Fly Creeker

NEWSLETTER of the FLY CREEK AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY (FCAHS)
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NEWS BRIEFS

- **Another Milestone …** We've reached middle age! This month marks the 35th anniversary of the founding of our Society. Following a few organizational meetings over the previous three months, the FCAHS was formally chartered on July 26, 1989. Happy Birthday to us!

- **Articles Wanted …** The *Fly Creeker* should be a repository for articles about area history: local businesses, homes and buildings, activities, people. And they should come from members of our Society. Do you have something to contribute – a history of your house, or a historical document of some sort? You don't have to be a journalist – just get the facts together and put your editor to work!

- **Pancakes Raise Dough …** Our May 5 Pancake Breakfast grossed $1,400 and netted over a thousand dollars for the Society! Thanks to chair Tony Kroker and his tireless regiment of volunteers and donors. The fall Pancake Breakfast is tentatively scheduled for Sunday, October 6, 8 AM to noon.

- **Behind Closed Doors …** President Greg Crowell has completed the repair, stripping, and painting of the hanging doors and threshold at our building. As he says, "This restoration should outlast us." This represented more than 30 hours of labor, which he donated. Thanks, Greg!

- **Remember the Atwells! ...** Longtime member Deb Dickinson is hosting an FCAHS-sponsored celebration at our FCAHS/Grange building on Saturday afternoon, August 17. It will be to honor Jim Atwell and his late wife, Anne Geddes-Atwell. Jim was FCAHS President from 1996-2000 and Trustee from 2002-06, and was instrumental in our acquiring the building. He also authored countless local newspaper columns (one on pages 2-3 of this issue) and books, mostly about his life in Fly Creek. Jim is now a resident of Woodside Hall, and will be turning 86 that day. Anne, a graphic artist, served briefly as our Secretary, and as Town of Otsego Supervisor from 2012-16; she died in 2020 but was not able to have a funeral due to COVID. Deb will be showing some of Anne's artwork for display and sale. Everyone is welcome to stop by!

- **Going Yard …** The annual Fly Creek Yard Sale Day is scheduled for Saturday, August 24. Contact Dora Cooke at 607-547-8321 if you want a 10'x10' space at the FCAHS building ($10), or want your home sale put on the map published in the *Pennysaver* and distributed that day ($5). That same day, the Fly Creek Cider Mill will be hosting an engine show and music performance.

- **Building for Rent …** The FCAHS has set a fee schedule for rental of its building. For full-day use, the rate is $200 for profit-making organizations, $100 for 501 C (3) non-profit organizations, $75 for the general public, and $50 for FCAHS members; the respective rates for half-day use are $100, $50, $37.50, and $25. There is no fee for FCAHS-sponsored events. A security deposit equal to the user fee, and proof of $250,000 liability insurance, are required. There are also fees for a custodian ($15/hour, minimum $60), and for heat, if required ($50). Contact the FCAHS President for further information.

- **And the Award Goes to …** Congratulations to the Fly Creek Cider Mill, winner of the 2024 William K. Guglielmo Legacy Award. It was presented on April 30 by the Chamber Alliance of the Mohawk Valley.

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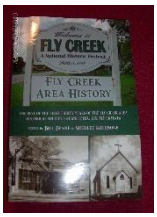


Each issue, we will include an article from our 2022 book, *Fly Creek Area Yesteryear*. A few copies of the book are still available at the FCAHS/Grange building ($20 for members), and at the Fly Creek General Store and Fly Creek Cider Mill ($25 plus tax for the general public). Copies can also be mailed in the continental US (library rate) for an additional $7 per book.

HISTORY LIVES IN AN OLD HOUSE

By Jim Atwell, Summer, 2004

[Editor's note: The following was written c. 1995, when Jim was a widower living alone in his old house at 134 Allison Road, Fly Creek. Jim now resides at Woodside Hall in Cooperstown, and the house is occupied by the Dan Crowell family.]

Living alone in a very old house, I pay a lot of attention to its creaks and groans, and think a lot about past inhabitants. My small clapboard has just turned two hundred. Last night, with central New York at almost thirty below, it complained steadily as frozen ground tightened around the stone foundation. Base sills moaned, as did oak posts and beams throughout the walls.

