



Clinton County Historical Association North Country Notes

Issue #423

December, 2019



A Permanent Home: CCHA Acquires Aikin Rifle

By Luke Cyphers

John Barton Jr. remembers being a child and seeing the 150-year-old rifle hanging on the wall of his family home, knowing it was important, yet never completely understanding why.

But as he grew older and learned more about the commemorative Aikin Rifle, the one deeded through an act of Congress to Martin Aikin himself, Barton became fully absorbed in a story of bravery that has

the Martin J. Aikin Rifle has been a centerpiece of the museum's galleries ever since. And it will remain so, now that the Barton family, who has owned the rifle for five generations, sold the gun to CCHA for the token amount of \$100 this past November.

"When I opened the email and saw the news, I got choked up," says CCHA Director Helen Nerska.



echoed through six generations of his family and two centuries of American history.

A story of how a scrappy band of teenagers helped fend off an invading force of 10,000 British troops and gained victory in the Battle of Plattsburgh, the clash that decided the outcome of the War of 1812.

A story of a young, war-weary nation that wanted to commemorate a remarkable, pivotal act of gallantry.

A story that now, thanks to the generosity of Barton and his family, will continue to be told to the public in the museum of the Clinton County Historical Association.

"I decided that this rifle was too important to be left in a private collector's closet someplace," Barton said. "And that was really the motivation that I had to get the rifle donated to the museum."

On loan to the CCHA collection since 1992,

The Martin J. Aikin Rifle (above), awarded in 1826 to a hero of the Battle of Plattsburgh, is now a permanent part of the CCHA collection.

The reason is simple—the Aikin Rifle is a singular object commemorating a signal event. "It's a one-of-a-kind piece of a one-of-a-kind battle in American history," says Julie Dowd, a former CCHA trustee and longtime volunteer.

The rifle's importance as a historical artifact can't be exaggerated. Aikin's Volunteers were a ragtag group of mostly teenage boys who served only 10 days during the War of 1812, but their courage changed the course of the climactic Battle of Plattsburgh.

The volunteers formed in Sept. 3, 1814, as word of an impending massive British attack from the north reached Plattsburgh. Most of the boys were Plattsburgh Academy

Thank you for
picking up our
newsletter!

The Clinton County Historical Association (CCHA) is a non-profit organization that is chartered by the New York State Board of Regents. We collect and preserve items that have relevance to Clinton County.

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Association News: CCHA to Celebrate 75 Years

By Geri Favreau, President

Even though winter has set in, CCHA is still humming with activity. There are always collections items to process, visitors to greet, books to sell and just the general business of running a bustling Museum.

We are eagerly looking forward to celebrating our 75th Anniversary in 2020 with a new exhibit and other fun activities.

The Board was very pleased at the excellent attendance at our Annual Meeting on Nov. 20. The meeting and dinner featured an in-depth presentation from Corky Reinhart on Isaac Johnson, an African-American who was sold into slavery as a child, but later escaped, fought for the Union in the Civil War and went on to become a stone mason, contractor and architect whose pioneering work left an indelible mark in the North Country and Canada.

Plans are being made for Reinhart to deliver his presentation again in the spring.

The CCHA Annual Report was presented at the meeting and will be included in the next issue of North Country Notes, to be published in January.

CCHA has received a \$5,000 grant from New York State, thanks to Assemblyman Billy Jones, which will be used to replace our front door.

We are very grateful to Assemblyman Jones for his continued support of our mission to preserve the region's history.

While the museum stays busy even when it is closed to the public, with volunteers and staff members updating and documenting the collections, CCHA is involved with many other projects outside our four walls.

The association is part of the regional group planning our areas contributions to the national America 250 celebration, which will commemorate the founding of the United States in 2026.

Closer to home, the CCHA is a voice at the table in the planning for the Town of Plattsburgh's proposed Battlefield Gateway Park on the shores of Lake Champlain, and a vital member of the Adirondack Coast Cultural Alliance.

In addition, CCHA is helping plan a local 2020 history conference, and playing a lead role in advocating to make the Old Base Museum Campus a cultural and tourism destination.

And, as usual, we have a long list of talks and events planned, which you can find on Page 3 of this issue.

While 2019 was a busy and prosperous year, 2020 promises to be even better!

Museum Corner: The Importance of Volunteers

By Helen Allen Nerska, Director

CCHA is all about volunteers – our Board, our docents, our donors, our Collections Committee, our Communications Committee, our Historic Photographs Working Group and our Library and Research coordinator.

