

The Playhouse Theater in Hudson, c.1927

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A Message from the President

County history, the understanding, knowledge and preservation of which is the mission of the Columbia County Historical Society, consists of more than settlement, development, economic growth and political evolution. We have also in the county a rich cultural heritage that CCHS is committed to preserving. Partly in response to the unique landscape surrounding us, books and poems have been written, pictures have been painted, photographs taken, architectural forms generated and built, music composed and performed. From native American ritual to contemporary film making, there has always been a significant arts presence in the county, even in the days when the average resident had much less leisure time than today. And in the present era, arts and cultural activities have burgeoned.

The Society itself has certainly contributed to the rich offering. During the past year we sponsored three concerts, all extremely well received, encouraging us to schedule more for 2004. Also we mounted a photography show and published an accompanying book of the highest aesthetic standards.

In this issue of *History & Heritage* we concentrate on illuminating the story of the performing arts in Columbia County, theater, music and dance, to try to give some flavor of the forerunners of today's stimulating "scene."

Much has continued to happen at the Society since we last communicated. We were gratified by big turnouts at our holiday events, the Gallery of Wreaths, Greens Show, and Holiday House

President's Letter continued on page 23...

Editor's foreword

When we decided to commit an issue of the magazine to the subject of theatre and entertainment in Columbia County, we did not realize what an ambitious an undertaking it would be. At every turning we found something new, something different and something certainly heretofore unknown to us. I am sure we have not discovered everything, and I have that sinking feeling that there may be glaring omissions.

Nevertheless it has been a fun issue to put together. Our writers have picked interesting subjects for stories which I am sure that you will enjoy – some on boxing, – some on the movies – some on Opera – and some on the buildings that housed them. We could not paint the whole picture, but I feel that we have given you a good taste of the magical world of entertainment that existed here in our county, and some of that still ongoing.

To add some balance to the issue, we have included the amazing story of a mutiny aboard the U.S. Navy brig Somers in 1842 which caused quite a stir here in Columbia County as it involved some of our own people. It reads like theater in itself. In fact, Herman Melville used the incident as a model for one of his books. Another story, also included, which sounds more like fiction than fact, is that of the famous Sullivan/Morrissey fight in New Lebanon – a truly ugly affair.

Our book review for this issue is on the *The Roosevelts and the Royals* authored by one of our county's own writers, Will Swift of Valatie. You may have read some of his articles in our magazine. Although not a book on a Columbia County subject, it depicts a friendship between two aristocratic and powerful families influencing events that affected the lives of countymen and countrymen alike.

You can help us by sharing your stories with us. We wish to encourage our readers and others to share their knowledge of the county's history with us. We are also always looking for new writers – both old and young. We would welcome some student writers. So please give us a call.

Jim Eyre, Editor



HOLLYWOOD OF THE NORTH COUNTRY

By Will Swift

Eighty-four years ago, in March 1920, the residents of Chatham became obsessed by visions of stardom when the plump and talkative John S. Lopez, who identified himself as “Director, Sphere Motion Picture Co., New York City” placed placards in the village saying:

“COME AND GET INTO PICTURES!”

See yourself in the movies when the picture has its first presentation on the screen at Cady Hall, Chatham. Who knows but there is a Pickford or Chaplin right here among you who only needs the opportunity?”

After two days of auditioning, Lopez selected a local cast of characters including Chatham housewives, their daughters, a local professor, an attorney and a Chatham Courier editor to star in the silent film *By Man’s Law*. On March 17th the village of Chatham worked itself into a frenzy over the arrival of the evening train from New York City. It brought to town silent screen leading man Harold Forshey, 18-year-old Norma Shearer, who would earn an Oscar for her role in *The Divorcee* in 1930 and who would later turn down the role of Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, and Chatham native Floyd Buckley. Buckley had made his 1914 silent screen debut in *The Exploits of Elaine* and went on to be the voice of Popeye on radio in the mid 1930’s. Chatham girls swooned when “Bud” Williams, a dapper former champion lightweight boxer and putative actor stepped off the train as well.

As filming began, according to the Chatham Centennial Souvenir Program, “All business on Main Street halted as the cameramen cranked and Director Lopez shouted through a megaphone. Horsemen thundered down the street, guns fired, women screamed, and Chatham basked in the glory of Hollywood. Chathamites are disconcerted by the bright

lights used in the interior scenes.”

The corny storyline of *By Man’s Law* included the last minute reprieve of a mountain boy convicted of murder. He was saved from hanging after a local woman discovered new evidence and made a quick dash on a stallion to Albany where she confronted the governor in time to let justice prevail. When the film was released the following March, New York City viewers derided it as lacking

**Historically,
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in plot. The *Chatham Courier* noted, however, on May 7th that the hundreds who showed up at Cady Hall for its’ Chatham premier “were pleased by the movie work of their fellow townsmen and women and by the beautiful scenery shown, but have expressed the opinion that the plot is weak and shallow.”



Cast and crew from Iriquois Production’s film *The Devil’s Partner*, released in 1922.

Albert S. Callan, whose mother appeared as an “extra” in a ladies’ social scene shot on the lawn of what is now the Payn Foundation in Chatham, told me that Norma Shearer was a guest of Floyd Buckley’s parents during the filming of *By Man’s Law*. Buckley later arranged for Shearer to reciprocate their generosity when his parents visited Hollywood. When Mr. and Mrs. Buckley arrived at Shearer’s studio, they were told that “she would be unable to see them because of her busy schedule.” According to Callan, “This rebuff caused many Chathamites to reject the film when it was shown at Cady Hall.”

Historically, Columbia County residents have always been passionate about the movies. In the first half of the 20th Century, residents used to take the trolleys to Albany to see the newest movies or attend films in theaters in Chatham, Hudson, Valatie or Copake. Today Chatham has its own film club, and a small but important film festival, founded in 1999, and held one weekend every October. In 2001 Columbia County’s James Shamus, who has produced “Sense and Sensibility” and “The Ice Storm,” brought Ang Lee’s “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” to the FilmColumbia festival for a pre-release first screening. In 2003 films like *Pieces of April*, *The Fog of War*, and *The Barbarian Invasions* took center stage at

the festival. In Hudson, Time & Space Limited, a non-profit performing arts center, shows many intellectually stimulating and provocative documentary films. In January 2004 they offered documentaries about visionary architects Antonio Gaudi and Louis Kahn.

The movie bug for Chatham residents began in the early 1900s when Cady’s Opera House, now Cady Hall, offered shows of sequential images created by the Antomotioscope, a machine which preceded the moving picture technology. On November 27, 1907 resi-

dents paid 10 to 15 cents per seat at Cady's Hall to see Sublime Movie Pictures' *The Life of Christ*, the first moving picture to be shown in Columbia County "By 1917 the *Chatham Courier* reports Charlie Chaplin was featured there "with his funniest side-splitting hits" in "10 Big Reels of Photo-Plays De Luxe," which included "dramas...news, comedies and cartoons."

During the 1920's Cady Hall, called at different times the Allen or the Orpheum Theater, showed "moving pictures" with Mary Pickford starring in *Dorothy Verdon of Haddon Hall* and John Barrymore in *Beau Brummell*. After it opened on Christmas Day 1926 with Jules Verne's *Michael Strogoff*, Chatham's current Crandell Theater provided competition for Cady Hall. As the stock market crashed in the fall of 1929 the Crandell was offering *The Broadway Melody*, billed as a "100% TALKIE-SINGING-DANCING," according to the *Chatham Courier*.

In 1921 Valatie had its big moment in movie history. Harry Houdini and his film company arrived in town to shoot the principle scenes of *Haldane of the Secret Service*. According to a September 1921 *Chatham Courier* article, Houdini's crew "wished to find a location where there was an old mill and a water wheel of the old-fashioned wooden construction." It was a difficult combination to find, but New York City actor Floyd Buckley, originally of Chatham, convinced Houdini's entourage that the "old Beaver mill there might answer their purposes." The script called for a large, old-fashioned water wheel which they had to build at the Beaver Mill site. Houdini was lashed to the wheel and, of course, figured out a way to escape.

As Valatie prepares to re-open its historic movie theater in 2004, it would only be fitting to



Harry Houdini on location while shooting his film Haldane of the Secret Service, filmed in Valatie in 1921.

start the new season with Harry Houdini's movie. Unfortunately *Haldane of the Secret Service*, the only film Houdini directed, was a commercial failure. Even worse, no copies of the film survive. Instead perhaps Valatie's residents will be able to see some of the other fine films that have been produced in Columbia County.

In September 1927 the Playhouse in Hudson was showing "the world's greatest motion picture," *What Price Glory*, with an augmented orchestra for the whopping price of 50 cents for orchestra seats and 35 cents for the gallery. Valatie in 1929 was showing *Me Gangster*. 1933 introduced a brother and sister team who moved through the

county showing silent movies in Grange halls for several nights at a time and who eventually built the Copake Theater, which offered movies until it burned down in June 1990.

All of these theaters probably showed twenty-two-year old, Chatham-born actress Marguerite Chapman's debut film *On Their Own* in 1940. Eight years later she starred with Randolph Scott in *Coroner Creek* before descending permanently to the "B" rank of actresses and ending her career by playing a tough, boozy tart in the cheaply made *The Amazing Transparent Man* in 1960. The movies of The Three Stooges, born in North Chatham, were popular as well in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.



Paul Newman reads a shot while directing the film Nobody's Fool at the Iron Horse Bar in Hudson.

In 1959, according to Al Callan, in his book *The Man in the Black Hat*, "the city of Hudson shivered with delight," when Chatham's Harry Belafonte, "along with the late Robert Ryan and Ed Begley, arrived in the county to do a film version of William McGivern's book, *Odds Against Tomorrow* [a crime caper with racial overtones]. Harbel Productions rolled its cameras up and down Warren Street for a bank robbery sequence and, with the magic touch that only Hollywood can bestow, suddenly everyone in Hudson wanted to get in on the act. Ham acting, in its pure and simplest form, was Hudson's bill of fare that glorious summer..."

Millay at Steepletop, a 1968 documentary about Pulitzer Prize winning poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, includes revealing interviews with her campy sister Norma Millay Ellis. It also gives a fascinating glimpse of the poet's life with her husband Eugen and their friends at their 700 acre farm in the hills of Austerlitz. During the production, director Kevin Brownlow found two extraordinary 100-foot rolls of 16mm film in the barn on the estate — home movies — the only existing films of the poet and her coterie. Brownlow captured the essence of Millay, the feminine ideal of the jazz age, by combining images of the beauty of the poet's farm with recitations of her famous poem including her best-known quatrain, "My candle burns at both ends; It will not last the night. But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—It gives a lovely light!"

In the early 1990's former Columbia Historical Society President Rod Blackburn, an author and expert on Dutch architecture, was approached by a member of Martin Scorsese's staff. Scorsese knew Columbia County well because in 1968 in Claverack, along with his actor friend Harvey Keitel, he had

directed his first feature film. That film *Who's That Knocking at My Door* told the story of a troubled relationship between a streetwise, Catholic tough guy and an independent woman. Now Scorsese needed an early Dutch home to use for a romantic scene in *The Age of Innocence*.

Rod knew instantly that the historic Luykas Van Alen house would be perfect for the film, and convinced Mark Hopinsberger, Scorsese's advance man. As the director needed a more visible fireplace for a scene in which the engaged society scion Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis) visits the Countess Lenska (Michelle Peiffer), Rod installed jack posts under the beams to hold up the fireplace. For three days the front lawn of the Van Allen house was covered with vans and satellite disks while the filmmakers shot ten minutes of the story, which pitted passion and self-expression against tradition and social status.

Hudson was the setting in 1987 for director Hector Babenco's film adaptation of William Kennedy's *Ironweed*, which had won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Critic James Atlas, writing in *Vogue*, had said "What James Joyce did for Dublin, and Saul Bellow did for Chicago, Williams has done for Albany" in his Albany cycle of novels. Jack Nicholson was nominated for an Oscar for his performance as Francis Phelan, a drunken former baseball player running away from his life and the painful memories that haunted him. Meryl Streep was also nominated for her role as Francis' longtime girlfriend in this film about depression-era hopelessness. Rod Blackburn's eight-year-old daughter Mara was fortunate to have been an extra.

In *Ironweed* Hudson's historic Allen Street, with its elegant mixture of Greek Revival and Victorian-era homes posed as Albany in 1938. The director had his crew touch up the exterior of the houses in order to capture that dark era. Mara remembers that Jack Nicholson approached her, complimented her on her beautiful hair, mentioned that he was going bald, and asked if he could have some of her lovely hair. She refused. During the filming the family's over zealous Labrador jumped excitedly up and down at the window of her mother's office causing the director to shoot scenes — over and over. When Nicholson later asked Mara's mother if he could have the dog, she, like her daughter, refused him. Nor did he win the Oscar.

During the filming of *Ironweed*, the State Grill on 7th Street in Hudson between Union and Warren Streets, was renamed the

Iron Horse Bar for scenes that took place there. The owner, Frank Martino, liked the name and kept it. The Iron Horse Bar's place in movie history was secured when it was also featured in the 1994 film *Nobody's Fool*, adapted from Richard Russo's novel, about the engaging characters of a small upstate town. The bar was carefully measured and replicated on a set south of Poughkeepsie for the indoor scenes.

Paul Newman directed Bruce Willis, Melanie Griffith, and Jessica Tandy in the film and starred as Sully Sullivan, who spent his life drinking beer and avoiding responsibility before coming to terms with his past and his family. Critics have said that the film is as much a portrait of a small town as of the characters in it. In one part of the movie, Jessica Tandy was shown walking out of the Columbia Diner on Warren Street.

Independent filmmakers are making their movies in the county with increasing frequency. In 2001 Peter Callahan shot his first

Back in 1922 Iroquois Productions from New York City leased the Exhibition Hall at the Columbia County Fair Grounds in Chatham as a movie studio.

film, a coming-of-age story called *Last Ball*, in Hudson. It tells the tale of a high-school graduate named Jim, who is too paralyzed by a love affair with a married woman to leave his small town. He drives a cab and hangs out at John's Bar & Grill while his high school friends move on to college and professional lives.

In November 2003 Dylan McCormick, a native of Claverack, and Chris Roberts shot *Four Lane Highway* in Spencertown, Chatham and Old Chatham. The film tells the story of a bartender, Sean, who falls in love with a student named Molly in a Maine college town. Sean meets Molly at Jackson's Tavern, renamed the Crossroads Tavern for

the movie, in Old Chatham. Two years later, after the relationship has ended, he tracks her down in New York City to find out what went wrong. The directors wanted a location, simulating a New England college town, which would be within a day's driving time of their production company in New York City. They found Columbia County's Tourism Board to be extremely helpful in guiding them to locations and in assisting them with the logistics of filming. County residents were used as extras in the two-hour movie, which will be shown at film festivals in 2005 and will be released in 2006.

It would take several more articles to do justice to movie history in the county. Since 1899, there have been thirteen films (see sidebar) made in Hudson alone. Film buffs remember that the cult classic *The Honeymoon Killers*, a dark, humorous thriller about a fat nurse and a Spanish gigolo who murder rich but lonely women, was filmed in Canaan. James Agee wrote *African Queen*, and Larry Gelbart created *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* while they lived in the county. Today executive producer John Sloss who has worked on thirty-nine films including *The Fog of War* (about Robert McNamara) and *Far from Heaven* (about repressed homosexuality in the 1950's) and *Vanity Fair* film critic and author Peter Biskind are only a few of the many creative film people living here. Biskind's new book *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film* made recent headlines with its skewering of Miramax studio head Harvey Weinstein's ego and Sundance Film Festival founder, Robert Redford's greed.

Apart from its rich film history, one of the hidden treasures of Columbia County today, according to film producer Diane Wheeler, is its large and private community of film producers, writers, critics, documentarians, and a wealth of filmmaking resources. Working in Columbia County, a director can call upon a highly developed network of filmmaking assets including sound-recording studios, camera and special effects people, digital video production, and post-production equipment. In nearby counties specialists offer period fabrics, dishware and other exterior and interior details for sets.

