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HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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# Confronting Christopher Yates

*by Michael Diana*

What does Patriotism mean?

It's a weighty question that defies easy explanation. As we prepare for the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we still struggle to understand the people who actually carried the Revolution to fruition here in Schenectady. Generally, there is a dearth of written material preserved from these people. We do have some fortunate insights into the time period, like the minutes of the Schenectady Committee of Public Safety. However, even that rare record focuses more on bureaucratic detail than public sentiment. To better understand this first generation of Schenectady patriots, we might do well to start with the most renowned among them.

Christopher Yates was a surveyor by trade, a job that brought him into the frequent employ of Sir William Johnson. When the French and Indian War began in 1755, Yates joined the Second Albany Militia, serving under Johnson at some of the most crucial battles. He was amongst the British troops defeated at Ticonderoga early in the contest and later participated in the successful siege of Fort Niagara. In the following years, Yates continued to forge relationships with local notables. Likely due to his military experience, Yates emerged as an early leader when Schenectady was seized by Revolutionary fervor in 1775. On May 6 of that year, he was elected to the first Committee of Safety and was quickly made chairman of that ad-hoc government. He would later be commissioned to serve as a quartermaster for Patriot forces north of Albany, and would spend much of the war in the vicinity of Saratoga.

Our Historical Society recently gained new insights into this local leader in the form of the Christopher Yates Papers, a folio in the possession of Syracuse University. It's a vast collection spanning multiple generations of this illustrious family. While most of these documents date to the late 18th century, the remainder span a range from 1677 to 1936. Crucially, these are letters written to Yates rather than by him. So while they

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# From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

We had our first blush of summer last month at our 3rd Annual Gala, as we gathered to honor **John Angilletta**, and **Ann and Jim Eignor**. The sun graced us with its presence, bringing with it a balmy 80° day and high spirits for all. Thanks to everyone who attended our gala – we appreciated your good company! And a very special thanks to our own **Audrey Jones** who was the logistical mastermind behind the event, ensuring everything went smoothly.

As we continue our America250 programming this year, I'm honored to share that **Russell Shorto**, author of *Revolution Song*, *Taking Manhattan*, and *The Island at the Center of the World* will be the keynote speaker at our **Crossroads of the Revolution** symposium on Saturday, November 7. Mr. Shorto will be joined by historians Claire Bellerjeau, John Gearing, Esq., Donald F. Johnson, Sean Kelleher, and Kiersten Marcil making it a fascinating day of local and regional history. Tickets are at schenectadyhistorical.org/event/crossroads.

As always, I hope to see you soon!

- Mary Zawacki Graves, SCHS Executive Director

# From the President

As we get ready for the buy season for SCHS, I want to reflect back a moment on our 3rd Annual Gala, held at SUNY Schenectady on April 14. This year we honored three devoted volunteers: **John Angilletta** and **Ann and Jim Eignor**.

Our volunteers play such an important role in carrying out the mission of SCHS. We appreciate our volunteers and all the skills, experience, and expertise they bring to their volunteer jobs. Many thanks to the SCHS staff for doing so much of the work involved in hosting the gala. I also wish to especially thank trustee **Sarah Kirby** for organizing this event. This is the third year she has done this, and she makes it look so easy!

The Historical Society has many programs planned for the summer. This is a very special year as we are celebrating our nation's 250th birthday. A number of activities are lined up for the coming months with just that in mind. Check out our calendar at schenectadyhistorical.org for details.

After such a long winter, I know we are all welcoming the warm weather and the opportunity to get out and have some fun. I hope you will consider including some of our great programs in the coming months, and I hope to see you there.

- Suzanne Unger, SCHS President

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don't preserve his exact words and sentiments, they do show us his conversations with other local notables like Henry Glen and Philip Schuyler. Careful reading provides invaluable insight into the experiences and attitudes of Schenectady's leading patriot. In theory, these papers have been available to researchers through the University. However, without digital copies, these were largely inaccessible to our staff and volunteers at the SCHS. To remedy this, our staff drove out to Syracuse University to photograph the papers. We then began the long process of transcribing the often opaque handwriting and diction of the 18th century authors. This article serves to summarize what we learned in the process, hoping to better understand and humanize the real people that history so often reduces to bit actors in some inevitable narrative. While the Yates Papers might not be able to tell us what "patriot" means, they can at the very least tell us what this one "patriot" did.


Unsurprisingly, most of Christopher Yates' letters relate to his work as quartermaster. There are the occasional glimpses of wartime drama, daring action, or gruesome details. But, to be frank, a quartermaster's work generally makes for dry reading. Pity the researcher who must sift through endless lists of military stores and marching orders in exacting detail. But we know that the outcome of the American Revolution depended on exactly these mundane details. The tug of war between American and British forces was confined primarily to the principal waterways north and west of Albany. The Hudson led north to Lake George, which in turn led to Lake Champlain at Ticonderoga. Some of the most significant early battles of the war, from the failed American Invasion of Canada to the British defeat at Saratoga, occurred along this corridor. We might imagine thousands of men marching north or south, with their attendant masses of camp followers, animals, and baggage. Poor logistics could lead to casualties as severe as any battle through starvation, exposure, disease, and desertion. Think of how George Washington's troops suffered at Valley Forge. So indeed, the American Revolution was only possible because of the work of competent quartermasters like Yates. For the patient student of history, his letters provide extraordinary insight into this work.

One of the most significant of these letters was sent from General Philip Schuyler to Yates on May 10 of 1776. This commission imbues him with the responsibility and authority over Revolutionary supply lines between Albany and Lake George. Indeed, the whole letter reads like a virtual how-to guide for any 18th century logistician. Schuyler describes how supplies must be first carried by wagon from modern day Waterford to Stillwater. There, the Hudson is calm enough that small boats called bateaux can ferry the goods a further 22 miles north to Fort Edwards. There again, the Hudson is too rapid to continue and wagons are needed for another 12 mile journey over land. What can be accomplished today in a few hours on the Northway, was a herculean effort of many days for the men under Yates's new command. Schuyler is sure to stress the importance of this supply chain. "No person," he warns, "can neglect any part of his duty without creating confusion in the whole chain of communication." He expects Yates to directly supervise the whole 40 mile route, traveling constantly to ensure compliance at every junction. Schuyler offers a stern conclusion to the orders: "I trust I shall not have reason to complain of you." As the war progressed, Yates would prove himself more than equal to the task, laying the groundwork for the eventual American victory at Saratoga.

And while Quartermaster Yates was responsible for logistics of a grand, strategic nature, we also see him burdened with matters that seem surprisingly petty. Specific requests, personal favors, and mundane details clutter Yates' letters. A perfect example of this comes in a letter from Hugh Hughes of Schenectady, sent to Yates on February 21 of 1782. By this point, Cornwallis had surrendered at Yorktown, and the threat of British attack was diminished but still real. The Continental Congress and Army had amassed debts to countless private

citizens in prosecuting their war for independence. Hughes had been issued Continental currency and charged by one Major Quackenbush with riding to Saratoga to settle some of these accounts. But alas, Hughes has no saddle to ride! His own two personal saddles had been worn out in previous public service. Major Quackenbush, apparently, has nothing to spare and little sympathy for his subordinate. Thus, Hughes writes to Schenectady's preeminent patriot to request a saddle and writing paper to discharge his duties. "I have been six years in service of my country," Hughes laments, "and never had a public saddle for my use." It seems Hughes is embarrassed by this complaint because he actually crosses out his own words, leaving them just legible enough these centuries later. To our eternal suspense, we may never know if Yates was able to fulfill this request.

