



## Chautauqua County: Its Historians and Treasures

Chautauqua County is the eighth and final county of Western New York discussed in this series of nine articles based on the Western New York Genealogical Society's Historian Project. For this project, in 2020 a questionnaire was sent to village, town, city, and county historians across Western New York with the intent to learn about the role of these historians, in their own words. We also wanted to hear from them about the historic records and items in their municipality's archives, historical museums and societies, and other repositories. My hope is that these articles would help family historians in their research and understanding of the areas of Western New York where their ancestors lived or traveled. It also was my intent to showcase these dedicated and hardworking guardians of our history in the hope that others will volunteer to help them in their work or follow in their footsteps. For me, it was a true pleasure to work on this project.

### Introduction

Chautauqua County was formed from Genesee County on March 11, 1808, but was administered until 1811 by Buffalo, which at the time was in Niagara County. The county name of Chautauque was officially changed in 1859 to Chautauqua. The county now has 27 towns and two cities, Dunkirk and Jamestown. The name Chautauqua is thought to come from an Iroquois word that means "a bag tied in the middle" or "two moccasins tied together." This could be a reference to the lake called Chautauqua, which is in the center of the county. It appears like a long lake that is cinched to make it look very narrow at its center. Chautauqua is the furthest western county of New York State. The State of Pennsylvania is at its southern and southwestern border, and Lake Erie is along the remainder of its western border. A small portion of Erie County borders Chautauqua County at the Town of Hanover. Cattaraugus County is to its east.

### County of Chautauqua

#### Chautauqua County Historical Society

The Chautauqua County Historical Society, **founded** in 1883, is in the McClurg Museum, the family home of James McClurg, in Westfield. A mansion built about 1818, it has been the home to the County's Historical Society since 1951. If you go the museum's website at <https://www.cchsmcclurg.org/>, you can learn more about the museum collection and its digital collections. Besides its historical displays, the museum also has a research room on site.



McClurg Museum in Westfield

Photo by author

#### Chautauqua County Historian

**Michelle Henry** has been the **Chautauqua County Historian** for over 23 years and spent about 35 hours a week at the job. She maintained the County Archives and the Reading Room for researchers. The County Archives, which is the largest repository of historical documents in the county, is located in the courthouse complex in the county seat of Mayville. Michelle stated that the hand-written court records, that are neither digitized nor available elsewhere, are the gems of the collection, as they are the sole copies. As county historian, she would meet twice a year with the other historians from Chautauqua County to share information about grants, programs, and projects that they could undertake together.

She is very active with the Chautauqua County Historical Society and a member of their Board of Trustees. Every historian I spoke with in Chautauqua appreciates all that Michelle does for the historians in the county and for helping to preserve Chautauqua's history.

There is a county historian page on the county government website at <https://chqgov.com/county-historian/county-historian>. Unfortunately, Michelle resigned from her job as historian, but will continue to work with the county's historical society. As of this writing, there is no new county historian.

## Town of Hanover

Since 1983, **Vince Martonis** has been the **Hanover Town Historian**. He also serves as the curator of the Hanover History Center in Silver Creek. He spends about 20-25 hours a week working at these jobs. The History Center is located in the town hall at 68 Hanover Street in the Village of Silver Creek. When I visited the Center, Vince mentioned that at one time Hanover was one of the largest towns in Chautauqua and had three railroads. There were six dining car manufacturers in the town, as well as other large industries.

Within the halls of the town building, he has several lighted display cases that he designed and had built according to archival specifications. They contain many artifacts from the town's past and displays about famous people who were born or lived in the town, such as Howard Ehmke. Ehmke was a pitcher for the Philadelphia Athletics and set a World Series record in 1929 with 13 strikeouts in Game 1 of the World Series, which the Philly A's won against the Chicago Cubs.

