

HISTORIC “GEMS” OF GENESEE COUNTY

In the December 2020 *JOURNAL* article about the WNYGS Historian Project, I described the role of a town historian through the words of Jeanne Mest, the Town Historian of Sheldon in Wyoming County. She described many of the “gems” that the Town of Sheldon and its Historical Society have in their holdings. In this article we will explore items and records of Genesee County based on information shared by its historians. Three historians from Genesee County completed our Historian Project Questionnaire and wrote about what they considered the “gems” from their collections. Each of these historians represents a different type of municipality within the county: (1) the overall county itself, (2) a city, and (3) a town within the county.

GENESEE COUNTY

Genesee County was formed in 1802 and originally encompassed all of Western New York. Its name is derived from the Seneca Native American word for “beautiful valley.” In the years between 1806 and 1841, as the population of Western New York grew, Genesee County eventually was divided into the eight counties of Western New York. The current Genesee County, situated on the eastern side of Western New York, is bordered by Orleans County to its north and Wyoming County to its south. It currently includes 13 towns, one city (the City of Batavia which is the County seat), and six incorporated villages.

Michael Eula, LL.M., PhD, has been the Genesee County Historian for over six years. He is also the County’s Records Management Officer. He has built on the legacy of the former County Historian and Records Management Officer, Susan L. Conklin, and the previous historians before her. The County’s History Department, Research Library, and Records Management Office are all located at County Building 2, 3837 West Main Street Road in Batavia, 14020.

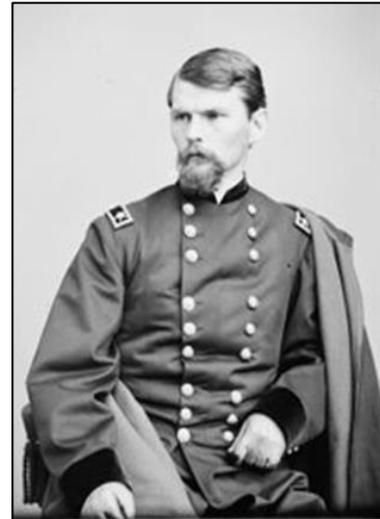
The County’s website (<https://www.co.genesee.ny.us/departments/history/>) contains an abundant amount of information including a link to the History Department Collection (<https://www.co.genesee.ny.us/departments/history/collections.php>).

The collection page provides an excellent, extensive listing of the records and documents in the collection’s internal files and those county files that can be searched or examined elsewhere via outside sources. This collection provides a wealth of information about the items, including geographic location, historical information, description and purpose of the record, and other information depending on the type of record. The listings are too numerous to catalog here in this article. However, by using the link above, you will be able to review such items as military records, naturalization records, marriages and

divorces, obituaries, newspaper items, and many other topics. They all are well worth a browse or deeper examination.

At <https://www.co.genesee.ny.us/departments/history/links.php> you can find links that take you to other sources of information, such as Fulton History (<https://fultonhistory.com/>), where you can search the county's eight 19th century newspapers, which are identified in the link. There is also another helpful link on how to maneuver successfully through Fulton History's newspapers.

As for what he considers the “gems” of this collection, Dr. Eula chose the personal papers of General Emory Upton. Born in Batavia in 1839, Upton attended West Point and was an army officer during the Civil War. He quickly went up the ranks. He committed suicide in 1881 at the age of 41, perhaps despondent over the death of his young wife. There is a statue of General Upton at the Memorial for War Veterans in the center of the City of Batavia at Main and Ellicott Streets. The memorial is commonly known as the Upton Monument.¹



*Gen. Emory Upton of N.Y.
Civil War photographs, 1861–1865
Library of Congress*

I was wondering why the papers of General Upton were selected by the County Historian as the one “gem” selected out of all Genesee County's historic items, but then I read the 25-page manuscript of a presentation titled *Emory Upton and the Formation of Modern America*, given by Dr. Eula on the life of General Upton (http://cms.revize.com/revize/geneseecountynew/docs/History/Emory_Upton_and_the_Formation_of_Modern_America.pdf).

