



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

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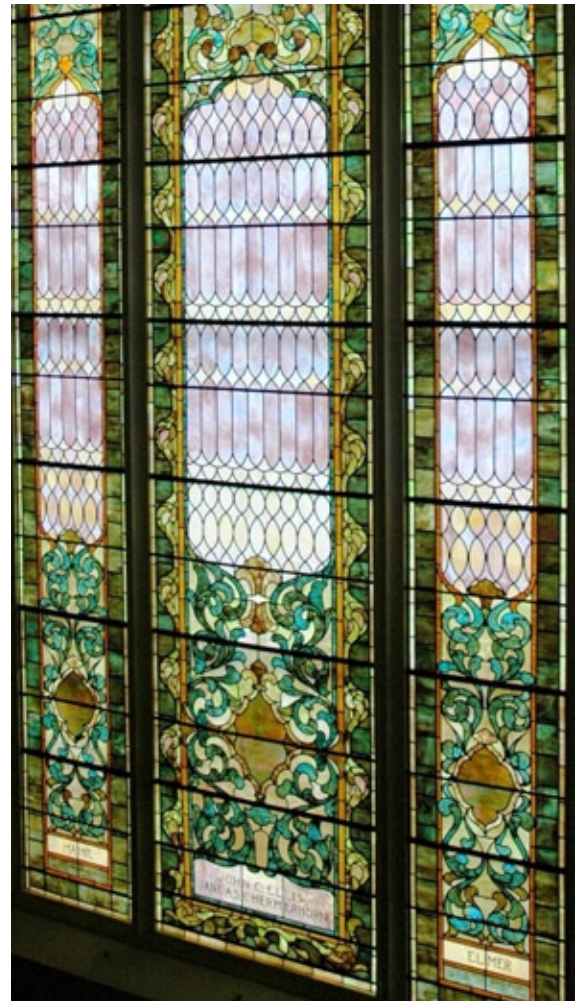
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH – A Brief History

by David Vincent

For its first century of existence, regular Christian worship at the Dutch Reformed Church in Schenectady was conducted only in Dutch. As the English-speaking population grew, so did a desire for services in English, primarily driven by members of the Church of England, the official church of the Province.

The city's population, decimated following its destruction in 1690, was about 300 households in 1759 when land for an English chapel was purchased.¹ Ground was broken the same year for a building originally planned as a chapel for all English speaking peoples,² and Presbyterians and other "dissenters" (non-Anglican Protestants) participated in both land and material acquisition. Construction began in 1762. As for the Presbyterians, while the actual date of organization is unknown, the best current approximation is 1760.

Friction developed early on between the two competing English groups. A 1765 letter from the Schenectady Anglican churchwardens to Sir William Johnson sought his acceptance as a trustee and his support for a petition before the Governor to grant the congregation a "Charter to Secure their Rights and privileges in the Church built here" in order to "prevent for the future the presbyterians from making any unjust attempts on the privileges in the Church."³



John C. Ellis window

—Continued on Page 4

¹ Willis T. Hanson, Jr., *History of St. George's Church*, 1919, p.38

² Ibid, p. 53. From a letter in the St. George's Church archives from Rev. John Ogilvie, Montreal, 19 Aug. 1761, "While the design of building the Chapel had been 'for the decent celebration of divine Worship in the english Language, & according to the liturgy of the church of England,' it had been planned that liberty should be granted 'to Protestants of every Denomination to use the—Chapel at such Hours as [should] not interfere with the Service of the established Church.'"

³ E. B. O'Callaghan, *Documentary History of the State of New York*, 1851, Vol. IV, p. 229

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HOURS

**MUSEUM
& LIBRARY**
MONDAY-FRIDAY 9-5
SATURDAY 10-2

MABEE FARM
Re-opens 5/3/2011

Letter from the President & the Veep

A FRANCHERE CENTER UPDATE

Happy New Year from the Society's Mabee Farm Historic Site. Normally this time of year finds the Farm settling into a long winter nap. Not so this year! Construction of the George E. Franchere Education Center started last June, and will continue through the winter months into the spring of 2011. Our construction contractors, subcontractors, construction managers, architects, engineers, equipment suppliers, and the Society's Franchere Center committee all have been working hard to get the building enclosed and capped for the winter so that work can continue on the interior. As can be seen from the



photo, construction is well along and the site is bustling with activity. December saw the installation of the slate roof and windows. The framing of the picnic pavilion began, and its photovoltaic (solar) panels have been delivered to the site and await installation on its roof. Plumbers and electricians have begun working inside the building. The interior room studding is well underway. We can actually envision where the offices, gallery, meeting rooms, and other rooms are situated.

