



## Niagara County: Its Historians and Historic Treasures

Niagara County was formed on March 11, 1808 from Genesee County. Currently, its county seat is the City of Lockport. Lake Ontario is to the north of Niagara County, and Erie County is to its south. The Niagara River runs along its western border and the Orleans and Genesee Counties along the eastern border.

### Niagara County Historians

We began our visit to Niagara County by visiting the offices of the **County Historian Catherine Emerson**. Catherine has been the county historian for almost 17 years. Her office, with that of the **Deputy County Historian Craig Bacon**, is located in the Civil Defense Building at 139 Niagara Street in Lockport. They are both paid and work about 17 hours a week. Craig Bacon is also the Historian for the City of Lockport.



*Niagara County Historian Catherine Emerson and Deputy Historian Craig Bacon examining an 1887 map of the City of Lockport. Photo by author.*

The County Historian's Office is open from 8:30am to 2:30pm on Wednesday and Thursday and 8:30am to 1:30pm on Friday. Onsite users should provide advance notice or make appointments to use the facilities or speak with the historians. No food or drink is permitted in the reading room. Only pencils are allowed.

The county historians meet with the municipal historians of Niagara County's cities, towns, and villages about once a month. They give them county updates and answer questions. These historians meet either at the county offices or at those of the local historians. They discuss mutual topics; share materials, websites, and ideas, including how they preserve their collections; help newer members by offering suggestions; discuss local history and events; and visit sites within the county to learn what is available.

You can find a list of materials and documents available to the public at the County Historian's Office by going to the Niagara County website at

<https://www.niagaracounty.com/departments/g-l/historian.php>.

These include, for example, family files and veteran files since the French and Indian War, obituaries from the 1840s, marriage and church records, and maps going back to about 1830, which may include names of those living on the property. The collection also includes diaries and journals, as well as photos and written files on topics such as daredevils, railroads, cemeteries, schools, hospitals, Native Americans, and individual cities, towns, and villages. There are also some family scrapbooks and letters. The County Historian's Office also has a Facebook page. It can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/Niagara-County-Historians-Office-299057299891>.

When the county of Niagara was formed from Genesee County in 1808, it included much of the western portion of Western New York. Buffalo was its county seat until 1821, when Erie County was formed from Niagara County. In that year, the Niagara County seat was moved to Lockport. Therefore, some records from Niagara County from 1808 to 1821 may be found in Erie County records.

County Historian Catherine Emerson describes some of the gems in the county's collection to be the Comstock Diaries and those of Lucinda Knapp. Artemis Comstock was a farmer from the Town of Lockport. In his diaries, he speaks of practical things such as farming and lumbering. When he writes his diaries, he is at an age that is younger

than Lucinda at the time of her writings. In comparison, the diaries of Lucinda, who was from Royalton, include such moving experiences as her watching her son die from illness, and her experience of having a photograph taken. She also writes of the day-to-day activities of the women of her time. She includes her "receipt book" (now more commonly called "recipe book") which includes much more than just recipes for food preparation. She also includes her recipe for making black hair dye and writes about how to lose weight.

Other gems include the trial papers of Jane Porter who was on trial for *lunacy*. Jane had inherited significant land holdings in the Niagara Falls area, including Goat Island. She was ruled insane by the court. This ruling may have been influenced by the economic interests of others. For more information about the trial papers of Jane Porter, see <https://news.niagara.edu/news/show/nu-grad-receives-award-for-study-of-jane-porter-relics-found-in-county-courthouse> (accessed 20 February 2023).

Another gem is the Medal of Honor awarded to Private First Class Frank Gaffney who grew up in Lockport and lived in Niagara Falls. Besides the Medal of Honor, Gaffney, who served in World War I and single handedly assaulted a German position, capturing eighty German soldiers, received other U.S. medals as well as those from Great Britain, France, Italy, Portugal, and the Kingdom of Montenegro. He is featured in the well-documented 2022 book by John R. Strasburg, *He Charged Alone: World War I Medal of Honor Recipient Private First Class Frank Gaffney*.

Other gems include the series of World War I letters from the Barker-Somerset area. There are also the letters of Mary Belknap who had extensive correspondence with acquaintances in France. The Niagara County historians hope to have these translated and made available to the public.

As for her goals, Catherine would like to have the Niagara County Historians and the Historian's Office be more visible within the Western New York community. She would like people and governments to know not only the importance of history, but the importance of keeping it. She is always looking for volunteers.