In the “Introduction” on page 4, he states:

Upton was more than a West Point graduate and a Civil War hero. He was more than an accomplished scholar who met a sad end. He was instead a clear product of his historical moment: the impact of industrialization on rural farm families; the place of the military in modern American life; the relationship between an embryonic American empire and traditional American ideas concerning democratic self-rule; the ritualization of love, marriage, and intimate friendship in middle class Victorian America; the dynamic of class relations in modern American life; the development of the professions in the nineteenth century; the influence of elite institutions such as West Point; the complicated interaction of race and ethnic relations in America; and the psychological consequences of modern warfare on those participating in it. An examination of the life of Emory Upton is not only an inherently fascinating story; it is also an intriguing microcosm of a rapidly changing America at a pivotal time in its history. To see the America of his day is to see the America of our own day.

¹For additional information see *Find a Grave*, database and images (<https://www.findagrave.com> : accessed 15 March 2021), memorial page for Emory Upton (27 Aug 1839–14 Mar 1881), Find a Grave Memorial no. 1052, citing Fort Hill Cemetery, Auburn, Cayuga County, New York; Maintained by Find A Grave.

The link to the listing and location of the county files about General Upton can be found at <https://www.co.genesee.ny.us/departments/history/collections.php>. Click on “Genealogy Files and Collections,” then on “Genealogy Collection,” and then scroll to the following entry (which gives a good example of the detail in the description of the records in the collection):

UPTON FAMILY

General Emory Upton (b. 1839 – d. 1881)

Military tactician, army officer during the Civil War,
author of *Military Policy of the United States*,
(Father - Daniel - farmer) - Batavia

Collection ID: Manuscript Box 5

Collection Location: 5A.5

Collection Volume: 1 Cubic Feet

Date Range: 1819–1907

Contains: Collection of published books on the Upton family, military reference, calling card collection, scrapbook of newspaper articles and hand-written notes.

Information on General Upton can be found by selecting Military → Civil War → Upton.

CW#11.4 –General Upton’s Letters 1858–1881

Arranged: Chronologically

Includes: Collection of photocopies of handwritten correspondence

Size: 3” Notebook

General Upton can also be found in the Batavia section under “Genesee County Prominent Citizens” at https://www.co.genesee.ny.us/departments/history/genesee_county_prominent_citizens.php.

CITY OF BATAVIA

In 1801 Batavia was founded by Joseph Ellicott, the resident agent of the Holland Land Company, as the home of the local Holland Land Company office. It is located in the center of Genesee County. As Batavia grew, it changed to an incorporated village in 1823, and became a city in 1915. It is known as “the birthplace of Western New York.”



*Holland Land Office Museum, City of Batavia, N.Y.
circa mid 20th century
photo from Library of Congress*

Larry Barnes has been the Historian of the City of Batavia for over 13 years. He notes that there is large collection of photos, which have been digitized, and a large collection of local newspapers on microfilm. He considers these newspapers the historic “gems” of the city. Three repositories house most of these and the other historic Batavia items:

1. The County’s History Office (as noted above under Genesee County) is located in County Building #2 at 3837 West Main Street Road in Batavia. It houses a large collection of records, documents, and other items.
2. The Richmond Memorial Library, located at 19 Ross Street, has a local history section and many of the historic local newspapers can be accessed on microfilm or online. See: <https://www.batavialibrary.org/localhistory>
3. The Holland Land Office Museum was originally the second office of the Holland Land Company in Batavia. It is located at 131 Main Street in the City and has many historical artifacts. See: <http://hollandlandoffice.com/>

Larry Barnes also notes that the city’s website includes a section devoted to city history. This can be found at <https://www.batavianewyork.com/about-us/pages/history-of-batavia>.

In addition, that page provides a listing of “Selected City Historian Monographs.” Some of the topics include: *The Brisbanes of Batavia*, *Batavia’s Trolleys*, *Bicycles Built by the Cooley Brothers*, and *A Tale of Two Cities* about Batavia, New York, and Batavia, Illinois.

The city’s website also links to a digitization of the book authored by Mr. Barnes titled *The History of Batavia: 1801–2015*. It is a look at the city decade-by-decade, starting with an overview of the area prior to 1801, and concluding with a chapter that looks to the future post-2015 (<https://www.batavianewyork.com/about-us/pages/book-online-the-history-of-batavia-1801-2015>).

