

Schenectady County Historical Society



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"There is Danger of Your Becoming a Public Charge:" Charles Steinmetz, Reparative Description, and the Contemporary Field of Disability Studies

by Gabriella Baratier

Charles Proteus Steinmetz (1865-1923) is often referred to as "The Wizard of Schenectady" for the pioneering work that he completed in the electrical engineering field as a Professor at Union College and as a researcher at General Electric. In the one hundred years since his death, numerous biographies chronicling a wide variety of facets of his life – from the political to the academic, and from the professional to the personal – have been published. Much has been said about the political persecution he faced in Germany as a result of his socialist writings, or his immigration to the United States as a penniless man who knew very little English, or his settlement in Schenectady and the myriad engineering accomplishments that soon followed, or the eccentricities of his lifestyle, or the adoption of his lab assistant Joseph Leroy Hayden.

It is clear that many of the intimate details of Steinmetz's fascinating life are remembered in both the Schenectady area and far beyond. That, then, begs the question: why should we return to scholarship on Steinmetz? To be sure, there are certainly other figures from Schenectady or General Electric history worth studying who haven't achieved nearly the same level of commemoration and visibility that Steinmetz has, yet whose stories are just as vibrant, and just as central to the making of Schenectady as we have come to know it. However, I argue that there is also immense value in critically examining exactly how a very public

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Letter from the President

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Happy Fall to everyone! The leaves are just starting to turn locally as I write this in late September 28. By the time you read this, they will perhaps be at or past peak color. It's a beautiful time of year, and one when many of us enjoy holidays celebrating harvest time. I'm looking forward to making jam from several hundred huckleberries that I started from seed back in February (fingers crossed, as the process looks more involved than I had expected). On the subject of harvest, SCHS hosted our Farm to Fork dinner in the barn recently – the first since the pandemic – and raised funds that will help to support our Society in its many offerings to the community.

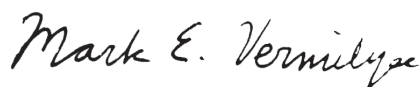
As always, I want to extend my personal thanks to our tireless and talented staff for the wide range of programs they create and implement so flawlessly – and also the many volunteers who support them. I look forward to helping with traffic control at the upcoming FallFest – always a challenge.

We have a change in our Board leadership team: Hannah Miller has a unique opportunity to pursue her passion for historic preservation in England on a special visa, and will be departing this month. She's been active and engaged during her tenure, serving on the Strategic Plan committee in 2021, chairing the newly created Governance Committee as they revised our Bylaws, and leading a "conditions assessment" of our historic structures by an outside consulting firm, which has resulted in the important determination that significant work will be required in several areas. Most importantly, Hannah brought a unique humor and wit to every discussion and meeting, and kept us all on our toes and often laughing with her. We all wish her the best of success and enjoyment in her new adventure.

As Hannah's successor, the board and I have agreed on David Trestick, who chairs our investments sub-committee and will now step into the role of chairing the Governance Committee – a very important role at this time as we are starting the process of a new Strategic Plan for SCHS. I look forward to working with David in both of these very important areas.

As you look back on 2023, please think about what SCHS means to you, and consider joining me at one of our many upcoming events during the winter season, including special Holiday Stockade tours, Jan Mabee's Twilight Tours at the farm, the Festival of Trees and its kickoff the Night of Lights, and of course our ongoing offerings of historical lectures that the staff sets up and coordinates so well.

And, as always, there will be a special year-end appeal for funds; please look for that letter in the mail and know that all contributions will be important to keep our buildings healthy and our programs running. As I mentioned in my last letter, while it's easy to think of history as something created by others in the past, we all have a role to play in creating the world that historians of the future will be researching, discussing, and evaluating. We look forward to working with each of you to create a better world over the next year, decade, and century.



Mark Vermilyea, SCHS President



Note From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

I'm going to save my penchant for waxing poetic for my article on the "thrills" of collections management, later in this issue, and use my note here to talk about what's been going at SCHS.

Our new Office and Visitor Services Manager, **Audrey Humphrey**, started her work with us this October. Audrey will be the friendly face or voice that greets you when you visit or call SCHS, and will lead many behind-the-scenes projects as well. Along with a BA in History from Geneva College, Audrey has a background in museum education. She spent the last six years working as the lead historic site interpreter at Crailo and Johnson Hall state historic sites. Audrey is no stranger to public history, or the history of upstate New York, and we're excited she's sharing those skills with us at SCHS.

With the harvest season just past us, we were able to share Mabee Farm's bounty with our friends at **Mabee Farm to Fork**. This fundraising dinner takes the place of a traditional gala, and provides an opportunity for our friends and members to support SCHS while enjoying a great meal. It was the first time we hosted this event in some years, and I must thank our staff and honorary committee for making it such a wonderful evening. SCHS is fortunate to have so many people in the community who see the value of local history and historic sites.

As SCHS moves ahead with strategic planning for 2024 and beyond, financial support will become ever more vital. This was underscored by the results of a **building conditions report** we had completed for our historic buildings at Mabee Farm. The site is home to four 18th century structures, and a variety of smaller outbuildings. The building conditions report was completed by architects and engineers, and delves into everything that we will need to do to maintain our historic buildings in the next ten years. Some of these issues are a simple fix, like replacing window trim or roof tiles. However, other projects will require a significant amount of work – and funding. The building conditions report estimates over \$500,000 in preservation projects in the next decade, the most significant of which is structurally stabilizing the 1767 Brick House. In the coming year, the SCHS staff and board will be focusing our efforts on securing funds for these crucial historical preservation projects, to ensure we can safeguard our shared cultural heritage.

In the meantime, our seasonal programming will really take off this winter. I'm especially looking forward to



Audrey Humphrey on her first day at SCHS.

the **Night of Lights**, our celebratory kick off of the Festival of Trees. And, our **Winter Speaker Series** will return in January, featuring history experts from universities across America.

See you soon!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Zawacki".

Mary Zawacki, SCHS Executive Director & Curator

Volunteer Spotlight: Brynn Marion



by John Angilletta

This issue's Volunteer Spotlight features a newer volunteer who has already made a big impact with SCHS in the Grems-Doolittle Library.

Brynn Marion has been with us for nearly two years after learning about the volunteer opportunity through one of her mother's friends. She is a 2020 graduate of Hartwick College, where she received degrees in geology and French. Brynn is currently a graduate student at Simmons University in Boston, where she is studying library science with a focus on archiving. She has also completed coursework in France, giving her an international perspective on history and archives.

Here at the Grems-Doolittle Library, Brynn has been involved with our archival collections, delving into a treasure trove of Schenectady history. She says that her favorite part of volunteering has been less about the

practical experience, and more about the human details of people from Schenectady's past. She especially loves discovering small details about people that may have not been known before. For Brynn, research in the archives has demonstrated that while we have many differences with people from the past, we have many more things in common.

Brynn has two semesters left in her graduate studies program, and then plans to move into a career in archiving, with a focus on art or metadata.

Brynn makes her home in Guelderland, where she lives with her orange cat Riley, and spends her leisure time watching classic movies from Hollywood's golden age, traveling abroad, and painting in acrylics.

We are truly lucky to have such an accomplished and enthusiastic volunteer like Brynn, and hope that her future endeavors will include working with us at SCHS!

A detailed historical map of the Adirondack region in New York, showing various lakes, rivers, and land parcels. The map is aged and has a sepia tone. Labels include "Fishing Locality", "Round P.", "Back P.", "Oregon P.", "CAPE W.", "SLIDE", "RODERS", "Mad P.", "WALL", "L. HONTE", "per Adirondack", "Works", "Sanford", "Troy P.", "Lower Works", "Hydro P.", "86 M from Saratoga", "Roots Hotel", "Schroon River P.O.", "CROWN POINT", "Spring Puts Co.", "Ingle", "Baileys", "Irondale", "Thompson", "8 MILES", "Ingle", "Baileys", "Irondale".

REVIEW: *Inside the Green Lobby: The Fight to Save the Adirondack Park*

by Martin Strosberg

In 1892, New York State established the Adirondack Park. It is composed of a patchwork of public and private lands, which today constitutes the largest publicly protected area in the lower 48 states. Safeguarding the land are some of the strongest environmental laws found anywhere, including an 1894 state constitutional amendment assuring the "Forever Wild" status of the park.

Overseeing the over 6 million-acre park is the Adirondack Park Agency. It was established in 1970, and given considerable zoning and other regulatory powers by the state. And the Adirondack Council was established in 1975, with the purpose of monitoring the work of the Adirondack Park Agency and any entity posing a potential threat to the pristine conditions of the forests and lakes. More specifically, the Council is a nonprofit and nonpartisan watchdog organization intended to exercise its "green voice" in accomplishing its mission of ensuring "the ecological integrity and wild character of the Adirondack Park."

