



SCHENECTADY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter Vol. 70, No. 1, 2026 | schenectadyhistorical.org



Celebrating 35 Years of the Grems-Doolittle Library

by Marietta Carr

The idea of a historical society for Schenectady County began with Jonathan Pearson (1813-1887), a local historian and professor at Union College. He had decided to “attempt the collection of some... old records and other relics that would illustrate the habits of our lazy old Dutchmen in former years and rescue from oblivion the origin of the city.”

Pearson’s pursuit was picked up by other local historians, such as E.Z. Carpenter, and eventually led to the establishment of SCHS in 1905. From the very beginning, the Library – and the documents housed within it – has been the foundation of SCHS and our mission. And since its construction in 1991, the Grems-Doolittle Library has served as the place where researchers, educators, storytellers, and history enthusiasts come to access and preserve the documentary, photographic, cartographic, and archival heritage of our area.

The first official home for SCHS’ archival and book collections was 13 Union Street, a building originally erected to house the offices of the County Clerk and Surrogate Court. SCHS leased it in 1912, and used it as an exhibit gallery, meeting hall, collections storage, and research room. The collections and activities of the society eventually taxed the available space in this building, and the board started looking for another headquarters. At the time, General Electric owned 32 Washington Avenue, but no longer needed it as the home of the G.E. Women’s Club. In 1958, GE deeded the house to SCHS, and the society moved into its current location.

One of the first undertakings in the new space was the creation of a Map Room to display the cartographic history of the area. The society then invested in securing a room to house the most

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From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

This year is America's 250th birthday – a hopefully transformative moment for how we as Americans understand our ongoing experiment

in liberty, equality, and self-government. At SCHS, we're committed to interpreting the "semiquincentennial" through thoughtful programming that incorporates a range of stories, voices, and perspectives. Programming for the big birthday kicked off earlier this winter with the opening of our new exhibition, "Threads of Liberty: Schenectady in the American Revolution," and will continue throughout the year. Please check out our calendar at schenectadyhistorical.org/rev250 to see what we have in store. Highlights include theater performances, an epic July 4th celebration featuring George & Martha Washington, and our November "Schenectady: Crossroads of Revolution" symposium. We hope our programming can – in some small way – inspire our members and visitors to uphold the Revolution's unfinished work.

I hope to see you soon!

Mary Zawacki Graves, SCHS Executive Director



From the President

Happy New Year! With the arrival of 2026, we begin the commemoration of our 250th anniversary of the birth of the United States, and SCHS has lined up varied and exciting programs to appeal to all ages and interests. If you watched Ken Burns' "The American Revolution," you saw a thorough review of the major events of the revolution and its impact on both prominent figures and those whose names

have been lost to the ages. We expand on that introduction, if you will, with a look at what our own community experienced during the war. Activities include a book club, special speakers, and an extra special Fourth of July celebration at Mabee Farm.

We owe a big thank you to the historical society staff, board member Kim Waldin, and the Schenectady Celebrates 250 committee, who are working hard to organize these programs.

All of this requires continued financial support. Our third annual gala will be on April 14. This will be a great opportunity, not only to support the historical society, but also to recognize the efforts of our volunteers and celebrate the society's contribution to our community. I hope you'll join us! Tickets are available at schenectadyhistorical.org/event/gala26.

With best wishes,

Suzanne Unger, SCHS President



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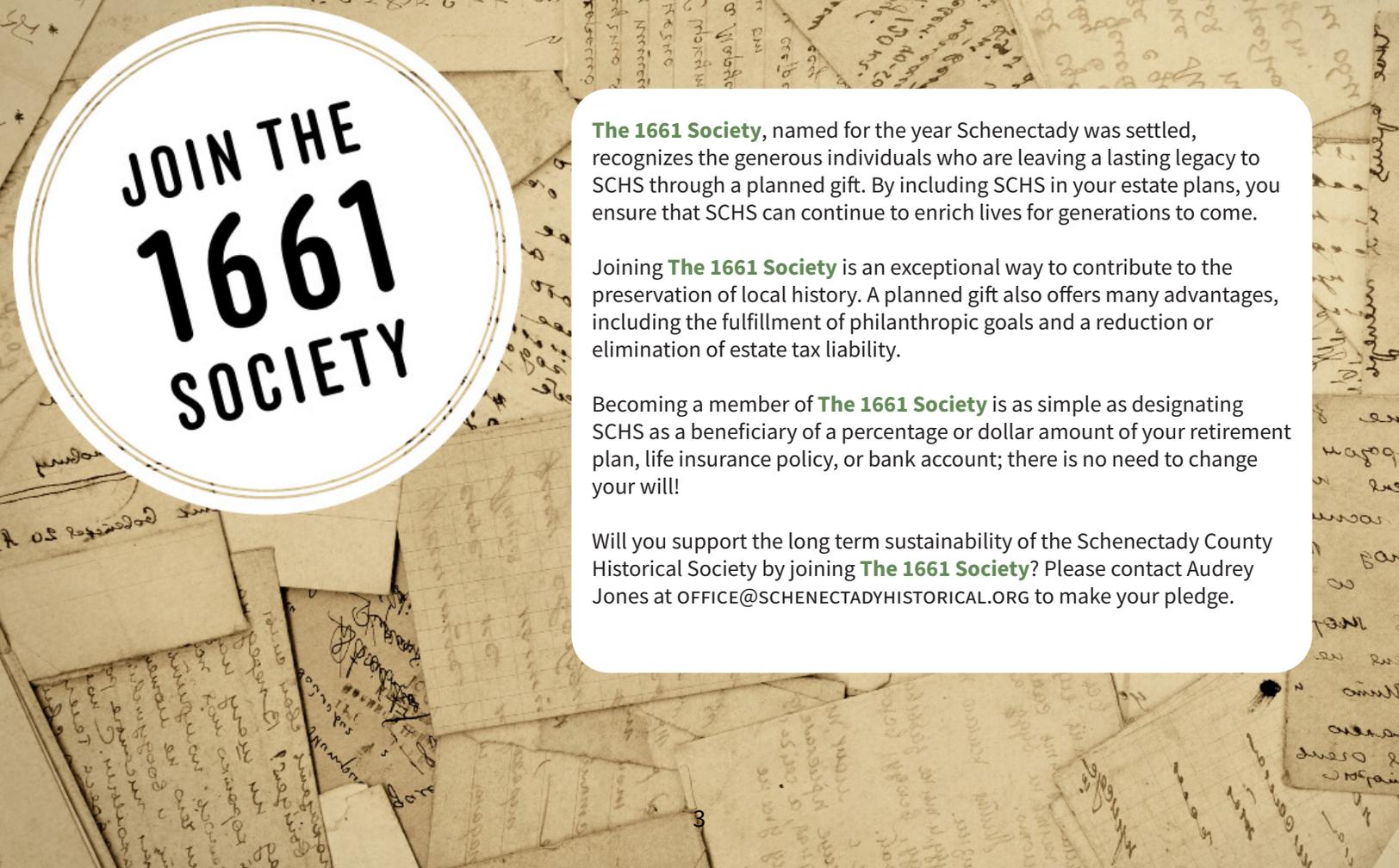
Just as they did during the days of the Erie Canal, **Lockkeepers** -- our monthly donors -- safeguard SCHS through the ebbs and flows of economic change and enable the stewardship of Schenectady's past, present, and future.

