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Etow Oh Koam, King of the River Nation (called Nicholas) – By Verelst, London, 1710

The Indians of Columbia County PAGE 3
I feel very fortunate to be writing as your President at this time. Fortunate to be following in this office the tenure of Susan Gerwe Tripp, whose dedication, intellect and professionalism greatly benefited our Society. Fortunate to be at the helm at a time when we have garnered several very significant grants that not only bring us badly needed funds (and the challenge of raising more funds to match them), but also validate the thorough and scholarly approach we have taken to the restoration of our properties. Fortunate to be here upon the launching, against great odds, of a successful and ongoing development campaign under the chairmanship of Nick Biggs. And fortunate to be writing in the third issue of this well-received publication, so ably edited by Jim Eyre and designed by Ron Toelke. Most of all, it is my great good fortune to be working with a Director whose commitment knows no hours, with a dedicated, enthusiastic staff, with a board that is fully engaged and a membership (now at an all-time high) that provides loyal support and a wonderful cadre of volunteers.

But it is my sad duty to report a great loss to the Society since our last issue. On November 4, 2002, Harry van Dyke died. A former President, longtime board member and ever-generous supporter, Harry initiated our annual scholarship award, which we are renaming in his honor. We grieve his loss and are inspired by his memory to complete the work that was so important to him.

You will read in the following pages of the most important grants we have received since the last issue of this magazine went to press. I have already mentioned the matching funds requirement for the restoration grants. Some of this money is already in hand, thanks to our development efforts. Much more still needs to be raised. It is our pre-eminent task to complete this fundraising so that we can receive the grant money and do the work so urgently needed to preserve our architectural treasures.

Another matter of great urgency to the Society is expanding the cadre of volunteers I spoke of above. Only by doing

Continued on page 13

Our Mission

The Columbia County Historical Society is a private, not-for-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of the history and culture of Columbia County for its residents and visitors.

It is the Society's goal to encourage understanding, knowledge, and preservation of the county's heritage through the acquisition and conservation of historic lands, buildings, objects and documents, and the sponsorship of research, publications, exhibitions, and educational programming. To help achieve its mission, the Society owns, maintains, and interprets to the public, buildings and collections of historical significance, and operates a museum that includes exhibition galleries and an extensive research library.
The Indians of Columbia County
Where They Came From and What They Were

By Jim Eyre

The emphasis of this and other articles in this issue will center on the early developmental stages of the Indians in Columbia County up to the time of the settlements by the Dutch. In this first article, we are presenting a composite of information taken and adapted from writings by Ted Filli, Jr., Claverack Town Historian; the late Ken Mynter, of Claverack and former professor at The University of Rochester; Dominick C. Lizzi, Valatie Village Historian; Stephen K. Comer, Doctoral Student in Mohican Studies, SUNY Albany; Shirley W. Dunn, author of "Mohicans and Their Land 1609–1730," and "the Mohican World, 1680–1730."

20,000 years ago the Hudson Valley was covered with an ice sheet 5000 feet thick. As the ice masses advanced and retreated, they carved out our present-day landscape. It was then that the rock shelters and plains along Spook Rock Road, Hudson, New York, later to become ideal Indian campsites, took their shape. It took another 9000 years for the ice to wane and the climate to change to near present-day conditions. In the place of the ice, tall forests of hemlock, spruce and oak appeared, and verdant open plains sprang forth from the rich soils left behind.

By the year 7000 B.C. carbon tests have proven that people were living and hunting in the area. Hard as it is to believe, this was before the building of the pyramids and at about the same time as Neolithic and Stone Age man was prevalent in Europe.

These first people were nomads and are referred to as Paleoindian. They are believed to be descendants of Asiatic tribes who came to North America via the Bering Straits and along the coastlines on small rafts following the shores in a series of migrations. They expanded southward through Canada and eastward through the central part of what is now the United States until they reached our Hudson Valley. These first visitors to Columbia County were hunters and gatherers most likely following the migrations of birds and game animals up north as far as Albany and even Lake George in the summer and then back down into Pennsylvania and other points south in the winter months. Their weapons were Stone Age in nature. Most were spears tipped with what we now call projectile points hefted onto them. These projectile points are not to be confused with arrowheads. The bow and arrow did not come into use until about 700–900 A.D.

There is little doubt that these people provided ancestry to the Algonkian language group which extended from what is now Manhattan to Maine and who were kin to the Mohicans or (Mahikans) that were to eventually inhabit Columbia County.

When the Paleo period ended about 7500 years ago and time entered what is known as the Archaic Period, the Hudson Valley area had become more peopled with small groups. Though still a time of hunting and gathering they settled along creeks moving their campsites up and down them as needed. One grouping was the Proto-Mohicans who occupied sites along Spook Rock in the winter and moved to the shores of the Hudson in the summer. The natural setting of Spook Rock, its tall trees and rock shelters, gave protection to the campsites located in and about them, both from the cold and the hot sun, and made the area extremely popular. The nearby Becraft escarpment also provided shelter against the cold northerly winds. Material findings show that groups of Indians may have returned to these shelters several times during a single year, as some of the objects uncovered were not of the sort to be moved about easily.

There is no evidence that the Spook Rock shelters themselves were occupied.

A late 19th-century painting of Henry Hudson and the ship Half Moon encountering local Indians along the Hudson River.
during the Early Archaic Period. However, many Early Archaic items have been found at open field campsites along Spook Rock Road and at the Becraft escarpment above. Found in these camps and shelters along with period projectile points were knives, scrapers, and hammer stones attesting to hunter and gatherer subsistence activities. The knives and scrapers would have been important in the butchering and skinning of animals. When an animal was killed, such as a deer or a bear, none of the beast was wasted. Skins were used for clothing. Bones were carved into tools. Fats were saved and recycled for many uses, while the meat provided their most important food. Different size hammer stones have been found, and their various uses ranged from flint knapping to cracking open bones to obtain marrow. Many of the tools and points found in the area were made from chert (unrefined flint) taken from above the Becraft escarpment. The chert was chipped away using stream cobbles from the Claverack and Taconic Creeks. The quarry that the Indians created there was forgotten and only recently uncovered. In summer months mussels were collected and fish were speared and trapped from the rivers and streams. Berries and acorns were gathered. The acorns were stored or ground into a meal, rich in fat and calories, and used to help survive the long winters.

This same semi-nomadic way of life persisted unchanged for 7500 years with the Archaic period gradually coming to an end about 3000 years ago. Thereafter, though hunting and gathering were still primary functions, a more settled lifestyle emerged. This new period, called the Woodland Stage, would last beyond the arrival of Henry Hudson and (about 700–900 B.C.) now complemented the spear making hunting more efficient.

They called themselves Muh-hi-kun-nuk meaning “Great Ocean People” and they used the name, Mah-hi-kanni-tuk, for the Hudson River.

By the time the Dutch arrived in 1609, and their settlements began in 1624, villages were scattered throughout a very large Mohican nation in which our Columbia County area was included. In the county Indian villages were located at the heads of streams each consisting of about 50 people. There were no large-scale settlements. However, there was a principal village called “Potcoke” by the Dutch located near the present site of Claverack on Claverack Creek. The total population in the mid-Hudson Valley at the time approximated 3,000–5,000. Some villages were protected by wooden stockades and some inter-relationships existed with other villages within a 10–20 mile radius. There were no territorial or property boundaries as land ownership was an unknown concept. Buildings were extremely efficient for the time. Pole size saplings were thrust into the ground and lashed together with a tough inner bark cord from basswood. They were spaced in parallel rows to create longhouses or in a circle for round storage houses. Sanitation was the primary one, or secondly the supply of firewood became used up. The Indians never chopped the trees for firewood. They used whatever fell to the ground. Only when they cleared land for settling, did they disturb the natural habitat. Another important reason for site relocation would be the depletion of fish and game. A group might return to reuse abandoned sites after an extended period of time and following nature’s cleansing and replenishing.