With the ideological stakes and mortal peril inherent in war, should Christopher Yates really be worried about one man and his riding accessories? Surprisingly, the answer might be yes. With the Continental Congress being so distant and disorganized, its resources and credit could not sustain the Revolution. Congress had no effective way to levy real taxes and thus had no way to pay its real debts. When it did, it generally issued a worthless fiat currency – the same that Hughes was charged with dispensing. If these payments ever happened, they were invariably delayed by such trifling circumstances as Hughes' lack of a saddle. Indeed, who knows how long these anonymous Saratoga creditors waited for satisfaction, while Hughes pleads his case with Yates.

As such, the Revolution was generally sustained not by Congress but by the resources and credit of local leaders like Yates…and to a lesser extent Hughes. In his letter, Hughes complains that "All my private money is spent in the public service." This reminds us that, almost by definition, Revolutionary leaders were men of property and preferably prominence who could afford to play the role. Sometimes even they were overwhelmed by the expenses. By leveraging their networks of personal relationships, they maintained cohesion amongst Revolutionary individuals and communities that otherwise would pursue their own specific interests in the chaos of war. So indeed, while no single personal favor would ever prove decisive, Yates' attention to even trivial matters likely had a significant cumulative effect.

While much of Yates' letters deal with managing supplies, he also has the responsibility for policing people. When the conflict begins in 1775 and Yates is elected to the Committee of Safety, he and his peers quickly begin adjudicating rumors that certain Schenectadians remained dangerously loyal to the King. In an earlier SCHS Newsletter, we discussed how locals George Ramsay and Joseph Kingsley were sent to jail in Albany after certain "unwarrantable expressions" they allegedly spoke. It's not surprising then, that the Yates letters show our preeminent patriot in conversation with an extended network of peers regarding suspected "Tories." Indeed we find in Yates' papers a letter from John Younglove written in November of 1776. Younglove was the chair of the Cambridge Committee of Safety, just as Yates was for Schenectady. The people of Boston had recently driven the British from their city and now set about rounding up their perceived enemies from within. Younglove discusses two men that he has imprisoned by virtue of what might be described as hearsay. To be brief, a Cambridge man testified that a woman in the neighborhood told him these incarcerated men had trafficked contraband to British troops. It seems that evidence was sufficient to Younglove who goes on to warn Yates about an associate of the prisoners named Blake. Younglove urges Yates to examine this Blake and to confine "Every person that is disaffected so near the mouth of the enemy as you are." Depending on one's perspective, such judicial proceedings might be considered a miscarriage of justice or a necessary wartime expediency. However, it's plain to see that Revolutionary leaders like Yates, were not inclined to tolerate any support for the King, be it material or simply verbal.

Another population Yates closely monitored was enslaved people, who might use the chaos of the Revolution to seek their freedom. In August of 1776, one T. Collins writes Yates that, "The Negro you write of I have taken up And I have had him hand cuffed and confined." Collins goes on to describe that the enslaved man will be brought under guard back to Yates to be forwarded on to Ballston. From this passage we see that Yates is not just responsible for facilitating the transport, but was the one who alerted Collins to the fugitive slave in the first place. Likewise, in June of 1776, Andrew Finke writes to Yates seeking to return a "servant boy" to his "Master" John Fonda. This person was not a fugitive, per se. Apparently, Fonda had loaned this "servant" to the army for a period of two months and expected him to be returned. We should also note that this "servant" is not explicitly described as enslaved. But whether a Black man bound for life or a White man indentured for a set term, he is certainly treated much like Collins' prisoner would be. Finke will not let the servant return on his own but will have him escorted back only after Finke is reimbursed certain expenses. "He was in a manner Naked and he has cost me upwards of five pounds to clothe him," Fink complains. It seems he expected Yates to provide that reimbursement. Clearly, the work of a Revolutionary quartermaster involved upholding existing social hierarchies.

Even when Yates isn't directly supervising the return of escaped enslaved people, the activities of these people is a subject of concern for him and his colleagues. Soon after the Declaration is signed, one William Wilke writes to Yates with general news from around the colonies. One curious passage states that "Dumore with his Black Brethren put the second Time to rout with loss of 11 killed." The identity of these Black Brethren is confirmed as Wilke describes them as "the fugitive Black Squadren." Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of Virginia issued a proclamation in 1775 promising freedom to any enslaved person who joined British forces. The creation of Dunmore's "Ethiopian Regiment," as it was known, was fiercely opposed by colonial leaders and likely served to radicalize many towards independence. For their part, Yates and Wilke are doubtlessly glad that these newly freed men were defeated. The issue of Black British troops reappears later in the Yates letters. On October 31, 1781, Henry Glen writes

Yates discussing some small local skirmishes. In the same letter, without any fanfare, Glen briefly mentions the British surrender at Yorktown earlier in the month. The men may not have realized that would be the final, decisive battle in the war. For our purposes, Glen relates that the defeated British force contains 5,500 regulars as well as 4,000 “tories and negroes.” The presence of Black troops amongst the British at Yorktown is generally unreported in traditional histories of the battle. Is their presence understated by tradition or overstated by Henry Glen? It's beyond our ability to comment on the actual number of freed Black men with Cornwallis. But what is clear, from Glen’s comments, is that he believed there was a significant number of them. For Schenectady’s Revolutionary leaders, freed slaves flocking to British banners were just as significant a threat as free white men who did the same.

We might wonder how seriously Revolutionary Americans took Jefferson’s words that “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” But there is little debate that some men had to wait until the war was over to achieve these rights, or perhaps a few decades thereafter. Schenectady's enslaved Black population numbered nearly 500 people in 1790. The majority of these people wouldn’t be free until 1827. Yates’s letters are another reminder that many Patriots who desired separation from Great Britain, didn’t necessarily desire social revolution at home.

Let’s return now to our original question: What does “patriotism” mean? Having studied the correspondence of Schenectady’s preeminent Patriot I fear we may still be unable to fully answer the question. The Yates Papers tell us much about what Yates did but very little about why he did these things. Did Yates embrace the radical Lockean worldview espoused in the Declaration of Independence? Or was he simply averse to the taxes and coercive policing of the British Parliament? Were his superlative efforts ideologically driven, or an attempt to further his personal interest in a time of crisis?

An individual's motivations are usually complex and malleable, and we may never have the primary sources to truly understand Yates. Furthermore, Revolutionary Schenectady was obviously bigger than any one person. We should assume that the conversations, concerns, and experiences of someone like Chistopher Yates differed significantly from other people in Schenectady. We’re entirely ignorant to the perspectives of those who, due to the social and economic limitations of the era, were not elevated to positions of leadership. We might also wonder about the loyalists jailed by Yates and his peers. Why did they risk persecution by their neighbors to remain loyal to a distant king? We may have to resign ourselves to the idea that no person or generation has a monopoly on the definition of “patriotism.” Our actions and ideas are subject to the interpretation and misinterpretation of our contemporaries. Today we might try our best to serve our country the way we know how, but we can only hope that future generations will celebrate our efforts.

1. Willis T. Hansen, *A History of Schenectady During the Revolution*, pg 275
2. Yates Letters, Schuyler to Yates 76/5/10
3. John Gearing, *Schenectady Genesis Volume II*, pg 203
4. Yates Letters, Hugh Hughes to Chrisopher Yates 82/2/27
5. Yates Letters, Younglove to Yates pt 2 76/11/15
6. Yates Letters, Collins to Yates 76/8/29
7. Yates Letters, Wilke to Yates 76/8/20
8. Yates Letters, Glen to Yates 81/10/31



# In Search of...Pizza!

*by John Gearing*

**Part 1: If you want pizza, you need Italians**

Flatbreads with savory toppings appear in the traditional cuisines of many countries. Many modern American restaurants offer their own interpretations of flatbreads, some savory, some sweet. This article focuses on the Schenectady County history of one particular type of flatbread: Italian pizza. These days there are a plethora of pizza parlors throughout the county, but when, historically speaking, did the first pizza appear here? One thing is certain: in order to have pizza, you need Italians. A logical place to begin this inquiry then, is with the birth of the Italian community in Schenectady County.

