

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE
CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 86

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

September, 1972

The September Meeting

of the Association will be held at 8 o'clock on the evening of Monday, September 11th, in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. Since this is Battle of Plattsburgh Day, it is particularly appropriate to offer a program concerning this great event.

The program will be in charge of Arnold Burdeau, historian, and Roderick Sherman, photographer, both teachers in the city's public schools. It will consist of an illustrated talk on the battle of Plattsburgh, including slides, music and background sounds. It was originally prepared by the two men as a teaching aid for Junior High social studies.

The public is cordially invited.

Concerning the October meeting, watch for further notices about the annual banquet.

The Robert Platt Homestead

The Robert Platt homestead was built by Col. Melancton Smith, a pioneer settler of Plattsburgh, honored both as a civilian and a soldier who died in his early manhood, not yet 28 years old, from the effects of malarial fever. The house may be considered historical inasmuch as it was erected in the primitive times of Clinton County (1812); pierced by bullets and balls fired from the American works in 1814 which remained imbedded as praiseworthy scars; and occupied by British officers during the siege, thus presenting a fair target for shapshooters. There is also proof that a young Lieutenant was killed in a large storeroom that joined a passage-way between the parlor and dining room, as he was enjoying an afternoon lunch.

The building stood facing Margaret Street (named for Colonel Smith's mother). In August 1818 Colonel Smith died and the house, still so fresh and young, remained tenantless and desolate for a few gloomy months.

In 1819 or 1820 the "Smith House" passed into the ownership of Judge Levi Platt, who had been closely identified with Colonel Smith and joint partner and proprietor in the creation of mills and extensive land holdings.

I might say at this point that I have hanging in my home a life-size portrait of Levi Platt and another of Eliza Miller Platt, his wife. This was the daughter of Dr. John Miller, the first physician of Clinton County. These portraits were painted by Edward Tuttle in 1815. She is shown in the dress described above, and wearing a necklace of jet beads. This necklace that I have on today is the same one Eliza Platt wore when she sat for her portrait 116 years ago.

A stay of several years in the homestead brought adverse changes to the second owner, and induced Mr. Platt's removal from the ancient landmark. Mr. Heman Cady next took possession of the house. This gentleman married the daughter of Theodoros Platt, one of the original settlers of Clinton County.

In 1844 the house again changed hands when it was acquired by Robert Platt and rechristened "The Platt House". No change of tenants took place during the time of Mr. Platt. He was the "Uncle Robert" of fond memory, whose farm at Port Jackson and that of his brother Jonas attracted the village children in plum season. Those wondrous trees had the green gage, blue gage and Bleeker Purpling, now disappeared from cultivation since the fruit from these farms was a real presence.

Shortly after Robert Pratt's death in 1858, the building fell prey to modern progress and ultimate claims, being sold to the U. S. Government and demolished to give place to the Customs House and Post Office.

THE CLINTON COUNTY POOR HOUSE

In the late 1700's and the early 1800's, the welfare system was operated by each individual town. But following the report of the Yates Committee to the State legislature in 1824, a state-wide movement was inaugurated to require the counties to take over the care of the poor from the towns.

Accordingly, in April 1827, the Clinton County Board of Supervisors, "after looking at several farms offered for sale, selected that of Ebenezer Allen in Beekmantown, which contained 90 acres, as the site for a County Poor House. The price paid was \$500." The farm would be partly worked by the inmates. It would produce for the House poultry, eggs, butter, milk, pork and beef. These products would be used also in exchange for groceries from local merchants.

During the following month, the Board entered into contract with Levi Marshall and Abram Howe to build the stone work of the Poor House for \$700. At the same time another contract was closed with Levi Marshall for the "carpenter and joiner work" for \$689. These jobs were both let to the lowest bidders. By the end of 1828, the first Clinton "County" Poor House was completed. Also, the new Superintendents of the Poor were appointed which included Calvin Everest of Peru and Isaac Platt of Plattsburgh.

