



The Western New York Historian Project
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The Historians and Treasures of Cattaraugus County

The focus of this Historian Project article is Cattaraugus County. Within this large rural county, one can find a Seneca Nation Reservation—one of several located within Western New York; an Old Order Amish Community—the largest in the United States; and splendid mountains and trails to enjoy skiing, hiking, and other seasonal adventures, including rafting, biking, climbing, and camping.

Cattaraugus County, formed in 1808 from a portion of Genesee County, borders Pennsylvania to its south, Erie County to its north, and a small portion of Wyoming County at its northeastern border. Chautauqua County is to the west and Allegany County is to the east. The County seat is Little Valley.

Last August, I took a road trip with my husband and spent three days in Cattaraugus County to enjoy and learn more about the County. I was looking forward to seeing in person some of the local treasures described by the historians who took part in the Historian Project. We were grateful that we were able to visit a few of the historical society sites that were open or made available for us to view.

What We Learned from the Historian Project

Nine historians from Cattaraugus County responded to our Historian Project Questionnaire. They have held the position of historian an average of 22 years, with a range from 1 to 40 years. All but two of the historians are both paid and reimbursed for expenses. On average, they work from a few to 20 hours per week. These historians represent seven towns, one village, and the City of Salamanca.

The **City of Salamanca** was our first stop, and the Salamanca Historical Society and Museum was open the day we visited. Salamanca City Historian James Griffith was at the museum, where his office is located. He gave us a tour of this large, three-story museum, located in a beautifully restored 1882 bank building (see below).

Salamanca is located on Seneca Reservation land, which is leased from the Seneca Nation. The city owns the museum building and pays for all utilities, but the Historical Society is in charge of all museum functions and owns the collection within the building. These artifacts, as described by Jim Griffith, include photographs and memorabilia from local businesses and industry, city government records, as well as histories of schools, churches, and cemeteries. A recently received artifact is the original Krieger House Register (1873–1878) which, located at Salamanca’s railway hub, catered to many famous travelers including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, and Buffalo Bill Cody.



Photo courtesy of Salamanca Historical Society Museum

Walking through each floor of the museum gave us a glimpse of the City of Salamanca and its early citizens who include Song Writer Hall of Famer Ray Evans who won Oscars for his compositions:

“Button and Bows” (1948), “Mona Lisa” (1950), and “Que Sera Sera” (1956). Evans also wrote the Christmas classic “Silver Bells” and the themes for “Bonanza” and “Mr. Ed.” A theater in town was named in his honor. American Theater Hall of Famer George Abbott also had a local theater named in his honor. He received Tony Awards for his musicals, including “Damn Yankees” (1956) and “The Pajama Game” (1955), to name just two.

However, Salamanca isn’t only known for its famous citizens in the Arts, it has its sports heroes too. Ray Slim Caldwell, at 22, was signed to the Highlanders, which became the New York Yankees in 1913. In 1919, he was traded to the Boston Red Sox and later in the season to the Cleveland Indians where, with his blazing fastball, he won 20 games and helped Cleveland win the 1920 World Series.

The Salamanca Museum has a website at <http://www.salmun.com/salamanca-area-historical-society.html>; a Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/Salamanca-Area-Historical-Society-Museum-204855169671116/>; and a quarterly newsletter.

The Historian's page can be found at <http://www.salmun.com/history.html>.



Rare 41-Star American Flag
photographed by MCO Tidwell

As for local “treasures,” Griffith pointed out that its newest treasure—a 41-star American flag—is also a national treasure. The nation’s 41st state, Montana, was admitted to the Union on November 8, 1889. Three days later, on November 11, 1889, Washington State was admitted as the 42nd state.

A local Catholic church on Broad Street found this extremely rare 41-star flag in a cupboard in its basement and donated it to the Historical Society and Museum in 2009. The museum used donations from its members, citizens, and businesses to preserve the flag with special UV museum glass in an airtight frame. The flag is now proudly displayed where it is visible upon entering the museum.

After visiting the Historical Society Museum, we went across the street to the Salamanca Rail Museum where you can learn about the heyday of train travel in a restored Baltimore, Rochester & Pittsburgh train depot. See: <https://www.facebook.com/Salamanca-Rail-Museum-171739779583682/>.

