

Schenectady County Historical Society



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The Often Overlooked Overseers of Schenectady's Poor

by Michael Diana

In March of 1830, Christopher C. Peek and Cornelius F. Van Santvoord mulled over a fateful decision. Both were prominent men in Schenectady, with respectable fortunes and land holdings. They had gone to visit the Holway family, a family with little money or property to distinguish them. While we do not know where the Holways lived, we might imagine they occupied some shanty on the outskirts of town, scraping together a living as best they could. We don't know if the Holway parents were well meaning people who had simply fallen on hard times, or if they were neglectful parents who would not provide for their child. But the fact that Peek and Van Santvoord had been called to evaluate them shows that the Holways failed to meet their neighbors' expectations of a respectable household. And indeed, Peek and Van Santvoord passed a harsh judgment: the Holways were paupers and were unable to properly care for their child. As a result, Benjamin Holway, aged just four years and eleven months, was taken from the home and bound out as a servant to another family. The human emotions of the moment, whatever they may have been, are not preserved through the centuries. Were the parents somehow reassured that their child might have a better upbringing in a more prosperous home? Or did they cry and plead to keep their child as we might expect them to? While we might not understand this decision at first, we shall see that Peek and Van Santvoord were acting within the scope of their duties. And we shall see that this was once a common occurrence in our city.

At the turn of the 19th century, Schenectady vested a select group of men like Peek and Van Santvoord with a unique power and title. These men were known as the Overseers

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www.schenectadyhistorical.org

Letter from the President

I expect most of you will join me in hoping that this year will go down in history as that in which the Covid pandemic released its hold on our society. You may also recall the articles about our country's preparedness for it, and whether we had adequately applied the lessons of history. I wonder how many of you spent time (as I did) in early 2020 reading about the history of the flu pandemic of 1918-20. I found myself feeling grateful for the historians who documented that event, and wondering how future generations will remember this one. I hope that as fellow history lovers, you appreciate the importance of applying some of society's resources to such pursuits. A recent book titled *Schenectady's Battle Against Contagious Disease*, co-authored by two of our past Trustees, details our local history regarding pandemics dating back more than 200 years.



Another historical perspective I'd like to share: my son gave me a book a few years ago titled simply *1920*, in which Eric Burns details many social, cultural, economic and political events during that eventful year, and their relationship to and impacts on the present day. I also recently completed Joseph Ellis' *His Excellency*, the first book I've ever read about George Washington. I find that the more I learn about our country's past, the better I'm able to deflect the doom and gloom that too frequently colors our perceptions of the present. I encourage you to try this approach.

SCHS' stated mission (at [HTTPS://SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG/ABOUT](https://schenectadyhistorical.org/about)) is to "share stories, inspire dialogue, and encourage understanding of the history, people and cultures of Schenectady County." Our vision is to "strengthen our community as an increasingly vital destination and resource for exploring history." These are both referred to in our Strategic Plan (available at the same link), which, as you read in this letter last year, the Board has been revisiting for a year now. Although it seems like just a few months! We have a vibrant and dedicated group of Trustees engaged in this process, and we have already made some changes to our organization in consolidating and simplifying our committee structure, and creating a clear "job description" of the Trustees' role. Our bylaws will be updated to reflect these and other changes, and we look forward to your review and participation in the approval of these changes in April.

While this will be old news as you receive this letter, I enjoyed decorating three trees at the Festival of Trees in December, and recently enjoyed volunteering to help take the trees down as we make room for the next exhibit at 32 Washington Ave. I want to thank all of our volunteers for their service to SCHS in 2022, and I look forward to seeing you at our volunteer appreciation event in the spring to meet and thank you personally. Check your e-mail for details!

Here's hoping that your 2023 will be a year of enjoyment and personal growth. I'm looking forward to seeing you at some of our events.

Dr. Mark Vermilyea, SCHS President



A Note From the Director

Though it's not a book about museums – not really, anyway – in the 2013 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Goldfinch*, author Donna Tartt spends a lot of time talking about old things. The kind of old things we cherish at SCHS. Old houses with creaking floorboards. Old furniture, from jumbled up Frankenstein dressers to fine Sheraton chairs. Old paintings – faded, maybe, but ever evocative and compelling.

I don't think I'm spoiling the book's ending for anyone when I quote Tartt on mending, preserving, and experiencing old things:

"Isn't the whole point of things – beautiful things – that they connect you to some larger beauty? Those first images that crack your heart wide open and you spend the rest of your life chasing, or trying to recapture, in one way or another? If a painting really works down in your heart and changes the way you see, and think, and feel, you don't think, 'oh I love this picture because it's universal, because it speaks to all mankind.' That's not the reason anyone loves a piece of art. It's a secret whisper from an alleyway. *Psst, you. Hey kid. Yes you. An individual heart-shock.*"

I know this feeling of "heart-shock." I've felt it in museums and historic houses, when I encounter an artifact that seems to speak directly to me, across centuries or even cultures. It's transportive. And I'm willing to bet you've felt it too; you've seen something deeply beautiful or moving, and felt

connected to something larger than yourself.

In a sense, it's why we visit museums, galleries, and historic sites. To learn, yes, but also to experience "heart-shock." We immerse ourselves in history and art to transcend our own experience, and open our minds and hearts to something larger. To glimpse the bigger picture, so to speak.

At least, that's why I visit history museums – I'm always trying to have my heart cracked open again.

And it's a big reason why, at SCHS, we're so keen on sharing "old things" with you. We want you to have every opportunity to have your heart cracked open by history. Because – and I think you'll agree – it's one of the best feelings in the world. And you don't have to travel very far to experience it.

I hope to see you at our sites or virtual programs in 2023. Check out our calendar – we have so much going on, and so many ways to connect with history.

Wishing you a joyous and beauty-filled New Year.

Mary Zawacki, SCHS Executive Director

What's Happening at SCHS

Please view our full calendar of events at SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG. Most programs require advance tickets, or, for members, an RSVP.

Talks

A Frontier Place: The Transformation of Colonial Albany, 1756-1763 with Dr. Elizabeth George

January 12 at 7pm @ Online | \$8, members free

Albany residents' interactions with the British army transformed Albany's insular backcountry culture. As the region became less isolated and more connected, it resulted in a blurring of cultures that was a hallmark of the ever-westward New York borderland.

Uncharted Waters: Diving into the Holdings of the NYS Archives with Jane Wilcox

January 14 at 2pm @ 32W | \$8, members free

Come learn about both familiar and obscure resources that will help you advance your New York research!

Industrial Policy in Eastern New York with Carlos Balsas

January 26 at 7pm @ Online | \$8, members free

Balsas will discuss urban industrial transformations occurring in NYS, and if recent projects on former industrial sites in Upstate NY succeeded at creating long-term, well-paying jobs.

Schenectady Aflame: The Great Fires of the 19th Century with Chris Leonard

February 4 at 2pm @ 32W | \$8, members free

City Historian Chris Leonard will discuss the four major fires that burned Schenectady, changing the face of the City forever. We'll also commemorate the 1690 Burning of Schenectady.

John Bradstreet's Raid with Ian Macpherson McCulloch

February 9 at 7pm @ Online | \$8, members free

McCulloch will provide the most detailed, thorough view of Bradstreet's raid ever produced, dispelling many of the myths that have grown up around the operation.

The Chiefs Now in This City: Indians and the Urban Frontier in Early America with Colin Calloway

February 16 at 7pm @ Online | \$8, members free

Native American people spent a lot of time in early American cities, primarily on diplomatic or trade business, but also from curiosity and adventurousness. Colin Calloway has gathered together the accounts of these visits.

Dining in America with Julie Johnson

March 4 at 2pm @ Mabee Farm | \$8, members free

Julie Johnson will discuss cooking and dining traditions in the American home during the 18th and early 19th centuries, using historic interiors and artifacts. Bring your appetites!

Alcohol, Sovereignty, and Social Segregation in New Netherland with Erin Kramer

March 9 at 5:30pm @ Online | \$8, members free

Kramer will discuss 17th century alcohol ordinances and their enforcement, uncovering the differences between Indigenous and Dutch interpretations of alcohol's destructive effects to community and sovereignty.

