

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

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Catskill Mountain House—Jonathan Palmer

A pleasant evening, the name of Jonathan Palmer, and a topic of the Catskill Mountain House led to almost standing room only. Almost twenty-five chairs were transferred from the small community room. Thank you to the two or three kind souls who helped out, and then returning them.

Signing the sign-in sheet: Robert Uz-zilia, Lou Knott, Jeff Pellerin, Chuck Heyer, Johanna and Robert Titus, Bob Shaw, Judy Rundell, Donna Willard, Diana Marshall, Barbara & Clark Ryndak, Margeaux & Garry Deatsch, Carolyn Savery, Gail NicholSEN,

Dennis Mower, Susan and Peter Keitel, John Earl, Peter O'Hara & John Garofalo, Roger Morey, Mary Lou Nahas, David Tschinkel, Nancy Thackaberry, Steve Tomasik, Margaret Donahue, Rachel Ceasar, Richard Ceasar, Flip Flach, Ron Teator, Susan Jennings, the Woelfersheim family (Albert, Rhonda, Shalisha, Selah, Rachel, Elijah), Melissa & Ralph Rosa, Mike Rosa, Stephanie Ingalls, Christine Mickelsen, and Don and Debra Teator. And I know a few more wascally characters eluded my sign-in sheet and my visual memory. Quite a large turnout.

At meeting's end, I begged Jonathan for a favor—a summary of the history of the Catskill Mountain House for the Newsletter. Most fortunately, he consented, sparing me the need to research the topic (next page)

The evening's topic—The Catskill Mountain House / Pine Orchard



Celebrating the 200th Anniversary of the Catskill Mountain House By Jonathan Palmer, Greene County Historian

It was with great pleasure that I had the opportunity at the beginning of June to join the Greenville Local History Group in celebrating the bicentennial of Greene County's most important historic site.

So many of us are well-versed in the nuances and salient details of this storied hotel - in fact, I often question whether anything else can be said about the Mountain House! Nonetheless, on this anniversary year, it is our responsibility as a community to reflect on the diverse roles of the Mountain House in shaping a part of our identity, transforming our relationship with nature, and challenging us as preservationists and caretakers of its legacy.

So what exactly, then, is the legacy of the Mountain House?

When stirrings began in Catskill around 1820 concerning the construction of a hotel at Pine Orchard, the vision of the soon-to-be proprietors was a simple one - help the public encounter America's "wilderness" outside of the context of conquest, colonization, and capitalization. While the very idea of slapping a hotel on a scenic overlook is anathema to the principles now espoused by Naturalists and Environmentalists, the idea that a mountain landscape in a predominantly agrarian region could be leveraged for uses other than cultivation and industry was still revolutionary among Americans.

This effort was bolstered by the perfect intersection of our own unique flavor of Romantic philosophy and a sense of inherited responsibility among those who took charge of the young republic after the founding fathers. The builders of the Mountain House seemed to ask aloud to all "*Where else but in America's Edenic land-*

scape could humanity encounter untrammelled creation and refresh our spirit? How could a Republic endowed with Nature as its inheritance do anything but succeed?"

Indeed it is no surprise that the hotel opened in 1824 and would rapidly evolve into a Greek Revival temple seemingly dedicated to the Republic and the worship of American Romanticism.

This gross oversimplification, while capturing the idealistic essence of the endeavor, glosses over the messy reality of the phenomenon. The Mountain House, while serving as a bridge between the 19th century's base industrialism and the nascent environmentalism of the Romantic Movement, also embodied



an amorphous philosophy soon to be coined as *Manifest Destiny*.

Indeed the Mountain House could never have existed were it not for the violent expulsion of Native Americans from their ancestral homelands, the exploitation of tenants on the leasehold system, and the enslavement and disenfranchisement of Black Americans. Each of these factors connects directly to both the people who were the instigators behind the organization of the Mountain House and the clientele that made the hotel a seminal cultural moment.

It is therefore little surprise that a phenomenon such as the Mountain House, borne from the collective visions of one era of the Republic, would wither and die with the Republic's transformation

and growth. The industrialism that the Mountain House seemed to refute, but could never have existed without, eventually resulted in such seismic changes in taste, infrastructure, and values that the Mountain House lapsed into abject irrelevancy - revered only by those in the valley who lived beneath its shadow and the memory of the vibrant economic landscape it once crowned.



Long decline &
Ignominious end



While the resort industry survives in Greene County, it has never enjoyed the comfortable certainty and assertive preeminence once manifest in the Greek temple at Pine Orchard.

Ultimately, the end objective of the Mountain House, to help Americans encounter the natural world that remains the birthright of all humanity, hasn't diminished since the destruc-

tion of the hotel in 1963. Indeed the scenery that once called America's poets and painters to the Catskills are as beautiful as ever, and the remarkable silence that once filled the mountains - broken only by the wind and sounds of the mountain streams, is restored and accentuated by the Mountain House's disappearance.

