



The Historians of Erie County

This year, 2021, Erie County is celebrating its bicentennial. As the County looks back over the past 200 years to its creation and remembers its rich heritage, it also is looking forward to its future. Wherever it leads, we can be sure that the County’s historians will record and preserve its future as they have its past. Below we will focus on the historians of Erie County who participated in the Historian Project. After a short description of the County, we will include information about the work done by these county historians and about their local historical collections and “gems” that we learned of from their responses to our questionnaire.

Erie County

Erie County is named for the Erie tribe of Native Americans who lived in the region until the mid-17th century. It was created in 1821 from a portion of a larger Niagara County. In 1808, Niagara County itself was created from Genesee County. Genesee County, established in 1802, was the original Western New York portion of the Holland Land Company Purchase. As the population of the region grew, new counties were partitioned from the original Genesee County and from the other counties created from it. These divisions are the current eight counties of Western New York.

Today, there are three cities and twenty-five towns in Erie County, as well as two tribal reservations. Erie County is bordered on the north by Niagara County and on its southern border by Cattaraugus County and a small portion of Chautauqua County. Genesee and Wyoming Counties are on its eastern border. To its west is Lake Erie and along its northwest border, the Niagara River. The County seat is located in Buffalo.

Historian Project – Erie County

Thirteen historians from Erie County participated in the Western New York Historian Project. They represent seventeen municipalities, including towns, villages, and the county itself. Also included are responses from John W. Percy, Historian Emeritus from the Town of Tonawanda, who served as a village and town historian for forty-five years. He is one of the longest-serving historians from Erie County, as well as from all of Western New York.

The work of many of these Erie County historians, like the work of many other historians across Western New York, is often accomplished without much volunteer support. Only 58% of these Erie County historians reported having volunteer support with their work. The other 42% do not. Often this volunteer help comes from members of local historical societies and museums.

Erie County's Historical Collections and "Gems"

We wanted to hear from the historians about the items and records in their local historical collections. In addition, we wanted to know which items these historians considered their "gems."

Town of Aurora and Village of East Aurora Historian, Robert Goller, pointed out that a summary of the items contained in their collection can be accessed at their website at <http://townofaurora.com/departments/historian/whats-archives>. Some of the items include obituary files, marriage and cemetery records, maps, photographs, scrapbooks, East Aurora High School yearbooks from the 1880s to 1990s, and items related to the Roycroft, civic clubs, and businesses. As "gems" he considers the scrapbook and diary collection of East Aurora residents, original visitor logs to the Globe Hotel dating back to the 1800s, and digitized and searchable versions of local newspapers. Their Facebook page can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/AuroraTownHistorian>.

Town and Village of Alden Historian, Karen Muchow, describes some of the historic items of her town: original Civil War letters, journals, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and photographs. Its "gems" are Samuel Young's Civil War letters, two volumes of Dr. Tyler's wife's journals, and information on Alden's Black Water Baths. Alden's Black Water was discovered in 1891 and was used for its medicinal properties until the mid-1960s. Due to the popularity of the Black Water Baths, Alden became a popular resort town during this era.



Black Water Baths Display at the Alden Historical Society Museum
Photo by M.C.O. Tidwell

Trains and buses brought health-minded tourists to the many new hotels, boarding houses, restaurants, and businesses that serviced the Black Water Baths. You can find many interesting and informative articles on the town's history, written by Muchow and others, for the Alden Historical Society Newsletter, *The Grannytown Gazette*, at <https://aldenhistoricalsociety.org>. The Society also has a Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/AldenHistoricalSociety>.

Town of Brant Historian, Patty Friend, points out that the Town website at <https://www.brantny.com/Historical.php> has a section on the Brant-Farnham Historical Society. As for the "gems" in the Town's collection, it seems to be its photographs. She says "the school photos seem to be the most popular with our visitors. Also popular are the Strawberry Festival photos, booklets and various items related to the festivals." One of her next goals is "to prepare a better listing of our veterans with photos when possible." She plans to continue encouraging people "to share photos and stories." After all, isn't that how history and family histories are preserved?

