to safeguard the country during time of war, these acts also originated in the Federalists' alarm at the growing strength of the Republican party led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the intemperate and

slanderous attacks made upon administration leaders by Republican journalists; and the widespread fear of the "foreign menace" represented by French agents and refugee Irish and English radicals."

Well, what had John T Ripsom said that was such a threat to Montgomery (and possibly Schenectady) County? Once more I quote: "John T Ripsom . . . being a wicked, Malicious, Seditious and ill disposed person, and being greatly disaffected to the laws and administration of the government of the State of New York and wickedly, Maliciously and Seditiously, contriving dividing and intending to stir up and excite discontents and seditions among the good people of the said State and to alienate and withdraw their affections, confidence and Allegiance from the said Government and Laws of the said State, and to insinuate and cause it to be believed among the people of the said State that the Laws of the said State were bad and subversive of the interests of the said people of the said State, and that the representatives of the people of the said State in the Senate and house of Assembly of the said State were persons of wicked, corrupt and dissolute characters and lives, and unworthy of the trust and confidence reposed in them by the people of the said State. . ."

It goes on for another couple of pages, but you get the drift. Remember, only a little over a decade before, the Constitution had been accepted by the states. And we all know about the first amendment to the Constitution -- freedom of speech! But as we also know, when a climate of fear exists, there is a tendency on the part of some to want to curtail the first amendment. So watch out!

We do not know if Ripsom had been indicted on the national version of the Sedition act, or if New York state had its own version. We're glad he was only fined \$50. Sometimes people get held incommunicado for indefinite periods of time.

LITERACY VOLUNTEERS IS LOOKING FOR YOU. . .

Did you know that 27 million Americans don't know how to read? Did you know that more than 60,000 adults in Albany and Schenectady County counties cannot read this message? Help lower these numbers; call Literacy Volunteers at 372-9819.

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING DEPARTMENT

Wanted!

Someone to do filing in the library. Our librarian can never catch up.
Great opening for volunteer with unsatisfied clerical lust! Call librarian at 374-0263

Wanted!

Someone to do data entry on one of our wonderful computers. You do not have to be a computer geek; you just need enthusiasm for the work of the society plus the ability to follow directions. Call librarian at 374-0263

Wanted!

A real extrovert to organize boat and bus trips. There are wonderful places to go around here, but all the board members are maxed out and we need fresh blood, verve, muscle and know-how to plan trips. Call office at 374-0263

Wanted!

A grant writer. We know the grants are out there; we just need that certain person with the time to ferret out where the grants are hidden so we can continue to enhance the work of the Society. Call President or office

Wanted!

Docents. A docent is a tour guide. We're running out of docents and we want fresh troops. Come now: you know that you've always secretly wanted to show people around the Museum. Follow Jo or Sally or Ann a time or two and you'll get the hang of it. Call Jo Mordecai at 374-926 for further information.

CONTRIBUTORS DURING DECEMBER 2002 AND JANUARY 2003 -WITHOUT YOU WE ARE NOTHING!

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The Open Door Bookstore

SHORT AND SWEET

Colonial Festival

Well we couldn't do everything but some of us enjoyed the Colonial Dinner and others reported on the Maritime Academy BOCES Open House where a 18th century bateau is being created. Thanks to Maureen Gebert for all her efforts, and hooray to the Schenectady Heritage area for their contributions.

The Van Dyck meets the New York Times

Mary Kuykendall sent us the January 12, 2003 magazine section of the NY Times which had a charming end paper by Stephen J. Dubner describing the time he, at age 13, played piano with Earl "Fatha" Hines. Where? At our very own Van Dyck. Hope some of you got to see it.

Boscov's Promotes Travel big Time

Boscov is offering an Escorted Travel Package for \$3496 per person double occupancy including round-trip air transportation to St. Louis, Missouri and returning from Portland Oregon, or by land package only for \$3036 per persons. This trip is in honor of the bicentennial anniversary of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The tour will start Saturday, June 21 and go through July 6, 2003. Part of the Lewis and Clark journey will be replicated. 16 days of retracing the Lewis & Clark Trail. Further details from Ruth Mitman, 610 370 3410 or Fax 610 370 3737 or email mitman@boscovs.com