As the structure grows, so does excitement and anticipation. The Mabee Farm Committee, along with the Farm Site Manager and the Society's curator and librarian will spend time this winter planning and preparing for displays, furnishings, media needs, and volunteer recruitment.

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Many of you are relatively new members or readers who have not yet had a chance to participate in the endeavor. We are still gladly accepting contributions to the building fund from those who wish to assist us in completion of our goal. Donate through the gift shop page on schist.org, or mail checks payable to SCHS / Mabee Farm to 32 Washington Avenue, Schenectady NY, 12305.

Ed & Merritt

FACES OF SCHENECTADY 1715-1750 The exhibit and the seminar are past. Memories linger on. People came from California, Texas, Indiana, and Iowa as well as New York to see the exhibit and attend the seminar. The exhibit had appeal not only to descendants of the early families but to students of art history. Many of the descendants had never seen portraits of their early ancestors and the portraits had never before been shown as a group. The seminar brought new information to light not only about the portraits and the artists but the extremely rare prayer book translated into the Mohawk language by Laurens Claese Van Der Volgen and Domine Freeman of the First Reformed Church of Schenectady. The portrait of Laurens Van Der Volgen donated by Mary Van Der Volgen Chatfield initiated the planning of the exhibit and the Society is extremely grateful to her and her family who believed the portrait and other family memorabilia belonged in Schenectady, its place of origin. Thanks to the many who contributed to the exhibit and seminar both financially and in other important ways.

—Ona Curran

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

Saturday, January 15

1:30 PM refreshments–2:00 PM Program

Mohican Influence on the Dutch presented by
Shirley W. Dunn

Shirley Dunn will present the impact of the Mohicans on the Dutch in the colonies. Topics discussed will include how the Mohicans initiated the upriver fur trade; Mohican land ownership on the Mohawk River; and the development of a close relationship with Arendt Van Curler. Dunn emphasizes the importance of the Mohicans to the history of the New York colony and state. A scholar of the Mohicans and early Dutch, Ms. Dunn is the author of *The Mohicans and Their Land, 1609-1730*; *The Mohican World, 1680-1750*; *The River Indians: Mohicans Making History*; *The Mohicans*, a booklet for young readers, and co-author with Allison P. Bennett of *Dutch Architecture Near Albany: The Polgreen Photographs*. Shirley is also a Fellow of the Holland Society.

Saturday, January 29 – Book Discussion: *Clarissa Putman of Tribes Hill* (1950) by John Vrooman
1:00–2:00 PM

New this winter, the Grems-Doolittle Library will hold book discussion of two historical novels. The January 29 discussion will be led by SCHS Librarian Katherine Chansky. *Clarissa Putman of Tribes Hill* tells the story of Clarissa Putman and Sir John Johnson. The author draws the reader into the world of Colonial Schenectady and explores the impact of the Revolutionary War. Part of the novel's appeal comes from the story's setting in the Schenectady area. The author's photographs of historic sites in the Mohawk Valley will be on display in the library during the discussion. The second Book Discussion will be on Saturday, March 26 on *My Name is Mary Sutter* by Robin Oliveira. Please sign up for these Book Talks in the Library by calling 374-0263 or e-mail to librarian@schist.org.

