



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

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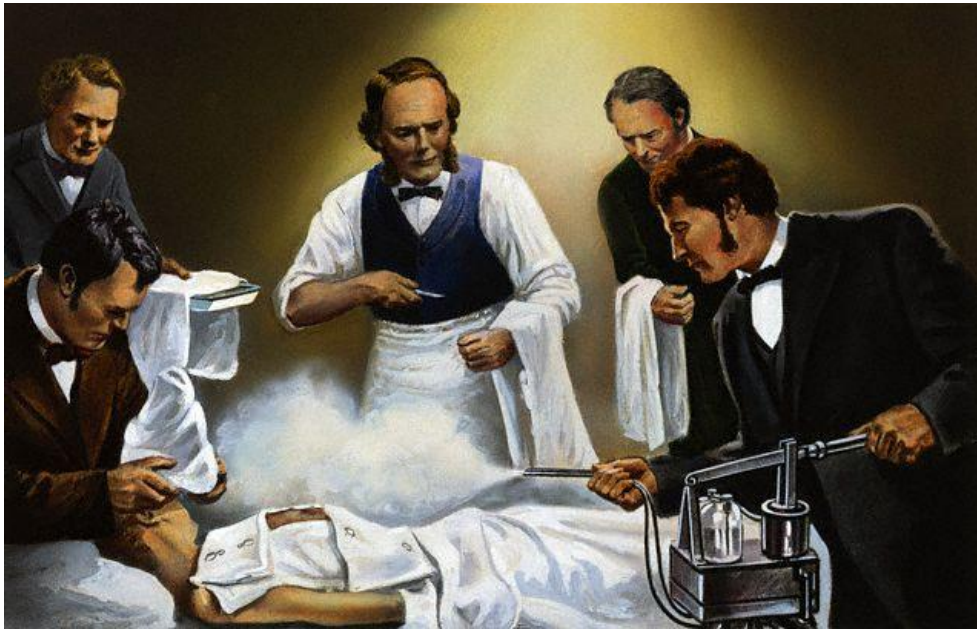
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Medical Practice in 19th Century Schenectady

by James M. Strosberg, M.D.



As Schenectady County marks the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War, we have an occasion to examine the health status of both our citizens and our soldiers during the middle of the 19th Century. Very little is documented about medicine during this period. There are no hospital records to review; Ellis Hospital was not founded until 1885; and the Medical Society did not meet between 1843 and 1869. We can glean some insight into this period from old newspapers, a wonderful book on the 134th NY Volunteer Infantry, minutes of the Schenectady Common Council, and old stories from the Efner Center and the SCHS library.

Joseph Lister calls for an antiseptic spray prior to surgery. ©Bettmann/CORBIS

Many 19th Century Americans never visited physicians. When they got sick they turned to self-help books such as "Domestic Medicine," which was so popular it went through 30 editions. Newspapers carried advertisements for all kinds of patent medicines promising cures for all sorts of diseases. One was Moffit's Little Pills which treated dyspepsia, flatulence, fever, dropsy (edema), and piles. This amazing concoction was prepared right here in Schenectady, on Broadway. To its credit, the Medical Society forbade its members from using nostrums whose ingredients were secret, and disciplined two doctors whose names appeared on a label endorsing a patent medicine.

The 1860 population of Schenectady County was 20,000, of whom 9,000 lived in the City. Twenty per cent were German and Irish immigrants. There were 4,500 farms. The Schenectady Locomotive Works employed 600 men. In this pre-automobile era, doctors practiced in Mariaville, Scotia, Duanesburgh, Pattersonville, Quaker Street, Sloansville, Esperance, Rexford Flats, West Charlton, and Schenectady.

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HOURS
MUSEUM & LIBRARY
Monday-Friday 9-5
Additionally Thursday 5-8
Saturday 10-2

MABEE FARM
Monday-SATURDAY
10 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Letter from the President

THE CUTTING EDGE



Photo by Ann Aronson

George E. Franchere Education Center Ribbon Cutting of October 7, 2011

And so it was done. The cut-ups are myself in the red tie and Gary Mabee in the light coat. To his left, as you glance to the right in the photo, are two more Mabees, Jonathan and Kim, then Mabee Farm Site Manager Pat Barrot, Librarian / Archivist Melissa Tacke, and trustees Laura Linder and Carolina Lazzari. Above that group, left to right, are Curator Ryan Mahoney, Tim Mabee, Custodians John Ackner and Mike Kowalski, and SCCC professor Ron Kingsley, obscured here but not in real life.

