



Phelps Community Historical Society

April 2020 Volume 28 Issue 239

The Howe House Museum

66 Main Street

Phelps, NY 14532

(315) 548-4940

E-mail: histsoc2@gmail.com

Find us on Facebook



Museum Hours:

Wednesday, Thursday and

Friday, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

or by appointment



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President's Message

Marty Van Kirk

Do you know that we have an indexed collection of local newspaper articles pertaining to Phelps dating back to the early 1800s? The collection includes births, marriages, deaths, and news from local newspapers. We would not have this resource without very dedicated volunteers. Every week for the past two decades Barb Gillespie has collected, photocopied, and compiled the individual articles. Every January, Doris Spink indexes the last year's collection by name to make this history searchable and accessible.

For almost twenty years Carol Conklin, also a very dedicated volunteer, has managed our collection. Each donated item has been documented, labeled, inventoried, and organized for storage or display. Carol also updates and indexes our Phelps cemetery records.

In addition to these accomplishments, Barb, Doris, and Carol all have invaluable Historical Society institutional knowledge. These are only a few of the very many volunteers we count on to accomplish the PCHS mission. Planning is under way to, when conditions permit, acknowledge all our volunteers with a Volunteer Appreciation event.

Are you interested in volunteering with us?

NATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK APRIL 19 - 25, 2020

Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the Howe House Museum has been closed since Wednesday, March 18. When we will reopen has yet to be determined. In the meantime, Carol Conklin is working on records and indexes from home, Dennis King and Gary Jones continue to work on the restroom/pantry remodel project, and Dana Mark takes the remodel debris, trash and recyclables to the Transfer Station as needed.

The Phelps Community Historical Society could not exist as an organization or serve the community without its volunteers. We look forward to opening our door again to visitors and seeing all the volunteers who make it possible for us to keep Phelps historical records, care for our collection of items, maintain the buildings, and mail out a monthly newsletter.

Thank you to all who contribute their time and talent throughout the year- *every hour makes a difference!*





Author Kristin Harmel

This was a fascinating and very enjoyable historical novel. Wrapped around family and finding roots while traveling the world and learning much about American history during the 1940s thru present day. The main character is Emily Emerson, who just lost her journalism job to downsizing in the newspaper world. Emily is an only child who lost her mother 18 years ago and lived with her grandmother until she recently passed, her father left the family when she was a child. Trying to keep herself financially stable with freelance articles and fighting depression, Emily gets a surprise package that hints at family ties she hadn't known about.

As we travel with Emily from New York City to Munich, Germany then down to Atlanta, Georgia and the Florida Everglades, we learn much about the art world and the POW camps here in the USA for German soldiers and sailors captured during WWII. Like many Americans who learn about this history, Emily wonders "how did I never know about any of this?" There were about 50,000 German POWs in the USA working on farms and helping to build roads, bridges and such. There wasn't a lot of newspaper coverage because the government didn't want people to panic about having enemy soldiers here. "Most prisoners were just young men who got caught up in something they didn't believe in." You didn't have a choice if you were a young male in Germany in the 1940's, a lot of prisoners were actually relieved to not be fighting anymore.

The mystery of who Emily's grandfather really was, and how she would even be able to find him, carries the story from beginning to end. We get glimpses of what life was like for her grandfather, as well. Moving into the past and reading about when Emily's grandmother Margaret met the only love of her life Peter. Not a cheesy wartime romance but a forbidden love, you couldn't help but feel the intensity and needed to keep reading to find out what happened between them. How did they end up as they did?

After the war ended and POW's were sent home, England got many of them and had them serve two years helping to rebuild the war damage before they were released to their homeland. Not actually prisoners and they could communicate with their loved ones, they were provided food and housing plus eighty cents a day labor. All interesting facts not in history books a person reads for school.

This author's stories are compulsively readable. I enjoyed that it was written in two time lines, one being contemporary and the other during WWII. Not just a book about war and its effects on down the line, but also of family, what tears them apart and puts them together again and constitutes family. I do recommend this interesting novel.

