



Clinton County Historical Association North Country Notes

Issue 419

Fall, 2017



Rich in History-Plattsburgh City Hall

by Rich Frost

**Thank you for
picking up our
newsletter!**

The Clinton County Historical Association is a non-profit organization that is chartered by the NY State Board of Regents. We collect, preserve and exhibit relevant Clinton County items and artifacts in our Museum.

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Plattsburgh last year saw perhaps its most contested mayoral race in quite a while. My attitude is that vigorous debate proves beneficial for a community no matter who wins in the end. Rather than focus solely on selected issues, I find myself harboring another thought: what exactly is this City Hall that both candidates were seeking so avidly to inhabit?

Before it became a city in 1902, Plattsburgh had its municipal offices in an upper story of Plattsburgh Theater, on the corner of Court and Marion Streets. Leading business and political leader Smith Weed had constructed that building in 1892. (It burned down in 1928.) One can assume his first concern was making a profit from his investment. However, Weed had a keen eye for what would benefit the area as well as himself. Later he also allotted rooms for the village's first library.

The new city was in its heyday back then. (In acknowledging my hopes and expectations for the future, let's call it the *first* heyday.) Soldiers at Plattsburgh Barracks had recently returned from fighting in Cuba and the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. Industry was thriving, with factories making anything from paper and shirts, to

typewriters and sewing machines. Not to mention luxury automobiles.

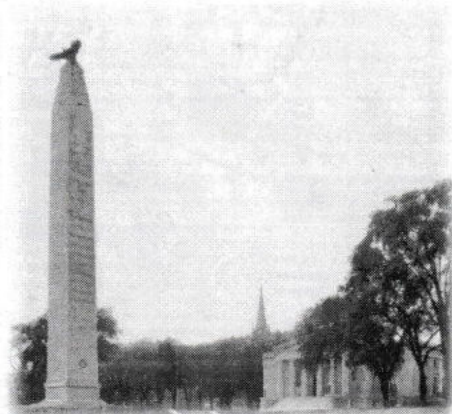
During the 1890's, William McKinley had used nearby Hotel Champlain as the summer White House. Plenty of attention to another President would be paid in 1909. That year a cast of luminaries led by William Howard Taft made Plattsburgh headquarters for a weeklong commemoration of the 300th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain discovering the lake forever after known by his name.

So now let me introduce a name that too few know, but of whom many more should be aware. Loyal L. Smith, born and raised in West Chazy, headed west, as did many of his era, to make his fortune. Working in Omaha and Chicago, among other places, he became involved in mercantile operations and in the steel industry. Along the way he also invested in real estate, amassing significant holdings in New York City.

His wealth assured, he semi-retired to a beautiful mansion on Broad Street by the Saranac River. During the week, he lived in his apartment at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in Manhattan. Then he would take the train north to Plattsburgh for the weekend. It sounded like a pretty good life.

But he suffered from a disease known as pernicious anemia. Today that entity is easily and inexpensively treated with Vitamin B-12, but the cause wasn't known a century ago. Smith died of the malady in 1908 at age fifty-four. His death gained front page notice not only locally but in New York City, too.

Smith's will was astonishing in its generosity. He left bequests to almost every major organization in town— the Vilas Home, newly-completed Champlain Valley Hospital, the YMCA, Home for the Friendless (later to become the Northern



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President's Report

by Geri Favreau

Things are always buzzing at CCHA! We have our new porch and steps (thanks to support through the Clinton County Tobacco Settlement Fund) and all our galleries have been updated (including some fresh paint) and new exhibits installed (it is always exciting to see artifacts which are stored in the locked rooms appear on display).

We continue to have interns from SUNY and students from area high schools who collaborate with CCHA on projects. We have had many interesting programs this past year and look forward to new and varied programs in the coming year. 2017 is the 100th anniversary of Suffrage and Helen, our Director, has been busy spreading the word about its impact on Clinton County.

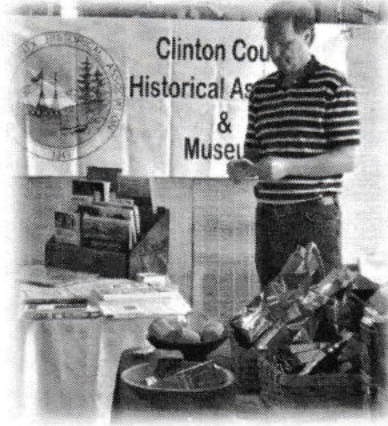
Work on Collections is a never-ending process – new artifacts are received every week. With all that is happening, we have multiple volunteer opportunities – docenting, working with the collection, doing research, gardening, cleaning and much more. You can chose the task that interests you! We appreciate anyone who can spend whatever time their busy schedule allows.

