

Schenectady County Historical Society



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Congregation Gates of Heaven: A Snapshot of Sisterhood

by Noelle Lennard

If you are ever heading down Eastern Parkway you may pass a brick building comfortably nestled on the corner of Ashmore Avenue among some beautiful greenery (and cherry blossoms in the spring). This building is home to Schenectady's first organized Jewish congregation, Congregation Gates of Heaven. Congregation Gates of Heaven is known for its welcoming atmosphere, with an emphasis placed on compassion and community. Gates of Heaven is home to an undoubtedly rich history, but I found myself particularly interested in its Sisterhood and their respective history. After completing a pre-capstone research paper last semester on Women Strike for Peace, a women's activist organization, I have found myself looking for opportunities to delve into the histories of women-led activist groups and related organizations. A passing reference to the Congregation Gates of Heaven Ladies Auxiliary (as the Sisterhood was first called) in an article posted twelve years ago on the old version of the SCHS website immediately captured my interest.

Within the SCHS archives and online databases, I found barely anything at all about the early years of the Sisterhood, or the congregation as a whole. As an intern at the Society, it is certainly possible I was in over my head attempting to research something so underrepresented in the collections

Continued on page 12

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Letter from the President

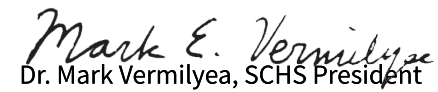
Greetings from Maine, where I have a family history of vacations dating back to my grandparents; I still have a seagull that my grandfather carved! My wife and I visited three local historical venues this week: the Old York Historical Society Museum, the Ogunquit Heritage Museum, and Odiome State Park in NH. The early European settlers that these sites describe date back to 1623! In late August, we also visited the Mint Museum in Charlotte, NC while on our way back from a reunion with college friends (an event with its own 43-year history!)

An interesting common thread for the Mint, Old York, and Ogunquit museums is that some or all of their structures were moved to their present locations - similar to our Mabee Farm barn. Moving entire buildings doesn't happen easily or quickly, but it's more common than I was aware of. It's always enlightening to visit such attractions and see how they portray history, and get a sense of the support that they receive from their local communities. Our staff and board rely on your continued support as an important part of our operating budget. And, as seen in our 2022 annual report, donations, admissions, and programs are just as significant as membership dues. Please continue your support of our organization by attending and letting your friends and family know about them! And of course, note that any large donations or bequests do the most to ensure SCHS' long-term future, as they increase both our endowment and investment income.

As we enjoy fabulous fall weather, I've managed to get in three beautiful rides on the back roads in from the Maine coast. However, the cool evenings remind me that fall is here, and with it some wonderful offerings. Be sure to check out our seasonal tours of the Stockade and Mabee Farm and the Festival of Trees at 32 Washington Ave in December. As winter approaches, be on the lookout for more programs with external speakers on many topics of interest.

In our ongoing mission to optimize our board function on your behalf, I'd like to note that our Vice President, Hannah Miller, will be leading a new Governance Committee in drafting an update to the board member roles and responsibilities as well as the board committee structure. The new Governance Committee will also be responsible for identifying potential new board members to ensure that we have a deep bench to draw from when members complete their terms. The first meeting of this committee is this fall, and we'll have updates from their work to share in the next newsletter.

I hope you enjoy this fall and winter, and I hope to see you at some of our events!


Dr. Mark Vermilyea, SCHS President



A Note From the Director

Thankfully, fall doesn't mean back-to-school for me. The thought of tests and papers coming due isn't at all attractive. But autumn does mean a return to being busy at SCHS. Different sorts of due dates, maybe, but definitely the kind I prefer.

With the hot, languid days of summer behind us, we can finally look ahead to the next months. Full of seasonal programming, fall at SCHS makes you glad to live in Upstate New York. History and pumpkin programs go hand-in-hand.

For behind-the-scenes updates, I'm particularly excited about two changes. First, our long-awaited **storage expansion project is underway**. The end result will be a 65% increase in archival storage, plus a new system for storing our collection of paintings. Portraits of ancestors? Watercolors of the Mohawk? Scrapbooks from your grandfather's attic? We'll have the space to store and care for all of those items. However, this project does necessitate some temporary closures. While we're moving all of these items around to make room for the new shelving units, the Museum and Library will be closed. We anticipate fully opening to the public again in early December, just in time for the Festival of Trees.

Next, our summer intern, **Noelle Lennard, has joined us as Museum and Media Assistant**. Noelle has been manning our social media presence over the summer, and doing a great job sharing both historical photographs and images she takes at our sites. She's also a budding historian, and contributed an article on Schenectady's Jewish history to this issue!

