

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

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Share Session

A much kinder than usual April greeted the year's opener. Attending were Phyllis Beechert, Ron Golden, Al Drexel, Judy and David Rundell, Marie & Bob Shaw, Stephanie Ingalls, Mary and Charles Kruppenbacher, Bette Welter, Sandy Noirot, Jeannette Rose, Christine Mickelsen, and Don Teator. Quite noticeable by her absence was Harriett; get well and be back soon.

Introductions were done, especially with as many new faces as we have seen in some time. Welcome to all; the inclusion of so many parts of the town was most welcome: Greenville, Freehold, Gayhead, Greenville Center, West Greenville, and even Sunside (a few miles outside the town). Only Norton Hill was left out of the loop. Well, we were missing Lambs Corners, too.

We reviewed our usual routine of share sessions interspersed with programs. Our May program will be the hosting of Dave Dorpfeld, the Greene County Historian. (more later) And then we will do another share session in June. Still, if you have ideas for programs, feel free to coordinate one or let Don know of the idea.

We made note that the Cairo Diner idea is kaput, and that the Gumports were moving.

We bemoaned the loss of our local newspapers this past year – the Local to the owners broadening the area it covers, and the Press gone due to issues that have not been made clear.

Talking about newspapers, Don asked Judy about Greenville Locals in the Vedder Library and Judy said she would check. Wow, she found more than I was expecting. On microfilm are a scattering of dates, sometimes a series within a year, that could be worthwhile investigating. If someone is interested, contact me and I'll share the letter. Better yet, contact Judy (I hope that is ok, Judy, and thanks so much).

Phyllis brought a bunch of stuff: news clippings, Memorial Days past (Capt. Gumport), a letter she brought last year about life in Greenville from the 1940s, the Kelsey bus line, and more.

We noted the closing of the Freehold House (formerly the Freehold Country Inn, Parks, etc.), and the usefulness of the published 1855 census.

The May 10 meeting is a program hosting Dave Dorpfeld. He'll give a short bio of himself, description of his County Historian post, and any other pertinent information. I'm sure we will tell our

share of stories and ask questions. Please come on out, and bring anyone else you think will be interested.

As always, if you have ideas for future meetings, or even parts of meetings, relay your idea.

Copied in this newsletter is a piece about Rensselaerville. (I must have been distracted in the piecing together the pieces, so I have numbered the order in which you need to read it.) I hope you recognize the efforts of one of our neighbors.

This past week, a gentleman stopped by, referred my way from people in Freehold. He was looking for the Rev. Lynam house, a place he had

stayed overnight in the 1970s. He was having a hard time finding the house. I suggested it was no wonder, considering it was torn down and burned in the 1990s. We had a pleasant chat about what had changed in Freehold since he had last visited, and I will send him a few photos of what Rev. Lynam's house looked like. The house was situated on the northwest corner of the intersection of CR 67, Red Mill Road, and Hempstead Lane.

Take care,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Don".

Historic hamlet is one of Seven to Save

1-28-10 A-E
By Zach Simeone

RENSELAEVILLE — This rural Helderberg hamlet has been chosen by the Preservation League of New York State as one of this year's Seven to Save, meaning greater chances of bringing in grant money to preserve Rensselaerville's historic buildings, and possibly working to increase heritage tourism as an economic jumpstart.

"I think that Rensselaerville can serve as a poster child, and an example for similarly situated historic hamlets throughout the state," said Erin Tobin, the Preservation League's regional program director for Eastern New York.

"Rensselaerville is a turnpike-era hamlet," Tobin told *The Enterprise*. "It was built before the age of the Erie Canal, before the age of the railroad,

and there are small hamlets like Rensselaerville throughout the state. Some are resort communities, some are second-home communities, but these are small places that need to find these sorts of creative solutions to regain economic vitality."

Philip Pearson, a resident of the hamlet and a member of the Rensselaerville Historic District Association, calls this designation "a recognition by a state organization, which is a member of a national organization, of the historical significance of this community."

Further, he said, "I think what caught the eye of the preservation league is that we asked for the designation of the whole district, not just a specific building."

