

The Colonie Historical Oracle

Quarterly Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie

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The West Troy Water Works

Submitted by Kevin Franklin, Colonie Town Historian

Fire! Fire! The words still strike fear into people, but in the 19th Century, the alarm of a fire in a community sometimes brought disaster. Unfortunately, large fires were very commonplace in recent area histories. Many local communities including Albany, Troy and the old Village of West Troy (now the City of Watervliet) document their fair share of serious fires. Fires in the early 19th Century sometimes leveled blocks of homes in Albany, and in the mid-19th Century, a spark from a steam engine set the old wooden Green Island Bridge on fire and westerly winds fanned the fire blowing hot embers into nearby Troy causing the great conflagration that destroyed much of the center portion of the city. Building codes changed due to fires.

Before the common use of bricks in building construction, many of the older structures in the cities were made of wood frames with wood clapboard exteriors and sometimes roofs capped with wooden shingles, all perfect fuel for a fire. Early buildings did not have any centralized heating and depended on fireplaces to generate heat. The fuel was wood. In later years cast iron stoves supplemented or replaced fireplace use. Wood was still used as fuel in early stoves until coal began to replace wood as a fuel source as it became more readily available. Gas lighting slowly replaced candles and kerosene lamps, but all of the methods of heating or lighting a home or business before the invention of electricity depended solely on some source of flame or fire. The brightness of light is described as: "candlepower".

In the book: "The History of the City of Watervliet

N.Y. 1630-to-1910" by James T. Myers, many of the chapters include mention of some of the city's more serious fires such as in October 1852 where a fire began in the canal (Erie) stables of the "Widow Botter on Whitehall Street which spread with great rapidity destroying six houses and five stables together with sixty five horses," supposedly set by an arsonist. The fire caused thousands of dollars in damage, most of which was not covered by insurances. Additional fires are mentioned in Myers history. Several were reported in local newspapers.

Another large fire occurred in West Troy in December 1854, and even reported in the New York Times: "A fire occurred this morning in West Troy, destroying four frame buildings, occupied by Henry Cole, clothier; J. Fortier, boot and shoe dealer; Jacob Cohen, clothier; Wm. Rouse, barber; James Morrison, saloon; James Brisland, boots and shoes; Meyers & Gunsaulus, clothiers. The buildings were situated on the Canal, near the corner of Union Street and were owned by Wm. Smith and John Knowes of Albany. A covered bridge across the Canal was also consumed. The total loss is \$10,000 but is mostly covered by insurance."

In order to fight fires a continuous source of water is needed. In the earliest days buckets of sand or water were hung in buildings to douse flames. Chemical "hand grenades" of glass balls containing a substance to throw at flames were also hung on walls of homes and in factories and hotels as a means to slow or stop a small fire from becoming larger.

The earliest mention of a fireman in the Myers book is on page 13 where it is written that William Andrews, Jr., who was born in 1830, was an “old time fireman identified with the old Rip Van Winkle [fire house or engine]; served in office as captain...” So, apparently there was some sort of an organized volunteer fire department in West Troy in the earlier part of the 19th Century, but where did the fireman and their equipment draw water from? The Hudson River was certainly a spot but because it was lower than the surrounding community it could not have provided unaided water pressure needed to combat fires. Open streams passing through the village or even the Erie Canal were another source when not frozen.