In other news, our Librarian, Marietta Carr, received an **\$87,500 federal grant** from the Institute for Museum and Library Services to fund the final phases of the ongoing African American Historical Records Project. Over the next two years, the funds will be used to identify records of enduring historical value created by members of the African American communities within Schenectady County, and create a catalog or database that helps make these documents accessible. As part of the project, SCHS is also working to establish relationships to support continued stewardship and preservation of African American historical records, and engage young people within the Black community in understanding and continuing community memory keeping.

Finally, we're excited to partner with or support **City Historian Chris Leonard** on a variety of initiatives in the coming months. Chris' revised volume of *Schenectady Genesis Volume I* is due out this year, and we can't wait to see what new truths he has uncovered. He's also bringing us a new seasonal wine club, and, for those who don't drink, a seasonal tea club. Be assured that both will be infused with plenty of local history and lore!

I look forward to seeing you in-person at some of our programs this fall, or online once our winter virtual lecture series resumes. Until then, enjoy everything Schenectady has to offer during this beautiful time of year.



Mary Zawacki, SCHS Executive Director

What's Happening

Please note that the Museum and Library will be closed throughout November. Both are anticipated to re-open in early December.

Please view our full calendar of events at

WWW.SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG

Tours

Please register in advance at schenectadyhistorical.org

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.

MABEE FARM "WOODS AT NIGHT" TOUR

November 18 at 6pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10

This program will take you "over the river and through the woods" on a journey back in time. We'll begin with a candlelit walk through our nature trail with guides to provide orientation and share local tall tales. Guests will then be invited to warm themselves up with a tour of our historic structures. The Mabee tavern will be serving some tasty refreshments based on historic recipes and board games will be available for an evening of fun!

JAN MABEE'S TWILIGHT TOURS

December 2 and 9 at 4:30pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10

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

STOCKADE HOLIDAY TOURS

December 14 and 21 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$13

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

For Families

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

KIDS CRAFT: TEA LIGHT SNOWMAN ORNAMENT

December 3 at 11am - 2pm @ 32 Washington | \$12

Create your own adorable snowman ornament to take home. Free for folks with a Family level or higher membership, just let us know you're coming.

Food and Drink

SCHENECTADY WINE SOCIETY

December 8 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$30

We'll uncork the perfect holiday wines to accompany your meals. Join City Historian and wine connoisseur Chris Leonard on a tasting and history tour of his favorite wines to make the season bright.

DRINK THE SEASONS: HOLIDAY WARMERS

December 9 at 5:30pm @ 32 Washington | \$30

Join for an evening of holiday warmers and more at Schenectady Historical. Led by historian John Gearing, we'll make — and sample — a variety of historic libations, made with seasonal flare.

CHOCOLATE HAUS (SOLD OUT)

December 16 at 6pm @ Mabee Farm | \$35

Experience a recreated 18th century chocolate house inside the seasonally-decorated Mabee Farmhouse. Well-known historian Paul Supley will tempt your pallet and tickle your tastebuds with a trio of historic hot chocolates. As a special finale to the evening, we'll taste a libation infused with port!

Music, Festivals & More!

HOWLIN' AT THE MOON CONCERT SERIES

WITH LOST RADIO ROUNDERS

October 27 @ Mabee Farm | \$7/person

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.

FESTIVAL OF TREES

December 3-23 @ 32 Washington Ave | \$7/person

The annual Festival of Trees is a celebration of the season, presented in partnership by YWCA NorthEastern NY and the Schenectady County Historical Society. During the festival, we welcome visitors to our sites to enjoy beautifully decorated displays of shimmering fir trees. All proceeds of the festival benefit the numerous programs and services provided by both the SCHS and YWCA NorthEastern NY.

Talks

Our 2023 Winter Speaker series will begin in January, and will feature frequent lectures offered both virtually and at our sites. Stay tuned to our website and social media as we add speakers and dates to the calendar!

From the Library

A Note from the Librarian

Library Closed October-December

The library is undertaking a major upgrade to our archival storage system which will ensure our ability to continue collecting historic documents, photos, maps, videos, and music of Schenectady County for many years to come. The new storage system will increase our capacity by 65%! Installation is scheduled for mid-November, so we've spent the summer preparing, including inventorying collections, rehousing materials, and stabilizing fragile materials. The next step in our preparations is to move approximately 860 linear feet of archival materials from the vault into the library research room to make space for the new storage system and keep the materials safe during the installation. Once the materials are safely moved, we can remove the old storage shelves and prepare the vault for installation. After the installation, we can return the materials to the vault. Because the archival materials will take up all of the available space in the research room, **the library will be closed to the public starting October 10th. The library will reopen December 12th.**

We'll post details and progress updates on the Grems-Doolittle Library blog and our website. 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. Check out our new posts:

Robert Allen Deitcher: Scotia's Composer

by Gail Denisoff

Robert Allen, once known as America's most popular songwriter, lived in Scotia during his teenage years. This post is a brief biography of the composer.