Complaints multiplied every time the heat came on – rumbles from the furnace in the low cellar, and then sharp protests, metallic and wooden, as heating pipes flexed and the wide wall planks strained, trying to strike compromises between dry heat on one side and lunar cold on the other. The whole old house sounded pained; sometimes I thought I heard a sound like breath drawn in sharply between clenched teeth. It was like the sound, after snow shoveling, I sometimes make when rising from a chair.

I lay awake, eyes closed, for a long time under the wool blankets, listening to the house and thinking of those who sheltered in it before me – eight human generations, at least. How many, I wondered, had lain where I now did, listening to wind-blown snow stinging the windowpanes like sand? How many births in that room? How many deathbeds, grieved families gathered around the very spot where I now lay? (I opened my eyes warily in the dark room: no circle of sad faces, staring down at me. I closed them again.)

More diverting, how many wedding nights were spent in that room? And, in two hundred years, how many couples, young and old, drew comfort from one another's warmth as the wind blew and the house creaked?

I often wonder about the men and women who walked down my stairs ahead of me; who, in summer, leaned against my kitchen door frame and looked out back, worrying about raccoons in the hen house or ear worms in the corn.

Thanks to some fine research by my neighbor Irene Dusenbery and some of my own, I know the names of most who have lived here over the years. I know, for instance, about Eliphalet Williams, who ran a carding mill down on Oaks Creek. His 1817 obituary says he left "a disconsolate widow bereft of a kind husband… the vicinity of a beneficent neighbor… the poor of a friend in need… the community of a useful and worthy member and an honest man."

I'd like to have known such a man as Eliphalet, and his family, too. And the Marvins who, before them, lived under my roof – and under the brand new Constitution. And the Greens, here for thirty years after the Williamses, who read the news about Gettysburg, perhaps sitting on my front stoop. And later the Spencers, who may have sat there shocked by word of the *Maine*, blown up, sunk.

I hoped to learn more about all of my predecessors two years ago when we razed the old summer kitchen. A cellarless ell off the back of the house, the summer kitchen held one long room and a low storage loft. Its roof was swaybacked, its walls, canted; floors, upstairs and down, gave under foot with an unnerving trampoline spring.

"A good kick'll bring it down," said Craig Philips, the contractor. He wasn't far off, though finally it took some sawing of brace beams and a truck hauling on a thick hawser.

"Watch for stuff under the floor," I urged Craig and his crew. In all those years, I thought, surely a few folk lived here who shunned banks, and may have grown old and forgetful of what they'd stashed under the broad boards. Zinc-topped canning jars, maybe, filled with five-dollar gold pieces? And, failing wealth, maybe we'd at least find relics that would help me better imagine the Williamses, Marvins, Spencers, and Greens.

In two days, Craig, Brian, and Jeff Philips, plus Mike Hart, had stripped the wing to its post-and-beam frame. In an afternoon they had all the timbers down (I've since re-used them) and were pulling up the wide pine floorboards. And, though there were no jars of gold coins, we were making some modest finds. We turned up a cat's skull, an ivory comb with three teeth left, two rusty knife blades with parts of bone handles, and a heavy pewter spoon.

The spoon hasn't the grace or curve of a modern soup spoon; it can't be balanced delicately across a finger and raised to the lips with hand and wrist alone. You close your fist around this spoon's handle; and when you raise it towards your mouth, your elbow must follow right along.

But more was revealed when the heavy floorboards were pulled away and stacked, enough to stop work and make the crew and me stand, thumbs in belts, gazing down into the rectangular foundation.

The summer kitchen had been built forty or fifty years after the main wing. When it went up, around the Mexican War, it was extended out over part of the yard. And when Craig and crew pulled away the old floorboards and sills, they opened to light three hundred and sixty square feet of Eliphalet Williams' dooryard, framed in the ell's dry-stone foundation.

Inside was a shallow stairwell of tightly laid split stone, built against the main wing's foundation and leading once, likely, to a root cellar. At the far end of the ell, with two of its foundation walls incorporated into it, the substructure of a long-gone building: a heavy base, nine feet by nine, packed with loose stone, that might have supported a smith's shop and its forge. And between the two, chopped down, no doubt, when the ell was built, the tree that had shaded the dooryard, its stump over four feet across. Too big to dig out, the stump had been chopped even to the ell's foundation; one of the floor joists had been laid right across the stump for added support.

