



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

Volume 53 Number 11-12

November - December 2010

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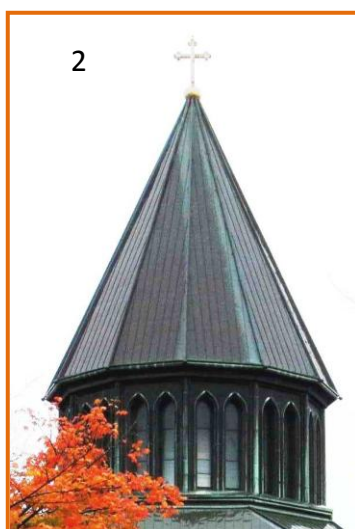
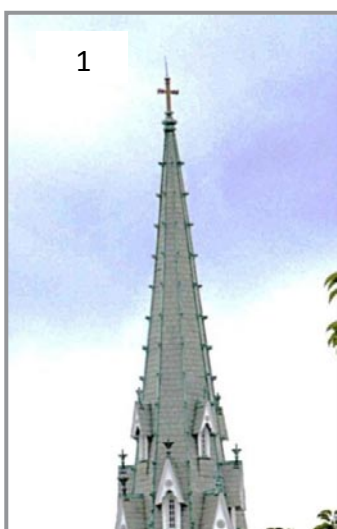
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(IN)SPIRING CHURCHES— buildings, ethnic groups, and the passing of time

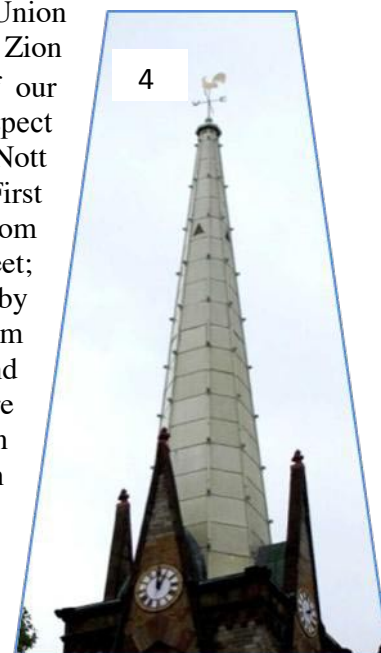
by Francis R. Taormina and Ruth E. Bergeron



Church spires mark the landscape you see in a panoramic view from the top of the Schaffer Heights building on Nott Terrace. Look south toward Mont Pleasant, then along the rise stretching from Summit Avenue, along Veeder Avenue, then along Nott Terrace, past Veteran's Park and finally over toward Nott Street. There is the impressive spire of St. Adalbert's (RC-Polish) on Lansing Street in Mont Pleasant, as well as the spires of St. Mary's (RC-Polish) on Eastern Avenue, St. John the Evangelist (RC-Irish) on Union Street, and Zion



Lutheran on Nott Terrace. This elevated part of our local landscape was once generally known as "Prospect Heights." Looking down the State Street hill from Nott Terrace, other spires can be seen: the one on First United Methodist on State Street directly across from Veterans Park; on St. Joseph's (RC) on State Street; and on the Frieden United Church (founded by German immigrants) on Franklin Street. Look from this same vantage point in a westerly direction and you see the three oldest spires in the city that are located in the Stockade area: First Presbyterian on Union Street, St. George's Episcopal Church on Ferry Street, and the First Reformed Church on the corner of Union and North Church Streets. There are ten spires to be seen in this sweeping view.



continued on pages 4-5

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HOURS

**MUSEUM
& LIBRARY**
MONDAY-FRIDAY 9-5
SATURDAY 10-2

MABEE FARM
Closed for season

Letter from the President

Last month's Faces of Schenectady Seminar held jointly by SCHS and the First Reformed Church of Schenectady was a smashing success, and now we have a new Face of Schenectady. Please stop in to meet our new Curator, Ryan Mahoney, whose bio and photo are given below. We are very fortunate to have him back with us.