The History of 'APRONS' Amie Clark - Author

Inspired by Tina Trivett's poem "Grandma's Apron"

I don't think our kids know what an apron is. The principle use of Grandma's apron was to protect the dress underneath because she only had a few. It was also because it was easier to wash aprons than dresses and aprons used less material. But along with that, it served as a potholder for removing hot pans from the oven.

It was wonderful for drying children's tears, and on occasion was even used for cleaning out dirty ears.

From the chicken coop, the apron was used for carrying eggs, fussy chicks, and sometimes half-hatched eggs to be finished in the warming oven.

When company came, those aprons were ideal hiding places for shy kids.

And when the weather was cold, Grandma wrapped it around her arms.

Those big old aprons wiped many a perspiring brow, bent over the hot wood stove.

Chips and kindling wood were brought into the kitchen in that apron.

From the garden, it carried all sorts of vegetables. After the peas had been shelled, it carried out the hulls.

In the fall, the apron was used to bring in apples that had fallen from the trees.

When unexpected company drove up the road, it was surprising how much furniture that old apron could dust in a matter of seconds.

When dinner was ready, Grandma walked out onto the porch, waved her apron, and the men folk knew it was time to come in from the fields to dinner.

It will be a long time before someone invents something that will replace that 'old-time apron' that served so many purposes.

Send this to those who would know (and love) the story about Grandma's aprons.
REMEMBER:

Grandma used to set her hot baked apple pies on the window sill to cool. Her granddaughters set theirs on the window sill to thaw.

They would go crazy now trying to figure out how many germs were on that apron. I don't think I ever caught anything from an apron - but love...

Happy 
Mother's Day



Fires

by Sarah Landschoot, Town Historian

A few years ago I did a program on the Howe House and the Howe Family. In order to understand the start of the Second Empire home that the Howe Family lived in for generations, I began with the Fires of 1864. Many people did not know of the set of fires that demolished part of Main Street, Phelps, and those who had heard about it wanted more details.

On the 1860's Main Street, Phelps was bustling with businesses and shops. Buildings were close together, as they are now, but many were constructed of wood, or partially wood and stone. The fires ravaged Main Street, Phelps from June through July of 1864 and literally tore through the north side of the street.

The first fire was discovered at 3am on Sunday morning, June 5th. The newspaper article reads that "every building in front and rear from Wormley's Hotel to the American Hotel was in a mass of ruins." The following are the places listed that were totally or mostly destroyed: Hardware Store, W.H. Jackson; Grocery and provision store, J. Gibson; Grocery and provision store, J.T. Gifford; Dry goods and variety store, J.H. Brown; Shoe Store, J.M. Crosby; Residence of J.B. Holmes; Banking House, C. and L.B. Hotchkiss; Store house, Dr. A. Thompson; Barn and Ice house, J. Wormley. The Cuyler Block built in 1830 was completely destroyed, it housed 4 of these shops. The loss was estimated at \$20,000 worth of damages and of course left many people without jobs, businesses, and at least one home.

I have not been able to find a date or much information for the second fire, but it struck in late June and did not seem to do nearly as much damage as the others. The third fire started on Sunday, July 3rd at Gibson's Distillery on Flint Street. Although only one business was destroyed, it put about sixty people out of work.

