



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

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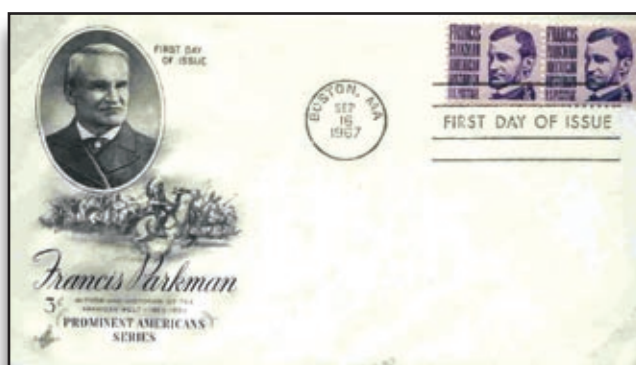
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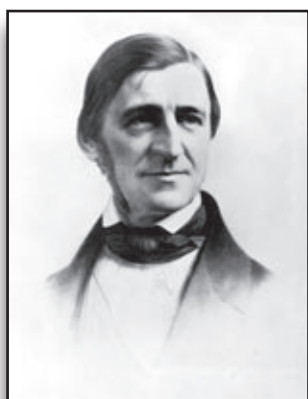
Elizabeth Cady Stanton
1815-1901



Francis Parkman
1823 - 1893



Clara Barton
1821-1912



Ralph Waldo Emerson
1803 -1882



Horace Greeley
1811-1872



Gerrit Smith
1797 - 1874



Henry David Thoreau
1817-1862

**Famous 19th Century Visitors to Schenectady
(who had something to say about the city)**

See Neil Yetwin's article *Schenectady in the Eye of the Beholder, 1642-1861* on pages 4-5.

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HOURS

MUSEUM & LIBRARY

MONDAY-FRIDAY 9-5
SATURDAY 10-2

MABEE FARM

CLOSED
FOR THE SEASON

President's Letter

Volunteers of the Age



Our Historical Society celebrated its centennial three years ago, so in addition to chronicling the history of our Schenectady area, it has a good bit of history of its own. A narrative of the first hundred years of that history is at <http://schist.org/society/history100.html>. For most of those years, SCHS had no paid employees; it survived through the efforts of countless dedicated volunteers. And although we now do have a small paid staff (see the masthead at left), we still could not come close to fulfilling our mission without our volunteers, whom we can never praise enough.

Through that parade of volunteers, extending into a second century, the Society is ageless. (And *not* incidentally, trustees are volunteers, too!) But, of course, volunteers are humans who can serve only limited times of healthful service, and we need constant recruitment. Come join us. Age is not a factor.



My best estimate is that Society volunteers range in age from 15 to 90. But at another local not-for-profit, New Netherlands Routes, Inc., the age range is even greater. Helping to build its replica of the 1614 Dutch ship *Onrust* at our Mabee Farm are youngsters of single-digit age and others old enough to be their great, great grandparents. Recently, I met Don Richards, shown

here above working with John Reek. After being introduced to Don, I then met his father, Hector, who has been working on the ship three days a week for several weeks. At age 98!



I doubt that this issue will reach you in time, but if it does go and help with a milestone in *Onrust* construction, the rigging of the ship, on October 25th. The rigging will be supervised by Courtney Anderson, a specialist from California who did a major part of the rigging work needed for the three "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies. Ship ahoy!

-Ed

Enjoy the FESTIVAL OF TREES

at the
Schenectady County Historical Society
and
YWCA of Schenectady

NOVEMBER 28 through DECEMBER 7
Daily from 10am to 4PM

Beautiful Christmas Trees decorated by local organizations
festive holiday music on Saturdays and Sundays
raffle for trees, tickets 3 for \$5, drawing December 8

Adults \$5 children 6-12 \$2 children under 6 Free

32 & 44 Washington Avenue • Schenectady, NY 12305

518-374-3394

MUSEUM – lectures, exhibits, and activities

“Rufus Grider: Artist of History” a lecture by Alice Smith Duncan

Saturday – November 8

1:30 pm Refreshments 2:00 pm Program

Nineteenth-century artist Rufus Grider re-created early Schenectady and the Mohawk Valley through art. Grider would not only paint watercolors of historic buildings, but he also tried to reconstruct accurately structures in his landscapes that had disappeared over time. Much of his research for these paintings would come from eighteenth century deeds, documents, and maps relating to the area. Alice Smith Duncan’s work on Rufus Grider arose from her thesis project for the Cooperstown Graduate Program on the life and work of Rufus Grider. Signed copies of her book will be available.