Bernard C. Melewski, chief environmental lobbyist for the Adirondack Council, tells the story of his part in carrying out this mission. He is the author of *Inside the Green Lobby: The Fight to Save the Adirondack Park*. During his long career with the Adirondack Council, Melewski played a key role in advancing the Council's environmental agenda. Most notable among his many successes is the addition of hundreds of thousands of acres to the public domain of the park, which were primarily purchased from private landowners. He also helped lead the fight against acid rain emanating mostly from coal-fired power plants in the mid-west, which were responsible for degrading Adirondack lakes and forests.

In his book, Melewski gives us a detailed, inside story on how things are really done in Albany. This is not a book about "how a bill becomes a law" as described in introductory texts in American

government. Quite the contrary; we learn about backroom deals, coalition building, election promises, and last-minute budget agreements by "three men in a room (now two women and one man)" with the Governor, Assembly Speaker, and Senate Majority Leader, all indicative of our messy process of public policymaking. Accordingly, an Albany lobbyist's work day involves frequent contact with elected officials and their staffs, agency bureaucrats, the media, leaders of friendly and opposing interest groups, and the public at large. It is from this perspective that Melewski describes his long, hard-fought battles to preserve the Adirondacks for future generations.

Not surprisingly, the Adirondack Council has not always been popular in the North Country, where locals resent being told what they can or cannot do with their property by the "tree-huggers" and "flatlanders" from New York City and elsewhere. A significant portion of the book is devoted to the ongoing struggle over the regulation of land use between the Council and opposing activists and politicians on the local and state level.

The book's final chapter is the "Art of Lobbying". Here, Melewski summarizes the lessons learned from the high and low points of the battles fought during a long career as described in previous chapters. Key to this "art" is an understanding of the political rhythms of the legislature and when and how to apply pressure on behalf of the Council's agenda. Melewski concludes with some tips for citizen lobbyists and activists.

If you want an exhaustive, blow-by-blow account of the fight to save the Adirondacks, with names, places, and who said what and did what to whom with what result, then this book is for you.

Bernard C. Melewski, Albany, Inside the Green Lobby: The Fight to Save the Adirondack Park. State University of New York Press, 2022.

Calendar of Events at SCHS

We're always adding new programs to the calendar! For full event details, and to get tickets, please visit schenectadyhistorical.org/events

Tours and Talks

Archives Day at SCHS

October 14 at 1pm @ 32 Washington | \$8 or free for members
Join us in celebrating National Archives Month by learning techniques that you can apply to preserving photos, letters, diaries, and cherished family documents! Marietta Carr, our archivist and librarian, will present on preserving historic papers and photographs using examples from our collections and a behind-the-scenes tour of the Grems-Doolittle Library.

Candlelight Tours

Throughout October @ 32 Washington | \$15
Meet Stockade spirits and learn the spooky stories of New York's first historical district on this haunted tour.

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 | \$8 or free for members
Author David Bushman will be joined by Schenectady Police Chief, Eric Clifford, to discuss his new book that explores the scandal that rocked the Schenectady police department in 1999.

Jan Mabee's Twilight Tours

November 10, 17, & Dec. 2, 8 at 4:30pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10
A costumed Jan Mabee from the early 1700s will lead us through the house, giving us a taste of what life was like for settlers living on the edge of the wilderness.

Holiday Stockade Stroll

December 14 & 21 at 5:30pm @ 32 Washington | \$15
The Stockade is beautiful any time of year but the holidays always bring out a certain magic! In this walking tour we'll explore the lights and sights of this historic district, and learn how generations past celebrated the season.

Food, Drink, and Festivals

American Girl Doll Tea

November 11 at 2pm @ 32 Washington | \$15
This tea is hosted by Josefina, a spirited young girl from the American Southwest in the 1820s. As Josefina guides our young guests, we'll discover the fascinating stories of America's past, exploring the customs, attire, and daily life of the 1800s.

Night of Lights

December 1 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$25
Celebrate the beginning of the Festival of Trees with the Night of Lights, an exclusive preview evening of radiant fir trees and wintertide enchantment. Featuring live music and great food.

Festival of Trees

December 2-23, 10am-4:45pm @ 32 Washington Ave | \$6
Celebrate the season as we fill our galleries with lighted fir trees! Decorated from classic to kooky Christmas styles, the Festival glows with the enchantment of the holidays.

Chocolate Haus: Holiday Edition

December 8 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$35
Experience a recreated 18th century chocolate house and enjoy delicacies enjoyed by English kings and the middle-class settlers of the Mohawk and Hudson Valleys. As a special finale to the evening, we'll taste a libation infused with port!

Drink the Seasons

December 7 at 6pm @ 32 Washington | \$30
Join us for an evening of seasonal cocktails amidst the backdrop of the Festival of Trees! Led by historian John Gearing, we'll sample a variety of historic libations made with holiday flare.

Full Moon Walks

America's earliest settlers celebrated the full moon with names, borrowing from Indigenous or European traditions. At Mabee Farm, we're celebrating the fall and winter moons with candlelit walks on our nature trail, and warm drinks!

Halloween Full Moon Walk & Campfire

October 26 at 6pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10 or \$5 for members
Join us for a bewitching walk under the glow of a full moon. We'll explore the woods by moonlight and candlelight, then gather 'round a crackling campfire to share spine-tingling stories. Warm drinks will be served to fight off the night's chill. Costumes are welcome.

Wolf Moon Walk & Tavern Night

January 25 at 5:30pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10 or \$5 for members
January brings the full Wolf Moon, named for wolf packs circling icy villages, howling out in the night. Join us for the Wolf Moon with a short illuminated walk in the woods of the Woestyne. Afterwards, we'll make a fire in the Inn's historic fireplace, and storytellers will share colorful tales from our area. Warm drinks will be served to fight off the night's chill.

Snow Moon Walk & Tavern Night

February 24 at 6pm @ Mabee Farm | \$10 or \$5 for members
Join us this night of the full Snow Moon for a candlelight walk through the woods of the Woestyne. Afterwards, we'll make a fire in the Inn's historic fireplace, and storytellers will share colorful tales from our area. Warm drinks will be served to fight off the night's chill.

Winter Speaker Series

Save the following dates, and join us all winter for expert speakers from around the country. These talks are mostly virtual. For updates, full details, and to purchase tickets please visit schenectadyhistorical.org/events

January 10: *The Cutting-Off Way: Indigenous Warfare in Eastern North America, 1500–1800* with Wayne Lee

In his newly published work from University of North Carolina Press, Lee recasts Indigenous warfare in a framework of the lived realities of Native people rather than with regard to European and settler military strategies and practices.

January 17: *Schenectady and the Regional Transportation Rivalry, Canals and Railroads, 1815-1860* with Michael Wheeler

Schenectady was at the center of a critical 19th century modal and geographical transportation rivalry. As a cartographer, Dr. Wheeler has developed extensive maps to illustrate this important period in New York State history. He'll discuss his findings, and shed light on the various transportation rivalries that shaped the region in the 1800s.

January 31: *Slavery and the Creation of a Northern Gentry* with Nicole Maskiell

In her recently published work from Cornell University Press, Maskiell connects developing Northern networks of merit to the invidious institution of slavery. During the first generations of European settlement in North America, a number of interconnected Northeastern families carved out private empires. Maskiell argues that slavery was a crucial component to the rise and enduring influence of this emergent aristocracy.

February 7: *Women in the Dark: Female Photographers in the US, 1850–1900* with Katherine Manthorne

Discover the stories of long-overlooked American women who, at a time when women rarely worked outside the home, became commercial photographers and shaped the new, challenging medium. Manthorne will fill in the gaps in photographic, American, and women's history and discuss the parallels between the growth of photography and the late-19th-century women's movement.

February 21: *Calvinists and Indians in the Northeastern Woodlands* with Stephen Staggs

The author of the forthcoming book *Calvinists and Indians in the Northeastern Woodlands* will discuss intercultural relations between the two groups in the 1600s, including sharing food and other goods, military alliances, diplomatic

assistance, and other forms of mutual dependence.

February 28: *Taverns in Upstate New York* with Gerald Baum

Using research from over 500 primary accounts of patrons of upstate inns and taverns, Baum will dig into the valuable contribution the inn made to the development of upstate New York. He will also discuss what a 19th century patron might have experienced staying the night at a roadside inn.

Date TBD: *Skeletons in the Cabinet: Memory and the Human Remains Attributed to the Schenectady Massacre of 1690s* with Andrew Robert Beaupre

The Stockade's story of the "massacre" has been venerated through first-hand accounts, ballads, memorials, and even re-enactments. While this metanarrative is ever present, the aftermath of the event remains buried under both the soil and political obfuscation. Beaupre will discuss the skeletal remains recovered in the neighborhood, many of which have been falsely attributed to the massacre, and examine the role of archaeology in collective historical memory.

