

Schenectady County Historical Society



Newsletter Vol. 66, No. 3, 2022 | 518.374.0263 | www.schenectadyhistorical.org



Don's World: The Bellevue-Schenectady Railroad

by Susanna Fout

At first glance, the world Don Klose has created seems real. An expertly framed snapshot of the miniature city's skyline could fool any casual observer. But this world is entirely fictional. Every building, every sign, every tree, every blade of grass was carefully designed, constructed, and placed by hand.

Welcome to the Bellevue and Schenectady Railroad, a fictitious division of the New York Central Railroad connecting Schenectady, NY to Wildwood, NJ. It is a stunning display of artistry and ingenuity, the product of decades collecting.

When not working as a funeral director at Bond Funeral Home, Don Klose, a long-time Schenectady resident, is building his "O scale" model train layout. The design began in 2006 with a few replica buildings from downtown Schenectady and has expanded to include a detailed recreation of the Electric City's downtown and an intricate model of Wildwood Harbor's boardwalk, his family's favorite summer vacation spot. A stop at Rotterdam Junction amid New York's rural hillsides connects the two cities and completes the layout which takes up the entirety of Don's basement in his Brandywine Avenue home.

Powered by 4,000 watts of electricity, the little

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Letter from the President

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I hope this message finds you enjoying the summer.

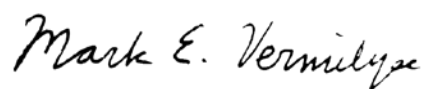
I'm honored to be your new Board President, having started my tenure at the Annual Meeting on May 5th. My personal relationship with the Society dates to my awareness of my grandmother's cataloging of the Tales of Old Dorp when I was in high school; she was perhaps the original motivation for my lifelong interest in history, as she carefully researched our family's genealogy. I became a volunteer in 2015, initially doing research into the history of the Schenectady Armory and leading two tours of the facility, and became a Board member in 2019, serving as Buildings and Grounds Committee chair until last fall. I'm a lifelong area resident except for five years away at college, graduating from Niskayuna in 1975 and returning in 1980 to work at GE Research, where I'm leading a team in the design and construction of a high-field brain imaging MRI magnet. I'm a passionate reader of historical fiction and non-fiction, and enjoy discussions about local and global events with others.

Each of you is probably aware of some of the many and varied options that the Society's staff has created for all ages to learn about and enjoy our local history. These include walking and even kayak tours, invited speakers with both in-person and virtual options, the upcoming Arts and Crafts Festival at the Mabee Farm in August, Howlin' at the Moon concerts in the barn, and many others. I encourage you to check out your e-mail updates and visit our web site for more information. You should also know that consultations in the Gremis-Doolittle library are available -- I used this benefit myself recently to meet with Marietta and go over my family souvenirs to decide how to catalog them for future generations of my family.

We are over 800 members strong, and I'd like to see that number grow to 1,000 during my tenure. To that end, please think of friends you have that would benefit from membership, and let them know about us and why you're a member. Each of you has a role in helping us reach this goal!

Your Society initiated a major change in 2017 when the Board chose to hire Mary Zawacki as our first Executive Director. Mary now handles many operational duties that were previously the Board's responsibility. As a result, the structure and function of the Board including its committees and even the number of members is being reviewed. The need for such a review was highlighted by the Society's 2018 strategic planning exercise, and revisited briefly last fall by a Board committee. Revisiting this important discussion will be a priority in the coming months. Our new Vice President Hannah Miller is working with Mary and me to initiate this process.

Finally - for this quarter at least - a reminder that while it's easy to think of history as referring to decades or centuries ago, especially here in Schenectady County where it's been over 300 years since the Colonial period, in fact history is being created all the time. We are creating tomorrow's history now, and I find that keeping myself aware of that fact helps to guide my personal actions and goals. Our staff is always evaluating ways to capture and maintain information that will be tomorrow's history.



-Mark Vermilyea, SCHS President



A Note From the Director

As we all know as historians, things are always changing and evolving. The present is never stagnant, and therefore neither is the past. So, it comes as no surprise to me that as SCHS emerges from COVID-19, we might have a few staffing changes pop up.

I'm saddened for SCHS, but thrilled for [Suzy Fout](#), our brilliantly creative Exhibitions and Collections Manager, who is starting a new role at the New York State Museum this summer. We will miss her a great deal, but it's to the benefit of the people of New York who can enjoy her graphic design work at the Museum's new exhibits. Luckily for us, Suzy has agreed to stick around and continue to consult for us on future exhibitions, so whatever comes next, her aesthetic signature will likely be on it.

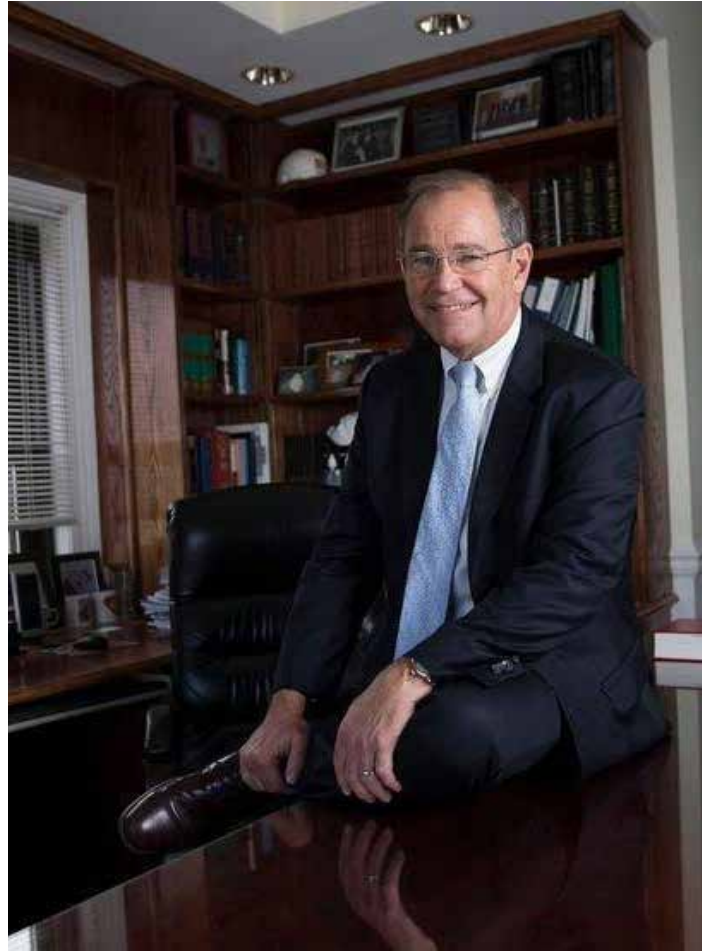
Another change is the promotion of [Michael Diana](#) from Programs Manager to Historian and Director of Education. Over the last year Michael expertly researched and produced a short documentary, "A History Erased," focusing on Schenectady's 19th century African American history. He

