



Schenectady County  
Historical  
Society

# Newsletter

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32 Washington Avenue, Schenectady, New York 12305

Web site: <http://www.schist.org> • Editor email: [rbergero@nycap.rr.com](mailto:rbergero@nycap.rr.com)

Librarian email: [librarian@schist.org](mailto:librarian@schist.org) • Curator email: [curator@schist.org](mailto:curator@schist.org)

(518) 374-0263

FAX: (518) 688-2825



## *The Legacy of Robert Furman*

by Frank Taormina

A community is the product of the individuals who inhabit it. Among these people there are, if the community is a fortunate one, some who possess the desire, the energy, the vision, and the personal gifts to help create a better community for all its members. Robert Furman (1826-1894) of Schenectady was such a person.

It is difficult to include all the things for which Robert Furman should be remembered in a list of his accomplishments. His home, which he built in 1857 and where he died in 1894, is still located at the corner of Lafayette and Smith Streets where it has served since 1928 as the Rectory for St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church. The main location for his business was at the northeast corner of State and Ferry Streets, a site recently bequeathed to the Schenectady County Community College by Mrs. Katherine Kindl, its most recent owner. It was here that in 1886 Robert Furman took the lead among local businessmen in helping to complete the transaction that enabled Thomas Edison to locate his electrical manufacturing business in Schenectady.

Continued on pages 4-5

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## *Letter from the President*

The world renews itself every spring, and so does the Society. April 1 marks the beginning of our new fiscal year, and with it comes our Annual Meeting, held on April 10 this year, and preparation of this May-June issue in which we needed four 4-column pages, 6 through 9, to list the many members and contributors who helped us through a difficult FY 2009.

Two new Trustees joined the other 22 of us this year; photos of Mike Karl and Rob Petito follow this letter and their profiles lead the following page. They are solid citizens who will be a great asset to SCHS.

FY 2010 will also be a challenge. One project underway is not fully funded, the restoration of the two large historic maps of New York State, one from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and one from the late 18<sup>th</sup>, that have been hanging, mostly unseen, in a third-floor room of our museum. Librarian Katherine Chansky wants very much to complete the much-needed restorations and then find a better place to hang them. We're pretty much out of wall space downtown, but by another year we should be able to find a place of honor for these maps in the new Franchere Education Center at the Mabee Farm.

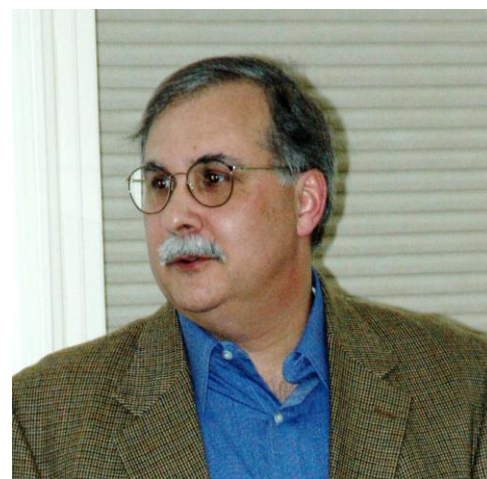
Here's how you can help make this happen. Three persons who choose to remain anonymous have contributed the \$1,000 needed to restore one of the maps. Their challenge to you is to match that \$1,000 so that the other may be also. So I ask that four of you each send us \$250, and you needn't remain anonymous. And don't be concerned if, collectively, the mini-fund drive is oversubscribed. There will always be more restoration to do.

The breaking news of the moment is that invitations to bid to build the Franchere Center have been extended, responses are due in mid-month, and then, next month, June will be busting out all over. Hear the music!

*-Ed*



Michael Karl



Robert Petito

### *Michael W. Karl*

New Trustee **Mike Karl** is a native of Rotterdam Junction with family roots going back to the Mabee family. He is a graduate of Schalmont High School, has a B.S. from Siena College, and is a Certified Insurance Counselor and Registered Professional Liability Underwriter. After service in the Army, he became a claims representative with the General Accident Group and moved up to become a Special Agent for them. A. He was recruited by AIG as its Albany Branch manager and left that position to join Jardine Insurance Brokers as an Account Executive and became Senior Vice President. He moved on to become President of Naples Risk Management (NRM) where he established Management Protection International, LLC, and specialized in international commercial insurance and management liability. Through a series of business mergers his employer became First Niagara Risk Management (FNRM) where he is now Executive Vice President at the Albany, NY Regional headquarters of FNRM. Mike holds a 20-year service award from the National Ski Patrol, and is part owner of Karl Racing's #71 modified race car. He serves on the Board of Trustees of the Schenectady County Community College and was elected Board Chair in July of 2008. He also served a four-year term as Councilman, Town of Rotterdam.

