



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

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Schenectady in the Eye of the Beholder, Part II: 1634-1810

By Neil B. Yetwin

The records of individuals who travelled into Schenectady from 1634 to 1810 include observations and commentaries on the region's geographical and topographical makeup, its political and military importance, and its commercial potential. Each account varies accordingly with the observer's background and personality, allowing the reader the opportunity to view the area through a different lens.

The earliest European accounts of Schenectady and its environs naturally include local relations with the Mohawk peoples, who gave the name "Schau-naugh-ta-da" to this important bend in the Mohawk River. A Dutch barber-surgeon named Meynderts van den Bogaert was sent into the Mohawk Valley in December, 1634 to determine why the fur trade had declined and to renegotiate an agreement with the Mohawks. In *A Journey into Mohawk and Oneida Country* he described the flatlands surrounding the village he called "Schenehalaton".

In 1677, Governor Edmund Andros sent one of his officials, Wentworth Greenhalgh, to settle an alliance with the Mohawks. In *Observations of Wentworth Greenhalgh in a Journey from Albany*



Governor Dewitt Clinton

to the Indians Westward, he reported his success in establishing "the Covenant Chain" between the English and the Iroquois. But just one year later, Andros proclaimed that "Sconextady prohibited all trade." This state of affairs apparently had little effect on the town, for on April 26, 1679 Jasper Danckaerts noted that "the village proper of Schoonechten" included about 30 houses surrounded by fertile, cultivated lands. And in *Of the Mission Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois of Agnie*, Canada's Jesuit Superior Francois-Joseph le Mercier recalled "Sieur Corlart" (Arendt van Corlaer, founder of Schenectady), whom he called "commandant of a hamlet near Agnie" (the French designation for *Mohawk country*).

Continued on pages 4 and 5

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Closed until May

Letter from the President

As is the case with any historical society, the product we dispense is knowledge of the past, past events and the people who created them. But we must also keep an eye on the future, that is, how do we plan to marshal our resources to cope with what lies ahead. Just over three years ago, in late 2006, the Society completed an intensive collaborative effort to create a Strategic Plan for a future that can, of course, be seen only through a cloudy crystal ball. The Plan began with a mission statement and continued with a "vision statement," to wit:



The Schenectady County Historical Society (SCHS) will be widely recognized as the foremost authority regarding the history and heritage of our geographical area and the primary source of information concerning it.

We didn't say when we expected this to be clearly true, nor did we discuss how to measure the degree to which we have approached the goal at any given moment. But one just occurred to me.

As president, my day to day work is primarily administrative. But every now and then someone finds my email address on our Website [www.schist.org] and asks me a question about the Schenectady area. I recently received one from a woman in Florida (the state, not the town in Montgomery County). She was in possession of a diary of her grandmother, who had been an Ostrander before she married a certain Herbert J. Perry in Schenectady in 1914. I was asked about many places in the area that Ms. Ostrander mentioned, and had great fun researching them. But most such email requests come to Grems-Doolittle Librarian Katherine Chansky. And she did me one better by having received *two* recent requests, both from Australia!

Now, to the crux. What possessed these far-flung correspondents to write to SCHS? Well, we do happen to be by membership, by number of locations, and by resources the largest "pure" historical society within 100 miles of Schenectady, but I doubt that either writer would have known that. (I don't mean by that qualification that there are "impure" historical societies, only that although there are many organizations that dispense history and may be larger, such activity is not their primary mission.)

So then, the frequency with which we receive these queries from distant lands, even if only out of state, is indicative that we are indeed becoming the "foremost" authority of the vision statement.

As to how the Floridians and Aussies find us, the answer is certainly the Internet, and in particular our Website. While you are there, visit our online gift shop. Put some things into your virtual shopping cart. Bill Buell's *Historic Schenectady County* is now posted, as is our recent Arcadia book *Niskayuna*. The shop is just as easy to use as Amazon.com, and lets members claim their discount (or become one first).