March 23 IN-PERSON AT MABEE FARM: *Mainstream Radicalism: Labor Organizing in Schenectady 1886-1906* with Catherine Haag

Catherine Haag's 2023 dissertation explores the confluence of Schenectady's Socialist history, local workers' adoption of direct labor action practices at the point of production, and the commitment of local labor leaders to industrial unionism to reveal how radicalism became mainstream among Schenectady's workers. Dr. Haag is a member of SCHS, and will present this in-person.

March 27: *Visualizing Equality: African American Rights and Visual Culture in the 19th Century* with Aston Gonzalez

In his recent work from University of North Carolina Press, Aston Gonzalez charts the changing roles of African American visual artists as they helped build the world they envisioned. The fight for racial equality in the 19th century played out not only in marches and political conventions, but also in the print and visual culture created and disseminated by African Americans, as Black artists produced images that advanced campaigns for equal rights.

The Dubious Dealings of Peter Penet ...and the Mystery of Penet Square

by John F. Gearing, Esq.

On December 10, 1775 an American merchant ship docked at Providence, Rhode Island. Mr. Rhodes, her captain, was returning from a mission to Haiti (then the French colony of Santo Domingo) with a supply of gunpowder for the American army. Also onboard, were two French merchants, one of whom was to play a role in the Revolution and in the post-war development of western New York. Peter Penet disembarked with letters of introduction from Haiti noting that he was a merchant with a firm in Nantes, France and attesting to his character. Penet announced that he was prepared to supply arms and ammunition from France to the Americans. His proposals got him favorable meetings with the Governors of Virginia and New York, along with General Washington, and Congress, the latter of which gave him a contract to provide arms and military supplies to the American war effort.

March, 1776, saw Penet back in Nantes, ostensibly to fulfill the contract. In August 1776, Penet prevailed upon Washington to ask Congress to appoint him as Washington's first aide-de-camp, a request which Congress approved in October of that year. Penet, however, was less successful fulfilling the contract he had signed with Congress to supply guns and ammunition. In fact, there is no evidence he ever came close to fulfilling it. As early as 1777, the American business agents in France warned Congress that Penet's firm had a dubious reputation. Later in the war, Penet signed another contract with Congress; this time to construct and operate a French factory to manufacture muskets, pistols, and other weapons for America. This plan never came to fruition either.

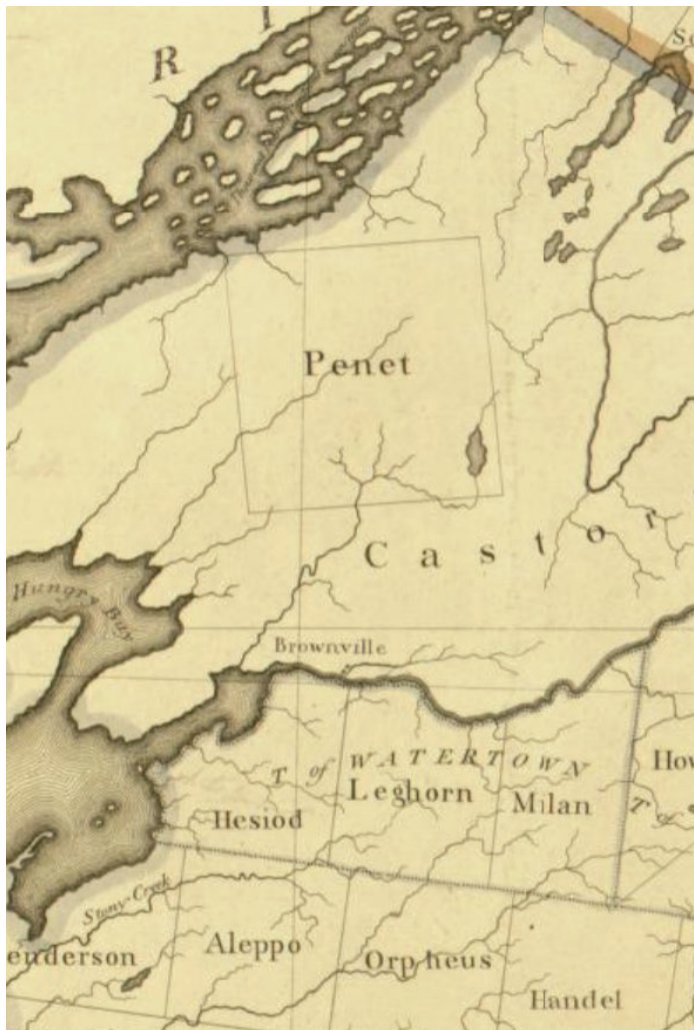
Penet then attempted, without success, to interest the Governors of New York and Pennsylvania in what he claimed to be newly-invented explosives, a new metal with which to sheath warship hulls, and a special paint that would prevent iron from rusting. In 1782, Penet signed an agreement with Virginia to secure French loans for the colony. That December, Benjamin Franklin wrote from Paris to say that Penet had disappeared and left a mountain of debt in his wake. There is no sign that Virginia ever received a penny of French investment.

In October 1783, Schenectady entered the story. The Pearson street books show that Peter Penet, "merchant of Philadelphia," paid John Cuyler and his wife Susannah £1050 for a house and lot with adjoining storehouse on the north side of State Street near the

corner of Church Street, where the building housing the Stockade Market sits today. In the years following, Penet is referred to as being a trader doing business with the Oneida nation. His involvement with the Oneida went far beyond merchandizing. Nineteenth-century historians of northwestern New York relate that Penet convinced the Oneida he was a friend of Lafayette, and a representative of both the French King, and the United States, who wished to lavishly reward the Oneida for the support that nation had given to the Americans during the Revolution. The leadership of the Oneida are said to have come to place enormous trust in Penet, even to the extent of allowing him to draft the code of laws for their government (which made Penet himself their final arbiter), and determining the boundary of the Oneida nation with respect to the other Huadenosaunee nations.

So deeply embedded with the Oneida was Penet that when the New York State commissioners met to consider Oneida land claims and craft a treaty with that nation, they found it turned to Penet for help and advice. Penet was present when the treaty was signed on September 12, 1788, and was even a witness to the separate treaty signed at the same meeting between the Onandaga nation and the state. Because of their support during the Revolution, the Oneida received much better treaty terms than the other nations, but Penet convinced them that these preferences were solely due to his own diplomatic efforts on the Oneida's behalf. At the treaty conference the Oneida speaker asked the commissioners to direct all their communications through Penet, calling him "Good Peter" and "our father" and asserting that "...he is a just and righteous man, he will deceive us in nothing, but will deliver to us the very truth..." In thanks for what they believed Penet had done for them, the Oneida asked for an article in the treaty granting to Penet a certain amount of land, from the land the nation relinquished to the state. That parcel, which became known as "Penet's Square" was ten miles on a side, or 100 square miles (64,000 acres), wherever Penet should choose. In the weeks that followed the treaty signing, Penet and his associates decided the boundaries of his land. However, when Penet did not deliver the promised presents from the French King, or from Congress, some of the Oneida began to question his veracity. The Reverend Samuel Kirkland publicized what he saw as Penet's deceptions. Under pressure, Penet left, he said, for New York, to collect the presents. He never returned.

Penet did, however, give to Schenectady fur trader John Duncan a power of attorney, dated January 23, 1789.



Left: "A Map of the State of New York," 1802 with Penet Square. From the Grems-Doolittle Library Map Collection.

Right: "A Map of the State of New York," 1804 with Penet Square. From the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

This document authorised Duncan to sell, lease, or hire any property Penet owned, whenever Duncan saw fit. It was John Duncan who received the patent when it was issued by the state in November 1789. At this point the story begins to twist and turn. Duncan offered acreage for sale via newspaper ads. Penet, it is said by some historians, turned up in Haiti claiming to own all the land between Oneida Lake and the St. Lawrence River, and proffering a map showing a large, well-developed town on his "square," in a bid for investors. No such town existed. Penet did not surface again.

So, Duncan signed a deed as Penet's power of attorney on July 13, 1790, selling the entire 100 square mile tract to James Watson and James Greenleaf in exchange for £4,600. However, this deed was never proved or recorded, rendering it a "purported" deed, since in New York deeds must be recorded to be valid. But back on January 23, 1789 (the same day he executed the power of attorney to Duncan) Penet had deeded all but 21,000 acres of his claim to the tract to none other than John Duncan, in exchange for £6,000. He had deeded the remaining 21,000 acres to a John Le Tonnelier.

