



The Western New York Historian Project

Marie-Cecile O. Tidwell, PhD (3625L)

Historian Project Chair – HistorianProject@WNYGS.org

Wyoming County: Its Historians and Treasures

Wyoming County is the focus of the Historian Project article featured in this issue of *The Western New York Genealogist*. The county was formed from Genesee County in May of 1841. Its county seat is the Town of Warsaw, which is at the Western New York crossroads of Routes 20A and 19.

Today, Wyoming County consists of sixteen towns: Arcade, Attica, Bennington, Castile, Covington, Eagle, Gainesville, Genesee Falls, Java, Middlebury, Orangeville, Perry, Pike, Sheldon, Warsaw, and Wethersfield. Bordered to its north by Genesee County, Wyoming County is bordered to its west by Erie County and to its east by Livingston County, with the Genesee River running along its southeast border. Cattaraugus and Allegany Counties are on its southern border.

Historians from seven of the towns completed the Historian Project Questionnaire. They reported serving in their paid position as town historians, on average, for almost 11 years, with a range from 2 to 35 years. Three of the seven historians are reimbursed for their expenses. They work as historians, on average, for almost 10 hours per week, with a range from 2 to 35 hours per week. Many of the historians are associated with their town's historical societies or museums.



Town of Sheldon Historian Jeanne Mest, & Sheldon Historical Society Schoolhouse Museum Curator Barbara Logel. Photo by author.

Town of Sheldon

When **Jeanne Mest** participated in the Historian Project, she was the Town of Sheldon historian for just over 2 years. You may recall one of the first Historian Project articles, published in the March 2021 *JOURNAL*. It was called "The Role of the Town Historian 'In Her Own Words.'" In the article, I shared an email written by Jeanne in which she described her role as town historian and as the archival curator for the Sheldon Historical Society Schoolhouse Museum, located on Main Street in Strykersville. Her words exemplified the role of all dedicated town historians throughout Western New York.

In the article, Jeanne described the *Sheldon Historical Society Newsletter*, started in 2011, as one of their "gems." She noted that people often signed up as members because they thought this quarterly 8-page publication was a member benefit. The result was that out-of-town membership now exceeds local membership. She also mentioned their Sheldon Historical Society Facebook page as another gem (<https://m.facebook.com/groups/70955606934/>). She continued by mentioning all the other treasures of interest to historians and family historians at the Sheldon Schoolhouse Museum. One of her goals for 2021 was to publish a special 40-page edition of the museum newsletter that would describe the life of a courageous young woman, Mary Amstad VonMatt, who came to the United States from Switzerland

in 1919 and eventually settled in Varysburg in the Town of Sheldon. This special issue, now in print, is titled *A Gallant Lady*. The story was written in 1973 by Norma Donnelly, compiled and edited by Jeanne Mest, with an introduction by Doris (Becker) Kirsch. It can be purchased at the museum for \$10 (\$12 if mailed) or free to new members. To contact Jeanne Mest, email her at townofsheldonhistorian@gmail.com.

My husband and I visited the two-room Schoolhouse Museum and met with Jeanne who showed us many of the other items of interest in the museum. We started in a restored 1890s classroom, with period wooden school desks and books. Jeanne pointed out that in a corner at the back of the room we could find a dunce cap—a staple in most classrooms of the era. Visiting children and adults alike enjoy trying it on for the experience. She mentioned that visitors who previously attended school in the old schoolhouse (which was used until the mid-20th century) have been known to come back for another look. One gentleman who visited the classroom was surprised to find a book that still had his name in it. Now that was worth his trip back in time!

The second room in the museum is set up with a large table where historians and genealogists can peruse the wealth of resources on the surrounding bookshelves. There are maps, family genealogies, histories, scrapbooks, obituaries, cemetery transcriptions, church records, books, gazetteers, and many other items of interest. This room also has displays and artifacts from the 19th and early 20th centuries. I especially enjoyed looking at the scenes and portraits depicted on the glass photographic plates, which are safely tucked away in a cabinet until these century-old photographs can be printed and seen again.



The Town of Orangeville corner at the Sheldon Historical Society Schoolhouse Museum. Photo by author.

The Town of Orangeville Historian, **Laury Lakas**, is the Sheldon Museum's Schoolroom curator. Because there is no town space available to display the Town of Orangeville's historical collection, she was generously given some space to display it at the Sheldon Historical Society Schoolhouse Museum.