On page 3, we try to attract you to *attend* our third annual Festival of Trees. Here, I appeal for commitments to *deliver* trees for attendees to see and enjoy. Samples from last year are shown on this page, and we hope to show you some equally nice ones at the actual Festival. Save a rainbow (if only we could bottle one), there is nothing more beautiful than a well-decorated holiday tree. Co-chairs Kim Mabee of the Society and JoAnne Rafalik of the Y are doing yeowoman service for the Festival, but we could use a few more trees. Use your imagination. Decorate with family heirlooms, old Wilkie buttons, playing cards whose jokers depict your bridge club members, or black-bordered Yankee baseball cards.

(Surely I jest. But surprise us.) Directions as to how to contract to display your tree are on www.schist.org; just click the designated place on the moving scroll at the left.



-Ed



Ryan Mahoney began his work as Society Curator on October 12. Prior to joining us, he had been the Collections Manager at the FASNY Museum of Firefighting in Hudson, NY, and still earlier, the Collections Assistant at the Antique Boat Museum of Clayton, NY and a contract Collections Technician at the Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, MA.

From May through the fall of 2008, Ryan served as an intern at our Schenectady History Museum and as acting curator during the six weeks that former curator Kate Weller was on maternity leave. Over that time he conducted research in preparation for the bicentennial year of 2009 and wrote a portion of the exhibit *A Most Beautiful Land, Schenectady County's History*.

Ryan graduated Magna Cum Laude from St. John Fisher College of Rochester, NY in 2007, receiving his B.A. degree with a dual major in history and political science. He was inducted into the Phi-Alfa-Theta History Honor Society in his senior year. In 2008, he received his M.A. in Public History from the State University of New York at Albany. In parallel with the formal studies leading to his degrees, he had volunteered at the Adirondack Museum and the Town of Indian Lake Museum and served as a tutor at Rochester, NY city schools. Ryan is a member of the Museum Association of New York (MANY) and the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums. He and his wife Casey live in East Greenbush, NY.

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

Saturday, November 6, 10 AM–4 PM

Genealogy Day

There will be four speakers on genealogy topics, a brown bag lunch and an introduction to genealogy for beginners. The Library will be open for research. Seats can be reserved by calling the Society. Speakers will be **Frank Taormina** on city churches and ethnic groups in Schenectady; **Robert Sullivan** on finding digital newspaper archives online; and **Katherine Chansky**, SCHS Librarian on getting started with genealogy. **Admission is \$5**, but free for Society members.

Saturday, November 13

1:30 PM refreshments-2:00 PM Program

***The New York State Military
Museum from the Civil War to
the 21st Century.***



Michael Aikey is a member of the Capital District Library Council board of directors. In his spare time he likes to tinker with classic British cars.

The speaker is Michael Aikey, Director of the New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, and founding member of the Capital District Civil War Roundtable. He will talk about the Museum, its collections, the Veterans Oral History Project, and much more. This is a wonderful opportunity for anyone who has an interest in military history. Mr Aikey is a member of the Capital District Library Council board of directors. In his spare time he likes to tinker with classic British cars.

4th Annual Festival of Trees

Begins Friday, November 26 10 AM–4 PM

Ends Sunday, December 5 12 noon – 4 PM

Weekday hours: 10 AM–PM

***During the Festival of Trees, Saturday
hours are noon to 4 PM***

This is a joint venture of the Society and the YWCA. Trees will be on display in both locations. Your purchase of a ticket entitles you to admission to both venues. **Admission is \$5 for adults, \$2 for children 6–12, children 5 years old and under are free of charge.**

Wednesday – December 1 6–9 PM

Open House for the Festival of Trees

Enjoy an evening of traditional holiday festivities. There will be Wassail (punch) and cookies, with music provided by the Mission Belles from the First Reformed Church of Scotia. Festival trees will be on display in both locations, SCHS and YWCA. Come and enjoy this highlight of the Festival.

Breaking News

The **Colonial Schenectady Project** is seeking an author for Genesis II, a sequel to Genesis Vol. I, *The Colonial Crucible*, ca. 1661-1774. Volume I was written by the noted scholar, historian, and highly acclaimed author, the late Susan J. Staffa, Ph.D.

