

The Colonie Historical Oracle

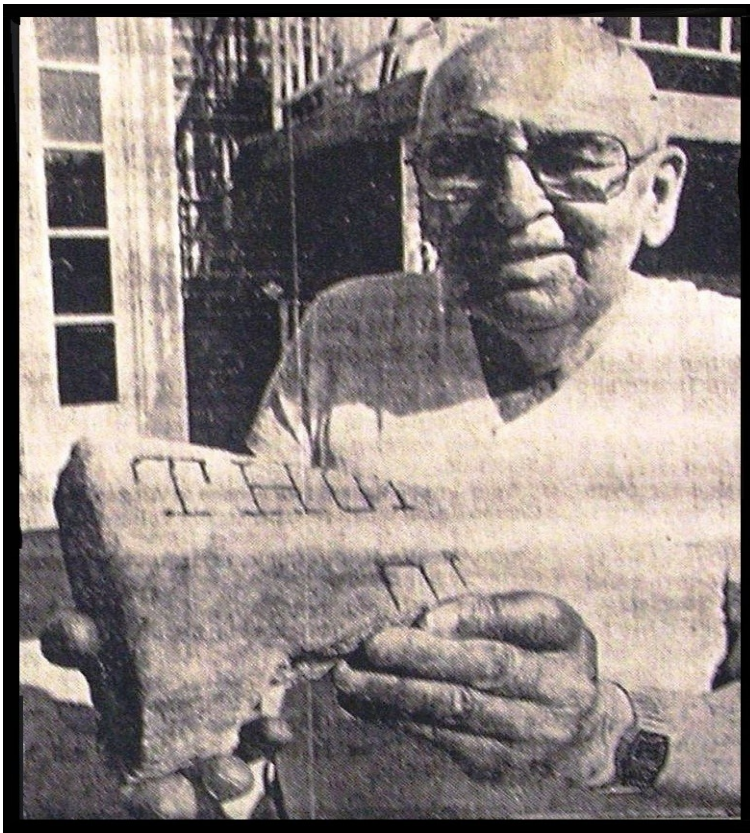
Quarterly Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie

Volume 16, No. 4

October-December 2021

Submitted by Kevin Franklin, Colonie Town Historian

Mr. R. Arthur Johnson



**Archaeologist, Genealogist,
Surveyor and Tireless
Researcher**

Photo
"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 New, July 1984

Shortly after being appointed as Historian for the Village of Menands in 1986 I was able to meet Mr. R. Arthur Johnson, or "Art Johnson", a man that I'd heard about through Dr. Paul Huey, archaeologist for the N.Y. State Office of Parks and Recreation and Historic Preservation. Mr. Johnson was living, at that time, in the Park Hill Apartment Complex in Menands. Mr. Johnson formally resided on the Old Loudon Road in Latham. I asked to visit him. I went to Mr. Johnson's apartment at Park Hill Apartments, and he and his wife graciously greeted me into their apartment. Mr. Johnson's health was failing, but he spoke of his many excavations at various places including Native

American sites in the Mohawk Valley and elsewhere including Colonie and Menands. I noticed that Mr. Johnson was "sizing me up" and my reactions to his conversation about the various places he had excavated. I hardly blinked as Mr. Johnson talked about his work and the many fascinating discoveries he had made. A shadow box like coffee table with a glass top displayed dozens of beautiful Native American points and stone tools. Mr. Johnson recollected where many of them had been excavated and from what period. Some were thousands of years old and many of the points were not native to New York State but

came from other areas of North America, carried to this area and apparently traded with Indian's of the Mohawk Valley. His knowledge of Native American and early European occupation sites was amazing.