What happens to donated archival materials?

by Marietta Carr

October is National Archives Month! In this post, Marietta explains the donation process and the work library staff and volunteers do to add donated materials to the collection.

The Last Man's Club of Schenectady

by Diane Leone

Many veterans and service members find support and connection through veterans' clubs and organizations. The Last Man's Club of Schenectady helped maintain lifelong bonds for local WWI veterans for over sixty years.

New in the Library

- Yearbooks from Mohonasen schools

- Tietsoort, Titsworth & Teachout Genealogical Collection (8 volumes)

- The D & H Company Freight House Structure Report by Hartgen Archeological Associates

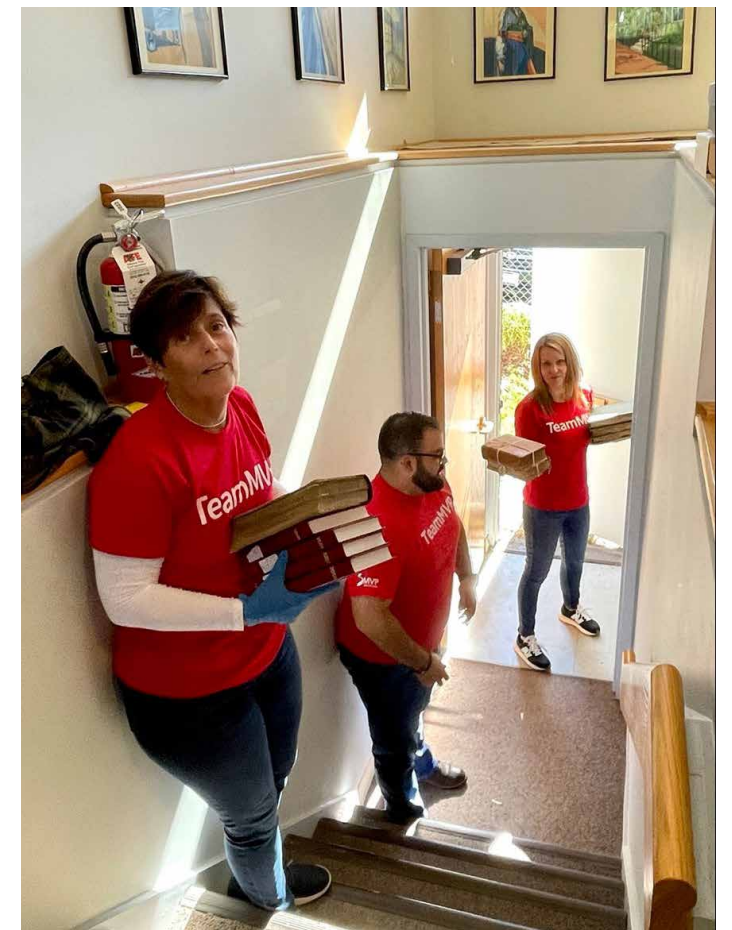


Photo: Volunteers from MVP have been a huge help in moving the archives.

Around the County with Bill Buell, County Historian

by Bill Buell, County Historian

In the long line of scientific geniuses and enterprising businessmen that make up the General Electric success story, Joseph Pacifus Ord isn't among the most famous.

But, if you listen to local historian George Wise, who knows the General Electric history and its impact on Schenectady as well as anyone, he probably should be.

A native of Monterey, California, and born in 1852, Ord headed east to make both his mark in life and his fortune. After graduating from Yale in 1873 and becoming a lawyer, he joined Thomas Edison's close circle of associates in 1890 and worked hard to promote the merger of the inventor's company with that of Thomson-Houston Electric in Lynn, Massachusetts. That happened in 1892, and Ord soon became comptroller and vice-president for the new General Electric before resigning in 1902 at the age of 50.

But, while he was a key individual in the formation of GE, Ord may have also been the sole reason the company remained in Schenectady during hard financial times in 1895.

Wise – a former GE employee himself where he worked as a communication specialist for GE Global Research – has already produced two big works on GE: a book titled “Willis Whitney: General Electric and the Origins of U.S. Industrial Research,” and “Edison's Decision,” an on-line product available through the website of the Schenectady County Historical Society. Still, there are new stories about Edison's company which pop up every now and then, and Wise never tires of learning more about the place where he worked for 26 years before retiring in 1998.

“I knew a little bit about Joseph Ord but I recently came across another very interesting story which suggests he was the man who saved Schenectady back in 1895,” said Wise. “He really should be much more famous, because he was an important figure in keeping GE in this city instead of it moving to Depew, out near Buffalo.”