The boundaries of the vast Mohican nation enjoy varying descriptions. Locations of tribes with mutual kin may have extended north as far as Maine, as far south as Connecticut and east to the Connecticut River. There were 13 known tribes in the North East, each with its’ own dialect. Dialects were much different and hard to understand due to lack of communication between tribes. They called themselves Muh-bi-kun-nuk meaning
“Great Ocean People” and they used the name, *Mah-bi-kanni-tuk*, for the Hudson River.

Their government was essentially democratic in style. A tribe, in council, elected a principal Sachem. Then the villages elected their own Sachem with both men and women voting. The village Sachems acted as counselors to the principal Sachem. Each village Sachem would appoint Runners (who carried important messages to other villages), Town Criers, Wampum Keepers, and War Leaders. The remaining men were warriors.

The Indians from the earliest times considered themselves in a manner connected with certain animals. The “idea of a supposed family connection” went back to religious beliefs about Indian origins under the Earth. Each clan animal had somehow benefited the Indian race. Members of the Turtle tribe believed their relation, the great Tortoise, supported their land on his back, and was superior because he could live in both the water and on the land. The Turkey tribe believed their animal connection, the Turkey, had merit because he remained nearby (possibly as a sustaining food supply). And the Wolf tribe believed their relation, the Wolf, was a benefactor of the Indians because he supplied the deer meat found by an ancestor who first emerged from the underground.

There was no need for elaborate housing and furnishings, for these were a hardy people whose lives were spent mostly outdoors. At the time the Dutch arrived, they were still hunters, fishers and gatherers of a great variety of natural foods. However, by then they were also cultivating large gardens of corn, beans, squash, melons, and pumpkins.

There was a natural and uncomplaining division of labor between sexes, and discrimination by sex was unknown. Men and boys were the hunters and trappers while women were adept in tanning skins for use in clothes adding fur from pelts for winter wear. Fish and game were smoked and corn parched, ground and stored in underground pits or dried on the cob and hung in the wigwam to dry. The women maintained the crops but also helped with hunting and fishing when needed. They, comparatively free from most diseases, until the arrival of the Europeans. Native plants were gathered and used for medicinal purposes. Up to the time the white man arrived, this was the way they were.
Mohicans Once Prospered Here

Taken from an article by Dominic C. Lizzi, in the Independent, 11/17/1996 issue.

They have all disappeared now. The trails they walked have gone. No markers honor their burial grounds. The woods are silent to their battle cries.

Their children no longer run in the meadows of Columbia County. The Mohicans, the area's original inhabitants, have no tribal lands here.

They warmly welcomed Henry Hudson and his crew of his ship Halfmoon on September 15 and 16, 1609. The explorer was on the river which bears his name just north of Germantown. He found a “very loving people and very old men”. They brought on board “Indian corn, pumpkins, and tobacco.”

At Castleton, further up the river, the Mohicans continued to be friendly. They killed two pigeons and skinned “a fat dog” for the Dutch to eat, and they broke their bows and arrows to show they would do no harm. The Dutch found that these natives had highly valued furs, particularly beaver furs and a willingness to trade. They also found the Mohicans a strong nation, which controlled the upper reaches of the river which they called the Mohicanituk, “the continually flowing water.”

The Mohicans belonged to the Algonkian language group and were kin to those of the same tongue from Manhattan to Maine.

Their western neighbors were the Mohawks, ancient enemies. The Mohawks were members of the powerful five nation Iroquois Confederation. Frequent warfare broke out over hunting and fishing.

From 1630 on, the Dutch settlers at Fort Orange (Albany) and across the river on the Van Rensselaer patronship attempted to keep peace with the Mohicans. The Van Rensselaer family owned much of present day Albany, Rensselaer, Greene, Columbia and Dutchess counties. They understood the need for good relations with the Indians in order to trade and obtain their land.

There were few European settlers and many Indians. Estimates of the Mohican population at the time of contact have varied from 3,000–8000. Settlements of Indians were discovered in areas of present day Castleton, Cohoes, Claverack, Ghent, and Brainard.

The Mohicans divided into families and clans. The Turtle, Wolf, Bear and Turkey were the major designations. Longhouses with rounded roofs were used in the villages, and sometimes held up to 18 families. The Sachem was the local leader. General councils of Sachems were assembled at stated intervals and during times of war.

Charles Shattenkirk, a local authority, states, “the Mohicans often camped on level land near streams.” He recently found 1,500 year old arrow heads near his home along the Kinderhook. The artifacts have been verified by archaeologists from the New York State Museum.

The fertile soil along the streams in the Hudson-Berkshire corridor was ideal for farming. The Indian women grew corn, beans, pumpkins and tobacco. Bush burning was a common practice; woods and fields were set on fire to clear and fertilize them.

Deer, hare, foxes, otter, bear and other fur bearing species were hunted by the men. The beaver was highly treasured for food, fur and medical purposes. They used the bounty of nature to clothe themselves, and both sexes were very modest.

The Dutch introduced wool blankets and cloth. Quickly, they became the most popular trade items. White and light gray were the most favored colors. Red was not desired because it was thought bad for hunting.

As the wars with the Mohawks intensified, villages were often surrounded by log stockades. Initially Mohicans desired cloth, socks, knives, hatchets, axes, kettles, pipes, fishhooks and hoes from the Europeans. Later guns, lead and powder became most prized.

Hard spirits, usually brandy and beer, were a major agency of the Mohicans deterioration. The Indians had never used alcohol and became intoxicated quickly. Providing liquor to the Indians was
not considered problematic, quite the opposite. Although decried periodically by European government officials, it was an important policy arm for trading with native population and obtaining Indian land.

Cultural differences caused conflicts over land ownership. Indians believed that unused land, even though sold, reverted back to them. They also believed that they kept hunting and fishing rights on sold land. And, as the availability of furs declined, the Mohicans sold more land in order to acquire wanted European goods.

Bitter wars with the Mohawks in the 17th century reduced the Mohican population. Eventually, the Mohawks gained the upper hand. Alcohol had devastated many and European diseases, particularly smallpox, further reduced their numbers. It was not long before they could no longer maintain their position in Rensselaer and Columbia counties.

By the mid-1700s the Tribe, having been forced to sell most of its land, moved eastward to establish villages along the Housatonic Valley in Connecticut and with the help of missionaries at Copake and Stockbridge, Massachusetts, beginning a process of Europeanization and Christianization. Europeans quickly moved into the cleared areas and started farms. Only a few Indians were left behind, those who had European spouses, and some who stayed to work on the settlers' farms.

From 1647 onward through 1734 there are many recorded sales of land in Columbia County and other parts of the Mohican nation, first to the Dutch and then to the English.

It was not unusual that these sales were sometimes in conflict with each other. This was true for many reasons. Perhaps the most significant one was that the Indians believed that land sold reverted back to them if not occupied or farmed. Secondly, all the Indians who may have had some claim to a piece of land may not have been signatory to its deed of sale. Or, in some cases, a previous Indian landowner could be seduced by an unscrupulous buyer into selling the same piece of land again.

A good example of the confusion and conflict brought about by these sales involved the Rensselaerswyck properties in Columbia County. One of the most significant sales in the county was one by an Indian Sachem, Pamitepiet (also called Keesiewey) to Brant Arent Slichtenhorst, Director of the colony of Rensselaerswyck on May 24, 1649. The purchase was on behalf of the Van Rensselaer family, and the deed was signed in the presence of Skiwias (also called Aepjen), Chief of the Mohican nation, with other Mohicans attending.

The deed for this land, now in the collection of the Brooklyn Historical Society, describes it as: “Land at Klaverack, Potomhasik, Patkook, and Stichsooch, ten flats along the River and Kill beyond the Klaverack, tien points eylant (Ten Points Island), and so far landward as they own.” The boundaries of this large piece of land encompassed much of Columbia County. The Claverack in the deed, from which the land extended inland, was near the present City of Hudson. Ten Points Island is present day Rogers Island.

The payment for this land by the Van Rensselaers was: 10 fathoms of cloth, 10 kettles, 10 axes, 10 adzes, 10 swords, 10 hand sewant (strung beads), 10 knives and 1 firelock gun.

