

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE
CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 68

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

October 1970

The October Meeting

of the Association will consist of its annual banquet on the evening of Monday, October 5th. It will be held at 6:30 o'clock at the Royal Savage Inn on the Lake Shore Road.

The program will include a slide presentation, "The Great Phantasmagoria," by Mrs. Katherine Leddick of Whitehall. Her collection of slides is, according to authorities at Eastman House, the only one of its kind to survive. They are hand-painted in jewel dust and date from the period of the 1850's to the 1870's. Some were made by Louis Daguerre in Paris. The main part of her collection was made in Germany by the father of Alfred Steiglitz, great American photographer. President Lincoln is said to have seen this show several times in the White House, and Mrs. Leddick's projector was used there. Included are pictures about the founding of the country, the French and Indian War, the Revolution and the life of Benjamin Franklin.

Members and friends of the Association are cordially invited to attend. Tickets are \$4.75 a person (all inclusive), and reservations should be made not later than October 1st with Mr. Evalon Merritt, Program Chairman, at Point View Terrace, Plattsburgh, whose telephone is 563-5215. Remittance must accompany all reservations. Tickets are also available from Association Board members David Martin of West Chazy, Ignatius Lacombe of Peru and Mrs. Derek Allan, John Caramia, Allan Everest and Eugene Link of Plattsburgh.

MORE OLD HOMES DISAPPEAR

This summer witnessed the destruction of two more fine old houses in the Plattsburgh area. One, the old Moffit home on the Moffit Road, blew up from the pressure of gas in July. The home was apparently started by Patrick Moffit around the middle of the 19th century, and occupied later by his son, General Stephen Moffit. The General lost a leg in the Civil War. Nevertheless, after his return to Plattsburgh he served as Collector of Customs, warden of Clinton Prison and Assemblyman. With his additions, his home became a fine brick mansion.

The other was the intentional demolition of the Charles Platt home at 24-26 Broad Street. Mr. Platt, a leader in the town's first settlement in 1785, built the rear part of this structure, probably by 1800. His son Nathaniel moved it back from the street in the 1820's and added the large front section. Judge Haile and Dr. A. C. Carver were later owners.

Henry King, The Man Who Wanted to Die

In July 1881 King and Hamilton had an argument. They were discussing the Prison at Dannemora. The trial which followed, and the execution which resulted, revealed the story of a very strange murderer. Henry King did not have to die; he could probably have received a life sentence for his crime. Instead, he sealed his own fate and condemned himself to be hanged. The **Plattsburgh Republican** and the **Plattsburgh Sentinel** followed the affair closely and are the sources for the strange story of the man who wanted to die.

Henry King was born in New York City in 1850. When he was young he appeared to have a bright future. He had a Catholic background and held a good position in a store for awhile, but then he fell into bad company and gradually became involved in petty crime. In 1876 he stole a watch from a man on the street and was pursued by a policeman. The officer caught him but was knifed during King's efforts to escape. He was subsequently apprehended and jailed, but the officer died soon afterwards. When told that he had killed a policeman, King said that he had not meant to do it and was sorry for it. He had only been trying to get away.

He was treated roughly by the police because the man he had killed had been very popular. A mob almost lynched him. His trial was speedy, and he was sentenced to life for murder in the second degree. The recorder at the trial said he regretted King could only be given life instead of being hanged. King was sent to Auburn Prison for a time and then was transferred to Clinton Prison. The authorities gained enough confidence in him to allow him to work in the kitchen, and he became friendly with a fellow prisoner, Mike Hamilton, who was serving five years for grand larceny.

In July 1881 King and Hamilton had an argument. They were discussing the condition of President Garfield, who had just been struck down by an assassin's bullet. Hamilton called Vice President Arthur a coward, which angered King. They decided to settle the matter by going into the woodshed to fight it out. It was there that King found an axe and killed Hamilton by a blow on the head.

The prisoner was kept in close confinement at the prison until shortly before his trial in September, when he was brought to Plattsburgh. Up to this point it had not been an unusual murder case. But at the trial Henry King's story began to take a bizarre turn. He was arraigned before the Court of Oyer and Terminer with Judge Landon presiding. When he was asked to state a plea, King said he originally had planned to plead "not guilty," but after having spent such a miserable night in jail he decided he would just as soon die as remain there, so he pleaded "guilty."

The case went to the jury without argument on either side. There was only circumstantial evidence against King because nobody had actually seen the murder. It looked as if he would be sentenced only for murder in the second degree, which would merely have kept him in prison for life. After the jury had been out for some time, they returned for a further explanation of the difference between first and second degree murder. Judge Landon explained that in murder in the first degree there must be a deliberately-formed purpose to kill which must be followed up persistently. It was obvious at that moment that such evidence was not present in the case.

Just then King sprang to his feet and explained that he did have time to think before he committed the murder. He said that his first blow only stunned Hamilton, and he looked at him lying on the floor for several minutes before he decided he would kill him. When his attorney tried to stop him King declared, "I must speak, my conscience bids me to speak and tell the whole truth about this matter." The judge told the jury that the prisoner's statement should be considered as evidence. This sealed his fate, because shortly afterwards the jury returned to the crowded courtroom with a verdict of murder in the first degree and a penalty of death. A motion to suspend sentence pending examination of the prisoner's sanity was denied, the judge stating that King's demeanor showed no signs of insanity. The prisoner's only reaction to the verdict was that he thought it was correct.