## **Town of Niagara**

**Peter Ames** has been the historian of the Town of Niagara for almost seven years. He began his job of town historian in April of 2016. His predecessor in the job was Dorothy Rolling who served from 1985 to 2015 after following her mother, Mary Marsh, in that role. Dorothy had also served as Niagara County historian.

We met Pete at the Calvin K. Richards Senior/Youth Activity Center at Veterans Park, 7000 Lockport Rd, Niagara Falls. He moved his office from the Highway Department to the Center in 2018 so he could easily meet with visitors and organize the town's historic records in what would become the Rowling/Marsh Local History Room. The room was named in honor of the mother and daughter historians of the Town of Niagara, who between them served for almost 50 years.

Information about the Town of Niagara historian and the town's historic repository can be accessed on the Town of Niagara website at <https://www.townofniagara.com/departments/town-historian/>. Ames can be reached by email at [pames@townofniagara.org](mailto:pames@townofniagara.org).

Peter Ames reports that he works as historian on average 20 hours per week. He receives a salary from the town and has a \$1,000 budget. He has no set days and hours for the public to come in, but indicates he can be available most times, if someone would like to make an appointment. He considers himself very lucky to have a dedicated space for the collection he inherited. He states that it had been "in the back of a 40' storage pod in the parking lot in 24 bins and boxes." The town purchased a fireproof safe for the room to house the town's early records, which include all the town supervisor journals from 1812 to current, digitized tax assessment records from 1819 to 1960, and paper tax records from 1860 to 1960. Pete refurbished two used blueprint cabinets to store his 150 maps. Depending on the project, Pete has three volunteers who will assist him.

In the center of the room, there is a long conference table and chairs. Around the perimeter of the room, he placed bookcases, shelving units, and filing cabinets. Stored in these are family files (in green binders), census records (in black binder), military records (in red binders), outlying area records, for example, outlying church and cemetery records (in blue binders). He is as organized with the other records, as well. A list of them can be found on the Town of Niagara's historian page, listed above.

As for which of these he considers the gems, he lists the digitized tax assessment records from 1819-1860, and some of the maps. He also has the original records from 1919-1959 of the Polish immigrants who attended the International Institute in Niagara Falls. These records contain information such as the immigrant's village of birth in Poland, parents' names, and name of the ship of arrival. These records can be found on the NY Heritage website at <https://nyheritage.org/index.php/collections/niagara-falls-international-institute-records>.

Pete also has collected information on Niagara Falls, even though it separated from the town of Niagara when Niagara Falls incorporated as a city in 1892. He has personally collected many items that he has added into the town's permanent collection.

When he originally completed the Historian Project questionnaire, Pete listed the following as his goals to achieve in the next four year as historian. First, he wrote that he wanted "to make the local history room the most organized" that he could make it. I can attest, after seeing it, that it is well on its way to be so. Next, he noted that he was involved in gathering as much info as he could on local veterans. To that end, he was in the process of framing a 75 year old service cloth, 5 foot by 10 foot, which on it were sewn the names and branch of service of 150 Town of Niagara WWII veterans. This, too, has been accomplished. Pete tracked down many of the descendants of these veterans so they could attend the unveiling ceremony. The service cloth now hangs in the Senior/Youth Center. In addition, he worked on the Hometown Heroes Project. Veterans with an honorable discharge, who had lived or worked in the town, could have a banner made in their honor. The banner would hang along the streets in the town from Memorial Day to Veterans Day, and then brought back again the following May. This project is well on its way. Each year more Hometown Heroes are being added.

Oakwood Cemetery was started in 1852 and has many notables within its grounds—from daredevils to businesspersons to war veterans. Pete has placed Distinguished Person Signage on the graves of many of these notable residents of the cemetery.

Now, he wants to come up with a numbering system that makes sense for the items in the collection —something different from the usual library numbering systems. He is willing to hear suggestions, and I'm confident that in the end, Pete will arrive at a workable numbering system that will meet his needs.

For all his work as historian and the successful projects he has undertaken, in the fall of last year, Peter Ames was awarded the Julia Reinstein Career Achievement Award at the Annual Conference of the Government Appointed Historians of Western New York.

## **Village of Middleport**

**Christa Lutz** is the historian for the Village of Middleport, which is on the Erie Canal. The village lies between two towns. The northern part of the village is in the Town of Hartland; the southern part is in the Town of Royalton. The Erie Canal, followed by the railroad, was instrumental in helping the village grow.