Another unique display in the town hall is a slice of the Hanover Elm. This tree, thirty-five feet at the base, fell by the wind in 1934. It was over four hundred years old and had about 425 rings. It was considered the largest tree east of the Rockies. In 1941, the esteemed Town of Hanover archaeologist and former curator of the Buffalo Museum of Science, Everett Burmaster, cut three slices from the fallen tree, about 54 feet from the base. He had Sanford Plummer, a Seneca artist, oil paint 34 vignettes from Western New York history on the four and a half foot wide slice, with a 14.5 foot circumference. You can watch Vince on a YouTube Video describing in more detail "The Historic Hanover Elm."



The Historic Hanover Elm – Photo courtesy of Vince Martonis, Hanover Historian

Vince, over the years, has authored about 75 newsletters called *The Hanover Historical*. As historian and curator, he receives questions about three or four times a day, and many of these are genealogical questions. He touches base with other historians from the county, but mostly through email and phone calls. Usually, he either is answering their questions or sharing with them some history he found related to their area. Vince has placed over 15 New York State historic markers throughout the town over the years. One such marker is for the Amos Sottle Cabin. Vince noted that Amos was the first settler who arrived to the area in 1796.

Vital records, such as birth, marriage, and death certificates are located in the town clerk's office. However, in the History Center there is a large room where Historian Martonis maintains numerous other records for the Town of Hanover, Village of Silver Creek, and the hamlets of Irving and Forestville. These include family files, obituaries, photographs, newspapers, and maps. There are also school and social files and those of town businesses and industries.

Vince can be reached by email at [vmartonis@gmail.com](mailto:vmartonis@gmail.com).

## Town of Portland

When **James Boltz** responded to our historian survey, he had been the **Deputy Historian of the Town of Portland** for over 15 years, spending several hours a week at the job. He indicated that the town was “the birthplace of the Great Lakes Grape and Wine Industry.” He reported that some of the gems, housed in the Town of Portland Museum, were the many tools and agricultural machines from the area. The museum is in the town’s former railroad station and has, among other things, a photo collection, and an excellent self-equipped telegraph office. The goal of deputy historian John Boltz was to fulfill the need for a new town historian. Within a few years, he achieved this goal.

When I went to visit the Town of Portland Museum, I met the new **Town Historian, Robert Pawlak**, who is also the museum curator. During the summer months, the museum is open on Saturday and Sunday, 11 am until 5 pm. Records available at the museum include, for example, railroad records, diaries, family photos and scrapbooks, town business records, and newspapers.

Rob’s goals as the curator is to enhance the museum facilities. As historian, one of his goals is to restart the historical society by garnering the interest of the community. When I asked him what he thought were the gems of the collection, he responded that they were the stories of the people who had lived in Portland.

While going through the museum with him, he told several of these stories, starting with a collection of arrowheads that were made by men who lived more than two thousand years ago. We then moved to the portrait of Elijah Faye who is credited with bringing grapes to Chautauqua, which had a topography that was very conducive to grape growing. Elijah was a minister who brought wine making to the area when he made church wine with the grapes. His nephew, Lincoln Faye, brought the Concord grape to the area. When a very cold winter in 1873 destroyed most of the grapes, the Concord grapes survived, causing many growers to plant the hardier Concord grape. Thomas Welch in New Jersey wanted to make a non-alcoholic grape product. Instead of increasing production by shipping grapes to New Jersey, he and his son, Charles Welch, in 1893, incorporated and relocated the plant to where the grapes were grown, in Chautauqua County.

Then there were the stories of men, like John Rondenell, who fought in the Battle of the Bulge, and those like Charles Pecor who fought in the Civil War’s 112<sup>th</sup> Infantry. On a lighter note, Brad Anderson, the creator of the cartoon character, Marmaduke, had lived in Portland. Another town notable, born in Portland, was George Pullman, creator of the Pullman sleeper train car. Pawlak mentioned that many of the roads in the town are named after people living in the town in the 1800s. Listening to the stories of these men, I realized why Rob calls the stories of these people the gems of the town’s collection.

