

# Schenectady County Historical Society



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## Unions and Strikes in Schenectady: An Overview

*by Gail Denisoff*

Those of us of a certain age remember General Electric and the American Locomotive Company when they were the major employers in the area. They provided good jobs leading to a robust local economy. With employment in the tens of thousands, unions were strong and strikes were resorted to when management and labor could not reach agreements after intense negotiations. The movement was so strong in Schenectady, that by the mid 1950s, the city was one of the major organized labor centers in the United States, and had the highest per capita union membership in the country.

The history of unions and strikes and Schenectady is not just a strong one, but also a long one. While many can recall the major GE and ALCO strikes of the mid 20th century, one of the first documented strikes in Schenectady predates those by over a century! In 1835, the Hatters and Cordwainers (shoemakers) struck demanding higher wages. While we don't know if their strike was successful, work stoppages in Schenectady and beyond have continued to this day as a way to force employers to take notice of worker demands.

### Early Labor Unions in the Capital Region

Labor unrest was very prevalent in the 1800s in the neighboring cities of Cohoes and Troy. Cohoes was a major milling town and one of the largest employers, Harmony Mills, was involved in several labor disputes. In 1858, 800 of 1,000 workers went on strike for three weeks to oppose a wage reduction. They won a 12.5% increase, marking the first time that workers forced the mill to raise wages. Workers at nearby Ogden Mills also struck, though without as much success. Indeed, mill

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Library & Museum  
32 Washington Ave, Schenectady, NY

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### Newsletter Contributors:

John Angilletta, Bill Buell, John  
F. Gearing, & Martin Strosberg

## Letter from the President

As you read this, we'll be well into the summer season, when most of us look forward to getting outdoors and vacationing with family and friends. It's also the summer reading season for youth -- and for me since I'm still young at heart. You can leverage SCHS to better enjoy all of these activities! With many programs and the resources available through the Grems-Doolittle Library, you can always turn to this organization to find ways to spend such quality time. As always, please tell your friends about the wonderful array of options that SCHS provides, and how great a deal our membership is -- especially with the new reciprocal arrangement we've created that allows members to visit dozens of museums throughout NYS.



We hosted two events at the Dutch Barn this summer; one to thank members, and the other to recognize volunteers. Thanks to our staff for conceiving, planning, and operating them, and to all who attended. At the former, I noted that our Society is about 100 years old, and Schenectady was chartered a little over 200 years ago. The changes over those two centuries have been monumental, especially since the Industrial Revolution. I know you're all interested in history as members, but what about the history we're creating now, and what do we want the world to look like in 100 years?

Along those lines, I've found myself immersed in several works of history recently, courtesy of our local library, all relating to World War II. Two described in great detail the Pacific campaign waged between the U.S. Army and the Japanese, and another the submarine campaign by the U.S. Navy against Japanese shipping. Finally, I read an excellent book detailing the siege of Leningrad. I came away being very thankful for having grown up in a time of relative world peace, certainly as compared to the first half of the 20th century. However, between the situation in Ukraine and the saber-rattling between the U.S. and China regarding Taiwan, there's concern about major-power conflicts that could rival those of the 20th century.

On another level, the much more recent computer revolution that started only about 40 years ago is now leading to fundamental questions about creating near-human consciousness in machines and the implications thereof for future society. Clearly there's no lack of interesting thought experiments that we can all perform about the future. To me, the more compelling challenge is **how do we employ our talent and energy to create the best future for the next generations of humans, as well as the rest of life on earth? A critical understanding of history is an invaluable asset in this undertaking, and one for which we all share responsibility.** I personally look forward to using my knowledge and energy to help steer the future in a positive direction!

Finally, it's likely that my recent history-book jag was sparked by several books about the early history of our area given to me by past trustee Dale Wade-Kezsey. Dale's contributions to the Society have been significant and wide-ranging. Please consider joining me at **Mabee Farm to Fork on September 17**, where Dale will be honored. I hope to see you there.

*Mark E. Vermilyea*

Mark Vermilyea, SCHS President

## Note From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

When I first started working at SCHS in 2014, our newsletter was just a few pages, and produced completely by a dedicated committee of volunteers. Since then, however, we've expanded the length, redesigned the format, and moved most of the newsletter's management to the staff (the notable exception, of course, are our volunteer writers who contribute expert articles every few months).

That transition to a staff-produced newsletter has meant that most (if not all) of the editing duties fell upon the shoulders of one hawk-eyed employee: **Mary Treanor**. Never afraid to speak up about an errant comma, Mary has been this newsletter's devoted copy editor for years. She reads every article with painstaking closeness, searching for their inevitable misspellings, formatting errors, and occasional inconsistencies.

But this issue of the SCHS newsletter will be Mary's last. Our editor, Administrative Officer, bookkeeper, and visitor services and gift shop manager is retiring. Mary's been with SCHS since 2014 in her current role, but even longer in various other positions. That's over a decade of working with our visitors, members, and sites. If there was ever an expert on the internal workings of SCHS, it would be Mary!

I'm sad to see Mary go, not just because of the excellent work she does for SCHS, but also because she's a pleasure to be around. If you've visited the Museum + Library you know what I mean. She knows everyone's name. She's always smiling. Her quick wit makes you smile, no matter what kind of day you're having. Yes, we will miss her immensely.

Thank you, Mary, for all your tireless devotion to SCHS. You are irreplaceable and indispensable to our local history organization. I think I speak on behalf of our staff, volunteers, trustees, and members when I wish you the very happiest and most fulfilling retirement.

*Mary Zawacki*

Mary Zawacki, SCHS Executive Director + Curator



*Photo: How I imagine Mary will be spending her retirement. Or, more accurately, a c. 1920s photo of Mary (Van Wagenen) at the beach, from the Grems-Doolittle Library Photo Collection*

*Mary Treanor's last day at SCHS will be October 27. Please do stop in to say farewell.*



# From the Library

## Note from the Librarian

Happy summer! This is the season for travel, family get-togethers, and enjoying the outdoors up with neighbors and friends. I'm looking forward to traveling for my own family reunion! There are a number of projects happening in the library this summer as we work on digitizing collections, cataloging new materials, and conducting collection inventories.

- Marietta Carr, Librarian/Archivist

## Blog Posts

The Grems-Doolittle Library Collections Blog ([www.GREMSDOOLITTLELIBRARY.BLOGSPOT.COM](http://www.GREMSDOOLITTLELIBRARY.BLOGSPOT.COM)) is a great resource for learning more about Schenectady County's rich history. Check out our recent and upcoming posts:

### **Siena College Service-learning at SCHS**

June – by Marietta Carr

### **Graubart Jewelers: A Family Tradition in Downtown Schenectady**

August – by Diane Leone

### **Special Projects and Partnerships**

September – by Marietta Carr

## New Materials in the Library

Schenectady High School Student Newspapers 1931-1968

Ancient Order of Hibernians, Schenectady Chapter, Scrapbooks 1961-1984, donated by the Schenectady Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians

“Mainstream Radicalism: Labor Organizing in Schenectady 1886-1906” dissertation by Catherine Haag, PhD, University at Albany, 2023

“The Smalbanack 2.0” by Christine Garretson-Persans

Additions to the Documents Collection donated by: Peter Tarantelli, Daniel Ciarmiello, Linda Blum, Suzanne Carreter-Voigt, Dick Stewart, Will Seyse, Tom Gifford

