

Bethlehem Historical Association

NEWSLETTER

Summer 2024



President's Annual Year in Review

June 1, 2023 to May 31, 2024

Where to start with the annual report for the Bethlehem Historical Association? With our volunteers of course. The people that make it all happen. Literally hundreds of hours were spent by over 45 people to create our various programs and events. Volunteer power makes BHA the vibrant organization it is. A heartfelt thank you is extended to each and every one.

During our program year **Buildings and Grounds** continued to work closely with the Town of Bethlehem regarding our National Register of Historic Places listed Cedar Hill Schoolhouse, the home of our museum. The lovely gardens by the front door were carefully tended and we looked forward to the delivery and installation of our new informational sign.

The **Finance** committee kept meticulous track of our funds. The **Fundraising** team had a successful Election Day Bake Sale. Our fundraising Afternoon Tea in April was a great success. The tea featured a visit with intrepid journalist Nellie Bly as well as delicious treats. At the museum, our sales corner continued to sell cookbooks and other small items.

Historic Preservation was championed by the town historian and his efforts to create a townwide historic preservation commission were supported by BHA trustees. The Historian also led an ongoing Oral History Project in partnership with the library. BHA was pleased to support that effort as well.

BHA Memberships were tracked and collected. Our current number is approximately 200 individual, family and life memberships.

BHA received several gifts to the museum collection this year including a large selection of bronze stenciled toleware created by Edith Mead

Crocker and memorabilia from the Slingerland family. The **Museum Collections** team led by the Registrar continued to do the work of maintaining the collection including inventorying, tracking accession numbers, and properly storing items. A new shelving system was installed in our basement storage area. Space was freed up when we held a donation-based yard sale in August. Non-historic items that we no longer use were passed on to appreciative folks.

Museum Exhibits continued to be updated. The exhibit *Dear Maria... Voices from the Mid Nineteenth Century* was installed in time for our February opening. It takes a deep dive into the life and times of Maria Becker when she was a young woman in the 1850s and 60s. We installed new exhibit furniture, including one that holds a glass display case and another large piece that holds exhibit items. We opened a Seasonal Dress display that looks at turn of the 20th century clothing. White spring linens and heavy fur clothes bracket woolen swimsuits. Another popular item loaned in September is a railroad diorama of 1907 Slingerlands.

Our Museum at the Cedar Hill Schoolhouse was an active, busy place. We were open Sunday afternoons from February to October. Besides our regular Sunday open hours, the museum hosted several special events including our annual

Continued on page 2

Inside this issue...

**Remembering Walter P. R. Pember
Exhibits in Detail: Album Quilt
Fall Speaker Series Preview**

Annual Report continued from page 1

Ice Cream Social, a Membership Reception, the Path Thru History Weekend, our Annual Holiday Open Houses, and special visits by Delmar Reformed Church, Mohawk Chapter D.A.R., and the Colonie Senior Center. We were open three weekdays during the February winter school break, a time that included educational materials designed for children. Our May annual meeting was also held at the museum this year. In total, 520 people came through our doors.

Three **Newsletters** went out this program year and we had several **Out and Abouts** including memorable trips to Historic Cherry Hill and the Albany Institute.

The **Speaker Series** continued in partnership with the Bethlehem Public Library. We had a full house (90 people) for most of the talks. Topics included stereoscopes, the Anti-Rent Wars, Indigenous land use in Bethlehem, diners, historic archaeology and James Selkirk's Revolutionary War memoir.

Our **Publicity/Media** team kept our Facebook page active and our website up to date. We maintain regular email blasts to our membership and post to the local newspapers as well.

Our **Young Historians** brought local Bethlehem history to *every* fourth-grade classroom in the Bethlehem Central School District either through in person teaching or with our traveling history kits. The kits, complete with old photos and hands-on artifacts, illustrate each school's unique history and are borrowed by teachers as requested. We are grateful to have received a grant from Stewarts Shops that assisted with refreshing the items in the kits.