One of the town’s sadder stories is of the 20 people who died in a railway accident in 1872. To date this is the single greatest loss of life in Chautauqua County. These persons are remembered each year at a Christmas Eve vigil. At one such vigil, the town was joined by a descendant of a baby whose life was saved when the baby was tossed by parents from the train car to safety in the snow. The parents perished but their child survived.

Portland’s new historian contributes to the *Old Times Around Brocton, and Portland, NY* Public Facebook Page, where you can see many old photos and memories from the Village of Brocton and the Town of Portland. Rob Pawlak can be reached at [museum@town.portland.ny.us](mailto:museum@town.portland.ny.us). The museum is at 6224 E. Main Street, Route 20, in Portland.

## Town of Clymer

For the past four years, **Cindy Willink** has been **Historian of the Town of Clymer**, which is in the southwestern part of Chautauqua County. She also is an officer in the Clymer Area Historical Society, which began in 1993. The Haverkamp House (Het Haverkamp Huis), built about 1880 by Hermann Haverkamp, a Dutch immigrant, is the home of the Society and owned by it. The Society’s early members worked tirelessly to restore the home. It is opened on Tuesdays from 9 am to noon, and by appointment. The Society has a Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/clymerhistoricalsociety>.



Parlor of the Haverkamp House -- Photo by author.

The first floor of the house displays period furniture, with some original Clymer furnishings. The second floor of the house includes various records for archival research, such as school yearbooks, family photo albums, histories, and scrapbooks, and many other records. Thanks to a grant, a barn was built in 2009 to house many of the larger museum items such as a sleigh, built in Clymer in the mid 1880s, with original paint and stenciling, and a peddle wagon from the early 1900s. The barn is also used for meetings and events. Cindy describes the gems of their collection as their museum building, a World War I diary of one of the town's residents, and the peddle wagon and sleigh mentioned above.

The town was named for George Clymer, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Cindy Willink said that the town had had many Dutch people, and this heritage is evidenced by the windmills around town and a Tulip Festival each May. She also mentioned that about half of the town is now Amish. The Clymer Amish moved to farms in the area in 1976 from a community in Ohio. She noted that they are very community minded and "fabulous" people. To find out more about the Amish in New York State, go to <https://amishamerica.com/new-york-amish/>. Chautauqua has several large areas called "Amish County."

Cindy stated that her historian predecessors continue to be an asset today. Marguerite Vander Shaaff, who served as historian from 1960 to 1982, produced numerous records on the town and its people, which are still in use by historians and genealogists. Also, when Cindy or others have a question, instead of looking it up, they ask the previous historian, Sue Rhebergen, for the information. Sue always seems to have all the answers in her head.

Cindy works several hours a week, mostly at the Historical Society, where all the volunteers are working very hard to get the collection in order and to organize donated items. One goal Cindy mentioned is to have all these items entered into the Past Perfect computer program, which seems to be used by many historians and historical societies in Chautauqua. Other goals are to increase the membership and interest of younger people, correctly store items, especially fabrics, and present programs of interest to the community.

In 2021, Clymer celebrated its bicentennial, which Cindy described as "a grand day in Clymer." It was "picture perfect." There was a parade with floats, food trucks, and a firework display. "It was a great day for the Amish and the English!"

## **Town of Villenova**

**Barbara Wise** has been the **Town of Villenova Historian** for over forty years. She considers the gems of its collection to be the photographs, the Town Picnic books and ribbons, and Veteran information. She mentioned that the town still has the honor roll started in World War II and Barbara designed a plaque to honor the Veterans in the town and those from the past. Her goal is to get an office to allow for more room for the collection, so that others could view and enjoy learning about the town's history. The town is inland on the eastern border of the county.

Barbara wants people to know that the Town of Villenova was known for its dairies. It had many small dairy farms, but now the town has one large dairy farm and only one or two small ones. Its first settlers came from New England. To learn more about the history of the Town of Villenova, which means new town, go to the town website at <https://www.villenovany.org/history.html>.

To contact the Town Historian, Barbara Wise, you could contact the Town of Villenova at 716-988-3476.