In a given week over 40 hours of volunteer time are donated, not including the many hours spent by the four members of your Executive Committee.

This year we had two SUNY Plattsburgh interns, each spending between five and six hours a week on projects you will soon see.

Intern Alexandra Thomas will be presenting in January on the photos and life of Rouses Point businessman and photographer Frank Pardy. She scanned and documented our collection of over 400 glass plate negatives of his work.

Intern Trent Green worked with past president Noel Stewart (in the photo at right) on the Clinton County WWI Veterans Story, identifying the gravesites of over 600 veterans, a project that should be complete in the fall.

Someone once commented to me that telling people how many volunteers or interns we have will give the public a sense that we don't need more help or support.

That is so far from the truth I was actually speechless when I heard the comment.

Documents and artifacts come in every day, joining pieces collected over the past 75 years that need documentation or updated descriptions.



We have a project for anyone who has an interest in County history. If you have a few hours a week to donate to us, please come in for a chat. We need you.

CCHA Coming Attractions

“The Frank Parody Story”

**Lake Forest Retirement
Community**

January 16, 6:30 p.m.

CCHA Intern Alexandra Thomas will give a talk on the life of Parody, the Rouses Point businessman and photographer. Based on Thomas’s extensive research scanning and documenting more than 400 glass plate negatives in the museum’s collection, the discussion will be an examination of Parody’s large body of work—including the photo at right.



“Winter Fun at the Museum”

CCHA

February 8, 10 a.m. to Noon

February 17, Noon to 2 p.m.

February 21, 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Children can come in from the cold on three days in February to explore the CCHA exhibits and make things to take home with them. February 8 will be “Make your own Valentines” day; the 17th and 21st will focus on building toys and other crafts.

“Stories of African Americans in Beekmantown”

Beekmantown Town Hall

February 27, 6:30

Jackie Madison, president of the North Country Underground Railroad Association, will discuss the history and legacy of the community. Part of the Town of Beekmantown Bicentennial.

“William Beaumont and His Legacy”

Lake Forest Retirement Community

March 25, 6:30 p.m.

Dr. Paolo Fedi, who named his practice after Beaumont, will bring into focus the enduring impact the 19th century Plattsburgh physician had on the history of medicine in the U.S.

“Parker Maple Farms Festival”

1043 Slosson Road, West Chazy

March 28, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Sweeten up syrup season by coloring your Easter eggs with CCHA.

“Prohibition in the North Country”

Site to be determined

April 7, 6:30

Author Larry Gooley brings to light a time when alcohol was banned and some locals made out—literally—like bandits.

“Reflections of Fantasy Kingdom/ St. Armands Beach”

Beekmantown Town Hall

April 23

In collaboration with the Town of Beekmantown Bicentennial.

Cemetery Tours

Peru, Town of Clinton, Beekmantown

Three cemetery tours have been planned for 2020, with dates and times still to be determined. Please check our events cards, Facebook page and local newspapers for information on CCHA events.

CCHA Acquires Aikin Rifle (cont.)

students too young for military service, but they gathered together and elected 21-year-old Martin J. Aikin as their leader and sponsor. The British had crossed the border, and the volunteers marched north on a scorching hot day to meet the enemy in Chazy.

For the next several days, they did what teenagers have always been adept at: annoying people. They observed and scouted the British, occasionally harrying the redcoats on their invasion route down Beekmantown Road (now Route 22). After fighting alongside an overwhelmed local militia on Sept. 6, Aikin and his “men” fell back to the Saranac River, taking up sniper positions in a mill, vandalizing a bridge to keep the Brits from crossing, and picking off enemy soldiers when they tried to ford the river. They disbanded on Sept. 12, 1814, one day after the Americans won a decisive, bloody naval confrontation on Plattsburgh Bay.

One member of the volunteer unit was killed in action.

The mere existence of the rifles tells a lot about the American experiment. Gen. Alexander Macomb wanted to issue rifles to each of the volunteers as a tribute to their bravery but was told by higher-ups that he couldn't. It took years, but in May of 1826, Congress passed a resolution awarding Hall's breech-loading flintlock military rifles to each of them “for their gallantry and patriotic services as a volunteer corps.”

Each rifle bore a silver plate engraved with the name of the soldier to whom it was awarded.

What's important to realize is that in the USA of the day, these things weren't done. Never before had Congress awarded a commemorative rifle to civilians, and it hasn't been done since.