Christ Church Duanesburg Restoration Project

March 11 at 2pm @ 32W | \$8, members free

Christ Church Episcopal in Duanesburg, founded in 1793, is the oldest active and unaltered Episcopal Church in NYS. Rev. Alistair Morrison, current rector, and Steve Schrade, church historian, will share details of the church's history and the historic preservation work currently underway.

Where Did All the Slaves Go? With Michael Douma

March 23 at 6pm @ Online | \$8, members free

Join us for a virtual presentation by Georgetown Professor Michael Douma discussing a chapter from his forthcoming book, "The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York."

Edison, Westinghouse, Schenectady with George Wise

April 1 at 2pm @ 32W | \$8, members free

It's 1886 and the competition to electrify the US is on! Join George Wise, historian and author, to take a closer look at this important moment in technology and American history.

Investigations at the Yates Farmhouse, Glenville with Daniel Mazeau and Aaron Gore, archaeologists

April 15 at 2pm @ 32W | \$8, members free

Archaeologists with Beverwyck Archaeology recently completed field investigations for the Yates house and property in Glenville. They will discuss their findings.

ANNUAL MEETING featuring Dr. Lucianne Lavin: "Dutch-Native Relationships in Eastern New Netherland"

April 29 at 2pm @ Mabee Farm | \$15, members free

After a brief business meeting, we will welcome Dr. Lucianne Lavin, the published Director of Research and Collections at the Institute for American Indian Studies.

Tours

Walking Tour: Stockade Sacred Spaces

April 15 at 10am @ 32W | \$13, members free

The various churches of the Schenectady Stockade stand out for their beauty and storied history. In this tour, we'll explore these spaces and hear their stories from the people who keep them sacred today.

Black History Month

Lost Voices Tour of Mabee Farm

February 18 at 11am @ Mabee Farm | \$10, members free

Not everyone at the Mabee Farm was free to live and pass down their stories for posterity. The Farm was also home to generations of enslaved people whose voices have been lost to history. In this tour, we try to see the Mabee Farm as Schenectady's enslaved people would have known it.

A History Erased: Black Schenectadians of the 1800s

February 25 at 2pm @ 32W | \$8, members free

At the turn of the 19th century, hundreds of enslaved people in Schenectady became free. In the following decades they built a community separate and unequal from their white neighbors. In this program we'll screen SCHS' 2022 documentary, "A History Erased," and discuss this community, and how/why it ultimately disappeared

Museum After Dark

Full Moon Wolf Walk

January 6 at 5pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10, members free

Celebrate the Wolf Moon with an illuminated walk in the woods of the Woestyne. Afterwards, we'll make a fire in the Inn's historic fireplace, and share colorful stories from our area. Warm drinks will be served to fight off the night's chill.

Archives Open House + Reception

January 18 at 6:30pm @ 32W | Free but RSVP required

Our collections storage expansion is complete! Join us for a showcase of our new archival storage system as we toast the improvement with champagne!

Full Moon Snow Walk

February 3 at 5pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10, members free

Celebrate the Snow Moon with an illuminated walk in the woods of the Woestyne. Afterwards, we'll make a fire in the Inn's historic fireplace, and share colorful stories from our local area. Warm drinks will be served.

A Schenectady Valentine

February 10 at 6pm @ 32W | \$10

We'll delve into our archives of historic love letters to tease out the passion penned on the pages. Guests will be invited to hand craft a valentine of their own. We'll have plenty of hot chocolate and wine on hand!

For Families

Colonial Ice Cream Parlor

January 28 at 10am @ Mabee Farm | \$10, members free

In this family-friendly class, we'll make and taste a frozen custard, prepared the old fashioned way.

Mabee Maple Day

March 4 at 10am @ Mabee Farm | \$10 for everyone 5+

In this family-friendly program, you'll learn the maple syrup process for yourself from colonial techniques to later innovations. And of course, we'll be able to taste the results!

Barn Raising Workshop

April 22 at 11am @ Mabee Farm | \$10 for 5+, members free

Roll up your sleeves as we work together to build a giant model of our Dutch Barn. We'll learn period woodworking techniques, basic timber framing, and teamwork skills.

Workshops

Spring Wreath Workshop

February 11 at 10:30am @ Mabee Farm | \$45

Create a deco mesh wreath, including completing the wreath frame, cutting and attaching mesh, and installing your custom signs and embellishments, including your bow.

Watercolor Collage Workshop

March 11 at 10:30am @ Mabee Farm | \$45

After learning different watercolor painting techniques, we will create a free-flowing, abstract 9x12 painting.

Food and Drink

Schenectady Wine Society

March 2 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$30

We'll uncork the perfect wines to accompany your meals. Join City Historian, Chris Leonard and wine connoisseur, Buffy Leonard on a tasting and history tour of their favorite wines!

Drink the Seasons: Spring Equinox

March 16 at 5:30pm @ 32 Washington | \$30

In celebration of the equinox, join us for an evening of seasonal cocktails and more. Led by historian John Gearing, we'll sample a variety of vernal libations.

Malt 'n Moonshine at the Mabee Inn

April 8 at 2pm @ Mabee Farm | \$21

We'll warm up the Mabee Inn and show you how colonial peoples crafted beers and spirits. A simple malt beer and some classic Mohawk valley moonshine are on the menu!

Music, Festivals & More!

Earth Night at Mabee Farm

April 21 at 5-8pm @ Mabee Farm | Free

An evening of music, art, hikes, demonstrations, crafts, and workshops that honor Earth and our natural surroundings.

Library Open for Research!

The library is open for researchers again! Thank you for your patience and support while the library underwent our major storage upgrade. If you are interested in using our collection, please contact me at LIBRARIAN@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG or 518-374-0263, option 3, to schedule an appointment. Please contact me at least 2 business days prior to the date you request. Please use our online catalog and collection descriptions to compile a list of materials you would like to view during your appointment. For more information on research appointments, please visit: SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG/RESEARCH
- Marietta Carr, Librarian/Archivist

Blog Posts

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 recent and upcoming posts:

The Last Man's Club of Schenectady

by Diane Leone (November)

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.

The End of the Original Burr Bridge

by Lola Sheeran (December)

When the Burr Bridge was constructed in 1804, it was an engineering marvel. Like all infrastructure, it deteriorated over time. This post summarizes the final years of the bridge and the court case that ultimately led to its de-construction.

Mabelle Primmer: Early Schenectady Photographer

by Gail Denisoff (January)

The field of photography has been largely populated by men, especially in the early years. When we came across a 1915 ad for Mabelle Primmer's studio, we had to take a closer look.

AAHRP Update

by Marietta Carr (February)

SCHS recently received a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to fund the African American Historical Records Project. This post provides an update on the project, including work supported by funding from the County and the IMLS grant.

Billiards Legend Frank Taberski

by Lola Sheeran (March)

Occasionally we have cause to revisit earlier blog posts. In this case, library volunteer Lola Sheeran updated and expanded the previously published biography of local billiards player and business owner, Frank Taberski.

Review: "Spaces of Enslavement: A History of Slavery and Resistance in Dutch New York"

by Martin Strosberg

Andrea C. Mosterman, Associate Professor of History at the University of New Orleans, dispels the misconception that slavery was somehow more humane in Dutch and later, English New York, than it was on a Virginia plantation. Her remarkable book covers, in addition to New Amsterdam, the counties of Ulster, Kings, and Albany (which included Schenectady County until 1809) during the period 1620 to 1827 when slavery was abolished in New York.

Mosterman examines the limited written records where she can find them. Significantly, she looks at the physical space where the enslaved were confined. What she concludes is that the miseries of bondage increased over time. In the 17th century, the enslaved had more freedom of movement. They were able to access public spaces, including the Dutch Reformed Church. Into the next centuries, these avenues of mobility were cut off as more and more of the enslaved came to reside in the houses of families for whom they did the farm and domestic work. At night, they were confined to the wretched conditions of cellars and attics. Day or night, their space was arranged so that they could be closely monitored and controlled.

