



SCHENECTADY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter Vol. 69, No. 3, 2025 | schenectadyhistorical.org



Dante Venditti: An Italian Immigrant to Schenectady

by Josie Culbertson

July 21, 1907 was just like any other day in New York harbor; immigrants docked in Manhattan after enduring a two-week-long voyage at sea on the *S.S. Virginia*. Despite popular belief, immigrants did not dock directly at Ellis Island. In fact, plenty of them never saw the golden, promising gates of the facility. First class, second class, and wealthy passengers, as well as influential passengers with connections, often sat through a quick inspection aboard the ship before being sent freely away to live their new lives in America. But passengers that were deemed third class – also known as steerage passengers – or who were suspected of needing a more thorough inspection, were put on ferryboats and sent to Ellis Island for processing. Most of these passengers were Italian, the largest ethnic group to pass through the center.

One of the Italian immigrants being shuffled off the ferryboat and into the large building that day was a soon-to-be two-year-old boy named Dante Venditti. He was traveling from Naples, Italy, to New York with his mother, Pasqualina Bonacquista Venditti, in order to meet up with his father who had immigrated the year prior. His father, Luciano Antonio Venditti, had arrived in New York on the *S.S. Antonio Lopez*. The mother and son passed inspection, and Pasqualina wrote their final destination down on the passenger manifest as Schenectady, New York.

Once reunited with his father, Dante grew up with his parents and eight siblings in the third ward of Schenectady on Romeyn Street. Per census records,

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Note from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Happy October! Here at SCHS we're busy every day with school trips: mainly visits from the fourth graders in the Schenectady City School District. Generous school bus funding from the Broughton Foundation has enabled us to serve these students, and we're thrilled to welcome them to Mabee Farm.

Our fall public programs are also operating at full steam, with a full slate of Candlelight Tours, craft workshops, family activities, and more keeping us busy over the next month or two.

If you want to peruse these offerings or register for a program, visit schenectadyhistorical.org/events.

We've had a spate of good news here at SCHS over the last few months. First, on a personal note, I'd like to offer my congratulations to our Director of Education, Mike Diana, who was recently married; I'm told their Nebraska wedding was beautiful.

Next, I'm happy to report that we received some very significant grants recently. These will make a big impact on our work at SCHS:

- \$99,000 from NYSCA for preservation work at Mabee Farm
- \$75,000 from New York State for operations and preservation
- \$20,000 from National Endowment for the Humanities for "Celebrate America 250"
- \$8,000 from Schenectady County for special events at Mabee Farm
- \$5,662 from NYS Documentary Heritage Program for processing collections
- \$3,200 from CDLC to digitize part of the Legal Matters collection

Wishing you and your family a happy autumn and holiday season. I hope to see you at an upcoming program.

Mary Zawacki Graves, SCHS Executive Director





BECOME A LOCK KEEPER

Just as they did during the days of the Erie Canal, **Lockkeepers** -- our monthly donors -- 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.

Join at schenectadyhistorical.org/support

Letter from the President



History has been in the news a lot this summer. Our federal administration has begun looking at the various Smithsonian museums with an eye to “revising” our history in order to present a more “positive” interpretation of our past. Our history is neither “positive” or “negative.” It simply is. However, there have often been efforts to leave out the uncomfortable facts

and only focus on those that shine a favorable light on our country and past actions and events. We are going through just such a period now. The purpose of such efforts is to create and justify a false image of who we are.

This begs the question, why should it matter? Is history important enough to be the focal point of radical revisionism? I hardly need to point out to this readership that history IS important. It is our collective memory as a nation, culture, and community. History provides us with context and understanding as to where we belong within time and place. It strives to answer the question: why? Knowledge of our past grounds us. It gives a foundation on which to build our future. For this reason, it is important that our knowledge of history be complete and as accurate as possible. Focusing on the parts that make us look our best

and deleting those parts deemed too difficult to address, creates a false narrative that will send us off into a funhouse of mirrors – a dangerous distortion that will lead to errors in how we choose to lead our lives.

Sometimes, it is the most difficult aspects of our history that provide inspiration for how to tackle today's challenges. As the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States approaches, we can draw valuable lessons from not just the stirring victories, but from the bitter defeats and how our forefathers and mothers responded to them. As in any human endeavor, some of those responses were heroic and others were not. Yet the complete narrative gives valuable insight.

The Schenectady County Historical Society will continue to endeavor to provide our community with as complete and accurate an understanding of our local history as possible: “the good, the bad and the uncomfortable.” This is something we can be proud of.

Suzy Unger, SCHS President

Events & Programs

For event details, and to get tickets, please visit schenectadyhistorical.org/events.

Tours and More

Candlelight Tours

Through October 31 @ SCHS

Autumn Glow Lantern Festival

Through November 2 @ Mabee Farm

Full Moon Beaver Walk

November 6 @ Mabee Farm

Jan Mabee's Twilight Tours

November 13-15 @ Mabee Farm

Holiday Stockade Stroll

December 17-20 @ SCHS

Festivals

Festival of Trees

December 6-27 @ SCHS

For Families

Family Program: Harvest's End

November 15 @ Mabee Farm

American Girl Holiday Tea Party

December 6 @ SCHS

A Very Mabee Christmas

December 13 @ Mabee Farm

Workshops

Felt a Turkey

November 8 @ Mabee Farm

Felted Shawl

December 6 @ Mabee Farm

Food & Drink

Workshop: Hippocras & Spiced Wines

November 14 @ SCHS

Tavern Night

November 21 @ Mabee Farm

Night of Lights

December 5 @ SCHS

Workshop: Wine Truffles

December 10 @ SCHS

Chocolate Haus

December 19 & 20 @ SCHS

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 SCHS can 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 SCHS 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!

Will you support the long term sustainability of the Schenectady County Historical Society by joining **The 1661 Society**? Please contact Audrey Jones at OFFICE@SCHENECTADYHISTORICAL.ORG to make your pledge.

The Baronet and The Mayor: A Schenectady County Story



by John Gearing

Most, if not all, of SCHS' members are likely to recognize the name "William Johnson." Arriving in the Mohawk Valley in about 1739 to develop a large tract of land that had been granted to his uncle Admiral Sir Peter Warren, William Johnson soon proved himself to have a keen understanding of regional affairs. While managing his uncle's lands, Johnson became an important wholesale merchant in the fur trade and established a relationship with the citizenry of the Mohawk Nation – one characterized by Johnson's deep respect for, and interest in, Native American culture. In time, Johnson was appointed Indian agent. During the French and Indian War, Johnson was credited with convincing the Iroquois Confederacy to support the English and was commissioned a Major-General in command of Iroquois and Colonial forces. As a result of his actions during the Battle of Lake George, Johnson was granted the title "Baronet of New York" by King George III. Baronetcies are hereditary, unlike knights, and rank below barons. Baronets are commoners, not peers, and are addressed as "Sir."

Sir William Johnson had, it was whispered, children with several women. But it was to his son John — whose mother was Catherine Weisenberg, an indentured servant from Germany and Sir William's common law wife — that Sir William arranged the transfer of his title. While on a tour of England in 1765, John Johnson was knighted by King George III. From 1765 to 1773 Sir John had a common law marriage with a

local young woman named Clarissa Putnam, who lived in the hamlet of Tribes Hill, a few miles upriver from the Johnson home, Fort Johnson. Legend has it that Sir John could see her house from Fort Johnson. Theirs is said to have been a love match, but it was not the one upwardly-mobile Sir William had planned for his heir. Instead, Sir John married Mary Nicol Watts on June 30, 1773. Mary Watts was a member of the elite Delancey family of New York, and closely related to the powerful Nicol, van Cortlandt, van Rensselaer, and Schuyler families. Her father was one of the richest merchants and landowners in the colonies. Mary and Sir John had eighteen children; ten sons and eight daughters.

