

The Colonie Historical Oracle

Quarterly Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie

Volume 13 No. 1

January-March 2017

Jean S. Olton Colonie Town Historian Emeritus 1969 - 2003



Jean S. Olton 1917—2017

Jean Olton:

I first met Jean Olton shortly after being appointed as the Historian for the Village of Menands in 1986. My late father, Charles J. Franklin was a member of the Town of Colonie Historical Society at the time. My father's parents emigrated to Menands from Czechoslovakia before WWI. My father was born in 1925 and spent his childhood growing up in Menands along with his brother and sisters. My father told me about all of the places and things that used to be in Menands but had long since disappeared. I was on a quest.

I visited Jean in her office when it was still in the Pruy House and introduced myself. I asked her if she had material on the Village of Menands, which she did, and immediately offered to help me in any way she could. I found Jean to be very gracious, exhibiting a quiet dignity and composure which invited one's immediate respect. Of Jean's many accomplishments, she was most proud of being able to save the important historic site known today as the Schuyler Flatts Cultural Park.

In 2003, Jean submitted her resignation to then Supervisor Mary Brizzell because of health issues. Upon hearing that, I submitted my application to become Town Historian and was accepted. Transitioning from one job to another can be difficult but Jean continued to come into the office as much as possible to help with that process and we became good friends.

There is a line on page 131 in the book: [Memoirs of an American Lady] which describes the character of the highly respected Madame Schuyler of the Flatts that reminds me greatly of Mrs. Olton: *"It may be easily supposed that Miss Schuyler met with due attention; --- who was respected for the strength of her character, and the dignity and composure of her manners."* Despite several falls and challenging health issues in her later years, Jean Olton continued to exhibit all of these qualities.

Kevin Franklin, Historian, Town of Colonie & Village of Menands.

Jean Olton and the Schuyler Flatts

Revised from remarks at the Schuyler Flatts
Cultural Park Opening, October 10, 2002
By Paul R. Huey

Jean Olton was a good friend, and she will be missed. Because of her, our Town is a better place. It is through her preservation of the Schuyler Flatts site and her many other achievements that her legacy will endure for the benefit of countless future generations. Without her vision and foresight, the historic Schuyler Flatts, now a National Historic Landmark, would not have been preserved and would not have become a park.



Above: Paul Huey, senior archaeologist of the State Historic Trust charts artifacts discovered in the ancestral home of the Schuylers. (Knickerbocker News, August, 1972.

In the middle of the cold winter of 1970 and 1971, during the excavations at the site of Fort Orange in Albany, I learned from Jean Olton that a restaurant chain, Sirloin and Saddle, had plans to build a new restaurant on the vacant Schuyler Flatts property. I met Jean after a program on the Fort Orange excavations at the Ten Broeck Mansion in Albany and expressed my concern about the archeological remains at the Flatts. As a result of this meeting, Jean wrote a letter to my office officially requesting us to commence an archaeological project at the Flatts as a rescue excavation, both to study the Schuyler family in the 18th century and to obtain 17th century material to compare with that from Fort Orange. I still have Jean's letter dated January 19, 1971.

This area was changing rapidly. Interstate 787 was just being constructed, and a large apartment complex was going to be built just south of the Flatts. Jean Olton, however, had a vision for the future that included preservation of the Flatts as a historic site. In her letter of January 19, 1971, she observed with remarkable foresight that "The whole riverfront, from Albany to Troy, would be a wonderful place for development of recreation areas, walkways, and bicycle paths." Now, 46 years later, that vision is a reality.

Jean was instrumental in 1971 in coordinating our first field season at the Flatts, working with William Sanford, Colonie Supervisor, James Creighton, the Town Planner, and Jean Pauley of the Heldeberg Workshop. The discoveries at the Flatts, at that time still privately owned and threatened by new development at that time created immense interest in the site and Colonie History.



Paul Huey, at left, explaining the significance of the stone courtyard uncovered at Schuyler Flatts.