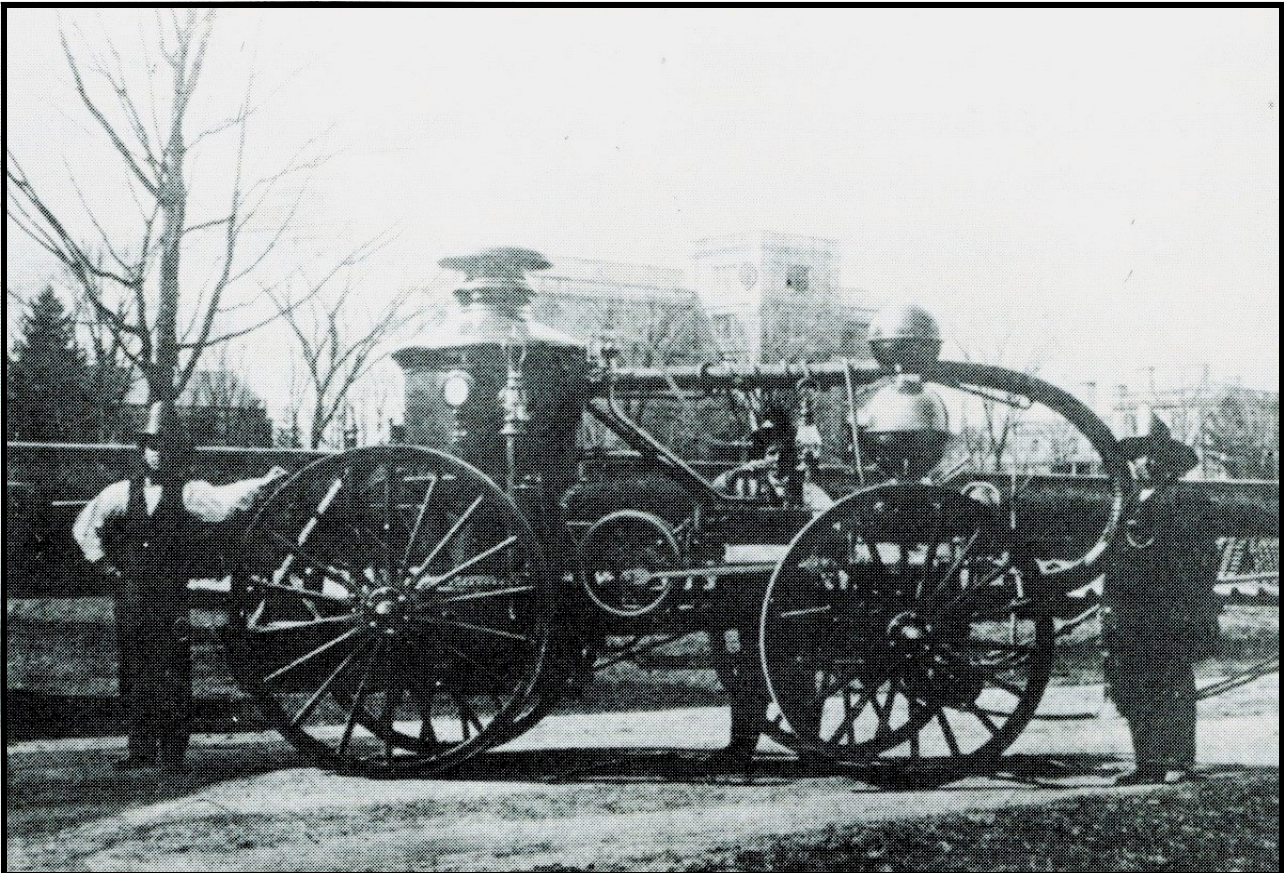


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Historical Society Town of Colonie

Myers also said the Watervliet Arsenal, (established in 1813) had its own horse drawn steamer/pumper by 1827: “The Arsenal engine, intended for exclusive use by the post, and manned by the employees when duty required it, was always ready to respond when assistance was required outside, either in the village (West Troy) or in Troy; the foreman of the company was he who first arrived and captured the trumpet that hung on the machine! The services of that engine has been many times required and at Troy’s large fires their presence was absolutely required. It had its day of usefulness. It was relegated to the scrap heap in 1880.” (Note: In recent years the pumper/aerial ladder truck of the Watervliet Arsenal Fire Department, through an agreement with the Town as part of Colonie’s mutual aid daytime response, continues to respond to fire calls in districts such as Menands, Schuyler Heights and Maplewood. If the 1827 date in Myers’ history book is true, the Watervliet Arsenal Fire Department has been serving the Arsenal and nearby communities for 190 years!)



Watervliet Arsenal Fire Pumper

The old Arsenal pumper may have been put to pasture by 1880 because of old age or the recent construction of the West Troy Water Works, incorporated in 1873-77 for the main purpose of providing a continuous source of water for fires (and drinking) into the Village of West Troy. Members of the incorporation board included Mr. Lorenzo D. Collins, (who would later become the first elected Supervisor of the new Town of Colonie in 1895). Another board member was Mr. George Wiswall. (A portion of present day Boght Road in Colonie leading to Watervliet was once called Wiswall Rd.) Also; Mr. George R. Meneely of the prominent West Troy Meneely bell makers was an initial incorporation member, among others.

A modern brick building housing pumps and other support buildings were constructed by the West Troy Water Works Corporation on the west bank of the Mohawk River near where the Dunsbach Ferry crossed the river between Colonie and Clifton Park. A wood and stone dam 1,000 feet long running from either shore to a small island in the middle of the river was erected diverting water to the main brick building that housed two water wheels; one of 40 h.p. and another of 60 h.p., powering two "Vergennes Pumps" developed by John P. Flanders of Vergennes, Vermont.

