



Clinton County Historical Association North Country Notes

Issue #420

June, 2018



**Thank you for
picking up our
newsletter!**

The Clinton County Historical Association is a non-profit organization that is chartered by the NY State Board of Regents. We collect and preserve items that have relevance to Clinton County.

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When the Bulldozers Came, the Old Cemetery Would Never be the Same

By Luke Cyphers, Trustee

Except for the occasional Halloween night, when teenage vandals would rampage through it, St. John's Cemetery on U.S. Avenue in Plattsburgh was a quiet, peaceful place that people mostly left alone throughout the middle part of the last century.

That was the problem.

Nobody bothered to maintain the old Catholic burial ground for the better part of four decades beginning in the 1940s. Oh, a Knights of Columbus group had cleared and cleaned up the cemetery in 1949, and some individual gravesites had been tended by loved ones and descendants.

But the cemetery had in large part ceased to be. The more recent dearly departed St. John's parishioners were now being interred in Mt. Carmel Cemetery, several blocks away, and the parish didn't have the funds to cover the estimated \$8,000 annual cost to maintain the old yard.

So nature took its course, with weeds and brush and saplings climbing up the steep bank of the Saranac River, which marked the cemetery's northern border, then establishing a jungle in and around the grave markers. Complaints about the shoddy old cemetery were common.

The pastor at St. John's, Msgr. Morris Dwyer, wanted to do something about it. In 1982, he'd hired a contractor to clean up a small section, and the work had gone well. The workers "carefully left all monuments with any legible inscriptions in an acre section adjacent to US Avenue in the northeast corner of the cemetery," Msgr. Dwyer wrote. "Grass had started and several remarked this spring on how much better the cemetery looked."

In the spring of 1983, he wanted an encore. For \$300, he hired a contractor, Floyd Sears, to clean up what the Monsignor said was to be about an acre of the property.

Sears started the job on or about Thursday, June 2, and by the following Tuesday, people noticed his work. They weren't happy with it.

As the June 8 edition of the Plattsburgh Press-Republican reported, "A major portion of St. John's Cemetery..., one of the oldest cemeteries in the city, has been cleaned out and bulldozed, old tombstones and all, over the northern embankment."



Parishioners, historians and other local residents were astonished that a piece of the city's civic and religious history, literally consecrated ground, was turning into a landfill.

There were grave markers dating from the 1820s in the cemetery, and it wasn't lost on the people interviewed in the Press-Republican: "One local funeral director was speechless when he heard of the work. 'That's history,' he said."

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Association News: CCHA Gears Up for America 250

By Geri Favreau, President

CCHA has many projects in the works to promote the history of our County. These projects are apart from the important work done daily at the Museum.

America 250: July 4, 2026 (just around the corner), is the 250th Birthday of the United States of America. The National Daughters of the American Revolution is planning the semi-quincentennial celebration. The Battle of Valcour, fought on Oct. 11, 1776, was a significant event in the war for independence. CCHA will be working with the DAR, the SAR, local towns and other local historical and community organizations to make sure that the Battle of Valcour receives the recognition it rightly deserves. CCHA has a great exhibit about the battle, in which Benedict Arnold helped stop a British invasion force on Lake Champlain, and much more information in our archives.

Destination Old Base Museum Campus: A Stakeholder Committee has been formed to develop and promote the OBMC as a destination. The Old Base is a gem and an important part of the rich history of our region. The OBMC has so much to offer: the Memorial Chapel, the site of Forts Scott, Moreau and Brown, The Plattsburgh Barracks Veterans Park, the US Oval with numerous markers placed by the Military Wives, Clyde A. Lewis Air Park, Old Post Cemetery, Rotary Centennial Park, four museums (Champlain Valley Transportation, Plattsburgh Air Force Base,

War of 1812 and of course, CCHA), Kid's Station, two breweries located in historic buildings (Oval Craft and Valcour Brewing), a proposed New Veteran's Park planned by the Town of Plattsburgh and the American Legion) and more.

Plans are being made to erect a new Interpretative Panel commemorating the World War I-era Plattsburgh Idea at the south end of the Oval next to Plattsburgh Barracks Veteran's Park. CCHA is the lead agency for this destination project and has received tremendous support from all the museums, breweries, the Chamber of Commerce and the Town of Plattsburgh.

