



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

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BICENTENNIAL EDITION



In this bicentennial year of 2009, the theme of this issue, we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the creation of Schenectady County, separated from Albany County in 1809, and the simultaneous formation of the Town of Niskayuna. The scene above depicts the Aqueduct area of Niskayuna in about 1870. The bridge at left center carries Balltown Road over the Erie Canal. The large building at the top left is the Craig Hotel and the pinkish building near the bridge entrance is its livery stable. The Canal and the Craig are gone, but the stable lived on, first as the Izzy Davis grocery store and then and through now, The Boat House.

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HOURS

MUSEUM & LIBRARY

MONDAY-FRIDAY 9-5

SATURDAY 10-2

MABEE FARM

CLOSED

FOR THE SEASON

President's Letter -

The reenactment of the 1690 ride of Symon Schermerhorn is always fun, and this year was no exception. Depicted are the outdoor and indoor festivities at the historic Albany City Hall. Albany Mayor Jerry Jennings greeted Symon, aka Mayor Brian Stratton of Schenectady, very cordially, saying inside that he had commissioned a very gentle horse from the stable of Albany's finest.

According to the long poem being read at the event by Kyle Jenks, the original horse and rider were both injured and in great pain as they soldiered over the 17-mile course from the Stockade through early Niskayuna to Fort Orange. To Kyle's left is the mayoral duo and our Society's copies of the pertinent minutes of the Albany Common Council. To his right are three genuine Schermerhorns, Jim and daughters Lauren, Alexandra, and Sophia. To their right is Laura Linder, Historian of the Town of Charlton. Two other Schermerhorns were in attendance, Jim's wife Christina and their fourth daughter, Callista Ann, who was born that evening.

In 1690, New York was not yet divided into the formal county structure we know today, and when it was, Albany County was very large. Then, one by one, the counties of Rensselaer, Saratoga, and Schenectady were split off to fend for themselves. The latter event, which happened on March 7, 1809, also marked the formal establishment of a Town of Niskayuna, so this year's Bicentennial celebrates the creation of both.



The big Bicentennial Gala at Glen Sanders will probably be over by the time you read this, but still ahead is the months-long Bicentennial Exhibit in our Vrooman Room. Members who attend our Annual Meeting on Saturday, April 11 at the YWCA next door get to see it first, and we will welcome all others at the grand opening on Saturday, April 18, 2 – 4 p.m. Colonial dress is optional.

-Ed

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

Because of the Bicentennial Exhibit in the Vrooman Room, the venue for this year's Annual Meeting will be at the Schenectady YWCA next door to the Society. Park once, visit both, on **SATURDAY, APRIL 11 at 2 p.m.** Members of record as of March 15 may vote on matters that come before the assembly including election of trustees and officers of the Society. As now specified in our bylaws, a quorum consists of 100 members who are either present in person or who have mailed a proxy that reaches the office no later than April 10. If you are not certain that you will attend, please use the proxy form on page 10 and mail to 32 Washington Ave., Schenectady, NY 12305 as soon as possible.

The Schenectady Massacre in 1690 led to an “Oops... in 1691, and the “Swits Patent” in 1708.

By Frank Taormina

Those familiar with the story of the Schenectady Massacre know that it took place on February 8th and 9th in 1690. It was a harrowing event for the small Dutch village. See the Tantillo painting on page 7 for what the village probably looked like. The historical record shows that 60 were killed – “men, women, children, and negroes.” Most of the families who came



to Schenectady became property owners. It had to be with great pride that they stood for the first time on land that was “theirs,” an experience they had not had as residents of the Van Rensselaer Patent. Owning property was a big incentive to move west

toward the sparsely settled wilderness. Of the Massacre survivors, a number of them were taken captive back to Canada and it was assumed at the time they would never be seen again. Indeed, few returned and many perished.

Isaac Cornelis Swits, also known as Kleyn Isaac, was one of those captured settlers. In 1690 when the village was burned, Isaac and his eldest son Cornelis were both carried off to Canada as captives, but they returned the following summer. During Isaac’s absence, the Governor ordered the Swits “home lot” to be taken for the site of a new fort. This is the “Oops....” part of the story in 1691.