To my right is Vice President Merritt Glennon, thence, trustee Deb Crosby, Associate Curator-Archivist Erica Flanagan, Society Secretary and Efner Center archivist Cindy Seacord, and trustee Marianne Blanchard. The three just behind them, left to right, are Frank Taormina, Dean of our Board of Trustees, Office Manager / Bookkeeper Jennifer Hanson, and County Legislator Angelo Santabarbara.

The group of honored guests and speakers behind the ribbon cutters, and behind us since the beginning, are Congressman Paul Tonko, County Legislative Chair Judith Dagostino, State Senator Hugh T. Farley, and Assemblymen George Amadore and Jim Tedisco. Above them are two pumpkin heads that we haven't named yet, but one, I believe, is Irish, so he's carved out to be Jack O'Lantern. They are dressed in orange because they are guarding a Dutch door.

A crowd at least as large stood watching us, one that included Schenectady County Chamber of Commerce president Chuck Steiner and director of government and community relations Gail Kehn. The Chamber coordinated the cutting and supplied the ribbon, which we took inside for the multitude to sign. We forgot to supply red rather than black marking pens, which would have been so appropriate for this red-letter day.

Except by advance appointment, the historic Mabee farmhouse is closed until May 1, but the Franchere Center at the Farm is now open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. You said to us "If you build it, we will come." So please do, and up through December 16, you can see 50 original Len Tantillo paintings, free to members, and only \$5 for non members, or ten cents each. What a bargain!

-Ed

*Events and Programs at the SCHS Museum,
the Grems-Doolittle Library, and at the
George E. Franchere Education Center*

**Museum current exhibit: *Through His Eyes:
Charles Lewis and the Civil War***

(Concludes November 12th) The diary of Charles Lewis offers firsthand insight into the Civil War. The writing begins in August of 1863, just as Lewis is returning to the front lines after recuperating from the wounds that he received during the Battle of Chancellorsville. Lewis shares his views and experiences of the War, discusses his trips back home to Schenectady, relives battles and reveals his thoughts on his own mortality. **Free to members, \$5 for non-members.**

**At the George E. Franchere Education Center:
*A Journey through History: The Artistic Works of
Len Tantillo***

(Concludes December 16th) The artwork by Len Tantillo included in this exhibit has the power to take the visitor back in time. These very well researched paintings help in our understanding of history at a basic level. Len Tantillo is able to display often overlooked aspects of events, especially in everyday life, that underlie our perception of history at the local, state, and national level. This exhibit features fifty pieces of original artwork, including some that were just completed within the past year. Do not miss this rare opportunity to see all of these paintings at one location. **\$5, free to members.**

PROGRAMS at the Museum

Saturday, November 12

1:30 PM refreshments – 2:00 PM Program

***Weapons of the Civil War* - by Matthew Zembo**

The American Civil War is often described as the first modern war because of the array of new technologies with which it was fought. Hudson Valley Community College Professor Matthew Zembo explores how changing technology, and military leaders' inability to respond to it, impacted the war and added to the overwhelming casualties during the Civil War. **Free to members, \$5 for non-members**

Saturday, December 17

1:30 PM refreshments – 2:00 PM Program

Schenectady Locomotive History

Presented by Harry Steven

Schenectady was once known as the “City that Lights and Hauls the World” for good reason. In the mid-19th century, Schenectady was one of the nation’s top manufacturers of steam locomotives, a business that kept the city thriving for close to one hundred years. Join SCHS Board Member Harry Steven as he discusses Schenectady Locomotive, ALCO, GE, and other aspects of locomotive history in Schenectady from 1848-1958.

Free to members, otherwise \$5.

Friday, November 25 – Sunday, December 11

5th Annual Festival of Trees

Hours: **Monday – Saturday 10 AM-4 PM**

Sunday – Noon-4 PM

The very popular Festival of Trees is back again! This is a cooperative venture between the Society and the YWCA. Trees will be on display at both locations. Purchase of a ticket entitles entry to both venues. **Admission to the Festival of Trees is \$5 for adults; \$2 for children 6-12; no charge for children 5 or under.**

PROGRAMS in the Grems-Doolittle Library

Thursday, November 17 6:00 – 8:00 PM

**Group discussion: *the history of medicine in
Schenectady County***

Dr. James Strosberg will discuss the history of the Schenectady County Medical Society and the role of its physicians in caring for Schenectady’s population. He will have copies of his recently published book “*Two Centuries: Caring for a Community*” available for sale and signing. Another guest will be Frank Taormina, who will speak about the life of Dr. Daniel Toll, a distinguished local physician who figures prominently in Dr. Strosberg’s book. **No admission charge.**