Then on June 25, 1662, thirteen years later, the same Sachem Keesiewey sold to Jans Francen Van Hoesen, for 500 guilders in beavers, a parcel of land described as: “in the Klaverack… extending from the little creek of Jan Hendricke, alias red hair, to the land of Slichtenhorst, in which parcel of land are comprehended three of the klavers (cliffs north of the present City of Hudson), on the south side of said red hair, and extending towards the...
The Legend of
SPOOK ROCK

Taken from an article by Ruth A. Sickles in the CCHS Bulletin, January 1941. By Jim Eyre

In every part of Columbia County, various relics of Indian days have been found — arrowheads, corn pestles, and even Indian skeletons. More fascinating, however, than these remnants of a past civilization is the charming story, the legend of Spook Rock, which students of Claverack love to relate to their friends.

The chief of a tribe of Mohican Indians had his wigwam on Beacraft Mountain, a short distance from the village of Claverack. This chief had a lovely daughter, whose lover was the son of an enemy chieftain of a neighboring tribe. One evening as the tribe slept, this beautiful Indian maiden sped swiftly over the trail to meet her lover on a huge rock overhanging a small creek.

Obedience to parents was one of the sacred Indian beliefs, and of course the happy couple were rudely violating this ancient Indian precept. As the Great Spirit looked down, he became very angry. He was, indeed, so indignant that he sent thunder crashing over their heads and lightning playing over the rocks. In the midst of this tumult the lovers clung to each other. When suddenly, a swift bolt of lightning struck the great boulder, which crashed down to the stream below, carrying the lovers with it.

After that, the storm was over. Stars began to appear again in the dark sky, but the great rock had found a new resting place for all the years to come. The Great Spirit had had his revenge. Tradition alleges that the only thing that remained to tell of the tragic tale was one tiny Indian moccasin.

AN INDIAN CALENDAR FOR COLUMBIA COUNTY

Indians went through long periods of change from the time of their arrival in Columbia County to the settlement of the Dutch. In fact, they total almost 14,000 years. Then, in about 150 years or less they were gone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PALEO INDIAN</td>
<td>11000 – 8000 B.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EARLY ARCHAIC</td>
<td>8000 – 6000 B.C.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MIDDLE ARCHAIC</td>
<td>6000 – 4000 B.C.</td>
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<tr>
<td>LATE ARCHAIC</td>
<td>4000 – 1300 B.C.</td>
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<tr>
<td>TRANSITIONAL</td>
<td>1300 – 1000 B.C.</td>
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<tr>
<td>EARLY WOODLAND</td>
<td>1000 – A.D. 1.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MIDDLE WOODLAND</td>
<td>A.D. 1 – 700 A.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>LATE WOODLAND</td>
<td>700 – 1600 A.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>DUTCH SETTLEMENT</td>
<td>1624 – 1664 A.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ENGLISH SETTLEMENT</td>
<td>1664 A.D. – ONWARD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIANS LEAVE</td>
<td>1736 A.D.</td>
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Continued from page 7

wood about one hour’s travel until beyond the great kil (the Kinderhook), and further, of such magnitude as the grantors have bounded it by the woods and kil’s....” This grant overlapped parts of the Van Rensselaer purchase of 1649 and naturally caused a great dispute after the patents were issued.

In the Appendix of her book, Mohicans and Their Land 1609–1730, author Shirley W. Dunn reports on 107 transactions. Further deeds for land were given by the Mohicans as the eighteenth century progressed leading to more confusion and more disputes.

Anyone interested in learning more about the Mohicans should read Shirley W. Dunn’s books, the Mohicans and Their Land 1609–1730 and The Mohican World 1680–1750. Both of these books are available for sale at our store at the Columbia County Museum in Kinderhook.
The three projectile points (8500–8000 B.C.) below are from the Paleo Period and were found in Columbia County. The two fluted points to the near right are attributed to local Indians while the third one is a Folsom projectile point native to the Great Plains. Found in Claverack it illustrates the connection with western Indians through trade. The eight pieces below the projectile points are Paleo stone tools.

From the Collection of Ted Filli, Jr.

Arrow points and stone tools

The Otter Creek projectile points below (4000–3000 B.C.) date from the Mid to Late-Archaic Period. The larger point in the center was found in Missouri. The similarities in style again illustrate the kinship and influence of Western Indians. Projectile points which were used on spears should be distinguished from arrowheads which are generally smaller in size. The bow and arrow (700–900 A.D.) did not appear until the Late Woodland Period.

From the Collection of Ted Filli, Jr.
A gold mine in Columbia County, a stock scheme, fraud, murder, butchery, allegations of cannibalism, flight, and claims of insanity — all were part and parcel of the case of The People of the State of New York v. Oscar F. Beckwith. As portrayed in the rather sensational account of the crime (some six days after it was discovered, in the Chatham Courier on Wednesday, January 18, 1882), this was “One of the most horrible and revolting murders ever committed in Columbia County… The atrocity of (which) was heightened by the fact that the bloodthirsty and fiendish instincts of the murderer led him to attempt the concealment of the crime by chopping up the body of his victim and cremating a portion of it in his cook stove.” The World, published in New York City, on March 5, 1885 announced the arrest of Beckwith some three years later in an article headlined “BUTCHERY AND CANNIBALISM, Arrest of a Hermit Wood Chopper of Columbia County After a Long Search.”

BACKGROUND
At the time of the murder on January 10, 1882, Oscar Beckwith, who was age 71, lived in a shanty outside of Austerlitz in Columbia County on a parcel that he had acquired some years previously. Beckwith had become convinced that there was gold on the property and had enlisted the assistance of Simon A. Vandercook, the victim of the murder, to help him develop a mine. As a result, Vandercook and several others formed the Austerlitz Mining Company, which issued stock. Beckwith deeded to the company his property for which he received a one-third interest in the corporation. He was supposed to be paid some $500 for his land but there is no evidence of his having received the money, only stock in the company, which, as it turned out, was essentially worthless.

The mine was worked under the supervision of Vandercook, who employed others to do the actual mining. Some 1,900 pounds of rock were removed and sent down to Chatham to be shipped by rail to Newark, New Jersey, to be assayed. On the journey to the train, Beckwith preceded the load of ore on horseback and tried to sell stock in the mine to anyone he came across. It was ultimately determined that the ore contained minimal amounts of gold and eventually Vandercook ceased working the mine. However, Vandercook proceeded to sell off the wood on the property previously owned by Beckwith and pocketed the proceeds.

Beckwith continued to feel that the mine was valuable but was frustrated in that the owners of the two-thirds interest refused to develop the mine. So, Beckwith continued to send wood to Vandercook, who employed others to do the actual mining. Some 1,900 pounds of rock were removed and sent down to Chatham to be shipped by rail to Newark, New Jersey, to be assayed. On the journey to the train, Beckwith preceded the load of ore on horseback and tried to sell stock in the mine to anyone he came across. It was ultimately determined that the ore contained minimal amounts of gold and eventually, Vandercook ceased working the mine. However, Vandercook proceeded to sell off the wood on the property previously owned by Beckwith and pocketed the proceeds.

...this crime was “One of the most horrible and revolting murders ever committed in Columbia County…”

THE CRIME, FLIGHT AND ARREST
The following description of the crime, flight and arrest of Oscar Beckwith is based primarily on the testimony of the prosecution witnesses at the second trial of Mr. Beckwith. However, the transcripts of the testimony of the defense witnesses as well as the closing arguments and instructions to the jury at the second trial have not been located. Yet, the prosecution’s case in and of itself probably accurately reflects the facts surrounding the crime.

On January 10, 1882, the date of the murder, Vandercook was seen in mid-morning going up to Beckwith’s shanty. He was never seen again. Around 4:30 P.M. that same day, Beckwith came down to the house of Harrison Calkins, a neighbor, where the victim, Vandercook, boarded. He spoke briefly with Calkins’ wife in the presence of her daughter. Both observed that he was in an agitated state with a ruddy complexion to his face. He told them that Vandercook had gone away with someone he met on the mountain and that they should keep his belongings until he returned. Beckwith then left and went back up the hill to his shanty.

