

Schenectady County Historical Society



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The WGY Players

by Gail Denisoff

A century after the first commercial radio station began broadcasting, 83% of Americans ages 12 or older listen to the radio in a given week. It's a technology that we may take for granted now, but the rapid development of radio technology and programming in the early 1920s led to significant changes in American culture and communication.

According to Professor Tom Lewis of Skidmore College, "radio became the first modern mass medium, one that knew no geographic boundary, and excited the imagination and minds as well as the ears of listeners." The act of tuning in to hear the latest news, the weekly antics of beloved characters, the current sports game, and the most popular music quickly became a standard ritual in the daily lives of Americans across every age, class, and race. It exposed millions to new entertainment, politics, culture, and information. General Electric, as a leader in technology and invention, was one of the companies pushing the envelope of

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A Letter from the President

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Time flies. It feels like only yesterday that SCHS unveiled its latest Strategic Plan—but while it may not seem like it, it's now been almost three years. Wow. And what a three years it's been! When we announced our plan, few of us could ever have imagined the havoc that would be wreaked by a once-in-a-century pandemic—a public health catastrophe that would end up causing numerous businesses and non-profits to cut back on their operations or even call it quits. But thanks in no small part to a long-range plan that would provide us with the vision and means to keep us reliably on course, SCHS would actually thrive in the face of perilous uncertainty.

As many of you recall, our Board of Trustees had actually made the decision to embark on a strategic planning process in 2017 (the same year in which the Board also chose to hire our first-ever Executive Director, by the way). And we spent our next two years reviewing programs with the aid of the Cooperstown Graduate Program, securing funding and administrative guidance from the New York Council for Non-Profits, and seeking input from several hundred community stakeholders. SCHS trustees, staff, and core volunteers followed up by reviewing community surveys and holding a series of focus groups across the county. And in June 2018, Board and staff members, along with selected volunteers, met for a daylong retreat and produced the action plan that would go into effect in 2019.

Our plan envisioned working with community members to educate residents and visitors and “enable them to become better-informed history makers.” And by focusing on community service, diversity, and collaboration, it identified strategies that addressed four specific, fundamental issues: 1) Programs and Services; 2) Collaborations, Community Engagement, and Communications; 3) Governance and Community Leadership; and 4) Fund Development.

My sense is that, by any reasonable measure, SCHS succeeded in meeting its goals. Without question, the pandemic took us (and everyone else) by surprise and disrupted our operations; like all the other museums and historical societies in New York, we were required to temporarily close our doors to the public. But, with our plan to guide us, we expanded our online programming and our research and collections management responsibilities. And when we reopened, we undertook new community-based initiatives and continued to provide first-rate public service, while at the same time ensuring the safety of our visitors and staff members and keeping our staffing levels, facilities, and finances intact.

So now, as the year 2021 comes to a close, it's time once again to update our strategic plan by assessing our operations and renewing our vision for the future. I've consequently asked our Vice President, Mark Vermilyea, to convene a committee to begin the process. The work has already begun, and I have confidence that Mark, his committee, the rest of our Trustees, our staff, volunteers, and members, and our many community stakeholders will all do an outstanding job of keeping us on course to become the model for New York's many other museums, historic sites, and non-profits. Stay tuned. We're still making history.



Robert Weible, SCHS President

From the Library

A Note from the Librarian

Summer and early fall are always popular times for research in the library, particularly for researchers traveling to our area. While we didn't see the same number of researchers this summer as we have in years past, we still had a steady stream of library visitors and remote research requests. Most of our researchers are from New York, but this summer, our visitors included representatives around the US and Canada, including Massachusetts, Arizona, Wisconsin, and Texas. We received research requests from around the world, including England, Australia, and Italy. Talking to these researchers, I'm often reminded of the motto "The City that Lights and Hauls the World" and the world-wide connections we have.

We plan to celebrate Genealogy Day this year on October 16 with a Facebook Live discussion with genealogist Tina Post. I hope you'll join me, virtually!

- Marietta Carr, Librarian/Archivist

Recent Acquisitions

- Carl Company photos and documents donated by Rita Moore
- ALCO photo and handbook donated by Karen Polsinelli
- Photos of the Schenectady Savings Bank donated by Lauren Slater
- Harris Ottaway Diary, Scrapbook and Photo Collection donated by Susannah Ottaway
- Books from Joseph McEvoy's library donated by Antoinette McEvoy
- Family correspondence donated by Peggy Bowe
- Central Park Jr. High program donated by Dick Williams
- Glass slide of Gertrude Daly donated by Frederick Griffiths

- Books from the Mielke library donated by Evelyn Thode
- Ferguson family home documents donated by Diane Quandt
- Nijkerk Exchange Collection donated by Don Ackerman
- Deed and keys to the Veeders' house donated by Peter Graham