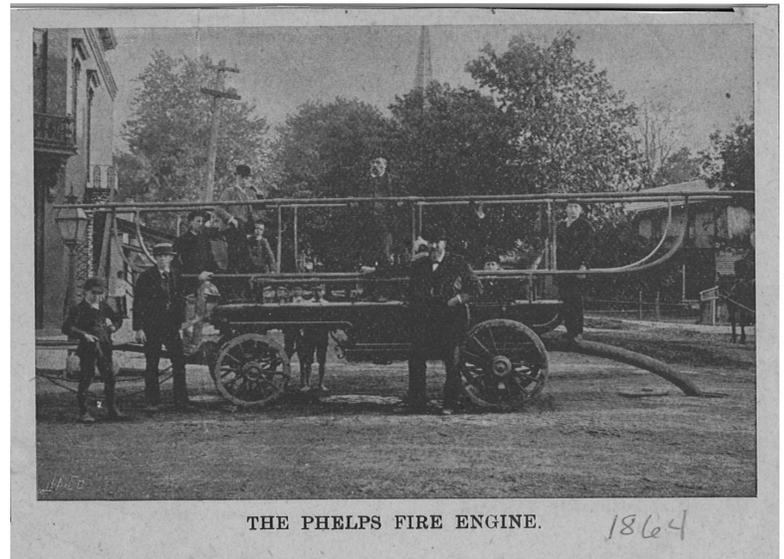
The fourth and final fire was on the night of Thursday, July 21st and was the most destructive, taking out buildings from the west corner of Main and Exchange Street down to North Wayne Street including a number of buildings on Exchange Street. The fire started in the barn of the American House, the present site of the Phelps Hotel and parking lot. The fire raged, spreading across Exchange Street to the carriage shop, several homes, and continued down Main Street. These are most of the places destroyed: American House & barns, James and John Cole's Carriage Shop (now Crafty Ales, & Lagers) the top floor was wood which burnt, the bottom two of stone still stand), A.D. Cooley's Store and George A. Condit's Shoe Store in the Cooley Block, L.B. Hotchkiss Storage House, Edmonston Tavern (now the site of the Howe House Museum) and Millinery Shop, and six homes located on Exchange Street and Main Street.

It seems that the entire village was out on Main Street trying to help. Reverend Anson Titus recalled that night stating the village was not ready for such a fire. Phelps did in fact have a hand-operated pump called The Torrent, water was poured in by buckets then pumped out. First, it didn't have much effect on the first three (3) fires so I'm sure it would have been no match to this fire. Second, it just so happened that it was being stored in the barn of the American House barn, one of the first buildings to be noticed on fire on July 21st.

Reverend Anson Titus spent most of his night across the street at the Phelps Town Hall helping to carry buckets to and up the building as sparks from the north side of Main Street fell on to the roof. Reverend Titus and others also noted the amazing occurrence as the fire reached L.B. Hotchkiss' store house.

The building housed a large stock of peppermint essential oil. When the building caught fire and the glass containers began to rupture the fire turned colors of blue, green, and purple. An amazing and absolutely devastating site.

The north side of Main Street was determined to be a total loss at \$80,00 to \$100,000 worth of damages. John Q. Howe lost multiple businesses totaling over \$20,000 in damages and loss. I have not found if a total figure was released for what the Hotchkiss' or others specifically lost in their businesses. The devastation was turned into positivity as the town found ways to move forward. The first thing was to purchase a pumper, "Old Ocean" from Geneva, which both Don and Chris Tiffany have written about in the past. In the next few decades there were multiple fire departments formed all over the village. New buildings and stores were built, some of the architecture still existing for us to admire today. But the question still exists, how did the four fires start? And how was it so out of control that half of Main Street was completely destroyed? I will explore the blame game that began next month.



“Woodpecker City”

by F. Lee Johnson

The place where John Decker Robison settled soon became a center of activity. As many settlers started to come into this section, they helped each other, what was called “Work Bees”. The settlers that came in late sometimes would stay with established families till they could get a start. The three immediate requirements of the settlers were food, shelter and clothing. They cleared their plots of land in and around the village and as they built log houses and chopped roads to their homes. Roads were not much more than Indian trails. In a couple of years there was so much noise and activity from clearing some of the forest trees and the sawing, pounding of hammers, hewing logs and the ring of axes that the settlement that was started (where the business section of the present village of Phelps is now located) was jokingly called (nicknamed) “Woodpecker City”.

