



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

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The Alexander Ellice house as it looks today.

What's in a name? Two that are pronounced the same, but spelled differently...

by Heather Cunningham

The first Ellice family of Schenectady was in the business of international fur trade. But when you say *Ellice*, Schenectadians assume you are referring to the *Ellis* family of ALCO fame. But there was an Ellice family that lived in Schenectady much earlier—a group of five brothers who emigrated from Scotland, entered the fur trade, and in the span of about ten years carved out of the wilderness an international trade empire. Very few now remember this illustrious band of brothers who possessed remarkable capitalist and entrepreneurial skills.

Alexander Ellice (1743-1805) was the first of the Ellice brothers to come to Schenectady. After emigrating from Scotland in 1765, Alexander joined the firm of *Duncan and Phyn* early in 1766. Alexander was able to purchase a third of the company for 714

pounds sterling and before long his four younger brothers, Robert, Thomas, John and James, joined him at *Duncan, Phyn and Ellice*. When John Duncan retired the following year, the firm became *Phyn and Ellice Co. of Schenectady*.

The partnership of Alexander Ellice with *Duncan and Phyn* came about through an introduction by General Gordon, a conclusion drawn from a letter written by John Duncan to Sir William Johnson on March 12th, 1766. There also seems to have been an in-law connection between Alexander Ellice and his new partner James Phyn. Some sources claim that Alexander Ellice married a daughter of George Phyn, laird of Corse of Monelly in Scotland, but other sources name only Ann Russell as his wife and the mother of his children.



Fireback located in the ballroom of the Alexander Ellice House.

Photos: Heather Cunningham

Continued on pages 4 and 5

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HOURS

MUSEUM & LIBRARY

MONDAY-FRIDAY 9-5

SATURDAY 10-2

MABEE FARM

closed

until May 2010

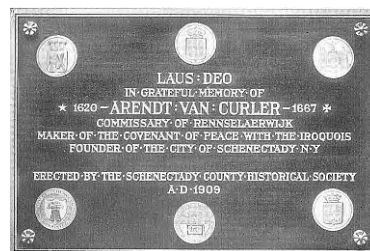
LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

A Tale of Two Cities

It was the best of times, it was....the very best of times. Here's how it started. On September 29, 1909, the Society, a tot of four years, unveiled a tabular plaque in honor of Arendt Van Curler, the founder of Schenectady. It lies at ground level at the corner of Union Street and North Church Street, snug up against what is now the Stockade Inn, and across from the First Reformed Church. A corresponding plaque had been erected two months earlier in Nijkerk, Netherlands, Van Curler's native town.



The Schenectady Tablet



The Nijkerk Plaque



The Nijkerk Visitors at City Hall *

Now, ever since Nijkerk Alderman Goos Terschegget sailed the Atlantic to visit us 25 years ago, the Nijkerk-Schenectady Foundation and the Schenectady/Nijkerk Council have been enjoying exchanges between the communities. So it came to pass that the archivist of the Reformed Church, Laura Lee Linder, or L³ (L cubed) as she is affectionately known, called to tell me that it was my solemn duty to represent the Society at the centennial of installation of the Schenectady tablet on Sunday, September 20. And Laura is, like Hilda Rumpole, a "she who must be obeyed."

The day came bright, sunny, and absolutely perfect. I arrived about a millisecond before the appointed time of 11 a.m. Laura, as event coordinator, ran up to me and said "You'll be introduced, but you can't speak." I was speechless, but not offended. I customarily speak on Monday through Saturday, but never on Sunday. Mayor Brian Stratton, who works 24/7, read a glorious proclamation, reminding us that 2009 was chosen for the event not only because the year is the Centennial of our Nijkerk plaque collaboration, it is also the Bicentennial of the formation of Schenectady County and the Quadricentennial of Henry Hudson's sail up the river that was later named for him. Other speechful people spoke, the tablet was (re)unveiled by Goos and Henry Hudson (Steve Weisse), and we all repaired to the Reformed Church for a great repast.