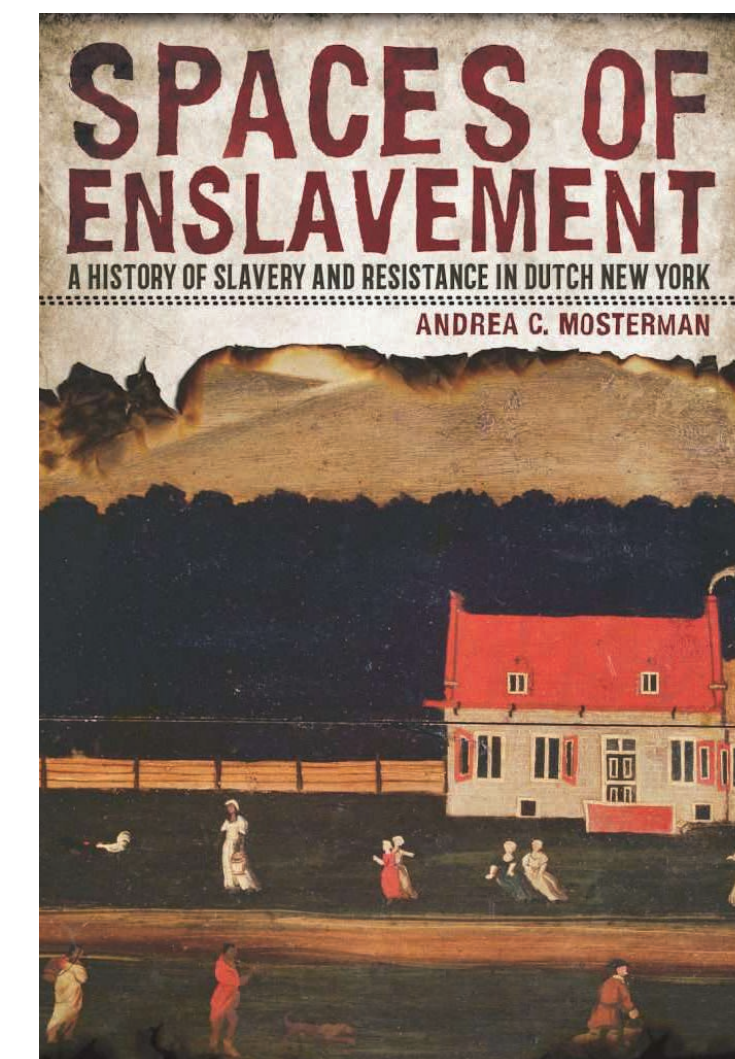
To illustrate this point, Mosterman takes us on an architectural tour of the Albany mansion (built 1761) of Philip Schuyler. Schuyler was one of the largest slaveholders in the area. We see how his 13 slaves lived in the cellar, closely guarded and carefully segregated from the family at night. The motivation for all this caution? Probably fear of violent retribution.

We should point out that in Schenectady County we have our own space to explore: the Mabee Farm Historic Site in Rotterdam Junction which is operated by the Schenectady County Historical Society. In *Slavery at the Mabee Farm*, a short documentary available on YouTube, Mike Diana, Historian and Director of Education, expertly guides us through the physical and documentary record of that tragic history. (SEE VIDEO AT [HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=QwYuSoSSM7U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwYuSoSSM7U).)

Much of Mosterman's book is devoted to telling the inspiring story of how enslaved people endeavored to overcome their limited mobility by creatively expanding the physical and psychological bounds of their restricted freedom. In doing so, they constructed an alternative narrative of their lives.

To be sure, this is a scholarly work; nonetheless, it is a rewarding read. In 2020, Mosterman's book received the Hendricks Award for best book-length manuscript presented by Albany's New Netherland Institute, an organization dedicated to casting light on America's long-neglected Dutch roots.

Andrea C. Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement: A History of Slavery and Resistance in Dutch New York*, Cornell University Press, 2021.



ARCHIVAL STORAGE OPEN HOUSE

@ SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL

Join us for a showcase of our new archival storage system as we toast the improvement with champagne!



Welcome, Caroline Brown!

by Noelle Lennard

There is a brand new face at SCHS. We are happy to welcome Caroline Brown as our inaugural Director of Development.

Caroline attended Barnard College in Manhattan as an undergraduate student. There, she completed a Bachelors of Arts double majoring in French and Russian. "At the time I was very passionate about language." Caroline explains. "My whole life growing up I was really into French. My senior year of high school I took a Russian class and thought it was really cool." Caroline explained to me her love for the Russian language was supplemented by her interest in Russian literature. After completing her undergraduate education at Barnard, she taught French for three years in Connecticut.

After teaching, Caroline decided to make a change and moved to Maine. "I moved to Maine with no plan in mind, at the time I didn't think a career in museums was a possibility!" While living in Maine, Caroline began working as an Education Intern, then Engagement Coordinator at the Brick Store Museum in Kennebunk. She cites her time at the Brick Store Museum as the spark that ignited her passion for museum work. Caroline then began working as the Assistant to the Director/Membership & Programs Coordinator at the Bowdoin Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine.

In 2020, Caroline began her Master's degree in History Museum Studies at the Cooperstown Graduate Program in Cooperstown, NY. While completing her graduate degree, she worked as a grant writer for the local chamber music organization, Musicians of Ma'alwyck, and at Old Sturbridge Village as a finance intern. Last January, Caroline became the Executive Director of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums, where she led the planning of two major museum conferences.

In November, Caroline joined the SCHS team as the Director of Development, a role which encompasses many responsibilities. "[I am] specifically working on the membership program, fundraising, events, Mabee Farm site rentals, and I'm sure much more in the future!" she explained. I asked Caroline what she is most looking forward to in her new position. "Just learning a lot! My focus will be finding ways that will be most effective to sustain the organization and allow SCHS to fulfill its mission."

Caroline is from Schenectady County and spent her childhood growing up in Niskayuna. "So much of my life was centered in downtown Schenectady, and actually, I lived in the Stockade as a baby!" Caroline tells me that originally being from Schenectady piqued her interest in SCHS. Today, Caroline resides in Oneonta with her partner, Will Kleffner, and their cat, Alix.

Caroline can be reached at DEVELOPMENT@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG

Happy new year from the newest addition to the Schenectady County Historical Society! I am delighted to have joined SCHS as the new Director of Development this past month and am honored to have been so warmly welcomed by my new colleagues and the SCHS community.



Schenectady holds a very special place in my heart. Having spent the formative years of my life here in this county, it is with unmitigated excitement that I return here in a professional capacity. It is such a privilege to use my background in museum administration and development in service of Schenectady's vibrant history and culture.

I am a passionate museum professional with a keen eye on the shifting future of cultural organizations. As we move into the post-pandemic era, it will be more important than ever to ensure the sustainability of organizations like SCHS that create unique and meaningful opportunities to explore our history and discover new ideas. In this newsletter, you can read about two development initiatives: **the Lockkeepers**, our circle of sustaining monthly donors, and **The 1661 Society**, our circle of supporters who have generously included SCHS in their legacy planning.

I look forward to meeting you this year in the SCHS galleries, on the Farm, or around town! Until then, feel free to contact me at DEVELOPMENT@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG.

Warmly,
Caroline Brown
Caroline Brown



The 1661 Society, named for the year Schenectady was settled, recognizes those generous individuals who are leaving a future legacy to SCHS. A planned gift offers many advantages, including the fulfillment of philanthropic goals and a reduction or elimination of estate tax liability.

We acknowledge a bequest intention or planned gifts of any size with membership in the 1661 Society. If you've already included SCHS in your giving plans, thank you! We would be delighted to include you in **The 1661 Society**. Kindly let us know your plans.



Lockkeepers—our circle of monthly donors—safeguard SCHS through the ebbs and flows of economic change and enable the stewardship of Schenectady's past, present, and future.

