

# NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

Issued Monthly by the Clinton County Historical Association

48 Court Street, Plattsburgh NY 12901, 518-561-0340

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## SEPTEMBER PROGRAM

CCHA kicks off its fall series of Monday evening programs with a presentation by Donna Bohon entitled "REAL INTEREST: The Growing Alliance Between Business and Politics, 1870-1892." Our speaker's research has focused on John Haughran, a politically powerful individual in Ellenburg. Mrs. Bohon uses Haughran as a vehicle to understand economic consolidation by which larger communities like Plattsburgh drew the lifeblood out of smaller towns and villages. Resident in the North Country for twenty years, Donna Bohon is a native of Worcester, Mass. Her academic studies and research at SUNY Plattsburgh have provided her with substantial amounts of information about North Country history. The program will take place in the Common Council Chambers, City Hall, Plattsburgh at 7:30 p.m. on Monday, September 11. Please note change of venue.

## ANNUAL DINNER

Please mark your calendars for the annual dinner on Saturday, November 4. More information will be included in the October *Notes*, but we can reveal now that our speaker will be Joseph F. Meany, Acting State Historian, whose topic will be "Native Sons and Daughters: New Yorkers and the American West." Don't miss this return visit to Clinton County by Joe Meany, who can always be counted on for an entertaining presentation.

## MUSEUM SHOP

Did you know that you can often find bits and pieces of fascinating local history in the museum shop? Currently offered for sale are billheads representing Isaac Merkel, manufacturer of cigars, and Bromley & Demerill, bakers and confectioners. Merkel, located at 40 Margaret Street, Plattsburgh, billed himself as a jobber of tobaccos, pipes and fire works, and as a bottler of boss lager. Carbonated drinks were also produced under the Merkel label. Bromley & Demerill, located at 10 Bridge Street and 3 & 5 Water Street, Plattsburgh, varied their mercantile activity by dealing wholesale in cigars. These inexpensive items can be framed to make attractive gifts. We have a large array of bottles embossed with names redolent of Plattsburgh's early business community.

## THE WRECK OF THE PHOENIX

“The following is an account of the conflagration of the steamer Phoenix, which took place near here, on Lake Champlain, September 5, 1819.

The steamboat left Burlington for Plattsburg about midnight, and had proceeded by one o'clock in the morning as far as Providence island, when the alarm was given. The boat at this time was temporarily commanded by a son of the captain, Richard M. Sherman, a young man of twenty-two. 'Amid the confusion, danger, and difficulties attendant on this terrible disaster, he displayed an energy and presence of mind, not only worthy of the highest praise, but which we might seek for in vain, even among those of riper years. To qualities like these, rightly directed as they were, was it owing that *not a person was lost* on that fearful night. In that burning vessel, at the dead of night, and three miles from the nearest land, was the safety of *everyone* cared for, and ultimately secured, by the promptness, energy, and decision of this young commander.'

Shortly after the fire was discovered, it raged with irresistible violence. “The passengers, roused by the alarm from their slumbers, and waking to a terrible sense of impending destruction, rushed in crowds upon the deck, and attempted to seize the small-boats. Here, however, they were met by young Sherman, who, having abandoned all hope of saving his boat, now thought only of saving his passengers, and stood by the gangway with a pistol in each hand, determined to prevent any person from jumping into the boats before they were properly lowered into the water, and prepared to receive their living freight. With the utmost coolness and presence of mind, he superintended the necessary preparations, and, in a few minutes, the boats were lowered away, and the passengers received safely on board. They then shoved off, and pulled through the darkness for the distant shore. As soon as this was reached, and the passengers landed, the boats returned to the steamboat and took off the crew, and as the captain supposed, every living soul except himself. But, shortly after the boats had left a second time, he discovered, under a settee, the chambermaid of the Phoenix, who, in her fright and confusion, had lost all consciousness. Lashing her to the plank which he had prepared for his own escape, this gallant captain launched her toward the shore; and was thus left alone with his vessel, now one burning pile. Having satisfied himself that no living thing remained on board his boat, and with the proud consciousness that he had saved every life intrusted to his care, he sprang from the burning wreck as it was about to sink beneath the waters, and, by means of a settee, reached the shore in safety. This is no exaggerated story. It is the simple narrative of one of the most heroic acts on record. We have only to add, that the captain who so faithfully and fearlessly discharged his duty on this trying occasion, is still (1840) in command of a noble boat on Lake Champlain, and is known to every traveller as Captain Sherman, of the steamboat Burlington.”