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which will, in turn, help hold up the building."

Also on the list of needed projects is the renovation of the Rensselaerville Library and Reading Room, which, like Conking Hall, is not currently handicap accessible.

This library, founded in 1896, is the second to exist in Rensselaerville, the first being the Federal Library, which was established in 1798, and eventually dissolved in 1832.

Now, this red-and-cream Tudor-style brick building is in an ongoing state of structural repair, Storms said.

Across the hamlet's main street from the library is the Palmer House, a restaurant with a tavern next door, and apartments above. It was there that Potter Palmer, founder of the Palmer House hotel in Chicago, got his start in the early 1800s.

Palmer sold the building in 1862 to the Rice family, which ran a general store there for 100 years. It was eventually sold to Walter Loetterle, and then to Robert and Edith Lansing, before being turned back into a restaurant in 1986 by three couples.

"It's a great place for people to meet and eat," Bishop said of the Palmer House. "It has sustained us for a long time."

The congregation of the Trinity Episcopal Church, further up the road from the previous properties, will celebrate its bicentennial in 2011; the building itself will also soon see its 200th birthday, in 2015.

Pearson, a treasurer and vestry member of the Trinity Episcopal Church, hopes that the Seven to Save designation will help make sure the church remains for generations to come.

"Through the recognition of this landmark conservancy, we hope that we will get some technical consulting from the

"One of the higher levels of the structure is rotted, one of the timbers, I believe," said Storms. "Because of the height and its particular location on the hillside, it's going to be a very expensive and difficult maneuver to basically take the steeple apart from the top down, and then rebuild it."

The importance of this building, he went on, extends far beyond the historic district.

"The building is so architecturally important and nationally recognized for its design, it makes it beyond whatever value it might have to the congregation," Storms said. "It has a more intrinsic value to the community at large, and to people who are interested in that style of architecture."

Another site that might be aided by this designation is the old Grist Mill, Storms said, which now houses the Rensselaerville Historical Society.

"The grist mill is structurally sound, but the front end of it is resting on State Route 85, which is in a state of imminent collapse, so, if the road gives out, the building falls down," said Storms. "So, the Seven to Save nomination will help us to draw attention to the situation and perhaps help us to direct what is really scarce state funding towards making the necessary improvements on the road,

was donated by Jost Nickelsberg, who left the office of town supervisor at the start of the New Year.

"We're extraordinarily lucky to have it," Bishop said of the piano, demonstrating the instrument's tone by letting its lower pitches ring throughout the theater.

Pearson, who serves on the board of directors at Conking Hall, hopes grant money will allow the building to be made accessible to those with handicaps, in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Village Voices also perform next door at the Presbyterian Church, though it's a less roomy venue. Bishop demonstrated the acoustics in the congregation hall, singing a single note and letting it echo.

"You can hear the reverb, which is just a gas to work with," she said.

If the town does receive grant money, Bishop said that the steeple of the Presbyterian Church will be the historic district association's first priority as far as structural repairs are concerned.

Kenneth Storms, vice president of the Rensselaerville Historical Society, said the church is currently trying to raise funds for the repair of the steeple, which is in a "precarious state," he said.

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"It really is a multipurpose facility," she said of Conking Hall, which is also the scene of weddings and other gatherings. The chorus practices downstairs, but the performances take place on the second floor, on a stage with a proscenium arch that is outlined by columns of fruit, every apple and grape hand-painted in the color of its natural counterpart by town resident John Geritz, who also painted much of the simpler white moldings that line the cream-colored walls, Bishop said.

A chandelier dangles from the center of the ceiling, right in between two massive paintings, which face each other from the two walls that stand 90 degrees from the nutritionally rimmed stage.

Bishop was unsure of who painted these murals. One depicts a woman playing the harp as two others look on; the other shows an ornately dressed man gesticulating with his hand as a young woman and bearded man look on — illustrated performances to accompany what transpires on the stage in real time.

The Bechstein piano backstage

4 Preservation League and also identify sources of revenue for grants," Pearson said.

The church's interior is loaded with rich, dark woods and vibrant stained glass. The walls on the upper floor hide older rows of Paladian windows, known by their round tops, which Bishop hopes will eventually be revealed by removal of the newer walls.