Additions to the Photographs Collection donated by: Dorothea Casey, Timothy Stanley, Christina McPartion, Dale Smith, Matthew Thornton, Virginia Loffredo, Anita McKee, Earl Wilson, Linda Murphy

Additions to the Postcards Collection donated by: Christine Connell, Susan and Frank Spadaro

Additions to the Periodicals Collection donated by: Sally Marchessault

Additions to the Family Papers Collection donated by: David Arnold, Nick Marino, Amelia Ottaviano, Kathleen Donnelly Secker, John Ackner

“McCrossan-Morrison Family History” compiled by Thomas McCrosson, 2022

“Heaven's Wrath: Protestant Reformation and the Dutch West India Company in the Atlantic World” by D.L. Noorlander, 2019

“Yates of the Mohawk Valley” by Laurel Andrews, 2022



## REVIEW: *New York's Great Lost Ballparks*

by Martin Strosberg

On the very first page of *New York's Great Lost Ballparks*, Bob Carlin acknowledges the historic role of Albany, Troy, and Schenectady in the early days of organized baseball in the late 1850s and early 1860s. These cities are among the more than 80 which had baseball parks (long gone) and fascinating baseball histories that deserve to be remembered. To this end, Carlin gives us a reference book for the ballparks of yesteryear, along with a thumb-nail sketch of the teams and personalities associated with them.

The 9-page entry for Schenectady, which had its first full year of professional baseball in 1899, is particularly rich in details. From 1860 onward, six different ballparks served as home to Schenectady teams, including the Alerts, Pastimes, Ancient Cities, Schenectady Dorps, Electrics, Frog Alley Bunch, Mohawk Colored Giants, and the Blue Jays. The first ballpark was the Albert Grounds located on Front Street near the Mohawk River. The last was the McNearney/Schenectady Stadium on Jackson Avenue, which was the home of the Schenectady Blue Jays of the Eastern League until 1957 (the final year of its professional baseball), after which it was torn down and replaced with a golf course.

Particularly noteworthy are the Mohawk Colored Giants, later known as the Mohawk Giants, who played at Island Park on Van Slyck Island (Iroquois Island). The Giants, an African-American team, who recruited from all over the country when Schenectady's African-American population was less than one per-cent, received great support from a white fan base. The team reached its peak of popularity in 1913. On October 5 of that year, 7,000 fans showed up to watch an exhibition game with the Washington Senators and its pitching ace Walter Johnson, a game which the Giants won. A reconstituted Mohawk Giants team played in Central Park from 1924-1943 and featured superstar catcher Buck Ewing. No doubt Ewing would have starred in the Major Leagues if it were not for the color ban. Today, a new baseball diamond built on the former Central Park site is dedicated to Buck Ewing.

Carlin's book lists, city by city, the ballparks' names, locations, dimensions, capacity, years of operation, and home teams. Also included are “fun facts” and photographs. An extensive bibliography is available for those seeking further information. This book will be a handy reference for baseball history buffs.

*Bob Carlin, New York's Great Lost Ballpark, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2022.*

*Photo: Schenectady Blue Jays dugout, from the Grems-Doolittle Library Photo Collection*



# What's Happening at SCHS

For full event details, and to get tickets, please visit  
[SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG/EVENTS](https://schenectadyhistorical.org/events)

## Tours

### Secret Stockade

September 6 and October 4 at 10am @ 32 Washington | \$35

### The Stockade Beyond the Pines

September 20 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$12/\$6 members

### Saving the Stockade

September 23 at 10am @ 32 Washington | \$12/\$6 members

### Candlelight Tours

Throughout October @ 32 Washington | \$15

### Jan Mabee's Twilight Tours

December 2, 8, & 15 at 4:30pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10

### Holiday Stockade Stroll

December 14 & 21 at 5:30pm @ 32 Washington | \$15

## Talks

### Revising *Schenectady Genesis, Volume I:*

#### A Tale of History and Recovery with Chris Leonard

September 21 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | Free

### Book Talk with David Bushman: *Forget It, Jake, It's Schenectady: The True Story of The Place Beyond the Pines*

October 21 at 4pm @ 32 Washington | Free

### Archives Day at SCHS

Date TBD @ 32 Washington

## Arts and Crafts

### Fall Paint pARTy

September 16 at 2:30pm @ Mabee Farm | \$35

### Workshop: Felt a Meadow Scene

September 30 at 10am @ Mabee Farm | \$40

## Food and Drink

### Mabee Farm to Fork - Honoring Dale Wade-Keszey

September 17 at 5pm @ Mabee Farm | \$100/\$75 (under 40)

