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# *Town Of Bethlehem Historical Association*

# NEWSLETTER

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*Old Cedar Hill School House*

*Selkirk, New York 12158*

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January 1999

## President's Message

The Bethlehem Historical Association closed out 1998 with some interesting and historical events, including our monthly programs of timely subjects.

THE MUSEUM BUILDING: The outside of our building was completely painted with that bright red, white trim and green cupola. No more eyesores now that it has been brought back to its original pleasant image. We are indebted to Sheila Fuller, our Town Supervisor, and to Gregg Sagendorph, Superintendent of Highways, for their support.

NATIONAL HISTORIC REGISTER: Through the persistent efforts of Joseph Allgaier, our member and Town Historian, and John Bonafide, New York State representative of the Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau, we received the following letter (in extract):

Re: District No. 1 Schoolhouse  
1003 River Road (NYS 144)  
Cedar Hill, Albany County

Dear Ms. Fuller:

I am pleased to inform you that the above referenced property has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. As you may know, the National Register is the nation's official list of properties worthy of preservation. Listing on the National Register recognizes the importance of these properties to the history of our country and provides them with a measure of protection. In addition, owners of income producing properties may qualify for federal income tax benefits. Properties owned by municipalities and not-for-profit organizations are eligible to apply for state historic preservation matching grants.

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Sincerely,  
Ruth L. Pierpont  
Director  
Historic Preservation  
Field Services Bureau

Our thanks to Allison Bennett and Rick Spaulding for their help in this issue

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THE ANNUAL HOLIDAY SILVER TEA was held on Sunday, December 6, 1998 as a town open house and hosting two chapters of its Daughters of the American Revolution. The beautiful floral decorations, displays, and refreshments were from the efforts of many of our B.H.A. members. Also, on this date we officially dedicated the Historic Plaque placed on the outside of our schoolhouse museum.

### SOMEWHAT OF OUR TOWN'S HISTORY

Although many books and articles have been written about the background of the Town of Bethlehem there are still many questions that are asked by visitors including the school children coming to our museum. Here is a brief of some subjects:

#### *Historical Background:*

In September of 1609, Henry Hudson, commanding the Dutch vessel "De Halve Maen", in quest of a short route to the wealth of the Orient, sailed up the river which now bears his name and encamped for a brief stay near the mouth of the Normanskill Creek—thus begins the recorded history of the Town of Bethlehem, Albany County, New York. The place where he camped was called by the local Mahican Indians "Tawasentha" and the name is perpetuated for all time in Longfellow's famous poem, "Hiawatha". Hudson did not find the passage to the Indies that he was seeking, but the officials in Holland, to whom he reported on his return, were not at all disappointed. They were enthralled by his favorable reports of "this faire land" and promptly took measures to secure unto themselves the exclusive trade of the new land. For the next twenty years the Dutch carried on sporadic trading ventures with the Indians. They built several trading forts on the river shores of the Town of Bethlehem, but spring freshets often wiped them out and they were forced in 1623 to move upriver to the present City of Albany, where they built a fortification and gave it the name of Fort Orange.

Permanent settlement of the area now occupied by the Town of Bethlehem began in 1630—one year after a charter was issued by the Dutch West India Company to a wealthy pearl merchant of Amsterdam, Kilian Van Rensselaer. He was given the impressive title of Patroon, and under this system of land tenure, ownership privileges were vested and under this system of land tenure, ownership privileges were vested in the Patroon and the land was operated by tenant farmers. Van Rensselaer's particular domain was entitled the Manor of Rensselaerwyck and it contained some 700,000 acres, including most of present day Albany and Rensselaer counties, 24 miles up and down the river from Cohoes to Coeymans and 24 miles inland on each shore. Van Rensselaer himself never settled in or even visited his colony, but he did send over a great number of settlers, encouraged the fur trade and constructed mills on the fast-flowing streams.

