



Historian's Bulletin



November 2015

Greetings Municipal Historians!

November is History Month! What are your plans for the month? Have you thought about writing an article for the newspaper? Perhaps host an event on the history of your town or village? Or put together an exhibit for your town/village/city hall? Possibilities are endless!

Our exhibit cases at the Old Courthouse have highlighted artifacts from the Civil War for the last few years. This month, we will be changing the exhibit to items from the Colonial period in Montgomery County, specifically around the time of the Revolution. One item of particular interest that will be exhibited is a letter, in our archival collection, written in October 1774 by Jelles Fonda, in which he discusses the high taxes paid by landowners (i.e. himself) and the Boston Tea Party. We have had this letter in our collection for a number of years and as I have been slowly digitizing that specific set of documents, I read the letter and was pleasantly surprised by its content.

In 2016, I would like to host a New York State Archives' workshop for all of you on digitizing your historical records. Please let me know if this would be of interest to you and I will work on setting it up.

Also, please let me know if there are specific topics that you would like to see covered at some of our historians' meetings. Stay tuned - the next meeting is scheduled for Nov. 30th here at the Dept. of History & Archives!

Have a happy & wonderful Thanksgiving!

Kelly Yacobucci Farquhar
Montgomery County Historian/RMO



Notes from Historians' meeting 9/14/2015 - Root Historical Society

Thank you to Bill Maring for hosting the meeting at the Root Historical Society in the hamlet of Flat Creek. We had the opportunity to see the wonderful collection that Root has been amassing since it organized a few short years ago.

Attendees: Kelly Farquhar (Mont Co. Historian), Lorraine Whiting (Charleston), Robert Carter (Minden), Earlene Melious (Mohawk), Margaret Schlotzhauer (Palatine), William Maring (Root), Dennis Malcolm (Ames), Beverly Guiffre (Fonda), Barbara Alkinburgh (Nelliston), Karl Gustafson (representing Mont Co Exec, Matthew Ossenfort)

OLD BUSINESS

Annual Reports: Kelly reminded the historians that it is a good practice to do an annual report and submit it to your town or village board to let them know your activities for the year. It can be oral or written and a copy could also be sent to the state historian's office in Albany (presently vacant).

Children's Booklet: Casey Boyd is still looking for the historians to submit a brief description of some local history of their area to include in the booklet. It could be about a person, place or an event of importance. Some historians have already submitted their information to Casey. You can either send it directly to Casey or forward it to Kelly, who will pass it on.

Historic Preservation: Kelly read an article about the importance of historic preservation and updated the group on the status of a spreadsheet of historic structures that the Dept of H&A is compiling. The dept is using historic structure inventory forms which were compiled in the 70's & 80's for input into the spreadsheet. We are updating the info with current owners, SBL numbers and would like to eventually add current photos if the structures are still standing.

Abandoned Cemeteries: Kelly reported that she and Bill Maring recently met with representatives from the offices of Senator Amedore and Assemblyman Santabarbara to discuss possible legislation which would give individuals access to abandoned cemeteries on private property. The legislation would release the homeowner from any liability. They saw no problem with bringing this before the legislature, which will not meet again until Jan 2015. Lorraine Whiting expressed her concerns on letting such easy access to the old cemeteries – use of metal detectors and vandalism were mentioned and discussed. Kelly suggested that we contact our representatives with support letters and also let them know of any concerns that we have about this proposed legislation.

NEW BUSINESS

Kelly talked about doing local history and handed out sheets on how to do historical research. She also read the state guidelines (1995) for local government historians and she outlined the four main areas of a historian's job.

Research & writing – write articles for local newspapers or magazines

Teaching/Public presentations – radio shows, lecture to groups, school classroom presentations

Historic Preservation – be an advocate & resource of historic preservation, identify local historic structures & historic districts, promote historic markers, keep all collections of documents & artifacts in a safe place (Town or village office – not in your home).

Organization & advocacy – support tourism

Kelly mentioned that the Village of Fultonville is working on a historical resource survey. Canajoharie & Fort Plain have already completed one.

It was also suggested that the Dept of History & Archives purchase a new book for their lending library – *On Doing Local History by Carol Kammen*

There were a couple of upcoming events added to the current list:

Ames Community Day, Sept 19th

Charleston Historical Society – Ryan Weitz speaking on “Cleaning headstones & the Development of Cemeteries”, Oct 18th

Next meeting scheduled for Monday, November 30th 2015 at Department of History & Archives, Old Courthouse, 9 Park St., Fonda, NY.

If you've never been to an historians' meeting before, we would love to see you there! Please RSVP to (518) 853-8186 or email kfarquhar@co.montgomery.ny.us.