### Cider-Making at Mabee Farm

October 14 at 10am @ Mabee Farm | \$10

### American Girl Doll Tea

November 11 at 2pm @ 32 Washington | \$15

### Chocolate Haus

November 17 at 6pm @ Mabee Farm | \$35

### Night of Lights

December 1 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$20

## Music and Festivals

### Arts and Crafts Festival

August 26 at 10am-3pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10/car

### Howlin' at the Moon @ Mabee Farm

August 31 - **Big Fez and the Surfmatics**

October 5 - **The Moon Shells**

The show starts at 7pm, admission is \$10, cash only

### FallFest

October 8 at 10am-3pm @ Mabee Farm | Free

### Festival of Trees

December 2-23 @ 32 Washington Ave | \$6

## Get Outside

### Halloween Full Moon Walk + Campfire

October 28 at 6pm @ Mabee Farm

JOIN THE  
**1661**  
SOCIETY

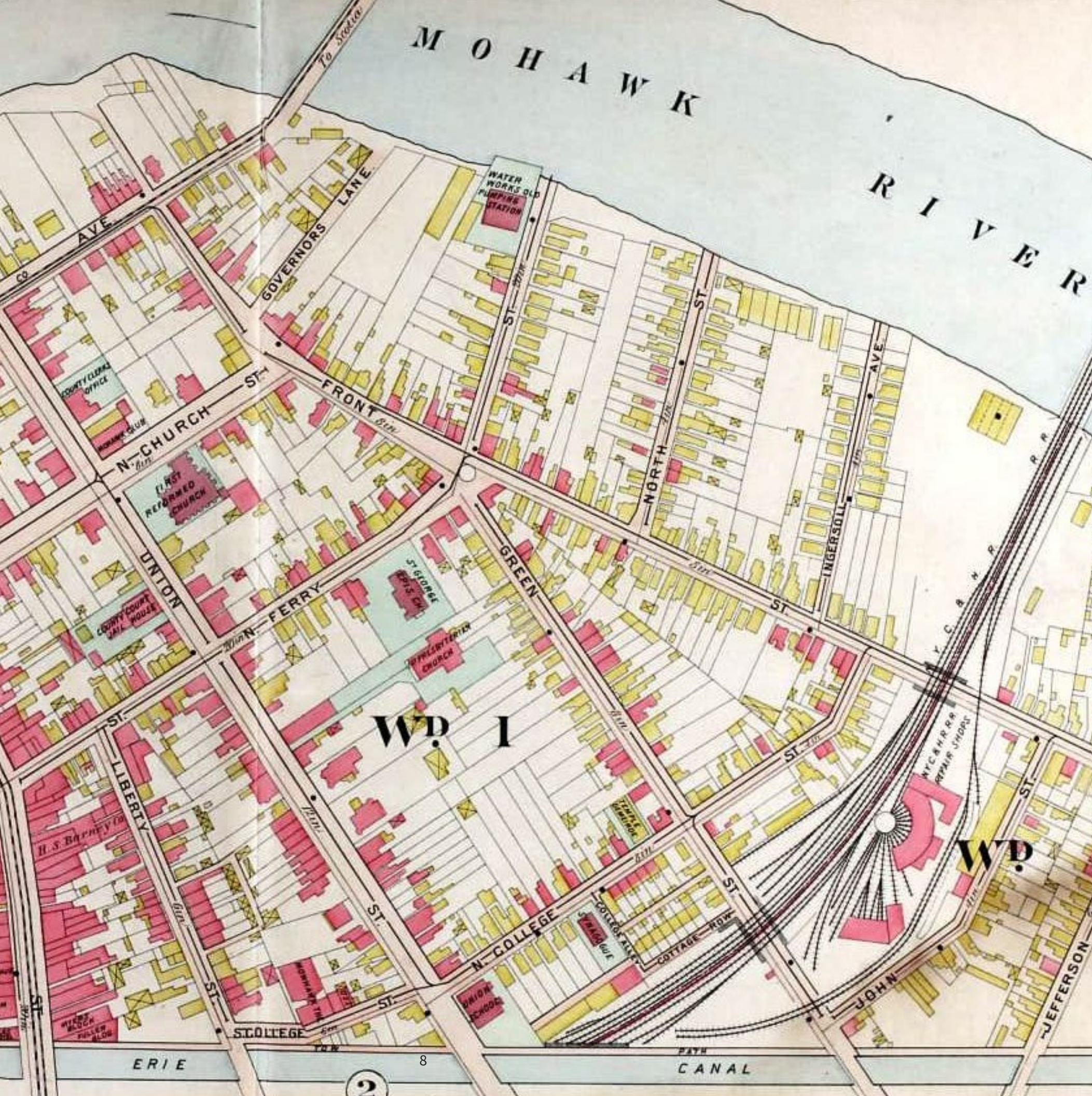
**The 1661 Society**, named for the year Schenectady was settled, recognizes the generous individuals who are leaving a lasting legacy to SCHS through a planned gift. By including SCHS in your estate plans, you ensure that this important educational and community resource will continue to enrich lives for generations to come.

Joining **The 1661 Society** is an exceptional way to contribute to the preservation of local history. A planned gift also offers many advantages, including the fulfillment of philanthropic goals and a reduction or elimination of estate tax liability.

Becoming a member of **The 1661 Society** is as simple as designating the Schenectady County Historical Society as a beneficiary of a percentage or dollar amount of your retirement plan, life insurance policy, or bank account; there is no need to change your will! Gifts of all sizes and types have the power not just to help SCHS weather future challenges but to support its growth and future expansion of offerings to the community.

Will you support the long term sustainability of the Schenectady County Historical Society by joining **The 1661 Society**? Please contact Caroline Brown at [DEVELOPMENT@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG](mailto:DEVELOPMENT@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG) or (518) 374-0263 x7 to make your pledge.





# HistoryForge comes to SCHS

by Marietta Carr

An exciting new project is underway at the Grems-Doolittle Library! As many of our researchers and members know, the library's collections include an impressive number of maps, photographs, deeds, and survey documents from around the county. These materials and the information they contain are vital to a variety of research topics, but many researchers struggle to use them effectively. One of the most frequent questions is along the lines of "where is this place today?" Reading maps and matching textual or photographic data to geographic data can be difficult, and researchers often ask for assistance in deciphering the information. Trying to match a historic document to a physical place in our modern world can be frustrating! The SCHS librarian and library volunteers are working on a new tool that will greatly improve this kind of research: **HistoryForge**!

**HistoryForge** is an open-source platform that integrates the historic demographic data in census records, maps, and other sources, allowing for its visual representation on historic maps layered over a Google Map. The result is a powerful tool for any community in the United States to explore its past. It was first designed by Bob Kibbee, the former Map and Geospatial Librarian at Cornell University, and David Furber, a software engineer. The project was launched by The History Center in Tompkins County, New York, in 2016.

After several years refining the software, the project is now an open-source, online environment available to any community to adopt and adapt to engage with their local historic maps, censuses, and documents. Last year, the HistoryForge project received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom. As a part of the "A More Perfect Union" initiative, the grant allows The History Center in Tompkins County to continue to improve the

open-source software, add more data, and engage more partners. The SCHS Library was invited to partner with the HistoryForge team to test new features, refine user manuals, and suggest improvements to the project. We're joining partners from around the country to help build a full-featured web environment that will provide a new way of exploring local history!

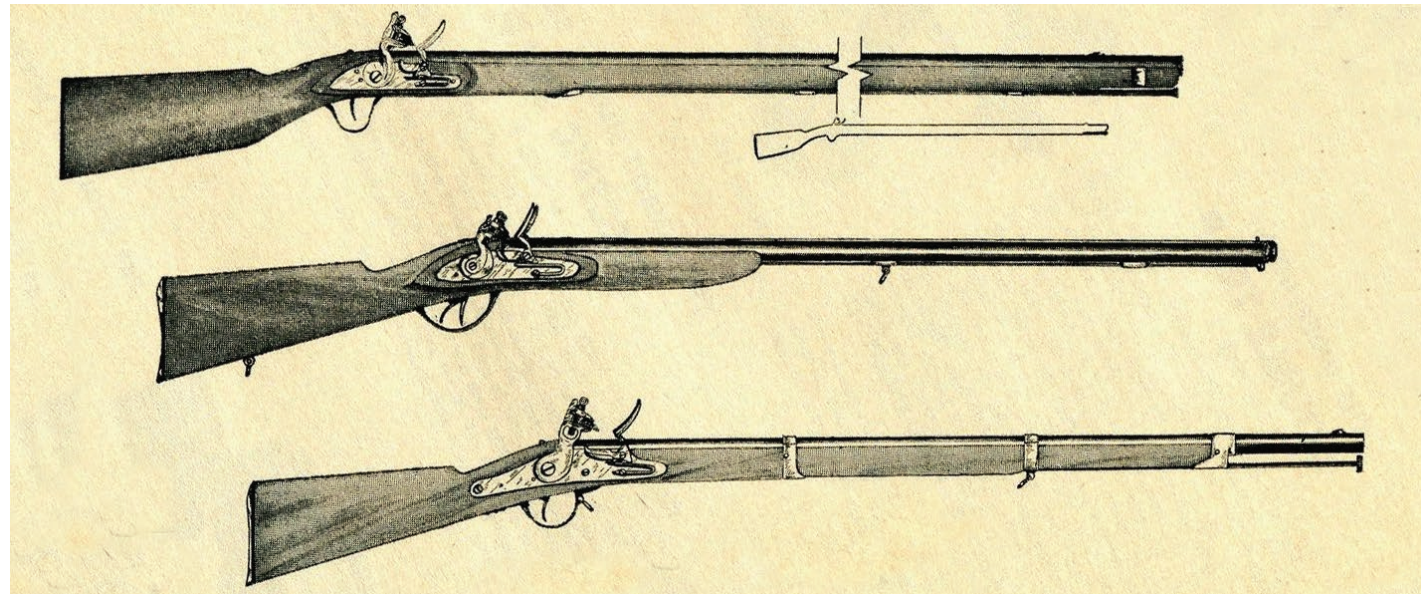
HistoryForge layers historic maps, photos, census data, and directory data onto a live Google Map. This allows users to see the geographic connections between people, buildings, and historic materials. HistoryForge users can review records connected to individual people, buildings, and businesses to see detailed information, documents, and photos. Searching the census and directory data, researchers can create map visualizations which will help them discover patterns, track how neighborhoods and demographics changed over time, and explore unfamiliar locations.