Ontario County began its legal existence on January 27, 1789. The Town of Canandaigua was established under an act of the state legislature on the same date. The first name assigned to the township, No.11-1st Range, was Phelpsburg. The exact date when the boundaries of Phelps town were established is not clear from the county history, but it appears that for a time it was regarded as being part of the town of Canandaigua or at least under its jurisdiction, as the people living in Phelpsburg were enumerated as being residents of Canandaigua. Shortly, however the section became known as the District of Sullivan. Later, Phelps was called Vienna (East/West) until about 1840. When the post office was started, it came to light that there was another Vienna in the state. This is when the village changed its name to Phelps, after Oliver Phelps. The village was incorporated under the name of Phelps January 2, 1855. Special note: this was six (6) years after 1849 when my great great grandfather John Johnston and his family arrived in Phelps from Ireland, during the great potato famine. And I always thought I was Dutch! That’s another story for later.

Phelps was the center of a wealthy agriculture region, which grew to importance, one of the revered towns in western New York. Oliver Phelps, in 1791, built the first grist mill at Littleville (Hopewell) on the Canandaigua Outlet, it was known as “The Phelps Mill”. There are some remains still visible today, just off Taylor Road and on the Littleville Road . Settlers in and around Phelps used this mill until Seth Dean and Philetus Swift, in 1792, built their grist mill on Flint Creek, next to the now Waterside Wine Bar building. The Wild Water Derby starts at the mill race of the old Phelps Mill, then north to Manchester.

John Decker Robison, after finishing the construction of the first land office and dwelling in Canandaigua for Mr. Gorham, headed back to his home and family in Claverack, Columbia County, NY late 1788. In May of 1789, John D. and his family left from Schenectady by way of the following 250 mile water route: up the Mohawk River to Little Falls (portage around the falls by wagon, up stream to Fort Stanwix (Rome), portage over a mile to Wood Creek to Oneida Lake, thru to its outlet stream to Oswego River, then up stream toward Onondaga Lake, into and through to Seneca River to Clyde River to Canandaigua outlet and Flint Creek. This must have been a terrible hardship for the family to endure, as one of the children, John Jr., was about one year old. Did you know that the Canandaigua Outlet is 34 miles long?



Remains of The Phelps Mill



(continued on page 5)

It is said that John D. Robison arrived at Phelps with eight of his nine children. Youngest son, James 16, did not come , but stayed behind, as he was helping Nathaniel Sanborn to drive a head of 100 cattle to Geneva. The Robison family arrived in the spring of May 14, 1789. They lived in a cloth tent that they had brought with them, during the first months of arrival. It appears that the Robisons had employees or hired workers that set to felling trees and began hewing the logs to build their cabin before winter set in. They were also able to clear small areas of land to plant corn and some vegetables. The Robisons were the only family that stayed the first winter 1789-90. Can you imagine what living conditions and hardships must have been like, especially with a child, John Jr. , born May 1788? The other early settlers had built their log homes in 1789 and returned to the east for the winter, then returned the following spring 1790 with their families. However, they did survive the ordeal!

As settlers came, so did some expire! John D. is said to have given a small plot of land for burials, located on the northeast end of the village, between now Exchange and North Wayne Streets. A number of burials were made there. About 1805, after some controversy over a burial at the Robison plot, Seth Dean ceded a ½ acre plot, first known as Vienna Cemetery now the Pioneer Cemetery. Seth’s daughter, 6 year old Dolly, was the first to be buried there. No more burials were made at the Robison plot and later some bodies interred there were moved to the Seth Dean Plot, without any marker or stones to tell them where their resting places were.

It is said that between 20 and 30 bodies still lie beneath the houses and door yards where the Robison plot was once located! Have you ever seen or experienced any apparitions, ghostly or paranormal activities in this area? Tom and Bev Cheney lived in that area for a time, and the Cheney Funeral Home is also in that general area. The exact location of the Robison Cemetery is not definitive and may never be known.

