

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CITY HISTORIAN FOR 2015

Submitted by Paul Loatman, Jr.

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A “Registered Public Historian” who serves on the Advisory Council for the Center for Applied Historical Research (CAHR) at The University at Albany and its Public Historians Education Committee, I am a Member of the Association of Public Historians of New York State (APHNYS), the Organization of American Historians and the National Council for History Education. CAHR acts as a clearing-house for municipal historians; organizes training seminars and workshops on behalf of APHNYS; maintains a website for local historians; and promotes the professional development of those seeking to become APHNYS “Registered Historians.” CAHR’s website maintains a link to the Mechanicville History page.

This report reviews the roles of the municipal historian as defined by APHNYS: research and writing, teaching and public presentations, historic preservation, and organization and advocacy. Copies will be filed with the Saratoga County Historian and the Office of the Acting State Historian.

Questions regarding local history most often come from people accessing the City’s History page website which lists my e-mail address. The nature of these inquiries can be inferred by describing some of the responses to their questions in the past year:

1. Anthony Palmieiri, a retiree from Oxnard California sought information regarding six Palmieri sibilings who migrated here c.1900 from southern Italy. Examination of census records, naturalization papers, and City Directories permitted me to present him with an extended family portrait. The process also raised the possibility that local “Palmer” and “Palmucci” families may be direct descendants who altered their surnames. Neighboring Stillwater historians Linda Saunders and Linda Palmieri were copied in on the correspondence on the subject.

2. Joseph Burgess, an Amtrak employee from Boston who spent part of his youth at the local Railroad “Y” where his mother worked and who began his railroad career in the local yards, met with me to share his memories of local rail lore. He also was searching for a picture of Tancredi’s Restaurant, a haunt of railroaders who made the 24-hour diner the busiest place in Mechanicville for decades. Despite its longevity, finding a photo of the place proved no easy task. As so often happens, that which we take for granted is forgotten once it is gone. Anthony later discovered a photo of the diner that he forwarded to me and it has been added to my digitized collection, insuring that “Shanghai” and Tancredi’s other cast of unforgettable characters will be preserved for future generations.

3. State Senator Cathy Marchione and Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner were provided with detailed chronologies of the political process that led to the incorporation of the City of Mechanicville in 1915. A number of articles I have written on our community’s history were also provided to aid them in preparing their respective Assembly and Senate Resolutions marking the City’s Centennial. This material was shared with Robert Murphy of the on-line “Mechanicville Mile” who was preparing a report on the subject.

4. I provided Malta Town Historian Paul Perreault with copies of ten articles from the Historical New York Times, letters of correspondence between FDR and

Mechanicville Mayor George Slingerland from the F.D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, and two articles I have published regarding the Mayor's role that led to the creation of the Saratoga Battlefield Park. Paul was researching the role played by local Rotarians in saving the battlefield.

5. The February issue of "The American Historian," a publication of The Organization of American Historians, published my response as one of five it included in addressing the question: "What Was the Most Important Television/ Movie Event In American History?" My comment focused on the impact on the nation's conscience of the coverage surrounding the Kennedy Assassination in November of 1963.

6. A former local resident now living in Texas seeking information about his grandfather, a local lawman, led to an interesting exchange with County Historian Lauren Roberts who researched County records on the topic. Late 19th and early 20th century Deputy Sheriffs were assigned to local jurisdictions. The practice appears to have ended shortly before World War II. Today, budgetary constraints have led some communities to consider disbanding local police forces and replacing them with Sheriff's or State Police patrols. What today might be considered an innovation was at one time the accepted practice.

7. Deland Title Search of Ballston Spa inquired about the history of property on South Central Avenue originally abutting the Champlain Canal and the Barnes & Ladow Sash & Blinds Company in the late 19th century. Present-day property lines run along Central Avenue and South Street. I abstracted information from relevant Sanborn Maps available on-line at the NYS Library, as well as local newspaper citations from the late 19th century referencing the property's ownership and use.

8. Marty Canavan requested permission to incorporate two of my articles along with photographs from my book on local history into an extended family history portfolio he is publishing. A former MHS basketball star now living in Saratoga where he is a professor at Skidmore College, Marty's sister lives with her husband in the old family homestead on Gilbert St.

9. Upon his request, I sent prospective property owner Patrick Riley a digitized copy of a postal photo printed prior to 1907 of a Francis St. streetscape. Riley plans on purchasing a home there and will use the photo to aid in restoring the home to its original appearance.