Later that evening, Harrison Calkins went up to Beckwith’s shanty. As he approached it, he smelled something burning. When he entered the shanty, he testified that he “…noticed that the top of the stove was all red and the other parts of it was red hot.” He testified that he heard sizzling noises in the stove, and asked Beckwith what he was burning. Beckwith replied that “…he had some pork rinds that he had thrown in the stove.” Beckwith also told Calkins, according to the latter’s testimony, that “…Vandercook had gone off with a man to get up a stock company…” (that) Vandercook told him (Beckwith) to tell me (Calkins) he was going off with this man (and) to take care of his things things until he (Vandercook) got back; he (Beckwith) said that
he (Vandercook) would be back about the first of March.” Beckwith was not seen again until he was arrested some three years later.

It was not until January 12 that several men went back up to Beckwith’s shanty, broke in the door, and discovered the evidence of the murder. In the bunkroom at the rear of the shanty, they discovered under a coat that appeared like one that Vandercook wore the remains of the victim, cut up into stove lengths. In the pocket of the coat were bills made out to Vandercook by a merchant in Great Barrington. Some of the body parts were found to be missing — the head, the left hand and the two feet. Calkins testified that Vandercook was missing a thumb on his left hand and had a scar on his foot. The absence of these body parts would have made direct identification of the remains as those of Vandercook almost impossible.

A basket was also found in Beckwith’s shanty, which contained the entrails and heart of the victim. Inside the stove they discovered fragments of bones that appeared to be part of a skull, fingers and toes. In the shanty they also found two axes, one of which had some hairs, ostensibly human, on it. The other was “greasy” and covered in blood.

On January 13 an inquest was held. As part of this inquest, the coroner laid out and pieced together the body parts found in the bunkroom. A physician, who attended the inquest, testified that he observed that the victim had a stab wound entering the body from behind, just below the right shoulder blade. He stated that the knife had also penetrated the coat and other clothing of the victim. After the inquest, the body parts were placed in a barrel and taken away by the coroner.

Beckwith was indicted in absentia on January 19, 1882 for the crime of murder in the first degree, a capital crime. Beckwith, who fled the scene of the crime on the day of the murder, eluded his captors for a little over three years until arrested February 20, 1885 in Canada, some 230 miles north of Toronto. He was subsequently returned to Hudson for trial.

THE JUDICIAL PROCESS

Beckwith was tried, was found guilty of murder in the first degree in November 1885 and initially was sentenced to be hanged on January 8, 1886. He appealed to the General Term of the Supreme Court of New York, which affirmed the judgment of the lower court and revised the sentence to be carried out on July 2, 1886. Upon appeal to the Court of Appeals, the judgments of the two lower courts were affirmed and execution was re-set for December 16, 1886. Records of the initial trial and the appeals have not been found and may have been lost in a fire at the Columbia County Courthouse in Hudson in 1907.

On November 10, 1886, Beckwith’s counsel submitted a motion for a new trial based on newly discovered evidence. In this motion, counsel shed some light as to the defense at the first trial. In item 6 of his motion, Beckwith’s counsel stated that Beckwith took the stand in the first trial and testified as follows:

“Vandercook burst in his cabin door, which was fastened against him by a button, by violence, refused to go out when ordered by defendant to do so, but knocked defendant down and then with great violence attacked him with a dangerous weapon, to wit, a stick of firewood, and threatened to knock defendant’s brains out. And, that a struggle ensued in which Vandercook ‘grabbed him by the throat’ and ‘stopped his wind’. ‘That he could not live in that situation five minutes’, that he ‘considered he was fighting for his life’, and that under the circumstances he considered he had a right to kill Vandercook.”

Counsel then went on to argue that if these facts were true, Beckwith at the very least should have been found guilty of a lesser crime than murder in the first degree, a capital crime.
It is with the greatest sadness that the Board of Directors and all of the staff of Columbia County Historical Society note the passing of their friend, past Board President and benefactor Harry Arthur van Dyke. Harry died at his home, "Forth House", in Livingston, New York, on November 4, 2002, after a brief battle with liver cancer. He was 76 years old. In addition to serving so ably as President, he gave continuous counsel and service as a very active member of our Board up to the time of his death. He was the founder of our annual scholarship for deserving Columbia County Seniors for excellence in the study of history. We have renamed the scholarship in his honor.

During an outstanding career as an architect Harry was noted for his restoration work on historic properties both in Columbia County and New York City. He graduated from Albany High School in 1944 and from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute with a B.A. in architecture in 1949. His architectural career began with Wurster, Bernhardt and Emmons in San Francisco, California. He later worked for two of our country's most famous architectural firms, that of Edward Durell Stone and Raymond Lowey Associates, both in New York City, before entering into private practice in New York City, Massachusetts and Columbia County. He was the architect for the Methodist Church in Port Ewen, New York, and, more recently, for housing for the elderly in Tivoli.

In 1978 he received the Albert S. Bard Citation of Merit in Architecture for his addition to the Frick Collection in New York City. He was, however, best known locally for his sensitive work on historic properties in Columbia County. Perhaps because he was a descendant of Hendrick van Dyck, who immigrated to New Amsterdam in 1642, Mr. van Dyke had a particular interest in the early history of the Hudson River Valley. He was a member of the Holland Society of New York, the St. Nicholas Society of New York, the Dutch Settlers Society of Albany, the University Club of Albany, and the Edgewood Club of Tivoli. In addition to the Columbia County Historical Society, Mr. van Dyke was also on the board of several organizations, including the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary and International House in New York City.

Mr. van Dyke is survived by his partner of 26 years, David W. Johnson, and by a brother, Robert van Dyke of Alamagordo, New Mexico. We shall miss him, and remember him fondly.

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The Society is proud to announce its most recent grant awards since our last publication.

Our 1737 Luykas Van Alen House has received a federal Save America's Treasures grant in the amount of $175,000 and a New York State Environmental Protection Fund grant for $75,500 to restore the roofing system, re-point much of the brickwork, conduct archeological work around the perimeter of the structure, and re-grade the land to slope away from the house. The Society is one of only six sites in New York State and one of eighty nationwide to receive the prestigious Save America's Treasures funding.

Private funding, as well as funding from foundations and other granting agencies, is being sought to match these grants. Preserving this National Historic Landmark while maintaining its historical integrity is challenging, but essential if it is to continue to survive and to teach us about our county's history and culture. Thousands have learned of our early Dutch heritage at the Van Alen House. With this major restoration project we will be able to learn more about Dutch architecture and building techniques as the work progresses.

New York State Council on the Arts has awarded the Society $16,000 for an education project in collaboration with Olana and Clermont State Historic Sites, Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, and Shaker Museum & Library. An article about this project is in our Fall, 2002 publication. The Columbia County Educator's Forum, spearheaded by our educator, Ruth Ellen Berninger, is conducting the planning and implementation phases of this project throughout the winter and spring months.

The Society greatly appreciates these grant awards as well as the private donations that have been received to help match them. We anticipate an exciting year of preservation and education with so many projects ahead of us! Please call or write to the Society office if you are interested in more information or wish to contribute to any of our projects.

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HARRY ARTHUR VAN DYKE

By David W. Voorhees
so can we hope to continue our ambitious schedule of community events and educational programs, museum exhibitions and growing our collections. We especially need volunteers in the Museum office to aid in computer input. If you have any skill at all in this area, no matter how basic, any time at all to give, no matter how little, your help will be deeply appreciated.

This issue of Columbia County History & Heritage is dedicated to the earliest residents of the county. We go back to prehistory to begin the tale of Native Americans populating our hills, valleys, stream-sides, lakes and riverbanks. We are grateful to Ted Filli, Jr., Ruth Piwonka, Shirley W. Dunn, Dominick Lizzi, Stephen Comer, Rod Blackburn, and so many others that have helped us in this important endeavor.