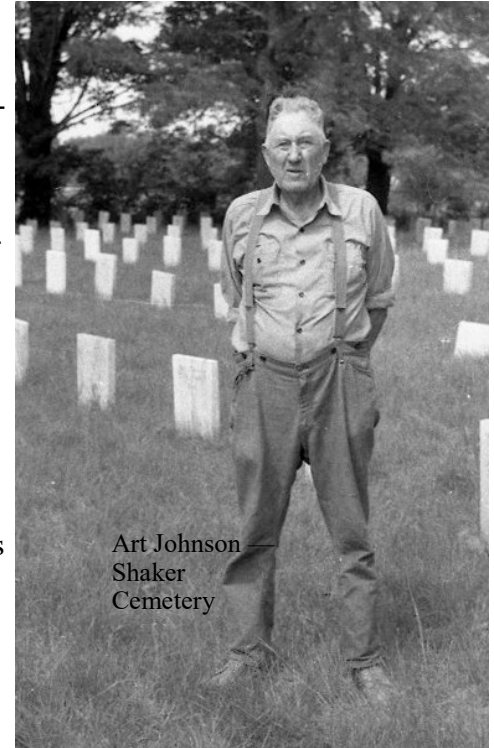
Our conversation turned to sites in the Menands area along the banks of the Hudson River and the "Little River" or that tributary of the river between the west bank and several large islands in the river in the Menands and South Troy areas including working at the Schuyler Flatts site and southward through Menands during the time that both I-787 and the Rt. 378 interchange were being built and about the same time, a large concrete pipeline that connected waste sewage from the Cities of Cohoes and Watervliet and other areas north of Menands through the Schuyler Flatts and to the Albany County Sewage Treatment Plant at the City of Albany and Menands Village line.

This construction afforded Mr. Johnson the ability to conduct several archaeological examinations of areas along the west bank of the Hudson River that would soon be covered over or otherwise destroyed by construction activity.

My Visit with Mr. Johnson lasted about 45 minutes. Toward the end, Mr. Johnson handed me a typed document titled "The First Farm in Menands" which documented an early 17th Century farm immediately south of the Schuyler Flatts site that belonged to a Dutchman named Broer Cornelis, or "Brother Cornelis" as the Indians called him. Broer Cornelis actual name was Cornelis Anthonisz van Schlick from Breucklen (Brooklyn takes its name from Breucklen). The "First Farm" document consists of 23 pages of typewritten pages of information about Broer Cornelis discovered in old Dutch Records of Albany including court cases against Cornelis for basically abandoning his farm south of the Flatts and allowing livestock to damage fences and land in adjoining farms, etc. The story about Broer Cornelis and the First Farm in Menands are worthy of it's own newsletter, but lets get back to Mr. Johnson's affiliation with both past Colonie Historian Jean Olton and the Historical Society of Colonie. The Historical Society of the Town of Colonie was chartered by the N.Y.S. Board of Regents in 1971, and the approaching U.S. Bi-Centennial in 1976 generated a tremendous amount of interest in our Town's History.

The Historian's Office, Town Board, and Historical Society of the Town of Colonie began preparations toward celebrating our Country's Independence from England in 1776. Good things began to happen in Colonie and one of those "good things" was the dogged energy, enthusiasm and intelligence of Mr. R. Arthur Johnson, a resident of Latham at the time.

The Town publicized that the Historian's Office wished for people to notify the Historian of any old family burial grounds throughout the town and about where these were located. Calls began to come in regarding these sites. But who would take up the



Art Johnson —
Shaker
Cemetery

task of meeting property owners, and be able to physically tromp through fields and woods and over streams to find gravesites that had fallen into disrepair and were long covered over with sod or fallen trees and be able to piece together broken stones, take measurements and photographs and more? Many of these sites were well over 100 years old and had never been documented. More and more calls came in about these sites and it was Art Johnson who volunteered to document them. Art Johnson would soon trek into woods and fields with his notepad, camera, shovel, tape measure, and ground probe along with some brushes and small hand tools and begin the task of carefully plotting the parameters of a cemetery, the location of stones within the site, their sizes and whenever possible all of the information on each stone including gathering up pieces of fractured stones, joining those pieces like a puzzle and documenting what he could by both pencil drawings and photographs.

Old tablet like gravestones are very heavy, some weighing well over 100 lbs. Mr. Johnson had to flip

those that had fallen over face down in order to capture names, dates of death, etc. It was not uncommon for information to include the number of years, months, and days that a person lived.

Johnson's notes themselves are truly unique. Besides his many areas of expertise, Mr. Johnson was a frugal individual. His employment at the telephone company afforded access to old phone company computer print outs and Mr. Johnson would cut and use the blank side of these printouts for his hand and typewritten information. His notes often contain a personal side, reflecting how he had nearly been badly injured falling into an old foundation hole and rescuing himself, thankful for only receiving some minor cuts and bruises. Keep in mind that Mr. Johnson worked alone and before the era of cell phones, so any debilitating injury being hundreds of yards away from his vehicle or a nearby home was a serious issue. Mr. Johnson sometimes documented his personal feeling toward individuals whose gravestones had been broken up and tossed about, and feeling a sense of gratitude when finding a critical part or piece of a gravestone of "my friend".