We will be having a huge party in the future and invite everyone to experience the Old Base Museum Campus when more details are worked out.

In the meantime, every Old Base facility is open for the summer and welcomes visitors. There is free parking within easy walking distance of all the venues. Drop by, and don't forget to schedule a Walking Tour of the Oval given by Helen Allen Nerska or Jan Couture. You can grab a bite to eat and a beverage at one of the breweries.

County History Conference: A committee is being formed to organize a conference centering on the history of Clinton County. This day of history is for all municipal historians, historical organizations, and any other interested

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CCHA Announces Bluff Point Lighthouse Tours on Valcour Island

July 15, 2018, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Peru Dock, Route 9, 1.5 miles north of the hamlet of Valcour

The public is invited to join the CCHA on Sunday, July 15, at the Peru Dock for an exciting opportunity to visit the historic Bluff Point Lighthouse on Valcour Island. Round trip transportation will be provided for a fee of \$25 per person. The fee includes an island trail guide and George Clifford's book on Lake Champlain lighthouses. Special Lighthouse T-Shirts will also be on sale that day.

The tour is sold out, but payment must be done by June 30 to guarantee a spot, and members of the public are free to join the waiting list. Once on the island, a docent will be available for tours of the Lighthouse, and self-guided tours of the Island are available.

The boat holds five people per trip and will begin shuttling at 9 a.m. with departures every 30 minutes. The Lighthouse will close at 4 p.m. and all visitors to the Island must return by 5 p.m. In the event of rain, the tour will take place Sunday, Aug. 12.

Valcour Island has no dock, so participants must be physically able to disembark and board the boat from the island's natural landing, walk on uneven surfaces over rough terrain, and climb

stairs. And beware: The island is notorious for poison ivy.

An adult must accompany anyone under 12, and those under the age of 16 must bring and wear their own life jackets. Individuals may bring a picnic lunch to enjoy on the island.

Lighthouse displays include depictions of the history of Lake Champlain lighthouses, Lake Champlain's military history, the island's 20th Century Great Camps, and the life of a lighthouse keeper. Visitors may climb to the Lantern Room to see the functioning light and an outstanding view.

WWI Artifacts, Documents Sought

CCHA has launched a project to collect and publish a record of all Clinton County World War I veterans, and is seeking any information, documents or photos that can help us in the research.

Please email Noel Stewart if you have any information to share at stewart9@charter.net.

Museum Corner

By Helen Allen Nerska, Director

There is always lots of activity at the museum – even when we are officially “closed.” If there is a car in the lot, you can almost be sure someone will answer the doorbell. Everyone is welcome, and it is a pleasure to show visitors the most diverse historical collection in Clinton County.

This winter we were privileged to have intern Makenzee Bruce from the SUNY Plattsburgh History Department working on our collection of Redford Glass slides. With great initiative, she documented and brought those long-ago slides to life. She presented her findings on May 15 at the Lake Forest Senior Living Community. Makenzee is currently working part time at CCHA processing and documenting our collections under the direction of Collections Committee Chair Maurica Gilbert.

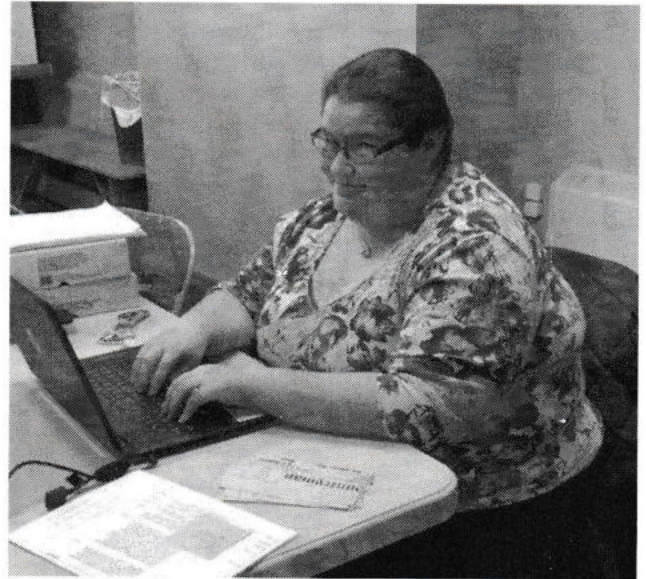
Meanwhile, SUNY Professor Justin Lowry’s archeology students took on the daunting task of identifying, documenting and photographing the CCHA’s Native American collection. This will be at least a two-semester project with a field visit to the Allen property in Peru for some hands-on exploration.