## Town of Ripley

**John Hamels, PhD**, a retired school superintendent, is the **Town of Ripley Historian**. He has served in this position for four years, and officially spends two hours a week, Thursday from 9 to 11 am, as historian. However, he is flexible and will meet by appointment.

The town of Ripley is in the western most part of the county, near the Pennsylvania border. It was first settled about 1804 and the town was formed about 1817. It was named for Eleazer Wheelock Ripley, a general in the War of 1812. There is a memorial in the center of town in honor of the town's veterans. The town has an online newsletter called "About Town" and a private town Facebook page, "Ripley Alive and Well."

Items available are Veterans records, marriage and death certificates, necrology, newspapers, maps, some photos and school records. Hamels indicates the gem of these is an almost complete newspaper collection that spans nearly 100 years. He mentioned that he is indebted to a former Ripley historian of many years, Marie McCutcheon, for the volumes of research and binders she left behind.

Within the next four years, "Doc" Hamels, as he is often called, said he hoped to achieve several goals. He wanted to create a Facebook page, inventory all materials by office location, assist the town offices with research, and periodically write a newspaper piece. He has applied for several historic markers. One was for Alexander Cochran, who was born in Ireland and bought land in what is now the Town of Ripley from the Holland Land Company in 1804; another for William Cosgrove, who was another early settler of the town; and yet another for the Hamilton House, a mansion which is now an AIRBnB.

Doc Hamels also hosts a live show, *Chautauqua Sunrise*, every Saturday morning from 9 to 10 am on Access Chautauqua. To date he has produced about 470 shows on a wide variety of topics, including history, genealogy, sports, health, and other topics of local interest, such as events and services. "Doc" Hamels can be reached by email at [hamels@fairpoint.net](mailto:hamels@fairpoint.net).

## Town of North Harmony

When **Daniel Thomas** was the **Town of North Harmony Historian** and responded to our historian survey, he had been the town historian for over five years. At that time he was also the town clerk and would spend about four hours a week in his role as historian. He would meet quarterly with the other historians in the county. As for the town's historical records, he indicated that all of the historical records were hard copies, and most were located at the Harmony/North Harmony Historical property. The area of North Harmony had been a part of the Town of Harmony until it split off into the Town of North Harmony in 1919. When visiting the towns of Harmony and North Harmony, I learned that Pamela Brown recently took over as the North Harmony Historian.

## Town of Harmony and Village of Panama

Before becoming the Town of North Harmony Historian in 2023, **Pamela Brown** was appointed the **Village of Panama Historian** in 2001 and the **Town of Harmony Historian** in 2013. At the time of the historian survey, she indicated she spent about 10 hours a week at the job. As historian, she noted that she does not retain any collection, but refers "donors to an appropriate repository." She promotes and encourages the use of the "local historical society collections and research library." Her local historical society "contains many one-of-a-kind primary source documents" like diaries, journals, school and other records, such as some criminal court records, which were going to be thrown away.

Pam would like to remind researchers that town and village historians are not paid genealogists who will do their genealogical work. Instead, they "refer inquiries to the appropriate resource like the vital records registrar or town clerk." She enjoys local history and sharing what she learns. For her, it's "the passion of promoting and preserving local history and sharing [the] findings."

When asked about goals, her goals were to research historical events and continue "working on editing and rewriting a town history that was done many years ago and bringing the history up to the 21<sup>st</sup>

century.” She wants to promote the proper use of resource(s) and continue to add more historical markers. In addition, she wants to “encourage local history in an educational setting” and promote educational programming in town schools.

Pam is active at the Harmony Historical Society, established in 1972. The Historical Society includes both towns and it manages the Harmony/North Harmony History Center at 1943 Open Meadow Road in Asheville. The Center recently was expanded by combining two existing buildings, thus providing additional space for displays, storage, research, meetings, and videoconferencing. The Center actively collects and preserves items related to the Harmony/North Harmony area.