In February 1795, Watson sold his interest in the tract to Greenleaf for £1,000. A year and a half later Greenleaf sold his share (the entire tract) to Simon Desjardines for £19,500. No one, it seemed, had discovered the deed from Penet to Duncan from 1789, which rendered the Watson and Greenleaf deed invalid. But questions about Penet and Duncan were raised regardless. Primary among these was whether Penet had died before the Watson/Greenleaf deed. A power of attorney ceases when the grantor of that power dies. Thus, if Penet had died before July 13, 1790, the deed to Watson and Greenleaf was invalid, for Duncan would have had no title to convey. Duncan himself was not around to clear up the confusion, having died in 1791.

The result of Duncan's actions was legal chaos. It became generally believed that Penet had died prior to the "purported" deed to Watson and Greenleaf, nullifying it. And because Penet was an alien, with no known heirs, the entire tract could have reverted to state ownership. Thus, to many, it was "free land." What followed was little short of a land rush. Adventurers and entrepreneurs rushed to "the square". There they

staked "claims" based on nothing more than simple possession, clearing brush to show boundary lines. These early arrivals were not settlers in the conventional sense of the word. They did not come to build houses, establish farms, raise families, and create communities. They came to cut down the forest and turn the trees into black-salt, potash, or staves, which could be sold for cash and even smuggled across the border into Canada. "Penet Square" was considered to be a wild, untamed place where "might" often established "right."

The flow of people into the square accelerated in the wake of the War of 1812. By then small communities had been established. In 1820, a group of inhabitants who lived in Brownsville petitioned the New York State Legislature for a definitive statement as to land ownership within the square, noting that 320 families then lived within it. The petition was referred to the Attorney General's office initially, which reported in January of 1821 that it could only review the records in the office of the Secretary of State, among which were found the patent to Peter Penet and Penet's deed conveying most of the square to John Duncan. How the title had been conveyed thereafter, or whether it still remained with the heirs of John Duncan, the Attorney General had no way to tell. Four days later, a select committee of the Assembly reported on the matter, citing the patent, the power of attorney, the deed to Duncan, and the deed from Penet (via Duncan's power of attorney) to Watson and Greenleaf. The committee noted that Penet had died in France, and that although they had searched for possible heirs, they could not even determine whether Penet had married. The committee recommended that the Attorney General's office investigate further, and begin a proceeding to determine whether "Penet Square" had reverted to state ownership.

While the Assembly was at work on the petition, a certain Hypolyte Penet of Andes, New York appeared, claiming to be Peter Penet's brother and heir. The strength of his confidence in his claim is shown by the fact that he sold it to John Samuel Le Tonnelier of Schenectady for one dollar. John Samuel Le Tonnelier's father, John Louis Victor Le Tonnelier, was almost certainly the same John Le Tonnerlier referred to as owning the 21,000 acres of the square excepted from Duncan's deed to Watson and Greenleaf. A suit followed in chancery court which resulted in the deed being set aside and declared void in 1828.

One of those who became involved with ownership in the square following the War of 1812 was a French man named John La Farge. Some said he had made a fortune running ships from the West Indies through the British blockade of France during the Napoleonic wars. Others said that he and Penet had been business partners in France, or that they had met in Haiti before Penet's death and La Farge had learned of the square there. However

La Farge learned of the Penet affair, he began buying land of questionable title and giving the squatters on it a choice: to either concede to his ownership and pay him rent, or face a lawsuit and ejection when La Farge won. Eventually, after too many twists and turns to here relate, La Farge secured clear title to "Penet's Square" in 1830.

La Farge built himself a stately mansion a mile south of La Fargeville, NY, but by 1838 he had moved to New York City. Some accounts hold that ill-will by some of the citizenry toward him caused this move, though others say that his young wife (27 years his junior) was unhappy with the remote location. His farm and mansion were purchased by one Bishop Dubois who turned it into a theological seminary and classical boarding school. After two years, the new Bishop, Bishop Hughes, realized it was too remote to attract many students. He moved the institution to a location just outside New York, where it was incorporated with the new St. John's College (now Fordham University), the third oldest (after Columbia and Union College) in the state and the first Catholic college.

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From the Library

New Collections on New York Heritage

New York Heritage is a public research portal digitized archival materials in New York State. SCHS has been a contributor to NY Heritage since 2016 and we add new materials yearly as we continue our in-house digitization program. Two new collections are now live:

[Overseers of the Poor, Schenectady County](#)

These materials relate to the Overseers of the Poor of Schenectady, Glenville, and Rotterdam, and capture important information about the treatment and condition of poor people in Schenectady County in the 19th century. The collection includes ledgers, receipts, indentures, reports, correspondence, and legal documents.

[James Duane Letters](#)

This collection contains correspondence between James Duane and his associates, including notable historical figures such as Thomas Paine, George Clinton, Ethan Allen, George Washington, and Alexander Hamilton.

Access all of our NY Heritage collections at <https://nyheritage.org/organizations/schenectady-county-historical-society>.

Library Collections Spotlight: Family Files

If you are just getting started in researching a branch or member of your family in or near Schenectady County, taking a look at our **Family Files Collection** is a great place to begin. This collection contains a variety of materials grouped by surname: obituaries, newspaper clippings, genealogical charts, transcriptions of family bible records, citations of other records sources or sources in genealogy publications, and correspondence detailing research about the family.

The number of resources provided in each surname folder varies greatly. Some files contain hidden gems such as copies of documents and portraits held by other institutions or private individuals. Our library volunteers have been adding newspaper clippings to our family files for decades, but some of the most valuable materials in the files came from library patrons that shared copies of their research, documents, and photographs.

We maintain an alphabetical list for our Family Files and note which surnames are connected to other sources in the library including original documents, photographs, published books, and collections of personal papers. This [list](#) is available along with many other research resources at <https://schenectadyhistorical.org/collections/>.

If you don't see the name you are researching in our list, you may want to browse our catch-all letter files. For example, the "A" file includes material related to all surnames beginning with the letter A not included on the family file surname list.

- Marietta Carr, Librarian/Archivist

Image: Portrait of James Duane from the New-York Historical Society collection



The Sankofa Youth Collective: An Update on the African American Historical Records Project

By Elijahjison Powell, Marietta Carr, Micha Broadnax, and Kijua McMurtry-Sanders

Carter G. Woodson, historian and founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, once noted, "Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history." For the past three years, the Schenectady African American Historical Records Project (AAHRP) has been working to carry out the implied directive in Woodson's words: preserve historical records created by African Americans in Schenectady, build relationships with the memory-keepers and record creators in the Black community, and create opportunities for the general public to engage with local African American history. This past summer, we launched a new facet of the project that we've been planning from the beginning: the **Sankofa Youth Collective**.

The Sankofa Youth Collective was created as an intergenerational program that would encourage and inspire Schenectady's younger generation around the importance of African American history, connecting to local history, and preserving the words and works of African Americans as part of the historical record. Working with the Schenectady County Connects Summer Youth Employment Program, we hired four young people to conduct oral history interviews, represent the project at community events, digitize archival materials, and research topics related to local African American history.

The first three weeks of the program were located at the Schenectady County Historical Society where the youth participated in an intensive curriculum focused on Black History, Historical Research, and Schenectady History.

In the following weeks, the youth participated in events at the C.O.C.O.A. House, visited Union College, and conducted short 'snapshot' interviews at the Common Unity Cup events.

Youth were able to participate in key interviews with AAHRP Committee Members Miki Conn, Walter Simpkins, Julia Holcomb, and Bill Buell during their introductory weeks as they learned about ethical and informed consent, explored the history of Black Schenectady, and learned the process of conducting oral history interviews. Youth became familiar with jobs in archives, libraries, and museums, as well as a variety of other occupations as held by interviewees. The youth also learned how to engage people in public settings and were able to do so at events such as the Common Unity Cup, Community Fathers' I AM FATHER FESTIVAL, and the Karen B. Johnson Library. The youth developed interview questions and learned how to use a voice recorder to conduct interviews.

The Sankofa Youth Collective recorded over seventy interviews with a variety of people from the Schenectady Black community, including City Council President Marion Porterfield, Rev. Catherine Patterson, DJ Ketchup, County Legislator Omar McGill, and Hamilton Hill Neighborhood

Association President Marva Isaacs. These interviews cover a wide range of topics including personal experiences and memories of living and growing up in Schenectady, recollections about local Black-owned businesses and organizations, and commentaries on the current affairs of the city, particularly efforts to improve the lives of Black people.

The success of the inaugural Sankofa Youth Collective is evident not only in the work the youth produced, which will become part of the SCHS' archives collection and

"Our mission this summer was to bring back forgotten history of Black Schenectadians, and shed light on the history being made today and document it for the future.

Our work was so important because a lot of Black history in Schenectady has been forgotten or left undocumented."

- Elijahjison Powell



form the basis for future research and education, but also in the feedback from the youth themselves. One youth noted that he felt he could use the skills of public speaking and knowledge of Black history for the rest of his life, and he finally felt as though he liked history. Another youth expressed her gratitude for having a job that made her think all summer and stretch herself about talking to others.