Recent Blog Posts

The Grems-Doolittle Library Collections Blog (GREMSDOOLITTLELIBRARY.BLOGSPOT.COM) is a great resource for discovering Schenectady County's history. Here are a few recent posts that you may have missed:

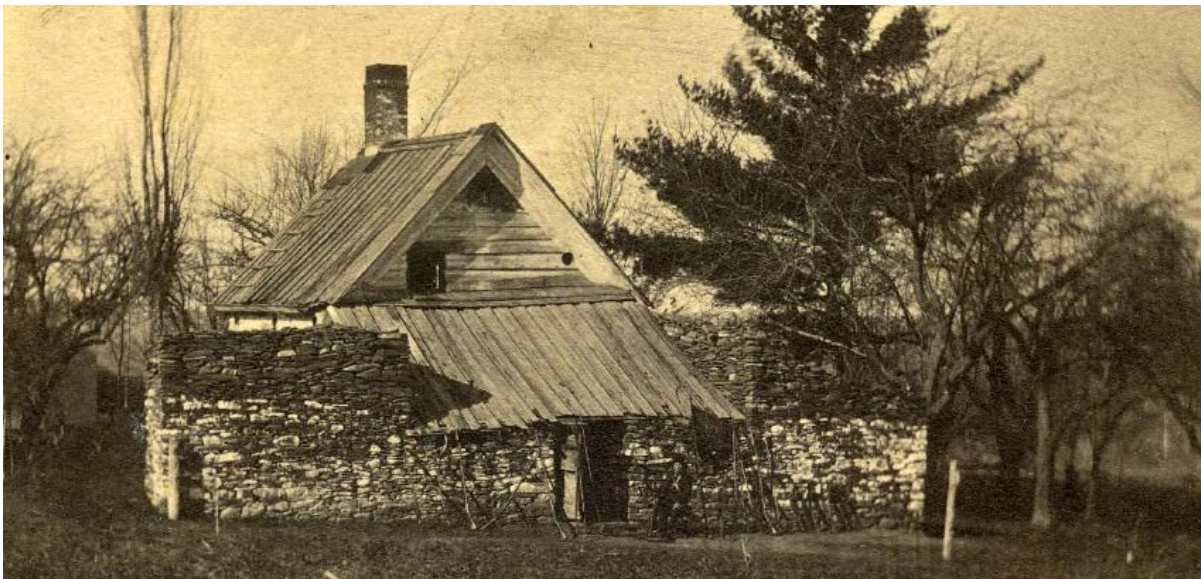
Lucky Lindy Visits Schenectady as Part of National Tour by Diane Leone, July 30

This post by library volunteer Diane Leone describes Charles Lindbergh's visit to Schenectady Airport in 1927. The event attracted a crowd of 25,000 people and highlighted the potential of the county's newly constructed airport.

A Polish Genealogy Resource Like None Other! by Mary Zawacki, September 9

In this post, Mary Zawacki introduces us to the Jaminy Indexing Team (JMI), a group of volunteers who have digitized and indexed parish records throughout northeast Poland. Their website is an invaluable resource for genealogists tracing their Polish roots.

Image: Nicholas Veeder's house in Scotia, known as the "Old Fort."



Around the County

with Bill Buell, County Historian

There were 154,859 people living in Schenectady County according to the last census, ranking us 22nd among the 62 counties according to population in the state of New York. Of those 62 counties, Schenectady is 56th in actual size and is generally regarded as the smallest county in land area in upstate New York. So, who would suspect that this small area of land, with a substantial number of people living in it, would have so many wonderful natural places to explore. Places to really get out and enjoy the woods. But Schenectady County does indeed offer just that.

Adding to the enjoyment of the great outdoors is the history connected to our natural areas. For people who appreciate nature and are fascinated with the past, the county is a great place to call home, and it's getting better.

There's a project in the early stages that we hope will result in Wolf Hollow Road, near the hamlet of Hoffmans in the western part of the county, being turned into some kind of nature preserve. If successful, it would allow the public to thoroughly enjoy the rich geological and American history that comes oozing out of the gorge. The road has been closed for the past few years because it is too dangerous for vehicular traffic, but the prospect of allowing people access to the area is a great idea that I hope will be realized soon.

Wolf Hollow, where the Mohawks and Mahicans had an epic battle in 1669, is a treasure that should be available to every county resident and anyone else seeking a little outdoor adventure. The road was built on a fault line in the Earth's surface approximately 1,000 feet deep and a mile long. That fault line was created half a billion years ago by the same plate-shifting that formed the Appalachian Mountain range. That's according to Union College geology professor Kurt Hollacher, who talked to me about Wolf Hollow for a *Gazette* article back in 2013. Often called the Hoffman's Fault by geologists, it extends from the Helderbergs in Albany County up to the southern Adirondacks.