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



JOIN THE 1661 SOCIETY

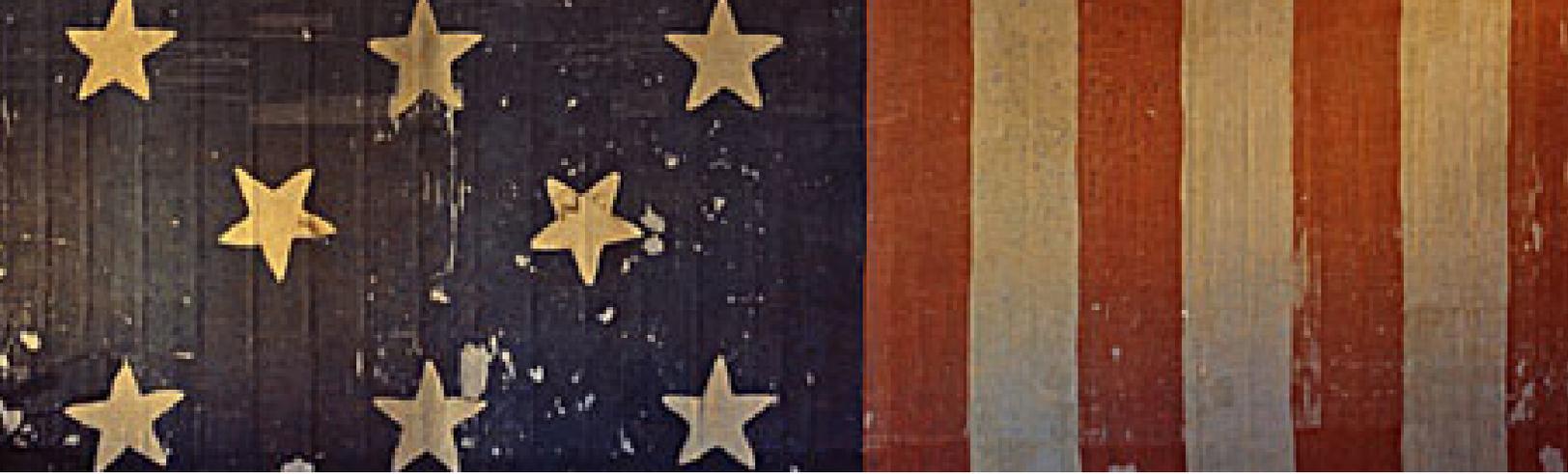


The 1661 Society, named for the year Schenectady was settled, recognizes the generous individuals who are leaving a lasting legacy to SCHS through a planned gift. By including SCHS in your estate plans, you ensure that SCHS can continue to enrich lives for generations to come.

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.



Schenectady's Kindling in the Independence Fire

by Kimberly Waldin

A tempest in a teapot does not boil over into justifiable revolution at the initial strike of a match. Temperatures must rise from the heat of the moment, bringing bubbles of disturbance to the once tranquil waters within, until the scream of “no more” to injustice echoes from the mouths of many. Thus, while the minds of 21st century Americans are exciting to the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, the match of memory ignited in Schenectady, as elsewhere in New England, to the resistance of Royal oppression years ago.

But watching the flame of history being revisited on Boston in 2023's commemoration of “The Destruction of the Tea” or sweeping through Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill with reenactments of the violence from 1775, from the quiet distance of our hearth and home, what can Schenectady claim as its contribution? While famous filmmakers shine a spotlight on Fort Ticonderoga and the Battlefields of Saratoga, where is Schenectady's place in our nation's legacy?

The only surviving flag of its kind from the Revolutionary War, dating back to somewhere between 1765 to 1775, the first hoisted in our thirteen beleaguered colonies, comes from Schenectady. Simple in design, like our county's deceptively “unseen” role in the struggle for Independence, the bluish silk square proclaimed in white letters Schenectady's demand for America: Liberty. In January 2024, the Schenectady County Historical Society marked the Semiquincentennial of our past citizens proclaiming that demand from the center of the city, at the height of a liberty pole.

That original flag, which became the official flag of New York's First Regiment during the early years of the War (a unit composed mostly of Schenectadians) and was possibly carried

at the Battle of Saratoga, has been proudly displayed at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia since 2023. At last, Schenectady's Liberty Flag has returned home and is the centerpiece for our new exhibit, “Threads of Liberty: Schenectady in the American Revolution.” The exhibit runs through the end of 2027 at the Historical Society.

Despite the changing of the temporary exhibit guard at Philadelphia's museum, Schenectady's presence will continue there amongst its permanent Revolution Generation in Photographs wall in their ‘A New Nation’ gallery, where an image of Glenville native, Revolutionary War veteran, and owner of that Liberty Flag, Nicholas Veeder (1761-1862,) resides.

Greater still is the perpetual presence of Schenectady's citizens amidst the undercurrents of America's journey to Independence. Just as it was not trained soldiers who rose up on Boston's Harbor or bled when the ‘Shot Heard Round the World’ was fired, so too, behind Schenectady's often-overlooked struggle in determining what was right, were the commonplace families earning their daily bread on our now busy city streets. This question of whether to remain loyal to the colonial government or gamble on a lofty fight for equality was awakened in “A Call to Arms,” a historical interpretative performance held at the Stockade Inn in May 2025. And we will continue to delve deep into that research brought to life, just as we are resolved to rediscover those ancestors who fired their weapons in world-altering battles.

The United States prepares to mark the culmination of this early strife, that centerpiece within nine years of civil war—namely on July 4, 2026. Whether by participating in our America 250 Reads: A Revolutionary Book Club, or toasting the Cause at our July 4th on the Third fireworks and encampment with George and Martha Washington, or attending our November Schenectady: Crossroads of Revolution symposium and the numerous theatrical performances throughout the year, you are cordially invited to explore with us our predecessors' heritage in that celebration in 2026...and beyond.

Kimberly Waldin is an SCHS Trustee and the chair of the Schenectady Celebrates 250 committee. For a full listing of projects and programs SCHS has planned for the semiquincentennial please visit schenectadyhistorical.org/rev250.