Thanks to a grant from Schenectady County Connects, one of the summer program participants, Elijahjison Powell, was able to continue working with the AAHRP and SCHS this fall. He reflected on his experience with the Sankofa Youth Collective:

“We learned this summer that Schenectady has a base support system of so many community leaders, activists, politicians, and volunteers who care about people and who help them. There is a system here of togetherness and compassion for your fellow man and a sense of community. Our mission this summer was to bring back forgotten history of Black Schenectadians, and shed light on the history being made today and document it for the future. Our work was so important because a lot of Black history in Schenectady has been forgotten or

left undocumented. Two of our interviews that I want to highlight are William Rivas and Walter Simpkins. Both men made decisions in their youth that caused problems for themselves and others, but they turned their lives around and are now community leaders. I’d like to see the Sankofa Youth Collective continue year-round, and maybe partner with the school district to make this history more interesting and available.”

The African American Historical Records Project and the Sankofa Youth Collective were made possible in part by grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Schenectady County Legislature.

Thank you to our project committee members: Miki Conn, Sophia Delamar, Philip Fields, Julia Holcomb, Johan Matthews, Adonis Richards, William Rivas, Sarah Schmidt, and Walter Simpkins.

Thank you to our consulting archivists: Micha Broadnax and Kijua Sanders-McMurtry.

Thank you to the first Sankofa Youth Collective Cohort: Elijahjison Powell, Mi’kala Moore, Jacob Jamison, and Silas Harvard.

Reading the Paint: Cleaning up the Collections Database

by Mary Zawacki

“An old board...has, to us, twice the value of the same piece new from the lumberyard. Each old board has its own individual history, always unknown, but always to some degree guessable from the kind of wood, its dimensions...or paint, its finish...its wear or decay. Any riverbank farm is a library where he who hammers or saws may read at will. Come high water, there is always an accession of new books.” - Aldo Leopold in *“A Sand County Almanac,”* 1949.

At our own riverbank farm, we have no shortage of “old boards” hanging around our artifact collections storage areas. But I think Leopold’s sentiment applies to any collection of old, forgotten, or once-loved items, which is most of what we have here in storage at SCHS.

Artifact collections are a vital part of any history museum. We collect pieces of history because of the stories they tell, and the way they connect us to the past. Museum collections can be endlessly fascinating, but more often are unwieldy and downright difficult. While you can always “read the paint” as Leopold says, sometimes an artifact’s background remains a mystery, and that can cause some trouble.

Some of our artifacts have a clear provenance: we know exactly who it belonged to, when and where they used it, and why it was special enough to donate to a museum. For us, this is the gold standard in understanding an artifact’s story. Often, however, an artifact’s provenance has been lost. At SCHS, we have just embarked on a project to rectify that. We are trying to reunite artifacts with their rightful history.

An impetus for this project was the 2020 completion of SCHS’ first-ever collections inventory. Completing the inventory revealed a glaring discrepancy: our collections database detailed over 13,000 artifacts, but during the inventory, only about 10,000 were accounted for. What happened to the other 3,000?

In some cases, the artifacts truly are gone. I don’t want to get into that, because museum theft is a serious topic and one covered recently in major news outlets. But for us, in most cases, the missing artifact comes down to poor record keeping in the past. Remember, in the 1930s they had no computer databases! They also didn’t use best-practices for museum collections, which includes labeling objects with their ID, writing detailed descriptions, taking photographs, and noting the exact shelf location.

As a result of poor record-keeping in the past, our records were riddled with errors. Managing collections requires painstaking attention to detail. A single digit off, or a misspelling results in not being able to locate an object. Consider someone processing a teapot, but mistakenly listing the teapot’s ID as 0.01 instead of the correct number, 2000.1.1. Now consider the frazzled curator (me), opening every box, desperately searching for teapot 0.01, becoming increasingly worried that the precious teapot is gone forever.

In this case, and in most of our “missing artifact” cases, it’s a duplication. That same teapot has been entered into the system twice under two different IDs. One record had been located, photographed, and inventoried, but the second, duplicate record was not – because it doesn’t exist! There is no missing teapot, just two listings for the same thing. I then delete the extraneous record from the system. Boom, a “missing artifact” problem solved.

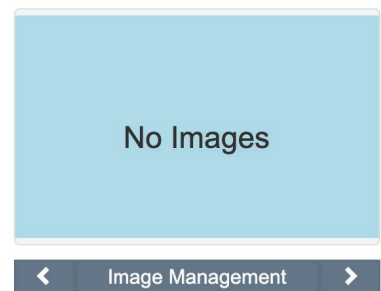
Another example is an artifact that wasn’t properly labeled with its ID when we received it. So, in the records, I know we should have a silk wedding gown (1970.1.1) that Mrs. Smith wore in 1970, but it’s listed as missing. However, by searching keywords, I can find a “found in collection” silk wedding gown that matches the description of 1970.1.1. That’s a match! The gown was not labeled with an ID when it came in, so the provenance was lost. When volunteers processed the gown in the 2000s, they gave it a brand new ID, and listed the provenance as “unknown.” So in my process of cleaning things up, I’ve not only located a duplicate record, but also restored the object to its provenance. It’s been reunited with its rightful history!

So I continue to plug away, solving these “missing artifact” problems. Sometimes it’s easy to see a duplication. Other times, it’s more intensive, and involves taking measurements and searching old paper records to ensure the record we delete really is a duplicate. Since I started this project, I’ve located over 550 duplications. That includes paintings, rifles, jewelry, and stoneware that we thought might be gone forever.

It’s a satisfying project, and one that I hope will result in SCHS gaining full intellectual control over our artifacts. I dream of a day where every artifact has a provenance and a story. And for those that really are a mystery -- all of our “riverside farm old boards” -- we’ll just have to employ Leopold’s method of “reading the paint.” That’s sure to tell a good story, too.

Collection	<input type="text"/>	a	Status	Missing2019	a
* Object ID	2015.00.1593		Accessn/Loan	2015.00	
Object Name	Painting	<input type="text"/>	Source	<input type="text"/>	
Other Name	<input type="text"/>	a	Catalog Date	09/25/2015	<input type="text"/>
Other No	<input type="text"/>		Cataloged by	<input type="text"/>	
Old No	<input type="text"/>		Date	<input type="text"/>	
Title	<input type="text"/>		Year Range	0	- 0
Location	32 Washington: Storage Closet C: 2				

Description Art - Painting with a gold or brass-plated/gilded wooden frame. The painting features small town with a barn in the center with a tower and a weathervane. Smaller brick and wooden buldings including buisnesses and houses are along the sides. A horse-drawn carriage with "A. Craig" - artist's name- in the left midground. Very realistically detailed, including text on a store sign and a man with a cane in the foreground.



Collection	<input type="text"/>	a	Status	INV2019	a
* Object ID	68.14.1		Accessn/Loan		
* Object Name	Painting	<input type="text"/>	Source	<input type="text"/>	
Other Name	<input type="text"/>	a	Catalog Date	07/30/2012	<input type="text"/>
Other No	<input type="text"/>		Cataloged by	<input type="text"/>	
Old No	<input type="text"/>		Date	1843	
Title	Old Dutch Church		Year Range	0	- 0
Location	32 Washington: Hallway, Second Floor		Item on Loan		

Description Art - Painting of "Old Dutch Church", oil on canvas. Painted by Samuel Sexton in 1843. Dimensions: Height - 14 1/3", Width - 18 3/4".



This Samuel Sexton painting of the "Old Dutch Church" was mistakenly added to the database twice, resulting in it being listed as "missing." We deleted the duplicate.



Front page: Charles Steinmetz in his lab, from the Grems-Doolittle Library Photo Collection at SCHS.
 Above: The 1921 Charles Steinmetz- Albert Einstein meeting, from the collection of miSci.

figure has been remembered, talked about, and thought about across time. This is especially true in the case of Steinmetz; as well-documented as so many different aspects of his life are in the existing literature about him, there is a part of his identity and his lived experiences that has all too frequently been overlooked, cast aside, or erased. Steinmetz had dwarfism. He stood at 4 feet, 0 inches tall. He also had kyphosis (an excessive curvature of the spine), and hip dysplasia (a hip socket which does not fully cover the ball of the thigh bone, causing hip instability and increased risk of hip joint dislocation). Upon reviewing a wide variety of literature that has been produced about Steinmetz across time, including biographies, local newspaper articles, and the *Steinmetz Papers Finding Aid* produced by the SCHS, I found that discussions of Steinmetz as a person with a disability are often absent from the literature about him. Even when dwarfism, kyphosis, and hip dysplasia are mentioned in the context of Steinmetz's life, it is overwhelmingly done so in ways that can be critiqued today.