Mr. Pasquale DeMarco was, according to Dr. Robert R. Pascucci's book *Electric City Immigrants: Italians and Poles of Schenectady, N.Y., 1880-1930*, the first permanent Italian resident of Schenectady. DeMarco arrived in 1881 as a laborer on a railroad construction crew. Such crews, made up of unmarried Italian men, often stayed briefly in the city before moving to the next work site. DeMarco, however, settled in Schenectady. Within a year he had graduated from the night schools that had sprung up in the city. He then opened a candy store on State Street before taking up barbering and opening a shop on Jay Street. As Schenectady's first Italian resident, he wouldn't have found grocery stores that sold the foods he remembered fondly from Italy, nor would he have found any bakeries making pizza. While there is no evidence that DeMarco did his own cooking or baking, by 1889 he had married, and it is possible that his wife could have made pizza at home. Although we cannot say precisely when the first slice of homemade pizza was eaten in Schenectady County, it seems unlikely for that event to have taken place earlier than about 1889.

Commercial pizza, though, requires an Italian bakery. And the Italian population of the county continued to grow. Dr. Pascucci recounts Italians (and Poles) arriving in Schenectady in such numbers that the police department arranged for officers who could speak Italian to direct arrivals at the train station to the neighborhood where most Italian residents lived. In those days, it was the Third Ward, roughly the area from Van Vranken Avenue to Front Street and Nott Street. By 1897, DeMarco began compiling lists of the county's Italian residents for the "Italian Directory" section of the county directory. Schenectady's population was rising rapidly due to the boom in industrial employment at GE, ALCO, and other factories. But by 1900, although there were sixteen bakeries in town, none were Italian. By 1910 the number of bakeries had grown to twenty-six, but still there were no Italian bakeries. That all changed by the time the 1911 city directory came out, which listed both the Mazzo and the Velletri bakeries operating in the heart of the Third Ward, on North Jay Street.

Did these establishments produce the first pizza in Schenectady county? Sadly, evidence is lacking on this point. Newspaper searches come up emtpy-handed for both bakeries. But within a few years, another Italian family had entered the baking scene in Schenectady, opening a bakery on John Street, Third Ward. In the city directory the family name is given as "Perrica," but it's safe to say that you would be hard pressed to find many in the county today who did not recognize the name Perreca.

**Part 2: But is it pizza?**

Perreca's Bakery, originally on John Street, today bakes in its historic oven at 33 North Jay Street, Schenectady. Maria Perecca Papa and her team bake "tomato pie," as the Perrecas have since 1914, according to the family. With a thick crust, a deep, unctuous, layer of tomato sauce, a mere sprinkling of grated hard cheese on top, and baked in large rectangular trays, tomato pie does not resemble what most people recognize as pizza today. There are no toppings; no thick layer of mozzerella; and tomato pie is meant to be eaten at room temperature. So then... is tomato pie pizza? The answer is "No!" according to the Albany *Times Union*, which ran an article about Perreca's in March 2023. In the article, author Jennifer Taber Vanderwerken concluded that "tomato pie is decidedly not pizza." Is it not? Perhaps a deeper historical dive is in order.

There is ample evidence that "pizza" came in many forms across southern Italy. An 1866 author described a typical Neapolitan pizza as being dressed with just olive oil, salt, oregano, and grated garlic. Variations, it was noted, included basil, lard, mozzarella, prosciutto, tomato, and clams. Even today, in Rome,


there are at least six widely different products, all of which their creators call “pizza.” It's worth noting that until Italian unification, the King of Naples ruled the southern Italian mainland for hundreds of years, during which time it was known as “The Kingdom of Sicily” – despite not including the island named Sicily. When the island of Sicily finally did come under Neapolitan control, the new, larger kingdom, with impeccable logic, became “The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.” On the island of Sicily, the traditional pizza has a slightly different, thick crust topped with tomato sauce, sprinkled with grated Romano cheese, and served hot. It is found on the menus of many Schenectady pizzerias. If Sicily's pizza is one variety of pizza, then it seems reasonable to count Perreca's tomato pie as another pizza variety.

A March 1930 article in the *Daily Gazette* recounted the “Italian Night” dinner held by the local Elks on March 15. The many dishes included “pizza a la pommadoro [sic]” which, upon investigation, turns out to have been tomato pie. As an interesting aside, it's worth noting that “antipasto a la Mussolini” was also served. What could that possibly be? As it happened, Il Duce promoted a salad of chopped raw garlic dressed in olive oil and lemon juice as a dish that would improve the health and physical strength of Italians. A few years later, the Third Ward's Pine Tavern (see the story of Pine Street in an earlier issue of this newsletter) advertised “Italian Pizza 10¢.” Given that the tavern was no more than a five minute walk from Perreca's, it seems almost certain it was their tomato pie being sold. Perhaps in a nod to that tradition, the Niskayuna Co-op Market sells Perecca's pizza (as they call it) by the slice from a large pie kept on the deli counter.

If there is one thing that your author has learned about Schenectady County, it is that everyone has their favorite pizzeria, just as they have a steadfast opinion as to which Italian restaurant's sauce is just like their mother's. It is left to you, gentle reader, to decide for yourself whether Perreca's tomato pie is pizza. Myself, I'll have another slice, please. And then another.

