The Little Falls Historical Museum

By LOUIS W. BAUM, Jr.

Special to The Times

LITTLE FALLS — The historic old bank building, currently the home of the Little Falls Historical Society, is a survivor. Constructed in 1833 at a cost of approximately $8,000 on a lot purchased from Dudley Burwell, it was the first bank in Herkimer County.

Built of native rock and dressed limestone, it has pillars made from a single stone — the same stone used in St. Mary’s (now Holy Family) and Emmanuel Episcopal churches. During the 1870s it served as the center of the national cheese trading markets. During the ensuing years, it was the home of the local Red Cross, D.J. Dean’s Mortuary Parlor, Little Falls National bank, used as the Railway Express office and Lowenfeld’s dry goods store. It was purchased by Urbanistener in 1864 and was slated to be demolished to become part of the parking lot for a new bank.

Citizens interested in the rich history of Little Falls fought hard to prevent this from happening. The group headed by Edward C. Burt, Jack C. Hussey, Mary Louise Cook, Lydia Louis, Mary Grace, Robert McElroy, Fred Sabin, John Gallagher and John George received a provisional charter from the University of the State of New York Education Department on April 26, 1959, and an absolute charter five years later.

Other prominent citizens contributing to the museum’s preservation and development included Natalie Derby, Ralph Vau Horn and Harold Sverbeck. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970 – one of only five in the area to be so honored. Purchased by the Little Falls Historical Society in 1977, it was carefully restored to its present grandeur over a seven-year period. Today, it serves as the depository for the society’s collections.

The Little Falls Historical Society charters states: “This museum exists to discover, collect, display, and conserve data, documents and artifacts that are a part of the history of Little Falls and to maintain an institution on educational usefulness.”

The members of the society have been faithful to that task through the years as they have amassed articles of significant historical importance to the greater Little Falls community.

Perhaps the “crown jewel” of the collection is the original land grant patent issued on May 30, 1755, to Richard G. and Jacob Zimmerman. The grant contained 3,600 acres of land north of the Mohawk River across from the General Herkimer home. In 1752 Schenck and Zimmerman joined forces to re-purchase land from the Indians after a 1735/4 deed was declared invalid. The 1755 patent in our collection was signed by the Bear, Turtle and Wolf clans of the Mohawk tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy, and has the wax seal of King George II of England.

An even older document, although not as famous as the Map of Fall Hill Patent which was granted to Jost Herkimer, the father of General Nicholas Herkimer. The map was drawn by an early Palatine, Hendrick Frey in 1722. The museum also contains a fascinating hand written letter dated Aug. 10, 1755 and signed by W. Shirley. The letter was an order for Captain Marcuse Petriss to report for military duty. Shirley stated, “I have this day appointed you Captain, immediately to proceed to the west end of the Canoeing Place from the Mohawk River to the Wicomico River.” For his service Petis was allowed two acreage per day in New York currency and had to provide his own clothing provisions, arms and ammunition. The Petriss were one of the original Palatine families to settle in the area in 1723 as a part of the Burnetfield Patent which was issued on April 30, 1725.

Little Falls history is intertwined with that of the Mohawk, the Mohawk River, Western Inland Navigation Canal and the Erie Canal (1825). The museum has a number of records of the village, city and the surrounding area. The oldest patent is a hand-colored “Turpintie Map” drawn by Saba Arnold in August 1821. Mrs. E. married Solomon Petisc and descended into the first mill in Little Falls in 1725.

An indenture dated March 3, 1809, conveys 68 acres of land in the town of Minongs to Jacob Cob and Erastus Ecker from Jacob Fox for the sum of $750. The indenture details the property boundaries in surveying terms to the time period.

The oldest church in Little Falls, the Octagon Church, was started in 1796 on land donated by John Porteus. It took several years to complete construction. The eight sides of the building denoted that it was intended for all denominations, and it was used in this manner for many years.

As congregations grew in size, many denominations built their own churches. The structure was torn down in 1842. However, we do have some artifacts remaining from the old Octagon Church. A six foot wooden bench is still in splendid condition, as is a Bible, known as the “Brown Bible,” found in the yard of the church. The only remaining part of the building itself is a small scrap of wood saved when the church was demolished. The museum has an oil painting of the church, a commemorative plate and a small model of the building made by the high school Yorker Club.

