

Fall/Winter 2015

# The Story Teller

MONTEZUMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MONTEZUMA  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY

PO Box 476  
Montezuma, NY 13117



Historical  
Society to  
Celebrate  
Ten years  
serving the  
community  
and  
preserving  
town history

*2006-2016*

*Special Edition for  
the upcoming  
Anniversary*

*by Cheryl Longyear,  
Town Historian*

In 2016, Montezuma Historical Society (MHS) will celebrate its tenth anniversary. From the beginning, members have been dedicated to supporting, volunteering time and investing funds they raise to preserve and promote the rich history for the Town.

Historic community structures and landscapes are more than just old buildings or a piece of land. They represent the intentions, assumptions, and lives of those who built, lived or worked in them. They have stories to tell about what the community was, and how it became what it is, and helps us understand who we are. Preserving those stories can be an important part of building a healthy community. Historic Preservation is about safeguarding and celebrating the historic elements of the community by maintaining the buildings and other elements that are linked to it.

Preserving historic architecture and the aesthetic character and heritage of the community helps to provide a sense of place and continuity. As suburban sprawl and roadside development make more and more places look the same, it becomes important for communities to keep their identities intact. Even one or two striking historic buildings can help to define a community and hint at its past. If whole neighborhoods or rural areas can be preserved, the effect is that much greater. The sense

of history can contribute to the community's pride, and to a better understanding of the community's present.

MHS was formed in 2006 for the Town of Montezuma after the former Mentz Church building was donated to the Town by the former North Central Methodist Conference.

As a Town Historian, it is my duty to serve the Town as an advocate for historic preservation, to identify historic structures and districts, to help prepare nominations to the State and National Register, to develop and manage historic marker programs and answer questions about the historic significance of places and properties. After the Town acquired the building, I worked with a representative of New York State Office of Historic Preservation to prepare a nomination for the former Mentz Church building located in the Town of Montezuma for the register. It was then that I realized it was my duty as Montezuma historian to the Town to advocate for its protection and preservation. A Preservation Committee was formed consisting of town board members and interested local residents. We began discussing ways to maintain and use the building to offer historic, cultural programs and for use as a chapel for weddings, or other services.

It was out of these discussions that it was decided to form the Montezuma Historical Society chartered by the



Early photo of Mentz Church

New York State Education Department, and formed as a not-for-profit organization (501c3) in 2006. Members are caring citizens that give back to the community what was built by the pioneering citizens first settling here in the late 18th Century. Since our founding, it has fulfilled its mission for the Town by being a steward for the building and to use it as a meeting place for the community to learn about the people and places of the area, and oversee its use as a chapel for wedding services. Volunteers have spent countless hours cleaning, maintaining, and preserving the building and the surrounding cemetery for more than ten years. A Society Building Committee headed by board of trustee members acts as a steward of the building for the Town to regularly check on it, and quickly address any issues that need attention, and report it to the Town Board.

One of the first tasks MHS undertook was to apply for a grant on behalf of the of the Town for a Conditions Report of the former church building funded by the NYS Council of the Arts. Trustee members worked with Ted Bartlett of Crawford & Stearns, Architects and Preservation Planners from Syracuse to prepare the report. The following is a quote from that report by the consultant, Ted Bartlett:

***“It is a true pleasure (and unusual as well) to go take a look at a building for group such as this and find that the building is being extremely well cared for in generally good shape, and that the folks in charge of its stewardship are right on top of all the issues. You should be very proud of your accomplishments and your planning efforts for the future use and care of the building.”***

The building was scraped and painted in 2004, by Butler Correctional facility inmates just prior to the report. The report noted it should continue to be routinely scraped and repainted. Because of the lead in the paint future scraping could not be done by volunteer inmate labor. Ten years later Breen Construction was contracted with to scrap and repaint the church by the Town.

The report set forth recommendations to address the future needs of the building. The Historical Society has made every effort to follow the recommendations and to keep the Town Board informed of any issues that needed to be addressed.