Stephan M. Mandel
President
Board of Directors

Society Welcomes Carla Lesh

The Society’s Board of Directors and staff welcome Carla Lesh as registrar/assistant educator. Carla is a Ph.D. candidate at SUNY Albany in American History. Beginning in February she will be working on curatorial projects and education programs.

She has previously worked at The Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, the New York State Museum, and the Huguenot Historical Society. She has experience as an interpreter with school programs and with processing and organizing manuscript and object collections. She currently serves as President of the Marlborough Historical Society. We all look forward to working with her.

CORRECTION: In the article “The Depots Large and Small” in the Fall 2002 issue, please note the following: The Stuyvesant station was actually built in 1880. Lincoln’s funeral train did not stop in Stuyvesant. It was listed on the printed schedule of stations that the train would pass in its slow journey north.

Columbia County History & Heritage is interested in hearing from you — if you have articles, pictures, or other items about Columbia County history and cultural heritage suitable for publication, please let us know. The Editorial Board will review all submissions, and all submissions considered for publication are subject to editing. We regret that we cannot guarantee publication.

Want to advertise your business in Columbia County History & Heritage? Call 518-758-9265 for more information.

THE SOCIETY NEEDS YOU

The Columbia County Historical Society depends upon volunteers to help it in its many endeavors. We are seeking individuals with experience and interest in any of the following areas to contact the Society and volunteer their time and effort. Don’t hesitate to contact us even if you think that your background is not suitable. We can explore with you our needs and your interests to determine how best you can help us.

If you are skilled in typing and/or inputting materials into computers, you could help us manage and catalogue our collection. Museum or archival experience would be helpful. Please call Helen McLallen, Curator, at 758-9265. She will be happy to discuss in more detail the type of assistance needed and what is required.

We need people who have an interest in either writing or presenting educational programs to help the staff Educator in this important outreach effort. If you have an interest in developing such programs or working with students, please contact Ruth Ellen Berninger, Educator, at 758-9265.

Finally, the Society can use help handling a wide variety of tasks in its library and office at the Museum in Kinderhook. If you would like to assist us in these areas, please call Sharon Palmer, Executive Director, at the telephone number shown above.
The Columbia County Historical Society announced its second annual “COLUMBIA COUNTY PRESERVATION HERITAGE AWARDS” at its annual meeting on October 19, 2002. The recipients were honored at the Columbia County Museum, where they received certificates for their efforts to preserve local history. The winners included two historical organizations, two historians and two elementary school teachers from all reaches of Columbia County. A $1,000 scholarship was also awarded to a deserving Columbia County high school senior studying history.

Steve Sorman accepted the Society’s Preservation Award for the Ancram Preservation Group. This volunteer organization is actively involved in the restoration of the Simon’s General Store, a circa 1870 building and a cornerstone in the hamlet of Ancram. Since they acquired the store in 2000 and received state funding, the group has continued to raise funds to keep the project moving forward.

Norma Edsall, president of the Austerlitz Historical Society, accepted the Preservation Award for the organization’s ambitious project called “Old Austerlitz Historic Site.” This recreation of an historic village has started with the Morey-Devereaux House, donated by Thomas and Debra Henson and currently being erected on its new site in Austerlitz. Norma recognized Robert Herron and Richard Mugler who are also spearheading this effort and who, with many other volunteers, have organized community events and fundraisers to make “Old Austerlitz” a success. Donna Beaudry and Janice Fingar, elementary school teachers at the Martin Van Buren School in Kinderhook, received their Preservation Awards for their enthusiasm and leadership in the study of local history. They have long been an inspiration to their 3rd and 4th grade students as they take them on field trips to historic sites and guide them in the creation of a museum in their classrooms each year. They have participated in the Society’s varied programs and added their own interesting projects on local history.

Canaan Town Historian, Anna Mary Dunton, accepted the Society’s Preservation Award for her consuming passion for the study and sharing of local and regional history. She has served as town historian since 1962, started the Canaan Historical Society, and transformed the Presbyterian Church in Canaan Center into the Meeting House Museum. Her long-time friend and 40-year member of the Canaan Historical Society, John Nickles, recognized her contribution of many years and nominated her for this award.

Nominated by the current Stuyvesant Town Historian, Juanita Knott, Priscilla Frisbee received the Preservation Award for her 22 years as the former Stuyvesant historian and her long-time contribution to the preservation of county history. She established research files of documents and photographs that are now housed at the new Stuyvesant Town Hall; she photographed Stuyvesant landmarks, community celebrations, and New York State historical markers for the archives; and she researched and wrote A Brief History of the Town of Stuyvesant and Friends of the Family: Butler-Van Buren.

The Columbia County Historical Society celebrates all of these contributions to the preservation of our county’s history and congratulates the winners of the 2002 Columbia County Preservation Heritage Awards.

The Society encourages Columbia County history enthusiasts to watch for those students, organizations, municipalities, individuals, and groups who are preserving our beautiful natural and built environments. The Columbia County Preservation Heritage Awards allow the Society to achieve its mission to promote an awareness of county history amongst its residents and visitors. Nominations will be accepted next summer at the Society’s office at the Columbia County Museum. For more information please call the Society at 518-758-9265.
Book Review:

A VISIBLE HERITAGE

By Ruth Piwonka and Roderic H. Blackburn and designed by Winston Potter

This is a book review adapted from “County Art Book Gets new Life” by Lawrence Hovish, The Independent, November 8, 2002

By Jim Eyre

It is not often that a book on a single county, by county authors, gets a third printing. This, in itself, attests to the quality of content. “There are treasures for everyone in this book,” says Black Dome Press publisher and owner Debbie Allen. “It is fun, and also enjoyable on a basic level.” The 160 page book published with the Columbia County Historical Society, contains hundreds of pictures of Columbia County’s art, commercial and residential architecture, and geography from the 17th century through the 20th.

Mr. Blackburn, the book’s co-author, says, “Ruth Piwonka and I did this book back in the 1970s when we were both involved with the historical society. She was director, and I was president, and we both realized that the last update on the county was 100 years old.” He says it took about two years to put together and it has always been well received.

“My motivation was real estate,” he says. “People were inaccurately dating and describing houses and were on average about 40 years off.” The book is now sought by newcomers to the county to research existing homes or to study architectural styles for the construction of new homes. In fact, there is a big interest in the book today, and the Society had a long list of people waiting for this new printing.

According to Columbia County Historical Executive, Sharon Palmer, there have been no changes to the content since the second printing, when more information was added in honor of the book’s 20th anniversary. However it does sport a new cover designed by Ron Toelke, another Columbia County resident, who owns Ron Toelke Associates in Chatham, specializing in graphic design and print publication locally, regionally and nationally. It’s a detail from a large painting in the historical society’s collection titled Salting Sheep. All agree that the new cover is the highlight of the third printing. “It will probably sell twice as fast now, mostly due to the new cover,” Mr. Blackburn says.

The book is available for purchase at the Columbia County Museum shop in Kinderhook. Every county living room should have a copy.

Raymond J. Andrews, a high school senior at Lasalle Institute was awarded the 2002 Columbia County Historical Society’s $1,000 Scholarship to be applied to his 2003-2004 tuition at the college he chooses to attend. R. J. lives with his family in Valatie and has a life-long interest in the study of local and regional history. He has conducted classroom presentations as an 18th century re-enactor to Ichabod Crane and Lasalle students; participated in 18th century military encampments and demonstrations of civilian life at the Society’s Van Alen House, Lindenwald, and Clermont; acted as student counselor at the Society’s Historic Day Camp; and assisted the Friends of Lindenwald at their 19th century craft fair. R. J.’s scholastic achievements are many and the Society is proud to award the 2002 Scholarship to such a deserving student.
History Around the County

By Julia Philip

Our Town Historians

Each of the five towns and sixteen townships of Columbia County has a Town Historian, although they are often not well known except in their own communities.