County workers have already cleared away some of the debris lining the road, and the long-range goal is to have some kind of trail for history lovers and geology buffs. Hopefully things will all come together to create another incredible outdoor area in our county.

But, in the meantime, we certainly do have a number of other wonderful places to explore. My favorite might be the Plotter Kill, also known as the Almy D. Coggeshall Plotter Kill Preserve, located on Route 159 in the town of Rotterdam, less than 20 minutes from downtown Schenectady. With three waterfalls and some rough terrain in its 600 acres, hikers have to be careful to stay on the trails. Accidents have happened.

The Sanders Preserve, also less than 20 minutes from the city,

has nearly 370 acres of land to explore in the town of Glenville, and, like the Plotter Kill, gives you a sense of being out in the woods. There is hunting allowed during the season in the Sanders Preserve, so take note. Also in Glenville is the Indian Kill Preserve, complete with rugged terrain and a waterfall or two, although on a smaller scale than the Plotter Kill. While the main entrance is located on Hetcheltown Road near the Glendale Home, county officials are developing another site to enter the preserve where the old Woodlin Club was at the end of St. Anthony Lane.

Over in the town of Niskayuna there is the Mohawk River State Park, also known as the Schenectady Museum Preserve, and the Lisha Kill Preserve, just off of Rosendale Road by the old Niskayuna Grange.

Sometimes hiking in these places can be a bit treacherous so caution is required. If you want to make sure your walk is a bit more comfortable, stick to places like the Great Flats trail on Campbell Road in Rotterdam, the H.G. Reist Wildlife Sanctuary in Niskayuna, or maybe the Woodlawn Preserve in the southeastern section of the city, or Central Park.

Also, look into walking around Vale Park right in the middle of the city, or, if you do want a little trip, head out to the town of Duanesburg and check out either the Christman Sanctuary, the Schenectady County Forest Preserve, or the Featherstonehaugh State Forest. You won't be disappointed, and it's always enjoyable to look into the history of these places and learn how they got created by actions of activist-citizens hoping to improve the quality of life for themselves and their fellow county residents.

Adding the Wolf Hollow area to this already wonderful list of natural places is a must. It won't nearly be as large as the Plotter Kill or the Sanders Preserve, and hikers will have to remain on a narrow trail, but making Wolf Hollow accessible for public use is the kind of idea everyone in the area should endorse.

Another project underway, in the town of Princetown, is the restoration of the Corry's Brook Presbyterian Church Cemetery near the intersection of Route 159 and Weist Road. Rev. William Johnston founded the church in 1753 after getting two acres of land donated to him by James McMaster. The church served the early Scots and Irish settlers in that area.

While there is still a lot of work to do, the county has begun cleaning up the area to help kickstart the project, which will be done by volunteers. Anyone interested in helping out can contact town of Princetown historian, Robert Jones.

Image: Recent photo of Wolf Hollow, by Bill Buell.

NO
PARKING
FIRE
TRUCK
ENTRANCE

NEW YORK
WOLF HOLLOW
A FAULT AND DISPLACEMENT
OF 1000 FEET IN EARTH'S
SURFACE ROCKS. HERE, IN
1689, THE MOHAWKS AMBUSHED
THEIR ALGONKIAN INVADERS
STATE EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT 1987

What's Happening

New Exhibitions

CRAFTED IN SCHENECTADY: THE BUILDING OF A COMMUNITY **Opening November 2021 at Mabee Farm**

Join us as we examine the evolution of Schenectady's craft economy and reveal its critical role in the development of the Mohawk Valley.

Workshops

BROOMCORN WREATHS

November 6 at 11am @ Mabee Farm | \$35

Fall in love with the season and create your own one of a kind broomcorn wreath. Organically grown and harvested at Mabee Farm, our broomcorn wreaths will feature a delicate balance of yellow, orange, and red colors that are sure to conjure warm feelings of the fall season. Also included will be herb and floral decorations collected from the Mabee Farm.

SINTERKLAAS GOURDS

December 11 at 11am @ 32 Washington | \$20

Sinterklaas, also known as Saint Nicholas, is dear to the hearts of Dutch children. He can be recognized by his eye-catching red cape with red miter and his long white beard. In this kid-friendly program, we will be putting a twist on a classic, and painting our very own Santa-inspired gourds.

Talks & Tours

CANDLELIGHT TOURS

Throughout October @ 32 Washington | \$13

Join us for spooky tales of Schenectady's haunting past. We'll explore the historic Stockade after dark, and discover the neighborhood's most blood-curdling ghost stories. Co-sponsored by the Schenectady Heritage Foundation.