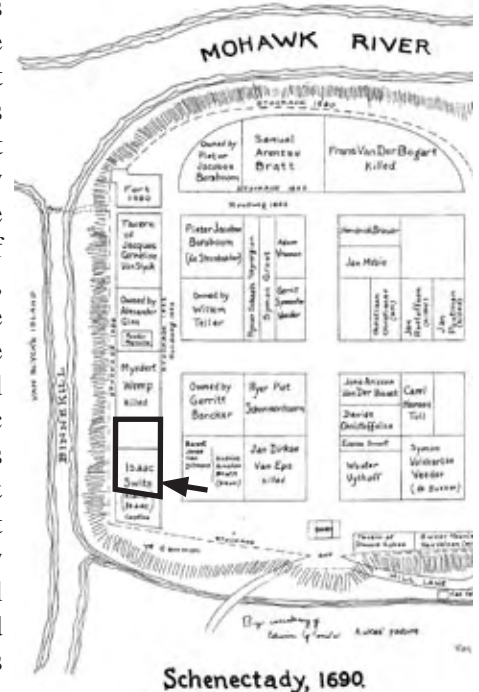
The next time you stand on the northwest corner of Washington Avenue and State Street, try to pick up the “vibes” no doubt still there from the emotions experienced by Isaac and Cornelis Swits. When they returned to the village they had been forced to leave as prisoners they found, in place of their “home lot,” a military fortification garrisoned by a lot of people they did not know.

The story is told in Jonathan Pearson’s “History of the Schenectady Patent” (see p. 148 and following) that Isaac and his son “repeatedly petitioned the Governor and Council for remuneration in money (30 pounds) or land” and how finally, “on the 10th of April, 1707 was allowed the privilege of receiving

from the Indian proprietors a deed for 1,000 acres of land lying along the south side of the Mohawk River, extending from the Ael Plaats (known today as Alplaus) to Rosendaal (known today as the area of Rosendale Road), for which a deed was granted October 2, 1708 under the following description: ‘a tract of woodland on the south side of Conestigione (known today as the Mohawk) river, bounded on the west by bounds of the woodlands of the town of Schenectady, east by bounds of Conestigione, containing 1,000 acres of land from said river southward between the bounds aforesaid.’”

It took 18 years for Isaac and his son Cornelis to obtain redress for the loss they experienced in 1690.

The “Swits Patent,” one of the earliest land grants in what eventually became the Town of Niskayuna, became the site of the General Electric Company’s Research & Development Center (now GE Global Research) and of the Knolls Atomic



Power Laboratory. We can only wonder what it was like for Isaac and his son Cornelis when they finally stood overlooking the Mohawk River and realized what their unremitting efforts had gained for them. Their spirit of persistence still lingers there to inspire the legions of “truth-seekers” who have occupied this site since the late 1940s in their continued search for solutions to modern day problems.

Since 2008, GE Global Research has remembered the historic event of the “Swits Patent” with a display in its lobby of framed copies of the original deed and a translation into present day English.

Efner Center and Research Library

The Efner History Center recently acquired a scrapbook given to the City by the son of the late Mayor Mills Ten Eyck which will be added to the Efner Center's Mills Ten Eyck Collection.

The scrapbook documents the effort within Schenectady County during World War II under the leadership of Dr. Hans Rozendaal to provide support to a liberated city within Holland. In time, the City



*Mills Ten Eyck (1883 –1957).
Mayor for two terms 1940 – 1947*

of Schenectady received from the assisted Dutch community formal notification of gratitude “..on behalf of the People...” in recognition of aid rendered. This, too, is part of the donation.

Processing of the Schenectady Railway Company Collection is ongoing with the help of volunteers including a local trolley car enthusiast. The effort



was begun during Archives Month in October of last year. The collection includes numerous photographs of trolley cars, car barns, and related trolley car maintenance equipment. The collection also includes records of the early the early SRC busses,

financial records of the Company dating back to the 1890s, and a photographic history of the construction of the Ballston line of the Railway dating from 1905.