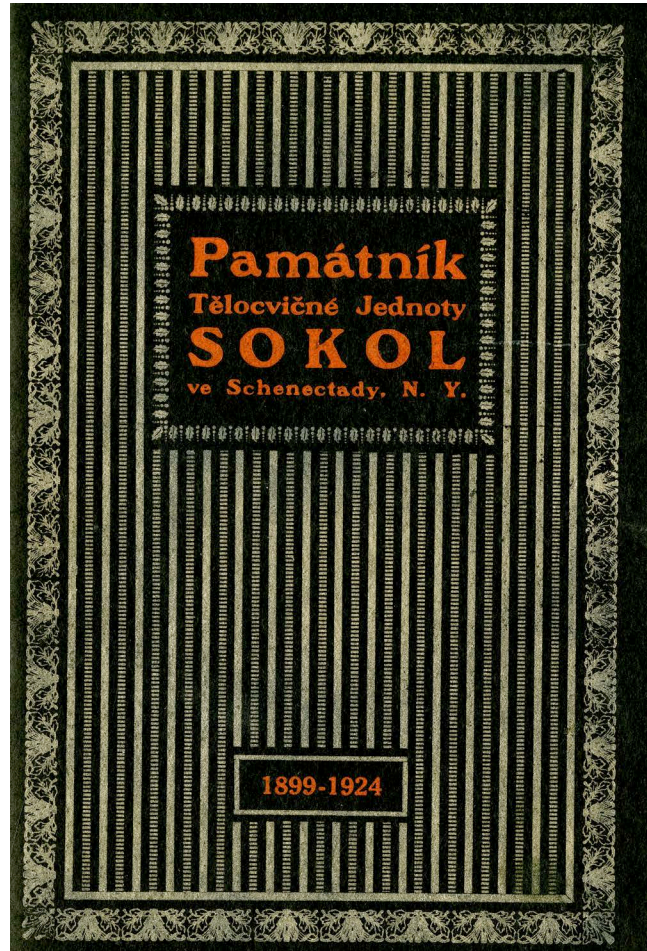
SCHS' mission. When you become a **Lockkeeper**, you know that each month, your gift directly supports the educational and preservation efforts of SCHS.

Why? Monthly giving allows SCHS to nimbly navigate the unanticipated needs that inevitably arise in the management of three treasured historic sites. Plus, your automatic gift reduces administrative costs, directing more funds toward

Join the **Lockkeepers** in making a consistent, meaningful impact through monthly donations by visiting SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG/GIVE

A Glance at the TJ Sokol Memorial Booklet

by Noelle Lennard



Schenectadians may remember the Czech cultural organization, TJ Sokol, which was located at Sokol Hall on Sixth Avenue. TJ Sokol, founded by Vaclav Cermak in 1899, was active within Schenectady until the 1960s. Sokol organizations were heavily involved with the cause of Czech patriotism, both here in the United States and abroad in Central and Eastern Europe. As part of the Czech patriotic movement, Sokol members sought Czech independence and emancipation from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which held control in Czech lands until its dissolution in 1918. Founded in Prague in 1862, Sokol organizations abide by the Latin principle of “Mens sana in corpore sano” or “a strong mind within a sound body.” This certainly rings true locally; TJ Sokol was known to emphasize the importance of group gymnastics and dance classes, all while preserving Czech cultural heritage in Schenectady.

Schenectady has long been home to a variety of local organizations that preserve and celebrate the diverse ethnic and cultural identities in Schenectady. With many immigrants making their home in industrial Schenectady, ethnic fraternal organizations were an essential way of building community. Take, for instance, the Schenectady Ancient Order of

Hibernians, an Irish Catholic fraternal organization dedicated to embracing Irish culture. Or, take the St. Andrew's Society of Schenectady, a men's social group dedicated to celebrating Scottish ancestry. Yet, compared to these other ethnic-based organizations, TJ Sokol stands out as a unique local entity. The organization's emphasis on physical activity within a social setting is unique and offers a distinct identity to Czech history in Schenectady. While other local ethnic groups offer collaborative and community activities to engage in, TJ Sokol's entire focus was to strengthen cultural identity through exercise, encouraging members to participate frequently in gymnastics, theater, and dance.

Within the archives of SCHS, there is a small designated collection of TJ Sokol-related documents and booklets. These documents largely contain information about the former members of TJ Sokol, as well as the organization's membership dues. One document recounts the founding of Sokol organizations in the 1860s and details the writer's desire to preserve its founding values. One booklet in particular, however, stands out among the rest. Among the yellowed membership lists, there lies a beautifully bound booklet. It is relatively small in size, with ornate detailing on the front cover. In angular letters, and a bold tangerine print, is the title of the book: *Památník Tělocvičné Jednoty SOKOL ve Schenectady* or *Memorial of the Gymnasium Jetnoy SOKOL in Schenectady*.

Among the trove of Dutch colonial history and genealogical documents in the library, this is a unique find. The booklet is written entirely in the Czech language in contrast to its companion documents, which are written in English. Through my superficial attempts at translation, I was able to peek into the early world of TJ Sokol for a moment. The booklet holds information about TJ Sokol from its chapter's founding in 1899, through its first twenty-five years of operation until 1924. Each year has its own dedicated section and overview of the group's annual concerns. As you turn the first page, you can see the seal of the Sokol falcon is printed above the organization's mission statement, proclaiming its steadfast commitment to the cause of Czech patriotism:

“...fervent love for the old country was our strength! And the longed for, great day came when everything burning and suffering ended, and the golden dream of the ancient glory of our ancestors was sealed with Czech blood.”

What follows through the 44 page booklet is a narrative that, while detailing mainly the economic struggles of TJ Sokol, also captures the interpersonal and emotional turbulence felt by the chapter.

The author of the booklet begins with an acknowledgment of the scarce Czech population in Schenectady at the founding of TJ Sokol. This lack of Czech residents interested in the organization is noted throughout the text. “[We,] following the example of other Czech settlements, founded the Sokol

Gymnasium in Schenectady, regardless of how numerically weak our Czech community was then [1899], we will surely understand that their task was not easy, and that considerable perseverance and courage were needed to overcome all difficulties and obstacles.”

These obstacles, as recorded by the author over a 25 year span, were indeed great. Due to the dearth of members (membership numbered about 15 people), TJ Sokol was at first dependent on donations in addition to its membership fee of 25 cents per month. The author cites \$10.95 as being the first substantial donation to TJ Sokol in 1899, but donations continued to be vital in supporting this small organization.

The determination of Sokol members to create a successful chapter, despite lack of membership interest, is strikingly clear. In 1899, Sokol's first year of operation, members were obligated to attend exercises twice weekly in order to drive participation. This was then increased to three times weekly. In an effort to appeal to local Schenectadians and drive membership, basketball was included in the available weekly exercises. “Since it was found that it would be best if our training membership included American sports as well, we purchased tools for the game ‘throwing in the basket.’” The club later purchased a pool table. In 1902, Sokol members purchased more furnishings for the gymnasium, including a jump bridge and a tool shed where members could participate in woodworking and tanning activities.

Additionally, in their founding year, Sokol began having conferences with the intent of forming a dramatic arts sector. This proved to be quite difficult, as members found their economic situations to fluctuate quite frequently. Later, in 1900, the creation of a drama sector was postponed because of “the great obstacles in its way.” But, six years later in 1906, efforts to expand the gymnasium and build a stage were successful with a budget of \$1,262. Yet, the stage itself was found to be questionable. “...the stage, which consisted of only a few boards placed on crates, threatened to collapse at any moment, and so there were doubts about how it would turn out.” Throughout the booklet, there is a considerable amount of personal notes added into the historical context of Sokol, mainly sporadic narrations of self-doubt on behalf of the author. Still, the efforts made by Sokol volunteers were not in vain, as the drama department continued to put on shows and, according to the author, became the main source of income for the chapter.

What is quite fascinating to me about this booklet is its function as a memorial of the organization, which today serves as a memorial to the Czech identity in Schenectady. Throughout its few pages, the author of *Památník Tělocvičné Jednoty SOKOL ve Schenectady* records each and every passing of its members. For instance, in October of the year 1907,

Brother Vaclav Cermak passed away. As a dedication to his passing, the author writes a memorial stating “[Sokol] calls on its members to all come quickly to the funeral of the deceased brother and thereby show their respect for his merits for the cause of Sokol and our unity. Honor be to his memory, because it will not disappear from our minds!” Similar sentiments are shared for each member who is recorded as passing. Of course, being such a small organization, it makes sense that there would be acknowledgement of deaths. Yet, beyond memorials to deceased members, a preoccupation with death pervades this entire booklet. The author's feelings of self-doubt and fear of failure emanate from each page, as if Sokol expected their organization to fail. Yet they kept on. In the conclusion of the booklet it is written:

“Did we fulfill our falconry tasks faithfully and enthusiastically? Judge for yourself! Our Sokol building was built with sacrifices and uncertainty. Let it be our Sokol temple.”