Back in 1922 Iroquois Productions from New York City leased the Exhibition Hall at the Columbia County Fair Grounds in Chatham as a movie studio. They made several "North woods" melodramas by filming indoor scenes at the fairgrounds and outdoor



The Iron Horse Bar as it appears today on 6th Street between Warren and Union streets in Hudson.

footage in the woods and mountains at Austerlitz. Norma Shearer starred in their silent film *The Devil's Partner*, which was released in 1922. *The Valley of Lost Souls* followed the next year.

There is no longer a movie studio in the county, but in 1991 the Oscar-winning team of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory established The Merchant and Ivory Foundation at Red Mills in a complex of landmark mills overlooking a lake, creek and waterfall in Claverack. During the longest partnership in independent cinema (lasting over forty years) Merchant and Ivory have made forty-five movies. Along with screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, they have produced film masterpieces from E. M. Forster's *Room With a View* and Henry James' *The Europeans*, *The Bostonians* and *The Golden Bowl*, among others.

Merchant and Ivory first moved to Columbia County thirty years ago "because of the historical feeling, and the farmlands and the beauty of the county." They set up their foundation to support promising artists in the visual and performing arts and to foster the

preservation and awareness of art and cinema. Ismail reports that the closest they have come to filming in Columbia County is an early scene in their movie *Jefferson in Paris*, shot south of Albany, when "a young reporter comes to ask about Sally Hemmings and the other descendants of Jefferson." In the last few years, actors Vanessa Redgrave, her mother Rachel Kempson, Matthew Modine, Mia Farrow, Wallace Shawn and Diane Wiest have done dramatic readings at the foundation. This summer film actor Uma Thurman will do a reading from Eastern poets at the Red Mills.

Currently, Merchant and Ivory are working on the film *The White Countess*, centering on an American in Shanghai before World War II and his dream about an ideal nightclub. They are preparing to make a film of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. They have also given a grant to Steven Sartorelli to help translate the poetry of the classically-inspired Italian film director-poet-novelist and social critic, Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was murdered in Rome in 1975.

Talented Columbia County residents can apply for internships with the Merchant and Ivory Production Company or their foundation or for grants to develop film projects. Recently Merchant Ivory Productions commissioned playwright Amy Fox to turn her play *Heights* into a screenplay.

Given Columbia County's increasing prominence and abundant film resources, it will be fascinating to see what local actors, directors, screenwriters and films emerge in the 21st century. ♡



We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Diane Wheeler, Sandi Knakal and Mary Gail Biebel of the Chatham Film Club for their generous help in researching this article. Some of the material comes from the Chatham Film Club's five year *Unravel* project which is documenting the history of filmmaking and filmmakers in the county. The project started in 2003 and is targeted for completion in 2007, coinciding with the 100th year of films being shown in Chatham. They are collecting information, artifacts, and memories, and if you have anything relevant please contact Mary Gail Biebel at 392-5108.

FILMS MADE IN HUDSON

1. Frank Gould's *Dogs* (1899) In this picture is shown a group of ten of the most magnificent St. Bernard dogs in the world; all of them being many times prize winners.
2. *Trade Secret*, A (1915) A silent film drama focusing on a chemist and his fiancé.
3. *Call of His People, The* (1922) A silent film. Plot unknown.
4. *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) See article.
5. *Shiek of the Mutilated* (1974) a frenzied hunt for a hideous beast uncovers an evil cannibal cult and death is the devil's blessing.
6. *Ironweed* (1987) See article.
7. *Toxic Avenger, Part II, The* (1989) the Toxic Avenger is lured to Tokyo, Japan by the evil corporation Apocalypse, Inc.
8. *Nobody's Fool* (1994) See article
9. *Daylight* (1996) disaster in a New York tunnel

as explosions collapse both ends of it. One hero tries to help the people inside find their way to safety.

10. *8MM* (1999) A thriller in which a private investigator is hired to discover if a "snuff film" is authentic or not.
11. *Last Supper, The* (2000) A short film about a prisoner on Death Row. The last day before his execution he must summarize his life into a series of foods for his last meal... and then eat his memories.
12. *Moon Streams* (2000) A short film which represents a hand-painted abstraction of creation. The intensity of flowing water on the moon's surface builds as the shifting colors reveal the consequence of chaos in space.
13. *Last Ball* (2001) See article. ♡

VOLUNTEER ASST. EDITOR SOUGHT FOR THIS MAGAZINE

The work can be fun, the title is impressive but the tasks are time-consuming — contacting writers, editing copy, re-writing or writing articles, researching, chasing ads etc. No pay but buckets of accolades — and so much better than sitting at home with little to do. Car, computer, and fax are necessary but experience is not as important as good English, intelligence and wit. Must live in Columbia county. Call Jim Eyre at (518) 851-9151.



ALL ABOARD THE SHOWBOAT

A Story of Entertainment in New Lebanon

By Kevin C. Fuerst, New Lebanon Town Historian

Entertainment in northern Columbia County had for decades centered on a unique establishment in New Lebanon called the Show Boat. The Show Boat was a dance hall built in the 1930 by Edmund Flynn, Sr., who operated the hall for five years until his death in 1935. The building that housed the Show Boat was built to resemble a large cruise ship including an entrance gangplank, a Captain's bridge and a promenade deck. After the death of Mr. Flynn the Show Boat was managed by Earle Roberts and his brother until the mid-1940s when it was sold to a retired boxer, Nicholas Pignone, who operated the Show Boat as a very popular nightclub for twenty years. Mr. Pignone then sold the nightclub to Jack Carpinello in 1966. Mr. Carpinello capitalized on the music of the times and operated the Show Boat as a rock 'n roll nightclub appealing to the younger generation.

Mr. Carpinello ran the Show Boat until 1974 when he sold the property to two gentlemen from Albany who quickly decided to resell the establishment to Francis Dinova. The new owner had plans to open the Show Boat to its former venue as a dinner club. Unfortunately before the Show Boat was reopened it suffered a devastating fire, which burned the landmark nightclub to the ground, forever silencing and erasing the fabulous entertainment center.

To get a true prospective of the character and atmosphere of the Show Boat, I asked long time resident of New Lebanon Robert Brown about the Show Boat. These are his reflections:

"It was a period full of entertainment, the best big bands, the best comic acts and well known burlesque acts all from a landlocked boat in the Lebanon Valley with the Taconic and Berkshire Mountains as

its' backdrop. The Show Boat was built to replicate the cruise ships of the times, but it was the glitz, the glamour and the popular acts that brought people from all over the tri-state area to the Show boat. The 'Boat', as it was commonly referred to, was located on Routes 20 & 22 in New Lebanon, N.Y., which was the main highway from Boston to Buffalo. All the top bands and burlesque acts played the Show Boat as they made their way to the bigger cities and bigger venues. Some of the acts caught at the Show Boat were; the Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey bands, Frankie Carle, Gene Krupa, and Paul

Whiteman. Comic acts included Redd Fox, Henni Youngmen and Buddy Hackett. Burlesque acts like Lilly St. Cyr, Gypsy Rose Lee and Candy Barr — all top club acts of the time — played the Show Boat.

It was the architecture of the 'boat' that made it unique. It was a very large structure measuring over one hundred feet in length and thirty feet wide. It was so foreign to the countryside and the mountainous surroundings that you couldn't just drive by without stopping to look at the building. It was complete with anchors, authentic portholes, and ship masts and cabin-like booths located around a large ballroom and dance floor. People would travel from all over the area just to take their picture in front of the marvelous structure."

Mr. Brown said it was sad that after forty-five years of big time acts performing at the Show Boat it all came to an end when fire erased the landmark from the countryside forever and all that remains are the memories of the once glamorous Show Boat.

Entertainment still survives in New Lebanon today thanks to the Theater Barn. The Theater Barn was incorporated in February of 1984 by Joan and Albert Phelps. It's first production was in June of 1984 held in the East end of the Tilden Place building, located on Route 20 in New Lebanon near the spot where the Show Boat once stood. The seating capacity was one hundred people.

After five years at that location the Theater Barn was moved to its current location at 564 Route 20, New Lebanon, N.Y. with a seating capacity of 134. The Theater Barn produced 170 different shows in the past twenty years, including large and small musicals, comedies, mysteries and musical revues. The Theater Barn is a non-union professional theater that uses actors, directors and musicians who audition in New York City and locally. The Theater hosts eight different shows a year from mid-June to mid-October with performances Thursday

through Sunday. New Lebanon would like to thank the Phelps family for their hard work to keep top-notch entertainment alive in New Lebanon. 🍷

The author would like to thank past New Lebanon Historian Reverend Ernest Smith for information gleaned from his book All Along the Wyomonock and Robert Brown for his reflection of the show boat in its heyday.

Some of the acts caught at the Show Boat were; the Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey bands, Frankie Carle, Gene Krupa, and Paul Whiteman



The Showboat seen shortly before the fire in which it was totally destroyed. The spectacular fire occurred on the night of August 29, 1975.



BARE KNUCKLES IN BOSTON CORNERS

Edited by Jim Eyre, compiled from the Chatham Courier and other sources

One of the most remote and sparsely populated sections of Columbia County as a triangle atop the Taconic Mountain range where the state boundary lines of New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut come together on a sharp, steep slope covered with thick underbrush.

The sprawling 1,050 tract of wilderness today gives no indication that it was, in 1853, the site of the — first-ever — prize fight on American soil, a bare-knuckle brawl between Yankee Sullivan and John “Old Smoke” Morrissey. Prize fighting was illegal then, banned in all thirty-eight states of the Union, but that didn’t make a whole lot of difference because Boston Corners was a virtual “no-man’s land.”

A round was over as soon as a fighter’s knee touched the ground.

It was Boston Corners’ unique history that led to its notoriety in those times. The prize-fight was only a piece of that story. Horse thieving, ladies of easy virtue, gaming and drunkenness were often associated with the area, although many historians say the stories of these goings-on have been exaggerated with time.

Boston Corners’ unique role dates back to the 1600s when New York claimed all of the territory eastward to the Connecticut River and Massachusetts claimed all the territory westward to the Hudson River. Some of the problems were remedied in 1757 when a line was established more or less right down the middle, although squabbles ensued for many more years. The line put the area known as Boston Corners in Massachusetts, but failed to consider that there was no access to the area from the Massachusetts side due to a very high slope. There were no roads, and Boston Corners residents paid no taxes, didn’t vote in elections and had no constable or jail. By 1853, Massachusetts had ceded the town to New York, but New York, aware of the alleged criminal activities taking place there, had not accepted the territory. So, in that infamous year, the sixty or so residents of Boston Corners were under nobody’s

jurisdiction.

Horse thieving was alleged to be the area’s biggest industry, conducted by the people affiliated with Black Brant’s Grocery, a general store and tavern that serviced the residents of Boston Corners, and the ruffians of New York City’s Bowery who came to Boston Corners to enjoy the liberties that a territory without law allowed. The story goes that the Bowery syndicate would slip up to Saratoga to steal thoroughbreds from the racetrack and the fine stables in the area and then bring them back to Boston Corners — one step ahead of the law. There was a dye-house behind the grocery where rustlers would dye the horses a different color and alter the brand marks to make the animals untraceable. The disguised horses were then led up the slopes to “Blow Hole” cavern, a nearly inaccessible place that wasn’t a cavern

at all, but rather a deep gorge in the mountain where, in winter, the snow drifted to sometimes twenty or thirty feet. Winds reached such velocity that they were once said to have blown several rail cars off the New York and Harlem railroad which ran along the base of the Taconics to Chatham. The thieves would later sell the prize horses to shady gentlemen who would take the disguised thoroughbreds to the Yonkers Racetrack, which always ran slower nags than Saratoga, and clean up with these ringers at ridiculous odds.

Meanwhile, down in New York, the stage was being set up for Boston Corners’ giant leap into prominence. John “Old Smoke” Morrissey, was a 23-year-old red headed bruiser and brandy drinker, who ran a “honky-tonk” on lower Broadway called the Gem and claimed the American prize-fighting title. Yankee Sullivan was a 41-year-old veteran brawler who held the English and the Continental titles (He is not to be confused with famed fighter John L. Sullivan). Supporters of the two fighters had mixed it up many times in a war of words with fisticuffs that were often a prelude to a fight. It is said that the rival factions had trashed the Gem (over who was the better man?) on

more than one occasion. Finally, a challenge was laid down and accepted, and the services of the same Bowery syndicate behind the horse thieving were engaged for promotion of the pugilistic event.

Because prizefighting was illegal in all thirty-eight states, Boston Corners unique status as a no-man’s land made it a perfect setting for the event. Though preparations were made in secrecy, word spread quickly and, on the morning of October 11, 1853, a great exodus began out of New York City. A special train was arranged on the New York and Harlem to carry some three-thousand of New York’s not so finest characters up to the fight. The train was crowded, with eighty men squeezed into cars designed to hold forty, and fighting, gambling and drinking marked the trip. The railroad estimated it collected only half of its fares. The brawling

and the mischief on the cars so terrified railroad officials that they stopped and disconnected the cars one-half mile short of the Boston Corners whistle-stop and quickly rode the engine away to safety in Chatham. The three-thousand occupants swarmed out of the disconnected cars across fields and wilderness to the fight scene, leveling everything in their path. A more dignified crowd arrived in Hudson on the steamboat and were carried by carriages to Boston Corners (Boston Corners was accessible from the New York side).

As the crowds gathered around the twenty-four square foot roped-off ring on the hillside, heavy wagering began. Lawmen from both states watched helplessly from the mountaintops. The lawmen could only take action when a spectator unsuspectingly wandered out of Boston Corners. The hapless visitor was then arrested for promotion of an illegal event by officials from whatever state into whose jurisdiction he unhappily found himself.

The fight was to be conducted according to the new London rules. Each boxer had to toe the mark at the beginning of the round. If a fighter failed to toe the mark when the referee called the round, he would automatically lose. A round was over as soon as a

fighter's knee touched the ground. The time between rounds was left to the referee's discretion, and most in this fight lasted 30 seconds. Seconds for Sullivan were a pair of thugs named Andee Sheehan and William Wilson. Morrissey's seconds were "Awful" Gardner and Tom O'Donnell. Morrissey's flag was red, white and blue, while Sullivan featured a black flag.

At 2p.m., referee Charles Allire called both men in to the ring for instructions. The odds were 5 to 4 for Morrissey, - the younger man. Moments later, America's first prize-fight began.

Fighting bare knuckled, Sullivan drew first blood with a blow to Morrissey's nose, and in the early going Sullivan easily controlled the fight. By round three the odds had gone 2 to 1 in favor of Sullivan. By round four, Morrissey's cheek had become so swollen that it had to be lanced to reduce the swelling. Sullivan's hands were sore and puffy.

As the fight continued, Morrissey's face was so horribly mangled that, according to a report of the time, "ladies recoiled in disgust." Blood poured out from his lanced cheek, his eyes, nose and ears. Morrissey did score a stunner in the ninth round, catching Sullivan in the neck, and by the tenth round the tide turned momentarily. But seasoned fighter Sullivan knew how to counter the punishment. After every blow he fell to one knee, which automatically ended the round and giving the aging fighter a rest. Rounds eleven through fifteen went by quickly under this counter tactic. Morrissey became infuriated with Sullivan's delaying action and, at one point, squeezed him into the ropes, leaving deep burn marks across the older man's back.

In rounds twenty through twenty-seven, both men were reopening old wounds and both went down frequently as punishment and fatigue took their toll. Sullivan rallied with the frequent rests, and, at the start of round twenty-eight, Morrissey took a drink of liquor that seemed to restore his energy as well. By round thirty-five both men were so beaten and cut that only those in the front rows could distinguish between the two.

The climax came in round thirty-seven, although exact reports of the incident vary. Throughout the fight there

were moments when seconds and supporters of the two fighters jumped into the ring to mix it up with their rivals. Most accounts tell of such a donnybrook occurring in the thirty-seventh round after Morrissey pinned Sullivan to the ropes and held his throat.

