



# CANAL FEST



Some toys are never out of date. Pictured above are youngsters having fun with the games of yesteryear at the recent Canal Fest along the Mohawk River.

Photos by Ann Aronson



Schenectady County  
Historical  
Society

# Newsletter

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## THE KING OF TERRORS

In his unique book *Facing the "King of Terrors" – Death and Society in an American Community, 1750 – 1990* Dr. Robert V. Wells, the Chauncey H. Winters Professor of History at Union College, Schenectady, New York comments on how people regarded death and dying with particular reference to a number of local residents in Schenectady. His research is extensive and includes among many other sources personal diaries, journals and correspondence.

For residents of Schenectady in the early 18th century, the passing of a loved one was a reminder that death could come at any time and preparing one's self was of utmost importance. If decedents died a good death by being properly at peace with the Lord, then their passing released them to a better place. If they died a bad death, such as suicide, or lived an unrepentant life, then their passing reminded the living of the need to prepare for when their time came.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, this attitude started to give way to a focus on the person's life and the emotional needs of the survivors. Yet the change was slow. In a growing atmosphere of sentimentality toward death, funeral sermons still urged parishioners "to prepare to die."

By the time of the Civil War, the need to mourn and the desire to memorialize the dead had taken full root. The author refers to Margaret Peissner whose husband Elias was killed in action at the battle of Chancellorsville on May 2, 1863. Margaret believed that focusing on her own emotions would be selfish. Yet her concern was not for the dead. Writing to a friend, Margaret expressed not wanting to "wrap herself in my own individual sorrow when so many hearts are desolate." She never fully recovered from his death; as late as 1901, Margaret sent a New Year's greeting on a card with a black border.



*Receive, o earth, his faded form/ In Thy cold bosom let it lie/ Safe let it rest from every storm/ Soon must it rise no more to die*

In memory of John H. Swaine who died Dec. 5 1806 at 34 yrs. (From a silk embroidery dated 1806)



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HOURS

MUSEUM  
MONDAY-FRIDAY 1-5  
SATURDAY 10-4

LIBRARY  
MONDAY-FRIDAY 1-5  
SATURDAY 9-12

MABEE FARM  
TUESDAY-SATURDAY 10-4

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Surely you noticed that the last issue of the Newsletter came to you in living color, and the feedback regarding the change has been excellent. As I looked at those spectacular photos of the May reenactment at the Mabee Farm, I just couldn't abide the thought of turning redcoats and bluecoats into barely distinguishable greycoats. SCHS is itself colorful, and that should be reflected in what we send you.

The last issue contained four color pages of the total of eight presented. For budgetary reasons, we have used just two for this issue. To compensate, I offer for your consideration two colorful views that I love dearly, but you have to imagine them with me. The first is the view of the Binne Kill as framed by the picture window in the Grems-Doolittle Library at 32 Washington Avenue. The other is the panoramic view of the Mohawk from the back fence at the Mabee Farm.

Come to think of it, I do believe I used a photo of the latter view on our website. And do invoke the main page of [www.schist.org](http://www.schist.org) and click on the "Mabee Farm" link to see the beautiful job that summer intern Emily Spinner has done in revising the Farm page. Or try [www.mabeefarm.org](http://www.mabeefarm.org) and note that you get there directly.

But did you realize that my favorite views are historically connected? Well, in 1792, General Philip Schuyler and a few cohorts set off from the Binne Kill in a bateaux just like our two replicas, the DeSager and the Bobby G., to test how far west the Mohawk River was navigable. I'd like to think, but certainly can't prove, that his party embarked from a point right opposite what is now the Society's back property line. But what we do know from Philip Schuyler's own journal is that his party paddled out into the Mohawk, proceeded a few miles upriver, and stayed overnight "at Jan Mabie's house," part of which was an inn for boatmen. Now, Jan Mabie had died 67 years earlier, but the reference shows that Jan's name left an imprint that endured for many years beyond his death. And, now, alternate spelling notwithstanding, we have carried it into the 21st century and marvel at the amazing coincidence that the two historic sites that comprise SCHS mark the termini of Schuyler's first-day's journey, 214 years ago.

Ed Reilly

Celebrate ARCHIVES Week - October 8 through 14 at the Schenectady City Hall Efner History Center which is located in the attic of Schenectady City Hall on Jay Street. There will be an open house to which the public is invited. This archives collection includes items that were "discovered" during an inventory process completed on July 31st. There are pictures still in need of identification - perhaps one of our visitors will provide clues! Among other items there is a collection of blueprints for buildings constructed between 1900 and 2000. It is not understood why many of these blueprints were saved while others were not, but they do offer unique information. There is now a computerized list of the blueprints; searching and indexing tools need to be developed. Cynthia Seacord, the Efner Center archivist, is working with Ellen Fladger, Special Collections archivist at Union College's Schaefer Library, to develop short term and long term needs to improve the Efner's records management system.