Current and retired Pfizer colleagues, please consider using their Annual Giving, Matching Gift and Volunteer Programs in support of CCHA. A retired Pfizer colleague is eligible to have Pfizer make a donation of \$500 to CCHA for 40 hours of volunteer work/fun a YEAR. Many other companies have matching gift programs too. Please consider using these programs when

making a donation to CCHA.

We are eagerly awaiting our new website! It will be maintained by one of our very capable volunteers. It will have our upcoming events, additions to our Museum Shop, local history stories, etc.

Please come and visit the Museum. We have worked hard to make changes to the Galleries and we think you will really like what you see. And remember we are open year round – Wed-Sat 10-3 or by appointment.

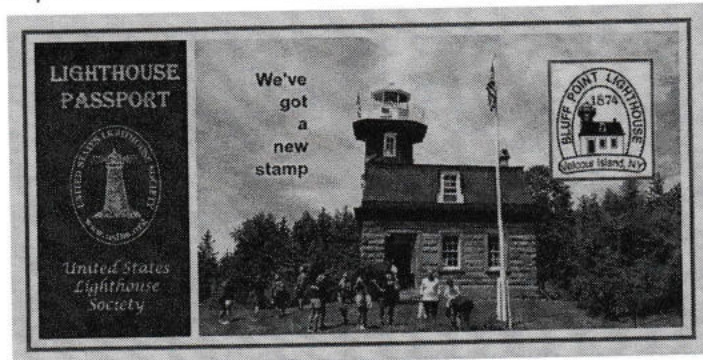


Luke Cyphers promoting CCHA at the Farmer's Market

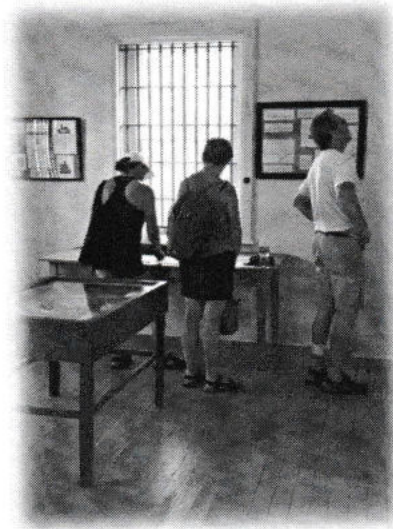
Bluff Point Lighthouse News

Over 300 visitors toured the Bluff Point Lighthouse this summer. Volunteers opened the Lighthouse every Sunday from July 2nd to September 3rd. One highlight this year was a visit from members of the United States Lighthouse Society. CCHA became a member of this society of lighthouse buffs because of our stewardship of the Bluff Point Lighthouse.

ation, more visitors will come to visit the lighthouse, the county and the beautiful Lake Champlain Basin.



Society members collect stamps on their specially designed lighthouse passports. They designed a stamp especially for us to use when members visit. We are pleased to be associated with this international organization and hope that through this associ-



Visitors at the Lighthouse



Director's Report

by Helen Allen Nerska



Beverly Durocher Morgan
enjoys our new Military Heritage exhibit

As we enter the close of another year at CCHA, we can look back on multiple successes and some regrets. The successes have been the result of a strong working Board of Trustees, an outstanding relationship with SUNY Plattsburgh, and an outstanding group of volunteers who continue to give their energies to the betterment of the Association. The regrets are always when we lose those talented volunteers who move on, yet we are fortunate for the legacy they leave behind.

As we move forward, we anticipate expanding our ability to share the history we have in our files: our negative collection, our documents and our research. This summer the museum had many out of town visitors and many researchers. This is the business we are in and are happy to make our history available to them. This year, perhaps more than most, we heard that our museum visitors do come to the North County because we have a history they are want to know more about. Busy is good – and we are that!

Collections Committee Notes

by Jan Couture, Chairman

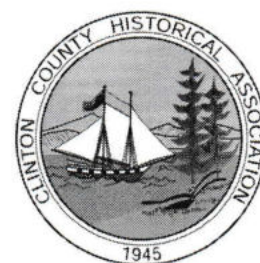


Royal Savage Cigar Cutter/Lighter
(Payette and Mendelsohn c. 1890)

A new addition to the collections.

