### The Chronicles of the Ontario County Historical Society

**Museum and Research Center** 

established 1902

#### Volume 50, Issue 1

#### Connecting our Community with its Past

June 2021

### In This Issue...

From the Director's Desk 1
Lead Story 3
What's In the Collection? 4
Your Historical Society6
Curator's Loft7
Arts Corner7
News and Announcements 8
Welcome New Members 9
Oliver Phelps Fund9
OCHS — The Organization 10
Business Members10
Membership Application11
Calendar of Events12



New Executive Director Cody Grabhorn

# From the OCHS Board of Trustees President

#### Happy Summer!

For the past year, Marci Diehl has been Executive Director for the Ontario County Historical Society. As many of you recall, Marci replaced our long time Director, Ed Varno, after his retirement following 25 years of service to the organization.

This past March, Marci, unfortunately, had to resign her position due to personal reasons. We are all sad she is no longer leading our organization into the future. We wish Marci the best in her future endeavors.

OCHS has had many challenges over the past 12 months, but the Board feels we are setting our course for a bright future. Our Board quickly set to work to search for a new Executive Director upon Marci's resignation. We are very pleased to announce that **Cody Grabhorn** accepted the position and began work here on June 1st.

Thank you again for your patience and support over the last year. We are so excited about the exhibits, projects, and activities that are in store for the rest of 2021.

Christopher T. Hubler

#### From the Director's Desk By Cody Grabhorn

On behalf of the Ontario County Historical Society staff and board members, I am excited to thank all our community members and advocates for supporting the museum, especially during the unusual times caused by Covid-19. Looking forward, I wish everyone a safe, happy summer and hope you all find time this year to enjoy the beautiful weather and some of the things that make our local communities unique. As the new executive director, I cannot express how honored I am to be a part of such a well-supported organization which has both a rich history and a bright future.

continued on page 2



As I prepared for my interview for this position, I continuously quizzed myself on a few questions that plague any historian or museum worker - What is the purpose of a museum? Why do we study history? What is the purpose of OUR museum specifically? I believe that Margaret J. Wheatley's statement "There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about" gets us closer to an answer to these questions. Museums should exist with a purpose of creating a strong community that is brought together by the stories of its past and the possibilities of its future. Additionally, a museum should be an inviting and inclusive space where we are encouraged to gather and discover stories from the past that help us to create empathy, tie us together as a community, and inspire us.

As the museum functions today, we do a good job sharing our history with the public through engaging exhibitions, walking tour pamphlets, and genealogical explorations among other educational experiences. However, we have the potential to provide even more educational opportunities that engage with diverse audiences and demonstrate that the history of this county is also critical for larger communities such as the state, region, and country as a whole. Therefore, we will make a concerted effort to show what we can offer by being present in the community and by reaching out to local schools, colleges, businesses, and other historic organizations, to name a few. Additionally, we will focus on retaining our current members as well as gaining new ones by creating new programs that are rooted in the best museum practices. In the end, if we focus our efforts on nurturing our bonds with the community and providing fun and informative educational experiences, I believe that our community will discover that the history of Ontario County is something that they care deeply about. That is our goal and purpose.

Although I would like to keep this all about the future of the museum, I understand that you might be wondering who I am and what my experiences are. I am no stranger to small towns rich with their own unique histories since I was born and raised in a small Midwest town similar to Canandaigua. Much like the towns in Western New York, my hometown's history is tied to natural beauty and industry, which was important because of the large bodies of water. Interestingly enough, my latest adventures in Ontario County revealed another link between Canandaigua and the area where I grew up. While on a tour of the lake, I learned that the local gem we know as The Canandaigua Lady was manufactured and used in the Mississippi River town my father grew up in. In fact, it is very likely that my father rode on the Canandaigua Lady as a child, back when it was called the La Crosse Queen. Needless to say, Ontario County is already finding ways to make me feel at home.

