

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

Issued Monthly By The Clinton County Historical Association

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DECEMBER PROGRAM

The Historical Association's final program of 1989 will be held in the meeting room of the Clinton County Government Center, Plattsburgh on Monday, December 4 at 7:30 p.m. Our speaker is Dr. Douglas R. Skopp, chairman of the history department at SUNY Plattsburgh and author of Bright With Promise, a history of the college's one hundred years of educational service. An essay by Dr. Skopp, celebrating the centennial of SUNY Plattsburgh, will appear in this year's issue of the Antiquarian, CCHA's annual magazine.

"Revenue Must Be Had", the current special exhibition at the museum, will be held over through December 5. Subsequently, the 13 wall-hung panels will be available for loan to schools, libraries and community centers, beginning with a booking in the Norther Tier. Original materials in the exhibition (manuscripts, books, photographs and artifacts) will not be included in the traveling component. Meanwhile, don't miss this opportunity to learn about the early days of the Customs Service in Clinton County - and its continuing importance to our community.

In advance of billing, some CCHA members have not only sent in their dues, but are doing their bit to attract new members. Please overlook it if you receive a bill after your subscription has been sent in. Bills have been prepared well in advance, and occasionally one will slip past our vigilant staff and volunteers despite their care. We don't blame the computer, but we're not perfect, either.

SEE PAGE 3 for news of grants from the New York State Council on the Arts. We're off to a great start for the coming year, highlighted by exhibitions in the museum, a new book for your shelves, special events - all to be announced early in 1990.

NINETEEN-EIGHTY-NINE will soon be over and with it the 175th anniversary of the Battle of Plattsburgh. On December 1st one of the stars of our special "battle" exhibit will return to its owner, Key Bank N.A. This large oil painting of the naval scene, executed in 1884 by J.O. Davidson, will hang in the balcony area of the newly redecorated downtown Plattsburgh office of the bank. We are grateful to Key Bank N.A. and its senior vice-president and regional manager John Vroman for their willingness to lend the picture to the County Museum for a lengthy period after it received professional conservation in 1987. The exhibit will continue until early December. Thanks are also due to the Fort Ticonderoga Museum for its loan of a naval presentation dress sword, to Rodney Ralston for loans of swords and a rifle, and to Phil and Shirley Gordon for the loan of their scrimshaw depicting scenes of the battle.

Visitors to the exhibit have seen a truly serendipitous acquisition to the collection, given by Nancy Barbour of Cincinnati. Just prior to the 175th celebration Ms. Barbour, grand-daughter of Mrs. Stackpole, gave the museum a rifle plate and accompanying shield from the rifle presented to her ancestor, Ira A. Wood. He was one of the teenage boy volunteers, known as Aiken's Volunteers, who fought in the Battle of Plattsburgh. The plate and shield document the award of rifles by Congress to each of the boys for their gallantry during the siege of Plattsburgh. Ms. Barbour shared the Association's pleasure that her gift was made at such an appropriate time.

It is worth noting that Alexander Macomb, whose recently-donated portrait hangs in the museum, is memorialized also in a portrait bust made by John Henri Isaac Browere (1792-1834). The plaster bust was cast in bronze in 1940 after Stephen C. Clark purchased it from Browere's descendants. It was part of a collection given by Clark to the New York State Historical Association at Cooperstown. According to The Magazine Antiques, in an article published in 1976, there is no record of how Browere made his life masks for plaster busts, a process that usually took a sculptor about two hours to complete without particular discomfort for the subject. This was not the experience of Thomas Jefferson, however. In a letter to James Madison in 1825, he wrote, "I was taken in by Brower (sic). He said his method would be of about 20 minutes and less unpleasant than Houdon's method. I submitted therefore without enquiry, but it was a bold experiment on his part on the health of an Octogenary, worn down by sickness as well as age. Successive coats of thin grout plastered on the naked head, and kept there an hour, would have been a severe trial of a young and hale person. He suffered the plaster to get so dry that separation became difficult and even dangerous. He was obliged to use freely the mallet and chisel to break it into pieces and get off a piece at a time. These thumps of the mallet would have been sensible almost to a loggerhead. The family became alarmed, and he confused till I was quite exhausted, and there became real danger that the ears would separate from the head sooner than from the plaister. I now bid adieu forever to busts and even portraits."