**Saturday, December 10 2:00 PM: Group
discussion: *Memories of World War II – Veterans
share their stories***

In recognition of the 70th anniversary of the US entry into World War II, local World War II veterans will share stories of their service. **No charge.**

Strosberg, continued from page 1

The number one illness in Schenectady was tuberculosis, causing more than one fifth of all deaths. TB was the most common cause of discharge from the Union Army, after gunshot wounds. It was not until 1904 that Governor Theodore Roosevelt signed the public health law that led to the opening of Glenridge Sanitarium in 1907, which started as a summer camp on Altamont Avenue. The second leading cause of death was cholera.

Since 1818 a City Physician had been selected by the Common Council, to provide medical and surgical care for all indigent persons, examine canal boat crews for cholera, provide small pox vaccinations, and consult on public health. Schenectadians enjoyed better medical care than the average American of the time. In his 1858 report to the City Common Council, the City Physician stated that “epidemics have rarely visited us, except in a form much less malignant than in other places.” There were several factors that contributed to our relatively good health, including geographic location, a municipal government concerned about public health, proximity to Union College and Albany Medical College, and some highly qualified physicians.

Our local government was responsive to public health matters. The Mayor kept a Book of Complaints. Citizens were asked to report nuisances deemed to be prejudicial to the health of the City. Before the discovery of germs by Anton van Leeuwenhook in 1676, and for a considerable time thereafter, it was thought that disease was caused by “miasma,” noxious exhalation of poisonous air from putrid organic matter. In 1700, French physician Andry Nicolas (1658-1742) wrote that microorganisms caused smallpox, but his theory took decades to gain credence. Our progressive City Council of the 19th century, by cleaning up the filth, undoubtedly improved the public health by eliminating breeding sites for mosquitoes, which can spread yellow fever and malaria, and houseflies, which can carry many infections. This was decades before flying insects were associated with disease.

The Civil War was bad for the health of our soldiers, twice as many dying from disease than from their wounds. In September, 1862, Schenectady soldiers of the 134th New York Volunteer Infantry were mustered in at Camp Veeder along the Schoharie Creek. The first death occurred even before the regiment left camp, a 21-year-old recruit. Fifteen more died on the way

south and 32 died before the first battle. The cause of death for most of them was listed as typhoid fever, an infectious disease caused by the Salmonella bacterium. The symptoms are fever, abdominal pain, diarrhea, and death.

New York State was one of the first to require medical licensing, which became the primary objective of the Schenectady County Medical Society. At its founding in 1810, the Society established the Board of Censors, which examined prospective candidates on Anatomy, Physiology, Surgery, Midwifery, Materia Medica, Pharmacy, Theory and Practice of Physic, and Chemistry. Some states and territories have no requirements whatsoever, and anyone could call himself a physician. Here, however, many local physicians were graduates of Union College, which had departments of chemistry and physics, and with the establishment of Albany Medical College in 1838, they had the opportunity for a formal medical education. However neither a college degree nor a medical degree was required to receive a license. As late as 1870, Schenectady County was licensing members who had



Surgical suite, mid-1880s

not graduated from a medical school, but rather on the basis of the examination of the Society's Broad of Censors.

Given the primitive level of medical knowledge in New York State in the 1860s, what difference did it make to the ability of Schenectady physicians to practice effectively? And what influence did the Civil War have on American medicine in general? Even 150 years ago there were certain drugs that were effective for specific conditions, such as colchicine for gout, quinine for malaria, opium for diarrhea, and morphine for pain. All except opium are still in use today.

Another example of the advance of medicine during the Civil War was the end of “heroic therapy.” This age old treatment involved bleeding or purging the poor patient. This was common practice before the War, and it was finally accepted that it didn’t work. George Washington was bled on his death bed when he was suffering from complications of streptococcal pharyngitis, a treatment that hastened his demise. Bleeding was also used locally. In 1834 the Schenectady Cabinet recommended bleeding for cholera. And Union College Worthy Jonathan Pearson (an early advocate for the formation of a Schenectady historical society) wrote in his now-famous diary that his physician bled him.