“ALCO – DL-640 Locomotive”

a lecture by Richard Steinbrenner

Saturday – November 15

1:30 pm Refreshments 2:00 pm Program

The lecture by Richard Steinbrenner will be based on his newest book *A Year of Demonstrations, A Half Century of Service – ALCO’s DL-460 Locomotive* which he co-authored with Christopher McDermott. This book looks back on almost a half century history of a locomotive design that saw the sale of only twenty-six units, but led to several of ALCO’s most successful designs in their Century Series that can still be seen in use today. Mr. Steinbrenner is also the author of *The American Locomotive Company: A Centennial Remembrance*, which is currently in its second printing. Signed copies of his books will be available.

“Festival of Trees”

begins Friday – November 28, 10:00 am – 4:00 pm

ends Sunday – December 7, 12:00 noon – 4:00 pm

Monday – Friday 10:00 am – 4:00 pm

During the Festival, Saturday hours are 10:00 to 4:00;

Sunday hours are 12:00 Noon – 4:00. This year, as last year, this is a cooperative venture between the Society and the YWCA and trees will be on display in both locations. Purchase of a ticket entitles admission to both venues. Admission for the Festival of Trees is \$5.00 for adults; \$2.00 for children 6 – 12 years old; and children 5 and under are admitted free of charge. Some of the trees are available through the purchase of raffle tickets at the Society or the YWCA.

See ad on page 2.

“A Visit from Saint Nicholas”

Saturday – December 13

1:00 pm – 4:00 pm Refreshments will be available. Bring the entire family for a special Dutch Holiday treat! St. Nicholas will be at the Schenectady County Historical Society with goodies for young and old.

LIBRARY NEWS

New materials:

Earl Brinkman donated a collection of later 18th and 19th century Schenectady books. Several volumes contained handwritten family history notes on the inside covers.

The Psalms & Hymns of the Reformed Dutch Church in North America, Rutgers Press, New Brunswick, 1826

A Popular History of the United States of America, from the Aboriginal Times to the Present Day by John Clark Ridpath, Jones Brothers & Co., 1881

The New Testament 1828, signed by Maryanne More, a Brinkman relative

The Old Testament, 1825 “John Moore’s Old Bible” containing family vital records for the More/Moore family (19th century dates)

Christ a Complete Saviour: or the Intercession of Christ, and who are privileged in it. By John Bunyan, 1793, printed in Scotland and brought to this area by early settlers.

The New and Complete Life of our Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

by Paul Wright, Schenectady, 1814, containing family records for the Primmer family

The Iroquois a History of the Six Nations by S. C. Kimm, 1900

continued on page 6

Schenectady in the Eye of the Beholder, 1642-1861

By Neil B. Yetwin

Ever since Arendt Van Corlaer declared in 1642 that the future site of the city of Schenectady was “the most beautiful land that the eye of man ever beheld,” a host of domestic and foreign visitors have passed through the city recording their impressions according to their tastes.

Like all newly established settlements, Schenectady had its ups and downs. Jaspas Dankaerts, newly arrived from Holland in 1680, expressed shock by the town’s lack of a resident minister and proclaimed that “this place is a godless one.” But the town did have the advantage of being surrounded by great natural beauty. In his 1744 *Itinerarium*, Dr. Alexander Hamilton (no relation to Aaron Burr’s unfortunate dueling partner) compared the pine-shrouded wilderness approach to Schenectady to “the curtain rising in a play and displaying a beautiful scene.” In 1785, Italian botanist Luigi Castiglioni reported that “the city is laid out in various handsome, wide streets.”

Another Italian traveler, Count Paolo Andreani, spent the summer of 1790 exploring the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys, including a trip from Albany on the King’s Highway. “The first village of significance that is found on this road is Schenectady,” he wrote in his account. “The location of the village of Schenectady is picturesque,” he noted, but admitted that the 17-mile journey from Albany “is truly dreary for travelers and tiring to the horses” because of “the dusty, cretaceous nature of the terrain” and because one has to “pass through continuous uninhabited woods, and a soil monotonous (and) almost always flat.” Schenectady itself, he continued, “is inhabited almost entirely by Dutch families, is passably built, and the roads are spacious and almost all at right angles.” And as still happens today, some visitors had difficulty pronouncing the city’s name. “Schenectady seems not to be a word fitted to common organs of speech,” remarked Timothy Bigelow in 1805. “We heard it pronounced Snacketady, Snackedy, Kanakidy, Snackendy, and Snackedy, which last is much the most common.”

