

Allegany County: Its Historians and Treasures

Allegany 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, on April 7, 1806. Its county seat is the Village of Belmont in the Town of Amity. Today, Allegany County consists of 29 towns and 10 villages. It is the only Western New York county that has no city within its borders. But it does include a small reservation, the Seneca Nation Oil Springs Indian Reservation. The county is met on its eastern border by Steuben County and on its west by Cattaraugus County. Wyoming County is along its northeastern border and Livingston County is along its northwestern border. Pennsylvania is to its south.

The story of Allegany County is “A Story Worth Telling,” and as described on its website:

The story of Allegany County is the best kind of story – with a cast of characters any talented writer would struggle to imagine. Medicine men, dance hall girls, missionaries, and industrialists all have written on the pages of our past. Their lives and livelihoods have shaped the course of our communities and continue to speak into our future though at times only through a whisper.

Historians from six of the towns and three of the villages of Allegany County participated in the Historian Project. They reported serving in their role as a town or village historian for an average of about 17 years, with a range from 1 to 30 years. They reported working on average 5.5 hours per week as town or village historians.

Ron Taylor has served as the historian for the Town of Alma for 20 years and the Town of Wellsville for more than four. In addition, he is the president and museum director of the Allegany County Historical Society, which is located in the Town of Andover. Although he is not paid, he receives a small stipend and is reimbursed for expenses. He spends about 40 hours a week as the museum director and an additional 10 hours as the town historian for both Wellsville and Alma. He considers the surname and obituary files part of the “gems” or treasures of the towns’ collections. His goal for the next four years is to continue the digitization of records.

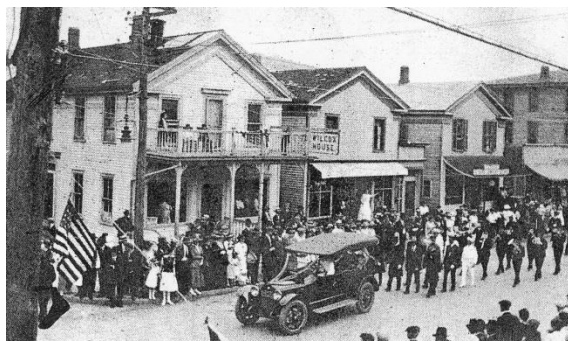


Allegany Historical Center & Museum, Andover, NY. Photo courtesy of the Allegany Historical Society.

The building that houses the Allegany County Historical Society had previously been the town opera house, as evidenced by the wide interior stairway to the upper level. After a fire, the opera house was converted into several other businesses before becoming the society’s new home. It had its grand opening in January 2017.

A part of the building’s first floor is shared with the Andover Historical Society. Prior to my husband and my visit with Ron at the county historical society, we visited the Town of Andover Historical Society, where we met with Ruth Manske, the Andover society’s archivist. Ruth mentioned that the Andover Historical Society has material that would be of interest to genealogists, including

information about families with a history in Andover, such as the Robinson, Kent, and Joyce families. The Joyce family, who originally came into Allegany County because of its oil boom, has always been very generous to the town, as are several other local families. Some old glass plate photos of the town have been made into postcards. These capture a glimpse of the town during the previous century.



Andover, New York, Fourth of July Parade c.1920.
Photo courtesy of the Andover Historical Society.

Ruth gave me a souvenir book, the *Town and Village of Andover's Sesquicentennial (1824-1974)*. The inside cover has an old map of the town which includes the name of the lot owners. It also includes a history of the town, the names of war veterans and businesses, and the history of town families and organizations. This book will be made available for viewing in the Western New York Genealogical Society's June P. Zintz library collection in the Grosvenor Room of the downtown Buffalo and Erie County Public Library.

It Happened in Andover 2021 is a publication of the Andover Historical Society, with Ruth Manske as its editor and publisher. It is a collection of information about the town for the year 2021. Each year a summary of the year's events in the town and village of Andover is recorded. For example, the book lists the town government, businesses, churches, and organizations; newsworthy events and property transfers; information about the Andover Central School, including the 2021 school graduates and what they are doing after graduation; and the deaths during the year. Also included is a sampling of what was listed in previous booklets, twenty-five and fifty years earlier. Andover has prepared these booklets each year since just after World War II. To me, these books, with all the information they contain, will be a treasure for generations to come.

If you would like to read more about the *Town and Village of Andover*, visit the Allegany County Historical Society's Website at <https://www.alleganyhistory.org/index.php/town-a-village-of-andover>. The town and village historian, Kim Haswell, can be reached at andovernewyorkhistorian@yahoo.com, and the Town of Andover Historical Society President, Mark Holt, can be reached at 585-593-8028.

Walking into the other side of the building, we were in the Allegany County Historical Society Museum and met with the society's president, Ron Taylor. Ron told us about some of the history, records, and artifacts in the county's museum. He mentioned that the first Europeans who settled in the county were the Dutch, English, Irish, and Scots. The museum has a large collection of Western New York history from Alfred State College, a selection of local newspapers, and an extensive website. Ron Taylor was the original creator of the website, which can be accessed at <https://www.alleganyhistory.org/>. There you also can access every issue of the historical society's quarterly newsletter, "The Recorder," which began publication in May 2010. The society also sells books on local history topics, a list of which can be viewed at <https://www.alleganyhistory.org/index.php/achs-bookstore>. Ron Taylor can be contacted at alleganychs@gmail.com or 585-610-8668.