Isaburo Nagahama: a Japanese Immigrant to Schenectady

by John Gearing

Born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1866, young Isaburo Nagahama completed elementary school there. He may have then become an apprentice embroiderer. In 1885, Isa emigrated to the United States, perhaps first to Honolulu, Hawaii and from there to the mainland. Sources place him in New York City around 1890, employed by Henry Parke, an importer of “oriental” art. The exact details of Isa’s employment remain a mystery, but Isa may have been a trusted advisor and perhaps a sales associate as well. By that time it seems likely that Isa had learned English to go with his native Japanese. Isa married his employer’s daughter, Augusta, and by early 1896 they were expecting their first child. Although they welcomed their daughter, Augusta, into the world in September of that year, scarcely a month later, her mother passed away, leaving Isa a widower with a baby to care for. Little Augusta, or Gussie, as she was known, lived with her maternal grandparents for a number of years.

Details of Isa’s life are scarce until he landed a job as a teacher – presumably an art embroidery teacher – at the Emma Willard School in Troy from 1903 to 1906. The 1907 Troy directory lists him as having moved to New York City, but the 1907 city directory for Schenectady contains an advertisement for the shop of “I. Nagahama, Art Embroidery” at 130 Wall Street. Perhaps he recognized the business opportunities presented by the booming industrial center that was Schenectady. With a rapidly growing population and rising incomes, there would have been plenty of customers. At first Isa lived and worked at the address of his shop, but in 1910, when he wed Gertrude Siver, the couple moved to 4 Brandywine Avenue. Within a few years, Isa and Gertrude adopted a little girl, Fujiko, who had been born in Japan in 1912. She attended Schenectady schools as did daughter Augusta, who had joined her father once he settled in Schenectady.

The Nagahama shop appears to have prospered. Subsequent city directories for many years featured a display ad for the store. The public perception of the quality of work done at the Nagahama shop is perhaps best illustrated by a newspaper ad for a new embroidery shop, which noted that its proprietor had formerly worked at I. Nagahama. After nearly 25 years owning his art embroidery shop, Mr. Nagahama announced in a *Daily Gazette* advertisement in 1931 that he had opened “Nippon Golf Course,” a small, 9-hole course on his property

on Pearse Road. In the ad, he stressed that his was not a “miniature golf” attraction, but rather a course designed for players to practice short approach shots and putting. Today, it might be termed a Par-3 course. The success, or failure, of this enterprise remains something of a mystery.

By the early 1930s, tension between the Japanese government and the United States was beginning to grow. In Schenectady, the press began carrying anti-Japanese articles, and published blatantly racist anti-Japanese stories. It’s unclear what happened to the Nagahama family. Despite living in Schenectady for 25 years and running an established local business, the Nagahama family appears to have left Schenectady. Was it due to a perceived growing threat of anti-Japanese sentiment? Or did the family simply wish to join the large Japanese community in California? We do know that Gertrude Nagahama died in 1934 at the family’s new home near Los Angeles.

An executive order signed by President Roosevelt in early 1942 resulted in the forced removal and incarceration of west coast Japanese citizens and Japanese-Americans. Of the approximately 122,000 Japanese or Japanese-Americans then living in the US, about 100,000 lived on the west coast. Isa Nagahama, then 76 years old, was one of them. From 1942 until November 1944 Isa was incarcerated in the concentration camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. It has been reported that while a prisoner Mr. Nagahama, then in his late 70’s, taught art embroidery classes for fellow inmates. Isa’s second daughter, Fujiko, married Masaaki Watanabe, a Los Angeleno, in that city in 1940. Notwithstanding birth in the United States, Roosevelt’s order resulted in Masaaki’s and Fujiko’s incarceration with Isa in the Heart Mountain camp.

Isaburo’s daughter Augusta Nagahama, meanwhile, became an RN. She married Kanzo Oguri, MD, a radiologist in Brooklyn, in 1920. Dr. Oguri enjoyed a long, distinguished career. Roosevelt’s internment order, being limited to the west coast, meant that normal life continued for Augusta and Kanzo. During the Second World War, Kanzo chaired the Japanese American section of the Red Cross. When Isaburo was released from captivity in November 1944, he moved to Brooklyn to live with his daughter and her family. Fujiko and her husband were not released until July 1945, which doubtless explains why Isaburo did not stay in California with them, as he had since 1940. By 1950 Fujiko, Masaaki, and their five children were living in an apartment on 1st Avenue in Manhattan. Masaaki was a self-employed gem cutter.

Although Isa never again lived in Schenectady, an item in the *Daily Gazette* in the early 1950s noted that he was in town paying a visit to a friend who lived on Troy Schenectady road. Isaburo Nagahama outlived both Augusta and Kanzo, passing away in 1968 at the age of 101. He shares his final resting place at the Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Maspeth, NY with them and five of his grandchildren.

From the Library

RECENT DONATIONS TO THE ARCHIVES

Thank you to the generous donors who contributed to the preservation of Schenectady County's history by donating their archival materials to the SCHS Library!

Dr. Alexander Ennis, 1903 physician's diary
donated by Jim Strosberg

Susan Eliza Brougham Ostrander autograph book
donated by Gail Delanney

Additions to the Stockade Association Records Collection
donated by Suzy Unger

George Westinghouse Jones and Sarah Phillips letters
donated by the California Genealogical Society

Yearbook
donated by Mont Pleasant 1975 50th Anniversary Class Committee

Interfaith Community of Schenectady Records Collection
donated by the Interfaith Community of Schenectady

Oral history interview with Anita Merims

Addition to the Nijkirk Exchange Collection
donated by the estate of Ellen McNett

SHUCIS Literary Magazines/Yearbooks
donated by Carol Plue

Additions to the Photo Collection by Laird Burnett

Charlotte Luckhurst Collection
donated by the Rensselaerville Historical Society

RECENT AND UPCOMING BLOG POSTS

Schenectady's 18th and 19th Century Newspapers

by Marietta Carr, September 2025

Schenectady's rich history of local journalism and newspaper publishing dates back to the 1790s. This post provides an overview of the first two centuries of newspapers in our area.

Corporal Jacob Henry Sager

by Gail Denisoff, November 2025

In honor of Veterans' Day, this post is a short biography of one of our Hometown Heroes.



Is It Apothecary-Druggist-Pharmacist? A 19th-century Conundrum

by Robert Baldwin, November 2025

Do the sniffles have you headed to the pharmacy this time of year? As you stock up on all you need to battle a bug, check out our blog for a look back at Schenectady's 19th-century druggists, apothecaries, and pharmacists