To bring this valuable tool to life, we need your help! HistoryForge is powered by volunteers. Community members build the project by transcribing census records, entering building information, connecting digitized documents and photos to people and building records, and constructing historic map layers. Volunteers can work on this project in person at the SCHS Library or at home on their own computers. Volunteers need patience, attention to detail, a commitment to accuracy, and experience typing. We'll provide all of the training and instructions volunteers need to successfully build the database and connect records to the map.

If you're interested in volunteering, please contact Marietta Carr at [LIBRARIAN@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG](mailto:LIBRARIAN@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG) or 518-374-0263 x3.



# Chasing History: Schenectady Rifle Makers Before the Revolution



by John F. Gearing, Esq.

I needed to take a break from reading the 18th century, hand-written documents I was studying for the research that led to my book, “Schenectady Genesis, Vol. II.” Standing up from the table in the SCHS library where I had been working, I walked over to the bookcases behind the archivist's desk and scanned the titles of the volumes there. One book in particular beckoned. It was a history of American firearms makers, published in the early 20th century. As I had just been reading merchant Daniel Campbell's letters about ordering goods for the fur trade, including muskets and ammunition, I was intrigued. Sitting in a comfortable chair by the bay window, I opened the book and began perusing the list of manufacturers.

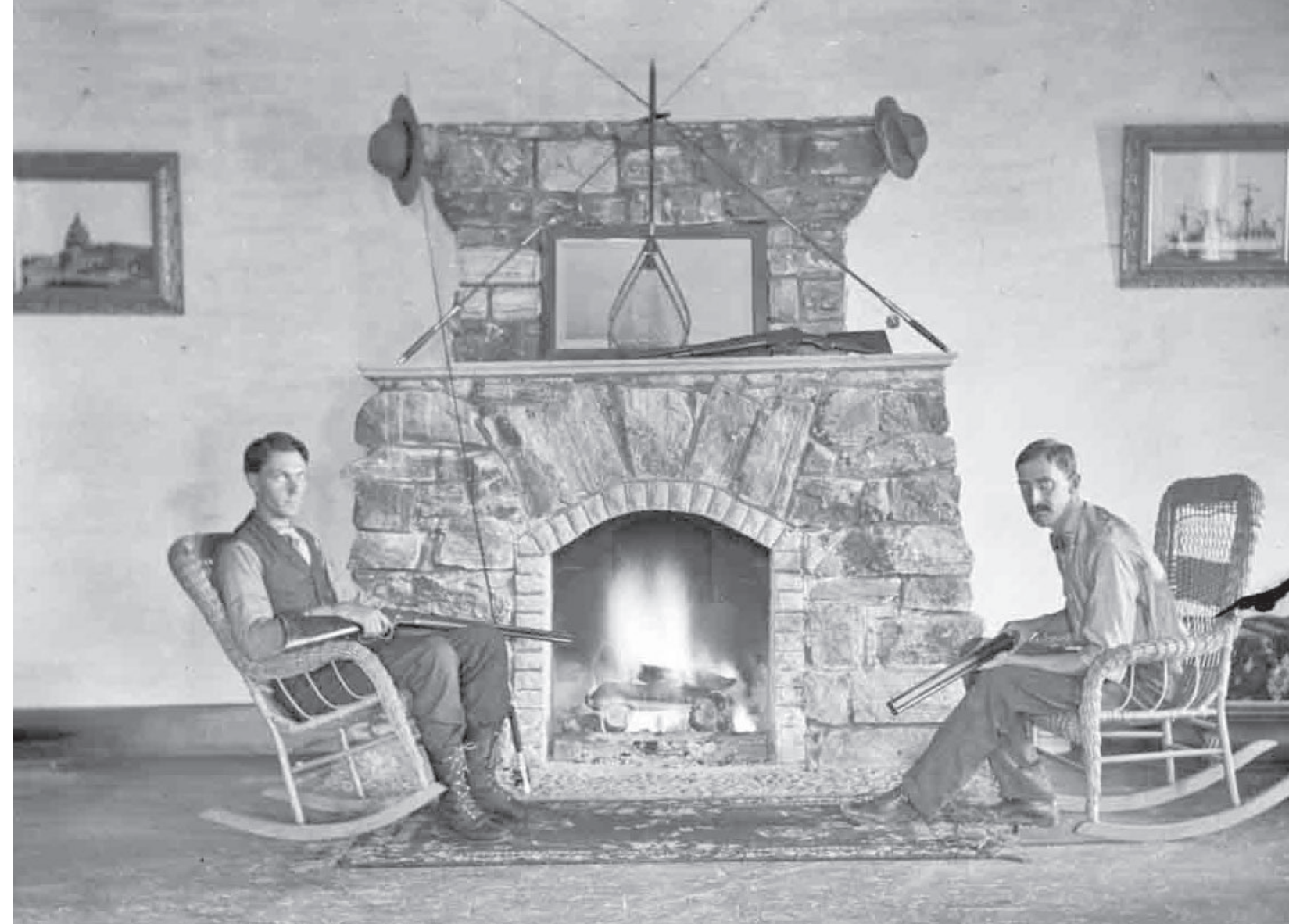
It was not long before an entry had captured my full attention. According to the author, Sir William Johnson had induced four rifle makers to relocate to Schenectady around 1769 by offering the artisans buildings and tools to use in their trade. The book listed Henry Hawkins as one of the four rifle makers, and went on to say that Hawkins had made rifles in Schenectady until 1775. Further, the author stated:

“By 1775 rifle making had become an enterprising industry with most of the settlers and Indians trading their smoothbores for rifles, and New York was second only to Pennsylvania in their manufacture.”

Intrigued, I consulted another, similar, volume on the library's shelves. The author there confirmed the basic

story I had just read, and elaborated upon it. Sir William Johnson, desiring to purchase a rifle for himself, had become frustrated that Schenectady lacked a gunsmith who could craft a rifle to his specifications. This, it was said, was the reason Johnson embarked on his efforts to bring rifle makers to Schenectady. But the story in this book did not end there. It went on to explain that as the Midwest opened to settlement following the Revolution, Henry Hawkins and his family moved west with the frontier, eventually settling in St. Louis where he and his family established the line of Hawken rifles that became famous for their quality and reliability in the first decades of the 1800s.