Tuesday, February 1 – opening of the exhibit *The Art in Cartography: Highlighting the Collection of the Schenectady County Historical Society*

This exhibit features maps, atlases, and artifacts from the Society's collection, including its two most recently conserved objects, maps of New York State completed by Simeon Dewitt (1802) and Claude Joseph Sauthier (1779), displayed alongside other state, city, county, and land plot maps. The exhibit will use maps from the collection of the Schenectady County Historical Society, and will focus on the evolution of cartography as well as on the cartographers themselves. From the hand drawn maps of James Frost to the engravings included on the maps of John Calvin Smith, this exhibit will be visually exciting and interesting to all visitors

Saturday, February 5

1:30 PM refreshments - 2:00 PM Program

Clarissa Putman from Fort Johnson to Van Horne Hall and the True Blues
Presented by Frank Taormina

Frank Taormina's research into the interesting relationship between Clarissa Putman and Sir John Johnson led to surprising discoveries about other families who were related to this famous couple. Frank will tell a new story that starts with Colonial times and follows a fascinating chain of people and events that led into late 19th century Schenectady.

Saturday, February 12

1:30 PM. refreshments – 2:00 PM Program

He Was Bought at Public Sale: Slavery at Johnson Hall
Presented by Wanda Burch

One of the most difficult interpretation dilemmas at any historic site concerns servants and slaves. At Johnson Hall State Historic Site in Johnstown, NY, the first major attempt to tell the story of the domestic staff thorough investigation of the Johnson documents for information on acquisition, names, living conditions, and clothing of as many as 40 slaves is currently underway. Wanda Burch retired from Johnson Hall State Historic Site in August of 2010 after 35 years as site manager. She is currently Vice President of the Friends of Johnson Hall. A graduate of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in museum administration, Wanda's career included over forty years of work in historic preservation.

It was apparently the naming of the edifice “St. George’s Chapple” in 1766 by Sir Henry Moore, the Governor of the Province of New York, and the efforts of the churchwardens to have the church formally designated a mission of the Church of England, which proved to be more than the Presbyterians could accommodate. A rift occurred and the Presbyterians departed into rented quarters about 1767. By 1768 they were seeking a pastor (the Rev. Andrew Bay). The rented building served until construction of a Presbyterian church was finished in 1773.¹ Competition for members, funds, and even prominence between the Anglicans and the Presbyterians appears to have been keen for decades.



Interior 1855

A church account book from the time records generous donations from provincial officials and members of both the Dutch and Anglican churches. The finished wooden structure had 43 pews and a gallery. It also had a prominent steeple and bell, and was topped by a gilded lead ball and weathervane. The steeple and bell were apparently the pride of the Presbyterians and the envy of others. No image or description exists, other than a front silhouette incorporated into the church’s seal. The first minister, Rev. Alexander Miller, a Princeton graduate, was settled in 1770 and served through 1781. The Revolutionary War dissipated the church’s membership (declining to thirty-seven) and financial resources; and it struggled to support its minister financially.

The second pastor, Rev. John Young, was settled in 1787 during a time characterized by conflict within the congregation. There were “formalists” who desired a worship service reflecting the formal

In 1769 eight members of the Presbyterian “society” purchased land on Niskayuna (now Union) Street southeast of the St. George’s lot, and construction of a new church was begun. Funds for the new structure were solicited far and wide, including Albany, Schoharie, and New York City.

Presbyterian traditions of Scotland, contending with those from a New England puritan background who considered spirituality to be more personal, a matter of the heart, known as “evangelicalists.” This conflict affected church affairs well into the next century.

Union College’s first President in 1795, Rev. Dr. John Blair Smith, another Princeton graduate, also occupied the pulpit at First Presbyterian Church until the settling of the next minister, Rev. Robert Smith, in 1796. Dr. John Blair Smith brought balance and stability to the church, installed four elders, and added fifty-one members to the rolls. The College’s second president, Rev. Jonathan Edwards the younger, son of the leader of the mid-eighteenth century “Great Awakening,” Rev. Jonathan Edwards, died after only two years in office and, per his wishes, was buried in the Presbyterian churchyard. The church’s relationship with Union College was long and intimate, with a clear benefit accruing to the church, particularly in the early years of both institutions. The church would host Union College graduations for more than a century.