Stairwell, stone base, huge stump. Literary types could find some symbols there, I thought – make them stand for ideas of all sorts. A stone stairwell, its wooden steps leading down to nowhere. A stone foundation, massive, strong, but supporting nothing. An ancient stump, its wood dried and friable as milkweed pods in winter, only its girth to hint at how huge the tree had been, how high.

But I wasn't hunting symbols. I stood looking into the Williamses' back yard, and I thought of them. Men of their time had surely leaned a sweaty shirtback against that tree's trunk, drinking from a dipper and gazing out at half the sunny field still to be plowed. Little boys, of several generations, had crouched grinning in that stairwell, breath held and knees pressed tight in excitement, playing hide-and-seek. Little girls, trailing wild giggles, had scampered off around that back shed during tag.

There was a woman, I'm sure, who sometimes stepped out to dash a pan of dishwater against the shade tree's bark, who hauled her split-oak basket of potatoes up from the dark root cellar, who called "Supper!" from the back door. And hearing her, there was a man, working in the square room above that back stone foundation, who laid down tools, straightened, and rubbed the small of his back.

A new clapboard ell, the same as the old in size and shape, has closed off light again from that rectangle of Eliphalet's yard. But I still lie in the wintry dark, hearing the house grumble about old age and change, and think of what had been under the floorboards, what had formed a tableau, all those years, in the blackness. I think mostly of that stump, how it bore the squared hemlock timber across it; how its roots had transmitted deep underground the thump and shuffle of human feet.

Such thoughts bring a fine, strange comfort on winter nights. And a kind of company, too. In a very old house, one needn't feel alone.

MEETINGS & PROGRAMS

The next three FCAHS meetings are scheduled for July 24, August 28, and September 25, 2024. They will be held at the FCAHS/Grange building on 208 Cemetery Road, Fly Creek, starting at 6:30 PM.

In July, we will hear from Dan Zimmerman, Otsego County Forester. He will discuss "The Emerald Ash Borer," a major threat to ash trees in Fly Creek and elsewhere.

August will feature our Annual Meeting, including yearly committee reports, and elections for President, Vice-President, Secretary, and a Trustee. It will be preceded at 5:30 by a covered-dish dinner. And in September, Martin Tillapaugh will tell us about "Burial Practices Through the Years." Martin is the proprietor of Tillapaugh Funeral Services, and the son of George Tillapaugh, who conceived the idea for our Society just before his death.

The three most recent gatherings were held on April 24, May 22, and June 26. In April, David Wightman (proprietor of Wightman Lumber & Specialty Woods in Portlandville) presented "A Walk in the Woods: A History of Wooded Areas in Otsego County." It was an interesting history of tree species in New York State, including factors which have rendered many of them practically extinct. In May, Hyde Hall Programs Manager John Aborn gave us "The Dangerous Victorian House Tour," an entertaining program which left us wondering how anyone ever survived in the 19th century. And in June, Emily Zaengle (CEO of Stone Quarry Art Park in Cazenovia) presented "Vanishing Landscape," her excellent documentation of 160 silos between Utica and Brookfield on Route 8.

Condolences to the family and friends of two long-time FCAHS members who died recently:

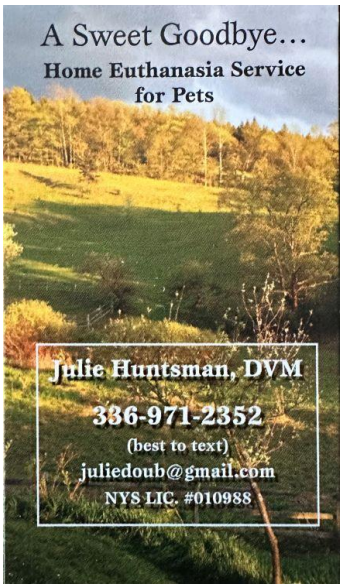
M. J. "Scottie" Baker, a charter member of the Society, died at her Fly Creek home on April 10, 2024. She was 79.

Mary Jean Scott was born July 27, 1944, and married Dave Baker in 1965. The two moved to Fly Creek three years later, buying the former Fly Creek School building on Schoolhouse Road, and remodeling it into a comfortable home and neighborhood shop, Schoolhouse Furniture. Following Dave's sudden death in 2001, Scottie sold the business in 2003, but she remained in Fly Creek the rest of her life.

