

Orleans County: Its Historians and Treasures

Orleans County is the focus of this issue's Historian Project article. It is the northeastern most county of our eight Western New York counties. Monroe County is on its eastern border, Niagara County on its western border, Genesee County to its south, and Lake Ontario to its north. It was formed from Genesee County by an Act of the New York State Legislature on November 12, 1824.

Orleans County is made up of ten townships: Albion, Barre, Carlton, Clarendon, Gaines, Kendall, Murray, Ridgeway, Shelby, and Yates; and four villages: Albion (the county seat), Holley, Lyndonville, and Medina. Only seven of the Orleans townships were part of the Holland Land Company Purchase.

The three easternmost townships—Clarendon, Murray, and Kendall—were formed from the 100,000-acre tract, the so-called "Connecticut Tract," which belonged in the early years of settlement to the State of Connecticut and to an English investor, Sir William Pulteney. The 100,000-acre tract included land to the south, not in Orleans County, as well as what became the townships of Clarendon, Murray, and Kendall.¹

Historians from six towns and two villages responded to our questionnaire. At the time they responded, they had been serving as town or village historian from almost 3 years, to over 40 years, and worked varied hours ranging from 2 to 20 hours. They all received a modest stipend for their work.

In addition, two county historians participated: Matt Ballard, who was moving from Orleans County and leaving his position of five years as county historian, and Catherine Cooper, who replaced him as county historian, after having served as the historian of the Town of Ridgeway for nine years. Both were paid and worked 20 hours a week.

In response to our question about county gems, Matt Ballard described three collections as "gems." The first is the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Collection. He notes that this is "an extensive collection of records/resources pertaining to St. Mary's Assumption Roman Catholic Parish (Polish) in Albion." The second gem is the Bogue Home for Dependent Children Collection. This is a collection of resources relating to the orphanage created by Virgil and Alice Bogue in Albion, with funds from Alice's will.² The third collection is that belonging to the Orleans County Poor House. It contains the ledgers relating to inmates at the County Poor House.

As for his goals as historian, Matt responded that they were to digitize the important collections and make them available online. In addition, "another major goal was to catalog and organize the collections using an open source solution such as *CollectiveAccess* to make resources discoverable." During his time as historian, Matt wrote many articles about people, places, and events in Orleans County. These can be found in the SUNY Digital Repository by entering "Orleans" in the search bar at <https://dSPACE.sunyconnect.suny.edu/>.

¹Gibson, Irene M., *Historic Sites in Orleans County, New York*, (Albion, N.Y.: Orleans Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution and Orleans County Historical Association, 1979).

²For more information on the Virgil Bogue Home for Dependent Children, see https://dSPACE.sunyconnect.suny.edu/bitstream/handle/1951/80241/pioneer_record/74/fulltext%20%281%29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Catherine Cooper was still new to the role of County Historian when she completed our questionnaire, but she brought her years of experience as a town historian to the job. As county gems she listed three: an 1832 map of Albion, pioneer records, and the original record of an appeal from the case of Charles Frederick Stielow, a German immigrant, who was accused of the double murder of his neighbors, a farmer and his housekeeper. The 1915 murders occurred in West Shelby in Orleans County. The case involved false confessions, false accusations, misleading forensic evidence, official misconduct, a murder conviction and sentencing to death by electrocution, eleventh-hour stays of execution, new evidence and confessions, and finally, an exoneration and full pardon by New York Governor Whitman.³ Having the original court transcripts of such a publicized case with so many twists and turns in the historian collection is truly amazing.



The Reading Room at the Orleans County Department of History, 34 E Park Street, Albion. Photo by MCO Tidwell.

Catherine stated that her initial goals were to finish moving the county's collection upstairs from the basement to its new office space, and then unpacking and sorting it, and creating finding aids. From her new and brighter offices, she intends to expand public presence through the county website and historian's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/orleanscountyhistorian/>). In order to share the history of the area, Catherine writes two columns a month for the *Orleans Hub*, an online news site (<https://orleanshub.com/local-history/>).

Catherine and the other historians of Orleans County meet to discuss projects, plans, and new acquisitions. The public can view the County's collection at the reading room at the Orleans County Department of History, where Catherine has her office. The regular hours are on Mondays and Wednesdays 10:00–12:00 and 1:00–4:00, but she is willing to be flexible for the researcher. She does require advance notice or an appointment and the use of pencils. No food or drink is allowed in the reading room. You can view information about Orleans County and click on links to areas of interest by going to the historian section of the county website at <https://orleanscountyny.com/departments/historian.php>.

