

Schenectady County Historical Society



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THE WEALTH OF WHEAT AND GRASS: RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S VISIT TO SCHENECTADY

by Neil Yetwin

Throughout the 1840s, members of the commercial and professional classes of Capital Region cities established “Young Men’s Associations,” loosely based upon the Young Men’s Christian Association recently founded in England. In Schenectady, ten prominent men formed their own Young Men’s Association in an attempt to bring culture to their growing city of 10,000 citizens.

Although the Association required an annual fee of \$2, members and ladies were allowed to attend the lectures for free. The entrance fee for men who were not members was 25 cents. “The association is the only place in our city, aside from the pulpits, where you are able to find any discoursing,” announced its founders in the Schenectady Reflector. “It is the only place where an amusement of a miscellaneous nature is to be found...It is the only place where the clerk, the mechanic, or lawyer, can spend an hour (profitably) out of his store, workshop, or office.”

Continued on page 20

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A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

As a historian, I'm inclined to study trends, themes, and the bigger picture when looking at the past. Sometimes, though, figures are what really stand out to make a point. One of my favorite figures is 90%. That's how many Americans lived on farms in the 1800s. Today, that figure is 1%. I can't think of anything else that so succinctly captures that massive demographic change in our nation's history.

This week, I found another "historical" figure that astonished me: 200. See, this past December we asked for your help in replacing the roof at 32 Washington Avenue. We hoped to raise \$26,000 to complete the project. The response from you, our members, was astounding. Exactly 200 people donated to the cause, for a total of \$33, 147! We've never seen such overwhelming support for a project before, in terms of both amount raised, and number of donors. Wow!

Thankful is the first word that comes to mind. Thankful for you -- for your generosity. But also awed. I'm awed that local history has so many advocates in our small county; that so many of us here in Schenectady recognize the deep significance of local history. Schenectady County Historical Society only exists because of you, our generous members. But, more importantly, we also exist for you. SCHS is yours: your museum, your archives, your stories. And 32 Washington Avenue, new roof and all, is your home for history.

Mary Zawacki, SCHS Executive Director

A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

In four years, Americans will be commemorating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, otherwise known as the nation's Semiquincentennial.

Good news, I think, and not just because it might lead to a government grant or two for Semiquincentennial programming. No, there's more to it than that. This is a chance for SCHS to further pursue our stated mission of strengthening "the community by sharing stories [and] inspiring dialogue;" it could also help us realize our vision of co-operating with community members and becoming "better informed history makers."

Opportunities such as this come along every once-in-a-generation or so, but it's important to recognize the timeliness of this particular opportunity. For better or worse, we're living at a critical moment in the nation's history: lots of conspiracy theories and violence and not enough rationality and civility. I'm reminded of something that novelist Tana French wrote: "Dozens and dozens of people, they just keep coming, and every single one of their heads is crammed with stories they believe and stories they want to believe and stories someone else has made them believe, and every story is battering away at the thin wall of people's skulls, drilling and gnawing for its chance to escape and attack someone else, bore its way in and feed off that mind, too." French wasn't writing about the future of American democracy, but she might just as well have been. These days, we're all cramming our heads with conflicting stories about the past—always, it seems, based on different sets of historical facts and always with unshakable claims of authenticity. It's a modern day Tower of Babel. And it makes it impossible to resolve our differences and move forward with any unified historical vision.

Still, it's not hopeless. There's even something that we at SCHS can do to help. After all, we are at our core an educational institution—and as the author of the Declaration of Independence himself noted, "The cornerstone of democracy rests on the foundation of an educated electorate." We're also a historical organization, and as George Orwell knew, history is an enormously powerful force: "[He] who controls the past controls the future. [He] who controls the present controls the past."

So, yes, SCHS is more important than we and others might realize: a nice thought for an organization like ours trying to imagine purposeful ways of commemorating the founding of the world's most powerful democracy. Let's start with the notion that—instead of marching in parades and flying a flag that everyone thinks of as their own and no one else's—we set as our goal the possibility of working with people from all of our various communities and constructing a better

understanding of the past and a truly democratic future. Simple, right? Hardly. We may all be Schenectadians, just as we're all Americans, but we really do come from separate backgrounds and have significantly different memories and ideas about history. So it's a little daunting to think we can turn lead into gold by transforming an ever-changing mixture of diverse communities into a unified nation. Still, given the chance, it is possible for people in one relatively small community to behave respectfully and listen to one another—assuming, of course, we can find a comfortable place in which to meet and discuss uncomfortable ideas. SCHS can do that, I think. After all, it's the kind of thing we do all the time. And that's not all. Given our training and research capabilities, we can speak with disinterested authority and help determine which historical facts are real and which ones aren't. And as professional historians, we can facilitate conversations that elevate the public historical consciousness. Hey, if we can't do this kind of thing, who can? It's our mission.

As my friend John Dichtl, the Director and CEO of the American Association for State and Local History, writes, the Semiquincentennial can help historical societies like ours "show audiences not just that history matters, but that their history matters. Through the stories we share, this anniversary can encourage patriotism and pride in American resilience while also fostering critical awareness of our faults, past and present."

Sounds good to me.

Robert Weible, SCHS President

WHAT'S HAPPENING

Exhibitions

CRAFTED IN SCHENECTADY: THE BUILDING OF A COMMUNITY Through October 2022 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. On display are our favorite pieces from our large crafting collection!

FROM HOBBY TO HISTORY: THE COLLECTIONS OF SCHENECTADY

Opens March 19 at 32 Washington Ave

Why do we collect things? There are collections in nearly every American household: some are stashed in basements and attics, while others are proudly displayed. Collections are the story of our community and its connection to the world around us. Join us as we dive deep into the world of collecting. Through both museum and private collections, we will discover how objects, art, and other ephemera can inform our understanding and perspective of history, build community memory, and create a meaningful sense of place.

Annual Meeting

2022 ANNUAL MEETING

April 23 at 2pm @ 32W | Free and open to members

Please save the date for our first in-person Annual Meeting since 2019! Join your fellow members and local history buffs for a brief business meeting, followed by a guest speaker and refreshments. We're still working out details, so check back on our website soon.