Barton, who has done extensive research on Aikin's Volunteers and the rifles in particular, says the guns were a conscious effort by leaders of the still-young nation to change how the broader populace thought of itself. “It was a really different time,” Barton says. “People considered themselves citizens of their states and not necessarily as a citizen of the United States. From what I can tell, the members of Congress were trying to

engender patriotism in the country itself, and stress the importance of preventing enemies from taking over our country.”

The rifles were a testament to the young country's need to show that its national government cared about patriotism, and that doing one's duty for the country would be recognized.

Meanwhile, the namesake rifle for the Aikin Volunteers is a testament to the forethought and care taken by a remarkable North Country family.

John Barton Sr. passed away at the age of 95 in 2017, and in his will declared that the rifle should be sold. His son John Jr. had the rifle appraised and learned that the market for such



Sterling silver plate on the Martin J. Aikin commemorative rifle. A close look shows the name on the plate is spelled Aitkin.

collectibles had declined precipitously after the 2008 financial crisis. He leafed through volumes of a glossy auction-house catalog and found that the most expensive firearms “were highly engraved, gold-plated, beautiful works of art, essentially,” he says. “Something you can imagine a collector would fetishize.”

In contrast, “You look at the Hall rifle, which has this simple plaque on it, and you could tell this was somehow influencing the value,” he continues. “The collectors were not as interested in the historical significance of the gun, but more

its appearance.”

So Barton made a decision, in consultation with the other heirs to his father's estate, that the rifle stay with CCHA. Barton's Sept. 27 email to CCHA said the family decided to sell the gun for a token sum. “I am pleased to tell you that (the family) has agreed with me that the best place for this rifle is where it is now,” the email reads.

Within weeks, former CCHA President Roger Harwood had donated \$100 for the sale price, and CCHA member Maurica Gilbert helped navigate through the required paperwork to make the rifle a part of the collection for as long as CCHA exists.

The Bartons sacrificed potential income from a sale of the rifle, but sacrifices are nothing new for the remarkable family.

The gun had been in the family ever since John Barton Jr.'s

William Henry Jackson's Monumental Legacy

By Virginia Mason Burdick

*One of the most noteworthy personages ever to call Clinton County home, William Henry Jackson was a pioneering photographer whose 19th century images of majestic landscapes across this nation and around the world—including the Adirondacks—not only captured history, they created it. Jackson's photos were instrumental in the establishment of at least two national parks, most notably Yellowstone. And his life story, all 99 years worth, remains an inspiration. This 1993 article by Virginia Mason Burdick ran in a CCHA publication, *The Antiquarian*, and has been edited for space.*

Three miles west of Peru village, the Little Ausable River winds its way past farms and houses situated on a knoll above a bend in the road. Here in 1850 George Hallock Jackson bought 200 acres of farmland with a house for his wife and expanding family, next to his cousin, Peter Hallock, on River Road.

George had lived in Keeseville, where he owned a blacksmith and carriage shop. George's wife, Harriet Allen, came from Troy, New York, home of the original Uncle Sam, Samuel Wilson, who was her great uncle. Harriet was graduated from the Troy Female Seminary (today known as the Emma Willard School), married George in 1842 and bore the first of their seven children, William Henry Jackson, in Keeseville on April 4, 1843.

George moved his family from place to place, a tendency William seems to have inherited. In pursuit of work as a carriage-maker, George took his family to Georgia, Plattsburgh, Virginia and Philadelphia. After that they came to rest in his wife's hometown of Troy.

George was always looking for new things. After the appearance of the daguerreotype process in 1839, he experimented with a camera of his own. Young William was later allowed to play with it as a toy when he was a small boy. "I got the feel of a camera almost before I could walk," William remembered. "I can't help believe that this childhood experience helped to direct my life."

The Jacksons lived on the Peru farm for two years. William walked half a mile to his first school, a one-room affair at the intersection of the River and Calkins Roads in Peru, but because his family's frequent moves, his education was spotty

until they finally settled down in Troy.

By the time William Jackson was 12, he was spending his free time drawing. "I can hardly remember the time when I didn't draw pictures."

At first William used watercolors to paint landscapes. Later he worked with oils, and copied old portraits. When he was fifteen, he worked after school for a Troy photographer. He considered this job the beginning of his career; he painted window screens for 15 cents a screen. In 1860, he moved to Rutland, Vermont, to work for a photographer for six dollars a week.

In August of 1862, Jackson enlisted in the Rutland Light Guard to fight in the Civil War. He saw limited action in Virginia and Gettysburg, where he guarded supply trains and prisoners, but as his talent became known, he was also kept busy drawing maps and sketches for his officers. In his letters to his family he often enclosed 3 x 5 cards with sketches of camp life. They gave him a certain amount of local fame.