We are grateful for the volunteers who work on newspaper clipping scrapbooks, some of which date back to the early 1900s. One of our volunteers has been working on identifying some of the photos, as well as scanning and indexing them. Progress is slow but steady on the Edward Marshall Stone Collection.



The Efner Center is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.. On the third Wednesday of the month we do not open until after 10:30 a.m.. Other visits can be arranged by appointment. Please stop by and visit!

MUSEUM - lectures and exhibits

Neil Yetwin tells the fascinating tale of the life of Moses Viney – a man born into slavery - his escape from Maryland to Schenectady, and his life in this city.

Saturday – March 14

1:30 p.m. Refreshments

2:00 p.m. Program

Moses Viney was born into slavery in the state of Maryland and made a daring escape all the way up to Schenectady, New York. He survived this grueling trek and made a home for himself in this city but he



still had to fight for his freedom. Neil Yetwin, a Schenectady High School teacher and local historian, explores the amazing life and legacy of Moses Viney. Yetwin will use period images and documents to explore Viney's life before and after he finally achieved freedom.

NYS Assemblyman Jack McEneny to speak on Irish immigrants in the Capital District

Saturday – March 21

1:30 p.m. Refreshments

2:00 p.m. Program

New York State Assemblyman and Historian Jack



McEneny will discuss the history of Irish immigrants in the Capital District region and how to trace one's Irish roots. Mr. McEneny is an avid genealogist and researcher of the Irish experience. He will share his insights and provide suggestions to those seeking information regarding their Irish kinfolk.

Mr. McEneny is a well-known teacher, historian, and a frequent speaker on local history and immigration. He led the effort that saved the 17th century Quackenbush House, Albany's oldest building, and later chaired the Albany Historic Sites Commission. He wrote and narrated the WMHT Public Television Tercentennial Documentary on Albany, and authored *Albany, Capital City on the Hudson*. He currently serves as a member of the New York State Archives Partnership Trust, the Commission for the Restoration of the Capitol, and the Albany Convention Center Authority. In 2006, New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver appointed him as the official Historian of the Assembly.

Locating family documents in Italy - a talk on genealogy by Peter Sisario

Saturday – April 4

1:30 p.m. Refreshments 2:00 p.m. Program in the Library

Peter Sisario is back by popular demand.

When he spoke at the Society in January about



immigration records, many people asked him to come back to offer more help in locating family documents in Italy as they continue their family research. Space for this program is limited to the first thirty applicants who register for the program by calling the Library at 374-0263.

Peter Sisario, a retired English teacher from Scotia, NY, is a genealogist and an experienced researcher. He honed his research skills while locating documents

about his family members who emigrated to the U.S. from the areas of Naples and Sicily. In his spare time he volunteers at the National Archives in Pittsfield, MA where he teaches workshops on genealogy.

Annual Meeting of the Schenectady County Historical Society

Saturday – April 11

2:00 p.m. Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of the Society will be held at 2 p.m. on Saturday, April 11 **at the YWCA at 44 Washington Avenue.** Following business, members are invited to the preview opening of the Society's Bicentennial Exhibit in the Vrooman Room at the Society. The formal opening of the exhibit will be a week later.

“The Most Beautiful Land”: Schenectady County's History- A Bicentennial Exhibit

Saturday – April 18

2:00 pm – 4:00 pm

Thereafter: Monday through Friday 9 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Saturday 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. April 19th through September 30.



Charles Stanford family home – later the Ingersoll Home

This is the title of our new exhibit which celebrates Schenectady County's bicentennial. We will offer visitors a fresh look at fascinating aspects of our county's history.

Artifacts for viewing will include the gravestone of a

Schenectady Massacre victim and the newly restored *Schenectady Massacre* painting by Schenectady artist Samuel Sexton which illustrates the violence of Schenectady's early history. You will see a remnant of President Abraham Lincoln's blood, as well as the American Civil War journal of Charles Lewis which reflect Schenectady County's connection with larger national events. Our exhibit will highlight not only the well-known aspects of Schenectady County's history such as the opening of the Erie Canal and the great impact that General Electric and ALCO have had on this community, but also the lesser known stories of the County. Immigrants from around the world have called Schenectady home and their stories will be told through artifacts, photographs, and documents. Brand new research surrounding



the experiences of both enslaved Africans and later free Blacks will be unveiled including previously unexplored artifacts and documents like the recently rediscovered book press given to Moses Viney by Eliphalet Nott.