also jumped back into the school programs saddle this spring, leading a memorable Mabee Farm experience for nearly 2,000 4th graders. In his new role, Mike will continue much of his excellent work with the public, while also taking on new historical research responsibilities. I know I'm looking forward to reading and viewing his next piece!

Finally, SCHS welcomed six interns to our sites this summer. Officially or unofficially, that has to be a record! [Noelle Lennard](#) is working on our social media, while [Jared Rash](#), [Shannon Roberts](#), and [Sarah Lindecke](#) are helping out with programs at the Mabee Farm. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, [Elizabeth MacNeil](#) and [Lucy Grossman](#) are working hard processing museum and library collections.

Wishing you all the best for this summer, and hoping you'll choose to spend part of your year with us at SCHS!

-Mary Zawacki, SCHS Executive Director



Welcome, New Trustees!

by John Angilletta

Schenectady County Historical Society would like to welcome our two newest members to our Board of Trustees. Both were recently elected to three year terms at our annual meeting in May.

First, we have local attorney **Tracey Chance**, who heads the Schenectady County Conflict Defenders Office. Tracey, a graduate of Albany Law School, is the first woman and first African American to head the Conflict Defenders Office. She received national recognition for her office's work during the pandemic, where she said that many court appearances had to be handled remotely, making a difficult job even more challenging. Having lived in Schenectady for over twenty years and with a love of history, Tracey is a natural fit for SCHS. She cites her passion for learning and love of local

history for helping her discover places like the Stockade and the Mabee Farm while living here.

Our other "new" trustee is actually an old friend of SCHS. **Robert Carney** has been an active member and past trustee of the Historical Society, and has been the Schenectady County District Attorney since 1990. Robert, a graduate of both Union College and Albany Law School, has also served as past president of the New York State and Schenectady County Bar associations during his long career in public service. Robert has an interest in local and United States history, and is particularly fond of reading about the American Revolution and our Founding Fathers.

We extend a warm welcome to both Tracey and Robert, and look forward to the next three years and beyond!

From the Library

A Note from the Librarian

It's an exciting time for the library! We are preparing to upgrade the shelving in our archival collections area. The new shelves are a much-needed improvement which will increase our storage capacity by 65%! This upgrade will ensure our ability to continue collecting historic documents, photos, maps, videos, and music of Schenectady County. However, preparing for the upgrade is a major undertaking, and will affect the library reading room and researcher access. Our current shelving is full, so we need to move approximately 860 linear feet of archival materials into the library reading room to make space for the new storage system and keep the materials safe during the installation. The library will be closed to the public for a few weeks in October and November. We'll post more information on the Grems-Doolittle Library blog and our website as we finalize the details. We appreciate your patience and support as we implement this vital improvement in the care of our collections!

- Marietta Carr, Librarian/Archivist

Blog Posts You May Have Missed

The Grems-Doolittle Library Collections Blog (www.GREMSDOOLITTLELIBRARY.BLOGSPOT.COM) is a great resource for learning more about Schenectady County's rich history. Here are our most recent posts:

The Belanger School of Nursing – May – by Gail Denisoff
In celebration of National Nurses Week, we took a look at nursing education at Ellis Hospital.

William Van Bergen Van Dyck – June – by Gail Denisoff
When he passed away in 1981, Billy Van Bergen Van Dyck was one of the oldest Schenectadians and Stockade residents at 105. He lived an interesting and varied life which we examine in this biographical post.

The History of Collins Park – July – by Diane Leone
Collins Park has been a feature of Scotia's landscape for over a hundred years. This post relates the founding, development, and significant stories from this beloved recreational greenspace.

New in the Library

- GE Apprentice Alumni Association Photo Albums and Scrapbooks - donated by the association officers
- Winne Business Records Collection - donated by Holly Griffin
- Schenectady County Tax Rolls Microfilm Collection - donated by the Schenectady Clerk's Office
- Broadside: Change of Service Notice for Schenectady Railway Co., Dec. 7, 1941 - donated by Keith Gibson
- County Jail Ledgers, 1920s-1970s, - donated by Schenectady County Office of the Sheriff
- Woestinian yearbooks - donated by Teresa Pistolessi



Photo: Our overstuffed storage area in the basement of the Grems-Doolittle Library.

What's Happening

Exhibitions

CRAFTED IN SCHENECTADY: THE BUILDING OF A COMMUNITY Through Spring 2023 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

Through November 2022 at 32 Washington Ave

Why do we collect things? 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.

THE MANY FACES OF SCHENECTADY ART SOCIETY

Through September at Mabee Farm

Schenectady Art Society is a very diverse and interesting group with many artistic talents. They shine in their varied artistic expressions of how they "see" things. From bold acrylics to softer watercolors, you can observe the talents of their membership. Join us for a reception celebrating the opening of this exhibition on **July 30 at 2pm**. Light refreshments served.

On the River

KAYAK THROUGH HISTORY

@ Schenectady and Waterford | \$35 includes kayak rental

This year, the popular Mohawk river paddling tours return to both Schenectady and Waterford. For centuries, Schenectady's history has revolved around the mighty Mohawk River. Our Schenectady kayak tour takes you from the modern Mohawk Harbor to the site of our city's ancient port. In nearby Waterford, history lives at the meeting of New York's two great waterways! The town of Waterford has long been a vital crossroads for the people of this area. Our Waterford tour takes you between picturesque islands and through the grand locks of the Erie Canal. Along both routes, our expert guide will regale you with the history of the area. Guests will be provided with a kayak, life vest, and paddle. Guests should be prepared to paddle for about two hours. There are no bathrooms at either site.