### *Robert A. Petito, Jr.*

New Trustee **Rob Petito** is a licensed architect who works in the field of historic preservation, restoration, and adaptive use of historic structures. Rob grew up in the Delaware Valley in a New Jersey community that was settled in the 1670s, and has lived in the Stockade neighborhood of Schenectady for 20 years. He holds an undergraduate degree in American History from Princeton University and an M.S. in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania. During the course of his career, he has directed the preparation of historic structure reports, conditions assessments, and documentation for restoration and rehabilitation projects for buildings of varying sizes and uses. In addition, he has worked on restoration projects involving churches, historic courthouses and commercial buildings, dam and water control structures, museums, historic houses, and historic military barracks. He served on the City of Schenectady's Historic District Commission for twelve years and was its chairman from 1996 to 2003. He served a term on the board of the Stockade Association, and currently serves as vice-president of the Schenectady Heritage Foundation. A member of the Historical Society since 1991, he has served on the Mabee Farm Advisory Committee from 1993 to 2000, and currently chairs the Library's subcommittee that is revising the Historical Society's booklet on Stockade homes.

## *Schenectady History Museum Exhibit*

**Saturday – May 8 2:00 pm**

### *Faces of Schenectady 1715 – 1750*

Ona Curran, curator for the exhibit that opened on May 1<sup>st</sup>, will discuss her 40 years of art research into the portraiture of Schenectady. Visitors will have the opportunity to ask questions and to purchase a signed copy of the catalogue designed and written by Ms. Curran.

The portraits of Caleb Beck and his wife Anna Fairly Mol Beck, on loan from Historic Hudson Valley, will be a major feature of the newly installed exhibit which will run at Society headquarters through November 1.

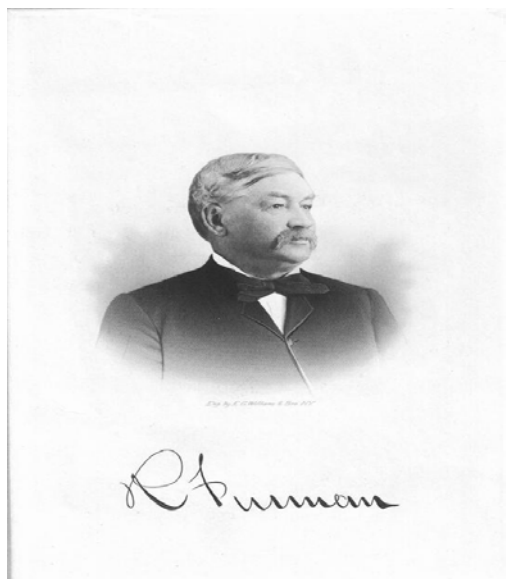
Anna Fairly Mol Beck (1678- c.1748) was the daughter of Jan Janse Mol and Engeltje Pieterse Mabie and granddaughter of Pieter Casparzen Mabie and Aechtje Jans. She came to Schenectady following her marriage to Caleb Beck in 1703, probably encouraged by her uncle, Jan Pieterse Mabie, who owned the historic Mabie house

in Rotterdam Junction. Caleb Beck was a master mariner from Portsmouth New Hampshire. The Becks were active members of the community who operated a tavern and dry goods store at Church and Union Streets. Caleb Beck died in 1733 but his wife carried on the business until her death circa 1748. The Becks were the parents of five children. The portraits of the Becks remained in the family until Catherine Beck, the daughter of T. Romeyn Beck, married Pierre Van Cortlandt in 1836.

The portrait of Laurens Claese Van der Volgen, acquired by the Society last year, will make its first public appearance in this exhibit. Other portraits and images to be included are from families with names like Glen, Sanders, Van Eps, Veeder, Swart, Truax, Vrooman, Van Slyck, Ten Eyck, Dunbar, and Post. A catalogue of the exhibit with illustrations of the portraits in color is available at the Society for \$19.95.