Talks & Tours

MRS. MARY POTTER OF SCHENECTADY, NY

March 5 at 2pm @ 32W and virtual | \$8/free for members

Historian Cheryl Renée Gooch, Ph.D. will explore the intriguing work of Schenectady's own hidden figure who levered her Presbyterian and social affiliations to garner financial support for the education of African Americans. *This program will be presented in a hybrid format: in-person presented at 32 Washington Ave and streamed virtually to registrants.*

A NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM: SCHENECTADY'S LEADING LADIES

March 8 at 6pm @ 32W | \$8/free for members

In Honor of International Women's Day, we'll be taking a look at women's history here in Schenectady. Join us for a special presentation by our educator Michael Diana focusing on some of Schenectady's leading ladies. We'll meet intrepid women on the frontier, brilliant physicians, pioneering politicians and more! Light refreshments will be served, and the Museum exhibitions will be open late.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS PLANT USE IN THE MOHAWK VALLEY

March 10 at 7pm @ Virtual | \$8/free for members

In the Mohawk Valley, archaeological data from Mohawk Native American sites can help researchers understand Mohawk cuisine preferences and how the arrival of Europeans in this area impacted Native American communities. Scott Ferrara will examine how archaeologists use plant remains to understand food preferences and discuss what specific local plants Mohawk communities were using nearly 500 years ago. Scott Ferrara is an archaeologist and PhD student at The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

CRAFTING GUITARS: LUTHIERING WITH ROY WATSON

March 12 at 2pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10/free for members

Guitars and fiddles were the instruments of choice for early rural America. Lightweight and easy to carry, these musical tools were expertly handcrafted by specialized craftsmen known as "luthiers." Today, in a world of mass production and manufacturing, only a handful of artisans still practice this ancient trade. Join us as we demonstrate and discuss the ins and outs of the trade with local luthier, Roy Watson.

A NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM: SCHENECTADY'S IRISH AMERICANS

March 15 at 6pm @ 32W | \$8/free for members

Fáilte! It's (almost) St. Patrick's day, so come and celebrate the history of the holiday with us. Tonight, educator Michael Diana will present a special talk on Irish history in Schenectady. How did this small Dutch and English town respond to Irish immigrants? Find out with us! Light refreshments will be served, and the Museum exhibitions will be open late.

FINDING THE LAW: TIPS FOR GENEALOGISTS

March 24 at 7pm @ virtual | \$8/free for members

Time and time again, we're told as genealogists that we need to look at records in the context of the law at the time and in the place where the records were created. Easier said than done! With 50 states and the federal government all passing laws, how do we find the laws we need? Judy Russell, JD and Certified Genealogist, will provide resources and specific examples from NY to help genealogists find the laws and legal information relevant to their research.

SOCIALIST SCHENECTADY: BIRTHPLACE OF THE HEDGEFUND?

April 1 at 12pm @ virtual | \$8/free for members

Socialist Schenectady's effects, it turns out, have reached far beyond the banks of the Mohawk...just not in the way its champions hoped. Join us for a discussion about Alfred Winslow Jones, inventor of the hedgefund, and his connections to socialist Schenectady.

LOCAL EDUCATION: HOW SCHENECTADY IS LIKE HOME

April 14 at 7pm @ virtual | \$8/free for members

Casey Jakubowski's recent research delves into the history of Schenectady's schools — how reforms over the last 200 years affected Electric City schools and the once rural but now suburban schools around Schenectady County. He will explore how the local Schenectady County area was part of rural, urban, and then suburban growth, decline, change, and practice and policy implementation.

NAVIGATING THE RECORDS FROM THE WAR OF 1812 WITH BRIAN RHINEHART

May 5 at 7pm @ virtual | \$8/free for members

From bounty land to pensions, there are no shortages of genealogical records for soldiers from the War of 1812. Brian Rhinehart will discuss why these records were created, how to make sense of them, and what those records can contain for your ancestors.

For Families

KIDS WORKSHOP: CORN HUSK DOLLS

March 26 at 10am @ Mabee Farm | \$10/free for members

In the Colonial past, the Mabees had to be self-sufficient. What few toys the Mabee children had, had to be made by hand with easily available materials. For children across centuries and around the world, a simple strand of corn husks could be fashioned into a precious doll. In this workshop, we'll teach the history and the practice of making your very own corn husk doll.

Music, Festivals & More!

MABEE MAPLE DAY

Feb 26, 12pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10/free for members

As winter cold begins to recede, the ground unfreezes and the sap starts to run. On a New York farm, the first harvest of the year was always maple syrup. In this family-friendly program, you'll learn the process for yourself from colonial techniques to later innovations. And of course, we'll be able to taste the results! COVID safety will be observed and face masks may be required, pending NYS mandates. This is an outdoor event in so be prepared for winter temperatures!

EARTH NIGHT

April 22, 4-8pm @ Mabee Farm | Free

A new twist on Earth Day. Featuring gardening and ecology workshops from Cornell Master Gardeners and our Curator, special tours, an exhibit of environmental art, and live music by Earth's Children. We'll close the night with a campfire.

SCHENECTADY COUNTY'S INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATION

July 3, 5pm-9pm* @ Mabee Farm | Free

Join us for a free, outdoor, riverside concert as we celebrate Independence Day! Fireworks will close the show. Food and alcoholic drinks will be available for sale, and crafters and vendors will be on site as well. **Tentative times.*

MABEE FARM ARTS AND CRAFTS FESTIVAL

Aug 27, 10am-3pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10/parked car

We're bringing together the very best of the Capital Region's handcrafted goods! Join us as dozens of artists and crafters spread out over the Mabee Farm grounds with their eclectic, beautifully handcrafted items. All items are handmade here in our region, and include jewelry, home decor, fine art, ceramics, artisan foods and wines, soaps, candles, woodworking, and more! With live music and farm tours.

FALLFEST

Oct 9, 11am-3pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10/parked car

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

June 16 | July 14 | Aug 11 | Sep 15 | Oct 13

@ Mabee Farm | \$7/person

Save the dates for a full season of Howlin' at the Moon! Our concert series showcases regional bluegrass, Americana, folk and indie music while providing an authentic musical experience for both audience and musicians. We invite you to come out and enjoy the music and tranquil scenery.



A TRAVELER COMES CALLING

by Michael Diana, Education and Programs Manager

Editor's Note: A few weeks after Neal's visit to the Mabee Farm he completed his journey, reaching the Statue of Liberty. The New York Times was there to cover the story.