TJ Sokol of Schenectady no longer operates; it closed up shop about sixty years ago. Yet other local ethnic and cultural organizations still continue to persist in Sokol's wake. Why would such a unique organization cease operation? This may be due to Sokol's mission as an exercise group. While offering a variety of sports and drama activities is wonderful, not all people are bound to be interested in participating. Or, perhaps, it was Sokol's additional identity as a Czech patriotic chapter that diminished its popularity, as there were, as noted by the author, a lack of Czech Schenectadians that took interest. Of course, during the 1960s the shadow of the Cold War loomed over the world, creating an American social stigma against those of Eastern European descent. This may have been a contributing factor in TJ Sokol's dissolution, as Czechoslovakia was barred behind the Iron Curtain. The closing of TJ Sokol, however, remains a mystery. *Památník Tělocvičné Jednoty SOKOL ve Schenectady* acts as a rather sorrowful account of the organization, and the financial and social adversity the group faced. The booklet certainly deserves an analysis that affords extensive time to its content, and historians interested in local Czech history should consider this booklet as a great source of interest.

Editor's Note: Sokol USA (SOKOLUSA.ORG) still exists, and there appears to be a few active chapters (or “lodges”) throughout the northeast. Most lodges have, however, closed. Though today's American Sokol organization seems to have little to do with Czech patriotism, its mission is largely unchanged: “To promote a sound mind in a sound body through physical, cultural, moral and educational development of its members.”

Room to Grow in the Archives

by Marietta Carr, Librarian/Archivist

When I joined SCHS as the librarian in 2019, I was excited by the breadth and depth of the library's collections. We have materials that date back to 1670 and contemporary materials up to the early 2000s. Our collections include photos, maps, diaries, scrapbooks, ledgers, and documents of all shapes and sizes. Some of our photos are panoramics that measure 6 feet long! As I explored the collections and familiarized myself with the work of the previous librarians, I realized something pretty crucial: the library was running out of space! At the time, I estimated we had 3 to 5 years before we filled the shelves in the library's basement. Without shelves to properly store the materials, we would need to stop collecting the documentary and photographic evidence of Schenectady County's history. We needed to evaluate our options and come up with a plan before we reached that hard limit.

This isn't the first time the SCHS library and archives has outgrown its storage capabilities. When SCHS moved into its current home in 1958, one of the first undertakings was the creation of a map room to display the cartographic history of the area. The society then invested in securing a room to house the most fragile and valuable documents collected in the preceding fifty years. Within ten years, the society started planning to reconfigure and expand the physical space to accommodate the growing library and museum collections. The front room was converted into the research room and an extension to the back of the building created the Vrooman exhibit gallery. Still, the library collections grew, and researchers needed more space to access the materials. The Grems-Doolittle Library addition was added in 1992. At the time, the square footage seemed well beyond what was needed to house the collections.

In the thirty years since, SCHS has developed our collecting scope to better represent the diverse communities and industries in our county, which has led to an increase in the archival collections in our library. According to my colleagues and library volunteers, the library felt quite full in 2012, when a donation of a small set of compact, mobile shelves helped us accommodate these archival collections as well as some pieces from our art and portrait collection. However, ten years later, I found it was time to address the overall shelving configuration and find a way to maximize storage in the archival collections area. Fortunately, the SCHS leadership recognized the importance of proper storage and supported the proposal for additional compact and mobile shelves, museum-quality art racks, and professional installation.

The process for preparing and installing the shelving upgrade started in the summer of 2021 with site visits from shelving vendors. We decided the design from Donnegan Systems best fit our needs. We scheduled installation for mid-November. The biggest hurdle in the process was figuring out what to



Photos, left: A clean slate for moving the archives into their new, much larger home and the state-of-the-art painting storage system featuring moveable racks

Photo, above: Our overstuffed archives before the new storage system

do with the materials housed on the existing static shelves. Essentially, everything in the archival storage area needed to be removed or protected so the installation could move forward. The existing compact shelves could be closed and encased in plastic sheeting to protect the materials, but everything else, approximately 800 linear feet, needed to be brought to the library research room for temporary storage and then returned to the archival storage area once installation was complete. The library volunteers and I have spent the last year preparing the archival materials – ensuring everything was labeled, stored in correctly sized boxes, and stabilized for moving. We started moving the boxes into the research room in October with the help of volunteer groups. After the new system installation, we reversed the process and returned the collections to their permanent homes. Thank you to the volunteers from MVP, Boy Scout Troop 3072, and the

Schenectady Kiwanis Club who joined the SCHS volunteers and staff to move the collections! The work of these volunteers was invaluable.

There are a few final steps to wrap up this massive project, including updating our collections management system and shifting some materials to ensure we are using the new shelves effectively. We now have 65% more capacity for archival materials and our art collection has museum-quality storage! All of the SCHS staff and volunteers are excited by the new storage systems and look forward to continuing our collecting mission.

of the Poor and were charged with maintaining the social harmony of the young American city. References to this office haunt the obscure reaches of our archives. Upon first glance, this decidedly Orwellian title might give pause to the uninitiated, and elicit certain questions. A practical question might come first: Who are these people and what on earth did they do? Or perhaps a more historical query comes to mind: In a young republic that just fought for Revolutionary notions of liberty, why would the people accept such an institution as Overseer in their midst? Finally, we might just ask the moral dilemma: Who are these people, and what gives them the right to oversee anyone?

I don't know if I can answer any ethical questions here. The scarcity of documentation we have prevents any real analysis of the Overseers and their work. But I can attempt to explain the practical and historical dimensions of the Overseers of the Poor. We'll begin by identifying a persistent theme through human history that I'll call the problem of endemic scarcity. With that in mind, we'll see that Schenectady's Overseers of the Poor were not a radical innovation, but inheritors of an established tradition that fell well within the social norms of the 19th century. Then, we'll tackle the specific details of how the Overseers operated and the effects of their methods.

Part One: Society and the "Poor"

And so we begin with a very broad and philosophical discussion about the scarcity of vital resources that is endemic to the human condition. Sometimes these deficiencies are caused when society lacks the technology or physical resources to meet the needs of its population size. A severe drought, for instance, might cause mass casualties as wells dry up and harvests fail. But human need can also be caused by a social system that allocates resources in an inequitable way. You might recall that the Irish Famine of the 1840s was not caused by a lack of food, but by certain privileged groups in British colonial society hoarding the excess for themselves. Lastly, there will always be people who simply cannot provide for themselves within the economic system in which they live. A farmer in a premodern society, who goes blind after a severe illness, will be unable to produce food despite her best efforts to persevere in spite of her injury. And let's not forget, mental illness and disabilities long predate our ability to diagnose or treat them. A certain percentage of people in every society will be unable to function independently for such reasons. No economy, no culture – no matter how technologically advanced – has proven completely immune to scarcity in vital resources like food, shelter, or clean water.

Keep in mind that scarcity has a ruthlessly efficient way of correcting itself. Crudely put, when human need goes unaddressed, people die and the need is thus lessened. Of course, this grim fact didn't bother British economist Thomas Malthus much. But more reasonable people would take caution if not out of human decency than for purely pragmatic reasons. Because before the needy perish, they become desperate. Someone with nothing to lose tends to have few reservations breaking the social norms of their day. Perhaps

they steal a chicken or two to meet their immediate needs. Perhaps they question the social and economic systems that left them destitute. Or perhaps they might band together and start to demand change from the more privileged classes. Large populations of restless poor can throw a small town into turmoil, and bring an empire to its knees. The French Bourbon monarchy that dominated Europe in the 18th century was toppled not by foreign armies, but by hungry Parisian women who marched on Versailles looking for bread. And so throughout history, we can observe that every society had ways to provide relief for the poorest among them.

