



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

Volume 51 Number 7-8

July-August 2008

32 Washington Avenue, Schenectady, New York 12305

Web site: <http://www.schist.org> • Editor email: rbergero@nycap.rr.com

Librarian email: librarian@schist.org • Curator email: curator@schist.org

(518) 374-0263

FAX: (518) 688-2825



Lock 23 - 1998

LOCK 23 on the Erie Canal – a case of “Lost and Found”

by Ruth E. Bergeron

Lock 23 was never quite totally lost but what can be seen of it today had almost disappeared from view reclaimed by Nature's heavy overgrowth of small trees and shrubbery. What has become visible is the eastbound channel on the south side of the enlarged Erie Canal. This is also the longer channel of the Lock, lengthened to accommodate two barges hooked up to each other. Lock 23 is located in the Town of Rotterdam just south of today's modern Barge Canal Lock 8, between the bike path and Rice Road near the intersection of Rice and Schermerhorn roads.

But for the persistence of local history buffs and a civil engineering professor at Union College, the disappearance might have been complete. Beginning in the 1990s local activists Mary van der Bogert, Jayson Henderson, and Mike Riley began a serious effort to clear out the debris by enlisting the help of numerous local agencies. Andrew Wolfe, a former Union College professor of civil engineering, was among the earlier leaders. With the help of college students they built a wooden pier, also called a fender platform, which once protected the lock's water controls, and a bright yellow lock-tender's hut based on research of historic records. But in 2003 Professor Wolfe left Union College and Nature was again reclaiming what had been cleared. There were still hardy volunteers but clearly they needed access to some heavy equipment if this effort was to have lasting success. With the help of another Union College Professor, Andrew Morris, this one from the History Department, more college students, the Sunrise Rotary Club, the Environmental Clearinghouse of Schenectady (ECOS), and Friends of the Mohawk Hudson Bike-Hike Trail, along with workers from the Rotterdam highway department, there was enough momentum and equipment to provide Lock 23 with real face-lift.

Continued on page 4



*Lock 23 – On National Register of Historic Places as of
May 10, 2008.*

Photos: Ann Aronson

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

EDWIN D. REILLY, JR.
PRESIDENT

MERRITT GLENNON
VICE PRESIDENT

RICHARD CLOWE
TREASURER

JOHN VAN SCHAIK
ASSISTANT TREASURER

CYNTHIA SEACORD
SECRETARY

STEPHANIE ALBERS

ANN ARONSON

RUTH BERGERON

EARL BRINKMAN

ANNE COGGESHALL

JIM EIGNOR

PHILLIP FALCONER

FRANK GILMORE

GAIL KEHN

CAROLINA LAZZARI

CAROL LEWIS

MARY LIEBERS

KIM MABEE

ELSIE MADDAUS

IRMA MASTREAN

VAUGHN LOUISE NEVIN

HARRY STEVEN

ROBERT SULLIVAN

FRANK TAORMINA

SALLY VAN SCHAIK

STAFF

KATHERINE P. CHANSKY
LIBRARIAN

KATHRYN WELER
CURATOR

PAT BARROT
MABEE FARM SITE MANAGER

PATTY SOULES
OFFICE MANAGER

NEWSLETTER EDITORS:

ANN ARONSON
RUTH BERGERON

HOURS

MUSEUM & LIBRARY

MONDAY-FRIDAY 9-5
SATURDAY 10-2

MABEE FARM

OPEN MAY 1ST
FOR THE SEASON

Letter from the President

HERE AT THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Only because it is true, presidents like to use their bi-monthly letters to members to tell



how busy we are at the Society. On June 14, the very day that over 1,000 people attended the annual Revolutionary War reenactment at our Mabee Farm, over 200 people went through our downtown museum to view the beautiful exhibit of roses arrayed by the Schenectady Rose Society. Hardly a typical day, but even the workdays in between public programs are filled with the hustle and bustle of members, staff, trustees, volunteers, and visitors going about the myriad tasks that further the multifold

mission of the Society.