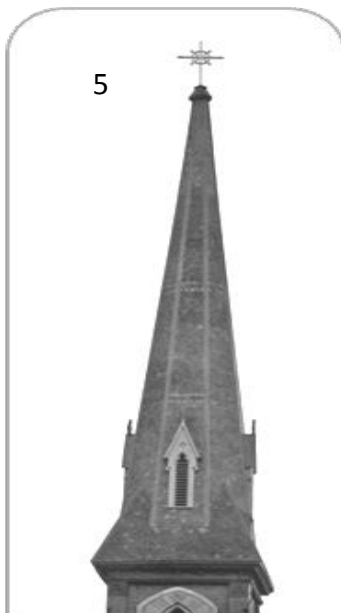
Genesis II is to be the second of a two part study to trace the evolution of the Dutch colonial village of Schenectady, first into an English colonial borough, then into an American city incorporated in 1798. Genesis II will continue where vol. I ends, covering 1775 to the early 1800s. It is intended to detail that historic period of Schenectady and fulfill the vision of Dr. Staffa.

Interested candidates should submit resumes and a sample of their historic writing to: Colonial Schenectady Project, 48 Washington Avenue, Schenectady, NY 12305, by December 30.

INSPIRING CHURCHES—continued from page 1

Whenever a community of people with identifiable characteristics have arrived in Schenectady they have found a place to settle and live, organized themselves and built a church. The Dutch began the process circa 1680 less than twenty years after they had established themselves here. The First Dutch Reformed Church, built shortly after 1680 by Alexander Glen—a Scotsman! —at the junction of what is now State Street and Church Street has been followed by five other edifices built for this long-lasting congregation. The English, as they became aware of themselves as a “community” among the Dutch built Saint George’s Episcopal Church, circa 1759. It is still in existence, having survived the American Revolution and all the years that followed. The Presbyterians, distinguishing themselves as “Scots,” then formed their own community and built the First Presbyterian Church, a building that has been standing since 1809. And so it has gone through the years: Irish, German, Polish, Italian, Greek, Jewish, African-American, and more recently, Guyanese, Hispanic and Muslim. The list is long and varied, and continues to grow.

We are told by Wikipedia that “The celestial and hopeful gesture of the spire is one reason for its association with religious buildings. A spire on a church is not just a symbol of piety, but is often seen as a symbol of the wealth and prestige of the order or the patron who commissioned the building.” There is great variety in how a place of worship is built to look distinctive without resorting to spires: local examples are the First Church of Christ Scientist, on Union Street, corner of Brierwood Blvd; the Afghan Islamic Center on North Brandywine Avenue; and the Unitarian Church on Wendell Avenue.



The history and dynamics of the creation of these churches, and then the changes that took place in them is unquestionably fascinating and reveals a great deal about our humanity. In the course of reading and thinking about these things one inevitably asks questions and, of

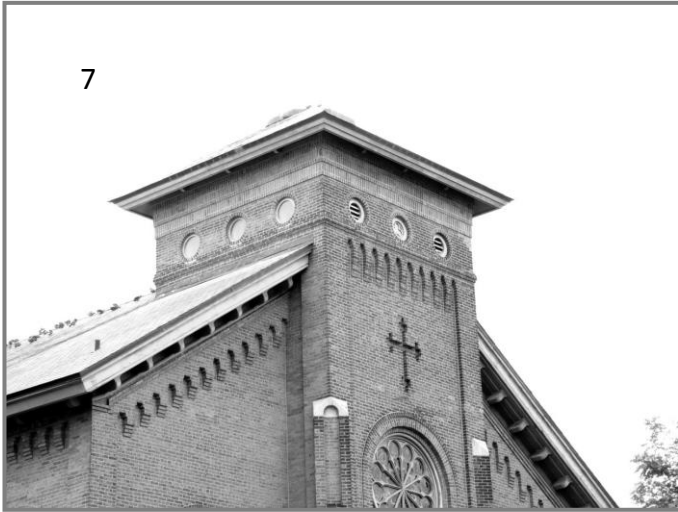
course, attempts to answer them. This process leads us to the observation that churches are places where, among other things, we regularly go to ask for things—spiritual, emotional, and material—and where, on a regular basis, we carry out the rites of passage that are a part of most of our lives: from dedicating children in their infancy, to the individual’s acceptance rites when of a suitable age, to marriage, and the final rites of our lives when we make our departure.