All in all, a very successful season at BHA!

Respectfully submitted
Susan Leath
President

A Postscript to BHA Members:

Please forgive me, but so many people make our events and activities possible that I didn't even try to name anyone. I was sure I would forget someone and feelings would be hurt. Not to be too cliché, but you know who you are! Thank you!

BHA volunteers are involved because we are doing something that is worth doing together. Won't you join us?

News and Notes

Membership Renewals

Have you renewed your membership yet? We want to make sure you are included in our Yearbook. Please contact Membership Chair Sharon Sestak if you have questions, 518-463-1029, Sharon.Sestak1@gmail.com. She would also appreciate receiving your address, phone or email changes. Thank you for your membership!

Fall Speaker Series Preview

All talks are presented in partnership with the Bethlehem Public Library and begin at 7 p.m. Pre-registration strongly suggested.

Tuesday, September 24, 2024: David Levine is the author of *The Hudson Valley: the First 250 Million Years: A Mostly Chronological and Occasionally Personal History*. Levine, a resident of Albany, will share his work highlighting entertaining stories from his book.

Wednesday, October 16, 2024: Historian and author Jill Knapp speaks about the Albany and Susquehanna Railroad and the railroad wars that marked its transition to the Delaware and Hudson Railway.

Wednesday, November 20, 2024: Jonathan Palmer, Greene County historian, talks about the history of the hay press. Bethlehem farmers grew an enormous quantity of hay that was shipped on the Hudson River to feed the hungry horses of New York City. The hay press, a large mechanical set up that uses pressure to squeeze loose hay into bales, was an important part of the process.

Help Wanted

Do you like working with **collections** objects like the quilt highlighted in this issue? Our registrar needs assistance organizing and numbering artifact donations and entering the data in our spreadsheet. Contact Nancy Newkirk, 518-767-3182, nnewkirkbha@gmail.com

How about folding letters and stuffing envelopes and keeping track of donations? Our **Business Sponsorship Program** needs attention. If that is up your alley, please contact Susan Leath at 518-209-5855, susanleath2011@gmail.com

Newsletter

If you would like to receive your newsletter via email and save us a stamp, please let Susan know. Contact info above.

Sports!

Planning for our *Sports!* exhibit is underway. Do you have sports-related memorabilia or equipment that we could borrow? Please reach out to Tim Beebe, 518-506-0850, tkbeebe@aol.com, for details.

Please Support our Business Sponsors

Bennett Contracting
Buenau's Opticians
Joyelles Jewelers
Pratt & Associates Business & Tax Consulting
Vadney's Underground Plumbing

Learn more about our business sponsorship program by contacting us at BethHist1965@gmail.com.

Historian's Corner

By Bill Ketzner

Remembering Walter P. R. Pember

What do we mean when we say someone is a "community booster?"

The Oxford English dictionary indicates such an advocate is a "keen promoter of a person, organization or a cause," and Bethlehem was chock full of them in the first half of the 20th century. The most prominent in those days were (typically) men like Alton C. Rowe (both father and son), Otto de Heus, Dr. Thomas Holmes, William A. Glenn, John Oliver and a host of others figuring prominently in the town's civic efforts and community growth. Simply pore over the many surviving group photos of our various fraternal organizations to increase this list of names, many of which can be traced back to far earlier eras of European occupation along the Normans Kill. Whether elected or self-appointed, these residents wielded much power in the growing suburb, and they were known to most everyone.

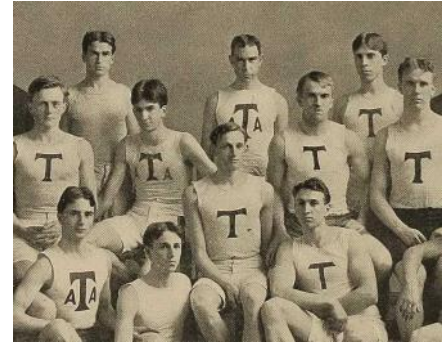
Interesting then, is a quieter, camera-shy and more reserved influencer like Walter P. R. Pember, who ran in those same circles. The son of British parents who emigrated to the United States in 1877, Pember grew up in a tiny rural community in central Maine. He earned his degree in architecture from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1903 and soon settled here, eventually establishing offices in Albany and Troy with partner William H. Demers to contribute a staggering amount of design work and planning to the built environments of Bethlehem, the Capital Region and the Northeastern U. S. in general.