*Image: Pizza eating contest, c. 1950. SCHS collection.*

# From the Library

**RECENT ADDITIONS TO SCHS COLLECTIONS**

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

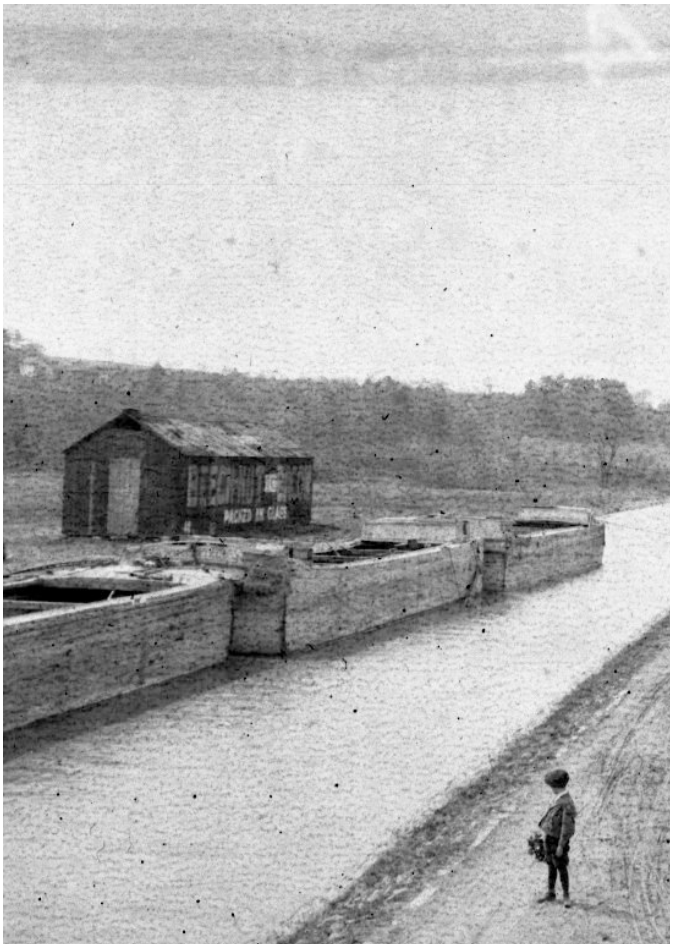
**New in the Library**

- *Albany during the American Revolution*, by Kevin Bronner
- *Outside In and Inside Out: A Story about Arnold Lobel*, by Emmy Kastner
- *Deaths in newspapers of Schenectady County, New York, 1795-1825*, compiled by Robert Sullivan
- *Women, Immigrants, and the Working-Class Battle in Little Falls, New York: the Textile Strike of 1912-1913,* by J.N. Cheney
- *Like It Was Yesterday,* by Dennis R. Bender
- *Clearing Iroquoia,* by Travis M. Bowman and Matthew A. Zembo
- *Anecdotes and Antidotes: Memoirs of a Schenectady Doctor,* by James M. Strosberg, M.D.
- *The Man Who Broke Capitalism,* by David Gelles
- *Power Failure: the Rise and Fall of an American Icon,* by William D. Cohan
- *History Information... Hotaling Family,* compiled by Anne and Don Hotaling
- *Philip Schuyler During the American Revolution*, by Kevin Bronner
- *Fire and Freedom: the American Revolution in New York,* by Thomas S. Wermuth

**New in the Archives**

- Additions to the photo collections donated by: Ellen Fladger, David Newkirk, Charlton Historical Society, Mike O'Brien, MaryAnn Coffey, Susan Crawford
- Additions to Yearbook Collection donated by Richard Gorsela, Teresa Pistolessi, Peggy Osborne, Carol Yauchler Hallenbeck, Sandra McDuffie
- *Daily Gazette* Newspaper and Photograph Collection donated by the *Daily Gazette*
- Map: *1609-Nieuw Nederland-1674* by the Netherlands in Europe
- VanderVeer Diaries donated by Sarah Alterio
- Dunn Research Files donated by Geoff Dunn
- *Scotia-Glenville Journal* and *Scotia Spotlight* Collection, 1969-2010
- Compilation of historic documents donated by Frank Karwowski
- Danish Brotherhood Collection donated by Carol Yauchler Hallenbeck
- Doris Cole Drawings donated by Lynn Bodden
- Schenectady Business Stock Certificates donated by Doug Horowitz
- General Electric Apprentice Alumni Assoc. Records donated by GEAA Assoc.

*Image: Newspaper Photographers, 1950s. SCHS Larry Hart Negatives Collection.*



# REVIEW: *Many Voices: Building Erie, the Canal that Changed America*

*by Martin Strosberg*

If you can read only one book on the Erie Canal, make it Laurie Lawlor's ***Many Voices: Building Erie, the Canal that Changed America***. In telling the story of how America changed, Lawlor appropriately devotes a considerable portion of her book to what life was like in America before the canal. Along the way, we get a healthy dose of colonial and early US history. She begins at the beginning, with Hudson's 1609 voyage up the river that bears his name. Hudson stopped eight miles short of the confluence with the Mohawk River, and the discovery of the future path through the Appalachians to the Great Lakes. But even if Hudson did make it to the Mohawk, he would have been thwarted by the 90-foot-tall Cohoes Falls. For two centuries, throughout America, travel to the interior was difficult, dangerous, and expensive, so Americans by necessity were oriented toward the Atlantic Ocean. The solution to accessing the interior of the continent was to build a canal that connected the Atlantic and the Hudson to Lake Erie, and thus to the boundless opportunities of the great American heartland. And the Mohawk Valley was key to the connection.

The 363-mile canal stretching from Waterford to Buffalo, completed in 1825 in just seven years, was arguably the most important construction project in American history. And Lawlor explains in an understandable way the history of canal design, engineering, and construction. She also tells us about the key personalities, including the "dreamers, scoundrels, and doers," who made the canal possible. Of course, the person most associated with the canal was DeWitt Clinton. At first derided as the originator of "Clinton's Folly" and "Clinton's Ditch," Governor Clinton in 1825 received the acclaim of thousands of people celebrating the arrival of the Seneca Chief from Buffalo into New York Harbor where he ceremoniously emptied a barrel of Lake Erie water. The opening of the canal not only made New York City the greatest city in the world, but also established Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo as major commercial and industrial centers. The canal was a spectacular success for the young nation, forever transforming the economic and social landscape. In Lawlor's words, "Like the Internet in the twenty-first century, the canal was the cutting-edge technology of its day, a mighty 'information highway' that linked the nation and world more closely."

The title of Lawlor's book begins with "Many Voices" and indeed she delivers. In particular she amplifies the voice of the thousands of nameless workers who built the canal while suffering hardships and dangers, and who received no recognition at DeWitt Clinton's New York Harbor celebration. Lawlor also describes the struggles of the Haudenosaunee, upon whose land much of the canal transversed. And she does not let us forget the toll the canal took not only on the exploited workers in the industries that grew up on the banks of the canal, but also on the environment due to deforestation, water pollution, and destruction of animal habitat.

The broad historical sweep of political, economic, cultural, and scientific-engineering topics covered by Lawlor in 15 chapters, right up to present times, is truly impressive. However, one important area which Lawlor neglected was the history of the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company, a precursor to the Erie Canal, which was chartered in 1793, spearheaded by Philip Schuyler, and served to connect Schenectady through the Mohawk Valley to Lake Ontario.

In short, Lawlor's engaging narrative, supplemented by pictures, maps, timelines, charts, and an extensive bibliography, is well-worth the read.

Laurie Lawlor, *Many Voices: Building Erie, the Canal that Changed America*, Holiday House, New York, 2025.

