

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE
CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 85

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

May, 1972

The May Meeting

of the Association will be held at 8 o'clock on the evening of Monday, May 1st, in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. The speaker of the evening will be Lt. Gen. Bertrand Fay of Westport and Albany, whose topic will be "The Delaware and Hudson Railroad." General Fay operates an advertising agency in Albany, but formerly was an official of the D & H.

The public is cordially invited.

QUARTERS FOR THE MUSEUM

By action of the Plattsburgh Common Council on April 6th, the third floor auditorium of the City Hall has been made temporarily available for the Association's Museum. A committee is studying how best to use the space. Watch the newspapers for an announcement of the Museum's opening in its new quarters.

RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Old riddle: the oldest church building still standing in Clinton County, identified by Maurice Turner of Keeseville, is St. John's Hall on Liberty Street in the Clinton County part of Keeseville. The Baptists built it in 1826 and sold it to the French Catholics in 1853. It has not been used as a church since 1903, when the new church was dedicated. The editors defer to Mr. Turner, for they had a slightly later building, Trinity in Plattsburgh, in mind when they posed the question. Can anyone beat the date of the Keeseville structure?

New riddle: what were the former identifications of the roads currently known as the Union Road in Peru and Au Sable; the Ashley Road in Beekmantown; and the short Fuller Street in Peru?

1894

New Years in Plattsburgh was notable for the disappearance of calls and cards, and no one was heard to express regrets. Spring was ushered in with hand organs, boys with marbles, and new maple sugar. Summer brought the usual lake excursions, Ringling Brothers' circus and James Corbett, the new world boxing champion, in "Gentleman Jack" at the local theatre. Fall brought new reports of a Champlain sea serpent.

Merchants advertised their sales as "A Sure Cure for Hard Times". The depression hit Plattsburgh, but unevenly. The Delaware and Hudson Railroad declared a seven-percent dividend, while extensive new construction was carried on.

This was the year of the Pullman Strike, Coxey's "army", the income tax and a new tariff, all controversial locally. In New York a constitutional convention was held, one result of which was the permanent upstate control of the legislature. In anticipation of the new convention, women agitated for an amendment to allow female suffrage. Susan B. Anthony participated at Plattsburgh and in 56 other counties in mass meetings on the subject, but the convention rejected their efforts.

In his annual report Dr. J. B. Ransom, state physician at Clinton prison, reported 200 prisoners with tuberculosis, which accounted for eighty percent of all deaths there. Statewide, it was second only to acute respiratory diseases as a cause of death. However, diphtheria was being brought under control by a new inoculation.

The education law of this year brought universal, compulsory school attendance one step nearer. A full year was required for children of eight to twelve years; a half year for those who were twelve to fourteen; and the fourteen to sixteen-year group must attend when not "lawfully and legally employed". Exemptions included those in "improper" mental or physical condition. Kindergartens were now authorized, but not required.

The Bridges of Keeseville

This article was inspired by the longest keystone arch bridge in the United States. In tracing its history, however, it became necessary to include the two other bridges of Keeseville, all of which link Clinton and Essex Counties at the village. The histories and tragedies of these bridges are so interrelated that it is impossible to neglect any of them.

The Au Sable River drops some 2,000 feet in its fifty-mile course from its origins to Lake Champlain. This causes it to have numerous areas of rapids. It also is susceptible to spring freshets. There is a mystery concerning the mighty waters of the Au-Sable. Sometimes, not at high or low level, but at some intermediate level, the river causes houses to shake and tremble. Buildings as far away as Port Kent, four miles distant, have been known to tremble. Although many explanations have been offered, none has been thoroughly satisfactory. But such is not always the case with the Au-Sable. Records of broken booms, of floods of ice, of wrecked barns and mills, of bodies swirling under the great arch of the bridge, and the marble marker there showing the highest level to which the river ever rose in its wrath, tell a different tale.