Upon Sir William's death in 1774, Sir John became the 2nd Baronet of New York. He led a regiment of the British Army during the Revolution. Having had their properties in New York confiscated during the war, Sir John and his family lived in Canada during the peace that followed. There, Sir John worked to settle loyalists on crown land grants and continued to run the Department of Indian Affairs.

Sir John and Clarissa Putnam had two children. Margaret was born in 1766, and William in about 1770. SCHS' Daniel Campbell Letterbook contains postwar correspondence by Campbell (a close friend of the Johnson family) to both "Clary" and Sir John concerning the welfare and education of the children. Clarissa, Margaret, and William seem to have moved from Tribes Hill to a house near Campbell's on State Street, allowing him to be well-informed about family matters. Campbell's letters show that Sir John provided financial support for the children in 1792-93, at least. An 1816 deed records Clarissa's purchase of a house and lot on State Street. She died in 1833. William eventually moved to Canada to hold a governmental position. Margaret married James Van Horne, son of Albany County Sheriff Abraham Van Horne in 1791.

Margaret and James had five children. Their son, James E. Van Horne, grandson of the 2nd Baronet of New York, became Schenectady's mayor in 1848. James' son, William Van Horne, Sir John's great-grandson, was also Schenectady's mayor (1871-1873). William owned a commercial property on State Street called Van Horne Hall. The late historian Frank Taormina once identified the building at 273 State Street as the site of the Hall. Daniel Campbell's house still stands, a short distance further along the street.

Today, Sir Colpoys Guy Johnson, born 1965, is the 8th Baronet of New York. And it seems likely that somewhere in Schenectady County there can be found his distant cousins, Clarissa and Sir John's descendants.

Image: "Sir William Johnson" by John Wollaston from the Albany Institute of History and Art

From the Library



SHARE YOUR BROADWAY/CENTER STREET PHOTOS AND MEMORIES

Broadway is a street of many pasts - over the generations it has changed in so many ways that capturing its history is a major undertaking. SCHS needs your help in documenting Broadway's heyday in the 1940s through 1970s.

Present-day Broadway begins just north of Union Street and extends to the Five Corners intersection in the town of Rotterdam. The street was originally known as Maiden Lane, before being renamed Centre/Center Street

IDENTIFYING THE LARRY HART NEGATIVES COLLECTION

Before Larry Hart served as the Schenectady city and county historian, he was a long-time reporter and photographer for the Schenectady *Union-Star* and the Schenectady *Gazette*. The SCHS Library holds his collection of personal and research materials, including a large number of photographic negatives that he created and collected during his career. Dating from the 1910s to the early 1980s, these negatives capture brief moments in Schenectady's history that might not be found elsewhere, such as accidents and fires, store openings, groundbreakings and building dedications, anniversary events, strikes, building demolitions, storms, sports and recreation, construction, farm life, parades, and street scenes throughout Schenectady County. We are working on adding the digitized negatives to our online catalog so they will be more accessible and useful to researchers, but we need your help! Many of the people, events, and places in these images are unidentified. We're asking you to peruse Hart's images by searching "2006.4.601.*" in our Photos catalog (the * is key to seeing the whole collection) and let us know if you recognize anyone or have information that might help us add details to the catalog records. For more information or to help with describing these images, please contact the librarian, Marietta, at librarian@schenectadyhistorical.org.

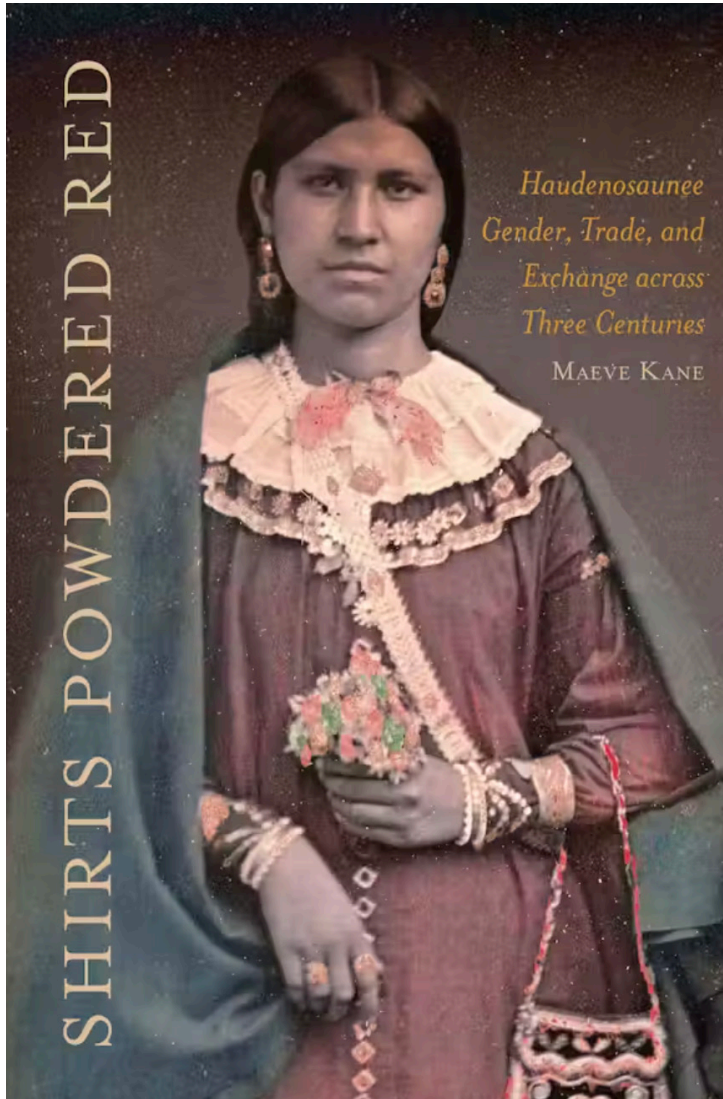
Image: From the Larry Hart News Negatives Collection: Broadway and Smith St., 1958 (now the Broadway Garage)

during the 1850s and finally named Broadway. In 1930, the different parts of Broadway were known by three different names: North Center Street from the short stretch of road between Warren Street and Pine Street down to Union Street, South Center Street from south of Union Street to State Street, and Broadway south of State Street.

Some of Schenectady's earliest colonial settlers lived along what is now the intersection of present-day Broadway and State Street. By the mid-nineteenth century, the area both north and south of State Street served as a busy commercial district as well as a residential area. In the 20th century, activity intensified as the city's downtown developed and GE drew thousands of people to Schenectady. Immigrants from Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Italy as well as African-Americans coming to Schenectady from the southern states settled along Broadway near the plant. In the 1940s, 50s, 60s, and 70s, Broadway was a lively destination for shopping, nightlife, hotels, and restaurants.

We're looking for photos, documents, and memories that show the businesses, hotspots, and residences of mid-century Broadway. In particular, we hope to gather more information on businesses owned by African Americans, Eastern Europeans, and Jewish Schenectadians. For more information or to contribute to the project, please contact the librarian, Marietta, at librarian@schenectadyhistorical.org.

REVIEW: Shirts Powdered Red: Haudenosaunee Gender, Trade, and Exchange across Three Centuries



by Martin Strosberg

The title of Maeve Kane's book needs explanation. The *Haudenosaunee* are the Iroquois, the powerful Six Nation Confederacy spread out over much of New York State: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora.