The Indian Castle Church was erected in 1769 as an Indian mission church on land donated by Joseph and Molly Beast. The church was constructed under the direction and expense of Sir William Johnson, superintendent of Indian Affairs for the northern colonies. The church has the log walls of the Seneca Nation and the Indian Mission Service from the church.

William Morralle came to Little Falls native England in 1801. The museum has in its collection a diary used by Morralle to carry people in the streets for preaching meetings. This was the beginning of Methodism in Little Falls in 1829.

Little Falls role in the Civil War is documented in the book: "Disturbing Drums" by Little Falls author David Krutz. We have many artifacts from this era. A German Bible from 1857 was the property of Margaret Davis. Her ancestors were Palatines Phillip and Eliza Helmer. A beautiful foot-high 1900 era china doll was donated by Mrs. Edith Eaton. Of particular interest is a see-through bottle of American flag design made in 1864 when Nevada was admitted to the Union. On display are Civil War caps, cartridge boxes, powder horns, cannon balls, shot pouches, a pistol holder, mini caps found on the Flint Avenue in 1898 during construction of the West Shore Railroad, mules, rifles and a belt made for the 1962 British Enfield rifle. The museum also contains World War I and II uniforms, helmets. gas masks, caps, medals, gaiters, grenades, mess kits, commissaries and hundreds of pages of newspaper articles containing exploits of local servicemen and women.

Cheese making began in Herkimer County and Little Falls around 1800 as a means of preserving milk. Little Falls was the center of the national cheese market in 1875. Artifacts in the museum include many photos, cheese marking stamps, receipts, cheese tiers made by D.H. Barrell Co. for sampling cheese. Rennet tablets produced at Hansen’s Laboratories, cheese boxes, books and other related paraphernalia.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s the implements used throughout the home and kitchen differed significantly from those used today. We have on display flat irons, coffee grinders, a soapstone, industrial irons, a kraft shredder, a rug stretcher, a potato peeler, a butter slice, a cherry pitter, a bender, a spatula, a donut cutter, candle molds and corn poppers. On display is also the original notice of application to establish the bank found in the Dec. 29, 1892, edition of the "Press" called the "Little Falls State Bank Manufacturing Company."

The Little Falls Hospital was an important part of our community since 1875. A Nurses Training School was established in 1897 and continued until 1918. The museum has many artifacts and photographs relating to both facilities. Little Falls became a manufacturing center when the waterpower of the rapids was harnessed. Among the most famous of our factories was the H.P. Snyder Company a premier manufacturer of bicycles and velocipeds sold throughout the world. The company was established in 1895, and we have several bicycles in our collection. In 1897, Swell"Newport" was on loan to Jesse Snyder Haberly, great-granddaughter of founder Homer P. Snyder. The collection at the Little Falls Historical Museum is eclectic and spans the years. From a 1960s era Little Falls High School marching band uniform, to the large drum proclaiming the local Ukrainian band from Overlook by famous photographer William H. Jackson. Another 1890 Jackson photo shows a train on the Fraser Curve with Moss Island, the Mohawk River, Fall Hill Railway and the industrial area of the city in the background. A favorite is the 1960s photo of the courthouse.

No collection or museum could be complete without records. The Little Falls Historical Museum has the "Coney Files." Compiled by long-time city, historian, Edward C. Coney and others, the files consist of nearly one hundred volumes of newspaper clippings from the 1880s to the 1970s. All the files have been indexed both by year and subject. More recent articles of local interest are also filed by subject. These files, along with cemetery records and obituaries, are available for genealogical purposes. Also on hand are complete collections of Little Falls High School and St. Mary’s Academy yearbooks dating back to the 1950s which have been indexed by name and graduating class. Many other scrapbooks on a wide variety of subjects of local interest are also available.

The Little Falls Historical Society continues its mission — to keep our unique and rich history alive for our future generations. The old bank building is our treasure — it continues to survive.

Little Falls — where history lives.

Louis Baum is president of the Little Falls Historical Society