

# Stephentown Historical Society

## Newsletter

Vol III, Issue VII

July 1998

### HISTORY OF THE TOWNS OF RENSSELAER COUNTY

#### FIRST SETTLERS

The largest number of the early settlers of the town of Stepentown were from the New England colonies. Many came from Rhode Island, settling upon the land of the manor of Rensselaerwyck, adjoining the Massachusetts line. Among the first of the New England emigrants to make their homes on this part of the great manor were Joshua, Caleb and Benjamin Gardner (three brothers), Asa Douglas, Elnathan Sweet, Nathaniel Rose, Joseph Carpenter, Alexander Brown and Joseph Rogers. Most of these settled here about the year 1766. William Douglas, a grandson of Asa Douglas, is said to have been the first child born in this part of the manor. The Hon. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois was a descendant of this Douglas family.

In the year 1766, it is said that Asa Douglas came from Plainfield, Conn., into this wilderness portion of the manor in search of suitable land for farming purposes. Having met an Indian chief he made known his object. The Indian told him that there was fertile land in what was shortly afterwards designated as "Jericho hollow." He, on a survey of the ground described by the Indian, was satisfied of its suitability for farming purposes, and at once took up about one thousand acres for cultivation. One half of this land now lies in the state of Massachusetts. Of the three Gardner brothers, Caleb's house was immediately on the boundary line of Massachusetts and New York. Joshua Gardner, in 1774, is said to have cut a private road through the thick woods from

the "old east road," over the mountain to the place where he had erected his log house. Job Gardner sometime after the year 1777 moved from Providence, R. I., to the vicinity of his three brothers' farms.

Among the names of settlers which appear upon the district records in 1784, are the following: Stephen Arnold, Samuel Bailey, Gideon Brayton, Aaron Budlong, Alexander Case, Hezekiah Coon, John Forbs, Benjamin Green, Jacob Green, Edward Hoad, Jonathan Howard, Ezekiel Huntington, William Kittel, 2d., Abel Lewis, Augustus Lewis, Obadiah Matthews, Timothy Mattison, Jonathan Niles, Nathaniel Niles, William Reynolds, William Rose, Benjamin Sackett, William Sanford, John W. Schermerhorn, Randal Shiner, Samuel Sweet, Nathan Tanner, Elijah West, Joshua Whitford, Abraham Winston and Walter Worden.



from Bern Foerster's *Architecture Worth Saving in Rensselaer County, New York*

*Vanderbilt House - in Better Times*

## Stephentown's Lost Landmark

by Jim Dwyer

Reprinted by Permission

Last February Stephentown lost a piece of its past, when Vanderbilt House was razed after decades of deterioration.

Built in 1871 as a railroad hotel by the entrepreneur Milo Daniels, Vanderbilt House stood for many years as the centerpiece of the Village of Stephentown, described in 1980 by the Rev. Ernest D. Smith in his *Valley Tales, Volume Two*, as "the only building that seemed to have real character to it."

Milo Daniels had bought the land on the strength of rumors that the old Lebanon Springs Railroad would soon extend its service to Bennington, Vermont, with a stop in Stephentown. The rumors proved true, the railroad began running in 1870, and Vanderbilt House opened the next year as a hotel and tavern, where a traveler could purchase livery service, a good meal, a drop to drink, a warm bed, and - it has been said - a companion to share it if he wished.

Interestingly enough, although it bore the name of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, the building's only known connection to the great railroad man was one of optimistic flattery. Almost 20 years before the line went through, the railroad's owners had tried to interest Vanderbilt in financing the extension to Bennington, but he'd backed off the million-dollar investment, saying that "grass would be growing in it in three generations." Now a generation later with the line showing signs of burgeoning success, they hoped to respark his interest. It didn't work, but the name stuck.

The railroad went through several financial crises and a few name changes before passenger service was discontinued in 1931. (The line continued, as the Rutland Railroad, to carry milk, vegetables, and other freight to New York City until 1952.)

By that time, Vanderbilt House's glory days were past and it was mostly a local bar. Mothers wouldn't let their children go there because, it was said:

"At Vanderbilt House  
All you can hear  
Is the tinkle of money  
And the slurping of beer."

By the time the Rev. Smith first saw Vanderbilt House in 1971, it was being used as a meeting hall for the Stephentown Volunteer Fire Department and the Boy Scouts.