In 1803 the sixth minister was installed, Rev. Dr. John B. Romeyn, a Union College and Columbia graduate, the son of Dr. Theodoric (Dirk) Romeyn, Dominie of the Dutch Reformed Church and primary founder of Union College. Dr. John B. Romeyn would go on to pastor, among others, Cedar Street Church (now Fifth Avenue Presbyterian) in New York City, and would be recognized as one of the most prominent Presbyterian figures of his day.²



Interior 1860

building, but its description as “shattered” evokes a particular image. And so in 1809 construction of the present brick church began just north of the original church, which was dismantled and its wood utilized in the new structure. A fellowship hall, now known as Mekeel Hall, has occupied the original church site since 1843.

In 1808 a committee reported to the congregation that the 1773 church building “was not an object worthy of their attention so far as to attempt the repairing of it from its present shattered condition.” It is unknown what tragedy befell the

¹ Anthony, Rev. Robert W., *Schenectady, 1769-1775, as shown by the unpublished Account Book of First Presbyterian Church*, paper read before the NY State Historical Society, 25 September 1932, archives First Presbyterian Church, Schenectady, NY.

² E. H. Gillett, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, Philadelphia, 1864

The new church was designed in Philadelphia and emulated the Ranstead Court Church, a Presbyterian church built there in 1804. It was rounded at its north end and had a unique oval interior. It was a typical spare Presbyterian structure with plain windows, box pews, and a unique continuous gallery that encircled the entire oval interior, depressed at the north end containing the pulpit.

Over a dozen ministers came and went during the church's first seventy years. Between ministers the pulpit was filled by many preachers, including two prominent men from Union College: Dr. Eliphalet Nott, the college's fourth president, and Dr. Thomas McAuley, professor of Latin and Mathematics. Dr. Nott, a highly-regarded Presbyterian minister, had come to Union College from First Presbyterian Church of Albany.

The church's unsettled period came to an end in 1832 when its fourteenth minister was installed, the Rev. Dr. J. Trumbull Backus, a young man of twenty-three. Born in Albany, the son of a prominent Albany businessman, he was educated at Columbia, Princeton and Yale. He would become a close friend of Dr. Nott and serve thirty-six years as a Union College trustee, many as president. Dr. Backus served forty years as minister of First Presbyterian Church, during which time over 1000 individuals were added to the church's membership rolls. Dr. Backus was deeply involved in the Schenectady community: a member of the school board, president of the YMCA, and founder of both the *Schenectady Home for the Friendless* and the *Schenectady Old Ladies Home* (now Heritage Home). During his tenure the church building was doubled in size with the addition of transepts in 1859, making it the largest gathering space in Schenectady. Additionally, this expansion significantly departed from the original spare interior. The church now had stained glass windows, a richly patterned ceiling, and a dramatic faux stone painted interior with new, dark oak pews.

Less than twenty years later the church would again be profoundly transformed with a complete Victorian makeover, resulting in an interior that is almost shocking to modern sensibilities. Following the 1887 installation of a large Tiffany mosaic in the apse behind the pulpit entitled "The Recording Angel," a memorial to the John Ellis family, the interior walls were painted deep crimson with salmon colored woodwork. Plaster ceiling arches were given a golden glaze and the columns supporting the gallery received a copper foil treatment called "Dutch metal." This interior resembled neither the original 1809 church nor the colonial revival interior that exists today; but its exuberance was certainly a reflection of the late nineteenth-century Schenectady community.

Founded in 1848 by Judge Platt Potter and John Ellis,³ two members of First Presbyterian Church, by the 1880s the Schenectady Locomotive Works, precarious in its infancy like Schenectady itself, had grown to national prominence; and its owners, primarily the Ellis family, had grown to great esteem and wealth in the Schenectady community. John Ellis and his four sons all served over time as president of the Locomotive Works, and many served as officers of the church, their influence being felt for decades.

Dr. Backus was succeeded in 1872 by Rev. Dr. Timothy Darling, who was minister through 1887 when he left to take a professorship at Auburn Seminary. Dr. Darling, a part-time professor at Union College, was also deeply involved in the Schenectady community and is credited in 1885 as founder and first president of the Schenectady Free Dispensary, which, following a bequest from Charles Ellis in 1891 in honor of his father John Ellis, became Ellis Hospital.



