

Bethlehem Historical Association

NEWSLETTER

Spring 2021



Museum Open Regular Sunday Hours Beginning May 2

We are pleased to announce that *Sunday Open Hours* at the museum will resume on May 2nd. This is an opportunity to get out of the house and spend some time in a safe environment enjoying the exhibits!

The decision to open is contingent on continued good news from the experts. Face masks are still required, and the bathroom must remain closed. Everything is tentative as we hopefully transition to normal times.

We do need one or two volunteers each week. If you are willing and able, won't you contact Dawn Pratt at 518 767-2285? Thank you!

Now on Display at the Museum

Rivers, Roads and Rails

School Days

All in a Day Work

Woman Suffrage

Bethlehem's Native American Connections

And more!



NEW Saturday Family Time

We have a new program designed for families! Aware that in the past year there have been few opportunities for children to get enrichment outside of the home, we have put together some play based learning activities designed for elementary aged children. They can explore the exhibits with scavenger hunts, try out a stereoscope, sit in a hundred year old school desk, figure out the use of some now obsolete household tools, and more. To ensure a safe environment, this event is by appointment. A family may reserve the museum for its exclusive use. Sessions are available on Saturdays in May and June. For details and to schedule a time, call Linda Davies (518- 439-1686).

News from the Nominating Committee

This year our nomination committee considered members to fill two seats on the Board of Trustees and the office of president.

We are pleased to nominate to the Board John Smolinsky and Andrew Reilly. We nominate Karen Beck for another term as president due to her capable performance of duties and the last year we have had as a result of the pandemic. All three nominees have accepted. We did not receive any nominations from the membership.

Thank you, John, Andrew, and Karen for serving the Bethlehem Historical Association.

Thank you also to the committee: Mary Kelle, Susan Leath and Sue Peters for the many Zoom meetings and contributions to these discussions.

Because we are again unable to hold our annual dinner/meeting, we will conduct the vote as we did last year. The ballot will be included with the membership renewal request. As always, we appreciate your support and request that you confirm these nominations.

*Vicki Folger
Chair Nomination Committee*

News & Notes

Second Saturday History Hikes and Paddles

Walkabout the hamlets of Delmar, Slingerlands, Selkirk and South Bethlehem. Paddle the Hudson River and Vlomankill, Stroll through Bethlehem and Elmwood Cemeteries. Check out Town Historian Susan Leath's Second Saturday series on our website. BethlehemHistorical.org



National Register Listings in Bethlehem

Each month in 2021, our website is featuring one of Bethlehem's individual listings on the National Register of Historic Places. Conveniently, there are 12 of them. New ones will be posted in the middle of each month. Above is March's featured home, the Slingerland House on Bridge Street in Slingerlands. The ones below will be revealed in the months to come. Follow us on Facebook for timely notifications.



Wat is er?

What is this strange item from our collection? The answer is on page 5.



A Glance at Bethlehem's Family Farm History

By Karen Beck

Sometime after A.D. 1000, long before Henry Hudson sailed up the river, the Mahicans learned to grow squash, beans, and corn. This enabled them to subsist for longer periods in one location, including the flats along the Hudson. Their successful practices related to soil fertility, crop rotation and storage were adopted by Europeans who arrived much later.

In 1630 Brandt Peelen, along with seven other men, made an arduous sixty-four-day journey from Holland to New Netherland. They were sent by Kiliean van Rensselaer in order to establish two farms on cleared land which had been purchased from the Mahicans. That land was part of the extensive Rensselaerswyck patroon system which was concentrated along the Hudson River for over 200 years. Brandt Peelen settled on Castle Island (later called Westerlo Island, and still later, VanRensselaer Island), where the Port of Albany is today. He is credited with having the first established farm on land which was later part of Bethlehem.

Albert Bradt, a very early Norwegian settler, built a sawmill on "Norman's Kill", which was named for him. Cornelis van Nes, Aert Jacobsen and Pieter Winne also leased land from the patroon and farmed in the area of present-day Cedar Hill. Teunis Slingerland purchased his land directly from the Mahicans.

By 1700, about thirty or forty families had settled around the river, an area prized for its rich, alluvial bottom lands. The Dongan Charter, which in 1686 had incorporated Albany as a city independent of the patroon, stipulated that the city have a monopoly on the fur trade. Although that decree was frequently ignored, settlers in the region, having few other viable economic options, focused on agriculture. They raised crops or started businesses that supported farming. The three streams in this region, the Normanskill, the Onesquethaw, and the Vlaumanskill, provided waterpower for grist mills, sawmills, wool carding, and potato starch factories.

Accounts do not depict a peaceful beginning for the town, but rather a time of much bickering and violent behavior among these neighbors. Harsh winters, flooded crops, and inadequate, rudimentary farm implements added to the misery. Attempts were made to raise tobacco with little success. Dense forests and fear of Natives kept settlement close along the Hudson.