Schenectady Dates:

meet at Mohawk Harbor near Druthers

Wed, Aug 31 @ 6pm

Waterford Dates:

meet at Waterford Boat Launch at First and Front Street

Wed, Aug 10 @ 6pm

Sat, Aug 13 @ 10am

Talks & Tours

Please register in advance at schenectadyhistorical.org, or for free member registration, email office@schenectadyhistorical.org

SECRET STOCKADE

First Wednesdays, August-October @ 10am-1pm at 32W | \$35

The Stockade and its secrets come to life on this colorful journey through the neighborhood. Walk its storied streets, meet local characters, and learn its legends and lore with us. Tickets include exclusive access to private Stockade homes and gardens, guided tours of the neighborhood and the museum, a visit with the artists of Brouwer House Creative, Schenectady's oldest house, and lunch at Arthur's Market. This program lasts approximately 3 hours and includes about ~1 mile of walking on uneven paved terrain. Lunch and drip-coffee provided.

SCHENECTADY BEERS, BIKES, AND BARGES

July 21 at 6pm @ Druthers | \$20 BYO bicycle

SCHS is partnering with the Erie Canal Museum for this hourlong cycling tour through Schenectady looking at the city's Erie Canal and brewing history, as you ride along the historic Mohawk River. The ride begins and ends at Druthers Brewing Company, where you will be treated to a beer as part of your ride as well as a brief history of the brewery itself. Register at ERIECANALMUSEUM.ORG.

RECENT MEMORIES OF MABEE FARM

August 6 and 13 at 4pm @ Mabee Farm | \$12

The Mabee Farm has nearly 300 years of stories to tell. This tour is about the last of the stories. Steve and Cathryn Larkin lived and maintained the Mabee House property from 1987 to 1993, having two of their children born on site. They are still fascinated by the history and evolution of this historical landmark, and are excited to share their memories with you.

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. Cosponsored by the Schenectady Heritage Foundation.

For Families

Please register in advance at schenectadyhistorical.org, or email office@schenectadyhistorical.org

COLONIAL KIDS FRIDAYS

Aug 12 at 10am @ Mabee Farm \$10/members free

On these special dates, the Mabee Farm will be open just for kids! Tour the entirety of our farm with special demonstrations of colonial crafts. Butter making, barnbuilding, blacksmithing and meeting the free-range farm animals are just some of the activities available.

CAMPFIRE NIGHT

Aug 19 at 7pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10/members free

Join us for a spooky evening! We'll kindle the campfire, roast s'mores, and take an after-dark tour of the Mabee Farm while sharing local ghost stories and tall tales.

Music, Festivals & More!

HOWLIN' AT THE MOON CONCERT SERIES

@ 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.

Aug 11: Sten and Maria Z with Everest Rising

Sept 15: Rusticator with Everest Rising

Oct 13: Lost Radio Rounders with Everest Rising

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 70+ artists and crafters spread out over the Mabee Farm grounds with their eclectic, beautifully handcrafted items. All items are handmade here in our region. With live music and farm tours.

STOCKADE WALKABOUT

Sept 24, 11am-5pm @ 32 Washington Ave | \$ TBD

Schenectady's Historic Stockade, New York State's first historic district, invites visitors for a rare opportunity to step inside a series of private homes and experience living history! Tickets will be available at: HISTORICSTOCKADE.ORG/WALKABOUT

FALLFEST

Oct 9, 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!



The Wedgeway: an Anchor and an Icon

by Michael Diana, Historian and Director of Education

A building can be more than the sum of its parts -- more than the bricks and mortar that give it shape. It can take on a life of its own, accumulate its own experiences and history. With enough time, a building can become an anchor for a community and a nostalgic icon for its people. Schenectady can be proud to host many such buildings. But as the years progress, even the most stalwart construction can break down. The historical memory of a place can deteriorate and be lost in physical space. Unfortunately, our city has seen this as well, with the dramatic demolition of the Nicholas Building. Such is the shadow that looms over one of Schenectady's central landmarks: the Wedgeway Building. The Wedgeway sits at the northwest corner of State Street and Erie Boulevard, right at the beating heart of downtown Schenectady. As Schenectady continues its downtown revitalization, and as its housing market heats up, you'd expect the Wedgeway to be primed to enjoy the rising fortunes. And yet that's unfortunately not the case.

The iconic Wedgeway opened in 1885 at the dawn of Schenectady's industrial boom. General Electric and American Locomotive Company were ushering in the most dynamic growth period in our city's history. The Erie Canal flowed where the boulevard is now, and for decades served as the commercial thoroughfare of the city. The Wedgeway's builder, A. Vedder, had grand aspirations for his structure, and built more than 55,000 square feet of floor space across six stories. Vedder boasted in his advertisements that "more people pass in and out of this building than any other office building in the city." And this bold claim is entirely believable a century later. An eclectic collection of businesses would take up residence in the structure over the next century, including lawyers, chiropractors, "Christian Science Practitioners," and even Vedder's real estate business. Frederick Freeman Proctor built his first theater at the Wedgeway in 1912, moving it to its current location in 1926.

The Wedgeway, despite its massive size and imposing facade, ultimately succumbed to the same general malaise that gripped Schenectady in the late 1900s. As the local industrial base declined and the wealthier segments of Schenectady moved to suburban enclaves, the downtown districts saw less and less business. But, even if its luster had faded, the Wedgeway was still making do in 2010. It was home to several tenants that people today might remember, such as the Grog Shop, the Photo Lab and the Wedgeway Barbershop. Several of the upper floors housed apartments. But a tragic development across town would usher in the Wedgeway's current predicament. On March 6, 2015, an intense fire swept

through a historic highrise on Jay Street, killing four people and leading to the demolition of the building. Fire inspectors had found several code violations within that aging structure, but neither the property owner nor City Hall did anything to follow up on these violations. In the aftermath of the blaze and the legal fallout, the city codes department took up a new zeal in its enforcement efforts.