Town of Napoli Historian Emma Jean Lindberg works without pay or reimbursement. Her goal is to “freely help when help is needed.” She describes her function as answering inquiries and directing people to the appropriate place or source. She notes that the town only has “a very limited amount of clippings, photos, and paper items which are categorized, dated, and stored in public accessible ring binders in the clerk’s office ... and always available during the clerk’s hours of business.” Original records are stored in the “fireproof storage facility” in the Town Hall, under the clerk’s access.

Lindberg emphasized that Napoli is strictly a farming community, “and the current farmers are the Old Order Amish.” As to the question about items that are most unique or important to the town, she replied “the framed newspaper pages regarding the airplane crash” from the early 1950s. Local citizens became rescue workers that December 1951 night and this crash was one that helped lead to aviation reforms. The *Salamanca Press*, on January 7, 2016, published an article on the crash by Press Reporter Deb Everts: https://www.salamancapress.com/news/author-marks-anniversary-of-1951-plane-crash-in-napoli-in-book-hang-on-and-fly/article_baee3570-b3f2-11e5-9b31-87551cfa9da2.html. The article discusses Tim Lake’s book on aviation crashes, *Hang On and Fly: A Post-War Story of Tragedies, Heroism, and Survival* (2015), which includes the Napoli crash. This was the era when people were beginning to fly

more for travel than riding trains. Because planes were falling from the sky more than ever before, changes needed to be made for the progress of American aviation. The Town of Napoli, and its history that December night, was a part of it.

Town of Randolph Historian Nancy Olejniczak pointed out that the role of town historians per New York State is to maintain a record of current events. “Besides responding to requests for info, [her] focus is creating an annual report [and] recording each year’s key events.” The Town Clerk’s office holds official records, such as birth, marriage, and death, as well as minutes from municipal meetings. Other town items are maintained in the collection of the Randolph Historical Society and the Randolph Free Library. See <https://randolphhistoricalsociety.org/> for what is in the Randolph Historical Society collection. In addition, learn about the town’s pre-1900 homes, part of the society’s Century Homes Project, which researches and verifies a home’s century status. The library has a local history section at their website at <https://www.randolphlibrary.info/local-history-room/>. This includes Randolph Central School yearbooks since 1920, County Gazetteers, and local Civil War history.

Town of Freedom Historian Lorna Spencer is the longest serving historian from Cattaraugus County participating in the Historian Project. She has held this position for over 40 years. When talking with her, it is obvious that she loves both history and research. Unfortunately, she notes that this small town does not have many historical records. Many have been lost over the years; some from fires or some just misplaced or lost, especially when stored in individual homes. Original records are stored in the Town Hall office. Because the office is opened only on a part-time basis, other information and books are stored at the historian’s home so she is able to work with them.

Lorna is presently training her new deputy historian, Sherry Bernard, who will take over Lorna’s position when she retires. Sherry is an expert on the town cemeteries and is learning about the intricacies of town history from Lorna. For example, Lorna mentions the fact that before 1850 there was a large influx of Welsh who moved into Freedom; this can help people better understand the history and events of their town. Something else Lorna would like people to understand is that “even small towns have interesting moments in history.” We just have to look back in time for them.

Town of Great Valley Historian Marilyn Eddy Siperek has been the town historian for over five years. Her town’s collection includes digital material and she can provide assistance in accessing them. There are digitized school records and yearbooks; original photos which are scanned; digital copies of documents and photos submitted by individuals (with originals returned to owner); and digital copies of personal columns in local newspapers. Original copies are housed in the town records and most digitized items are posted on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Town-of-Great-Valley-NY-History-246130745549974/>. Donations of historical objects are referred to nearby museums.

Marilyn has been compiling books on the town’s history. Because of the large amount of information, her plan is to have them be in several publications. The first will be on education in the town, followed by a book on the town’s veterans. As for the town “gems,” she considers these to be the historic photos in the town’s historic collection.