Occasionally, a noted writer captures this mood, or a humorous caricature of it, in a work of fiction. Twice, eighteen years apart, one of my very favorite writers, Steven Millhauser of Skidmore College, did so. His 1990 work, *The Barnum Museum*, contains a short story of the same name that describes a curious museum which could not, because of its immense size and complexity, possibly be confused with one of ours.

Now, in his new collection of short stories of this year, *Dangerous Laughter*, Professor Millhauser has regaled me again. Every story therein describes a world something like our own, but one in which something is slightly awry. My favorite, "Here at the Historical Society," begins as if it were being written to members of a perfectly normal historical society. But if you were to read this satirical story beyond the opening words quoted here, it would become apparent that, in hysterical rather than historical societies, things can be carried to extremes. Enjoy:



"WE HERE at the Historical Society are tireless in pursuit of the past. Although we work from eight-thirty to five-thirty, Tuesday through Saturday, and Sundays from twelve to five, many of us may be found here in the evenings as well, often as late as midnight, to say nothing of Monday, our official day of rest, for there are always new artifacts to label and classify, facts to assess, reports to be written, projects to be advanced. Despite our long hours, about which no one complains, our labor represents only the outward sign of an inward devotion that never ceases. At home, among our families, we think about some piece of business that hasn't yet been completed, on after-dinner strolls along the maple-lined streets of our town we recall a memorandum that needs to be consulted before tomorrow's meeting, in the midst of our most intimate embraces we picture, for a moment, the new report that awaits our attention, and even in sleep our minds are invaded by images of bursting walls and falling towers that we recognize, upon waking, as nightmare visions of piles of unpacked crates in the shadowy storage rooms beneath our exhibits. All things considered, I think it is fair to say that we never stop working, here at the Historical Society."

-Ed

Painting Schenectady: Samuel Sexton and his Works

**Opening Saturday July 19 through August 30
at the Schenectady County Historical Society**

One of Samuel H. Sexton's most famous works, *The Schenectady Massacre*, has been returned to the Society's collection. It has been unavailable for the last two years due to cleaning and conservation work at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. This exhibit will also include a drawing by Giles Yates which was recently discovered in the archives of the First Reformed Church of Schenectady. It inspired another of Sexton's popular paintings owned by the Society, *The Old Dutch Church*. There will be an interpretive exhibit on the works of Samuel Sexton courtesy of Laura Lee Linder, Historian for the First Reformed Church of Schenectady, and Ona Curran, art historian, who has published an authoritative book on the works of this local artist. Our collection of Sexton works has been augmented by the gift to the Society of five more Sexton paintings from the Schenectady Museum. The Society now has the largest known collection of Sexton's works.

Known for creating a "good likeness," Sexton concentrated on portrait work for most of his 60-year career. Despite his emphasis on portrait work, he experimented with capturing many different subjects and styles, especially in his younger years. He ranged from portraits to landscapes, historical vignettes and copies of the work by other artists.



A Generous Gift to the Schenectady County Historical Society from the Turner Family

Last fall, Paul V. Turner, Professor of Art at Stanford University, visited the Society while on a visit to his alma mater, Union College, for a presentation to Union of his new book about the architect who designed the Union campus - *Joseph Ramee: International Architect of the Revolutionary Era*.

The Turner family has a connection with Schenectady going back over a century. Family members include Clarence Porter Turner, who began work at General Electric as an electrical engineer about 1900, and Clarence's son, Ralph Moore Turner, who worked for 41-years for the *Schenectady Gazette*, beginning as a reporter and becoming part of the newspaper's administration. Both of Ralph's sons, Paul V. and Ralph C., were born in Schenectady and attended school at Nott Terrace High School and Linton High School respectively. Paul Turner graduated from Union College in 1964. During his visit to the Society, Prof. Turner expressed his family's interest in donating two pieces of furniture from his family's collection.

