



Historians' Bulletin



February 2010

1st issue

Greetings Municipal Historians!

At our meeting in November at the St. Johnsville Community House (thanks to Anita Smith for hosting!) we discussed having a newsletter to keep each of us updated on what our colleagues in Montgomery County are doing. I want to thank those of you who were able to attend for your input and discussion. There were many great ideas and I hope that if you are not able to attend our meetings, that you will be inclined to share any ideas, projects, etc. with all of us through this newsletter.

Minutes from Historians' meeting 11-7-2009

Attended: Bill Maring (Root), Lorraine Whiting (Charleston), Ryan Weitz (Fultonville), Anita Smith (St. Johnsville), David Manclow (Palatine & Minden), Barbara Alkinburgh (Nelliston), Kelly Farquhar (Montgomery County)

Minutes from the last meeting were ok. Census information provided, at last meeting, by Anita Smith, will be copied and forwarded to Lorraine.

Discussion of Montgomery County map identifying locations of cemeteries -

- Kelly has info for Florida, Charleston, Nelliston & St. Johnsville
- Ryan suggested using Lethbridge transcription (at History & Archives) to compare with what we already have available - we can also use Schoharie County book as a model with a fold-out insert map of the county
- May have to seek out funding sources - Anita will contact D.A.R. & American Legion posts to include veterans
- Can apply for funding through NYS Archives' Local Govt Records Management Improvement Fund (LGRMIF) - Minden can be lead sponsor for application
- Other possible funding sources: Bank of America, Allstate (Bill McLaughlin), NBT Bank, Target, Yerdon Foundation, Arkell Foundation, Wasserman Foundation, Golub Foundation, Duffy Foundation; www.federaldomesticassistancecatalog.gov (online)
- Ryan will email his information for Glen
- Suggestion of putting town information on back of a county map in lieu of compiling a book

Anniversary celebration - 150th anniversary of Civil War (1861-1865) 2011

- Local regiments 115th & 153rd mustered out of Fonda and trained at Camp Mohawk (Route 30A north of village heading toward Johnstown) - what can we do to commemorate this historic anniversary??
- Suggestion of re-enacting the walk from Camp Mohawk down Rte 30A to where soldiers got on train in Fonda
- Contact Jim Morrison (military expert/re-enactor) & Mark Silo (authored book on 115th) re. 150th anniversary celebration
- Enlist participation of Civil War reenactment group from Herkimer

Historians' newsletter

- start newsletter to circulate to historians in Montgomery County - get input from historians on their activities
- include minutes from previous meetings
- include list of historians

Annual Reports

- Each historian is supposed to compile an annual report for their appointing authority as well as NYS Historian.
- You can send a copy to County Historian who will forward them to the State Historian in Albany by Feb. or March of each year

Next meeting scheduled for March 26th 2010 at Dept. of History & Archives - 1pm. Please RSVP to (518) 853-8186 or email kfarquhar@co.montgomery.ny.us.

Upcoming Events

April 18th-20th 2010 – Hyatt Regency Hotel, Buffalo – *2010 Annual State Conference for The association of Public Historians of New York State (APHNYS)*. www.aphnys.org for details.

May 15th 2010 (Sat.) – 10am-3pm – Montgomery County Dept. of History & Archives, Fonda -- *Heritage Day*. Join us for an open house, tours of the history & genealogy research library, along with walking tours of the village of Fonda. Raffle and bake sale. Book signing for Arcadia Publishing's newest publication – a postcard history of Amsterdam written by Gerald R. Snyder and City of Amsterdam historian Rob von Hasseln. Call (518) 853-8186 for details.

May 24th 2010 – 10am-4pm -- Fort Klock Historic Restoration, St. Johnsville – *Opening Day. An encampment of Tryon County Militia and colonial crafts demonstrations*. Call (518) 568-7779 for details.

Montgomery County recently acquired a trolley car that had been part of a camp for over half a century. Although there was no identifying car number, certain features suggest that the car could be one of the five that ran on the Haganan line of the Fonda, Johnstown & Gloversville railroad (see photo to right). The County Historian is working with some local FJ&G experts to document the car and to seek resources for the future reconstruction of the trolley car.