Among the earliest settlers was one Albert Andriessen Bradt, surnamed "deNoorman" by the early Dutch, coming as he did from the north—Norway. To him, in 1636, the Patroon granted the rights to erect a mill on the falls of the stream which still bears his name, the Normanskill. These early mills were the very nucleus of the colony

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and the center of local commerce. Everyone had to take his grain to the mill to get the wherewithal for his daily bread and thus the miller was a man of considerable importance in these years. Agriculture on the fertile bottom lands was started early by the colonists, mainly for their own subsistence, but the fur trade was and continued to be the single largest economic factor for a long period of years. Bethlehem was early settled along the river and larger streams, but progress toward the outer reaches was slow. Fear of Indians and dense forests kept most people near the original settled community areas. Toward the middle of the eighteenth century, however, social conditions and trade and agricultural development greatly improved and gave a new impetus to further settlement. The hardy pioneers began quickly to penetrate the neighboring wilderness, took up and improved farms and built sturdy stone and brick farmhouses for themselves, many of which are still standing today and providing the same snug shelter they did in the 1700's. By the middle of the eighteenth century too, a large number of settlers were coming into Bethlehem who were not of Dutch ancestry, but of Scotch, English and Irish descent, and these readily found a place for themselves in the settlement. They often intermarried with the daughters of the earlier Dutch farmers and assimilated the Dutch culture and customs. The names of many of these settlers are preserved not only in old record books, but their descendants are still to be found today among the residents of our Town.

After the Revolutionary War a sufficient number of people had settled in Bethlehem to warrant a need for some sort of self government for the area. Accordingly, the Town of Bethlehem was established on March 12, 1793 and separated from the old original Town of Watervliet. At that time the Town of Bethlehem also included the area of the present Town of New Scotland and several portions of the City of Albany, mainly in the Delaware Avenue-Whitehall area and the southern section of the city. In 1832, New Scotland was set off as a separate town and Albany annexed a large portion of the Kenwood area in 1870. In 1926, the City of Albany purchased from Bethlehem islands in the Hudson River for the sum of \$63,000, upon which to build the Port of Albany, and in July 1967 the City of Albany annexed 1,382 acres of land in the Hurstville-Klarsfeld section. The total land area of the town today is approximately 30,600 acres, and includes the following villages and hamlets: Beckers Corners, Bethlehem Center, Cedar Hill, Delmar, Elsmere, Glenmont, Jericho-South Albany, Kenwood (Corning Hill area), Normansville, North Bethlehem, Selkirk and Slingerlands. The town is bounded on the north by the City of Albany and a small portion of the Town of Guilderland, on the west by the entire eastern boundary is the Hudson River.

### *The Normanskill (Tawasentha)*

Along the valley of this stream ran an Indian trail which also came to serve the Dutch and English in their settlement of the Mohawk country, The source of the Normanskill is close to the present village of Duanesburg—flowing thence eastward, passing four to five miles south to Schenectady and emptying into the Hudson just south of Albany. To the eastward of Schenectady the Normanskill trail divided, one branch leading slightly northwest into Schenectady and the other slightly southwest, leaving the Normanskill to enter Fox's Creek Valley and so on to Schoharie Creek at the junction of these two streams.

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The name "Normanskill" is derived from Albert Andriese Bratt De Noorman (Norseman) who had an early settlement and mill in Beverwyck near the mouth of this creek. Along its lower banks were Indian settlements and later some of the earliest of the Dutch settlements. It was known to the Indians as "Tawasentha" and as such is familiar to everyone who has read Longfellow's poem "Hiawatha".

On its banks was signed the Treaty of Tawasentha between the Dutch and the Iroquois which cemented their mutual friendship and assured the Dutch a powerful ally throughout the troublesome times to come. This treaty was ratified thirty-nine times between its signing in 1618 and 1799 when the Clinton-Sullivan Expedition broke the backbone of the Iroquois Confederacy.

One of the first Indian deeds conveying land in the "Vale of Tawasentha" was to a Dutchman named Jan Hendricks van Bael; it was ratified by Governor Lovelace on August 21st, 1672. There seems some doubt that van Bael ever settled on the land but by 1686 it was owned in two separate parts by Simon Volkertse Veeder and Jan Hendricks Vrooman, both of Schenectady. Some of the Veeder and Vrooman descendants still own parts of the original tract. A part of the patent was located in the Slingerlands North Bethlehem area. An old family cemetery containing the graves of early Veeder settlers is a short distance southeast of Guilderland and just west of the road leading to Voorheesville. The Veeder farmhouse nearby was probably built in the early eighteenth century. The cemetery lies north of it at the top of the hill, smothered in a young forest growth. The earliest dates on the remaining stones seem to be soon after the year 1800.

The Vrooman settlement was to the westward along the Cherry Valley turnpike near the present Watervliet reservoir where state markers indicate the home sites.