The Mohawk (then Hudson) Theater

by Gail Denisoff, December 2025

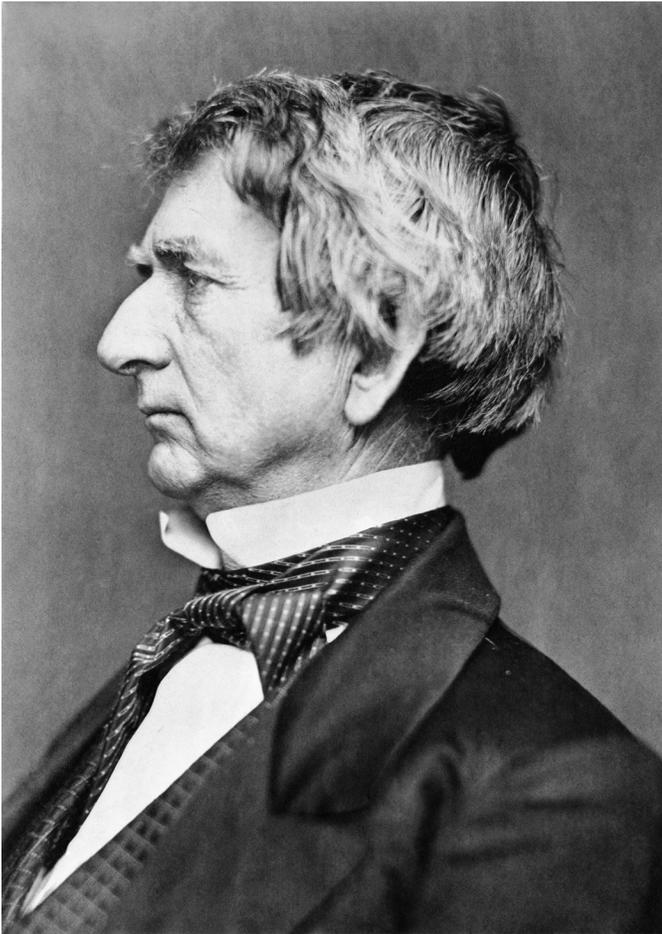
Located at 10-12-14 S. College St. from 1904 to 1934, the Mohawk Theater was a hotspot of Schenectady's entertainment landscape.

John L. Turnbull, Duanesburg Merchant

by Robert Baldwin, January 2026

The SCHS Library holds fifteen ledgers of John L. Turnbull's Duanesburg store (1875 to 1896). This post takes a look at Turnbull's life and business, and the research potential of these ledgers.

Image: Hudson Theater (aka Mohawk Theater) College St. west side between Liberty St & Union St. 1934 view. From the SCHS collection.



REVIEW: Seward's Law: Country Lawyering, Relational Rights, and Slavery

by Martin Strosberg

In the courtyard of the Schenectady County Library (Karen B. Johnson Main Library) stands the statue of William E. Seward (1801-1872) alongside that of Harriet Tubman (1822-1913), the African American abolitionist. Seward is no doubt familiar to members of SCHS as a Union College graduate (1820), New York State governor (1839-1843), U.S. senator (1849-1861), secretary of state under Lincoln and Johnson (1861-1869), and purchaser of Alaska (1869). But in *Seward's Law: Country Lawyering, Relational Rights, and Slavery*, Peter Charles Hoffer presents an aspect of Seward's story that is generally not well-known. Informed by his experience as a country lawyer in upstate New York, Seward adopted an approach to the law

that Hoffer, Distinguished Research Professor of History at the University of Georgia, characterizes as relational rights. Seward himself never used the term.

As a small-town country lawyer, embedded in the social fabric of the community, Seward had a diversified practice and represented all points of view: rich and poor, creditors and debtors, employers and employees. From his perspective as a litigator and also a mediator, he saw the inherent value of a society that was grounded on mutual respect where members exercised their rights but also accepted their obligations to one another. This is the essence of relational rights, which Hoffer associated with Seward based on his legal arguments, political speeches, and executive and legislative decisions. Good laws and legal decisions – whether at the local, state, or national level – went hand-in-hand with relational rights.

Throughout his life, Seward led the fight against slavery on both the state and national levels. Slavery constituted the greatest violation of relational rights. Masters owed nothing to their slaves and slaves owed everything to their masters. Hoffer devotes most of the book to Seward's struggle against slavery, especially as a U.S. senator and as Lincoln's loyal and trusted secretary of state. As a popular reference, Hoffer cites Steven Spielberg's movie, *Lincoln*, dramatizing the passage of the 13th Amendment outlawing slavery.

With regard to the issue of secession, Seward argued in the Senate that all states and indeed all citizens were part of a like-minded community sharing duties and enjoying benefits. Within this framework, and emphasizing their common heritage, he hoped that the North and South could reconcile their differences, especially since the newly elected Lincoln had vowed to leave slavery untouched in the South. Of course, when the South did secede (i.e., leave the community) the federal government had no choice but to put down the rebellion. Seward's priority then became to end the rebellion as quickly as possible and hasten the reunion of North and South. However, as Hoffer points out, this priority took precedence over protecting the freedoms of freed slaves. Indeed, Hoffer faults Seward on this position: "Instead of pressing Lincoln and then Johnson to ensure and protect the former slaves, he wished the government to restore the white citizens of the South to their former station in the community."

Although belief in relational rights had an important influence in Seward's life as a politician and public servant, Hoffer concludes that it did not have a lasting impact on American jurisprudence.

Without an extensive background in the legal and political history of the period, the reader may find this book rough going. Nevertheless, for those so inclined, Hoffer offers a new appreciation of the connection between Seward, the country lawyer and Seward, the national politician.

Peter Charles Hoffer, *Seward's Law: Country Lawyering, Relational Rights, and Slavery*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2022.

A Century of Imagination: 100 Years of Proctors

by Madeline Olesky

When Marilyn Sassi, co-chair of the Proctors Historical Committee, was only four years old, her grandfather took her to see her first movie at Proctors: *Song of the South*. Their second film was another classic: *The Wizard of Oz*. As she grew up during the 1950s, Marilyn went to the theater every Saturday to see the newest films playing on the big screen. And for the past two decades, she has been a dedicated volunteer at Proctors, showcasing the historic and cultural impact of the theater. When Sassi took the time to give me a behind-the-scenes historic tour of Proctors, the love she has for the place seeped out of every story she shared.

People in Schenectady and beyond share these feelings with Sassi. Proctors has been a key institution since it opened in 1926, and people from all walks of life have been entertained in that shared space. Since this year marks the 100th anniversary of Proctors, it is the perfect time to look back on the long history between Schenectady and Proctors.

A Brief History of Proctors

The theater scene in Schenectady once looked a lot different than it does today. Proctors was just one of many places in the city that catered to an audience hungry for entertainment of all kinds. Vaudeville was the most popular form at that time. It was all about continuous performance; a person could buy a ticket and stay in the theater as long as they liked, taking in acts from musicians, clowns, acrobats, actors, and more. Frederick Freeman Proctor was one such entertainer who had dreams of becoming a major force in the business. After opening multiple theaters in places like New York City and Albany, he set his sights on Schenectady. Proctors opened to the public on December 27, 1926. Tickets were 35 cents for a matinee and 50 for an evening show – prices that seem like a fantasy to the modern theatergoer.

A major supporter of Proctors from the start was General Electric. Alongside the American Locomotive Works, GE supported businesses in the city that appealed to the hired executives and scientists who moved here. There was also the benefit of having Proctors as a spot to test out new inventions from the lab. The most famous example of this was in May 1930 when GE research scientist Ernst Alexanderson gave the first public demonstration of television.