When William's one-year enlistment ended in 1863, he returned to his old job in Rutland, where he soon had a sweet-



William Henry Jackson (front) and photo gear near Yellowstone, sometime between 1871 and 1878. Credit: Library of Congress

Jackson's Photographic Legacy (cont.)

heart, Miss Caroline ("Caddie") Eastman. He moved to a better job with a photographer in Burlington, but on Sundays he visited Caddie in Rutland. One day Miss Eastman and Mr. Jackson had a quarrel. He admitted afterward that always "she had spirit, I was bull-headed." The argument escalated, and, as he put it in his memoir, "I was, so to speak, discharged."

He was angry and decided he "must leave Vermont forever." He was 23 years old.

Without telling his parents, William took the train to New York and then started westward, earning just enough money to reach the end of the railroad.

He worked rugged jobs as a bullwhacker on a wagon train and driving horses from California back to Nebraska, before finding work with a photographer in Omaha, and in 1868, starting his own photo business with his brother Edward.

He got work photographing Native Americans in Nebraska and riding the new railroads to shoot landscapes in the West. To take pictures on his travels, William made a large box to fit on the back of his wagon. It was his "traveling dark room" that carried his equipment for "wet-plate photography." In 1869 William married Mollie Greer in Omaha, just as he caught his big break.

The turning point of William's career was his meeting with Dr. Ferdinand Hayden, a geologist in the Department of the Interior. In July 1870, Hayden stopped in Omaha to examine Jackson's pictures of the West. He liked the photographs and asked him to join his group for the summer. Jackson gladly joined the United States Geological Survey, helping map territories little-known to white people. During the summer of 1871, Hayden's men explored the Yellowstone country. Jackson's photographs of Mammoth Hot Springs were the first ever published. In March of 1872, largely as a result of the stunning pictures of Jackson and others in the Survey, Congress created the nation's first National

Park at Yellowstone. But just as he was experiencing this historic triumph, Jackson faced one of his darkest hours.

His wife Mollie died in childbirth, and their newborn daughter "survived but a short while," he wrote in 1940. "These are matters about which, even now, I can write no more."

In 1873 Jackson set out with the survey to find the Mount of the Holy Cross in the Colorado Rockies. After making their way



William Henry Jackson (right), his mother Harriet Jackson (left), son Clarence S. Jackson (top center) and young son Billy in a 1910 family portrait. Credit: Library of Congress.

through a pass they found a native trail that led to the base of a tall mountain. Down one side of the mountain they saw a rock formation of a "snowy cross." They were among the first white people to look upon this spectacle.

Jackson and two men lugged the heavy equipment up a nearby mountain opposite Holy Cross. By the time they reached the summit, clouds obscured the summit. After a cold night on the mountain nearby, Jackson wakened

at dawn to a clear sky. He made eight excellent exposures,

the first ever made of this spot, and the most famous mountain picture he ever made.

He married Emilie Painter, a doctor's daughter from Omaha, in 1873, and they couple spent the winter in Washington while Jackson catalogued his summer's work with the USGS.

One of the most exciting events of the survey in 1874 was the exploration of prehistoric cliff dwellings in the remote southwestern corner of the Colorado Territory. With much difficulty Jackson and his co-workers climbed 800 feet above the canyon to reach the ledges and their sandstone ruins.

When Jackson's photographs and detailed records became widely known, they helped confirm Congress's belief that it must continue to establish National Parks in the west. Consequently, in 1906 the federal government declared the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde a National Park of 50,000 acres.

During the summer of 1875, Jackson explored the Arizona Ter-

Jackson's monumental legacy (cont.)

ritory and photographed the Ute Indians, but by 1879, Congress "reformed" the survey and Jackson said goodbye to his friends. His pleasant summers of photography, sketching and exploring for the government were over.

Jackson decided to settle down in Denver and open a photographic business. Thanks to a fortuitous meeting with Denver and Rio Grande Railroad magnate Jay Gould, Jackson was able to supplement his income by traveling by rail throughout the west in the 1880s, taking pictures to advertise hotels and trains. The travel made for difficult times for Emilie and their children, but they built a home with William's profits. In 1892, he incorporated his business as W.H. Jackson Photograph and Publishing Company.

Jackson couldn't get enough of wandering. In 1894, he accepted a friend's invitation to join him on a trip around the world as the "official photographer" for the World's Transportation Company. Travel expenses would be paid, and Harper's Weekly would pay him for his pictures.