### Bethlehem Town Supervisors

Under English rule, the "Duke's Laws" provided for the laying out of the province of New York in towns and counties. This followed the example set in New England by English settlers. However, the concept of "selectmen" to administer the affairs of a township was not adopted. Instead, the office of supervisor emerged. The earliest reference to the office and the functions to be performed was in 1702, in connection with an act passed for destroying wolves within the counties of Suffolk, Queens, and Kings. It stated, "The Supervisors...shall be appointed and Authorized to Supervise, Audit or allow of the Accot's [accounts] and payments of the respective Treasurer.

In the following year, the colonial assembly passed an act to increase the effectiveness of local government. The act provided for the annual election of supervisors, assessors, and collectors in every town. The supervisors within a county, responsible for the fiscal status of their towns, were required to meet annually to determine taxes to be levied in support of the county.

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After the states won independence from the English, the New York State Legislature granted similar powers to the supervisor. The fiscal responsibilities of the supervisor to audit bills and make appropriate payments are, to this day, unchanged. As the years progressed and the town grew, additional functions were added, requiring increased energy and time for administration of town affairs and development of specialized departments.

It was on April 10, 1794, at the house of Henry Burhans, an innholder, that the first meeting of the town of Bethlehem took place. Philip Van Rensselaer was chosen as supervisor and John Van Derheyden as town clerk.

Philip Van Rensselaer, who was both a merchant and farmer, served as supervisor until his death in 1798. He resided in the mansion he built in 1786 on his farm, called Cherry Hill, just south of the city of Albany. The area, at the time, was within the town of Bethlehem. Van Rensselaer was active in public service and during the Revolution served under his cousin, General Philip Schuyler, as a colonel and quartermaster of the Army of the Northern Region (New York), responsible for supplying the army with provisions.

Very little is known about Philip Van Rensselaer during the period from 1794 to 1798, when he served as supervisor of Bethlehem. Although he was a prominent individual, few, if any, personal documents from this period have surfaced. More than 500 people were invited to attend his funeral, which was held at Cherry Hill on March 7, 1798. An interesting fact, which can lead to some speculation, is that only one name on the invitation list, John Van Allen, coincides with the name of any of more than 150 town officials (two-thirds of whom were involved with highway matters) who served in various capacities during the 1794 to 1798 period. A John Van Allen served in 1797 as an overseer of highways for the town.

Through 1992, a total of forty-three supervisors have served the town. The office holder with the longest period of service was John M. Oliver, who served from 1942 to 1959.

When John Oliver died in November 1959, shortly after being elected for another two-year term, the Bethlehem Town Board appointed Bertram E. Kohinke as supervisor. He had been serving at the time as sewer commissioner. Mr. Kohinke retained the post until 1974, thereby establishing his tenure of fifteen years in office as the second longest in the history of the town, matching the administration of David Delong who served from 1804 to 1818. Long-term tenures as supervisor were unusual. With the exception of David Delong, terms of office prior to the year 1900 were six years or less, averaging two and one-half years. Since 1900, the average term has been ten years in length. We now have four (4) living supervisors:

1978 - 1984	Thomas V. Corrigan
1985 - 1989	J. Robert Hendrick
1990 - 1993	Kenneth J. Ringler Jr.
1994 - to present	Sheila Fuller

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**The Museum of the Bethlehem Historical Association**

The red brick Cedar Hill School, designed by Walter Hunter Van Guysling and built in 1859, was originally a one-room schoolhouse facing Route 144. Eventually, it was necessary to enlarge the building, and it was redesigned in 1907 by noted Albany architect Marcus T. Reynolds (1869-1937). A second room, a new entrance vestibule on the Clapper Road side, and a noteworthy cupola were added. This building was used as a school until 1959 when it was closed by the Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Central School District. The "little red schoolhouse," as it is known locally, has been occupied by the Bethlehem Historical Association since 1965, the year in which the New York State Board of Regents chartered the association. Here, historic items and information concerning the town's past are gathered and preserved by the Association. Exhibits in the museum located in the building feature the Home, the Farm, the River, Ice Harvesting, and the School.



Cedar Hill School (1859). Home of the Town of Bethlehem Historical Association Museum. Route 144 (River Road) and Clapper Road.

**Sources:**

Book: "Bethlehem Revisited" A Bicentennial Story 1793-1993. Available in Town Hall and local bookstores. Copies are in the Bethlehem Town Library.

Book: "Forts and Firesides of the Mohawk Country" by John J. Vrooman.

**BETHLEHEM HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION**

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Selkirk, New York 12158

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