We even have a presence on Facebook. While there, you can become a fan by typing the name of the Society into its search box and clicking the relevant link.

Our 2006 strategic plan tried to look only three years ahead. When we update it late this year, we should try for ten. To see clearly, we need 2020 vision.

-Ed

Events and Programs at the MUSEUM and the GREMS-DOOLITTLE Library

Saturday - January 9

1:30 pm Refreshments 2:00 pm Program

Maps that Henry Hudson Would Have Had – by Calvin and Carol Welch, our local experts on maps, who will explain the history of New World maps and illustrate their lecture with examples. This is a rare opportunity to see maps as they began to emerge from the 1300s onward purporting to document the appearance of the American continents. See what kinds of maps Henry Hudson would have had access to and may have even used on his historic trips to the new world!

Saturday - February 13

1:30 pm Refreshments 2:00 pm Program

"New York's First Canals" The National Waterway – 1790 to 1820 by Philip Lord, Jr., retired Director of Museum Services for the New York State Museum. Thanks to his relentless study of documents, maps, aerial photographs and on site fieldwork, the history and location of this first ever New York canal was resurrected. He writes, *"The natural streams and lakes of the Mohawk/Oneida waterway served as an inland corridor for European exploration and military expansion for a century before becoming a vital transportation link for the new Nation between the Hudson River and the Great Lakes."*

Monday – Saturday February 15 – 20

Arts & Crafts Classes to be held this February at the Historical Society Spend an enjoyable afternoon introducing a young person in your life to a new art form and bring home a beautiful basket, decorated tile, hand sewn book or wool craft. The Historical Society will host arts and crafts classes for adults, and for school age children accompanied by an adult, during the public school vacation week, February 15 through February 20. The classes will be taught by well known local artists: *Delft Tile making* – Cynthia Turgeon; *Basket making* – Beverly Cornelius; *Wool and Felt Crafts* – Betsy Neal; and *Hand Sewn Bookmaking* – Samantha Couture.

Pre-registration begins Monday January 4th (374-0263) and is required. Weekday classes will be held in the afternoons from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm. Materials are

provided; class fees vary from \$20 to \$4 per class; please call for details. Contact Kate Weller or Katherine Chansky at (518)374-0263 for more information and to register.

Delft Tile Painting Monday Feb. 15th Recommended for students in 4th grade and older, and adults.

Basket Making Tuesday Feb. 16th and Wednesday Feb. 17th Recommended for students in 5th grade and older, and adults.

NOTE: This class meets on two consecutive afternoons to give participants time to complete the basket.

Wool and Felt Crafts Thursday Feb. 18th Recommended for children in Kindergarten through 3rd grade, accompanied by an adult.

Bookmaking Saturday Feb. 20th Recommended for students in 5th grade and older, and adults.

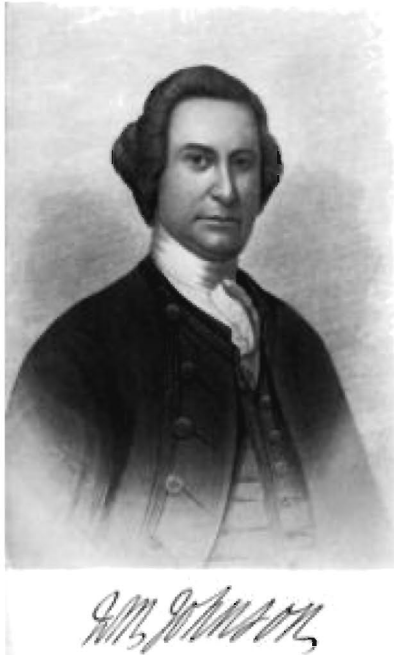
NOTE: *This class will run from 2:00 pm – 5:00pm*

More program notes on page 6.

