

The Little Falls Historical Museum

By LOUIS W. BAUM, Jr.
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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 \$3,000 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. Dineen's Mortuary Parlor, Little Falls National bank, used as the Railway Express office and Lovenheim's dry goods store. It was purchased by Urban Renewal in 1964 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 Cooney, Mary Louise Cooney, Lyda Loucks, Mary Grace, Robert McEvoy, Fred Sabin, John Gallagher and John George received a provisional charter from the University of the State on New York Education Department on April 26, 1963, and an absolute charter five years later.

Other prominent citizens contributing to the museum's preservation and the society's formation included Natalie Derby, Ralph Van Horn and Harold Sperbeck. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970 — one of the first 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 and, since 1985, has served as the depository for the society's collections.

The Little Falls Historical Society charter 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 John Jost Schnell and Jacob Zimmerman. The grant contained 3,600 acres of land north of the Mohawk River across from the General Herkimer home. In 1752 Schnell and Zimmerman joined forces to repurchase land from the Indians after a 1733/4 deed was deemed invalid. The 1755 patent in our collection was signed by the Bear, Turtle and Wolf clans of the Mohawk

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tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy, and has the wax seal of King George II of England.

An even older document, although not as famous, is the Map of Fall Hill Patent which was granted to Jost Herkimer, the father of General Nichols Herkimer. The map was drawn by an early Palatine, Hendrick Frey, in 1752. The museum also contains an interesting hand written letter dated Aug. 10, 1755, and signed by W. Shirley. The letter was an order for Captain Marcus Petri 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 Wood Creek..." For his service Petri was allowed two shillings per day in New York currency and had to provide his own clothing, provisions, arms and ammunition. The Petris were one of the original Palatine families to settle in the area in 1723 as a part of the Burnetsfield Patent which was issued on April 30, 1725.

Little Falls history is entwined with that of waterways — the Mohawk River, Western Inland Navigation Canal and the Erie Canal (1823). The museum has a canceled New York state stock certificate dated April 1817 which was issued in order to obtain money for building the original Erie and Champlain canals. The society's collection has a large number of maps of the village, city and the surrounding area. The oldest map is a hand colored "Turnpike Map" drawn by Sabra Arnold in August 1821. She later married Solomon Petrie, descendant of Jost Petrie, builder of the first mill in Little Falls in 1725.

An indenture dated March 3, 1809, conveys 68 acres of fertile land in the town of Minden to Jacob and Gertrude Eacker from Jacob Fox for the sum of \$750. The indenture details the property boundaries in surveying terms common 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

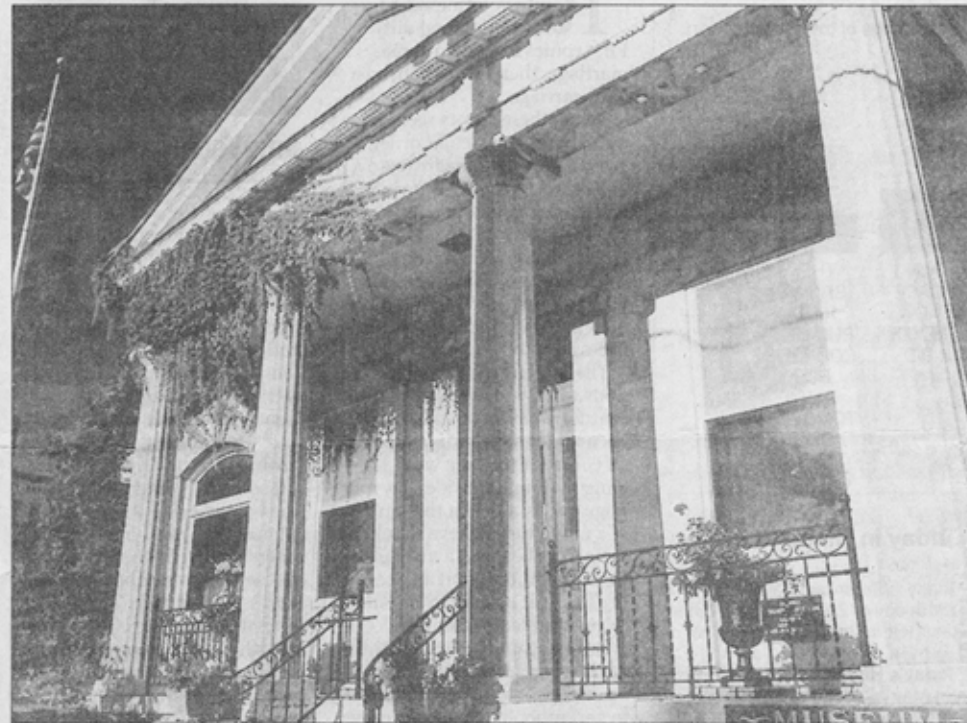
own churches. The structure was torn down in 1842. However, we do have some artifacts remaining from the old Octagon Church. A six foot deacon's bench is still in splendid condition, as is a Bible, known as the "Brown Bible," found in the yard of the church. The only remaining part of the building itself 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 Brant. The church was constructed under the direction and expense of Sir William Johnson, superintendent of Indian Affairs for the northern colonies. The museum has the old pewter Communion service from the church.