And so began a struggle between City Hall and owner William Eichengrun, who had acquired the Wedgeway in 2018. Inspectors found several violations with the aging building. According to who you ask, the story changes dramatically. City inspectors will argue that Eichengrun was unwilling to do the needed renovations and obfuscated the inspection process at every turn. Others might argue, the proprietor was simply unable to keep up with the increasing demands of City Hall. In a 2019 article in the Daily Gazette, at least one anonymous tenant of the Wedgeway argued that Eichengrun was making an honest effort to correct the violations. Whatever their opinions of their landlord, many tenants resisted orders to vacate the building despite intense pressure from the city. But in any case, caught in the crossfire between private interest and public policy, every occupant left one by one. Readers may remember our recent article on the iconic Photo Lab, which was forced to close in November 2021. The Eoff family operated that store for three generations since it opened in 1914.

Another such casualty was Basil Al-Saraf, proprietor of Downtown Convenience. Al-Saraf had lived much of his life in Iraq and when U.S. and coalition forces invaded in 2003, he became a contractor with NATO forces. In retaliation, local militants targeted Al-Saraf and his family and chased them from the country. From Iraq to Poland to Albany, the family looked for a new place to live until finally settling in Schenectady in 2013. Al-Saraf's storefront at the Wedgeway was more than just a business; it was a fresh start in a safe place. However, in 2020, the City refused to renew Al-Saraf's license to operate the convenience store, citing the back taxes owed by Eichengrun, ultimately forcing Al-Saraf to close the shop for good. This particularly poignant vignette shows how when a building falls into disrepair, it disrupts not only the city skyline but real people's lives as well.

There may yet be a light on the horizon for the embattled Wedgeway. Earlier this year, the Schenectady Metroplex authority announced that Cass Hill Development was preparing to restore and even expand the crumbling structure. With no available details on the private investment required for this massive project, Metroplex has announced a commitment of more than \$500,000. The restored Wedgeway

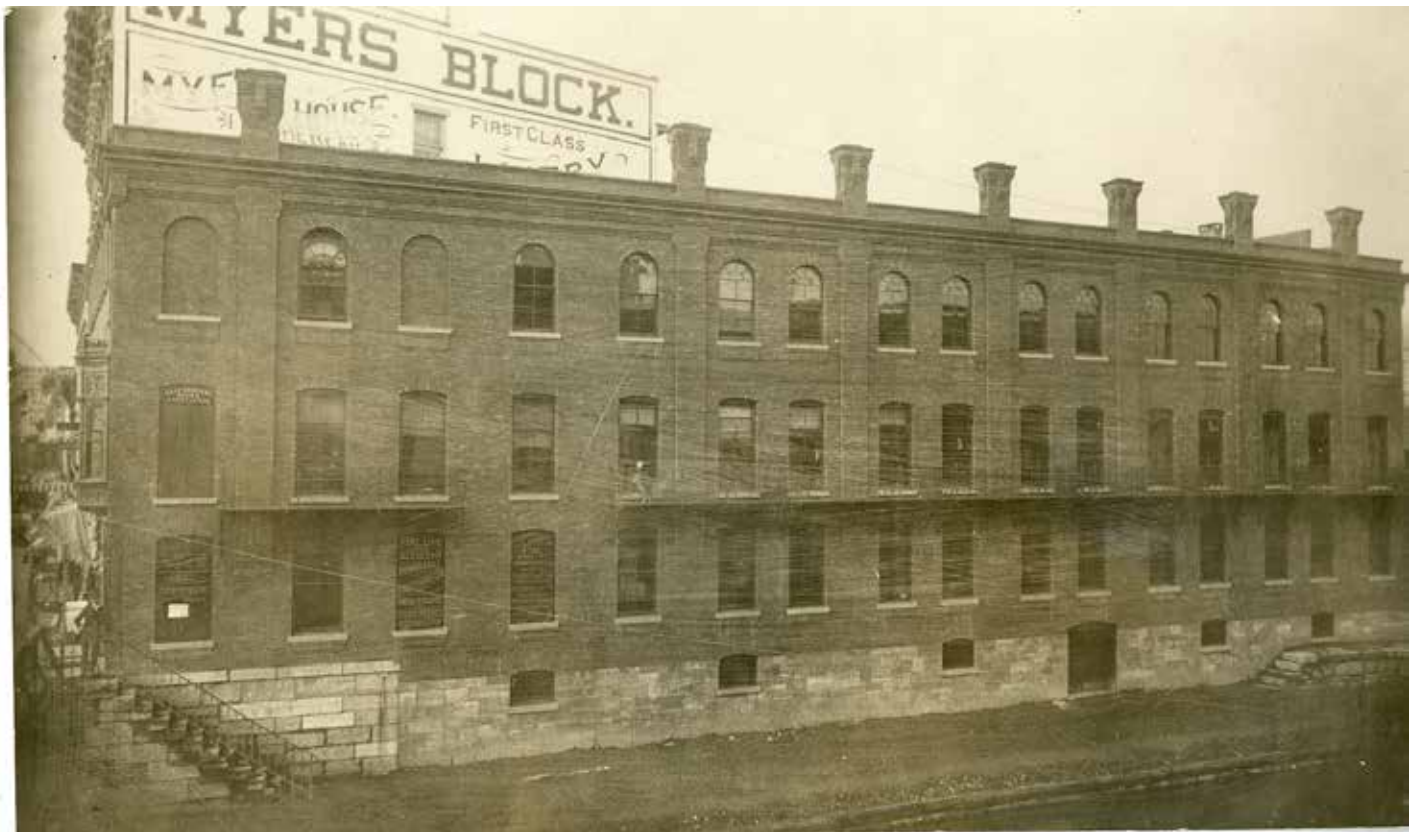


would serve the same role with commercial space at ground level and new residential units created on upper floors. If successful, this project could represent yet another triumph for the reinvigoration of downtown Schenectady. But perhaps we should temper our optimism until the actual restoration work begins. Proposals can always fall through. And we must always remember that the success of any rehabilitation is dependent not on developers but on us as local consumers. Even if the Wedgeway gets the facelift it needs, even if it will be

beautiful once again, it will only fall back into disrepair if we fail to patronize the renewed location.

Photos: The Wedgeway Building over the years, all from the collection of the Grems-Doolittle Library. Notice how much the facade evolved over the years, and the transformation of the Erie Canal into Erie Boulevard.





Around the County with Bill Buell, County Historian

by Bill Buell, County Historian

Urban renewal – when the U.S. Government decided it would be a good idea to help cities tear down the old and put up the new – began a few years after World War II and continued into the 1970s.