During the melee, which saw both fighters pouring punches into their rival's supporters, one Morrissey backer half chewed off Sullivan's ear, and the bloodied fighter ran out of the ring. When the dust was cleared Morrissey was found crawling around the ring, but Sullivan was nowhere to be found. Referee Allire lifted Morrissey off the ground and declared him the winner, just as Sullivan came rushing back to ringside shouting that he was ready to continue the fight. Allire remained adamant, stating the Sullivan had failed to toe the mark when the round was announced, and the whole place looked like it was about to erupt into a giant brawl.

Allire took off fearing for his life, and a \$2,000 purse in gold coins was withheld pending investigation of the outcome. The entire fight had lasted 55 minutes.

As the mob poured off the hills, they descended on the Boston Corners station to await the southern train from Chatham running back to New York. The train engineer, however, realized the crowd was beyond the capacity of his train, and he ran through Boston Corners without stopping. The unruly mob was left on its own to wend its way home by varying routes. When the two pugilists finally made it back to New York, they were almost immediately arrested and

were detained for a short while.

As reported earlier in this article there were differences in the reporting of the climactic thirty-seventh round in which Sullivan was said to have had half his ear chewed off. This may have been the reason for his leaving the ring, or he may have just departed the ring for safety.

However, "ear chewing" must have been a common fighting tactic in those days. This was demonstrated by another fight taking place in New York City during the following week. On October 15, in the Gem, Mr. Awful Gardner, who had served as a second for Morrissey, became "exasperated" according to the *New York Times*, over remarks by another pugilist, William Hastings, better known as "Dublin" Tricks. Voices were raised in fierce argument over the outcome of the Boston Corner affray, and an irate Gardner pinned Tricks to the barroom floor where he proceeded to chew off Tricks' lower ear, and spit the morsel out on the floor. Several other skirmishes ensued, and the Gem's bar was destroyed. Two days later, an alert New York policeman nabbed Gardner as he was about to board a boat for Jersey City. The last heard of him was when he was held on \$1,000 bail in New York City's Sixth Ward Court.

Sullivan soon after moved west with the gold rush and died three years later of questionable causes after being rounded up and jailed by vigilantes in a sweep of suspected lawbreakers.

Morrissey enjoyed a quite different fate. Using his connections to rise through the corrupt Tammany Hall government, he served and died as a state legislator from Saratoga, N.Y.

In 1855, New York State accepted Boston Corners into its jurisdiction, and the lawlessness of the area cleaned up quickly. Prize fighting remained illegal in many states for years to come. Other venues were sought and during the later nineteenth century there were reports of great prize fights being rejected by various states — only to take place on ocean-going barges or in such foreign countries as Mexico and Cuba. But none had the notoriety of that great brawl at Boston Corners. 🍷



An open field served as the stage for the fight. benches were reserved for a few well-to-do members of the audience. the rest of the mob stood and every tree in the vicinity was filled with children



HAIL COLUMBIA

A WORLD IN WHICH MUSIC ABOUNDS

By Joan K. Davidson

Editors Note: Joan Davidson is President of Furthermore Grants in Publishing, Former Commissioner, Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation and is a Board Member of our Society. She lives in Germantown..

Our own revered historian, Franklin Ellis, whose voluminous *History of Columbia County* was published in 1878, took note of music in these parts as early as 1799. The occasion was the death of George Washington on December 26, when Capt. Nicholas Hathaway's Company of Infantry "with Arms Reversed and Musick Muffled and Shrouded" played in the president's honor. It's a safe guess the program included *Hail Columbia!*, America's first national anthem, although the words had been written only one year earlier.

In 1824, Ellis records the Columbia County musical presence on another grand occasion, when "the Hudson City Guards, the Scotch Plaids, and the Hudson brass-band" steamed south to Clermont to greet the visiting Marquis de Lafayette and escort the illustrious guest north to Hudson.

A splendid organ (still extant) that Ellis tells us was installed at the Vedder Church in Gallatinville in 1872 confirms the importance of religious music for Columbians, and we learn a great deal about local music education from his observation that Claverack College and Hudson River Institute boasted no fewer than twenty-eight music rooms in 1878. Elsewhere, we learn, concert per-

formances had their place.

The elegant auditorium in the 1854 Hudson City Hall had mainly to do with lectures, but not long after the Civil War, on a pleasant June evening in 1866, the celebrated soprano Mme Marietta Gazzaniga gave a "grand operatic concert" there. "Nothing that we have ever heard" the concert review read, "was more effectively beautiful than the marvelous correctness and sweetness of all her efforts last evening, and the enthusiastic reception... showed how securely she had won the hearts of her audience".

Columbia County's heart, it seems, has always been won by music and is so still. Especially in the summer months, the county jumps with music — music in its manifold forms, in every sort of venue, and thanks to many hands — all across the expansive local landscape. Bluegrass and folk music belt out across the fields of Ancram and Copake,

country dance and square dance rhythms pulsate out of county grange halls, jazz charms the night in intimate watering holes in the towns, and the heavenly strains of chamber and choral music float out from our beautiful churches.

Famous musicians, you ask? — Alexander Bloch, conductor of the National Symphony and other well-known orchestras, died in Hillsdale in 1981 (having lived there some 100 years). In the early part of the twentieth century Mabel Mercer had a house here; and, sad to say, Ella Fitzgerald spent time (as a sixteen-year-old "juvenile delinquent") in the forerunner of today's Hudson correctional facility. Among us now? How about the Guarneri Quartet's Arnold Steinhardt, jazz legend Sonny Rollins, the pianist Lincoln Mayorga, singer Mindy Jostyn, and composers Richard Robbins and Harold Farberman

for starters? Many high-level professional music organizations based in New York City regularly share their cultural riches with Columbia County residents, while local groups that may never have ventured far from home produce riches in their own backyards.

The much-loved Flag Day parade in June turns Hudson's Warren Street into a musical feast and celebration of local heroes. Bands from far afield join in — from the Quantico (VA) Marine Band to the Rhode Island Navy Rock band — joining with local talent that includes firemen's and high school bands, community drum and bugle corps, and the venerable Ghent Brass Band.

Jazz singer Natalie Lamb has kept Dixieland throbbing here with an annual Columbia Jazz Festival. The Winterhawk and Falcon Ridge popular concerts have become extravaganzas, attracting thousands — complete with chairs, blankets, picnics, and beer — to these festivals under the stars. And every Sunday from the Shiloh Baptist church — and now from the new Jubilee Restaurant in Hudson too — rousing gospel music gets feet tapping.

Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and their classical brethren are welcomed throughout Columbia County as they long have been. Harpsichordist Andrew Appel and the brilliant Four Nations ensemble perform concerts of baroque music in private houses — and barns as well. Until the money ran out, they also performed memorably in our local schools. The Whitcomb Foundation presents recitals by young artists in a magnificent house with a dazzling setting



A 19th-century impression of a Fourth of July parade.

overlooking the Catskills. And indigenous groups — Philmont Chorus, Hudson Valley Choral Society, and Clarion Concerts among them — offer a broad range of classical music in area churches, ambitiously presenting Carmina Burana and the Mozart Solemn Vespers. Kathy Folkers and Ardal Powell, flutists and music historians, not only perform but also make classical flutes and write books on music.

And increasingly, the avant-garde is migrating to Columbia County — 32B, the new recording studio, has set itself up in Germantown, and new music composers are gathering in Hudson.

and the beloved Nowell Sing We Clear Singers.

In this shining panoply of music, a jewel shone brightly for fifteen years and has now — not for long we hope — burnt out. Gwen Gould's Columbia Festival Orchestra brought us wonderful American music — under a big tent — until financial woes forced it to close down this year.

It isn't easy for arts organizations — or for working people either — to manage in the current economic world, but amazingly, major new efforts keep getting launched.

The Pleshakovs, roaring in from Russia, Shanghai, and

Columbia County's heart, it seems, has always been won by music and is so still.

The steadiest diet of music for Columbia County people is provided by established institutions that grow stronger every year. At the center of things is the venerable Hudson Opera House, home to lively events of every kind with a strong emphasis on music recitals. Farther north, in Kinderhook, the North Pointe Cultural Arts Center is a hotbed of arts activities for old and young, including concerts and music lessons. Farther east, Tannery Pond in New Lebanon puts on superb chamber music concerts in the lee of the Shaker Museum. Chatham boasts the Mac-Haydn Theatre, with its rich mix of stage events, as well as the Blue Plate restaurant where, along with delicious food, jazz and folk songs are served up each week. To the east, the Spencertown Academy presides over a sparkling program of plays, art exhibitions, and a rainbow display of music, including Celtic, flamenco, klezmer, raga, and regional stardom as exemplified by Jay Ungar and Molly Mason, Tom Paxton,

Stanford, have set up a music center smack in the middle of Hudson's Warren Street, turning classical music into a kind of daily bread — and a healthy thing it is! Exciting music events make up much of Hudson's signature Arts and Winter Walks and pop up around the county where you'd expect to find them — and in unexpected places too: at the indispensable TSL, the Basilica, the Plumb-Bronson House, Simons General Store, Steepletop (Edna St. Vincent Millay's house), Art Omi, Hawthorne Valley School — and who knows where they'll pop up next?

As summer 2004 approaches, the Hudson River Regional Festival plans to bring us not only historic ships for the river but outdoor music for the streets of Hudson, organ music for the churches, and jazz, bluegrass, and the big band sound for our new waterfront park.

So — as the lordly Hudson does — let the sound of music and the good times roll! ♡

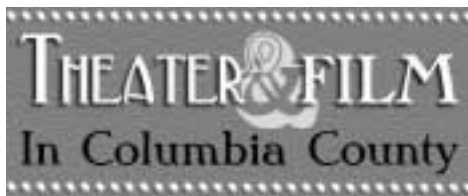
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THE HUDSON OPERA HOUSE

In the beginning,
the building was
intended to be
the City Hall...

By Jim Hamilton

The building at 327 Warren Street in Hudson might present a small problem in identity to a stranger to the area. Clearly, the metal plates on either side of the main entrance state that this is “The Hudson Opera House”. However, the words incised into the sidewalk in front of this entrance just as clearly say, “City Hall”. To further confuse this stranger, the street that runs along the side of the building is called “City Hall Place”. Well, we Columbia County residents know perfectly well that this is the Opera House. City Hall is elsewhere in Hudson.

In the beginning, the building was intended to be the City Hall, and, in early 1854, a city hall building committee was formed which received permission from the state to spend more than \$12,000 on the new building. The city then purchased three lots on Warren Street and removed the buildings from these lots. The architect chosen for the final design of the new City Hall was a young Hudson resident, Mr. Peter H. Avery, who worked closely with Mr. J. T. Waterman, a member of the building committee. In June 1854, bricks and lumber were purchased, and the following month, ground was broken. The city acted as its own contractor, but bids were submitted by three “boss carpenters”. The bid of Mr. A. Calkins was accepted at \$12,975.

Construction went ahead in good order except for some minor mishaps. A small fire resulted in one room where a stove, which was placed to keep plaster from freezing, became overheated and set nearby clothes and a barrel on fire. No other damage occurred. A “new patent” ventilator blew off the roof, but damage was slight.

Overall, the cost of the building, including the masonry work, by a Mr. Berrage, has been variously reported to be from \$27,000 to \$35,000. Similar buildings were on a par with this range of cost. This was at the time when dwellings in the city were being constructed for \$300 to \$1,000 with most at less

than \$1,000. Masonry homes were more highly priced, up to \$5,000.

Finally, on January 2, 1855, the new City Hall was opened, and The Franklin Library Association had speakers lined up for the next two months. The first was “one of the most popular authors and elegant speakers of the day: George W. Curtiss”. Today, no one remembers Mr. Curtiss. However, some of the names are still familiar: Bret Harte, Henry Ward Beecher and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Unfortunately, Mr. Emerson, who



The splendid facade of the Hudson Opera House in 1880.

was scheduled to speak on February 9, telegraphed that he was stuck in a snowstorm, and was unable to appear. Bitter winters in Columbia County are not just a recent phenomenon.

These lecture series were very popular at the time, and were held on the second floor, which was designed for entertainment with a stage and an area for seating. The room was intended to accommodate 2,000 persons. The majority of the seats were portable so that they might be removed and stored when balls, church fairs and similar activities requiring open space, but minimum seating, were held.

The first floor held the city offices, rooms

of The Franklin Library Association (which was responsible for the events held on the second floor), the City’s Police Court, Common Council Chamber, as well as four stores. The building as a whole occupied 13,000 square feet, divided equally between the two floors.

The lecture series continued to be well received until after the Civil War. As the more exciting speakers had been fostering the anti-slavery cause, it was natural, since the issues had been settled, that interest in the lecturers was no longer there. However, City Hall continued to offer entertainment on the second floor including boxing matches, school events, musical concerts and minstrel shows.

In the 1880s, the term “Opera House” began to be used. An item from the *Hudson Register*, January 1882, stated that the net receipts of a ball held by the Temperance and Literary Society at the “Opera House” was \$155.04, and that this was the “largest sum ever turned into the treasury from a ball in this city”.

So Hudson now had an Opera House, although, precious little operatic music was ever performed there. The practice of re-naming city offices and theaters to opera houses had been common for some time all over the country. In September 1873, the Rochester Democrat, bemoaning this practice, wrote, “Why are there so many opera houses and so few theaters, particularly as there is not one opera house out of a dozen that knows the difference between opera and a small beer!” However, this was the Gilded Age, and anything that tended to add class to a city, or any other area, was welcome. To claim to have an opera house was about as classy as one could get.

In the latter years of the 19th century, the activities at the Opera House continued with plays, both drama and comedy, minstrel shows, musical presentations and anything else requiring a stage and seating for an audience. Some of the names of the groups that

performed are vaguely familiar: the Swiss Bell Ringers, Christy's Minstrels (not the New Christy Minstrels, a modern singing group), and Barry & Fay, Irish Comedians

Minstrel shows were very popular at this time. An intriguing advertisement was placed in the *Hudson Register* for the appearance at the Opera House, on June 17, 1882, of "Duprez and Benedict, Famous Gigantic Minstrels and Military Uniformed Brass Band... Over \$6,000 Worth of Elegant, Rich and Extravagant Brilliant Costume Wardrobe is used..." Tickets were 25 to 35 cents.

Into the Twentieth Century, various first floor tenants came and went. Among them were: Hudson Post Office, First National Bank of Hudson, Hudson Police Department, Elks Club, and others. However, the entertainment continued as strong as ever. It has been reported that trial runs of plays destined for New York City were held at the Opera House. People, whose names are familiar to most of us, appeared there on their way up: Milton Berle, Pearl Bailey and Bing Crosby among them. However, by the 1940s, the use of the second floor had ceased, perhaps following a condemnation for building violations. The building was sold to the Moose Lodge after the city offices had moved in 1962.

So Hudson now had an Opera House, although precious little operatic music was ever performed there.

During the 1970s and 1980s, private owners bought the building. Unfortunately, nothing was done to maintain or repair it, and for many years, it continued to deteriorate. Finally, when it had sat idle, with several feet of water in the basement and more coming in through the roof, to forestall possible demolition, a group of local citizens was formed, Hudson Opera House, Inc. (HOH). In 1993, this group purchased the building for \$50,000.

By 1997, sufficient funds had been raised to open the first restored area, the West Room. Since then, restoration has steadily continued on the first floor, and, by September 2002, HOH had succeeded in completing Phase I of the rehabilitation plan. Phase II will restore the upstairs auditorium.

To anyone who believed that it was unproductive to save this dying building, the results of the work of HOH have proven that the impossible can be achieved with dedication and hope. HOH and their board, volunteers, donors, and certainly not the least, Gary Schiro, Executive Director, and his aides, Joe Herwick and Christine Calise have succeeded in establishing a remarkable cultural and educational center in our midst.