Christa has been the government appointed historian of the village since 2011. A history major and retired schoolteacher, she works about 20 hours a week as the village historian. Although she does not receive a salary, she is reimbursed for expenses and has a small budget. Her office is at the Village Hall and she has office hours on Tuesdays and Thursday from 10 am to 3 pm.



*Town of Niagara Historian Peter Ames in The Rolling-Marsh Local History Room with a map of the Town of Niagara and a Distinguished Signage Marker from the Historic Oakwood Cemetery for the grave of Sgt. Edward Sarsnett, U.S.C.T., a "U.S. Colored Troop" Civil War soldier.  
Photo by author*



*Painting by Myrtle Wilmot, hanging in Town of Middleport Historian Office, titled "Middleport on the Erie Canal, Batavia Preserving Company."*  
*Photo of painting by author.*

The office is a large room with a very long conference table. It is surrounded by file cabinets and drawers. The walls are covered with several paintings of the town by the artist Myrtle Lewis Wilmot (1888-1974). Myrtle's father, Elgie J. Lewis, was an inventor of practical items, as were several men in Middleport. Elgie is best known as the inventor of the pineapple corer. Middleport, at the time had a cannery, the Batavia Preserving Company that closed in the early 1900s. Myrtle included the cannery in some of her paintings.

Christa has an online presence through the village website where there is a link to the historian's office at <https://villageofmiddleport.org/historians-office/>.

She posts important information in the town newsletter. She often posts on Facebook through the *Memories of Royalton, Gasport, and Middleport* Facebook page, which can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1411709179060081/>.

She is willing to help the public view what she has in the historian's collection, but for genealogical research, she recommends the County Historian's Office in Lockport,

which has a much larger collection. The village collection includes some photocopied family files; notebooks with photocopied newspaper clipping of local businesses, including the last 30 to 40 years of the FMC Corporation, the Royalton-Hartland Central Schools, police, fire, and village board minutes. There is also a photograph and postcard collection, information on all local churches, the community choirs, and both the original and digitized church books from the Universalist Church (1841-2015). Christa considers the Universalist Church records and the post cards the gems of the collection.

As for her goals as historian, Christa noted that she wants "to continue preserving and filing pertinent information where it can be found." She continues to work at this goal but adds that she would like some improved and more secure storage for the collection. When we visited her at her office, she showed us her organized files on topics such as village families, obituaries, information on the canal, school yearbooks, and churches. She mentioned that she had learned that there had been a maternity hospital in the village. A member of the family of a nurse who had worked at Middleport's Vinehurst Maternity Hospital brought the nurse's notebook in which the nurse had recorded the names and dates of those she attended who gave birth in this almost forgotten hospital.

As for cemeteries, she has records for the surrounding area cemeteries. Christa mentioned the story of when the village was expanding there was a burial site within the new borders. It was decided that those buried in this local burial site would be moved north to Pearson Road and reinterred in what is the LeValley Cemetery. So, in about 1915, it was determined that those families who wanted their ancestors moved were to pay \$3.00, with an extra 50 cents if they wanted the stone moved as well. Other families may have had their relatives moved to family plots or other cemeteries.

Since 2020, Christa and the Village of Middleport participated in the Hometown Heroes Project. Persons currently in the military or veterans with an honorable discharge who lived in Middleport could have a banner hanging in the village in their honor from Memorial Day to Veterans Day. Each year Christa publishes a booklet with the story of each of the hometown heroes who joined the ranks of those on the banners from the prior years.

The former village historian of 30 years, Anna Wallace, had written a manuscript about the history of Middleport. When Christa found the manuscript in one of the file cabinets in the historian's office, she asked Anna, who was now in a nursing home (and since deceased), if she could help her publish it. Anna agreed. The book, published in 2016, is titled *A Friendly Community: A History of Middleport, New York* by Anna B. Wallace. It can be purchased through Amazon.com.

## Town of Cambria

**Gail Reinbird**, when she completed the historian questionnaire, was in her first year as Town of Cambria historian. She had previously been the deputy historian and an officer in the historical society. We met her, almost two years later, at the Town of Cambria Historical Society and Museum, which had been the Old Town Hall at the intersection of Lower Mountain and Cambria-Wilson Roads. This is where she has her office.

Originally, in 1808, Cambria was the only town in what is now Niagara County. Now, the County is comprised of twelve towns. There is a link to the Town of Cambria Historian on the town's website at <https://www.townofcambria.com/Historian->. The Historical Society is currently working on starting a Facebook page. They and the historian write articles and notices in the Town of Cambria Newsletter, which can be found at <https://www.townofcambria.com/newsletter>.