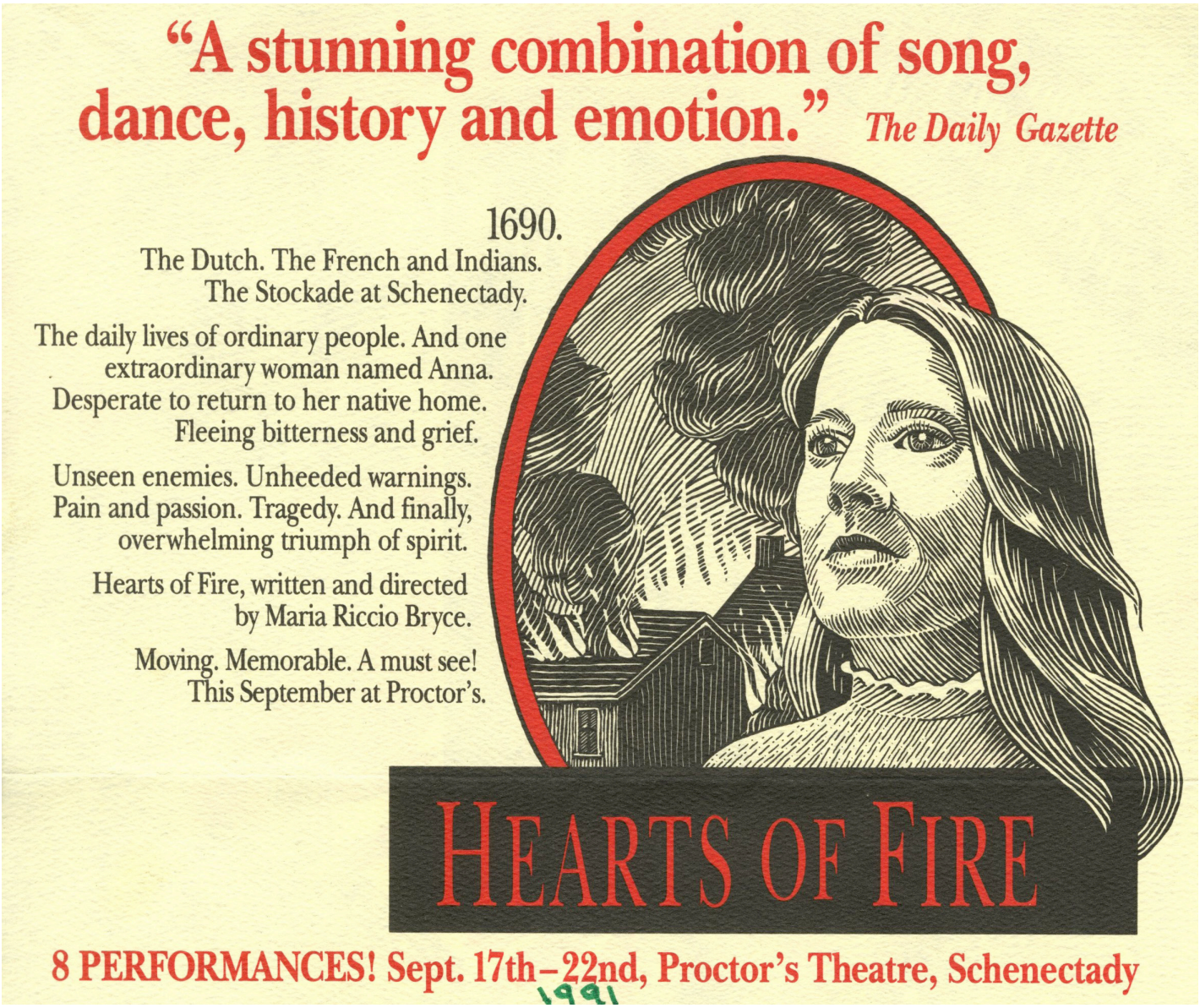
*Image: Erie Canal in Pattersonville, NY, c. 1920s. SCHS collection.*

# *Hearts of Fire*: A Musical

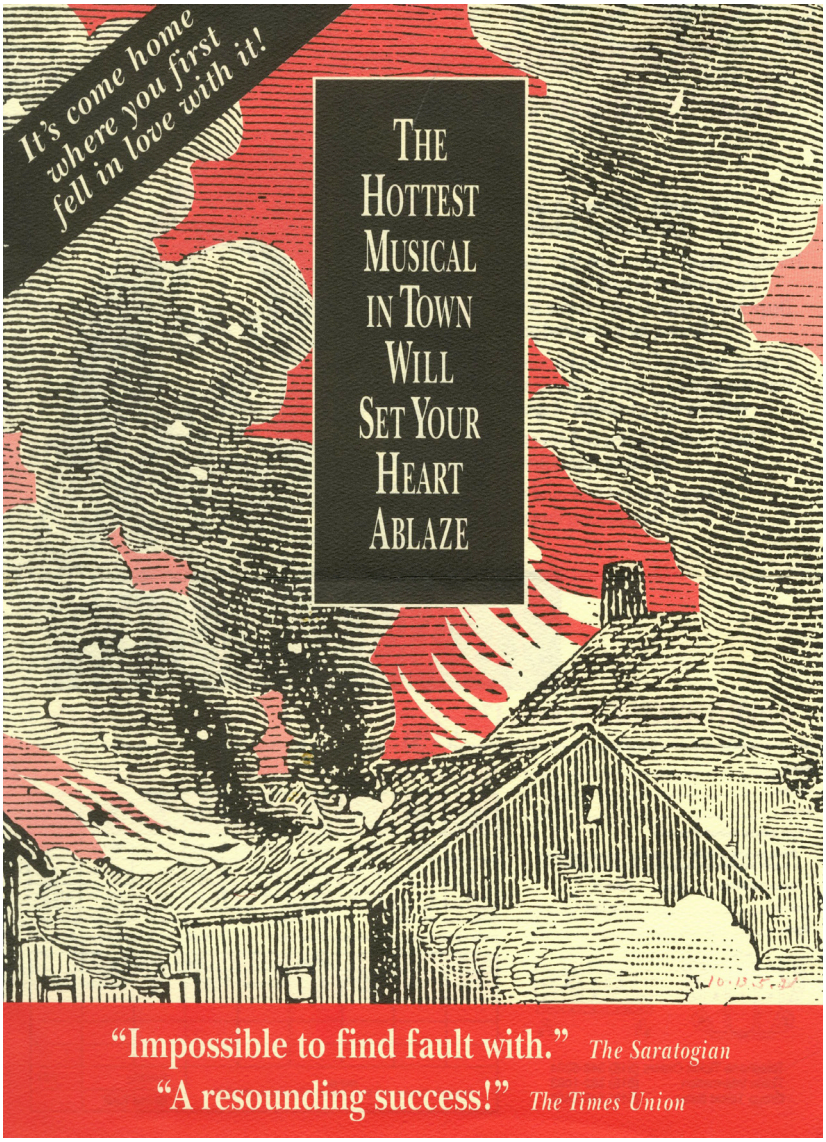
*by Madeline Olesky*

Avid readers of the SCHS newsletter will know that I recently wrote an article about the history of Proctors Theater in honor of their 100th anniversary. During my research, I learned about the existence of a musical that Proctors produced in 1990-1991: *Hearts of Fire*. Penned and directed by Maria Riccio Bryce, it details life in Schenectady before and during the infamous 1690 massacre. As a lover of live theater, I knew that I had to find a way to see this emotional story with creative music and powerful performances. As a history professional, I had to see how the musical portrayed a real event, evaluate its accuracy, and determine if it was successful in getting people interested in history. As luck would have it, the public library has a recording of the show, so I decided to check it out.

The story opens on July 3, 1776. Samuel van de Bogart is on his deathbed with his nephew Arent at his side. A survivor of the 1690 massacre, Samuel takes this opportunity to share the tragic story with his descendant, in the hopes that it will guide his decisions as America enters a new age of independence. We cut back to spring 1689, where a young Samuel lives with his grieving mother Anna van de Bogart; they have just lost their father/husband. Over the course of the next year, they make plans to move back to Anna's family in the Netherlands, although Samuel is reluctant to leave the place he calls home. The rest of the town chimes in with their disagreement with this plan, including Jan Spoors, a friend of Anna's late husband and a widower and father himself, who clearly has feelings for Anna. In between this personal conflict, we learn about the people of the town, the cycle of agricultural life in the colonial Mohawk Valley, and the personalities of some key figures like Alexander Glen.



The musical is not overly interested in the grander political forces at play in colonial New York, but there are some key moments when they come crashing in. We see a meeting between French Canadian officers and their indigenous allies where they plan their strike on upstate New York, initially targeting Albany. This moment situates the story in the complex web between the English, the French, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), and the indigenous peoples of Canada. At the end of Act 1, as rumors of the attack swirl during autumn 1689, Governor Jacob Leisler releases a proclamation that no residents can leave the village, trapping Anna and Simon before they can move to the Netherlands. Leisler and his rebellion are a separate topic deserving of their own article, but rest assured that he was causing a lot more trouble than ruining the van de Bogarts' travel plans.




