

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 370

Shirley L. Koester, Editor

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The Next Meeting

is December 6, 1999, at the first floor meeting room at the Government Center, 137 Margaret Street, Plattsburgh, at 7:30 PM. Elaine Reynolds, Executive Director of The Ticonderoga Historical Society, Hancock House, will speak on "The Hancock House, An Enduring Icon of Historic Preservation". Elaine Reynolds has a Masters Degree in Anthropology and is the Society's first professional museum director.

This program is made possible with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency, and also by the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences, a federal agency serving the public by strengthening museums and libraries. It is free and open to the public.

For the Last Century

.....or at least slightly more than a half the century, the Clinton County Historical Association has been the keeper of the past: people, places, events and industry. Established in 1945, the Association has existed through the dedicated efforts of many, who through the years, organized, collected and preserved the stories, artifacts and all things "Clinton County," for posterity.

Those serving as officers and board members of the Association in 1946 were: Dr. Carter Alexander, Hugh McClellan, Dr. William Ladue, B. Fuller Allen, Elizabeth Gilliland, Helen Hale, Simon Fitzpatrick, William Howell,

Dr. John Rusterholtz, Dr. Blakely R. Webster, Dr. Milo Hillegas, Henry G. Rogers, Oscar Bredenburg, John Craig, Mrs. W. H. Miner, Mrs. Ralph McCuen, John R. Cain, Frank Atkins, Mrs. Oliver Wolcott, Mrs. Gilmore Thew and Mrs. Robert Casey.

These individuals, began a long tradition of treasuring and preserving the history of Clinton County. There have been many who, through the years have contributed time, energy and resources to carry out the mission of the association

Moving into the 21st Century, we encourage you to think of The Clinton County Historical Association, when you consider disposition of memorabilia and assets, honoring and cherishing the memory of those who have made us who we are. We welcome your input and involvement through continued help, shared talents, and gifts, enabling us to present to future generations a record of their past in tangible form, to make the past "live" for them.

Culver Hill

If you were to drive north from Plattsburgh on route twenty-two you would find Culver Hill monument on the left side of the road, about four miles north. Erected by the Plattsburgh Institute in 1894, the simple granite marker stands at the site of the first skirmish of the Battle of Plattsburgh.

The British invaders had separated into two parties; one advanced by way of the lake shore (present day route nine); the other followed a bridle path through the woods and farmsteads of Beekmantown. This latter party topped a rise into a clearing, where stood a partly completed house. They were met by a volley of gunfire. Several men fell and in the ensuing confusion the boys from Plattsburgh Academy moved quietly away from their hiding places and disappeared in the woods. The stone wall at the crest of the hill, which had concealed them from the British is still there, though it has several more layers of stone today.

The wounded that day were carried to a shelter within the stone walls of the half-finished house, east of the path. Three were killed; one of those buried on the hillside northeast of the house was Brevet Lieutenant James Wellington, nephew of the famous "Iron Duke." Many years later members of the Wellington family removed the remains to England. The rectangular opening in the earth filled partially and turfed over as the years passed.

The British soldiers were stopped again by cannon fire at Halsey's Corners as the monument there will testify. In case you are not an old resident, Halsey's Corners is where the Tom Miller road meets the old route twenty-two, the part now cut off by the Northway.

These delays inflicted no serious losses on the invading troops. However they did help the Plattsburghers who had rallied to the defense of the town by giving them time to destroy bridges across the Saranac and to make provision for the safety of other citizens.

Many stories of the Battle of Plattsburgh will be told but little will be said of Culver Hill. So let us return there. The first holder of the property was Francis Colver, the spelling of the name changed sometime in the nineteenth century. He came from Connecticut some time before the turn of that century and was one of the early settlers in the county. His land was comprised of some four to six hundred acres of cleared flat land, hills and woods, well watered and pleasantly situated. As children grew up and married, acreage was cut from the home place to furnish living space for the new families. The farm where the old house stands remained family property until 1944.