Another Angle of Jonathan's Celebratory Program Don Teator

I am always pleased when Jonathan accepts an invitation to speak at a GLHG meeting. And I left the Library that evening feeling like I had re-acquainted with an old friend (Catskill Mountain House), even if that old friend exists no more and perhaps I never really knew that old friend.

Jonathan's article, although capturing a modern-day view of the significance of the CMH,

somehow cannot diminish my nostalgia and appreciation for that time gone by, however flawed or ephemeral or fated it might be.

Jonathan related the chronology of the CMH. The early painters helped establish a visual for potential visitors. (I could not help but think of the Titus book and their section about the artists. Go read it, please, and buy one if you want to support local.)

One of the maps, when in sequence, showing the expansion of transportation infrastructure. The grayed area of the bottom is the Clove. The straight line right-center represents the Otis Railway (making obsolete the



And the ability to see financial gain, always present in American culture (Jonathan would probably argue it was only some rarified parts of that culture), led to discussion of how to do the nearly unthinkable. One idea led to another led to serious talk led to money available led... eventually to the building of our icon.

Jonathan's telling of that chain of creation is a compelling one. Compelling also is the story of making possibility reality. How does one get there in a wilderness? What does one do? Who can afford to partake?

One strand leads to another and one of the most striking parts of this presentation, in my opinion, were the maps spanning the course of a half-century showing the development of roadways, carriageways, train tracks, sites of ancillary businesses, and, especially relevant to Greenville, how "lesser" venues came to fill the need for people like us to enjoy the envied splendor.

This trend is reflected in Greenville's 20th century of the resort business, with thousands of tourists enjoying the wonders of nature and exploiting (in a positive way) that experience into personal gain, personal enjoyment, community anchoring, familial furtherance, occupational choices, and all the other facets that comprise our life story.

CMH's demise is a mournful one. Many of us wish someone or some group had the foresight and wherewithal to have preserved the unique site. We local historians have witnessed so many opportunities evanesce and wither and come to naught; at the same time, we occasionally have witnessed, or ourselves have become instrumental in, the preservation of a piece of our local history experience. We are witnessing it now with

the Prevost Hall project, have seen it morph with the establishment of our Vanderbilt Town Park, and have cried foul with the destruction of the Sherill and Chatterton houses.

The vision of a Catskill Mountain House still wafts on that ledge for many of us.

Jonathan, thank you, for the re-telling of a grand story, even a well-known one. Sometimes, they are the best ones.

Greene County Historian
Jonathan Palmer
& Friend of
Greenville Local History Group



Excellent Reviews

One reaction to the new Titus book detailed in the last program:

“I want you to know I purchased the Titus's book...*The Hudson River Schools of Art and their Ice Age Origins*. I am on the very last chapter. I had to slow down these past couple of days ...!

“But should you run across the Tituses, please let them know I absolutely loved this book. Every page holds my attention. Now, the next time I ride AMTRAK to Hudson I will be looking out those windows with a different view!”

—TT

Life Moving On

I could not help but think of life marching on, whether we are ready or not. Three examples:

- Greenville resident Beth Heisinger Stewart, named 2025 President and Executive Director Greene County Chamber of Commerce
- Kayla Carlsen, daughter of Greenville resident Abby & Russ Carlsen, selected to be the next executive director of the Albany Institute of History & Art after a national search attracted more than 70 candidates.
- Gary Nichol森's passing has both shocked us and also allowed us to reminisce of the many contributions he and the Nichol森 family have made to Greenville.

Notes:

—Thank you, thank you to Stephanie and Christine for continuing to bake and prepare the light refreshments the advertising for GLHG meetings promises!

—Debra Teator announced meetings of the Clematis Club and the display of art in the Community Room (70 paintings of hers)

—Thank you, Jonathan, for your support of local history across Greene County, of the Hudson Valley, and especially Greenville. You continue to be a shining beacon!

—A personal note: Many of my favorite official historians came together for this meeting: Ted Hilscher (Town of New Baltimore), Mary Lou Nahas (Town of Durham), Robert Uzzilia (Town of Cairo), and of course, Jonathan Palmer. Missing from this group: Sylvia Hasenkopf (Cairo Historical Society, in Italy this evening) and Dede Terns-Thorpe (Town of Hunter)!

—Flip Flach will present the program for July. More below.

The Canvas of Greenville, Part IV

Flip Flach will present his fourth part of a series of memories centered around the Four Corners on July 8, at the Library, at 7:30 pm.

A few years ago, the germ of a conversation led to the concoction of a worthy idea. Tentatively titled: An Extended Village Canvas, Flip's intent was to present his memories of "ex-buildings, ex-businesses, ex-entrepreneurs" that graced and inhabited the roadways a half-mile or more from the Four Corners of Greenville.

The starting point has lengthened somewhat—the town line past Norton Hill for Rt 81 west, and the former Wheel Inn on Rt 32 north. Two meetings were needed for SR 81 and Flip will try to finish SR 32 in a second program evening. We had progressed southward to the edge of Bryant's Plaza, with intentions of arriving at the Four Corners.

—All are welcome to share memories and to add to Flip's nuggets. .



Starting point on July 8, and disproving that “nothing ever changes in Greenville!”