As we try to recall and understand the experience of former generations of Schenectadians who built these houses of worship, we find that buildings erected by one group have often become “home” to another whose beliefs differed, or are no longer church affiliated. The German Methodist Church on the southwest corner of Union and Lafayette Streets was listed in the 1880 Schenectady City Directory. After many prior uses, it is currently home to a graphics design business. A former synagogue on State Street is the current home of the Schenectady Light Opera Company (SLOC), whose new home is under construction using buildings that were part of the former St. John the



Baptist Church (RC) campus located in a block between Franklin and Lafayette Streets. Of the two buildings in this complex that face Liberty Street, one was a convent for the nuns who taught at the parochial school next door. Recently demolished, it was called Bethesda House and served many of the city’s homeless population. The remaining building which had been the parochial school was built originally in 1836 as the 3rd home for the congregation of First United Methodist Church, the 2nd having been displaced by construction of the Erie Canal. A current “stained glass manufacturing facility” on North College Street started out as a synagogue built by a Jewish community in 1891, then became the Church of the Holy Cross (RC) sometime after 1920 serving a Lithuanian community, and then a local RC church in the Stockade neighborhood. The Islamic Center, on North Brandywine Avenue was for

many years an Advent Christian Church . Refreshing Springs Church and Community Center on Summit Avenue occupies what was once the First English Lutheran Church. The building on the northeast corner of Union Street and Wendell Avenue began as a home for the Unitarian Society and is now home for a Spanish



speaking evangelical congregation. It is for sale at this writing. Congregation Gates of Heaven is the oldest Jewish congregation in Schenectady. The first few families worshipped in a private home on North Ferry Street until they organized a congregation, originally orthodox, in 1854. Two years later it was incorporated as Congregation Shaarai Shamayim (meaning Gates of Heaven) and a synagogue was built on North College Street in 1892 where a modern ritual was adopted. In 1920 the congregation moved into the former Christian Science Temple at what is now 1098 Parkwood Blvd. It moved again in 1956 to its present location on Ashmore Avenue.

Church membership, often reflecting a particular ethnic group, enables relationships with others as part of a community, to help maintain that community, and to allow individuals to provide one another with the support everyone needs in life. In her book, *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong tells us, “We are meaning-seeking creatures.” She concludes the paragraph: “....from the very beginning we sought ways of placing our lives in larger settings that revealed an underlying pattern...and gave us a sense that life had meaning and value.” Are these spires or distinctive church designs witnesses to and reminders of the human quality that Karen Armstrong expresses so well—a quality that unites us all as human beings? At the same time, with perhaps a bit of irony, do they also remind us of how we divide ourselves from one another? All asking the same questions, but as the divisions in the

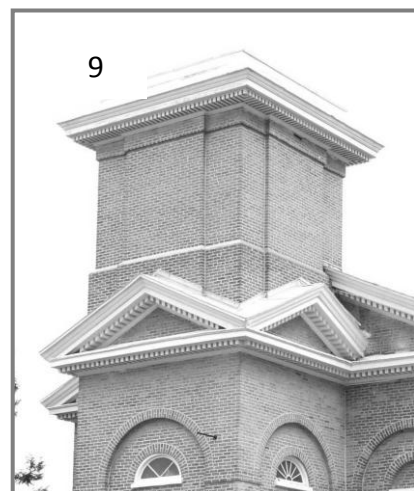
community show, frequently getting different answers. Does the existence of all these churches in proximity to one another illustrate the presence of “tolerance” among us? Or is it a case of a “... sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own ...” Maybe it’s the consciousness we all share of being shrouded in a mystery which, try as we may, we can never quite entirely explain.



It is difficult even for a casual observer not to be aware of the presence of these communities among us all, different, yet, by their very existence, testifying to our common humanity. Could those spires and building tops all be pointing in the same direction to remind us of what we all have in common?

