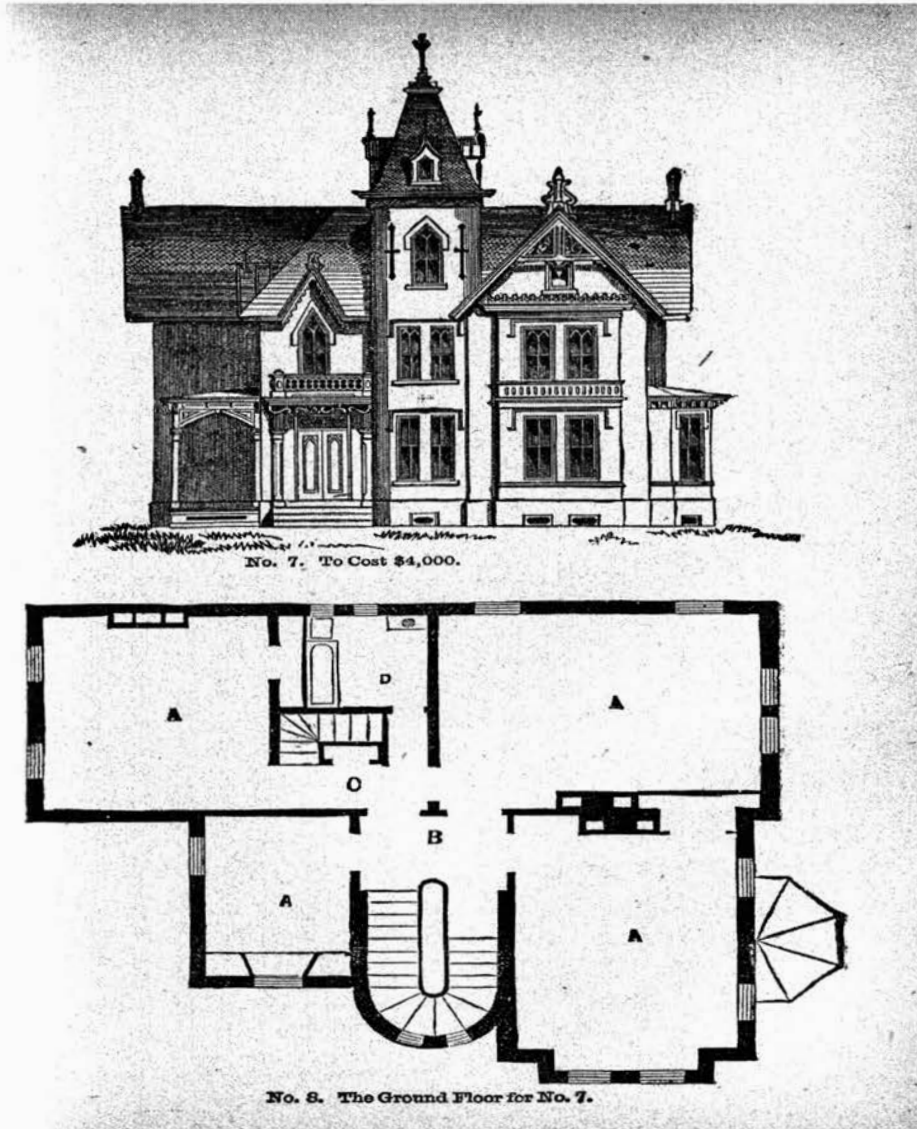


The St. Lawrence County Historical Association  
**QUARTERLY**

Volume XLIX

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Winter 2004



**"Old buildings are not ours. They belong, partly to those who built them, and partly to the generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead still have their right to them: That which they labored for, we have no right to obliterate."**

**--John Ruskin**

# The St. Lawrence County Historical Association at the Silas Wright Museum

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is a private, not-for-profit, membership organization based at the Silas Wright House in Canton, New York. Founded in 1947, the Association is governed by a constitution, by-laws, and Board of Trustees. The Historical Association's membership meets annually to elect its trustees.

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## Our Mission

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is a not-for-profit membership organization and museum which serves as an educational resource for the use and benefit of the citizens of St. Lawrence County and others interested in the County's history and traditions. The Association collects and preserves archival material and artifacts pertinent to the County's history. In cooperation and collaboration with other local organizations, the Association promotes an understanding of and appreciation for the County's rich history through publications, exhibits, and programs. The St. Lawrence County Historical Association operates within museum standards established by the American Association of Museums.

## SLCHA Membership

Membership in the St. Lawrence County Historical Association is open to all interested parties. Annual membership dues are: Individual \$30; Senior/Student \$25; Family \$40; Contributor \$55; Supporter \$100; Patron \$250. Members receive the SLCHA Quarterly, the Historical Association's bi-monthly newsletter, and various discounts on publications, programs and events.

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Additional copies may be obtained from the St. Lawrence County Historical Association, P.O. Box 8, Canton, NY 13617 at \$4.00 each (\$2.00 for members), plus \$2.00 for postage.

**Contributions:**

*The SLCHA Quarterly* welcomes contributions. To submit a manuscript, or for further information, please contact the editor through the St. Lawrence County Historical Association. Please address communications to: Managing Editor, *The SLCHA Quarterly*, P.O. Box 8, Canton, NY 13617.

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**QUARTERLY**

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**CONTENTS**

From the County Historian <i>Trent Trulock</i>	2
Sacred Space: DeKalb's Historic Methodist Meeting House <i>Bryan Thompson</i>	4
A Mysterious Landmark Opens to the Public Eye <i>David Sommerstein</i>	9
The Little Depot That Could: A New Life for Lisbon's Old Train Station <i>Nancy Lafaver</i>	13
Restoration Work in Heuvelton Renews Interest in Local Diva <i>Todd Moe and Linda Marshall</i>	16
Restoration Resources <i>Compiled by Bryan Thompson &amp; Todd Moe</i>	21
The First Preserve America Presidential Awards	23
Mystery Photo	24

**Issue Editor:**

Todd Moe

**On the Cover**

*A Gothic Cottage Villa (Tudor style), from The Architecture of the Home, in Gays Illustrated Circle of Knowledge. Copyright 1886. Gay Brothers & Co., Publishers, Reade St., New York.*

# From the County Historian

By Trent Trulock

Historic preservation is a hot topic! Every year I receive calls about preserving historic buildings in St. Lawrence County. Some days it seems like everyone knows of a building worthy of placement on the National Register of Historic Places. Some of these buildings belong to the callers; others are just old structures that the caller believes should be saved. Sometimes people are just calling for ideas about what they can do for an old building. But most of the time people call me looking for funding to preserve an old building. I can almost hear the disappointment in their voices when I tell them that unfortunately the St. Lawrence County Historical Association does not have money to give out for historic preservation, and that there is not much money out there for private individuals to preserve their homes. But I do mention that the National Register of Historic Places is something important that individuals can pursue for their own homes.

The National Register of Historic Places is a federal listing of sites deemed historically significant. While most of the listings are for buildings, anything from the built environment could possibly be eligible including archeological sites and sculptures! Normally a site has to be at least 50 years old to be considered. Other criteria for nominations include: significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering and culture; possessing an integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and feeling; and an association with either significant events or people, or embodying distinctive characteristics, or having yielded, or to be likely to yield, important information on history or prehistory.

The benefits of a listing on the National Register include consideration in the planning of projects using federal funding, eligibility for federal tax provisions, and qualification for federal preservation grants. I should note here



*The Silas Wright House, home of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association.*

that most of the grant funds available for historic preservation are for not-for-profit organizations and municipalities. For the most part individuals cannot apply for these funds. In addition to the benefits above, building projects for other properties that would have an affect on National Register properties are subject to notice requirements of the New York State Environmental Quality Review Act, which can help to protect the integrity of a historic property.