After a few years the Poor House was found to be too small. So the Board of Supervisors appointed a committee "to contract for building additions to the Poor House, agreeable to a certain plan furnished them." The Poor House admitted any person, man, woman or child, who could not provide for himself. These people were known as paupers. Some of the causes of pauperism or dependence included the following: insanity, idiocy, epilepsy, paralysis, general feebleness of mind, blindness, deafness, vagrancy, and many others. In 1868, for example, there were 81 full-time paupers at the County Poor House. This number was broken into categories of dependence, such as: "no. of lunatics, 12; idiots, 16; blind, 3; mute, 2; no. of children born at the house, 6; and no. of deaths during the year, 10;" and continued until all were accounted for.

But all was not well. In 1873 a "Committee on County Poor House," made its report to the Board of Supervisors. The Committee considered the County Poor House to be in "bad condition" and recommended that the Board take into consideration the building of a new one. The following is a small portion of the Committee's findings.

"In this particular building there are nine "wards"--which means simply "rooms"--and in those "wards" are kept at the present time 63 paupers--there are sometimes as many as ninety. Pretty well crowded they are, but that is to be expected--the house is of course old-fashioned, the rooms varying from fifteen or twenty to thirty feet square, with up to fifteen beds arranged around the outside."

"Passing through the yard to the rear, you enter the "Hospital," occupied by women, one of whom crouches by the stove, mumbling and crooning to herself. She is an idiot, or partially idiotic, as the most casual observer would soon discover. Another poor creature sits upon a bed, having upon her face the smirk which only lunatics wear; she puts on airs and immediately informs you that she is the daughter of a Baptist clergyman--that she is married to a prominent citizen, whom she names, and that she would thank you for a cup of tea."

"There is a daughter of an old idiotic woman, who goes by the name of "Mary Ann". For all we know she was probably born here herself. At any rate, she has brought forth two children while here, both illegitimate (which is very common in the Poor House), and is supposed--the keeper told us--to have borne another last week, which she has "hid somewhere" as it cannot be found! This act of illegitimate births is due to the limitation of rooms and convenience which allows this common intercourse among the sexes to occur."

"The keeper spoke of this matter as if it were of no consequence--might not the child better be put out of the way rather than grow up another imp like the eldest born of Mary Ann's, running about in the snow, nearly fourteen years old, with foul marks of syphilis--transmitted from his parents--upon his face and body, and whose huge, reddened, feet have evidently never been in contact with shoes or stockings."

"In the so-called "New Room", where there exists no warmth of any kind, there is an old man who is afflicted with inflammatory rheumatism, who keeps from freezing by lying abed all day. Another man, evidently in the agonies of death--his limbs and body are almost a mass of corruption from foul disease--dropsy, they say-- but from the sickening odor, sufficient to infect a whole neighborhood, you would judge it to be something worse--syphilis perhaps, or elephantiasis."

The bathing facilities were limited. The inmates were fortunate if they received one bath a week in which all used the same tub of water.

"Next we come to the 'jail', which appears worse than the infamous Black Hole of Calcutta, with the howling maniacs and the smell of corruption and death. The 'jail,' which is full of darkness, contains a man who hasn't seen daylight in sixteen years and probably will not for the remainder of his life." (Incidentally, the 'jail' has just recently been removed to the County Jail for use in the recreation area as a security measure.)

The report concluded with statements about the high death rate among the inmates. For many years, when a pauper first arrived at the Poor House he would make his coffin with his own hands. In addition, the Poor House had its own grave site, and by tradition numbers of people in the Beekmantown area, who could not afford a burial plot, are believed to have utilized the grave site also.

It was this report which caused a public outrage and enabled the Board of Supervisors to raise the sum of \$30,000 from the sale of County bonds for a "new" Clinton County Poor House which, in part, is still in use today. The "new" County Poor House was finished in September, 1875. It was built only a few rods south of the "old" Poor House. The "old" building was probably taken down after the "new" House was constructed. The yearly cost of maintaining the "new" House was estimated at approximately \$20,000. (Today, the budget for the year 1972 is approximately \$590,000.)

At first the "new" County Poor House seemed like a large improvement over the "old". The rooms were larger, heated and well ventilated. There was also a large water supply and the overall stench of death was absent. However, even though it was an improvement, it quickly brought back memories of the "old."