Harmony/North Harmony History Center  
Photo by author

For a look at the new Center, go to <http://www.harmonyhistoricals.org/research-center.html>. Also, on the page you can click on a link that will take you to *Helpful Online Genealogy Resources*, some of which may be new to you. The Harmony Historical Society has a Facebook page, YouTube channel, and a newsletter. The society can be contacted via email at [harmonyhistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:harmonyhistoricalsociety@gmail.com).

Besides being the historian for the Village of Panama and the towns of Harmony and North Harmony, Pam is also on the Board of Trustees of the Chautauqua County Historical Society. She can be reached at [maizer@netsync.net](mailto:maizer@netsync.net).

### Village of Mayville and Town of Chautauqua

The Village of Mayville, in the Town of Chautauqua, is the Chautauqua County seat. It is at the northern end of Chautauqua Lake. **Devon Taylor** has been the **Historian of the Village of Mayville and the Town of Chautauqua** for about thirty-two years. He noted that he spends anywhere from 2 to 20 hours a week at the job. He works from home but keeps materials stored in a shared municipal office, with limited access. He meets semi-annually with other county historians to discuss what “each is doing and what might be accomplished in common.”

I met with Devon at the Chautauqua Township Historical Society, which is located in the old train depot. The railroad played a big part in Mayville’s history. The town purchased the property in 1968, and the Historical Society rents it annually for \$1. Devon would send weekly historic photographs that would be posted on the Historical Society’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100041194162601>. He also wrote about the history of Mayville for the Village website. This history can be found at <https://www.villageofmayville.com/history.html>.



Depot Museum in Mayville Photo by Author

Records and artifacts held by the historian include newspapers going back to 1835, historic photographs, diaries, letters, and the records from the previous historian. Taylor considers the thirty percent of newspapers that have not been microfilmed to be the gems of the collection. He wrote that his goals were to continue researching area history and to respond to information requests by the general public.

Devon has written several books, including: *Mayville: A View Through Time* (1993); *Chautauqua Gorge: History, Legends, and People* (1995); and *To Chautauqua by Rail, 1881 to 1926* (2016). Together with the Chautauqua Township Historical Society, he secured historic markers for the town. The first, obtained through the William G. Pomeroy Foundation, honors the former commercial lake ice harvesting and shipping industry, and the second, sponsored by the Town of Chautauqua and approved by them and the Village of Mayville, honors the railroads that dominated the transportation industry of the region.

Devon Taylor can be reached by email at [devtay@fairpoint.net](mailto:devtay@fairpoint.net).

## Town of Mina and Findley Lake

**Mary Norcross** has been the **Town of Mina Historian** for over eight years. She is also the President of the Findley Lake and Town of Mina Historical Society. The Historian's Room and Historical Society's "Heritage Room" are both located in the Mina-Findley Lake Community Center, which is in a former elementary school at 2883 North Road in Findley Lake. Visitors can view the items in the Historian's Room and Heritage Room on Saturdays from 9 am to noon. They can also call 716-769-7688 for an appointment, which is preferable in order for the historian to prepare for the subject being researched. There is a surname file for those who may have roots in the town.

On average, Mary spends about 16 hours a week as historian. She meets quarterly with other historians from the county and they discuss program ideas, fund-raising events, the lack of volunteers, and the use of ancestry.com for genealogy research. In addition, they discuss the PastPerfect Museum Software, which many of the historians and museums in the county are using for collection management, reports, and tracking donations and memberships. Mary worked closely with County Historian Michelle Henry and Town of Harmony Historian Pam Brown to install the program in many of the local historical societies.

The Findley Lake and Town of Mina Historical Society website is <http://findleylakehistory.weebly.com/>. A list of some of the paper and non-paper artifacts housed at the historical society can be found at <http://findleylakehistory.weebly.com/artifacts-at-society.html>.

According to Mary Norcross, one gem among these items is the history of the original water driven mill, built by the first landowner, Alexander Findley, after whom Findley Lake, and the hamlet around it, is named. Another gem is the history of the Lakeside Assembly, a Chautauqua Institution-like assembly on Findley Lake, fashioned exactly like the original. But, one of the most memorable gems described by Mary is the history of "the roller skating rink with its live organ music that entertained as well as seared the music in our minds as it drifted down the lake." It appears that this is the gem that is etched into the minds of all who skated there.