Almost no one thought it might be a bad thing. The Department of Housing and Urban Development was giving communities grants and loans to help themselves improve and modernize what was becoming aging infrastructure.

It was an idea liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans, as well as everyone in between, could agree on. So could business leaders and housing reformers. There didn't seem to be any downside to the notion of helping create new homes and businesses, whether the location be in the inner cities or more affluent neighborhoods.

However, eventually some consequences of urban renewal began ringing alarm bells. Many historic structures were being destroyed without much thought, and many low and middle-income housing areas were being flattened to make way for commercial development. What that often meant was that the city's stock of affordable housing was being diminished.

Giles van der Bogert, a Schenectady native and architect with a long, long family history associated with the city, had the foresight as early as the late 1950s that somebody might want to take a closer look at what we wanted to tear down, and what we should restore and treasure. As a result, the nucleus of what would become The Stockade Association held its first meeting in September of 1957, and the organization was officially formed in 1961.

But it was back in 1958 that the group held their first walking tour of the neighborhood that included getting inside a number of historic homes. There was another one in 1960, and after taking a year off, the “[Stockade Walkabout](#)” was back for good in 1961. It hasn't been held every year, including the last two due to COVID-19. But when it returns on September 24 this fall from 11am-5pm, history lovers and architecture buffs will be in their glory.

My first Walkabout was probably sometime back in the early 1980s, and since then it's always been on my radar every September. I've missed a few over the years, but not too many, and after becoming a volunteer at the Schenectady County Historical Society back in 2002, I don't think I've missed any.

We can all thank van der Bogert, his wife, Mary, and his two partners in his architectural firm, Jim Schmitt and Werner Feibes, for creating this great event more than 60 years ago. There are plenty of other people throughout that time that also deserve plenty of praise for the Walkabout's success.

I never met van der Bogert because he died way too young in 1965 at the age of 58. But I did get to know Schmitt and Feibes, and two nicer guys you'll never find.

Schmitt told me back in 2007, for a *Gazette* article, that he “came to Schenectady, saw the Stockade and was bowled over. I fell in love with the place and never left.”

Back when he was helping van der Bogert create The Stockade Association, Schmitt and others contacted neighborhood groups in Beacon Hill, Massachusetts; Georgetown, Maryland; Charleston, South Carolina; Providence, Rhode Island; and New Orleans, Louisiana. These communities had already created movements to save their historic districts, and the Schenectady group wanted to learn as much as they could about how they went about doing it. All that work led to the Schenectady City Council in 1962 declaring the Stockade a designated “historic zone,” the first in the state of New York.

In that same 2007 article, Feibes told me how “our partner [van der Bogert] had told us that right after World War II, the Stockade was considered kind of a slum. But instead of just talking about it, he and some other people bought houses and moved in, and that attracted other people. I became intoxicated with the place because of this sense of community that you felt.”

While Schmitt moved to Schenectady in 1957 from Cincinnati, Feibes was born in Germany and fled that country with his family when he was eleven, shortly before World War II broke out. He and Schmitt met at the University of Cincinnati and lived together in their small home on North Ferry Street in the Stockade for more than 50 years. Feibes passed away just last November at the age of 92, while Schmitt died in 2013 at the age of 87.

“When you move into a suburb, you usually see people with the same level of income and lifestyle, but what makes the Stockade so interesting is its diversity,” Feibes told me in 2007. “There are professionals, skilled workers, and unskilled workers. That all has its ups and downs, but it also makes the place a much nicer sociological neighborhood, and I love that diversity.”

Having lived in apartments on Union Street, Washington Avenue and North Church Street, I know exactly what Feibes meant. The Stockade is a special place, and the opportunity to enjoy another Walkabout is really something I'm looking forward to.

Schmitt, Feibes, and van der Bogert also helped create the Schenectady Heritage Foundation, a non-profit whose mission it is to foster historic preservation in Schenectady County, and *The Stockade Spy*, a newsletter that keeps everyone informed of what's going on in the neighborhood. We were lucky to have such a talented and foresighted trio. It's great that Schmitt and Feibes took to the neighborhood so well and stayed, and as for van der Bogert, well, he had too much family history here to move away. His descendants were among the early settlers of the area and in February of 1690, a Frans van der Bogert was one of 60 citizens killed by the French and Indians at the Schenectady Massacre.

So when I step back in time this fall at the Walkabout, I'll remember Schmitt, Feibes, van der Bogert, and others who helped preserve this unique piece of history for later generations. And along with the wonderful houses that will be on this year's tour, don't forget to stop in at Arthur's Market

and pay your respects to "Lawrence." There's also the First Reformed, St. George's and First Presbyterian church buildings that should not be missed, and don't forget to visit the SCHS headquarters on Washington Avenue and the Brouwer House Creative on North Church Street. There will be plenty to see and enjoy.

Sylvie Briber, another Stockade resident and a major positive force in the neighborhood, is the main contact person for this year's event. You can purchase tickets at [HTTPS://SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG/EVENT/WALKABOUT2022/](https://schenectadyhistorical.org/event/walkabout2022/). Tickets are also available at other outlets in the county, including Felthousen's Florist in Niskayuna, Kulak's Nursery in Rexford and the Open Door Bookstore in the city. Tickets are \$20 in advance and \$25 the day of the event. Student tickets are \$10.

Everyone with proof of purchase should stop in at the historical society on that Saturday to pick up a wristband and a map before heading out on the tour.

Photo: A sampling of the colorful historic houses that make up the Stockade. Credit: Mary Zawacki.



Golf's Edison: Arthur F. Knight

by John F. Gearing

Arthur F. Knight, a GE electrical engineer, avidly embraced the game of golf when it became popular in Schenectady in the 1890s. While it is not known whether Knight ever played on “the pasture course” set up by Union College professors and students in the early years of that decade, he was a founding member of the Mohawk Golf Club in 1898. When the club laid out its first course, Knight was on the design committee with course architect Devereaux Emmet of Garden City, Long Island. Knight was a skilled golfer, said to have been the top player on the Mohawk Golf Club team, which competed in match play against teams from other clubs around the region.