To learn more about the Efner City History Center's mission statement, and its collections check out [www.cityofschenectady.com/efner\\_city\\_archives.html](http://www.cityofschenectady.com/efner_city_archives.html)

Hours are Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and by appointment.



The Schenectady County Historical Society, a nonprofit organization, depends on its members for support. Members provide the means to conduct programs and plan exhibits that relate to the community and tell the story of Schenectady County. Current members, please extend an invitation to your friends to join so they too can take part in the upcoming Fall and Spring programs.

The List of Contributors will be published at the end of the fiscal year in the Society's expanded Annual Report. The Society thanks each and every one of you for your continued support.



Mabee Farm WORKSHOPS  
September-October 2006

September 9, 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM  
**Make A Gourd Birdhouse** - Fee: \$35 (includes materials)  
Instructor: Pam Buccì

September 16, 10:00 AM - 2:30 PM  
**Knit A Hat** (for beginning knitters) - Fee: \$60.00 (includes materials); Instructor: Pam Buccì  
Bring your own lunch! Additional yarn and circular needles available for purchase.

September 23, 1:00 - 4:30 PM  
**Knit A Scarf On A Frame** - Fee: \$60 (includes materials)  
Instructor: Pam Buccì; learn the use of a knitting frame.

September 30, 10:00 AM to 1:00 PM  
**Soapmaking** - Fee: \$40 (includes materials)  
Instructor: Brenda Kelly; you will make 100% natural all vegetable soap.  
(Please wear an old long-sleeve shirt and bring a towel or blanket in a box or insulated cooler to carry your "curing" soap home).

October 7, 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM  
**Dutch Oven Cooking** - Fee: \$60 (includes materials, food)  
Instructor: Pat Buccì; we'll make a soup, main dish, and dessert.

MEMBERSHIP FORM  
Schenectady County Historical Society

Please indicate one of the following for your membership:

- ☐ \$25 Individual  
☐ \$40 Family  
☐ \$50 Donor  
☐ \$100 Sponsor  
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☐ \$1000 Lifetime

☐ Check enclosed

☐ Please charge my credit card: ☐ MasterCard ☐ VISA  
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Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Also enclosed is a gift of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ for special projects designated as follows:

Museum: Art Restoration \_\_\_\_\_ Acquisitions \_\_\_\_\_ Publications \_\_\_\_\_ Programs \_\_\_\_\_

Library: Equipment \_\_\_\_\_ Publications \_\_\_\_\_

Mabee Farm: Preservation \_\_\_\_\_ Education Building \_\_\_\_\_ Programs \_\_\_\_\_

Your tax-deductible membership can be matched by G.E. (800) 305-0669

EXHIBITS:

"A Desirable Residence": Schenectady and the Erie Canal - Explore the deep impact, both positive and negative, that the Erie Canal had on Schenectady. This exhibit uses first hand accounts of the canal as well as historic images and artifacts. Enjoy this new exhibit at the Historical Society and learn some of the interesting history of Schenectady's connection with the canal.

Date: June 15th - September 30th

Time: Monday through Friday 1:00 - 5:00; Saturday 10:00 am - 4:00 pm

Cost: Free - for just the exhibit

Tours of the Historical Society - \$4.00 for adults; students and members free

Mourning Customs, and the ideas behind them - This exhibit will be based on the book by Dr. Robert Wells entitled Facing the "King of Terrors" - Death and Society in an American Community, 1750 - 1990. As this book implies, facing death has had a profound effect on people. Dr. Wells' book deals with the community in and around Schenectady. Articles from the Society's collections will illustrate mourning practices.

Date: October 14, 2006 - March 15, 2007

Time: Monday through Friday 1:00 - 5:00; Saturday 10:00 am - 4:00 pm

Cost: Free and open to the public

***Remains of Schenectady’s First Municipal Water Supply Found***

Article and photos by Don Rittner  
Schenectady County and City Historian

In June of 2006, the county historian’s office asked the city engineer’s office for permission to monitor excavations that were taking place around the city for improving and replacing the city’s old water pipes. It was felt that any work underground in the Stockade district could uncover important archeological remains. It took only one day to prove that theory correct. Workers under contract by the city uncovered a 6-foot long section of a wooden water pipe that was part of the city’s first municipal water supply of 1836. The 6 foot log, probably elm, has a 3 inch hole drilled through its length and was connected to another wooden pipe by a cast iron pipe. The pipe was located under Union Street at the junction of South College Street.