TOWN OF ALABAMA

The Town of Alabama is in the northwest section of Genesee County. Joseph Cassidy, who has been the town historian for the past 13 years, said that the town was founded in 1826 and named Gerryville. The name was changed two years later to “Alabama,” which is a Native American word that means “here we rest.”

As a historian, he considers the diaries that are in the town’s historical collection its treasures. These diaries often yield information about the town and its residents not found in other sources. The diary of Nathaniel Fenner tells of Nathaniel’s search for word of his soldier son Irwin’s fate during the Civil War. The result of this lengthy search, which lasted several months and is described in the diary, was that Irwin was killed at the Battle of Cold Harbor in Virginia.

The diaries of Mary and Margaret Nichol are from the 1850s and 1860s when they were young women in the town’s Hamlet of Wheatville. In their diaries, they write about the schools, merchants, businesses, and town residents as well as national and home-town events. They describe the circus that came to town, and they provide their recollections of the Lincoln-Douglas debates and those who came to town in search of support for their presidential candidate. When a member of the Ramsdell family, which was a Mayflower family, came to town in search of the date of death and burial location of an ancestor who lived in the Town of Alabama, there seemed to be no record. Luckily, one of the Nichol

sisters mentioned in her diary that the Mr. Ramsdell of interest had died on the date of her entry. So, thanks to Miss Nichol's diary, a Ramsdell family history brick wall was broken down.

Other interesting items from the town's historic collection are early maps of Alabama and the surrounding towns. There is also a collection of postcards and envelopes from the 1800s and early 1900s with local addresses. These often had photos of the town and its citizens. There are school records from several of the eleven original one-room schoolhouses, some partial cemetery records from the inactive town cemeteries, some church meeting minutes and financial records from the Oakfield Alabama Baptist Church, and some later records from the former St. Patrick's Catholic Church in the Hamlet of Wheatville. There is a history of the Old Orchard Acid Springs and Hotel, a spring known for its medicinal properties, popular with visitors in the 1800s.

Nathaniel Fenner's son, Irvin, is not the only soldier mentioned in the town's collection. There are Leander Davis's Civil War letters to his wife, Sue. At the end of the war when Leander's unit was marching in celebration of the end of the war in Washington, D.C., he was in an army hospital dying, not from a Confederate bullet, but from disease. The town has documents pertaining to the careers of two local military pilots. Lt. Harmon J. Norton served with distinction in World War I. His pilot's license had been signed by Orville Wright. Career serviceman Col. Ernest B. Shepard was a decorated World War II fighter pilot.

Civil War veteran and local town boy John S. Vosburg is known more for his activities off the battlefield. He was a gunsmith and silver miner who traveled to the Arizona Territory. There he became the Adjutant General of the Territory and one of the founders of the Tombstone Mining Co., as well as of the famous town of Tombstone, Arizona. Some of the materials in the collections of John S. Vosburg were given to the town courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society.²



*John S. Vosburg (1840-1931)
circa 1860*

Town Historian, Joseph Cassidy has compiled several books on such topics as the Civil War and the Town of Alabama, certain odd crimes committed in the Town of Alabama, and a new look at the history of the town titled *Here We Rest*. Another book, *The Case of the Dust Chair*, is a non-fiction book he wrote on the local murder trial of James J. White, the man everyone loved. White was accused of murdering a friend. However, everyone was White's friend, including the jury. In case you are wondering, he was acquitted!

If your family is from or migrated via Genesee County, this article may provide some clues on where to look for information you may not have previously discovered. For those

²John S. Vosburg photo from *Find a Grave*, database and images (<https://www.findagrave.com> : accessed 1 May 2021), memorial page for John Selah Vosburg (19 Sep 1840–9 Jan 1931), Find a Grave Memorial no. 224462313, citing Evergreen Cemetery, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California; Created by BJW; Photograph added by Tom14411 (contributor 47503443).

without ties to Genesee County, enjoy a visit to the home of the Holland Land Company in Western New York and other interesting sites. You can do so either in person or through the online stories and historical accounts of the persons and events of this first important county of Western New York. These can be explored thanks to the dedication of the county, city, and town historians. Visit when you can and see all that Genesee County has to offer.