For example, we can look at our own society. In the modern era, there are a variety of means-tested programs at the Federal and state levels that distribute cash benefits based on certain income thresholds. These include things like Medicaid, SNAP or perhaps even free lunches for school children at the local level. Other wealthy nations offer even greater public benefits for their citizens. We modern Americans are somewhat spoiled by an unprecedented abundance of resources. Our post industrial economy produces more than enough food, more than enough housing, and could even afford to produce a host of luxury items for every living American. We choose not to do this for economic and moral reasons that we won't discuss here. But in the agrarian societies that predate the industrial revolution, the limitations of technology would have made it genuinely difficult, if not outright impossible, to provide a social safety net. Most families struggle just to meet their own caloric needs. And so alternative means were devised.

Part Two: The Origins of the Overseers

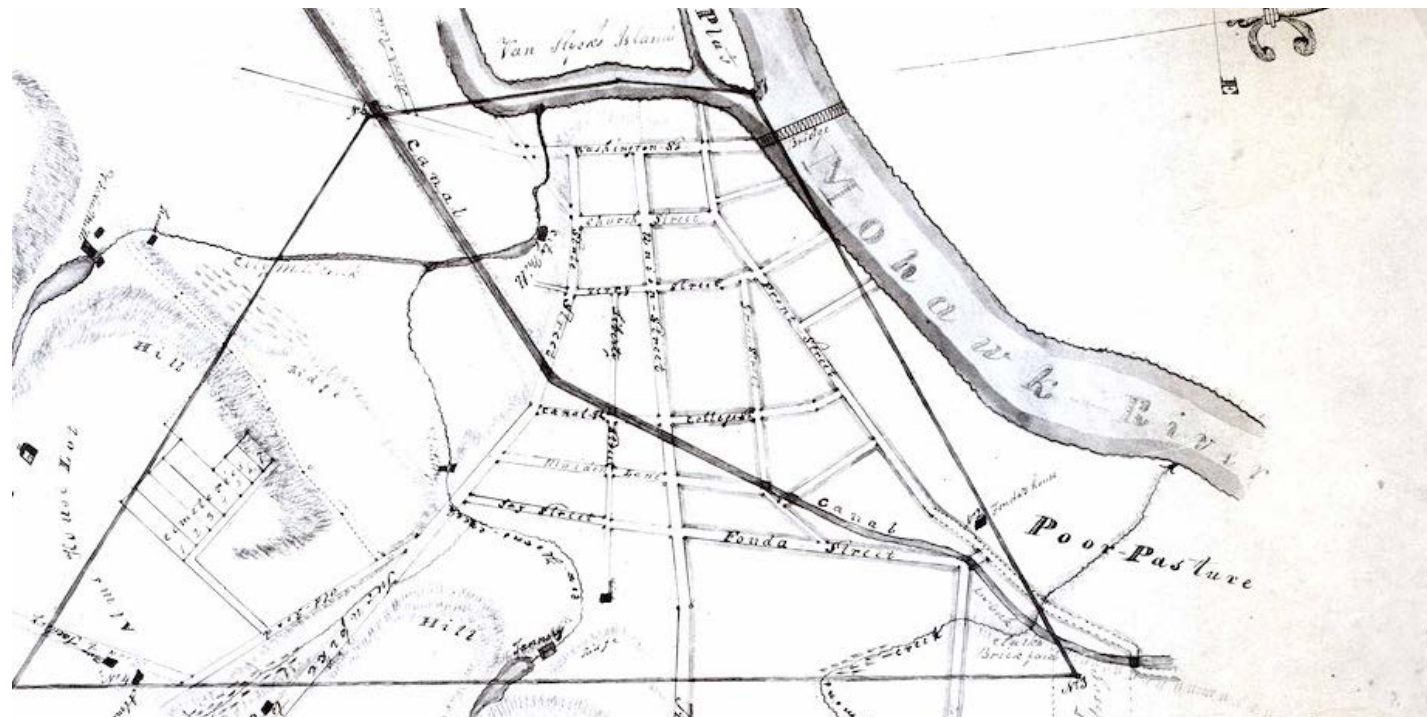
When Schenectady appointed its first Overseers of the Poor, it was drawing on a long tradition in the Anglo-American world of social welfare. We might find insights from "The Eighteenth Century Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor," edited by Eric Nellis and Anne Decker Cecere. In this work, Nellis and Cecere provide a succinct account of the Overseer institution from medieval England to colonial Boston. The Overseer institution was first created by acts of Parliament known as Poor Laws in the 17th century. These laws required each parish to elect Overseers. Their duties included collecting a poor tax, distributing money or food as necessary, and supervising a parish poor house – a shelter and work space for those who had none of their own. If a stranger came into town, the Overseers would be dispatched to "warn them out" or insist that they move on to another town so as to prevent an increase in transient people.

When English settlers arrived on the shores of modern Massachusetts, they sought to recreate all the institutions they knew from home in this new England. The Overseers were one such transplant. Nellis and Cecere show how, from 1630 to 1692, Boston's Selectmen assumed all responsibilities of town governance including the traditional roles of the Overseer. This is to say that Boston had Overseers, but by a different name. But after 1692, as the town grew larger and a dedicated position was needed, Overseers were appointed, resulting



Front: A view of the Schenectady County Poor House, on the corner of Craig and Emmett Streets. The Schenectady County Almshouse, also called the Poor House or the County Home, was first established in 1826. The Schenectady Museum was later housed in this building.

This page: Early views of Schenectady Almhouse, located at Emmett St. at Craig St., both taken before 1900



An 1830 map of the Limits prescribed for the Jail of the City and County of Schenectady surveyed by Nicholas Switz, showing the Stockade area and slightly beyond including the Poor Pasture.

in an office almost identical to that in England. At any point in the 18th century, there would be four to twelve Overseers managing the needy people of the growing city.

The Boston Overseers even played a major role in addressing the frequent epidemics that plagued colonial Boston. They set up quarantine camps where patients might hope to recover, and inoculated others against smallpox when the technology became available. According to Nellis, Overseers were always wealthy men – among the richest ten percent of Boston's population. Some seemed happy to assume their duty, and performed it for decades. Others were reluctant appointees saddled with a burdensome duty.

If the Overseer institution is a product both of English influence and of municipal organization, it wouldn't have been present at the settling of our town. After all, Schenectady began in 1661 as a Dutch town and the English didn't predominate until the turn of the 19th century. Similarly, the small town of Schenectady had few formal structures of governance until its incorporation as a city in 1798. Before there was a city government to appoint Overseers, the wealthier members of Schenectady's society had a certain noblesse oblige to assist those less fortunate than them. Through acts of altruism, a landed gentleman or woman of Schenectady would prove their moral merit and thus justify their superior social position. This would be done most importantly through the Dutch Reformed Church. We see many early Schenectadians leaving some of their worldly wealth to the Church on their deathbed, specifically for the purpose of poor relief. After all, it can't hurt to make one last act of virtue before one faces their final judgment.

By far, the most significant of these donations came from Hans Janse Eenkluyts. He had been a soldier for the Dutch West India Company, and when he retired to Schenectady in the 1670s, he bought a considerable amount of land. The produce from this land could easily support him, but as he grew older and more frail, with no children to do the farmwork, he needed help. The Church saw to his care until Eenkluyts died in 1674. With no heirs, he had no one to inherit his 36 acres (18 Dutch morgens) lying above Front Street to the east of the Stockade. And so he willed it to the Church, which used it as a "Poor Pasture" to support people in need. This poor pasture would be maintained by the Church and rented out to various landowners. The money thus collected could be distributed to the needy. Though it is unclear how much money could be raised from the pasture, we do know that, in 1820, more than 40 applicants appealed to the Church to use the land, suggesting that it was in high demand. This particular institution lasted for nearly 190 years until 1863. In this year, perhaps a symptom of the quickly urbanizing city, the pasture was sold for \$10,000. With this resource gone, the needy of Schenectady would have to rely on a secular institution: the aforementioned Overseers of the Poor.

