



# Amenia Historical Society

...where what was old is new again

July, 2006

Volume 1, Number 2

PO Box 22 Amenia, New York 12501

[AmeniaHistorical@aol.com](mailto:AmeniaHistorical@aol.com)

## In This Issue...

- Gridley Chapel: a Wassaic Landmark
- Gridley Iron Works

## Digging in the Archives



*vintage art work from the collection of Ruth Miller*

Poster of available Palmer Novelties made in Wassaic from the early 1920's to the early 1950's by the Palmer Novelty Company.

"Snappers" were assembled in what had been the Wassaic House Hotel, called "The Novelty Shop", and some were farmed out to licensed home workers as piece work. Ruth Miller, who today lives in the former Gridley house, is the daughter of Arthur Palmer who founded the company in Dover Plains. She and Howard Miller purchased the Gridley homestead after they were married.

## Gridley Chapel: Wassaic's Landmark

Built in 1873 and Rededicated May 21, 2006

By Doris Selfridge Smith

*Doris grew up in Wassaic and attended services at Gridley Chapel as a young girl, along with her friends the Rivenberg sisters, the Haskins and the Callahan girls. She served as the first Deacon when she was just a teenager in the 1950's, visiting the sick and elderly. For many years, Doris taught Sunday School and was a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher at Webutuck. She also found time to serve as a Church Elder.*

On May 21, 2006 about 40 people attended a rededication service at United Presbyterian Church's Gridley Chapel in Wassaic. Due to a grant from the Berkshire Taconic Foundation, some much needed renovation work was completed on the inside of the building and a thank-you service was felt appropriate. At the service there was special music by Nan Herow and the Tom & Jane Allen Family. Many of those present told about their special memories relating to the chapel. A reception followed the service.

The chapel was built in 1873 by Noah Gridley whose iron-working business attracted others to the town. Mrs. Emeline Gridley, his wife, was particularly interested that there be a Sunday School for the children in Wassaic. In 1881 she deeded the chapel to the Union Society, the governing body of the South Amenia Presbyterian Church. Later in 1954 a deed of conveyance was

## Programs Coming Up...

August 6: Farmers' Day at Indian Rock. Antique farm tools demonstrated, farm wives' activities and children's old time games. Bring a picnic lunch and water to drink. Noon to 2 pm free.

Sept. 10 : Smithfield Church & Cemetery at 2 pm

Sept. 30: Indian Rock Schoolhouse Community Day, chicken barbecue and picnic

Oct. 7: Historical walk through Wassaic sponsored by Heritagewalks- free- 2pm

### Programs in the Works:

Amenia Union Memories - Lori Nussdorfer, Ester Pollard, Pete Jones and others are preparing a fascinating presentation on this once-bustling hamlet which will be given in the late spring of 2007. Included will be information on the industries, St. Thomas Episcopal Church, the one-room schools - two of them!, the stagecoach route and the families who lived on the border between Connecticut and New York State.

*Ideas, suggestions and volunteers: write to Bill Burke [janandbill59@yahoo.com](mailto:janandbill59@yahoo.com)*

### Available Publications:

Early History of Amenia by Newton Reed

Amenia Cookbook

Lake Amenia Booklet Reprint

Finding Aid for Amenia's Historical & Cultural Resources

*Also a selection of postcards*

*Write to Treasurer Catherine Murphy:*  
[murphycm@mohawk.net](mailto:murphycm@mohawk.net)

*for prices and information*

given to the First Presbyterian Church of Wassaic with a reversion clause, that should the church fail to function as a Protestant Church the property should revert to the Union Society.



*Photo courtesy of William (Tom) Butts, Amenia*

The church has functioned as a Presbyterian church, going through various unions and cooperative ventures with the churches in Amenia and South Amenia and even with the chaplain's office of the Wassaic State School. In the late 1930's and 1940's the church was serviced by a series of New York seminary students who took the train to Wassaic to lead services. From about 1965 to the time the United Presbyterian Church was formed in 1991, a three-way venture called the Webutuck Council (Wassaic, Amenia and South Amenia) financed a minister who conducted three services each Sunday - one in each church.

*Below: John Quinn(left) learns about the history of the church from John Whiteford, long time resident of Wassaic and member of Gridley Chapel's congregation*



## Next Amenia Historical Society Program September 10th, 2 pm at Smithfield Church

Smithfield is one of the oldest hamlets in the Town of Amenia. Located to the west of the village on Route 83, off Route 44. Smithfield Valley is one Amenia's most beautiful rural landscapes, characterized by horse farms and large homes. For many years the small settlement at the end of the valley was jokingly called "The City", boasting a grist mill, blacksmith shop, school and post office.