Scottie was one of the original 55 members when the Society was formally chartered in 1989. Before we acquired our own building in 1999, she and Dave stored artifacts and documents for us at their home/business. For this, the FCAHS granted her lifetime membership.

Donald Spraker, a member for the past two decades, died in Oriskany on April 26, aged 91.

Donald was born in Cooperstown on March 26, 1933, and married Shirley Wightman in Schuyler Lake in 1953. They had two children, three grandchildren, and a great-grandchild. The two joined the FCAHS in 2004; Shirley died in 2017. According to Don's daughter, Susan Keller, "Fly Creek was a very special place for Dad. He had much history and special memories there." Thinking of us to the end, he renewed his membership three months before his death, and his obituary included, "In lieu of flowers, please consider donations to the Fly Creek Area Historical Society (P.O. Box 87, Fly Creek, NY 13337) in Don's memory."



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FROM THE ARCHIVES

By Deecy Haviland

Each issue, we will plan to feature an item from our FCAHS Museum collection. The museum is open during FCAHS monthly meetings and special events, and by appointment (deecy2650@gmail.com).

When I first saw the pictured item in our museum collection, I had no idea what it was. No one in the Society I questioned about it had any idea what it was or what it was used for, only that it was donated to our collection by charter member George Badgley as a "bee box." The box, painted barn-red, is approximately 6 x 6 x 5 inches with an opening on the top (typically covered with some kind of mesh). A bee box, sometimes referred to as a Queen box, holds a healthy Queen honeybee to be safely carried to someone interested in starting their own hive. It could be used to separate newly hatched Queens, again for the purpose of starting another hive in a different location. In the 1850s, when beekeeping in our area became more popular (and profitable), special Italian honeybees were imported in this way to improve the stock.

But in the early days of Fly Creek's settlement, it was used as more of a hunting trap to keep a captured honeybee safe until it was released. Pollen and/or honey were placed in the box in hopes of attracting feral bees. These local wild bees would then be released and followed closely (as they made a "beeline") home to their hive. The bee hunters hoped to find and capture the swarm – as well as its honey. The swarm could then be re-established in a more convenient location where its sweet bounty could be more easily harvested in the future.

An 1860 New York State Agricultural Census shows many Otsego County farmers with hives producing hundreds of pounds of honey, either for home consumption or for sale. That year Fly Creeker Lester Taylor produced 700 pounds of honey! Many of his neighbors also had hives producing anywhere from 20 to 200 pounds of honey. Honeybees are among the most efficient pollinating species in the world, so not only did the farmers get a sweet harvest, but the bees provided pollination for their all-important crops.

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- **Musical Chairs …** During the May meeting, President Greg Crowell appointed or formalized the following committee chairs: Deecy Haviland (Archives and Research Committees), Bill Deane (Publications), Kathy Snyder & Layne Madison (Program), Sharon Kroker (Membership), Greg Crowell (Building & Grounds), and Tony Kroker (Activities), with the Finance Committee still vacant. Please reach out to Greg or the appropriate chairperson if you are willing and able to help with any of these committees.

- **Walking the Walk …** Otsego 2000 hosted a walking tour of Fly Creek on July 7. It started at our FCAHS building, where Sharon Kroker, Claire Kepner, Kathy Snyder, and Deecy Haviland arranged time for walkers to tour our building and fuel up with refreshments. Dr. Cindy Falk took it from there. Falk is Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies at SUNY Oneonta and Professor of Material Culture at the University's Cooperstown Graduate Program. She led 32 pedestrians in a short tour focusing on Fly Creek's history of "rural entrepreneurism." Among the interesting tidbits was another theory as to the origin of the Village's name: the creek was used to power fly-wheels used in various businesses. Falk promises a future tour covering the part of the Village north of State Highway 28, maybe next year.

- **Mys-Terry …** In front of our building is a concrete marker which reads "TERRY 1954-1971." Presumably, it commemorates a departed pet or mascot of the Fly Creek Grange. Does anyone know who Terry was?

- **Prime Ministers …** Wilson Jones is the new minister at the Fly Creek United Methodist Church. Previous pastors are listed on pages 101-102 of *Fly Creek Area History*.

- **Members Only …** Welcome to our newest member, Edward Rowley; and welcome back to Ron Sarles and Marty Helfand!

FLY CREEK AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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