Since then, Proctors has always shown a mixture of stage and screen productions. As the prominence of vaudeville faded, movie screenings became more popular at the theater. Classic films such as *Gone with the Wind* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* all had lucrative runs.

Despite this success, the fortunes of Proctors took a turn. The general malaise that fell over Schenectady during the 20th century caused most of the downtown theaters to close, leaving only Proctors. And by the 1970s, even Proctors was in danger of being bulldozed to make way for new development. The Arts Center and Theater of Schenectady (ACTS) banded together in response to this. They rallied community and economic support of Proctors. According to Sassi, this grassroots organization led by people like Mardy Moore spent countless hours and resources on restoring it back to working order and convincing the city to forgive the theater's outstanding debts. They were successful, and the theater reopened in January 1979.

After a full overhaul in the early 2000s, the theater was again revitalized. The stage was doubled in size to accommodate touring productions of larger Broadway musicals. When it was announced that *Phantom of the Opera* would be the inaugural show on the new stage in 2006, the people of the Capital Region were ecstatic. This marked a new era for Proctors. Modern hits like *Wicked*, *Hamilton*, and *Hadestown* have all made appearances since then, entertaining audiences and drawing an average crowd of over 700,000 people per year to its golden halls.

How Proctors Impacts Schenectady

When I spoke with Paul Moore, a longtime Proctors board member, he used a phrase to describe the theater that really stuck with me. To him, it is a “motherhood of institutions,” and I could not agree more.

The theater is one of three members of Proctors Collaborative, alongside Universal Preservation Hall in Saratoga Springs and the Capital Repertory Theatre in Albany. And while it is well-known for hosting touring musicals, Proctors also hosts film festivals, movie screenings, and visiting speakers. It collaborates with local schools and universities to support young people with dreams of showbusiness. Open Stage Media and other local television programs are recorded there. The Collaborative Scene Shop crafts props and scenery. All of these exist under one roof.

Perhaps my favorite of these community services is an unexpected one for a performing arts venue: their power plant. Since 2005, Marquee Power has generated power for Proctors and surrounding buildings. Local businesses are only responsible for paying for the power they use and helping with maintenance costs. During the winter, there is the added bonus of a snowmelt system that keeps the surrounding sidewalks clear in the winter.

And that doesn't even cover the economic impact of its



presence. Every year, over 700,000 people walk through the doors of Proctors. And while many of those are locals, many are people who come from across the Capital Region, the northeast, and beyond. Those visitors eat meals in local restaurants, shop for souvenirs in small businesses downtown, and overall spend more time in our community than they would have otherwise.

Conclusion

I wish that I could include a picture of every ticket stub, playbill, and flyer from Proctors in our collection. Theater lovers across time and space are fond of saving these bits of memorabilia. Those items are evidence of these moving experiences, proof of the impact that the arts have. The people of Schenectady have always been drawn to Proctors; the imprint of Proctors can be seen on the city. I hope that this relationship will continue to grow during the next 100 years.

A special thanks to Marilyn Sassi, Paul Moore, Judie Bouchard, and Dan Sheehan for their assistance in my research. Proctors is what it is today because of the incredible staff, board, and volunteers who keep the place running. The Proctors Historical Committee is hard at work planning a year of events and programs to commemorate the theater's anniversary. Keep an eye on their communication channels to see their schedule!

Image: State Street, easterly view toward railroad overpass from Proctors Theater Arcade, Nov. 9, 1968. From the SCHS collection.



Around the County with Bill Buell

by Bill Buell, Schenectady County Historian

Is there anything more American than the Erie Canal Song?

Everybody sang it at some point in their life. I joined in enthusiastically with my music class in seventh grade, as did countless other American school children throughout the last century. It was a regular in Pete Seeger's songbook for decades, and in 2006 Bruce Springsteen produced his own version, which I have to say, was probably my favorite.

However, Springsteen is now No. 2 on my list. My new No. 1 rendition of the song – which also went by the title, "Low Bridge, Everybody Down" – was performed back in October during Schenectady County's celebration of the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Erie Canal. With a replica of the historic canal boat, the *Seneca Chief*, paying a visit to Mohawk Harbor in front of a large crowd on October 14, Niskayuna High students Sophia Connell, Natalie Dinneen and Maryn Gleason put on a performance that stole the spotlight.

The three young women have had a busy couple of months since then. They were All-State Mixed Chorus singers at the NYSSMA Conference in Rochester, and more recently performed as part of the chorale group in the Melodies of Christmas at Proctors. They are a part of three select vocal ensembles at Niskayuna, and are also involved in Niskayuna's High School musical this season, *The Wizard of Oz*.

"They are well-rounded students who are involved in sports, clubs, work and other extracurricular activities," said Christina Pizzino-Catalano, Niskayuna's High School Choral Director.

"We are very proud to have such outstanding singers, and it was wonderful to be a part of such a great event to celebrate the Erie Canal."

For the Buffalo Maritime Center crew that was on the boat from Buffalo to Albany and then down the Hudson River to New York City, the visit to Schenectady was one of many highlights of their long trip.

"All of us had our own perspectives which have been fun to revisit and reminisce about," said Chelsea Moore, education director at the Buffalo Maritime Center. "A couple of the big highlights for me were the day we left Rochester and continued down the canal. It was the farthest that the *Seneca Chief* had ever gone."

"Schenectady was so memorable from the moment we entered the marina," continued Moore. "Not only was the marina one of the more logistically challenging places to maneuver into, it was also one of the most rewarding as we were greeted by an enormous crowd on shore. One of my favorite parts was the acapella performance by the high school students. They were fantastic and it's now one of our favorite versions of the song."

Other highlights for Moore and the crew include being greeted by 140 fourth graders in Rome, and the completion of their nearly 300-mile voyage from Buffalo to Waterford where they then entered the Hudson River before heading south to New York City.

While the original voyage for the *Seneca Chief* took around 10 days, it took Moore's crew 35 days – because of all their long visits – to complete its adventure.

It was a wonderful mix of history, music and the outdoors, which these days we can enjoy at our leisure thanks to the glorious Mohawk River, the New York State Barge Canal and the Erie Canalway Trail. Bike it, hike it or travel by river, it's an experience that helps keep many of us young, fit, and educated about our past.

It was Thomas S. Allen who wrote the Erie Canal Song somewhere around 1913, a few years after the national landmark had been shut down due to all the advances in transportation during the second half of the 19th century.

The Erie Canal may no longer be a part of our world in the 21st Century, but its history will long be remembered and its legacy will last forever.

Image, above: Niskayuna High students Maryn Gleason, Sophia Connell, and Natalie Dinneen.

Image, top right: Erie Canal and the aqueduct at the crossing of the Mohawk River at Rexford, c. 1910. Featuring the Craig Hotel

Image, bottom right: The Erie Canal in Schenectady.