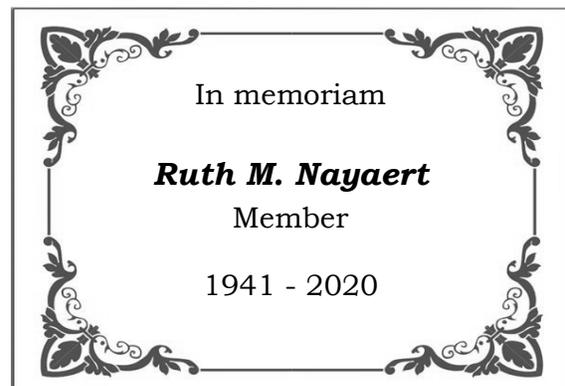
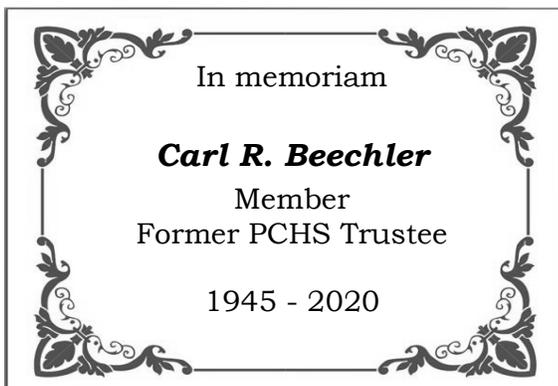
Next time, the building of the Erie Canal and its effect on West Vienna businesses.

From our collection

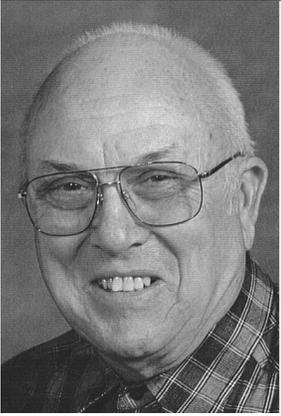
In September of 1862, Myron H Fuller, Phelps, NY, a log pump manufacturer, enlisted in the military at the age of 29. During the Civil War he carried this brass coronet dated 1861 (case not pictured) as a member of the 148th Regiment band.



Marsh Cornford gave it to Mabel Oaks who donated it to the Phelps Community Historical Society. It is on display in the Military Room at the Howe House Museum.



In Remembrance



April 20, 2020 marked five years since the passing of our beloved Town Historian Don Tiffany. Don was a regular contributor to the Phelps Community Historical Society newsletter and a friend to the PCHS organization. Following are excerpts from "Comments & Conclusions" by Don Tiffany, an article that appeared in the May 2011 issue .

The Methodist Church was razed in 1983 and the L.V.R.R. underpass on Rte 488 was removed. The Silver Floss water tower was toppled in 1985. Z-Axis was started in 1989 in part of the old Empire State Pickling Company factory on Eagle Street, the same year the building was purchased by Garden Galleries Nurseries. Z-Axis moved to its new facility on Rte 96 in 1999. The *Norstar Bank* redid the façade of the old *Security Trust Company Bank* (previously the *First National Bank of Phelps*). Since that time the name was changed to the *Bank of America* and is now the Phelps Branch of the *Seneca Falls Savings Bank*. The scale house and office of *Seneca Kraut* was moved from its site on the southeast corner of Newark Street and Rte 96 and trucked to County Road #46 south of Hopewell Center and is now a private building.

The Village had the water tank erected on the hill north of Mary Street in 1990 to help increase and maintain the system water pressure. Main Street was completely torn up and rebuilt and new water mains were installed in 1992-93. All the original bricks were removed, most of which were dumped in the remains of the old Howe's pond east of the Eagle Street Kraut Factory. Leo Burns (born 1905) watched the project and told me, "I watched this street being paved in 1914 and I'm standing here watching them tear it up!"