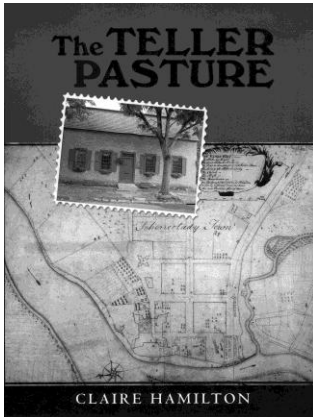
—Frank Taormina and Ruth Bergeron

NOTE: Can you identify the places of worship associated with the 14 spires or building tops seen in this Newsletter? The **Answers** can be found on Page 6.



Library News—Books and documents added to the Library

The Teller Pasture: an investigation of a place, people, and events that changed Schenectady by Claire Hamilton The author has donated a copy to the Library. Published by New York: iUniverse, Inc. 2010 (65 pages, illustrated, with endnotes and an index).



Review by Katherine Chansky, Librarian / Archivist, Grems-Doolittle Library:

Claire Hamilton's new book, *The Teller Pasture*, is both a house history and a study of a particular area of the Historic Stockade District. The Teller Pasture refers to a five-acre parcel of land granted to Willem Teller, one of the original settlers of the Schenectady Patent. The Pasture was located on the north side of Front Street, bounded on the east by North Street, and on the south along Front Street by the Teller House (121 Front Street), the Adam Vrooman House (119 Front Street) and the William Schermerhorn House (113 Front Street). Over 350 years of documented history already exists for the Teller Pasture site, but Ms Hamilton has added more. The author has completed an advanced certificate in archeology from the Schenectady County Community College (SCCC). This book is a result of her archeology studies, her interactions with SCCC faculty members, her study of the 1756 Wetterstrom survey map in the New York State Archives (overlooked for years), and her interactions with present and former owners of the Teller House. Her book adds significantly to our knowledge of the precise location of the Teller Pasture and of the northeast stockade line. She has assembled convincing proof that Jesse Van Slyck was not the *builder* of the Teller House in 1762, as has been commonly assumed; rather, he purchased the property from Deborah Glen with a building already on it.

ANSWERS to quiz on places of worship

Spires on Page 1

1. St. Adalbert Church (RC)—Lansing Street
2. St. John the Evangelist Church (RC)—Union Street
3. First United Methodist—their 4th home—now on NE corner of State & Lafayette Streets
4. First Reformed Church—NE corner of North Church & Union Streets

Spires on Pages 4 and 5:

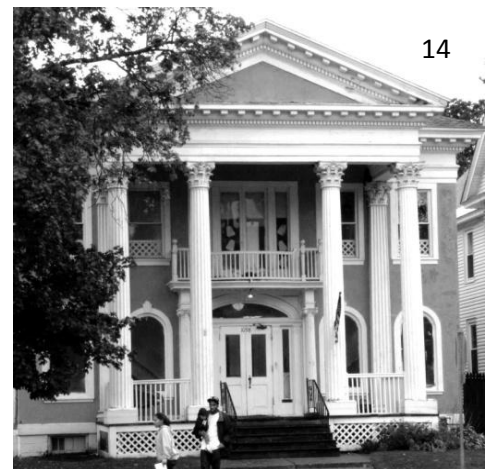
5. St. Joseph's Church (RC) —SE corner of State and Lafayette Streets
6. St. George Episcopal Church—North Ferry Street in the Stockade
7. German Methodist Church—SW corner of Union & Lafayette Streets—now a business site
8. St. George Greek Orthodox Church—Clinton St
9. St. John St the Baptist (closed) —Franklin Street, new site of Schenectady Light Opera Company

Places of worship on Page 8

10. Afghan Islamic Center—No. Brandywine Ave. near Becker St.
11. First Church of Christ Scientist—NE corner of Union Street & Brierwood Blvd.
12. Unitarian Church—Wendell Avenue, GE Plot
13. Temple Gates of Heaven synagogue; then an ethnic RC church, now a business site.

Building shown below

14. 1098 Parkwood Blvd.—SE corner of Rugby Rd. This was built as the first home of First Church of Christ Scientist; and then it became the 2nd synagogue for the Congregation Temple Gates of Heaven. Now a day care center.



Happenings around the Society



Faces of Schenectady Seminar



Photos: Ann Aronson

Schenectady County Historical Society



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