While public officials, brokers and developers received most of the credit and acclaim for shaping the contours of the Tri-Village area in the first half of the 20th century (some held all three titles), it was the steady hands of professionals like Pember who determined, ultimately, how all of it actually looked to our eyes.

Consider a small sampling of his work in the Elsmere and Delmar hamlets of Bethlehem alone:

Delmar Free Library. Built in 1917 and located where the Stram Center stands today, this was the first free-standing library for Bethlehem residents. It was developed and operated for many years by the Delmar Progress Club, of which Pember's wife Amy was an early and longtime member.

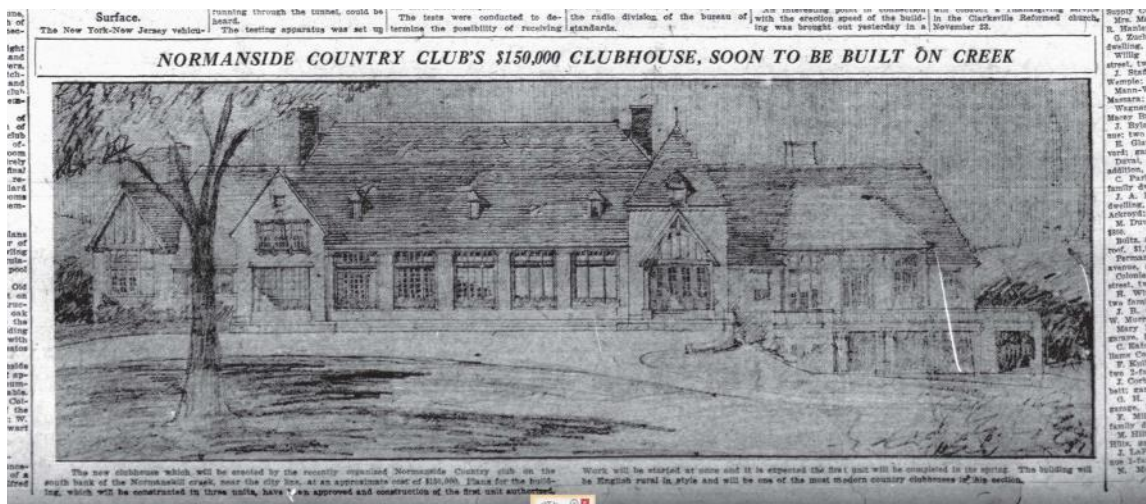
Continued on page 4



Top: 1907 M.I.T. yearbook. Pember is in the center.

Middle: An undated newspaper clipping from the early 1940s showing Pember in the center.

Below: Sketch from the November 13, 1927 issue of *The Knickerbocker Press*. The article begins, "Plans for a new \$150,000 club house for the recently formed Normanside Country Club were announced yesterday by Walter P.R. Pember, of Pember and Demers, architects."



Remembering Walter P. R. Pember
continued from page 3

Delmar Fire Department. This structure remains part of the department's primary firehouse at 145 Adams Street. Built in 1950, it houses the company's firefighters and engines behind the historic 1838 Adams House on Delaware Avenue, which served as its previous station and is now home to Bethlehem Chabad.

Bethlehem Cooperative Freeze Locker. Built during World War II as a U.S. War Production Board facility, this building was designed for wartime regional food preparation, rationing and storage, as food freezers were not yet a common household appliance. It can still be seen at 2 Howard Place in Delmar.