The number of hours Gail works as town historian varies, but she would guess it is between 5 to 10 hours per week. She receives a stipend from the town and could be reimbursed for expenses. There is one other paid staff person, the deputy historian, Brooke Gentner Morse. Brooke had been the previous historian until she moved from Cambria, and Gail and Brooke then switched positions.

Gail will meet by appointment with those interested in seeing what the historian's office has in its collection. In her office, some of these records include family, person and subject files, organization files, and diaries. Her goals are to restart the historical society after its closure during COVID and have it function again efficiently. She has started to document the artifacts in the Historical Society and to help provide an online presence for the society and historian's office.

When we arrived at the old town hall, Gail gave us a tour of the museum and a history of the town and some of its citizens. Thomas Root was a Methodist deacon and abolitionist. The Root family home provided a stop on the Underground Railroad for those escaping slavery. Root and his wife, Martha, provided them with provisions. Gail mentioned that it is documented that Frederick Douglas spoke three times about slavery in the hamlet of Pekin in the Town of Cambria.



On a different note, Cambria was the birthplace of the famous Sutherland Sisters, who Gail described as something like the Kardashian Sisters of their time. These seven sisters, known for their very long hair, were part of a singing group that started in the early 1880s and continued as they traveled worldwide with Barnum and Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth." Their father, Fletcher, developed and sold hair tonic and other hair related products. With his daughters as his initial source of advertising, these products became very popular. Although they became very wealthy, because of their extravagant lifestyle, most of the sisters died destitute.

Gail considers the gems of the society to be the Native American beadwork items that are on display in the museum as well as the artifacts of the seven Sutherland Sisters.

*Large cutout display of the Seven Sutherland Sisters at the Town of Cambria Historical Society and Museum. Photo by author.*

Before we left the Museum, however, Gail pulled out another treasure. It was a donation of an 1815 copy of the New York State Legislature's Proceedings. It was in excellent condition for being over 200 years old. The Museum is planning to copy some of the book's pages in order to put parts of its content on display.

You may want to visit the Town of Cambria's Old Town Hall and Museum and see many of these items. The president of the Cambria Historical Society is Jim Ellis, and he can be reached by email at [jellis77755@gmail.com](mailto:jellis77755@gmail.com). You can contact Gail by email at [historian@townofcambria.com](mailto:historian@townofcambria.com).

## **Town of Wheatfield**

**Justin Higner** has been the Town of Wheatfield Historian since 2016. We met with him at the Wheatfield Community Center, which is next to the Wheatfield Town Hall. The historian office currently is in the town's Highway Garage and visitors are restricted to the main hall. Justin is looking forward to the town building a new historian's office. At present, appointments are necessary. As historian, Justin works about 8 hours per week and is paid and reimbursed for expenses. On occasion he has had student volunteers to help assist him with his work.

An interesting, active, and informative Facebook page, titled "Town of Wheatfield NY: Our History" can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/441502469273029/>. Here Justin and others post photos and documents related to the history of the town. Justin has made numerous YouTube presentations, such as this one that presents the history of Wheatfield: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7iSdnWRdy8>. He also has done podcasts and radio interviews. Justin mentioned that Wheatfield was the last town to be created in Niagara County. Thus, in 2036 the Town of Wheatfield will be celebrating its bicentennial and Justin has already starting to plan for it.

One thing I noticed, compared to most of the other historians I have visited, is that Justin was one of the younger town historians I met. This made me ask the question: "What made you so interested in history?" His response was that when he was 9 years old, he saw a documentary on the Titanic. It instilled in him his love of history and of ships. I should add that besides being a historian, Justin is an artist who makes ship sculptures out of reclaimed materials.

When asked of the records and items in the historian's collection, he responded that he had "15 large newspaper albums, several file cabinets of older news clippings from 1948 on, special files on subjects such as NCCC [Niagara County Community College] and Bell Aerospace....and over 4000 assessment cards and accompanying photographs." He has "an open call for additional paper, digital, and photographic documentation from the public." He conducts interviews and is preparing a book on the history of the town, which he plans to have ready for the 2036 bicentennial. He considers the assessment cards the gems. A YouTube video of a presentation by Justin (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjZwGvPGBr>) entitled *History at Home: Tax Assessments and Photos as a Reference* depicts photos of older homes and other buildings in Wheatfield (including the parked automobiles of the time). Assessment cards with photos can help trace the genealogy of a home or building.