One concern noted in the report was the infestation with honeybees. It was noted in the report that *"eradication of the honeybees is important to achieve."* Mr. Bartlett also indicated that in his experience *"the best tool to get rid of bees after sealing up many of the exterior small openings is tenacity on your part with continued inspections and removal finally overcomes their determination."*



Karen Thomas-Lillie painting interior of Mentz Church

Through donations, membership fees, and fundraising efforts, minor repairs and preservation measures have been undertaken. Countless hours have been given by dedicated volunteers to protect and preserve the building. An inoperable kerosene stove and pipe were removed and replaced with the pew originally in the space. Layers of wallpaper were stripped; walls, floors, ceiling, woodwork and pews were scrubbed and painted. The double front doors that had been removed were replaced with new antique hardware, and a new threshold built. An antique Bradley and Hubbard Chandelier and a Coleman gas light found in the attic were restored and now used. Local volunteer electricians installed a new 100 amp box and the building was rewired. Historical Society member Bob Melvin designed, made and donated a stained glass "Dove of Peace" to replace a front window. Bob also repaired several damaged stain glass panes on the side windows. Through donations received, special plexiglass panels were designed for the windows by Binghamton Glass and installed over the windows for their protection.



Restored Bradley-Hubbard oil Chandelier



Claire Fox traveled from NJ to provide music for dedication of building



Bob Melvin replacing doors



Peter & Michelle Marshall  
Wedding-Sept 15, 2006



***“The cemetery is a phenomenal rural feature of the site. Every effort should be taken for its preservation.”***

—Ted Bartlett, Consultant  
Crawford and Stearns,  
Architects and Preservation  
Planners  
Conditions Report - 2005

Following those recommendations, Cynthia and Walter Aikman, beekeepers, volunteered their services and for two days worked and were overseen by volunteer historical society members at no cost to the town. The clapboards were carefully removed along with the bees from the northeast side of the building. By the following year the bees returned posing again a hazard to the building, workers maintaining the cemetery, and visitors, this time in the front southeast portion of the building. This was reported to the Town Board, and the Board requested that Stan Longyear acquire quotes for the Town to consider removing the bees.

Mr Bartlett is quoted here as saying:  
***The cemetery is a phenomenal rural feature of the site. Every effort should be taken for its preservation.***

The graveyard was established before the church was built. A cemetery association had helped to maintain it and later a Mentz Fidelius church group took over supporting it with funds, but the group eventually could no longer continue. Lester Ohara grew up across the street from the cemetery and was raised going to the church. For years he contributed his time to doing what he could to maintain the church and cemetery. Cemeteries no longer supported by associations eventually become the Town’s responsibility according to State law for upkeep and maintenance including any fence that surrounds it.

In 2005, a roof leak between the church and foyer roof line was discovered. Don Helmer, a local roofer volunteered his services to caulk around the leak. He also replaced some missing shingles and put a cap on the chimney. Don recommended replacing the roof soon. In 2009, the Town funded removing the existing shingles and replacing the roof. The job was contracted by Helmer Construction, thereby investing the funds back into the community with a local contractor.

To honor the cemetery and church’s place in history the William G. Pomeroy Foundation funded the historical society with a historic roadside marker for the Town. Gary Bell traveled once again from Michigan to be at this dedication and shared what it meant to him and his family that the church and cemetery were preserving the legacy his forebears had left for the community.

The founding church members came to this country in search of religious freedom. They found it in the countryside of Montezuma, and proudly built their homes, school and church to worship and as a place to raise their families with their new-found freedom. We often take this freedom for granted, but we enjoy the benefits of it ever single day, and it should not be forgotten. It is in honor of their dedication that we preserve what remains of their legacy to us.

It has been a real joy to reconnect with so many descendants of the early settlers over the last ten years. The historical society has hosted on different occasions reunions of Bell, Gilmore, and Chappel families who have visited from all over the country, and who continue to support our efforts through their memberships and donations.

I have been asked what does the historical society do with the money they make from bake sales and other fundraisers. We would be glad to open the church building at any time for a tour. We have scrapbooks full of before and after pictures to show what we’ve invested in with both volunteer labor and money.

In addition to the improvements to the building mentioned above, we use funds raised to offer public programs to provide entertainment and educate about local history. Programs that have been offered to the public include: Civil War Connections talk about local involvement in the war presented by John Lamphere; a one-room school house program highlighted seven early Montezuma schools houses.



Arts & Craft Show showing the art of weaving 2008 - Mentz Church



Savannah Historian, John Spellman portrayed the doctor who delivered Lucille Hitchcock in Montezuma in 1915.

*Happy 100th Birthday, Lucille!*



Rev. Marty Robson portraying hymn songwriter, Fannie Crosby

A talk on gravestone art was given by Owasco Historian, Laurel Auchampaugh; arts and crafts and several quilt shows were held at the church, scanning family and historic photographs; presentations on genealogy and preserving family stories. The Finger Lakes Antique Tractor held a countryside ride to highlight the history of farming in our community.