When I speak of the frugality of Mr. Johnson, this included using some kind of camera that split a normal frame of 35mm film into two images. So, a 24 frame roll of film gave Mr. Johnson 48 images.

Mr. Johnson not only documented over 24 old family cemetery sites scattered throughout the nearly 60 square miles of Colonie, but his follow up research included trips to various places where public records were kept including court houses, county clerks offices, and public libraries where Mr. Johnson gathered information on deeds, early land surveys, wills, church records, meeting with various descendants, and more.

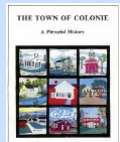
All of the information gathered by Mr. Johnson was accomplished before the era of computers. So many, many hours of his time, miles traveled, his personal money spent, have provided a treasure trove of historic information of many of Colonie's earliest settlers. Mr. Johnson turned over three

large binders documenting early family graveyards complete with photographs, hand drawings, and text to the Historian's Office. In addition to the binders on cemeteries, Mr. Johnson also donated 31 binders of what must have been hundreds or even thousands of hours of research on many of those early families who lived in Colonie two hundred or more years ago. Those binders now fill a 4 drawer legal size fire filing cabinet in the Historian's Office. The information gathered by Mr. Johnson has been provided to numerous archaeologists and engineering firms conducting environmental impact surveys on parcels of land slated for development here in Colonie.

Most recently, Mr. Johnson's notes were extremely important regarding land to be developed in the Boght area of town which includes both a foundation site and probable cemetery of one of Colonie's earliest free black farmers named Thomas Powell. Mr. Johnson is seen holding a piece of Thomas Powell's gravestone on the front of this newsletter. The Powell site will likely be protected against development. Thank you Mr. Johnson for all that you did for us and the Town.

If anyone has the book "Town of Colonie A Pictorial History" and/or the book "Wolf Road: A Century of Deveopment" that they would be willing to donate to the Historical Society, we'd gladly accept all offers.

Please contact us via email at:
historical.society.town.colonie@gmail.com



Welcome New Members!

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

Vanessa Crosby, Shae & Daniel Check, Doris Simon, Amy Sternstein, William & Donna Marie Munro, Caitlin Treacy, Joan Sligh, Michelle Toch Dinsmore and Diana S. Praus



Please visit our Facebook Page:
Historical Society Town of Colonie

**NOTE—Volume and Dates are correct—
THIS IS A CATCH-UP ISSUE**

The Fruits of Art Johnson's Labors—

The Town of Colonie's Historian was given a wide range of archival materials after the death of Art Johnson, including his research on the old family cemeteries and the earliest settlers in the Town of Colonie. Some of these materials are accessible electronically in the New York State Heritage Digital Collection <https://nyheritage.org/collections/colonie-new-york-cemetery-collection>.