As time passed, however, events eased the lives of these early residents and secured the town's future as a farming community. The fourth patroon, also named Kiliean van Rensselaer, began to offer lifetime leases to the tenants. That decision greatly improved the fortunes of the farmers as they then had the ability to buy and sell land as well as bequeath it to their heirs.

When French and Indian Wars ended in 1763, a greater sense of stability opened the area to an influx of new settlers. Scandinavians, Scots, Germans, Irish and English arrived,

planted orchards, and introduced new methods of farming. The Meads came in 1771 and continue today to reside on land on Meads Lane. In 1774 John Haswell began a family farming tradition that would span six generations.

The end of the Revolution in 1783 brought a new mood of self-reliance and independence that strained the patroon system. Stephen VanRensselaer, known as "The Good Patroon," regularly practiced rent forgiveness. But, after his death in 1839, his heirs reversed that habit and attempted to collect back rents. This angered the farmers, particularly those who were struggling in the hill towns. Newly empowered, the tenants rebelled. Although farmers in Bethlehem were not directly involved in the uprising, the ensuing Anti-Rent Wars eventually led to the end of the manor system.

As the city of Albany grew, so did its demand for farm products, providing Bethlehem farmers with a dependable market for their goods. In 1804 the Albany - Bethlehem Turnpike Road was constructed. At Bethlehem Center it connected with the South Bethlehem Plank Road which extended through Beckers Corners to South Bethlehem. Soon after, in 1805, the Albany-Delaware Road was built. Farmers would load up their wagons and take the goods along these plank toll roads to the market in Albany.

Bethlehem farmers were considered progressive. They readily embraced modern methods and recognized the need to organize. Gradually, associations and agencies were formed to focus on common concerns which led to much needed standards and regulations.

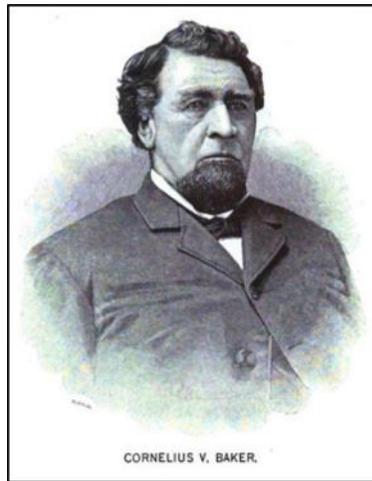
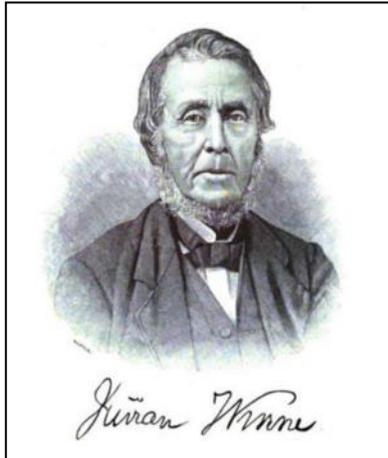
The New York State Agricultural Society, first formed in 1832, was reorganized in 1841 with Bethlehem farmer, Joel B. Nott, as its president. Later, other Bethlehem farmers, including L. G. TenEyck and Richard Kimmey, held offices. This organization is still active today and is responsible for the annual state fair.

Jurian Winne, who raised sheep and cattle where today's Selkirk rail yards are located, helped to organize the Albany County Agricultural Society. That group's first annual fair took place at Bethlehem Center in October 1853.

One of the finest examples of farming excellence was the "Grand View" farm, which was owned by Cornelius Vroman Baker, who was a tireless advocate for agriculture. His farm was noted as the most productive in the county in 1872.

The formation of our local Bethlehem Grange in 1874 by George Sprague provided local farmers both an advocacy group and a place to socialize. There were thirty charter members which, unique for the times, included women. Jurian Winne served as the first Master. After a few moves, the organization settled on the location on Rte. 396 in Selkirk where it is still active in the community today.

The Winne and the Van Wie docks became two of the busiest places in town. Great quantities of farm products were shipped down the Hudson to New York City. Wheat, melons, hay, and apples as well as the cabbages and potatoes grown on the offshore islands were sent. Bethlehem was an important supplier of oats for NYC horses. Dairy farmers were proud of their high-quality butter which was prized by New York City restaurants.



Continued next page.

Not all farming was devoted to food production. The Corning Estate in Kenwood maintained ten acres of nursery stock, including both native and rare specimens. Greenhouses held scores of orchids and other exotic tropical plants. This estate was also known for its flocks of rare sheep and choice horses. At Font Grove in Slingerlands, Van Allen and Henrick maintained twenty-one greenhouses for cut flowers and plants. They also sold fruit trees and other nursery stock.

By 1875 there were an estimated three hundred fifty-eight farms covering over 32,000 acres in Bethlehem. The subsequent demand for fuel and lumber decimated the once dense forests. Large expanses of farm fields provided unobstructed views of the river that are hard to imagine today.

Annie Moore, in her 1881 diary, speaks of watching the ice break up on the river from the vicinity of her home on what is now Weisheit Road. A few decades later, Anna Clapper could go to an upstairs window, and with a lantern, signal to friend as he sailed by on his boat far below her home on Clapper Road.