As the rain came down in blinding, billowing sheets the afternoon of November 13th, I found myself at the Mabee Farm awaiting a rather unusual guest. I could hear the wind howling and the boughs shaking, making for a truly miserable day to travel. Our guest was due in from Amsterdam. But rather than drive a short fifteen minutes, he had to walk for at least five hours between there and here. I knew he was out there, somewhere along the Erie Canal towpath struggling against the elements. It wasn't until the rain clouds had passed and the sun stole out for some final shining moments that I caught sight of Neal Moore. Or perhaps I should say I saw his canoe first, mounted on a single wheeled axle and packed to the brim with bags, equipment and virtually everything one might need to survive life on the road – or the river. Neal himself was in the rear, pushing his canoe and gear along as he had for the last ten miles that day. The dreadful weather hadn't defeated his strong stride and cheerful demeanor. But still, he looked like he could use a break.

If you're thinking a long and wet walk from Amsterdam pushing a canoe was the greatest challenge of Neal's journey, you'd be sorely mistaken. He began this odyssey 7,500 miles and twenty-two months ago on the Columbia River in Oregon. From the west coast he canoed his way back east across the country, portaging from river to river as necessary. Neal made his way up and over the Continental Divide in the Rocky Mountains, down into the barren badlands of the Dakotas, and south along the mighty Mississippi, paddling all the way until he reached the Gulf of Mexico. Turning back north, the Ohio river led him back toward Lake Erie and the great Erie Canal that stretches across our state. By the time he reached Syracuse, the barge canal had closed for the season and Neal resolved to portage, or carry, his gear along the rest of the towpath. While in Amsterdam, someone had called us on his behalf to arrange his stay at the Mabee Farm. Having heard his incredible story, and wanting to be part of this remarkable cross-country adventure, we felt obliged to help.

When Neal arrived, we opened the Mabee House for him, which would be his quarters for the night. Of course, we couldn't just leave someone alone in the historic house, so I spent the night there too. I was eager to take the opportunity to talk with him about his journey and share what I could about our area. Once he had warmed up a bit, we grabbed a quick, tasty dinner at the River Road House. Returning to the farm, we sat down to chat about his life's adventure so far. I was, of course, very curious to hear what would lead someone to canoe across America.

Neal grew up in Los Angeles. His older brother passed away

when Neal was just 13. After that, Neal was sent to live with family in far flung destinations from Hawaii to England. It was during these trips that he first discovered his love for travel. Further tragedy struck when Neal was 19; his mother passed away after a long battle with illness. Her final request was that Neal become a missionary. Despite having not been religious until that point, Neal traveled as a missionary to South Africa which was in the process of dismantling a brutal apartheid regime. Despite the high tensions of that place and time, Neal was inspired by the challenge and impressed with the diversity and culture of this new place. After a few years, he left the missionary work behind, instead dedicating his time to traveling and exploring the world. Over the next 30 years, Neal made his way throughout Africa and Southeast Asia – his experiences could fill volumes.

In 2016, Neal returned to the United States to rediscover his country of birth. After a particularly contentious presidential election year, it might be tempting to conclude this was a nation divided. Neal, perhaps used to greater political turmoil abroad, wanted to seek out for himself the things that united Americans. And so he conceived of his canoe journey from West to East across the country. He meticulously planned his route, not just for his own logistical reasons but also to see the widest possible cross section of America. He sought out small towns far away from the national spotlight; river communities that had seen their fortunes ebb and flow.

His first cross-country attempt was thwarted by a harrowing accident along the Columbia River. Undeterred, he began a second attempt in 2020. Of course, just a month into his journey, the nation and world was gripped by the Covid Pandemic. And so he adopted the additional goal to document how Americans of all backgrounds grappled with this emergency. Despite the many months of horrific headlines, Neal has a notably optimistic perspective. While he's certainly seen people struggling, he's also seen communities coming together and supporting each other.

Neal shared many incredible anecdotes with me: a run in with a bull shark in the Gulf of Mexico, and the words of a native Umatilla man at Oregon's Celilo Falls. But it's hardly my place to try to paraphrase all that here. I was, however, particularly interested in his impressions of New York. What does his global and national perspective tell him about our historic Erie Canal corridor? He paid many fine compliments to the natural beauty of the area. But perhaps more insightful was his observations about the various towns along the way and how some are reinventing themselves while others are still struggling. Neal believes that the towns finding new success are those that have invested in their historic connection to the canal. Lockport and Potsdam, for instance, have done well with this while Rome might have some catching up to do. I noted that Schenectady itself is in the process of pivoting back toward its river and canal in what many of us hope will be a renaissance for the city. Ultimately, according to Neal, the



resilience of a town is drawn not from any particular economic model but instead from a sense of community and solidarity. People need to be able to talk to each other, work with and for each other, even when it's not fun or easy to do. "It's simple but it's profound- it's simply profound," Neal mused.

The next day, the sun rose low over the Mohawk river and slowly melted away a ghostly fog hanging over the floodplain. Neal and I woke up early so that he could begin the walk down the bike path into Schenectady- a relatively simple feat for him. I elected to accompany him for the first mile or so and offered to push his canoe for much of that distance, just for my own curiosity. I found that pushing it wasn't so hard, but steering it was a nightmare. At Kiwanis Park, we grabbed breakfast at the Hungry Chicken before parting ways. Neal still had a long journey ahead. He'd walk through Schenectady and follow the canal path to Waterford. There, he could finally stop pushing and start paddling his canoe down the Hudson river. This would be the final leg of his odyssey, to conclude at long last in New York Harbor at the Statue of Liberty.

I've often wondered about the countless people who have passed by this spot over the last three centuries. Before the Mabee Farm was built, for untold thousands of years, the natural landscape of this land funneled people through this river valley. While the Mabees lived here, they would have

seen diverse peoples passing through. In the early days it may have been Mohawk traders and diplomats, followed by colonial interpreters and frontiersmen. In troubling times they may have seen soldiers making a grim procession past their door, drawn to some far off conflict by the fickle winds of politics now forgotten. After one such conflict, the American Revolution, the Mabees would have seen waves of American settlers surge past their farm, on their way to claim new lands on more distant frontiers. Some would travel overland, others on the Mohawk river itself. Later generations would be towed along the Erie Canal by pack mules or driven along a railway by beasts of iron and steam.

For every person who's passed by our door, there's a story lost to time. What circumstances compelled them to travel? Where exactly did they intend to go? Even when the Mabees opened part of their property as an inn, they didn't keep any records that would shed light on those questions. And, in fact, we could likely never capture the full humanity of all those itinerant stories anyway. But as I watched Neal walk off toward his ultimate destination, I couldn't help but see the relation between his journey and theirs. Humans have been in nearly constant motion since before they were technically even human. And everyone is on a journey of some kind. I'm glad that Neal's unique journey brought him to our Mabee Farm, if only briefly.