Let us employ the contemporary field of disability

studies to better understand how we can make these critiques, and how we can reframe our conversations and analyses about Steinmetz as we move into the future. Disability studies is an academic discipline that first arose in the 1980s. The field challenges many of the dominant cultural views about people with disabilities, and about what it means to have a disability. These views and definitions of "disability" have been long shaped by "neurotypical" or "able-bodied" individuals – that is to say, people without disabilities. Thus, the views of disability are often imbued with specific stereotypes, prejudices, or other negative associations that disability studies scholars have identified and levied critiques against. I will apply theories and concepts from the disability studies field to various moments in Steinmetz's life in order to make specific suggestions about areas where applying reparative description work would be beneficial. In some cases, reparative description work can mean either contextualizing or outright removing harmful, inoffensive, outdated language that appears in a past finding aid. In other cases, this can mean adding more information to it – bringing to light details

about a person's life that have otherwise been buried. Both applications of reparative description work are applicable to previously published literature on Steinmetz. My suggestions will also apply to how aspects of future scholarship on Steinmetz can be improved.

First of all, what does it mean when a text about Steinmetz makes little to no mention of the fact that he had a disability at all, as is the case in John Winthrop Hammond's 1924 *Charles Proteus Steinmetz: A Biography*, or the *Charles Steinmetz Papers Finding Aid*, produced by the SCHS? You may be asking yourself: isn't it a good thing if people do not see Steinmetz as having a disability, given all of the negative implications that come with being viewed that way in our society? For contemporary disability studies scholars, as well as for many individuals with disabilities, disability is not a negative condition, but an aspect of human diversity. At its core, the field encourages people to think about disability not as an isolated, individualized condition or characteristic, but a social categorization, just like race, gender, or class. Modern disability theorists argue that the issue lies not with individuals who are labeled as having disabilities, but with broader society for failing to accommodate them. Indeed, it is society's inaccessibility, as opposed to any medical condition, that is "disabling." Simi Linton, an American author, activist, and disability rights theorist, wrote in 1998 that "disability studies takes for its subject matter not simply the variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing, but, more crucially, the meaning we make of those variations." Therefore, to pretend that Steinmetz didn't have a disability means to erase the fact that his lived experiences in an "ableist" society were most certainly shaped by this categorization. Erasing his disability entirely means we fail to make any meaningful criticisms of the power structure (ableism) that is at play.

Since the *Charles Steinmetz Papers Finding Aid* as it currently exists does not make any mention of his disability, the finding aid is a great candidate for additive reparative description work. This does not mean to simply throw in a sentence somewhere, listing out his physical disabilities. Mentioning someone's disability in a biographical context should be done to help contextualize their lived experiences, make an observation of, or commentary on the structures of power and prejudice that they came up against. It also means to normalize disability as an aspect of human diversity, not as something that needs to be kept shamefully hidden. With all of that in mind, which specific parts of the biographical section of the *Charles Steinmetz Papers Finding Aid* would benefit from being revisited and rethought? By cross-comparing the finding aid biography to other biographical texts on Steinmetz, I have identified three potential areas.

About Steinmetz's immigration to the US, the finding

aid states that "Steinmetz came to the United States in 1889 by the invitation of his Zurich roommate Oscar Asmussen." Other accounts claim the process was far more complicated than is implied here.

Steinmetz was initially denied entry into the United States due to his lack of money, his unfamiliarity with the English language, and no doubt, in part, because of his disability. In the 1956 book *The Little Giant of Schenectady*, author Dorothy Markey describes that because Steinmetz is "shabbily dressed, without the language, without resources or means of support, and badly handicapped," the immigration officers instinctively deny him entry (40). In Markey's account, an immigration officer tells Steinmetz directly, "There is danger of your becoming a public charge," employing commonly seen rhetoric that frames people with disabilities as public burdens (41). Even when roommate Oscar Asmussen meets with the immigration officers to vouch for Steinmetz, there is still some hesitation to grant him entry into the country: "The official hesitated. Genius or no genius, the cripple might become a public charge" (45). The officer asks Asmussen, "Will you see to him?", and thus bases his allowance of Steinmetz into the US on Asmussen's affirmative answer, demonstrating the infantilization of people with disabilities (46).

Describing that Steinmetz almost never made it into the United States because of ableist prejudices and assumptions (combined with classist and nativist ones as well) is therefore useful and relevant biographical information to include in any account of his life because it gives us deeper insight into his personal lived experiences, along with the systemic perpetuation of ableism in his lifetime, and the prevailing societal views of people with disabilities in his lifetime.

The SCHS finding aid is very effective at synthesizing Steinmetz's many professional accomplishments, describing him aptly as "one of the foremost inventors, scientists, engineers, researchers, and mathematicians of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries," but it also goes on to make a claim that is worth investigating further. The finding aid states that his myriad accomplishments made him "one of the most popular men in America" towards the end of his lifetime. Though it is not an untrue statement on its surface, I nevertheless want to complicate this view and argue based on several written accounts that the intense veneration for Steinmetz was, and still is, influenced and exacerbated by normative assumptions surrounding what people with disabilities can, and cannot, accomplish.

Overwhelmingly, Steinmetz's immense and numerous accomplishments have long been presented in contrast to his physical disability. In 1924, Hammond writes that "he had a very unusual brain, but his body was sadly crippled" (4), and in 2013, the *Times Union* reports that "although he stood just 4 feet and his twisted,



Charles Steinmetz poses in his 1914 Detroit Electric Car with his adopted family, from left: Midge, Billy, Joe, and Joseph LeRoy Hayden, 1914. From the collection of miSci.

hunchbacked body moved with a herky-jerky gait, Steinmetz became a giant among ranks of 20th-century scientists like Edison and Einstein.” Many accounts also describe that he was mystified throughout his life: in 1958, Markey describes that when he presented at his first engineering conference, “he looked like a dwarf out of a Grimm’s fairy tale. However, the audience forgot his appearance when he had read a few pages” (129). Further, in *The Electrical Genius of Liberty Hall* (1962), Floyd Miller describes that after Steinmetz’s pet alligators escaped from his home and made their way into the Mohawk River, an amazed crowd formed outside of his home. He writes, “the little hunchback went into the house, the two crows still clinging to his shoulders and talking vehemently. Thus was written another chapter in the neighbor’s growing legend of Steinmetz. At this stage no one could foresee that Steinmetz, more than any other single man, was to be responsible for the growth of the General Electric Company into one of America’s industrial giants” (14-15). Finally, a 2021 *Daily Gazette* article discussing Einstein and Steinmetz’s 1921 meeting displays acute awareness that the fascination surrounding Steinmetz was born in part from his physical disabilities: “Einstein and Steinmetz...really

were two of the most famous people in the world at the time, and part of that in Steinmetz’s case was probably due to his physical appearance. You saw him once and you remembered. But despite his small frame – he wasn’t even five-foot-tall and suffered from dwarfism, hunchback and hip dysplasia – Steinmetz was quite a dashing figure.”

Taken together, these accounts make clear that much of the prevailing admiration for Steinmetz is rooted in rhetoric that implies he “overcame” his disability in order to be successful. This is quite the logical fallacy because his physical disability is very much not something that disappeared at his first stroke of success, and that by doing so he is an inspirational figure. The issue here does not lie in the celebration of Steinmetz’s immense accomplishments, which we should most certainly be doing. It lies instead in the way in which his achievement of those accomplishments is framed. Stating that a person with a disability who is academically, professionally, or otherwise successful has “overcome” their disability paints all people with disabilities as helpless or pitiful figures who experience constant illness or suffering. It also stops us from



From left: Joe Hayden, Joseph LeRoy Hayden, Corinne Hayden, Billy Hayden, Charles Steinmetz, and Midge Hayden at Camp Mohawk, 1911. From the Grems-Doolittle Library Photo Collection at SCHS.

critiquing the ableist social structures and power dynamics that prevent all people with disabilities from thriving, reducing disability down to just an individual matter rather than a marginalized social categorization.

Linton critiques the use of phrases such as “[he] has overcome [his] disability and is a great success” and “I never think of you as disabled,” writing, “an implication of these statements is that the other members of the group from which the individual has supposedly moved beyond are not as brave, strong, or extraordinary as the person who has overcome that designation” (17-18). When we celebrate Steinmetz’s successes, let us refrain from contrasting his intellect from his physical disability so as to not make a man simply living his life into an “inspirational” story. This will allow us to stop placing the burden on people with disabilities to “prove” themselves by overcoming ableist attitudes and barriers, and instead allow us to begin questioning the systems of power and oppression which prevent all people with disabilities from thriving in our society. The *Charles Steinmetz Papers Finding Aid* would do well to document and describe that, in part, Steinmetz’s popularity, both during his lifetime and beyond, derives from ableist

assumptions about what a person with a disability can and cannot accomplish, and from a tendency to idealize and mystify him as a beacon of inspiration. This information gives us insight into how people viewed Steinmetz, and allows us to observe, rather than erase, the ableism that was woven into recollections of him.