10. The Mechanicville Public Library requested copyright clearance from me to allow the Northern New York Library Network to digitize the microfilm collection of local newspapers that was placed on permanent loan with the Library in 1995. These 19th and early 20th century newspaper files were microfilmed through grants I secured from the NY State Newspaper Project and the City. The loan agreement requires my permission as editor of the collection before they can be removed from the Library. The original microfilm master copies are retained by the N.Y. State Archives.

11. The City Clerk provided me with copy of a Death Certificate requested by a former resident now living in Texas whose father had passed away in 1946. At that time, he had provided the information to the attending physician who signed the certificate. He sought a copy in order to document his family's history.

12. Former resident Joanne Devoe McMahon sent me a 1913 newspaper account of a railroad accident that killed her great-grandfather and another resident at the Short St. crossing. I edited a poem she had written memorializing the incident at her request.

Serendipitously, the newspaper account of the rail tragedy was juxtaposed next to a column reporting an exhibition of "A Remarkable Invention," Edison's Talking Pictures, at Proctor's Theater on Park Avenue. The article suggested that this innovation "might revolutionize" the movie industry. The local theater regularly presented picture shows on Park Avenue from 1913 until 1915 when the owner moved to Albany. The Proctor family went on to build a chain of theaters throughout upstate New York which dominated the movie industry in the region until the 1960s. Proctor's Theater in Schenectady remains the last evidence of the family's influence in public entertainment, a tradition that may have begun in Mechanicville.

Joanne also related the story of a meeting between gubernatorial candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt and her great-grandfather, William Hickey, at his home on South Main St. in 1928. Hickey's position as Superintendent on the Champlain Canal afforded him opportunities to exercise influence over political patronage. Joanne has long served as the "official family keeper" of the Noritaki China used to entertain the future President at that time. A preliminary search of the archives in the FDR Library in Hyde Park has turned up correspondence between FDR and Hickey in 1931. Further research involving their interactions will be pursued in the future. The Hickey family's political influence has extended down to our own day through the public service careers of former Mayor John Connors and his son, County Supervisor Greg Connors, Hickey descendants.

13. I provided resident Annina Fuller Wells with Xeroxed copies of a sampling of articles from "The Hudson Valley Star," a local version of a chain of "hometown newspapers" published throughout the United States after World War II that was edited by her father. After leaving Mechanicville, he served as the long-time publisher of "The Delmar Spotlight."

"The Star" was published here six days a week in 1949. The 12-page tabloid offered a combination of local coverage with nationally-syndicated columns during a critical time in Mechanicville's history when World War II veterans began asserting themselves in public life. The newspaper also devoted extensive coverage to Governor Thomas E. Dewey's crackdown on illegal gambling, a move which had serious repercussions on Saratoga County and local politics. At the time, one national magazine referred to Mechanicville as "Little Las Vegas" following the seizure of over 100 "one-armed bandits" by the State Police here as part of Dewey's anti-wagering crusade.

14. A woman from New Mexico whose brother had worked at the Westvaco paper plant inquired about the mill's history. She was also seeking information regarding the "Miss West Virginia Diner" adjacent to the mill property that was patronized by paper workers. I referred her to three relevant articles about the paper industry that I have written available on the City website and sent her a digitized photo of the diner that is included in my photographic history of Mechanicville.

15. Sandy McBride of "The Express" sought background information on the consolidation of the Mechanicville Fire Department while preparing an article on the subject. I referred her to a history of the Department, "Ye Olde Fire Laddies," that I had written for the "Family Day Journal" in 2008. I also consulted with James Salmon, an MFD officer, and former Mayor Anthony Sylvester who confirmed that the reorganization took place in 2005-2006 during the final year of Mayor Sylvester's term.

Sandy also asked me to examine photos she had acquired of the devastating 1913 Hudson River floods to help in identifying the scenes shown. I offered "educated

guesses” regarding the pictures and also sent her digitized copies of photos of the flood’s impact on the operations of the Westvaco paper mill here. In the flood’s wake, business and political leaders in the Upper Hudson Valley pursued government aid in achieving flood control, an effort that led to the creation of the Sacandaga Reservoir. N.Y. State Senator George Whitney of Mechanicville played a crucial role in this effort.