The Bromley Hoke house, on Mohawk Street in Canajoharie, is a potential candidate for listing on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Chester Bromley Hoke served in the U.S. Civil War in one of the nation's first colored regiments, the 54th Massachusetts. The struggles faced by this regiment to fight in combat and gain a sense of equality with the white regiments was depicted in the 1989 movie "Glory."

County Historian Kelly Farquhar has been working on a survey of African American life in Montgomery County during the 19th century. Researching the lives of the African Americans who lived here through church records, abolitionist or anti-slavery activity, newspaper accounts, and land records, she will apply for funding through the Preservation League of New York to hire a professional consultant for research and compiling the information for online access.



GHOST HUNTING IN AMSTERDAM

By Rob von Hasseln, City Historian

I just had time to snap on the lights and throw my trench coat and fedora on the coat rack when she walked in. Classy dame, from the ritzy side of town: Century Club, Ice Cream Social, you know the type. "Are you the City Historian?" she cooed. "That's what it says on the door, sister," I replied, as I poured two stiff slugs of free-trade *café au lait* into mismatched mugs and offered her the cleaner one. By the refined way she held her coffee, I figured this was going to be a missing ancestor locate or maybe a royal land grant case, but I had to ask. "There are 18,000 stories in the Carpet City," I told her, "what's yours?" It didn't take her long to let me know she had been around the carriage house a few times and that it was haunted.

Ghosts! I wracked my brain: what was it they had taught me at the Close-Cover-Before-Striking School of Detection? "Dead men tell no tales?" – No, that was *Pirate School*; my timbers shivered as I recalled how I washed out of there when I tried to change my major to History. "Dead men don't wear plaid?" True enough, but not very useful. Slowly the mental picture of a beloved instructor formed before my eyes saying "History is like detective work, only most of the witnesses are dead." Well, at least that explained the trench coat and fedora, I thought, as he faded away. Suddenly he popped back to add: "And don't forget - get the money up front!" Then he disappeared, leaving nothing but a lingering scent of musty books and archival quality paste.

I told the damsel-in-distress I'd take the case for my usual fee (10 cents a copy; 25 cents color) and sent her on her way. My first thought was to check the cold case files: a city as old and odd as this, with abandoned mills and a castle for an armory, should have lots of leads. If only my predecessors' spirits still hovered over the office: then maybe I could ask them where exactly those files were, and if one of them wouldn't mind taking some of the genealogy calls (my request for a line in the city budget for a *femme fatale* assistant had been declined and they don't do well at the sixth cousin twice removed thing, anyway).

So I lit out to check with sources on the job with the Amsterdam PL. After rounding up the usual suspects (Donlon, Cudmore, Reid, Jones, Pitkin, and company), preliminary findings are as follows:

THE REAL GHOSTS OF AMSTERDAM, NEW YORK

THE CASE OF THE MYSTERIOUS MOHAWK. Not long after the Revolution, an elderly Mohawk lived in the area east of the settlement at Amsterdam. An excellent hunter and fisherman, he kept mainly to himself. After one particularly good day fishing, he came to a white settler he knew and

presented him with the entire catch, saying “Great Spirit calls – Indian no need.” Later, local children saw him sitting with his arms folded in his canoe as it moved westward against the river current. A few days later the canoe was found empty several miles downstream. A week later, the old man was seen on a river island seated and staring west. Thinking he needed a lift ashore, a settler rowed out to assist him, only to see him vanish. This vision was repeated for years afterwards.

THE CASE OF PERSISTENT POLLY. When public sentiment in the Valley began to swing to the Patriot cause, Loyalist Guy Johnson, his wife Polly, and their household beat a hasty retreat. Unfortunately, Polly died on the trek to Canada. After the Revolution, the confiscated Guy Park Manor was sold by the state and became a tavern. Soon after it opened visitors began seeing a mysterious woman in white in an upstairs room. Some suspected Polly had returned to her home, others thought it was a maidservant dispatched by Guy Johnson to retrieve papers and valuables secreted in the house before his hasty departure. A German *hexmeister* who travelled the Valley offered to stay overnight in the room and rid it of its ghost; thereafter, the visitations ceased. But the question remained: did he help Polly depart, carry out Guy Johnson’s plan, or beat the Johnson family to its treasure?