For this bicentennial exhibit, *“The Most Beautiful Land”: Schenectady County's History*, the Schenectady County Historical Society will unveil its new museum lighting system and the new digital picture monitors. Enjoy the fresh look of our Vrooman Room exhibit area with its greatly improved lighting. Throughout the exhibit you will also view photographic montages created by our library volunteers. Take this opportunity to explore this unique exhibit that looks at Schenectady County's history from its beginnings as a frontier trading community to becoming an industrial center while retaining its rural suburbs.

Shop online for items on sale at the Historical Society and the Mabee Farm

The e-store is now live. Society members can start purchasing from our new web store by going to www.schist.org and following the directions on the main page. Users may create an account although this is not absolutely necessary. Members may claim their 10% discounts on purchases. Membership renewals can be done online.

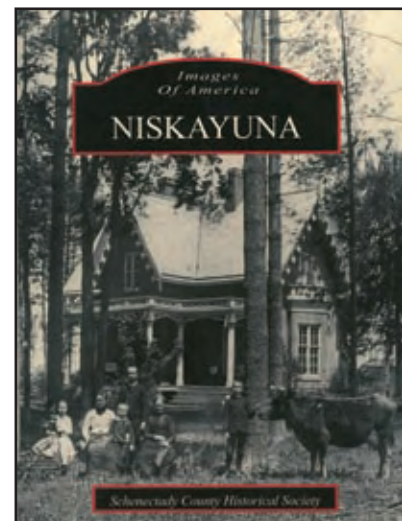
There are 100 items (three examples are shown) in this online catalog which represent most of what we sell.



Schenectady Harbor 1814 by Len Tantillo



Mugs



Coming soon.



Schenectady Town early on February 8th 1690 by Len Tantillo

Library:

Donation and conservation of the Heitkamp-Dettbarn Marriage Certificate

In 1992 Paul Hooker of Scotia, NY donated to the Society an ivory silk wedding dress worn in 1903 by his grandmother at the first wedding held at Friedens United Church of Christ located at the corner of Franklin and Clinton in downtown Schenectady. In 1903 Friedrich C. Heitkamp, born in Germany, and Auguste Dettbarn, of Schenectady, were married at



Heitkamp Wedding portrait by Walter E. Talbot, 1903

This past fall Paul Hooker found family documents from the wedding which he donated in September: a wedding invitation, a photograph of the young couple on their wedding day, and their wedding certificate. The wedding certificate had been rolled up and stored for years making it almost impossible to unroll without cracking the document. The solution was to call on Samantha Couture, paper conservationist, Society member, and neighbor on Washington Avenue, to take the certificate to her studio where she placed the brittle paper certificate in a humidity chamber. In time she could unroll the document and it could be cleaned, repaired and mounted on acid-free matte board. Samantha's conservation work revealed surprising details about the certificate: beautiful colors and the fact that it was written in German.

Paul Hooker took a copy of the certificate to a translator of German, Patrick Madden. It read in English as follows: *Wedding Certificate that Friedrich C. Heitkamp*

from Schenectady, NY and Auguste B.C. Dettbarn from Schenectady, NY on 4 June 1903 in Schenectady, NY in the presence of the witnesses Maritally Connected were, and is herewith credibly proven...C. Schauer, Pastor of the Evangelical Peace Church.

One reason for all the attention to the certificate at this point was a family reunion at Thanksgiving in the home of Mildred Heitkamp Olson, the last surviving child (of seven) from the marriage of Friedrich and Auguste. Paul arranged for a relative to bring to Mildred Olson in Virginia a copy of the restored certificate for her parent's marriage. The donation from Paul Hooker completes an exceptional Schenectady wedding ensemble in the collections of the Historical Society and preserves the family history of an old Scotia family.



Mildred Heitkamp Olson, of Stuart's Draft, VA, 95 years old, last surviving of seven children of Friedrich and Auguste Heitkamp. Photo: Paul Hooker, Scotia, NY – nephew



Original wedding certificate.