16. George Beauvoir inquired about the history of 138 North Second Avenue where his parents had run a “superette” in the 1950s and 1960s. An 1897 photograph revealed that the building originally housed Rice’s West Side Market and apartments upstairs. Following the Beaver family venture, the building hosted the Golden Crust Bakery in the 1960s and 1970s. Currently, the weekly “Express” newspaper office occupies the former storefront, with apartments on the second floor. I cite this brief sketch as an example of the public’s increasing interest in tracking the history of properties they acquire. The movement appears to be an offshoot of the growing curiosity about genealogy, adding a new twist to the old saw that “all history is local history.”

David Hastings, a book collector from Glens Falls, donated a soft cover 1925 MHS Yearbook and a Centennial Anniversary booklet of the local Presbyterian Church which later merged with the Baptist congregation in 1974. Each of the items provides new insights into Mechanicville’s social and religious history. Jane Perkinson, who had donated her large collection of historic post cards of Mechanicville last year, contributed another historic postal item she had recently acquired, again offering it as a gift to the City’s collection.

In October, I met with Richard Hoover who donated two items of enormous historical interest. Richard’s great-grandfather, Albert H. Barnes, married into the Ladow and Denton families and his wife acquired an 1859 New Testament Bible believed to have been carried by Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth during his spectacular but brief military career during the Civil War. [Ellsworth’s mother was Phoebe Denton and one of her sisters married a Ladow.] The book also contains a lock of hair and an anonymous hand-written note—“Presented by his mother, may it never be forgotten.” I have enlisted the help of personnel at the New York State Archives, John Bonafide, Director of the Technical Preservation Bureau at Peebles Island, a local historical appraiser, the Abraham Lincoln Bookstore in Chicago which has specialized in Ellsworth memorabilia, the New York Military History Museum and other experts in attempt to clearly establish the provenance of this important artifact. At some point, DNA testing will probably be performed on the lock of hair. When all these efforts have been completed, the book will be added to the Ellsworth Collection at the Mechanicville Public Library.

Mr. Hoover also gave me a transcribed copy of the extensive hand-written memoirs of his great-grandfather, Albert H. Barnes, who lived between 1841 and 1931. An impoverished English immigrant whose father had fled to America to avoid debtor’s prison, Barnes bought his way out of an exploitive apprenticeship in his teens and later became co-owner of one of the largest sash and blinds factories in the United States. The home he built on the corner of Park and Second Avenues remains a classic example of late Victorian-era architecture. His descriptions of the “boom and bust” cycles of local businesses as well as his depiction of social life here may be the most significant primary source available recording Mechanicville’s history in the late 19th century.

In May, I created a portfolio of 30 photographs covering the history of the local paper industry for display at the Centennial Celebration held at the Ugly Rooster. Two story boards containing photos of the 2011 Sesquicentennial Celebration of Col. Ellsworth featuring the Zouaves and other Civil War re-enactors were also exhibited.

I conducted a class on Mechanicville history for adult learners enrolled in a Saratoga County Community History course offered by Empire State College's Academy of Lifelong Learning. Following my presentation, one of the students disclosed that she was a cousin of the two Reilly boys from South Main St. who were killed in World War II. I later met with another Reilly descendant to share what I knew regarding their service experience. I also made suggestions on how the family could secure service records and search relevant newspaper files regarding the two soldiers. Unfortunately, the family had not been aware of the memorial service held here in 2011 honoring the fifty-three local men who were killed in WWII and missed out on the opportunity to publicly receive County Medals of Honor on their behalf.

In May, I also reprised the career of Fr. Joseph Scerbo, S.A., Ph.D., at a celebration honoring him following his death early last year. A Mechanicville "hometown boy," Joe became an author and religious historian, founder of a graduate school of philosophy at a California university, served as a missionary to Russia, India, and Africa, and became the first Franciscan priest assigned to a California Native American mission in 155 years. Despite his many achievements in the larger world, Fr. Joe kept in close contact with his friends in Mechanicville, never forgetting from whence he came.

In August, I joined seventy-five members of the Clifton Park chapter of Volkssports on walking tours throughout the City who enjoyed learning about our community's history while exercising. They also enjoyed a taste of local cuisine by visiting restaurants following their walk. "The Express" published two photos and an accompanying article I wrote describing the experience. The Clifton Park organization is modeled after Volkssports founded in Germany, and has been organizing walking tours through historic Upstate communities for the past decade. I look forward to hosting the group again.

In November, I was the guest speaker at the monthly meeting of the Mechanicville Area Lions Club touching upon the highlights of our community's economic and social history. An engaging group who raised numerous questions about Mechanicville's past, I was gratified by the level of interest shown by club members.