After three centuries of dependence on the river to move people and goods, the Industrial Revolution brought rapid change. Both municipalities and the state began to improve road conditions and to assume responsibility for their maintenance.

In the late nineteenth century, the Albany and Susquehanna Railroad laid track from Albany through Adamsville to Slingerlands and beyond. The route included frequent local stops, providing a fast, dependable commute to Albany.

These new methods for overland travel and transportation

of goods prompted the establishment of businesses and a dramatic increase in population. Homes were clustered in growing communities along the routes. Its proximity to Albany and attractive green spaces made Bethlehem an appealing alternative to city living. Its popularity as a desirable place to live created a demand for housing, retail, and other supportive businesses. The town's identity as a bedroom community began to emerge.

At the same time, families who had maintained farms for generations were drawn to new opportunities and an easier way of life. The pressure to sell land caused entire farms to be sold off. Farm auctions selling all the contents of the house and barns were common. Just as once the dense forests fell for farmland, much of the farm acreage has in turn been lost to residential and commercial development.

Those new residents of Elsmere, Delmar and Slingerlands were then consumers of fresh, local farm produce and dairy products of the remaining nearby farms. As automobiles came into use and Sunday drives into the country became a family tradition, farm stands began to appear along the roadside. Besides produce and eggs, the farmers' wives sold homemade goods such as jams, pickles, and pies, often accepting payment on the honor system. Many dairy farmers, such as Heath's Dairy had home delivery routes. But the days of the family farm had come to an end.

Today we have to look hard for evidence of those family farms that once dominated the landscape. A dwindling number of barns still stand. Mostly, we are just left with place names: Creble, Van Allen, Haswell, Becker, Mallory, Blessing...



Previous page: Jurian Winne & Cornelius V. Baker

Top left: Members of the Clapper family harvesting hay.

Top right: The barns at the Becker farmstead

Bottom left: A cow stops by for a visit on Willowbrook Ave in So. Bethlehem.

Bottom right: Wright family members delivering milk.

Wat is er?

It is a **sewing bird**. Before the sewing machine came along, women spent hours doing basic sewing like hemming sheets and towels. A sewing bird provided an extra hand. When clamped onto a table, the bird's beak holds fabric taut for hand sewing.

Below is Charles Waterman's 1858 patent drawing for a "ladies sewing bird."



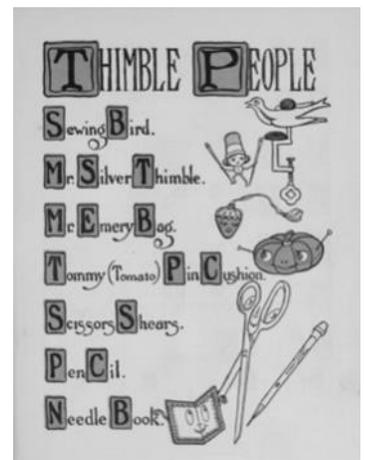
Members of the Degenaar family pick what looks like cucumbers or squash at their Selkirk farm.

Farming Today

Karen Shaw, Bethlehem's Open Space Coordinator, reports that there are currently about 30 residents who own just over 70 parcels of land that are in active agricultural in town (determined by data showing parcels that are enrolled in the NYS Agricultural Assessment program). Some of these landowners do not farm the land themselves, but lease their parcels to farmers who actively work the land. Most active farmland in town is in hay or corn production. There is one active dairy farm remaining in Bethlehem. Other agricultural products, such as livestock and vegetables, are grown at these Bethlehem agricultural businesses.



Above and right are illustrations from *The Mary Frances Sewing Book or Adventures Among the Thimble People* a book by Jane Eayre Fryer, illustrated by Jane Allen Boyer. The book teaches sewing with story and whimsical characters. It was published in 1913.



Always Seeking Volunteers

We are seeking volunteers to help with the creation of exhibits.

Do you have graphic art skills?

An aptitude for design?

Like to research and write?

We need you!

Email us at BethHist1965@gmail.com.

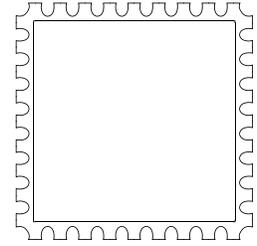


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Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum

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Follow us on Facebook

The Bethlehem Historical Association

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Membership with BHA, Won't You Join Us?

As a member you would:

Be notified of all our programs and events.
Receive a copy of our yearbook and three newsletters a year.
Be eligible to join us on "Out and About" adventures.
Support the exhibiting and care of our collections.
Enable us to provide programming and events.
Bring local history lessons and activities to students.
Enjoy socializing & working with great people!

Join now and your membership will be in effect until
May 31, 2022

Contact Sharon Sestak: 518-463-1029 OR just mail us a
check made out to Bethlehem Historical Association.
Student \$5 Individual \$20 Family \$30 **Thank you!**

The museum is open
Sunday afternoons
beginning May 2!