## The Legacy of Robert Furman – continued from p. 1

Robert Furman came to Schenectady in 1843 from Herkimer, NY at the age of 17, coming at the behest of his brother, Rensselaer Furman, a Schenectady merchant. While working for his brother, he attracted the attention of another merchant, Myndert Van Guysling, who occupied the building at the corner of State and Ferry Streets mentioned earlier. Van Guysling hired Robert to work for him, and on December 2, 1857, Robert married Catherine Van Guysling, with whom he lived the rest of his life in that house.



Robert's interest in real estate is framed for me in the existence of two streets: one is Van Guysling Avenue, a street one block west of Broadway, and parallel to it, that runs from Clinton Street extension to Interstate 890; and the other is Furman Street, a few blocks east of McClellan Street in the midst of a very large piece of property he owned in the neighborhood of where Becker Street is now. Also within this framework of reference at the top of the State Street hill, we have Veteran's Park, formerly known as Crescent Park (see image on cover), which was created around 1860 from property donated by Robert Furman and Judge Platt Potter, whose portrait, along with Furman's

bust, now occupy the same room in the Schenectady County Historical Society.

One could hardly do better in recognizing the role Robert Furman played in the Schenectady community than to quote from the ever present "Net" via a reference on [www.scpl.org](http://www.scpl.org), the Schenectady County Public Library website:<sup>1</sup> "He read law, was admitted to the bar, and practiced in the county, state, and federal courts. He continued as a merchant, and had an established position among the solid energetic businessmen of the town, as well as a high professional standing at the bar. But it is not as either lawyer or merchant that gave him his enviable position in the estimation of his fellow citizens. Rather, it was his unvarying public spirit and unceasing effort to advance the interests of Schenectady. Manufactories, railroads, parks, and public buildings all owed to him their inception and successful development. He was a restless and irresistible promoter of new enterprises and public improvement. He was one of the organizers of the Schenectady and Ogdensburg Railroad, and in connection with Colonel Campbell and Judge Potter, paid for the survey. He was instrumental in having Thomas A. Edison locate his General Electric Works in Schenectady, which plant is now [1910] employing upwards of fifteen thousand people."<sup>2</sup> He was an organizer of the Schenectady and Athens railroad. He inspired a railroad promoter to come to Schenectady and build a street railroad. He was a trustee of the Young Men's Christian Association, and made a generous contribution to the building fund. In the New York State legislature, to which he was elected, he secured an appropriation of \$30,000 for an *armory*<sup>3</sup> at Schenectady, one of a like amount for a survey of a railroad to run north to Canada, one for \$100,000 for an observatory for Union College (vetoed by the governor), and appropriations for the Old Ladies Home and the Home of the Sisters of Charity. In season and out of season, he was always working for the good of Schenectady."



In 1863, at the request of his personal and political friend, Governor Horatio Seymour, Furman raised a regiment and was ordered to Buffalo to be equipped and sent to the front to check the northern advance of General Lee. But the great victory gained at Gettysburg rendered the regiment unnecessary, and they were not actually called into service. He had been commissioned colonel of his regiment (83<sup>rd</sup> New York) and would gladly have led them to the fields of action had his country called.

In every department of life, Colonel Furman was eminent—a thoroughly successful man of business; a lawyer of ability; a true and patriotic citizen; a neighbor whose service and sympathy was always assured; a friend in whose fidelity one could always confide. He was most liberal and charitable, but his giving was unostentatious and always timely. He died January 5, 1894, at his home at the corner of Smith and Lafayette streets, Schenectady, aged sixty-eight years.