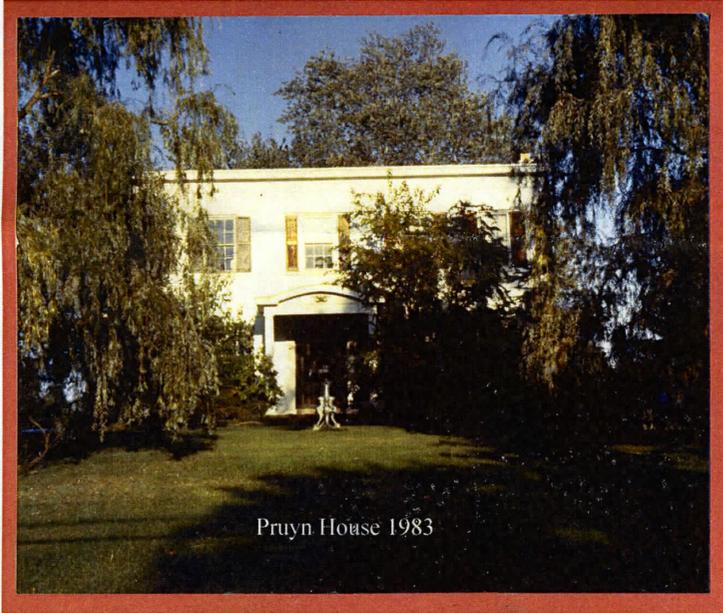
One result was the formation of the Colonie Historical Society through Jean's efforts. The Historical Society held a grand reception on October 17 which included a tour of the excavations and on October 18 and 19, for two days, all 5th, 6th, and 7th grade students in the entire Town of Colonie toured the excavations. Jean Olton organized all of these events at the Flatts, and already she was promoting plans for "a miniature park there with historical markers." As Colonie Town Historian, Jean Olton was instrumental in preserving not only the Flatts but many other places and areas as historic sites for public enjoyment and education. These include historic cemeteries and spectacular ruins of the Erie Canal, such as the Weigh Lock and Lock 4 in Maplewood and the sections of the canal near the Schuyler Flatts. Jean Olton was a truly outstanding Town Historian.

Now, perhaps more than ever before, is the time for us to remember our history, and to preserve the historic places such as the Schuyler Flatts which can inspire our imaginations and teach our young people about who we were and who we are.

Jean Olton & Pruyn House, remembered by past Colonie Town
Supervisor Fred Field:

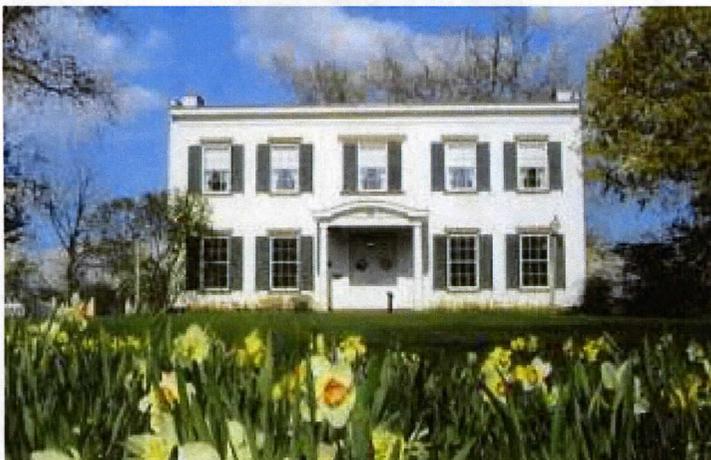
Jean Olton was very dear to me. We worked together for 18 years and it was a privilege to know her and work with her (and sometimes for her). She was one of the kindest and gentlest person I had the pleasure of knowing. Her commitment and dedication to the history of Colonie was unequalled and her knowledge of what made Colonie the great Town that it is was something to behold.

I vividly remember the day she and several others came to my office in Town Hall and suggested we should purchase the Pruy House because of its historical value. I said I would look at the house to see if it was as she said it was. I drove over to Old Niskayuna Road and went right by it without seeing it because it was so overgrown with vegetation. I did eventually get inside to it and frankly did not think much of it. Jean can be most persuasive in a gentle way and ultimately I took the question to the Town Board and they agreed to purchase



Pruyn House 1983

Needless to say the Pruy House is now a jewel in the Town of Colonies crown. Colonie has truly lost a giant, a most valuable friend, and for me personally someone I really admired and enjoyed serving with. She has left a legacy that will keep her in our thoughts for eternity.



Pruyn House 2017

Diane Morgan
Curator, Pruy House

For those of us at Pruy House, we remember the role Jean Olton played in saving this old house. As Town Historian, Jean joined with others to persuade Supervisor Fred Field and the Town Board members to purchase this house and 5 ½ acre site. The plan was to make this a historical and cultural center for the Town. Jean's love of history led her to pursue placing many structures of this Town on the National and State Registers. Her focus was on preserving historic sites for public enjoyment and education. Jean was a remarkable lady who will be remembered for years to come.