In New York State applicants to the National Register first apply to be on the State Register of Historic Places, which is overseen by the Commissioner of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Once a building is on the State Register then the commissioner nominates the building to the National Register listing. More information about this process and application forms can be obtained from the Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau of the NYOPRHP, Peebles Island, PO Box 189, Waterford, NY, 12188-0189, 518-237-8643, [www.nysparks.state.ny.us](http://www.nysparks.state.ny.us).

Please note that National Register status does not automatically protect a building from change or destruction. The property owner has the right to change the building,



within the limits set by building codes or other laws. Protection for National Register sites may come into play if there is a local law passed regarding historic structures, or if federal or state money is involved in the project. Ultimately it is up to the property owners and the community to protect historic structures.

On a completely different note, I want to thank the Village of Hermon Historian

Mary Smallman for the information she provided on a photograph of the Bullock Family farmhouse that appeared on page 4 of the #1-2 2003 *Quarterly*. The photograph was undated but by using genealogy materials Mary was able to narrow down the date to circa 1890. Mary has also provided the historical association with further information on the family for our files. Thank you Mary for helping our information on the Bullock family grow.

---

“What we ourselves have built, we are at liberty to throw down. But what other men gave their strength, and wealth and life to accomplish, their right over it does not pass away with their death.”

--John Ruskin<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> **John Ruskin (1819-1900), British poet, artist**

Ruskin was the greatest British art critic and social commentator of the Victorian Age. His ideas inspired the Arts and Crafts Movement and the founding of the National Trust, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Labour Movement. He actively promoted art education and museums for the working classes.

# Sacred Space : DeKalb's Historic Methodist Meeting House

By Bryan Thompson,  
Town of DeKalb Deputy Historian,  
President of the DeKalb Historical Association



Photo courtesy Bryan Thompson

*Front view of the building following restoration.*

In the fall of 1994 the newly formed Town of DeKalb Historical Association was looking for a site for a town historical resource center. The former Methodist Episcopal Meetinghouse at East DeKalb was suggested. The response of most people was, "What building? There isn't any building there."

The Meetinghouse had served as a tool warehouse for the Town of DeKalb Highway department for since 1912. Its windows were boarded up, its siding was gray and weathered. The building was literally disappearing behind a twelve-foot thicket of brush and brambles.

Was there anything left worth saving? The location was ideal for easy access for local school children from the adjacent Hermon DeKalb Central School. It was worth a visit. I will never forget the first time I peered into the dark interior over piles of tires and saw the elaborate trompe l'oeil painted ceiling still intact after 80 years as a warehouse.

After some discussion the Historical Association decided to look into the feasibility of restoring the Old Meetinghouse. The Town of DeKalb agreed to give us a life lease on the building. We contacted the Preservation League of New York who put us in touch with the preservation architects, Crawford and Stearns of

Syracuse. We next contacted the New York State Council on the Arts and applied for and received a grant for a conditions assessment by Crawford and Stearns.

On March 24, 1995 Randall T. Crawford of Crawford & Stearns visited the Old Meetinghouse. Randy's visit uncovered several previously undetected details including a stash of whale oil lamps, tin candlestick holders and hymnals dating from the 1840's in the attic. His final report confirmed that the building was historically significant, and included a conditions assessment and detailed plan of work for the careful restoration of the Meetinghouse.

In May of 1995 an application was submitted to the NYS Department of Parks and Recreation to have the building placed on the State and National Register of Historic Places. The detailed application showed that the Neo-Classical Meetinghouse had been erected in 1839 by the local carpenter William Cooper. The building originally had twenty-four 3-by-6 foot windows, a classroom and a gallery encircling the auditorium. In 1866 the building was extensively remodeled: the gallery was removed, the number of windows reduced, and their size increased. At this time the au-

ditorium was replastered and painted with trompe l'oeil decorations. It was to this 1866 period that it was recommended to date the restoration

In June 1995 the 4<sup>th</sup> grade classes of Mrs. Woodside and Mrs. Streeter of Hermon DeKalb Central School under the supervision of Dr. Steven Marqusee of SUNY Potsdam conducted a detailed archeological dig. Many interesting items from the era of the Meetinghouse were uncovered, including onyx beads, shoe buckles, a clay pipe stem, coat hooks, pieces of oil lamps and candle holders, a wooden rain barrel, and the remains of two sets of front steps (the newer measuring 6-by-24 feet).

The remainder of 1995 was occupied with removing ninety years' worth of accumulated tires and debris. Historical Society members and the local cub scouts began the removal of the undergrowth from around the exterior of the building.

Our restoration project was literally from the ground up. All repair and restoration work utilized appropriate period techniques and materials. Members of the Historical Association and the local community donated 4400 board-feet of saw logs. The tim-



Photo courtesy Bryan Thompson

*Hermon-DeKalb 4th graders removing rocks to build a garden.*

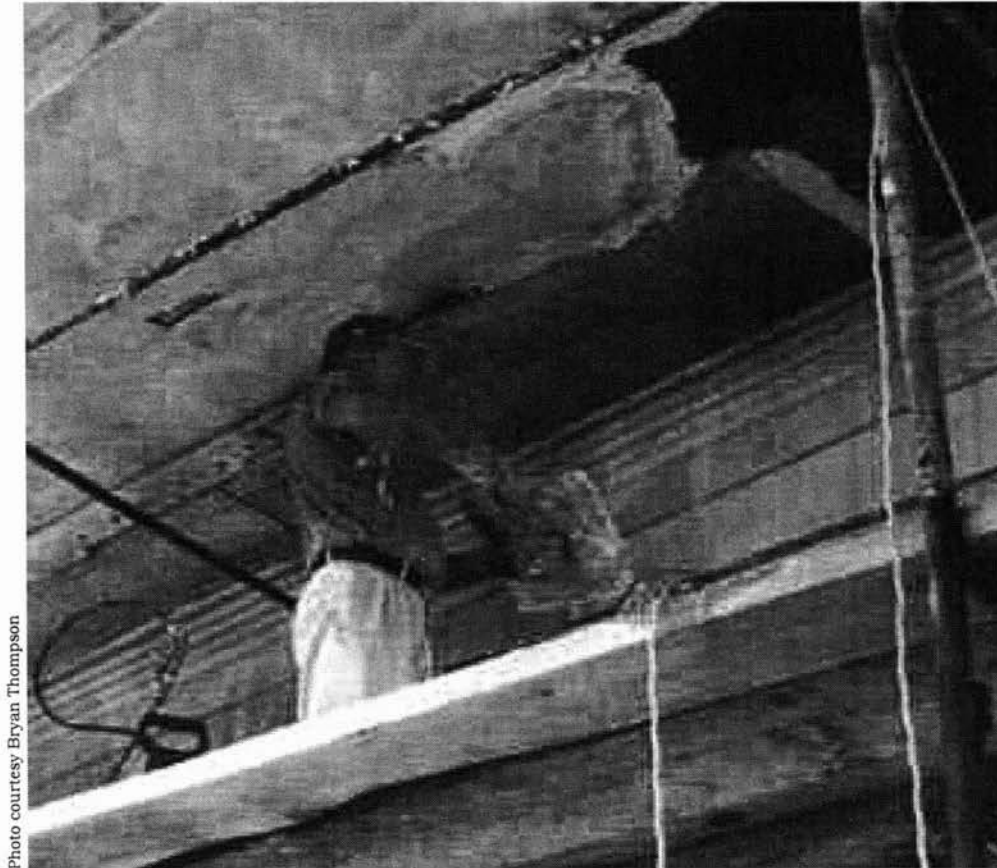


Photo courtesy Bryan Thompson

*Emile Bedard repairs auditorium plaster.*

ber was hauled to the mill by the local telephone company where it was custom-cut to the specifications of the restoration project

In May 1996 we held a restoration workshop on the repair and building of lime mortar stone walls. This allowed us to train volunteers for the repair of the Meetinghouse foundation as well as train local home owners so they could do their own restoration work. In May and June of 1996 the entire foundation of the Meetinghouse was relaid by volunteers. The backhoe work, sand and other materials were donated by local citizens.

