

# NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

Issued Monthly by the Clinton County Historical Association  
P.O. Box 332, Plattsburgh NY 12901, 518-561-0340

No. 293    PRESIDENT: David C. Stortz    EDITOR: Helen W. Allan    January 1993

## JANUARY PROGRAM: RADIO REMINISCENCES

Return to those thrilling days of yesteryear, when local radio was just getting started in Clinton County. This opportunity to take a nostalgic trip back in time will occur at CCHA's monthly meeting at 7:30 p.m. on Monday, January 4, when some of Plattsburgh's broadcasting pioneers will gather to reminisce about those early radio days. Emcee for the evening will be former WEAV owner George Bissell Jr. He will be joined by radio personalities Chet Bosworth and Gordie Little of WIRY and former sportscaster Mike Mannix. The format will be a free-wheeling, free-spirited discussion involving highlights and lowdowns of the way it was way back when. Come prepared to share in the memories and hear anecdotes about what was involved in putting those early shows on the air. Audience participation is invited. This meeting, which will take place in the County Government Center in Plattsburgh, is free and open to the public.

## BOARD MEMBERS ELECTED

At the December 7 CCHA meeting, the following slate of nominees was approved to serve three-year terms on the board of directors:

J. William Woythaler  
David C. Stortz

Mark A. McCullough  
Diane M. Turner

Bradley G. Knapp

Also, board president David Stortz appointed Bernieta Schumacher to fill a vacant two-year term. CCHA welcomes its new directors—Mrs. Schumacher, Mrs. Turner and Mr. Knapp—and thanks them and the returning directors for serving on the board.



## *Season's Greetings*

*We send warm wishes to all CCHA members and particularly to those friends of the museum who did so much to help the staff during the transition period of our move to Court Street.*



# THE CITIZENS' REVOLT THAT SHAPED CITY HALL

By Keith A. Herkalo

Speaking through his will, Loyal L. Smith, who spent his early life on a farm in Clinton County and later was a resident of the city, expressed his generosity by endowing many worthwhile organizations. Among the fortunate recipients was the City of Plattsburgh. In his will Smith stated:

"I give to the City of Plattsburgh, New York, the sum necessary to build a City Hall, not to exceed the sum of \$200,000, upon a site to be selected and purchased by the City of Plattsburgh, New York, and in accordance with the plans and specifications to be approved by my executors.

"I direct that out of said sum a tablet shall be provided by my executors and inserted in the outer front wall of the said City Hall, which shall bear the following inscription: "In Memory of Loyal L. Smith, Donor of this Building to the City of Plattsburgh, who died (followed by the date of my death)."

A newspaper article regarding the will noted that the gift of several hundred thousand dollars (ultimately \$159,649) for a city hall came most unexpectedly. "It anticipates the future, and insures the finest public building in the city," the article stated. However, that "finest public building" status was not to be achieved without a controversy which so enflamed the citizens that they acted apart from their governmental representation and its leader, the mayor.

In March, 1916, after the executors of the estate notified him that Smith had endowed the building of a city hall, Mayor William B. Mooers appointed a commission with himself as chairman. The "City Hall Commission" immediately began to acquire, through a combination of negotiations and condemnations, sufficient land in the center of the city for the construction of the new building.

John Russell Pope, the nationally known architect, was in Plattsburgh overseeing the construction of the federally funded Macdonough Monument when the commission invited him to a meeting to discuss the hiring of an architect and to review tentative plans for the building. He was ultimately chosen as the project's architect. In May, 1916 the commission began to focus on the use of the finished building and the manner in which the interior spaces should be divided and employed. A committee headed by the chairman, Mayor Mooers, prepared sketches and a rough plan of floor space. Proposed facilities included offices, a court room, libraries, rest rooms and equipment rooms—well-appointed, generous, comfortable spaces for a mayor, his government and his counsel.

Minutes of the commission's meetings from that period (late spring and early summer of 1916) display an overwhelming lack of detail regarding these matters. Minutes of the June 2 meeting quote Commissioner Weed's suggestion: "It would be best not to have reporters present at meetings unless especially invited, and that the Mayor give out all reports for publication." Open contempt? Indeed, the June 7 meeting was a closed executive session with Pope's representative. The commission had officially sanctioned Pope as the project's architect on June 30. Throughout, the process appears to have been conducted without citizen involvement or press scrutiny.

