A Preservation Reunion

Do places retain the memory of their occupants? Could floors and walls and ceilings indeed tell us what they had heard and seen and felt about the people who once trod them, leaned on them for support, stared up at them in joy or dismay?

Could we resurrect them all? The inhabitants of this place? Ignoring the strictures of time, the melancholy restraints of death, we could just invite them to join us for a party here, where, over the span of two centuries or more, they all once lived?

Glen and Bradt, Duncan, Schuyler, Vrooman, Stanford. What would we talk about?

Ah, Mr. John Duncan, you knew both Amherst and Johnson? Did they get along? And Richard Duncan—How do you feel, now that the Revolution is over?

Did you and Lawrence Vrooman know each other as boys? What a time you both went through, you on the King’s side, he on the American.

Mr. Harmanus Schuyler—What a beautiful house you built here. How were you related to Philip Schuyler? I’m sure you remember the duel. Is Elizabeth Hamilton your relative? How did she get along?

Mr. Harmanus Schuyler—What a beautiful house you built here. How were you related to Philip Schuyler? I’m sure you remember the duel. Is Elizabeth Hamilton your relative? How did she get along?

John I. Vrooman—Is it true? Your daughters were married here? Why did you decide to sell to Stanford? Don’t tell me—I think I know.

And Senator Charles Stanford. My goodness. Do you recognize the place? Can you tell us about the changes you made in it? You came so close to making this the Governor’s mansion! Imagine, Leland on the West Coast and you here in the east. That would have been something!

Does everyone know everyone else here? Let me introduce you. Thank you for coming. Can you tell us who we were? Can you help us to remember? Teach us to cherish what is beautiful and good, and to avoid the pitfalls of misusing what you left us.

— Frank Taormina, January 2, 2005
Letter from the President

Dissemination of historical information and sponsoring events with a historical overtone is the relatively easier part of the Society’s mission. The really hard part is that of historic preservation. Schenectady’s record in this regard is a mixed one. Two notable successes are Proctor’s, all of which and more has been saved except for its apostrophe, and the Van Curler Hotel, which is now Schenectady County Community College. Two miserable failures are the Steinmetz mansion, reduced to a passive park with a modest monument, and our majestic Union Station, replaced by a black box of absolutely no architectural merit. The Society played no financial role in any of these four examples because saving or even attempting to save large structures is inordinately expensive for a not-for-profit cultural institution. A fifth example of success that I could have given is the Mabee Farm, but it is ours only through the extraordinary good fortune of it having been given to us. Even the restorations that followed stemmed primarily from the Franchere donations that came with it.

Now we are facing the possible, if not probable, loss of the historic Stanford-Ingersoll home at the apex of Balltown Road and State Street in Niskayuna. The sadness of the prospect is poignantly captured in Frank Taormina’s prose poem on the cover. See also the excellent profile of the home’s most distinguished owner, Charles Stanford—brother of Leland—in the centerfold. This was researched and written by SCHS Trustee Garrett Hermanson. My name is on that piece too only because Gary asked that it be; my only role was a Procustean abridgement of his longer essay and the addition of a tidbit here and there.

So, what can be done? One remaining impediment to replacement of the Stanford home and its more than ten acres of green space with, among other things, a Walgreens on State Street right next to a CVS in Schenectady, is Ingersoll’s application for a Special Use Permit that will allow more than one structure on the property. Ingersoll, on behalf of Highbridge Development, which wants to buy the site for $3.5 million, has the legal right to ask for that Permit. But, they do not have a legal right to demand that it be granted. So, members, especially the third of you from Niskayuna, please watch for the announcement of the November public hearing and pack the meeting room. Remind your Board members that to vote is to choose. Which do they think their constituents would rather have, preservation of the historic Stanford Home and its 12 beautifully landscaped acres, or a new 3-lane cut through to State Street and yet another humongous drug store?

Ed Reilly
SAMUEL FULLER
architect and Mohawk Valley legend
November 11th 1:30 pm refreshments; 2:00 pm program

Samuel Fuller, a descendant from the Mayflower settlers, arrived in Schenectady during the French and Indian War in 1758. He was employed in the King’s service in Schenectady and in surrounding areas. In 1761 he settled in Schenectady until his death just prior to the American Revolution. During the period of 1761-1766 Samuel Fuller designed and built a mansion that was located on 28 acres of land conveyed by the Dutch Church of Schenectady to the local merchant, John Duncan, and was referred to as the “Hermitage.” The Hermitage eventually burned down and was replaced by a mansion commissioned by Harmanus Schuyler around 1818. Schuyler was an Albany surveyor and he called his property “Loxust Grove.” This property is now known as the Ingersoll Memorial Home at the corner of Balltown Road and State Street. Samuel Fuller’s impact is still visible today in the homes, buildings, and churches that have survived including St. George’s Episcopal Church in the Stockade section of Schenectady.