The story goes, according to Wise, that in July of 1895, Ord spoke before the Schenectady Board of Trade, informing them that if GE wasn't given more room to expand, they were heading out to western New York or possibly Cleveland. “He claimed, in sworn testimony, that GE had been made an offer to move, and that he was the only member of the company's executive committee that had held out against it,” said Wise. “He said how the executive committee was eager to

accept this offer, but if the board could buy out Kruesi Avenue and allow GE to expand, then they would stay. GE needed room to build more buildings and it was a hard financial time. They had almost gone bankrupt the year before.”

The Board of Trades, a relative newcomer to Schenectady, agreed to Ord's suggestion and various businessmen donated funds totaling \$40,000 to eliminate much of Kruesi Avenue and turn it into part of the GE campus.

“Ord had a reputation as an honest man, but when you see a story like this, which was widely reported in the Daily Union, you have to wonder if it's true,” said Wise. “Was he the only one who held out? Or, like Edison had done before, did GE just want to pay a little less and have the city pay a little more. Did they make up the whole story just to get a better deal?”

According to contemporary historian Austin Yates, the city and GE both wanted to “clean up” Kruesi Avenue over concern “for the morals of its workers.” That area was notorious for its gambling houses and other vices. Wise doesn't endorse that idea, and suggests that Ord's proposal was strictly made for financial reasons.

“Who knows exactly what the story was, but GE said it needed more room or they were moving, and they stuck to that story,” said Wise. “So maybe he was the guy who saved Schenectady. When you think about what Schenectady would be without GE, he's a pretty important guy.”

Ord died in 1913, just 10 years after marrying Susan Van der Poel of Albany. The couple had one daughter, and remained in the area after he left GE, residing at 459 State Street in Albany, while also maintaining a summer home on Lake Champlain. He had been a member of Albany's Fort Orange Club and according to the Engineering and Technology History website, he “possessed a natural sense of humor and literary talents of a high order,” and also had “the gift of witty and frequently caustic repartee.” The website also called him “fearlessly truthful.”

As a volunteer at the historical society and miSci, Wise says he will continue to look into GE's past and tell stories about the company's fascinating workforce. For those of us who love looking back in time, knowing that Wise, a Cleveland native, is still immersing himself in local history, is a reason for joy. Both miSci collections vice-president, Chris Hunter, and SCHS librarian-archivist, Marietta Carr, say they're happy to have Wise working with them.

“George was one of the first people to recognize the value of the GE photo collection and helped save it,” said Hunter. “He also recognized the need for an organization devoted to Schenectady's history of invention and innovation.”

“George has been an invaluable resource,” said Carr. “He has lent me his considerable local knowledge to answer questions from researchers, identify photographs and drawings in collections. He is a regular contributor to the SCHS newsletter and blog, providing new insights into Schenectady and GE history. I'm excited to continue working with him in the library and look forward to learning from his research pursuits.”

George was also a valuable resource to me when I reported on GE and its history for the Gazette from 2000-2019. The county is fortunate to have such an individual dedicated to preserving the region's history.

Photo: The infamous Kruesi Avenue after GE took it over, during the Mohawk flood of October 1903.



Chris Yates: Meet the *Other* Chris Yates

by John F. Gearing

A Conversation with Christopher Yates and Christopher Yates

On a warm summer evening not too long ago, after finishing one of my “Drink the Seasons” programs for the Historical Society at the Brouwer House, I sat down on one of the benches that bracket the front door. Watching the last rosy sunset hues fade to blue-gray, I tried to imagine the house, the street, the neighborhood, as it would have been in 1772. Closing my eyes, I listened for the murmur of voices drifting out of open windows; of husbands and wives recounting their day to each other, of children giggling, of merchants closing their accounts for the day, and artisans putting up their tools and closing shop. As the sunset deepened into gloaming, silence would have descended on the old dorp.

Breaking my reverie, I stood up to leave, when I saw a pair of peculiarly dressed men walking toward me up Church Street. I took them to be historical re-enactors, for they were both wearing buckle shoes, stockings, breeches (one light, the other tan), waistcoats (blue, and green), and cutaway jackets (dove gray, and fawn). They were hatless, but seemed to have longish hair, combed back. They stopped before me. Then the first man spoke.

“Permit me to introduce myself. I am Christopher Yates.”

“Permit me to introduce myself. I am Christopher P. Yates,” said the other, and they smiled thin smiles at me.

“May we join you?” the first Yates asked, and without waiting for an answer the two of them climbed up the steps and sat down side by side on the bench opposite me. Thus began a remarkable conversation between the three of us. I set my phone to record, but when I checked it later, I found it had only recorded the ambient noise around us. What follows is my recollection of the conversation.

JFG: What...ah...what...is going on?

CY: It's come to our attention that in 2022 there is quite a bit of confusion about Christopher Yates, wouldn't you say?

CPY: Oh, indeed. Funny how a misunderstanding can grow legs and go prancing into the future. That's what we wanted to talk to you about. In your time I think the phrase would be 'to set the record straight.'