Savannah Historian, John Spellman, portrayed Dr. William Sweeting, a local physician who served Savannah and Montezuma. Dr. Sweeting traveled by trolley to Stop 71 to deliver Lucille Hitchcock on December 4, 1905. Lucille, an MHS member, will celebrate her 100th birthday next month.

Talks were given by local historical fiction authors, Peg Smart and Mary Ann Johnson's granddaughter. A historic-based fictional play written by Mary Riley was performed. Don Quant gave a talk on canal boats; a collaborative meeting with Weedsport, Port Byron Montezuma historical societies, historians and teachers was held to explore common threads of early canal history and how we might work together to promote it; special community events were sponsored providing entertainment by; Merry Mischief and the Muckland Crooners.

In 2008, County historical programs were promoted called, "History in Your Backyard." MHS hosted a 185th anniversary program for the Mentz Church. CCC History Professor Ron Grube portrayed one of the first ministers of the church, Rev. Seth Matheson from Weedsport.

Several picnic lunches and ice cream socials and waffles were served over the years following other programs at the church. In 2009, MHS sponsored an archaeological dig in Heritage Park; held a dedication of the Byron Lapp Memorial Trail; and a special Appreciation Day presented the town with plaque for the many funders and contributions to Montezuma Heritage Park.

As mentioned, the cemetery and surrounding fence by law became the responsibility of the Town.

The fence that surrounded the church has become broken and in disrepair. The Town Board has discussed replacing it on several occasions. Paul Baker, historical society member decided to assist the Town by requesting donations to replace the fence. To date, he has raised over \$3500 donated for the Town to do the project. The estimated cost for a wooden fence is \$5600, and Paul asked the Town contribute to help fund the project. Any money that the Town may decide to allow for this project is NOT being given to the Historical Society as was recently misinterpreted in an article in the Citizen. Nor was it mentioned in the article of the generous donations received for this project to date. This is not a project for the benefit of Historical Society. Paul merely offered to help raise funds for the town, and MHS manage it as a not-for-profit to accept donations. It is a project for a town-owned cemetery property, and as such is a legal responsibility of the Town.

Clearly, by the generous donations received for the Town from many former and current residents, the project is seen as worthy and one the donors wanted to financially help the Town with and see completed. In addition to the donations made, I offered to write a grant proposal due next March to help with the project.

It's heartwarming to know there are so many people who care about how our community looks, and want to respect our pioneers' graveyards with proper upkeep. Thank you to the donors who are making this project possible. Your donation contributes to the pride we can have in taking care of our surroundings.

The historical society will donate a plaque with the names of contributors when the project is completed.

“Investments in canal infrastructure and heritage are enlivening communities from Albany to Buffalo. The economic development potential of the canal and related waterways is driving investments in communities large and small... the Erie Canal is an integral component of upstate New York’s transportation and tourism infrastructure that has delivered on its promise for nearly 200 years. That promise still exists—albeit in different ways—and New Yorkers would be wise to capitalize on it today.”

Bob Radliff  
Executive Director,  
Erie Canalway National  
Heritage Corridor



MHS has hosted a Historic Walking Tour led yearly by Mike Riley since 2006.

In this day and age, Town officials face tough decisions on how to spend tax-payers’ dollars. Costs for everything have more than quadrupled, yet they are expected to not raise taxes. By the recent election ballot it’s not hard to see that no one wants the job. Preservation of community resources is not an easy decision, but neither is it a waste of money. This is why MHS works so hard to help out. It’s an investment in the community’s future. We appreciate those who have shown their support in many ways.

Another important piece of early Montezuma history is of course the Erie and Cayuga-Seneca Canals that the Town was built around. What remains of this early transportation system not only connects to our local history, but was an important contribution to the development of this country.

The property that contains these resources was also recognized by being placed on the National Register, known as the ***Seneca River Crossing Canals Historic District*** in 2005. The district was recognized for including remnants of the original Erie Canal, built between 1817 and 1825, including Lock #62; more than a mile of the Enlarged Erie Canal prism built here between 1849 and 1857; towpath and heelpath; a drydock; the remains of the Richmond Aqueduct crossing the Seneca River; and piers of the original mule bridge from that era; and a culvert that carries a stream beneath the Enlarged Erie Canal.

This too, was criticized in the recent Citizen article as being defined as a park. Again, the facts were misinterpreted. In 1965, the town was awarded funding to purchase seven parcels (136 Acres) of property for preservation, conservation and recreational public use as historic ***“parkland.”*** By definition, parkland is a wilderness area, a protected area, or nature reserve, and further defined by how it is used.