"FROM HERE TO THERE: THE FUTURE OF FASHION IN THE CAPITAL REGION" WITH FATIMA BEY

October 16 at 2pm @ 32 Washington | \$5; members free

Throughout the year, SCHS' exhibition "Redesigning Fashion" has delved into the history of clothing and fashion in our community. We have examined how the past affects our present, and how fashion plays a role in creating identity. In her presentation, Fatima will take us from the present to the future of fashion in the Capital Region. Fatima Bey is a Dressmaker and Master seamstress, specializing in bridal wear and alterations. For the past 5 years, Fatima has served as an advisor for the Fashion Edition Institute, a Capital Region based organization which provides fashion professionals and entrepreneurs with career and business development coaching and mentoring.

GENEALOGY DAY LIVESTREAM WITH TINA POST

October 16 at 4pm @ Facebook Live | Free

Genealogy helps us see where we come from and connect our personal history with the bigger picture. Genealogists often come together to hash out research problems, celebrate discoveries, and share insights into history. Whether you're new to genealogical research or a seasoned researcher, there is value in talking to others in the genealogy community. In this Facebook Livestream, professional genealogist Tina Post and librarian Marietta Carr will discuss their experiences navigating archival research and uncovering family histories.

MABEE FARM TWILIGHT TOURS

November 12 & 19, December 3 at 4pm @ Mabee Farm

\$10; members free

Each twilight at Mabee Farm brings a different array of lights and colors, as the warmth of the sunset transforms into deep blue, moon-lit skies. Join us as we explore Mabee Farm as it's meant to be explored; awash in changing colors, the wind gusting outside, and the flickering lights of the Mabee house keeping us cozy and warm. A costumed guide from the 1600s will lead us through the house, which is decorated for the season. He'll delve into the histories and mysteries of the Mabee Farm, and give us a taste of what life was like for settlers living on the edge of the wilderness.

HOLIDAY STOCKADE STROLL

December 14 & 18 at 6pm @ 32 Washington

\$11; members free

Schenectady's Stockade is beautiful any time of year but the holidays always bring out a certain magic! In this walking tour we'll explore the lights and sights of this historic district while learning the ways in which generations past celebrated the season. Light refreshments will be served, and guests are invited to explore the sparkling Festival of Trees before and after the tour!

Music, Festivals & More!

SCHENECTADY COUNTY FALLFEST

Oct 10 at 11am-3pm @ Mabee Farm | Free

A celebration of all things fall! Join us for a free community festival featuring live music, boat rides, pony rides & petting zoo, hot cider, fall activities, craft fair, craft beer, and more!

HOWLIN' AT THE MOON CONCERT SERIES

October 21 at 7pm: Crabgrass Boys & Lost Radio Rounders @ Mabee Farm | Free!

Howlin' at the Moon showcases regional bluegrass, Americana, folk and indie music while providing an authentic musical experience for both audience and musicians. We warmly invite you to come out and enjoy the music and tranquil scenery.

A MABEE CHRISTMAS CAROL

December 28 at 6pm @ Mabee Farm | \$6 adults

Humans have long celebrated the winter solstice, greeting the year's longest night with songs, drinks, and merriment. From the pagan rituals of Yuletide to the trimmings of modern Christmas, we'll explore the history of the holidays from the perspective of Mabee Farm. The house, properly decked in festive decor by the Hugh Platt Garden Club, will be open for tours from 3-5pm, and at 4pm, we'll feature a special performance of historic carols sung by our very own Schenectady Historical Wassailers. Each ticket includes a warm drink of wassail (for adults) or hot chocolate (for kids), best enjoyed around the campfire. This is an outdoor performance- be sure to dress warm!

FESTIVAL OF TREES

December 4 - 23 @ 32 Washington | \$6 adults

Celebrate the holiday season with us as we fill our galleries with dozens lighted fir trees, each one uniquely hand-decorated. We look forward to welcoming visitors to our sites to enjoy the shimmering displays of glittering fir trees.

Pre-registration is required for some programs. Please visit schenectadyhistorical.org/programs to reserve your spot.





Crafting in Schenectady: A New Exhibition Opens at Mabee Farm

by Susanna Fout, Collections & Exhibitions Manager

Imagine a land of hillsides covered with dense forests, deep valleys, raging rivers, and twisting streams as far as the eye can see. Now, imagine building a home amongst this vast wilderness. Where would you start? What would you need to transform the landscape into a strong, successful community?

As westward expansion brought European colonizers further into the New York wilderness, outposts such as Schenectady were established for trade and the collection of natural resources to be shipped back across the Atlantic. Of course, these settlements didn't just appear one day, fully-formed and mature. They were painstakingly built by hand, over decades and centuries, by craftspeople whose names have now mostly been forgotten. Terms such as artisan, craftsman, and tradesman are often used synonymously in the annals of American history. Though each has a slightly varying definition, together, they make up a class of skilled laborers who used their hands to build, mold, forge, and craft our world into the vision we see today.