Many stories make their way out of our collection and onto the lecture circuit. In February, former intern Matthew Hoth shared his project of identifying county architectural influences.



Jared Ginley (left), a history and anthropology major at Plattsburgh State, and anthropology major Miriam Kempster work with the Native American collection.

Dick Soper gave two lectures on the Lozier family and their pioneering automobile plant using the museum collection’s Lozier factory photos, as well family photos from our portrait files. Our JCEO-sponsored staff member, Simon George, recorded and organized materials given to us by the John McKenna estate. CCHA Trustee and Treasurer William D. Laundry, with support from Simon, presented photos of Plattsburgh



CCHA intern Makenzee Bruce

John shot in 1975 at Lake Forest on May 1. This presentation will be offered daily at CCHA over the summer.

Meanwhile, Peter Sorrell, the newly appointed Altona Town Historian, identified previously undocumented CCHA collection relics from both the Revolution and the War of 1812— yet another indicator that collections activity is at an all-time high.

CCHA has an extensive negative collection, both glass and celluloid. Under the direction of Simon George, volunteers are organizing our Brush Studio portrait collection of glass plate negatives for easier access. North Country Public Radio’s Amy Feiereisel, with support from Roger Black, is choosing CCHA photos to include in NCPR’s Northcountryatwork.org web site.

Our June 16-17 Museum Weekend is just around the corner. All county museums are open and free to visitors. CCHA is celebrating this year with a new exhibit, “Trains, Planes and Automobiles,” and the weekend will include other exhibit updates, walking tours of the Oval and an archeology adventure for children on Saturday.

CCHA activities are highlighted regularly on Facebook, along with interesting stories of our history. Please contact us if you have any questions and/or wish to join our volunteer family.



CCHA Appoints Batchelder, Coffey and Farrington

The CCHA is proud to welcome three new members to its Board of Trustees. Karen Batchelder, Kevin Farrington and Sue Coffey bring a diverse array of experiences to the board, and have hit the ground running. Here is a quick introduction to the new members:

Karen Batchelder

A long-time North Country resident, Karen works at the Plattsburgh branch of the Clinton Essex Franklin Library System. She's had a lifelong interest in the region's history and how her family fits into it. After she and her husband, Rick, became empty nesters six years ago, they moved from Rouses Point to Plattsburgh. With her three children now grown up, she looks forward to retiring in a few years and devoting even more time to work with the CCHA.

Kevin Farrington

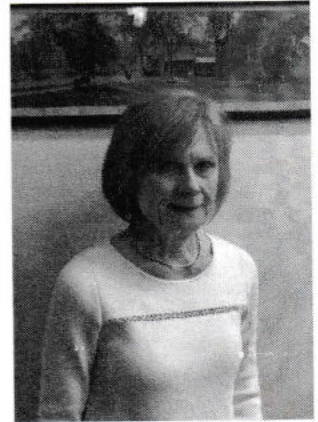
Kevin is director of civil engineering at AES Northeast, PLLC, and previously served as the City of Plattsburgh engineer for 15 years. Rotary International gave him its Paul Harris Award for contributions to the community, which include volunteer work with the Clinton County Planning Board, Lake Champlain

Technical Advisory Committee, and the Adirondack Young Professionals. Kevin has two adult children and lives in Saranac with his wife Shelly and their two young children.