Who has the very best job in the entire museum??? I DO! Welcome to Collections where we get to see all the neat treasures people want to give the museum. I think of it as Clinton County's Attic. I have been lucky enough to be one of only a few to see a Daniel Folger Bigelow original sketch. I was also lucky enough to be warned about the 'dangerous' cigar cutter...it WILL cut your finger!

Apparently, the finger-sized hole is also the same diameter as a cigar. We try to keep our mission of collecting items from or related to Clinton County in mind. If you are interested in joining the 'Collections Club' just let us know. You don't have to be a board member, just a CCHA member.





Book Review: "The Plattsburgh Military Reservation: A Pictorial History" by Bernie Bassett

There has been a military installation in Plattsburgh New York for over two hundred years. "The Plattsburgh Military Reservation: A Pictorial History," by Dr. Richard B. Frost and Melissa A. Peck, is the story of the Military in Plattsburgh as it parallels the history of this country. The Plattsburgh Military Reservation, is the name arbitrarily chosen by the authors to represent the many changes in mission that has taken place in Plattsburgh.

Over a period of more than two centuries, the Plattsburgh Military Reservation had a number of names that defined its mission. It was known as the Post, the Barracks, Camp Macdonough, General Hospital #30, the Plattsburgh Air Force Base and even Champlain College, to name a few! The story of this installation is the story of America. Soldiers housed at Plattsburgh's base played substantive roles in the Seminole Wars, the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf Wars.

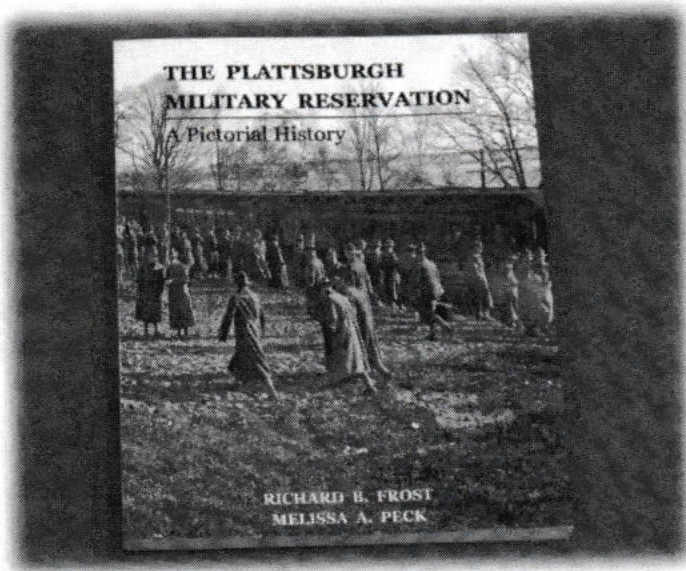
This is not only a story about the military and war. It is a story about the people who were assigned to the Reservation and a community that welcomed and supported them. It is about the impact on the local economy and the community learning to adapt to each change as the City and upstate evolve

through the decades. This book tells the story about the challenges faced by local community leaders to identify a proper use of the property when the military was not there. It is a story about the resilience and determination of the people that enabled them to survive beyond the assigned role as a military installation.

This Pictorial History is about the inevitable nature of change and the lesson learned that few things are permanent. As noted by the authors, "As a corollary to resilience, the sequential occupancy of this historic tract should also remind us that there is never a reason to be complacent."

Frost and Peck have captured this chapter of the history of the military as well as the story of the Champlain Valley. "The Plattsburgh Military Reservation: A Pictorial History," should be of interest to history and military enthusiasts as well as those who enjoy learning real stories about real people who adapt and survive through wars and economic challenges.

This book is only available at the Clinton County Historical Association. There are a limited number of books available in this printing. If considering a copy for your collection or as a gift, please stop by the CCHA Museum to make your purchase.



Upcoming Programs & Events

November 2nd– 5-7 pm. The Great American Women's Suffrage Trivia Challenge, American Legion Post 20, Quarry Rd., Plattsburgh. Music by Sounds of the Northway. Prizes and snacks provided, and beverages available. \$10 per person.