2009 MABEE FARM EVENTS

June 6 - 7

Schenectady County History & Heritage Day French & Indian War Re-enactment and Market Fair

Skilled players will recreate British, French, Native Americans, and Provincials in the battles that took place in our own backyard in the mid 1700s. You can watch cavalry demonstrations, boat battles with cannon, a Punch and Judy Show, and a sword swallower. All of this and more will capture your imagination. There will also be an 18th century Market Fair complete with a vibrant blend of Colonial period craftsmen and merchants. This is great educational fun for the whole family! Free admission

August 1

Early Technologies Day

Learn about fire starting, making cordage, and using deer sinew. Observe quill work, powder horn engraving, tinsmithing, blacksmithing, basket making, beadwork, working with brain tanned leather, and more! Highlights of the day will include a hands-on flint knapping workshop, and atlatl throwing with Barry Keegan. Bring your Native American artifacts for identification by the Van Epps Hartley Chapter of the New York State Archaeology Association. Free admission

Boat tours available – fee charged.

August 8 - 9

Canalfest/ Canalsplash

Enjoy musicians such as Pat Wictor, Mike and Ruthy, and the Black Creek and other artists gather for two days of entertainment and workshops. Free admission
Boat tours available – fee charged.

August 22

Arts & Crafts Festival

The festival will feature the best in local area folk and creative arts. There will be wood crafting, making jams, creating hand woven items, making candles, and fashioning jewelry. There will be examples of fine arts, painted furniture; you will be able to watch artisan demonstrations, and listen to traditional music.
Boat Tours available – fee charged.

September 12

History Day – The Dutch Influence in New York, and Bicentennial Treasures Day

Presenting lectures will be: Robert Trent, former curator of Dutch Furniture at Winterthur; John Stevens, author of *Dutch Vernacular Architecture in North America, 1640-1830*; and Bill McMillan, restoration expert from historic Richmond Town on Staten Island. There will be architectural tours of the Mabee Farm buildings. These events are co-sponsored by the Dutch Barn Preservation Society and Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture. Bring those historic treasures from your attic for identification. Free admission
Boat Tours available – fee charged.

October 17

Farm & Foliage Day

Join us for family fun! There will be pumpkin painting, scarecrow making, pony rides, and hay rides. Watch craftspeople and other artisans as they work. This is great family fun! These events are sponsored by the County of Schenectady. Free admission
Boat tours available – fee charged

May – October

Historic Boat Tours on the Mohawk River.

Please call (518) 887-5073 for more information.



Mabee Farm circa 1930s

Members who do not expect to attend the Annual Meeting of April 11 are asked to copy this form (twice for those holding a Family membership or above), fill it out, and mail to SCHS at 32 Washington Avenue, Schenectady, NY 12305 as soon as possible.

PROXY

I, _____, a member of the Schenectady County Historical Society, hereby authorize ☐ the Secretary of the Society, or ☐ (Name) _____ to vote on all matters brought before the members assembled at the Annual Meeting of April 11, 2009.

Name _____

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Signature _____

Membership Levels: (please check a box)

- ☐ Individual \$25
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If using a credit card, please fill in all information below — or call it in to (518) 374-0263.

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expiration date: ____/____/____ *security code:* ____ (far right side/back of card)

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(OPTIONAL) Enclosed, please find an additional contribution of \$_____ to be used for:

☐ Society Operations ☐ Mabee Farm ☐ Franchere Center ☐ Library ☐ Museum ☐ Schermerhorn Site

We appreciate your support of the Schenectady County Historical Society. Your membership entitles you to our bi-monthly newsletters, free use of the library, tours of the museum and Mabee Farm, volunteer opportunities, plus a vote at the annual meeting in April. Thank you.

SCENES NO LONGER SEEN



Recent events at the Society



Peter Sisario lectures to a large crowd about researching Italian genealogy



Kate Weller, Museum Curator, presents a school program on fur trade in Schenectady.

Photos: Ann Aronson



A Schenectady Christian School fourth grader makes a necklace with reproduction trade beads.

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