FROM THE LIBRARY

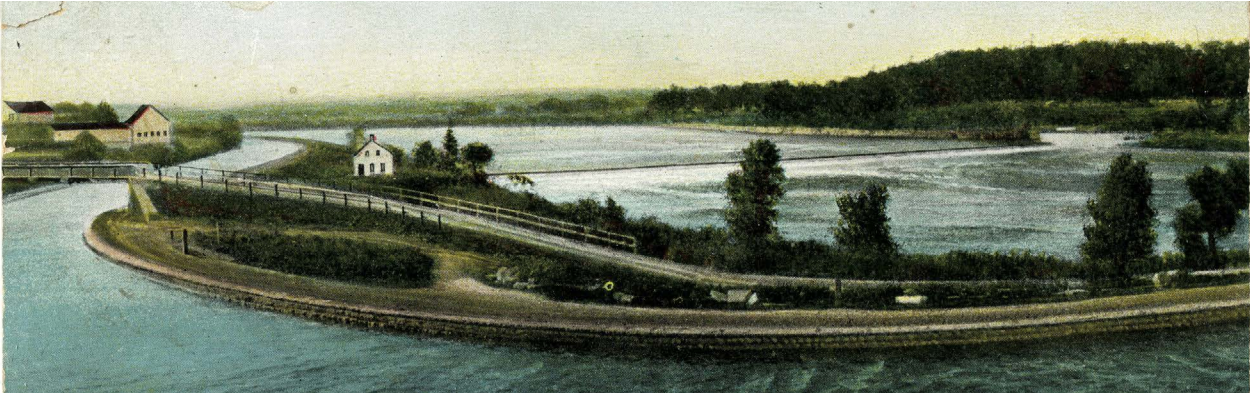
A Note from the Librarian

In the library, we use the winter season to review the progress we've made on our projects and take stock of our collections. We don't have as many researchers, so we turn our focus to cataloging, preservation, and archival processing. If you're thinking about organizing your personal and family papers and photos, check out the tips below. If you're looking for a new home for your inherited family records and photos, there may be a place for them in the library's collections! Please contact me to discuss donating your materials to our collection.

- Marietta Carr, Librarian/Archivist

Organizing Your Family Papers and Photos

- Think of your collection as one unit of related materials. Don't feel overwhelmed by the number of items. Just start somewhere and work at a comfortable pace.
- Keep like with like. For example, you can organize by type (e.g. all the photos together), by creator (e.g. all of your grandfather's papers together), or by context (e.g. all of the photos and documents from the same event together). There's no one right system to organize your papers. Do what seems natural or sensible to you.
- Label everything, including the folders and boxes you use for storage. Include as much information as you can, such as names, dates, events, and locations.
- Don't forget your digital files! Emails, photos, and social media data can all be saved and organized. Back up your digital files regularly.
- Check out the Grems-Doolittle Library Blog for more tips on preserving and organizing your personal collections.



New Collections on NY Heritage

NY Heritage is a repository for digitized archival collections. It's a collaborative project of the Empire State Library Network and contains thousands of items from libraries, archives, and museums across the state. Thanks to our library volunteers, we've created four new collections over the last two years:

Pearson Street Books – This collection consists of four volumes of notes and sketched maps created by Jonathan Pearson, city historian, about property ownership in Schenectady from the 1660s through the mid-nineteenth century.

Schenectady County Deeds – This collection contains 18th and 19th century deeds for land and property in Schenectady County. These are digitized copies of documents from the library's Historic Manuscripts Collection.

Documents about Enslaved People in Schenectady – This collection is composed of 18th and 19th century documents that mention enslaved and formerly enslaved people in Schenectady County. These documents are part of the Historic Manuscripts Collection and Mabee Family Papers Collection.

Schenectady County Civil War Collection -- This collection contains documents created by or received by Schenectady County soldiers in the course of their service during the American Civil War, 1861-1865, including letters, certificates, memoranda, military orders, and commissions.

You can access our collections at [HTTPS://NYHERITAGE.ORG/ORGANIZATIONS/SCHENECTADY-COUNTY-HISTORICAL-SOCIETY](https://nyheritage.org/organizations/schenectady-county-historical-society)

Image, page 7: Neal Moore outside Mabee Farm.
Image, page 8: Michael Diana and Neal Moore at Mabee Farm.
Image, below: "Where the Erie Canal Crosses the Mohawk River"



A SIGN OF THE TIMES: SCHENECTADY'S PHOTO-LAB

by Susanna Fout, Collections & Exhibitions Manager

It was a bleak and windy November afternoon when historical society staff gathered outside 271 State Street. The meeting had been hastily arranged, scheduled the week prior after a phone call with some interesting news. It seems our good friend and county historian, Bill Buell, had been speaking with John Eoff, owner of Schenectady's Photo-Lab. The family business, which John had taken over from his father, was closing after 107 years of operation and John was interested in donating the store's iconic sign to SCHS. We gathered there that day with ladders, tools, and a pick-up truck, intent on safely dismantling the sign and transporting it back to our collections storage.

Readers are no doubt familiar with the store's iconic facade. If you have spent any time in the city within the last 70-ish years, you have probably seen "THE PHOTO-LAB" perched above the store's front door, blanketed by a sea of dark green glass tiles, greeting customers and street goers alike. Perhaps some may even remember when the neon sign was still in working condition, illuminating downtown's busy thoroughfare. The sign, John believes, has been there since the family moved to this State Street location in 1948.

Back then, photography, just like Schenectady's downtown, was experiencing a heyday. Kodak founder, George Eastman, had commercialized the industry through the development of a self-contained box camera with pre-installed rolled film. The camera could be sent back to the factory for the film to be developed and prints made, much like modern disposable cameras. The breakthrough of removable 35mm film and portable cameras by the 1950s would further take photography out of the hands of the wealthy and into those of the everyday consumer. Photography has continued to change ever since, and the Eoff family has been there to experience the industry's highs, as well as its lows.

It was John's grandfather, Beverly Eoff Sr., who started it all in 1914 from his Regent Street home in the city's G.E. Realty Plot. What had begun as a hobby for the assistant editor turned into a full-fledged business with multiple locations; first on Wall Street, then on Jay Street, as well as pop-up and satellite stores during the holidays. When Beverly Sr. passed away in 1940, his wife, Harriet, took on the mantle while their son, Beverly Jr., served in the South Pacific during World War II. When he returned home, Beverly Jr. moved Photo-Lab to its final location and started selling cameras and equipment, as well as stationery and greeting cards. He even bought the store a new sign, proudly declaring in neon lights the store's purpose: "THE PHOTO-LAB, KODAKS [and] CARDS."