It is appropriate that we pause now and then to honor Arendt van Curler. I hope I'm invited back in 2109, by which time I may have my voice back.

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

Thursday – November 5

6 – 8 pm

**Reception and book signing for Schenectady
County Historical Society's new book "*Historic
Schenectady County – A Bicentennial History.*"**

Author Bill Buell will talk about his new book and the research behind it at 6:30. Throughout the evening enjoy light refreshment and our continuing bicentennial exhibit "*Schenectady County – A Most Desirable Residence*" for which Bill was one of the curators. Take this opportunity to speak to the author, and be one of the first to purchase your own signed copy of our new book.

Saturday – November 7

10 am – 4 pm

***Schenectady County Genealogy Day at the
Grems- Doolittle Library***

Join us to explore the world of genealogy and learn from local experts. Use the Library – volunteers are on hand to help you. Do an interview with Oral Historians to share local history. Attend a genealogy session; there will be speakers throughout the day.

10 am *City Directories* by Frank Taormina

11 am *Online Immigration Records Research* by Peter Sisario

12 **LUNCH** – bring your own sandwich – beverage and dessert provided

12:30 pm *Efner History Center* by Cindy Seacord

1 pm *The Schenectady Digital History Archive* by Robert Sullivan

2 pm *New York State Library for Researchers* by Nancy Curran

Saturday – November 21

1:30 pm refreshments 2 pm Program

***Saint Nicholas: The Saint Who Became Santa*
by Peter G. Rose**

Author, columnist, and food historian Peter G. Rose delves into the history and early life of the person who became known as Saint Nicholas. She explains the various changes in his veneration, how his tradition was brought to America by the Dutch in the 17th century, and how he became Santa Claus in the 19th century. Copies of her new book as well as copies of her previous history books and cookbooks will be available for sale after the program. **RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED** – Please call the Society at (518) 346-0263

3rd Annual Festival of Trees

begins Friday – November 27, 10 am – 4 pm

ends Sunday – December 6, 12 noon – 4 pm

NEW this year: Wednesday, December 2, 6 – 9 pm

Enjoy an evening of traditional holiday festivities, music and food for young and old and everyone in between. In addition to the regular admission, please bring some kind of donation to benefit the YWCA of Northeastern New York. The YWCA is particularly in need of sheets, towels, pillows, and pillow cases as well as personal care items for the women and children cared for at the "Y." We will also accept new toys and non-perishable food items. Enjoy yourself at the Society and help our community at the same time.

Monday – Friday 10 am – 4 pm

During the Festival, Saturday hours are 10 am - 4 pm. Sunday hours are 12 noon – 4 pm. This year, as last year, the Festival of Trees is a cooperative venture between the Society and the YWCA. Trees will be on display in both locations. Purchase of a ticket entitles admission to both venues. **Admission** to the Festival of Trees is \$5.00 for adults; \$2.00 for children 6 – 12; children 5 years 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 8

With John Duncan's retirement, *Phyn and Ellice* improved its London business contacts and began to work with John Blackburn in 1770. Blackburn was the most prominent London merchant when it came to the New York fur trade. Working with Blackburn elevated the status of *Phyn and Ellice* among other merchants. During this period the company's western offices also expanded. Local author Susan Staffa claims *Phyn and Ellice* "lost no time in increasing the volume of its business by establishing close connections with other

Detroit" and that this connection allowed for their unquestionable success.

With their business connections moving westward, *Phyn and Ellice* took the next logical step by opening a branch in Canada. When the Townshend Acts of 1767 (enacted by the British Parliament to raise revenue to support British troops in the colonies) made trade through New York City difficult by creating an embargo on English goods, the creation of a Canadian office presented a solution. The company opened a branch in Montreal with the help of James Porteous, the brother of John Porteous of Detroit. The *Phyn and Ellice* partners then had their goods shipped to Quebec and down to Detroit, bypassing the embargo completely. Many of their fellow New York merchants frowned upon this evasion of the Townshend acts, but *Phyn and Ellice* claimed they were preventing Canadians from gaining control over the New York fur trade. When importation was again allowed in the summer of 1770, the Canadian office was closed despite Alexander Ellice's call for the *Phyn and Ellice* business to move operations to Canada permanently. Not until the Revolutionary war, when the fur trade in New York came to an end, did the firm move to Montreal permanently thereby making Canada its base in North America.