Early colonists crafted out of necessity. Some brought with them craft skills acquired in their home country, however, most of these newcomers were not master craftspeople. They were merchants and farmers who learned new trades out of necessity, producing what they needed to survive. Drawing on the landscape, craftspeople used wood, fiber, clay, glass, metal, and minerals as the foundations of the objects they made. They cut stone and hand hewed timber into beams for their homes. Carpenters transformed wood into furniture, barrels, and wagons. Blacksmiths forged metal into nails, hinges, and horseshoes. Weavers spun plant and animal fibers into textiles for the home, or to be used by tailors and seamstresses as they fashioned clothing for the population.

In the vast wilderness of the New York frontier, craftspeople built and repaired items needed for survival, mostly items which were too expensive or too difficult to be imported. Farmers grew and harvested natural resources for these skilled crafters who operated shops in Schenectady's center, a four-block radius now known as the Stockade. Blacksmiths and carpenters were of particular value in the developing town; a number of shops were located in the Stockade with proprietors whose names are now recognizable: Vrooman, Swits, Van Patten, and Mynderse. Shipyards popped up along the banks of the Mohawk on Front Street, building most of the region's bateaux and Durham boats. These watercraft shipped regional resources east to Albany to begin their journey across the Atlantic. Often, households were generalists, working multiple trades and crafting a variety of goods and bartering

their excess goods in town.

Craftspeople were integral to building Schenectady, and to building the United States. Muster rolls from the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 show a large presence of artisans from Schenectady, suggesting the region was an attractive place for craftsmen to live and work. They likely took advantage of the region's raw materials and access to trade routes. Craftsmen were integral to the success of such war efforts as they were needed to build and repair barracks, storehouses, and bateaux. In September 1775, Schenectady artisans Jacob Vrooman, Michael (Claus) Veeder, and Tacarus Van der Bogart were enlisted as captains of a regiment employed with the task of building storehouses along Lake George and Lake Champlain. In March 1776, an emergency crew of thirty-eight craftsmen from Schenectady were sent by General Schuyler to repair Fort George and Fort Ticonderoga after they had sustained heavy damage.

As Schenectady grew and prospered and life became more ordered, generalist tradesmen turned into skilled crafters. Since real skill at any trade comes from years of full-time work, with time and practice a burgeoning craft trade eventually developed in Schenectady by the end of the 18th century. City directories record more numerous and diverse skill sets such as milliner, tinsmith, goldsmith, cabinet maker, and joiner. Moving from blanket occupational terms such as "carpenter," or "smith," these refined skills suggest a market and need for higher-end products. The commercial thoroughfare began to shift from the Stockade to State Street, signaling new commerce and new markets. New buildings and businesses cropped up in the city. Most of these were family operated, with their homes serving as living quarters, workshop, and store. The male head of household served as master craftsman, with his wife, children, elderly kin, apprentices, or journeymen supplementing the workforce.

Prior to 1830, the process of hand craft changed little. The social and economic dynamics of these trades fluctuated with changes in population and demographics, but the skill sets remained the same. And then came the Industrial Revolution. Mechanical power transformed global industry, and by the 1840s a shift from craft enterprise to automated industry had begun. As the production of goods moved from small, home businesses into factories, crafters found it increasingly difficult to keep up with cheap, mass-produced goods. These changes caused considerable existential questioning. What is the place of the artisan or the craftsman if machines replaced them? What role do craftspeople play in the economy, in society, and in culture, in this new industrialized society?



These questions and more are at the heart of a new exhibition debuting in November at the Mabee Farm Historic Site.

Crafted in Schenectady: the Building of a Community will explore the evolution of Schenectady's craft economy and reveal its critical role in the development of the Mohawk Valley and the building of our community. Consisting of countless occupations working with diverse materials, varying from

amateur to the highly skilled, craftspeople throughout the US developed styles and techniques which were unique to them and their region. Once the foundation of our labor force, these craftsmen and artisans helped to give Schenectady its character, its identity, and its life. An appreciation of how the working people of Schenectady earned a living is basic to understanding how our world was created.

Previous page: "A Craftsman at Work," c. 1900. From the Schermerhorn family photos.

Below: "Blacksmith and Wagonmaker, West Glenville," c. 1903. Blacksmith George Bull (left) and wagonmaker Matthew Hallenbeck (right) pose outside their respective shops. These two trades have always been well supported by Schenectady's economy, even after the Industrial Revolution. Up until the 1920s and 30s, before cars became the main mode of transportation, wagon makers remained essential to transportation services throughout the region.

Opposite top: "Blacksmith shop, 1888." The extended Ruopp clan poses for a photo behind their blacksmith shop in Niskayuna. Rural farmers often dabbled in handcrafts, learning basic skills needed to repair broken items on the farm. It was common for farmers to own a house and land with a trade shop in an outbuilding, as shown here. Typically they produced only what was needed at home, though adept craftsmen were able to use their skills as additional income, or as trade for other goods and services.