"It has suffered with the years," he wrote. "Changes have been made internally until only the exterior remains as Milo had it, and much repair is needed outside. A cement floor extends out to where the old sills once were, and the absence of sills makes it nearly impossible to elevate the grand old lady to her former glory."

In recent years both the SVFD and the Stephentown Historical Society have sought funding to overcome the ravages that time inflicted on the "grand old lady," but reclamation proved impossible. And so, on February 28, 1998, Vanderbilt House came down.

Still, the Rev. Smith's words should be remembered: "Today," he wrote in 1980, "Vanderbilt House is quietly sitting there in all its dignity. Perhaps someone will recognize the architectural heritage in Stephentown, and compensate for the many losses of recent years . . . with the restoration and preservation of what is left. Indifference to our architectural heritage may cause us to spend major portions of our waking hours amid visual trash, until we lose our ability to see and recognize the treasures still about us."



Photo by Jim Dwyer

*Vanderbilt House - Its Last Days*

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

Officers:

President	Bill Jennings	733-5923
Vice-President	Beverley McClave	733-5170
Recording Secretary	Jim Dwyer	733-5061
Corresponding Secretary	Libby Kogan	733-6662
Treasurer	Howard Leibensperger	733-5716

Trustees:

Betty Feathers	(413) 637-4435
Wyatt Haley	733-5771
Helen Koepp	733-5640
Joan McMillan	658-9218
Alan White	733-5250
Bill Zimmerman	794-8430

Committee Chairpersons:

Cemeteries	Wyatt Haley	733-5771
	Alan White	733-5250
Collections	Sally Fox	733-5817
Fundraising	Sylvia Leibensperger	733-5716
Genealogy	Virginia Atwater	733-5136
Heritage Center	Betty Feathers	(413) 637-4435
Membership	Beverley McClave	733-5170
Nominating	Al Silvernail	733-5255
Newsletter	Bill Zimmerman	794-8430
Program	Pat Bowman	(413) 738-5420
Refreshments	Sylvia Leibensperger	733-5716

\* \* \* \* \*

**EVENTS THIS SUMMER**

- July 5 **17th Annual Strawberry Festival - Zema's Too, Route 22 1 - 5 pm**  
Join us for shortcake, low-cal, salt-free, or high-test. And conversation to match.
- July 25 **Exhibit - Stephentown Historical Society - 25th Anniversary**  
**Stephentown Heritage Center - 10th Anniversary**
- August 1 **9th Annual Juried Craftfest - Stephentown Volunteer Fire Department Muster Field & Pavilion, Grange Hall Road 10 am - 4 pm**  
High-quality craftsmen and discriminating shoppers make the Craftfest a special event. Christmas ideas abound.
- September 5 **Tag Sale -Gardner's Field, Route 22 (Rain Date September 7) 9 am - 3 pm**  
A highlight of the Labor Day weekend, it's still warm enough to exchange your castoffs for someone else's treasures.

**CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

Program Chairperson **Pat Bowman** continues to inspire us with outstanding educational and entertaining programs in a wide variety of historical fields. We look forward to the results of her continuing searches for outstanding talent in our own and neighboring towns. And we also know that she would appreciate some assistance. If you know of an interesting speaker or topic, please don't keep it a secret. Contact Pat and volunteer to set up a program for a meeting. All programs and events are held at the Stephentown Heritage Center and begin at **7:30 pm** unless otherwise specified.

Monthly Programs:

- July 6 **The Making of Route 20**
- August 3 **Chatham - Railroad Village**
- September 14 **Organs, Church and Other**
- October 5 **Floorcloths**
- November 2 **Old Ways - New Ways**
- December 7 **Holiday Potluck - Party**

\* \* \* \* \*

**MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION**

January 1 - December 31

Membership categories and dues are:

Individual Member	\$ 5.00
Contributing Member	15.00
Business/Organizational Member	25.00
Life Member	100.00

Please join us this year. Make your tax-deductible check payable to:

**Stephentown Historical Society**  
P.O. Box 11  
Stephentown, NY 12168

Monthly meetings are held at the Heritage Center, generally on the first Monday of the month. Check your Newsletter, local newspapers, and bulletin boards for current program information.

**Save This Sheet for Reference**

## Grandma Climbed the Family Tree

by Virginia Day McDonald  
Macon, GA

There's been a change in Grandma, we've noticed as of late.  
She's always reading history, or jotting down some date.  
She's tracing back the family, we'll all have pedigrees.  
Grandma's got a hobby, she's climbing family trees.