Join us at the Schenectady County Historical Society on November 11th to hear architectural historian Walter Richard Wheeler discuss the legacy of Samuel Fuller and to learn more about Fuller’s architectural achievements, the world he lived in, and the man himself.

Celebrate the Holidays with the Schenectady County Historical Society!

“Thomas Nast: Creating Christmas” December 1st through January 31st

Thomas Nast’s portrayal of Santa Claus has become our universal image of the symbol of Christmas. Almost single-handedly, Thomas Nast created the modern image of how we visualize Santa Claus. Nast created illustrations for Harper’s Weekly throughout the 1860s and 1870s. His drawings documented everything from the Civil War to the infamous “Boss” Tweed. His images of Christmas had the greater effect on the American public. Thomas Nast had the greater effect on the American public. Celebrate this artist’s vision with the Schenectady County Historical Society’s holiday exhibit.

December 13th 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm

Enjoy an evening of holiday fun as the Schenectady County Historical Society is transformed by the Hugh Platt Garden Club into a Victorian holiday wonderland.

For November and December our request is simple: The Efner History Center is looking for the volunteers. We need volunteers to work on projects such as identification of photos, photo collection processing, photo-copying, filing, boxing documents, and setting up folders for documents, etc. Adult volunteers can come in any time between 9:00am and 12:00pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday to learn more about the projects we have. We also welcome interested History Club and National Honor Society history buffs, and other high school students recommended by their teachers. We can work out an afternoon for volunteer archive work that suits your schedule. Contact Mrs. Seacord at 382-5088 or HsCenter@nycap.rr.com.
Charles Stanford (1819 - 1885) by Garrett Hermanson and Ed Reilly

Charles Stanford died quietly at the age of 66 at his Locust Grove home in Niskayuna, New York, on the afternoon of August 24, 1885. The funeral was held at his home, now part of the Igersoll Memorial Home across from Mohawk Commons in Niskayuna (see cover). At the time of his death, Schenectady city historians referred to him as "much of the enterprise in Schenectady owes its existence to him." During his lifetime, he was a local Assemblyman and State Senator, a successful businessman, a newspaper publisher, an excavating contractor, a railroad builder, a thoroughbred horse breeder, and a California merchant.

Charles's older brother Leland is certainly the better known Stanford brother nationally, but it is Charles who lived here among us and whose saga was such an integral part of Schenectady's 19th century history.

Charles's grandparents, Lyman and Elizabeth Roberts, came from Massachusetts in 1799 and settled in the hamlet of Lishakill, NY. The Stanfords leased a 179-acre farm from Lt. Schuyler and up to 1859, the home had several owners, including Lemuel Hand and Lawrence Vrooman, who had been Niskayuna's first Supervisor in 1809.

In 1836, when Charles was 17, his parents leased a 322-acre farm about four miles east of his grandmother's Lishakill farm on the Albany-Schenectady turnpike (now Central Avenue), from Stephen Van Rensselaer III. His parents' new farm in what is now Colonie was called "Elm Grove" and was located in the present area of Roessleville in the Town of Colonie along Central Avenue between North Elmhurst Street and Varrano Road.

After the death of Stephen Van Rensselaer III in 1839, most of his property on the west side of the Hudson was inherited by his son, Stephen Van Rensselaer IV, and his wife Harriet. In 1840, Charles's parents purchased Elm Grove from the Van Rensselaers and the Stanfords converted the main house into the Elm Grove Hotel.

Between 1844 and 1847, Charles worked as an excavation contractor in Albany. One of his biggest contracts was to fill the Rutten Kill, a creek which flowed from present Washington Park in Albany to the Hudson River. At one time, he employed 250 men and 60 teams of oxen to fill its ravine.

Charles married Jane Eliza Page on April 25, 1847. They had eight children, Winfield Scott (1847), Welton (1849), Nora (1855), Charles E. (1857), Josiah, Jr. (1858), Jennie (1860), and twins Maude and Victor (1860). In 1850 he went to California with his brother, De Witt, to work with their brother Josiah at his store on Mormon Island, now at the bottom of Folsom Lake. Not long after arriving at Mormon Island, Charles and Josiah opened a second store in Sacramento. In the fall of 1851, Charles returned home with his substantial earnings.

In March of 1852, Charles returned to California and worked with his brothers at Mormon Island. After five months, he joined Josiah and Phil as proprietors of the new Stanford Brothers store in Sacramento. As operations continued to grow, Charles again returned to Albany County where he became the purchasing agent for Stanford Brothers and bought locally manufactured goods and shipped them to his brothers to sell.