Even with the second floor auditorium unavailable, many concerts have been held by groups as diverse as Desperado Bluegrass, Four Nations Ensemble, Columbia Festival Orchestra and many others. Educational programs include workshops and classes in Tai Chi, Watercolor, African Dance and Drumming. Altogether, many hundreds of cultural programs have been presented. Also, HOH has presented art exhibits, readings, and lectures (going back to the roots). The largest and best known undertaking, with the most public participation, by HOH is "A Winter Walk on Warren Street" held on the first Saturday of each December.

One hears people commenting on how Warren Street has awakened and come to life in just a few years. If they ask why, it is HOH that has driven these changes, which will continue, and Warren Street will only get better. ♡



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THE ELEPHANTS OF GHENT

By Mary Faherty-Sansaricq

Just imagine... the year is 1933. It's late at night. There's a soft fog lingering in the low-lying valleys. The train-whistle sounds and the train from the Harlem division of the New York Central slowly pulls into the quiet station in the tiny hamlet. A large boxcar opens up and three huge elephants are guided off the car past the freight house. The elephants don't need to be prodded. They are very familiar with the station. They have just returned from their last show at the Palace Theatre, and they laboriously begin the slow walk home along the dirt road that leads to their barn.

carnivals, and small circus shows throughout the 1930s and 40s.

When they weren't on the road working or in the barn rehearsing, the elephants would be staked in a field behind the farm near a hill to graze on grass. Children from Ghent and Chatham would come to visit the elephants, and there are still some folks who remember the experience as if it were yesterday.

Dorothy Goold Losee recalls seeing Adele, costumed in rhinestones and brown velvet shorts, spinning somersaults between the legs of the elephants to the great enjoyment of the audience, and she vividly remembers riding on the backs of the elephants at the farm with her brother Gordon. Indeed many children at the time were

Three elephants, named Myrtle, Tillie, and Jennie, lived and trained with Adele in the big barn on the farm on Harlemville Road.

Are these theatrical pachyderms returning to their training camp at Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey or are they spending the winter in some zoo? No! They're walking on the Harlemville Road to one of the least known theatrical venues in Columbia County — the Adele Nelson Elephant Farm in Ghent, New York.

Adele Nelson grew up as a member of a famous circus family from the state of Michigan called *The Nelsons*. They performed in various carnivals and vaudeville theatres throughout the country, combining acrobatic feats with trained show elephants.

Adele met and fell in love with Lew "Pa" Reed, a hunter/adventurer, who made his living by traveling to India to capture elephants for zoos and circus shows throughout the world. Together, with her two sons from a previous marriage, Adele and Lew made Ghent the home of the Adele Nelson Elephant Farm.

Three elephants, named Myrtle, Tillie, and Jennie, lived and trained with Adele in the big barn on the farm on Harlemville Road. The elephants performed at various locations and events from Maine to Virginia like the Palace Theatre in Albany, state fairs, firemen's

overjoyed to go see the "elephant show" in Ghent.

A story is told of how during one hunting season, a hunter became separated from his companions on the hill behind the elephant farm, and suffered quite a shock when he happened upon an immense elephant in an area he thought was only populated with whitetail deer.

The elephants were so well known around the county that one day, after a particularly wet spell, the truck of John Berninger got stuck in one of the muddy ruts or sink holes that covered the Harlemville Road on the busy route to the Ghent train station.

A call for help went out, and Adele came to the rescue with one of her elephants who just picked up the truck by the back bumper and pushed it out of the ditch and sent it on its way to town.

Adele Nelson and her elephants are no longer here, and the train station in Ghent is gone, but the memory still lingers in the hearts of some grown-up children about the time when there was an elephant show in Ghent. 🐘



Elephant Farm, Ghent, NY 1933. Left to right: Bob Crosby, Adele Nelson Reed, Lew "Pa" Reed, Dorothy and Gordon Goold up on Myrtle and Jennie.





Elephant Farm, Ghent, NY 1933. Left to right: Helen Goold, Jane Berninger, Bob Crosby, "Pa" Reed, Myrtle, Tillie and Jennie.

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CORNERSTONE OF COLUMBIA COUNTY

By Barbara Peduzzi

Editor's Note: Barbara is the Assistant Producer at the Mac-Haydn Theater and has been a leading light since its inception.

The history of theatrical ventures in the Chatham area is long. The Crandall Theatre started out as a vaudeville house in the 'roaring 20s'. Cady Hall, above Main Street stores, drew traveling and area troupes when the audience traveled by horse and wagon to view their acts. The old Malden Bridge Playhouse produced many enjoyable shows, and started Barbra Streisand on her way to superstardom.

But the most successful and long lasting theatre in Chatham, indeed in all of Columbia County, is The Mac-Haydn Theatre, and it is to this popular and unique place that the cur-



"42nd Street" makes actors and audience alike want to jump for joy, with its dynamic tap-dancing, well-known songs and happy story of the small town girl who hits the big time. (Mac-Haydn Staff Photo).

knew that this area was without any such entertainment, and thought it would welcome Broadway shows, close to home and professionally produced. The two drove back roads for miles around, until a family friend suggested the Chatham Fair Grounds. Some floor scraping and dressing room painting, auditioning and rehearsing later, The Mac-Haydn Theatre's premiere opening night brought the stage lights up on "My Fair Lady".

This was in 1969, when starting a theatre was a brave new idea, and two women starting one was even braver and newer. The venture, done on a 'let's just do it for a summer, instead of driving to Alaska' thought, had so many people asking "Are you going to do this again next year" that they decided to try it again. And again and again, until now Artistic Director/Producer Lynne Haydn is gearing up for the 36th season.

The Mac-Haydn started on a shoestring and in a cow barn, and went on to prove that the area could and would support good theatre.

rent abundance of entertainment in the area owes its base.

The Mac-Haydn started on a shoestring and in a cow barn, and went on to prove that the area could and would support good theatre. Founders Linda MacNish and Lynne Haydn met in New York City, where Ms. Haydn was an aspiring actress and Ms. MacNish was writing and producing way-off Broadway shows. A mutual love of musical theatre, and the strong desire to foster this individually American theatre form, led to talk along the lines of the classic "Let's find a barn and put on a show!"

Ms. MacNish had grown up in Spencertown and Austerlitz. She



The cow barn that housed the Mac-Haydn Theater in 1969.

Linda MacNish passed away in 2002, from complications of diabetes. When asked if the theatre would continue without her, the answer was, "It would not be right to her memory to do anything else".

Their early 'theme song' was "The Impossible Dream", which became and continues to be a reality. Mac-Haydn has come a long way since those tentative beginnings. They have moved about half-mile up the road to their own home, on a hill looking over the village of Chatham. From about ten actors and a couple of technicians putting together six shows that first season, the staff has grown to over



“Will Rogers Follies” is as much fun as the name suggests, with tap-dancing, great songs and lots of laughter telling the story of that great entertainer’s life. This is from the rousing “Campaign Song” (Mac-Haydn Staff Photo).

fifty professional performers, directors, designers and tech staff who come to Chatham to present seven to eight main stage and four children’s theatre shows each summer.

The performers are both widely experienced professionals and young hopefuls looking for the experience and resume credits they need to move forward in their careers. If you came to shows on the fairgrounds, you might have seen a talented 21 year old named Joe Lane — he has grown up to be Nathan Lane, Tony award winning star. Many others who got their start singing and dancing on the theatre-in-the-round stage here have gone on to Broadway, TV and movies, tours and regional theatres. Chatham native Monica M. Wemitt just finished four years in a feature role in Disney’s “Beauty and the Beast”. Lovely Paige Turco most recently held a leading role in “The Agency”. Many more are ‘working in the business’ and any theatre person will tell you that in itself is success.

The performers rehearse one show during the day and perform another at night, opening a new production every two weeks. The tech staff puts in hours and hours working on the costumes, the sets, the music, the lights, the sound to put the show together with the high standards that people come from miles away to see. They are young and eager to learn and perfect their crafts, and they love it. People return to The Mac-Haydn Theatre year after year, “Because it feels like family. Chatham feels like home”. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Mac-Haydn can glow with pride that the



Tour groups in busses, season subscribers who enjoy every show from the same seats all summer, and patrons coming to just one performance fill the parking lot and eagerly enter The Mac-Haydn Theatre for a Sunday afternoon matinee. (Photo by Andrew Gmoser).

county is now a center for the arts, with numerous theatres of many types, galleries, antique centers and more, and it all began when two women had an impossible dream and put it together in a cowbarn in Chatham.

Starting again in late May, busses will roll up the driveway, cars jostle for parking spaces, volunteer ushers show people to their seats, the lights go down, the music starts, the lights come up and the laughter, applause and appreciation begin for The Mac-Haydn Theatre, cornerstone of theatre in Columbia County. ♡

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A DREAM THAT NEARLY CAME TRUE: A VICTORIAN MUSIC PARK IN COLUMBIA COUNTY

By Jim Eyre

In the beginning

We all have dreams for great success, fame and riches, a string of Jaguars, becoming the President of the United States, becoming the world's greatest author — you name it. Too few of these dreams come true. This is a story, however, of two young men and a dream they pursued to an unfortunate end. They wanted to own an opera house of their very own and they did.

John-Peter Hayden, Jr. and Donald Richard Chapin are cousins who shared a devotion to operetta from the days of their youth. Mr. Chapin once described operetta as “a kind of light opera for the layman that flowered in the Victorian era.” Hayden and Chapin, in their late twenties by 1966, had become successful businessmen, working in New York City, ensconced in that city's young society, and planning their vacations in Europe around operetta performances. In that same year they led an ad hoc citizens committee in an ill-fated effort to prevent the razing of the Ziegfeld Theater and save it for light opera. The theater was lost but, the Ziegfeld Guild lived on as the Gotham Light Opera Guild.

Hayden and Chapin's dream was to own a small opera house with living quarters where they could stage private performances for themselves and their friends. This was

hardly an easy thing to find. But the chance came in January 1970 when a 100 seat grange hall in Ancram, New York was advertised for sale. The pair were in Vienna at the time but hurried home. Even in the cold and bleak winter setting they found Ancram charming, so they pooled their resources. By May 1970 they became the owners and had taken up residence in the grange where they lived for 18 months as restoration began. Electric heat had been quickly installed, but living area and sleeping space were separated by only a stage curtain and they enjoyed a far from conventional bathroom.

But their dream grew much larger. As they became more familiar with the small town and its 19th-century architecture, they had a new vision. They would buy and restore aging buildings and turn the town into a Victorian music park — a place for people to visit and enjoy operetta at its best and between performances, stroll beneath grand old trees in newly constructed and landscaped gardens.

The Ancram Restoration

Being an industrious and gregarious pair, it was not long before their scheme included not only the grange which became The Ancram Opera House; but Simon's General Store, built in 1874 and needing heavy reconstruction; Dr. Oliver's residence which would become an Inn and restaurant called Oliver House; the Johann Strauss Antheum, a former church turned bowling alley and

now to house exhibits of operetta memorabilia, and provide space for film and concert programs; and finally the old Livingston mansion to be renamed “Vauxhall” after an 18th-century park in England and become Messrs. Chapin and Hayden's private residence. The grounds were to be reshaped and a large pavillion from the Henry Astor estate in West Copake installed. The Gotham Light Opera Guild would be relocated from New York City to Ancram and officed at the Johann Strauss Antheneum.

The young impresarios touted their program as a “new concept in historic preservation.” The buildings would be restored to function as closely as possible to their original use, and in every case to house profitable enterprises that would provide taxes to the town. Ancram residents were encouraged to make restorations on other historic buildings in anticipation of a new prosperity that the park would engender. Income from Hayden/Chapin partnership projects would accrue to the partners for their lifetime, but upon death both property and its income would perpetuate as part of a non-profit foundation.

When the restoration of the buildings was well underway, The Columbia County Board of Realtors presented the pair with its Make America Better Award “for their contributions to the beautification of their community and their dedication to Making America Better.” In 1974 Arnold Gingrich, Founder and President of *Esquire*, personally



The restored Ancram Opera House c. 1977.



Donald Chapin and John Peter Hayden in front of Simon's General Store.

presented them with the magazine's prestigious "Business and the Arts Award" as winners of an international competition which included 200 nominees.

The financing for all of this, according to Mr. Chapin, was accomplished by "hard work, wise investments and good luck" and by the fact that the two men "got out of the (stock) market in 1970 before it dropped." Economies in reconstruction were realized with the two acting as architects. The work was done by local artisans augmented by imported German carpenters.

A Dream Come True

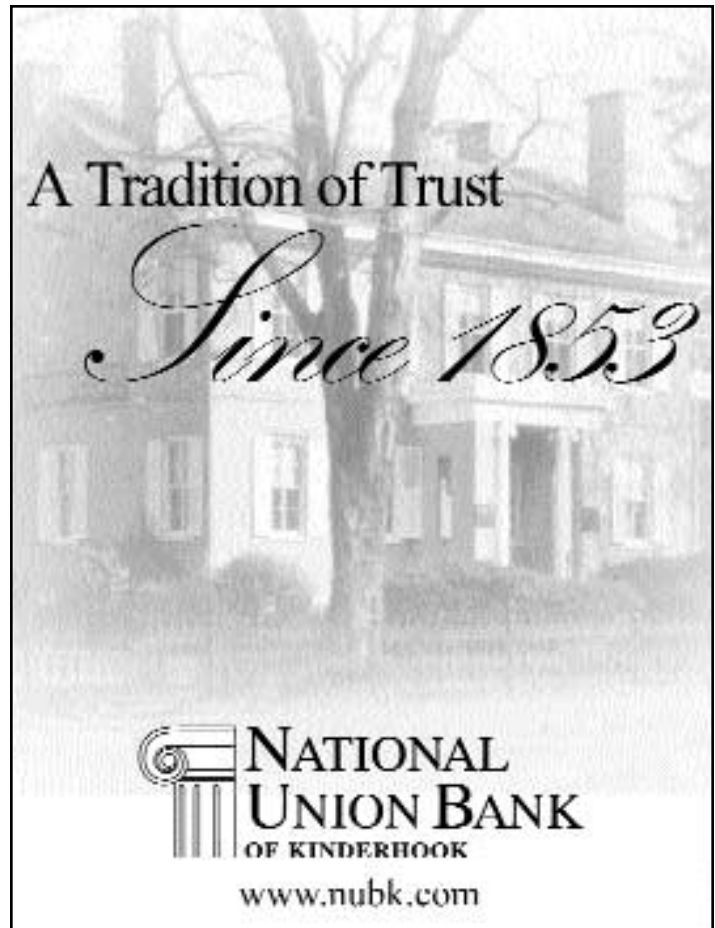
On Nov. 20, 1971 the main floor of the Simons General Store opened for business. Restoration on the Inn and the building to house the museum and guild were soon to follow. The bowling alley attached to the front of the 1855 St. Janes Methodist Episcopal church became a theatre, and the church behind was resurrected and, with a newly donated organ, offered Roman Catholic and Episcopal services

By mid 1972, 7,000 people had visited the Johann Strauss Antheum (Operetta Museum) and in May of 1973 the Ancram Opera House opened its doors to a Grand Ball. White and black tie formal attire was called for, and elegant dress became the norm for future gala performances and special private functions. By 1975 Ancram had seen two Christmas extravaganzas running from Thanksgiving through the third Saturday in January. House windows were lit with single candles and it seemed the whole town was afire with white lights. Live concerts with top opera stars were performed at the antheum and later at the Opera House. Films such as *Naughty Marietta* and *The Great Waltz* were shown to packed houses — and so it continued throughout much of the year.

The *New York Times* reported that 10,000 visitors came to Ancram in the winter of 1974 to witness the Christmas observance. *Family Circle* magazine devoted an entire issue to the Ancram Victorian Christmas. *Travel & Leisure* wrote a feature article called "Americana, Plain and Fancy." Regional inns such as the Beekman Arms in neighboring Rhinebeck, the Suisse Hutte in Hillside and the Lakeville Inn were kept filled with overflow guests from the Oliver House. Ancram and the Hayden/Chapin project had become famous. To keep it famous the two partners started their own newspaper, *The Ancram Standard*, which grew to enjoy a circulation of 35,000.