These modern pumps pumped the water from the level of the Mohawk River upwards 130 feet over the river embankment, where it traveled about a half a mile to a holding chamber where it then flowed by gravity through large pipes to a newly constructed reservoir a half mile above West Troy beside the Troy and Shaker Road (now called Watervliet Shaker Road) in what would later become Colonie by 1895. A deep ravine between the Watervliet Shaker Road and St. Patrick's Catholic Cemetery on the north side of the ravine was dammed with an earthen dam creating a reservoir holding 70 million gallons of water which flowed by gravity alone to pipes that fed a new water delivery system for West Troy consisting of 87 fire hydrants and 584 individual household "taps". A later addition to the system would also serve Green Island.

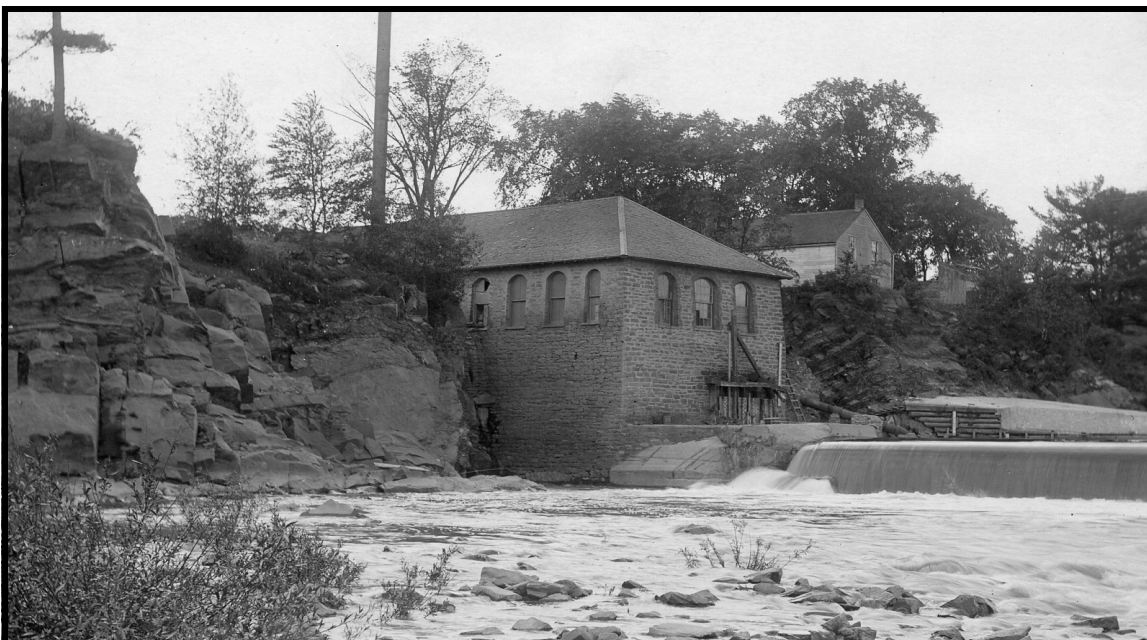
NOTICE! ~ NOTICE! ~ NOTICE! ~ NOTICE!

Upcoming HSTC Programs Announced by
Program Chair Ann Eberle:

January 29: "Ice Harvesting History" by Tom Ragosta at the Colonie Town Library.

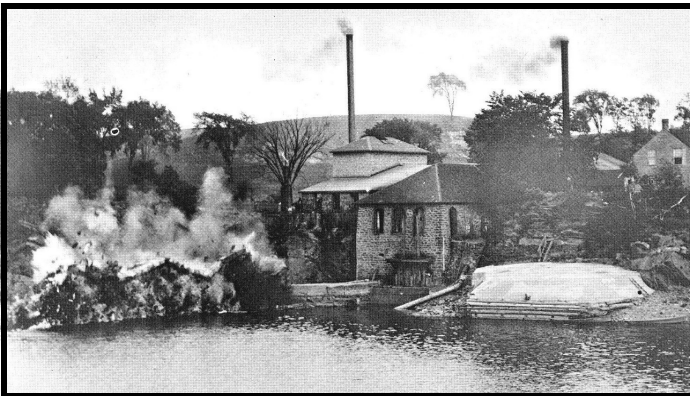
March 26: "Exploring Schuyler Flatts, the Nicoll-Sill House and Van Schaick House" by Michael Lucas, PHD at the Colonie Town Library.