Town of Hinsdale Historian Stephen Clute is also the president of the Hinsdale Historical Society. I met with him at the Hinsdale Historical Society Museum during our road trip to Cattaraugus County. The museum is in the former St. Helen Catholic Church building. Some of the items on display are a collection of early arrowheads, Union Civil War rifles, local tools used by cobblers and woodworkers, and dairy equipment. There is also fire department equipment, items related to scouting, and school yearbooks.

The museum has a Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HinsdaleHistoricalSocietyMuseum/>. It also has a lengthy and information-filled newsletter, which is sent annually by mail and online.

One of the treasures of Hinsdale is Civil War hero, Benjamin Gifford, who is buried in the Hinsdale Cemetery. He received the Medal of Honor for his actions at the end of the Civil War at the Battle of Saylor's Creek, Virginia (April 6, 1865). Here he fought and successfully captured the Confederate battle flag, a true measure of heroism.

Before leaving the museum, I noticed a book for sale entitled *Hinsdale . . . My Home Town: History and Memories* (1999), by Lila G. Cooper. Lila, born in Hinsdale in 1911, was the Hinsdale Historian since 1971. She died in 2008. This book is a compilation of her research and memories that begins with the area's early history, settlement of the town, and its citizens up through the 20th century. It includes photos of the town, the people in it, and information from newspapers and scrapbooks. She describes the town churches, schools, cemeteries, organizations, and businesses. Included is a compilation of local family histories and stories, with a list of the town veterans from the Revolution to Vietnam. I'm glad I bought the book. It is packed with interesting information about life in a Cattaraugus town across two centuries and can be purchased at the Hinsdale Historical Society.

Town of Dayton Historian Ruth Bennett has held the position for 20 years. She is also the Town Clerk and Court Clerk. The earliest records of the town are from after 1908. Prior to that date, vital records and town minutes were lost in a bindery fire in the City of Buffalo. Ruth considers these remaining records the "gems" of the town's collection.

The Dayton Historical Society Museum is located on Route 62 in the original building of the St. Paul of the Cross Church. It provides a glimpse of town life from 1865 onward. Here you can find household items, family libraries and other genealogical information, as well.

A history of the town can be found online at <https://www.daytonny.org/history.html> and at <http://historicpath.com/history/dayton>.

Ruth also has provided a town history at <https://historicpath.com/article/town-dayton-history-ruth-bennett-408>.

Two books about the town's history: *History of Dayton* (1901) by Charles Schults, and *History of Dayton, NY* (1985), by the Dayton Historical Society can be purchased from the Dayton Historical Society Museum or the Dayton Town Clerk's office.

Town of Franklinville Historian Bruce Frederickson has been town historian for over 16 years. His wife, Madelynn (Maggie) Frederickson, has been the **Village of Franklinville** Historian for over 20 years and the curator of the three museums of the Ischua Valley Historical Society. I met with Maggie who escorted us to three stops in Franklinville.

Our first stop was 3 Park Square, located in the Park Square Historic District of the Village of Franklinville. This historic district is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Village



Medal of Honor Recipient, Benjamin Gifford. Display photographed by MCO Tidwell

Square has been there for almost 200 years and is the center of many town activities. Here, the Ischua Valley Historical Society is remodeling a building donated to the Society. It will become the society's Research and Genealogy Center. When opened, researchers will have a place to examine many of the records owned by the society, such as maps, biographies, cemetery information, numerous articles, pictures, artifacts, and obituaries, which Maggie considers some of the Village gems. There are also records from the Ontario Knife Company, which today is the oldest working USA knife company.



Glass Plate Photo of Early Mail Truck and Mail Carrier.
Photograph courtesy of Ischua Historical Society

In addition, family researchers will be able to view photos from 3,500 glass plates given to the society. Albert Cole was a photographer in Franklinville and 2,500 of the plates were from his collection, dated 1880 to 1916. About 75% of these photos have the subject of the photo identified. Another large group of photos came from the collection of Colonel Phillips from Franklinville. The society is currently in the process of developing and digitizing these valuable historic photographic glass plates. Thousands of identified early town residents, families, and town scenes, businesses, and homes now can be seen over a century later.