One of the gifted items is a Jelliff parlor table which dates to the 1870s and was constructed in the workshop of John Jelliff, a popular furniture maker in Newark, New Jersey during the second half of the nineteenth century. Paul Turner suspected that John Jelliff was

the master craftsman who made the table, and he contacted Ulysses G. Dietz, the curator of the Newark Museum, who was able to confirm the probable origin of this table. Paul Turner's query about this table was helpful to the Newark Museum because it helped the staff there to link other Jelliff tables of similar style. The depicted Jelliff table is an example of "revival" style.

The other gifted item from the Turner family is a chair which is an example of the Rococo Revival style dating to about 1885. It is yet another example of a revival style showing little resemblance to its origins. It does not resemble anything made during the original Rococo period of the eighteenth century. Despite that, this style became very popular during the nineteenth century and found its way into many Victorian American homes.



The depicted Jelliff table is an example of "revival" style

Continued from page 1

In February of 2008, Lock 23 was named to the state historic registry and in May of 2008 it received official designation to the National Register of Historic Places. Those awards will be helpful to the Town in obtaining various grants. They also reflect the dedicated efforts and hard work of all those over the last 18 years who rescued the remains of Lock 23 as a valuable piece of New York history.



Lock controls - 1998

It was in 1817 that the New York State Legislature made the financial commitment of seven million dollars for Erie Canal construction. The 363 mile canal was completed in 1825. Initially, it was about as wide as a 2-lane country road and ran parallel to the Mohawk River for much of its length. The original Erie Canal Lock in Rotterdam back in 1825 was Lock 26. The Erie Canal was the great success story of 19th century transportation and expansion. Its early success led to improvements. Some Locks were eliminated and Lock 23, a “double wide” variety, was built around 1841 during the first enlargement of the Erie Canal. The new and improved Lock 23 was known as Alexander’s Lock and measured 110 feet long by 18 feet wide (the original was 90 feet long and 15 feet wide). It was built with traditionally cut limestone blocks and is a fine example of mid-19th century engineering and masonry. Barges could now move east as well as west at the same time. In the 1890s the east bound channel on the south side, the one we see today, was lengthened to allow for two barges to be hooked up and go through at the same time. With the original locks on the Erie Canal it could take as long as 51 minutes to pass through. By 1847 with the upgraded locks on the Erie Canal, barges could pass in under 10 minutes. As many as 250 boats per day would pass through Lock 23 in 1847. Lock 23 closed in 1918 when the Barge Canal opened, which made extensive use of the Mohawk River.

When the Barge Canal was opened in 1918, Lock 23

was no longer part of canal transportation and the area was acquired by the General Electric Company. During the 1950s the property was conveyed to the Town of Rotterdam. The Town was building its new water pumping station on the nearby well field. The project ran its new main water line through the canal chamber. That pipe was relocated at a later date and the hope is to remove the concrete walkway above the abandoned pipe and expose even more of Lock 23. It might even be possible at some point to expose the other channel, the shorter westbound one.

In its heyday, Lock 23 was known as “The Gateway to the West” and it was among the busiest of the Erie Canal’s 83 locks. Schenectady was the last major community reached by the eastbound canal traffic, making the city a major transfer point for goods and passengers. People and goods were transferred at Lock 23 to avoid the time and difficulty of dealing with 22 more locks before reaching Albany. From Albany goods could be shipped on the Hudson River or transported by overland means. Time passed and other means of transporting goods played a more important role such as railroads and the Interstate Highway System. In 1959 the St. Lawrence Seaway opened. The Barge Canal still exists but its use for the transportation of goods has been greatly diminished. It is now part of the New York State Canal Corporation and is used more and more for promoting tourism in upstate New York.