The beautiful neo-classical Smithfield Church is actually the third church on the site. Join the historical society for a tour of the elegant interior, the simple white columned exterior and the noted cemetery nearby. Visit the site of the famous Whitefield oak and the gravestone of former town historian, Catherine Flint Leigh. Learn about many of Amenia's earliest settlers who lived in Smithfield.

Members of the congregation will be our tour guides. AHS members are encouraged to e-mail Arlene Iuliano to volunteer to bring cookies and /or punch for the refreshments.

[arlenei@mohawk.net](mailto:arlenei@mohawk.net) or call: 845-373-9088



The Gridley homestead built in 1820 is still standing today, the residence of Ruth Miller. Across the street is Gridley Chapel, a small architectural treasure of the past and another reminder of the legendary Gridley family.



In 1991, a corporation known as the United Presbyterian Church of Amenia joined Gridley and the Amenia Presbyterian Church was formed. A commitment was made to continue to use Wassaic's Gridley Chapel for services.

## Wassaic: the Home of the Gridley Iron Works

By John Quinn, AHS trustee

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the iron industry in Wassaic was thriving. In 1844 Noah Gridley and his son, William had purchased the small iron works started in 1825 by an enterprising group of townspeople. This early venture was in conjunction with the Johnny Cake ore bed (now part of Silo Ridge Golf Course) in Amenia.

As with a number of other furnaces in the Oblong area of New York and Connecticut, the ingredients for successful iron making were right and handy - rich ore deposits, timbered hills for making charcoal, limestone just about everywhere and running mill streams to power the furnace bellows. The many small lakes and ponds of the Oblong today are the filled-in ore beds of years ago.

Over the 40 years of Gridley's furnace the hills of Deep Hollow were completely laid bare in the harvest of timber for charcoal.



The Wassaic House Hotel, constructed by Noah Gridley, has undergone various uses. As a hotel serving a vibrant business community, many business people including the Vanderbilts would have arrived here by train from New York City. The Vanderbilt Railroad Car had red fringe around the roof, it is said.

Buyers for iron products as well as wholesalers for condensed milk would have stayed at Wassaic House. The only other choices for transportation to Wassaic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century - besides the railroad - would have been by horse or just plain walking. (Cars, of course, had not been invented) Note the tracks in the foreground.

Later, it became "The Novelty Shop" (see page 1)



The same Wassaic House Hotel is shown above part way through construction, being changed into a much larger Maxon Mills. Note the porch torn off on the first floor and the addition to the right. The old hotel building is still embedded in the towering grain elevators and remaining shed. Gridley Chapel belfry is visible on left..

*Photo: gift from the Herring family*

According to James H. Smith's "History of Dutchess County", by 1843 ten furnaces in and around Amenia were producing 10,000 tons of iron and gave employment to some 1000 men - miners, colliers, teamsters and furnace men. The demand for this labor brought people from Europe including a large influx of Irish immigrants to work in the ore mines.

The wealth of Noah Gridley and his influence through his association with the railroad moguls Commodore Vanderbilt and Jay Gould helped make Wassaic a commercial hub that brought the New York Central Railroad north. Gridley built the old Wassaic House Hotel and backed Gail Borden in his milk condensery....Eagle Brand Condensed Milk.

Noah Gridley died in 1887 at the age of 85. Today, the only evidence of his iron works are the beehive shaped charcoal kilns in a clearing near the intersection of route 22 and Deep Hollow Road.

Love this e-mail Newsletter from the Amenia Historical Society? Get it for FREE from now 'til October when all memberships need to be paid.

**E-mail member**.....\$10/year (no voting rights, but you may attend all events)

**Individual member** (e-mail or hardcopy newsletter, voting rights, events)...\$15/year

**Family membership**...\$25/year (e-mail or hardcopy newsletter, voting, events)

### **Our new e-mail newsletter is very popular!**

We welcome letters, photos and articles on any topic dealing with the history of the Town of Amenia. Our next issue...in August....will deal with the Smithfield Valley and Smithfield hamlet. Perhaps you have memories of Catherine Leigh, Mary Lasker or some other famous resident of Smithfield. How about an article on "The Square" or the Moravian Indians?

Don't be shy....we are interested in history, not style! Use snail mail if you don't have a computer...if you do, photos as JPEG files, articles and letters in Word, please.

Questions or Promises? 845-546-1148