After Charles's father died in April 1862, Charles and Jane moved from their home in Schenectady to the Locust Grove estate in Niskayuna that his parents had bought three years earlier from Town Supervisor John I. Vrooman. In 1865, Charles's mother Elizabeth transferred the estate to her children. Charles and Jane eventually bought out his siblings' interests in the property and obtained sole ownership.

The state's brick house known as Locust Grove was built in 1814 by Harmanus P. Schuyler, the great-grandson of Pieter Schuyler, the first mayor of Albany. Harmanus Schuyler was also a former Albany County sheriff (1800) and a Niskayuna Town Supervisor (1817-1821). The Schuyler house was the second built on what was already a very historic site. A farmhouse called the Hermitage was built there in 1760 by John Duncan, the first non-Native American owner of the property, but it burned down some thirty years later. After Schuyler and up to 1859, the house had several owners, including Lemuel Hand and Lawrence Vrooman, who had been Niskayuna's first Supervisor in 1809.

Fifty years later, In March of 1859, Charles and Leland Stanford's parents purchased the three-story federal-style farm house with over 200 acres of land from another Vrooman, John, the Town's 31st Supervisor, and called it Locust Grove. The house and its remaining 12 acres of property in Niskayuna is located at the intersection of State Street and Balltown Road.

In 1869 Charles reorganized the Schenectady Water Company that serves it. A few months later, in March of 1859, Charles and Leland Stanford Jr. visited Charles and Jane at Locust Grove. Leland Jr. died from yellow fever in March 1884, only a few weeks short of his 16th birthday, and in 1887 his parents established the Leland Stanford Junior University, now just Stanford University, in his honor.

While living at Locust Grove, Charles made many improvements to the magnificent estate. He built stables for his trotting horses and a racetrack on the east side of Balltown Road, now the site of Mohawk Commons. At one time, he had as many as 175 thoroughbred trotting horses quartered there. Locust Grove was also known as “Stanford Heights” by locals because of its prominent location at the crest of a small hill, and that name is still used to describe the area and the fire department that serves it.

In the ensuing years, Charles accumulated a great deal of wealth from business and real estate investments in Schenectady and Albany. In 1864 he was elected to the New York State Assembly and between 1866 and 1869 he served two terms in the New York State Senate. In 1865 he founded the Schenectady Union-Star, the publisher of the Union-Star until he sold it in 1883. In 1866 he became president of the Central Pacific Railroad and became a co-builder of the first transcontinental railroad. The Golden Spike Ceremony at Promontory Summit, Utah Territory, on May 10, 1869, celebrated the union of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads. Leland and others symbolically drove the final spike on that historic occasion.

In the late 1800s, Leland owned the largest winery in the world at Vina, California. Leland also was the world’s foremost trotting horse breeder and owned over 900 thoroughbred horses at one time, some of them establishing world records in racing. In 1878 Leland set up a series of cameras designed by Central Pacific Railroad engineers and noted photographer Eadward Muybridge to take a sequence of photographs of a trotting horse to doubters that a horse in a fast trotting gate really does have all four feet off the ground at one time. Leland lived until 1893, serving the last eight years of his life as a U.S. senator from California.

Sometime after Charles's death in 1885, his son, Welton, inherited the Locust Grove estate. Welton, and his wife Catherine, continued to live in the Schenectady area for many years. The Welton Stanfords maintained Locust Grove until Welton's death in 1922. Catherine, sold the Locust Grove estate in 1923 to the Igersoll Memorial trustees.

Welton and Catherine had three children, Welton (1878-1947), Grant Lansing (1883-1956), and Lorraine (1888-1981, married to Glen Huntsberger). Welton and Catherine’s son, Grant, was a graduate of Albany Law School (1907) and practiced law in Schenectady. Grant and his wife, Ethel (1886-Sept. 12, 1950), resided in the Schenectady area for most of their lives and also had homes at Pacific Grove, California and at Caroga Lake in the Adirondacks.

Charles Stanford was interred in the Stanford Mausoleum at Albany Rural Cemetery with his wife, Jane Page Stanford, and four of their children, Winfield, Charles E., Josiah and Victor. Leland’s parents, Josiah and Elizabeth, were also interred at the Stanford mausoleum at Albany Rural Cemetery. Welton and Catherine, who died in 1926, were interred at the Stanford Mausoleum at Vale Cemetery in Schenectady with their son, Grant, and his wife Ethel.

In all of Schenectady County, only the Society’s Mabee Farm can match the rich centennial history of Locust Grove and the Duncans, Vroomans, Yates, Schuylers, Lansing, and Stanfords who lived there.


4