The story of the Schenectady chapter of the *Phyn and Ellice Co.* ends with the beginning of the American Revolution. The Ellice brothers, as well as James Phyn and several of their other trading associates, were loyal to the British government. In 1775, Alexander openly discouraged the citizens of Schenectady from creating a Committee of Safety and he was declared an enemy to the American cause. Soon afterwards Alexander Ellice moved to Canada and took over the reopened Montreal office. Robert Ellice, though not as bold as his older brother, claimed he had too much property in Canada to declare himself for either side of the conflict and followed his brother to Montreal. It was the youngest brother, James, who became the family's Schenectady representative. James was the only Ellice to remain in the city. In May of 1776, the Committee of Correspondence transferred all of *Phyn and Ellice Co.*'s American assets to James, with the understanding that his former partners "were not to reap any profits therefrom." Despite this ruling, James was closely watched and "was Looked upon as Dangerous" by the Committee of Correspondence. In June of 1777 James Ellice was forced to take an Oath of loyalty to the United States.



Alexander Ellice's House, circa 1854.

Schenectady County Historical Society Collection.

merchants who were working in the west and north." Many of these connections may have been helped by a strong relationship with Sir William Johnson. Johnson certainly used his influence to arrange military supply contracts for the *Phyn and Ellice* company, especially in the Great Lakes region. These contracts with the army helped to stabilize the business, especially when the price of fur fluctuated unpredictably. At first, Alexander Ellice travelled alone to oversee transactions, but soon *Phyn and Ellice* formed a partnership with John Porteous, a former partner of John Duncan, whose business was located in Detroit. In addition to the Porteous affiliation, *Phyn and Ellice* affiliated with several other firms and private traders who operated in the wilderness that was both north and west of Lake Superior. Historian Thomas Norton claims that "*Phyn and Ellice* developed the largest New York trade with

After the American Revolution, the Ellice family fractured, and the brothers seem to have gone their separate ways. Alexander returned to the United Kingdom in 1779. He died in London on September 29, 1805. However, the story of Alexander Ellice does not end there. Upon his death he was a considerably wealthy man who owned land on both sides of the Atlantic. His eldest son, Edward Ellice (1783-1863), continued in his father's business path. It was Edward, demonstrating the same business sense as his father and uncles, who brought about the merger between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North-West Company in 1820. This merger was instrumental in unifying North American trade. Besides his business dealings, Edward Ellice also became a rather successful Member of Parliament, serving as both the

beginning of the American Revolution, Robert worked in the Montreal office, eventually becoming its chief manager when Alexander returned to London. *Robert Ellice and Co.* continued as the Canadian branch of



Historic signs on 203 Union St. house.

Photo: Heather Cunningham

Phyn, Ellice and Co. until Robert's death in 1790. Thomas and John Ellice appear to have left no traces in Schenectady and it seems that James was the only Ellice brother to die here in Schenectady. After the war, James remained in Schenectady with his wife Ann Adams, living at 17 Front Street in the house which today we think of as the Governor Yates House. Joseph Yates married the widowed Ann Ellice after James's death in the 1780s and thereafter began living in the house at 17 Front Street. James and Ann seem to have had only one child, Catherine Adams Ellice, born December 24, 1786. Catherine was buried in the Dutch Reformed Church cemetery, having died less than a year old on August 23, 1787.