The first crossing of the Au Sable River in Keeseville was just below what is now the upper bridge, where there is a shallow part of the river. This was known to early settlers and even to General Burgoyne as he led his army across. Often those early travelers cut down immense pines with trunks five or six feet in diameter. In 1802-03 the first settlers, Bigelow and Shaeffer, came to Keeseville and built a dam just above the later site of the stone arch bridge. The first bridge was built in 1805 where the current arch bridge now stands. The present arch bridge was built in 1842. The foot bridge, first built in 1842, also fell in 1842. No foot bridge existed until the 1860's, when another was built. The map of Essex County dated 1858 by Whitlock and Company of New Haven, Connecticut showed the arch bridge, a dam, and the upper bridge. This seems to substantiate the belief that no foot bridge existed between the years of 1842 and the 1860's. It is our assumption that the arch bridge, completed in 1842, proved sufficient for the community during those years.

The foot bridge built in the 1860's lasted until 1878 when it burned in Keeseville's great fire of that year. It was not replaced until the present structure was put up in 1888. The earliest records concerning an upper bridge are dated 1841, in which George Troop bought a home on the Chesterfield side of the river and in his scrapbook noted that a bridge existed where the iron bridge now stands. This structure was destroyed in the spring of 1856 by the swelling of the river. A covered bridge was built in the same year and lasted until it was destroyed by a snow storm in 1878, and the final upper bridge was built. These three bridges, built in 1842, 1878 and 1888 respectively, are still in use today.

These bridges all have their own story. Their construction highlights an era when water-powered mills lined the banks of the Au Sable at Keeseville.

THE ARCH BRIDGE

The first structure was built in 1805, just below the present arch bridge. Robert Hoyle was its builder. It was a small wooden structure painted white and very close to the water, with steep inclines going up each bank. This was the first official bridge in Keeseville.

In 1842 the Keystone Arch Bridge was built. The project was undertaken jointly by the towns of Chesterfield and Au Sable. The contractor was Townsend. Native stone was used for the structure. The keystone was made of limestone and the rest of sandstone. This is surprising since limestone is the softer of the two. The old bridge was removed and a supporting structure of timber was built to receive the stone work of the new. Two large poles at either end of the bridge were used to lower the rocks into place. The first heavy course of stone, including the keystone, was complete and a second, lighter course was started. A rainstorm came up suddenly and thirty or more men rushed to shelter in a wooden shed on the bank of the river. Just then the unfinished bridge collapsed with a roar that supposedly shook buildings in Port Kent. The lime mortar in the stone so poisoned the water that bushels of floating fish could be picked up out of the water. The whole work had to be started over at a great loss to the contractor.

This delay had an indirect bearing on a tragedy that occurred later that year. If the bridge had been finished on time, the militia would have used it instead of the foot bridge, which fell with great loss of life.

The bridge has stood ever since as America's longest keystone bridge. However, it has not entirely escaped nature's wrath. In 1856 a spring flood caused the Au Sable to rise so high that no teams were allowed to cross it for 24 hours. A white marble on the southeast corner marks the high spot the water reached at that time. And so it has been standing for over a century and a quarter as a fine example of early America's ingenuity.

THE FOOT BRIDGE

The first foot bridge was completed in 1842. The bridge originally led to Liberty Hill and the Common. The Common was used periodically by the New York State Militia for military reviews. This bridge was nicknamed the "swinging bridge" because as a suspension bridge it would swing slightly back and forth with pressure or wind.

One of the most tragic events in Keeseville's history occurred with this bridge on September 13, 1842. At the time the arch bridge was not near enough completion for use except by adventurous footmen, who climbed down on one side, walked the plank with difficulty and clambered up the bank on the other side. There was a great parade and celebration that day as the militia held their review. The crowd followed the militia onto the bridge. It began to swing more than usual and collapsed at one end under the measured tread of the soldiers. The river at the time was a raging flood because of recent rains. The northerly end of the bridge held firm, but the supports at the southerly end gave way, and as the woodwork struck the water it swung around near the AuSable shore so that the people clinging to it were rescued. A number of persons were thrown into the water, while others clung to the partly submerged iron work in the river, and by means of the iron chains most of them were able to work their way to shore. Two or three dropped off one by one and were hurled over the dam to death. One man tried heroically to save the others and met death himself. Among the victims were two young boys, sons of Richard Peabody and Martin Pope, who were said to have gone over the dam in each other's arms.