Knight's first foray into golf innovation was a comparatively minor one. In 1902 he patented a table-top golf game played with twiddly winks on a cloth printed to resemble a golf course. Out on the links, however, he was unsatisfied with his putting. Seeking a way to improve, Knight turned his attention to putter design. Putters of the day had blade-shaped heads with the shaft attached at the heel, so that the ball was struck with the flat of the blade. Knight's experiments with his homemade putters resulted in a club with a low, blocky head having the shaft attached almost in its center. While his prototyping had been done in wood with internal lead weight, Knight chose the then-exotic material of aluminum for his final design in the summer of 1902.

Shortly after, Knight was using his putter at the Mohawk course, when he encountered his old friend and colleague Devereaux Emmet, who was visiting. Knight enthusiastically showed Emmet his new putter, which had so greatly improved his game. Intrigued, Emmet took the putter back to his home course at Garden City for further testing. Garden City also happened to be the club where one of the country's best amateur golfers, Walter Travis, frequently played. Emmet showed Knight's invention to Travis. Emmet likely referred to the club as “the Schenectady putter.” Travis tried the putter, liked it, and shortly wired Knight to order “a Schenectady putter” for himself. Knight made two putters for Travis, the second having slightly more loft. It was this second putter Travis declared “the best I have ever used.” That autumn, Travis used the Schenectady putter to finish second in the US Open, the best finish by an American. Journalists and golf enthusiasts took note of Travis' putter and orders from prominent golfers began to flow soon thereafter. Travis went on to use the putter to win the next US Amateur Championship, but his most famous victory with Knight's creation came in 1904 when he became the first non-British player to win the British Amateur Championship. He ascribed a large part of his success to the Schenectady putter. At one point Knight had proposed to Travis that he call the design

“the Travis Putter,” but Travis demurred, and it remained “the Schenectady Putter.”

Controversy swirled around the Schenectady putter. Was its design within the rules of golf? Around 1911 the Royal & Ancient Golf Club, which controlled the rules of golf, declared the Schenectady putter to be a “mallet,” an illegal style, and barred it from competition. In a first, the United States Golf Association refused to classify Knight's design as a mallet, and refused to ban the Schenectady Putter from USGA events. This great divide lasted until 1951, when the Royal & Ancient finally lifted their ban.

Arthur F. Knight had not finished innovating golf. Though his putting had been improved, he was dissatisfied with his driving. Traditionally, golf club shafts were made of hickory. Golf experts had long known that hickory shafts twisted during a swing, making it very difficult for a golfer to strike his ball at a consistent angle. Only by long hours of practice could a golfer learn to shape his swing so as to compensate for this feature. In 1910 Knight was issued a patent for hollow steel golf club shafts. His patent described several different designs having in common the ability to eliminate twisting while retaining the suppleness demanded by golfers, termed “feel.” His shafts, Knight wrote, improved a player's consistency and made it easier for beginners to learn the game. The Horton Manufacturing Company of Bristol, CT began producing tubular steel shafted golf clubs under Knight's patent, and again, controversy ensued.

The rules committees of both the United States Golf Association and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews took a dim view of Knight's latest invention, banning steel-shafted clubs from competition. The popularity of golf in the US was exploding in those years. Not only did steel shafts improve a player's game, but the supply of the high quality hickory needed for traditional shafts was becoming scarce. Amateurs enthusiastically embraced the new, modern, hollow steel shafted clubs. In 1926, the USGA bowed to reality and rescinded its ban. The fact that the Prince of Wales had publicly used a steel shafted golf club in 1929 may well have influenced the Royal and Ancient's decision later that year to lift its ban on steel shafts. By the 1930s, hickory had been relegated to the sawdust pile of history.

Besides designing golf clubs and games, A. F. Knight is credited with being the designer of the Schenectady Municipal Golf Course, the Edison Club course, and for the design of the course on Carleton Island, GE's corporate summer resort in the Thousand Islands.

Golf innovator A. F. Knight made his home at 831 Union Street, Schenectady. He died on May 2, 1936 at the age of 71.

Photo: Golfer Walter Travis with the Schenectady Putter. Image from Walter J. Travis Society ([HTTP://TRAVISSOCIETY.COM](http://travissociety.com))





world Don has created includes at least three train lines which weave in and out of the cities, through tunnels, and over bridges. There is a complex lighting system that even Thomas Edison would be proud of. Want a night scene? With a flick of a switch, the cities come alive with neon lights, revealing a humorous and sometimes bawdy nightlife. Don has even included an ambient soundscape and aromatherapy to set the scene. No detail is too small, and the work is never finished. Don is constantly fiddling, adding new buildings, or new features. He is currently installing telephone poles for his residents, complete with birds sitting on the wires.

Don is one of many train enthusiasts whose collecting has extended beyond a fascination with model locomotives to the creation of miniature worlds through which the trains can travel. The hobby includes not just scale models of locomotives, but also of rolling stock, streetcars, tracks, signaling, and detailed landscapes featuring bridges and tunnels, canyons, buildings, vehicles, and model figurines.

Railway modeling has come a long way from its early years. In the 1790s, before trains were even being built at full size, engineers and builders used scale models to understand the mechanics of trains. Not surprisingly, the development of train modeling followed the development of railroads. As the industry began to boom, train models became popular worldwide

as marketable toys and collectibles. The first mass market sets were produced in 1891 by the German company, Marklin. Only ten years later, on the other side of the world, New York City native Joshua Lionel Cowen developed the first true model railroad which ran using electric power. Originally, the models were sold to stores who used the moving trains in window displays to attract customers. The trains became so popular that clientele began approaching the newly formed Lionel Corporation to buy their own personal models.

The railroad industry captured the imagination of the American people quickly. Not only were railroads instrumental in the transportation of goods, but also of people. Rail travel transformed the nation's landscape, opening up settlement of the West and connecting the vast country from coast to coast. Opportunities were endless and travel had never been so easy. Meanwhile, manufacturing, new technology, and increased leisure time opened up collecting to the masses. No longer just a hobby for the rich, everyday consumers could collect and admire a wide variety of memorabilia and ephemera.

By the 1950s, train collecting had become one of the most popular hobbies in the United States. As technology advanced, model train kits became more realistic. New applications of electricity improved model train engines, and the invention of plastic allowed companies to create incredibly detailed, life-



like model trains. Today, a variety of different train scales exist, and it is estimated that over a half a million people in the U.S. and Canada collect model trains just like Don.

