



STEPHENTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

January—2020



THE END OF AN ERA

Beverley McClave

Many readers have enjoyed the daily entries in the diary of George Holcomb, a Stephenstown resident and farmer who wrote in his diary from 1805 until 1856, a journal consisting of almost 11,000 pages. We marveled at his lengthy pedestrian jaunts to sell his cheese, apples or livestock and can't quite fathom his hard life "chopping wood to the door" or maintaining the road in front of his house for public use. Last fall it was disturbing to see his barn on West Street with a serious sag on the right side, threatening a collapse like so many other barns in the area. Fortunately, and thankfully, the owners have had it carefully deconstructed, board by board, to be reassembled in Austerlitz. If only these timbers could talk, but then again, they do—through George's diary.

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We're on Facebook! Visit our page and give us a "Like"! See what's going on from week to week! We're "under new management" so check it out—you'll be glad you did!

Genealogy buff?

If so, check out-
www.stephentowngenealogy.com
This site is maintained by Jeanette Otis and contains a lot of interesting information!

And don't forget the SHS website! Visit us at
www.stephentown-historical.org

HAVE SOME TIME ON YOUR HANDS?

Why not volunteer at the Historical Society? The "work" is easy and interesting, and we could sure use the help. We're open on Fridays from 1 to 4 pm and just recently began opening every first Saturday of the month from 10 am to 2 pm and by appointment. Give us a call and we'll fill you in on what needs to be done and what projects need a helping hand. Call us at 518-733-6070 or drop us a line at shs@fairpoint.net. You'll be glad you did. Here's a sample of what we could use help with:

- We need a scrap-booker! Someone to help us catch up with all of the newspaper articles, photos and other memorabilia that has been collecting.
- We have family files that were donated that must be combined with our existing files.
- The SHS Accessions Spreadsheet needs updating
- Fragile newspaper articles, photos and other collectibles need encapsulation.
- Newspaper articles need to be copied

And that's just what we haven't been able to get to! But please don't be discouraged or worried that you won't know what to do. We'll be so happy to show you! We guarantee "on the job training"!

MEMBERSHIP

As you are probably aware, the Historical Society is a non-profit entity, completely dependent on its wonderful group of volunteers and supporters. We rely almost entirely on membership dues and donations to "keep the lights on", pay our bills and continue with our monthly informative programs and events. Is your membership current?

Watch for the renewal letter! Or—Not a member? — why not consider joining?

Thank you for your support!!

AMAZON SMILE

DID YOU KNOW? That you can earn money for SHS simply by shopping on Amazon.com? Through the **Amazon Smile Program**, Amazon will donate a percentage of your purchase to SHS if you designate the Historical Society as your charity of choice. Just go to www.smile.amazon.com, sign in with your regular account information, choose SHS to support, then continue shopping as you normally would. It's that easy!

ADDITIONAL VISITING HOURS

The Stephentown Historical Society would like to remind everyone that the Heritage Center is now welcoming visitors on the first Saturday of every month from **10:00 a.m. to 2:00 pm except December. These Saturday hours are in addition to the regular Friday hours of 1:00 to 4:00 p.m.** and offer more Stephentown residents and visitors the opportunity to explore what the Society offers for genealogy research and local history. The Heritage Center is located at 4 Staples Road at the corner of Garfield Road. Admission is free and the building is handicapped accessible.

TOWN HISTORIAN'S CORNER

Patricia Flint

The National Gazette (Philadelphia, PA, USA) on September 14, 1824 -reported:
(Troy, NY Sept.8) **Daring robbery** — On the evening of the 26th ult. Mr. Griswold Denison, a worthy and respectable inhabitant of the town of Stephentown in this county, was robbed of about 80 dollars in money and some articles of clothing. Between 8 and 9 in the evening the family having retired to rest, Mr. Denison was alarmed by the noise of some persons in the kitchen, which is the West room of the house and adjoining that in which he slept. Mr. D. thinking them neighbors, enquired their names and business, when they immediately rushed into the room where he and his wife were in bed, demanded a light and at the same time threatened to shoot him if he attempted to stir. After being informed by Mr. Denison that there was a fire in the stove, two of them returned to the kitchen, in order to light the candles, while the other remained near the bed to prevent Mr. D. from rising. Mrs. Denison, who during this time had made no noise, took advantage of the darkness, slipped on her clothes, and escaped from the room unperceived by the robbers. She went into the East room, thence up stairs into the room directly over that in which she left her husband, where Briggs, the hired man, slept; and, after waking and reminding him of the gun, which hung in the kitchen, passed on into the kitchen chamber to procure a weapon; but, not finding any, she returned by the way she came, down stairs into east room, passed out at the east door and going to the window where her daughter slept, informed her of what was going on and directed her to make her escape by the window, which she effected. Briggs, after being awaked by Mrs. Denison, not understanding distinctly what was passing below, put on his clothes and went directly down stairs into the kitchen, where two of the robbers were in the act of lighting their candles. He passed through the kitchen towards the room in which Mr. D. slept, apparently undiscovered by the robbers, until the instant he entered the door, when a candle blazed, and the robber near the bed discharged a pistol at him, but without effect; the charge, which consisted of coarse shot, passing near him and lodging in the door casing about sixteen inches from the threshold.

Started at the report, Briggs sprung into the hands of the robber, when the others, entering the room with a lighted candle and armed with pistols, drove him on to the bed with Mr. Denison, whom they ordered to get up and deliver his money, threatening him with instant death, and his buildings with conflagration, if he hesitated or refused.