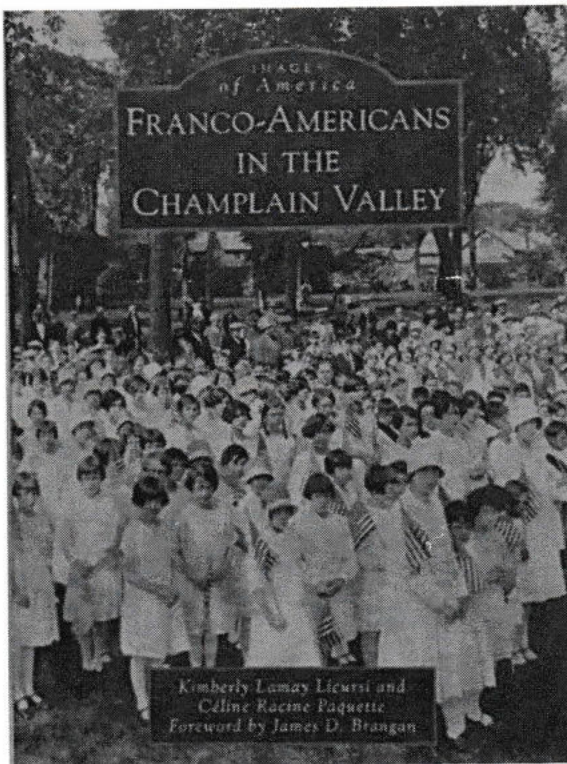
Susan Coffey

A resident of Plattsburgh for 65 years, Susan worked for several years as a Certified Public Accountant with Telling and Potter and went on to own and run General Trading Company, a popular and successful retail business, in the Town of Plattsburgh from 1993 to 2016.

Now retired, Susan has long been active in the community, serving on the boards of the North Country Girl Scouts and the Villas Home assisted living facility. She and her husband, James Coffey, have two adult children, John and Sarah.



In the Gift Shop



New:

Northern Reaches of Lake Champlain (LTL) \$10
Franco-Americans in the Champlain Valley (Kimberly Lamay Licursi and Celine Racine Paquette) \$21.99

Gently Used/Single Copies:

Pioneer Homes of Clinton County 1790-1820 (Allan S. Everest) \$25
Plattsburgh, New York – A City's First Century (Richard B. Frost) \$45
The Naval War of 1812 (Theodore Roosevelt) \$10
Our North Country Heritage (Allan S. Everest) \$20
Beekmantown: Forest Frontier to Farm Community (Philip L. White) \$25

We also have CDs, DVDs, notecards, coloring books, historical calendars, maps, prints, pictorial postmarks and photo prints.

Past copies of the Antiquarian (issues 1984-2003) are available for \$5 each. Copies of the Moorsfield Antiquarian (May 1937-February 1939) edited by Hugh and Charles W. McLellan are available for \$25 each or \$140 for the set of all eight issues. Call the Museum for a list of subjects.

Association News: CCHA Gears Up for America 250 (cont.)

people. The tentative date is Nov. 2 at the Elks Club on Cumberland Avenue in Plattsburgh. More information will be forthcoming as the committee sorts out details.

Another date to keep in mind: A total solar eclipse (100 percent coverage of the sun) will take place on April 8, 2024, passing right over the North Country. If the mania over the 2017 eclipse is an indicator, it should bring throngs of visitors to the region—and the museum campus.

Reference Library: Need help doing research? CCHA is here for you. Our Reference Library is full of wonderful information about our County. We have 16 file drawers full of articles, brochures, etc., 36 shelves of books and eight drawers of pictures, as well as six shelves full of oversized photos and maps. Volunteers have inventoried every piece of information in our Reference Library and created a searchable list with thousands of entries. That doesn't even include all the material in our document, map and glass plate negative storage rooms. Anyone looking for information should call ahead to let us know what information they seek, and schedule a time to visit.

Museum Guide: Jan Couture (board secretary, docent, researcher, and Town of Saranac historian) has created a guide to our Museum. Guides are available as you enter the Museum and distributed in our membership letters.