It turns out, just like the Canandaigua Lady, I was meant to travel far away from home. However, I had a few extra stops on the way. My educational experiences and career path have further allowed me to learn the unique stories of both small towns and big cities in Wisconsin, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and now New York. Most recently, I earned my Master of Arts degree in History from Lehigh University and volunteered my time at the Fort Loudoun Historical Society in Pennsylvania. However, before I met all those places, my love for history was cultivated on the rich soil where my family had lived for six generations. I particularly credit my love for history to my father who instilled in me a penchant for asking why, when, or how while observing buildings and artifacts. Likewise, my grandfather captured my interest by telling countless stories of his life in the early, mid, and late twentieth century. Their stories live within me just like our stories live within the walls of our museum.

As I am settling into this role, I would love to meet as many of you as I can, so please don't be a stranger to the museum! Until then, please share our Chronicles and upcoming events with your friends and family so that we can continue to realize what we all care about – the history of Ontario County.

#### The Chronicles

### **Reflections on the "Peanut Line"**

#### By Preston E. Pierce, Museum Educator

The study of local history is often a mirror, or a microscope. By learning about local history, we can see how local events reflected national events. The reverse is also true, allowing us to see how national stories reflected local events. Both of those thoughts are illustrated very well in the case of the "Peanut Line" of the New York Central Railroad.

If you know where to look, you can still see its legacy. During the winter, when snow

has killed off, or packed down, the weeds and underbrush it is often easier to recognize the remnants of the "Peanut" than in milder weather. The tracks from Canandaigua to Bloomfield have been gone for forty years now. In some places, the old right-of-way has become a driveway or a local road. One short stretch, connecting Co. Rd. 30 and the Cooley Rd. (Town of Canandaigua) is now a rail-trail good for hiking, walking your dog, or cross-country skiing, thanks to the generosity of Jim Judkins in 2008. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer people even think about that rambling old rail line. Fewer still understand that it was once part of a national story in which Ontario County played a starring role.

The Batavia Branch of the New York Central Railroad for most of the twentieth century, which came to be known as the "Peanut Line," began as the Canandaigua & Niagara Falls Railroad. It was incorporated under the new general incorporation law for railroads passed by the state legislature in 1850. That new statute made it easy for railroad promoters to feed the "railroad fever" gripping the nation in the midnineteenth century.

The Erie Railroad was completed from New York to Lake Erie in 1851. Two years later, its arch rival, the newly formed New York Central, was opening its consolidated main line to Buffalo and the Great Lakes. Both of those railroads coveted the business of Upstate New York. Railroad fever among local entrepreneurs, and railroad promoters elsewhere in the Northeast, prompted the building of the "Peanut." However, it was a national – really, an international – bridge project that made the success of the farm country line believable enough to attract investors as far away as England.

Many of you have probably read David McCullough's prize winning book *The Great Bridge*. First published in 1972, and still very popular, McCullough's book is not only the story of the Brooklyn Bridge, but also a detailed biography of John A. Roebling, the engineer whose project it was. More important to the story of the Canandaigua & Niagara Falls Railroad, is the fact that Roebling built several other suspension bridges before his career-defining span linking Brooklyn and Manhattan in 1884. One of those earlier bridges was the International Suspension Bridge across the Niagara gorge near the Whirlpool Rapids. It was the promise of that bridge, providing a short-cut to Detroit and Chicago, that prompted great interest and investment in the Canandaigua & Niagara Falls Railroad. In fact, it was that bridge that prompted the builders of the C&NF to put "Niagara Falls" in the railroad's name and send its surveyors to the falls rather than Buffalo.

At the time that the "Peanut" was proposed and incorporated, John Roebling had already begun his Niagara suspension bridge. His proposal was not the first. Canadian entrepreneurs were in the forefront of planning for a suspension bridge over the Niagara gorge. The first proposal was submitted by William Merritt of St. Catherines, Ontario in 1844 and the first charter for a bridge over the gorge was obtained in Canada, largely through Merritt's efforts, in 1846. Four bridge engineers were invited to submit plans and Charles Ellet eventually received a contract in 1847. His proposed bridge included a railroad track. Unfortunately for Ellett, the larger Roebling bridge began in 1848 and quickly superseded Ellett's effort, which never actually included a rail line.

continued on page 5

#### The Chronicles

#### June 2021

### What's in the Collection?

By Wilma Townsend, Curator

This past fall, OCHS received two fine oil paintings of Harlow Loveridge Comstock and his second wife, Helen Elizabeth Buxton Comstock, from their descendants Steve and Dave Rockwell. The artist was Charles V. Bond. Both portraits are now hanging in our Research Room where they can be enjoyed by researchers and visitors. Read on to learn more about this distinguished judge, his wife, and the artist.