In late June 1996 a vapor barrier and dehumidifying layer of crushed stone was put into the building by hand. On July 20, 1996 an old fashion work bee, including a great lunch was held. In one day 23 people replaced the entire first floor flooring system in the building. At about this time our

application for 501C3 status was approved so we could begin to apply for grants.

In the Fall of 1997 the building was straightened and a historic schoolhouse out house was donated to the association. The out house was mounted on a modern sanitary holding tank and carefully restored. During this same period the exterior of the building was painted by prisoners from the Gouverneur Correctional facility. The paint was donated by the local hardware store. During winter of 1997-1998, members repaired and replaced the framing for the second floor classroom. More logs were donated to make lath for repairing the plaster walls in the entry hall and classroom/archives.

Our project was greatly advanced in the spring of 1997 by the receipt of two major grants: One from ALCOA allowed us to put in a rough electrical entrance electrifying the building for the first time in its 158-year his-



tory. The second, from Sweet Grass foundation, allowed us to have the entry doors and two interior staircases reconstructed. We were fortunate throughout the restoration process that portions of almost all missing elements were intact and available to guide the restoration.

In 1997 we ran a series of four historic restoration workshops to train our volunteers for further work. The workshops included two on lime and gypsum plastering techniques, one on historic barn preservation, and one on wood graining techniques. The major project for 1997 was the restoration of the southern façade including replacing the clapboards and four 12-over-12 windows. Our members spent many messy hours dip priming the clapboards before their installation.

In the fall of 1997 the Town of DeKalb Highway Department removed an old stone truck loading ramp from the property and the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders from Hermon DeKalb Central picked rocks and raked the area to make a historic garden. In May 1998 the local garden club planted a period garden on the site featuring plants and flowers typical of the period 1839 to 1850. A wooden rail fence was erected between the parking area and the garden. In April 1998 the Town of DeKalb deeded the property outright to the Town of DeKalb Historical Association.

In the spring of 1998 the interior staircases were completed and door casements installed. In June of 1998 volunteers began the repair and replacement of the lime plaster in the entry hall and the classroom/archives. In the Summer of 1998 the large window sashes (24-over-16) in the auditorium were repaired

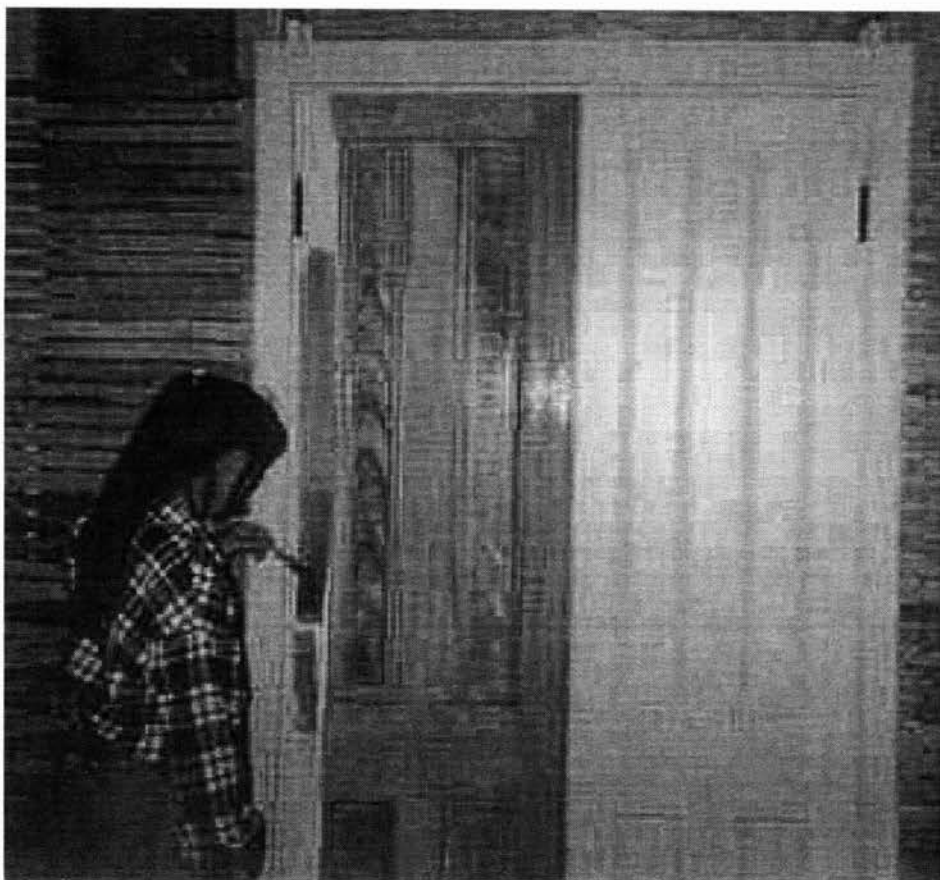


Photo courtesy Bryan Thompson

*Dee Gallo wood graining the reproduced front entry doors.*

and replicated. In October 1998 the New Ventures program finished the front area wiring and installed a monitor heater in the entry room. Plastering continued into January 1999. Volunteers beautifully wood grained the new entry doors and other casements.

In February 1999 the Town Historian was able to move her office into the new archives room on the second floor. In March 1999, after three years of waiting, we received official notification that the building was placed on the national register of historic places. The plastering was completed in the entry rooms and a finished tongue and groove floor installed in time for a dedication of the Old Meeting House Museum on September 25, 1999. The dedication was held almost 160 years to the day after the first religious service was held in the building.

The building was dedicated, the Town had a Historian's office and archives but the project was still not finished. The auditorium with its elaborate trompe l'oeil painting was still in need of repairs.

In the Fall of 1999 the last of the repaired window sashes were installed. The Building Trades Class from Canton College installed commercial floor outlets in the auditorium, leaving the original walls and ceiling untouched. More lumber was donated for replicating the missing wainscoting. Crogan Island Mill Works replicated the original wainscot profile for us. The rear doorway was framed. The western wall of the building was resided using dip primed 8-inch pine clap boards.

Thanks to another grant from the Sweet Grass Foundation, in the spring of 2001 the plaster walls and ceiling of the auditorium were professionally repaired. A new six-inch tongue and groove floor was installed in the auditorium. Volunteers grained the wainscoting and painted the floor. In December 2001 a special holiday concert was held to celebrate the completion of the auditorium.

The Old Meeting House Museum is now a functioning museum and local history resource center. The archives, open year-round on Wednesday and Thursday, have been vis-

ited by people from throughout the country as well as by many local school children. We have rotating exhibits on various aspects of local history. The fall fair is a big hit with area school children. The auditorium has been used for many concerts and program including a bicentennial concert series. The acoustics of the room are quite exceptional and are once again available for the community to enjoy.

The restoration process is not complete. We are still seeking funding to restore the trompe l'oeil painting. In the next year we hope to recreate the 24-by-6-foot exterior entry steps revealed in the archeological dig in 1995.

The Old Meeting House Museum is now a point of pride in the local community. The restoration was made possible through generous grants from; The NYS Council On the Arts, The Preservation League of NYS, The Sweet Grass Foundation, ALCOA Foundation, Iroquois Gas, The Masonic Charities, and many local banks and stores and individuals. Many people donated items in kind such as saw logs, lumber, sand, gravel and crushed stone, a pallet of old glass, paint, a historic outhouse, antique hinges, etc..