John can't remember much about the metal sign his father

purchased for the store, except that it was originally painted white. At one point, the "S" in Kodaks was painted black due to litigation over the proper use of the company's trademarked name. Rather than permanently disfigure the sign, it was simply blacked out. Like a beacon, for decades this sign called out to streams of people parading up and down the sidewalks, on lunch break or out shopping for the day. The streets and buses were packed in this pre-shopping mall era; the downtown was crammed with department stores, independent retailers and shops, cafes, restaurants, and theaters. It was a bustling city, and the little camera store thrived. Selling cameras and stationery was only part of the store's revenue. The Eoffs also processed film for individuals, local drug stores, and the large department stores such as Wallaces and Barneys. John always thought of his family as mostly in the "people" business. They knew everyone, from suppliers to Kodak representatives, from photographers, journalists and newspaper editors to the myriad local customers who relied on the Eoff's expertise for all their family photo needs. Yet all of this would change with the coming of the new millennium. By the 1990s, Schenectady had started feeling the effects of the country's economic depression. Plus, the shift to digital photography was revolutionizing the industry.

By the time SCHS staff all arrived at the store, I had had a chance to chat with John and his wife Marie. We saw some friendly faces, including a gentleman who asked at length about the archaeology collection at Mabee Farm. It turned out he had volunteered on several of the exploratory digs and remembers uncovering an almost-complete charger (large ceramic plate). The door chimed open at a steady rate, signaling customers coming in for the Going Out of Business sale. They picked through bare shelves, occasionally dotted with vintage cameras, unused flashbulbs and accessories, 1950s-era display signs, framed photographs, and miscellaneous antiques. A particular 1930s National brand cash register caught my eye, along with a retro, light-up "PHOTO" display sign, which had been marked as sold earlier that week and awaiting pickup. A young lady came into the shop interested in looking for a specialty lens for her camera and John helped her find the perfect fit and case. I imagine this was the people part of the business that he loved so much; reminiscing with regulars while helping old and new customers alike with all their camera needs.

Inside, the store was only slightly warmer than the blustery day outdoors. Heat, and the lack thereof, is just one of the many complaints the Eoffs have had with their landlord. Another is the building's leaky roof and a slowly deteriorating condition. It's a premature end for the Photo-Lab, which has managed to survive through drastic industry changes, the shift to online shopping, and a declining downtown. As a young



man, John originally wanted nothing to do with the family business. It's ironic that as a boy growing up in a camera store surrounded by film and photography all his life, he never appreciated the artistry of it all. It wasn't until art school that John developed a passion for the work. In the summer of 1977, an offer from his father to move back to Schenectady and work at the shop to save some money led to John taking up the family torch. Now, he doesn't want to leave.

The Eoffs had planned to stick out the last few years until officially retiring. But litigation swirling around the crumbling complex and its owner has forced the Photo-Lab out, rather than encouraging the landlord to fix the building's issues. Their lease was not renewed. The Eoffs were the last holdout in an exodus of tenants which included Sassy's Satellite, the Grog Shoppe, Wedgeway Barber Shop, State Street Tattoo, and Downtown Convenience. All the residential tenants have left too, vacating after National Grid cut power to that part of the building. On December 1, 2021, there was no one left.

My colleagues and I stood outside the shop, discussing how we could remove the sign. Our plan was for SCHS facilities manager John Ackner to scale a ladder, working to detach the sign. Once free, the rest of the staff would be on hand to help lower it to the ground, and then into Ackner's truck. As we waited for Ackner to work his magic, it was impossible not to feel the sadness of it all. The once grand and stately building which had housed multiple theaters, retail stores, offices, and tenants is now eerily empty and quiet. It's actually two separate buildings; the Kresge building, where Photo-Lab is located, and the Wedgeway, aptly named for its wedge-like shape which comes to a point at the intersection of Erie Blvd and State St. Known together as the Wedgeway complex, the two structures are showing signs of decades of neglect. The facades are crumbling. Crude fencing lines the Erie Boulevard

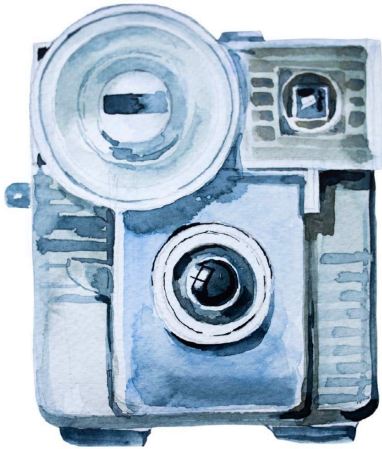
side of the towering edifice, protecting passersby from falling bricks. Trash is piling up around at the entrance of the old State Theater, a fitting nod at the deteriorating marquee sign directly above. The vacant lot where the infamous Nicholas building once stood is directly across the street, a ghostly premonition of what happens to neglected structures with absentee landlords. It's on all of our minds, yet none of us want to speak the words. We avoid eye contact. The future is uncertain for this building.

After several hours out in the cold watching Ackner work, it was apparent the sign wasn't coming down that day. Our rag-tag team of museum workers wasn't quite enough for the task. We would need professional help. And, of course, once the sign is finally off the building, what do we do with it? Coming in at just over 14.5' long, the lengthy sign will be difficult to navigate through our narrow corridors and staircases. It certainly won't fit on existing shelves. Storage space is a constant battle at SCHS, but over the years, I've developed tricks to eke out more square footage. Eventually, the sign will go on display. It carries with it stories of Schenectady's Golden Era, business and industry, our changing urban landscape, and the resiliency and dedication of the people who live here. These are the stories of Schenectady, the ones we preserve through our collection. The ones SCHS will continue to tell for as long as we can.

A special thanks to Olson Signs & Graphics, for helping us remove our new collection item and carry it safely to storage at the Mabee Farm Historic Site.

Check out our virtual exhibition: "Changing Downtown: The Rise, the Raze, and the Revitalization of Schenectady" at <https://schenectadyhistorical.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/> if you're interested in learning more about the history of our ever changing city.

Image, previous: John Ackner removing the Photo-Lab sign, November 2021.
Image, left: Photo-Lab staff in 1983.