Lock controls partially covered; lock tender’s hut in background – May 10, 2008 *Photos: Ann Aronson*

Author’s Note: As the author of this article I owe a great debt of gratitude to Carol Lewis, a Society Trustee and chair of the Society’s Library Committee. She is a self-confessed Erie Canal buff and has been part of a dedicated group of volunteers who have worked over the years to preserve the remains of Lock 23 and tell its story. She made a wealth of material available to me, much of it from her own personal collection.

LIBRARY NEWS

Our Library intern for the summer, Mandi Beecroft, has been working on re-housing fragile library materials into protective paper enclosures; is developing a computer-based catalog using Past Perfect software; and has taken on special projects such as arranging and describing the records of Schenectady Music Association. Mandi is also arranging and describing historical records given to the Society by the Heritage Home for Women, a private facility devoted to caring for elderly women. The Heritage Home, currently located on Union Street in Schenectady, has a long history in our city. These records will be highlighted in an exhibit installed in the Vrooman Room at the Society during September to help celebrate both the 140th anniversary of the founding of the Heritage Home and the transfer of this archival collection to the Historical Society.

A Brief History of the Heritage Home for Women:

In the year 1868, a charitable organization known as the Ladies Benevolent Society formed the "Haven of Rest." Later that same year it was renamed "Home for the Friendless." The Home was intended to house and care for the needy women of Schenectady who had no remaining family or friends to whom they could turn. The first house for these women still stands at 237 Green Street. It was necessary to find a larger facility because of the increase of this needy population. In 1905 a new building was started at 1519 Union Street and at that time was called The Old Ladies Home. It was opened in 1909.

The Home was brought into being through the hard work and contributions of many well-known families from Schenectady with names like Vedder and Mynderse. Two women in particular were among the primary movers in establishing this safe haven for women. They were Urania Nott, third wife of the former Union College President Eliphalet Nott, and Cordelia Crane, wife of the prominent businessman Jonas H. Crane. These women served as "Directresses" of the Home upon its opening in 1868, and shortly after opening, they welcomed their first resident, a young widow by the name of Sarah Jane Clark. Since Clark's admittance into the "Home for the Friendless," the Home has grown considerably in size, and even after moving to the larger building on Union Street, the Home maintained a waiting list.

The Home was able to move to its current location through the help of a large donation from Mrs. J.W. Smitley. Deciding that a new image called for a new name (and partly upon the insistence of Mrs. Smitley),

the "Home for the Friendless" became the "Old Ladies Home." This name changed once again in 1968, 100 years after the Home's establishment, and became the "Heritage Home for Women" as it is known today. The Home now houses 36 female Schenectady residents.

Recent additions to the library

- Grand-Daddy's Drawings and True Stories for Boys* by Edgar Knowlton, gift of Ted Knowlton
- Randall Gleanings* and *Stone Ridge*, gift of the author Annie Hanchett Coddington
- ALCO ephemera and Photo negatives, donated by Wayne Tucker, Schenectady, NY
- David Lester Estate Papers, donated by Linda Post, Schenectady, NY
- The Bickelmann Family Papers and records of the Bieckelmann Jewelry Store, donated by Anne and Charles Bickelmann.
- Schenectady and Genealogy books and magazine, including *The True Blues of Schenectady*, by Rev. W.N.P. Dailey, and *Great Battles of the Civil War* - an *illustrated history*, edited by Neil Kagan, gifts of Kim Mabee
- Smith's Zouaves, Schenectady, NY, ca. 1890, a photograph, gift of Shirley Sutphen
- Electric City Pond, an environmental history of Schenectady and the Adirondacks*, by Gregory Rosenenthal, gift of the author.
- Visitors to the library will find a copy of the 1922 silent film showing Edison's visit to Schenectady in that year, gift of Phil Falconer.