The Dream was Over

As is true with so many dreams, clouds appeared on the horizon. What had started as a small private endeavor had turned into a "big time" enterprise. New exploits such as this usually take a goodly time before profits are turned. This one had grown fast — perhaps too fast. A venture in neighboring Ancramdale — an attempt to mimic the Ancram project — had gone bankrupt. This failure had received untoward attention in the press — reported in newspapers in New York City, Boston and as far afield as Pennsylvania. The bad publicity cast a shadow over the popular Ancram scene and attendance fell off sharply. As the business had grown larger and larger so had costs. High costs preceded income, and payments to providers slowed. Creditors began to worry and press for payment. It was time to reassess, and the partners chose to close down their operation for the 1978 winter season, fully expecting to reopen in the spring of 1979. There were indeed problems, but, they were surmountable with proper planning and if people would just have patience.



As a solution, the partnership, now called Ancram Restoration, Inc. filed for bankruptcy under Chapter 11. This was a purposeful action. It was a petition filed for time to raise \$1,000,000 and to include properties not already included in a not-for-profit foundation eligible for federal and state grants as well as private, tax deductible contributions. But creditor pressure continued and with a lack of operating funds and the need for restoration of two newly optioned properties the end was inevitable. Realizing that "the cards were stacked against them" the partners withdrew and reluctantly chose to cease operations. On June 29, 1979 Attorney Penn Stuerwald, acting as referee, announced the sale at auction of the six parcels of real estate that were the properties of Ancram Restoration, Inc. Sadly, the dream had ended. ♣



The Opera House interior after restoration, April, 1975.



THE OPERA HOUSE LIVES ON

By Joan Arnold

Editor's Note: Joan Arnold, a former dance and fitness teacher, is a certified yoga instructor and Alexander Technique teacher with a private practice in N.Y.C. Also a freelance writer, her features on a range of subjects have appeared in national magazines. www.alexandertech.net.

When I first saw the Ancram Opera House, I was thrilled by the prospect of owning an intimate theatre with a beautiful old maple dance floor. In a charming, rural setting, the building was constructed in 1929 by the Ancram Grange. Since then, the community and its owners have put it to an array of uses. I bought it in February, 2002, and when I walk around the building, the walls are vibrant with public history and personal memories.

In 1980, when John Peter Hayden and

the Opera House.

While working at *Publisher's Weekly*, Melina came to Ancram on weekends to the house near Ancram's town center that she shared with writer Leanne Schreiber. Originally from South Carolina, Melina had come to New York City, MFA in hand, to be a theater director. As an actress, she had found some success in the commercial world and off-Broadway, but not as a director. While in Ancram, the Opera House just up the hill immediately captured her attention. The theater was unused, and Melina spoke to Rinny about putting on a play there, "just to see if anything would fly."

She staged "A Couple of White Chicks Sitting Around Talking," casting herself and another New York City actress. "With the help of a friend who was a carpenter," she says, "we built the set on this tiny little stage

season — from April to December — culminating in a children's holiday show. Miraculously, the company ended each year in the black. People came from Albany, Poughkeepsie, Greene and Dutchess Counties, from Connecticut and Massachusetts, to see dramas, comedies or musicals. Plays included: "Painting Churches," "Pump Boys & Dinettes," "Cahoots," "Smoke on the Mountain." Some productions moved on to the Egg in Albany, a real theater with a real budget, providing unprecedented income for the company and its actors.

Rinny was thrilled with the arrangement. "The theater took off," she says. Audience members browsed in her studio during intermission and bought her pottery. "My best friend took over the concession stand downstairs. For me and for the theater, it was a golden time."

**I have never lived in a building so alive with voices
of the past, and I feel buoyed up by the town's
affection for this historic little theater.**

Donald Chapin's Ancram restoration adventure had failed, a young couple, Rinny and Dick Staber, heard that cheap properties were available. Dick, an accomplished folk musician, saw it as a place where he could perform and his wife Rinny could build a ceramics studio. They bought the place for a song and moved in with their two children. Dick would use the theater for musical performances and Rinny created a studio in the basement and used the outdoor shed for her kiln. They renovated the top floor from an empty shell to a charming living area with a kitchen and three bedrooms.

Dick could not make a go of his hoped-for concert series, Rinny recalls from her present home in Naples, Florida, "so we closed off the theater and gave great parties there". "Then my marriage went under, and my alimony was the Opera House." Now managing the building on her own, she needed help in managing the expenses. That opportunity came when a stranger came to watch her at work, and introduced herself. That was Melina Hering, who proved to be the force that shaped the next few years at

and borrowed very rudimentary lights." The run of the performance completely sold out the 100-seat theater.

"We got lots of attention in the local press," Melina says, "and the next thing I knew, people started asking for the name of the company. I'd answer, 'Well, it's really just one play.'" Realizing that a directing job in New York was not on the horizon, she decided to quit her magazine job, move to Ancram full-time and start a theater company. She chose the name Leap Productions, apt for a venture that required a giant leap of faith.

Melina installed bathrooms in the basement and created an area for the audience to circulate during intermission. She raised money and rewired the theater, upgrading it to 400 amps, expanded the size of the stage, created proper wings backstage, purchased lighting and partitioned the basement to accommodate dressing rooms and a scene shop.

In the fall of 1989, the Opera House doors opened to Leap's first performance. For five years, this little company in a rural hamlet with no restaurant or trendy bed and breakfast did four or five plays in an astoundingly long

Every year during Leap's tenure, Melina would choose the program for the season, start her fund-raising and rehearse one show while another was running. "When I look back on it," she says, "I can't believe I was able to keep all those balls in the air. If I had a trust fund, I'd still be doing it. I had a wonderful time."

That era came to an end when Rinny moved to Florida to care for her aging parents. Melina was burned out and ended Leap's memorable run, returning to New York City and a job at Advertising Age. Ultimately, Rinny sold the building to carpenter Larry Healy, a single dad who used the theatre to coach his daughter to become a basketball star.

I have never lived in a building so alive with voices of the past, and I feel buoyed up by the town's affection for this historic little theater. I hope to shore up its flaws and brighten its façade. Next summer, I'll be using it to teach yoga classes and workshops.

I'm grateful to be in a place that so comfortably holds creative energy in its seasoned, weary embrace. 🍷



GHEENT'S PLACE FOR ENTERTAINMENT

By Calvin Pitcher, Town Historian

Making the Town House into a Playhouse

The 110 year-old Town House (later to be called Town Hall) sits opposite a pond with two decoy ducks and a firehouse, and across from what was formerly the local post office. The look is serene. But, don't be misled. Those walls have echoed with loud talk, music, laughter and fun right from day one. Built in 1894, the buildings original purpose was to provide a meeting place for town officials.

But even in the early years it was seen as a community center that might be used for a variety of purposes. Politics and entertainment often find a common ground. So it took no time for the town board to allow the building to be used by local groups for events and functions that would further entertain area residents. It became the hub of Ghent, bustling with activity. For example gathering there were the Ghent Hunting and Fishing Club to play volley ball, the Ghent Fire Company for meetings and sport, the Boy Scouts, 4-H Club, The Ghent Mothers Club and the ever popular Ghent Band.

Confirmation for the concept that the town hall was indeed a site for community entertainment came in 1915 when approval was given to build an addition that would house a stage. By March 1917 the scene was set for part of a century's worth of performances culminating in the transformation of the hall into a full-time theater.

And Now the Shows Begin and Players Begin to Play

No complete record exists of all the activities

that have taken place on the town hall stage, but oral history tells us they were many and varied. In March of 1916 a local group presented *The Fruit of His Folly*, a minstrel played to a packed house. In November of 1933 the Town Board rented the hall to Gibbs Vaudeville Show for three days. This was no doubt one of many such touring shows common in the 1920s and 1930s. In March 1954, the Ghent Fire Company held their 4th Annual Minstrel Show there and quite possibly the prior three.

In 1974 and just out of college, Debby

es and their request was approved. So with bold strokes of imagination and daring, dinner theater in Columbia County was born.

It was a great idea except the new troupe had no money, no stage, no props and no costumes. No problem! Hold a bake sale to raise "seed" money. Then send plucky entrepreneur, Jayne Hester, to Columbia Greene Community College and Ulster Community College for help. Wow! She walked away not only with a stage and lighting equipment but arrangements for a truck and driver to deliver the goodies.

The fledgling troupe's first production was a presentation of three one-act plays. A combination of fine performances by the actors, the technical lighting expertise of Hy Miller, luscious cooking by the Clover reach kitchen and Camille's skillfully designed costumes resulted in a smash hit. From that evening the CCP has never stopped growing, expanding, and sharing their talents and love of theater with the community.

Finding a Place to Play

It wasn't easy. By the end of the 1970s they had most of the essential

elements but no stage of their own and no permanent home. So they took to the road playing on stages such as those at the Hillsdale Masonic Lodge or the Spencertown Academy. They played in restaurants, at backyard picnics and birthday parties — you name it — throughout Columbia County, the Catskills, and the capitol region. And, they survived.

As early as 1985, Barbara Perry — a major spear heading force behind the Columbia Civic Players and then the organization's president, approached the Ghent town board for permission to use their Town

Ghent's Place... continued on page 25




Old Ghent Town Hall c. 1940.

Miller, Camille McComb and Jayne Hester were three young roommates who all loved the theater. There was no theater company in all of Columbia County at that time. They wondered what they could do to express their love of acting and performing. Brainstorming and taking matters into their own hands, one of them suggested: "Let's put on a play!" And so, it began. Welcome the Columbia County Civic Players!

The newly-married Debby and her husband, Hy Miller, were members of the Clover Reach Country Club. The couple approached the club's board about using their facilities to hold theatrical performanc-

"Let's put on a play!" And so, it began.
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News of the Columbia County Historical Society

President's Letter continued...

Tour. Although the historic houses are closed for the winter, they are still centers of important activity. Archeology has been completed at the Van Alen house and actual construction will begin when the weather breaks. In anticipation of that moment, the furnishings are being removed and, with augmentation, will be the basis of a Museum show in the spring. Our window restoration project at the Vanderpoel house moves toward completion. Most importantly, we have embarked on the complete rewriting of our Long Range Plan to set forth directions and goals for the Columbia County Historical Society in the 21st century. We are developing exciting plans for the years ahead and we look forward to sharing them with you.

Stephan M. Mandel
President
 Board of Directors

ARCHEOLOGY AT THE VAN ALLEN HOUSE



Hartgen Archeological Associates, Inc., with project manager, Matt Kirk, spent several weeks at the Van Alen House site in Kinderhook in October and November of 2003 excavating in pre-selected locations to determine the extent of previous land use and occupancy on the property. This work was commissioned by the Society in preparation for the regrading project that will take place on the site in the fall of 2004. Read more about this work in the next issue of CCH&H.

One of the test excavations in front of the Van Alen House. Photograph courtesy of David Lee.

Our Mission

The Columbia County Historical Society is a private, not-for-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of the history and culture of Columbia County for its residents and visitors.

It is the Society's goal to encourage understanding, knowledge, and preservation of the county's heritage through the acquisition and conservation of historic lands, buildings, objects and documents, and the sponsorship of research, publications, exhibitions, and educational programming. To help achieve its mission, the Society owns, maintains, and interprets to the public, buildings and collections of historical significance, and operates a museum that includes exhibition galleries and an extensive research library.

THE SOCIETY NEEDS YOU

The Columbia County Historical Society depends upon volunteers to help it in its many endeavors. We are seeking individuals with experience and interest in any of the following areas to contact the Society and volunteer their time and effort. Don't hesitate to contact us even if you think that your background is not suitable. We can explore with you our needs and your interests to determine how best you can help us.

If you are skilled in typing and/or inputting materials into computers, you could help us manage and catalogue our collection. Museum or archival experience would be helpful. Please call Helen McLallen, Curator, at 758-9265. She will be happy to discuss in more detail the type of assistance needed and what is required.

We need people who have an interest in either writing or presenting educational programs to help the staff Educator in this important outreach effort. If you have an interest in developing such programs or working with students, please contact Ruth Ellen Berninger, Educator, at 758-9265.

Finally, the Society can use help handling a wide variety of tasks in its library and office at the Museum in Kinderhook. If you would like to assist us in these areas, please call Sharon Palmer, Executive Director, at the telephone number shown above.

Join us at the opening of the second phase of Around Columbia County on March 26, 2004, from 5:00 — 7:00 p.m. This year long exhibit features the towns of Ancram, Copake, Gallatin and Taghkanic and features artifacts from the agricultural and industrial history of the region including slave documents, Taghkanic baskets, cider press, school trustees record book, and a photographic display of historic markers. Come gain new insight into the towns by meeting the historians, looking at the objects and reading through the notebooks they prepared. Town historians Clara Van Tassel, Ancram; Gloria Lyons, Copake; Dolores Weaver, Gallatin; Nancy Griffith, Taghkanic, worked with Columbia County Historian Mary Howell and CCHS educators Ruth Ellen Berninger and Carla Lesh to create this collaborative exhibit.

We plan to invite historians from the towns of Austerlitz, Canaan, Hillsdale, and New Lebanon to participate in 2005, while Claverack, Greenport, the City of Hudson and the Village of Philmont will be invited in 2006. Stockport and Stuyvesant in 2007, with Chatham, Ghent, Kinderhook, the Villages of Chatham, Kinderhook and Valatie rounding out 2008. The exhibits provide museum visitors with a unique look at the county, towns and villages through artifacts in private collections supplemented by those in the CCHS collection.

Columbia County History & Heritage is interested in hearing from you — if you have articles, pictures, or other items about Columbia County history and cultural heritage suitable for publication, please let us know. The Editorial Board will review all submissions, and all submissions considered for publication are subject to editing. We regret that we cannot guarantee publication.

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THEATER & FILM In Columbia County

THAT MAGNIFICENT GHENT BAND

By Gregg Berninger

Though a latecomer to Columbia County's band community, The Ghent Band has survived over half a century longer than any other community band in the county and marches on today as healthy as it was in the year of its founding, 1899. In that year fifteen men gathered up some old second hand instruments and prevailed upon the conductor of the Chatham Band, Frank Waltermire, to conduct weekly rehearsals at the old Ghent schoolhouse. With the exception of the World War II years, the band has been thrilling audiences of parades and concerts both near and far ever since.

One of the early obstacles the band overcame was finding a permanent conductor. In a 1958 interview, Milford Teator, a founding member, recalled, "It was so many years ago I can't remember the year but I know we wanted Jake Isenhart of Philmont as a band leader. Jake was willing but he had no means of transportation to get from Philmont to Ghent and return. It looked like we were stymied but Will Southard, a member of the band, came up with a thought. He told Mr. Isenhart he would give him a horse and Jake quickly assented to join the band."

Shortly after 1900, members of the Ghent Band bought lumber and built a band stand by the brick hotel, the Bartlett House, in the center of town. This structure stood until 1949 when the band moved to the platform on the grounds of the Ghent Firehouse. In 1984 the band moved to its current home, the grounds of Ghent VFW Post #5933, on the gazebo dedicated to the band.

The first of what would become many jobs outside the town of Ghent came in 1900 in the hamlet of Red Rock when that community celebrated its 100th anniversary. Legend has it that the band's seats were placed right on top of the rock. Fifty years later at Red Rock's 150th anniversary two

members who played at the 1900 commemoration, Milford Teator and Brad Wagar, performed. In 1975, at the 175th anniversary, Raymond Ringer, who played with Teator and Wagar in 1950, played and is still playing today. With such long serving members, it's no wonder that the band has lived for a hundred years.

"THE NIGHT WAS
IDEAL FOR A
BAND CONCERT..."

For over eighty years the Ghent Band's August home has been the historic bandstand on the village green in Kinderhook. The warm reception the band always receives there keeps them coming back. A newspaper account dated July 1, 1925, describes that upcoming season of joint concerts.

"The concerts this season will undoubtedly surpass those of other years, as the band will have the same personnel throughout the entire season, every member of which will be a trained musician and ranking with the best in the country on his respective instrument. The band will be a consolidated affair con-

sisting of all the best and most experienced members of the noted Ghent band, George W. Tracey and all the best players of the Kinderhook band and Professor Gustave Rapp, the noted composer and band instructor and clarinet virtuoso of Hudson."