IN MEMORIAM

It is with deep regret that we announce the death of Geraldine "Jerry" (Turner) HOROHOE (#87L) of Kenmore, N.Y., at age 91 on March 18, 2021. Mrs. Horohoe was a Charter and Life Member of WNYGS, joining in 1974. She was also a member of the General Society of Mayflower Descendants as well as the Governor William Bradford Compact. She served on the executive board of the Tonawanda-Kenmore Historical Society.

ASK A GENEALOGIST

Do you have a genealogy question that you need help with? Consider submitting an Ask a Genealogist request. We are seeking questions in which various research techniques may be demonstrated, little-known resources employed, or genealogical strategies explained. Priority will be given to those questions that have the most educational value for our general readership. The response may not include an answer to your specific question, but it will provide guidance for further research in getting past your "brick wall." Please do not submit basic questions that can easily be located through an Internet search such as "Where do I write for a birth certificate in Buffalo?" etc. We will only publish your question and a response if we think it will be instructive and have a broader application for other readers.

Members may submit one question per quarter. The same question may only be submitted once. Questions will not be accepted from non-members. Submitters will not be notified regarding acceptance/rejection of a question. Those accepted will be published along with a response in the *JOURNAL*.

This column is printed on a space-available basis and questions may be held over for the next issue due to lack of space.

Questions for this column may be submitted by e-mail to genealogist@wnygs.org. Please put "WNYGS – Ask a Genealogist" in the subject line.

HAVE YOU JOINED THE WNYGS FACEBOOK GROUP?

As part of the Society's expanded offerings, members also have the opportunity to share, learn, break down brick walls, and get the latest updates by joining the WNYGS Facebook Group at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/WNYGS>.

**THE JUNE PARTRIDGE ZINTZ MEMORIAL LIBRARY
OF THE WESTERN NEW YORK GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY**

The June Partridge Zintz Memorial Library of the Western New York Genealogical Society is housed in the Grosvenor Room of the downtown Central Library of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library at 1 Lafayette Square, Buffalo.

The following items have been added to our collection and are now available for use in the library.

Hansen, Kevan M. **Map Guide to German Parish Registers: Cities of Munich and Nuremberg with full street index: Vol. 59.** 227p. ©2020. Family Roots Publishing Company, Orting, Washington. Call number: 943 han vol. 59. Purchased by WNYGS.

Hansen, Kevan M. **Map Guide to German Parish Registers: Cities of Cologne and Dusseldorf with full street index: Vol. 60.** 181p. ©2020. Family Roots Publishing Company, Orting, Washington. Call number: 943 han vol. 60. Purchased by WNYGS.

Hansen, Kevan M. **Map Guide to German Parish Registers: Cities of Breslau and Stettin with full street index: Vol. 61.** 171p. ©2020. Family Roots Publishing Company, Orting, Washington. Call number: 943 han vol. 61. Purchased by WNYGS.

Hansen, Kevan M. **Map Guide to German Parish Registers: Cities of Frankfurt Am Main and Stuttgart with full street index: Vol. 62.** 174p. ©2020. Family Roots Publishing Company, Orting, Washington. Call number: 943 han vol. 62. Purchased by WNYGS.

Ritter, Steven Carl. **Our Ritter Family Genealogy: Over 200 years in America.** 140p. ©2020. 48 Hour Books, Akron, Ohio. Call number: 929.2 RITTER rit. Donated by Steven Carl Ritter.

Donations to the Zintz collection are always welcome. Individuals interested in donating books and records should contact the Library Chair, Amanda E. Perrine (3677), by email librarian@wnygs.org or phone (716) 868-6388. Once the item(s) have been reviewed and approved by the Committee as per the collecting policies and guidelines of the Society, the transfer arrangements will be made, and items will be added to the collection. To ensure the safety of your materials, please do not leave items at the library or mail/ship items without prior approval.

Are you a member with a purchase recommendation for our collection? Send suggestions to our Acquisitions Chair, Rhonda Hoffman (3495L), at acquisitions@wnygs.org.

CORRECTION: Angelo F. Coniglio, the author of "Sicilian and Italian Genealogy" published in the March 2021 issue of the *JOURNAL* was incorrectly identified in the Table of Contents for that issue. The *JOURNAL* staff sincerely apologizes for the error.