My husband and I drove to Albion to visit Catherine in person and to visit the new space for the County's Department of History. We think it will be a great place for historians and family historians alike to study and learn about the history of Orleans County and any ancestors they might have from the area. Catherine walked us through the offices and showed us some of the treasures that were in the boxes she was unpacking and organizing. She seemed especially proud of the very large *New Century Atlas for Orleans County, 1913*, which lists the residences and farms, and gives descriptions of the buildings and businesses from that time period. This is just one of the many unique items that you can find there.

Town of Ridgeway history can be found at <https://townridgeway.org/ridgeway-history/> as well as Catherine Cooper's Town of Ridgeway Year End Reviews for 2013 to 2020.

Marsha Defilippis has been the **Village of Holley** Historian and the **Town of Murray** Historian for about 42 years. She is also the Director of the Murray-Holley Historical Society Museum, which is housed in a restored 1907 railroad depot. Luckily, she has a few volunteers to help with the work. Her office is in her home, so when guests want to use her sources, she is willing to be there to accommodate them. She considers local books, maps, and history the gems of the collection. Her goals are to "write another book or two" and to find grants to fund projects.

Village of Lyndonville Historian, Teri Woodworth, wears many hats. Besides being Village Historian for the last 9 years, she is also the Village Clerk, Treasurer, and Registrar. In 1903, the village incorporated and

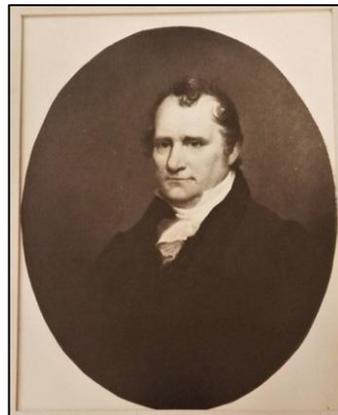
³See <https://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/casedetailpre1989.aspx?caseid=312> for more details about the Stielow case.

separated from the Town of Yates, even though it is completely within its borders. For more about Lyndonville, see <http://www.villageoflyndonville.com/about.html>. Teri considers the birth and death certificates her village's gems. They are located at the Village Hall and are mostly originals with some copies. There are also newspaper articles in the village collection.

Town of Gaines Historian, Adrienne Kirby, has held this position for over three years. When asked what she would consider a "gem" in the town's collection, she wrote that in 1910, there was a fire in the town offices. So, the fact that there are still town minutes from the Village of Gaines from the 1830s "is pretty amazing." Adrienne periodically posts articles on the historian page of the town's website, which can be found at <https://www.townofgaines.org/historian/>. She notes on the website that a book by a former historian, Delia Robinson, entitled *Historic Gaines 1809-1984*, provides an excellent overview of the town's history, including photographs and chapters on each town community. It can be borrowed through the Nioga Library System. When asked about her goals for the next four years, she responded that her "mission as historian is to write and publish through any means possible."

Town of Carlton Historian, Lysbeth A. Hoffman, who had served for 41 years, died on February 18, 2021. According to her obituary, she had been a 47-year member of the Orleans Chapter of the DAR and was one of the founding members of the Orleans County Historical Society. We send our sympathy to her family and all who knew and worked with this dedicated historian. To learn about the history of the Town of Carlton, you can visit <https://townofcarlton.org/town-history/>.

Town of Yates Historian, Dawn Metty, has been in her historian position for over 5 years. She is also the town's Deputy Clerk. She describes the gems of the town's historical collection as their military uniforms and the family history information from several families in town. The collection, which is stored in the historian's office, also includes newspaper clippings and old newspapers, postcards of the town, and some census records written on index cards. Her goals are to get better shelving and to find a better way of preserving items. On our trip to Orleans County, we visited Dawn at the Town Hall. Here we learned that Yates was originally named Northton, but after a few months, the name was changed to Yates, after Joseph Yates, the sixth Governor of New York. A summary of the town's history can be found on the town's website at <https://townofyates.org/history-town-yates-ny.php>, where you can also see some historic photos and maps. If you have any questions or want to make an appointment with the Town Historian, Dawn can be contacted through the website.