While it may seem interesting that *Phyn and Ellice* used Schenectady as a base of operations for an international company, the reader may still be feeling rather detached from the history of this powerful early family. The Ellice brothers left us a legacy which can be seen in a quick walk about the Stockade. James Ellice once lived with his wife at 17 Front Street, the Governor Yates House. Arguably, the house should be known as the Ellice mansion, since Yates inherited the house from Ellice's widow. The *Phyn and Ellice* warehouse was located on Washington Avenue on the wharves of the Binne Kill until the fire of 1819 destroyed them. Alexander Ellice resided at 205 Union Street, which today is the English Garden Bed and Breakfast.



Governor Yates House. Photo: Heather Cunningham

Financial Secretary of the Treasury and the Secretary of War before his death in 1863. The Ellice Islands, a Polynesian island nation, was named for Edward. It is unclear how many other children Alexander Ellice had, but another of his sons, Robert, served as a Lieutenant Colonel and married Eliza Courtney, the illegitimate daughter of the famous beauty Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire.

There is considerably less information about Alexander's brothers. Robert seems to have married a Gertrude Van Slyke and on May 14, 1771 their son Robert Ellice was baptized in St. George's church here in the Stockade. Having fled the colonies at the

EFNER HISTORY CENTER

There is a treasure trove of material in the Efner History Center located on the top floor of Schenectady City Hall on Jay Street. Even as new material is received, this trove is slowly being organized by dedicated volunteers such as Kimberly Kunker, a history major and senior at Houghton College. Her project this summer was an inventory and evaluation of the Center's scrapbook collection. In addition to this project, Kimberly worked with the Center's regular volunteer, Pilar Seacord, to re-house the Center's photograph collection from the Schenectady Department of Public Instruction (DPI). A series of photographs from this collection were exhibited at Lincoln Elementary School during the celebration of its 2008-9 celebration of its 100th anniversary.

The Efner Center is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9 am to 1 pm

Updated Wish List for the Efner Center:

- A scanner that scans all sizes of negatives so they can be turned into positive photo images
- A used DVD/ VCR player so we can show photos and videos on Schenectady history on our small, portable, color TV
- Volunteers are always welcome! Please contact Cynthia Seacord at 382-5088



Photo: Pat Barrot

During the recent History Fair, scholar, Bill McMillan discussed the Mabee Farm's jambless (no sides) fireplace. Located in the main room of the farmhouse,

it is a Dutch fireplace, circa 1600 - early 1700s, seldom found after 1720 . Opening a door or window would help to push smoke up the chimney.


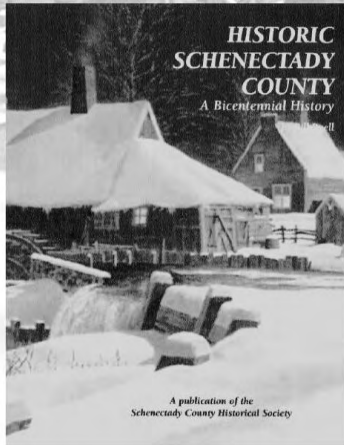
IN MEMORIAM - We acknowledge with sadness the passing of Margaret L. (Clute) Spring on October 6, 2009 at the age of 96. Margaret was a much valued volunteer for many years at the Society, one who gave countless hours of her time to working in the Library. Her obituary in the Daily Gazette notes that she tended to all the details of being a farmer's wife and was the much loved mother of four children and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren, all of whom survive her. May she rest in peace.

Book Signing for Bill Buell's New Book

Historic Schenectady County: A Bicentennial History

Thursday November 5
6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Copies of Historic Schenectady County are also available online in our digital gift shop.



A publication of the
Schenectady County Historical Society

Fun at Farm and Foliage Day

Mabee Farm



Photos: Ann Aronson, Pat Barrot.

Schenectady County Historical Society

CELEBRATE THE FESTIVAL OF TREES

AT THE
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NOVEMBER 28 TO DECEMBER 7

\$5.00 FOR ADULTS AND
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DECEMBER 2 EVENING OPEN HOUSE 6 • 9

FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE OUR PROGRAM DESCRIPTION ON PAGE 3
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