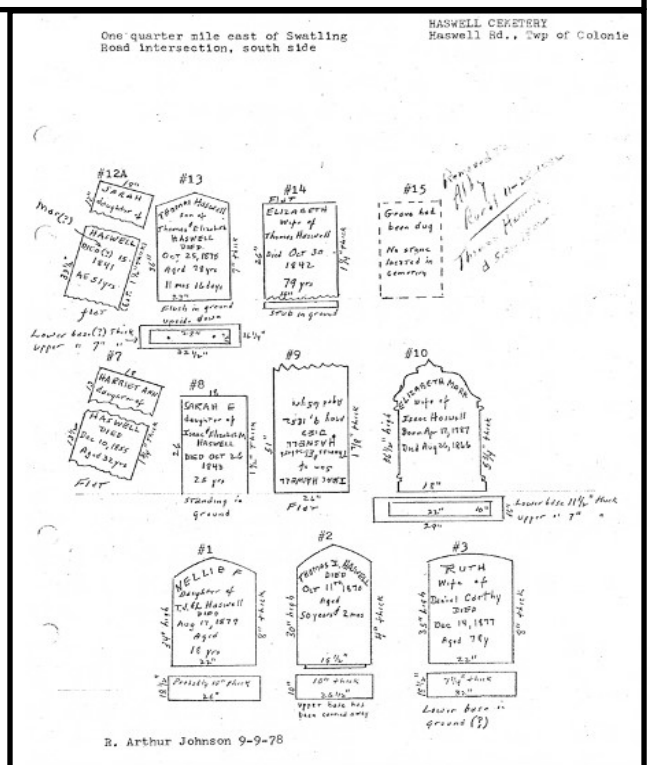
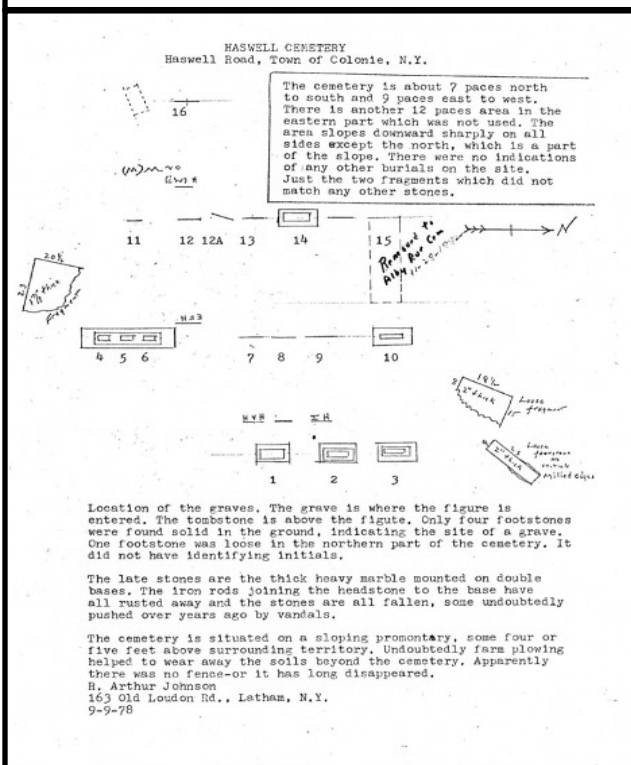
The collection includes documents and photographs created by the Johnson throughout the 1970s as a part of his mission to document all the small family or farm cemeteries in Colonie. These smaller Colonie-area cemeteries are an important part of our Historian's collection, and reflect Art Johnson's important research about the early history of Town. These smaller cemeteries were usually centered around one or a small group of families on land originally owned by them. The general timeframe of the burials in these cemeteries ranges from the late 1700s until the early 1900s. Some of the earlier graves were for individuals involved in or touched by the Revolutionary War.

Shown below are two pages from the Digital Collection illustrating the detail that Art Johnson collected on each of these cemeteries showing Art Johnson's work on the Haswell Cemetery--Haswell Road in Colonie. From the New York Heritage Digital Collections downloaded at <https://nyheritage.org/collections/colonie-new-york-cemetery-collection>

The Historical Society of the Town of Colonie was fortunate to have the late Colonie resident (and noted archaeologist, surveyor, genealogist and historian) R. Arthur "Art" Johnson as a member. During the 1970's and 1980's Art Johnson conducted the following formal presentations sponsored by the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie:

- Nov 1973 Prehistoric Residents of Colonie Artifacts from Nearby Excavations
- Sept 1978 with Jean Olton & Barbara Ruch: Tour of Latham, Boght, Mohawk River Area, Cohoes Falls, Knox Trail, Vandenburg Cemetery
- Nov 1978 Family Cemeteries & Town History
- May 1982 with Paul Russell: Shaker Walking Tour. Colonie History Week
- May 1982 with Robert Flores: Reminiscing about Colonie's Past with Howard Dill, Walter Engle, Elva Hills Smith, Frank Willey. Colonie History Week
- May 1983 Above ground Archaeology at the Witbeck House Site

These presentations were audio recorded and we hope over time, to make those that are still of sufficient audio quality accessible via a new website for the HSTC that we are planning on rolling out.



Our Shaker Seed Box—By Bebe Morehead, Trustee

In 1984 Mrs. Irving Buhrmaster donated a Shaker Seed Box. It is a pine box with dovetailed corners for seed storage, hinged with a metal fastener. Dimensions: 4 ½ x 23 ½ x 11 inches. The box was in good condition, but very dirty. The paper labels were fragile and vulnerable to further damage. In 2021, the Society decided to send the box to Spicer Art Conservation, LLC in Delmar for treatment to improve the appearance and to preserve the wood and paper.



The label on the front of the box



The remnants of the blue paper under the front label which had to be removed.



After treatment the box is clean, and the cleaned labels are backed with acid free paper and returned to their original location.