Of course the single biggest donation we have received has been the over 16,000 document hours of volunteer labor! The DeKalb Historical Association is eternally grateful to all who have responded so generously! When a community pulls together great things can be done!

# A Mysterious Landmark Opens to the Public Eye

David Sommerstein

Singer Castle on Dark Island is the kind of place even life-long residents of the St. Lawrence River gawk at. It's not uncommon to see boaters slow down to a steady chug in the Seaway channel to take in the massive granite work, the red clay tile roofing, the boathouse that is larger than most homes. Floating downstream, they crane their necks for one last look at the five-story clock tower crowned by a delicate spire that pierces the air.

For more than 30 years the castle on Dark Island, located about halfway between Ogdensburg and Alexandria Bay, was largely off-limits to the public. It was owned by the Harold Martin Evangelical Church, which held Sunday worship in the castle's airy breakfast room on the second floor. Locals would attend the services just to catch a sneak peek at the castle's interior.

In the summer of 2002, an anonymous group of investors known only as American



Courtesy David Sommerstein

*A view of Singer Castle on Dark Island from the south in the St. Lawrence Seaway Channel.*

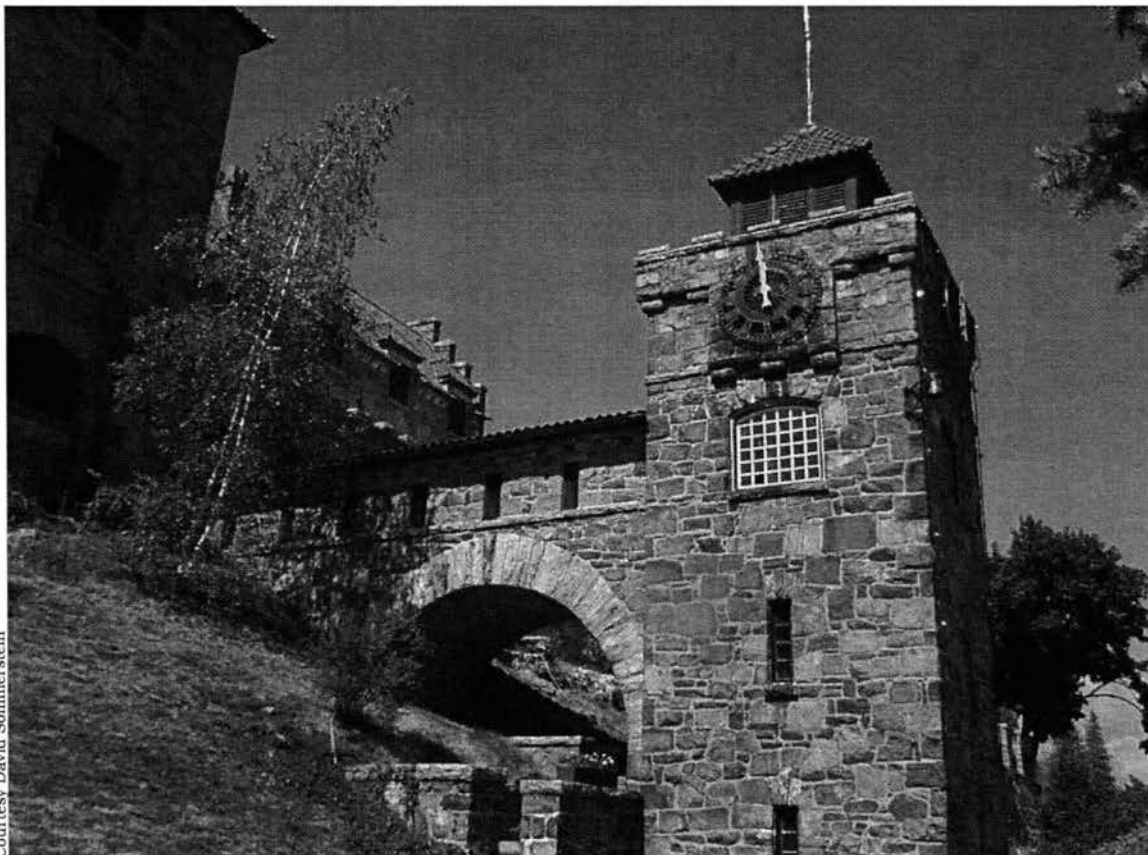
Castle Holdings, Inc. bought Dark Island and its buildings for \$1.8 million. It opened as a tourist destination last June. The group's attorney David Brown said straight-away the goal was restoration. "We could make it a modern jazzy place," Brown said shortly after the purchase. "That is absolutely not the intention. The intention is to return it substantially to what it was to the best we can determine."

Singer Castle was built at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Thousand Islands was a fashionable location for New York City's wealthy to build their dream houses. Frederick G. Bourne, then president of the Singer Sewing Company, wanted to surprise his family with a "hunting lodge" on an island in the St. Lawrence River. From 1896 to 1904, he had tons of granite quarried from nearby Oak Island in Chippewa Bay and dragged over the ice in the winter. He contracted Italian stonecutters to shape the

granite. He hired American architect Ernest Flagg to design a three-story, 28-room castle inspired by a Scottish castle in a Walter Scott novel. Flagg was later to design the Chrysler Building in mid-town Manhattan.

Bourne didn't stop with the castle, though. He built two boathouses, a two-story icehouse (key to entertaining before the era of the refrigerator), the five-story clock tower (which still chimes every 15 minutes), an indoor squash court, and a cutting-edge diesel engine to provide electricity on the island.

What is most interesting about Singer Castle, and what sets it apart from Boldt Castle, its better known contemporary upriver near Alexandria Bay, is the interior. It is completely furnished, so completely that the new owners had to throw out several dumpsters full of soiled bedding, clothes, and ruined furniture, according to William Grater of Grater Architects, PC, Clayton, who is overseeing the restoration. "Stuff accumulates on these islands over the



Courtesy David Sommerstein

*The granite clock tower is 5 stories tall and still chimes on the quarter hour.*





Courtesy David Sommerstein

*Like most rooms in the castle, the Drawing Room is full of period furniture.*

generations,” Grater says, “stuff of no historic value whatsoever, so there was a lot of cleaning to do.”

Inside, two knights of armor stand guard in the medieval entranceway, framed by stone arches and pillars. A plush library off to the left is lined with original books bought (and read, presumably) by Bourne and his daughter. The walls, bookcases, and criss-crossing latticework on the ceiling are made of maroonish-brown walnut wood. Up a winding stone staircase from the entrance hall, the drawing room features hand-carved tables and chairs, bridge lamps, and wrought-iron chandeliers. An elk, caribou, deer, and moose mount crowns each of the

four walls (remember, this is a hunting lodge). A green Italian marble fireplace presides over the dining room. A dumbwaiter in the pantry connects to the kitchen downstairs. Down the hall, the breakfast room, where the church held services, features floor-to-ceiling gothic windows on three sides, offering dramatic views up and down the St. Lawrence River. More hallways lead to bedroom after bedroom, including a master bedroom with a prototype electric sauna, perhaps the first skylight, and a tiny oval bathroom on the top floor.

Bourne obviously had an appetite for luxury and high-society entertaining. According to Singer Castle’s website, famous personalities like Cornelius Vanderbilt, Vincent Astor,

and dancer Isabella Duncan vacationed at the castle. Bourne liked fast cars and boats; some of the latter can be seen at the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton.

But the castle's most unique feature reveals more about the sewing machine millionaire: an appetite for intrigue, secrecy, maybe even a little paranoia. Secret passages snake through the walls of most of the rooms. Through an inobtrusive door in the wine cellar, a tight spiral staircase runs up the spine of the castle. Cramped, musty passageways lead off to grates and hidden exits to most rooms, even the bedrooms. Bourne (or others in the know) could peek through a grate at guests at the dinner table or spy at those lounging in the drawing room from behind a painting. In the library, two metal screws are mounted underneath the mantelpiece. The savvy host could touch a coin to them, trig-

gering an electromagnet to open a hidden door to the left of the fireplace.