Opposite bottom: "Schumacher's Shoe Store, State Street," c. 1900. Owner John G. Schumacher (far right) poses outside his boot & shoe store at 519 State St (near Crescent Park), along with Andrew Schumacher, a cobbler. Shoemaker and cobbler were popular trades in Schenectady, especially before ready-to-wear clothing was easily accessible. Typically, a cobbler – as opposed to a shoemaker or cordwainer– referred to someone who repaired shoes, as opposed to making footwear "from scratch." Craft trades were often a family affair, with multiple members of the family working together to run a single business, or working several trades together. Perhaps the name Schumacher refers to a long line of crafters in the business of footwear.



Continued from page 1

what radio could and should do. The creation of the WGY Players, GE's in-house radio acting troupe, was one such innovation.

In February of 1922, General Electric received its first broadcasting license for a new radio station to be located in Schenectady, NY. The debut broadcast took place on February 20th of that year. It began at 7:47pm with announcer and Program Director, Kolin Hager, welcoming listeners to station WGY, and explaining that the call letters signified W for wireless, G for General Electric, and Y for the last letter of Schenectady. The broadcast, "furnished by some of the city's best talent," consisted of live music with announcements of song titles and lasted about an hour. The next broadcast was two days later and featured a speech about George Washington, delivered by W.W. Tranch, the commander of Schenectady's American Legion post. WGY then broadcast a live concert.

With one of the strongest signals in the state—more than three times the power of other stations—WGY covered an area with at least a 500-mile radius. The broadcasts quickly became more sophisticated and innovative. Just three days after signing on, they presented a speech by Governor Nathan L. Miller from the Union College gymnasium followed by a short concert, becoming a pioneer in remote broadcasting. They also aired the Harvard-Yale football game live from New Haven, CT, the WGY String Orchestra live from the State Theater in Schenectady, and the first live broadcast of a World Series game, as well as many other remote presentations from GE scientists, explorers, and politicians during their first year.

Edward H. Smith, the director of "The Masque," a community theater group from Troy, NY, suggested to Kolin Hager that the station carry weekly adaptations of plays. On August 3, 1922, "The Wolf," directed by Smith and mainly using actors from his theater group, became the first full length melodrama ever produced for radio. Since there was no rigid schedule to follow, listeners heard the play in its entirety, about 2 ½ hours, with the WGY orchestra performing between acts. The response was overwhelming; the station received over 2,000 letters asking for more radio dramas. One letter, from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, claimed that the screams of the character "Hilda" were so real that a policeman on foot patrol hearing the program through an open window burst into the writer's home to stop the "assault."

By September, the WGY Players were formed, becoming the first dramatic radio troupe for radio, ultimately presenting 43 plays during the initial 1922-23 season. After the production of "The Wolf," forty minutes were allotted for these plays, as it was thought unwise to dedicate an entire evening's programming to a single play. Director Edward H. Smith worked to carefully edit full length plays to the required forty minutes. They became such a popular feature that, after the first eight plays, the time limit was abandoned, and many were performed in their original length. As more regular programming was introduced, the Schenectady GE Works News included the WGY weekly broadcast schedule in each issue. Detailed information, including the names of the actors playing each character, was included in the schedule.

Most of the WGY Players had professional theater backgrounds, but performing on radio was a new experience for everyone. When "microphone fright" was discovered, the microphone was covered by a lampshade. The actors initially wore costumes and stage make-up, thinking it would help them get into character, but that was soon abandoned as unnecessary. They became pioneers of radio sound effects, experimenting with many found objects to get the desired effect for radio. The actors carefully rehearsed their roles, but read from scripts during broadcasts to avoid missed cues and forgotten lines.

The WGY Players served as a springboard for talented actors in the early stages of their careers. Lola Sommers, an orphan from Hoosick Falls, started her career as a Vaudeville dancer and stage actress, and supplemented her acting income by working as a maid in Schenectady. She became a household name and a Capital District celebrity as one of WGY's first leading ladies. Several successful and celebrity radio performers and personalities started their careers with The WGY Players. Rosaline Greene, for example, started her career in radio when she auditioned for The WGY Players during her sophomore year of college. After three years with WGY, Greene went on to win a 'perfect voice' competition at the 1926 Radio World's Fair, perform in numerous radio plays, and host regular programs for CBS during the Golden Age of Radio. Stars of stage, opera, and concert halls, intrigued by the novelty of radio, considered it an adventure to come to Schenectady to be part of a broadcast.

By December of 1922, WGY became part of the first radio "network," linking it to stations in New York City and Washington, DC, who were able to listen in to The WGY Players. Eventually that network expanded, and one night

Cover: Early performers on WGY.