THE CASE OF THE PICKLED PEDDLER. Sometime in the early decades of the 19th Century, a storeowner and a drunken traveler got into a violent struggle, which carried out of the store and into nearby Old Fort Johnson. There the shopkeeper shot and killed his attacker, and the body was removed to the basement and hidden in a barrel of whisky. In the spring, the barrel was rolled out and dumped into the Mohawk River. For years afterwards doors in the basement were said to open and close by themselves, and banging noises were heard in the house, particularly in the basement. A female spirit has also been said to linger at the historic site.

THE CASE OF THE COMBUSTIBLE CABIN. In March, 1839, two young men set off for Troy by sleigh from a farmhouse northeast of the Village of Amsterdam. They had not proceeded more than a mile in the very early morning hours when they saw a strange glow in the woods ahead. At first they assumed it was the moon rising, but soon realized that this was not possible and thought it must be a large fire in Amsterdam or Schenectady. Some miles on, about a mile from the village, they broke out of the woods and were horrified by the sight of a log cabin fully engaged in flames. Thinking its inhabitants were in desperate need, they whipped on their horses. But as soon as the snow kicked up by the horses fell from their eyes, they saw nothing but darkness. A search of the area revealed only an old fence: no sign of that there had ever been a cabin there.

THE CASE OF THE LAMENTED LOCOMOTIVE. This story is common to almost all former New York Central Railroad towns, and tells of the annual reappearance of President Lincoln’s funeral train as it retraces its sad journey to Springfield, Illinois. The train passed through Amsterdam at 5:25 PM, April 26, 1865. Ghost train spotters are reminded that there was no Daylight Savings Time in that year, and to stand clear of all modern and supernatural railroad right-of-ways. Strange lights were also disturbing train crews in Amsterdam during August, 1883, according to a *New York Times* article from the same month.

THE CASE OF THE FRIGHTENING FIRE STATIONS. Local spirits seem to enjoy the challenge of haunting Amsterdam’s Bravest. David Pitkin in his *Ghosts of the Northeast* relates the tale of a fireman who responded to a fire at his family’s old house on Division Street only to discover signs that certain departed family members had not really...departed. Pitkin and other sources also state that Firehouse #4 on Bunn and Chestnut Streets was haunted by ghostly footsteps and white mists. And the city’s first firehouse, which stood on Chuctanunda Street, was plagued soon after it was built in 1839 by the wail of a *banshee* so terrible it drove volunteer firemen away from their cards and drinking on at least one occasion, according to an old *Recorder* article by Hugh Donlon.

THE CASE OF THE WISP OF THE WIDOW. Widow Susan Road is said to be haunted by a sad woman in white, who seems to be looking for something. There once was a real Widow Susan: Susan DeGraff carried on after her husband died in 1848, raising their three children and tending to their farm located on the road that later bore her name. When her daughter married and moved to Michigan, she followed, although it is reported that when she died in 1892, her body was sent back east to be buried in Green Hill Cemetery. Her spirit is assumed to be restless there, wishing instead to be interred with her

husband, and looking for his grave among the several cemeteries that adjoin the road where their farm was. The problem with this explanation is that all these cemeteries were established long after her husband's death. However, Renee Mallet offers another possibility in her recent book *Ghosts of New York's Capital District*: there is also in the area a long unused and generally forgotten DeGraff family plot, with gravestones dating to the proper period. It may be this that Widow Susan seeks.

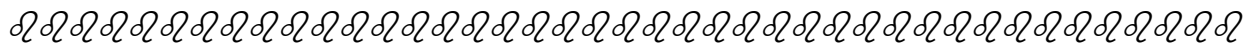
THE CASE OF MAZZO MAORIELLO. First recorded in the 1940s but probably much older in origin, Mazzo is the spirit of a young boy who has been murdered by robbers so that his ghost may guard their loot for the same period as would have been his full life. Apparently released from this enslavement, he lingers on in the fully formed vision of a cheerful young boy in a "striking" red cap who likes to play with other children and often appears on family moving days to help (perhaps in memory of happier times). It has been suggested that Mazzo, or at least his story, immigrated to Amsterdam in the late 1800s with immigrants from around Rome, Italy.