The first attempt to develop a water supply for the city took place in 1799. A franchise was granted to Henry R. Teller, Richard Rosa and Remsen R. Teller to tap springs for this purpose. However, there is no evidence that the work was ever undertaken.

In 1836, Jabez Ward established a small water works using a spring, dammed to form a pond, at the foot of Engine Hill at Veeder Ave (This is the present day site of a Goodyear Tire & Auto Service business and across State Street from

the former NYS Armory.) The water was brought into the village by means of wooden logs that had holes bored through them with a diameter of about two to three inches and used the gravity system for distribution. Ward’s logs were laid in State Street down to Washington Avenue, with connections to Ferry, Front and Union Streets. The log found at the Union Street and South College Street intersection had a 3-inch diameter hole.

This water supply seemed to survive until around 1872 when Senator Charles Stanford (in the NYS legislature) reorganized a company to take water from the Mohawk River. Stanford was the brother of Leland Stanford who founded Stanford University and one of the leaders in connecting the east and west coast via the transatlantic railroad.

Stanford used what was known as the Holly system and installed a powerhouse at the foot of Ferry Street. The Holly System was named after Birdsill Holly who was born in 1820 in Auburn, New York. In his lifetime he made great contributions to the fields of mechanical and hydraulic engineering and held over 150 American patents, and several foreign patents. The system of pressurized municipal water supply was one of his major inventions and still used today. One of his other inventions is the fire hydrant.

Stanford’s water supply was ample but also carried typhoid germs and death to every section of Schenectady. The city secured control of the plant and took steps to procure a proper water supply. In 1885, the Common

Council purchased the water works for \$90,000 and eventually in 1904 used water from springs in Rotterdam for a safe water supply. Water from



the Rotterdam aquifer is still the source of the City’s water supply. One of the city’s water commissioners, George T. Ingersoll, who became known as the “Father of Water,” was an early proponent of sanitary water conditions. When he died in 1913, he left his estate to form a home for aged men, known today as the Ingersoll Residence. Ironically, this was the same home of Charles Stanford who died in 1885. The home is in danger of being destroyed for a commercial development in Niskayuna.

At the request of the historian for the city and county, the city engineer’s staff picked up the wooden water pipe and brought it to the Schenectady County Historical Society where it will be cleaned, preserved, and displayed.

Along with the water pipe, three sections of planks used for a plank road (on Union Street) were recovered and will also be donated to the Schenectady Historical Society.

This successful rescue mission proves that with cooperation among the city, county, and private sector, our city’s historic resources can be recovered and protected. While the wooden water pipe isn’t pretty, it’s an important part of the history of Schenectady.

**Related events:**

Lecture on Mourning Customs - Author and Union College Professor Robert Wells will give a presentation based on his book, *Facing the “King of Terrors.”* Come and hear this fascinating speaker and take the opportunity to speak with the author. Signed copies of his book will be available for purchase.

**Date: October 21<sup>st</sup>**

**Time: Refreshments 1:30 pm, Program 2:00 pm**

**Cost: Free and open to the public**

Gravestone Preservation –New York State Historical Association conservator C.R. Jones will speak on the importance of preserving one of our most valuable genealogical resources, gravestones. Although these artifacts appear indestructible, gravestones are susceptible to everything from the environment to human error. Learn the history, preservation, and importance of gravestones from one of the leading experts!

**Date: October 14<sup>th</sup>**

**Time: Refreshments 1:30 pm; Program 2:00 pm**

**Cost: Free**

TOUR at Vale Cemetery: Symbolism and Statuary – Meet at the Caretaker’s House at 907 State Street in Schenectady. Wear comfortable walking shoes. Your guide will be Christopher Hunter, a Trustee of the Historical Society and the principal archivist at the Schenectady Museum. The Cemetery is on the National Register of Historic Places and there is a wealth of fascinating material to explore.

**Date: October 8<sup>th</sup>**

**Time: 2:00 pm**

**Cost: \$5.00 per adult; children 12 years and younger, free**

**Library and Archives Photographs**



Can anyone identify these men? Does anyone know where or when this photo was taken?

**Events: September and October**

Musicians of Ma’alwyck – Enjoy an intimate evening of music in beautiful surroundings. The Historical Society will be the setting for the performance of music from the nineteenth-century by the accomplished “Musicians of Ma’alwyck.” This will be a trip back in time to the gracious enjoyment of beautiful music in an intimate setting. Come join us for this very special occasion.