In addition to portraits of Macomb at West Point Military Academy and in City Hall, New York (and the Clinton County Historical Museum), Macomb is represented with other

members of his family in the collection of Saint Memin's miniatures in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. One of these is Mrs. John Navarre Macomb, born Christina Livingston, daughter of Philip Livingston, signer of the Declaration of Independence.

So little has been written about General Alexander Macomb in this century that we feel the balance has now been redressed by the publication of Allan Everest's new book, The Military Career of Alexander Macomb & Macomb At Plattsburgh. It is available at the Museum Shop or by mail and is an excellent Xmas gift for the local history collector.

1990 GRANTS

CCHA has been notified that it will receive generous support next year from the New York State Council on the Arts. Funding in the amount of \$4,800 will help to cover basic operating costs. The museum has been awarded \$4,000 for planning an exhibition on the history of fire and fire control in Clinton County to be scheduled in 1991. A grant of \$3,500 will be used to improve cataloguing and storage of CCHA's extensive collection of photographs which has become such an important community resource in recent years.

A SEASONAL NOTE

H.K. Averill recalled his grandfather, William Pitt Platt, as follows:

"In my memory I see him, as I did in my childhood, sitting in the kitchen by his old fireplace, the old crane hung with pots and kettles, a blazing fire upon the hearth, the old bake-oven being made ready for a batch of bread (rye or Indian or what-not), the old though bright tin roasting oven with its rotary spit carrying a monster turkey, the savory smell of apples, dumplings, mince-pie with all the nick-nacks (sic), (for Thanksgiving is coming) and there he sits watching the proceedings with his clay pipe smoking away, ever and anon picking up a coal from the fire with his little wire tongs and lighting his pipe and looking as though pleased with himself and all the world. A single lock of white hair as wide as your finger, just above the right corner of his forehead and the remainder of his hair black, slightly inclining to brown. His eyes were black."

In his portrait (in the possession of his descendants) William Pitt Platt looks stern and unbending, which was not unusual in early 19th century portraiture. Born in 1771, he was given a large tract of land on Cumberland Head in 1790 by his father, Zephaniah, to which he brought his bride, Hannah Kent of Dutchess County. The above reminiscence by his grandson paints a gentle picture of William who died in 1835 at the age of 64.

A GREAT STOCKING STUFFER (but don't bend it): The Hamlet of Lyon Mountain, \$3.00, by Helena T. Penalís & others in that community. Available at the Museum Shop.

ELECTION OF TRUSTEES

A Nominating Committee consisting of Margaret Byrne, Ralph P. Hubbel and C. Randall Beach has submitted the following slate of individuals to serve as CCHA Board members for a term of three years:

Mark Bennett
Jim Dawson
Mark McCullough

David Stortz
William Woythaler

The election will be held at the December 4 meeting. At CCHA's Nov. 28 annual banquet Pres. Jack Myers paid tribute to outgoing Board members Hans Hirsch, Richard Ward and James Bailey, referring to their many years of loyal and devoted service to the organization. As past presidents and treasurer, they have given generously of their time for the furtherance of the Historical Association and its mission to preserve the history of Clinton County.

Special thanks are in order for our wonderful volunteers who staff the museum at weekends, help with mailings, organize the flea market, lay out and proof-read publications, repair and paint gallery walls after the closing of exhibitions, drive vans to transport loan materials to and from the museum, and so on. There are too many to be recognized individually, but we trust they know how much we appreciate the gift of their time and energy. If YOU would like to join this group, please give us a call. Whatever your talents are, we can certainly use them.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO ALL CCHA MEMBERS AND FRIENDS!

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