The 1661 Society through the Years

by Audrey Jones

As a member and supporter of the Schenectady County Historical Society, you may have noticed a group of individuals we recognize in our newsletters and special events called the 1661 Society. The 1661 Society is composed of men and women who have committed to leaving a legacy gift to SCHS. While the name of this generous group is fairly new, legacy gifts have always played a vital role in the longevity of SCHS and in our ability to carry out our mission and engage with our community. Each legacy giver has their own unique story and specific reason for giving beyond their lifetime.

We have the pleasure of personally knowing current members of the 1661 Society, including Sarah Kirby. Her ties to SCHS stem back to her college years working as a collections management intern. Even when her professional career led her to development and management at other non-profit organizations, she continued to stay connected to the Society and currently serves as a board member. For Sarah, her gift comes from a desire and belief in the importance of ensuring that all stories of Schenectady County's past are told, "The work that SCHS has been doing to tell more complete stories of all who call Schenectady County home is very important to me. Supporting this work has only become more essential in times of uncertainty and divide. I am leaving a legacy gift to support the inclusive and engaging opportunities for our community for generations to come."

While we have the ability to know why current members feel compelled to leave bequests in their estates, there are many more whose gifts, and the sentiment behind them, will never be fully known to us. Instead, we look to the individual lives of past 1661 Society members to glean insight into their generosity and their contribution to our 121 years as an organization.

Mary C. Curtis was one of the earliest documented members of the 1661 Society. A Brooklynite by birth, the first twenty years of Ms. Curtis' life was spent downstate before settling in 1870 within Schenectady's Stockade District with her mother and father, George and Catherine. It is unclear how actively involved Ms. Curtis was with our organization, but she felt compelled, whether through the work SCHS was performing or personal relationships within the organization, to bequeath us a gift upon her death in 1928.

Nearly twenty years following Mary Curtis' passing, another transplant was brought to Schenectady and

into the Historical Society's sphere. Carl A. Niemeyer, an English Professor originally from the Midwest, earned a teaching position within the Humanities department of Schenectady's oldest institute of higher education, Union College. A well respected scholar, Dr. Niemeyer became the chair of the English department, taught at St. Andrew's in Scotland and chaired the committee recommending that Union College become coeducational in 1970. Following his retirement from Union, Dr. Niemeyer continued to offer lectures and insights on literature through the public library and served as secretary of SCHS for a time. A life-long learner of world literature, cultures, and languages, Dr. Niemeyer dedicated his life to encouraging his students and Schenectadians to likewise embrace a love of learning. It was likely in this vein that he desired to see cultural institutions, including SCHS, continue to flourish in Schenectady, and gave to them accordingly.

One of the most recognizable members of the 1661 Society was Gertrude Naylor. A native of Schenectady, Ms. Naylor grew up across the street from current SCHS headquarters on Washington Avenue. The daughter of a prominent Schenectady County judge, she lived a privileged life, and utilized her time and resources to serve and benefit numerous charitable organizations. From leading Girl Scout Troops for over twenty years, to coordinating Red Cross motor corps volunteers during WWII, to actively serving on the League of Women Voters, she promoted the importance of these organizations within her community through her involvement.

This promotion extended to SCHS and the Stockade Association as she opened her home to visitors during the popular Stockade Walkabout. Ms. Naylor's active role and generosity toward her hometown was seen through her actions during and after her lifetime.

As the lives of all these men and women show, 1661 Society members have come from all different backgrounds. No matter the time period they lived or their level of giving, one belief continually unites them together: the importance of local history to their community and a desire for SCHS' work to continue even after their death. Would you join Mary, Carl, Gertrude, and Sarah in this cause?

If you plan on leaving a bequest to SCHS in your estate planning, please reach out to Audrey Jones at office@schenectadyhistorical.org or 518-374-0263 x5.

Adventures in Baby-Wearing



by Mary Zawacki Graves

Taking care of a newborn is relentless. So when my son, William, was born this summer I didn't leave my house very often. Taking the dogs for a walk at Riverside Park was about as far as I'd make it, and even that felt like a big win. One evening I could just about make out the waterski team across the river at Jumpin' Jacks. I don't know what they were doing, but I know they were there. That was about as exciting as my July got.

But suddenly it was fall, and baby William was sleeping and napping very well. Which meant for me – home on intermittent paid family leave – a lot of empty hours. I started getting antsy. There's only so many jigsaws you can do before you start dreaming of puzzle pieces.

Then I remembered my SCHS sponsor-level membership. Which, as you may be aware, includes free admission to organizations participating in the North American Reciprocal Museum (NARM) Association® network: “a mosaic of 1,512 art museums and galleries, historical museums and societies, botanical gardens, children's museums, zoos, and more.” Right up my alley.

First, I called my friend, Juliet. “How would you feel about taking a little day trip a couple times a month? To some museums and historic sites? Free?” She was in (and thank God, because, as I quickly learned, daytripping with an infant is a lot easier with an extra pair of hands).

Next, I made a list of all the NARM sites within a 90-minute drive. I figured a 60-90 minute drive would be ideal with a napping infant. I could get William up, dressed, fed, have a little play time, and then just as he started getting sleepy we'd hop in the car. An hour later, as we pulled up to whichever museum we were going to that day, he'd awoken, refreshed, curious, and eager to be strapped to his mama to take in some great art. After touring the museum for a few hours, we'd grab a bite, and then hit the road, with William peacefully napping in the backseat.

My plan worked perfectly. William and I visited nearly a dozen museums or historic sites this fall and winter, with either Juliet, my husband Roland, or my mom Kathleen accompanying us. All of them were fantastic, all of them were close by, and, best of all, all of them were free! Of course, museum gift shop purchases and a tasty lunch are certainly not free, but, hey, those are technically optional.

When I say there's 48 NARM sites within 90 minutes, I'm not exaggerating. If you extend that radius to 2.5 hours – still a day trip, in my opinion – it's more than 120 sites. And that's not even counting all the museums in New York City. Personally, however, I'm not ready to take on NYC with a baby. Maybe next year.

Our Top Five NARM Sites (so far)

1. The Clark, Williamstown, MA
2. Hildene, the Lincoln Family Home, Manchester, VT
3. Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, NY
4. Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, NY
5. Schenectady County Historical Society

(You didn't think I'd leave out SCHS, did you? I've lost count of how many times I've taken William to the Museum or out to Mabee Farm. Obviously, we love it there.)

Honorable Mention: I would be remiss if I didn't give a shoutout to the **National Bottle Museum** in Ballston Spa. Its delightful director (and SCHS board member), Chris Leonard, gave us a private tour, and let us get up close to the only red bottle in the museum. We were not, however, permitted to climb the 20 foot rolling ladder. That's ok with me. (I actually would NOT recommend the Bottle Museum with a baby. There is a lot of glass there. Just saying).

If baby William and I could make this museum magic happen, I'm sure you can too. *Sans* baby, *sans* bottles, but with an SCHS sponsor-level membership – and thus NARM – you too can turn our region into your museum playground. Want to become a Sponsor-level member or upgrade your membership so you too can access this plethora of museums? Contact Audrey at office@schenectadyhistorical.org.