REVIEW: Who Runs This Town?

by Martin Strosberg

B. Donald Ackerman, former Schenectady County legislator and long-time Democratic Party stalwart, has written an informative and engaging book on Schenectady politics. The framework for the book is a remarkable timeline of 225 entries, starting in 1609 and ending in 2021, which chronicle the landmark events in political history. Narrative chapters cover major historical periods: colonial, early American, ALCO and GE (industrialization and immigration), urban decline and suburban growth, and 21st century progress. Interspersed among the chapters are profiles of such luminaries as Governor Joseph Yates, NYS Assembly member Dr. Elizabeth Van Rensselaer Gillette, Mayor George Lunn, NYS Assembly Speaker Oswald D. Heck, Congressman Sam Stratton, Mayor Frank Duci, and Mayor Karen Johnson.

A theme that runs throughout all the chapters is the story of how governmental structure at the city and county level evolved under the jurisdictions of the Dutch, the English, and New York State. (A noteworthy date is 1798 when Schenectady became incorporated as the third city in New York State, following Albany and New York City.) And Ackerman explains the social connections of those in charge. For example, in the early colonial period, he cites the importance of the Dutch Reformed Church. "Hardly a leader in Schenectady emerged for the first one hundred years that did not have strong ties to that church."

Ironically, Rev. George Lunn, Schenectady's only Socialist Party mayor (elected in 1911), served as pastor at the First Reformed Church (the successor church) before entering politics. And prior to turning Socialist he had been a Republican.

We learn, in great detail, of the changing fortunes of politicians and political parties of all stripes at the village, town, city, and county level. Of particular interest is Ackerman's description of the dominance of the Republican Party during a large part of the past two centuries. And, no doubt, the author now enjoys telling the story of the ascendancy of the Democratic Party over the recent decades at the city and county levels.

We also learn about Schenectadians who went on to play an important role in New York State government, e.g., New York State Governor Joseph Yates (1823-1824) and New York State Assembly Speaker Oswald D. Heck (1937-1959).

Along the way, we learn some fascinating "fun facts." For example, in 1929 brothers William and Bernard Golub (of Price Chopper fame) ran unsuccessfully for local political office on the Socialist Party ticket. In 1959, Mayor Sam Stratton, father of Mayor Brian Stratton, ran successfully for Congress with the support of the "establishment" (namely, Legs DiCocco and local gambling interests), who wanted to send the anti-crime mayor out-of-town to Washington. And, a few decades ago, long-serving Mayor Frank Duci proposed establishing a floating gambling casino on the Mohawk River.

On the book's back cover, as an extra-added bonus, readers will find a colorful historical map of Schenectady.

B. Donald Ackerman, *Who Runs This Town? A Political History of Schenectady and Its Governments*, The Troy Bookmakers, 2021.

Image: Mayor Jacob W. Clute in his office.



REVIEW: SCHENECTADY'S BATTLE AGAINST CONTAGIOUS DISEASE

by Mary Zawacki, Executive Director

It's remarkable that Drs. Martin and James Strosberg conceived of and researched this book only months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. To begin a chronicle of contagious disease on the eve of a pandemic is eerily prescient and a fortunate coincidence for us readers, who, in 2022, have a new understanding of and relationship to sickness. As we read "Schenectady's Battle Against Contagious Disease – from Smallpox to Covid-19," many of its scenes are familiar. Our trained minds are now adept at analyzing health information, eyeing statistics, and crudely determining outcomes.

Simply put, this vivid and expertly-researched work of non-fiction comes at just the right time. It's perfectly unplanned publicity. More importantly, the ability to connect with this aspect of Schenectady's history has never been so easy; today we have a ceaseless connection to contagion. Indeed, it is easy to empathize with the doctors and nurses, parents and policy-makers of Schenectady discussed in the book. In part, this is because their struggles in the 19th and 20th centuries bear astonishing similarity to ours today. But also because the Strosbergs have so compellingly crafted a narrative that grips the reader. I finished this book in less than a day, and it certainly isn't short.

In its 219 pages, Drs. Strosberg take us on a journey through dispensaries and hospitals, political meetings, private homes, and public squares. The Mohawk River flows through most of the book as well; its role in every aspect of Schenectady history truly cannot be overstated. Yet, what these places have in common is unknown to even the most erudite Schenectadian of the 19th century – they're united in their proliferation of contagion-causing bacteria. Microbes. Germs.

Drs. Strosberg capture the fear and misery of disease in this work, while also inspiring a zeal for public health in the reader. Pioneering doctors Vedder and Duryee walk off the page as 19th century heroes, and with good reason. Their decades-long commitment to cleaning up filth, promoting hygiene, administering vaccines, and providing free care for the poor brought major changes to Schenectady County, most notably increasing life expectancy, and all but eliminating contagious disease. And to think, this was all without truly understanding microbiology.

Not being particularly knowledgeable about medicine, the reader may pause throughout the book to look up definitions of unknown medical terms. Sputum, for example. Yet these interruptions in no way detract from the book's enjoyment; quite the opposite. Drs. Strosbergs' clever use of history to encourage understanding of health and medicine is effective.

Among other highlights in the book is its discussion of the Progressive Era in Schenectady, and how industrialization and demographic changes necessitated public health reform and progress. The image of a city without sewers, clean water, and pasteurized milk is disturbing, and this book underscores how important these measures were to Schenectady's successful development and overall health. Also fascinating, though discussed only briefly, is the evolution of our contemporary healthcare system – how we went from a nation of small, private doctors and charity hospitals to the conglomerates of today.

Today, nearly all of the contagious diseases discussed in the work have been resolved. Smallpox has been eradicated globally by vaccine. Modern sewage treatment has eliminated Typhoid and Cholera, at least domestically. Tuberculosis, once the leading cause of death in Schenectady, is now easily cured. Drs. Strosberg have completed this seminal work on the history of contagious disease in Schenectady – up until now. Obviously, one major contagion still exists. Many of the questions raised in their final chapter, "Postscript: Covid-19," remain unanswered in 2022. Indeed, it is the work of future historians to understand and interpret COVID-19; such recent (current) history is impossible to contextualize. We can only hope that when the next chronicle of Schenectady's contagious disease is published, sickness won't be so close.

Martin A. Strosberg, M.P.H, Ph.D., and James M. Strosberg, M.D., *Schenectady's Battle Against Contagious Disease, from Smallpox to Covid-19*, SCHS, 2020.

Image, right: The Schenectady Free Dispensary.



AROUND THE COUNTY

with Bill Buell, County Historian

There’s plenty of wonderful history in the Stockade district of Schenectady, but few of the neighborhood’s buildings ooze both antiquity and activity like the Schenectady Civic Playhouse at 12 South Church St. It’s been around since 1869 – originally built as a masonic lodge by members of the St. George Episcopal Church – and it is now home to the Schenectady Civic Players, an acting troupe that is as fresh and alive today as it was in 1928 when it was formed.