There is one further omission in the biographical section of the SCHS finding aid on Steinmetz that I would like to raise for consideration: the details of his family life. Both Steinmetz’s father and grandfather also had dwarfism, kyphosis, and hip dysplasia. Steinmetz was aware of the genetic component of his disability, and as a result, he chose never to marry or have biological children. He made this choice despite loving children and wanting very much to have a family. There are moral arguments to be raised against this line of thinking today, certainly, but it is an important detail of Steinmetz’s life because it highlights how his disability shaped his everyday life and the possibilities that he felt were open to him. Of Charles Proteus Steinmetz’s adopted son, Joseph LeRoy Hayden, the SCHS finding aid states: “he became Steinmetz’s administrator, filling the void left by Ernst Berg when he left Liberty Hall. Steinmetz adopted Hayden.” Hayden



Charles Steinmetz working on a project while sitting in his canoe on the Mohawk River, near to Camp Mohawk, c 1920s. From the Grems-Doolittle Library Photo Collection.

and his wife, Corinne Rost, moved into Steinmetz's home in the GE Realty Plot when it was completed in 1903, and the Haydens, along with their children Joseph, (b. 1906), Midge (b. 1909), and William, (b. 1910), lived with Steinmetz the remainder of his life. While this section does indicate Hayden's role of "filling [a] void" within Steinmetz's life, I still find that the importance of the Hayden family in Steinmetz's life is undersold here, compared to its emphasis in many Steinmetz

biographies. Hammond, for instance, emphasizes the closeness of this relationship, writing about Steinmetz's participation in the annual Hayden family reunion: "Dr. Steinmetz never more completely exhibited his unity of life with his adopted son and grandchildren than on these occasions. He was one of them in every respect, and took part with the children in their games and revels" (464-465). I personally was very touched by this account. Despite ableist societal pressures and

assumptions which kept Steinmetz from having the biological children he desired, he was able to forge a family of his own, and it meant an immense deal to him. The SCHS finding aid would benefit from detailing his relationship with the Hayden family further, to enrich the account of his family life, to highlight the pressures which kept him from pursuing his desire for biological children, and to explain why developing a relationship with the Hayden family was so important to Steinmetz.

Beyond my suggested reparative work for biographical accounts about Steinmetz, I also want to summarize some “dos” and “don’ts” when it comes to language and terminology, to make sure that when modern accounts do make mention of Steinmetz’s disability, it is not done in a way that is demeaning, outdated, or otherwise limiting. Works about Steinmetz, regardless of how long ago or how recently they were published, tend to use the same words and phrases over and over. Markey’s *The Little Giant of Schenectady* (1956) describes Steinmetz as having a “dwarfed body” (23) and being “a cripple - a hunchback” (24), and being “badly handicapped” (40). Decades later, in *Steinmetz: Engineer and Socialist* (1992), Ronald R. Kline describes Steinmetz as having “pronounced physical deformity” and “hunchbacked dwarfism,” and quite similarly, in a 2011 article by *Smithsonian Magazine*, author Gilbert King labels him “a dwarf,” and describes that “his body [was] contorted by a hump in his back and a crooked gait”. In 1924, Hammond described Steinmetz as a “queer, gnome-like figure” (229). This descriptor has had a lasting legacy. The very first description of Steinmetz that Kline offers is that he is a “queer, gnomelike (sic) man” (ix). In 2011, King also refers to Steinmetz as a “queer, gnome-like figure.” Perhaps this phrase, or phrases analogous to it, were levied against Steinmetz during his lifetime, hence why Hammond, who conducted interviews directly with Steinmetz in order to write his two books, may have used it. However, why has it been used as a descriptor towards Steinmetz into the 21st century?

There are few, if any, contexts in which we use the same words and phrases that people would have used in a different era to describe themselves or others in conversations we have today, especially when it comes to offensive, outdated, and demeaning language previously used to describe marginalized social groups. Why should talking about Steinmetz work any differently? The language we use about him does not need to be, and in fact should not be, limited to words that he himself or those around him would have used. In future scholarship, proper medical terminology such as “kyphosis” can replace the derogatory descriptors “hunchback” or “hump in his back.” Phrases that are almost universally rejected as offensive by disability scholars and people with disabilities today, such as “dwarf,” “crippled,” or “handicapped,” can be replaced with person-first language (“a person with a disability”), or the medical term for the specific disability in question

(“a person with dwarfism”). If a phrase like “queer gnome-like figure” is going to stay associated with Steinmetz, then it should not be continually used as a present-day descriptor, but rather a way to highlight the ableist manner in which he was treated and described in the past. The phrase should be placed in proper historical context, and authors should take a stance to condemn its past usage instead of simply perpetuating its usage.

We should not erase Steinmetz’s disability, because to do so would be to ignore the fact that in an ableist society, the fact that he was labeled as having a disability most certainly impacted many facets of his lived experiences. We also, however, need to reject any and all stereotypical and limiting narratives, such as the “overcoming” narrative, about Steinmetz, applying modern disability theory retroactively. The arguments presented here hold relevance to all scholarship and discussions about people with disabilities. We can use all of this to better uplift and share the stories of people with disabilities from throughout Schenectady’s history. Discussions about Steinmetz’s disability in the modern era hold very real relevance for people with disabilities who occupy the Schenectady of today.

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Around the County with Bill Buell

by Bill Buell, Schenectady County Historian

Somebody asked me once, who is my favorite historical figure in Schenectady's long and glorious history.

That's more than three and a half centuries, so I resisted just blurting out the name, Charles Steinmetz, and decided to give it some serious deliberation.

After mulling it over, Steinmetz remains my most admirable and most important figure in the county's history. He was a narrow choice over people such as Christopher Yates, a colonial leader during the American Revolution, Mordecai Myers, a Jewish mayor here in the city and War of 1812 hero, George Lunn, our Socialist mayor from 1912, and more recently Sam Stratton, another mayor and longtime U.S. Congressman.

And just for the record, there are women in my top ten, all from the 20th century, which only makes sense because women and their role in society had been relegated throughout most of history. Only in the last 100 years have they begun to take their rightful place among the decision makers of the world. I'll have to put together a top ten, women-only list sometime in the future, but for now let's get back to Steinmetz.

Why do I like him so much? Well, he was a scientific genius, no one can dispute that, but he was also a civic-minded individual who really cared about the quality of life of others.

A German immigrant who came to Schenectady in 1894 to work for GE, Steinmetz was also president of the city school board and the city's Common Council. An active Socialist during the second decade of the 20th century in Schenectady, he may be known mostly for his scientific genius, but he also was the man largely responsible for the creation of Central Park and the construction of three new school buildings around 1912 when the city's population was booming.

It was 100 years ago on Oct. 23 that Steinmetz passed away at age of 58. A bronze likeness of the man has twice been created by sculptor Dexter Benedict to help honor his memory. There is the glorious life-size statue of Steinmetz with his friend and colleague Thomas Edison in downtown Schenectady at the corner of Erie Boulevard and South Ferry St., and there is also the bust of Steinmetz up on Wendell Avenue in the GE Realty Plot where he used to live.

At the 2017 ceremony to unveil the bust, I had the opportunity to talk to Joseph Steinmetz Hayden, the adopted great-grandson of Steinmetz. Hayden drove

in from his home in New Hampshire for the unveiling, and while he wasn't born until after Steinmetz's death, Hayden had a great understanding of the man.

"I knew Steinmetz through my father, and I knew him more as a humanist than a scientist," said Hayden, who grew up at 1018 Nott Street just around the corner from Steinmetz's former home. "He was a great scientist, but of course he loved children so much and he loved teaching. He was so appreciative of a good education."

There are several wonderful Steinmetz stories that paint what I think is an accurate picture of the man, and the one I enjoy the most is the story of Henry Ford's visit to Schenectady sometime before 1917. As related to former Schenectady County historian Larry Hart by WGY newscaster Kolin Hagar back in 1972, Ford needed some help with the generator system at his new plant in Dearborn, Michigan.

Hagar, by the way, was the guy who first uttered the words "WGY" on the radio back in 1922, explaining that the W was for wireless, G for General Electric and Y for the last letter in Schenectady.

Hagar's retelling of the story suggests that Ford knocked on the front door of Steinmetz's home on Wendell Avenue, was ushered into a parlor by a maid, and then waited for an hour before the professor finally entered the room to greet his distinguished guest. Steinmetz had been reading to his adopted grandchildren and that ritual was so important to him that even his distinguished visitor from Michigan wasn't going to interrupt that routine. I've also heard another version of the story that has Ford walking through the streets of Schenectady for an hour while he waited for Steinmetz to get done with his nightly obligation.