An additional gem in the Wheatfield collection is the Loveland collection of documents. Loveland, a farmer, was the supervisor of the town in the 1870s. His documents include eight years of correspondence, political writings and opinions, letters and postcards.

One famous building that Justin mentioned was a famous Restaurant and Nightclub that once stood on River Road



*Ted Ra Restaurant and Nightclub, built c. 1930*

*Photo courtesy of Historian's Archives*

on the Wheatfield and Niagara Falls line. The Ted Ra Nightclub welcomed celebrities, politicians, mafia men, "and many others for great music and dancing under the stars...." It was built c. 1930 and demolished in 1973 after being damaged by fire. Among those the Ted Ra hosted (even privately), were Marilyn Monroe, Joe DiMaggio, and others, such as Duke Ellington.

When asked about his goals for the next four years, Justin wrote that he wanted to complete the digital documentation of the items in the historian collection. He also wanted improved outreach programs and presentations, to do more interviews, and to complete his book on the town by 2030. He added that he maintains several Civil War graves and “wants to raise awareness, through media, of our past.” He seems on his way to meeting these goals. Justin can be reached by email at [justinh@wheatfield.ny.us](mailto:justinh@wheatfield.ny.us).

Besides being Wheatfield’s Town Historian, Justin is also on the board of the neighboring Historical Society of the North German Settlements of Western New York (Das Haus, Einhaus, und Der Stall Museum). In the mid-1800s, about 800 German Lutherans, mostly from Prussia, settled in this area. It is in the Niagara County hamlet of Bergholz, named for the town these immigrants left in Prussia. Many descendants from these families still live in the area today. For more information, go to <https://dashauseum.org/>

## **Town of Pendleton**

**Carissa Smith** has been the historian of the Town of Pendleton for about three years. At the time she completed the historian questionnaire, she had been historian for one year, and the number of hours she worked at the job varied. Although paid for her role as historian, she is not reimbursed for expenses. She had no set hours when the public can view the historian’s records. Advance notice or appointments are required. She can be reached at [CSmith@Pendletonny.us](mailto:CSmith@Pendletonny.us). Carissa wants visitors to know that there are no stupid question, so she looks forward to answering any question someone may have about the town’s history.

There are many records and items in the historian’s collection. Some of these include vintage maps, photographs, archival books, and articles from past town historians. She has a small box filled with local goods. She plans on investing in a safe, and adding to the collection herself. Of the gems of the collection, she notes the book of the Barns of Pendleton is unique. Also, there is the bicentennial map from 1976 and photographs of significant townspeople.

Carissa’s goals as historian were to include a webpage on the official Pendleton website “so people can soak in the history;” displays at local government centers and at the town hall “that would allow people to view local history;” occasional guest speakers; local tours around the canal with a stop at Uncle Gs’s Ice Cream; and a blog chronicling the Pendleton area. She noted that “part of [her] family has lived in Pendleton for over six generation” and they attended St. Paul’s and Good Shepherd Church.

## **City of Niagara Falls**

**Elaine Timm** has been the historian for the City of Niagara Falls for about 7 years. She also is active with the Historical Society of the North German Settlements of Western New York. Although not paid, and not reimbursed for expenses, she does spend on average at least an hour a week as the municipality’s historian. In addition, she does meet with the other Niagara County historians about once a month.

Elaine notes that the Local History Department of the Niagara Falls Public Library contains much of the history of the City of Niagara Falls. Their website is <https://www.niagarafallspublib.org/local-history-department.html>. You can reach Elaine by email at [Etimm01@aol.com](mailto:Etimm01@aol.com).

## **Other Stops Along the Way**

We made three other stops along the way. In Lockport, at 215 Niagara Street, we stopped at the Niagara History Center – home to the **Niagara County Historical Society**. See: <https://niagarahistory.org/>. After buying a book on Niagara County’s Bicentennial of 2008, we went up the stairs to arrive at the **Niagara County Genealogical Society Library**. See: <https://niagaragenealogy.org/>. Sylvia Bryan was the volunteer there that day. I remembered that a leaf from my family tree had moved from Buffalo to Wilson, in Niagara County. Sylvia helped me find information on Wilson. There I was able to find a picture of Okie’s Pharmacy, owned by this distant cousin. Success!

We then continued to the **Lockport Library** at 23 East Avenue. There we visited the Local History Room. See: <https://lockportlibrary.org/history-lockport-ny.php>. Here you can find resources on microfilm, online, and in print, such as local newspapers, school yearbooks, and U.S. and New York State censuses for Niagara County. This was our last stop on this very interesting glimpse of Niagara County history.