In Memoriam

We note with sadness the passing of Blaine Johnston, a former trustee and longtime supporter of the Society. A native of Ohio, he was a veteran of World War II and a retired art teacher. Shortly after moving to the Stockade in 1982, he joined both SCHS and the Stockade Association. He was also a member of the Truro Historical Society on Cape Cod, where he enjoyed his summer home. He served as a Society Trustee from 1988 to 2000. During that period and continuing afterward until his health began to fail, he chaired the SCHS Nominating Committee and, with Don Smith, co-chaired the SCHS Committee on Historic Sites, a committee which commissioned the historic plaques mounted on so many Stockade homes. He was a valued advisor with regard to the paintings displayed and the furnishing of what we now call the Schenectady History Museum. His legacy will endure.

The devastation of Europe's Thirty Years War (1618-1648) caused tensions to erupt between Schenectady's Dutch Protestants and Irish Catholics into the 18th century. Warren Johnson, brother of Sir William Johnson, arrived here from Ireland in 1760-61 to visit his brother and left this harrowing account:



“A Mob of Dutchmen assembled the 18th of January 1761, at Skenectady, at 11 o’ th’ Clock at Night, murdered two Irish Men: The Next Day all the Irish, in Town, got together & offered five pounds for the sight of a Dutchman, but None dare appear. The Magistrates there (who are all Dutchmen) summon’d the Rioters / their Country men,

to appear before them, and Only fined them, to the Number of 14 men, 7 lbs. 16 shillings for the Murder.”

On May 12th, 1769, New Jersey State Treasurer and Assemblyman Richard Smith made a brief visit to Schenectady, which made up part of *A Tour of Four Great Rivers: The Hudson, Mohawk, Susquehanna and Delaware in 1769*:

“Lodged last Night at Clench’s in Schenectady, a very good Inn, and the Landlord’s intelligent and obliging. The Town according to our Conjecture counts about 300 Dwelling Houses besides Out Houses, standing in 3 Principal Streets nearly East and West; these are crossed by 4 or 5 other Streets. Few of them are contiguous, some of them are constructed in the old Dutch Taste generally of Wood but sometimes of Brick and there may be 6 or 7 elegant Mansions without including a large Dutch Church with a Town Clock, a Presbyterian Meeting House and a Neat English Church now finished off, containing a particular Pew for Sir William Johnson adorned with a handsome Canopy supported by Pilasters. There are no Wharves but a public landing or two at the Ends of the Streets where the Batteaux bring

the Peltry and wheat from above.....The Inhabitants are chiefly Descendants of the low Dutch, a few Irish & not so many English....There is yet remaining in Schenectady a small wooden Fortress having 4 Towers at the corners.”

A New Jersey soldier named Joseph Bloomfield, who would later become that state’s 4th governor, noted in his 1776 journal that “the Mohawk River seems to run all the way from Schinactaday to Fort Schuyler.”

Francois-Jean de Beauvoir, the Marquis de Chastellux, was a soldier, friend of Franklin, Washington, and Jefferson, and author of *Travels in North America*. In it he wrote that a trip to Schenectady “excites some curiosity from being built in the very country of the Indians.” He arrived here by sleigh on a cold December day in 1780, writing:

“This town stands at the foot of a small declivity, on your coming out of the woods; it is regularly built, and contains five hundred houses within the palisades, without counting some dwellings which form a suburb, and the Indian village adjoining this suburb. Two families, and eight inhabitants, are reckoned to a house...I alighted at Colonel (John) Glen’s, the quarter-master general of this district, a lively, active man who received me in the politest manner.”



Governor Andros – See page 1

Four years later, French-born entrepreneur, judge, assemblyman, and U.S. Congressman Peter Saily of

Plattsburgh added that Schenectady is “a pleasant village with fine houses.”

Elkanah Watson, who aided in the peace negotiations after the Revolution and helped guide a canal law through the state legislature, came to Schenectady in 1791 to determine the area’s potential as part of a canal system. In his *History of the Rise, Progress, and Existing Condition of the Western Canals in the State of New York* (1820) he noted that Schenectady’s state is a matter



Cardinal Francois-Joseph leMercier

state is a matter of regret and astonishment; - apparently following the direction of original Indian footpaths, whereas the nature of the ground will admit of a spacious turnpike road; which I am confident, may be established at a moderate expense, compared with its great importance.... Schenectady is handsomely laid out...