The stories told in these two books had my full attention at that point. If true, they shined a light on an hitherto unknown aspect of Schenectady history, and deserved mention in my book. I set to work to see if I could verify the information I had just read. The SCHS library has a wealth of material pre-dating the Revolution, including tax rolls, militia rolls, and many letters, wills, deeds, and other documents, all properly indexed. It also has the full set (14 volumes) of the William Johnson Papers, published by the NYS Education Department in the 1930s. I opened Volume 14 of the Papers, the comprehensive index, and looked for Henry Hawkins under the “H” heading, including spelling variations. There was no entry. Next, I looked for “rifle” under the “R”s. There was an entry, but when I looked up the transcript of the document referred to, I found it had to do with a rifle Sir William had from a London maker. Next I turned to “S” and looked under Schenectady for any entries that might relate to Hawkins or any other rifle



Above: Photo of two unidentified men c. 1900, from the Grems-Doolittle Library Photo Collection.

Left: Stoeger Arms Corporation advertisement for flintlock guns, c. 1960.

makers, coming up empty handed yet again. Though it was true that, when he established Johnstown, Sir William enticed artisans to move there by providing houses he had built for that purpose, (one of these houses still stands in downtown Johnstown), I had never read any account of Johnson doing anything of the sort in Schenectady.

My suspicions were further aroused at the claim that there was a brisk trade in rifles in Schenectady and that they were sold to Native Americans and settlers alike. Following the French and Indian War, Johnson had written a report to his London supervisors detailing his recommendations for regulating the fur trade in the years to come. In his report, Johnson specifically called for establishing a law banning the sale of rifles and rifle ammunition to Native Americans. “Indians”, he wrote, would give almost anything to obtain a rifle, and with one were “capable of infinite mischief.” Given Johnson's position, it seemed extremely unlikely he would promote the rifle industry in Schenectady, which was then the

center of the colonial fur trade. Also, if by 1775 many Schenectadians possessed rifles, one would expect to see that fact mentioned in Willis T. Hanson's excellent book “Schenectady in the Revolution,” but Hanson says nothing about the local militia having rifles.

For completeness, I looked for Hawkins' name in relevant tax and militia rolls, with the same result: not listed. The library catalog also drew a blank. Increasingly doubtful as to the truth of the stories, I extended my search to the internet. Eventually I found an article in an academic journal, which noted there was no truth at all to the story of Johnson bringing rifle makers to Schenectady, or that one of them was of the famous Hawken family, but that many later historians had simply accepted the stories at face value and repeated them in their own writing.

The mystery was solved. There were no rifle makers here, no Henry Hawkins. It was quite a story, though. If only it were true.



# Volunteer Spotlight: Becky Hudak and Steve Andersen



by John Angilletta

This issue, our Volunteer Spotlight features **Becky Hudak and Steve Andersen**, two volunteers who have made a big impact on the Schenectady County Historical Society since joining our ranks in late 2019.

Becky and Steve have a history of volunteering going back to the early days of the pandemic. Before things were literally locked down across the country, Becky and Steve had traveled across America in their mobile home to Vancouver, Washington, where they volunteered at a living history site run by the National Park Service. For

over four months they actually worked and lived on site in their trailer, doing docent work and even donning period costumes that they made.

Upon their return to New York, they became members and volunteers at SCHS where they turned their talents to helping out wherever needed, both at our headquarters and Mabee Farm. Both Becky and Steve trained as docents at the Farm, and have been a big help with our school programs in the spring. Becky has pretty much cemented herself as our "butter expert" with the school programs, and Steve is a huge hit with the students giving Mabee House tours.

Becky grew up in Long Island and worked as a reading teacher at Page Elementary School in Schenectady prior to retiring. Steve, who originally hails from Rochester, had a career with IBM and is now the Chaplain at Albany Medical Center. Their mutual love of history drew them into volunteering. They said that from the start they were impressed by the passion and knowledge of our staff and volunteers, citing Director of Education Mike Diana as a fountain of information.

Their favorite part of volunteering is definitely school programs. Becky loves SCHS’ “hands on” approach that brings to life what the children are learning about in school. Steve likes helping the kids imagine how life was for the Mabee family back in the 1700s, and how everyone in the family had to contribute to the farm.

When asked what advice they would have for new volunteers, Becky responded that it was important to learn more than one activity and take the tours both downtown in the Stockade and at the Mabee Farm. Steve said that he learned a lot by shadowing Mike and some of our other docents, who all offer slightly different approaches to the tours.

When they’re not helping us out, both Becky and Steve enjoy camping, seeing films at the Spectrum, and visiting historic sites together. Becky also relaxes with sewing and reading while Steve unwinds by riding his bike and taking nature photographs. We at SCHS are lucky to have these two terrific volunteers, and if you stop by for a visit, you might be lucky to meet them!

*Photo: Becky and Steve in costume, volunteering at Fort Stanwix in Rome, NY.*

# Summer Intern Spotlight

by Caroline Brown

**Gabby Baratier** and **Maddie Pelletier** are this summer’s interns at SCHS!

Maddie is from Voorheesville and studies at Skidmore, where she is majoring in History and minoring in Anthropology and French. Her favorite course has been “Queering the Middle Ages,” where she enjoyed working with objects and bringing her perspective as a history major to an art history course. At Skidmore, she is on the executive board of the radio station, WSPN 91.1, and works as the History Department Assistant. In her free time, Maddie enjoys the great outdoors through hiking, gardening, and making farm-to-table dishes.

Maddie first learned about SCHS through her grandmother, whose garden club decorated the Mabee House for many years. Through this internship, she hopes to gain more experience presenting public history and to explore the balance between education and entertainment in museums. Her favorite aspect of her role so far has been seeing students get excited about history and caring for Mabel the calf. Maddie is considering graduate programs in Museum Studies and Public History after graduation.

Gabby hails from Altamont and is a History & English double major at Union College. Her favorite course has been “Badly Behaved Women in the English-Speaking World,” where she analyzed the activist spirit in Louisa May Alcott’s diaries in comparison with the ideas in the novel, *Little Women*. Gabby has worked at the Writing Center and the Special Collections and Archives offices at Union. She handles Communications for Union’s Pride Club and enjoys biking in her spare time.

Gabby first considered an internship with SCHS while volunteering this past winter. She is interested in gaining experience in museum operations and making public history accessible to a broad audience. Her favorite aspect of her role so far has been conducting school programs, especially the butter churning station and the house tours, where she has been excited to see students make connections between their own lives and the lives of the Mabee family. When she finishes college, she hopes to continue her studies in public history, information services, archives, and disability studies.

Thank you, Gabby & Maddie, for joining us this summer!



Maddie Pelletier at Mabee Farm.



Gabby Baratier at the installation of our "BLACK SCHENECTADY" pop-up exhibit at SCPL.



*Unions and Strikes continued from page 1*

workers continued to strike many times over the years, many times unsuccessfully.

In Troy, collar laundresses formed the Collar Laundry Union in 1864. Organized by Kate Mullaney, it was one of the first unions of female workers in the country. They were active for a few years until the union collapsed in 1869 when its strike was broken. Manufactories began to introduce disposable collars and cuffs made of paper, which defeated additional union efforts. In 1892, however, the unionized workers of the new disposable collar and cuff industry struck for over a year in a wage dispute. Thus, labor disputes and strikes have been part of life in the Capital Region for over 150 years.

### Early Unions and Strikes at GE and ALCO

In Schenectady, much of our city's labor history springs from the strong presence of General Electric (GE) and American Locomotive Company (ALCO). In 1886, the Bricklayers, Masons and Plasterers Union, No. 16 of the City of Schenectady received its charter. The local was organized in response to the large-scale building project begun by Thomas Edison when he moved his Edison Machine works to Schenectady. Just a few years later in 1893, Local 105 of the Schenectady County United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry was chartered, indicating the growing presence of industrial laborers in the city.