Gender refers to the women of the Haudenosaunee. Drawing upon archaeology, oral history, and art, Maeve Kane (Associate Professor of History, University at Albany) makes the case that women played a central role in the social, political, and economic life of their communities and took on the responsibility for preserving Haudenosaunee culture in the face of European encroachment and ultimately domination.

Haudenosaunee society was based on a matrilineal kinship system. Men, upon marriage, joined their wives' families in the longhouse. Women were responsible for growing the crops and making the clothing. *Shirts Powdered Red* refers to the efforts of the women to maintain Haudenosaunee identity by modifying clothing purchased from the Europeans to reflect a distinctive style. But more than that, it symbolizes the Haudenosaunee's tenacious resistance to three centuries (1600s to mid-1800s) of European and American cultural onslaught.

Central to the geopolitical map of North America was the fur trade. The Dutch, British, and French, competing for control of the continent and intent on enlisting the Haudenosaunee as allies, needed furs, primarily beaver, to make their colonial efforts profitable. The Haudenosaunee were the key suppliers of furs. The Europeans specialized in producing cloth and clothing in addition to cookware, knives, guns, and ornamental goods. Fort Orange, later known as Albany, was at the center of *Trade and Exchange*.

The following story illustrates the pivotal role that the fur trade played in the history of our region. In 1690, an Onondaga woman named Osissijenejo made a trip to Albany to trade a fur for a shirt and pair of leggings. "With a single otter, trapped and only minimally dressed, Osissijenejo purchased the labor of at least eighteen Europeans. With a single otter, Osissijenejo saved herself and her family the time and effort of hunting, dressing, tanning, and sewing up the four deer necessary to make the shirt and leggings she purchased."

Almost from the beginning of the establishment of the trading post at Fort Orange in 1624, the Haudenosaunee and Europeans became economically linked together. Could the Haudenosaunee preserve their way of life even through the devastation of the Six Nations during the American Revolution? Could Haudenosaunee women prevail in spite of attempts of their new American overseers to marginalize their influence? This is what Kane's book is about. It is a scholarly work of 350 pages including 44 pages of notes and 50 pages of bibliography. Reading it is well-worth the effort.

Maeve Kane, *Shirts Powdered Red: Haudenosaunee Gender, Trade, and Exchange across Three Centuries*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2023.

Prostitution on the Erie Canal

by Anne Raymond, Mary Graves, and Marietta Carr

As SCHS digitizes our Legal Matters collection, we decided to dig into the records we have about prostitution. Historical research on prostitution has evolved and grown over the last few decades, but much work remains to be done about its history here in Schenectady.

The Legal Matters collection consists of about 5,500 documents related to legal transactions and disputes, dating from 1670 to 1972, including land agreements and leases, affidavits, petitions, judgments in civil and criminal suits, notices, promissory notes, licenses, bills of sale, contracts, and bonds. The documents were created by the courts of the City of Schenectady, the County of Schenectady, and NY State, attorneys, and residents of Schenectady County. How exactly all of these documents ended up in the SCHS archives is unknown, but we have good reason to believe that most of them were passed down through the families of the people involved in each case and then given to local historians, who later donated or bequeathed them to SCHS.

Because the Legal Matters collection is so large and wide-ranging, we've been steadily working on identifying, digitizing, and transcribing documents within the collection with common themes and high research potential. Thanks to funding from the Capital District Library Council, we plan to digitize a set of almost 200 documents that capture important information about the treatment and condition of women in 18th and 19th century society, particularly their pursuit of justice and rights within the court system. These items present widows and mothers fighting for financial support and protections for themselves and their children, women pursuing justice after assault and rape, criminal cases of prostitution and disorderly conduct, and the aftermath of breaches of contract, insolvency, and abandonment. The collection illustrates differences in legal status for women under Dutch tradition compared to women under English and American law as well as the communication between women and the men acting as their legal representatives.

Out of all of these documents, only 17 explicitly relate to cases of prostitution in Schenectady. Curiously, most of these records date from the 1830s, and are thus contemporaneous with the then-new Erie Canal. More than reveal answers about the nature of prostitution in Schenectady, this set of documents raises questions. Why were so many individuals arrested for prostitution in the 1830s? Was it a mere coincidence, a collecting bias, or something more? And, what connection is there between the spate of prostitution arrests in the 1830s and the new Erie Canal? All of these are questions that we hope a future researcher will be able to answer more fully once the collection has been digitized and added to our NY Heritage site.

Initially, Schenectady residents were positive about the new

Erie Canal. Local attorney Samuel Jones wrote about the canal in his diary in 1821: "A great sensation has been excited among the citizens...of the city by their endeavors to have [the Erie Canal] pass near them. Most persons think it will make their property very valuable wherever it touches."

But by 1825, Schenectadians had soured on the Erie Canal. Schenectady had been reduced from an important transportation hub to just one of many stops along the canal. "The evils and embarrassments that have come upon us by the construction of the Erie Canal" were still being bewailed by a Schenectady mayor in 1839. Schenectady's growth, already slow before 1820, ground almost to a halt in the 1820s. With the opening of the canal, some of the city's greatest sources of income disappeared. In their place, new kinds of businesses sprouted up along the canal's banks.

By the 1830s, supply stores, grocery stores, and more were found along the canal. But so too were taverns, saloons, and brothels that served countless canallers, laborers, and travelers. These "dens of vice" brought with them drunkenness, gambling, and of course prostitution. So, did the Erie Canal and its port culture increase the incidences of prostitution in Schenectady? Almost certainly. The book *Intimate Matters* explains "...wherever single men congregated they created a market for sexual services, ranging from titillation by erotic literature or the theater to physical access to prostitutes in dance halls and brothels." The men who worked or travelled on the Erie Canal were usually single or away from family. Some sought out prostitutes or visited a brothel when they had the time and money to spare. As the documents in our Legal Matters collection shows, Schenectady was not immune to this vice.

Schenectady's prostitutes were not always arrested with the charge of prostitution. Instead, they were sometimes charged with vagrancy or disorderly conduct. Meanwhile, brothel owners were usually charged with having a disorderly house. The SCHS archive documents these arrests, along with convictions. At the bare minimum, documents mention the crime and the date. Indeed, very few prostitutes are actually named in the records. It appears that those who are named either worked in higher end brothels, or were murdered and had a highly publicized trial. We were able to glean additional names from reform institutes' records, such as the House of Refuge opened by the New York Magdalen Society. But, in most cases, we are not privy to the details of the crime, and must fill in the story for ourselves.

The earliest records of prostitution in our archive date from the 1820s. On July 1, 1820 a jury convicted John Schermerhorn and his wife of being disorderly persons under the "Act for Preventing Immorality." Their sentence was thirty days of confinement in jail. In 1821, Peter and Flora Dawson were convicted of "keeping a disorderly house in the first ward" of Schenectady. Their sentence was six days in jail "on



bread and water.”

Convictions ramped up in the 1830s. Ann Sharp, Sally Butterfield, and Harriet Davison were all convicted in July of being a common prostitute. That same year, Samuel Ostrander was charged with having a disorderly house. In February 1833, Margaret Van Buren was convicted “of being a disorderly person by being a common prostitute.” The following October, Harriet Mannis was convicted of being a common prostitute. The complaint against her came from one John Mynderse, who

alleged that she was a prostitute and a disorderly person.

On March 10, 1834, Ann Smith and Charlotte Smith were both convicted of being common prostitutes. Ann Smith was also convicted of being a disorderly person. John McGee was convicted two days later of “keeping a house...for the visit of common prostitutes.” On July 15, Sally Van Eps was convicted of being a common prostitute. A complaint was filed against her by one John Boning, who claimed that Van Eps was a common prostitute whose house was visited by people for the “purpose of prostitution.” Later that year, Ann Linden was charged and convicted of disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. Testimony was given by a man named William Gordon. Near the end of the year, Mary Williams was convicted of being a common prostitute by her own confession.