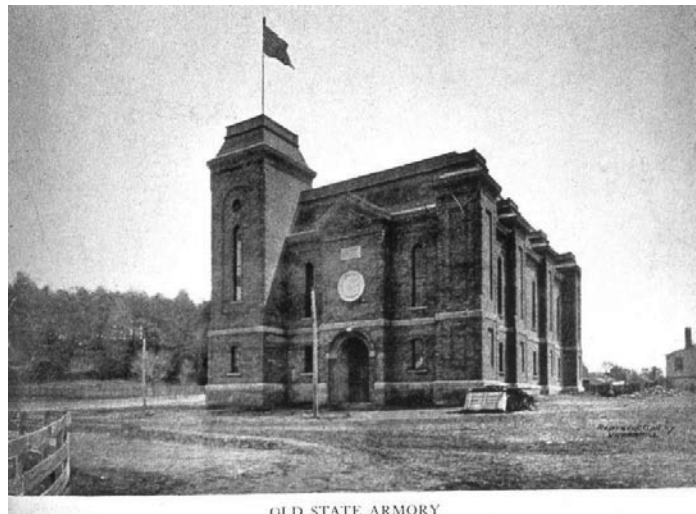
-Frank Taormina

<sup>1</sup> Vol. III, pp. 1066-1068 of *Hudson-Mohawk Genealogical and Family Memoirs*, edited by Cuyler Reynolds (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1911). It is in the Reference collection of the Schenectady County Public Library at R929.1.R45.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the role that Robert Furman played in bringing the Edison Machine Works to Schenectady, there are copies at the Society of newspaper articles that appeared in May and June of 1886 in a local newspaper, *The Daily Union* (which later became *The Union-Star*). The Union Star later published an article describing the coverage in 1886. A selection follows:

On May 26, 1886, "Walter McQueen resigned his position as general superintendent of the then existing locomotive works and with Senator Charles Stanford, N.I. Schermerhorn, and some others organized the McQueen locomotive works. About eight acres of land were purchased and two large buildings were erected on the site of the present General Electric works at a cost of about \$80,000. But before any machinery was put in the buildings, Mr. McQueen resigned and Senator Stanford died and the project came to a standstill." The same article continued to tell of the prospect of getting the Edison Works here and states that a committee was selected to see what could be done in the matter. "The most prominent of these who interested themselves were Col. Robert Furman, John A. DeRemer, William B. Schermerhorn, and Judge Alonzo P. Strong. .... [The sum of ]\$7,500 had to be raised.... It is well understood that the sale was made for \$45,000. The Edison Company offered to give \$37,500 for the property which was refused by the McQueen Company who fixed upon \$45,000 as their lowest figure. Citizens contributed \$7,500. (Col. Furman himself gave \$250 in addition to the money he had already given.) The consent to the transaction of all McQueen Company stockholders was obtained by Mr. John A. DeRemer, Col. Robert Furman, and others and the result is a sale. —*Daily Union*, June 23, 1886.

<sup>3</sup> This building was originally referred to as an *arsenal* and was located approximately at the corner of what is now Nott Terrace and State Street. This was demolished to make way for the nearby *Schenectady Armory*, 1989-99. That too was demolished. The present day Schenectady Armory was built in 1936 on Washington Avenue near what is now the Schenectady County Community College. See *New York's Historic Armories—an Illustrated History* by Nancy L. Todd.



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## MABEE FARM – news and events

**Saturday – June 5** 9:00 a.m.–12 noon

### ***Spinning With A Drop Spindle***

The dreaded drop spindle need not be feared at all. All it takes is a little practice and a sense of humor. Spin along with Badger, the Mabee Farm sheep, who provides the wool. At the end you will be well on your way to creating your own handspun yarn. Use our spindles or bring your own.

**Instructor:** Pam Bucci

**Cost: \$30.00 (\$25.00 + \$5.00 materials)**

**Saturday – June 19** 9:00 am–1:00 pm

### ***Basket Making – Weed Basket***

Learn the skill of basket making by making your own clever little basket designed for holding dried flowers or other items. Students will learn continuous weave, and row on row weaving using reed. Students will leave class with a basket of their own about 6" tall, 5" wide at the base.

**Instructor:** Beverly Cornelius

**Cost: \$40.00 (\$25.00 + \$15.00 materials)**

**Saturday – June 26** 9:00 a.m.–12 noon

(lunch at noon)

### ***Dutch Oven Cooking***

Students will learn the basics of cooking with a Dutch oven by preparing entrees, breads, vegetables, and dessert. Other topics will include the history of Dutch oven cooking, and how to clean and care for one. We conclude by dining on our delicious homemade preparations. This is a beginner's class in the use of a Dutch oven.