The first home of Francis Culver was probably a cabin standing a little north of the crest of the hill. The stone house was begun in 1813. The kitchen and work rooms were dug into the hill side; the remnants of old partitions were distinguishable in the cellars when I was a child. The stone for the walls was quarried on Culver land and hauled by oxen up the hill to where it would be used.

Sometime in the nineteenth century a clapboarded wing was added to the south of the stone house, and the main business of living moved above ground. The timbered addition had a kitchen, a large pantry and a sick room. Above the kitchen was a room for the hired man.

The stone house had a living room from which a bedroom opened; a wide hall and stairway; a parlor with a guest room beyond. The "company" door of the house opened into the hall and stairs led from the hall to a wide landing. Another short flight led to the two bedrooms and "The North Room." I never heard it called anything else but "The North Room," had all the fascinating attributes of an attic. It had never been completely finished; it extended the width of the house; and it was filled with the cast-off paraphernalia of living. One end was the resting-place of the old carpet loom. I've seen similar looms in The Farmer's Museum in Cooperstown, but never one so big, so enthralling as that one looked to a child's eyes.

There were all sorts of relics of other days. Grandfather was a collector and a craftsman. There was a muzzle-loader up there and a sword that had been carried in the 'Battle of Plattsburgh. He had belonged to a fife and drum corps organized by one of the Platts and the fife hung just out of reach of eager fingers. There were round-topped trunks full of pictures and letters and deeds and diaries.

Grandfather had an ancient box full of musket balls he'd found when he opened the old wall and dug a path for the cattle to cross into the west pasture. On the flat lands below the house he'd recovered bits of pottery and finely made arrowheads. His grandfather had told him of Indians that camped each spring near a narrow, languid stream there.

Best of all, Grandfather collected stories, and took the time to tell them to a fascinated child.

I spent my early childhood at Culver Hill. A book would be too short to tell of those days. The sugar-house was gone then but there were maples in the woods and Grandfather tapped some trees to show me how. He hitched the horses to the bobsled and

spent morning after morning driving around to collect the sap. We boiled it down on the wood range in the kitchen and sampled the product often, in the making.

I never read Robert Frost's *Invitation* without thinking of the clear, cold spring that bubbled out of the ledge where the woods began. We always "Stopped to rake the leaves away," if we passed near it.

I played house in the shallow rectangular hole on the side hill. I doubt that knowledge of it's former occupant would have disturbed me. I was experimenting with the use of real eggs in my mud pies; and testing the inner bark of the old apple trees (it looks so much like stick cinnamon!).

Today the house at Culver Hill is a pathetic ruin. The elms and the maples that made cool, green havens of shade on the hot days are gone. The windows are broken and walls show widening fissures. The plaster has fallen away from the hand hewn beams that stretch across the window openings.

One day I shall go to pay my respects and find only a heap of stones. Then I shall be able to see it again as it used to be, loved and lived in....Culver Hill.

This remembrance of a childhood spent with a beloved grandfather, was presented to the DAR by Julia Fisher Simmons, and exemplifies the best sentiments of those loyal residents of the north country and specifically those of Clinton County residents, who trace their ancestry back to earlier days.

The McMasters Prize for the Writing of History

The Clinton County Historical Association is offering its twenty-third annual prize for the best composition on a theme from the history of Clinton, Essex, or Franklin Counties. Authors need not be North Country residents.

The deadline for the submission of papers is April 1, 2000. For more information on the McMasters Prize, please call the Association at (518) 561-0340.

We wish all our members and friends a happy holiday season and good health in the new millennium!

Holiday Gifts: Consider sending a membership to the association to a friend. We will be glad to send a gift note announcing your gift.

We are offering a 20% discount on Clinton County Historical Association titles, through December 30, 1999. This discount applies to all titles published by CCHA. Please call the museum for a booklist and information on prices and shipping. 518 561-0340

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
48 Court Street
Plattsburgh, New York 12901

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Ms. Elizabeth Botten
81 Butler Rd.
Plattsburgh, NY 12901-5115