Part Three: The Overseers at Work

Schenectady appointed its first Overseers at the dawn of the 19th century, as it was finally incorporated as a city and gained a functioning municipal government. The first Overseer named in the SCHS archives is John B. Wendell in 1803. Much like their historical counterparts, one of the chief responsibilities of the Schenectady Overseers was running a Poor House (not to be confused with the aforementioned Poor Pasture). This was situated in the fourth ward on the

south side of Schenectady, and consisted of a large communal shelter and several acres of arable land. Theoretically, this land could be farmed by the poor so that they might provide for themselves. But it seems the number of people sent to this shelter quickly outstripped the produce of the land. To this end, the Overseers were given a stipend from general taxation to offset the upkeep of the Poor House. Doubtless, this changed over time, but the going rate in 1830 appeared to be \$.55 per pauper per week. This we know from an 1830 "Report on the Poor" in which we also learn that Henry Clute was appointed as "keeper." The report goes on to say that despite the stipend, the poor house was already in debt to the amount of \$465, and needed a further \$650 in repairs. Indeed, it seems that there was a budgetary crisis which could only have dire consequences for the people living at the Poor House. We might imagine the grim conditions of the Poor Farm at this time. There were likely small, dilapidated cabins housing far more people for which they were designed. We might see the portion of able bodied residents laboring away to support themselves and their disabled fellow paupers who were unable to do so. And one shudders at the plight of the "insane" housed there. Of course this refers to the mentally ill and all the others who needed treatments that simply did not exist yet. Our archives show that doctors would be contracted to visit the Poor House. For instance, in 1826 and 1827, Drs. McDougal and Tonlier visited the poor house at least once each year. But surely their efforts were spread far too thin. In all, while the Overseers were certainly privileged in their position, it would also seem they were saddled with an onerous responsibility.

Indeed, with the Poor House perpetually crowded, a chief responsibility of a good Overseer was to keep "paupers" out of Schenectady in the first place. In 1817, the Overseers in Schenectady were locked in a court battle with their counterparts in Livingston Manor. A brief from this suit is stored in our archives. The issue at stake here is the actual legal residence of one Christina Yancy. The Schenectady men maintain that Christina does not live in Schenectady anymore, but resides in Livingston. Their opponents claim the opposite. The document we have does not offer any resolution on the facts of the case, but it's not immediately important where Christina lived. Instead, we should note that the Overseers seem particularly interested that she should not fall under their authority and that she is not their responsibility.

In 1814, a similar case was litigated between Schenectady Overseers and Schoharie Overseers over one Jacob Young. Again, both groups seem adamant that the Jacob in question lived in the jurisdiction of the other. The eagerness of Overseers to discharge their duty onto someone else seems to suggest that the average pauper imposed a greater cost to the Overseer than any benefits that could be gleaned from their labor. It seems that the wealthier classes of Schenectady County determined the best way to deal with paupers was to keep them away entirely. In 1825, a group of men were indicted for transporting a pauper named Betsy Haines from Charlton to Glenville. It's a surprisingly draconian way to compartmentalize the issue of poverty in the county, but it

was the rule of the day in the early 19th century.

In their own way, the Overseers were also responsible for the welfare of the children of paupers. And this brings us back to the dreadful scenario we began with. Simply put, the primary means for the Overseers to support needy children was to bind them out as servants or apprentices to another family that could feed and clothe them. They could even send children across state lines, as we shall see later. It seems barbaric from a modern standpoint, but this was actually quite a common practice in the 19th century. Even families who weren't considered paupers might send their children out to raise money for the family. If a child was to become a blacksmith or a carpenter, they would be bound out of their home as an apprentice in very much the same way. So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised when, in 1833, seven year old Eliza Morgan was sent by the Overseer to serve in the home of Lydia Consaul. And, for what it's worth, not every indenture required a child to be torn from their family. When Louisa and Catherine Rector lost their parents in 1828, the Overseer responsible for them arranged for their grandparents to support them. Of course, the experience of leaving home would likely be very difficult for any child, for any family. We shouldn't forget the pain this process inevitably caused or the stigma the parents incurred knowing they must surrender their children to another family. Our point here is to understand that early 19th century society simply didn't have an alternative means to support children in impoverished homes.

The Overseers role went beyond just the financial; it included legal guardianship as well. The law was a complicated thing at a time in which many people were illiterate. And with every able-bodied pauper supposedly at work on the poor farm, they wouldn't have much time to represent themselves in court. And so it fell to the parochial duties of the Overseer to represent his charges in court as well. In an undated court case, one David Thompson is accused of stealing beef. Rather than face the charges himself, it is "Poor Master" David Lyon who appears in court. In 1813, as one Polly Rogers waged a paternity suit against Abraham Brown, it was the Overseers who represented her.

The Overseers were thus not just agents of the state, but part of the paternalistic social structure that prevailed in the 19th century. Schenectady, like the rest of the newly independent nation, was still just a generation or two removed from the colonial and feudal social structures that made William Johnson a Baron. The Rensselaers were still Patrons lording over most of what is today Albany and Rensselaer counties. And of course, slavery was still a significant institution in Schenectady, even if it was beginning to disappear. As men of wealth and means, entrusted with this specific duty, it fell to Overseers to look after the poorer and less privileged sorts. And at the same time, it was expected that those poorer sorts would defer to the judgment of their superiors.

One of the first major social projects the Overseers were responsible for is the emancipation of Schenectady's enslaved population. You'll recall that the legally mandated end



Schenectady Poor Farm at Steuben St.

of slavery in New York was in 1827. Prior to that year, any Schenectady citizen who wanted to manumit a slave would have to justify to the local Overseers that this newly freed person would not be a drain on society. We have one such document in the SCHS archives from 1803, as John Sanders hopes to free a woman named Meg. This could only be done with the permission of Overseer John Wendell, who thankfully grants it. This process only accelerated as the 449 people enslaved in Schenectady in 1800 navigated the complex legal and social realities of New York State's gradual abolition of slavery. However, these newly freed people were not freed from the Overseers' authority. Indeed, they were uniquely vulnerable to it. Once freed, most of Schenectady's Black population were almost immediately classified as paupers. They had no land to farm, no money to invest, and usually no property other than the clothes on their backs. It is likely that prevailing racial attitudes of the day ensured that an Overseer took a less-than-charitable approach to dealing with Black families.

On the fifth of March in 1830, Overseers Christopher Peek and Cornelius Van Santvoord were summoned to oversee another child. This was Robert Simmons, a young Black boy, about ten years old. We know young Robert is Black because Peek and Van Santvoord are keen to mention it. They made no such notes about young Benjamin Holway, from our introduction. We know essentially nothing about the Simmons family – they don't even appear in the federal census of that year. But we do know that the Overseers determine that Robert's parents were paupers, and were thus unfit to care for him. And so, Robert is sent to be apprenticed to one Jacob Hogeland, a farmer in Amsterdam. Six days later, Peek and Van Santvoord bind out Robert's younger sister, Rachel, to Tecarius Van DaBogart. Robert and Rachel disappear from our records, and perhaps from our city, for the rest of their lives. We know from our exhaustive search of federal census data that Schenectady's

Black population fell from 538 in 1800 to just 380 in 1850. At this point, we can only wonder how much of this decrease was orchestrated by successive Overseers of the Poor binding out children in newly freed families.

Conclusion:

It's all too easy to look back with moral indignation at the institution of the Overseers of the Poor. We can be unnerved by the miserly conditions of the Schenectady Poor House, and horrified by the practice of bound child labor. But, remember, it's easy to take the moral high ground 200 years later. Indeed, what contemptuous conclusions will be drawn about us by our descendants 200 years from now? But this article is not just a ploy to elicit cheap outrage. Instead, it's an invitation to consider the age-old question of how human societies distribute resources, and how they provide for those who find themselves on the losing end of a socio-economic system. In the 19th century, resources were scarce and labor was in constant demand. And so Schenectady, like many other cities throughout the Anglo-American world, bound impoverished labor to the land and wealth of others. It's a solution with a brutal logic, but a logic all the same. We shouldn't devote too much of our time to judging the past. We must always remember that our own society of 2023 has this same issue. On either side of the political spectrum, you'll find critics of the various social welfare programs we have in place. Some will say they are too generous, while others argue they don't do nearly enough. And while we argue theory and politics, many of our neighbors – our fellow Schenectadians of all ages and backgrounds – fall through the cracks and suffer for it. The most important question here is how might we better serve them?