So, why a replica of Schenectady? For Don, the answer is simple; history.

While this isn't Don's first train model layout, for this current masterpiece, Don was inspired by the city he has grown to love, its history, and its architecture. After all, if you're going to pour your heart, soul, and time into something, it might as well be something you care about.

Realism is the name of the game in Don's Electric City. To recreate his favorite Schenectady buildings, Don studies the local architecture and collects as many photographs as he can. He dives deep into the building's history, often using the archives at our very own Grems-Doolittle Library.

The first Schenectady building Don recreated was Proctors Theater, one of the few remaining vestiges of Schenectady's vaudeville heyday.

In 1926, Frederick Freeman Proctor, a bald and mustached circus acrobat, opened a 2,700-seat vaudeville house in Schenectady and called it Proctor's Theatre. Located at 432

State Street, the theater pioneered the concept of "continuous vaudeville," where patrons could pay admission at any point in the day and stay for as long as they wanted during a stream of nonstop acts.

At the time Proctors was built, Schenectady, like most of the country, was basking in the glow of sustained economic growth, new technologies, and social and cultural dynamism. Nestled in Schenectady's bustling downtown, Proctors was one of a dozen theaters that catered to the artistic needs of the city's ever growing urban population. Though, like the Roaring Twenties, this period of prosperity for theater would come to a screeching halt. The Great Depression, WWII, and suburban migration were not kind to the city of Schenectady. Audiences began to drift away, searching for new entertainment in television, drive-ins, and suburban cineplexes. After decades of declining attendance and a decaying downtown, the rundown Proctors was seized by the city.

Unlike Schenectady's other popular playhouses which suffered a similar decline, Proctor's was rescued from the wrecking ball in 1977. Restored to its former glory and re-imagined as much more than just a performing stage, today, the theater is a gem in the Capital Region's cultural landscape. At the heart of the 90-year history of Proctors is the story of resilience and redemption; a tale beautifully captured in Don's cityscape.



Since Proctors, Don has added dozens of other buildings, including Schenectady's most iconic structures: the Seneca Building, the Gleason Building, the old Schenectady Gazette building, Union Station, the Nicholaus building, the Hotel Foster and, of course, General Electric. Most of these buildings date back to Schenectady's Erie Canal days or the "Golden Era," when the city's footprint was being developed into what it is today. Builders erected majestic stone and brick structures along the city's thoroughfares. Reaching high up into the sky, these stately buildings were a declaration of Schenectady's prosperity and growth.

Don strives to be as faithful to a building's architecture as he can be, though he takes a fair amount of creative license with the city's layout. After all, he has to make do with the space he has in his home! Besides, as historians, we know that Schenectady and its buildings are constantly evolving and changing over time. Facades are updated, businesses come and go. Some of these buildings, ravished by time and progress, are no longer standing; they only exist in our memories of the past. In Don's world, he gets to choose which buildings to replicate, and which stories to tell.

Each building tells a story, you see. Beyond just the "who, when, and why" it was built, there are personal memories. It's taking in a show with friends at Proctors, going out to a

family dinner at the old Nicholaus restaurant, a shopping trip with mom at Wallace's department store, or saying goodbye to a sweetheart as they depart from Union Station. For Don, it is important not to just re-create the buildings, but the life of the city as well. You can see these little vignettes everywhere. Peering into buildings, outside in the squares, and along the mock streets are scenes carefully crafted by Don; delivery boys bringing fresh milk, grocers hocking their produce at market, lovers embracing, factory employees laboring hard at work, and hungry customers lined up at the local food truck. Some of these stories are personal experiences, places visited and things seen. Others are stories he has gathered through research, or are based purely on imagination.

Just like the buildings he replicates, Don's creative process has evolved over the years. When he first started making layouts, Don was fabricating each building from scratch. It was a slow and laborious process, making molds and plaster casts. These days, Don creates a CAD drawing (computer based drafting program) of his subject and sends it to TW Trainworx, a company in Texas which specializes in laser cutting for the model train world. The finished model is sent back to Don for assembly, painting, and decorating.

To recreate a realistic landscape, the devil is in the details. And that means Don's collecting extends beyond just train memo-



rabilia, to obscure, everyday items he can repurpose. Advertising ephemera is fashioned into building and road signs; model cars, dollhouse miniatures, and toy figurines build his lifelike scenes. One of the first buildings he ever built was a mock car garage, aptly named “Don’s Chevrolet.” The building’s sign is made out of an old chrome car emblem off a 1956 Chevrolet, which just happens to be the year Don was born. Bottle caps have turned into vents on rooftops, old tiles become roadways, and Christmas ornaments are turned into decorations for a hunting lodge. Don’s collecting even extends to nature, picking up rocks, pebbles, moss, and the like, all of which make their way into his world.

Of course, it’s not just life in miniature that excites Don; at the heart of his passion are the tracks and trains which connect his worlds. As a young boy, he marveled at the train set which took a place of honor at the foot of the family’s Christmas tree each year. Unsure what to give the ten-year-old as a Christmas gift, Don’s grandmother gifted him his very first train set. One look at the Marx Rock Island Train set and it was love at first sight. The shiny new train cars, and the experience of building the set with his grandfather, sparked a lifelong interest. Don still has those memories — and the locomotives— safely tucked away and lovingly cherished.

Don has been collecting trains and train memorabilia ever

since that Christmas. He has a particular interest in Lionel model trains and anything from the New York Central Railroad (NYCRR). Don attributes this obsession to his great-grandfather, Jacob Klose, who migrated from Germany to Albany in the early 1900s and built steam locomotives for the NYCRR. And really, Don couldn’t have picked a more appropriate hobby for Schenectady. What could be more fitting than a reproduction of the city which “lights and hauls the world?”

Schenectady was at the forefront of the railroad industry almost since the beginning of train travel in America. The Mohawk and Hudson Railroad — which was eventually consolidated into NYCRR— was the first permanent railroad in New York state and one of the first railroads in the United States. Chartered in 1826, the tracks connected the Mohawk River at Schenectady to the Hudson River at Albany and provided a much needed bypass of the time-consuming locks on the Erie Canal.

Subsequent railways continued to connect Schenectady directly to Utica, Syracuse, Saratoga, and Troy, and indirectly to major city-centers such as Buffalo and New York City. As the home to George Westinghouse, railroad entrepreneur, and the American Locomotive Company (ALCO), a titan of industry, it was only natural that Schenectady be a major depot for train travel in New York.