These little touches give Singer Castle its romantic allure for the visitor. It can feel like you're a character in an Agatha Christie novel, or Professor Plum or Miss Scarlett in the board game Clue. For architect William Grater, it's like a childhood flashback to help restore it. "It's been terrific for me, because I grew up on the river right there within viewing distance of the island," Grater says. He used to fish in the waters nearby and occasionally sneak ashore to prowl around the grounds.

Restoration of the century-old structure has proceeded somewhat at odds with an aggressive timeline to get four boats floating up to Singer Castle's rickety docks. Grater suggested devising a "master plan", but he says the owners preferred to go in "baby steps". For example, the south boathouse required extensive, costly work to be fully rehabilitated, but the owners settled with a more modest design that would pass safety codes and last five to ten years, "at least give them a start," Grater says. The reconstruction helped the castle open for business in time for a successful 2003 season. The first year of operation included a 45-minute tour, video, and gift shop, with boats from Alexandria Bay and Morristown.

The owners are turning their attention to more restoration in the off-season. Grater says the crumbling stone porch outside the breakfast room is a top priority. Singer Castle is also pursuing a bid for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. State and federal officials confirmed in September that the castle is eligible for an historic designation. That would raise the profile of a castle that has long been shrouded in mystery and privacy. Given all those secret passageways, maybe Frederick Bourne would have liked to keep it that way.



Courtesy David Sommerstein

*A crumbling concrete support on the porch outside the Breakfast Room testifies to more rehabilitation work that needs to be done.*

# The Little Depot That Could : A New Life for Lisbon's Old Train Station

Nancy Lafaver, Lisbon Town Historian

The founding of the hamlet of Lisbon was a consequence of the construction of the first railroad line across northern New York, in the late 1840s. Samuel Wells built a small hotel, or boarding house, for the men who worked on constructing the Northern Railroad. In 1848 he built a more substantial stone building, the Lisbon Centre House, to house those same workers. A Mr. Dix of Ogdensburg built a store, and later in the same year the railroad company built a depot. The depot was centrally located in the fledgling hamlet. As business increased and more shops and homes were built nearby, the community was given the name Lisbon Centre.

The railroad company placed Mr. James E. Robinson in charge of the station. Mr. Robinson remained the station agent until his death in 1888, serving the original and two subsequent owners of the line, variously known as the Northern Railroad (1850-1858), the Ogdensburg Railroad (1858-1864), the Ogdensburg and Lake Champlain Railroad (1864-1901), and the Rutland Railroad (1901-1961). Mr. Robinson lived with his wife and son at one end of the depot. They managed a grocery store and handled the duties of the railroad depot at the other end. The original depot was a large structure, because it served residential, mercantile, and transportation functions.



*The Lisbon Railroad Depot, built in 1931. The original depot, built in the 1840's, was destroyed by fire in 1925.*





*The Lisbon Depot is on the National Register of Historic Places. Historians cite its Bungalow/Craftsman architectural style.*

The railroad also served many functions. It provided passenger service from 1849 to 1953. The Lisbon Centre House, the handsome two-storey stone block hotel built in 1848 by Samuel Wells, was dependent on railroad travelers and served them from the beginning to the end of passenger service, after which it went out of business. From 1963 to 1970 the structure was used by the Aldrich Brothers feed mill, then fell vacant and was ultimately demolished.

The Lisbon station handled a substantial value of merchandise each month. Feed and grain came in to Carragher's Mill (the building, no longer used, still stands across the tracks from the depot). Coal, automobiles, and farm machinery arrived on the train. Milk and butter from the Sheffield Farms Creamery, as well as turkeys, hay, and cedar posts, went out to other communities. In 1943 army soldiers were transported to Lisbon where they conducted maneuvers at bases set up nearby. During the

construction of the Seaway in the 1950s such a volume of building materials was brought through the line that a switch engine was put in place in Ogdensburg to handle it all. In sum, the railroad and its depot were vital to economic and social life in the hamlet of Lisbon.

The original depot burned in 1925. It was rebuilt in 1927. However, on May 1, 1930 the station was once again destroyed by fire, as were several other nearby buildings, after a blaze started in C. B. Wright's feed store. The fire burned the station, freight house, three freight cars, the section house, and cattle yards. William Duffy, who was the station agent at the time, set up his headquarters temporarily in a railroad car until the station was rebuilt and reopened in 1931. This building is the present depot standing in the center of the hamlet of Lisbon.

The new depot soon established a good record. The Rutland Railroad's publication, *The Rutland Newsliner*, commended the Lisbon station for being one of the cleanest and most sys-



temized stations on the Rutland line. The Lisbon station also boasted an accident-free record. Milton King Sr. of Lisbon worked for the Rutland line from 1933 until the railroad closed in 1961. He was the agent-operator in Lisbon from 1941 to the end of operation.

For many years after the railroad ceased operation, the depot was little used. For a while it was used as a storage building for Martin's feed store, located nearby.

In 1984 the Ogdensburg Bridge and Port Authority, which had acquired the Rutland property in 1964, approved the Town of Lisbon's request to lease the former Rutland railroad depot building and its parking space for the purpose of using it as an historical society building. The five-year renewable lease was for a modest \$100 annual fee. However, the Town wished to purchase rather than rent the property and was able to buy it in 1991 for \$6,500.

In 1997 the Lisbon town board approved a request to begin an application to have the Lisbon depot placed on the National Register of Historic Places. A committee which included the town historian, Terry Fischer, worked hard to do the research needed to begin the application process. After three years of effort, in 2001, the town received official notification that the depot had been placed on the National Register.

According to the statement of significance on the National Register application form, "The Lisbon Railroad Depot is architecturally and historically significant as a highly intact example of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century passenger/freight depot which is representative of the significant role the railroad played in the historic growth and development of Lisbon . . . Today, the Lisbon Railroad Depot stands virtually "as built" with a level of historic architectural integrity not usually found in buildings of this type that have been decommissioned for a number of years. It is an excellent example of a small hamlet depot built by the railroads during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century."

"Features of the one-story, frame building include: rectangular shape with passenger/ticket office area on the west end of the building and the open freight area on the east end, hipped roof with wide overhanging eaves supported by pronounced brackets, exposed rafters, combination of horizontal and vertical butt-joined siding, projecting ticket office bay, original multi-pane sash, original entry and freight doors."

"The interior of the station also retains a substantial degree of integrity with its original floor plan and wood finishes, including floor-ceiling beaded board and paneled doors with transoms, virtually intact. The freight area also remains unchanged with the original scale intact."

Through the services of Senator James Wright, the Lisbon Depot Committee received a substantial grant from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, which allowed electricity and plumbing to be installed. The floors and baseboards in the meeting room and ticket office were stripped and refinished. The building has a new, handicapped-accessible bathroom. A proposal has been submitted and approved for landscaping the front area into a walkway and small park. Future renovations of the building are planned as well. The depot, staffed by volunteers, serves as a seasonal (unheated) museum, emphasizing local history and artifacts.

Some people used to complain that the Rutland Railroad went "from nowhere to nowhere." But the Lisbon depot has gone "somewhere" and the ride isn't over yet!

# Restoration Work in Heuvelton Renews Interest in Local Diva

Todd Moe and Linda Marshall

A group of residents and historians in Heuvelton is doing its part to preserve a small part of St. Lawrence County's history. The centerpiece of their work is one of the oldest buildings in the village. The Heuvelton Historical Association has set its sights on restoring Pickens Hall, which was built in the 1850's. It originally housed a general store and a music hall. And the building's restoration has sparked a renewed interest in the

career of Bessie Abbot, a granddaughter of the original owner of Pickens Hall. Bessie was born in Heuvelton in 1878 and took the opera world by storm in the early 1900's.