THE CASE OF THE RADIO STATION WRAITH. The MacGregor Mansion has stood on Market Hill for over one hundred years, and will probably stand for another hundred (apologies to *The Haunting of Hill House*). At first it was the home of domineering Elizabeth K. MacGregor, and then of her daughter Julia M. MacGregor, and granddaughter, Julia K. Moore, whose lives Elizabeth made miserable. In the 1980s, the house served as the radio station WKOL, and strange things began occurring. Some, such as interruptions to its signal could probably be explained; others, such as the sighting by employees of a beautiful woman in a pink dress, were less easily dismissed. After the station closed and the building was bought by another firm, the new staff reported other odd events such as shutters opening and closing and small objects going missing and then returning several days later after "Julia" had been asked to return them. At least two psychics have examined the building although their explanations differ: one saw a small girl and a Mohawk Indian, unhappy that his view from the hill had been blocked by modern buildings; another, a chauffeur who had killed himself in the garage.

NO GRAVESTONE LEFT UNTURNED. While pondering the above, I received two additional tips from confidential informants that failed to pan out. A promising lead about a school spirit dead-ended after hours of secretly tailing the AHS Marching Rams (good moves and music, wrong type of spirit). And a pale figure of a middle-aged man was reported to shift between the dim recesses of the third floor of City Hall and the side porch smoking area, appearing and disappearing in a cloud of cigarette smoke. City workers claim he seems to be looking for something: copier paper, an internet connection, a paycheck, or an old volume of Common Council minutes. He isn't malevolent and as he only is seen on Fridays, most staff regard him kindly as a harbinger of two days off. I passed many hours unsuccessfully attempting a tan and chain-smoking while waiting at the side of the building to no avail: despite that *my* office is on the third floor and that I work at City Hall *only on Fridays*, I was never able to intercept this shadow, much to my chagrin and the general amusement of various public servants.

Nevertheless, none of the aforesaid spectral suspects match the *MO (modus occultus)* of the *habeas non corpus* in question. Therefore, the investigation remains open. Person or persons having information about these and other paranormal experiences, real or legendary, are asked to report the same to the Office of the City Historian, (518) 841-4366. All calls confidential - *natch*.

Rob von Hasseln is the Amsterdam City Historian. In what only seems like another lifetime, he was Supervisor of Investigations for the New York City branch of Pinkerton's, the detective agency. He adds: "The Historian's office visit really did occur, although the description is fictitious, and it wasn't the first. And I really am seeking information on the supernatural events related to the City."



Bill Maring, historian for the Town of Root, has been working on sorting and cataloging the town's historical papers and artifacts. Additionally, he is also diligently documenting all of the abandoned family cemeteries in his town, making a map of each cemetery and identifying the locations of each stone. To date, he has located 42 cemeteries.

Bill keeps himself busy interviewing the town's older residents recording their memories and the changes that they have experienced growing up in their town. The Town of Root now has an historical society organized under Bill's leadership. With 14 members, they are working on adopting bylaws and a constitution so that they can apply to the state for their charter.

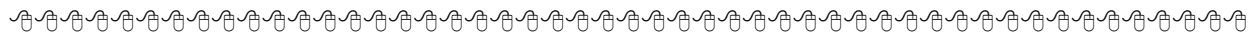
Anita Smith, historian for the Town & Village of St. Johnsville, hosted a variety of history meetings and workshops at the St. Johnsville Community House in 2009 which included touring the Bates-Engelhardt mansion and discussing the Engelhardt family, their "Peerless" piano and their contributions to the village. She served as tour guide for the American Lifestyle TV Network as they filmed local historic sites.

Anita continues to serve on the Village Planning board and as the schoolteacher reenactor for the Fort Klock schoolhouse. She provided historical information for recent and upcoming publications that contribute to the awareness of the significance of our local history.

Maude VanArsdal, Ames Village Historian, was recently honored on Feb. 13th 2010, at the Ames Village Hall, along with her husband Leon "Gus," for their years of community service & devotion to the Ames Museum. Congratulations Maude – thank you for your efforts in preserving our local history and keep up the great work!

Kathy Hanford, historian for the Town & Village of Canajoharie, is working on updating the listings for all cemeteries in Canajoharie, comparing the surveys that have been done in the past and adding more recent burials for a comprehensive list. She also plans on digitally photographing the entrances for each cemetery as well as the more interesting tombstones.

Please send me information about the work that you are doing as a public historian in Montgomery County and I'll include it in upcoming newsletters. We love to share with each other the progress and success of our projects, as well as any difficulties. You can either send me a little note in the mail or by email to kfarquhar@co.montgomery.ny.us.



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