All of this builds to the climactic massacre of Act 2. The French and indigenous soldiers march through an Adirondack winter, changing their target from Albany to the less protected Schenectady. While the scene is far more gruesome than you would normally see in a musical (people are gunned down in the street, a prop baby doll is slammed into a wall, the indigenous characters claim the scalps of those killed), the emotional impact is also greater. Many of these characters are people we had spent the last two hours getting to know, watching their joys and their sadness as the narrative works its way to their doomed conclusion. Plus, the Bradt, Schermerhorn, and Vrooman families were all real people who lived in Schenectady at this time. Jan Baptist van Epps, a young man who gets taken back to Canada, was a real captive who later escaped and returned to Schenectady. Alexander Glen, who had a good relationship with both the French and the indigenous peoples, claims that many survivors are members of his family so that they were not taken captive. Lawrence, a member of the Mohawk nation, appears to lend his aid. These historically accurate moments in the musical show that there were acts of heroism in dark times. Anna, who survived the massacre alongside Simon and Jan, provides a final message of hope in this moment, urging the townspeople to rebuild. This is the same message that Simon in 1776 is attempting to pass on to his nephew; that Arent must be hopeful and stay strong to support this new America, as a way to honor his ancestors of the Mohawk Valley.

*Hearts of Fire* is not a perfect musical. Like any piece of historical fiction, it takes some liberties with the facts. Its depiction of indigenous peoples is earnest yet outdated, especially to a 2026 audience. Enslaved peoples are all but nonexistent in this version of Schenectady, although in real life they made up a large percentage of the casualties and captives of the massacre. On a technical level, some moments can feel almost sickeningly sentimental. But that sentimentality is the very thing that can make theater, and art in general, so powerful. I love musicals because they are one of the most humanizing forms of storytelling; they are all about big emotions and dramatic decisions. Thus, this piece accomplishes the same mission that we at the historical society strive for: to show that history is not made up of great men but of average folk just like us. Those people, with families, and fears, and dreams, are the ones who built our region into the place it is today.

And now that all of the songs are thoroughly stuck in my head, it is time to hunt on eBay for a CD copy of the soundtrack. A task more daunting than hiking through the Adirondacks in February.

*Images: Hearts of Fire promotional materials. SCHS collection.*

# Around the County with Bill Buell

*by Bill Buell, Schenectady County Historian*

There's a lot to see in upstate New York this summer if you're looking to dive into Revolutionary War history, and you might want to add to your list of destinations a place like Old Fort Johnson on Route 5 just west of Amsterdam.

Fort Johnson? A Revolutionary War site? Well, yes. Sort of. While some of you historical nit-pickers out there might like to point out that there was never a battle fought at Fort Johnson, there was plenty of relevant activity going on at William Johnson's former home on the Mohawk River.

Scott Haefner is a Schenectady native, a Linton High graduate, a former librarian at the Schenectady County Historical Society and the last person who could actually refer to the Mabee House in Rotterdam Junction as "home." Now the site director at Old Fort Johnson, he reminded us that just because the Johnson family, staunch loyalists, had moved further west at the outset of the Revolution, doesn't mean that there weren't still things going on at the old homestead back east.

Johnson, one of the most influential men in America during the middle decades of the 18th century, had built Fort Johnson in 1749 before moving out to what is now the Johnstown area where he built another home, Johnson Hall, in 1763.

"When William moved to Johnson Hall, his son John moves into Fort Johnson, and [John] lives there until his father dies on July 11, 1774," said Haefner, "John and his wife then move to Johnson Hall that fall, and stay there until heading to Canada in 1776."

It wasn't an easy time for the Johnsons and other loyalists living in the Mohawk Valley.

"In most places in America, there were a third of the people that were for independence, a third that wanted to remain loyal [to England], and another third that just sat home and didn't do anything," said Haefner, who lived in the Mabee House for five years during the late 1990s. "In New York, however, with the long Canadian border to the north, it was more of a 50-50 breakdown. You were either with us or against us. Some wanted to be neutral, but the Committee of Safety made that very hard,"

It was a visit from the Tryon County Committee of Safety that forced John Johnson's hand and sent him to Canada.

"They disarmed him, and he was slated to be arrested in May of 1776," Haefner said of the younger Johnson. "But he flees to Canada with his family, works with the British and becomes Superintendent of Indian Affairs up there, and a real empire builder. He gets very involved in creating Upper Canada and selling land in Ontario to the loyalists that had left America."

When John Johnson left Fort Johnson, a fellow loyalist named Barclay moved into the home, but about a year later he also fled to Canada without paying any of the rent money he owed to the Tryon County Committee of Safety.

"It was weird the way the Committee of Safety treated loyalists," said Haefner. "The policy of the government of New York was to hold the loyalists' property in a trust, and in 1778 they opened up the house and auctioned things off. But by 1780 it's pretty clear the loyalists aren't coming back. So they initially sell the personal property that the loyalists had left behind and try to pay the militia with it. The militia always had a hard time getting paid because New York was going broke. Then they took the large land ownings of Johnson, and other loyalists too, and sold off 5,000-acre lots to raise some money."

A member of the Tryon County Committee of Safety named Albert Vedder eventually purchased Fort Johnson in 1783 and it remained in private hands until it was given to the Montgomery County Historical Society in 1906. Fort Johnson was named a National Historic Landmark in 1972.

So, investigating Fort Johnson to see what life was like for the loyalists is a good way to learn more about the American Revolution. And when Haefner looks to get away from the Johnson family and their home, he has a number of Revolutionary War sites in upstate New York he likes.

"Well, you have to go to Saratoga, and I recommend taking one of the guided tours of the park," said Haefner, referring to the Saratoga National Historical Park. "You really learn more about troop movements and the fighting that took place there. Fort Stanwix and Oriskany are two good places in the Mohawk Valley to visit, and if you're looking into the 1780 raids, then you should go to the Old Stone Fort in Schoharie, and the Fort Klock site further west on the Mohawk."

*Image: Portrait of Sir John Johnson. Library and Archives Canada.*

# Year Round Family Fun

*by Audrey Jones*

School is soon to be out for the summer, and if you have school-aged children or grandchildren they will like enjoy the extra freedom these months provide. While I am more than a few years removed from my own school years, I can still recall the joys of summer break and I hope you do too! Scattered throughout my school breaks were small, special activities to occupy my brother and I, giving us lifelong memories with beloved family and friends that we cherish to this day. These often involved visiting regional historic sites and museums.

We hope that through your SCHS membership you can make lasting memories with your own children or grandchildren not only in the summer, but year round. Each month we offer at least one program specifically created for families. Geared toward ages 5-12, these programs allow young Schenectadians to explore local history and culture in fun and engaging ways. For current SCHS members with a family level or above, you receive free admission for two children to most family programs.

Right around the corner on August 7th your family can participate in Farm Kid Friday at Mabee Farm. Through hands-on activities you and your family will experience life on a colonial farm as you build a replica barn together, churn (and taste!) your own butter, and meet and greet with our sheep and goats. Participants will also learn of the critical role that the Mohawk River played in the everyday lives of colonial men and women throughout the Mohawk Valley. Who knows? You may learn something new and fascinating for yourself right alongside your child or grandchild.

If your family has previously attended a Farm Kid Friday event, don't worry! We will have a brand new family program on our calendar as we celebrate America 250. You can join us on September 12th at 32 Washington Avenue in the Stockade for Schenectady Spies and step into the world of an American Revolutionary spy ring. Your family will discover how spies on both sides of the war secretly delivered key information to their allies regarding war plans and efforts. Will you crack the code and find the information you need before time runs out?