Town and Village of North Collins Historian, Georgianne Bowman, considers their Civil War items to be their "gems." These original Civil War records can be found at the North Collins Historical Society Museum and some of them are now digitized. There are over 800 records of Southern Erie County soldiers from the Civil War (including North Collins, Collins, Brant, Concord, Eden, Evans, and Gowanda). Paper copies can be found at the Museum and digital copies through the Town Historian. The Society also has access to online census records, some old assessors' books, and a marriage record book from the 1840s. Tax records are at the assessor's

office and birth and death records are with the Town Clerk. The Town website, <http://www.northcollinsny.org/>, lists some town history and historian contact information.

Town of Grand Island Historian, Jodi Robinson, has been Town Historian for over 7 years, but in August of 2020 she was able to move into her dedicated office space. Robinson has been setting up her new office space with a goal of making it organized and “shipshape.” Not all historians are as fortunate to be working out of a dedicated office space. She inherited a collection from an at-home historian. At the time she completed our questionnaire, nothing in her collection was online, yet. The collection Jodi manages includes mostly photos and documents, and maps. As for her “gems,” she says it is a set of maps from the early 1800s through the late 1950s. To visit the Grand Island Historical Society online and to read a history of Grand Island, you can go to <http://isledegrande.com/gihist.htm>

Town of Cheektowaga Historian, Richard Rusiniak, says he “has a lofty goal of starting a larger museum” to hold the Town’s collection. Currently, the Cheektowaga Historical Association and Museum sits in front of the Cheektowaga Senior Center on Broadway. Cheektowaga had been a hunting ground for the Seneca Nation. The Town’s name comes from a word in the Erie-Seneca language meaning “the place of the crabapple tree.” When asked what he considers one of the Town’s “gems,” Rusiniak responded: the Curtiss-Wright Airflight Plant in Cheektowaga. It was built in 1940 and produced planes until 1946. He added: “We won the war because of the people who built those planes.” For more information on Cheektowaga’s history, go to the Museum’s blog at <https://cheektowagahistorydotorg.wordpress.com/> and to its Facebook page which can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/cheektowagahistoricalassociation/>.



Photo of Curtiss-Wright Airflight Plant #2 in Cheektowaga, circa 1940s
Courtesy of the Cheektowaga Historical Association and Museum

Town of West Seneca historian, James Pace, notes that West Seneca’s collection consists of expansive records, photos, and original documents. These all are housed in the West Seneca Historical Society Museum along with numerous artifacts. The Society has a website that can be found at www.westsenecahistory.com, a Facebook group, which can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/208095474664/>, and a newsletter mailed quarterly. As for what he considers the Town’s historic “gems,” Pace lists the Native American relics, the Ebenezer Society items, historic firearms, and historic photographs from the past 160 years. In addition, he lists their museum building itself, the “Community of True Inspiration Residence,” named after

the Ebenezer community that came to America from Germany in the 1840s. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Village of Kenmore Historian, Ed Adamczyk, has served in this capacity for almost two decades. In 2015 he took over as **Town of Tonawanda** Historian with the retirement of John Percy. He notes that the Town's collection is held by the Tonawanda-Kenmore Historical Society whose website can be found at <https://kentonhistory.org/>. The Society's Museum has three resource rooms that include (1) documents and photographs, (2) objects and artifacts, and (3) textiles. There are also agricultural equipment and farm tools from the area's agricultural past. The Museum is housed in one of the oldest structures in the KenTon area, St. Peter's (German) Evangelical Church, which was erected in 1849. The old church cemetery surrounds the church. Therefore, the area's early pioneers will always be nearby to encircle the Museum and its visitors. Their Facebook page can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/TKhistoricalsociety>.



St. Peter's (German) Evangelical Church and Cemetery. Photo courtesy of the Tonawanda-Kenmore Historical Society.

Town of Elma Historian, Frank Maciejewski, has been the Town's historian for five years. You can learn much about Elma's history from the Elma Historical Society's website, which can be accessed at <https://www.elmanyhistory.com/>. The Society's Museum complex consists of the Hurd House (built for an early town family in 1846), the Barn (filled with artifacts related to farming, the early Bleek Post Office, and an Elma-made carriage and wagon), and the Hurd and Bridge 1846 Sawmill (Maciejewski was one of the designers and builders of its recent restoration). Besides Indian artifacts from the area's original settlers and charming antiques and furnishings, the Hurd House also boasts a lovely research library for genealogy of the Town's early families and history, with many original and unique records. Information about the genealogy research library can be found online at <https://www.elmanyhistory.com/Research-Library/>. Here you can find a link to 1880 maps of Elma at <https://archive.org/details/1880-maps-of-elma-ny> and a link to the 1939 history of the Elma Cemetery that includes a catalog of lot owners and deceased persons, 1853–1939 at <https://www.elmanyhistory.com/gallery/1939%20Elma%20Cemetery%20Data.pdf>.