In September 1812, 4,000 officers and men of the newly reconstituted United States Army marched on the King’s Highway into Schenectady and on to the Niagara Frontier to engage the British during “Mr. Madison’s War.” Dr. James Mann, who was in charge of administering to the soldiers’ medical needs, wrote a book about his experiences entitled *Medical Sketches*

of the Campaigns of 1812, 13, 14 which contains a rare glimpse of Schenectady on the eve of the War of 1812:

“Schenectady, an incorporated city, is situated on the banks of the Mohawk, twelve miles above the falls. It was, originally, settled by the Dutch; and is one of the most ancient towns in the state of New-York. Its early inhabitants severely suffered by the Indian wars, and their depredations. The town, consisting of sixty-three houses, was destroyed in February, 1690, by a party of French and Indians from Canada. This was a frontier post, until the conclusion of the revolutionary war. Since then, it had wonderfully increased. Its population in 1810, by census, was 5,909. The great turnpike, from Albany up the Mohawk, passes through this town, and here crossed that river, over a superb wooden bridge, 997 feet in length, roofed over throughout its extent. The city is built on streets, regularly laid out in squares, and contains between five and six hundred houses, mostly of brick, and three edifices for the College, which will become within a few years, the first literary institution in the United States.”

During the Jacksonian Era, the well-to-do on both sides of the Atlantic were appalled at the very thought of the “lower classes” exercising their newly-won social and political influence, and their diaries and letters overflow with degrading comments about bustling cities like Schenectady. One Englishman, Asa Green, passed through here in 1830 and sniffed that, “the only thing worthy of note here is a college, as it is denominated in America, which means nothing more than a school where a parcel of boys learn Latin and Greek and a few other things.” And Yale President Timothy Dwight wrote that same year that “the morals of the inhabitants, particularly of the inferior classes, are extensively upon a low scale. Among the causes this is one: the merchandise which passes into the western countries is usually embarked here on the Mohawk. Of course, the numerous boatmen employed in transporting it make this their place of rendezvous, and few collections of men are more dissolute. The corruption which they contribute to spread among the ordinary inhabitants is a greater evil than a stranger can easily imagine.”

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a major figure in America’s women’s movement, recalled a stop in Schenectady in her memoir, *Eighty Years & More: Reminiscences 1815-1897*. In September 1825 the Cady family was on its way from Johnstown to Canaan, Columbia County by carriage when they stopped for lunch at the Given’s Hotel, which stood at the corner of State Street and Wall Street.

“We were wild with delight as we drove down the Mohawk Valley, with its many bridges and ferry boats. When we reached Schenectady, the first city we had ever seen, we stopped to dine at the old Given’s Hotel, where we broke loose from all the



Given’s Hotel on corner of State and Wall.

moorings of propriety on beholding the paper on the dining room wall, illustrating in brilliant colors the great events in sacred history. There were the Patriarchs, with flowing beards and in gorgeous attire; Abraham, offering up Isaac; Joseph, with his coat of many colors, thrown into a pit by his brethren; Noah’s ark on an ocean of waters; Pharoah and his host in the Red Sea; Rebecca at the well; and Moses in the bulrushes. All these distinguished personages familiar to us, and to see them here for the first time in living colors, made silence and eating impossible. We dashed around the room, calling to each other” “Oh, Kate, look here!” “Oh, Madge, look there!” “See little Moses!” “See the angels on Jacob’s ladder!” Our exclamations could not be kept within bounds. The guests were amused beyond description, while my mother and elder sisters were equally mortified; but Mr. Bayard (the husband of Stanton’s oldest sister), who appreciated our childish surprise and delight, smiled and said: ‘I’ll take them around and show them the pictures, and then they will be able to dine,’ which we finally did. After this we took frequent journeys to Saratoga, the Northern Lakes, Utica, and Peterboro, but were never again so entirely swept from our feet as with the biblical illustrations in the dining room at the old Given’s Hotel.” By the time the family reached Albany, it was decided that the sisters would eat in their rooms.

Prince Maximilian of Wied, Germany passed through Schenectady in 1834 after hunting buffalo out West and found it “a considerable place.” Francis Parkman, who became one of America’s greatest historians, stopped here briefly in 1842 to research what would be his monumental *France and England in North America*. The then-23-year-old future author of *The Oregon Trail* must have had a fruitful visit, for his *Count Frontenac and New France Under Louis XIV* contains a vivid description of the Schenectady Massacre. Unfortunately, Parkman viewed Schenectady (and every other American and European city he visited) through the eyes of a Boston Brahmin, for whom anywhere not Beacon Hill represented the height of barbarism:

“After passing the inclined plane and riding a couple of hours (on the railroad) we reached the valley of the Mohawk and Schenectady. I was prepared for something filthy in the last mentioned venerable town, but for nothing quite so disgusting as the reality: Canal docks, full of stinking water, superannuated rotten canal boats, and dirty children and pigs paddling about, formed the foreground of the delicious picture, while in the rear was a mass of tumbling houses and sheds, bursting open in all directions, green with antiquity, dampness, and a lack of paint. Each house had its peculiar dunghill, with the group of reposing hogs. In short, London itself could exhibit nothing much nastier.”