In 1847, fourteen years before the advent of our Civil War, Hungarian physician Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis (1818-1865) began an intensive campaign to convince surgeons to wash their hands vigorously prior to surgery, but it was many decades before the world took notice. The War ended in 1865, the year of his death, and by whatever coincidence, it was that very year that Sir Joseph Lister (1827-1912) of England published a paper that stressed the importance of antiseptic surgical environments, and the year that Abraham Lincoln may have died for lack of knowledge of proper medical treatment. Lister’s advice spread throughout Europe fairly quickly, much more slowly in the United States. *Listerine* is named for Lister (but there is no *Semmeline* hand lotion).

For far too long in mid 19th century Schenectady, the practice of “homeopathy” was rife. The term was coined in the early 1800s by its founder, Dr. Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843) of Germany. A basic tenet of homeopathy is “like cures like.” For example, a tiny amount of coffee could supposedly cure insomnia. Another tenet was that the more dilute an alleged remedy, the stronger effect it will have on the body. Hahnemann’s students brought homeopathy to the United States where it prospered and competed with traditional medicine. Hundreds of homeopaths volunteered to serve in the Medical Corp during the Civil War, but their offer was declined by President Lincoln. In 1900, there were hundreds of homeopathic hospitals and 22 homeopathic medical schools.

For many years, homeopathic physicians may have had better results with their dilute remedies, which probably could do no harm, than traditional physicians with their “bleed ‘em and purge ‘em” treatments. In 1862 the Schenectady *Evening Star and Times* carried an advertisement from Homeopathic Physician Dr John

V. Riggs “...giving special attention to private and chronic disease including the numerous class requiring the use of electricity for a speedy cure.” But when the Medical Society reorganized in 1870, its by-laws stated that “none but *regular* physicians may be members.”



Medical instruments, mid-1880s

Schenectady was fortunate in having several distinguished physicians during the 19th century. One was Dr. James Van Ingen, Union College Class of 1840. He went to France for advanced training and became an expert at orthopedics, and his scientific articles were cited in medical text books. He served with the 18th Infantry, New York Volunteers, and also served several years as City Physician. His grandfather, Dr. Dirck Van Ingen, born in Holland, was the Commander of the Continental Army Hospital on Lafayette Street and was a founder of Union College. Van Ingen, the grandson, was a large person, 6 ft. 3 inches tall, who weighed over 300 pounds. He was an eccentric with a bad temper and had numerous squabbles, several of which led to fist fights. He was a familiar figure around town, wearing a beard, cape, and broad-brimmed hat, and often carried a whip or a gun.

Dr. Van Ingen would sometimes be called for a second opinion by the family of a patient undergoing homeopathic treatment from a certain Dr. Swit. Dr. Van Ingen would call for all homeopathic medicines prescribed by Dr. Swit, drink them down on the spot, and declare to the patient and his family “there you are, not a bit of potency in all that medicine.” Dr. Swit got his revenge however; he gave all of his patients an unlabeled, undiluted bottle of ipecac (an emetic), with the instruction to take one drop in water once weekly. The next time Dr. Van Ingen consulted on a patient of Dr. Swit he swallowed all of his competitor’s supposedly “impotent” medicine, became violently ill, and lost a good portion of his 300 pounds.

New Materials in the Library

BOOKS

A Beautiful and Fruitful Place: Selected

Rensselaerwijck Papers, Volume 2, edited by Elisabeth Paling Funk and Martha Dickinson Shattuck

The Descendants of Col. Henry Filkin of Flatbush, Long Island, 1689-1878 by Oswald Haldane, gift of **Rob Petito**

A Genealogy of the Schenectady County Branch of the Wingate Family, gift of author, **Roy Wilson Wingate III**

The Hotaling Lineage, comp. by Ruth Sessler Blume and Emily Holden Sessler, gift of **Elsie Saar**

The Keeper of the Gateway: Sir William Johnson, Baronet by Rev. W.N.P. Dailey, gift of **Augusta Prince**

Mayflower Bastard by David Lindsay and *Saints and Strangers* by George F. Willison, gifts of **Elsie Maddaus**

A Nick in Time by Mary Ellen Boscia, gift of **Mary Ellen Boscia**

200 Years of Soot and Sweat: The History and Archaeology of Vermont's Iron, Charcoal, and Lime Industries [PDF on CD] by Victor R. Rolando, gift of **Victor R. Rolando**

PERIODICALS

Everton's Genealogical Helper magazine, 1977-2006 (runs for 1983, 1983, 1986-1990, and 1994 are complete), gift of **Betsy Mattice** in memory of **Clarence G. Brisee**