"The consolidated bands will have three band leaders among its players. They will be C.W. Vincent, leader of the Ghent band, George Tracey, leader of the Kinderhook band and Prof. Rapp, of Hudson, who is the leader of the famous Atlantic Mills band. C.W. Vincent, leader of the Ghent band will be conductor, and he is well equipped for this important musical position, as he is universally recognized as being one of the best conductors in eastern New York and can wield the baton with the best professional conductors."

One newspaper account pegs the attendance of that years August fifth concert at 3,000. Another newspaper item dated September 9, 1925, details the season's ninth and final concert and lends a clue as to why people traveled from so far and wide to hear the band.

"The night was ideal for a band concert and as all seemed to style it the best concert of the series. It was a fitting climax to the best attended and most satisfactory series of band concerts yet held on the band stand, and great praise has been given to members of the Ghent band for the fine musical talent displayed by them in the series of concerts just ended. The only 'outsider' as it were in the band

Saturday night was your humble servant and I considered it a high honor to have been able to play with them during the 1925 season. Each member of the band is a Ghentite to the manner born, and they do everything in their power to further the interest of their beautiful village. They are always ready to donate their services for any occasion where the music of a band would attract or help, manifesting at all times



The Ghent Band in 1927



The Ghent Band today.

a spirit of civic pride that is commended on every side.” The noted, late and aforementioned prominent conductor and musician George W. Tracy of Kinderhook wrote this stirring tribute.

Many of the pieces the band plays today were also played in the early part of the twentieth century. John Phillip Sousa’s *King Cotton*, John N. Klohr’s *The Billboard March*, and the band’s signature march, E.E. Bagley’s *National Emblem*, were all a part of the 1925 season and are still performed regularly today.

Much of the Ghent Band’s fame stems from its parade appearances, which have taken the band from Lake Placid to Northern New Jersey. The band’s juggernaut energy has allowed it to sometimes play more than one job during a day and even march through the same parade twice. On one occasion, the band played for a Fireman’s Convention in Hudson during the day, and then marched in a Catskill celebration that same night. The band made the trip across the river from Hudson to Catskill on a launch. It was a case of “walking all day and half the night,” in the words of the late Milford Teator.

In October of 1958, the band was on hand to celebrate the opening of the Berkshire Spur of the NYS Thruway, and in 1971 at the Welcome Home Celebration for Vietnam Veterans in Ghent. In January of 1999 they helped send off then freshman Congressman John Sweeny to Washington D.C.

The Ghent Band still performs from spring to autumn much as it did before the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century – and for the same reasons: to bring relaxation, fun and enjoyment to its listeners, and to carry proudly on the time honored musical ideals of the 15 original members. 🍷

Ghent’s Place... continued from page 21

Hall facilities and was turned away. However, it wasn’t long before the town government needed more space. And in 1987 town officials decided to move their offices to the vacated Old Ghent School. A public hearing was called asking for community suggestions on the future use of the Town Hall they had left behind. By a stroke of luck Barbara Perry was the only person attending the meeting and a deal was soon struck. They had found a permanent place to play.

By the summer of 1988 the CCP was ready to move in. It was hot — hot. — hot! But players and friends dove into the renovations. Under the paneling and suspended ceilings they were delighted to find surfaces superb for acoustics. The apron of the old stage had been covered with formica having served as a counter in an official’s office. It was happily restored to its former use. Floorboards were removed uncovering original foot-lights with tin reflectors. Some things were tossed, but much more saved.

As the rehab work was taking shape, Barbara Perry was busy conducting rehearsals for the theater’s opening show. Due to the extent of the restoration work, the opening had to be delayed. However, just after the New Year, on January 13, 1989, the curtain went up on Carnival. The show enjoyed a two week run in its new home. All six performances were played to a capacity crowd, which sat on wooden chairs loaned by the Ghent Fire House — a long time friend and champion of the troupe.

In the years that followed, more comfortable movie theater seats donated by the Hellman Theater in Albany have been installed and recently upholstered. Another improvement is that the last four rows were placed on raised platforms to create better sight lines. The theater now boasts a well-equipped lighting booth, as well as a beautiful outdoor sign designed and donated by friends. It is a happy place, and things get better and better for this hardy and talented group. They want me to ask you: “to come to see them sometime”! 🍷



Nick (Fred Gibbons, left) and some of the patrons of his San Francisco waterfront honky-tonk gather together to inspect the acrobatic monkey toy purchased by Joe (Nick Miscusi front right). More than 20 characters walked, strutted, and staggered on and off stage during the ambitious, critically acclaimed production.



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Book Review:

THE ROOSEVELTS AND THE ROYALS:

FRANKLIN, ELEANOR, THE KING AND QUEEN OF ENGLAND AND THE FRIENDSHIP WHICH CHANGED HISTORY

By Dr. Will Swift

By Jim Eyre,
editor of Columbia County History & Heritage magazine

Sarah Bradford (biographer of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Queen Elizabeth II, King George VI and soon Lucretia Borgia) calls *The Roosevelts and The Royals*, “Fascinating!” A well researched study of the relationship between the American presidential family and the Windsors which was a key component of Anglo-American friendship during World War II. Dr. Swift is the first to concentrate on this unusual subject with such a wealth of sympathetic detail.” Hugo Vickers, official biographer of Cecil Beaton and author of a biography of Prince Philip’s mother Princess Alice, calls it a “splendid work.”

Given the tight Anglo-American alliance of the twenty-first century, it is hard to fathom how frayed British-American relations were in the 1930’s. Americans, particularly in the heartland, felt hostile and suspicious toward Britain. While some East Coast Americans had continuing and deep feelings of kinship with the English, many ethnic groups, including Irish-Americans and Jews, saw the British as part of an elitist and class-conscious Europe they had come to America to escape. Americans were suspicious of foreign allegiances and entanglements of any kind, bitter about the costs and results of the last world war, and resentful about Britain’s failure to pay war debts. By 1939 the resulting isolationism was deeply entrenched in the United States, especially in the Midwest, where many mainland European immigrants had settled after fleeing monarchies and dictatorships.

As war in Europe began to look inevitable, the British initiated a massive propaganda campaign to win America to its side. The June 1939 state visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth to Washington, New York City, and Hyde Park was a crucial component of that crusade. Although such personages as the Duke of Windsor, Ambassador Joseph Kennedy and aviator Charles Lindbergh were expressing awe over German military might, President Roosevelt initiated the royal visit in order to sway public opinion toward supporting England in the upcoming war. The centerpiece of *The Roosevelts and The Royals* is the precedent-shattering picnic that the president and his wife hosted at FDR’s estate in Hyde Park, New York where George and Elizabeth delighted in eating hot dogs for the first time, not only signaling their accessible style and their accommodation to

American ways but cementing Anglo-American relations at a dangerous juncture.

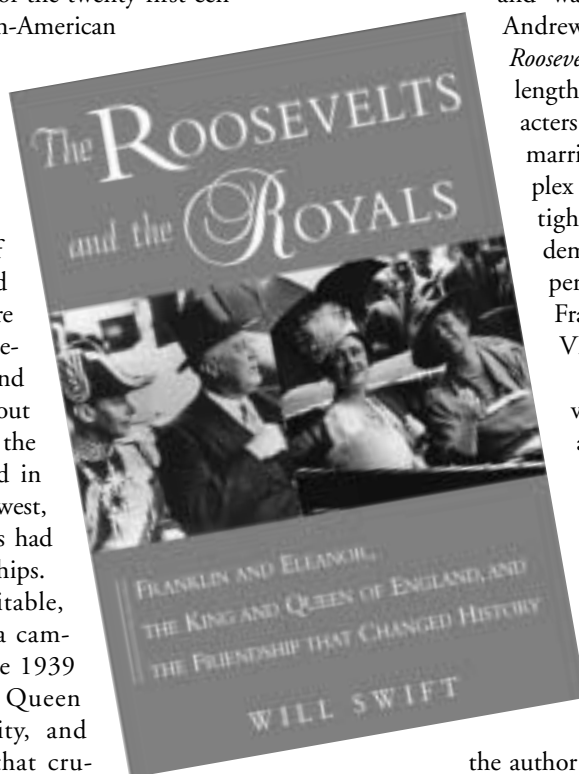
Previous historians have treated the royal visit and the Roosevelt-Windsor connection as a mere footnote to history. For the first time, Dr. Swift vividly demonstrates the importance of that visit in developing Britain and America’s “special relationship” and in the eventual creation of President Roosevelt’s “Lend-Lease” program. He shows how the two couples worked together to help save democracy.

Above all, the book is a joint biography of the Roosevelt and Windsor dynasties. It shows how the relationship between the two families, begun in the early 1900s when Teddy Roosevelt befriended King Edward VII, continued through Eleanor Roosevelt’s close bond with the king and queen after FDR’s death, and was revitalized last year when Prince Andrew spoke at the FDR Library. *The Roosevelts and The Royals* is also the first book-length study of these four complicated characters and their intriguing radically different marriages: the Roosevelts’, spacious, complex and quite modern; the royal couple’s, tight-knit, traditional and simple. It demonstrates the similarities between the personalities of Queen Elizabeth and Franklin Roosevelt and that of George VI and Eleanor Roosevelt.

The book is based on exclusive interviews with the Roosevelt grandchildren and on previously unpublished letters of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Elizabeth II, the Duke of Windsor, and the Duke of Kent found in the FDR Library and the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. Publication of the book was supported by the Queen Mother, who in the last months of her life, gave

the author quotations about the Roosevelts. Her private secretary, Sir Alistair Aird, was an enthusiastic advocate for the book as well.

The Roosevelts and the Royals reads more like a novel than a standard history. It is written in a lively and engaging style making it an extremely enjoyable reading adventure for biography lovers, history buffs and scholars. It should be available and on display at your neighborhood bookstore and a limited number of copies will be offered for sale at the Columbia County Historical Society Museum in Kinderhook. 🍷





SUMMER STOCK IN MALDEN BRIDGE

The following article is based exclusively on material gleaned from issues of The Chatham Courier spanning the years 1931 until 1962. The author especially wants to thank the current editor of the Courier, Babbette Ryder, and her staff for making these available to him.

For over 30 years the quiet hamlet of Malden Bridge was the site of a vibrant, professional summer stock theatre. Performances were held in a century old theatre/barn, which had been converted from a factory for this purpose. Initially founded as an all female theatrical school, this soon became a full-fledged summer stock theatre with experienced actors and actresses from New York, Chicago, Boston and other places performing there. In addition, the theatre each year had a number of apprentices who came to learn their skills, a couple of whom went on to future fame.

In the July 2, 1931 issue of the *Courier* it was announced that "A school for the teaching of theatre technique will be added to Columbia County life, Monday, when the Berkshire Theatre Workshop will open at Malden Bridge under the management of Ms. Adele Hoes Lee and Emily Patee Neitsche." This self-styled "dramatic workshop houseparty" consisted of 22 young ladies, "many with stage experience". The announcement went on to state: "It is the purpose of the management of the school to render several dramatic productions during the summer, these to be staged as soon as the course of training has progressed to a point satisfactory to the heads of the school." Later that year the group gave at least two series of performances, one of Edna St. Vincent Millay's "The King's Henchman" and later a drama called "Gypsy Fires", which was staged at the auditorium of the Chatham High School. The performances that season, other than the one in Chatham, were performed out-of-doors as the theatre/barn had not yet been converted.

In announcing the 1932 season, several changes were noted. First, all productions would be indoors in the new theatre. This building now had a lounge on the first floor along with dressing rooms and a scenery storage room. The second floor consisted of an auditorium seating approximately 250. Also, the new building had been re-named the Nell Gwyn Theatre and the road leading to it was then designated Drury Lane. Finally, the student/performers now included men as well as women and seven or eight productions were tentatively scheduled for that year.

The Nell Gwyn theatre continued in operation until after the 1941 season, when it closed for the duration of the war. In 1942 Mr. and Mrs. Walter Wood purchased the theatre/barn.

In 1946 the theatre was reopened. The name was changed from

the Nell Gwyn Theatre to Malden Bridge Playhouse. The new theatre was managed and operated by a group of veterans of WW2, headed by Walter R. Martini, a former corporal in the Marine Corps. It was also announced that Eunice Osborne (Mrs. Walter Wood) of Chicago and Malden Bridge would direct the productions. She would be assisted by Bill Stigall, another WW2 veteran, who had just then been appointed to the staff of the Goodman Memorial Theatre in Chicago.

The theatre/barn had also been refurbished. As set forth in the June 27, 1946 issue of the *Courier*:

"The Malden Bridge Playhouse is being extensively remodeled. In the old days, patrons of the Nell Gwyn Theatre will remember, the only way to reach the balcony was by climbing [a] perpendicular ladder into the former hayloft. Now a new door has been cut and an outside staircase makes arrival at the balcony far less precarious. A door has also been cut at the main floor level opposite the entrance to the Playhouse. The fire law requirements have now been met."

In announcing the new additions to the Malden Bridge Players, the *Courier* noted that among them was Shelley Berman, "...formerly of the Navy, a versatile young actor who will play many varying roles." In subsequent reviews, the *Courier* was less than effusive in its appraisal of his performances. In one production it noted that Mr. Berman's part was only "above par". A later review stated only that there was "satisfactory" support by Shelley Berman. However, the review of his final performance that season, as well as his final appearance with the Malden Bridge Players, said that "Shelley Berman went

from the sublime to the comic as the school principal." This obviously foreshadowed his subsequent career as a comedian, not an actor.

In 1951, the barn/theatre was once again refurbished. Additional toilets were added and new box seating was set up. The latter, according to the *Courier*, consisted of folding, bridge chairs.

Although not great stars, the actors and actresses appearing at the Malden Bridge Playhouse were professionals from around the country and had prior stage experience. A core group seemed

to come back in the summers year after year, among whom were Paul Broussard, Arthur Gorton, Betty Parker, Robert Hartman, and John Hale. Indicative of the experience of such persons, the *Courier* noted



The theater building as it appears today. The large addition at the rear of the building is the stage that was affixed in the late 1950s.

Summer Stock... continued on page 28

Summer Stock... continued from page 27

in 1957 that John Hale had appeared in Kraft Theater productions during 1956 and 1957, worked with Elia Kazan on "Face in the Crowd", starred in an off-Broadway play that season and directed another off-Broadway show. In the case of John Hale and Paul Broussard, in addition to acting, they sometimes directed productions during the period from 1946 until 1952. Later each of them became a full-time director of this theatre.

Eunice Osborne continued to direct most productions up until 1952. Representative of the almost universally rave reviews by the *Courier* is the following comment on a production of Noel Coward's "Hay Fever":

"It is rather difficult to review or criticize a group of players such as this one. Difficult because they know their jobs, what is expected of them, and then jumping in and giving a splendid performance. They all seemed to be getting a lot of fun out of their work, and this spirit infected the entire audience...We are fortunate in having such a splendid company in our midst, headed by such an able and experienced director as Eunice Osborne Wood."

Paul Broussard succeeded Ms. Osborne as primary director for the Playhouse in 1952. In 1954 he purchased the entire site from Mr. and Mrs. Wood.