These historic details are not lost on Don, and only further fuel his passion. Transforming the collecting of model trains into something enduring, Don has created more than a collection. He has created a story, a teaching, a work of art. Like many collectors, Don's hobby began with a personal connection and has blossomed to a lifelong pursuit of knowledge.

As a curator, my role at the SCHS has been to oversee and grow our collections, as well as interpret the collection for the community. Objects tell stories, and through these stories we create a tangible connection to the past and a better understanding of our present. The SCHS has been actively collecting since 1906, and has amassed a formidable collection which tells the diverse story of our region.

Of course, the SCHS isn't the only collector in the county. Stashed away in basements and attics, or proudly on display, there are collections everywhere. Collecting is one of the most common hobbies in the United States. There are as many cultural and psychological reasons for collecting as there are things to collect. You are probably a collector and you don't even realize it. But why are we so fascinated with objects? How does a private collector or a museum amass a collection? What lies behind a collector's passion for collecting?

These are the questions behind our latest exhibit at the SCHS.

A love of art, a love of history, and a search for understanding our world form the foundations of many collections. Collectors are always seeking out new sources for their hobby, advancing scholarship, and conducting research on their collections. What develops over time is not just an assortment of objects, but a visual reflection of changes in society and modernization. Through collections, we can develop an understanding of how our society evolves, how cultures and people interact, and how mankind and technology changes. They reveal insight into past eras and different perspectives of our own time. They illustrate what was fashionable, what was taboo, what was artistic, what was a commodity. Every assortment of objects has its own story to tell, just as each individual has a personal reason for their hobby.

Don Klose's collection is one of many featured in [*From Hobby to History: the Collections of Schenectady*](#). Now on display at the museum at 32 Washington Ave, the exhibit examines the social, cultural, and psychological impulses of collecting. Through both museum and private collections, we dive deep into the world of collecting and discover how objects, art, and other ephemera can inform historical perspectives, build community memory, and create a meaningful sense of place. We hope to see you there!

All photos by Michael Diana.

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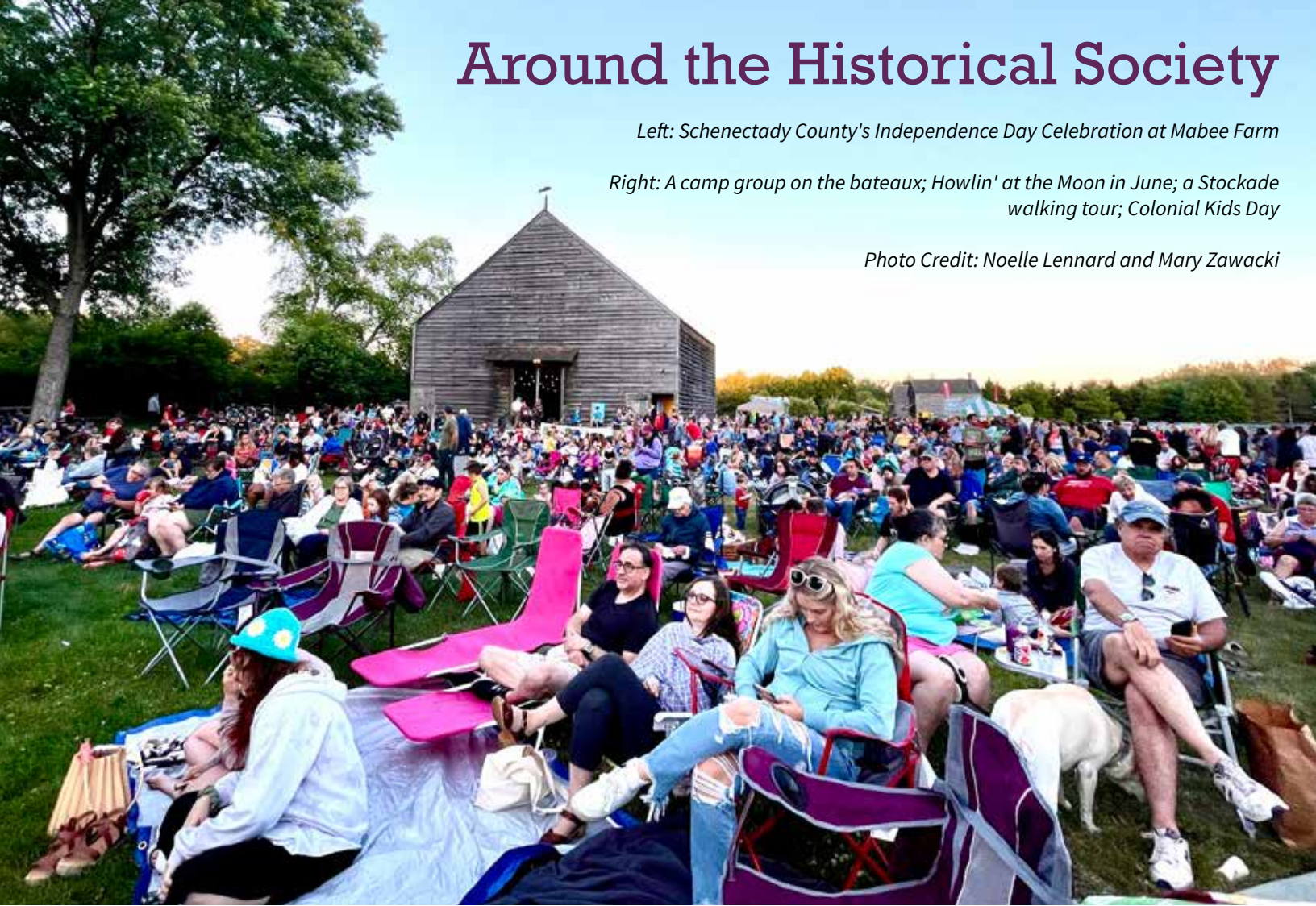
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Around the Historical Society

Left: Schenectady County's Independence Day Celebration at Mabee Farm

Right: A camp group on the bateaux; Howlin' at the Moon in June; a Stockade walking tour; Colonial Kids Day

Photo Credit: Noelle Lennard and Mary Zawacki





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