It contains about three hundred houses, and sixteen hundred inhabitants, mostly of Dutch descent. The fur trade has vanished, and with it their enterprise. Although they are situated in a country abounding in resources, yet they will not depart from their old track, and strike off into a new road, which would lead them to affluence."

In July of the next year, Dutch scholar Adrian van der Kemp traveled through Catskill, Coxsackie, Albany and finally Schenectady:

"On Friday morning, I rode on to Schenectadi, where I spent a few hours with the Rev. Romeyn, one of the most learned and eminent divines of the Reformed Church in this State. He communicated to me many important observations with regard to the soil, the stupendously increasing population of the western country, with its vast increasing strength. He assured me that fifteen hundred families passed by his house during the winter of '91, to various parts of the Western lands."

Isaac Weld, Jr. observed in 1795 that Schenectady's older houses, built "in the Dutch style," gave the city "the appearance of an ancient European city."

Historian and clergyman Jeremy Belknap, founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, had few positive things to say about the city when he stopped here on June 16, 1796. "This village is not a very sightly place either from a distance or when you are in it." He briefly mentions Union College and the city's boat-building industry, but: "At Skenectada the cows parade in the streets by night, and make dirty work before the doors.

The whole town is a perfect cow-yard." A German geologist named Friedrich Rohde agreed with other travellers that Schenectady was not fulfilling its potential, that it was "not quite as prosperous" as it appeared. Of Union College that year (1802) he could only write: "There must be...very few students, or they must be kept in their cells, for I did not see a single one." Yet missionary John Taylor, stopping that same year, saw in the city "a simplicity, a neatness that is very pleasing."

In 1810, New York City Mayor De Witt Clinton was appointed to a legislative commission to explore "a route for a canal from the Hudson River to Lake Erie," a connection to the Erie Canal that led to his election as governor in 1817. His *Private Canal Journal*, unpublished until 1849, reveals his thoughts on Schenectady, whose "dullness" caused him some "anxiety," especially since he visited on the Fourth of July:

"Imagine yourself in a large country village, without any particular acquaintance, and destitute of books, and you will appreciate our situation. Schenectady, although dignified with the name of a city, is a place of little business. It has a Bank, a College, and a Courthouse, and a considerable deal of trade is carried on through the Mohawk; and all the roads which pass to the westward on the banks of that river necessarily go through this place. A great portion of the crowd that visits the Mineral Springs at Ballston and Saratoga also visit Schenectady. With all these advantages it does not appear pleasing, and we endeavored to fill up the gloomy interval between this time and our departure, by viewing the pageantry which generally attends this day."

As the Irish author Margaret Wolfe Hungerford wrote in her popular 1878 romantic novel *Molly Brown*:

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."



Lady Margaret Wolfe Hungerford

Portrait Exhibit planned for May through June in 2010 – “Faces of Schenectady”

The Society recently received an important gift – the portrait of Laurens Claus Van der Volgen painted around 1720. It was given to the Society by a family descendant, and was accompanied by another family portrait as well as a number of family artifacts. Laurens Claus Van der Volgen was taken prisoner during the Schenectady Massacre of 1690, lived in a Native American community for about ten years, returned to Schenectady and became a well respected interpreter. The Society is planning an exhibit based around this significant acquisition, and is actively seeking to include all known portraits of this period in Schenectady history. We are seeking portraits of people who would have been neighbors of Van der Volgen with surnames like Veeder, Beck, Glen; and full names like Jacobus Van Slyke, Susanna Truax, Catalyntje Post, Barent Vrooman, John Dunbar and his wife Jeannette-Egmont-Schermerhorn, and Cornelius Van Dyke. We will, of course, include the Society’s own portrait of Helena Van Epps Pieterse.