In the mid-1800's Heuvelton, which sits along the Oswegatchie River in farm country, was an industrial and commercial center. It attracted sawmills, gristmills and cheese factories. Today the downtown's businesses include a convenience store, gift shops,



Courtesy: Todd Moe

*Built in 1856, Pickens Hall is the tallest building in Heuvelton. The 3rd floor housed the opera house.*

video store, laundry, barbershop and a tavern.

About three years ago, a group of Heuvelton residents formed "The Heuvelton Pride Committee" in an attempt to spruce up the downtown and draw visitors. But an opportunity to buy a historic building on the main drag has slightly changed the group's direction. Linda Marshall, Heuvelton village historian, was one of the voices behind a push to buy Pickens Hall, and restore it. Back taxes landed the building in the county's hands, which then sold it to the village historical group.

"At that point, We were all fledglings in our group," Marshall said. "We're just determined, tenacious, as some people would say. We were elated and we knew, okay, now we really have to get our act together. So immediately we started forming our 501 c3, because to own the building we had to be a nonprofit organization," she said. "We were on our second meeting in April of 2001 when David Kingsley came to the meeting with an idea. From his house down the River he could see the looming large three-story stone building on the corner of State and Water Street. It had been a small grocery store and had closed its doors. The building had been for sale but most of the people who looked at it wanted to make it into apartments and this was just too costly. The building was now up for taxes. It was rumored that if the County took it over, it would be torn down or left to decay until it fell down. It is the cornerstone of our Business district and the largest and tallest building on the main street. It was just too beautiful to tear down. David's idea was to find a way to buy the building and restore it. This was a far cry from the committee's original idea of planting flowers, and cleaning up the main street. We all looked at each other--how could we possibly pull this off? So we went from the Heuvelton Pride to the Heuvelton Historical Association in a matter of minutes. Because of the building. The building really generated this whole thing. Looking as great as she does."



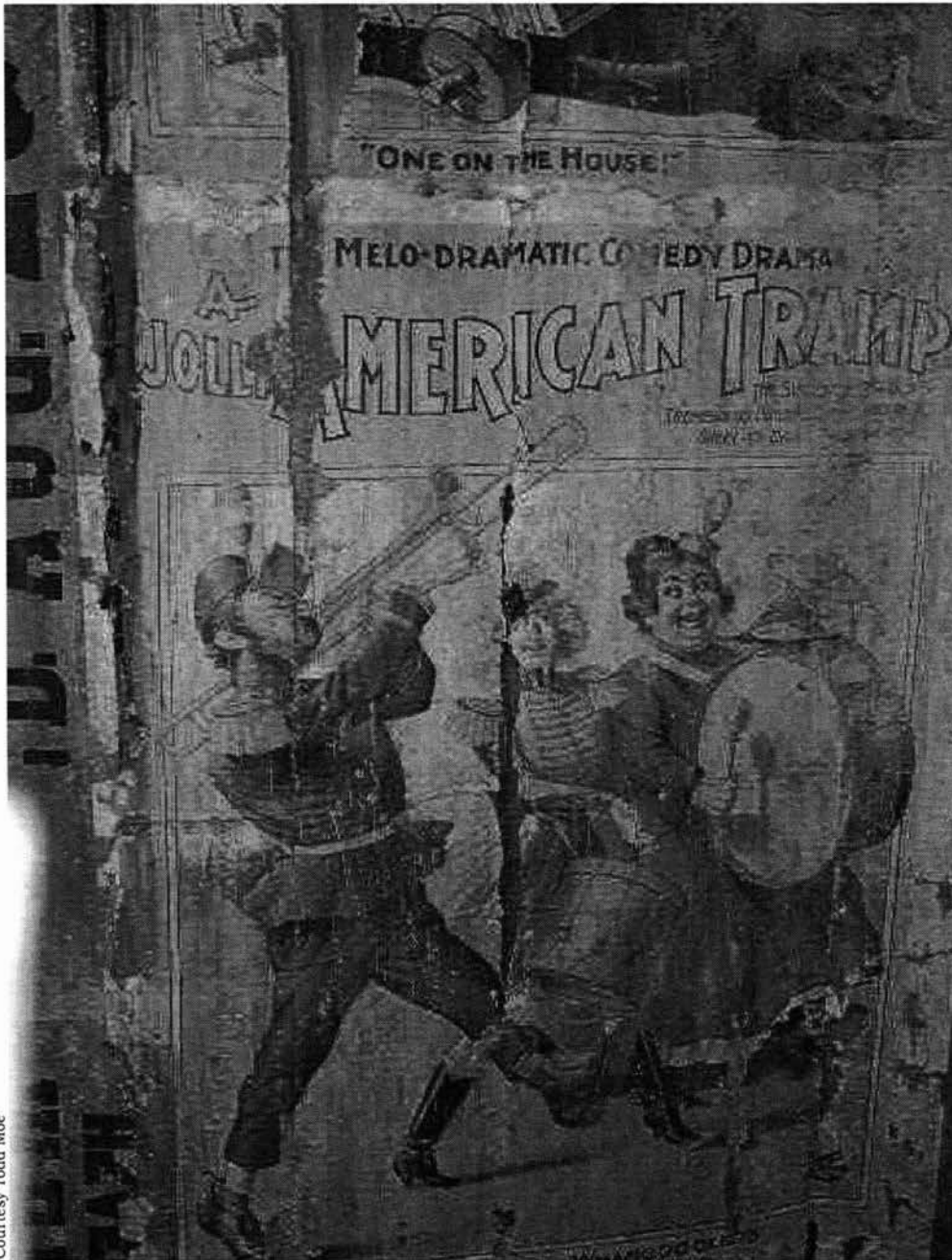
Courtesy Todd Mor

*Decorative ironwork on the building's exterior.*

Pickens Hall is a three-story brick building in downtown Heuvelton, built by John Pickens, a wealthy landowner and merchant in 1858. Linda Marshall recalls its history, from general store and theatre to community center, apartments and grocery store. "We started doing extensive research on the building and found we really had not only a beautiful old building but it has a huge historic significance. The building had been built by the Pickens Family, one of the wealthiest and most prominent families who were significant in the settling of Heuvelton. It was Bessie Pickens who was born in Heuvelton and whose father owned Pickens Hall who became one of America's leading opera singers. The third floor of the building was used as a local opera house."

Most of the restoration work so far has been structural. The village historical association replaced the roof with help from a state grant last fall and began cleaning out junk from the rooms. There are traces of a once opulent





Courtesy Todd Moe

*A show poster from the late 19th or early 20th century was discovered among debris during renovation.*

music hall on the third floor – faded peeling wallpaper from the late Victorian era, light fixtures with vintage bulbs and pieces of long-forgotten stage sets and backdrops.

The third floor music hall was an occasional performance space for the internationally acclaimed soprano Bessie Abbot and her twin sister Jessie – granddaughters of John Pickens. After their father died sud-

denly in the early 1890's, the girls took their mother's maiden name, Abbot, and their joint musical career began in neighborhood parlors and vaudeville houses singing in musical comedies and popular favorites of the era, with Bessie on the banjo and Jessie on the guitar.

Heuvelton resident Sandra Chambers, who's working on a biography of the Abbot



sisters, says that eventually Bessie's vocal talents earned her a trip to Europe. A chance meeting in 1898 with distinguished operatic singer Jean de Reszke led to music lessons with top vocal coaches and an invitation to study opera in Paris. She made her debut there in 1901 as Juliette in Gounod's opera. Chambers says, after five years in Paris, Bessie Abbot joined the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. Her debut there in 1906 was as Mimi in *La Bohème*.