What makes a place so vibrant? What makes it so successful? It’s easy, according to current Schenectady Civic Players president Cristine Loffredo: A very talented and devoted host of volunteers.

“Our success is all about our volunteers, and the people who are helping us today, their moms and their dads were helping us way back when,” said Loffredo. “Duncan Morrison and his family have been with us four decades, and Matt Moross’s mother and father were always helping out. It seemed everybody was helping out way back when, and their family members are still volunteering for us today.”

Along with Morrison and Moross, two names synonymous with local theater, Loffredo also praised the service of former Town of Niskayuna Supervisor (1980-87) Mardy Moore. “We have a new section in our newsletter, the Teleprompter, about our great volunteers, and Mardy Moore is the first person we’ve singled out,” said Loffredo. “We couldn’t do what we do without people like Mardy. That really showed during the COVID pandemic. We also have great subscribers to go with those volunteers and that’s the only reason we have survived this tough time.”

Joe Fava and Bill Hickman, meanwhile, are two men who have been an integral part of the SCP team for 50 years now. Fava has directed, acted, and helped build SCP’s costume department. A production of “To Kill a Mockingbird” a few years ago required a pair of overalls, and it was Fava who went out and bought a pair for the actors. That’s only one story of hundreds he could tell about the SCP costume collection.

And then there is Hickman, who, since moving to Schenectady to get a job at General Electric in 1960, has performed countless times on stages throughout the Capital Region – not just SCP – and for most of the past two decades has served as the Civic Players’ public relations man.

“As for Joe and Bill, well, we’d be lost without them,” said Loffredo, who quickly added another name to her list, former president Don Mealy. “He still helps me behind the scenes all the time. Don has been president numerous times and never

stops volunteering, and Mark Stephens and Gary Hoffman stay involved. Gary had been off the board for years but now he’s back. That’s how devoted people are to this theater.” Loffredo, a regular on-stage performer at SCP and also around the Capital Region, recently made her directorial debut at the Church Street venue, handling the reins of “This Random World.” To no one’s surprise it got great reviews.

“And then there’s people like Sally Farrell whose whole family was a big part of the playhouse until she moved to Florida,” said Loffredo. “She still gets up here and sees a show from time to time, and still sends us a check to support us. I hadn’t seen her for a long time, but when I made my directorial debut last month she sent me a beautiful bouquet of flowers.”

There are too many long-time volunteers to mention, according to Loffredo, and Schenectady Civic also has a newer and younger cast of characters, many who just work backstage and will most likely never step out in front of an audience. “Within the past few years we’ve had people like Linda Veraska, who had never seen a show here,” said Loffredo. “She walks into the building, watches a show, volunteers to help clean up, and now she’s our head of ushering.”

I’d like to tell you that the Schenectady Civic Playhouse is the oldest community theater troupe in the country, but that’s not quite the case. The Footlight Club in Boston is generally recognized as number one when it comes to longevity, having held at least one performance a year since 1877, including the last 93 years in the same venue, Eliot Hall.

Still, the Schenectady Civic Players, created by Union College English professor Raymond Herrick, has quite a legacy and life. It all began at Nott Terrace High School, but in its second year Herrick had found a permanent home at 12 South Church St., the old masonic lodge.

It really sounded like the Roaring Twenties were special in Schenectady, at least when it comes to the theater. Along with the Civic Playhouse opening up downtown, two years earlier the Schenectady Light Opera Company, the invention of Schenectady school teacher, Etta Moore, was up and running. SLOC has had many homes in its near century-long history, and is now housed in a historic structure in the middle of downtown Schenectady, the former St. John the Baptist Church, built in the 1830s. Unlike SCP, however, SLOC, originally dubbed the Bellevue Young People’s Chorus, was forced to take off a few years during World War II.

Around that same time, Proctors, still going strong today as a venue for national touring productions fresh from Broadway, made its start. What a theatrical downtown the Electric City can boast of, and within this decade we will be celebrating 100 years for all three places. What a joyful thing to look forward to for people who love the nexus of history and theater.

Image, right: Cristine Loffredo and Marty O'Connor in a scene from the Schenectady Civic Players' production of "Gods of Carnage."



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The Schenectady Association was one of hundreds of informal organizations that appeared throughout America after the creation of the Lyceum by Massachusetts teacher Josiah Holbrook. The Lyceum Movement, as it came to be called, presented lectures, debates, scientific experiments, and dramatic and musical performances as a way of encouraging education, appreciation for books, and civil discourse at a time when compulsory education was not required. Daniel Webster, Henry David Thoreau, and Mark Twain all lectured on the Lyceum circuit. Lincoln made his first public appearance at a Lyceum in his adopted hometown of Springfield, Illinois.

Locally, the Schenectady Association managed to attract a wide variety of academics, clergymen, and ex-governors to its podium. These lecturers included Union College President Eliphalet Nott, nearby speakers from Albany, Catskill, Poughkeepsie and New York City, and speakers from out of state. Lecture topics included “Phrenology,” “Shakespeare,” “Temperance,” “The Arabs,” “The Past, Present and Future of the Human Race,” “The Six Days of Creation,” and “Modern Notions of Practical Education.” But by 1850 the Association’s membership had only 60 paying subscribers. Its advertisements in the Reflector regularly announced a long-term goal of 400 regular subscribers and 100 honorary members and its leaders noted that “while most of the members work hard for the \$1 to pay the fee, some of our wealthiest citizens contribute nothing.”

This state of affairs began to change when Samuel Thurston Freeman (1831-1892) became chair of the Association’s Lecture Committee. Freeman, a Union College graduate whose family owned the property now occupied by the Water’s Edge Lighthouse, was Schenectady County’s District Attorney and later practiced law in New York City. Under his proactive guidance, the Association’s membership and reputation improved dramatically. Horace Greeley, Frederick Douglass, abolitionist Gerrit Smith, and diplomat-poet-travel writer Bayard Taylor were among those who spoke before the Schenectady Association. Henry James came to expound on the topic of “Woman;” Herman Melville was invited but unable to come. The high point of the Association’s lecture series came in November, 1852, with the appearance of what historian Carl Bode called “the phenomenon of Ralph Waldo Emerson – outstanding lecturer of his age.” Emerson was indeed the most popular and successful lecturer in America. From 1833 to 1881, he delivered 1,489 lectures in 22 states across America, as well as lectures in England and Canada. These lecture tours were lucrative for Emerson, earning him up to \$2,000 per six-month season. The contemporary equivalent of that is \$70,000.