William Morrallee came to Little Falls from his native England in 1801. The museum has in its collection the bell used by Morrallee to call together people in the streets for preaching meetings. This was the beginning of Methodism in Little Falls in 1832.

Little Falls' role in the Civil War is well chronicled in the book, "Distant 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 whose ancestors were Palatines Phillip and Eliza Helmer. A beautiful foot-high 1840 era china doll was donated by Mrs. Edith Eaton. Of particular interest is a 36-star American flag dating back to 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 balls (found on Flint Avenue in 1882 during construction of the West Shore Railroad), muskets and rifles including an 1862 British Enfield rifle. The museum also contains World War I and II uniforms, helmets, gas masks, caps, medals, gaiters, grenades, mess kits, commendations 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 preserv-



ing 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 trier made by D.H. Burrell 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 kraut shredder, a rug stretcher, a potato ricer, a butter ladle, a cherry pitter, a chopper, a spatula, a donut cutter, candle molds and corn poppers. On display also is a convertible highchair manufactured in 1859 by the Casler Manufacturing Company.

The Little Falls Hospital has been an important part of our community since 1873. A Nurses Training School was established in 1897 and existed until 1928. 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 H.P. Snyder Company a premier manufacturer of bicycles and velocipedes sold throughout the world. The company was established in 1895, and we have several bicycles in our collection, the oldest being an 1897 "Swell Newport" on loan from Jesse Snyder Huberty, 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 a large drum proclaiming the local Ukrainian band,

to original Bartlett prints depicting the locale in the 1800s, to a large display of Little Falls diamonds and wedding gowns and period clothing covering many years. Maps, maps and even more maps in all sizes from the 1700s to 2010 showing the changes in the community are on display or in storage. Oil paintings on display include those of Mrs. J.J. Gilbert, William G. Milligan and Sarah Osborne Richmond.

Our building was the first home of the Herkimer County National Bank. Our collection contains a one dollar bill issued by this bank in 1862 signed by its president, H.P. Alexander, and cashier, A.G. Story. The bill was donated by Judge Edmund McCarthy. Also on display is the original notice of application to establish the bank found in the Dec. 29, 1829, edition of "The People's Friend and Little Falls Gazette."

Occupying a prominent place behind the museum is the last remaining Frog watering trough in Little Falls. Made in 1878 by the local Reddy Foundry, it was a landmark at the intersection of West John and West Main streets watering both man and beast. Inside the museum is a section of a wooden water pipe used in the village approximately 150 years ago, and a metal coupler used to fasten sections of wooden pipe together.

Our collection includes thousands of photographs of all facets of life in Little Falls, its history and its citizens as they spread throughout the world. One is a 4 feet by 2 feet panoramic view of Little Falls tak-

en from Overlook by famous photographer William H. Jackson in 1890. Another 1890 Jackson photo shows four trains abreast on the Gulf Curve with Moss Island, the Mohawk River, Fall Hill Rollway and the industrial area of the city in the background. A favorite is the fourth grade class at Benton Hall on April 10, 1910.

No collection or museum would be complete without records. The Little Falls Historical Museum has the "Cooney Files." Compiled by long-time city Historian Edward Cooney 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 by 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 1920s which have been indexed by name and graduating class. Many other scrapbooks on a wide variety of subjects of local interest are at the museum.

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