L to R: Micki Lieber (Friends of Fort Plain), a Diefendorf descendant, Fort Plain Mayor Guy Barton, Kelly Yacobucci Farquhar, Helen Martin (Elizabeth Cady Stanton Consortium), and Eileen Chambers (Historian, Village of Fort Plain)



I had the opportunity to participate in the dedication of historic markers in Fort Plain on Saturday, Oct. 10th. Three markers, acquired through a grant awarded by the Pomeroy Foundation, were dedicated for Clinton Liberal Institute, Fort Plain Free Library, and Diefendorf Hall. Following the Diefendorf Hall marker dedication, event organizers had a wonderful array of refreshments and attendees were able to see the progress in restoring the building at 47 Main Street. Great job to Fort Plain Historian Eileen Chambers and all who put this event together and are working to preserve the history of our county!

Diefendorf Hall – Fort Plain

Many notable personalities in history have crossed the threshold of this building's doors. There have been times that its future was uncertain but we are fortunate to be standing here today – thanks to the efforts of a number of people – who have taken steps necessary to preserve not only the structure itself, but the social and cultural history that goes along with the bricks and mortar.

Bob Smith wrote an article in 2011 in which he cited Nelson Greene's 1947 history of Fort Plain and Nelliston where Greene discussed a fire that burned most of this village's business district in 1855. Smith said that "among the architectural gems born of that calamity was the 1861 Diefendorf Hall, a three-story, brick commercial building in the Italianate style at 47 Main Street."

John I. Diefendorf, a businessman who lived at 51 Main St which accommodated travelers through the area, built in 1861 this structure that became known as "Diefendorf Hall." Other similarly styled structures, both commercial and residential, are reminiscent of the prominence that developed as a result of the Erie Canal presence here.

Mercantile shops occupied the first floor while the second floor housed a hall that was the scene of many lectures, musical presentations, community events, etc. The third floor accommodated storing goods that were to be shipped on the Erie Canal.

As I mentioned a minute ago, there were notable personalities that walked through these doors at a time when residents eagerly attended events sponsored by local churches or discussions to hear advocates speak about social movements as they toured the battle-worn nation in the days following the Civil War.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony spoke at Diefendorf Hall in the spring of 1867 on the subject of "universal suffrage." Horace Greeley, founder and editor of *The New York Tribune* newspaper, talked that year, possibly on his support of restoring relations with the war-torn South and his support of Jefferson Davis' release from prison. Stanton made a return visit in 1877 talking about training girls in the "right of female suffrage."

The next year, in 1868, Mark Twain opened his lecture tour in Fort Plain discussing the “American Vandal Abroad” and author/poet/journalist Grace Greenwood (aka Sarah J. Lippincott) orated on women’s rights and her opposition to capital punishment.

Rev. Thomas K. Beecher, brother to abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, lectured on South America in February 1870 and Fredrick Douglass pleaded in March for justice to all races according to the *Mohawk Valley Register*.

Musical concerts were presented in the hall by groups such as Walrath’s Band. This venue served other culturally significant events like musical productions during the era of Reconstruction when white actors in “black face” typically portrayed black characters.

In August of 1876, the Hyers Sisters (Anna & Emma) performed at Diefendorf Hall. Admission was 50 cents for this musical drama about a freed slave who is made over to fit into upper-class white society. The name of the production was “Out of Bondage” containing scenery and melodies reflective of plantation life. Well-known comic actor of the day, Sam Lucas, also performed in this production that pushed boundaries of musical theater because all of the actors portraying black characters were not in black-face – the actors themselves were black. The Hyers Sisters, very young women at the time of this production and tour, were critically acclaimed, according to author Jocelyn Buckner, for “developing works that moved beyond stereotypical caricatures of African American life.”

Incidentally, Sam Lucas the comedian, was born in 1839 to parents freed from slavery. He lived into the 20th century and was the first black man to portray Uncle Tom both on stage in minstrel shows and on screen in a 1914 film of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

The second-floor hall was renovated in the early 20th century to accommodate a 500-seat auditorium and house the Rialto Theater. After a period of vacancy, when the building was purchased by the American Legion in 1933, it again served the community as a venue for church events, recitals, school dances.

Through the years, Diefendorf Hall has changed variously in ownership and structurally. With the 2008 incorporation of the Friends of Fort Plain as a not-for-profit dedicated to preserving this building, and the efforts to identify the greater portion of the village as an historic district to the National Register of Historic Places, Diefendorf Hall has a bright future ahead.

By Kelly Yacobucci Farquhar, Montgomery County Historian/RMO, remarks at the ceremony for the dedication of the historic marker at Diefendorf Hall, Oct. 10, 2015

Sources:

- Smith, Robert E. “47 Main: A Milestone in Fort Plain,” *Courier-Standard-Enterprise*, April 4, 2011.
- “Diefendorf Hall: Cultural Heritage Center,” stjohnsville.com/DiefendorfHall.html
- *Mohawk Valley Register*, www.fultonhistory.com
- Buckner, Jocelyn L. “Spectacular Opacities”: The Hyers Sisters’ Performances of Respectability and Resistance.” *African American Review* 45.3 (2012): 309-323. *Project MUSE*. Web. 13 Oct. 2015. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/>>.
- Wikipedia contributors, "Hyers Sisters," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hyers_Sisters&oldid=583593486 (accessed October 07, 2015).
- Wikipedia contributors, "Sam Lucas," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sam_Lucas&oldid=677154479 (accessed October 07, 2015).
- Wellman, Judith and Kelly Yacobucci Farquhar and others. “The Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African American Life in Montgomery County, 1820-1890,” (2011)