In the course of their search, they fortunately found a quantity of rum, which, in this case, produced the happiest effect, by detaining them longer than they otherwise would have staid, and thus leading probably to the speedy apprehension of the first and subsequent arrest of the others. After they had obtained the sum of money above mentioned, not being satisfied with their booty, they threatened the life of Mr. D. if he did not tell them of more—but being satisfied by the protestations of Mr. D. that no more was to be had, they obliged Mr D. to swear that neither himself nor any of his family should disclose anything of the robbery in 48 hours, and took their leave.

In the meantime Mrs. D. had succeeded in rallying the neighbors, who arrived seasonably to witness their departure, and make pursuit. One of the robbers was overtaken and seized a short distance from the house by a young man of the name of Brown. The next morning, another was found under the roof of a log house, about two miles from where the robbery was committed. The third has yet eluded his pursuers.



MAKING CHARCOAL

contributed by Dave Flint

In historical photos we can see that much of the landscape around Stephentown and Berlin was pretty much denuded of forests. A predominant reason for that was charcoal making. It was the time before coal and oil became the fuel for America's burgeoning industry. Charcoal was the fuel for the iron furnaces in Troy because it burns much hotter than wood and at a more consistent temperature. Vast quantities were needed for the Burden Iron Works alone. Much of that charcoal came from the forests of Berlin, Stephentown and Sand Lake. The area around west Berlin and Taborton especially was dotted with charcoal pits. In 1834 charcoal burners, including the Jordan and Yerton families, were brought over from Germany and settled in that area. The Dobert family later became active in charcoal making in Taborton and continued the craft well after industrial use declined.

Loren Dobert produced an excellent video some thirty years ago that shows the process in detail from beginning to end. The film was shown in September of 2019 at the Stephentown Heritage Center to a packed house. Originally about an hour & a half long, the film was carefully edited to a length of 45 minutes, with all of Loren Dobert's commentary retained. Present at the showing was Loren Dobert himself along with friend and charcoal making protégé, Frank Kehn, a Taborton resident. Loren Dobert, narrating, describes the process as we see his brother, Gene Dobert, building and tending the pit. He starts with a plot about 26 ft. in diameter. We see huge stacks of hardwood cut to 4-ft lengths prepared and aged in advance. Gene fills the coal bottom with the wood limbs standing on end, leaving a "chimney" in the center for draft. The limbs are placed around & around—about 12 full cords of wood. A bundle of limbs tied together form the second tier of the chimney & more limbs are placed upright around it forming the second layer of wood. This is followed by a third layer of shorter lengths, or the "head", laid out on the top of the pit. The pit, now 10 to 12 ft. high, is covered with a bedding of hay and a layer of dirt on top of that. A fire is lit at the top with tinder stuffed down the chimney and the top is then covered and sealed to create a down draft with air holes poked into the foot of the pit around the bottom. Then follows weeks of "feeding" the pit, removing dirt and bedding off the top and dropping small brands of burning coals into the pit, and resealing with bedding and dirt. Since the wood inside the pit is sealed from the air, the wood doesn't actually burn but is baked and this incomplete combustion produces charcoal. The pit gradually settles and shrinks as air holes are moved around to control the burn. When the pit gets down to about three ft. high and stops smoking the charcoal is raked out around & around the pit and separated from the dirt which is shoveled back on the pit. This process is continued until all the charcoal is out & bagged and the pit has disappeared. Gene Dobert is now deceased. Loren says he has retired from charcoal making but his protégé Frank Kehn still does one or two charcoal burns a year up in the hills of Taborton.

SCHEDULED PROGRAMS

JANUARY TO JULY—2020 (All Meetings Begin at 2 PM)

Sunday, January 5	-	50th Anniversary of the Founding of Zwack, Inc. Presented by Michael Zwack
Sunday, February 2		Crooked Lake Hotel: From 1800's Tavern to Historic Events Center Presented by Bob Moore
Sunday, March 1		Scherenschnitte, the Art of Papercutting Presented by Pamela Dalton
Sunday, April 5		NYS Division of Military & Naval Affairs— Program on D-Day & Normandy Presented by Eric Durr, Director of Public Affairs
Sunday, May 3		TBA
Sunday, June 7		TBA
Sunday, July 12th @ 6 PM		Annual Picnic at the Firemen's Pavilion (Please bring a dish to share. Hotdogs, Hamburgers & Drinks Provided)

LOOKING AHEAD—2020

WELCOME PACKAGES—We are actively working on this project, and the response thus far has been very favorable. We envision this package having lots of "stuff" like names and contacts to help people find just about anything in town. New folks need to know where to send their kids to school; or where to find someone to fix their plumbing or electrical. Maybe they want to get involved and meet people—we'll include organizations in town such as the library, the Veteran's group, the Volunteer Fire Department and the Historical Society, as well as the various churches and synagogues, to name a few. We'd like to provide a listing (along with business cards where possible) of all local tradespeople and businesses. We want to include any groups in town— such as the Heavenly Quilters or the Boy & Girl Scouts. We'd love to have menus from restaurants and maybe "new customer" discounts or other such coupons. It is a formidable task and we don't want to leave anyone out, so we are asking for your help! If you are a local business or tradesperson and would like to be included in this package, please contact us at shs@fairpoint.net or call us at 518-733-6070. Let us know who you are and what you have to offer—be sure to leave us your contact info so that we can get back to you! Thank You!

DID YOU KNOW??

On December 15, 1870, less than one-half mile from the Eddy Farm in Stephentown, Francis and Lucinda Kittle were victims of a bloody murder committed by their blind and developmentally disabled son, Asa. While the murders filled the local press with sensational coverage, the only mention of this tragedy that was carried down in the Eddy family was that "something terrible" had once occurred in the neighborhood. Asa Kittle was committed to an institution, where he lived until his death in 1932.
As a result of this controversial case, State legislation was passed in 1871 to authorize "judicial inquiry as to the sanity of persons indicted for capital offenses."

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