May 18, Annual Dinner: "The Battle of Hubbardton, VT, July 7, 1777" by Bruce Venter at Shaker Ridge Country Club.



West Troy Water Works Building

By October 1900, (according to the Rome, N.Y. Daily Sentinel), the West Troy Water Works was re-organized. The old West Troy Water Works property, including the reservoir were sold under a mortgage foreclosure in July, 1900. The name of the new corporation was called the Watervliet Hydraulic Company. Its new officers coming not from this area but from Utica, N.Y. and Bridgeport, Ct. By 1901 it seems the plant at Dunsbach was not capable of producing the quantity of water needed by the city, and the quality of the water unfit for drinking. The City of Watervliet also claimed the price the company is charging them for the water is “exorbitant” and brought the Watervliet Hydraulic Company to court in an attempt to have the facility at Dunsbach condemned. (Troy Daily Times, Jan. 30, 1901). By September, 1901 the Hydraulic Company completed work on the construction of a new reservoir, six acres in size to the west of the original 1877 reservoir. By 1915, 7,500 feet of new pipe had been laid from the plant at Dunsbach to the new reservoir off Watervliet Shaker Road. (Albany Times Union Nov 7, 1915).



West Troy Water Works being demolished

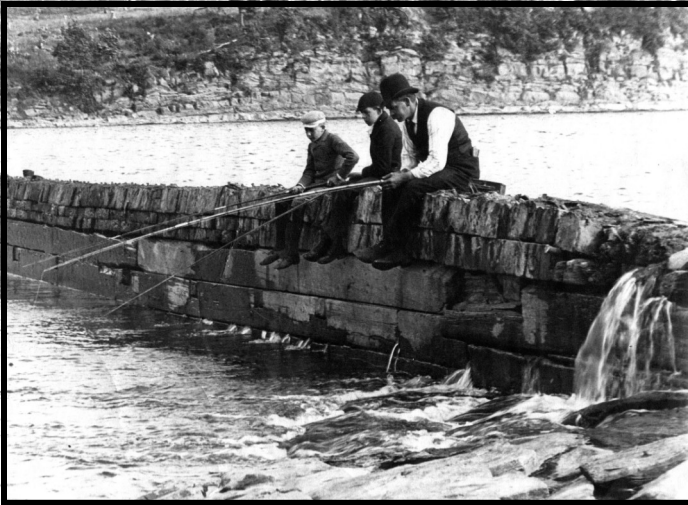
The first decades of the 20th Century experienced great changes in many aspects of American life. Electricity and the electric light bulb were replacing candles and oil lamps to light homes. Improvements to the internal combustion engine continued to be made, making gasoline power more affordable and efficient. Gasoline engines now powered things previously powered by horses or humans. Early cars or “horseless carriages” slowly replaced the horse and carriage. The use of stones in building of foundations was slowly being replaced by concrete. How would any of this progress effect the Watervliet Hydraulic Company? The answer was the old Erie Canal among other influences.

By the turn of the 19th into the 20th Century, the old Erie Canal was now 75 years old. Its infrastructure was under stress. Railroads had been competing with the Erie Canal since the mid-19th Century, ever expanding into areas throughout the state. Opinions were being voiced in the New York State Government about building a much improved New York State Barge Canal System or abandoning the idea of using canals altogether in favor of railroads. Arguments were voiced and it was decided that besides railroads, the continued use of an enlarged canal system was still vital for commerce in the state and that the new system would take advantage of the Mohawk River itself. Canal boats once pulled by horses and mules will be replaced by boats with gasoline powered engines. The old Erie was to be abandoned.

In order to accomplish using the Mohawk River channel itself between the Hudson River and the Mohawk above the Cohoes Falls, a series of five huge modern concrete walled locks would be built at Waterford, N.Y. Known as the “Waterford Flight”. This series of locks lifted boats almost 170 vertical feet in a distance of about a half a mile, replacing the series of many locks on the Cohoes side which eventually raised boats above the height of the Cohoes Falls.

Larger boats could now be used and less time would be needed now to navigate around the barrier of the Cohoes Falls. The new Waterford Flight was also powered by electricity which drove powerful pumps that quickly filled and drained the lock and electric motors that opened and closed huge steel doors. The Waterford Flight remains an engineering marvel lifting boats the greatest height in the shortest distance of any lock system in the world.