After the trial King was confined to the county jail until the day of his hanging, November 4th. The change that came over him during this time was truly fascinating. At first he seemed to display a great deal of contempt for spiritual advisers and said they would have a hard time reforming him. Apparently he had not yet realized the meaning of what he had done during the trial. He told reporters that he did not want to die and was not tired of life. A rumor circulated that King was putting up a ruse and had gotten himself the death sentence, knowing he would be

kept in the county jail where he could more easily escape.

But during the ensuing weeks a radical change was reported in his attitude.

He was one of the quietest prisoners in the jail and spent many days on self-imposed fasts. His religious outlook changed as he welcomed the interest of clergymen in his welfare and the daily visits of sisters of the D'Youville Convent. On the day before his death King told reporters about the look Hamilton had given him when he was laying on the ground before he died. He said that he would never be able to forget that look as long as he lived. He asserted that Hamilton was worth a dozen of him and admitted that his downfall had always been his quick temper. The **Republican** printed King's last written statement, which was addressed to the editor:

Dr. Bixby: You may not see me again, or rather I may not have the time to speak to you. Now I wish you would do me this justice, for to publish what I have written to you. You asked me if I felt as if God would forgive me for the sins I have committed. I shure I told you that I put all confidence in the Goodness of God, and have the greatest hopes of a pardon for my sins. My religion teaches me that any one feeling sincere sorrow for their sins and asking forgiveness of God will receive the means of gaining that forgiveness. I feel certain that my sins have been forgiven me, for as I said before no one could feel more sorry for what they have done than

H. King

The Monday before the hanging King's mother and brother arrived from New York. They visited him several times but otherwise kept fairly secluded. The brother told reporters he could not remember a time when King didn't have a quick temper, and his mother described his character as "dark, always dark."

Prior to the execution a private group started to set up staging next to the jailyard so as to collect admissions for watching the hanging. Since the staging was on private property the town could do nothing officially about it. However, Sheriff Mooney spoke to the people and offered to pay their expenses if they would take the staging down. They agreed and accepted \$65 which he paid out of his own pocket. The citizens of Plattsburgh reimbursed him.

At 8 o'clock on the morning of November 4th Father Walsh of St. John's Church said Mass for the prisoner in his cell. King had arisen at 5:30 after having private devotions until 1:30 in the morning. He refused food because Friday was his fast day. His hanging was scheduled for midday. A crowd had gathered outside the courthouse and jail by 10 o'clock and sixty special policemen were sworn in, half for duty inside the jailyard and half for duty outside.

At 11:35 Father Walsh entered the yard wearing his church vestments. He was followed by another priest and King, who was intent on his prayers. The prisoner shook hands and thanked all the officers and clergy. He was allowed to make a final statement, which the **Republican** published:

"As for my religion I have little to say. I am sorry for what I have done and have asked God to forgive me and hope He will do so. That is all."

A black cap was drawn over his face, his legs and arms were pinioned and the rope was placed around his neck. The weight dropped and his life ended, the seventh execution in Plattsburgh's history. After being pronounced dead his body was placed in a coffin and hearse that had been ordered by his brother and paid for by the county. He was given a funeral service at St. John's Church and buried in the parish cemetery.

So died Henry King, a man who had said while awaiting death, "I am better prepared to die than I ever should be again. I deserve my fate and will not flinch from it."

Wallace L. Philips, SUC

RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

September riddle: fortunately for us, Woody McLellan answered his own riddle in the September issue. Apparently he wanted to avoid the multiple answers that the question concerning the demolition of old churches occasioned. For reasons best known to himself he has departed for the Southwest and no one knows when or if he plans to return.

New riddle: where and what was Cumberland Spring?

New Stamp to Commemorate Fort Snelling

A postage stamp to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Fort Snelling, Minnesota will be issued in October. It celebrates the role that the historic outpost played in opening the West.

Colonel Josiah Snelling, commandant of the 5th Infantry, laid the cornerstone in 1820. He was the commander of the fort from that year until his death in 1828. Originally known as Fort St. Anthony, it was renamed by the War Department in 1825 in honor of Colonel Snelling.

Snelling fought throughout the War of 1812. As Inspector General of the Army and a lieutenant colonel, Snelling saw duty in Plattsburgh after the war, in 1817. The Kent-Delord collection at the Feinberg Library at the College contains several short business letters from him. In one he ordered a dozen bottles of "cyder of good quality" from the firm of Bailey and Delord.

Another, written to Judge Delord, reveals that Army officers, even of high rank, were not always paid promptly:

"I am in daily expectation of receiving six hundred dollars & in the meantime I am hard pressed by Platt & Co. for the amount of their bill; could you add another to the many favours I have already received from you by loaning me 100 dollars for a few days, I shall be very grateful."

BEQUEST TO THE ASSOCIATION

The Historical Association recently received from the executors of the estate of the late Lewis Robinson of West Chazy a bequest of \$1,000. The Board of Directors has voted to put the money into the Association's Museum Fund.

Mr. Robinson had a life-long interest in local history and was the author of articles about the early life of the area. He was a descendant of Lewis Robinson who operated the famed Robinson's Tavern on the Military Turnpike for many years after 1810.

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Issued by the

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

David K. Martin, Secretary
West Chazy, New York

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