

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

Issued Monthly by the Clinton County Historical Association

48 Court Street, Plattsburgh NY 12901, 518-561-0340

No. 316 PRESIDENT: Mark A. McCullough EDITOR: Helen W. Allan January 1995

JANUARY PROGRAM

A new season of monthly programs begins with a presentation by Darren Phaneuf, a senior history student and a SUNY presidential scholar. His topic is "Community at War: Class, Ethnicity, and Social Tensions in Plattsburgh during the Civil War." A graduate of Northeastern Clinton High School, Darren was one of the few undergraduates in the United States to receive a 1994 National Endowment for the Humanities summer grant to assist with research and writing this paper. He found that Plattsburgh was not a united community during the Civil War. Initially, Anglo males enlisted in the military, and local opinion was in support of the war effort. But Plattsburgh males were 37% immigrant, and their early enthusiasm for enlistment cooled. Furthermore, the war tended to heighten class, ethnic and occupational fault lines.

The free program will take place on Monday, January 9, 1995 at 7:30 p.m. in the Old Courthouse meeting room, second floor, which is handicapped accessible. Everyone is invited to attend. (Please note the alternative venue.)

SLATE ACCEPTED

At CCHA's December membership meeting the following five members were elected to the Board of directors: Jane Ellis, Ralph Martin, Jamie Trautman, Bill Laundry and David Martin. As the Class of 1997, they join Bradley Knapp, Bill Woythaler, Bob Perkins, David Stortz and Mark McCullough (Class of 1995) and Fred Smith, Celine Racine-Paquette, Rose Matthews, Keith Herkalo and James Giroux (Class of 1996). The officers for 1995 were elected at the December Board meeting. They are as follows:

President: Mark A. McCullough
Vice-President: J. William Woythaler
Secretary: Celine Racine-Paquette
Treasurer: Frederick G. Smith

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN PERU, NEW YORK

Editor's note: A recent article in the Press-Republican about the Underground Railroad resulted in a letter to the Editor by CCHA member Ann Keese Chien and a copy to the Historical Association. The Underground Railroad is of great interest to researchers of Clinton County's history, therefore we are printing her letter in its entirety.

"I read (*the article*) with great interest and some alarm because it perpetuates a myth about the house, mentioned in the article, that I grew up in. I feel that I must set the record straight about my former home at the corner of Union and Harkness Roads in the town of Peru. The New York State Historical Society marker in front of the house, pictured in your article, reads, "seventh lineal descendant on farm." My brother, Gordon, and I were the seventh lineal descendants of Richard Keese, the original settler of the property, and the fifth lineal descendants of Peter Keese, who built the house, approximately 160 years ago. (It is) now owned by Lincoln and Ann Sunderland.

"Long-time residents of the area may recall that my mother and, before her, my grandmother conducted tours of the house. Both were actively interested in local history, as well they might have been, living as they did on a property with a deed that dates back to the year of the signing of the Constitution of the United States. As a child, I always tagged along with the tours. I learned my grandmother's spiel by heart, and when I was old enough I was called upon from time to time to conduct the tours myself.

"There was never any mention to our guests or in family conversations of our home having been a station on the Underground Railroad. We did know of two Underground Railroad stations on Union Road near Peru. One was the Stafford home mentioned in Ms. Caudell's article. The second was a Keese house, but it was not our home. It originally belonged to Stephen Keese and is now owned by Northern Orchards. In the village of Keeseville, the former Green Apple Inn on North AuSable Street did not house runaways, but it did provide a secret passage to the river, used to transport the escapees on their way to the safety of Canada.

"There has always been speculation linking our house with the Underground Railroad because of my family's Quaker heritage and because of a dark room in the corner of the cellar, never used during my lifetime, that can be reached only by a trap door from above. To the best of my knowledge, this room was a milk cellar, its function was to keep food cold in the summer. (The house was not electrified, and therefore had no refrigeration, until World War II, more than a century after it was built.) Hiding places in true Underground Railroad houses that I have visited were always ingeniously concealed by means of false walls and hidden

passageways, the better to avoid detection. Our milk cellar, however, would have been immediately obvious to anyone who gained entrance to the cellar. Furthermore, it is an integral part of the structure, which was built in the decade before the Underground Railroad became a widespread phenomenon.