November 8th– 5 pm. CCHA Annual Meeting, Ground Round, Smithfield Blvd., Plattsburgh. Save the date!. Review of the year, emeritus honorees. Program: The Clinton County Suffrage Story. Followed by dinner as preferred.

November 25th– 10 am to 3 pm. Small Business Saturday, a holiday shopping event. Free gifts for the first 25 visitors.

December 9th & 10th– 10 am to 3 pm. Holiday Open House at the Museum. Free gifts for the first 25 visitors.

Our Newest Publication, Now Available in the Shop, \$19.99

Publication of the book was made possible by CCHA though a grant as follows: an agreement awarded by the Great Lakes Fishery Commission to the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission in partnership with the Lake Champlain Basin Program.



City Hall, continued

New York Center and then Behavioral Health Services North) – plus funding for replacement of his family’s church in his native West Chazy. But among his largest grants was one of \$200,000 to the City of Plattsburgh, with a view toward solidifying the young city’s image as a regional economic and political center with a grand City Hall.

Serious planning began around 1915. Immediately some problems arose. Selection of a site resulted in the need for clearing a diverse working-class neighborhood that included markets, saloons, shops, a livery stable, and a movie theater. Inevitably, the city’s offer of “fair market value” left many property owners feeling they were not being suitably reimbursed for their land. Undoubtedly, there was at least temporary hardship for people with less financial wherewithal who had to be relocated.

There were complaints that the general public was not allowed enough of a role in the design process. In August 1916 a coalition of women’s group leaders presented a petition arguing “present plans for the new City Hall are not satisfactory to the majority of the citizens.” Ultimately, they lobbied the estate of Loyal Smith directly, arguing that it was unfair to the general population to have every square inch reserved for office space and the workings of government.

Their arguments apparently carried weight. The decision was made to include a public auditorium on the third floor. When one looks back at the workings of most bureaucracies, this must be seen as an unusual concession.

Few could complain about the final product. Architect John Russell Pope, early in a career during which he became one of the country’s leaders in his field, won the commission. He had already been selected to design the soaring monument to Commodore Thomas MacDonough across the street. Count this as another stepping stone in a career that gave America the Jefferson Memorial, National Archives, National Gallery of Art, and much more.

Pope chose Indiana limestone for the Classical Revival style building. A grand outdoor staircase would lead to the entrance, with six massive Doric columns to complement the design. A. E. Stephens Company of Springfield, Massachusetts, handled the construction. Vermont marble, a copper dome, and prestressed concrete floors were additional features. The handsome overall effect would seem to have satisfied Smith’s dream.

That top-floor auditorium, by the way, has unfortunately been too little used over the years. The local library, set inside the Plattsburgh Theater from 1895, moved to City Hall in 1918. It stayed until it got its own home later. During the Great Depression, the auditorium hosted women who were employed in WPA sewing projects. For a time in the 1980s, the Clinton County Historical Association had its home there.

Restored during the 1990s through an effort led by then-City

Clerk Keith Herkalo, this place still has the potential to be a wonderful venue.

During the Battle of Plattsburgh Bicentennial Commemoration in 2014, many people were introduced to the auditorium via its hosting of a major quilt show. More recently this space has served as the venue for the annual meeting of the Library Trustees Association of New York State. “Plattsburgh to the Peace,” featuring actors playing the roles of James Madison, Albert Gallatin, and John Quincy Adams, was offered on the auditorium’s stage during this past September’s Battle of Plattsburgh festivities.

Looking elsewhere in the building, it’s gratifying that the first floor public meeting room has found frequent use hosting meetings related to civic purposes. The public doesn’t often have reason to see the council chambers. Inside hang portraits of former mayors and councilpersons. This is also the one place in which a portrait of City Hall’s benefactor, Loyal Smith himself, can be viewed.

I’d like to think that everyone locally – and many out-of-town visitors – have ventured inside City Hall to spend a few minutes in the lobby. Of course, I realize far too few have taken advantage of the opportunity.

There are two notable attractions here.

First, there’s the anchor from the *Confiance*, the British flagship during the Battle of Plattsburgh during the War of 1812. Panels offer detailed information on the battle, the salvaging of this particular artifact, and the preservation efforts that allow it to remain on permanent display.

After the battle, several of the ships were transported down to Whitehall. Some were sold at auction. The others, including the *Confiance*, were then sunk in the nearby Poultney River in 1820, so as to clear shipping lanes on Lake Champlain. In 1873, during dredging operations, the ship was detonated with gunpowder. Over a century later, in 1996, the anchor was found again. On September 11, 1998, it was raised from the water.