Genealogy Room at the Elma Historical Society Museum – Hurd House. Painting above mantel is of Allen Hurd, 21, who died at the Battle of Gettysburg. Photo by M.C.O. Tidwell

Information about the genealogy research library can be found online at <https://www.elmanyhistory.com/Research-Library/>. Here you can find a link to 1880 maps of Elma at <https://archive.org/details/1880-maps-of-elma-ny> and a link to the 1939 history of the Elma Cemetery that includes a catalog of lot owners and deceased persons, 1853–1939 at <https://www.elmanyhistory.com/gallery/1939%20Elma%20Cemetery%20Data.pdf>.

Town of Newstead Historian, Donald Holmes, indicates that there are two types of files in the Town of Newstead collection, Family Files and Community Files. He has goals to increase traffic into the office and improve the use of the family files and system of file organization. The Newstead Historical Society has two museums, the Rich Twinn Octagon House and the Knight Sutton Museum, both in the Village of Akron. These house the Village and Town artifacts. The

Historical Society has a website and newsletters at <http://www.newsteadhistoricalsociety.org/>. In addition, they have a Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/newsteadhistoricalsociety>. Mr. Holmes is a member of the Facebook group, “Snippets of Your Town/Village Historian,” found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/400753297267361>.

Town of Concord and Village of Springville Historian, David C. Batterson, considers all of the items in their collection “gems.” These include both printed and digital *Springville Journal* newspapers from 1867 to the present; a collection of large World War I and II posters; school records and yearbooks; family records and bibles; cemetery, church and Civil War records; as well as town tax records, maps and atlases; and an extensive local photograph collection. In addition to being Town and Village Historian, Batterson is also the Vice-President of the Concord Historical Society which has five properties: Lucy Bensley (Genealogy) Center, Warner Museum, Concord Mercantile (1890 General Store), Carriage House, and Heritage Building (with a life-size Springville Main Street circa 1920-1960). Here, at Schuster Motor Car Co., Springville’s George Schuster will take you on his 1908—around the world—New York to Paris Race, which he won while driving a Buffalo built 1907 Thomas Flyer. You can learn about all these buildings at <https://www.chs14141.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/LucyBensleyCenter/>. Using the QR Code activated audio tours, visiting these properties would provide an enjoyable and interesting day trip into history.

Doug Kohler is the **Erie County** Historian. He notes that the County Historian’s Office (as several historian offices across WNY) does not house a historical collection per se. In the past, when the position of County Historian was created, the historian was also the Director of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society and “so...in a sense...that was its collection.” In the 1980s, this dual relationship ceased, but the collection remained in the Historical Society’s buildings (now called the Buffalo History Museum). Kohler notes that an excellent working relationship exists between the Historian and the Museum. If you go to the Museum’s website buffalohistory.org, you can browse some of what is in its library and artifact collections by clicking on “Museum Collections” under the “Research and Learn” tab. Kohler, during this very difficult year, has been exceedingly busy preparing for the Erie County’s bicentennial celebration.

Conclusion

The bicentennial celebration of Erie County continues until April 2, 2022. Therefore, there is still time to use the Erie County Heritage Passport. See: <https://www3.erie.gov/ec200/erie-county-heritage-passport>. It can be stamped when you use it to guide you to the historical societies and museums across Erie County. At each of your stops, you can learn more about Erie County’s rich and varied 200-year history. I hope that I was able to shine a light on some of it by pointing out what these thirteen historians who participated in the Historian Project had to say about what had been collected, recorded, and preserved by generations of dedicated historians. They all have been keeping Erie County’s history alive for future generations. Enjoy your travels!

ANNOUNCEMENT!

WNYGS is now offering a new Junior Membership for those 18 and younger for only \$10.00/year (electronic *JOURNAL* only). A perfect gift for your child or grandchild. Contact our registrar at registrar@wnygs.org for details.