While visiting the Museum we met **Barbara Logel**, the current curator of the Sheldon Historical Society Schoolhouse Museum. She joined us in a conversation about the museum's resources. When I mentioned that I wanted to see the Church of Saint Cecilia site on our drive out of town, she arranged to have Mike Almeter, who is a lifelong member of the church, meet us there to give us the inside tour. The original stones used to build the church were taken from the quarry that is on his farm. Barbara then offered to drive us to the church so we wouldn't get lost. Inside this lovely church, there is a plaque with the names of "The First Catholic People in Sheldon" that includes their birthdates, where they came from, their families, and their years of arrival in Sheldon.

Barbara then let us follow her to our next stop which was the Java Village Historical Society.

Town of Java

David Carlson is the Town of Java historian and has served in this position for over 15 years. He also works in conjunction with the Java Village Historical Society, which is in a two-story, 1850 schoolhouse. Its resources mainly consist of artifacts and records, such as early pictures, town records, school records, early tools, and other historic items. Mr. Carlson considers the "gems" in the collection to be their photographs of early town people and buildings. His goal is to preserve as much history of the Town of Java as possible and he works with the county historian's office to assist him in meeting these goals.

The president of the Java Historical Society is **Penny Logel**. The day we visited, she walked us through the two-story schoolhouse and pointed out the various artifacts and displays. There is a display of an antique stove and kitchen, military uniforms from various wars, including the Spanish-American War and Union and Confederate uniforms from military schools. Outside the building, a Pomeroy Foundation marker commemorates the fact that Java School No. 1, which now houses the Java Historical Society, had been placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2001 by the U.S. Department of Interior.

When Penny took us to the second floor, we found a room set up as a classroom. Offices for the town historian and the society president were in the back. We were joined by some energetic volunteers who told us about their plans to develop creative activities to introduce children to local history and genealogy. This sounded like an excellent way to have them learn about these things in a fun way. In addition to planning activities for the children, volunteer Ashley King is making sure that those who came before are not forgotten. She showed us a map on her phone of all the cemeteries in Wyoming County. Her intent is to make sure that the names and information on the stones of everyone in these cemeteries are recorded and saved. To get an idea of what she is doing, you can go to her Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/ReawakenHistory/>.

Town of Perry

The Town of Perry is named after the hero of Lake Erie, Oliver Hazard Perry. Like the towns of Covington and Castile, which are north and south of Perry, the Town of Perry was part of the Morris Reserve. These towns were not part of the Holland Land Purchase as were the other Wyoming towns west of the reserve.

Norma Spencer has been the Town and Village of Perry historian for over 35 years. Norma considers the “gems”—that is, those unique or important historically to the Town of Perry—to be the “files of activities of the people of Perry.” Other items in the collection are pictures, news clippings, and death records, which are all safely stored in file cabinets. Each year the Town of Perry buys Norma a subscription to the *Perry Herald* newspaper to help her record the current history of the town. Her goal for the coming years is to complete two articles for *Historical Wyoming*, a periodical published quarterly by the office of the Wyoming County Historian. You may remember that Norma is also the historian for the Village of Freedom in Erie County. She is also a member of the Board of Trustees of the Arcade Historical Society.

Included in the town’s collection are *The History of the Town of Perry, New York (1915)*, written for the Town’s Centennial, and the *History of Wyoming County* by F.W. Beers.

Below is an illustration from the *History of Wyoming County, NY with Illustration, Biographical Sketches and Portraits of Some Pioneers and Prominent Residents (1880)*, published by F.W. Beers.



FARM RESIDENCE OF R. W. BRIGHAM, PERRY, N. Y.



Dresser built by Col. Prey of Eagle for his wife.
Photo by author.

Town of Eagle

Lorraine Wagner has worked for over five years as Town of Eagle historian. She is also the assistant curator of the Town of Eagle History Center (also known as the Eagle Historical Museum) on Main Street in the hamlet of Bliss. What she considers her town's historic "gems" are all the pictures they have including the portrait of Col. Gilbert Prey, who was a member of the 104th New York Infantry Regiment and fought at many of the great battles of the Civil War. For information on the career of Col. Prey, see <https://civilwartalk.com/threads/prey-gilbert-gibson.174557/>. Prior to the war, Col. Prey was a carpenter and joiner in Eagle. Thus, another treasure of the town at the history center is a dresser that he had built for his wife.