Emerson was considered the premier American essayist, philosopher, and poet, as well as the leader of the Transcendentalism movement of the 19th century. With such a dignified reputation and influence, one historian named him “the voice of intellectual culture in the United States.” Emerson’s writings, such as his book “Nature”, and essays “Self-Reliance” and “The Over-Soul,” encouraged people to find connections with their inner selves while warning them

to avoid society’s stress on mindless conformity. “I have taught one doctrine,” he stated, “namely the infinitude of the private man. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.” His “Concord Hymn” poem, which dedicated the monument marking the Battle of Concord, was a staple July 4th recitation for decades. A listing of his friends and correspondents is a Who’s Who of influential 19th century characters, including Thoreau, Hawthorne, Alcott, Agassiz, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Coleridge, Whitman, Emily Dickenson, John Brown, Francis Parkman, William James, John Muir, Margaret Fuller, and Emma Lazarus. Emerson was also instrumental in introducing Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and Persian poetry into America, he influenced German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and he conversed with President Lincoln at the White House.

As successful and popular as he was, Emerson was also a controversial figure for much of his career. He had been a practicing minister before leaving the pulpit, and in July 1838, he was invited to deliver the annual address at his alma mater, the Harvard Divinity School. In his speech, he discounted Biblical miracles, stated his belief that while Jesus was a great man he was not God, and suggested to the newly minted ministers that they should try to live by Christian tenets rather than simply preach about them. Emerson was denounced as an atheist and was not invited back to Harvard for 30 years. He was often criticized as a Pantheist, charlatan, narcissist, a selfish, egotistical, critic of all organized religion, a “worshiper of Nature,” and a mere “word juggler” who practiced “the supernatural cunning of an insane man.” Over time, people gradually overcame their preconceptions about Emerson and came to appreciate his humanity, creative genius, and “keenness and subtlety of intellect” as “a source of power and inspiration.” One reviewer reported that Emerson “dives deeper, stays down longer, and comes up drier than any other explorer of modern times.” At the time of his death in 1882 at age 79, one obituary compared Emerson to both George Washington and Charles Darwin, who had died just a few days earlier.

Stephen Dewey Bingham, the Superintendent of Schools in Bennington, Vermont, wrote to Emerson asking him to speak there on November 26, 1852. Emerson informed him that he would be speaking in Schenectady on that same evening, but added that he hoped to lecture there “sometime during the winter.” In a letter to his brother William, Emerson outlined the itinerary for his upcoming Western Lecture Tour. His first stop would be at Troy, and “thence to Schenectady, Rochester, Buffalo, Sandusky, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and St. Louis on the 25th to be there probably a fortnight.” As often happened on these tours, Emerson added more lectures along the way, including stops at Palmyra, Genesee College, Elmira, and Canandaigua before continuing on his way to Cincinnati. As he had planned, Emerson spoke on November 25th at Troy on “The Traits and Genius of the Anglo-Saxon Race.” The Troy Daily Times of the 26th was not impressed, stating on the day of Emerson’s Schenectady appearance that his lecture “exhibited deep thought, but not sufficient care in its arrangement.”



and destroying its natural environment. England, he said prophetically, might lose the empire it had struggled to build, as “she too is in the stream of fate, one victim in a common catastrophe.” The December 3rd Reflector reported the following:

“The inclement weather prevented a large, but could not prevent a select audience, at the lecture Of MR. EMERSON, on Friday, night last. His subject was Wealth, and was treated with all that happiness of thought and style for which he is so distinguished. Those who went to hear Transcendentalism, came away astonished to find that they had understood, admired and most heartily approved of everything said by the lecturer.”

Emerson’s lecture fees varied

Nevertheless, the Association was anxious to attract a large audience for “the Sage of Concord” and placed this announcement in the November 26th Reflector: “Ralph Waldo Emerson opens this lecture-season of this institution this evening in the Presbyterian Church. No man in America stands higher as a thinker and writer. He is emphatically a ‘word painter’, to whom no description can ever do justice. Our citizens will do well not to let this opportunity pass of hearing him. The ladies, especially, need now feel no scruples about going alone or in be vies without an accompanying masculine, and it is hoped they will turn out largely to welcome Mr. Emerson.”

Emerson never lectured without a prepared text and tried out his essays multiple times before audiences before publishing them, which might partially explain the critique of his Troy lecture. He thus decided instead to read his essay “Wealth” at Schenectady. This piece contained observations he had made about England during his trips there in 1833 and 1847-48. He had Thoreau proofread it, included it in his book “English Traits,” and it eventually became a chapter in Emerson’s 1860 book, “Conduct of Life.” Emerson admired many things about England, but was critical of its overemphasis on wealth. “There is no country in which so absolute an homage is paid to wealth,” he told his Schenectady audience that night. “An Englishman who had lost his fortune is said to have died of a broken heart.” He also observed that the Industrial Revolution was dehumanizing England’s rural population

anywhere from \$10 to \$100, depending upon the size of the town, village or city, the resources of the organization that booked him, and the size of the audience. According to his surviving account books, he earned \$25 for the Schenectady lecture.

Emerson stopped only briefly at Schenectady on January 16, 1860, to purchase a 75-cent train ticket on his way from a Saratoga engagement to another in Utica, but came close to lecturing here once again in 1866. In February of that year, Emerson was invited to return to lecture here by Schenectady Locomotive Works President Charles G. Ellis, but was unable to do so.

Emerson continued to write, travel and lecture until just a few years before his death. His works, including the essay he shared with his small but “select” Schenectady audience on that snowy night in 1852, remain permanent fixtures in the canon of Western literature.

Editor's Note: The full text of Emerson's "Wealth" is available at [HTTPS://EMERSONCENTRAL.COM/TEXTS/THE-CONDUCT-OF-LIFE/WEALTH/](https://emersoncentral.com/texts/the-conduct-of-life/wealth/)

*Image, front: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Retrieved from the Library of Congress.
Image, Above: First Presbyterian Church interior (undated).
From the John Papp Collection, Grems-Doolittle Library.*



AROUND THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Above: The Library volunteers' created an ode to fashion in Schenectady for their Festival of Trees submission, perfectly complemented by artifacts from the Museum collection.

Right: Carolers at December's wassailing event at Mabee Farm; A small section of "Crafted in Schenectady," the latest exhibition at Mabee Farm; Educator Michael Diana accepts a donation from Rivers Casino, part of their 12 Days of Giving.



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