The above programs are just two of the five programs we are hosting through the remainder of the calendar year. Stay tuned for our October, November, and December programs by following our social media accounts (Facebook & Instagram) or checking out our events calendar on our website. Please remember, even with a current SCHS membership we still need you to sign up on our website, as this allows us to properly prepare and ensure that every family has an enjoyable experience.

If you know a family who may be interested in our events or membership, please share our information with them, or consider gifting a membership. You, our members, are truly the ones who make our efforts at Schenectady County Historical Society worthwhile and who keep our mission going. Thank you for your contributions to keeping local history fun and engaging for the next generation of Schenectadians!


# The *Daily Gazette* Collection at SCHS

*by Marietta Carr*

Newspapers are some of the most important and heavily used archival materials in any library collection. We've written about Schenectady's rich history of local journalism and newspaper publishing (which dates back to the 1790s) as well as our Clippings and Family Files (clipped from a variety of local publications, organized by topic and surname) in previous newsletters and blog posts. We're excited to share a new effort to preserve a vital piece of our community's newspaper history for future generations: the ***Daily Gazette* Collection**.

The *Daily Gazette* was originally established in 1894 when the Schenectady Printing Association, under the guidance of Gerardus Smith, took over a weekly called the *Schenectady Gazette* and converted the paper into a daily. The *Gazette* grew quickly, surpassing its competitors' circulation numbers within two years, and developing into what many consider to be Schenectady's 'paper of record.'

For 130 years, the *Daily Gazette* maintained an archive of its newspaper print issues, the photography produced by staff photographers, and the clippings and reference materials used by journalists and editors. This collection contained bound volumes of print issues, microfilms and microfiche, print photos, clippings, indexes, film negatives and digital files on CD. Last year, the Daily Gazette determined it could no longer maintain this collection, and reached out to the Union College Archives and Special Collections and the Schenectady County Historical Society for help preserving the materials. I worked with Sarah Schmidt, director of Union College Archives and Special Collections, and Bill Buell, County Historian and former columnist at the *Daily Gazette*, to review the collection, determine the best way to preserve the content, and implement a plan to ensure future access to issues of Schenectady's longest-running newspaper.

After reviewing the collection, Sarah and I determined that we needed two plans: one for ensuring access to the articles and information in the newspaper, and one for preserving the photography collection. The clippings, reference materials, and indexes were the smallest part of the collection and easily integrated with SCHS' existing collections (e.g. the Clippings

Files). Several years ago, the Daily Gazette worked with vendors to create microfilms of their volumes of print issues 1899 to 2004 (with some small gaps in the run) and digitize issues from 1921 onward, but these copies are not available to the general public. The earliest newspapers in their collection (prior to 1899) only exist in print; bound in large, extremely fragile volumes.

For the newspaper content, the best way forward is to focus on making the historical issues accessible to the public for research through the NYS Historic Newspapers Project. We moved the earliest set of bound volumes (1894 to 1921) to our archival storage areas at Union College Library and SCHS, and all of the microfilm reels to SCHS. Thanks to funding from the Daily Gazette, we sent the first set of microfilms (1899 to 1921, about 70 reels) to the Northern NY Library Network for digitization and processing for NYS Historic Newspapers. This process will likely take at least a year. The New York Historic Newspapers Project exists to digitize and make freely available for research significant runs of historic newspapers for every county in the state. The database is created and administered by the Northern New York Library Network in partnership with the Empire State Library Network. SCHS previously submitted twenty-four titles, all 18th- and 19th-century publications, to the NYS Historic Newspapers Project.

The next steps in this plan are to determine where there are gaps in the microfilm run and get quotes to have the bound volumes microfilmed and digitized. Due to the fragile nature of newsprint, and the condition of these volumes, we need to use a special vendor who can handle the materials properly. Due to the condition and fragility, these volumes will never be available for research use as merely touching and turning the pages leads to irreparable damage. Microfilming and digitization are really the only way to ensure the contents of these early newspapers will be accessible to future generations of researchers.

The second component of this project is processing the *Daily Gazette* Photography Department materials. The entirety of this collection was transferred to SCHS and temporarily stored at Mabee Farm in the Education Center. A team of skilled volunteers spent about six months working on sorting the materials, shifting the negatives into boxes for long-term storage, and describing the scope of the collection. In the spring, we moved the boxes to the SCHS Library for long-term housing in our archival storage area, and we are now working on writing a discovery guide and a preservation plan for the collection. The collection is approximately 200 boxes (totaling 185 cubic feet), spans 1949 to 2010, and is organized chronologically. The labels and documentation accompanying the negatives and digital files are inconsistent, but generally indicate the photographer name and topic. The collection includes photos that appeared in the newspaper issues, but the majority of the images have never been published. We expect that this collection will be available for researchers to use in-person at SCHS by January of 2027.

SCHS will be the permanent home of this collection, but our small staff could not have undertaken a project of this magnitude without the support of our dedicated volunteers and our partnership with the Daily Gazette and Union College. Bill Buell and the *Daily Gazette* staff were essential in surveying and documenting the collection. Sarah Schmidt and Joanna DiPasquale of Union College have been instrumental in determining the plan of action and navigating the logistics for processing, preservation, microfilming, and digitization.

Given the size, condition, and research value of the collection, it will take us many years to fully process the materials, and preservation will be a never-ending priority. Thanks to our volunteers and partners, we look forward to taking care of the *Daily Gazette* Collection for generations to come.

*Image, left: Pat and Dave Gosda pose with the processed* Daily Gazette *negatives at Mabee Farm's Franchere Education Center.*

*Image, above: The* Daily Gazette *negatives collection before processing.*

# Revolutionary Women

*by Mary Zawacki Graves*

***Threads of Liberty: Schenectady in the American Revolution*** is a new exhibition at SCHS that explores Schenectady's role in the American Revolution. It makes perfect sense for us to open the exhibition this year; not only are we celebrating America's 250th birthday, but our 1771 Liberty Flag just returned from spending a few years on display at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia. By centering the Liberty Flag amongst research, artifacts, and documents of the time period, our hope is that the exhibition will serve to both commemorate America's semiquincentennial while also shedding a little bit of light on Revolutionary Schenectady.

I say a "little bit" of light very purposely. Obviously the American Revolution is a complex subject, and the people who lived through it had myriad perspectives and experiences. It's impossible to tell a comprehensive or complete history of the Revolution, even in a small town like Schenectady. Locally, we had patriots, loyalists, enslaved people, indentured servants, indigenous people, and women all of whom had their own ideas about liberty, equality, and self-government. And what makes telling a "complete" story of the Revolution here in Schenectady even more impossible is the dearth of primary sources. There's not much in the way of firsthand accounts or original documents that tell us about Schenectady during the time period – primary sources that relate to Schenectady are few and far between. And the documents that we do have present a lack of variety in terms of perspective. That is to say, every single one of the sources is male. And I get it. It was men who enlisted in the Continental Army, joined local militias, and served as quartermasters, on the various committees of safety, or in countless other positions. It makes sense, then, that the correspondence dealing with all of these issues would be to and from men.

But it's still disappointing. I want to know what the female half of the population was thinking, feeling, and doing during this revolutionary time. From secondary sources, we know that local women were not just involved, but indispensable to the Patriot cause. From the outset of the war, when Americans began boycotting British goods, women increased production of clothing, including shirts and stockings that went directly to American forces. In the absence of able-bodied men, Schenectady's women also took over farmwork, made, procured, and carried supplies, held scrap drives, and ministered to the sick and injured. We also know that unlike women in other colonies, Schenectady's women were never forced to evacuate from their homes. Instead, they welcomed officers and men passing through town into their houses, providing food, lodging, and washing for them. Other Schenectady women likely went with their husbands' regiments, trudging from camp to camp, and providing the same services of cooking and washing. Crucially, Schenectady's women lost their sons, husbands, and brothers to the Patriot cause. Yet they remain nameless, and their grieving anonymous.