Who were these women? We have some of their names and dates, of course. And we can imagine they likely worked on or adjacent to the Erie Canal. But what separates them from women of the pre-canal era? Why did they engage in prostitution instead of other kinds of labor?

The early 19th century was a time of massive labor changes in America. Industrialization and the market revolution spurred rural people to move to cities for work instead of staying on their family farm. This included working-class women, who, for the first time, entered the labor market en masse and at a severe disadvantage.

Throughout the 19th century, women from poor and working-class families were driven into low-paid, unskilled jobs in factories and domestic service. Once employed, they endured long hours, poor conditions, and “the worst labor practices and wage exploitation.” In canal cities, it was also not

uncommon for a working woman to supplement her income by taking in boarders, scavenging supplies and food, or even engaging in casual prostitution.

Did Ann Sharp, Sally Butterfield, or Harriet Davison fit this profile? Were they born on a farm, and forced to Schenectady to make money? Unfortunately, it’s very difficult to find any information about these women at all. Before 1850, women weren’t listed by name in the federal census unless they were head of household. So, searching for them by name in the 1830 or 1840 census doesn’t reveal much. By 1850 it’s possible they are listed by name, but it’s more likely that in the twenty years since their arrest they moved away from Schenectady, or got married and changed their name, or died.

Nevertheless, a cursory census search did provide a few clues into these women’s lives. Some of the women might have come from families who were already living in the Schenectady area. In 1830 there were Butterfield, Davison, Van Eps, and Manis families living in Schenectady County. Were Sally Butterfield, Harriet Davison, Sally Van Eps, and Harriet Manis daughters of those families? Were they among the many daughters of Glenville and Rotterdam farmers who made their way into the city of Schenectady to work?

The 1850 census shows us two Ann Smiths living in Schenectady. Both are unmarried and living in shared accommodation. One Ann Smith has an infant son with her. The other is listed as a “pauper” and has a birthplace of Ireland. Both of these Ann Smiths fit the profile of an impoverished or immigrant woman driven into prostitution for survival. If it is the first Ann Smith, the situation is even darker – she would have been just 14 years old at the time of her arrest for prostitution.

Margaret Van Buren is the clearest case of the connection between the Erie Canal and prostitution. The 1850 census shows a Margaret Van Buren (b. 1817) living in Oswego County, New York with a brother. Their home is listed as a “canal boat,” and her brother’s profession is “boat man.” Perhaps Margaret grew up on the canal, seeking customers in the ports her family stopped in. Was she arrested more than once? For how long did she work as a prostitute? Did her brother and the rest of her family know?

Wherever these women came from, and whatever their story, we can make a few assumptions. First, it is likely that they experienced poverty in their lives. Second, they were probably familiar with sickness: up to 40% of prostitutes in antebellum New York suffered from syphilis, gonorrhea or other venereal diseases. Finally, they were no stranger to the vices, violence, and filth endemic along the canal’s banks.

For works cited and the full bibliography, please visit: schenectadyhistorical.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Works-Cited.pdf

Image: “*Progress of a Woman of Pleasure*, Richard Newton, 1794, Wikimedia Commons

In Search of van Curler: Finding Origins in Upstate New York



by Madeline Olesky

Whenever I tell people that I moved to New York from Florida, I typically get two responses: “People normally go the other way!” Or, “What do you think of winter?”

It might seem like an odd jump, but it was a natural move to me. I wanted to work in museums, and New York is filled with them. Learning how to drive in the snow was a price I was willing to pay. When I was offered a role at the Schenectady County Historical Society, I was excited for many reasons. SCHS offers a diverse range of programs that find new ways to explore history. But perhaps more importantly, I saw an opportunity to settle down. I have been in constant motion since I left home for college nine years ago, and I saw this as a chance to put down some new roots.

But then came the hard part: with so much to see in the Capital Region, how would I become familiar with this area? A (slightly silly) idea came to me: Arent van Curler is the founder of Schenectady; so, if I journeyed to locations in upstate New York related to his life, would I feel like a part of the story of this place?

Schuyler Flatts Cultural Park

Arent van Curler was born around 1619 in Nijkerk, the Netherlands. In 1637, the 18-year-old set sail for the New Netherlands in order to serve as a leader of Rensselaerswijck, a large tract of land owned by his great-uncle Kiliaen van Rensselaer. During this time, he established a home on the Great Flatts of the Hudson River, where he ran the colony and formed strong bonds with the indigenous Mohawk people. Today, that site is part of the Schuyler Flatts Cultural Park.

Since I did not think that SCHS would subsidize a trip to the Netherlands, I decided that this park would be my best starting place. Within the larger site, the location of van Curler’s home is marked with a frame of stone blocks. I spread a blanket in the middle and spent some time sitting and reflecting on the history of this space. Members of the Schuyler family would live here for generations after him, but van Curler was the first European to call it home. As the site evolved over time, it was changed by the historic events happening around it, while also maintaining its cultural legacy. This balanced sense of fluidity and stability was comforting.

Since food is part of how I judge an area, I stopped by a Vietnamese restaurant for lunch, run by a very friendly family. As I munched on a bánh mì sandwich, I got nostalgic for a favorite restaurant my parents and I would visit. Everyone needs a go-to restaurant, and this was it for me.

The Stockade Inn

After reading about the high expectations of van Rensselaer, I cannot blame van Curler for wanting to leave his great-uncle's colony and establish a community of his own. Not long after he gazed upon "the place beyond the pines" – a stretch of flat, fertile land along the Mohawk River – van Curler purchased it from the Mohawks and founded Schenectady. The intersection of Church and Union streets was the original center of this settlement surrounded by stockade walls, and it was only natural that their leader would set up his home at this focal point. Today, the Stockade Inn stands at this same spot.

I had already been to the Inn a few times since I moved here; Graham's Coffee Parlor was an instant favorite of mine. For this trip, I spent hours sitting in the lobby trying to imagine what this space was like during van Curler's era. During that time, many people came and went. A pair of colleagues sat on their laptops working on a project. A young mother and her child snacked and chatted while waiting for the father to visit during his lunch break. A solitary older man sat companionably in a chair near mine, silently reading the same way I was. These people were my new neighbors, and I liked to think that the settlers of early Schenectady were just as eager to be out and about in their community as I was.

Corlaer Bay and Lake Champlain

I wish I could say that van Curler spent many years as the leader of Schenectady, guiding the young town through its infancy. Instead, he met an untimely end only a few years later, far from the home he had created. In addition to his duties in Rensselaerswijck and Schenectady, van Curler spent time as a diplomat to the Indigenous people of North America on behalf of the colonial governments. In 1667, during a journey to meet the French-Canadian governor in Montréal, van Curler's boat overturned in Lake Champlain and he drowned.

It was only appropriate that I end my journey at the same



spot where van Curler met his permanent end. I booked a night at an Airbnb on the shores of Lake Champlain, and spent the day nearby in Plattsburg. Funnily enough, the first road I saw when I got into town was Boynton Avenue. As someone who lived the first 18 years of her life in Boynton Beach, Florida, I immediately felt some poetic parallels.

By complete coincidence, I had booked a room only a 15-minute drive from Corlaer Bay, a variation of van Curler's name to indicate it as the supposed spot on the lake where his boat tipped over. During the final moments of my trip, I stood on the bay's shore staring into the distance, wondering what his final thoughts may have been, and how he felt about ending up in a place so unfamiliar and

strange. For a moment, I missed Florida so much I felt it in my bones.