Harlow Loveridge Comstock (1820-1883) was born in Groton, Tompkins County to Ransford and Anna Loveridge Comstock. Growing up, his family moved several times around Central and Western New York due to his father's lumber business. As a young man, he worked as a weaver in Hammondsport. In 1843, he sold his business and went on to read law. By 1850, Harlow was living in Warsaw, Wyoming County where he practiced law and was elected District Attorney. In 1855 he was elected County Judge, a position he served in until 1867. He married his first wife, Jane O. Ives (1822-1859) of Warsaw, where they had three children: Martha Jane, Catharine, and Anna Laura. Jane died most likely in childbirth in 1859. His second wife was Helen Buxton (1838-1862), whom he married in 1860. She was the daughter of Chauncey and Elizabeth Buxton of Warsaw where her father had a wagon making business. Harlow and Helen had one child: Helen Elizabeth in 1862. Helen died less than six months after the birth of her daughter.

In 1868, Harlow and his family moved to Canandaigua, where he practiced law with his brother-in-law, Thomas Bennett. They lived at 115 Howell Street on the corner of Park Street. He was one of the founding members of the First Presbyterian church (now the United Church) where he was elected an elder and led a Sunday school class. By 1875, he had married a third time to Cordelia Shepard (1845-1905). He continued practicing law until his death in 1883. He and other family members are buried in Warsaw, Wyoming County.

Artist Charles V. Bond (1823-1864) was born in Vermont and moved to the Midwest with his family in the 1830s. He first worked as a portrait painter's assistant in Ohio and then on his own in Michigan. He later moved to Boston, where he worked as a portrait painter before he traveled and studied abroad in Europe. By 1852, he returned to Detroit, Michigan where he established a studio. In 1855, he was commissioned to paint six portraits of former Chicago mayors and won awards for portraits at the Illinois State Fair. After a second trip to Europe in 1858-59, he worked in Chicago, Milwaukee and Louisville, Kentucky. He also traveled around the Northeast to work on portraits. He died in 1864 in New Jersey.



Harlow Loveridge Comstock

> Both portraits are on exhibit in the Research Room

Helen Elizabeth Buxton Comstock



#### June 2021

In fact, several other bridges across the Niagara River, north of the falls, had already been built or begun construction when Roebling began his project. One of them, at the very location chosen by Roebling, had barely started and would be replaced by Roebling's bridge – others were incapable of supporting railroad traffic, and one collapsed into the gorge. Roebling was confident, however, as were his backers, that his design, including a rail line, would work.

For proponents of any railroad to go to the expense of building rails to Niagara Falls, and crossing a suspension bridge, took confidence, courage, and some degree of daring. Roebling's bridge would be the first railroad bridge to cross the Niagara. It would also be the first, and only, suspension bridge to carry a railroad over the gorge. That said, the possibilities offered by a successful suspension bridge were powerful incentives. Other than a bridge, there was no reason for a railroad to make Niagara Falls its terminus. Buffalo, to the south, was the Lake Erie port with access to the mid-west. In fact. the earliest western components of the future New York Central, as well as the New York & Erie, were built toward Buffalo.

By January 1, 1853, the C&NF was completed from Canandaigua; through Holcomb, Ionia (Miller's Corners), North Bloomfield, and on to Batavia. July 28, 1853 saw the first passenger train on the rest of the road to North Tonawanda. It was finished to Niagara Falls on April 1, 1854. The railroad company then ran a series of excursions for the people living along the line so they could enjoy the new and faster means of travel and marvel at the natural wonder of the falls.

The C&NF was under the influence of Erie railroad supporters when it was first built to six-foot "wide gauge." The Erie was desperate to compete with the New York Central for fast traffic to New York City. It was also desperate for a fast connection to Canada. The "Peanut" satisfied both of those needs. Consequently, for its first five years the C&NF offered an Erie connection using its line to Canadaigua; and the Canadaigua & Elmira RR; to the Erie mainline across the Southern Tier and Catskills.