Mary Howell, County Historian since 1944 and also Historian for Livingston, believes this may change this spring as three towns in the southern end of the county begin plans for a joint exhibition with the Columbia County Historical Society. With the working title, “Uses of the Land,” the exhibit will focus on the industries and agriculture of Clermont, Germantown and Livingston. The exhibit will be displayed at the Historical Society’s Museum in Kinderhook. Anne Poleschner of Clermont, and Marguerite Riter of Germantown are the other Town Historians who will take part in the event. Helen Mcallen, the Historical Society’s Curator, and Ruth Ellen Berninger, the Society’s Educator, will assist in selecting and mounting the materials for the exhibit.

The Society hopes that this first exhibit will encourage other Town Historians to participate in a series of exhibitions that will illustrate the diverse resources of Columbia County.

Town Historians should not be confused with local historical societies of which there are nine in Columbia County. Town Historians are local government officials, mandated by law and appointed by the town supervisor or village mayor. Most receive no pay beyond modest amounts for postage or office supplies. They are expected to make annual reports in January to the State Department of Education.

In 1919 New York became the first state to establish the office of local historian. That year the “Historian’s Law” passed the State Legislature and was signed by Governor Alfred E. Smith. It called for the designation of an historian for each city, town and village of the state who could respond to requests for information on the history of the locality. Since the law did not specify a salary for the job, little interest was shown at first. By 1920 there were only 735 appointments for well over 1500 positions.

The first task assigned to the local historians was to assist the State Historian in a study of New York’s role in World War I. Again there was no provision for funding the project and voluntary cooperation was necessary. The project continued for over ten years. These new local historians became the main resource for completing the project, interviewing veterans and making summaries of service records of those who served from their communities. The role of County Historian was added later to act as local coordinator under the State Historian.

In 1927 Town Historians were asked to assist in a new project, the Historic Markers Program. There was a concern that the markers be historically accurate, and Town Historians were asked to verify the texts proposed for all the markers in their areas.

During World War II local historians were called upon again to work with public officers to collect and preserve military and civilian mobilization records that were being generated in virtually every community in the state and across the nation.

Finally, the most important challenge for Town Historians was to assist local governments in preparation for the country’s Bi-Centennial celebrations in 1976.

Columbia County’s Historians vary in their interests as much as one area of the county varies from another. The towns along the Hudson River have early Dutch and Palatine histories, and some of those Town Historians can trace their families back to the settlers of the late seventeenth century. Some have special interests in the American Indians, particularly the Mohicans who lived throughout New York. Others who represent towns in the northeast of the county focus their interests on the early Shaker settlements. Others are interested in the railroads and trolley lines that crossed the county. Some do genealogical searches, and most have collections of documents and records that are used by individuals interested in finding their family roots.

TOWN AND CITY HISTORICIANS

ANCRAM
Clara Van Tassel
329-0632

AUSTERLITZ
Sally Light
392-4270

CANAAN
Anna Mary Dunton
781-4801

CHATHAM
Kathryn Burgess
794-7512

CHATHAM VILLAGE
Linda Conway
392-5377

CLAVERACK
Ted Filli, Jr.
851-6834

CLERMONT
Anne Poleschner
537-6604

COPAKE
Gloria Lyons
325-5877

GALLATIN
Delores Weaver
537-4315

GERMANTOWN
Marguerite Riter
537-3600

GHENT
Calvin Pitcher
392-2127

GREENPORT
David Hart
828-4656

HILLSDALE
None at this time

Hudson City
Patricia Fenoff
828-0034

KINDERHOOK
Ruth Piwonka
758-7605

LIVINGSTON
Mary Howell
828-2969

(Also County Historian)

NEW LEBANON
Kevin Feurst
766-5071

PHILMONT
Charles Nichols
672-7032

STOCKPORT
Viola Williams
828-9172

STUYVESANT
Juanita Knott
758-6752
AND A HAPPENING IN HUDSON:

The year 2003 marks the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Alexander Jackson Davis, premier American architect of the mid-19th century. Within Columbia County there is an extremely fine example of this noted architect’s work: the Plumb-Bronson House located on the grounds of the Hudson Correctional Facility in the City of Hudson. Historic Hudson, the preservation organization that has taken up the cause of preserving and restoring this grand Hudson River estate, will be celebrating the bicentennial of A.J. Davis’s birth with two events at the house in late June: a gala evening on Saturday, June 21, and an open house on Sunday, June 22. For more information about the Plumb-Bronson House and bicentennial celebration, you may contact Historic Hudson at 518-828-1785.

Columbia County Re-Grant Program Year 2002 Grants Awarded

The Columbia County Historical Society has announced the following awards for projects being conducted by historians and historical agencies throughout the county. Thanks to funding in the amount of $1,500 from the Columbia County Board of Supervisors, the following applications were awarded funds.

- Gloria M. Lyons, Copake Town Historian: $125 toward the purchase of archival materials to preserve local documents relating to the Town of Copake.
- Nancy Griffith, Taghkanic Town Historian: $125 to be applied toward the purchase of archival storage materials to preserve items relating to the history of the Town of Taghkanic.
- David Hart, President, Greenport Historical Society: $125 for the purchase of an archival cleaning system, labels, and supplies to preserve an historic slide collection recently acquired by their Society.
- Juanita Knott, Stuyvesant Town Historian: $125 to be used for the production of a bulletin board and shadow box as exhibit aids to promote the town’s history.
- Robert G. Leary, President, Riders Mills Historical Association: $225 for the purchase of archival materials needed to preserve historic books and documents relating to the Riders Mills Schoolhouse.
- Marguerite Riter, Germantown Town Historian: $125 for the purchase of archival storage materials for the town’s collection of documents relating to the history of Germantown.
- Dominick Lizzi, Village of Valatie Historian: $400 toward the development of a walking tour of Prospect Hill Cemetery, including a pamphlet, grave markers, and research.
- Dolores Weaver, Gallatin Town Historian: $125 toward the purchase of archival storage materials to hold newspaper clippings, photographs, and other historical documents relating to Gallatin’s history, preserving them for future generations.
- Patricia Fenoff, Hudson Historian: $125 toward the purchase of archival materials to store the city’s historical records now in her possession as well as at City Hall.

A clarification

The following notes are to correct some unintended errors in our article about the Austerlitz Historical Society and its Old Austerlitz Historic Site which appeared in our Fall 2002 issue:

- Thomas Henson should be Thomas E and Debra L. Hanson.
- J. Walter Kelley should be J.M. Kelly, Ltd.
- John Borotta should be John Buratto.
- Preservation Architects should be Preservation Architecture.
- Robert Herron — ‘has donated 55 acres and three of the houses to the historic site’ — should be ‘has donated 3 acres to the Society on which the Society has reconstructed a small house and a granary.’
- The Morey Devereaux House, which is currently being reconstructed, is also on this parcel. Mr. Herron has established a trust through which his current home, the Sauers-Kellogg House, the Varney House, where he grew up, and a reconstructed barn will become an integral part of Old Austerlitz. An additional 52 acres will also become available for Society use at that time.
- The Varney House has not been deeded to the Society. It is currently used by the Society for small meetings and as an office.
Among the Society’s collections is a pair of 18th-century bark barrels, or casks, which were found in the 1960s in the attic of the Columbia County home built for Johannes Van Alen in the 1760s. Johannes Van Alen was the second son of Luykas Van Alen, in whose house the barrels are now exhibited. The Luykas Van Alen House in Kinderhook is owned and maintained by the Society and is open to the public during the summer months.

The casks are large, approximately 40” high and 46” in diameter. Each is made from a single large sheet of smooth inner bark formed into a cylinder. The edges were overlapped and laced together through holes punched into the bark. Remnants of a twisted vegetable fiber cord remain. They have no obvious evidence for a bottom or base. The deterioration of their lacing had deprived them of structural support, and they developed horizontal splits along the grain. The Society had them conserved in 1996. Objects conservator Heidi Miksch worked on them on site at the Van Alen House. She realigned the split edges, working gradually over a period of weeks, then gluing the splits together. The casks were then relaced with a compatible modern cord.