Workers at General Electric were initially represented by craft unions; in 1903, the armature winders union won concessions after a three-week work refusal strike in 1903. Two years later, 600 winders held a five-hour "folded arms" strike, which was recognized as the first sit-down strike in the country.

ALCO – headquartered in Schenectady – was formed when the Schenectady Locomotive Works merged with seven smaller companies in 1901. Ten years after forming, ALCO boilermakers went on strike when ALCO assigned them work on 38 engines from the New York Central Railroad. Since boilermakers were at the time striking the NY Central, ALCO boilermakers refused to do the work and walked out.

The first plant-wide strike at General Electric occurred when plant stewards Frank Dujay and Mabel Leslie were laid off in November of 1913. The Electrical Trades Alliance called for a plant-wide strike, and all 15,000 workers left the plant. Women played an important role in this strike, being among the first to walk out. Additionally, two thousand women led a march to GE to collect the previous week's salary. Ella Reive Bloor organized the women, relying on her deep union experience in the mines of Montana and West Virginia.

By the end of the strike, Bloor had signed up 90% of the women in the plant. The strike lasted over a week and ended only when Dujay and Leslie were offered new jobs.

Less than two years later, on October 4, 1915, the GE Metal Trade Alliance called for a strike to push for an eight-hour workday. General Electric offered a 9.5 hour workday and 12,000 employees struck. As a result, GE used various tactics to break the strike, including discrediting union leaders, frightening the public with the threat of violence, using local police and vigilantes to intimidate strikers, and threatening to close the plant if work was not resumed. GE continued to successfully use these tactics for many future strikes, including the first company-wide strike in 1918.

In 1917, office workers organized at the General Electric plant. The War Labor Board granted union members wage increases up to 20 percent, and women were guaranteed equal pay for equal work during the war years, which was uncommon for that time.

### The Labor Temple, Teachers, and Trolleys

The Schenectady Labor Temple Association incorporated in 1907, with the mission of promoting labor relations and interests within Schenectady County. In 1914 they built their Labor Temple on Clinton Street. Over the years it housed over 30 union offices and published an annual labor and business directory. The last union housed there, Laborers Local 157, has since moved to another location, and today the Labor Temple building contains apartments and the Whitney Book Corner.

Other labor groups throughout Schenectady continued to incorporate. In 1934, Local 166 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) was chartered with jurisdiction over inside electrical work in Schenectady. By 1990, Local 166's jurisdiction included work done in radio, television, and telephone, and members worked on sites throughout the Capital Region. GE was a frequent job site for contracted workers.

Teachers were also interested in organizing. In 1918, Schenectady educators met to organize the City Teachers Association of Schenectady, which would represent all professionals in the city's department of education. It was initially formed to replace the defunct city branch of the New York State Teachers Association and to improve teacher salaries. By 1932 it affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA). Later, in 1943, the Schenectady Teachers Association became displeased that teachers' salaries had not risen with the cost of living as other city employee salaries had. This resulted in the formation of a union affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers. The Schenectady



*Front page: 1946-47 strike at General Electric, from the Larry Hart Collection at the Grems-Doolittle Library  
Above: 1923 trolley strike, view at State St west from Jay St, from the Larry Hart Collection at the Grems-Doolittle Library*

Federation of Teachers, Local 803, received its charter in 1944.

In September of 1975 the Schenectady Federation of Teachers Local 803 went on strike after being unable to negotiate a contract over the issue of class size. The strike lasted 14 days and resulted in the SFT winning its negotiating point. Since strikes of public employees are illegal under the Taylor Law, 12 union members, including the President of the SFT were prosecuted and sentenced to short jail terms, and teachers were docked 30 days' pay. The strike, which coincided with several other teacher strikes in the Capital Region, brought out animosities in New York between the National Education Association and New York State United Teachers. Ultimately, the SFT disaffiliated with the NEA and joined NYSUT.

Service workers also organized in Schenectady. The Van Curler Hotel's Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union struck in 1937, and again in 1955 when the company refused to negotiate after offering minimal wage increases. The hotel took its stand to the public with open letters in local newspapers. A picket line parading in front of the hotel disrupted scheduled conferences and hotel and dinner reservations.

Schenectady's trolley workers unionized in 1912 as part of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America. However, the union was not taken seriously by the Schenectady Railway Company, and the union's first strike in 1916 demanding higher wages was unsuccessful. A second trolley strike in 1923 completely disrupted the city. In May of 1923, the union voted to strike when their demands to reinstate the previously cut wage scale and increase wages for veteran drivers were ignored. The Schenectady Railway Company, led by General Manager Harry Weatherwax, completely refused to negotiate with the union and brought in drivers from other areas.

Perhaps surprisingly for Weatherwax, the unionized trolley drivers had the support of city residents, who boycotted the trolleys. Violence broke out, with crowds stoning the cars and cutting cable lines. Eventually, licenses for 900 jitneys were taken out, with the Schenectady Railway Company unsuccessfully seeking an injunction against them. By the end of August, the strike resolved itself with no clear-cut winner. Many trolley drivers returned to work when the company offered special compensation. Though the union had failed to force their demands, all returning workers did receive a pay raise. And while the Schenectady Railway





Above: ALCO strike in 1947, from the Larry Hart Collection at the Grems-Doolittle Library  
 Right: 20th century union pin and ribbon from Schenectady Historical Museum collection

Company did not back down, they lost public respect, and patronage of the trolleys never returned to pre-strike levels.

### Pre-War Politics

Schenectady in the early 20th century was a city of immigrants, many from central Europe. They brought with them new cultural identities, and, in some cases, new political identities. Take, for example, the Trade Union Unity League branch at the Schenectady GE plant. Left-wing central European immigrants organized the branch in 1932, and it initially had about 150 members. The following year, British socialist and machinist William Turnbull organized another small union of about 150 members, including many fellow socialists from Great Britain. The two unions merged to form a union of 300 militant members, eventually becoming Local 301 of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) — a force to be reckoned with.

Meanwhile, GE established a company union, the Works Council, in 1924. It was, not surprisingly, wholly ineffective in representing workers' interests. In 1935, the National Labor Relations Act — which protected the rights of workers to organize — forced GE to change the Works Council to the "Workers Council." It required the removal of management members, but not before the company had destroyed its 36 craft unions. In response, Local 301 pushed for a National Labor Relations Board election between 301 and the Workers Council. The vote was held in December of 1936 and resulted in Local 301 defeating the GE Workers Council by over 1,000 votes. Thus, Local 301 became the only union recognized by the federal government as the bargaining agent for the Schenectady GE plant.

### World War II and the Post-War Period

World War II introduced many challenges and changes to daily life in America, and labor unions were certainly

no exception. A particularly big change was the influx of female and non-union male workers, filling in for male workers who had left their jobs to serve in the armed forces. During the war, many labor unions also took no-strike pledges. These agreements meant wage freezes, and as a result labor disputes piled up. When the war finally ended, these stifled labor disputes came to a head. Thus, in 1946, many unions around the country struck.