Exaggerated accounts of the accident spread far and wide. In 1967, in a pamphlet called OLD KEESEVILLE TALES, some of these accounts were reproduced. One of them mistakenly had boat racing as the occasion:

"125 Years Ago—The stagecoach mail from the East brought a recent issue of the *N. Y. Herald* in which is an account of an accident at Keeseville, N.Y. on Sept. 14, when a bridge spanning the Sable River gave way, drowning fifty persons who were standing on the bridge watching a boat race."

However, the same publication arrived at an estimate of fewer than fifteen lives lost—still a major tragedy. It also contains a reminiscing excerpt from a letter by Winslow C. Watson, written in 1900:

Our family lived at Port Kent and my father had taken my brother and me up to see the training and had left us standing on the sidewalk in front of Spencer and Adgate's store and had gone across the street to Forsythe's hotel, which I have mentioned, with directions to stand right there until he came back. The fifth commandment was kept in our family—Casablanca did not observe it better than we did. Soon after we heard the fife and drum and marching feet of a little company of soldiers followed by the usual crowd of village boys. I was then too going to school but my brother had attended the old academy and several of the boys stopped to talk with us and our big dog and sail our toy boats. Two of the boys, sons of Richard Peabody and Martin Pope, I think they were each named Richard Henry, each eight years old and great friends. They told us the company was going to cross the "swinging bridge" and up to the square to drill, asking us to go with them. We told them we could not go then as our father had told us to wait there for his return. They thought he would not care. We wanted to go but told them we could not because we must mind him. They ran on laughing after their companions. The fifes screamed, the drums rolled, the gay company laughed and shouted. They reached the swing bridge. There were 40 people on it. The strain of the measured steps of the troops was too much for its strength; the upper chains gave way, one scream arose, and all the people were in the foaming river.

Mr. Watson continues that he thought he saw his friends going over the dam. Their bodies were found next spring. They were buried together with the inscription "They were lovely in their lives and in death they were not divided."

The next foot bridge was built in the 1860's in the same location. This bridge was destroyed by fire in 1878. The posts to suspend the bridge had been built with wood instead of iron.

The third and present bridge was built in 1888. There is an interesting story about the construction of this bridge. It was originally built in New Haven for trolley cars but it had not proved sturdy enough. The towns of Chesterfield and Au Sable bought it and it was sent to Keeseville by railroad. It was constructed by the local blacksmiths, who also made some of the additional supports which had been damaged when the bridge was taken apart.

THE UPPER BRIDGE

The first records of the upper bridge come from George Troop's scrapbook. He purchased a home on the Chesterfield side of the river in 1841 and noted that a bridge stood where the present iron one is now located. A photograph dated 1852 and Maurice Turner's notes show this bridge to be of the truss type, resting on three piers in the river. The frame was constructed of heavy wooden beams with a flooring of heavy planks. This bridge was washed away in 1856. In the same year, a covered bridge was erected at the same site. This was an example of the Howe truss. This is the type in which the trusses were supported by iron tension rods to lend additional support. This bridge did not have pier supports, but relied on strong foundations at each end. It was destroyed in the 1870's in a severe snow storm.

The final and still-standing upper bridge of Keeseville was erected in 1878 by the Milton Car Work Company, which built the iron bridge and substructure. The total cost came to \$4,400. This bridge is of the iron truss type with open steel gratings for the floor. It is built in two distinct sections which are evident to a casual observer. This bridge, like the arch, is used by cars today, even though it is wide enough for only one vehicle.

Jacqueline Owens and Christopher Eatz, SUC

AMENDMENT TO ASSOCIATION CONSTITUTION

Since the April "Notes" did not contain the exact language of one of the proposed amendments, and since such information is required in advance of the meeting at which action will be taken, this amendment was tabled while the others were adopted at the April meeting.

At the May meeting, members will be asked to vote on the following addition to Article VII, Committees:

"Section 7. The genealogy committee shall organize information about the history of Clinton County families by compiling family files of data concerning individual families, by attempting to make local genealogical records more available and easier to use, by indexing published and unpublished records pertaining to Clinton County families, and by such other means as will facilitate genealogical research in Clinton County. The committee shall answer correspondence of persons needing local genealogical research, charging such fees as are deemed appropriate."

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