The history center also has military uniforms and records, school and church records, and organizational records such as those of Masonic lodges. There are land deeds, pictures, books, maps, information on former businesses, family histories, scrapbooks, and photo albums. Rounding out the collection is an antique washer and antique fire equipment, as well as items related to the railroad, the town doctor, and the

1919 fire that destroyed a large portion of Bliss. Lorraine's goal is to continue searching for items for the town's historical center.

On our drive through Wyoming County, we stopped at the Eagle History Center. We were met by its Curator, **Ann Smith**, who pointed out many of the items mentioned by Lorraine and showed us a few others that she considered of interest. One unique piece was a violin, one of a number hand-crafted by Ernest Wright, who lived in a house next door to what became Eagle History Center. A neighbor sealed this musical instrument in a special display case and gave it to the center as a piece of Eagle history. Another interesting piece of history is a low child's bed or crib that looks as if it could fit two young children. It had been used for several generations of the Mahar family.

Lorraine mentioned that in the back of the center, the Town of Eagle has an onsite retention room for town records, such as those for the highway and fire departments. Ann showed us this room, which the center also uses for archival storage.

Lorraine Wagner can be reached at lorr211@yahoo.com. If you are interested in visiting the Town of Eagle History Center, you can contact its curator, Ann Smith, at 585-322-7319 to make an appointment.

Town of Covington

I spoke with **Shirley Warren** who has been the Town of Covington historian for 5 years. The information collected by the historians of Covington—past and present—pertains to its churches, old country schools, and houses. There are also historic records outlining the 1820 school districts. Shirley considers an 1820s book of grazing cattle earmarks the "gem" of the collection. These ear markings identified which cows belonged to which farmer. There are also genealogical searches in the historian files. These records are locked in a vault in the town building. Shirley's goal is to organize the materials in order to make it easier for the next historian. Recently, the town received a Pomeroy Foundation historic marker for the 1836 LaGrange School, which closed in 1958 and was moved in 1998 to the Silver Lake Pioneer Association.

Town of Gainesville

Mary Mann is the historian for the Town of Gainesville and the Village of Silver Springs. She indicates that the Town of Gainesville historian has a very limited collection of artifacts and records. Original records are kept in file drawers, but photocopies in various notebooks are available for public use. None are available online. Her goal is to keep track of the items she has and to add relevant items when available. She collects what she can, answers questions, and makes suggestions as to where help can be found, which is usually at the Wyoming County Historian's Office.

Town of Warsaw

Sally Smith has been the Town and Village of Warsaw historian for 8 years, and the assistant Wyoming County historian for over 7 years. Between both jobs, she works about 35 hours per week.

Sally indicated that the county's collection includes family, town, and veteran files, as well as numerous pictures of the people and places within Warsaw and the other Wyoming County locations. She considers all the paper documents related to the town and county as "gems" and historically important to the area. Her goal is to collect and preserve "as much of our history as we can get." As a proponent of the importance of learning about local history, Sally believes that town and county histories should be taught in schools beyond the fourth grade.

Sally is very familiar with the cemeteries in Warsaw and as town historian has independently been willing to help out-of-towners find a Warsaw grave of interest. Through her work as town historian, she catalogued the stones at the town of Warsaw Cemetery. Along with others, she uploaded information and photos to Find-a-Grave. She continues to add photos and obituaries as she finds them not only to the Warsaw Cemetery on Find-a-Grave but also to the adjacent Pioneer Cemetery and the St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery.

Sally can be reached at ssmith@wyomingco.net.

There are two classic historical books about the Town of Warsaw that can be accessed at <https://archive.org/>. They are *History of Warsaw, New York from Its First Settlement to the Present Time* by Andrew Young and *The History of the Centennial Celebration: Warsaw, Wyoming County, New York, June 28 - July 2, 1903*.



Wyoming County Historian, Cindy Amrhein, at right, and Asst. Wyoming County and Town of Warsaw Historian, Sally Smith, on porch of the county historian's office. Photo courtesy of the Wyoming County Historian.