In addition to attending quarterly CAHR meetings, I attended other gatherings promoting the history of Mechanicville and the larger area. County Historian Lauren Roberts convened the Spring meeting of Saratoga County municipal historians in Charlton in May to discuss ways our communities might participate in the Sesquicentennial of the County Fair taking place in July. I also shared my experience of working with Arcadia Publishers with other historians who are considering publishing books about their communities.

I later represented CAHR at a meeting of the Saratoga County Fair Sesquicentennial Committee apprising them of the possibility of employing a SUNY Public History graduate student to aid in researching the fair's history. The Committee had originally contacted me because Mechanicville hosted the County Fair from 1849 through 1858. Local Judge and Saratoga County political power broker, William C.

Tallmadge, also served as Fair President from 1889 through 1895. Jennifer O'Neill of the N.Y. State Archives provided me with a list of publications in the Archives' collection dealing with on 19th century agricultural shows and fairs, information I passed on to Centennial organizers. I also provided them with photos of Tallmadge and another Mechanicville leader, Lewis E. Smith, who also served as President of the County Fair.

I attended a presentation by National Park Service personnel regarding the history of the Saratoga National Park at the June meeting of the Stillwater-Mechanicville Rotary Club. Additionally, the Friends of Saratoga National Park, a group hoping to purchase the site marking Burgoyne's Surrender, made a presentation regarding their fund-raising efforts and I offered a couple of suggestions that might help in this regard.

In October, I attended a "Lake To Locks Roundtable" in Schuylerville focused on "The Industrial Revolution in The Champlain Valley." SUNY Professor David Hochfelder and former State Historian Robert Weible made presentations on the topic which was followed by an extended discussion evaluating the impact of industrialization on local communities. The following month, the "Lake To Locks" group organized another conference on "The Working Landscape In The Champlain Region." Each of these meetings brought together historians, museum personnel, Saratoga County publicists and "Lake To Locks" officials to create comprehensive databases of historical and cultural resources in the region. Participants hope that fostering public awareness of the area's rich history as the crucible of the American nation will permit the Upper Hudson/ Champlain Valley Region to achieve its rightful place as a primary heritage tourism destination.

During the course of the past year, a number of former residents have sought copies of my book on Mechanicville history. In many cases, they take the time to spontaneously share their personal stories and reminiscences of living here, thus adding significant details and local color which broadens my knowledge of our history in ways that would otherwise be undocumented.

Since last February, I have been supporting the efforts of Curtis Bateman, a descendant of Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth, to persuade the Office of Historic Alexandria, Virginia, where he resides to place a historic marker at the site where Ellsworth was killed on May 24, 1861. Often, area residents returning from visits to Alexandria express shock that a plaque honors the person who shot the Colonel, yet there is no mention of Ellsworth at the site where he died. A move to correct this oversight was taken when our City Council passed a Resolution in support of Bateman's effort that was forwarded to the OHA. I also enlisted the support of Malta Town Historian Paul Perreault in getting a similar resolution passed by his Town Board.

The efforts to balance the historical record are on-going. Curtis has had a number of meetings with local authorities, but the Ellsworth issue has been placed on the back-burner while the OHA has been forced to deal with the larger issue of what to do about seventeen Confederate flags located at historic sites in Alexandria following the assassination of nine people in a Charleston South Carolina church last Spring.

I published an article for "The Express" on this topic last Spring and will update the public in the near future. "The Express" also published "Cigar Store," a discussion of the Amann family business on Park Avenue that became a legendary institution that functioned as an unofficial community center visited regularly by Mechanicville residents ranging in age from nine to ninety. I published a couple of other articles in "The Express"

last year not noted here, but none evoked stronger positive reaction from local residents than this piece despite the fact that Amann's closed up shop thirty years ago.

Finally, I conclude with my annual reminder that according to APHNYS and State Education Department guidelines, municipal historians should be provided with a mail drop, office space, and other services needed to fulfill their responsibilities. For the record, I use my home and telephone for office purposes, and provide my own internet, computer, Xeroxing, postage, and e-mail services. Of necessity, I store historical artifacts and documents in my home, a matter about which I have grown increasingly uneasy, especially in view of the losses experienced by my predecessor and other local historians due to storm damage in the past few years. My employment in another profession permits me to operate in this manner, but these arrangements should not be expected to be permanent. I am well aware of the fiscal constraints faced by the City and raise these points merely as a reminder that there are established guidelines for conducting the office of municipal historian that hopefully can be met in the future. In the meantime, I trust that my continued service will meet your expectations.