A Native-American container form, it is probable that bark casks were adopted by Euro-Americans because of their usefulness and durability. Bark casks of varying sizes were used to store dried corn, smoked fish, beans, dried fruit, and other possessions. References to their use occur as early as Champlain’s descriptions of them in 1616 and continue through the 19th century. Father J. F. Lafitau described in 1724 “great bark casks in tun shape, five to six feet high, where they put their maize when it is shelled.” An example is illustrated in Lewis H. Morgan’s classic Report on the Fabrics, Inventions, Implements and Utensils of the Iroquois (1851).

Arthur C. Parker, of the New York State Museum, commissioned a smaller elm bark cask, now in the New York State Museum’s collections, from the Seneca in 1909 as an essential artifact to interpret Iroquois culture. No other extant examples of casks as large as the Columbia County Historical Society’s are known to Native-American specialists, although documentary evidence indicates they were commonly used by Eastern Woodlands cultures. Little documentation of their use by Euro-Americans has been located. Whether the Society’s examples were made by Native-Americans or by Euro-Americans copying native techniques is not known, nor can they be precisely dated aside from their 18th-century context. Their presence in the Johannes Van Alen house attic, however, is an intriguing illustration of the intersection between Native-American and Euro-American cultures in Columbia County.
THE CELESTIAL BEAR OF THE MOHICAN PEOPLE

By Stephan K. Comer, Doctoral Student at SUNY Albany, specializing in Mohican Studies, and the only enrolled Mohican tribal member living within the original tribal territory.

The Mohican Indians, also known as the Stockbridge-Munsee, the Original People of Columbia County, paid a heavy penalty for Europeanizing, eventually moving from their aboriginal homelands to Wisconsin. They lost virtually all of their ancient customs and beliefs along the way. Although they have been returning periodically to their ancestral area for the last half-century, they have discovered to their disappointment that relatively little was recorded about them. Thus, great gaps still exist in their cultural patrimony. An outstanding exception to this state of affairs is their Bear Sacrifice Ceremony, ably explained in a 1945 publication by anthropologist Frank Speck, who drew his knowledge from Munsee-Mohican informants at the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, Canada. The culturally conservative mixed band of Munsee (Delaware) and Mohicans had migrated to Canada about the same time that the main body of the Tribe established themselves at Stockbridge, MA, thus they were able to practice much of their ancestral culture until the mid 19th century.

In a monograph entitled The Celestial Bear Comes Down To Earth, Speck describes their mid-Winter festival as an elaborate ceremony that involved singing, dancing, recitation of visions, and the ritual killing and eating of a bear who was to act as a spiritual emissary to the Celestial Bear, the chief of the Bear people. Amazingly, this ceremony echoes similar myths and rites once (and in some places still) practiced around the Arctic Circle by cultures that have never had contact with one another. Of even greater import is the (unproven) possibility that all these myth/ritual complexes derived from a so-called ‘Bear Cult’ that originated 20,000 years ago with Early Homo sapiens in what is now Europe.

The Mohican people are fortunate to have access to this important component of their heritage. The tale goes roughly as follows:

In the sky is a Great Bear, an eternal Bear, the Chief of all the earthly bears, to whom respect must be paid before he will allow his people to be killed. The Great Bear is eternally the object of a hunt, and as he twists around in the northern sky he is continually followed by three hunters. They manage to kill him in the Fall. We know this because the leaves turn red with his blood and the snow is the fat which falls from his dead body. But the Celestial Bear never truly dies. He lies in his den through the Winter and rises up every Spring, and the hunt begins once again.

The way to honor the Great Bear is to show respect to his people. When an earthly bear is killed, it must be summoned from its den with respect, dispatched with a hand-held weapon, ritually skinned, and its pelt tied around the sacred world-tree post. When the flesh is cooked, all present must eat, and none may leave until all the meat has been consumed. The bones must be kept from the dogs and burned in a fire. The skull will be decorated and set high in the branch of a tree. From there the earthly bear will be entreated to fly to the heavens and tell the Great Bear that all is well between the bear people and the human people. Then the Great Bear will allow his people to be taken, and things will go on as they were meant to be.

Speck’s primary informant, Nekatcit, told the story of a single ceremony, perhaps the last one, which took place about 1850. The following is a condensed version of that story:

An old woman had a dream about where the bear would be found to celebrate the annual Bear Sacrifice ceremony. Twelve men were sent to capture it. They rapped on the tree where the bear was sleeping and called for it to come out. The bear came out and was escorted to the Big House. But when it came to a creek it refused to go any further and lay down on the ground instead. The chief was summoned to kill the reluctant bear. Then it was carried to the Big House, skinned, and cooked. After the people were finished eating it the chief stood in the middle of the floor and said, “Go home, don’t get caught up in petty matters, don’t cheat other people, be good to one another.” Then all the people went home.

Although the Mohican people no longer celebrate the Bear Ceremony, they still have the story of the Great Bear which belonged to their ancestors. And the Celestial Bear still goes around and around in the northern sky.
degree. He also noted in his motion that Beckwith’s claim of self-defense was not contradicted in any way during the trial, nor could it be corroborated except by circumstance. Counsel then went on to state that “…to have furnished to the jury corroboration of facts with which to compare the testimony of defendant would have been generally to defendant’s advantage at said trial.”

In the motion, Beckwith’s counsel then noted that while on the stand in his first trial, Beckwith had testified that he had reason to believe that Vandercook had attempted to take his life by poison and that this testimony may explain the intent with which the attack was made on his client and throw light on the “…alleged necessity which may have existed for defendant to take the life of Vandercook.”

Attached to the motion was a deposition by Giles S. Hulette, a physician, who at the time of the murder was practicing medicine in Great Barrington and knew Vandercook and Harrison Calkins. In his deposition Hulette stated that he first became aware of his deposition. Hulette stated that he never heard such conversations.

Vandercook and Calkins were interested were discussed. Calkins and Vandercook both stated to me on several occasions that the mine in their opinion was a rich one, that they expected to form a stock company and develop it, …that Beckwith was the only obstacle in their way to do this, and that if they ‘could get rid of him’, they should go on and do it.”

Hulette further deposed that “…Vandercook, either on two or three occasions consulted him on the subject of poisons, the nature and effects of the different kinds.”

Based on the foregoing, a new trial was granted which began on February 4, 1887. Much of this article is based on the complete transcript of the testimony of the prosecution witnesses at that trial. However, a diligent search has failed to locate the transcripts of the defense witnesses’ testimony, the arguments by the prosecution and defense and the instructions given to the jury by the judge. Therefore, it is unknown as to whether or not Hulette appeared at the trial and testified and what, if any, weight was given to such testimony or deposition. It should be noted that Harrison Calkins did file a deposition stating that he had never had an interest in the mining company, that he had no recollection of any such conversations alluded to in the Hulette deposition, that he never heard of any conversation in which was stated that he and Vandercook ever intended to form a stock company, or that Beckwith was an obstacle to their plans, and that if they could get rid of him they could proceed to work the mine. In his deposition, however, Calkins never denied directly the fact asserted by Hulette in his deposition that Vandercook had talked to Hulette about poisons, only that he never heard such conversations.

The jury in the second trial again found Beckwith guilty of murder in the first degree. He was then sentenced to hang on March 24, 1887. Beckwith did appeal to both the General Term and to the Court of Appeals once again, but both courts affirmed the judgment of the lower court. This resulted in the execution of his sentence being further delayed.

In January 1887, a sanity hearing was held, the transcript of which was reviewed for this article. At this hearing a number of “experts” testified as to their examinations of Beckwith, some opinion that he was sane, others that he was insane. It is clear from the transcript of their testimony that at the very least Beckwith was eccentric, that he may have been delusional in that he felt that he was the victim of a plot by the freemasons, and that his counsel was a mason and was part of this plot. In addition, there was testimony presented at the hearing of insanity in Beckwith’s immediate family. Yet, the commissioners in their report of January 26, 1887 found that Beckwith was sane.

Also, in response to a petition for clemency by reason of mental incompetency made to Governor Hill of New York, experts on insanity
again examined Beckwith on February 27, 1888, three days before the date of his execution. However, Governor Hill on the next day refused to commute the sentence to life imprisonment.