Jackson's itinerary of seventeen months let him travel, photograph and meet people of all nationalities and classes. When he visited eastern Siberia, which he crossed in an open sledge in 20-below temperatures, he thought the "Russians were the kindest people in the world."

Jackson's tour ended in New York on March 3, 1896, and he reinvented himself again, as part owner of the Detroit Publishing Company in Michigan, producing colored postcards and prints. His business did well amid the booming young automobile industry.

In 1899 he returned to his traveling career with "zest." He photographed in Canada, the Thousand Islands and the Adirondacks. In 1918, when Jackson was 75 years old, he retired from the picture-publishing company. Unfortunately, Emilie did not live long after his retirement, dying just before the 1918 Armistice.

But Jackson, indefatigable, returned to painting, and in 1924 moved to Washington to create art on canvas and sketchpads and to write in his journals. Ten years later he was given the job of secretary of the Oregon Trail Memorial Association. He wasn't through yet. At the age 86, he made Manhattan's Latham Hotel his permanent headquarters, with a living room, bedroom, stu-

dio and darkroom. During a visit to Washington in 1935 Jackson received a commission from the Department of the Interior and spent the next year painting large murals depicting the Hayden Survey's work. Paid \$150 a month, he was "never happier."

In 1937, on a visit to Wyoming, he fell through an open cellar door to a cement floor ten feet below. He was forced to lie still in bed for one month, but the 94-year-old's fractured vertebrae healed perfectly. In 1940 he completed his entertaining autobiography, "Time Exposure", and he worked until his death in 1942 at age 99.



Jackson took this photo in what is now Guangzhou, China, in 1895. Credit: Library of Congress.

Let's end not with his death, but a story of his remarkable life. In October 1939 Jackson spent a week in Clinton County visiting his relatives, the Ladue family and Grace Wilson. With the help of Arthur and Virginia Burrell, Jackson searched for the site of his former house on River Road. They found a row of old apple trees and a "vine-covered excavation."

When the Burrells mentioned the old school house still standing up the road, Jackson said with much joy, "This is the right place." He pulled a tiny Eastman camera from his pocket and photographed the trees and the foundation of his boyhood home.

In the Next Issue

North Country Notes will be back in January with the CCHA Annual Report and 2019 donor list.



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CCHA Acquires Aikin Rifle (Cont.)

great, great grandmother Minerva Lake Aikin, Martin J. Aikin’s niece, who lived from 1812 to 1897, took possession of it sometime in the 1800s. Some details of the firearm’s history are unclear, including how to spell the name Aikin. It is spelled on various documents Aiken, Aitkin (which is how it’s spelled on the commemorative firearm’s silver plate), Aitken and Aikin. CCHA uses the Aikin spelling because that’s the name on Martin J. Aikin’s grave.

In any case, Minerva married Lyman Barton, and at some point in the marriage, the couple inherited the rifle, probably from Minerva’s father, Abraham Aikin Jr. Minerva handed it down to her son Lyman Guy Barton, who died in 1944, and then to Lyman Guy Barton Jr., who died in 1968.

All three Lyman Bartons were successful North Country physicians, with Lyman Guy Sr. inventing an obstetrical forceps still in use today. John Barton Sr. obtained the rifle from Lyman Guy Barton Jr. in the mid-to-late 1960s. The rifle was prominently displayed in John Barton Sr.’s homes, in New Jersey and then in Rhode Island, before it was loaned to CCHA in 1992.

The rifle had a special meaning for the elder John Barton, who was a soldier in the famed 10th Mountain Division and served in World War II and Korea.

“He was involved in quite a bit of action in Korea,” says John Barton Jr. “My father was 6-foot-2, and I believe his healthy weight was about 180. When he came back from Korea, he had had dysentery, and weighed 120 pounds.”

Like other soldiers, he’d also been sharing rations with hungry Korean citizens.

It makes the fact that Martin Aikin is one of John Barton Jr.’s forebears all the more poignant. “The story behind the rifle is so important,” Barton says. “Obviously, teenagers think they’re going to live forever, but they all could have been killed (in the Battle of Plattsburgh). The militias were outnumbered something like 9 to 1, and if the naval battle had gone a little bit differently, it probably would have been a massacre.”

He added, “To know that (Martin Aikin) had gone to that length to try and preserve his freedom engenders a sense of patriotism in me. Knowing what my father went through, it assured me that that spirit would be carried on.”

CCHA’s display of the Martin J. Aikin Rifle helps keep the story, and that spirit, alive. “I’m very happy that the gun is where it is,” Barton says. “I know it will be cared for, and I know people will ask that question: ‘What happened?’

“So it’s in the right place.”