JFG: Alright, what you are saying then, is that there are TWO Christopher Yates?

CY: Exactly so, sir. I am Schenectady's Christopher Yates. My father was Joseph Yates and my mother was Eva Fonda, daughter of Jellis. I was born on July 8, 1737. I grew up here in the town of Schenectady, which it seems was almost as large as the size of your county today.

CPY: I am Christopher P. Yates. I was born in 1750 in Canajoharie, in what was then Tryon County. I married Maria Frey shortly before the war broke out. My brother-in-law, and one of my closest friends, was Major John Frey. Another, his brother Hendrick Frey, was a loyalist who fought against us in the British Army. Our war was, I believe, much more a “civil war” than the later conflict in your history I have heard of.

CY: I couldn't agree more. I married Jannetje Bradt in 1761. One of her sisters married John Butler, a business associate of Sir William Johnson of Johnstown, who was one of the wealthiest men in the colonies. The Butlers had a son, Walter, my nephew by marriage, who practiced law. Though I fought in the American cause, John Butler led a Loyalist force called “Butler's Rangers.” His son Walter was an officer in that unit. They were widely blamed for massacres like the one at Cherry Valley. By contrast, my sister, Thanneke, married Col. Cornelius Van Dyke of the New York Line.

CPY: I knew Walter well, as he and I both practiced law in Tryon County. And I knew his father too, of course. In those days everyone seemed to know everyone else.

JFG: Can you each tell me more about the parts you played in the Revolution?

CPY: Certainly. I was present at the very first meeting of the Palatine Committee of Safety. Being a man of learning, I drafted our letters, resolutions, and our association. I was elected chairman, and later became chairman of the Tryon County Committee of Safety for a time. And I was one of the two representatives chosen from Tryon to attend the Provincial Congress. Once the war was underway, I was commissioned as a Major in the Continental Service. Before the war ended, I resigned my commission and returned to Tryon County and continued supporting our fight. After the war I became the first county clerk of the new Montgomery County, and built myself quite a reputation as a trial lawyer. I also served as Surrogate for a time. I lived in the county until my death in 1815.

CY: And I was elected chairman of the Schenectady Committee of Safety, albeit we did not organize here as early as they did in Tryon. I did not stay long as chair, as I joined the militia as an officer. I first served to lead a unit, many of whom were from Schenectady, operating sawmills and building boats at Skenesborough at the foot of Lake Champlain for use by General Arnold in the battle of Valcour Island. The following year, as Burgoyne approached, I directed my men as they cut trees to block the roads and



paths and waterways the enemy might use to advance southwards. Some said afterwards that our delaying tactics were critical in giving our army time to assemble and prepare the field at Saratoga. For the rest of the war, I served as a Deputy Quartermaster General for the Saratoga district, collecting and distributing supplies to our forces. I built a lovely house for myself and my family here on Front Street!

JFG: Did the two of you ever meet?

CY: Of course! In fact, there was at least one meeting of the Schenectady Committee of Safety at which Christopher P represented the Tryon Committee.

JFG: Which one of you has been called “one of the best informed and most efficient patriots in the Mohawk Valley?”

CY and CPY: We both have!

CY: That description was first used by an historian named Jephtha Simms in a book he published in 1845 with the rather convoluted title “History of Schoharie County and Border Wars of New York.” One sentence in that volume very clearly describes Christopher P. Yates in that fashion, not me.

JFG: How did it come to be used to describe Schenectady's Christopher then?

CPY: It was, first, Professor Jonathan Pearson's error. He

applied that phrase to Schenectady's Christopher in his 1873 book “Contributions to the Genealogies of the First Settlers of the Patent and City of Schenectady from 1662 to 1800.” Another title that's a real mouthful.

JFG: So, Professor Pearson got it wrong?

CY: He must have mis-remembered what Simms had written when he came to write his book. And then still later Howell and Munson's history of Schenectady repeated the mistake. Then it was repeated again by Willis T. Hanson in his “Schenectady in the Revolution.” Even pieces written in your own time have gotten it wrong!

JFG: Thank you, gentlemen, for clearing that up. I fear I've been remiss in not having offered you some refreshment. We could go inside and I could make you some tea?

CPY: Tea? Pardon me, but I think not, thank you.

CY: Haven't had a cup since 1764 and don't miss it.

As I was about to offer them coffee instead, the streetlights came on and the two Yates began to fade before my eyes.

“Wait,” I cried, “I must know – are you cousins? What relation are you?” They just smiled, and then Christopher P. said “that is a story for another time,” and they were gone.

initially available to me, but I wanted to continue. I found the research, and the conclusions I eventually came to, fulfilling. A few gracious members of the congregation assisted me in searching the Congregation's records and members' personal papers. Ultimately, our efforts turned up only a few documents related to the early history of Sisterhood.