But only for a moment. Just like van Curler, I have been searching for a place to call home for a while. I have not lived in the same place for more than a couple years since I was 18. I also had to make huge moves in order to make a life for myself that I am happy with. As I looked out at the vastness of Lake Champlain, contemplating beginnings and endings and everything in between, I silently thanked van Curler for being my inspiration for exploring this new world of mine. With a quick nod to acknowledge the past, I turned from the water and headed back to my car. My future in Schenectady awaited me.

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Image, left: The site of van Curler's home at the Great Flatts
Image, above: Looking out at Corlaer Bay on Lake Champlain

The Sankofa Spirit in Schenectady



by Marietta Carr

“It is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.” This Ghanaian concept, usually expressed with the word Sankofa, has always been one of the guiding principles of the Schenectady African American Historical Records Project. This past year, this phrase has become even more meaningful. This article is an opportunity to reflect on the progress of the project and the results we’ve achieved so far.

The Schenectady African American Historical Records Project is a collaborative public history project focused on preserving historical records created by African Americans in Schenectady. The project supports community stewardship of archival collections, enabling future generations to access information and archival sources that document Black history in Schenectady. It also integrates local Black historical narratives to create a more complete and robust understanding of Schenectady County’s history.

Historical records and archival collections are the keys to understanding history, and access to those materials helps all communities to connect to our shared past. People of African descent have been part of Schenectady since colonial times, but their presence, activities, and experiences are significantly underrepresented in the collections available to the public in institutions like the Schenectady County Historical Society. Churches, community organizations, Black-owned businesses,

families, and individuals have their own historical collections, but the impact of these collections is lessened by existing in isolation. Additionally, maintaining these collections can be a burden on caretakers’ resources. Our goals are to recognize and support record creators and memory keepers in preserving their own history, build relationships between SCHS and members of the African American community, and serve as a resource for the preservation of community archives and research into local Black history.

For the last five years, the AAHRP has been primarily grant funded. Initially we received funding through a Documentary Heritage Program grant from the NYS Archives, then later we received funding via a direct grant from the Schenectady County Legislature and a federal Museums for America grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Our IMLS grant was terminated after the president's executive order dismantling the IMLS in March of this year, but our funding was reinstated after the court injunction in the case of *State of Rhode Island, et al. v. Trump et al.*, (case no. 1:25-cv-00128) in May. While we lost some time to work on the final stages of the grant objectives due to the situation, we were able to push forward and achieve the primary goals of the grant.

These three grants allowed us to do the following:

- Establish the project’s foundation by convening an advisory committee of community members (paid through

honorariums for their time/expertise/advocacy) and hiring consultant archivists to train the SCHS Librarian, develop the project methodology and documentation (including community surveys and youth program curriculum), and facilitate conversations with stakeholders.

- Initiate a community survey and conversations which elicited information about local Black history, SCHS' relationship with the Black community, and recordkeeping and memorykeeping already in practice in the community.

- Set up an annual youth engagement program, including a curriculum for introducing high school students to archival work and educating participants on Black history with a focus on local history.

- Host community outreach and education events and conversations that informed the public about the AAHRP, educated participants about local Black history, and helped build connections with community members.

- Start an oral history program focused on local Black community leaders and memorykeepers and create a snapshot of events and changes happening now that are impacting the Black community

One of the most significant and successful components of the project is our 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 started this program in July 2023 and it has become an annual highlight in our library! For six weeks in the summer, local high school students work in the SCHS Library with the SCHS Librarian, AAHRP committee members, library volunteers, and AAHRP project archivists to conduct oral history interviews, digitize archival materials, and research topics related to local African American history. Students in the Sankofa Youth Collective develop their research and literacy skills, reading comprehension, communication and writing skills, intergenerational empathy, and knowledge of and interest in Schenectady's history.

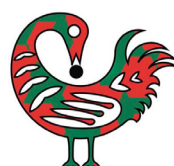
This summer, our two Sankofa Youth, Silas Harvard and Isaac Furnish, crafted a brochure and informational webpage for the African-American Ancestral Burial Ground at Vale Cemetery. For this project, they photographed headstones in the section, researched the people and families interred there, wrote brief biographies and family trees, designed and wrote the brochure, and identified and compiled data and questions for future research. This brochure is available at Vale Cemetery and the webpage is available in our HistoryForge site (<https://schenectady.historyforge.net/buildings/1667>). Silas and Isaac also recorded and transcribed oral history interviews that focused on the experiences of Black women, researched Black-owned businesses, assisted with collecting historical

newspapers, and digitized archival records and photos from the Vale Cemetery Records Collection at SCHS.

The success of the Sankofa Youth Collective is evident not just in the work the youth produced – which will become part of the SCHS' archives collection and form the basis for future research and education – but also in the feedback from the youth themselves. Silas has returned to the program each year since its inception. The first summer with us, Silas learned about Moses Viney and was particularly inspired by his life. As a Sankofa Youth this summer, Silas interviewed Neil Yetwin, the historian who brought Viney's story to light, and appreciated the chance to contribute to preserving the African-American Ancestral Burial Ground where Viney is buried. Isaac started the summer eager to learn more about local history, but not sure what exactly this job would entail. He found resonance with the idea of bringing attention to people like Bartlett Jackson who is buried in Vale, but lacks a headstone, and Francis Brown whose headstone sparked a series of questions about the Brown family. Isaac also found satisfaction in the newspaper collection work, stating, "Actively saving something was pretty cool."

While the grant funding has ended, our work with the Schenectady African American Historical Records Project continues. We are still working on one of the key components of the project which we started during the IMLS grant period: the creation of an initial catalog to explain the project results so far, highlight relevant archival collections, and present research pathways. We expect to publish this catalog by the end of the year. There are areas where we can better position ourselves to meet the goals of the project, such as working with organizations and community leaders to process archival collections in-situ and digitize at-risk formats like A/V materials, but the foundation we've created over the last 5 years is solid and many of the components we initiated will continue to thrive. We look forward to continuing this work for many years to come.

Thank you to our project committee members: Miki Conn, Sophia Delamar, Philip Fields, Julia Holcomb, Johan Matthews, Adonis Richards, William Rivas, and Sarah Schmidt. Thank you to Walter Simpkins who served on the project committee and whose wisdom and legacy will continue to inspire the project. Thank you to our consulting archivists: Micha Broadnax and Kijua Sanders-McMurtry. Thank you to Lorena Flores, Schenectady County Connects Job Coach to the Sankofa Youth Collective. Thank you to the 2023 Sankofa Youth Collective Cohort: Elijahjison Powell, Mi'kala Moore, Jacob Jamison, and Silas Harvard. Thank you to the 2024 Sankofa Youth Collective Cohort: Silas Harvard and Carter Wilson. Thank you to the 2025 Sankofa Youth Collective Cohort: Silas Harvard and Isaac Furnish.



**SCHENECTADY
SANKOFA
YOUTH
COLLECTIVE**



Around the County with Bill Buell

by Bill Buell, County Historian

Everyone in Schenectady, the Capital Region, New York and the entire nation should all be wearing their party hats over the next few years, celebrating the wonderful ongoing anniversaries that mark the creation of the United States of America and its history.

There's the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution and the signing of the Declaration of Independence that will be enjoying most of the attention over the next few years. However, in Schenectady and throughout the Mohawk Valley, this fall the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Erie Canal is also getting plenty of notice, including the visit of a replica of the *Seneca Chief*. A replica of the canal boat which made the maiden voyage along the canal to Schenectady back in 1825, is duplicating that trip this month.