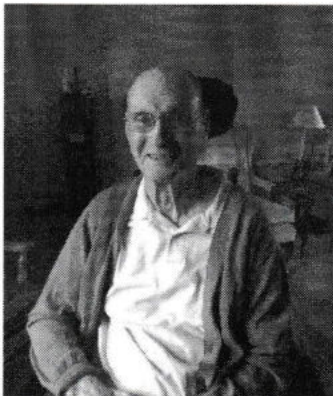
Outreach: Volunteers are planning on participating at the Farmers' Market a couple of times this summer. We like to sell books there, but more important, talk to people about our mission and listen to their stories. We often have our presentations at sites other than CCHA. Our director, Helen Nerska, speaks before many organizations about the important work we do and the amazing history of the North Country.

Donations: A good friend that we will all miss is Pfizer. The company recently donated three flat files for our Map Room and three 4-drawer file cabinets for our Reference Library. Pfizer has been a good friend to area non-profits, and Pfizer retirees who volunteer only 40 hours in one year can request that Pfizer donate \$500 to that organization! That's not even one hour/week, and the \$500 is so important to any non-profit.

Come and visit *your* Museum. We think you'll be pleased.

Collection News: Turner Donates 1812 Musket

An 1812 Springfield Musket has found a permanent home with CCHA, thanks to a donation by Lee H. Turner, Sr.



Lee H. Turner, Sr.

Turner, a longtime CCHA member, reports that his great-grandfather Pierre (Peter) Alexis Turner purchased the musket from a soldier who used the weapon when he fought on Bridge Street during the Battle of Plattsburgh. The musket was originally a flintlock but was modified into a cap lock.

Turner family tradition was to fire the old musket once a year on the 4th of July.



This musket may be seen on exhibit in our Military Heritage Gallery, and Lee Turner's oral history of life in the North Country is available in the CCHA archives.



Daryl Turner, son of Lee Turner, and Geri Favreau with the 1812 Springfield musket.

When the Bulldozers Came to St. John's Cemetery (Cont.)

Not to mention the personal connections to the place. "Mercedes Loughan Drown is mortified by the work on the sacred grounds," the Press-Republican reported. "She said her family had just begun to trace their genealogy and found at least two relatives buried in the cemetery."

Rev. John Angevine told the paper the site, littered now with broken gravestones amid the uprooted stumps, reminded him of a war zone. "This looks like Hospital Ridge in Burma to me," Angevine said. "This is violence of the worst kind. Even when you're dead, you're not safe."



There were demands that the work stop immediately. It didn't. Nobody was in a position to tell the contractor to halt the bulldozers.

Msgr. Dwyer was away on a retreat. The city's mayor, Carlton Rennell, was in Albany at a conference.

The state director of cemeteries told the newspaper he had no authority over church-run or municipal cemeteries.

He did offer that "work would never be allowed" at a state-run cemetery, such as Riverside Cemetery or Schuyler Falls. "To destroy any monument would be out of the question," he said.

The contractor's comments in the Press-Republican weren't reassuring.

Sears told the paper he planned to keep clearing the rest of the week, and that the cemetery was overgrown. "Who's taking care of an 1823 tombstone?" he asked, adding 95 percent of the tombstones weren't standing and the others were leaning or tipped over. "It boils down to dollars and cents."

"Keep the wheels rollin', boys, so we can move out," Sears was quoted as saying, even while relatives were picking through dirt piles to find traces of their ancestors' graves.

Now that it had made the media, the cemetery was a cause celebre. By the next day, signs appeared on the chain link fence bordering St. John's: "The Devil's Work Hurts All," proclaimed one. "You're the Devil that Digs," said another.

The Press-Republican reported 75 community members dropping in on the site to voice their displeasure. Meanwhile, confusion reigned. Msgr. Dwyer said he'd intended to have the worst parts of the property cleaned up so the city could take over the maintenance. The city's Common Council said it had never agreed to such an arrangement.

Finally, on Thursday, Msgr. Dwyer ordered the work stopped, as relatives of combed through the dirt for signs of their ancestors' markers..

The community response was brutal, with most of the blame falling on the monsignor. Tim Cunningham, the Press-Republican city editor, opined on June 11: "The monsignor acted irresponsibly—when he ordered the land cleared—when he left the project unsupervised—when he waited so long before ordering the work halted. Such damage to a cemetery cannot be repaired, and for some, the monsignor included, this wound may never heal. His act will haunt both him and his parish for a long time."

Three days later, in a contrite letter to the editor, Msgr. Dwyer explained and apologized for his actions.