The State Legislature authorized the construction of the new barge canal system in 1903. Construction began in 1905 to create the Waterford Flight and the concrete dams built between Colonie and Clifton Park at Crescent and another dam at Dunsbach Ferry thereby increasing the depth of the river westward of the Cohoes Falls to support modern motor powered boats and barges. The construction of the dams at Crescent and Dunsbach not only increased the depth of the Mohawk River, but increased its width in many places as well. The new State Barge Canal System would have a disastrous impact on the Watervliet Hydraulic Company’s works at Dunsbach Ferry which would soon become



Fishing on the dam of the West Troy Water Works

inundated. The City of Watervliet would have to find another source of water quickly because the new Barge Canal System was scheduled to open in 1918, and problems continued to plague the pump house at Dunsbach for a variety of reasons.

In 1914 a severe thunderstorm with lightning hit the area of Dunsbach Ferry causing considerable damage to many properties including the Water Works plant which was “wrecked with a bolt of lightning and the huge smokestack hurled from its foundation.” (Mechanicville Mercury Newspaper, Aug. 29, 1914). In 1915, the City of Watervliet offered to buy the water works plant at Dunsbach from the Watervliet Hydraulic Company but the company rejected the city’s offer as insufficient.

The City of Watervliet was now in a race against time with the construction of the infrastructure supporting the new State Barge Canal System on the Mohawk. The City found its answer by damming the Normanskill stream in Guilderland creating a new and large reservoir shared by the Town of Guilderland. The new geometrically shaped Watervliet Reservoir and a new filtration plant building were built on the Watervliet Shaker Road in Colonie and the new delivery system into the City was completed by 1917, just shy of when the new, New York State Barge Canal system opened in 1918. The old pumping station at Dunsbach Ferry was completely obsolete and its stone dam dynamited and cleared as part of the project to open the new Barge Canal. The original reservoir of the Watervliet Water Works constructed by 1877 was simply abandoned to the elements.

In later years, serious storms including the devastating Hurricane Floyd in 1999 threatened dams throughout the north east. A project was initiated to identify the many dams (active and abandoned) which still held back water that could potentially fail causing catastrophic damage to areas downstream. The old earthen dam of the 1877 West Troy Reservoir was identified as one of those susceptible to failure and construction began in 2006 to remove trees and growth from the face of the dam and reinforce the water side of the dam with stone rip-rap. A new concrete weir was constructed on the north end of the dam to allow for a controlled overflow during storm events. The old West Troy Reservoir now provides a pleasant scenery for the residents of Lake Shore Apartments.

The new Watervliet Reservoir at Guilderland holds enough water to provide an average of 1 (one) Billion gallons of potable water to the residents of the City of Watervliet alone, not counting what is drawn to satisfy the needs of the people of Guilderland.



Original Stand Pipe, c. 1877, at Watervliet Reservoir on Watervliet Shaker Road (Rte. 155).

Welcome New Members!

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

Kelly M. Giminianni
 Rose Zaloom
 Michael P. Barrett
 Franklyn C. Mooney
 Ed Pellegrini.

Welcome Aboard!!

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	\$250.00 & 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 _____

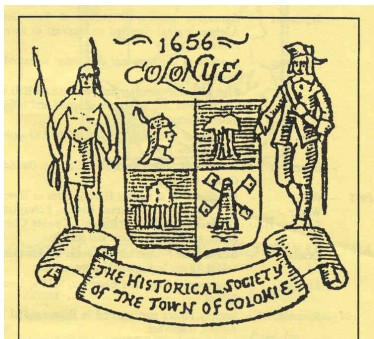
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**THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF THE TOWN OF COLONIE**



Historical Society Founded 1971

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Kevin Franklin: Town Historian

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Support the Society's efforts to stimulate an appreciation of the historical heritage of your community. Join Now!

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

At the 21st Annual Capital Region Archives Dinner in October at Shaker Ridge Country Club, Craig Carlson, Deputy Albany County Clerk, presented the Sister Elaine Wheeler Award for Distinguished Service Award, to Kevin Franklin, Town of Colonie Historian, received for the work we all know he does so well. Kevin again demonstrates his interest and understanding of the rich history of Colonie in this article about the West Troy Waterworks.

Remember the days of the Ice-box? Our next membership meeting will be Sunday, January 29, at 2 p.m. at the Library. Tom Ragosta, President of the Watervliet Historical Society, will present a program, "Ice Harvesting History". This power point presentation will be a brief history of its development on the Hudson River and detail the process for harvesting, storing and delivery. Tools of the trade will be on display.

Wishing all of our members a Happy and Healthy New Year.

Fran McCashion, President