The original cottages on Findley Lake are 110 years old. At one time there were steamboats on the lake, which is the 2nd largest lake in Chautauqua County.

In the years ahead, Mary wants to continue to maintain the collection and to learn and teach the local history of the town. In 2024, the Town of Mina will be celebrating its bicentennial. The celebration plans are in progress. It should be a grand event.

Mary Norcross, who had lived on the lake, may be contacted by email at [flhistoricalsoc@gmail.com](mailto:flhistoricalsoc@gmail.com).



Souvenir map of Findley Lake Property Owners  
Photo of map by author

## The Lily Dale Assembly

The hamlet of Lily Dale is in the southeast corner of the Town of Pomfret and borders Lake Cassadaga. In September of 1879, what became the Lily Dale Assembly purchased 20 acres of land that they divided into 40' by 50' lots. In 1887 they purchased more land and created 50' x 60' lots. What began as the Cassadaga Lake Free Association became the Lily Dale Assembly in 1906. It was named Lily Dale because of the large number of lilies that grew at the lake. Now with about 162 acres of land, Lily Dale remains a center for Free Thinkers and the Religion of Spiritualism. It offers numerous events and activities throughout the summer that attract thousands of people, while the year-round population is only a few hundred.

We drove to Lily Dale and entered its gate, paying the \$15 per person, summer entrance fee for the day. My goal was to meet **Ron Nagy**, the **Lily Dale Historian**, who participated in the WNYGS Historian Project. I wanted to learn more about this unique place and its history, including the artifacts and records that would be of interest to genealogists. We met Ron at the Lily Dale Museum. The museum is housed in the former 1889 one-room Town of Pomfret Schoolhouse #6 that stands at the corner of Library and East Streets. The Lily Dale Museum has a Facebook page where you can see numerous photos of the museum's interior and many of its artifacts. There is also a website for the Lily Dale Assembly, Inc. at <http://lilydaleassembly.org>.



Lily Dale Museum

Photo by author

Ron has been a Lily Dale historian for 22 years—the first few years he worked alongside his mentor, friend, and teacher, Historian Joyce LaJudice. Together they wrote several books about the community. In 2005, he officially became the Lily Dale Historian. As for his job as historian, he said you have to like what you are doing. It is obvious, he does.

Ron explained that the Assembly owns all the land in Lily Dale, so those who purchase homes do not own the land that the house is on. Instead, they can lease the land for 99 years or can rent it for the season. No person can lease more than two lots. Those who want to be a part of the community must be members in good standing of the Lily Dale Assembly, and their moving there must be approved by the Assembly's Board of Directors.

As for what is housed in the museum, Ron noted that there is a “treasure of Spiritualist memorabilia, vintage newspapers, period photographs” and “precipitated Spirit Paintings, Spirit Slates and Séance Trumpets.” The three Fox sisters played an important part in the creation of the Spiritualist Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The museum has a Fox family bible and scrapbooks of the Fox family.

Ron indicated that writers and researchers from around the country come to their archives. For the genealogist with roots in Lily Dale, there are courthouse records of anyone who owned a home there. Many records in the museum have been digitized, which makes it easier for the historian to locate them. Some of these include hotel sign-in sheets from 1880 to 1940 and Board meeting minutes from 1910.

There is also Woman Suffrage memorabilia, which includes pins, pamphlets, and scrapbooks, as well as information on Susan B. Anthony who made five appearances at Lily Dale. On August 11, 2023 there was a dedication ceremony for a “National Votes for Women” Pomeroy Trail Marker commemorating the Lily Dale Assembly of 1891 for its “Woman's Day” in Lily Dale.

You can contact Ron Nagy by email at [ronnagylilydale@gmail.com](mailto:ronnagylilydale@gmail.com). You can also visit his website at [ronnagy.net](http://ronnagy.net) where you can access his blog and learn about the books and articles he has written.