*Image, this page: At Hildene in December.
Image left, "Daisy" William Morris wallpaper, 1864. From the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*



COFFINS AND SHROUDS.—Mahoga-
ny, plain and mounted, Black Walnut and White Wood
Coffins, neatly trimmed, and of all sizes, constantly on
hand. Also, Fisk's Improved Patent Metallic Burial Cases.
Muslin, jaconet, bishop lawn and flannel (a few with satin
fronts) Shrouds—at
Jan 6 **BROWN & HAND'S,**
No. 58 State st.

The Lost Iron Casket

by Michael Diana

Many modern residents of Schenectady live their lives unaware or unconcerned with the city's past which might be buried, figuratively or literally, just beneath their feet. And so it can be shocking when this history is unearthed. Such was the case on October 13 when locals awoke to a report in the *Daily Gazette* that human remains were discovered in an ancient iron sarcophagus on Hamilton Hill. The coffin, and an unidentified woman, were revealed as construction workers excavated what seemed to be a vacant lot at the intersection of Westover Place and Georgetta Dix Plaza. Police quickly dismissed the concerns that the burial was recent or suspicious in nature. So rather than forensic investigators, local historical authorities were called to assess the situation.

Imagine my surprise when Keith Brown, Public Health Director for Schenectady County, called the Historical Society to see if we were interested in documenting this iron casket for posterity. We certainly couldn't pass up this opportunity, and so on October 27, I was among a select few given a chance to view and photograph the casket at the Vale Cemetery crematorium. During its accidental discovery, the casket had been damaged with a hole punctured in the midsection and the bottom almost completely shorn off. The nearly mummified feet of the occupant were visible. Dutifully, I took photographs for our records while more experienced archaeologists poked, prodded, and pontificated about the subject. After the brief viewing, the casket was taken to a quiet part of Vale for reburial. It was a solemn, respectful, and slightly bizarre ceremony. Of course, no one in attendance knew the identity of the woman in the casket. Surely this long

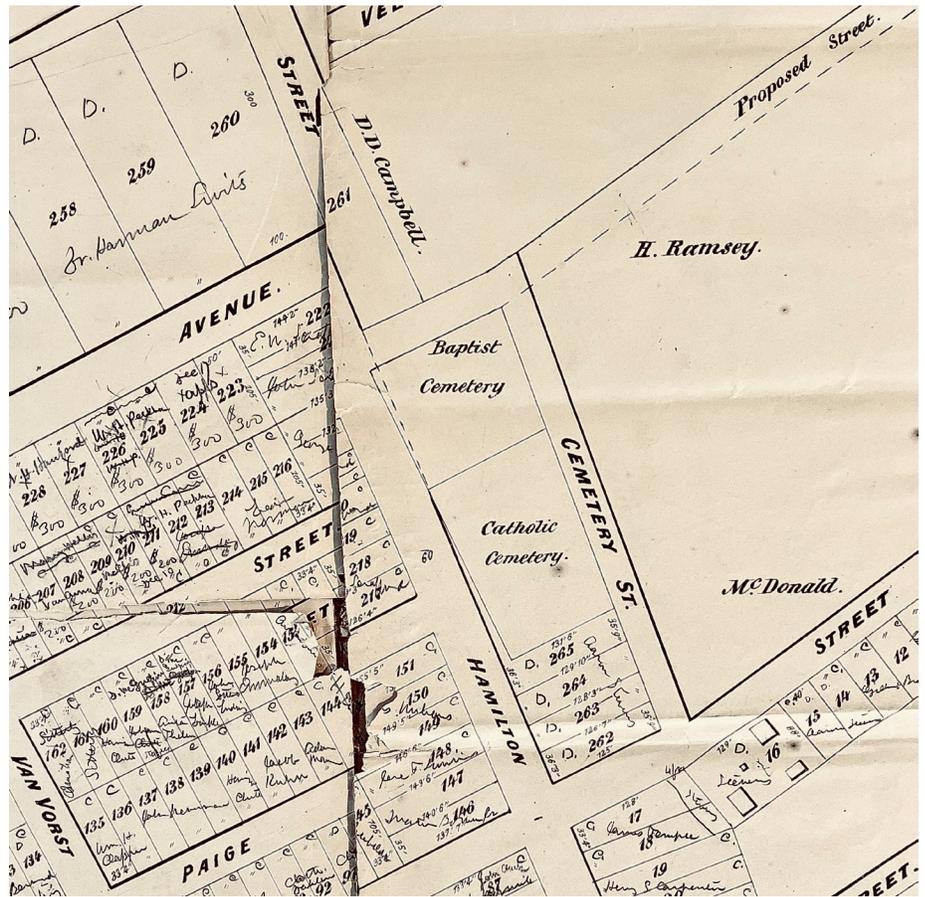
deceased woman would have never imagined her mortal remains might be relocated in this way. Some kind words were said as the casket was lowered into a new, permanent grave.

Westover Place is an unassuming residential street today, with nothing above the surface to suggest a burial ground. However, even a quick look through our records shows this area had long been used for human burials. Dating back to the 18th century, we know the African Cemetery for enslaved and free Black citizens was located nearby, somewhere along Veeder Avenue. In 1863, what remained of this cemetery was relocated to the newly built Vale Cemetery. In 1823, the area where the casket was found was deeded to the First Baptist Church to be used as a cemetery. The following year, the parcel directly south was made a Catholic cemetery. It's no surprise then, that Westover Place was originally known as Cemetery Street. A city map from 1869 illustrates the Baptist and Catholic cemeteries nestled between Cemetery and Hamilton Streets. But, by the time this map was created, this Baptist cemetery was likely undergoing the process of relocation to Vale. A few years prior, in September of 1857, the Baptist congregation sought and received permission from the city government to sell their cemetery lot. One would expect the congregation to relocate their burials before or during the process of such a sale. By 1889, as shown in a Sanborn Insurance Map, the Baptist cemetery had disappeared, leaving just the Catholic one. That too disappears by 1914, as the Sanborn map from that year shows only houses along Westover Place. And so, for the last 110 years, this area has maintained a residential appearance- on the surface!

There were no clues above or below ground as to the identity of the female occupant, but the iron sarcophagus itself was instantly recognized for its designer: Almond Dunbar Fisk. Form-fitted from cast iron, bolted tight, and elegantly contoured to resemble a somber cloth shroud, this recent discovery exactly matched Fisk's 1848 patent for a "Metallic Burial Case." Fisk developed the caskets in an era when

steam travel allowed Americans to travel further than ever with minimal effort. However, without modern refrigeration or embalming technology, human remains could not be transported for any significant distance without decomposition setting in. Fisk suffered from this first hand when his brother died in Mississippi and could not be returned to the family cemetery in New York. The tragedy inspired Fisk to apply his skills as a boiler maker to develop his air-tight iron caskets. With a sealed design, Fisk reasoned, “the air may be exhausted so completely as entirely to prevent the decay of the contained body on principles well understood.” A further advantage to the casket was that contagious pathogens could be sealed completely inside, enabling mourners to safely view the deceased one final time through a glass faceplate. The caskets were generally only affordable by the middle and upper classes. While a simple pine casket might cost around \$2 in 1850, Fisk’s “improved” design sold for \$100. Fisk received immediate celebrity endorsements in 1850 when both John Calhoun and President Zachary Taylor died and were interred in his metallic caskets. So beyond any practical advantages to Fisk’s design, the brand itself could be seen as a sort of status symbol for the family of the deceased.