Of course, without the founding of Gates of Heaven over 160 years ago, there would be no Ladies Auxiliary, Sisterhood, or the precedents set by the early operation of the Ladies Auxiliary. In 1854, the Schenectady Jewish community established its first Jewish congregation in the city, Sharei Shomajim, or Congregation Gates of Heaven as we know it today. This congregation was founded mainly by the Austrian and German Jews that had immigrated to the United States little more than a decade prior in the 1840s. As the Jewish population grew, additional Jewish congregations would be founded in the city; Agudat Achim, for example, was established in 1889, by diasporic groups of Russian and other Eastern European Jews, and Beth Israel followed between 1902-1905 primarily through the efforts of Hungarian Jews. All synagogues in Schenectady were initially founded as Orthodox, and would later stay or diverge into other branches of Judaism, such as Reform or Conservative.

In 1897, more than four decades after the organization of Congregation Gates of Heaven, the Ladies Auxiliary formed as a branch of the synagogue. Women were, of course, instrumental in the founding and organizing of the synagogue body, though their efforts were largely behind the scenes. The Ladies Auxiliary would become “the right arm” of Congregation Gates of Heaven over an extended period of time, and would eventually become what we now know as the Sisterhood branch of the congregation.

Although there had been a formal congregation created in 1854, Congregation Gates of Heaven did not acquire a physical synagogue until 1865 when they acquired their first building on Ferry Street. During the congregation's first decade, services were held in community members' homes, rotating week by week to different house-holds. The Ladies Auxiliary continued this practice, and held their meetings in the homes of various members, as there was no designated space for the auxiliary within the synagogue quite yet. The auxiliary was organized by two women, a Mrs. Jonathan Levi and a Mrs. Julius Davidson.

Due to a lack of historical records relating to Ladies Auxiliary meetings, the first names of these women and other Auxiliary members have been lost to time, so we now only know them by their husbands' names. In the group's founding year of 1897, the Ladies Auxiliary of Congregation Gates of Heaven was composed of only a few members; less than ten people made up the body of this membership. However, this number would grow to over thirty within a decade. The women of the membership each held true to themselves values they found to be beneficial to the congregation. This was to facilitate the amelioration of the Temple, but to also hold a collective spirit of compassion for those both within and separate from the

synagogue's immediate community. It was these determined and altruistic women who, at the turn of the 20th century, planted the seed for the formation of the modern Sisterhood.

Women hoping to join the ranks of the Ladies Auxiliary in its early years were handpicked by the president and the few other officers within the group. The auxiliary would hold a vote on each prospective new member, and acceptance into the auxiliary was an indication that you were well received and respected by other members of the congregation. Imagine yourself as a young woman during the earliest years of the 20th century, a fresh face to the congregation and hoping to make some connection with the respected women of the auxiliary.

In 1907, Ms. Sidonia Stark (born 1888), a young woman of about 19 who was just becoming a member of the congregation, and a resident of Schenectady, went through the process of becoming a member of the auxiliary. A brief letter written by Stark documents the process of joining the group. Stark recounted the anxiety of waiting on the porch of a fellow congregation member's home, while the auxiliary officers inside voted on her membership status. Imagine the feeling of facing the scrutiny of your peers in such a way!

Stark also described her eventual acceptance into the membership, and having to face an immediate fundraising challenge: hosting the Kaffee Klatch. The Kaffee Klatch was a common means of fundraising for the auxiliary in its early years. Kaffee Klatch literally translates from German to “coffee” (Kaffee) and “gossip” or “scandal” (Klatch). These meetings, however, had nothing to do with gossiping, and instead were used as a platform to socialize and to discuss the best methods for supporting the Temple. The Kaffee Klatch brought in a considerable amount of money from the Ladies Auxiliary members themselves. When attending each meeting, all members were expected to contribute financially. Stark recalled a fee of about \$0.15 with every attendance, and an additional \$0.05 fee would be added on at the next meeting should you have missed the last. In 1907, one dollar was equivalent to approximately thirty dollars today, meaning at every Ladies Auxiliary meeting, members were asked to pay the equivalent of a \$5 attendance fee. All money collected at the meetings was donated directly to the Temple. When the Ladies Auxiliary admitted new members, the newcomers were expected to host a Klatch themselves.

Hosting the Kaffee Klatch required a strenuous amount of baking, and enough courage to present your baked goods to all the respected ladies. The pressure was certainly on! The key item expected at the Klatch was the kuchar. “Kuchar,” similar to the standard German word, “Kuchen,” translates to cake. In her letter, Stark remembered the look of horror upon the faces of fellow auxiliary members when she presented them with cake rather than kuchar at her first Kaffee Klatch attempt. Indeed, Kuchar translated simply to cake may be a bit deceiving. Rather than the typical Betty Crocker style cake we all know, Kuchar is more similar to a coffee cake. It's likely this mix-up on Stark's part was due to nerves; which, she had

written, were quite high!