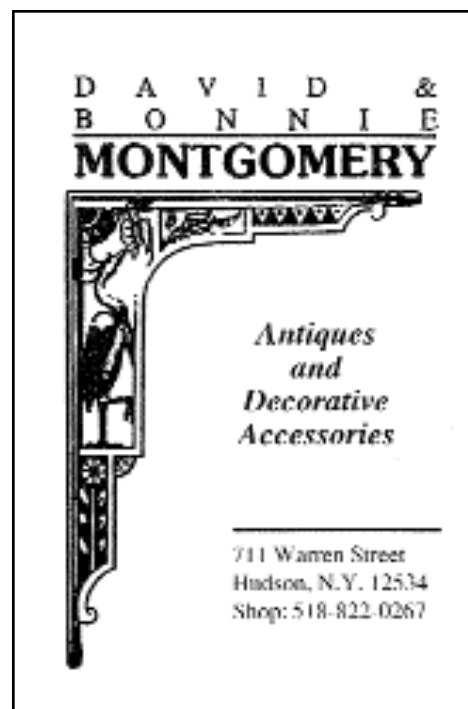
During the 1957 season, Barbara Streisand (she later shortened her name to Barbra) apprenticed with the Malden Bridge Players. She roomed that summer with Ingrid Meighan who remembered her roommate as having "...a wonderful sense of humor and was more of a comic than a serious actor". The *Courier's* review of Ms. Streisand's first speaking role in "Desk Set" was that "...Barbara Streisand turns in a fine performance as the office vamp — Down boys!" She appeared in minor roles in a couple subsequent productions that year but never returned to the Malden Bridge Playhouse.

The actors and actresses at the Playhouse generally resided in the

lodge across the road from the theatre/barn. This lodge was formerly the primary factory for the Hoes Pump Works, which occupied this site from the mid-1800s until the around 1919. Not only was this the residence for most of them during their summers in Malden Bridge, this building also served as a rehearsal hall and place where costumes and scenery were created and refurbished. Not all of the actors lived in the lodge, however. Some lived in "...prefabricated chicken houses which have arrived through the mails and been turned into admirable cabins". (In the 1970s the lodge burned down, but the chicken house/cabins can still be seen opposite the theatre/barn, which is now occupied as a home.)

The Playhouse was incorporated at the end of the 1957 season and the grounds and theatre were enlarged. A new stage building was added to the original barn auditorium, a new canteen area was built, the parking lot was expanded and additional seating was arranged, bringing the total seating capacity to nearly 300 seats. In the *Courier's* review of the first play that season, "Visit to a Small Planet", the new accommodations were favorably commented upon "...the transformation from a cramped, antiquated barn into a comfortable, well designed and beautifully decorated theatre rates four stars, in fact, it's heavenly."

Heavenly or not, the Malden Bridge Theatre appears not to have operated for the next two seasons. Although a tentative schedule of productions, a new stage director and a call for new apprentices appeared in the *Courier* in early 1959, there was no subsequent mention in the paper of either the theatre or any plays during 1959 and 1960. A season of six comedies, however, directed by Paul Broussard, were presented in 1961, again to universally rave reviews. For instance, in the review of "Marriage Go Round" it was noted, "Let it be said at the outset that the new Playhouse cast is the most mature, capable and outstanding group of young men and women to grace the stage of Columbia County's only summer theatre." Yet, after that season the Malden Bridge Playhouse ceased to exist, the theatre/barn was darkened, and was subsequently converted in the mid-1960's to an art school and later a home. Hence, three decades of summer stock in Malden Bridge came to an end, "not with a bang, but with a whimper". 🍷



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Germantown Neighbors Association mission statement

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Film and Theater around the County

Editor's Note: In this issue we are using this section in an attempt to identify on-going entertainment throughout the county. We will surely overlook many fine programs extant in the county. Names mentioned are those we came across while researching other articles. In many cases performance schedules were not yet solidified at the time of this printing. However, we will try to tweak your imagination and give you a few numbers to call. The county has many stages, and you can be the audience.

Chatham

The Mac-Haydn Theatre Read the article on pages 16–17, but it does not tell it all. This summer stock theater has brought truly professional showtime to its audiences with more than 300 productions, and has furthered the careers of close to 1,000 talented performers. In addition it has developed a program for young people with original musicals based upon famous children's stories and fairytales written by staff professionals. At the time of this printing, the list of shows for 2004 had not been determined, but last year you could have seen: *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamboat*, *Smokey Joe's Café*, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, *Sugar Babies*, *Always... Patsy Cline*, *Hello Dolly!*, *The Secret Garden*, or *State Fair*. To find out what's in store for this year call: 392-9292 or visit www.machaydn.org

The Chatham Film Club Chatham has its own film club, started in 1998, and a small but important film festival founded at the behest of the Columbia County Council on the Arts and held one weekend every October. In 2001 Columbia County's James Shamus, who has produced "Sense and Sensibility" and "The Ice Storm" brought Ang Lee's "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" to the Film Columbia festival for a pre-release first screening. The next year the national premier of "The Pianist" took place at the festival. In 2003 films like "Pieces of April", "Fog of War" and "The Barbarian Invasions", took center stage in Chatham before they were released to the general public. Producer James Shamus brought "21 Grams" to the festival for a sneak preview. For information call 392-1162 or visit www.filmcolumbia.com

Copake

The Copake Theater Company (CTC) Formed in 2003 by a group of artists led by Producing Director Liv Cummins and Musical Director Christina Dellea the CTC plans to host plays, musicals and musical variety shows, as well as educational events and workshops. Their first presentation in December 2003 was "Tales From the Hoot" which Upbeat magazine heralded as "very funny — a personal tour de force." Already in February 2003 they have staged "Nine Months" a one-woman comedy starring Elise Dewberry and there is lots more to come. To find out what, when and where check out the following; Telephone: 329-2506, or visit www.copaketheatercompany.com

Germantown

The Four Nations Ensemble Founded by Andrew Appel in 1986 the group brings together soloists who are leading exponents of period instrument and vocal performance to present great music from the Renaissance through the Viennese classical masterpieces of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Four Nations has earned a leading presence on the early music scene in Columbia County and across the country. They last performed in Rhinebeck at the Church of the Messiah in February. For information call 537-5379 or visit www.fournations.org

Ghent

The Columbia Civic Players/The Ghent Playhouse Reference is made to the story entitled "Ghent's Place for Entertainment" on page 21 which tells the history of this energetic and accomplished group. Playing at the old Ghent Town Hall, now their own private theater renamed the Ghent Playhouse with 102 seats, the players present an ever widening range of shows, offering a complete theatrical medley — from musicals to drama to comedy. For instance, the 2003-2004 season was started off with Steven Dietz's "Dracula," and followed in the fall by Steven Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life". This past winter audiences enjoyed the celebrated Noel Coward comedy "Private Lives." Beginning March 19, 2004 and running through April 4th, the playhouse will regale audiences with the beloved Gilbert & Sullivan show "H.M.S. Pinafore" followed by the very popular "Nonsense". To find out more and save the best seats call 392 6264 or visit www.ghent-playhouse.org

The Ghent Band Read the article *That Magnificent Ghent Band* on pages 24–25 in this issue to discover the unique and proud history of Columbia County's most celebrated band. Today the band plays many of the same jobs they've been playing since the earliest days: Kinderhook & Ghent Concerts, Columbia County and Hudson Valley Firemen's conventions, the Chatham Fair Parade. Keep an eye out for them and listen to some fine marching music. The band is always at the ready to play at special occasions. Call ken Wilber at 392-2688.

Hudson

TSL (Time & Space Limited) Opened at 434 Columbia Street in Hudson, in 1991, it has become a most important space for films, performances, exhibitions, open forums, and community commitment. Founders Linda Mussman and Claudia Bruce have no fear of controversy or confrontation. Emphasizing personal, political and experimental points of view, TSL creates opportunities for artists and activists to address the issues of the times. Mussman exclaims: "the stage has just gotten bigger — first a room — then a building, and then an entire city". Should we add the whole world?

Of a broadside of an art exhibit named SHOUT just recently closed there on March 1, Timothy Cahill, Staff writer, wrote: "The bracing fact of SHOUT, the exhibit now at Time & Space Limited in Hudson, is that in many countries the show would be illegal and the artists in it subject to arrest". Hail TSL for its vigilance and courage.

What next — you may ask. Call 822 8448 or visit <http://timeandspace.org>

StageWorks StageWorks, Columbia County's only professional Equity theater company, was founded in 1993 with a mission to provide opportunity, venue and a home for professional and emerging theater artists in the community, while at the same time offering exceptional productions and programs to the county and its neighbors. It has done just that.

StageWorks administers four primary programs:

- Mainstage, which produces a season of professional Equity productions.
- NewWorks, showcasing professional and emerging playwrights, actors and directors.
- KidsWorks, which includes SummerStage, a four week long summer theater arts pro-

Film and Theater around the County

gram for children, and Theater Arts for School Kids, an arts-in-education program currently in collaboration with Questar III and their Incarcerated Youth Program at the Columbia County Jail.

- Share the Stage, an outreach program providing access to our programs and productions for both traditional and nontraditional local residents of all ages and backgrounds. Share the Stage conducts a Mainstage Internship Program and has partnered with Olana to present the Mettawee River Theater Company in a free outdoor performance for the past three years.

Based at the North Pointe Cultural Arts Center since 1998, the company is now positioned to develop their own permanent home in the former Kaz factory building opposite Hudson's Amtrak station. They expect to announce their 2004 production schedule in the very near future. For further information contact them at 828-7843 or visit www.stagework-theater.org

Kinderhook

North Pointe Cultural Arts Center With doors which opened in January of 1997 this organization provides the community with programs in music, theater and visual arts. The focal point is their Concert Hall seating 160 whose surfaces reverberate with romantic, baroque and renaissance classical music, as well as jazz, swing, show tunes and contemporary favorites by world-renowned talent and aspiring artists. Below in the Coffee/House Meeting Room on Friday nights one can enjoy the music of folk, jazz and blues musicians from comfortable chairs with candle-lit tables. One can also find music teachers, dance instruction, and art exhibits there — all under one roof. On April 18th there will be a children's program, "The Mother Goose Jazz Band" followed on April 24th by the solo and chamber music repertoire of pianist Simone Dinnerstein in the Concert Hall. In the Coffee House on April 16 you may hear from Steve Gillette and Cindy Mangsen, a team of singers, songwriters, and musicians performing with guitars, concertina, banjo and fiddle. On May 7 one can enjoy the powerful and compelling voice of John Rossbach. They say he can lift you with the lilt of an old time mandolin melody, rivet you with a lowdown slide-guitar blues and fire you up with a diving banjo breakdown! WOW! Contact them for details about other programs at 758-9234 or visit them at www.northpointe.com

New Lebanon

The Theater Barn Entertainment still lives in New Lebanon today thanks to the Theater Barn incorporated in February of 1984 by Joan and Albert Phelps. Located at 564 Route 20 it has produced 170 shows in the past 20 years inclusive of large and small musicals, comedies, mysteries and musical revues. The Theater Barn is a non-union professional theater seating 134 that uses actors, directors and musicians who audition in New York City and locally. The Theater hosts eight different shows a year from mid-June to mid-October with performances Thursday through Sunday. Last year's shows included such dandies as "Fame Takes a Holiday," "Natalie Needs a Nightie," "Same Time Next Year" and "Chicago." They say that the quality is top notch. To find out about this year's schedule call 794-8989 or visit www.theaterbarn.com

Spencertown

The Spencertown Academy The Spencertown Academy is a cultural center presenting art and craft exhibits as well as arts-related workshops and classes. It is also known for its first-class entertainment. Its 140 seat auditorium is used to present classical, folk, jazz, and traditional concerts; storytelling and poetry/prose readings; small theater pieces; puppet shows and movies. A sampling of their 2004 schedule includes The Carpentier Quartet presenting classical music with a Latin flair on April 17; Jonathan Bass on the piano on May 22; a poetry reading by John Ashbery on April 24; a childrens program featuring Steve Charney and his friend Harry with their surprising, clever and funny magic tricks on April 16. Then there will be the Academy's monthly film series for 2004 entitled An Antidote to War, which begins on Mar. 4th with Stanley Kubrick's "Paths of Glory" starring Kirk Douglas. However, the highlight will be the Academy's third annual festival of documentary film, The film Eye: Documents and Explorations, which will be held April 30th through May 8th. For added information about the Academy's extensive schedule we urge you to call 392-2693 or visit their website www.spencertown.org 🍷



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THEATER & FILM In Columbia County

VALATIE'S OPERA HOUSE

By: *Dominick C. Lizzi*

Editor's Note: Mr. Lizzi is Valatie's Village Historian and the author of Governor Martin H. Glynn: Forgotten Hero. His work in progress Valatie: The Forgotten History has reached first draft status. He is also a member of this magazine's Editorial Committee.

All that's left of the Valatie Opera House, once the entertainment center of Northern Columbia County, is a raised grass mound on the north side of Upper Main Street just up from the corner of Mechanic Street. But for almost sixty years, beginning in 1879 when a referendum sanctioned it, the Opera House was a popular destination. On performance nights the village and its many Main Street stores and taverns were filled with theater goers.

In about 1900, the village chose as manager Harry C. McNamara, a young man who began booking popular acts of the day as well as the new silent films. Touring and local theater companies often filled the house; minstrel shows, which were the rage of late 19th-century America, drew crowds as well. Surviving accounts show a full range of productions held at the hall.

New York State Governor Martin H. Glynn, considered one of the nation's foremost orators and a Valatie native, the day before the presidential election of 1916, gave his famous "He Kept Us OUT Of War" speech to over 1,000 people crowded into the Opera House, a venue designed to hold 800, while another 1,000 lined the streets. The speech, originally given at President Woodrow Wilson's second nomination convention in St. Louis, was the source of Wilson's anti-war

basketball games and boxing matches were also booked into the Opera House. When local Valatians boxed, the House was filled with fans cheering for their hometown favorites.

By 1926, the glory days of the Opera House were over. Harry C. McNamara moved his operation to the new Valatie Theater he had built further down Main Street. However, the Opera House continued to be used for sports, dances and other social activities. Local churches and Fire departments rented it for their events.

Around 1933, the Opera House, now badly deteriorated, was demolished. Although the Opera House is gone, the Village of Valatie is restoring the Valatie Theater at 3031 Main Street with the hope that it will take the place of the Opera House of the past. With the help of several govern-

But for almost sixty years, beginning in 1879 when a referendum sanctioned it, the Opera House was a popular destination.

Valatie, in establishing its Opera House, followed the example of nearby Kinderhook Village and other rural communities across America in the last decades of the 19th century. With a population of 1500, the village fathers felt the need for a venue for public entertainment, public meetings and government functions. The First Presbyterian Church whose congregation had built a new edifice on Zion Hill was secured as the new theater.

The town was prosperous enough to support an Opera House: one of the earliest mill villages in the United States, its cotton textile industry produced much of the wealth for northern sections of Columbia County. These mills, established around 1820, replaced the early grist and lumber mills of the late 17th century. With a paper mill, the work force numbered about 550 people, most of whom, along with their families, shopped on Main Street which boasted shops of every type from dry goods, clothing, grocery, drugs to hardware and supply houses for tradesmen and professionals. The Valatie Opera House would become the gem, symbolizing the village's success.

campaign slogan and ultimately was credited with helping the president win re-election. Glynn's speech was so dramatic that William Jennings Bryan, known as America's greatest orator, upon hearing it at the convention was moved to tears.

Sporting events such as walking races,

reconstruction has begun.

The empty lot on which the Opera House stood is quiet now. The sounds of the once thriving theater exist only in the memories of the village's older residents and in the hopes of those who witness the new construction. ♡



The Valatie Opera House (the building with the steeple), 1908.

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Highlights from the Society's Collections: "The Valley Vagabonds"

By Helen McLallen, Curator, *The Columbia County Historical Society*

During the summer of 1941 a regional theater group took up residence at Lindenwald. It was the second season for the Valley Vagabonds, a group of young thespians interested in incorporating the history and folklore of the Hudson Valley into their productions. The sixteen actors and actresses were presenting two shows "Mehitabel Wing" and "Johnny Doodle."

"Johnny Doodle" was composed of a series of comic sketches and ballads dramatizing historical incidents and times, including the competition between Hudson River steamboat lines, the building of the Erie Canal, and rural electrification. These sketches were held together by the device of the Poughkeepsie to Highland ferry boat captain who invites his passengers to travel through time with him. "Mehitabel Wing" told the story of a Columbia County Quaker

woman whose husband was caught up in the early anti-rent wars.