The brand of this recent discovery gives us some clues as to the time of the burial. It’s beyond me to say conclusively when the first Fisk metallic casket was sold in Schenectady. The earliest direct reference I can find for such a coffin was from the *Schenectady Reflector* published on January 27, 1854. This advertisement, for the firm of Brown and Hands at 58 State Street, announces the sale of Fisk’s Improved Patent Metallic Burial Cases. Indeed, the listing even features a small illustration of a casket, bearing an eerie resemblance to one found on Westover Place. So while it’s possible the casket could have been specially ordered earlier, 1854 is likely the earliest date this casket could have been procured from a local vendor. At the same time, we know that burials should not have been happening in this plot by September of 1857, since at that point the Baptist congregation was trying to sell the land and presumably relocate previous burials. That leaves us a narrow window of possibility of only 3 years in which this burial could have taken place. With that information, perhaps the records of the Schenectady Baptist church could shed some light on the identity of this long-deceased woman. Unfortunately, that congregation was dissolved recently in 2018. I have no personal knowledge of the state and physical location of any records they kept.



1. <https://valecemetry.org/african-american>
2. *Schenectady Reflector* September 4, 1857
3. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/blog/death-burial-and-iron-coffins/>
4. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/morbid-monday-fisk-mummy-case>
5. <https://www.thehenryford.org/explore/blog/gone-but-not-forgotten--fisk-iron-coffins>

Image, left: Schenectady Reflector advertisement, 1854. From the SCHS collection.

Image, above: Paige lot map, 1869. From the SCHS collection.

Image, below: The Schenectady casket, 2025



fragile and valuable documents collected in the preceding fifty years. Within ten years, the society started planning to reconfigure and expand the physical space to accommodate the growing library and museum collections. The front room was converted into the research room, named in honor of Howard McConville, SCHS president (1950-1951), archivist, and avid genealogist. Still, the library and archival collections grew, and researchers needed more space to access the materials. By the mid-1980s, the SCHS board realized that the only way forward was to construct another extension on the building.

The Library Addition Project generated significant interest, but the question of fundraising was daunting. Thankfully, a committee of stalwart supporters, led by James Pontius, took on the challenge and were particularly encouraged by the generosity of Mandy Grems. Born in Canastota, NY in 1913, Mandy Grems was in many ways a liberated woman before her time. She studied math and chemistry in college and joined General Electric in 1941 as an engineer's assistant. Grems was a pioneer of computer technology, including the use of punched cards for engineering calculations. Her career took her all over the U.S. and Europe, where she designed and implemented software for companies such as Boeing and IBM. She retired from GE in 1978.

Grems' hobbies included genealogy and archaeology. She was an ardent supporter of libraries and archives, and as a member of SCHS, she frequently volunteered her time and skills in the library. When the board started fundraising for the library addition, Grems responded with a \$100,000 donation and a challenge to the community to match her funds. In recognition of her gift, the planning committee offered her the opportunity to name the new library. She named the extension in honor of her parents, Charlotte May Doolittle Grems and Edward George Grems.

Construction on the new addition began in June 1989. The project was beset by the obstacles and setbacks typical of all construction undertakings. Fundraising continued to be a chief concern for the planning committee. However, with community and donor support, the committee prevailed and the 3,000 square-foot addition was completed in summer of 1991. The Grems-Doolittle Library officially opened with a dedication on October 12, 1991. The SCHS board designated it as a reference library whose purpose was "to gather, preserve, display and make available for study, books, manuscripts, papers, photographs and other records and materials relating to the early and current history of Schenectady County and of the surrounding area."

Today, the Grems-Doolittle Library houses the largest collection of archival materials related to the history and cultural heritage of Schenectady County. Our collections range from 1670 to present day and include a large variety of formats. Our collections are particularly strong in the early colonial history of the area, the development of the Erie Canal and railroad systems in NY, and the impact of companies such as General Electric and the American Locomotive Company.

Over the last forty years, SCHS has developed our collecting plans and activities to better represent the diverse communities in our county, which has led to an increase in the archival collections in our library. In the past three decades, we've overhauled the shelving configuration in the Grems-Doolittle Library twice to increase storage capacity and improve preservation of the collections. The library is temperature and humidity controlled in accordance with archival best practices, and staffed by a professional archivist and highly trained volunteers.

Users of the Grems-Doolittle Library include students from 4th grade through post-secondary, genealogists, new residents, local historians, community memory-keepers, writers, and artists. SCHS regularly works with local colleges and K-12 institutions to introduce students to archival collections, primary source literacy, and the work of archivists and librarians. We receive about 400 visitors and research requests a year from around the world. Genealogy and property history questions make up the largest percentage of reasons for use of our collections. Over the last decade, we have seen a significant number of researchers using our materials as inspiration for artistic works, neighborhood improvement, and commemoration and memorialization. One such example is the historical marker erected in 2024 at SUNY Schenectady to commemorate the Mohawk Colored Giants, Schenectady's all-Black baseball team founded in 1911.

You can discover our collections through our online catalog, library blog, social media posts, and participation in state-wide search platforms. We use EmpireADC for finding aids and New York Heritage for digital collections. You can also access the materials in the Grems-Doolittle Library by scheduling a research appointment – we're one of the few special collections libraries in the Capital Region that offers research appointments six days a week. We also participate in Consider The Source NY, a project to increase access to and use of primary sources for K-12 students and educators.

This fall we will celebrate 35 years in the Grems-Doolittle Library. We're incredibly grateful to the people who built it – both the building itself and the collections within it. In 120+ years of operation, SCHS has relied almost exclusively on donations of archival materials, books and funding. Indeed, over the years, financial donors have regularly and enthusiastically contributed to the operations and physical needs of the library. So many volunteers have given their time, energy, and expertise to the library that to name them all would be like publishing a phone book. Their work in the library's collections has enabled researchers from all walks of life to answer countless questions and articulate the ways Schenectady has impacted our country and the world. We're excited for the next 35 years and the many people we'll have the opportunity to serve as we continue the library's work.

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Image: "Threads of Liberty" now open at SCHS

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ALBANY, NY

SCHENECTADY COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

GALA

HONORING ANN & JIM EIGNOR
AND JOHN ANGILLETTA
APRIL 14, 2026