He said Sears was only to work on a single acre, with a small bulldozer and tractor.

Instead, the monsignor wrote, it was Sears' decision to "to hire large equipment and exceed by some five acres the space and type of restoration indicated for his work. Until I saw pictures Friday I did not imagine any work was done outside the area agreed upon. ... I agree that I should not have allowed work while I was away."

He also asked for help. "Would everyone interested please offer plans and suggestions in writing, mailed to Old Catholic Cemetery. Hopefully, public interest shown now will generate the help needed to restore and improve the cemetery."

It fell on deaf ears. A short news update on Sept. 24 reported that donations for maintenance of the cemetery totaled a paltry \$80 from two contributors. "No one wants to deal with the problem," Msgr. Dwyer said, "but they still holler."

The cemetery didn't get a real makeover until 1989, six years after the disaster, according to author Thea Lewis, in her book, "Ghosts and Legends of Lake Champlain." Volunteers from the Air Force Base's 380th Civil Engineering Squadron helped clean the place up, retrieving several markers from down the embankment on the Saranac River. Many of the markers were now mere shards, so they placed as many intact markers as they could together in a section of the graveyard. But of course, knowledge of the original grave sites disappeared when

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When the Bulldozers Came to St. John's Cemetery (Cont.)

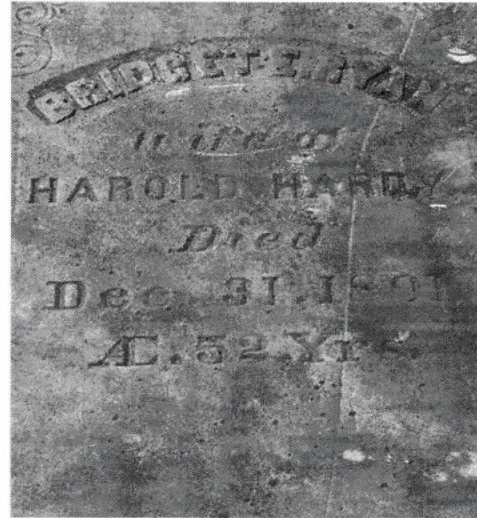
the bulldozers came in 1983. And to this day, tombstone bases and shards of markers still litter the hill leading down to the river.

Not all was lost, however.

Back in 1933, members of the McLellan family voluntarily began copying and compiling a list of legible grave marker inscriptions throughout cemeteries in Clinton County. That list still exist today at several local archives, and is part of the CCHA's permanent collection.

And over the past three decades, St. John's has done a fine job of maintenance on the cemetery. The grass is mowed regularly, the weeds are kept at bay, and the remaining markers retain their dignity.

It's a perfect place for a quiet stroll, and a reminder that history is filled with wonders, and, sometimes, blunders.



Donations, Memberships, Grants and Support

Robert and Mary Adams, Adirondack Architectural Heritage, Jane Alexander, Allen County Library, Carol and Ron Allen, Ara Asadourian, Martha Bachman, Jim and Anne Bailey, Ira and Kathy Barbell, Larry and Vesta Barcomb, Jack Barrette, Betty and Bernard Bassett, Karen Batchelder, Jack and Donna Bell, Rod and Christine Bigelow, Roger and Bonnie Black, Kit and Sally Booth, Alan and Jennifer Booth, Helen and Robert Booth, Tom Braga, Ronald Brault, Brown Funeral Home, Angela Brown, Carolyn Burakowski, Dr. Edgar Burde and Family, Ken and Trudy Burger, Bruce Butterfield, Caterpillar Foundation, Mark and Holley Christiansen, City of Plattsburgh Firefighter's, Shirley Coffey, Paula Cormier and Sarah Gooley, Linda Lee Coryer, Jan and Dave Couture, Richard Daly, The DAR Library, James and Caroline Dawson, John Dawson, Monsignor Lawrence Deno, Nelson Disco, Mary and Robert Donlan, Barbara Dorrance, Janet and Elmer Duprey, Danielle Erb, Geri Favreau, Connie Fisher, Mason and Joan Forrence, Nancy Frederick, Maurica Gilbert and Noel Sowley, Doreen and Rod Giltz, David and Lynne Glenn, Glens Falls National Bank, Robert Haley, Hannaford Bros. Company, Bob and Evelyn Heins, Judith Heintz, Alix Heuston, Mark Cohen and Patricia Higgins, Frank and Carol Hochreiter, Bart Holm, John and Norma Homburger, Jacqueline Huru, Mick Jarvis, Ray and Lola Johnson, Euclid and Susanne Jones, Peter Keenan, Caroline Kehne, Susan and Richard Kelley, Bill and Jane Kelting, Debra Kimok, Carole and Harold Klein, Carol Klepper, John Krueger,