There certainly is a lot of reason to look back on Schenectady's long history, in particular the decade of the Roaring Twenties. But before we do that, let's check out what Schenectady County Historical Society curator, Miss Ella Stickles, was doing 100 years ago in 1925. Back then, the historical society was located in a county-owned building at 13 Union St. It wasn't until 1957 when the group moved into the Dora Jackson home at 32 Washington Avenue. Still, Stickles had plenty to work with.

There were a number of documents on display, including an 1853 petition signed by local citizens urging the mayor to prohibit the sale of intoxicating beverages. Stickles also had a framed advertisement from 1837 promoting a circus soon to be in town.

A headline in the *Gazette* from the fall of 1925 also heralded the arrival of an old jail bell that had been used by the Schenectady Court House, while also on display was a lock of George Washington's hair, a painting of former New York governor and Schenectady native Joseph Yates, and an old Liberty Flag owned by American Revolutionary War veteran Nicholas Veeder of Scotia.

Earlier that year, back in May of 1925, SCHS president W. Delancey Watkins was one of the guest speakers at an event called the Union College Tradition Night. It was held outside on the campus between Silliman Hall and the "Terrace Wall," as an opportunity for Union faculty and students to talk about their love for their college and their country.

Watkins was a Union graduate from 1880, while Archibald C. Wemple – who would go on to serve as mayor of Schenectady in the 1950s – was also part of the proceedings. A soon-to-be Union graduate in 1926, Wemple was the school's band leader which provided music for the occasion.

In August of that year the *Gazette* reported that SCHS

members E.R. Whitney and Alonzo Paige Walton would be representing the historical society at a meeting of the Mohawk Valley Historical Society held at the Old Stone Fort in Schoharie. Whitney, not to be confused with the GE scientist, was a principal at Schenectady High School, and Walton was another prominent citizen who owned a number of properties in the Stockade.

In September of that year, the *Gazette* reported that people from all over the Northeast were flocking to see all the history Stickles had on display.

"Despite construction on both the Amsterdam Road (Route 5) and Union Street, visitation to the society has not diminished," said the *Gazette*. "The situation of the society near the Van Curler Hotel also contributes to the exceptionally great number of guests shown the curiosities and relics each day."

An invited guest to the historical society in December of that year was Mrs. Max Heindel. A few years earlier her husband had created the Rosicrucian Fellowship, a group affiliated with the International Association of Christian Mystics. When Max died in 1907, his wife continued doing his work. The *Gazette* reported that part of her speech at the historical society would be about spiritual healing. There was no follow-up about any possible miracles that week in Schenectady, or if there were, the newspaper didn't report on them.

The historical society wasn't the only group that was spreading its wings in Schenectady in the mid-1920s. There was plenty going on:

In 1925, the city saw the opening of the Hotel Van Curler along with the opening of the Western Gateway Bridge across the Mohawk River to Scotia. The Schenectady League of Women's Voters was created in 1925, along with the Burnt Hills Women's Volleyball Club. The following year, the General Electric Company raised its huge sign at the end of Erie Boulevard and it's still there today, while the formation of a new Proctors Theater was another highlight in December of 1926. The theater community also saw the creation of the Schenectady Light Opera Club in 1926, while the Schenectady Civic Players got started in 1929.

Meanwhile, one of the biggest innovations of the 20th century, the television, would be introduced to the world here in Schenectady by GE scientist Ernst Alexanderson, initially with a demonstration of his work at his home in the GE Realty Plot in 1927, and then at Proctors in 1928.

It seemed like the best of times. But, sadly, the stock market crashed in the fall of 1929, and the Roaring Twenties turned into the Great Depression. That's a story for another day...



Above: Students at Nott Terrace High School, 1925, from the SCHS collection
 Below: The draining of the Erie Canal, c. 1920, from the SCHS collection



Activities in the Attic



by Gabriella Baratier

2025 marked my third summer working at the Mabee Farm Historic Site. In 2023 and 2024, I served in a very public-facing role: giving guided house tours, churning butter with our fourth grade school programs, and assisting with rentals and special events. This year, visitors to the Mabee Farm may not have seen me when they stopped by, but they still probably heard my footsteps above their heads. I spent my summer in the Franchere Education Center's attic, working behind-the-scenes with the Historical Society's vast collection of artifacts.

Across the summer, I worked on photographing artifacts, conducting provenance research, resolving any lingering discrepancies, errors, or duplicates in the system that first arose during the transition from analog to computerized cataloging, reporting on the condition of each artifact, and writing descriptions (the who, what, when, where, and why of each object, as best as we know) to make our artifacts keyword searchable and easy to find for interested researchers. The artifacts with newly up-to-date photographs, condition reports, and descriptions are available for searching and viewing on our website, and our long term goal is for every object in our collection to be publicly accessible. Slowly, but surely, progress is being made to this end.

It would be easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of artifacts—all told, we have nearly 12,000—but to me, this is the most exciting part of working with collections. You can spend an entire summer in the attic, and still come across something new every single day. I have cataloged farm equipment, swords, ceramics, quilts, dresses, toys, muskets, and furniture, to name just a few commonly represented objects, produced anytime from the Dutch colonial period to the 21st century.

I haven't found my favorite artifacts to be the fanciest, shiniest, or rarest objects that our collections have to offer. In fact, on the contrary, I have developed an affinity for the imperfect, the worn out, the commonplace. A teddy bear so well-loved that it has lost a paw and most of its fur (left). Kitchenware that was broken and carefully mended back together (below). Board games and puzzles with pieces missing from family game nights; aprons with stains from home cooked meals; farming combs with tufts of sheep's wool still stuck in the bristles; socks and shoes with holes in the soles from all the miles their owner walked in them. It is these artifacts which, to me, best embody and animate Schenectady's rich history: material remnants of time well spent and lives well lived here on the Mohawk River.



Intern Spotlight: Josie Culbertson and Anne Raymond



by John Angilletta

This summer SCHS was fortunate to have two outstanding young women as interns to help at our library and the Mabee Farm. I was very happy to meet and interview both of them.

Josie Culbertson has been a volunteer at our library for two years, and has made herself an integral part of our library team. She attended

Southern New Hampshire University where she studied history and creative writing. When she began volunteering a few years ago, her first assignment was assessing and describing a collection of documents from the Babcock family in Rotterdam. This summer, Josie went from volunteer to intern and her duties expanded to include processing new collections, researching, cataloguing, and transcribing census data for the HistoryForge digital mapping project. She has worked closely with our librarian, Marietta Carr, who she describes as both a mentor and a fountain of knowledge.

Josie's favorite part of the experience has been the atmosphere at the library and talking with the other volunteers and sharing their knowledge. This fall she is studying online at St. Johns University where she is working towards a masters degree in library and information sciences. In the meantime, she will still be helping out at our library. Josie lives in Schenectady with her parents, a sister and her nephew. She also tells us that she is mom to two fur babies, a bunny named Twilight and a cat named Shadow.



Our Mabee Farm intern, Anne Raymond, has also been volunteering at SCHS for two years. This year she took on the full-time internship position, where she was quickly thrown into the maelstrom that is our spring school program. Anne quickly mastered our Mabee House tours, the art of butter-making, and helping to care for our sheep and goats. She said that she was surprised by the knowledge of the fourth graders who make up our school programs and their very interesting and sometimes amusing questions. She credits the school programs with helping her to be more at ease speaking to large groups.

Anne's favorite part of volunteering has been sharing information with our visitors both young and old, and learning about where they are from. She also said that growing up in a home with four cats and two dogs helped prepare her for helping with our "critters" at the Mabee Farm. Anne lives in Charlton with her family, and in her free time likes to play video games and read scary novels. She currently attends Ithaca College where she is a senior this fall. Upon graduation she would love to go into museum studies.

With our two very talented interns, the Historical Society indeed hit the jackpot this summer. We hope that Josie and Anne will return to SCHS and wish them both the best in their studies.