The Phelps Theater burned in February 1993 leaving a vacant space across from the War Memorial. The P & C Grocery store closed in 1994 leaving Phelps with no supermarkets in the Town. Jack Gifford opened his Mr. Video store just north of Phelps on Rte 88. This building later became the *Phelps Town Court* building. The *Ontario National Bank* of Clifton Springs opened a branch office on Rte 96 just east of the Village. This is now a branch of *Community Bank*. A new bridge was built across the Canandaigua Outlet at the Rte 88 crossing in 1994. Ontario Pathways finally opened their hiking path along the old Pennsylvania Railroad bed south from Rte 96 during 1994-95.

The new Midlakes Middle School and Bus Garage were completed in 1995. The old bus garages on Teft Avenue in Clifton Springs and off Main Street in Phelps were torn down. The *Seneca Kraut Company's* factory was razed in the triangle between Rte 96, the N.Y.C. RR and Newark Street that year. John Karalia converted the Tyman Ford/Motors building into the Blue Ribbon Restaurant in 1995.

John Britting retired from law practice in 1999. This was the first time in 155 years that the office on Church Street did not have a lawyer as an occupant.

Ray Weston opened a computer company called *First Priority* in the old *Finger Lakes Paint Company* building on

Exchange Street. The old stone shop was no longer a paint plant, repair / blacksmith shop but a 20th Century business with a very 20th Century product. Construction of the *Magnus Precision Manufacturing Co.* plant on Rte 96 began in 2000. While a new building was being raised, the gas station and store on the northwest corner of this same intersection of Rte 96 and Newark Street were being torn down.

So Phelps, on the edge of the 21st Century, had been changed in significant ways. I'm sure William Hildreth couldn't have dreamed of how his West Vienna had changed over 200 years. From a hotel, railroad depot, schoolhouse, mill and a slaughterhouse through the time of a large kraut manufacturing factory, car dealerships and gas stations and grocery stores to the present collection of a restaurant, plant nursery, BOCES classroom, vacant lot and an empty building simply show that our Phelps is still active, viable and constantly changing.

I have chosen to end this general history of Phelps for several reasons.

The majority of people who have read this history are over 30 and have lived in Phelps sometime in their lives during these last 3 decades.

Contemporary history is best written by later historians who can give, I think, a better perspective of events and how they relate to subsequent occurrences.

For those of you who have been gone less than 30 years, not much has changed physically – Phelps Central School is now Vienna Gardens, a retirement home, The Empire State Pickling Company plant on Eagle Street is now a nursery warehouse for Garden Galleries. We have our Pioneer Cemetery stone wall back on Main Street however the Methodist Church is missing across the street. Phelps Theater is just a vacant lot.

The Phelps Elementary School is now the Phelps Community Center housing, among other things, the Phelps Community Library and the Village Offices.

For those of you gone more than 30 years be aware that the skyline has changed dramatically. The Nester malt house at the corner of Ontario and William Streets disappeared in a fire in 1967. Also the Methodist Church spire, both the kraut factories tall boiler chimneys are gone. We haven't heard the 7:00 a.m., noon and 5:00 p.m. kraut factory whistle in over 40 years.

Do you remember the grocery stores! – gone! Gas stations? – gone – Ruthven's Texaco, Celehar's Gulf, Dickinson's Mobil, Parks Esso, Denniston's Sunoco and Goodman's Gulf stations are just places of memory.

The GLF paint plant off William Street, the GLF fertilizer plant on Main Street and even GLF itself – gone.

But the stone block Whitney Dam on Main Street is still a pretty sight any time of the year and, of course, Flint Creek and the Canandaigua Outlet still flow as they have done for centuries.

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If "Final Notice" is highlighted this will be your last newsletter if dues are not paid.*

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Margaret Jolliff	Mike Waters		

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Nancy Doubleday
*Special thank you for your contribution to the Vertical Platform Lift Project
in memory of all her many Ontario County ancestors*

Ellen Champion
in loving memory of Richard Champion

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in memory of Robert Donnelly & Raymond Donnelly

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