**Instructor:** Pam Bucci

**Cost: \$33.00 (\$25.00 + \$8.00 materials)**

**Saturday – July 3** 10:00 a.m.– 12 noon

### ***Corn Husk Dolls***

We get many good things from corn: corn on the cob, popcorn, sweetner, starch, and even ethanol for engines. Native American children had fun making dolls from the husk of the corn. Students will learn how to make a traditional Iroquois cornhusk doll. Children under eight years old must be accompanied by an adult. Bring home your own corn husk doll.

**Instructor:** Pam Bucci

**Cost: \$25.00 (\$20.00 + \$5.00 materials)**

**Saturday – July 10** 9:00 am – 5:00 pm

(b.y.o. bag lunch)

### ***Basket Making – a New England tote (Penobscot style)***

Make a beautiful, large, market size basket whose origins are Native American. This version designed by Diane Stanton of Massachusetts, is fabricated using reed with two Shaker tape swing straps for ease in carrying. The finished size will be approximately: 12 ½" x 12" x 9".

**Instructor:** Beverly Cornelius

**Cost: \$75.00 (\$40.00 + \$35.00 materials)**

**Saturday and Sunday – July 10 and 11**

12 noon to 4:00 pm each day

### ***Beginning Blacksmithing***

Watching the hot glowing metal take shape under the pounding force of your hammer is a powerful experience. Explore a variety of forging techniques and develop your blacksmithing skills in this 2-day class. Learn basic skills like making nails and S-hooks and how to care for a forge and the equipment. Class sizes are small to allow for individualized instruction.

**Instructor:** John Ackner

**Cost: \$150.00 (includes materials)**

### ***VOLUNTEERS WANTED***

If you have been considering volunteering and being of service in the community, look no further. Come join us and learn how you can be a part of the Mabee Farm Historic Site, one of the oldest in New York State! All types of help are needed from gardening, leading site tours, staffing the gift shop, to manual labor. Call (518) 887-5073 for more information.

### ***NEW EXHIBIT : “ Whatzit?”***

The beginning of the Industrial Revolution brought a widespread replacement of manual labor with all kinds of new inventions of machinery and gadgets. Join us as we bring some of our collections out of storage and try to figure out what these items were actually used for.

 <h2 style="text-align: center;">Howlin' at the Moon</h2> <h3 style="text-align: center;">Music Series</h3>	
<b>Thurs, May 27th 7 - 9 pm</b>	
<i>Showcasing:</i> <b>Riverview Ramblers</b> <i>with singer songwriters:</i> <b>Kyle Miller</b> <b>Mike Pouloupoulos</b>	
<b>Sat, June 26th 7 - 9 pm</b>	
<i>Showcasing:</i> <b>Fairview Avenue Bluegrass</b> <i>with singer songwriters:</i> <b>Mark Baptiste</b> <b>Courtney Blackwell</b>	
	<i>Sponsored in part by:</i> <b>ROSE &amp; KIERNAN INSURANCE</b> <i>Insurance, Surety &amp; Benefit Services</i>
<b>MABEE FARM HISTORIC SITE</b> <i>Route 5S, Rotterdam Jct. 887-5073</i>	



### Saturday – June 5

#### **Schenectady County History and Heritage Weekend.**

The Society will participate in this countywide event that will be fun for the whole family. Families are welcome to visit the Society, engage in a variety of hands-on activities: make a trade-bead bracelet or a Dutch tile to take home. Use the Society as the starting point for a guided tour of the Stockade, talk with 17<sup>th</sup> century interpreters, and hear tales of the Native People, the Dutch, and the English.

### Saturday – June 12 – 2:00 pm at SCHS

***Why New Netherlands Matters*** – by Joyce Goodfriend, an author who has written extensively on this subject and on the role of women in this history. Her books include: *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730*, *Going Dutch: The Dutch Presence in America 1609-2009*, and *Lives of American Women: A History With Documents*. Space for this lecture is limited to 75 attendees. Tickets are available on a first-come, first-served basis at \$5. Call 374-0263 to reserve a space.



New roof for the Mabee Farmhouse



plus a new pigmy goat

Photos: Pat Barrot,  
Kate Weller.



Ona Curran, Exhibit Curator,  
Faces of Schenectady 1715-1750

# *Schenectady County Historical Society*

## *Faces of Schenectady 1715-1750 Exhibit*



*Photos: James Jenkins*

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