Dan Ladue, Michael Lafontaine, Arthur LaJoy, Connie Lalonde, William Laundry, William and Beverly Leege, Brinley and Dorothy Lewis, Jim Lindgren, Roland and Martha Lockwood, Patricia Loughan, Stephen Martin, Elizabeth McKee, Ann and Ron Merkley, Thomas and Elizabeth Metz, Kelly and Miles Moody, Henry Morlock and Ursula John, Ruth Mowry, Pat and Sheila Murnane, Merrie Nautel, Helen Nerska, Chris and Sandra Neuzil, Sylvia Newman, Mary Nicknisch, Northern Insuring, New York State Library, Cassidy O'Brien and Pam Seymour, Don Papson, Celine Paquette, David Patrick Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund, John Patterson, Melissa Peck, Pfizer Foundation, Plattsburgh Rotary Club, Kris Portal, Princeton Area Community Foundation-Rush Holt/Margaret Lancefield, Pearl Rabin, Stan and Christine Ransom, Geri Rickert, Steve and Mary Riley, Rouses Point-Champlain Historical Society, Thomas Rumney, Jean and John Ryan, Kevin and Mary Ryan, Douglas and Evelyne Skopp, Sowley Management Inc., Merritt and Joan Spear, Jeff and Janet Stephens, Stewart's Foundation, David and Sandy Stortz, David and Roberta Sullivan, Jack Swan, John and Louise Tanner, Town of Ausable, True Insurance/Hunt True, Gary and Billie VanCour, June Vennette, Village of Champlain, Village of Dannemora, Village of Rouses Point, Linda and Stuart Voss, Steve and Sue Welch, Kay and Bill Wellman, John Willey, Bill and Lucy Wilson, Dale and Ruth Wolfe and Clinton County.



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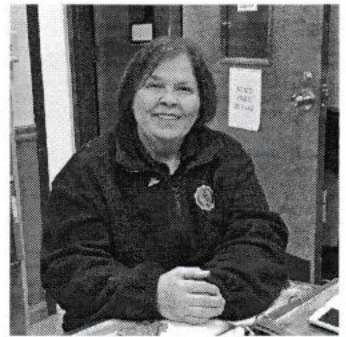
Issue 420, Spring, 2018

Current Resident or:

American Legion Film Crew Visit

After soldiers returned home from World War I, they were given \$60, a train ticket to the station nearest their home, and the right to wear their uniform until they got there. That was it. Things have changed for the better since then, thanks to the formation of the American Legion. Nine of the founders of the Legion were trained in the Military Training Camps on the Plattsburgh Reservation leading up to America's entrance into the war in 1917.

The American Legion will celebrate 100 years of existence next year, and to prepare for the event, a film crew came to the home of General Leonard Wood's Plattsburgh Idea to document the history of the national training program. The crew, which included interviewers from Post 43 of the American Legion in Hollywood, CA, spent the afternoon of April 5 at CCHA in the Military Timeline Gallery, taking photographs of our collection and speaking on camera with Helen Nerska



Rena Nessler



and Julie Dowd. Our book, *The Plattsburgh Military Reservation*, proved a valuable resource for their script writer.

The film will be shown at the Legion's national convention next year in Indianapolis.

Steve Bowman of the Clinton County Veterans Service Agency escorted the crew around the area. We were honored to have Rena Nessler, a U. S. Navy veteran and first woman commander of The American Legion Department of New York, accompany the group on the shoot at CCHA, and proud to have contributed to the project.

Richard Frost (left) with visiting film crew