Poor Grandpa does the cooking, and now, or so he states,  
He even has to wash the cups and the dinner plates.  
Well, Grandma can't be bothered, she's busy as a bee,  
Compiling genealogy for the family tree.

She has no time to babysit, the curtains are a fright.  
No buttons left on Grandpa's shirt, the flower bed's a sight.  
She's given up her club work, the serials on TV.  
The only thing she does now-a-days is climb the family tree.

The mail is all for Grandma, it comes from near and far.  
Last week she got the proof she needs to join the DAR.  
A monumental project - to that we all agree,  
A worthwhile avocation - to climb the family tree.

There were pioneers and patriots mixed with our kith and kin,  
Who blazed the paths of wilderness and fought through thick and thin,  
But none more staunch than Grandma, whose eyes light up with glee  
Each time she finds a missing branch for the family tree.

To some it's just a hobby, to Grandma it's much more.  
She learns the joys and heartaches of those who went before.  
They loved, they lost, they laughed, they wept - and now you see,  
They live again in spirit around the family tree.

At least she's nearly finished, and we are each exposed.  
Life will be the same again, this we all suppose.  
Grandma will cook and sew, serve crullers with our tea.  
We'll have her back, just as before that wretched family tree.

Contributed by Pauline Shunk



**From the Membership Chairperson . . .**

In this our **25th Anniversary** year, the Society would like to honor all of its members - Life, Individual, Contributing, and Business. Five of our original Charter Members are still active: **Ed Fox, Cal Kenyon, Helen Lapp, and Al Silvernail**, with **Sally Fox** serving as Curator of Collections. We now have 66 Life Members and 5 Honorary Life Members. The funds raised from your dues go a long way in helping with the everyday expenses of running the Heritage Center. Won't you consider at this special time making an investment in our future by becoming a Life Member? The \$100 fee, which has not risen in many, many years, goes into an endowment fund. This fund is not spent but accrues interest to protect the solid foundation that we have built over our first quarter century. Become a Life Member and never again be bothered with the hassle of annual dues! - Beverley McClave

\* \* \* \* *In Memoriam* \* \* \* \*

**Laurence Dubin**  
1945 - 1997

**Lillian Bassett**  
1918 - 1998

**Joe Cole**  
1909 - 1998

**Gladys Deamer Gooley**  
1912-1998



© **Mystery Photo**

Can you identify any of the people (students or teachers) in this photograph from the Heritage Center's archives? The photograph of a Mount Whitney School class was taken by E. Q. Tuttle of Stephentown between 1881 and 1892. Contact Sally Fox at 733-5817 if you recognize any family (or other) characteristic.



## CHARTER MEMBERS - 1973

Margo Andsch  
Janet Atwater  
Agnes Coates  
Suzie Cooper  
Greer Fitting  
Edward A. Fox  
Sally Fox  
Ann Gantz  
Harold Hager  
Gladys R. Howe  
Mrs. Kenneth James  
Calvin J. Kenyon  
Helen Lapp  
Cynthia Pease  
Frances G. Rathbun  
Donna Sidor  
Albert J. Silvernail  
Irene Silvernail  
Thelma O. Tomlinson  
Ulysses Sweener  
Edwin Wheeler



## ANNUAL FUND DRIVE

The 1998 Annual Fund Drive is under way. This year's goal is \$5000. The 5-year plan is in place that will finish the restoration of the tin ceiling and walls by the end of 2000 (less than 3 years away). This year's contributions will be used for exterior painting and continued work on the restoration of the interior.

\*\*\*\*\*

## HERITAGE CENTER WISH LIST

### WANTED

Pictures of the Methodist Episcopal Church before it became the Stephentown Heritage Center - before the balcony was added, when it was used as a Youth Center, and when it was used for rummage sales.

Do you have an hour or two available per month? Of course. We all have a few spare moments, even in these busy times. Sally and Betty have many tasks, large and small, that are looking for your talents. Everything from maintenance to cleaning to filing to organizing to keyboarding (and programming). Please call Sally at 733-5817 or the Heritage Center at 733-6070.



Post Office Box 11  
Stephentown, N.Y. 12168

©  
Stephentown  
Historical  
Society

### Editors:

Virginia Atwater  
Klaus Burg  
Ruth Leab  
Richard Lewis  
Bill Zimmerman