Pope prepared several preliminary drawings, and by mid-summer 1916, he had completed a final

series of drawings, presenting them to the commission through an associate, Mr. Hirsch. Former Lieutenant-Governor T.F. Conway visited the commission on August 14 to advise it regarding the plans presented by Pope. Pope agreed to travel to Plattsburgh from New York City to meet with the commission on August 28 at 3:30 p.m.

By this time the community, led by several women's groups, had become aware of the general nature of the plans. They had sufficient notice of this final presentation to organize the attendance at that session of a large group of women who felt that a city's hall should accommodate the public needs of its citizens and the functional needs of its government. After Pope's presentation the women had a presentation of their own—a petition entered in its entirety into the minutes of the commission meeting.

That section of the minutes reads as follows:

“On motion of Commissioner J.B. Riley, Judge Tierney, Counsel to the Commission, was directed to take the plans of the City Hall to the meeting called by Ladies Societies mentioned in petition below and filed with the Commission, and explain the plans to them. CARRIED.

“To the Committee on building the Smith Memorial Hall:

We, the undersigned, representing the Women's Organizations of Plattsburgh, believing that the present plans for the new City Hall are not satisfactory to the majority of citizens, do petition your honorable body to call a meeting of the men and women of the City on Monday evening, August 28th, in the Court House at 8 o'clock, to discuss the plans for said building.

Mrs. Geo. F. Tuttle, Regent Saranac Chapter D.A.R.  
Mrs. C.S. Johnson, Vice-President Civic League  
Helen I. Smith, Prs't Champlain Valley Hospital  
Blanche A. Stults, Prs't Women's League of Physicians Hospital  
Mrs. C.J. Vert, Chairman American Red Cross Assn.  
Mrs. W.E. Parkhurst, Clio Club  
Mrs. John H. Booth, Chairman Federation of Clubs  
Mrs. A.W. Emery, Tuesday Club”

At the citizen's meeting, it can be assumed from the tenor of the newspaper account that the weight of the popular discussion was sufficient to cause Conway to express (apparently somewhat timidly) his “belief that an assembly hall could be built in the third floor.”

The citizens, not resting with a “belief”, sent a delegation to meet with the executors of the estate, who agreed that a “city” hall should accommodate the needs of the city's public. One gets the impression that the executors, and Pope himself, were growing weary of the commission's manipulations. The executors sided with Plattsburgh's public, and Pope increasingly dealt with the commission through associates. The Plattsburgh *Sentinel* of November 3, 1916 reported that the executors had ordered new plans drawn “... to conform more generally to the ideas of the people of this city as expressed at the public

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meeting held in the court house several weeks ago.... the floor above will be devoted in a large measure to an auditorium....”

*(It is the author's belief that the city hall building may not have been constructed if the public auditorium was not included.)*

With the moving of the Clinton County Historical Association and the County Historical Museum from the temporary quarters established in the auditorium space to its long-awaited and well-deserved home on Court Street, the people of the City of Plattsburgh are poised to reclaim a part of their heritage through restoration of the auditorium and the renewal of the soul and spirit from which it sprang.

*(Keith Herkalo, the Plattsburgh City Clerk, has a strong interest in city history. This account of the development of plans for City Hall is drawn from seldom-studied documents and records in the city archives.)*

## NEW IN THE MUSEUM SHOP

The museum shop has acquired a few copies of a new book entitled *Crossing the River: Historic Bridges of the AuSable River*. This 42-page softcover book was written by CCHA member Steven Engelhart and is copiously illustrated with photographs, maps and diagrams. For all those who are interested in unique historical treasures of this area or are fascinated by the wide variety of engineering solutions to the problem of spanning a river, this book is a bargain at \$6.

## THANK YOU

The Association wishes to thank Mr. and Mrs. Robert Dodds and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Dodds for their willingness to lend treasured family memorabilia for the recently closed interpretive exhibit of the Dodds family's lengthy ownership of 48 Court Street. Bob Dodds also deserves our heartfelt thanks for the hours he spent on a ladder painting ceilings and walls during the renovation of the museum building last winter.