Wyoming County Historians

In order to learn more about the Wyoming County Historian's Office and the collection there, we drove to Warsaw and visited with Sally and County Historian **Cindy Amrhein**. Cindy has been county historian for over 7 years, and before that was assistant county historian for 8 years. Currently, Cindy is serving as the executive council chair of GAHWNY (Government-Appointed Historians of Western New York). Founded in 2008, GAHWNY's purpose is to provide assistance and support to its membership, which includes all who are the officially appointed local government historians within Western New York. On their website, you can find lists of books available for sale by the historians of WNY. For those from Wyoming County, go to <http://www.gahwny.org/books-wyoming.html>.

As we walked through the County Historian's Office located in the Village of Warsaw, Cindy noted that parts of Wyoming County (the eastern portions of the towns of Covington, Perry, and Castile) are in the Morris Reserve. She indicated that it is more difficult to do research in the Morris Reserve records than in the Holland Land Company records. Also, as noted above, Wyoming County was formed from Genesee County, so some Wyoming County genealogists may need to research in Genesee County.

Years ago, it was determined that there was a need for a county historian, so in 1947 Harry Douglass became the first. He remained Wyoming County historian for 27 years. Mr. Douglass transcribed many Wyoming County gravestone inscriptions during his tenure. I was told that the Daughters of the American Revolution will accept the information written down by Douglass if the stone is no longer standing.

There were three additional historians—John Wilson, Ray Barber, and Doris Bannister—before Cindy Amrhein became county historian in 2015. The year 1947 is also known for being the year that the *Historical Wyoming* quarterly magazine was first published. It has been in print since September of that year. The mission of the office of the county historian is “to collect, preserve, interpret, and document through publication the history of Wyoming County; as well as manage and collect historic records for the use of the public in their own research.” These historians have been diligently doing so for 75 years.

The Wyoming County Historian's Office has cemetery records for locations all across Wyoming County. There are family files for 10,000 Wyoming County surnames, which include obituaries and birth news. Some New York localities kept vital records between 1847 and 1851. For dates outside this period, the historian's office has Dr. Ives' notebook in which he recorded births or diseases and deaths. There are also books by local authors, some New York State histories, and Native American histories, to name a few.

Newspapers are on microfilm or can be found digitized on the Fulton History website at <https://www.fultonhistory.com/>. Hard copies are bound from the early 1850s. Original newspapers are in archival boxes. There are also some school yearbooks, including an almost complete collection for Warsaw. Veteran files include data on soldiers from most major U.S. wars. There are atlases from 1852, 1866, and 1902, as well as other maps. The 1938 tax maps show who was the owner of the property at the time. Highway maps are available for every town from the 1920s forward. And, of course, there are photographs and glass negatives.

The county is very supportive of the county historian's office. Every year there is a summer family history program that is very successful at getting participants into their town museums. Although the historians' focus is history, they are happy to provide resources to the genealogists for their own research. They currently are focusing on creating an online inventory. Cindy's current goal is to get the Pioneer Cabin and grounds at Silver Lake on the National Historic Register. I'm sure she will be successful!

The Wyoming County Historians Office is at 26 Linwood Avenue in Warsaw. The office is open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday. It has been known on occasion to open on a Saturday for a student or visitors from out of state. It is closed on Sundays.

For more information about the Wyoming County Historian's Office, go to their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/WyomingCountyHistoriansOffice>. You may also call 585-786-8818, and you may email Cindy Amrhein at camrhein@wyomingco.net.

NOTE: SUNY Press is republishing the 1880 F.W. Beers *History of Wyoming County* with a new introduction by Cindy Amrhein. The hardcover version is on sale now, and the softcover should be available in December at a lower price. For more information, go to <https://sunypress.edu/Books/H/History-of-Wyoming-County-N.Y.>



The Seth Gates House Museum of the Warsaw Historical Society.
Photo by author.

The Warsaw Historical Society and the Gates House Museum

After visiting the Wyoming County historians in the Village of Warsaw, we drove to the Gates House Museum to speak with its curator, **George Anna Almeter**. George Anna has been the museum’s curator for 20 years. She has recorded the provenance of everything in the building in a searchable database. If you are looking for something in particular, George Anna, by checking her database, will be able to tell you if she has it or not. Walking through the museum is like walking through time, as you progress from one historical display to the next. It starts with the area of Warsaw being a hunting ground for the Seneca Nation. Then, in 1803,

Elizur Webster, the first settler in Warsaw, came from New England to purchase land from the Holland Land Company; he became Warsaw’s first supervisor and tavern keeper. In 1838, Seth Gates, a congressman, moved from Genesee County to Warsaw and purchased the house where the museum now stands. Gates was a radical abolitionist whose home was a station on the Underground Railroad.