"Your article mentions the importance of 'oral tradition and folkways...to pass on nuances and textures of history.' But an oral tradition should be authentic. The Keese Homestead was built by my grandfather's grandfather. My family lived in the house uninterrupted for 140 years. We may wish that it were so, but there is no family tradition, nor is there any reliable documentation, supporting any claim that our house was a station on the Underground Railroad.

"My Grandmother Keese was named by her family's pastor in Brooklyn—the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, an ardent abolitionist and the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of the great abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Likenesses of President Lincoln that adorned our home were silent testimony to our family's commitment to the anti-slavery cause. You can be sure that if there had been any possibility of Underground Railroad activity at the Keese Homestead, Grandmother Keese would have proclaimed it proudly to one and all."

A SON'S TRIBUTE

"Melancton Smith was commissioned a Major of the Twenty-Ninth Inf. on the 20th day of Feb, 1813, and was promoted to Colonel on the 12th of April following. He left the army at the close of the war, and died at Plattsburgh on the 18th of August, 1818. In the eastern extremity of the old burial ground at Plattsburgh I found his grave in 1860, and at the head of it an elaborately-wrought tombstone of blue limestone, on which is the following inscription: 'To the memory of Colonel MELANCTON SMITH who died August 18, 1818, aged 38 years. As a testimony of respect for his virtues, and to mark the spot where rests the ashes of our excellent Father, this stone is erected by his son Richbill. United with many masculine virtues, he had a tear for pity, and a hand open as day for melting charity'. "

(Editor's note: We found the preceding entry in The Pictorial Field-Book Of The War Of 1812 by Benjamin J. Lossing, 1869. Richbill Smith, son of Melancton, was the artist whose watercolor painting of Nathaniel Platt's house was given to the museum by Mrs. Martha Signor Bier. The painting depicts Nathaniel's house ["done on the spot, 1796"] which burned down in 1822 and was replaced by his son-in-law William Bailey with the stone dwelling that exists today on the same site at 176 Cornelia Street, Plattsburgh.)

"January 4, 1767: 4th to the 12th, warm good weather, built part of our clay chimney in the new kitchen."

Journal of William Gilliland

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DOLLHOUSE WINNER

And the lucky winner is.....Fred Songayllo of Chazy! Fred's family will receive the pretty Victorian doll house which was built by Bob Post of My Doll House. CCHA president Mark McCullough sends thanks to all our members and friends who contributed to the fundraiser. He notes that the proceeds of the third annual doll house event will benefit the programs and activities of the Historical Association and the County Museum.

OPPORTUNITY TO VIEW PORTRAITS

The Historical Association recently borrowed two oil portraits by Vermont artist Asahel Lynde Powers for the purposes of research and appraisal. The 1840 paintings are of Peter Weaver and Susan Butler Weaver, and they are part of the Powers oeuvre completed in Clinton County in 1840-41. In a 1973 catalogue entry for the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Williamsburg, VA, folk art expert Nina Fletcher Little commented on the Powers paintings made in Clinton County which include CCHA's portraits of Mr. & Mrs. Elisha Arnold and Dr. & Mrs. Isaac Patchin. The Patchin portraits were recently cleaned and repaired, thanks to conservation funding from the New York State Council on the Arts. The museum also exhibits the loaned Powers portraits of Mr. & Mrs. Abel Knapp.

According to Little, "use of the (classic) column behind Mrs. Weaver proves that Powers had become aware of the artistic conventions of his period. In Clinton County he was painting prominent and well-to-do families for whom he was striving to produce dignified and conventional likenesses that would win him recognition and future commissions."

Privately owned, the Weaver portraits are on exhibition at the museum during January. This is a fine opportunity to see the charming portrait of redhaired Susan Weaver and the accompanying image of her pioneer husband Peter who came here from Vermont in 1800. As Peter's third wife, Susan took good care of him for he lived to the ripe old age of 100.