"They're just beautiful," Bishop said of the windows. "We hope to bring these walls down one day and really let some light in here."

and Catalpa House — these are in danger because there's not a viable economic structure underneath," Storms said. "So, what we hope to be able to do is find a way to improve the economic climate, if you will, so that these buildings can be sustained in the long run."

Storms went on to describe what he thinks should be two of Rensselaerville's primary goals: "First, we want to make the improvements and the restorations that are going to help the existing structures right now. And, we

"They're just beautiful."

In Bishop's eyes, these are just a few examples of why Rensselaerville's historic district is one to save.

Marvelous heritage
"They have a marvelous architectural heritage," said Tobin of Rensselaerville, "and a beautifully intact hamlet, which is literally a textbook example of a 19th-Century hamlet." Rensselaerville was developed from the late 1700s through the early 1800s, she said.

But Rensselaerville's current economy is not a strong one, Storms said, and he hopes that the Seven to Save designation will change that.

"The large public buildings — the libraries, the churches, the large commercial buildings that are not occupied by the Palmer House and Bells Hotel

want to find a way to strengthen the economic environment in the community so that we can sustain them in the future, which is a long, theoretical gust of wind, but that's the real problem."

Tobin already has a vision for where the hamlet should be by the end of 2010.

"I think what I see as an outcome by the end of the year would be an integrated marketing strategy for the hamlet, in which the historic buildings are highlighted, and there might be a how-to package for people interested in rehabilitating a historic building, grant funding for those not-for-profits who need structural repair, and fund-raising strategies," Tobin concluded. "The ultimate goal is long-term sustainability for the community, based around its historic buildings."

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Tobin said she plans to give a presentation to the historic district association in February on the economic benefits of heritage tourism, containing "more nuts-and-bolts information on economic re-development as far as funding sources, and turning abandoned buildings into income-generating buildings."

Along similar lines, Harold Miller, a former Berne resident who now lives in Mexico, started

spend money, and heritage tourists spend more money than almost any other kind of tourist, Tobin said.

They stay at the historic bed and breakfast, they eat at the café, and they patronize gift shops — and heritage tourists don't visit a town with a Walgreens, a CVS, and a Kite Aid at its four corners," she quipped, referring to the intersection of Western Avenue and New Karner Road in Guilderland.

"There's an intangible sense of place and uniqueness that the preservation of historic architecture brings."

late last year to build a network of individuals interested in assembling an association of Hilltown farmers and businessmen that would act as a virtual chamber of commerce for the Hilltowns, the goal being to increase agricultural tourism to the Hilltowns as an economic stimulus.

The Edmund Niles Huyck Preserve, also located in the Rensselaerville hamlet, plans to host an organizational meeting for the proposed business association this spring; April 17 has been chosen as a tentative date for the meeting. [For more on the Hilltown agri-tourism initiative, go to www.altamontenterprise.com, and look under archives for Dec. 24, 2009].

Preservation, Tobin said, is basic to economic development.

"There's an intangible sense of place and uniqueness that the preservation of historic architecture brings to a community, and that leads to heritage tourism, which is a huge draw," she said. "It's one of the top forms of tourism in the country and within New York State."

When outsiders are brought into a community, they often

Worth preserving
The Seven to Save designation is most often awarded to individual structures. But, rather than competing for individual recognition, the owners of some Rensselaerville's most prized old buildings worked together in applying for the award. This includes Conkling Hall, the Presbyterian Church, the Rensselaerville Library, the Palmer House café, and the Trinity Episcopal Church.

This week, Jan Bishop, president of the Rensselaerville Historic District Association, showed *The Enterprise* these historic properties.

Conkling Hall was built in 1839 as the Rensselaerville Methodist Church, and has since been sold to the adjacent Presbyterian Church as a community meeting center, serving as a venue for musicals, choral performances, and movie showings.

Bishop is also director of Village Voices, a chorus that she calls "a group of many faiths." The Village Voices are able to perform at Conkling Hall with full instrumental accompaniment.

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