HISTORIC DOCUMENTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Linton High School yearbooks (1959, 1960), Schenectady High School yearbook (1929), Van Corlaer Press Club *Loud Speaker* (1931), gifts of **Arnold F. DePaula**

Geiger family documents, gift of **Gary Geiger**

Material pertaining to 1995 Schenectady Colonial Festival – VHS tape, narrative, program, clippings, gift of **Margaret B. Moore**

General Electric Corporate Research and Development Photo Directory (January 1984), gift of **Paul M. Callahan**

Nott Terrace High School yearbooks (1945/1946, 1947, 1949, 1950); Washington Irving School yearbook (1944); photographs and memorabilia related to George Richard Kelly of Schenectady, gifts of **Patty Mangino**

Print: "The Stockade – Union Street" by D.R. Forstner (1976), gift of **Victor Jakway**

Postcard of Veeder Pond and Mt. Pleasant Bridge, gift of **Harold Veeder**

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS AND FAMILY PAPERS

Additions to Frank Keetz Baseball Collection:

Jimmies 1966 girls' softball program, photographs of Mohawk Giants, photographs of local semi-pro teams, miscellaneous information, gifts of **Frank Keetz**

FINDING AIDS for the following collections have been added to schenectadyhistory.net/library/collections:

Dutch-language documents in the Gremms-Doolittle Library [research guide]; Index to obituaries compiled by Margaret Van Vranken Van Eps (over 5,000 entries); Monday Garden Group of Schenectady; John Papp Photograph Collection; Ann Ross Genealogy Research Collection; Schenectady Liederkrantz Records; Soroptimist International of Schenectady Records; Strong Collection

Please visit the Library blog at

<http://gremmsdoolittlelibrary.blogspot.com> for more information about our collections.

Mabee Farm—Classes at the George E. Franchere Education Center

Saturday – November 5

10 AM – noon: *Sounds of the Mohawk Language*

Learn how to pronounce the Mohawk language:

Thanksgiving Prayer, numbers, colors, time, and other words and phrases. Instructor: Dave Cornelius. **Class fee: \$25.00 plus \$2 for materials.** Minimum class size 5.

Saturday – November 19 (two separate classes)

9 AM - noon: *Quilted Fabric Ornaments* - These no-sew folded fabric ornaments are easy and fun to make. There are so many fabrics that it is easy to personalize them. Make them for Christmas, Valentine's Day, baby showers, or as gifts for friends. **Instructor:** Jessica Van Denburgh **Class fee: \$35.00 plus \$10.00 for materials.** You also need to bring a black Sharpie and a flexible tape measure.

1 – 4 PM *Wheat Ornaments* - This workshop is perfectly timed for the Holiday Season. We will spend the afternoon making ornaments to decorate your tree or gift packages or as a lovely addition to your Holiday table. We will work with both ash and wheat. No weaving experience is needed. We will make four ornaments: a reindeer made of ash, a French knot made of braided wheat, a wheat heart, and a wheat star large enough for a tree topper. **Instructor:** Beverly Cornelius. **Class fee: \$35.00 plus \$15.00 fee for materials.**

Around the Society



Kayaking to feed the animals at the Mabee Farm after Hurricane Irene.



Collapsed pole barn at Mabee Farm after Hurricane Irene.



Dr. & Mrs. Robert Liebers with Kim Mabee at the Len Tantillo Exhibit Opening.



Len Tantillo (r) discusses one of his paintings.



John Ackner, our resident blacksmith, demonstrating at Farm & Foliage Day.



Emma lov'in' the bunny at Farm & Foliage Day.

*Photos:
Ann Aronson,
Alex Kaczor.*

Schenectady County Historical Society

New Gift Shop

For the holidays, shop the
Mabee Farm Gift Shop

bigger and better than ever!!

Now featuring a fine selection of gemstone
jewelry, hand made Shaker Island Brooms,
unique colonial toys, delft and more!!



OPEN 6 DAYS A WEEK,
Mon - Sat: 10 am - 4 pm.

MABEE FARM HISTORIC SITE
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5th Annual Festival of Trees

at the
Schenectady County Historical Society

and
YWCA of Northeastern NY

November 25 – December 11

Friday Nov. 25 10AM-4PM

Saturdays 10AM-4PM

Sundays Noon-4PM

Monday-Friday 10AM-4PM

\$5 Adults

\$2 Children

5 and under free



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