After we left the Allegany County Historical Society, through the building's second front door, our next stop was the Village of Almond and the Hagadorn House. In 1971, the Hagadorn House, first built in the early 1830s, was bequeathed to the Almond Historical Society by a descendant of the John Wetherby family, an early occupier of the home.

We first entered through the historical society offices and were graciously met by two society volunteers, Cheryl House and Lillian Hanks. Cheryl took us around the various file cabinets and drawers and pointed out the many records and items preserved by the society. There were numerous cabinets of family files. In addition, there were schoolhouse files that included pay stubs, school reports, and teacher lists from 1879 to 1936. In 1940, their school districts were consolidated into the Alfred-Almond School District. There also are drawers that contain clippings and information about school sports, churches, and clergy.

Included in their records are those of the Almond cemeteries, including local family cemeteries. There are also Civil War letters, and information on local author and teacher, Helene C. Phelan. Phelan wrote several books which cover the topics of slavery, the Underground Railroad, and the Hagadorn House, that is based on the Hagadorn family diaries. The historical society also has its “sad drawer” where, like in so many historical museums, they have photos of individuals and families who remain unidentified and nameless. These photos are good reminders to leave a note on your photos, so the “sad drawer” never becomes their final home.



Victorian Parlor in the Hagadorn House, Almond, NY. Photo by author.

Next, our guide, Cheryl House, continued our tour by taking us next door to visit the Federal-style Hagadorn House, with its impeccably decorated rooms of antiques. Each room was more interesting than the next and filled with many special items. In the photo of the Victorian parlor depicted here, among the antique furniture and piano, you can see the curio cabinet (upper left) which is holding the collection of cruets that belonged to Lillian Hanks who greeted us when we arrived. Furnishing the house seems to be an activity enjoyed by all the society’s members. The Hagadorn House and the items in it are clearly some of the town’s treasures. For more information about the Hagadorn House or the Almond Historical Society, you can go to the society’s website at <https://almondhistory.wordpress.com/>.

Although there is no historian for the Town and Village of Almond, Donna Ryan, who is the Almond Historical Society secretary, responded to our Historian Project Questionnaire. She noted that there is an Almond Historical Society Facebook page and a society quarterly newsletter. The society has between four to six volunteers and the society’s archives is open for viewing on Fridays from 2 to 4 p.m. She reported that the society was chartered in 1965 by the New York State Department of Education and that it has a large collection of data in its offices. In addition to the numerous drawers of family information, it has maps, photos, scrapbooks, books, manuscripts, and documents. She indicated that they have hundreds of personal family files, and she considers them the “gems” of their collection. She added that she wants us to know that they are very proud of the Almond Historical Society and its facilities. To contact Donna, email her at dryan14804@gmail.com or call her at 607-725-0735.

The Town of Angelica Historian who responded to our questionnaire was Jonathan Makeley. He reported that the town has a collection of various records and books related to town history. The originals are in the town’s storage area and digital images are available on the historian’s website at <https://mrhistory956.wixsite.com/angelica-ny-history/>. There is also a Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/AngelicaNYHistory/>. He stated that his goal is to continue to build the town’s collection of records, to make them more available, and to encourage further efforts to inform people about the town’s heritage.”

When Dana Ross responded as the Town of Amity historian, he was in that position for less than a year. He noted that one of the “gems” from the town’s collection is the picture of the town in the Belmont Library. The Belmont Literary and Historical Society Free Library was next on our list to visit. It is located in the county seat in the Village of Belmont, in the Town of Amity. The history of the library can be found on its website at <https://www.belmontfreelibrary.org/>. The cornerstone of the building was laid in 1893 and the library was completed in 1904. The clock tower was added in 1909.



The Belmont Free Library, Village of Belmont, NY. Image from Eyesofibad on Wikipedia.

We arrived at the library about an hour before closing and since, at that time, we were the only patrons, we were able to talk to the library assistant, Curtis Decker. He was a young man who told us how he loved working in the library. He enjoyed going there as a child and was always pleased to see new young families come in to choose their next selection of books. He showed us around the library and pointed out the books and items that would be of interest to genealogists. There was a section of personal journals, as well as local and family histories and photos. Historic copies of the newspaper, *The Belmont Dispatch*, from the years 1929 to 1966, are available on the library shelves.

The Belmont Literary and Historical Society Free Library is a charming place to peruse its books and historical materials. On the upper level is a large area that can serve as a meeting room. When I recently went to the library's website, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that former library assistant, Curtis Decker, is now the library director. He notes on the library's website that he has some new ideas for improving the library for its patrons, but also wants to hear the patrons' suggestions. We wish him well in his endeavors. To access the library's website, go to <https://www.belmontfreelibrary.org/>.