Like many early railroads, however, the Canandaigua & Niagara Falls failed financially—another reflection of a national trend. In 1858, reorganized and bankrupt, it was leased by the New York Central and later purchased. Almost immediately, the Central reduced the track gauge to Standard Gauge (4'8.5") to conform to its increasingly common width (yet another national reflection). By that action, the Central effectively blocked, for a while, much of the interchange with the rival Erie coming from Niagara Falls.

The "Peanut" line was a vital link for small town passengers, farmers, and business operators for many years. By 1939, passenger traffic had ended and freight traffic had dwindled. The line between Holcomb and Caledonia was abandoned that year. At our end of the line, the tracks between Holcomb and Canandaigua were abandoned in 1972. One train a week—two cars—went to Holcomb, by then. Most of the rails were removed by 1979. The downsizing of American railroads was another national trend of the 1970s, reflected in the story of the "Peanut" line.

There is much more to say about the "Peanut line." It may be gone, but should not be forgotten. Its story reflected many national events and trends. Your Museum Educator is in the process of compiling a new publication about the "Peanut." Look for it this summer.



Peanut Line Locomotive

### **Your Historical Society**



Toy Display



### Arts Corner

By Judi Cermak

The Ontario County Arts Council is appreciative of the North gallery space where the artists display their talents.

Also in the North gallery space is a mini shop full of unique handmade items for \$20 or less. We encourage you to stop in. Recent studies and research are proving that a trip to the gallery and museums can positively impact your health and well-being.

We've been reading many books related to the exhibit theme for 2022 -- Fabric & Fibers. On March 29, Joyce Kowba presented a book review on the history of fibers, *The Golden Thread* by Kassia St Clair, at the Wood library.

Another book, *Threads of Life* by Clare Hunter, has inspired a banner project. Banners have been used

over the centuries for many different reasons: to celebrate, to motivate, to advertise, to commemorate and to protest.

The Arts Council has developed a banner project to communicate experiences and emotions during these historic pandemic years. We asked residents (adults and children) to transform a 6 x 6 square piece of felt into an expression of how they've felt during the pandemic. Each felt piece has a word or words, along with anything else that helps to express the feelings they've experienced.

We have assembled the pieces on long banners that are on display here and in libraries throughout the county until the end of July. One banner will be donated to the Museum for their collection of artifacts.

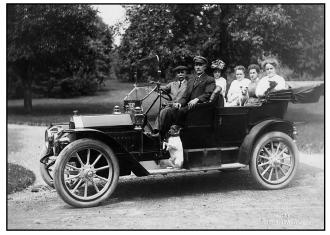
### The Curator's Loft

By Wilma Townsend

Do you have a pet that you love? Want to know more about pets, past and present? Then come to the museum to see our latest exhibit **Our Family Companions: A History of Pets in Ontario County**. This exhibit looks at what defines a pet, how our perception of pets has changed over the past 200 years, how we have cared for our pets, and why pets have been and still are so important to our lives. Featured are numerous local old and new photos of beloved family dogs, cats, rabbits, horses, and other animals, paintings of pets, children's toys and stories that use pets as characters, and the history of pet food and pet accessories. This exhibit will be open until late April 2022.



Girl and her Devoted Pug, Canandaigua U. T. Dubell Family and Pets, Canandaigua



### **News and Announcements**

The **OCHS Annual Garden Tour** will be held in Canandaigua, July17th, from 11 AM-4 PM. Please call the museum 585 394-4975 or go to www.ochs.org for ticket information.

**Reception for New Director and Exhibit Opening** will be held Thursday, July 8th from 5 to 7 PM. Please join us in welcoming our new executive director, **Cody Grabhorn** and viewing our new exhibit *Our Family Companions: A History of Pets in Ontario County*.

#### UPCOMING BOOK! Eminent Riparians by Richard Hermann

OCHS is excited to announce that we are publishing a new book by Richard Hermann: *Eminent Riparians* – *Biographical Sketches of Finger Lakes Luminaries and Leading Lights*.

## We're offering a pre-sale price to our members of \$20 plus tax and shipping. The Society will receive 50% of the profits.

Many of you may have known Richard since he grew up in Canandaigua. This latest book by the attorney, author, storyteller, and history scholar is a fascinating and fun read with plenty of surprises.