In 1946, in the bitter cold of a Schenectady winter, over 10,000 ALCO workers struck. Represented by the United Steel Workers Union Local 2504, the workers struck for two months, picketing through snowstorms and ice before finally settling for an 18 ½ cent per hour raise. At the same time, 25,000 General Electric workers held a 9 week strike, also battling Schenectady's harsh winter elements. The result? Also an 18 ½ cent per hour raise. These strikes created hardships for not just the workers, but for many businesses around the city; Union College had to cancel evening continuing education courses because not enough workers registered.

Labor received a deep blow in 1947 when, in response to the mass strikes, Congress passed the Labor Management Relations Act (better known as the Taft-Hartley Act). The act was highly contentious; President Truman vetoed Taft-Hartley, calling the act a "dangerous intrusion on free speech." Labor leaders further derided the act as a "slave-labor bill." Taft-Hartley restricted the activities and power of labor unions, and was explicitly designed to weaken labor. The act also required that every labor leader sign a non-communist affidavit. As a result, in 1949, the United Electrical Radio and Machine (UE) workers of America were expelled from the Congress of Industrial Organizations along with nine other international unions for being "communist-dominated." The CIO immediately created the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) in the UE's place. In Schenectady, however, the Local 301 representing General Electric workers remained with the UE.

In Schenectady, tensions grew within the movement. The National Labor Relations Board held elections in 1950 and 1951 between the United Electrical Radio and

Machine Workers of America (UE) and the newly formed International Union of Electronic Electrical, Salaried, Machine and Furniture Workers (IUE) to determine which union would represent the workers at the Schenectady GE. Both times the charismatic Local 301 leader, Leo

Jandreau, had no trouble convincing the membership to stay with the UE. But in 1954, Jandreau's opinion changed, shocking the labor world. Jandreau now felt that the UE had become too weak to make gains for its members or organize new plants. In March, he successfully led the members of Local 301 out of the UE and into the IUE-CIO. A final vote in 1954 determined that Local 301 IUE won the right of representation over the UE by almost 4,000 votes.

Tensions between workers and management also continued. Early in 1951, the United Steel Workers requested a 16 cent an hour raise from ALCO management. Not only did ALCO deny the raise, but they also laid off 2,850 workers. The result was that 1,600 workers walked off their jobs. United Steel Workers production and office workers, as well as Locals 2504 and 3180 all voted to strike at midnight on January 31. Led by Local 2504 leader Anthony Barbieri, over 4,000 workers stayed off their jobs until March 9 when union members voted to ratify a new wage agreement. They had won an average increase of 16 cents per hour for production workers, and an 11.4% increase for office workers. Additional strikes by ALCO workers in 1952-53 and 1955 led to further wage increases.

### Red Scare

As we've seen, labor turmoil was by no means confined to wage disputes

— political leanings also began to play a role. In 1954, GE fired seven Schenectady workers (and 28 companywide) for being admitted or suspected communists. Firing workers for their political beliefs was new to American industry at that time. Due to the Cold War, and the uncharted waters of political firings, the labor unions did not get involved.

However, the issue of alleged communist workers did not end there; Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy was on a nationwide hunt for communist spies. In 1953-1954, McCarthy conducted hearings in Albany's Federal courtroom, targeting the Schenectady GE plant.







Ellis nurses on strike Sept. 15, 1985, from the Larry Hart Collection at the Grems-Doolittle Library

Subpoenaed witnesses – many of them top officials of United Electrical Workers Local 301 – invoked their Fifth Amendment rights, infuriating McCarthy. Although his Albany hearings produced no concrete evidence, McCarthy told reporters he was completely satisfied that he had alerted the Capital Region to the threat of communist spy activities.

One of the subpoenaed union officials was Helen Quirini. Quirini had worked tirelessly for Local 301, and as an advocate for equal rights for women at the General Electric plant. Indeed, Local 301 was one of the prime movers behind the UE being the first union in the United States to hold a national conference on issues of working women. Throughout the 1950s, Quirini and Local 301 fought for equal pay for equal work, jobs based on content not on sex, a single job rate structure, an end to jobs based on marital status, and an end to what they called GE's exploitation of women workers. After

Quirini retired, she spent another 30 years working for GE pension benefits, and became famous for showing up in person to GE stockholders' meetings to speak out for pensioners, women workers, and the union.

### Major Strikes of the 1960s

Besides the strike of 1946, General Electric's biggest strikes were in 1966 and 1969.

In July of 1966, Local 301 voted in favor of striking due in part to GE's elimination of piecework pay, which was generally more lucrative than a straight salary. After failed negotiations, Local 301 struck on October 1, but returned to work on October 3 when President Lyndon Johnson requested that the union try to come to an agreement with GE because GE was vital in the production of naval planes during the Vietnam War. Local 301 complied, but could not reach an agreement

with General Electric and walked out again on October 17, 1966. This time, they were joined by the draftsman, technical engineer, plumber, pipe-fitter, and teamster unions. After more than two months on strike with financial hardship to workers and the community, an agreement was finally reached. The strike ended December 30th. Although piecework was definitively eliminated, GE agreed to transition pay for pieceworkers that would last during their tenure with the company. GE also agreed to invest in new buildings and facilities, to strengthen the layoff and rehiring procedures, and to increase employment at the Schenectady plant.

Three years later, in October of 1969, IUE Local 301 joined other unions across the country and began a 101 day strike against GE. Their target this time was GE's unfair bargaining practices, particularly the tactic of "Boulwarism." Boulwarism – named for Lemuel Boulware, GE's vice president of labor and community relations – was a controversial policy of "take it or leave it" bargaining, intended to make collective bargaining and unions meaningless. Despite the National Labor Relations Board declaring Boulwarism an unfair labor practice, GE used this aggressive policy for over 20 years, right up until Local 301's strike.

It took the work of IUE Local 301 leading an alliance of unions to finally break Boulwarism's back. On October 28, 1969, the US Court of Appeals handed down a historic decision against GE, calling Boulwarism illegal for bypassing the union, not engaging in "give and take" negotiations, and undermining employee confidence in the judgment of union negotiators. Workers were back on the job by February of 1970. They had a new contract with increased wages, vacation and sick days, and adjustments to pension benefits. GE unions were strengthened by the strike, but that would not last.

### Deindustrialization and the Erosion of Unions

When the American Locomotive Company plant closed in 1969, Schenectady's large industrial workforce began to diminish. Schenectady's workforce was further reduced in the 1980s when General Electric started cutting jobs or sending them elsewhere. And, though GE's anti-union policy of Boulwarism failed, another anti-labor tactic known as "Welchism" succeeded.

Jack Welch, GE's chairman and CEO from 1981 to 2001, inflicted severe damage to GE's unionized workforce during his tenure. There were no company-wide strikes during Welch's tenure, and there have not been any since. Welch drastically eliminated union jobs without openly fighting with unions, resulting in union membership dropping from 70% to 35% of the workforce. Welchism did not just disarm unions at GE; his tactics influenced other American companies as well. Union leaders across the US agree that Jack Welch led an anti-union charge that still resonates with unions

today, ultimately eroding union membership in the US to record low levels in 2023.