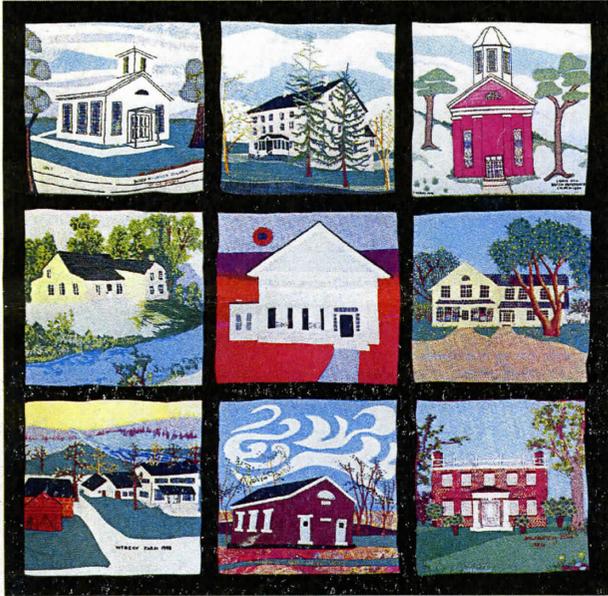


"The Town Of Colonie: A Pictorial History" was published under the supervision of the Town Historian, Jean S. Olton; edited by Warren F. Broderick. Jean is pictured above with members of the Book Committee: Maurine Evans, Dee Herbrandson, R. Arthur Johnson, Elizabeth Lee, Barbara Ruch and Betty Shaver. David Barnet was also a member of the committee.

This comprehensive volume is the first published early history of the Town and encompasses the archaeological and geographical features of the area; its earliest settlement by Native Americans; the colonization by the Dutch, followed by the English and later many other European immigrants who comprised it's population. It includes the early growth of the community and the founding of the Town of Colonie in 1895. The numerous illustrations including maps, documents, water color renditions and many previously unprinted photographs; forming a vivid picture of the community and the life and development of its people.

THE TOWN OF COLONIE

A Pictorial History

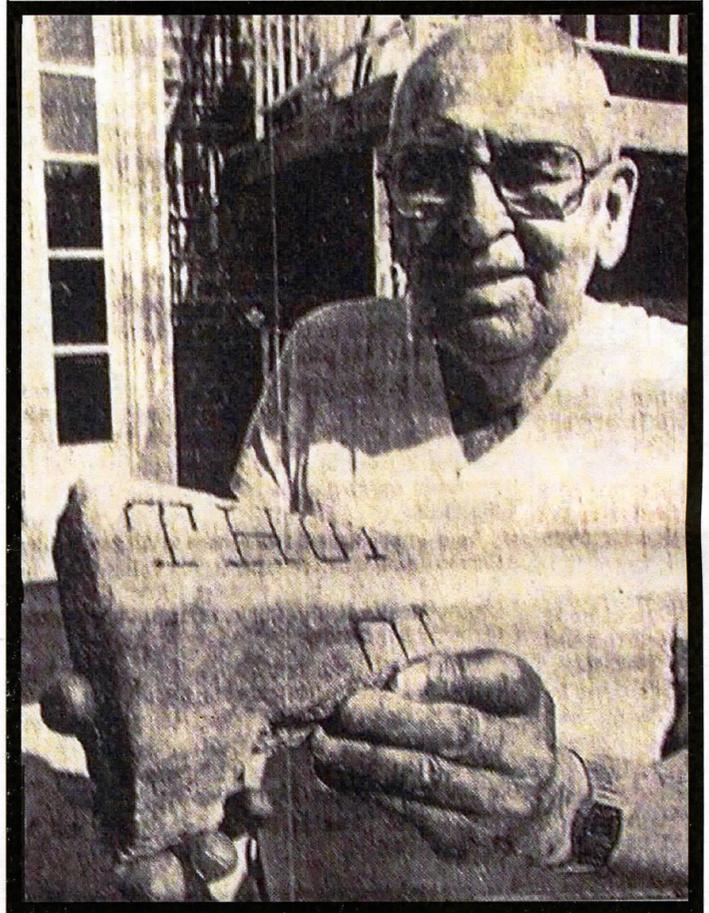


Jean Olton, Preserver of the Historical Record
By Bebe Morehead

Jean Olton was a very helpful member of the Town Clerk's Records Management Advisory Committee which I chaired. One day she said that the Historian had the opportunity to secure a large donation of archival records documenting substantial portions of Colonie history. Jean sighed and said she didn't know how to take in this great amount of material. Of course, we agreed to help and followed Jean to Art Johnson's residence where we boxed up the contents of two file cabinets. At our office we created content list for each of the boxes and a large bundle of oversize maps to make them available to researchers.