On December 2, 1876, the Plattsburgh Republican noted: "We regret to learn that the new County Poor House is in a bad condition and needs new floors in the entire building of three stories which will require another outlay of a large amount. So goes the peoples' money!"

On October 1, 1889, Dr. David S. Kellogg wrote in his journal: "Today, with Dr. R. E. Hyde of Beekmantown, I examined all of the insane and all of the idiots at the County House in Beekmantown. This was done by order of the State Board of Lunacy. There are ninety-four inmates of the County House. Of these thirty-five are insane and nineteen are idiots. Just think of that! Many were apparently rational enough until they were touched on their peculiar delusions. One man attended the boiler of the steam-heating apparatus. He was faithful from morning until night, always in the boiler room, but ask him what he met on the road and he would go on and give a long conversation between himself and some animal he had met."

This care of the insane was not unusual. In May 1889 the state legislature defeated a bill to remove the indigent insane from the county poorhouses. Nevertheless, the State Care Act of 1890 forbade such confinement of the insane and made them wards of the state. At the time the state assumed their care, 2,200 were in county institutions.

The Poor House was also a place where some tragic accidents occurred. For instance in the early 1800's, a "crazy pauper--Elvira Steele--chopped off the head of Mr. Carter, the keeper with an ax while he was asleep. Miss Steele was tried at Plattsburgh by Judge Throop and acquitted on the ground of insanity." Another incident occurred in the early 1900's, when a Miss Mary Laporte, age 45, was standing too near the fireplace and her clothing was drawn into the flames. "Mrs. Savage, an employee at the House, grabbed up a rug and threw it over the woman, thus smothering the flames. But, even this prompt action could not save the unfortunate woman, whose flesh was dropping from her body as she ran. Miss Laporte died the next morning."

It was many decades after these incidents occurred when the state finally set up some "rules and regulations" to aid in preventing such misadventures. Some of the rules were of the following tone: "inmates shall submit to search when in the opinion of the superintendent or his assistants such search is deemed necessary; fighting or quarrelling, or use of vulgar, abusive or profane language is strictly forbidden; also, expectorating (spitting) in or about the building is absolutely prohibited."

Today, the County Home has changed greatly in respect to name, size, operation and atmosphere. This change is indeed a change for the better. The outrages suffered by the inmates over the years have gradually produced great improvements in Clinton County's care of its indigent.

This article, written by Barry Kahn, SUC, is based upon the Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, the Record of Inmates maintained at the Home, the newspapers, and interviews with Mrs. Barbara Tosh, Director of the Home.

MUSEUM ON THE MOVE

On July 28 and 29, the Association's museum collection was moved from the DAR house, where it has been in storage since December 9, 1967, to its new if provisional quarters in City Hall. The third floor auditorium was made available to the Association by the Common Council in April. The move was subsequently delayed over problems of insurance and security.

A committee headed by Tom Holland of the College Art Department is sorting the collection. The Curator, Mrs. Ruth Hecht, and the Exhibit Director, Mrs. Helen Allan, are planning the displays. Watch for the announcement of the Museum's opening in the near future.

RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Old Riddle: the Union Road in Peru and Ausable was once a part of the Rogers Road; the Ashley Road in Beekmantown was formerly known as the Doodey Road; and the short Fuller Street in Peru was once a part of the State Road.

New Riddle: Why did so many early Congregational churches in Clinton County become Presbyterian?

NORTH COUNTRY ARCHITECTURE

Later this month Tundra Books of Northern New York will publish Allan Everest's new book on architecture, NORTH COUNTRY HERITAGE: BUILDINGS WORTH PRESERVING IN CLINTON AND ESSEX COUNTIES. The text is an architectural history of the North Country and the many pictures are chosen as outstanding examples of each style of construction.

The book is sponsored by the Historical Association and assisted by a generous grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. It will be available at local bookstores and from the publisher, Tundra Books, 18 Cornelia Street, Plattsburgh. It will be priced at \$3.95 a copy, with special rates at the publisher's for multiple purchases.

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