Here's what our own Preston Pierce had to say on the book:

If you think you know a lot about the great lights of the Finger Lakes, think again! Here are the biographical sketches of the famous and familiar, the not-so-famous (but important) and the un-familiar—people, who in their own ways, have made our world what it is. They are people you ought to know or know better. They come from every field of intellect and endeavor. A few are even villains! Their stories are written in a style that is nearly conversational. You may imagine Mr. Hermann sitting in one of your easy chairs. You will find it hard to put this book down!

We expect this 390-page, softcover book to be out this Fall, and it will retail at \$24.95.

Call us at the Museum and get your name on the list! And keep an eye on our Facebook and website for more news on a book signing with Richard Hermann in the future.

**New Publication** available in OCHS Bookstore: *The Canandaigua Letters: A Memoir of the Late 60s*, by Canandaigua native and award-winning author William Winship. Price: \$25.00.

**Our Second Annual Drive-Thru BBQ was a success!** Thank you to our Fundraising Committee and to FLX BBQ for the smooth operation of delivering pulled pork and chicken dinners to ticket holders as they arrived. We exceeded our goal of 100 tickets sold. Our thanks go out to all the OCHS members and others who bought dinners.

**New OCAC Exhibit.** The Ontario Arts Council opens their newest exhibit, "*Food for Thought*," on July 2nd here in the North Gallery of the museum. The exhibit will run through the end of August. If you haven't seen the OCAC exhibits, you're in for a sensory feast. Please visit! We're also excited to have a small gift shop of items made by the OCAC artists.

**Lifting of COVID-19 Restrictions.** With New York State lifting COVID-19 restrictions, visitors who have been fully vaccinated are free to visit the museum without masks. We do encourage that those visiting that have not been vaccinated to kindly wear a mask while here.

### What if Your House Could Talk?

Have you ever wondered about the chain of ownership of your house? Would you like to know about the lives of the people who lived in your home previously?

These are questions that were the topic of a recent research request. A friend asked us to help provide a history of ownership for another friend's residence, and a history of former residents, as a gift to her. The research took several months, but we were able to trace the chain of ownership and provide information on many of the previous owners. We prepared a binder to organize and showcase the information - what a wonderful gift it made!

Would you like a unique gift for yourself, a friend, or a relative? A residence history would make a great birthday or anniversary gift for the person who has everything. OCHS would be happy to do the research for you! Just go to the OCHS website at https://www.ochs.org/research-authorization-form/ and fill out your research request today to get the process started.

#### Note from a Satisfied Customer!

Dear Ontario County Historical Society,

We were completely surprised and delighted to receive the 130 year old history of our home from you!! Words can't describe how grateful we are to you. We are thrilled to finally know its history—something we've wanted to research for many years...

With warmest thanks and our deepest appreciation.

David & Debbie Baker

Canandaigua, NY

### We Welcome These **New Members**

Kelly Gilligan Eric Ulinski Lisa Wemett Laurel Edwards Nathan Simons Stuart & Victoria Tucker **Bob** Palumbo Rebecca Pollot Michael Nighan George Gerspacher

### **The Oliver Phelps Fund**

Bill and Donna Andrews, Jeff Steele In memory of Mary Purdy Suzanne Winslow Dolores V. Looney Sharon and Everett Day Gail Flugel Marian McAllister Brendan and Mary Brady Linda Anderson

In memory of Mary Purdy In memory of John Stearns

#### **IN MEMORIAM**

We were saddened to learn that we have lost several of our members recently.

Our condolences to the family of Michael and Patricia Wilder. Michael passed away in 2019. Patricia died last October 2020. We also offer condolences to Barbara Harradine's family. She passed away in April 2020. Thank you to Chris and Rayne Wilder and to Tom Harradine for letting us know of their passing.

We fondly remember long-time volunteer and OCHS supporter, Mary Hickox Purdy of Canandaigua, who passed away at age 92, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021.

### The OCHS Organization

#### Staff

We wish to extend a special thanks to all of the volunteers who donate so many countless hours in support of the Historical Society.