**Date: September 9<sup>th</sup>**

**Time: 7:00 pm**

**Cost: \$20.00 per person**

The Stockade Walkabout – an annual favorite! The Schenectady County Historical Society will have an open house, provide free guided tours of the building, free light refreshments, and a last chance to see the Erie Canal exhibit.

**Date: September 30<sup>th</sup>**

**Time: 11:00 am – 5:00 pm**

**Cost: \$20.00 per person day of event – includes all of the venues.**

Children’s 1920s Halloween Party – Come in costume to our vintage 1920s Halloween Party. There will be candy that children of that era enjoyed plus activities that include period crafts.

**Date: October 28<sup>th</sup>**

**Time: 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm**

**Cost: \$3.00 per child**



In the foreground is the A.A. Van Vorst & Peter Vedder Lumberyard on Pine Street, with Union College campus in background. (Circa 1872) Note the circular base of the Nott Memorial, under construction.

***Corporal Jared A. Jackson—20th Regiment  
U.S. Colored Troops***

*by Neil Yetwin*

On November 24, 1888 the Schenectady *Evening Star* carried several articles marking the anniversaries of such Civil War battles as Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge, the lives and exploits of Generals Grant and Sherman, and the courage of those Schenectady veterans of the 134th New York Infantry. On page 4 of that same edition of the Star there appeared the following notice:

*“DIED.JACKSON–In this city, Nov. 21st, 1888, Jared A. Jackson, aged 48 years. Relatives and friends are respectfully invited to attend his funeral Sunday afternoon (Nov. 25th), at 3 o’clock, from the African M.E. Church, Jay street.”*

What was not mentioned in the *Evening Star* was that Jared Jackson had been a corporal in Company N of the 20th Regiment U.S. Colored Troops and served as one of 200 black soldiers who helped guard more than 12,000 Confederates at the Elmira Prison Camp in the final year of the Civil War. The paper also neglected to report that those same 200 guards were unjustly blamed for a prisoner escape from Elmira for which they all paid a heavy price.

Jared Jackson was born in Bethlehem, New York on May 20, 1840. His parents, George and Jane Ann Jackson, were originally from New York City and settled in Bethlehem with a group of African-Americans following the total emancipation of this state’s slaves in 1827. The Jackson’s were tenant farmers and Jared Jackson’s later enlistment papers record his occupation at that time as “farmer.”

On March 23, 1863 the War Department established the “United States Colored Troops” or “U.S.C.T.,” one of which was the thousand-man 20th Regiment. Jackson, then 23, enlisted in Company N of that regiment on December 14, 1863 at Albany. On January 18, 1864 the 20th was sent to the Elmira Military Rendezvous for basic training, then assembled at Riker’s Island, New York Harbor, on March 5th. Eight hundred soldiers of the 20th were then shipped down to Louisiana to work as army laborers. The remaining 200, including Jared Jackson, were transported back to Elmira, where the military training depot had been hastily converted into a prison camp for Confederate soldiers.

Conditions at the Elmira Prison Camp had already deteriorated by the time the new guards arrived in mid-July. Nearly 10,000 underfed and poorly clothed prisoners were forced to live in 35 makeshift barracks and 1000 tents, none of which had floors or blankets. Substandard medical care led to epidemics of pneumonia, cholera, dysentery, scurvy, and smallpox. Many prisoners were reduced to eating garbage and rats. With a death rate of 5% a month, or eight prisoner deaths a day, the camp became known as “Hellmira.” The Southerners, enraged at the thought of black guards with guns, spit and swore at them and shouted racial slurs. One prisoner started to approach a guard and was warned several times to stop before being shot and wounded. Despite the abuse, the guards maintained their digni



*The only extant photograph of a black guard observing a Confederate prisoner being processed at the Elmira Prison Camp. While likely not Jared Jackson, the guard is a member of the 20th Regiment, U. S. Colored Troops. Courtesy of the Chemung County Historical Society.*

ty and professionalism. Lt. Col. Seth Eastman found them to be “entirely reliable and trustworthy.” The Elmira Daily Advertiser reported that “it is now dangerous to attempt any escapes where the Negro guards are on duty.” Any would-be escapee, the paper warned, would find it “not so easy to get away with the colored fellows on duty.” For their part, the black soldiers responded to the rebels’ taunts by shouting, “Looks like the bottom rail’s on top now!”