Today's iteration of the Ladies Auxiliary is now called the Sisterhood of Congregation Gates of Heaven. However, regardless of the name, both organizations serve the same purpose: continued betterment of the Temple, including fundraising, community, and educational work. This, however, begs the question: How did the Ladies Auxiliary become the modern Sisterhood? The answer to this question demonstrates the Ladies' Auxiliary's relationship with the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods.

Another document, written by long-standing Sisterhood member Hester Shapiro, sheds some light on this topic. In her 1963 account, Shapiro considered the existential question facing the auxiliary in those early years, a question prompting some conflict: to join the the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS) or not. The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods was founded in 1913 after women from over 50 US congregations met in Cincinnati, Ohio, with the intention of uniting each women's branch associated with a synagogue or Temple. The organization placed a great emphasis on the local aspect of religious life, and encouraged Sisterhoods to focus predominantly on supporting their respective Temples. The NFTS also focused specifically on uniting those practicing Reform Judaism, and through this unification, supporting social service efforts such as Jewish education became a necessity. Gates of Heaven had transitioned to Reform Judaism from Orthodox Judaism by 1907, meaning the Ladies Auxiliary's only reservation in joining NFTS was financial. When joining NFTS, the Ladies Auxiliary would be obligated to surrender some of their profits to the NFTS headquarters, rather than donating it all directly to the Temple. In return, they would receive some benefits, including access to grander methods of fundraising through the national benefit. This, according to Shapiro, divided the Ladies Auxiliary for some time, until they finally decided to join in 1925, thus becoming a “Sisterhood.” Before the Sisterhood's incorporation into the NFTS, other means of fundraising aside from Kaffee Klatches included bake sales and luncheons. Now, with the addition of NFTS membership, the Sisterhood was able to hold fundraising events that surpassed their initial efforts. Some of which included larger scale bazaars, art gallery shows, dances, and the annually held garden party in Brandywine Park.

There are many newspaper articles published in local outlets throughout the early to mid-20th century detailing the fundraising work of the Sisterhood, but that was not the only aspect of their mission to support the Temple. Sisterhood members often stepped up to take positions of authority when there were those in need of guidance or support. Congregation Gates of Heaven, during the decade following 1920, experienced some turbulence. Without a Rabbi permanently in place to assist in guiding the Congregation, the community was somewhat in a state of limbo. Without a permanent Rabbi, the Sunday children's school was often left unattended. Members of the Sisterhood, however, took over the Sunday school in 1926 and led it quite successfully, guided by their strong faith and compassion for others. The Sisterhood also

placed a large emphasis on community outreach, outreach that extended past the Gates of Heaven synagogue body and out into broader Schenectady. The Sisterhood held large luncheons and public suppers, feeding hundreds of people within the community throughout the 20th century. The Sisterhood advertised these public luncheons and suppers quite often in local newspapers, mainly the Schenectady Daily Gazette. Additionally, the Sisterhood engaged in intra-faith events with other local synagogues, hoping to create an even deeper sense of community and compassion for Jewish residents of Schenectady. An intra-faith play titled “Universal Sisterhood” was advertised in the Schenectady Daily Gazette on November 1st of 1967. Sisters from Gates of Heaven, Beth Israel, and Agudat Achim all contributed to the creation of this play, including the stage art and music. Yet, the most important factor of the play was the togetherness of the Sisters and the community at large.

Looking to the present day, I was curious to see how the Sisterhood is faring today. 2022 marks the 125th anniversary of the Sisterhood. They have a page on the congregation website that appears to be active, with some small gatherings happening every here and there, and even a modern Kaffee Klatch called Conversation & Coffee. I was fortunate to be able to speak with Ann Cramer about the present-day Sisterhood one August evening. Ann Cramer is a former president of the Sisterhood, serving in this position from 1975 to 1977, and she served as the first female president of Congregation Gates of Heaven from 1986 to 1989.

We spoke for about an hour over the phone, and I was saddened by what she had to say regarding the state of the Sisterhood. When Cramer first joined the Sisterhood in the mid 1960s, there were over 150 members. Today, this number has dropped to about 50, and has continued to dwindle since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Sisterhood, she told me, has been losing the funding needed to participate in their pre-pandemic activities. Morale seems to be down as well. Before the pandemic, the Sisterhood was able to engage with charities and soup kitchens, such as the Salvation Army Kitchen and the Regional Food Bank. Today, however, many members feel unsafe working in close conditions in these contained areas. As a result, these activities have diminished.