The major exception is the Committee of Safety minutes. If you haven't read it, I highly recommend a perusal (https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=miun.abp1949.0002.001&seq=5). Somehow it manages to be both fascinating and extraordinarily dull at the same time. Spies and loyalists show up. Men are hauled off to prison. Negotiations are made with the Mohawk, danger is sensed right outside town. And yet to glimpse these tense moments of the Revolution you have to sift through hundreds of, well, committee meeting minutes. Have you ever sat on a committee? I rest my case. But, there are women there!

One example is Clarey Bastedo, who attended the January 18, 1776 meeting to inform the Committee of Safety of "some intelligence…relative to the proceedings in John's Town." Clarey was sworn in under oath to give her testimony. The Committee of Safety then determined that whatever Clarey's intelligence was, it needed to be sent to General Philip Schuyler: "We think it our duty to send you the inclosed, as the fact therein attested is in it self possible, and as it is so necessary to guard against and Counteract a thing of that sort." I wish we could know what "a thing of that sort" refers to – my best guess is loyalist activity.

A month later, when the Committee wants to appoint John Bradt to captain of a company, they called upon his wife,

Maayke Bradt (née Fonda) to weigh in. John was away in Montreal on a trading mission, so Maayke comes in to share her sentiments on the matter, and to let the Committee know when John will return. Maayke is not the least bit shy to tell the fine gentlemen of the Committee that while she disapproves of John joining the army, "he always did as he pleased."

In May of 1776 there were a handful of prisoners being held at Schenectady who needed to be moved to Albany. This included a Doctor Sanden, who informed the Committee that his wife, also in Schenectady, "was near the time of delivery, and in such a situation that she could not with safety be removed." Doctor Sanden begs the committee to allow him to stay with his wife for some time before he is removed to Albany. What follows is a debate between the Albany and Schenectady Committees of Safety as to what to do with Doctor Sanden and his very pregnant wife: "this delay will probibly [sic] be but a few days, we think it would be rather severe to order him away before his wife is delivered, but must leave this consideration to you." In response: "we think to order him away from her would be rather Cruel." Granted: Doctor Sanden, his wife, and his unborn baby can stay together in Schenectady. At least for a little while.

In the world of cinema, the Bechdel Test measures the representation of women, asking if a film features at least two women who have a conversation about something other than a man. Not surprisingly, the Committee of Safety minutes do not pass. While we do have another instance of a woman appearing, she is there on behalf of her husband. Huberty Bradt appears on July 8, 1777 to make an oath that her husband "is some time Disordred in his mind; and in a bad state of health and that she thinks him unfit to go on the Expedition." The Committee resolves to clear him from the tour of duty, probably to Mrs. Bradt's relief.

These are just a handful of instances of women taking an active part in the revolution – the handful that is documented. The work, fear, pride, and grief of the hundreds of other women who lived in Schenectady during the Revolution are lost to time. But we know they were there, supporting their families and supporting the cause.

Despite their contributions, however, and despite the Revolution's egalitarian implications, the status of women deteriorated after the war. Confining ideas of "ladylike" behavior were increasingly adopted as the simple settler society of America became wealthier. In fact, New York was the first state to explicitly disenfranchise all females, stating in its 1777 constitution that voting was extended to "every **male** inhabitant of full age." It would take another 143 years and the tireless efforts of generations of new generations of "revolutionary women" before all American women were granted the right to vote.

*"Threads of Liberty: Schenectady in the American Revolution" will be on display at SCHS at least through November 2027.*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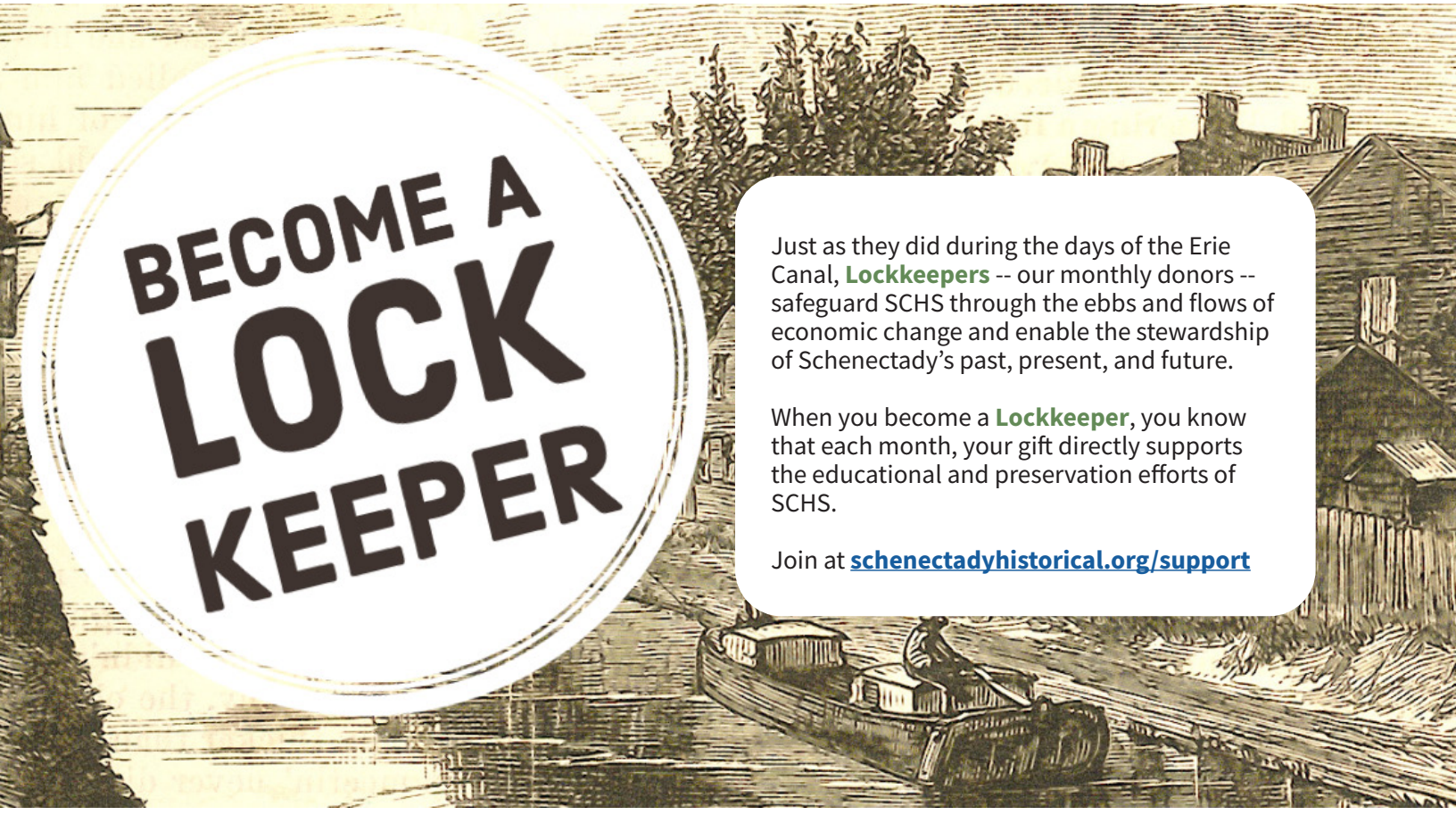


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