The museum continues with Warsaw’s history through the Civil War, the women’s suffrage movement, regional industries, its three railroads, hotels, salt baths, and sanitariums. More about Warsaw’s history and its outstanding citizens can be found on the museum’s website at <https://warsawnyhistory.org/>.

The museum has received five Pomeroy Foundation roadside markers. One marking that the Gates House has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of Interior in 1992. Warsaw also has a collection of photographic glass plates. We saw two photographs made from these glass plates. One depicts the Erie Railroad crossing in Letchworth State Park in 1875. The other is an old scene of Main Street in Warsaw during Old Home Days.



Old Home Days, Main Street, Warsaw, New York. Photo of colored photograph made from glass plate by author.

The Gates House Museum is at 15 Perry Avenue and is open from Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m.

The Arcade Historical Society

On our last stop in Wyoming County, we visited the Arcade Historical Society. The society represents the Town and Village of Arcade and the surrounding area. It encompasses the 250 sq. mile Pioneer Central School District, which extends beyond Wyoming County, including, for example, the Town of Freedom in Erie County and Yorkshire in Cattaraugus County.



Arcade Historical Society's Old Fire Hall, lecture and exhibit hall. Photo courtesy of the society.

In Arcade, we met **Susan Andrews**, who has been the society's operations manager for the past 11 years. Her office is at the Old Fire Hall on 15 Liberty Street in Arcade. The building is now owned by the historical society, which moved into the space in March of 2020. Besides being used as society office space, the building is used as the society's archival depository. Susan maintains an extensive database with an inventory list of what is stored in the society's collection. Also, Arcade Town and Village Historian **Jeff Mason**, stores his materials and records in the building.

A research room is available on the first floor and a large lecture and exhibit hall is upstairs. Some of the records housed in the brick fire hall include census and cemetery books, Civil War letters pertaining to Newton Wells who died in 1864,

family scrapbooks which are being digitized by a dedicated volunteer, and historic photographs. The wood entrance and cabinet doors in Susan's office came from the Arcade Elementary School after it was remodeled. Vernon Gibby, who was an amateur photographer and kept a darkroom in his basement, had a collection of photographs and glass plates. Seventeen hundred glass plates are stored on the shelves within the cabinets.

The Gibby House, a Queen Anne-style home designed by Buffalo architect Frederick Mohr, was built in 1903 by Vernon Gibby's father, John Gibby, a successful cheese manufacturer. Vernon, who had occupied the house, willed it to the society in 1983 with all its content. The society's artifacts are kept at the Gibby House, which is used as an exhibit space with period rooms from 1865 onward, with an emphasis on the 1920s and 1930s.

Another famous occupant of Arcade, now resting at the Arcade Rural Cemetery since 1962, is Fran Striker. Born in Buffalo, with a summer home—"Fiction Farm"—in Arcade, Striker was the writer for the radio program, *The Lone Ranger*. His simple grave marker, a silver-like stainless steel cross, is reminiscent of the Lone Ranger's signature silver bullets and famous final words, "Hi-Yo Silver, Away."

To find out more about the Arcade Historical Society, its special events, lecture series, membership information, and volunteer opportunities, go to <https://www.arcadehistoricalsociety.org>.

Conclusion

In this article, I added a little more about Wyoming County than what we learned from the Historian Project alone. My husband and I made several day trips to visit some of the historians and historical societies throughout the county. We learned firsthand from these historians and curators about many of the records and items that are stored or on display in these repositories. You may find that this fall would be a great time to visit them and learn more about Wyoming County and its history. Perhaps I'll see you there!

Marie-Cecile O. Tidwell, PhD, a member of WNYGS since 2014, is a Family Life Member. She has been on the Board since 2019, having served as Vice-President and currently as President. As chair of the WNY Historian Project, she reached out to the historians across the eight counties of WNY. Her goal was to learn from them about their job as historian and the history and historic treasures of their municipalities. As a contributing editor to *The WNY Genealogist*, she is sharing with our membership what we have learned from these dedicated historians and from many of the other keepers of history across WNY. Marie recently has served as chair of the WNYGS Strategic Planning Committee and its Finance Committee. She is a member of several local, state, and national genealogical organizations.