The Sisterhood, however, does continue to fundraise for local and regional charities that need assistance; it is simply done from a distance. Another big change is the lack of Sisterhood board officers. In its early years, the Sisterhood had a full slate of officers including a president, secretary, and treasurer. Cramer tells me as little as five years ago there was a full slate, but the pandemic ended this practice, and no members have felt the pull to step up and lead the Sisterhood. There is, of course, no right or wrong in this situation. The Sisterhood is dwindling, and the lack of incentive to lead a congregation branch in this state is conceivable. But the frustration present, and the desire for the Sisterhood's survival is fully understandable. Today, the Sisterhood depends partially on the Judaica Shop, a small store selling items such as

menorahs, mezuzah, and jewelry, for programming funds.

For Cramer, the state of the Sisterhood is a personal one. Cramer’s mother, Lena Gershon, was an active member of the Sisterhood for many years after she and her family joined the congregation in 1948. Cramer recalls being excited to participate in Sisterhood activities with her mother as a child, such as the mother-daughter dinners that were occasionally held. “It was very exciting to me as a kid, but these are the times,” she explains.

Cramer hopes that within the near future a spark will ignite within the Sisterhood, allowing the membership to flourish once again. Although the Sisterhood has always served the greater community, right now it appears it must heal itself,

and determine the best way to support those within the Sisterhood and the congregation. Cramer hopes to encourage active members in the Sisterhood to speak up regarding their concerns and needs towards the branch. Of course, the Sisterhood will always continue its compassionate practices of community outreach no matter its state.

As Cramer stated: “We are not just camped on Ashmore Avenue for ourselves. We recognize we can do something good for the community when the need arises...and that is all relative, I think, from a Jewish perspective. We have always helped the greater community.”

Around Schenectady Historical!

Below: The kids' craft project at this year's FallFest
Right: A dance performance at Mabee Farm's Sound Immersion event; Farmer John with his bumper crop of squash; the final day of Schenectady City School District field trips to Mabee Farm

Photo Credit: Noelle Lennard, Mary Zawacki, Daily Gazette



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Volunteer Spotlight: Olivia Marine



by John Angilletta

Working outdoors and a love of local history are what first attracted Olivia Marine to become a volunteer with the Schenectady County Historical Society.

Olivia, who began her volunteering last year at the

Mabee Farm started the hard way by working in the fields and gardens at the farm. She helped with both the harvesting last year and the planting this spring. She has also assisted our staff in caring for our expanding family of animals at the Mabee Farm.

Olivia's interest in local history was piqued by archaeology courses she took at SUNY Schenectady, as well as courses in anthropology and archeology when she attended SUNY Stony Brook. All of this makes for a perfect fit as a SCHS volunteer.

She tells us that her favorite thing about volunteering is working outdoors and helping out at our many special events. She recently helped out at the membership table at the Arts and Crafts Festival, and was in charge of the popular mulled cider station at the FallFest.

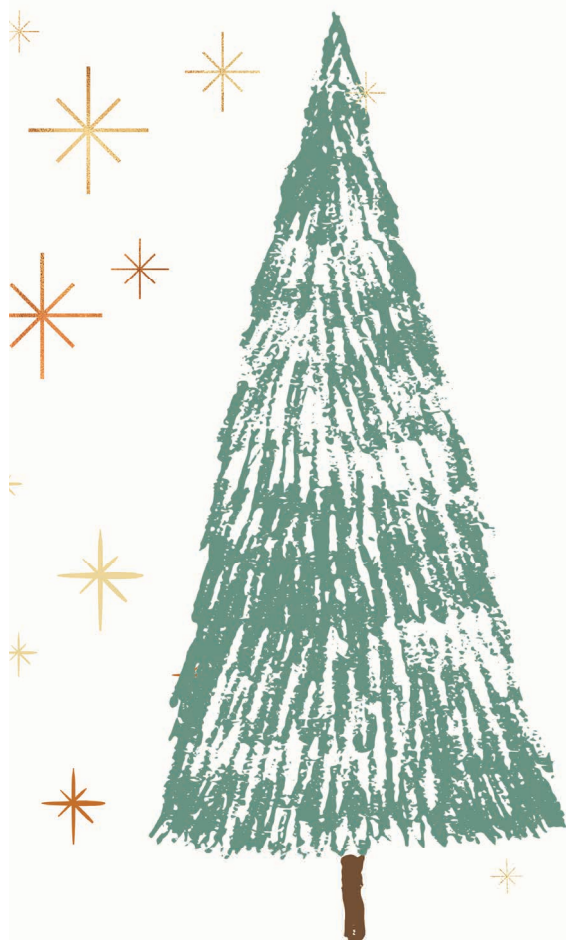
As a recent homeowner Olivia spends much of her free time working on her new home. When she does have some real free time she enjoys playing music.

SCHS is fortunate to have great volunteers like Olivia and we hope that she remains a part of our volunteer family for many years!

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