Art Johnson's years of research on the old family cemeteries and the earliest settlers of Colonie were preserved for future researchers. There are binders containing the details about the cemetery followed by historical and genealogical research on the people who owned the land and those buried in the cemetery.

Today as I volunteer in the Historian's Office for the Colonie Historical Society, my appreciation grows for Jean's unwavering determination to collect the archival history of the Town of Colonie as we catalog the resources collected through the years. The Society, with the advice of the Town Historian, will continue Jean's legacy to the residents of Colonie by collecting objects and archival material, and educational programming.



"Arthur Johnson of Menands holds a broken section of a tombstone unearthed at a Colonie site he thinks may be a 130 year old cemetery for freed slaves." Knickerbocker News, July 1984

Welcome New Members!

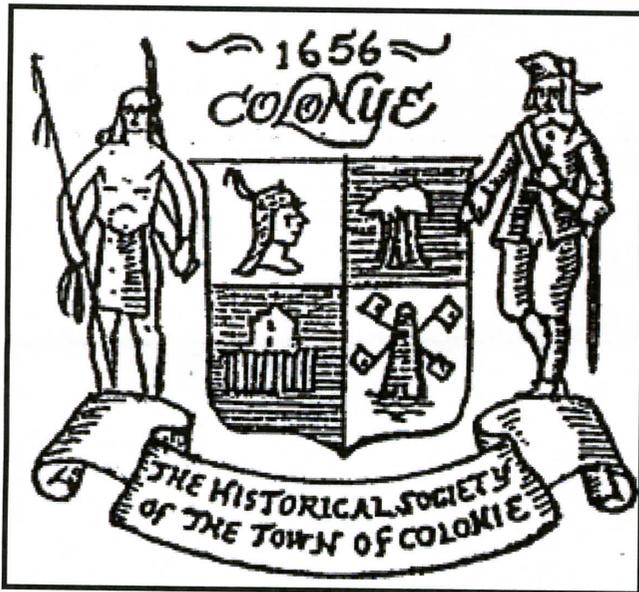
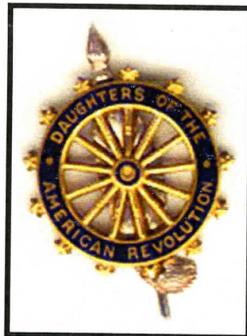
The Historical Society of the Town of Colonie
would like to welcome our newest members!

Diane L. Hutchinson
Carol F. Hedges
Karen Jones
Linda D'Oranzio Miller
Lynn Ryan
Beth Garabedian
David & Sharon Brennan



In 1963 Jean was one of the Founders and Charter Trustees of the Colonie Free Library Association. She was instrumental in having this Library turned over to the Town of Colonie as a Municipal Library in 1970.

1968 – 1971 Regent (President) of the Mohawk Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, Albany.



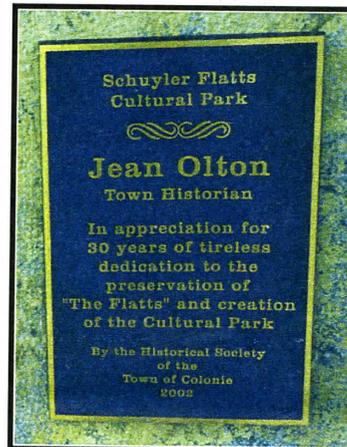
1971 Founder of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie. The first meeting of the Society attracted 75 members for a talk on the Lisha Kill Reformed Church. The fourth meeting brought 450 people to a talk on the Erie Canal. Many of those interested became volunteers in the many projects proposed by Jean Olton in a time of renewed interest in preserving our history.

National Register of Historic Places

In 1972 the Historic Sites Committee was formed to identify structures worthy of preservation. Beginning in 1974, Chair Catherine S. Eckhof divided the town into 11 districts which were surveyed by members of the Historical Society with selected properties then examined by David G. Barnet and John Harwood. Mr. Barnet and Mr. Harwood examined over 300 properties and identified nearly two dozen farm cemeteries throughout the town. A total of 39 homes and sites were eventually admitted to the National Register of Historic Places. Two additional sites have been added since which include the St. Agnes Cemetery and Albany Felt Co. building in Menands.