"Another highlight, I feel, would be when she was actually discovered by Jean de Reszke. It seems like it was a whirlwind from there to her debut. Not much was said about what happened to Jessie. But it looks like she married and settled down, and Bessie went on to a life that was performance after performance. And not long afterwards she came to the United States and debuted at the Metropolitan," Chambers said.

Bessie Abbot sang and recorded with some of the greatest opera singers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – Enrico Caruso and Antonio Scotti. Dr. Gary Busch is Chair of Music Theory, Literature and Composition at the Crane School of Music in Potsdam. "Anybody who could sing with the likes of Caruso and Scotti, and somebody especially who was an American, that is a real accomplishment," he said.

Busch, an avid collector of early Edison and Victor phonographs, wax cylinders and 78's, says Bessie Abbot's career went in different directions after she left the Met, but she continued to tour throughout Europe – from Paris to St. Petersburg. "Europe was really the center for all musical life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that goes for our composers as well," Busch said. "If you wanted any kind of credibility you had to make it in Europe first. You didn't just start out at home and make a career here. You had to go over there to either France or Italy and make a debut there. Louise Homer was another American singer, who was a direct contemporary, in fact Bessie Abbot recorded with Homer on some of her recordings. She

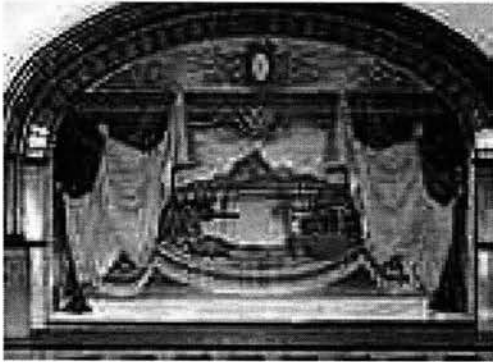
was somebody from Philadelphia who went over to Europe, made it big and came back."

Sandra Chambers said her research on the singing Abbot sisters began out of curiosity after tagging along when her daughter's Girl Scout group toured Pickens Hall a couple of years ago. She's put together an exhibit and gives public lectures on Bessie and Jessie's lives, constantly searching for more clues.

After touring Europe, Bessie Abbot returned to the U.S., formed her own touring company, and took *La Bohème* on the road. She was on tour with the troupe in San Francisco when the 1906 earthquake struck. After she married noted sculptor T. Waldo Story, she retired from the stage and a few years later died in 1919 in her early 40's.

You'll find Bessie Abbot listed among the great American opera stars of the early 1900's. There are recordings of Bessie and her contemporaries available through record collectors clubs and online. Sandra Chambers' research has turned up local vintage newspaper accounts of Bessie Abbot's return to the North Country at the height of her musical career, performing in Ogdensburg's Opera House. Chambers says restoring Pickens Hall would be a fitting tribute.

Restoration plans for Pickens Hall include returning the first floor to retail use, the second floor would house the Heuvelton historical association's offices and a museum, and the third floor would again be devoted to music. Village historian Linda Marshall says the restoration work is an important step in revitalizing the downtown. "Your past is your future," she says. "Whatever you were, whatever you did in your past reflects on what you're going to be in the future. It's all part of the whole idea of rediscovering the past. How do you know what you're going to be if you don't know what you were. This village is just full of history. It's so exciting. Here's this little village that we think we're in the middle of nowhere and we have nothing to offer, and look at our past. Our past was actually more exciting than some parts of our present. So, let's bring the past, meet it with the present and go on into the future."



Courtesy Todd Moe

*The Edwards Opera House (ca. 1896) is on the second floor of the Town Hall. It retains a handpainted Victorian theatre backdrop and original interior woodwork.*

Old opera houses are hot in St. Lawrence County. Heuvelton and now Edwards have rediscovered the elaborate stages of their pasts. The Edwards Arts Council has begun raising money to restore its historic opera hall, on the second floor of the Edwards Town Hall. Built in 1896, after a fire

destroyed much of downtown Edwards, the opera house is in surprisingly good shape.

The Edwards Arts Council's Bridget Clark says the auditorium contains 270 seats, most with their original wire hat racks. A pleasant surprise is the vintage stage curtain or scenic backdrop that was painted in 1897 by a traveling troupe, and left behind as a gift to the community. High school commencement ceremonies were held in the space in the early 1900's. Last summer, the front entrance and original ticket window were restored to make the place more inviting. The roof still leaks on rainy days, said Clark, but remarkably, most of the old opera house is in good shape. In fact, the theatre is being used to hold fundraising events for its future restoration. "The reason we started this project wasn't just to save the opera house," she said. "It was also to bring a little more economic activity into our village. And we hope to have a regular schedule of events here to bring in more visitors."

# Restoration Resources

Compiled by Bryan Thompson and Todd Moe

*Editor's note:*

*This list is by no means complete, but offers a sample of what's available.*

## **The National Trust for Historic Preservation**

Department of Public Policy  
1785 Massachusetts Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202)673-4000  
(Many helpful brochures)

## **Preservation League of NYS**

44 central Ave.  
Albany, NY 12206  
(518)462-5658  
(Awards, support, networking)

## **NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation**

Peebles Island  
PO Box 189  
Waterford, NY 12188  
(518)237-8643

## **Adirondack Architectural Heritage**

Civic Center, Suite 37  
1790 Main St.  
Keeseville, NY 12944  
(518) 834-9328  
[www.aarch.org](http://www.aarch.org)  
(Formed in 1990, with a mission to promote better public understanding, appreciation and stewardship of the Adirondack's unique and diverse architectural heritage. AARCH offers tours, lectures, workshops and other special events)

## **The Preservation Institute for the Building Crafts**

a division of **Historic Windsor**  
Main St. PO Box 1777  
Windsor, VT 05089

(Teaches a series of annual workshops on historic building preservation trades)

## **NYS Council on the Arts**

915 Broadway  
NYC, NY 10010  
(212)387-7000  
(Offer grants to cover conditions assessments etc.)

## **New York State Barn Coalition c/oCaRDI**

43 Warren Hall  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, NY 14853  
(607)255-7412  
(The coalition is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, preservation, rehabilitation, and re-use of historic barns in New York State. On the web: <http://www.barncoalition.com/index.html>)

## **Crawford & Stearns Architects and Preservation Planners**

134 Walton St.  
Syracuse, NY 13202  
(315)471-2162

## **Upper Canada Village**

Morrisburg, ON  
(613)543-2847  
(Village of building of St Lawrence valley restored to 1860's, good source for advice on supplies and examples)

## **Algonquin College Heritage Institute**

Perth Campus  
7 Craig St.  
Perth, Ontario  
(613)267-2859  
(Most well known program in Canada to train people to work in the restoration of heritage)

buildings and a good information resource as well)

On the web:

**Old House Web** – ideas, advice and community for old house enthusiasts.

[www.oldhouseweb.com](http://www.oldhouseweb.com)

**Technical Preservation Services for Historic Buildings** (National Park Service website with a mission of helping citizens and communities identify, evaluate, protect and preserve historic properties.)

[www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/index.htm](http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/index.htm)

**The New York State Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau**

The Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau helps communities identify, evaluate, preserve and revitalize New York's large and diverse collection of historic properties. <http://nysparks.state.ny.us/field/welcome/>

**Preserve America** (A White House initiative in cooperation with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the U.S. Department of Commerce.)