Stereoscopic photograph of a Round Lake home. W.H. Sipperly's. Saratoga County. In the SCHS collection.

The Village in the Grove: A Local Historical Gem

by Michael Diana

Hidden in plain sight, besides the bustling monotony of Northway exit 11, a delightful secret is kept. There, you'll find Round Lake, a bright and cheery water whose shape amply justifies its name. Along its scenic shore sits the village of the same name. The unconcerned majority of people speed past right by this quiet little village. If they cared to look, they'd first be struck by the gingerbread charm of the architecture, then by the narrow and winding streets. Finally, they might be

perplexed by the enigmatic auditorium that sits at the heart of this village. The whole village of Round Lake exudes an air of history and mystery. Its story is truly unique for our area; one of spontaneous and explosive growth, followed by long and lingering decline. But more recently, the community has enjoyed a quiet revival while the buildings have benefited from meticulous restoration. This renaissance offers a lesson in optimism even as it raises difficult questions about historic preservation.

To understand this story we must first know that the founders of Round Lake set out to build not a village but a summer camp. The year was 1867 and the nation was still recovering from the horrors of the Civil War. The cities of the industrialized Northeast had grown dramatically, and the factories that powered them wasted the landscape. The people of these urban centers – at least those with disposable income – sought places of rural refuge. Meanwhile, open air Christian revivals saw a surge in popularity. These massive gatherings were opportunities for charismatic preachers to spread their interpretations of the faith and win new converts. Methodist congregations innovated a style of summer camp to host these revivals, founding wildly popular retreats at Wesleyan Grove in Martha's Vineyard and Ocean Grove in New Jersey. Joseph Hillman and Gardner Howland, of the Troy Methodist Episcopal Church, sought to replicate this model. They purchased some uncultivated farmland and along the train line to Ballston Spa, overlooking the beautiful Round Lake which would become the namesake of the new camp. For the residents of Albany and Troy, this location was easily accessible by train which is how most Americans traveled at the time. The Troy Methodists organized the Round Lake Association, the body that would govern the camp for the duration of a 99 year lease.

And thus, in 1868, the first camp meeting was held. Initially, the infrastructure was limited. An open air speaker's podium was situated in the middle of the wooded grove that composed the new camp. The audience cobbled benches together with planks of wood atop newly-cut tree stumps. Rudimentary pathways radiated out from the central assembly area like spokes of a wagon wheel. These lanes were populated by tents, many army surplus from the recent war. Communal latrines were situated along one end of the grove. If the accommodations seemed basic, this did not deter attendance. Nearly 8,000 people, dressed in their finest attire, flocked to the new camp to hear sermons and enjoy the fresh air. Worship would begin with an early bell at 4am and continue throughout the day. The extraordinary success of the inaugural year only grew over the next two decades. At its height, the camp attracted 20,000 attendees, a seasonal population nearly half that of neighboring Troy.

The popularity and longevity of these revivals encouraged significant improvements to the camp's infrastructure. Even as the draw of religious meetings waned, the governing Methodist Association successfully broadened its appeal with general educational offerings inspired by the contemporary Chautauqua Institute. In 1884, the simple speaker's podium at the heart of the camp was replaced with a massive auditorium, featuring an equally impressive pipe organ. George West, the wealthy inventor of the paper bag, sponsored the construction of a museum overlooking the picturesque lake. Meanwhile, those who could afford to do so replaced their rugged tents with small "gem" cottages which got increasingly large and ornate as neighbors sought to outdo each other. Most of these structures employed a Carpenter Gothic architecture which was stylish for the late 19th century and perhaps made most famous by the Methodist community in Martha's Vineyard.

This whimsical style, with its bright colors and elaborate wooden flourishes gave rise to the nickname "gingerbread cottages." Altogether the camp acquired a delightfully unique storybook appearance.

As with all things, the camp's success would not last indefinitely. By the middle of the 20th century, its educational and leisure activities were largely overlooked by a modernizing world. The ease of automobile transportation allowed travel to further and more exotic destinations. The Round Lake Association, still the governing body of the community, began investing less in improvements and even basic maintenance. Some of the grandest and most expensive buildings, like the George West Museum, were demolished to save money. When the original 99 year lease finally expired in 1966, the Camp Association simply dissolved itself. By then, the camp was a shadow of its former glory. Many of the quaint cottages were boarded up and abandoned. The 880 people who still lingered in the derelict camp elected to reconstitute themselves as a village.

Six decades later, the village is perhaps precariously preserved. On the one hand, the narrow lanes of Round Lake still boast many of the beautiful gingerbread cottages from the late 19th century. These are lovingly restored and maintained by their owners, whose efforts are nothing short of herculean. In that way, we might find similarities to our own Schenectady Stockade and the private owners who preserve it. However, unlike the Stockade, the Village of Round Lake has no authority to mandate the maintenance of these historic structures. Besides a personal commitment to historic preservation or aesthetic preference, there's no compelling reason for a Round Lake homeowner to keep their wooden siding or slate roof when cheaper materials might easily replace it. In 2013, a historic gem cottage was purchased and demolished to make way for a larger, more modern home. This could certainly happen to other structures.

It's not our role at the Schenectady County Historical Society to make recommendations for the people of Round Lake. But perhaps they might consider adopting preservation guidelines like what our Stockade has. In the meantime, we can confidently recommend that you, dear reader, visit nearby Round Lake for yourself. The historic auditorium still stands and hosts events, if at a smaller scale than previously. The village library is housed in a beautiful gingerbread house and is, of course, open to the public. Let this be a reminder that fascinating history and unique aesthetics are all around us. It is incumbent upon us to always be seeking it out.



they stayed there until 1931 and then moved to Barrett Street. Luciano Venditti worked at the American Locomotive Company operating a punch press until 1942, and he ran a grocery store out of the family home from around 1925 to 1930. Like many new immigrants, the Venditti family possessed a resourceful streak and a work ethic that helped them settle into their new environment. These qualities were passed down to future generations.

Heather Giorgianni is part of that future generation. She is the goddaughter of Donna, Dante and his wife Eva's only child. When Donna passed, Heather inherited a collection of important documents, photos, and a scrapbook that told of the fascinating life Dante lived. This past spring, she graciously decided to donate the items to the SCHS Library, trusting that they would be in good hands here. As we processed the collection, we uncovered a goldmine of information about Dante Venditti and decided to dig further, curious as to what his life was like in Schenectady as an Italian immigrant.

One of the collection items that stood out is a Schenectady City Court Marshal badge. Dante worked a few different jobs until he became the City Court Marshal in January of 1934. The role of a City Court Marshal is not something we find in Schenectady today, and the job varies drastically even in the few places in the United States where it still exists. Generally speaking, City Court Marshals were tasked with enforcing court orders and maintaining law and order in their communities. In Schenectady, the City Court Marshal was appointed by the Mayor or the Court Judge – an indication of how respected and trusted whoever held the position was.

Italian immigrants, particularly in the early and mid-twentieth century, had a bad reputation in Schenectady. As we've talked about in previous newsletters and blog posts, the negative perception of Italian immigrants was often perpetuated by bad press ("Schenectady's Immigrant Communities in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century" by Maddie Pelletier). It seems that respect from Americans for Italian immigrants during that time was rare, but Dante Venditti is an example of breaking through the stereotypes and earning a position of trust and authority within the broader Schenectady community. One

example of this in our collection is a letter addressed to Dante and sent by the Schenectady City Judge-Elect, Chatfield T. Bates. "It gives me a great deal of pleasure to re-appoint you City Court Marshal of the Schenectady City Court to become effective January 1, 1940," Bates stated. He continued the letter by thanking Dante for his work and cooperation during his first term as Judge-Elect. Dante held this position until his retirement on January 1, 1958.