The group preferred informal venues, often outdoors. They carried their props in a trailer they named "Archie" as they traveled to engagements up and down the Valley. They offered to entertain at barn dances, club meetings, and children's parties. Locally, in addition to Lindenwald, the performances were held at the Village Fair in Chatham Centre (where they were greeted by the then present-day ferry operator, Captain Smith), a fund raiser sponsored by the Lebanon Valley Garden Club for the benefit of the Fountain Fund, and at Prindles Barn Theatre in Copake.

In 1991 Chatham town historian Kay Burgess donated photographs and publicity materials, including radio interview transcripts, newspaper clippings, press releases, and posters, about the Valley Vagabonds to the Society. The collection gives a glimpse of the troupe and the entertainment it provided. 🍷



Scene from "Johnny Doodle", performed on Lindenwald's front porch.



The Valley Vagabonds rehearsing at Lindenwald.



Rosalind Fradkin and Frank Overton rehearsing "Mehitabel Wing" in Lindenwald's front hall.



Edward Binns, Rosalind Fradkin, and Katherine Dain in "Mehitabel Wing", with Martin Van Buren's scenic wallpaper as a backdrop.

A Mutiny That forged the U.S. Naval Academy

Involving the Son of a Hudson Born Man

Edited by Jim Eyre, with permission of the *Chatham Courier*

There have been many dramatic events in Columbia County's history but none equalled the emotional impact of the hanging at sea of Midshipman Phillip Spencer. On the bright morning of December 1, 1842, the young sailor and two others were hoisted into national prominence at the end of a yardarm of the brig *Somers*. Spencer, the 18 year-old son of John Canfield Spencer, a native of Hudson, had been charged with plotting a mutiny aboard a U.S. Navy vessel. A nationally publicized controversy ensued that led indirectly to the founding of the U. S. Naval Academy.

The midshipman's father was serving as Secretary of War in President Tyler's cabinet when young Spencer and two enlisted men were strung up by a dictatorial commander who played the role of both judge and jury. The elder Spencer was born in Hudson in 1788 and, following his graduation from Union College in 1804, he became a lawyer. Aided by his father, Chief Justice Ambrose Spencer, the young attorney rapidly rose through a series of political appointments by Governors DeWitt Clinton and Marin Van Buren to become Secretary of State.

It was in 1841, following his appointment as Secretary of War, that his youthful son, a Hobart College graduate, set sail upon the brig *Somers*. Midshipman Spencer was intensely disliked by the martinet who commanded the ship. The captain, Comdr. Alexander Slidell MacKenzie, a 39 year-old regular, had been at sea for almost 18 years. Except for a brush with a pirate sloop in the West Indies some years before, they had been dull years for the Commander. From that day of that one skirmish onward he saw pirates under his bunk.

MacKenzie confided to his journal that he didn't like Spencer being put aboard because of "political reasons." Actually not many people liked the youth including his own father. The youth had already been reprimanded for drunkenness on a cruise to Brazil on another ship under another Captain.

Unblessed By Nature

Phillip was sadly unblessed by nature. He was handicapped from youth by a drooping eye which gave him a sinister look. An operation in his early teens had improved his appearance somewhat, but he still found it hard to deal with cruel taunts from his shipmates. He rebuffed what few friendly overtures he received and kept moodily to himself.

Phillip was not overly bright, yet was said

good" and shipped him off to the Navy in hopes that iron discipline might make a man of him.

For fate, Spencer couldn't have picked a worse captain than Comdr. MacKenzie. MacKenzie envisioned himself a writer and at one time was a protege of Washington Irving. Ashore he was a man of wealth and social standing, but on board ship he was unpleasant, humorless, quick to flog his men and so rigidly moral that he looked upon brandy, carried on board as a cure against malaria, as much worse than the disease. He ran his ship strictly by the book, possibly because he was unsure of himself.

The brig-of-war *Somers*, a sleek and swift two-master, only 103 feet long, had just become a training ship when MacKenzie took command. Though built to carry 90, she had a crowded company of 110-120 seamen, seven midshipmen and three officers when she set sail for Monrovia, Liberia.

Midshipman Spencer got off on the wrong foot from the start. He was contemptuous of his fellow midshipmen and spent most of his time hobnobbing with the forecandle crew, which deeply annoyed the proper Mackenzie and put the rigidly disciplined enlisted men ill at ease.

He attended his duties well, however, and the *Somer's* voyage was uneventful until she was homeward bound. On the morning of Nov. 26, 1842, a purser's steward confided to one of the junior officers that Spencer was plotting a

mutiny. The midshipman, he said, — and he didn't know how many of the crew — planned to seize the ship and go a-pirating on the Spanish Main.

Such a tale would normally be considered preposterous but aboard MacKenzie's ship every rumor had to be reported to the captain. It was felt certain that MacKenzie



The brig USS Somers; a brig-of-war was a small, two-masted warship that carried perhaps 20 guns.

to be a persuasive talker when it served his purpose to emerge from his protective shell. What really set him apart from his shipmates was a fertile and vivid imagination fueled by a steady diet of blood and thunder novels about pirates and mutiny on the Spanish Main. Today Phillip would be called a mixed-up kid. His father called him a "no-

would dismiss it as nonsense, but instead the captain showed every evidence of complete panic.

Two days later, the ship's company watched open-mouthed while three men were dragged to the open deck. They had to be dragged because each was so heavily chained that none could walk. Two were able seamen. The third was Midshipman Spencer. The men were left on deck all day and that night MacKenzie ordered them stuffed into big canvas sail bags closed by drawstrings at the top, where they were held until sunrise.

More Men Seized

The next day four more men were seized and clapped into irons. MacKenzie held a hearing of sorts in his quarters. None of the so-called witnesses had taken the young midshipman's boasting seriously. But it was clear that Spencer had doomed himself in the Commander's mind with his talk of mutiny and piracy.

On the morning of Dec. 1, MacKenzie appeared on deck in his dress uniform — ordered blocks and light lines (called whips) rigged to the yard and had all hands piped on deck. "In one hour," he announced "a gun will sound for the execution of these three mutineers." Bedlam broke out on the deck. The chained men shouted their innocence while their shipmates wept openly.

Sixty minutes later the cannon boomed, the condemned men's heads were covered with black hoods and details of sailors grasped

punishment" and with "mocking and taunting prisoners in the face of death. The two non-capital charges were dropped, and MacKenzie pleaded not guilty to the murder charge.

The court martial bore little resemblance to a trial. MacKenzie was not required to take the stand, and a civilian was appointed a special prosecutor, but was not allowed to interview the captain. The verdict was a foregone conclusion — not guilty.

The whitewash precipitated a bitter fight in the cabinet, led by Spencer. Yet a great deal of good came from the tragedy aboard the Somers. Public opinion forced Congress to the realization that some means must be provided to select and train naval officers so that misfits like Spencer couldn't get in and unstable officers like MacKenzie couldn't stay in.

Academy Opened

A little more than two years later the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis opened and with it came the safeguards to protect enlisted men. As the case died away, legend grew that the *Somers* was a haunted ship. On dark nights, the crew swore the ghosts of the three condemned men appeared in the shrouds crying out for justice until one stormy night the *Somers* rolled over and sank with half her crew.

The story is partly true. She did capsize in 1846, but it was top-heavy construction and not vengeful ghosts that did her in with 40 of her 90 member crew.

Spencer, the 18 year-old son of John Canfield Spencer, a native of Hudson, had been charged with plotting a mutiny aboard a U.S.Navy vessel.

the lines and ran down the deck. While the bodies of the accused mutineers swayed in the air with the roll of the ship, the captain called for "Three cheers for loyalty and the flag" and had the crew piped below for dinner.

On the homeward voyage MacKenzie spent days composing a long literary report on the mutiny for the Secretary of the Navy. The story — MacKenzie's side at least — soon leaked in the newspapers and overnight the Commander became a national hero. His old friend, Col. J. Watson Webb, a native of Claverack, wrote in his *New York Courier and Inquirer*, that the captain's "quick thinking had saved the Port of New York from a corsair that might have ruined their commerce."

Only Spencer's father, now filled with remorse for his bitterness toward the boy, challenged MacKenzie's account. His sharp questions sent a number of pamphleteers scurrying for their pens — including James Fenimore Cooper, himself an old salt, and James Gordon Bennet, who loosed a salvo in his *Herald*: "Capt. MacKenzie and his officers acted under a species of insanity produced by panic and lively imagination. Theirs was human intellect run mad."

Court of Inquiry

As the tide of public opinion shifted, the Navy called a court of inquiry into the case. The court absolved Mackenzie of all culpability. Furious, Secretary of War Spencer demanded a trial in civilian court, but settled for a Navy court martial. MacKenzie was charged with three murders, with "oppressive and illegal

A Navy legend had it that Cmdr. MacKenzie went mad from drink. Not so, he undertook a diplomatic mission in Mexico, wrote a biography of naval hero Stephen Decatur and died peacefully in his sleep in 1848 at the age of 47.

And the legacy of the *Somers* lives on in another way. Herman Melville, a sea-faring man himself, who had deserted the U.S. Navy frigate *Acushnet* in the South Pacific in 1842 used the story of the Somers for a short novel that was published in 1892. Melville called the book *Billy Budd.— An Inside Narrative.* 🍷





A COLONIAL TREASURE DEARLY PRIZED: THE DAR THEATRE OF WARREN STREET

By Leonne F. Gould

Editor's Note: Ms. Gould moved recently to Stockport from Baltimore, Md. where she was a teacher of writing at Goucher College. She has earned her MFA in poetry and her work published. She is a member of our Editorial Committee.

Over the years, forward thinking women in Hudson have invested their efforts in the theater. In 1900, just one year after Jane Addams opened the first Little Theater of America at Hull House, the Chicago inner-city settlement house where she devoted herself to the problems of her immigrant neighborhood, the Hudson chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), debuted its theater. Frances Hartley, the daughter of Robert Jenkins, an early mayor of Hudson, gave her childhood home to the DAR for use as a chapter house and then gifted them the theater.

The lovely new theater would not only raise funds to support Hudson's first free library started by the DAR in 1898 in the Fourth Street School, but would offer the community an important resource for entertainment and education. Over the years, the theater presented amateur and professional theatrical performances and musical entertainments featuring local as well as national talent. Among the more well-known offerings was Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* presented in 1901. In 1902 the DAR sold series tickets at the "low rate of \$2.00 for five entertainments" to benefit the free library.

Committed to education, the DAR offered a series of lectures many of which were free that examined contemporary issues. The lectures ranged from discussions of particular battles, American history, world geography, to politically sensitive issues of the day.

In 1901, George Graham spoke about the Spanish War using "pictures made by himself." He was commended as an enthusiastic speaker whose "zeal never left him in the wake of an enemy's shell."

Of particular interest were the exploits of adventurous women such as Anita Newcomb McGee, M.D. who in 1910 spoke about "A Woman's Experience in the Japanese Army," the story of a group of Red Cross Nurses who worked in a Japanese Army Hospital. Another lecture focused on Hannah Arnett, "a loyal American woman of Revolutionary times that few knew about." One wonders what effects such lectures may have had on the attitudes of Hudsonians toward the important upcoming issue of women's suffrage.

Lectures at times resulted in community action. In the 1920s, the integration of the immigrant into American society had become controversial. Captain Arthur Guy Empery, a "nationally known soldier writer," espoused the rapid Americanization of the foreign-born to prevent the U.S.'s loss of identity as a nation. The DAR, sympathetic to the plight of those stranded on Ellis Island, collected and sent needed goods there. In 1926 Dr. Bates of Cornell "spoke about the American Indian and made an appeal for more justice for the first

Americans." Subsequently, a scholarship at Cornell was established for an Indian girl in memory of Olive Whiteman, wife of former Governor Whiteman.

The new show place, built behind the chapter house on what was once a rose garden, was immediately celebrated as a "colonial treasure dearly prized." Not only elegant, it incorporated the latest comforts. The 328 opera seats manufactured by the Grand Rapids Seating Company "with ball bearings for noiseless operation" were installed on sloping floors that permitted "perfect views". The ceiling, a "magnificent piece of work" in white and gold furnished by Penn Metal Ceiling Company, complimented walls painted "two shades of terra cotta with a white frieze."

The danger of fire in the 77x40 auditorium, lit by two brass chandeliers supplemented by gas and electric burners, was minimized by two entrances from the foyer above which were leaded stained glass windows and two spacious exits to the side gates.

Although the auditorium was both comfortable and beautiful, the playing space was the DAR's pride. Seven different sets of scenery, four interiors and three exteriors, "all of them surpassing anything of the kind in Hudson" enhanced performances; dressing rooms were built under the 15x40 stage; the

orchestra played from a sunken square behind "a handsome brass railing."

Best of all, was the drop curtain, a "work of art" depicting Henry Hudson's ship, the Half Moon approaching the city and framed by lush forests. In March 1962, the curtain, then still in use, was pictured in a National Geographic article about the Hudson River.

After many years, the theater, fallen into disrepair, was unable to earn its own way. In 1945 the DAR allowed other community groups to rent it. Renovated, it became the



This beautiful original stage curtain depicting Henry Hudson's ship Half Moon has been saved and is currently on loan to the Hudson Opera House.

home of the Clavarack Players, an amateur theater group where many Hudsonians, according to Jean Brice McMillin, (Hudson Revisited 1985) “trod the boards’.”

In 1958, according to DAR Regent Dot Avery, the DAR could no longer afford the theater’s upkeep. “It was in pretty bad shape” she said “so regretfully it had to be torn down. All that’s left are a few “opera seats” now folded in the attic and the beautiful curtain stored at the Hudson Opera House on Warren Street. ♡

Note: All quotes not otherwise identified come from: *The Historian’s Books, 1895–1965*. DAR Library, Hudson, New York and include clippings from contemporary articles first published in *The Register-Star* and *The Columbia Republican*.



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Columbia County Historical Society Calendar of Events

Please note in your calendars the following events and dates. For additional information regarding these, please call the Society's office at (518) 758-9265 or visit our website at www.cchsny.org.

March 8th through November 27th

Around Columbia County: Ancram, Copake, Gallatin & Taghkanic. Exhibit by the Town Historians, Clara VanTassel, Gloria Lyons, Dolores Weaver, and Nancy Griffith. Featuring the agricultural and industrial history of their townships.

March 26th

Opening reception from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. for Around Columbia County. Meet the historians.

April 10th

Kevin Jacob's Annual Classical Piano Recital at the Nathan Wild House, Valatie. 6:00 hors d'oeuvres, 7:00 concert. Tickets 518-758-9265.

April 10th through November 27th

Museums in the Classroom exhibit by fourth graders from the Ichabod Crane School District.

May 28th

Van Alen House Furnishings exhibit opening, 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. at the Columbia County Museum. Exhibit runs through mid-November.

May 28th

Opening day at the James Vanderpoel House and Luykas Van Alen House. The Van Alen House grounds will be open for tours while the restoration project is underway and the furnishings are on exhibit at the Museum.

June 12th

KinderCrafter Fair on the grounds of the James Vanderpoel House, Village of Kinderhook. 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Rain or shine. Sponsored by the Kinderhook Business and Professional Association. Crafts, artwork, music & food. Fun for all ages.

June 19th

First Columbians Champagne Reception and Antiques Festival Preview. On the grounds of the James Vanderpoel House, Hors d'oeuvres, champagne, music, silent auction. Antiques for House & Garden.

June 20th

32nd Annual Antiques Festival on the grounds of the James Vanderpoel House. Antiques for House & Garden.

July 10th

Sponsors Cocktail Reception

September 5th

- Pandemonia Concert at 6:00 p.m. at the Van Alen House.
- Saturdays in September: Walking Tours of Chatham, Hudson, Kinderhook, Philmont.

October 16th

- Annual Meeting and Members Reception
- Second Century Circle Gala Dinner

December 4th to December 12th

Gallery of Wreaths and Holiday Craft Boutique at the Columbia County Museum. Display of handcrafted wreaths by individuals, businesses, organizations and florists. Wreaths are up for silent auction. Holiday crafts are for sale.

December 10th

Candlelight Night and Home for the Holidays Tour in the Village of Kinderhook and the Greens Show at the Vanderpoel House.



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