Right, clockwise from top: The WGY players perform the sound effects for the radio play "Danger" during the early days of radio before they had prerecorded sound effects. C. 1923. Courtesy of miSci.

Kolin Hager, Station Manager of G-E Radio Broadcasting Station WGY, at Schenectady, N.Y. C. 1941. Courtesy of miSci.

Early performers on WGY.



each week listeners across the country tuned in to hear Kolin Hager announce: "Station WGY, General Electric Company, Schenectady, New York. Our program for this evening will consist of the drama/comedy _____," followed by the title.

The WGY Players staged both dramas and comedies. Some of their early broadcasts, in addition to "The Wolf," included such plays as: "The Garden of Allah," "Way Down East," "Are You a Mason?" "Within the Law," "Under Cover," "Bought and Paid For," "The Witching Hour," "The Man from Home," "The Sign of the Cross," and "Miss Lulu Bett." The light operas, "H.M.S. Pinafore," "The Mikado," and others were also performed with the WGY orchestra and singers joining the productions. Actors in leading roles were paid, usually \$5.00 to \$7.50 a week. Actors in lesser roles received no pay, although they may have experienced the thrill of stardom when a limousine and chauffeur brought them to the station.

On November 6, 1922, The WGY players presented their twelfth play of the first season, "The Sign of the Four," a Sherlock Holmes mystery by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Edward W. Smith performed the role of Holmes, and F.H. Oliver, who usually did sound effects, played Dr. Watson. What makes this particular performance interesting is that the famous Sherlock Holmes actor, William Gillette, has often been cited as the first actor to portray Holmes on the radio (in "The Speckled Band" on October 20, 1930). However, the distinction actually goes to Edward H. Smith for his 1922 performance, although Gillette can still be credited as the first to perform Holmes in a radio network series.

Since many of the actors came from the professional ranks, they usually left Schenectady to perform in summer stock theaters from July through September. In order to continue the radio dramas, the Schenectady GE Works News encouraged workers to try out for the "WGY Student Players." Many applicants, eager to make their radio debut, came forward, and Edward W. Smith was kept busy interviewing prospective thespians. A group was selected, most employees of General Electric, and they gave "some very credible performances during the summer season... which was demonstrated by the many complimentary letters received by WGY during their run," according to the Works News. Several of these players were also selected to augment the regular player group when they returned.

The WGY Players performed many of the popular dramas and comedies of the day. By their second season, they were looking for new material. An article in the October 1923 GE Monogram, a nationwide GE publication, advertised a contest to be held "for the best play written for the specific purpose of being broadcast in Schenectady by The WGY Players." The first-place prize was \$500 (over \$7,700 in today's dollars) and having the play produced over the WGY airwaves. According to the rules for the contest, the plays should be 1.5 hours in lengths and "plots must be clean with no attempt at questionable situations... No 'sex dramas' will be considered." Over one hundred plays were submitted and, according to Kolin Hager, only one produced, with disappointing results.

Radio dramas were soon being broadcast by many stations around the country. The WGY Players, as well as groups in other cities, could be heard through radio networks from coast to coast. In the late 1920s, WGY added the WGY Matinee Players, who performed a weekly daytime radio drama. Later, WGY introduced plays for children. By the 1930s, daily radio dramas, eventually referred to as soap operas, were being broadcast from New York City. These quickly became very popular. Network shows for children such as "Little Orphan Annie" and weekly scripted comedy and drama programs written specifically for radio were mainstays in American households.

The WGY Players were also responsible for the earliest known attempt at a television drama in the country. A production of "The Queen's Messenger" was presented with the Baird/Jenkins mechanical TV process in 1928. As television gained popularity, radio dramas slowly declined. The WGY Players performed into the 1940s with a weekly show called "The FBI in Action" and continued to provide radio dramas on a limited basis as late as 1956.

In their early years, no other actors had as large an audience as The WGY Players. It was estimated up to a million people tuned in around the country to listen to their productions. Thanks to the vision of Edward H. Smith and Kolin Hager, WGY in Schenectady became the true birthplace of the radio drama as well as the first "network" for dramatic programs.

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REVIEW: *Schenectady: Trolley Hub of Eastern New York*



Image: Trolleys running on State Street, in Schenectady.

by Marty Strosberg

Eric H. Allen, a life-long enthusiast for all things having to do with electric rail transportation, especially trolleys, has written an informative and attractive book on the history of trolleys in Schenectady and surrounding cities. With a Ph.D. in electrical engineering from M.I.T. and an extensive knowledge of trolley history, Allen is well-equipped to chronicle the story of the Schenectady Railway Company from its earliest days in the 1880s, through the peak years of 1912-1922 and to its decline and demise from 1930-1946.