Parkman seems not to have realized that Schenectady was already something of a cultural mecca, drawing the likes of Henry James, Sr., Horace Greeley, Clara Barton, Gerrit Smith and Ralph Waldo Emerson to speak in its churches and social halls on literature, politics, theology, philosophy, and public health. Henry David Thoreau never lectured in the city, but on May 14, 1861 the still-obscure author of *Walden* was returning to Concord, Massachusetts after an excursion to Niagara Falls when he jotted a typically laconic entry in his journal describing the Pine Barrens between Schenectady and Albany: “Albany to Schenectady, a level pitch pine plain with also white pine, white birch, and shad-bush in bloom, with *hills* at last. No houses; only two or three huts on the edge of woods without any road. These were the last pitch pines that I saw on my westward journey.”

From the vantage point of the early 21st century, it might be well to consider that the charm and appeal of any city, and especially our own, rests in the eyes of its beholders – whether they be Dutch, Italian, English, German, New Englander – or native Schenectadian.

Library news continued:

A Marriage Certificate from the Heitkamp and Dettbarn family of Scotia, NY, gift of *Paul Hooker*. The certificate ties into the Museum's wedding dress collection from the same family.

Ona Curran donated art and museum collections books: *Pleasure Grounds* [about Montgomery Place] by Jacquetta M. Haley; *Colonial Craftsmen* by Edwin Tunis; *The Illustrated Guide to American Glass* by Emma Papert; *Early American Inns and Taverns* by Elise Lathrop; *Boscobel Restoration*.

Looking ahead to 2009:

Italian-American Genealogy Research

a program by Peter Sisario, local genealogist

Saturday - January 10, 2009

1:30 pm Refreshments 2:00 pm Program

Save the date to hear a talk by Peter Sisario on researching Italian American family history. Peter lives in Scotia and travels frequently to the regional office of the National Archives in Pittsfield, MA to give talks on genealogy. He will share his researching experience to provide helpful tips for beginning genealogists, and for those who have "hit the brick wall" in their family research.

EFNER HISTORY CENTER

The Efner History Center at City Hall announces new hours: Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9:30 to 1:00, and by appointment. Archivist Cindy Seacord also works part-time on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Contact her a day in advance at **382-5088** to arrange a time to do research on those days. We welcome volunteers who have 2-3 hours of time a week to donate. Contact Mrs. Seacord if you are interested.

The two collections currently being worked on at the History Center are the Schenectady Railway Company Collection and the Edward Marshall Stone Collection.

The Schenectady Railway Company Collection consists of photographs, drawings, maps, court papers, news clippings, financial materials, and other documents accumulated by the SRC from its inception in 1887 through to its auction in the late 1940s. It came to the Efner through a Schenectady Railway Company trustee shortly after the company's demise. A collection finding aid for researchers will be prepared once

the documents have been inventoried and appraised. It will take about a year to get the collection unpacked, sorted and properly archived.

Edward Marshall Stone, a local historian, left his collection of notes, transcripts and other documents on topics of Schenectady history to the Efner Center in the 1950s. Stone was one of several Schenectadians who, during the Great Depression, worked for the WPA as part of the Federal Writers' Project. Sometime after Stone's collection was donated, someone thought it was a good idea to put some of his documents into history topic files, along with news clippings and documents on the same topic. Normally, an archivist would not consider attempting to reconstruct a collection that has been treated this way, but Mrs. Seacord found this case to be an exception. Collection reconstruction seemed workable since Marshall's documents were all marked, with many done in his distinctive handwriting. Marshall himself was helpful by listing the contents.

Seacord tackled the History Center's vertical file containing many of the "renegade" documents to purge them of newsprint, staples, and other metal fasteners. Acid-free photocopies replaced the acidic newspaper clippings. Finally, the materials are stored in brand new archival folders, and a finding aid was developed.

During October, in honor of Archives Month, the Efner Center invited the public to view some of its photographs from the Schenectady Railway Company Collection, and to observe the archivist at work, processing the collection.

IN MEMORIAM The Society notes with sadness the recent passing of Miriam Lewis, a retired speech pathologist and community volunteer. Her contributions to the Schenectady County Historical Society might rightly be described as "heroic" with a no-nonsense approach to her service. A long time Trustee, she contributed the base on which the Doll House is set, noting typically, that an artifact of this value needed to be presented to the public properly. At another point when the Society lost the services of its Receptionist/ Records Keeper it was Miriam who stepped up and voluntarily took on this responsibility, serving for a full year at a crucial time for the Society as it completed the construction of the Grems-Doolittle Library. She deserves to be remembered and honored for the service she gave so unselfishly to us, and to her community.

— Frank Taormina



2008 Farm and Foliage Day at Mabee Farm



Photos: Ann Aronson



SCHENECTADY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



*Stockade
Walkabout
2008*



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