Address correspondence to:

Ontario County Historical Society 55 North Main Street Canandaigua, New York 14424

We are open Tuesday through Friday 10 AM to Noon, 1 PM. to 4:30 PM., Saturday 11 AM. - 3 PM

#### Phone: 585-394-4975 Fax: 585-394-9351 Webpage: www.ochs.org Email: newsfromochs@gmail.com Please "Like" us on Facebook! Just go to www.facebook.com and search for the Ontario County Historical Museum.

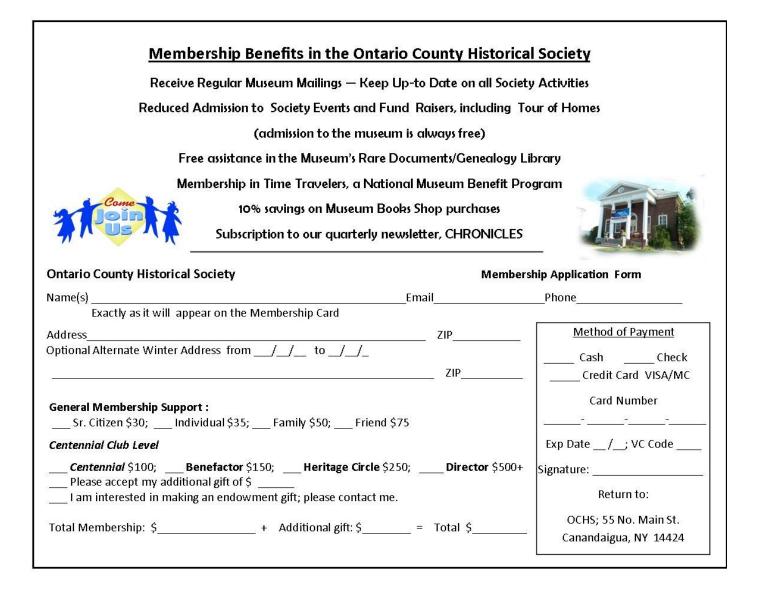
**Board of Trustees** 

### **Business Members**

We wish to thank the business members listed below for their continued support. Please consider them when purchasing goods and services. In addition to these business members, we also appreciate the small donations we receive from dozens of local businesses in Ontario County each year.

1840 Inn On The Main
Aberle Eye Care
Allen County Public Library
B & E Electric
Bella Rose Bed & Breakfast
Canandaigua Carpets Inc.
Canandaigua Insurance Agency
Canandaigua National Bank
Clifton Springs Historical Society
Dick Anthony Ltd.
Edelweiss Properties Realtors LLC
Farmington Historical Society

Finger Lakes Community College G.W. Lisk Company Inc. Granger Homestead Society J. D. Chapman Agency Inc. Johnson-Kennedy Funeral Home Inc. JSJ Decorating Lyons National Bank Mayflower Gardens Ltd. Mid Continent Public Library Mitchell Pierson Jr. Inc. Realtors Monica's Pies Naples Historical Society Ontario County Historian Patty's Place Randall Farnsworth Auto Renaissance - The Goodie II Shoppe Ryan's Wine & Spirits Saralinda Hooker Planning and Development Consultant Sonnenberg Gardens and Mansion VR Food Equipment Inc. Wegmans West Bloomfield Town Historian Willow Bend Farms



### The Chronicles

### **Upcoming Events:**

June 2021 through April 2022: Exhibit—Our Family Companions – A History of Pets in Ontario County July 8: Reception for New Director and Pets Exhibit Opening, 5 to 7 PM

July 17: OCHS Annual Garden Tour, 11 AM to 4 PM

August 7 and 21: Arts Council Still-Life Sessions with an Artifact

August 17 to 20: Mini-Makers Week: "Make Art in an Historic Way," for 4th thru 6th graders, 10 to 12 noon

August 19, 2021: Program A Bit of Bradgon: His Architecture and Legacy, speaker Richard Chait

August date TBA: Ontario County History Auto Tour-with Preston Pierce, OCHS Educator and **Ontario County Historian** 

NOTICE: If your address changes seasonally, please let us know the alternative address and the effective dates.

#### Or Current Resident



Canandaigua, New York 14424 55 North Main Street



VN , auginbrand Permit No. 29 **GIV**<sub>d</sub> U.S.POSTAGE Non-Profit Org.