Our next stop in Franklinville was the Simeon B. Robbins House, called *The Miner's Cabin*, a large three-story Queen Anne style mansion—also on the National Register of Historic Places. It was built in 1895 by Robbins who made his fortune in the Alaska Klondike. The Ischua Historical Society was able to obtain this elegant building for back taxes and restored it as a museum and gathering place for its meetings. Here you can see the hand-sewn uniform created for use by the first female mail carrier. Miss Jessie McCaa began delivering mail in Franklinville during the era of World War I.



The Miner's Cabin Mansion and Museum
National Register of Historical Places



Howe-Prescott Pioneer House (circa 1812)
Photographed by MCO Tidwell

Our last stop in Franklinville was the hamlet of Cadiz, which was a stop on the Underground Railroad. The Howe-Prescott Pioneer House (circa 1812) is the home of another museum of the Ischua Historical Society. Besides housing period furniture and household items, the house has a rare and unique indoor well, allowing the occupants to stay inside their home when bringing up water.

Al Fish, who is the president of the Historical Society, met us at the Howe-Prescott House. After telling us about the history of the house, and the items within, he took us to see the barns on the property. Here he showed us an extensive collection of tools from the 1800s.

Additional information about the history of the town and town life has been written by the Town of Franklinville Historian, Bruce Frederickson, at <https://www.franklinvillenyny.org/history.html>.

The Ischua Valley Historical Society also has a website that includes a history of the society, the buildings it acquired, various historical articles, available resources, online resources, and a listing of area cemeteries. These can be found at <http://www.ischuavalleyhistoricalsociety.org/index.html>. Maggie Fredrickson, who is also the society's newsletter editor, notes that the society sends its members, by mail or email, a quarterly newsletter that is rich in area history and memories.

In Conclusion

Many of the historians who participated in the Historian Project noted that Cattaraugus County hosts monthly meetings with its historians. At these meetings, they discuss what the various historians and historical societies are doing in each area and coordinate projects, such as those pertaining to the Underground Railroad. They work on creating brochures and promoting history tourism.

So, before leaving Cattaraugus County, we decided that we needed to make one last stop on our road trip. We wanted to visit the Cattaraugus County Museum & Research Library, located in the Historic Stone House on Route 16 in Machias. The museum curator is Brian McClellan and the county historian is Sharon Fellows. We enjoyed the museum displays and learning about the Research Library from Susan Allen who walked us through the museum. She pointed out the materials available for researchers in the library portion of the museum, as well as the displays, many of them regarding county citizens who served in the Civil War. The library also has veteran letters and diaries from that period.

You can visit the museum's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/CattaraugusCountyMuseum> and visit its website, accessed via the county website, at <https://www.cattco.org/museum>.

Cattaraugus County also has *A Guide to Family History Research*, which can be downloaded from https://www.cattco.org/sites/default/files/2017-geneology-brochure-final-x_0.pdf. It provides extensive information about available records in the county and where to find them, including those in the research library. This is a must read for the family historian with roots in Cattaraugus County.

I hope you enjoyed our tour through Cattaraugus County and reading about what we learned from the historians who participated in the Historian Project. Happy researching—until next time!

Marie-Cecile O. Tidwell, PhD has been a member of WNYGS since 2014 and recently became a Family Life Member. As chair of the Western New York 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 from them about their role and job as historian and about the history and historic treasures of their municipalities. As a contributing editor to the WNYGS JOURNAL, she is sharing with our membership what we have learned from these dedicated historians. Marie is a member of several local, state, and national genealogical organizations.

IN MEMORIAM

Peter FENGER (#2197) of Hamburg passed away August 6, 2021 at the age of 96. Mr. Fenger was a WNYGS member from 1991 until 2020. His mother was a descendent of the Kronenberg family that came to Hamburg from Switzerland in 1842. He was a World War II veteran and a board member of the Hamburg Historical Society. As a Moog Engineer, Mr. Fenger worked on projects for the Gemini and Apollo Missions, the Space Station, and the Space Shuttle.

IN MEMORIAM

Mary Cecilia (nee Long) MURPHY (#765) of Amherst, passed away July 18, 2021. Mary was a longtime member, joining the Society in 1979. She held a Family Membership with her late husband, William, and remained active until 2015. She held the society title of Library Volunteer Coordinator from 2012 until 2015.