The following description of this terrific scene was written by one of the passengers: "I awoke at the time of the alarm, but whether aroused by the cry of the fire, the noise of feet trampling on deck, or by the restlessness common to people who sleep in a strange place, with a mind filled with sorrow and anxiety, I am unable to tell. I thought I heard a faint cry of fire, and, after a short interval, it seemed to be renewed. But it came so weakly upon my ear, and seemed to be flung by so careless a voice, that I concluded it was an unmeaning sound uttered by some of the sailors in their sports on deck. Soon, however, a hasty footstep was heard passing through the cabin, but without a word being uttered. As I approached the top of the cabin stairs, an uncommon brilliancy at once dispelled all doubts. Instantly the flames and sparks began to meet my eyes, and the thought struck me that no other way of escape was left but to plunge half naked through the blaze into the water. One or two more steps assured me that this dreaded alternative was not yet arrived: I hastily stepped aft, a lurid light

illuminated every object beyond with the splendor of a noon-day sun; I fancied it was the torch of death, to point me and my fellow-travellers toward the tomb. I saw no person on deck; but, on casting my eyes towards the boat that was still hanging on the larboard quarter, I perceived that she was filled, and that her stern-sheets were occupied with ladies. I flew to the gangway, and assisted in lowering the boat into the water. I then descended the steps, with the intention of entering the boat; but perceiving that she was loaded deep, and that there was a strong breeze and a high sea, I desisted. The painter was soon cut, and the boat dropped astern. I ascended the steps with the design of submitting myself to the water upon a plank; for I had great confidence in my skill in swimming, and I acted under an impression that the shore was only a few rods, certainly not a half mile distant. Judge what would have been my astonishment, and probably also my fate, had I done as I contemplated; when the fact was, that the steamboat at this period was in the broadest part of Lake Champlain, and at least three miles from any land. I had left the deck about two hours before, and this change had occurred in the meantime. I looked round upon the deck for a suitable board, or something of sufficient buoyancy, that I could trust to amid such waves as I saw were running. There was nothing large enough to deserve such confidence; I looked aft over the taffrail, everything there looked gloomy and forbidding; I cast my eyes forward, the wing was directly ahead, and the flames were forced, in the most terrific manner, towards the stern, threatening everything in its range with the utmost destruction. I then thought that if I could pass the middle of the boat, which seemed also to be the centre of the fire, I might find security in standing to windward on the bowsprit. I made the attempt. It was vain. The flames were an insurmountable barrier. I was obliged to return towards the stern. There was then no one in sight. I stepped over upon the starboard side of the quarter-deck. I thought all was gone with me. At that moment I saw a lady come up to the cabin door; she leaned against the side of it, and looked with a steadfast gaze and distracted air toward the flames; she turned and disappeared in the cabin. It was Mrs. Wilson, the poor unfortunate lady who, afterwards, with the captain's assistance, as he informed me, committed herself, with many piercing shrieks and agonizing exclamations, to the treacherous support of a small bench, on the troublous bosom of the lake. I then looked over the starboard quarter to know whether the other boat was indeed gone. I had the happiness to see her; she seemed to be full, or nearly so, one or two passengers were standing on the lower steps of the accommodation ladder, apparently with the design of entering the boat when she came within reach. I was determined to enter her at all risks, and instantly leaped over the quarter and descended into her. I found her knocking under the counter, and in danger of foundering. The steam-vessel continued to advance through the water: the waves dashed the boat with considerable violence against her, and most of those who had sought safety in the boat, being unacquainted with water scenes, were much alarmed, and by their ill-directed efforts were adding to the risk. Under these circumstances it became necessary to cut the fast, which was done, and those that were in it, were instantly secure. All these incidents occurred in a shorter time than I have consumed in writing them. From the moment of my hearing the first alarm to that of leaving the steamboat, was not, I am satisfied, near ten minutes; I believe it was not five."

**Editor's note:** Since the origin of this piece has not yet been uncovered, we would be pleased to hear from anyone who can guide us in the right direction. Possibly appearing first as a newspaper report, it may have been reprinted elsewhere. Whatever the source, the writer paints a vivid picture of terror on board a burning vessel when there seemed little chance of escape from either a fiery or watery death.

Available for study at the museum is a copy of the 1981 Champlain Maritime Society's report on the "Phoenix Project". The report provides fascinating information about the steamboat era on Lake Champlain and the Maritime Society's underwater archaeological project to identify and document the wreck.

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### VALCOUR ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

Good weather attended this year's Open House at the lighthouse, although the lake's low water level prevented larger boats from landing at the island. However, many visitors found their way to the National Register property, including Mr. & Mrs. John Brust who own the Barber Point lighthouse, a twin of the Valcour light. Another visitor was Miss Stella Wallenwein whose memories of summers on the island are still vivid after many years. Volunteers on August 26 were Lynn and Bill Woythaler, and Linda and Roger Harwood.

We have recently received a generous contribution to the fund plus a charming little oil painting of the lighthouse from Mrs. Richard H. Hoyt whose parents were co-owners of the structure during the 1930s and early 40s. Mrs. Hoyt recalls pre-World War II summers on Lake Champlain and many guests who would stop in to see the lighthouse, just as they do today.

Valcour Island (including the lighthouse) tee-shirts are available at the Museum Shop and we are happy to fill mail requests. Sizes S, M, L and XL are \$13.00; XXL is \$15.00. They make a great gift and they help the Association to pursue its goal of preserving the lighthouse for posterity. We also have supplies of a full-color print made from an original painting by local artist Rennie Fenwick.

### MARKING THE ANNIVERSARY OF SEPTEMBER 11, 1814

"The British naval effort on Lake Champlain during the War of 1812 ended in defeat at Plattsburgh on September 11, 1814. This defeat marked a turning point for British strategy in North America. Combined with the defeat of the British force that attacked Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland, it gave the impetus for a peace settlement that was finally signed in Ghent on December 24, 1814."

Dennis Lewis, *British Naval Activity on Lake Champlain During the War of 1812.*