From Lorraine Whiting in response to our discussion at the Sept. 14th Historians' meeting -

On August 29, I received a request on my gmail account regarding Find A Grave website, from Mr. Lee Park of Maryland. His 2X Gr. Grandfather was Dr. William Smith, buried in the Baptist Church cemetery in Charleston. He wanted me to add some family information to the William Smith page as I was the one who originally posted the minimal information for Dr. Smith on Find A Grave.

This would have been an ordinary "please add this information" request, except for one thing: the request mentioned that Dr. Smith was at the Battle of Plattsburgh in the War of 1812.

I placed the information verbatim on the William Smith page and emailed Lee Park that I had done so. Then I asked if he had any information he could send me about Dr. Smith's service during the War of 1812. He did. And he did. Mr. Park emailed me an index card for War of 1812 Muster Rolls, Pay Rolls, Pay for travel and Subsistence Accounts. Over the next several weeks of Gmail correspondence, I received bits and pieces of a book that had been written by Mr. Park's mother, Alice Crandall Park, then four copies of the book, Our Immigrant Ancestors From Scotland was received in the mail. Mr. Park's wife, Mary, a former librarian, did some checking and discovered that the book had been sent to most of our area's major libraries but not in Schenectady, so I volunteered to give a copy to the Schenectady Library and the Schenectady Historical Society.

I told Mr. Park that Dr. Smith's name would be placed on the Honor Roll

Board in front of the Charleston Town Hall. He seemed delighted with the idea and said his mother would have been happy.

Of course, this doesn't happen every time I answer a request on Find A Grave. I've been working on Find A Grave for 6+ years.

How does this genealogical hunt fit in with the work of a municipal historian. I have learned that Prior's Regiment of the New York Militia included at least one person, a doctor, from the Town of Charleston. Also, that I could possibly trace all the men of Charleston that participated in the War of 1812 with a little more digging. The Battle of Plattsburgh was fought September 11, 1814, and is said to have ended the invasion of the northern states. Now it is history more than genealogy.

And all this because I answered a genealogical request.



Wednesday, Nov. 1st is Veteran's Day

Remember -- thank our veterans and their families for their service to protect our nation and our freedoms!!

The Department of History & Archives is collecting donations for the local animal shelters.

- pet food
- toys
- litter
- old blankets/pillows
- monetary, etc.



If you have any items that you would like to drop off at the Dept., please stop by Mon-Fri. 8:30am-4pm. Collected donations will be distributed to the SPCA in Amsterdam and the Ayres Animal Shelter in Sprakers before Christmas.



The Town of Mohawk Highway Dept is planning to repair and paint several markers in the town. They recently removed the “Can-A-Gor-Ha” marker near Reservoir Rd.

On Oct. 27th, the Jay DiLorenzo, President of the Preservation League of New York, presented Montgomery County with a \$10,000 check to conduct a cultural resources survey of historic resources in the rural parts of western Montgomery County. Jessie Ravage will be the consultant for the project.



The Universalist Church at Fordsbush was taken down, possibly in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Photo courtesy of Alan Weaver.

Upcoming Events

Montgomery County First Responders Appreciation Dinner



THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 19
Winner's Circle, Fonda



\$15 PER PERSON
Nominees & Guest Complimentary
RSVP by November 13
to 853-4304 or to
asantillo@co.montgomery.ny.us



Cocktails: 6-6:30 p.m.
Dinner: 6:30-7:30 p.m.
Awards & Recognition: 7:30-8 p.m.



County Executive Matthew Ossenfort encourages us all to show our appreciation for our first responders. If you are interested in attending the dinner, please call the Executive's office at the number above.

Dec. 2nd, 2015 – Christmas Tree Lighting at the Ames Museum, 6:30pm followed by refreshments at the Ames Fire Department hall.

Dec. 2nd 2015 – Heritage Society night at McDonald's, Fultonville, 5-7pm. *Enjoy a meal at McDonald's and a portion of the proceeds will benefit the Heritage & Genealogical Society.*

Dec. 5th 2015 -- Heritage Society Christmas Party

February, 2016 – Book discussion, date/time TBD – American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies in the Founding of the Republic (2008) by Joseph J. Ellis. *Acclaimed historian Joseph J. Ellis brings his unparalleled talents to this riveting account of the early years of the Republic. The last quarter of the eighteenth century remains the most politically creative era in American history, when a dedicated group of men undertook a bold experiment in political ideals. It was a time of both triumphs and tragedies—all of which contributed to the shaping of our burgeoning nation. Check your local library for available copies or book can be purchased online or at major bookstores.*

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