But on the night of October 7-8, 1864 ten Confederate POWs did succeed in escaping Elmira Prison by digging a 3-foot wide, 60-foot long tunnel from their tents to outside of the prison’s 12-foot-high stockade fence. In spite of the documented fact that it had been white guards on duty at that section of the fence that night, and that they had fallen asleep, it was the guards of the 20th who were blamed. There were many higher ups in the War Department who disapproved of having blacks do anything but manual labor in the army, and despite Lt. Col. Eastman’s pleas on their behalf, Jared Jackson and his comrades were assigned to labor duty in South Carolina and Louisiana.

Jackson was transferred to Company H, 26th Regiment of U.S.C.T. stationed at Beaufort, South Carolina. According to his medical records he was helping to unload a naval vessel on November 1, 1864 when he sustained a back injury. After his discharge from Hilton Head on August 28, 1865 he returned briefly to the family farm at Bethlehem until moving to Schenectady.

***Jared Jackson cont. from p4.***

There, in October 1866, he married Hannah E. Wendell. Jackson tried to run a stable near Fonda from 1868 to 1869 but gave it up to hire himself out as a general laborer in Schenectady. The Jackson’s purchased a home in 1869 at 523 Schenectady Street, which still stands today.

At some point during those years Jackson began to suffer from consumption, then a common and often fatal disease. He had applied time and again for a military disability pension but was continually rejected until September, 1888 when he began receiving \$12.00 a month. Ten weeks later, on November 21, 1888, Jackson died at age 48 years, 6 months. His death certificate states “Consumption and Chronic Liver Disease” as the two causes of death.

***In Memoriam — Elsa Church (1911 - 2006)***

Elsa Kjolseth Church died in Greenville, South Carolina on July 7. From at least 1974 to 2006, Elsa was a member of the Society, serving at various times as Librarian, Trustee, and as a leader in the effort to bring about the creation of the Grems-Doolittle Library, devoting not only her time, energy, and talent to that enterprise, but, along with her husband, giving one of the larger monetary gifts that made that Library possible.

One can delineate titles and name all the roles Elsa played more easily than one can characterize the presence of Elsa here during the time she served the Society. Her warmth, wisdom and good humor always helped to create a welcoming atmosphere that was inevitably part of the experience for anyone who came to 32 Washington Avenue.

While Elsa was here entry into the Society was gained through the front door. As soon as you entered you were greeted by Pauline Wood, whose desk faced the hall. Elsa was behind Pauline in the room, then serving as the “library,” which is now the dining room. At the table behind Pauline you would often see Helen Mynderse seated. Helen was then the Society’s Assistant Treasurer. Conversation abounded in those cluttered rooms along with lots of laughter, a sense of genuine effort to answer any question you might have, and, inevitably, some sort of candy in a dish on the table. It was always a pleasant place to come to and spend time in.

Elsa was a caring person in every sense of that expression, from her conscientious effort to answer any question the most casual genealogist might have to a concern for the welfare of the people around her. She and Mandy Grems were friends. It may very well be that Elsa’s relationship with Mandy contributed to Mandy’s decision to

Jared Jackson’s obituary said nothing of his service in an army that would not be fully integrated for another 90 years. But his gravestone reads proudly:

JARED A. JACKSON  
CORPORAL  
CO.N 20.REGT.  
U.S. COLORED TROOPS  
BORN MAY 20.1840  
DIED NOV.21.1888



*Gravestone located in Vale Cemetery. Photo: Ruth Bergeron*

make the very generous gift to the Society that brought about the Library we now enjoy.

From a Larry Hart article in the Schenectady Gazette, we learn that Elsa was born Elsa Kjolseth in Scotia, that she later moved with her family, first, across the Mohawk River to Rotterdam, and later, across the Atlantic to Norway, where she and her family spent four years before moving back to Scotia. She graduated from Scotia High School in 1930, and continued her education at Albany State Teachers College where she obtained a degree in 1934, and embarked on a teaching career in Henderson, New York. The following year, in 1935 she embarked on another career, as the wife of Charles Church, became the mother of three children, and ultimately, the grandmother of eight.

Fortunately for us, and for the entire community of which she continued to be a part, she extended her energies and her talents to teaching part-time and to becoming the Librarian for the children’s section of the Scotia Public Library, and ultimately the SCHS Librarian.

Increasingly, the passage of the years leaves me with the impression that I am looking back on a stream of people moving through time. The memory of all those I have had the opportunity to meet as they have come through the portals of the Society is certainly marked by the presence of Elsa and the positive difference she made in the lives of so many of us. Because of her, the institution we continue to enjoy has become a better place, with more of the resources that support an interest in genealogy and local history and with surroundings that more easily and more comfortably accommodate the people who wish to use them. Elsa made a difference in all our lives.

Francis R. Taormina