All appeals having been exhausted, Beckwith was finally sentenced to die on March 1, 1888. The sentence was carried out on that day at the Hudson jail. At the time Beckwith was just nine days short of his 78th birthday.

Throughout the entire process, Beckwith was aggressively defended by Levi Longley who was court appointed counsel. Yet, at the end of Longley’s Herculean efforts on behalf of Beckwith, for which he probably received little, if any, compensation, Beckwith turned on him as being part of the freemasonry plot against him and claimed that he failed to properly represent him.

**WHY WAS BECKWITH HANGED?**

The case is fascinating, not so much because of the grisly nature of the crime, but for the many questions it raises. First and foremost, contrary to the reporting in some publications and as was believed by some at the time, there was no evidence of cannibalism presented by the prosecution, at least according to the transcript of the prosecution witnesses’ testimony. Based on the statements of these persons, the only logical conclusion is that Beckwith was trying to conceal the crime by burning the victim’s remains in his stove. Yet, there is no doubt that the crime was of a sensational nature and probably created a sense of revulsion among the people in the surrounding area. This aura surrounding the crime might account for the fact that Beckwith was indicted for the crime of murder in the first degree, a capital crime, and not for murder in the second degree.

The evidence presented by the prosecution witnesses as to motive, premeditation and intent on the part of Beckwith to kill Vandercook appears to be somewhat weak and subject to reasonable doubt. As to motive, there was no doubt that Beckwith had reason to feel that he had been cheated by Vandercook. Yet, in both the direct and cross-examination of these witnesses, there is conflicting testimony as to whether or not they had quarreled or had “bad blood” between them. Some prosecution witnesses actually testified that Beckwith and Vandercook appeared to be on amicable terms with each other.

The primary evidence as to premeditation and intent on the part of Beckwith to kill Vandercook comes from two prosecution witnesses. These testified at the second trial that Beckwith had approached them sometime before the actual murder to help him get rid of Vandercook. However, there were no witnesses to these conversations, so this testimony was essentially uncorroborated. More importantly, neither agreed to go along with the scheme and generally dismissed the requests as the ranting of an eccentric old man. As testified to by one of these persons, Beckwith not only sought assistance to get rid of Vandercook, he also solicited him to do the same with Harrison Calkins, the brother of the person providing this testimony. He later stated that he did not think enough of the threat to warn his brother. Without the testimony of these two witnesses, which was not supported by any other evidence, there is no other showing in the prosecution’s case that Beckwith either planned to or intended to kill Vandercook.

Finally, there is Beckwith’s testimony as to the struggle with Vandercook, which led to the murder. His assertion of self-defense at the least should have raised some reasonable doubt as to whether or not the murder was premeditated and intended, even if it did not satisfy the jury that it was in fact self-defense. Also, there is no evidence, at least in the prosecution’s case, as to why Vandercook went up to Beckwith’s shanty on the day of the murder. It may have been that Vandercook did intend to harm Beckwith in some way. Assuming the evidence of Vandercook’s interest in poisons was introduced at the second trial and was given weight, coupled with the fact that Beckwith at the time did think that someone was trying to poison him, these would lend some credence to Beckwith’s claim of self-defense. On the other hand, there is the testimony that the victim was stabbed from behind in the back. This probably gave both juries problems with Beckwith’s assertion of self-defense.

Without strong evidence of premeditation and intent, one can only wonder why both juries did ultimately find Beckwith guilty of murder in the first degree, which verdict resulted in his being hanged. As reported in the *Troy Times* on February 24, 1888, co-counsel at the sanity hearing for Beckwith stated that: “As I look at the case, there is no evidence of premeditation; not enough to make it safe to hang Beckwith. I believe he is a crank, and he ought to be locked up for life, but I don’t think he should be hanged on the testimony of this case.”

Yet, until the full transcript of either or both trials are discovered, one can only raise questions and speculate on what led the juries who tried him and the courts who affirmed their judgments to conclude that Oscar Beckwith, the incorrectly named “Austerlitz Cannibal,” should be hanged for this crime.

**AFTERWORD**

The author of this article wishes to thank Dick Cartwright who collaborated in developing this story and whose assistance was invaluable in uncovering the facts on which it is based.
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Please note in your calendars the following events and dates. For additional information regarding these, please call the Society's office at (518) 758-9265 or visit our website at www.cchsny.org.

Sunday, March 2nd
In our continuing series of Monthie Slide Programs: Slides of Livingston, 3:00 p.m. Location to be announced or call the Society at 518-758-9265.

Sunday, March 23rd
Monthie Slide Program, 3:00 p.m. Slides of Germantown and Clermont. Location to be announced or call the Society at 518-758-9265.

Sunday, April 6th
Monthie Slide Program, 3:00 p.m. Slides of Kinderhook. Location to be announced or call the Society at 518-758-9265.

Saturday, June 7th
KinderCrafter Fair on the grounds of the James Vanderpoel House, Broad Street, Village of Kinderhook. 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. rain or shine. Sponsored by the Kinderhook Business and Professional Association. Crafts, music, food, fun for all ages. 518-758-9265.

Saturday, June 14th
First Columbians Champagne Reception and Antiques Festival Preview. 5:00 to 7:30 p.m. on the grounds of the Luykas Van Alen House, Route 9H, Kinderhook. Admission. 518-758-9265. Hors d’oeuvres, champagne, music, silent auction. Over 70 antiques dealers offering treasures for sale.

Sunday, June 15th
31st Annual Van Alen House Antiques Festival on the grounds of the Luykas Van Alen House, Route 9H, Kinderhook. 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Admission. Rain or shine. Over 70 antiques dealers offering treasures for sale.

Saturday, December 6th to Sunday, December 14th
Gallery of Wreaths and Holiday Craft Boutique at the Columbia County Museum, 5 Albany Ave., Kinderhook. Monday-Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.; Sunday 12:00 to 4:00 p.m. Display of hand-crafted wreaths by individuals, businesses, organizations, and florists. Wreaths are up for silent auction. Holiday crafts are for sale.

Friday, December 12th
Candlelight Night in the Village of Kinderhook, 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. Sponsored by the Kinderhook Business and Professional Association. Businesses open with refreshments, music, wagon rides, a visit from Santa, and the Greens Show at the Vanderpoel House.

Friday, December 12th to Sunday, December 14th
Greens Show at the c1820 James Vanderpoel House, Broad St., Kinderhook. Friday and Sunday 12:00 – 4:00 p.m.; Saturday 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Historic house decorated for the holidays by local garden clubs and flower shops.

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The Sachem pictured on our cover is the Mohican, Etowobkoam, whose village was located on Kinderhook Creek. He was one of four Indian chiefs to visit the English Queen Anne in 1710.

While there they posed to have their portraits painted by John Verelst, a noted artist. They were dressed in new blankets and tunic length shirts, probably of linen, and wore European swords. Iron hatchets lay nearby. These items were all typical of trade goods and gift items. The tattooed Indians also wore leather moccasins, woven belts and head-bands, and brandished native weapons, a romantic blending of European trade goods and native items.

Etowobkoam is holding his war club, and behind his right foot a turtle is shown representing his clan symbol. Members of the Turtle clan believed their relation, the great tortoise, supported their land on his back, and was superior because he could live both in the water and on land.

Jim Eyre.

Unlikely the other names [of the chiefs], this name is not Iroquoian, it is Algonkian, the language family to which the Mohican Indians belong. In the 17th and 18th centuries these were commonly known as ‘River Indians’ because they lived on the Hudson River around Albany. Although at war with the Mohawks off and on during the 17th century, by 1710 they were cooperating in the common goal of defeating France. Thus it was not inappropriate for a Mohican to join this group going to London.

Nicholas’s native name, E Tow Ob Koam, may bespeak his origin as well, for it means “two parts” or “two sides,” or “both sides” as in both sides of the river which would relate to where the Mohicans lived. His totem is the turtle which is the clan of the chiefs among the Mohicans, thus he may have been a chief, but there is no independent confirmation of this.

Roderic Blackburn

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