ADOPT A PORTRAIT

Many of the portraits of these Schenectady residents belong to other institutions. To assemble them for this exhibit involves costs for shipping to and from those institutions, exhibit installation, catalog production, insurance, and fees for guest speakers. This is a very ambitious undertaking and the Society needs your assistance to defray these costs. Donors will be listed in the catalog in accord with the following designations:

Patroon	\$1,000
Provincial Governor	700
Dominee	500
Housewright	300
Captain of Militia	200
Limner/Artisan	100

Contributions may be made by check or credit card. Make checks payable to Schenectady County Historical Society “*Faces of Schenectady*.” For credit card donations, please call (518) 346-0263.

The Poulin Scrapbook Collection in the Grems-Doolittle Library

Francis Poulin loved history and he loved railroads. Evidently, he also enjoyed a good walk. During the 1950s and ‘60s, when he was a clerk for the NYS Department of Motor Vehicles, Poulin walked the entire Rutland Railroad, taking photographs covering every inch of the right-of-way. Poulin was a member of various railroad organizations, and a trustee of the Schenectady County Historical Society. He was appointed by Mayor Karen B. Johnson as archivist for the City of Schenectady from 1989 until his death in January of 1994 at age 79. Larry Hart was the City’s historian at that time.

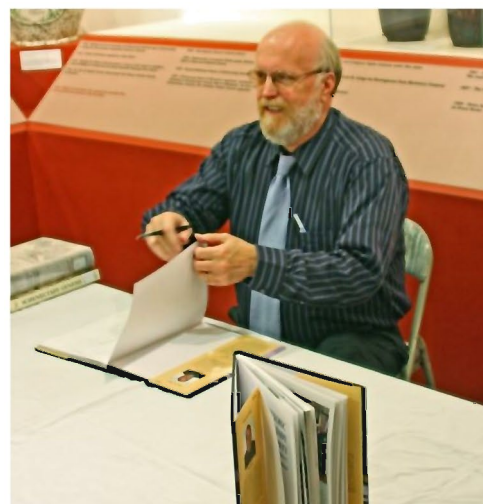
After retiring from the state in 1979, Poulin immersed himself into history, serving as historian for Mont Pleasant High School and as advisor for the historical preservation of Proctor's Theatre. He was the unofficial historian for the Mont Pleasant area of Schenectady and, according to former City Historian Larry Hart, Francis Poulin was an authority on vaudeville magnate F. F. Proctor.

Poulin's research notes, photographs, and copies of original source documents and newspaper articles make up much of the 86 3-ring binders in the collection, including 16 books devoted to George Westinghouse Jr. and his family. There are wonderful bits of history in these scrapbooks but until recently finding them was not unlike searching for buried treasure. Thanks to the hours, weeks, and months of work by Carol Lewis, Marianne Blanchard, and Bill Buell, each scrapbook now has a table of contents listed in a keyword-searchable computer file. This winter, the new finding aid to the Poulin Collection will be cataloged and added to our PastPerfect database to relate the subjects in the tables of contents to those in other library collections. This will be of great assistance to researchers who seek to use the vast amount of history collected over the years by Mr. Poulin. The next time a library visitor asks for Schenectady history we will be sure to direct the researcher to this gold mine of history collected by former city archivist, Francis Poulin.

Activities around the Society.....



Photos: Ann Aronson, Jim Eignor

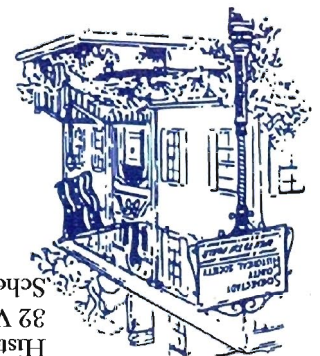


Schenectady County Historical Society



*Festival of Trees
2009*

Photos: Ann Aronson



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