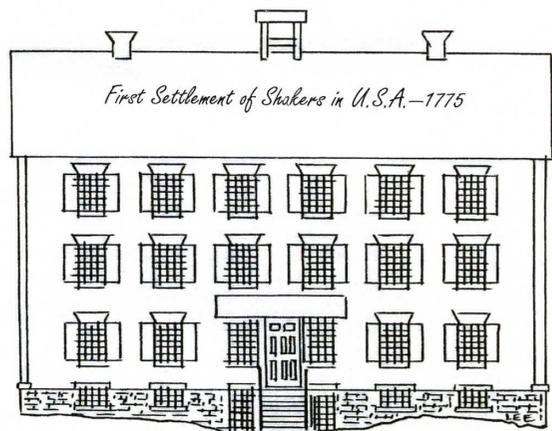
A listing of the Historic Register Properties in Colonie can be found by looking at the following Internet site:

<http://www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/ny/albany/state.html>



Plaque for Jean Olton at the Schuyler Flatts Cultural Park.

Schuyler Flatts is on The National Register of Historic Places and Recognized as a National Landmark Site



1978: Jean was an organizer and a Director of the Shaker Heritage Society. The 25 buildings and 107 acres of land was the first historic site admitted as a Historic District in the Town by Jean and the Historical Society.

Yes, I would like to become a member of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie, New York, Inc. in the classification I have checked or renew my membership as noted.

My annual dues payment in the amount of \$ _____ is enclosed.

Classification	Annual Dues	Classification	Annual Dues	Classification	Annual Dues
<input type="checkbox"/> Students and Senior Citizens. .	\$10.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Family	\$15.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Supporting.....	\$100—\$250
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual	12.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Business	50.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor.....	\$250 & up

Please accept my additional donation of \$ _____ as a gift to the Historical Society. *The Historical Society is a not-for-profit corporation.*

Name _____

Address _____

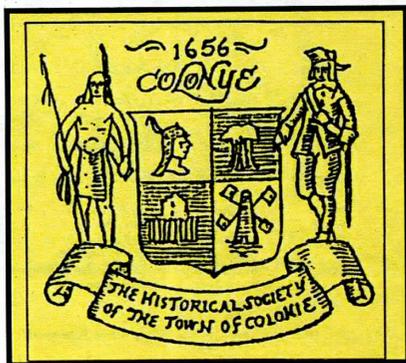
Post Office _____ Zip Code _____

Telephone Number _____ E-Mail _____

Please mail to Membership Chairperson c/o Historical Society, Memorial Town Hall, Newtonville, N. Y. 12128-0508

CHARTERED BY THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

**THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF THE TOWN OF COLONIE**



Historical Society Founded 1971

MEMORIAL TOWN HALL
NEWTONVILLE, NY 12128-0508
518-782-2601

Kevin Franklin, Town Historian

Current Officers of the Society

- President:** Francina McCashion,
- Vice Pres.:** Dr. Donald Morton
- Treasurer:** Kristie Schimpf
- Recording Sec.:** Bebe Morehead
- Corresponding Sec:** Ursula MacAffer
- Membership Chair:** Karen Senecal
- Past President:** Mark Bodnar

- Trustees:** Charles Flanagan, Ed Engle,
Robert Reilly, Tony Brankman,
Karen Senecal, Ann Eberle,
Deb Gaulty, George Webb,
Marcia Codling

Please support the Colonie Historical Society's efforts to stimulate an appreciation of the historic heritage of our community! Join Now!

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Spring has arrived according to the calendar. Perhaps someone can inform Mother Nature, although the sun is brighter, higher and warmer. April 9th brought the honoring of our beloved late Town Historian Jean Olton, at the Pruyn House. Those of us who worked with Jean gathered to reflect, remember and celebrate her legacy of awakening the historical background of the town of Colonie.

May 18th at 6:30 pm will be the Historical Society's Annual Dinner at Shaker Ridge Country Club. Dr. Bruce Venter, a former Albany educator and historian, will present the evening talk following dinner. The election of Trustees will be held and the annual historical Society's report will be available. I do hope you will be able to join us for an interesting evening of food and fellowship.

Fran McCashion, President

Editor's Note: This newsletter was compiled with a whole lot of discovery and patience working with "Publisher" and both Kevin Franklin and Bebe Morehead can now appreciate all of the hard work that Mark Bodnar has done over time to put together these newsletters! (It ain't easy!) Wishing Mark swift recovery from his recent knee surgery!