237 Green Street, original location of Home for the Friendless.
Photo: Mandi Beecroft

Free Canalfest Music
July 12 & 13th
Saturday & Sunday

Saturday, July 12th:
 11 am—Landfill Mountain Boys
 12:30 pm—Susan Trump
 2 pm—Jay Ungar & Molly Mason
 2 pm—Dulcimer workshop/Susan Trump
 3:30 pm—Riverview Ramblers

Sunday, July 13th:
 12 pm—Gary Van Slyke *The Parker Inn*
 1 pm—Yarn
 2:30 pm—Roy Hurd
 3:45 pm—Little Toby Walker

Artisans, hay rides, alpacas, crafts and great food from Mosall's Grove

New—Historic Boat Tours
 12:30 pm, 2 pm & 3:30 pm
 \$10.00 per person

MABEE FARM HISTORIC SITE
 Route 5S, Exit 1A off I-890
 Rotterdam Junction
 (518) 887-5073

Jay Ungar & Molly Mason

Little Toby Walker

Roy Hurd

**JAY UNGAR AND MOLLY MASON
 TO APPEAR AT MABEE FARM'S
 CANALFEST**

Jay Ungar and Molly Mason have become one of the most celebrated duos on the American acoustic music scene. Their soundtrack of Jay's haunting composition "Ashokan Farewell" is the musical hallmark of Ken Burn's PBS documentary "The Civil War" which won a Grammy and was nominated for an Emmy. They have appeared on Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion," NPR's "Morning Edition," "All Things Considered," and on CBS's "This Morning." They have also worked on film soundtracks such as "Brother's Keeper" and "Legends of the Fall." Their music can be heard on most of Ken Burn's PBS documentaries such as "Lewis and Clark," "Thomas Jefferson," and "The West." In their spare time, Jay and Molly host WAMC-FM Northeast Public Radio's "Dancing on the Air - Live at the Linda." Come and enjoy their musical talents at the Mabee Farm's free **Canalfest** on Saturday, July 12th at 2 pm.

HISTORICAL BOAT TOURS - Learn about the history of the Mohawk River while talking a trip aboard the "Wofford." See vestiges of the old Erie Canal, remains of the camp once used by Charles P. Steinmetz, and Native Americans camp sites. Tours begin Saturday, July 12th and costs \$10.00 per person. Call: (518) 887-5073 for information and reservations.

Arts & Crafts Festival
Saturday, August 23rd
 10 am—5 pm

Fine arts
 Handwovens
 Glass
 Wood
 Photography
 Soaps
 Jewelry
 Traditional music
 Boat Tours
 Hay rides

MABEE FARM HISTORIC SITE
 Route 5S
 Rotterdam Jct.

Early Technologies Day
 August 9th from 10 am—4 pm
 Co-sponsored by the Native American Institute of the Hudson River Valley

Fire starting
 Deer sinew
 Beading
 Flint Knapping & atlatl throwing
 Brain tanned leather & buckskin
 Basket making
 Artifact ID—NYS Archeological Assoc
 Primitive weaving
 Blacksmithing
 Tinsmithing
 Rope making

MABEE FARM HISTORIC SITE
 Route 5S
 Rotterdam Jct
 Exit 1A/I-890

(518) 887-5073
 www.mabeefarm.org
 mabee@nycap.rr.com

See <http://mabeefarm.org/> for more information.



Bateau in re-enactment battle.



Cannon firing during re-enactment battle at Mabee Farm

Photos: Ann Aronson; Pat Barrot



Jeff Tew – demonstrating for children's musket drill.



Cliff Oliver Mealey portraying Jack, the Mabee Farm slave, during a school visit.



Mike Kowalski in Mabee Farm bateau portrays a boat builder for a web film to be shown at the Stockade Walkabout.



L-R: Ed Reilly, SCHS Board President; Ray Smith, Analyst, NYS Historic Preservation Program; Steven Tommasone, Rotterdam Town Supervisor; Frank Renna, secretary Sunrise Rotary Club, and Andy Morris, Union College history professor.



2008 Re-enactment at the Mabee Farm.



Photos: Ann Aronson,
Pat Barrot.

Non-Profit Org.
US POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 942
Schenectady, NY

Historical Society Newsletter
32 Washington Avenue
Schenectady, New York 12305