Interior 1890

As the twentieth century dawned, the church was once again transformed. Victorian exuberance began to give way to more restrained colors and features. About 1902 the current dramatic stained glass windows were installed. The three largest and most prominent are memorials to Ellis family members. In 1923 the church interior was painted white and the current gabled entry façade and narthex with its Palladian window, golden glass and canopied entry was constructed. In 1953 the Tiffany mosaic was removed and donated to a museum, and the current colonial revival interior was installed. In 2002 a massive restoration project was completed, including a new slate roof, structural repairs to the roof trusses, and complete re-plastering of the ceiling. In 2010 the church conducted a year-long celebration of its 250th anniversary.

³ *Growing With Schenectady – American Locomotive Company*, Schenectady: ALCO, 1948

Library News

BOOK TALKS IN THE LIBRARY

New this winter, the Grems-Doolittle Library will have book discussions about two historical novels: *Clarissa Putman of Tribes Hill* by John Vrooman on January 29th (see page 3 for details) and *My Name is Mary Sutter* by Robin Oliveira on March 26th. Both will be held from 1:00 – 2:00 PM in the library; the facilitator will be Katherine Chansky, the Society's Librarian. Please sign up for these meetings in the library (call 374-0263 or email librarian@schist.org).

New online access to descriptions of Library Manuscript Collections at

www.gremsdoolittlelibrary.blogspot.com, created by volunteer Sarah Russo, a graduate student at the University at Albany's Masters in Information Science program.

Genealogy Day on November 6 was a great success.

Many thanks to the presenters who volunteered their time and expertise: Frank Taormina, Peter Sisario, Cindy Seacord, Robert Sullivan, and Nancy Curran. Over 40 people attended the sessions and the library.

Books and genealogy materials added to the library

Ernst Fredrik Werner Alexanderson by Bengt V. Nilsson, gift of Edwin Reilly.

Family Tree Maker 2011, software purchased for the Grems-Doolittle Library and available for use by our visitors.

The McNeill Family of New Hampshire and Carlisle, Schoharie County, New York by Linda A. Roorda (2008), gift of the author.

Sure Foundation—a 250 Year History of First Presbyterian Church, Schenectady, New York, 1760-2010, by James Stewart and David C.

Vincent, gift of the authors. The cover story of this issue is based on the book.

Donated Historic Documents added to the library collections

ALCO booklets, Nancy Flanders

Historic Schenectady booklets, Peter Graham

Historic Schenectady newspapers, Norah Pattison.

New Manuscript and Family Papers:

Godfrey Family Collection added to the library

The collection comes from the estate of Dorothea Godfrey (1921-2010). She was the great granddaughter of Colonel Robert Furman and Eve Van-Guysling. Her father, Clark Godfrey, once owned the land that became the Rosendale Estates development in Niskayuna. Credit goes to Laura Linder, with help from Bob Sullivan, for saving these papers. Laura purchased them from the Godfrey estate and donated them to the Library, in memory of Dr. Susan Staffa.

The Maybee Society records have been donated to the Historical Society by John Maybee. This collection is destined for the new Franchere Education Center. The records include primary and secondary source materials for family research on the Maybee/Mabie/Mabee and related families. The records add to the library's holdings of Mabee family research compiled by George Franchere.

The Robert Mielke Collection of Dettbarn family documents was donated by Evelyn Thode. The collection includes Civic Music Association programs and Zion Lutheran Church music programs from the 1920s-1940s, along with family history dating back to the American Civil War.

The Helen Quirini Collection documents Ms. Quirini's community service in Schenectady and includes her collection of historic Schenectady newspapers. Gift of Rudolph Quirini.

The Joseph Fazzone Collection of World War II memorabilia, a journal and letters written in 1945 by Fazzone, a seaman in the U.S. Navy. Gift of Dale Wade-Keszey.

New audio/visual materials

DVDs of the 2009 and 2010 Schenectady City School District's Athletic Hall of Fame Reunions. Gift of Bob Pezzano.

Thank you to all the individuals who made gifts to the library, in the form of books, documents, and their valuable time as volunteers.

Happenings around the Society



Festival of Trees

Photos: Ann Aronson



Franchere Education Center going up



Photos: Merritt Glennon

Schenectady County Historical Society



The First Presbyterian Church of Schenectady and its Ellis stained glass windows.

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