During World War II, between 750,000 to 1.5 million Italian-Americans joined the US military to show their support for America and that their loyalties did not lie with Mussolini. Dante was one of them. He initially applied to join the U.S. Air Force, but received a letter from the War Department stating, "It is regretted that no suitable assignment exists for a man with your qualifications in the Army Air Forces. Therefore, your file has been forwarded to other branches of the service where full consideration will be given to your application with a view toward another assignment." He officially joined the U.S. Army on September 17, 1942.

There is not much information on the specifics of his time serving in the Army. The archival collection includes several cards authorizing leave to visit Hattiesburg, Mississippi, which indicates that he was likely stationed at Camp Shelby. However, he was discharged on March 26, 1943, and we have not found records detailing his activities in the service or why he was discharged. Family stories suggest that Dante may have wished to leave the Army to care for his wife, Eva, who he married a few months prior to enlisting, and who was not in good health following the birth of their baby girl, Donna, who was born in February of the same year. Nevertheless, his service to America during World War II did not end with his discharge from the military.

Discussion of Schenectady's role in World War II is often focused on the contributions of the American Locomotive Company and General Electric. Both companies were tasked with the daunting effort of making complex and secretive war equipment. However, there were many other ways Schenectadians helped the war effort on the home front. Funding a war is no easy task and war loan drives, or war



TREASURY DEPARTMENT
WAR FINANCE COMMITTEE



OFFICE OF STATE CHAIRMAN

COMMITTEE OF AMERICANS OF ITALIAN ORIGIN
FOR SCHENECTADY COUNTY
FIFTH WAR LOAN DRIVE
124 Clinton Street
Schenectady 5, N. Y.
Phone 4-5740

Dante Venditti
Alexander Grasso
Co-Chairmen
Anna Battaglia
Secretary

June 15, 1944

Fellow Americans:

The invasion is on!

Every American of Italian extraction is behind this invasion--some are fighting, others are backing the attack in many other ways.

Now an extra effort is needed--buy as many bonds as you can--contact either of the above. Put in your order now!

There are 32,800 Americans of Italian extraction in Schenectady County, if each one buys a \$100 bond it will mean \$3,280,000 in bonds.

Seven thousand of our boys are in service, the more bonds you buy the sooner they will be home.

Sincerely,
Dante Venditti
Alexander Grasso

Dante Venditti,
Alexander Grasso,
Co-Chairmen

AG:AB

P.S. If you purchase bonds from other than the above committee, phone or write to Miss Battaglia the amount you have purchased.

ethic and community connections to the success of his family's endeavors. Current Schenectadians may be most familiar with Dante's legacy in connection to the Venditti Boulevard Liquor Store. The earliest known record of the notable Venditti Boulevard Liquor Store can be found in a news article published by the *Daily Gazette* in 1948. Louis F. Venditti, Dante's brother, started the store at its initial location of 503 South Avenue. By 1949, the liquor store could be found in the city directory and Dante's wife, Eva, was listed separately from her husband as a dealer for the store. For the time period, directories rarely recorded women distinctly from their husbands under their own name, indicating that Eva was independent with a career outside the home. In 1951, the store moved to Eva and Dante's home address at 1232 Union Street, and Eva was listed in the city directory as a proprietor of the liquor store.

Eva Venditti passed away in 1955 at the age of 37, but the momentum of the liquor store did not stop. Louis, Dante, and later on, Dante's daughter Donna, carried on with the business and kept it alive for several more decades. In that time, the store once again moved to another location, this time to 1311 Nott Street, only a few stops away from Ellis Hospital.

Nowadays, people might recognize the building as the home of a pizza shop. Dante created a scrapbook, included in Heather's kind archival donation to SCHS, which paints a beautiful picture of how the store brought family and friends together. Through photos, the scrapbook chronicles the store's footprints and the positive effect it had on the community.

While chatting with Heather about Dante's archival collection, it became clear just how much the liquor store meant to the family, long after the original owners passed away. She graciously explained to me one of her favorite memories of the store, when her father worked a second job there. "I loved dusting the beautiful bottles," she told me. The kaleidoscope of colors, intricate patterns, and sparkles when the light hit them made a lasting impression on her, surviving as a symbol of all the happy memories the liquor store created for so many people.

So much of Dante Venditti's life was given to public service, protecting and serving the community he grew up in. Because his parents worked so hard when they first came to America, Dante and his siblings had a strong foundation to grow from. He carved a life out for himself and his family on a new continent and became a well-respected figure in the city of Schenectady. On November 1, 1980, he passed away, and he was buried in Saint Anthony Cemetery in Glenville. The legacy of his impact on our community, an example of the life hoped for by those who passed through the great doors on Ellis Island, will echo long into the future.

bond drives, became a huge financial help for the Allied cause. During these eight drives, the U.S. Treasury encouraged people to buy bonds to help cover the cost of the expenses of war. In 1944, the fourth and fifth war loan drives took place across the country, and in Schenectady County, Dante Venditti was commissioned by the Treasury Department's Committee for Americans of Italian Origin to lead these efforts.

As drive chairman, Dante turned his attention to Italian-Americans, believing that he could make a big difference with their support. "The committee...will seek to contact every Italian-American family in the county during the drive to urge the purchase by each of at least a \$100 war bond," Dante was quoted in a June 1944 *Daily Gazette* news article. The drives' promotional campaigns through newspapers and signage succeeded because of speakers and promoters like Dante. Schenectady's Italian immigrants saw Venditti as someone who was similar to them, someone who understood them, and someone who protected them. Articles in the Schenectady *Gazette* newspaper highlighted the results of Dante's outreach, reporting successes such as \$1,500 raised through telephone pledges on the first day of the Fifth War Loan campaign and an invitation for Dante to join the 1944 NYC Columbus Day Parade in recognition for his efforts. Overall, residents of Schenectady County significantly aided the success of these war loan drives, with the helpful contributions from the local Italian American community.

In addition to his public service, Dante committed his work

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Membership Unlocked: Automatic Renewals at SCHS

by Audrey Jones

From our ever popular walking tours to the Howlin' at the Moon concert series and monthly family programming, throughout the year SCHS offers member discounts on programming and events. Have you ever found yourself signing up for one of these programs, looking down at your membership card, and realizing your membership has lapsed?

You're not alone and we understand! Different seasons of life bring their own unique commitments, and our calendars and to-do lists quickly build up. Tasks we want to complete slowly inch their way down our priority list. SCHS has provided a way to take one item off your to-do list.

Late last year, SCHS rolled out membership subscriptions, an online payment that helps ensure your support and membership benefits never lapse. With a membership subscription, you enter your preferred credit card or PayPal information one time. On the same day, each year, your membership dues will be automatically charged, allowing your membership benefits and support for SCHS to go uninterrupted.

Signing up for a membership subscription is not only a convenient option for members, but enables SCHS to make your donation go further within our organization. With automatic renewals, our administrative costs and time for printing and mailing will decrease, allowing those monies and time to instead further support the programs, preservation efforts, and membership initiatives undertaken by SCHS staff, board, and volunteers throughout the year. In addition, automatic renewals will help us better project and plan our budget each year to ensure that we continue to responsibly allocate the generous support we receive from our members.

If at any point, life circumstances result in the need or desire to change your membership level, you have the ability to opt out of the automatic payments and renew at a new membership level of your choosing. All other payment options (cash, check, and credit card payments via phone call) will remain available for members to pay their dues.

If you are interested in automatic renewal or have additional questions, please contact Audrey at 518-374-0263 ext. 5 or office@schenectadyhistorical.org.

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