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. Pember developed postwar modifications to the original 1926 portion of this church, where he was an officer, vestryman and organist. While greatly expanded now, this structure still stands at the corner of West Poplar Drive and Elsmere Avenue.

Elsmere Elementary School. By 1929 the former District #15 school on Elsmere Avenue could no longer accommodate area families, and the construction of a more modern facility addressed that concern – for a time. By 1948, the postwar population boom created a need for further expansion, and Pember designed the layout for a new library and classroom wing additions to the current building, which remains in service to families at the corner of Herrick and Delaware avenues. This history is detailed in Beth Anderson's wonderful new book, *Evolution to Excellence – Bethlehem Central School District's First Fifty Years*.

Hannay & Holmes Funeral Home (50 Adams Place). This short-lived venture opened on the corner of Adams Place and Kenwood Avenue in February 1938. Partners Jesse C. Hannay and Dr. Thomas C. Holmes were finished in less than two years, and by the 1940 federal census Pember converted it into a residence for his family. By the early 1950s he sold it back into commercial use and designed a smaller residence on the funeral home's former parking lot on adjacent Kenwood Avenue. This made way for the longtime dentist office of Marvin J. Sagor, whose practice spanned decades on the site. Both houses still exist, and his office is currently for sale (though incorrectly listed as being built in 1915). Own a piece of Bethlehem history!

Normanside Country Club. Pember was one of the founding five "public spirited citizens" that formed a holding company in 1927 to buy 282 acres along the Normans Kill from the Salisbury, Secor and Zimmer families for the town's first 18-hole golf course. It follows, of course, that he'd want a hand in designing the clubhouse, but sadly it burned to the ground in 1960. If you look at the names of those who spearheaded the initiatives above, you'll find them on Normanside member rolls.

While he seemed to have the Midas touch, some of Pember's ideas never came to fruition. As a member of the Citizens Association for Sensible Schools in the early 1950s, he opposed the construction of a new high school on Delaware Avenue and Van Dyke Road, instead proposing additions to the existing facility (now the middle school). He also created a futuristic vision to redevelop the Four Corners that was soundly rejected by town planners, proposing a small arterial of sorts to circumvent its rapidly evolving commercial footprint. It's great fun to imagine how such a scheme would have impacted development in Delmar.

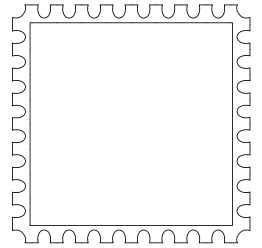
Due to his relatively rapid decline and death a few days before Christmas in 1953, we'll never know what else Walter Pember had in store for Bethlehem, or how his work was impacted by the town's creation of a planning board and ZBA, especially since he also drafted plans for a slew of residential properties (including several on Salisbury Road leading to Normanside). Perhaps this history can be unveiled through successor firms who purchased and archived his creative canon.

Who's up for a research project?



Bethlehem Historical Association

Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum
P.O. Box 263
Selkirk, NY 12158



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The Bethlehem Historical Association

Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum
1003 River Road
P.O. Box 263
Selkirk, NY 12158
(518) 767-9432
bethhist1965@gmail.com
BethlehemHistorical.org

OFFICERS

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Treasurer: Mary Ann Shubert

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Tim Bebee, Karen Beck, Linda Davies, Vicki Folger,
Mary Kelle, Andrew Reilly, John Smolinsky
Ex Officio: Town Historian Bill Ketzer

Newsletter Editors

John Berninger & Susan Leath

*Live for Today Dream for Tomorrow
Learn from Yesterday*

EVENTS Calendar

BHA's Cedar Hill Schoolhouse **Museum** is open Sunday
afternoons from 2 to 4 PM thru October 27.
1003 River Road, Selkirk

Discover what is inside our backyard outbuildings! The
tollgate, carriage house and privy will be open the
following Sundays:

July 14 August 18 September 15 October 20



See inside for info on our **Fall Speaker Series** which begins
September 24.