The "List of Garden Seeds" after treatment



The inside of the box is partitioned into 7 sections with vertically placed boards; 2 of these sections then have an additional horizontal board, resulting in 9 individual sections. Along the partition boards small pieces of paper list different vegetables including cucumbers and

The Watervliet Shaker Seed Industry

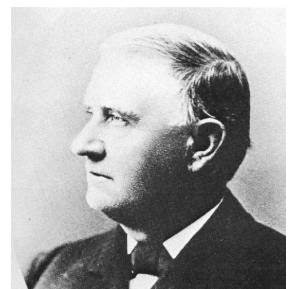
Joseph Turner of Watervliet assigned about two acres of land in 1790 for the purpose of raising vegetable seeds to sell for an income. The Watervliet Shakers were the first people in the United States to sell garden seeds commercially.

General stores displayed these wooden boxes with various seed envelope packet "papers" – as the Shakers called them. Shaker brothers, traveling established seed routes, left boxes of packaged seeds with merchants along the route with the understanding that they would return in the late summer or fall to retrieve unsold seeds and some negotiated share of the money realized from their sale.

The large label on the inside of the box reads "List of Garden Seeds Raised by the Society of Shaker, near Albany, N. Y. Orders addressed to Philip Smith, Shakers, Albany, N. Y." / "Dealer in BROOMS, BRUSHES, PREPARED SWEET CORN, MEDICAL HERBS, ROOTS & EXTRACTS and all other articles manufactured by the Society."

Brother Philip Smith was born in 1837 and died April 17, 1905. Philip was brought to the Shakers, along with his sister Lucretia, on October 27, 1841, by their father Simon. Philip worked as a herdsman, botanist, and took care of the poultry. In May 1875, Philip was appointed as Trustee to care for the seed business and continued his duties until his death.

Brother Smith Photo from collection of Gertrude Reno Sherburne



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"/> Student and Senior	\$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 _____

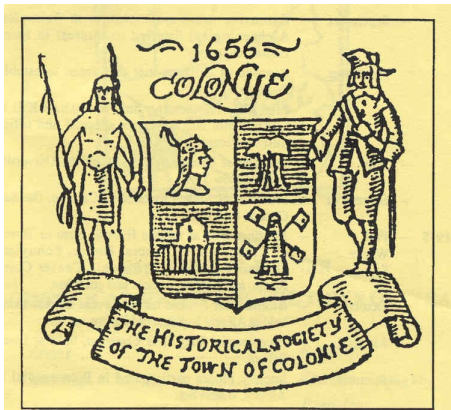
City/Town _____ Zip Code _____ Home Phone # _____

Cell Phone # _____ E-Mail _____

Please mail to Membership Chairperson c/o Historical Society, Memorial Town Hall, 534 New Loudon Rd, Latham, N. Y. 12110-0508

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
534 New Loudon Rd., Latham NY 12110-0508
518-782-2601

Kevin Franklin: Town Historian
Current 2022 Officers of the Society

- President:** *Dr. Michael Radlick*
- Vice President:** *David (Yizhen) Lin*
- Treasurer:** *Laraine Gillette*
- Recording Secretary:** *Barbara McCarthy*
- Corresponding Sec:** *Susan Ivie Mahar*
- Past President:** *Francia McCashion*
- Trustees:** *Peter Cooke, Joseph Erkes, Al Lansing, Ursula MacAffer, Bebe Morehead, Diane Morgan, Dr. Donald Morton, Bill Remia, Kristie Schimpf*

Membership Chair: *Karen Senecal*

Newsletter Editor: *Joe Erkes*

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

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Reflecting back on my past two years as president of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie (HSTC), the expression “Interesting Times” definitely comes to mind as a description of this pandemic-period. As I start my second two -year term I hope that the Historical Society can move forward from under the clouds of COVID to more normal activities. Among a few of the things I am proud of accomplishing during this past two years was the achievement of State and National Historic Register status for the Mark Farm house. This revolutionary war, Van Rensselaer tenant farmer era structure is unique and very important to the Town of Colonie. I hope that we can finalize plans to maintain its history for the future generations of the Town. Nothing is more important for the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie, in my judgement, than the preservation of that history. We plan on additional information on this house in our upcoming newsletters. Stay tuned.

We need people who are willing to get involved in our history. Please join the HSTC as a member. Also if you are willing to volunteer for activities, contact me at historical.society.town.colonie@gmail.com.

Michael S. Radlick, PhD, President