Considerable research went into delineating ownership of the anchor. Any question of its right to remain here was obviated by a decision by the British Ministry of Defence agreeing to recovery and conservation plans, with long term display in Plattsburgh. Extensive conservation, coordinated by Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, went into assuring the artifact’s long-term survival.

It’s interesting that this symbol of an adversary occupies such an honored place in the city. But it fits well with the knowledge that Riverside Cemetery is one of those rare graveyards with the burial sites of leaders (one of them Captain George Downie, commander of the *Confiance*) from both sides of a conflict.

The lobby also includes a series of murals, an underappreciated project commissioned the mayoral

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City Hall, continued

administration of Carlton Rennell. These depictions were created by artist Peter Charlap.

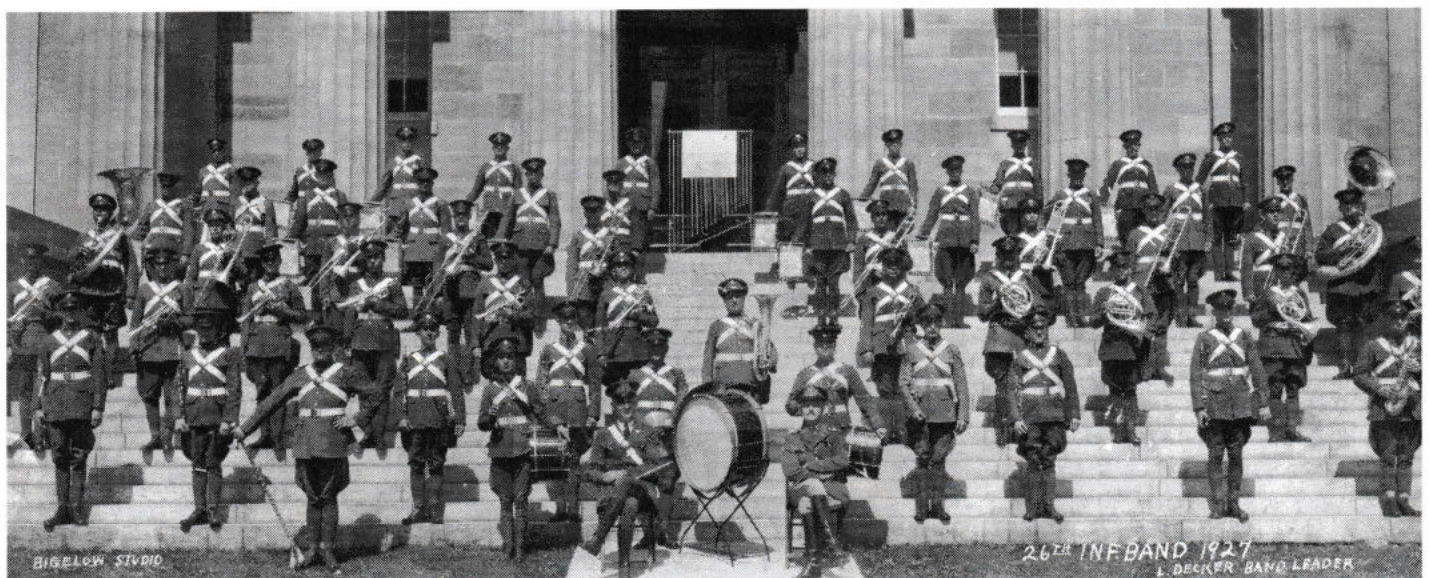
There are four panels in the mural cycle. Careful scrutiny of them from left to right gives a condensed picture of our area's history. The first begins with early Native American presence, while the second highlights the Battle of Plattsburgh during the War of 1812. Commodore Thomas Macdonough, hero of the battle on the lake, gets full hero treatment. With careful attention, one will also find the legendary "plucky rooster."

Next comes an illustration of an iron foundry, a reminder of an important early source of wealth for local settlers. The final painting is the most complex in design, and it's my favorite. Here one sees why Plattsburgh is located where it is, with symbols of early industry like iron mining, lumber mills, and more. Consider the river logjam a literal representation of logging days rather than a modern-day political statement.