The Honorable Joseph Yates (1768-1837) 6th Governor of New York State after whom the Town of Yates was named.

Town of Albion Historian, Ian Mowatt, has been the town historian for over 5 years. He suggested going to the Looking Back at Albion NY Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/albion.ny.history>) to learn more about the history of Albion. He notes on the town website at <http://www.townofalbion.com/historian.html> that the Town Historian "collects data, records, and photographs of historically important past and present events" and for genealogical questions, he lists some suggestions to initially retrieve answers.

While driving throughout the area, we saw many cobblestone buildings. On Ridge Road (Rte. 104) near the intersection of Oak Orchard Road (Rte. 98) in the hamlet of Childs in the Town of Gaines, we stopped at the Cobblestone District, a National Historic Landmark. It consists of three buildings: the Cobblestone Church (the Childs Universalist Church), its parsonage (the Ward House), and the Cobblestone School House.⁴ The use of cobblestone masonry was popular in this area of upstate New York between 1825 and 1860. Glaciated stone (fieldstone) found on the land and lake-washed cobblestone found along the beach of Lake Ontario, were sorted by size, and used to decorate the exterior masonry walls of buildings. This labor-

⁴See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cobblestone_Historic_District for more information about the Cobblestone District National Historic Landmark.

intensive work meant it was usually the wealthy who could afford them. The Cobblestone Museum notes that the over 900 cobblestone buildings in New York State represent almost 90% of all cobblestone buildings in the United States.⁵ Perhaps your ancestors lived, prayed, or went to school in one.

Before leaving Orleans County, we wanted to visit the Local History and Genealogy Room at the Hoag Library in Albion. At the desk in this room, we met Dee Robinson, Local History Librarian, who we learned had been the former Gaines Historian for 30 years. She was the person who wrote *Historic Gaines 1809–1984* mentioned above by the current Town of Gaines Historian. Dee was a wealth of information and gave us a tour of much of what is housed in this section of the library. There are Albion High School Yearbooks from 1903 to present. Oral histories are available from interviews made in 1970 with local citizens on such topics as life on a canal boat, trolley rides, drying apples, and other diverse topics. She told us about Caroline Phipps who wanted to open a school of higher learning for women, which she did when she opened the Phipps Union Female Seminary in Albion in 1833. It was the second school of higher learning for females in the United States.



Gaines District No 5 School House (1849). Photo by MCO Tidwell.



Flag of U.S. Colored Troop 26 (New York). Photo by MCO Tidwell.

Another fascinating treasure housed here is the United States Colored Troops flag for the 26th Regiment, Infantry. The 26th was one of three colored regiments from New York State during the Civil War. This rare flag has thirty-five stars; the thirty-fifth was for West Virginia, which broke away from Virginia and remained with the Union.⁶ The connection of this flag to Orleans County is, as noted by Dee, that Henry F. Hawkins, a black man of Medina, New York, was enlisted in the 26th and was a First Sergeant when he left. Charles H. Mattison, a white man of Barre, New York, enlisted in the 151st Infantry, was promoted twice, and then was transferred to the 26th USCT.

Whether your ancestors were from Orleans County or not, this county and its ten towns, four villages, and hamlets can provide much of interest to see and learn. This article provides just a hint of what Orleans has to offer. Besides what I've written here, there are other towns and villages to explore and historical societies and libraries to visit. You'll likely find that it's well worth a drive. I know I plan to go back.

Marie-Cecile O. Tidwell, PhD, a member since 2014, is a Family Life Member and Vice-President of WNYGS. As chair of the WNY Historian Project, she developed a questionnaire to reach out to the village, town, city, and county historians across the eight counties of WNY. The goal was to learn about their role and job as historian and about the history and historic treasures of their municipalities. As a contributing editor to the *Genealogist*, she is sharing what we have learned from these dedicated historians. Marie is a member of several local, state, and national genealogical organizations.

⁵For more information about the Cobblestone Museum and visiting the buildings, see <https://www.cobblestonemuseum.org/>.

⁶To learn more about the battle unit details of the 26th Regiment, see <https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battle-units-detail.htm?battleUnitCode=UUS0026RI00C>. You can find hints on how to find ancestors in the Colored Troops, including links to other sites, at *FamilySearch*: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/26th_Regiment,_United_States_Colored_Infantry. Additional information can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/26th_United_States_Colored_Infantry_Regiment.