On our second day of visiting Allegany County, we planned on going further south to visit the Richburg-Wirt Historical Society. On our way there, it was recommended that we stop to visit the Pioneer Oil Museum, which was open that afternoon. The museum was started to honor the area's oil producers and preserve the legacy of the local oil industry. The museum is located in an 1863 building that had been the Oil Field Supply Store. Here we learned that Native Americans first found oil in the Oil Springs and used it for medicinal purposes. Those who followed found other uses for oil.

We spoke with Jessie Davison, wife of the current president of the Museum's Board of Directors. In addition to volunteering at the museum, she has a small shop of assorted items for sale in one of the rooms. We learned from Jessie that the first oil well that the drillers hit in the area was in Richburg in April of 1881. This changed the whole area into a boomtown, with people moving in to take advantage of the opportunities for riches. For more information about the museum, you can go to its website at <https://www.pioneeroilmuseum.com>.

After looking at the exhibits and buying some items in the store, we made our way to our next stop, the Richburg-Wirt Historical Society Museum, which is in the former Seventh Day Baptist Church, in the Village of Richburg, in the Town of Wirt. When we arrived, we were greeted by one of the society's volunteers, Elizabeth Webb. She told us that the first settlers to the region were from New England. As she walked us through the museum, she added that it was the oil boom that brought people, such as Bradley Joyce and the other oilmen, to the area to drill for their fortunes. Along with the drilling, the village felt an explosion of its population, the advent of railroads and trolleys to the area, as well as other changes—some good and some bad. The museum has a chart that indicates how the Village of Richburg expanded after the gush of the first oil well. In 1881-1882, the village had 70 oil producers, 34 boarding houses, 21 hotels, 17 grocery stores, 24 saloons and restaurants, and a population of over 8,000.

As oil production slowed, by 1900, the population decreased significantly. However, in the early 1920s, with new methods, oil flowed again, as did prosperity. During the years of the Great Depression, the area around Richburg and Allegany County didn't feel the same effects of the Depression as much of the country.

Within the museum, there was much to see. One interesting item was a working model of a drilling rig built by LaVerne Jordan. There also is a display of a classroom with photos of former schoolteachers. Books and scrapbooks, as well as histories of those who lived in the area, or may have stayed for a while and then

moved on, could be found on the shelves in the research section of the museum. L. Frank Baum, the man who wrote the *Wizard of Oz* book series, was someone who called Richburg home for a while. His father was in the oil business and built the opera house, which burned down in 1882.

To find out more about the Richburg-Wirt Historical Society Museum, and history of the area, go to <https://www.alleganyhistory.org/places/historical-societies/richburgwirt-historical-society>.

In the final stop of our two-day visit to Allegany County, we arrived at the Village and Town of Cuba, near the end of their festivities for the sesquicentennial celebration of the Cuba Circulating Library, which opened in 1872. The town, settled by the Irish, was created in 1822 from the Town of Friendship. Therefore, this year, 2022, the Town of Cuba also is celebrating its bicentennial.

In Cuba, we met with the town and village historian, David Crowley, who, when he responded to our Historian Questionnaire, indicated he had been the historian for over 30 years. He also noted that he had the help of several volunteers who were deeply involved with the Cuba Historical Society Museum and assisted in maintaining various files such as obituaries and news clippings. The town's historical collection consists of "many notebooks and records such as schools, hospital, industries, fire department, local businesses and organizations, all housed in the museum operated by the local historical society." In addition, there are scrapbooks of local obituaries, events, and festivals.

As for the "gems" in the collection—those that are most important to their municipality—he listed the scrapbooks and the complete collection of bound yearly volumes of the local newspaper, the *Cuba Patriot*, which dates back to 1862. His goal for the next several years is "to get more young people involved in local history, and to restore the vitality of the local historical society that unfortunately has dwindling membership and support."

We met at the Cuba Historical Society Museum, where David mentioned that the town was named, not after the country of Cuba, but after the goddess in Roman mythology called Cuba, the protector of the young. Across the street from the museum stands a statue of the goddess along with some other items of historic interest. For instance, there is "The Liberty Pole" which is a 150-foot-tall flagpole on Main Street. We were told that there are only two this tall east of the Mississippi. Also, near the statue of Cuba, there is a plaque dedicated to Charles Ingalls, also known as "Pa Ingalls." He was born in Cuba in 1836, prior to his family moving out west. He was the father of Laura Ingalls Wilder, the author of the *Little House on the Prairie* book series.

As we left the Cuba Historical Society Museum, we enjoyed watching the activity that was winding down at the close of the town's celebration. At that moment I realized that Cuba was keeping its history alive with its historian and town volunteers while continuing to create new history for a new generation of town residents.

Although time did not allow us to visit every town and village within Allegany County, I was happy to talk with the historians and historical society volunteers that we were able to visit. They represent the other village and town historians and hundreds of volunteers across the county, and across Western New York who are keeping their local history alive. Every time I travel across the eight counties of Western New York, and write one of these articles, I am amazed at the dedication and hard work of them all.

To them, I say "Thank you."