Transportation gets its due. Its position on the lake made Plattsburgh accessible to steamships, then later to railroads. Oh, and there's the Air Force, also a piece of history now, though expected to be immortal at the time the murals were created. See it as a good reminder that life constantly changes. The community that understands that will prosper better than the one which fights it.

Ninety years ago, murals and other art work for public buildings were commissioned during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, primarily as a means of providing work for underemployed artists during the Great Depression. This work follows in that tradition. I see these also as a link from the past toward the projects now being added around downtown Plattsburgh under the guidance of Amy Guglielmo, Julia Devine, and others as part of the Plattsburgh Outdoor Art Project.

The 26th Infantry Band posed on the steps of Plattsburgh City Hall.



Many in Clinton County look to its biggest city for leadership. Therefore, any landmark for the city, especially one like City Hall, which was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, necessarily becomes one for the rest of the area, too. I trust that the mayor occasionally takes a few moments to ponder the majesty of the building itself, its philanthropic beginnings, and what it continues to signify for the region. Hopefully, he appreciates the grand building's history and the displays contained inside. And finds many opportunities for encouraging the rest of us to appreciate them, too.

This article first appeared in Richard Frost's "Rich in History" column in the November 2, 2016 issue of the Lake Champlain Weekly and is reprinted with permission.

CCHA has produced a new ornament honoring City Hall for this, its 100th anniversary, and it is available now for purchase in the shop. The price is \$15.00.

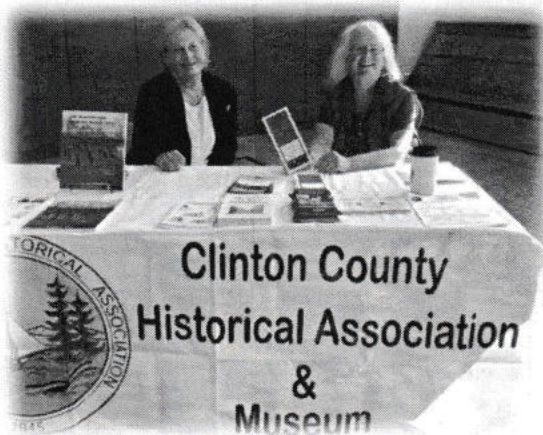




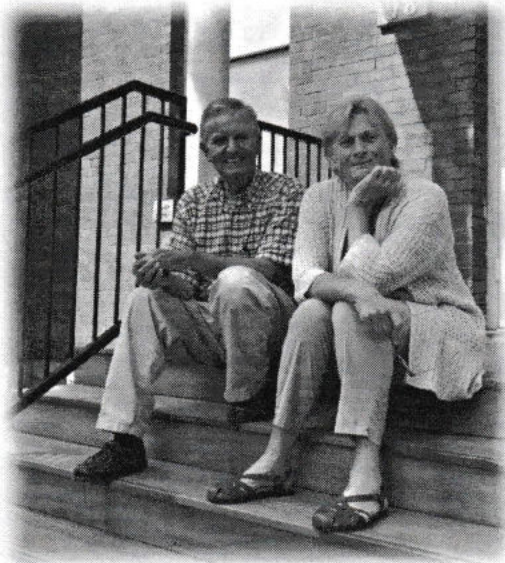
Donations, Support, Grants and Dues January 1, 2017 through September 30, 2017

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Julie Dowd and Helen Nerska promoting the new book at an event in Newcomb.



Bill Laundry and Helen Allen Nerska on our new County funded porch.



CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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Current Resident or:

Calling all volunteers! We need you at the Museum. Docent positions, cataloguing helpers, collections committee, fundraising and more.

Updates on the Book and Gift Shop

New:

Waterways of War: The Turning Point of the American Revolution
(Benson/Toelke/Westbrook) \$15.00

The Plattsburgh Military Reservation: A Pictorial History
(Frost/Peck) \$19.99

Unshackling America (Willard Sterne Randall) \$25.00

A Tale of Three Gunboats: Lake Champlain's Revolutionary War Heritage
(Lundeberg/Cohn/Jones) \$25.00

Chasing Mosby, Killing Booth, the 16th New York Volunteer Cavalry
(Carson) \$30.00

Gently Used/Single Copies:

Bluff Point Golf and Country Club (Doh) \$30.00

Adirondack Golf Courses ...Past and Present (Martin) \$8.00

The Saranac Valley-Vol. 1 or Vol. 2 (Baker) \$10.00

Coming Soon!

Clinton County Memories II