Volunteer Spotlight: Pat and Dave Gosda

by John Angilletta

Four years ago, SCHS Librarian Marietta Carr put out a call for volunteers to help in cataloguing and archiving our vast collection of historical books and materials at the Grem-Doolittle Library in our Washington Avenue headquarters. To our good fortune, Pat and Dave Gosda answered the call and joined our ranks of volunteers.

If there is such a thing as a perfect fit for our library, it would be the Gosdas, who reside in Niskayuna. Both Pat and Dave have spent their entire professional careers working in libraries. Pat was with the Niskayuna School System, and Dave worked for the New York State Library in Albany. Both Pat and Dave told me that they were lucky to have been involved in the library field in both the early and current stages of the computerization of library materials. They joked about the very early days of floppy disks and computers that would look prehistoric next to our modern cell phones.

When they first started volunteering, the Gosdas were involved with the digitization of the Pearson Street Books collection on New York Heritage (now available at [HTTPS://BIT.LY/3UTLVDR](https://bit.ly/3UTLVDR)).

When Covid entered our world and shut nearly everything down at SCHS, the Gosdas continued their work remotely from their home.

The Gosdas are dedicated to getting more of our treasure trove of historic material online and available to the public. On the day that I visited with them, they were scanning some very old scrapbooks in our collection, and digitizing old VHS tapes (remember those?) of programs at Washington Ave. and the Mabee Farm.

For Pat and Dave, this is all a labor of love – they truly enjoy uncovering new stories from our collection and getting this information out to the public. The Gosdas' work ensures that even our oldest and most fragile books and documents will be preserved and made available to future scholars and history buffs.

The Gosdas spend their free time attending the theater and concerts, and of course, reading. Thank you Pat and Dave for joining our volunteers. We hope that you will be with us for a long time!



Around the County with Bill Buell, County Historian

by Bill Buell, County Historian

Before I met Marsha Mortimore, I had no idea who Richard P.G. Wright, or his son, Theodore Sedgewick Wright, were.

I suppose I could have spent weeks combing the shelves of the Gremis-Doolittle Library at the Schenectady County Historical Society – and that is a wonderful way to spend some time – but I’m happy to report that Mortimore, full of intelligence, initiative and energy, saved me the effort.

Her book that was published in 2014, *The Early African American Presence in the City and County of Schenectady*, opened up a whole new segment of local history I wasn’t all that familiar with. Like most history buffs in the Schenectady area, I was familiar with the Moses Viney/Union College story, but the Wrights were brand new names and faces for me, as was Julia A.J. Foote and Bartlett Jackson.

There are others mentioned in Mortimore’s book, including William Childers, John Dickerson, and Peter Sampson – three Black Schenectadians who fought for the Union Army during the Civil War. There’s also a brief summary of the 1844 Colored Convention, held in Schenectady’s Union Hall, and a short history of the Duryee Memorial AME Zion Church. Mortimore also put together a book about the history of the Duryee church, the city’s oldest Black church, and where she is a member.

For a 20th century contribution, she mentions the work of the Schenectady Silhouettes, created in 1958. Mortimore concludes her book with an exhaustive timeline documenting important milestones in Schenectady’s Black history, a piece of work that journalists and historians like me are blessed to have at our fingertips.

Julia Holcomb, a Black woman and a retired history teacher in the Schenectady City School District, is also very appreciative of Mortimore’s dedication to preserving local Black history.

“Marsha’s book opened the eyes of many Schenectadians about the contributions made by Black people in the city’s history,” said Holcomb, who grew up in Schenectady and retired as a full-time history teacher two years ago. “She put in so much time and effort putting her book together, and it’s an inspiration to all of us, including young people who can read it, and think to themselves, ‘wow, maybe we can make a contribution to the city, too.’”

While Holcomb has always been interested in history – she chose it as a profession after spending 20 years in the U.S. Air Force – it was Mortimore who turned her on to local history.



Photo Above: Marsha Mortimore

Photo Right: The Schenectady Silhouettes pose for a photo in 2001. Founding members include, from left, Eveyln Baird, Marsha Mortimore, Minnie Stamper, Hilvan Finch, Corine Sadler and James Stamper. Source: Gazette file photos

“All of Marsha’s work made me want to do more research and really dig into the important contributions made by Blacks in the history of our city,” she said. “All that work she did is of such value to us. Her work is very important, and she’s also just a wonderful person.”

Because of Mortimore’s work, I learned that Richard P.G. Wright was a free Black man working as a barber in Schenectady throughout much of the first half of the 19th century. His son, Theodore Sedgewick Wright, back in 1828,

was the first Black man to graduate from the Princeton Theological Seminary.

Mortimore’s timeline includes some significant Black Schenectadians and their contributions from the second half of the 20th century. There are too many to name them all, but I have to mention people like Maude Branich, the first African American woman hired by the Schenectady Police Department (1957); Malinda Myers, the first female president of the Schenectady NAACP; and Georgetta Dix, who founded the Refreshing Spring Child Care Center in 1969.

Of Dix, Mortimore told me back in 2012 that, “When I look at Mrs. Dix, I see someone who was always helping other people. It didn’t matter what had happened, she always found the capacity in her heart to forgive people. She was the woman who taught me how to serve others.”

Another female who greatly influenced Mortimore was Lee Toland, who, in 1958, formed the Schenectady Silhouettes, an African American civic organization that helped serve the needs of the local community. Toland is Mortimore’s grandmother.

“She had the energy to take care of all of her children, help out with the grandchildren and devote some of time to cultural activities,” Mortimore said of Toland for a *Gazette* story 10 years ago this month. “The Silhouettes are a civic organization that awards scholarships to first-year college students and to older adults who are returning to school. It was important to my grandmother to do something for the community.”

While her health doesn’t allow her to get out as often as she’d like these days, Mortimore is still an active member of the Duryee church. Nikki Harris has been the pastor there for four years now, and has enjoyed learning about the history of her parish and the city from Mortimore’s research.

“I had learned a lot about her contributions, the important work she has done, even before I came to the Duryee Church,” said Harris. “Her legacy, the work she has done with the history of our church and the city will speak to us for years to come.”

Harris also said the opportunity to get to know Mortimore personally has been an enjoyable experience she will cherish.

“She’s still a church member, much of the time on Zoom, but we talk on the phone and I’ve gotten to know her pretty well,” said Harris. “She is an absolutely wonderful human being.”

Back in 2014, The First Reformed Church in Schenectady’s Stockade was so impressed with Mortimore’s work they

decided to pay for the printing of Mortimore’s book.

“Marsha is very enthusiastic, and very aware of the importance of sharing that history,” church archivist Laura Lee told me in 2014. “The story is not complete if we don’t have Black history, and Marsha is very good at going around to different sections of the community and talking about history, making sure people are aware of it. She’s very committed.”

Deidre Hill Butker, an associate professor of sociology and director of Africana Studies at Union College, has also grown close to Mortimore and her work in the past two decades.

“I’ve seen her write funeral programs for people who couldn’t do it themselves,” Butler said in the 2014 *Gazette* story. “I’ve seen her help people who didn’t have the money to bury a family member, and I know that she makes meals for the sick and shut-in members of our church family. She goes above and beyond for members of the community.”

As we celebrate another Black History Month in February, it’s important to pay tribute to people like Mortimore who have really made a difference in the lives of others. As a long-time reporter for the *Daily Gazette*, I count getting to know people like Marsha – and others like James Stamper, Ralph Boyd and Twitty Styles, to name a few – as one of the best parts of the job.

All three of those men have passed, but I will remember them fondly and the stories they told when I had the honor to visit with them in their homes and share their stories with *Gazette* readers. Stamper was an Atlanta native who moved to Schenectady in 1930, and after serving in World War II, became the first Black foreman at the General Electric Company. Along with Boyd, a Norfolk, Virginia native and former World War II veteran, he created the Schenectady Chapter of the NAACP and the Schenectady Silhouettes.

Styles, meanwhile, grew up in rural Maryland, and moved to the Schenectady area in 1965 to take a teaching position at Union College. A biology professor, like Stamper and Boyd he exuded a sense of warmth, grace, and dignity that made him immediately likable.

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