[ww.preserveamerica.gov/](http://ww.preserveamerica.gov/)

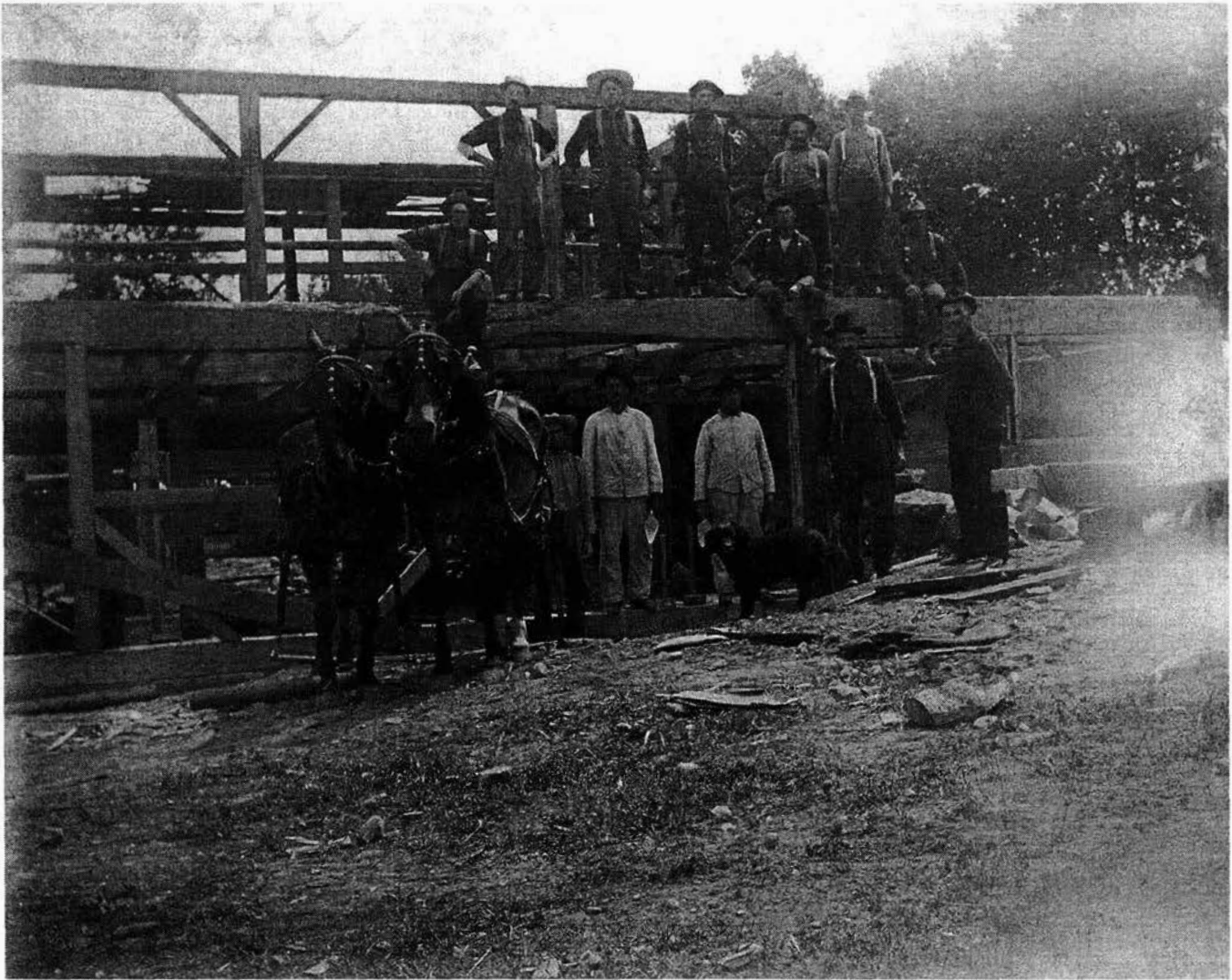


# The First Preserve America Presidential Awards Beginning in 2004

From the *Preserve America* website

President and Mrs. Bush will present four Preserve America Presidential Awards – two for projects that advance heritage tourism and two for exemplary privately funded historic preservation projects or programs. The awards will honor organizations, businesses, government entities, and individuals for exemplary accomplishments in the sustainable use and preservation of cultural or natural heritage assets; demonstrated commitment to the protection and interpretation of America’s cultural or natural heritage assets, and the integration of these assets into contemporary community life; and innovative, creative, and responsible approaches to showcasing historic resources in their communities. More information and nomination forms are available [online](#) or by e-mail to [Paawards@achp.gov](mailto:Paawards@achp.gov). Awards will be announced during National Historic Preservation Week, May 3-9, 2004.

## Mystery Photo



**Okay, not exactly renovation work**, but it's an old construction photo from the SLCHA archives. On the back is written, "Framing a barn. Hand-hewn timbers. Note the masons in white." Recognize anyone?

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## St. Lawrence County Historical Association Hours

SLCHA Office, SLCHA Archives  
& Silas Wright House

Open Tuesday - Saturday, Noon - 4:00 p.m.  
Friday Noon - 8 p.m.  
(and by Appointment)  
Admission Fees:

Museum	Free
Archives	Members - Free Children - Free College Students - \$2.50 General Public - \$5.00

## *Going somewhere warm this winter?*

**Would you like to have your  
Quarterly follow you?**

If you're planning to be out of the area and would like to have uninterrupted service on your membership, please phone, e-mail or drop us a note with your seasonal address.

**St. Lawrence County Historical Association  
at the Silas Wright House  
3 East Main Street, PO Box 8  
Canton, New York 13617  
(315) 386-8133  
fax (315) 386-8134  
e-mail: [slcha@northnet.org](mailto:slcha@northnet.org)  
[www.slcha.org](http://www.slcha.org)**

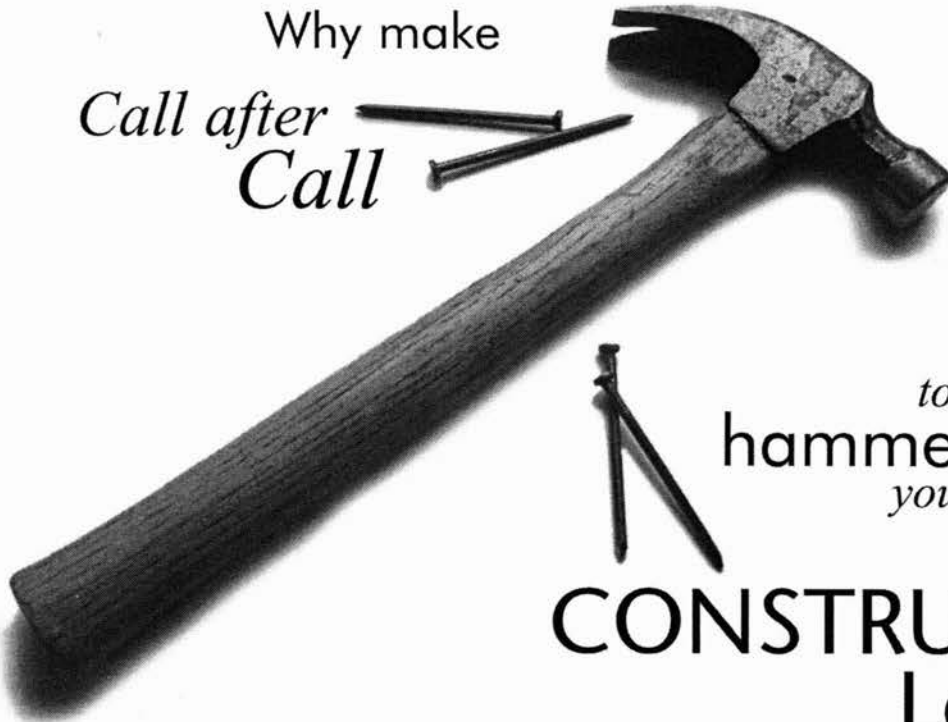
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