How much of this story is true we can't really say. What we know for a fact is that Steinmetz did travel out to the Dearborn plant, spent two days working on the generator, fixed the problem, and returned home to Schenectady.

What's also true is that GE sent a bill to Ford the next week asking for \$10,000 for Steinmetz's work. When Ford asked for an itemized explanation of the bill, Steinmetz himself responded with a short and simple letter:

"Making chalk mark on generator, \$1.

Knowing where to make chalk mark, \$9,999."

Along with his scientific prowess and his political/social contributions, Steinmetz also had a long connection



Billy Hayden, Steinmetz, Douglas Fairbanks, Midge Hayden, Joe Hayden, Jr. in Hollywood, 1923. From the Grems-Doolittle Library Photo Collection.

with Union College, teaching engineering courses for more than 20 years in the early 20th century.

“The interests of Steinmetz transcended the purely scientific,” *The New York Times* wrote in his obituary from 1923. “The facility in which he wrote scientific articles that made complex subjects plain to the lay reader was an example of his broad viewpoint. This led him to regard science as only one aspect of human activity and made him something of a philosopher as well as a scientist.”

Back in 2003, I had the opportunity to interview Marjorie “Midge” Hayden at her home in Niskayuna. She was 94 at the time, having been born in 1909, the year Steinmetz invited Joseph Leroy Hayden, his lab assistant, into his Wendell Avenue home. Along with Hayden came his wife, Corinne, and two children, including an infant, Midge. The following year, Steinmetz legally adopted Hayden and his family, which would soon include a third child

Midge was 14 when Steinmetz died in 1923.

“He was a perfect dear, and I really can’t say enough about him,” Midge told me that day in 2003. “Whatever we wanted, he got for us. We were completely spoiled.”

Midge said that she and her siblings called Hayden “father,” and referred to Steinmetz as “Daddy.” “He really was a wonderful friend to me,” she said. “He was nice to all of us and all of our friends. He left most of the discipline to my father. I know he never hit me, and I don’t think he ever hit my brothers. He just wasn’t that way.”

So, there is my argument for labeling Steinmetz as my favorite Schenectady “person of significance,” I will call it. And I didn’t mention the Law of Hysteresis, the Three Phase Induction Meter, or any of the 200 patents credited to his name. He really was special.

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Making History a Little Sweeter

by Caroline Brown

As a nonprofit organization, we are always seeking to offer to our community new avenues to get involved with SCHS. Whether it is visiting our galleries, attending programs and workshops, volunteering, or giving, each way that you engage with the SCHS sites will help to keep us active for generations to come. We are so pleased to share a new, sweet way to support the Historical Society: a partnership with **Villa Italia Pasticceria** for a special promotion of our monthly donor program, the Lockkeepers.

Just as they did during the days of the Erie Canal, Lockkeepers safeguard SCHS through the ebbs and flows of economic change and enable the stewardship of Schenectady's past, present, and future. When you become a Lockkeeper, you know that each month, your gift directly supports the educational and preservation efforts of SCHS.

Now, Lockkeepers not only have the satisfaction of championing the preservation of Schenectady County's history, but they can also enjoy a tasty treat as a token of our gratitude.

Lockkeepers who choose to give at least \$10 per month to SCHS will be granted a one-time \$10 gift card to Villa Italia, as well as an ongoing 10% discount on future in-store purchases through the end of 2024.

Monthly gifts are automatically deducted each month, just like any other subscription service you might use. There are advantages to giving monthly; this program only requires a one-time sign-up, and you will not need to renew each year, though you are welcome to contact us at any time to manage your account. You can also rely on the rhythm of donation each month, which means a lot for planning on our end, as well.

To become a Lockkeeper, simply visit our website and click the purple "Donate" button on the top right-hand corner. Once on the secure SCHS PayPal page, select "monthly." Type in the amount you wish to donate each month and add your information. We will send you your gift card and key tag through the mail.

We want to extend our heartfelt gratitude to our generous friends at Villa Italia for making

this partnership possible! We are honored to work with an organization at the heart of our community that helps make life a little sweeter. And we thank you, our Lockkeepers and all of our supporters, for your generous support and service to this organization.

Questions about SCHS Lockkeepers? Contact Caroline Brown at development@schenectadyhistorical.org or (518) 374-0263 x7.



Part I: The Inevitable Politics of History

by Michael Diana

These days, national headlines are abuzz with various attempts by governors or legislatures to erect or demolish certain monuments. To shape the touchstones of our collective memories. You might further read of certain political parties on the “left” or “right” using their majority status to influence standards in public education, in particular the historical narratives we teach our children. This often takes the form of banning books or subjecting teachers to the wrath of parents and school boards.

No matter how you identify politically, I know you can find some recent episode of the machinations above that you found deeply disturbing. And it would be reasonable to want it all to stop. Shouldn't we just keep politics out of teaching history altogether? I'm sorry to tell you, but that's impossible. The telling of history is inherently a political act. If we are to tell history in a responsible way, we must first acknowledge that reality.

But how does history become political? Can't we just tell the facts? I wish it could be so simple. To truly understand history we must first understand that “facts” can never be taken for granted and are incredibly superficial in their explanatory power. Just because a historical claim is carved in stone or written in a textbook, doesn't make it a true statement about the past. I'm always reminded of the plaques adorning the Mabee Farm house, placed there in the 1920s. They state very matter-of-factly that the structure was built in 1680. We now know that this is completely not true, and can prove otherwise with techniques like dendrochronology. Thus, our understanding of the “facts” is always evolving. Of course, it's a matter of relatively low stakes to know when exactly the Mabee house was built. But if such a trivial detail is subject to revision, consider the controversy that can ensue around claims of greater political significance.

Consider, for instance, that there is no universally accepted date for the formation of the Haudenosaunee or the Iroquois Confederacy. The union of those Five Nations was easily one of the most significant developments in the history of this area (and influenced the nascent United States democracy) and yet its inception cannot be definitively put on a timeline. All this is to show that if the individual facts that punctuate our history are subject to revision and debate, then our understanding of that history as a whole is subject to revision and debate.

Indeed, every historian knows that to study history isn't to memorize “objective” facts, but rather to sift through



A puzzling monument to a topical figure. What does it mean? And is this the best way to commemorate our region's significant Italian-American heritage? It seems even broaching that subject becomes instantly political.

and interpret evidence. Ideally we formulate questions about the past and analyze documents or objects from the appropriate period to answer those questions. But the very questions we ask inevitably start with a value judgment of what we think is important. Which is ultimately a political question. For instance, when studying a figure like Robert E. Lee, we could focus our attention on the military tactics he used to overcome Union forces. Past generations of scholars have done precisely this, and accordingly wrote favorably on him as a brilliant leader of men, perhaps even one worthy of a statue. But we could instead focus our attention on his attitude towards enslaved Americans. Indeed, more recent attention has been paid to this aspect of Lee, leading people to more negative views of him. Perhaps he shouldn't get that statue after all – but that's another question entirely (should we erect statues of inherently flawed humans at all?).

Even if somehow we had a perfect factual record of the past, politics would still be injected into our

understanding of those facts. For instance, no one would contest that New Deal public works programs began with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidential administration in 1933. But that fact on its own tells us nothing. What did New Deal programs do? Were they successful? How can we even define and measure that success? These are the important questions that need answering. And in answering these questions, we inevitably bring our personal value judgments. A conservative and a liberal could evaluate the same set of facts concerning FDR or perhaps Ronald Reagan, and tell completely different stories about their careers. Simply put, the human brain isn't wired to understand the past as a set of facts or data points. Instead we understand the past as a story. In creating these stories, we also create cause and effect relationships between phenomena which may or may not actually be related. And ultimately, we make value judgments that reflect our own personal politics and philosophies.

At the risk of being overly reductive, we might posit that narratives about the past can fall into two categories: conservative or progressive. In a strictly American context, conservative narratives tend to be more celebratory of the past. They tend to lean into the idea of American exceptionalism, and highlight the innovations and triumphs of past generations. Perhaps it's not

surprising that these histories are more popular with people on the right of the political spectrum. Meanwhile, progressive histories tend to be more critical of past generations. They seek to expose past injustices or inequalities, and illustrate how these things contributed to the present state of affairs. Of course, such narratives are usually more popular on the left.

In my experience, when people complain about history becoming "political," it's almost always in cases which challenge their personal views, and the narratives they've constructed about history. Their understanding of history is obviously "correct," while others are biased or perhaps even malevolent in their intentions. But we must be more mature than that. All histories reflect their author's worldview. Even a relatively uncontroversial American historical claim is political in nature – it simply reflects the politics and worldview of a majority. Step into the worldview of someone from a different country, and that mundane historical claim might seem incredulous.

So what does this mean for our work at the Schenectady County Historical Society? It's a subject I've been mulling over for a while now. And it's a subject I will revisit in our next newsletter. Stay tuned.



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