### Today's Labor Legacy

Though Local 301 still actively represents its members in Schenectady, it is with much diminished power. The same might be said for the myriad other unions that once represented Schenectady's workers. Nevertheless, labor strikes still occur in the 21st century in the Capital Region. In December 2020, Albany Medical Center nurses struck for 24 hours after a stalemate with hospital administration. Overwhelming caseloads, burnout, heavy staff turnover, and concern about the ability to safely care for patients during the pandemic were the major negotiating points. On June 30, 2021, after three years of negotiations, a settlement was finally reached with the 2,000-member union which included a safe staffing grid, more input by nurses in work issues, and increases in pay and benefits.

From the Bricklayers and Masons Union, the Carpenters Union and the Schenectady Typographical Union of the late 1800s (all still active today) to Starbucks and Amazon workers organizing in the 21st century, unions have endeavored to protect the rights of workers and improve workplace conditions for two centuries. They give workers the power to negotiate for more favorable working conditions, higher wages, and job security through collective bargaining. Schenectady has a long, proud history of being a major hub of organized labor in the United States. The many local unions, although diminished in numbers, are still proudly fighting for their workers.

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# A New Nation: Schenectady in the Early Republic



by Mary Zawacki

There's two subjects people love to talk about at SCHS. First is Schenectady's colonial period. Not too many cities in the US have a colonial heritage, nor extant colonial architecture, so it's not surprising that people come to SCHS to learn more about the 17th and 18th centuries.

The other big topic people like to explore here is Schenectady's "Golden Era," which we'll define as the industrial age of the early 20th century. Immigration and industrialization left a huge mark on the city, and many people today still remember their parents or grandparents working at manufacturing giants like General Electric.

Notice anything missing in there? Perhaps the entire 19th century? I'll grant you that the Erie Canal often gets a shoutout, and so does the early railroad. But that's about it for a period spanning over 100 years – 100 years that weren't exactly the dark ages. We seem

to skip straight from the powdered wigs of 1776 to the light bulb, as if there wasn't anything in between worth talking about.

In fact, the 1800s are a fascinating time in Schenectady history, and we have some incredible artifacts in our collection from the era. Taken together, the stories and artifacts of the period are the basis for our new exhibit ***A New Nation: Schenectady in the Early Republic***. Schenectadians of c. 1800-1830 lived through defining years in our nation's history. They were part of a growing city in a new nation, searching for a local identity, and helping to develop a national one.

In 1800, Schenectady was a small but lively town with an important harbor on the Mohawk River. It had just been incorporated as a city, and had its first "real" government. There was certainly excitement in the air as new manufactured goods filled up people's homes, and new technologies began to replace the old ways of doing things. For the first time, newspapers and books were readily available, and people were increasingly



literate. Novels, periodicals, and self-help guides widely circulated the city, helping to facilitate discussions about equality and freedom. Schenectady, so recently a frontier outpost, was now a gateway to the western United States. Streams of settlers passed through Schenectady on their way westward during this time period – notably displacing western Native peoples as they went.

Life during the era was marked by a slow but steady change from the austere and patriarchal world of the colonial period to the dynamic market economy of the 1800s and beyond. There was a new national government, elected democratically, albeit only by some white males. New modes of transportation and production developed, facilitating consumption of new decorative styles in middling homes. America's abundant land afforded new economic opportunities, and spurred westward expansion and migration. All these changes affected the values and daily habits of citizens – and raised questions.

Would Schenectady evolve into a quiet country town or a bustling riverfront hub? What would be the proper role of women in this new society? How would citizens set up a new city government? How should Schenectadians respond to the growing shift from village farmers and craftsmen to urban factory workers? How could they reconcile the inconsistency of a "free" and "equal" nation with the enslavement of nearly a million Black men, women, and children? And anyway, just what was this American experiment?

In ***A New Nation***, you'll find a carefully curated collection of historical artifacts and accounts that answer some of these questions. The exhibition uncovers daily life in Schenectady and explores how ordinary Schenectadians — a motley collection of folk — responded to and shaped the social and cultural shifts of America's Early Republic period.

***The exhibition is on display at the Schenectady Historical Museum at 32 Washington Avenue through November 2024.***





## Summer Enrichment on the Farm

by Michael Diana

Every so often I like to give our readership an update on the spring school programs at Mabee Farm, and take a moment to thank our hardworking educators for the time they spend with our curious little learners. We finished up the 2023 spring school programs in late June, with a record-breaking 2,400 students from across the Capital Region. And then, with barely enough time to catch our breath, we were onto something new: summer school programs.

You may be aware that Schenectady Historical is on a mission to strengthen our engagement with local

students and teachers. In doing so, it's important that we seize upon all opportunities. Just because the regular school year ends, it doesn't mean we can rest on our laurels (though this year it would have been tempting to do precisely that). Throughout July and August, our staff and volunteers have continued to bring educational programs to the deserving students of the Schenectady City School District (SCSD). These new "Summer Enrichment" programs have offered new challenges but ample rewards.

In fact, this is the second year of our partnership with the hardworking folks of the Schenectady Summer Enrichment program. Throughout July, I visited the

various Schenectady elementary schools that host these summer programs – this year there were five such schools. My job inside the classrooms is to provide an introduction to life at the Mabee Farm, but, perhaps more importantly, to bring a fun farm-themed craft for the kids to complete. These in-class programs prepare the students for the much more exciting field trip hosted at Mabee Farm.

This summer, we hosted 150 Summer Enrichment students in this way. And while this is all quite simple in concept, making this happen takes a great deal of effort. SCSD faculty have to arrange for buses and chaperones, they have to manage permission slips, and above all, they have to coordinate all of this in a context that inherently lacks the discipline and structure of the regular school year. It's the school's "off-season" if you will. Luckily, SCSD has Rebekkah Hendrickson, a Farm to School Coordinator, who deserves special credit for facilitating all of this.

The hot and hazy summer months are actually a great time to host field trips at the Mabee Farm. Indeed, we can offer several activities that simply cannot be done during spring or fall. One of the highlights, for instance, is a threshing program where students help us to manually separate the edible rye seed from the inedible straw and chaff. This is done through repeated impacts with a large flail, a visually striking activity that kids can do under careful supervision. The grain they process is collected and saved for our upcoming Farm to Fork Dinner. Summertime also means that we can call upon the assistance of Michael Nally, president of the Schenectady County Farm Bureau. He leads an excellent presentation on beekeeping, and brings some of his honey which the students always enjoy. Two of our

visiting schools even had the fortune to see an excellent bateau demonstration punctuated, of course, by a shot from our cannon. They'll surely remember that!



Throughout my interactions with the students, I'm struck by their intelligence, their curiosity, and their sometimes hilarious commentary. Many of these kids live in areas of Schenectady with which SCHS rarely engages. Many, for economic reasons, won't have the same opportunities to visit our farm or take advantage of our family programs in the same way suburban kids can. And yet, they readily display the same aptitude when given the same opportunities. Many of the students I meet during these programs have virtually no prior knowledge of agricultural life. Their parents might not have an automobile to take them on drives into the country. These are the students who are shocked and

delighted to see our resident sheep and goats for the very first time. Other children, however, actually have an impressive familiarity with farming – particularly children of Guyanese families who deftly maintain farming traditions even in the inner city neighborhoods of Schenectady.

Most encouraging of all, however, is when students remember me or the Mabee Farm from a previous school program they did. It shows that these programs really do leave an impression. And while we certainly can't make expert farmers or historians of grade schoolers, we do know that just a small impression can lead to a lifelong inspiration.



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