Schenectady history mavens, as well as trolley aficionados, will appreciate this book. The development of the trolley system is integral to the social and economic history of boomtown Schenectady, kicked off by the arrival of the Edison Machine Works in 1886; in fact, General Electric purchased the Schenectady Railway Company in 1891. Of course, it had an interest in transporting its own workers to the ever-expanding Schenectady Works. But, as Allen notes, GE recognized that the line could be the showcase for modern electrical technology. As Schenectady became the “City the Lights and Hauls the World,” the physical nature of Schenectady changed. Bellevue became one of the nation’s first “trolley suburbs.”

And Niskayuna was transformed from a rural community with a sparse population into a suburb. The recreational pursuits of the population also changed. Rexford’s hugely popular Luna Park, across the Mohawk, was made possible by a trolley line across the longest trolley bridge in the world.

As the book’s title suggests, Schenectady was the trolley hub of the region. Allen devotes considerable space to the interurban lines to Albany, Troy, Saratoga, and Gloversville. The trolley system from one hundred years ago had some features that will be sure to astound modern readers. For example, Allen notes that some of the interurban trolleys on the line to Gloversville had plush seats and restrooms and could reach speeds of 75 miles per hour!

This 11x8.5 inch book is loaded with pictures, maps, timetables, lists of trolley car models and their manufacturers, and ridership statistics. Its well-researched chapters draw heavily from the archives of the Schenectady County Historical Society, the Efner History Center, and the Schenectady County Library.

Eric H. Allen, Ph.D., P.E., *Schenectady: Trolley Hub of Eastern New York*, Arcadia Publishing, 2021, 106 pages.

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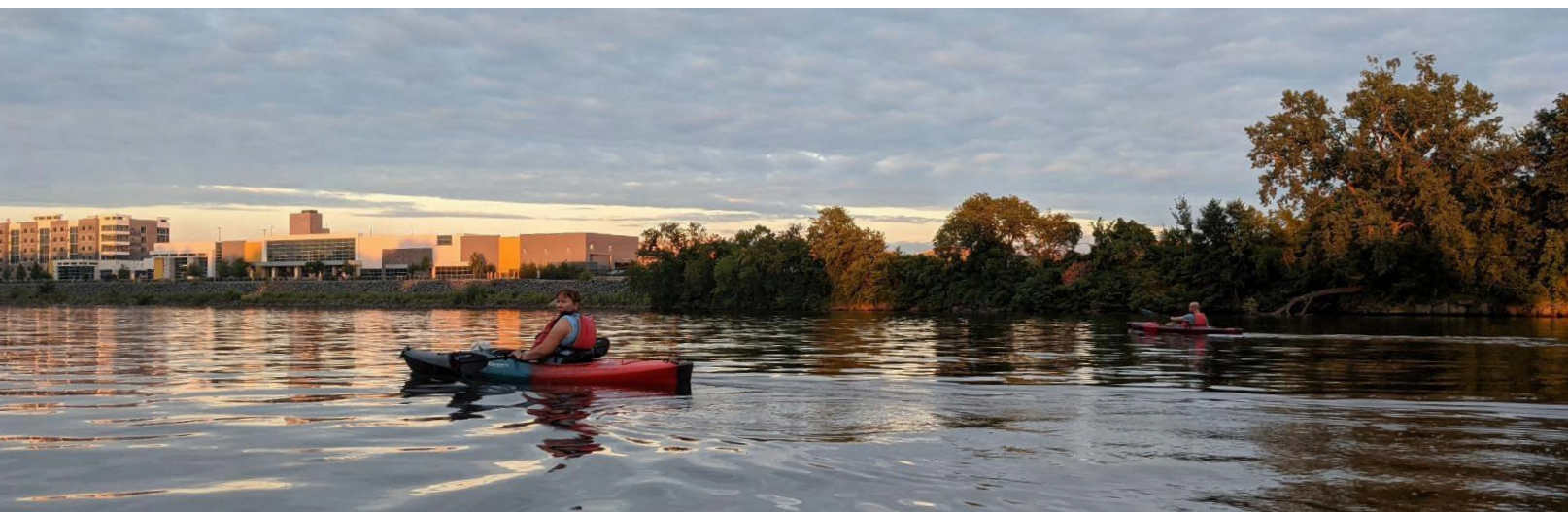
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Around the Historical Society

Above: Educator Michael Diana speaks to the NYS Canal Corp conference about the history of the Stockade; Paddlers on the Mohawk River during one of our summer Kayak Through History tours.

Opposite: Volunteers and staff work to raise up the Mabee Farm carpenter shop; Leah LaFera, Owner & Soapsmith of Sweet Sprig, poses in front of the fireplace at Brouwer House Creative on the afternoon of her shop's grand opening inside the space; Visitors participate in Mabee Farm's cider-making day.



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