In 2010, the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation approved to help fund a Planning Project to develop the parkland for recreational use. Community members were repeatedly invited to participate in the planning meetings and public presentations. The plan ideas may be seen at the Town Hall. Even this funding has been perceived, as using taxpayers dollars, but if we don’t apply for it, it will go to some other municipality, probably down state. Why shouldn’t we have our share of the pie to benefit this region?

In the meantime, the historical society formed a sub-group, the Friends of the Montezuma Park consisting of volunteers who have worked to develop and maintain over five miles of trails in the Park. Small local grants, donations and volunteer efforts have funded and built two kiosks with maps, thirteen benches, a look out deck, trail and road signs, duck and bird houses, and interpretive signage for the historic resources that tell the amazing story this important property holds.

Historic walking tours are offered yearly in the park led by Canal historian, Mike Riley. Mike has helped us to learn about the amazing story of how the canals were built and developed the town.

The importance of community art is seen as a way to preserve the heritage of a community. One of the projects we are most proud to have given the community was the historic mural that marks the significant site where the Erie Canal joined the Cayuga-Seneca Canal and the Exchange Hotel provided travelers a place to stay, eat and care for the mules and horses that pulled the boats. The building and the canals are long gone, but the beautiful mural painted by mural artist Dawn Jordan reveals how the town looked at the turn of 19th Century.

MHS was assisted in funding this project by the Cayuga Community Foundation. Through the generous donation of A-Verdi, the container



Historic Mural by Dawn Jordan gifted to the Town of Montezuma by MHS in 2011



Over 600 bicyclists came through Montezuma in July 2015 on their way from Buffalo to Albany, ages 91 to 2 years old. MHS volunteers were there to greet them with water, coffee, snacks, and postcards to mail home.



Zach Reckio & Kourtney Verdi  
2014 Scholarship Winners

Four student scholarships have been given to help with the 5K race and build leadership skills

building was donated for the mural. Future plans will include this mural on a canal boat depicting “The Montezuma,” one of the first boats built here by Comfort Tyler, that traveled the canal.

Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, Parks and Trails, NY and the NYS Canal Corporation have recognized MHS as playing an important part in contributing to the promotion as a Point of Interest along the Corridor. MHS has received technical support and funding for the town that included training to build two websites — one for MHS and with this training one was built for the Town. Funding was also received for a strategic plan, brochure, and events to promote our area and the Corridor.

The across-state Erie Canal Trailway is already bringing economic, public health, tourism, and quality of life benefits to the more than one million New Yorkers living in upstate Canal communities and to the countless visitors that use the Canalway Trail each year. We will miss out on this tremendous opportunity if we are not prepared to be a part of the growing activity along the canal corridor. A 2014 report found that the state-wide trail generates \$253 million in economic activity annually from 1.6 million users each year. It is becoming enormously popular and a major economic driver for the communities it winds through. In 2010, 2.4 million pedestrians and bicyclists traveled along the 270 miles of existing trail segments. Once finished, the Erie Canalway Trail will be a premiere tourist destination for cyclists and outdoor enthusiasts and will be the longest, continuous intrastate multi-use trail in the nation, attracting an annual 700,000 users.

Montezuma is very fortunate to have the historic and natural resources to be able to take advantage of this opportunity. No where else along the corridor is there one site that tells such a unique and complete story of the New York State Canal System. Without the “parkland,” we would just be passed on by.

MHS has recognized the potential the state-wide trail offers, and has helped for several years with the annual week-long Erie Canal Bike Tour. This year over 600 bicyclists from ages 91 to 2 years old were on the tour traveling from Buffalo to Albany. Volunteer members were set up and ready for them at 7 AM to provide water, coffee and snacks for those who needed to take a break. They were extremely interested in the Town’s history, and several took side trips to visit the aqueduct. For a \$1 they could buy a postcard to send home, and we provided the postage and mailed their cards.

All of this is laying a foundation to promote the area for local business to see the potential here to locate. The Marina has already been purchased, and the new owners are looking forward to benefitting from the renewed recreational interest both on the river and connecting to trails the “parkland” offers.

The Aqueduct 5K Run is another undertaking that MHS has assisted so that sponsors and donators may use it as a tax deduction. Proceeds from the 5K are being invested into the Park to further improve the trails and fund projects as we can undertake them. In 2014, \$715.00 was invested in the trail at the Route 31 end to eliminate runoff problems. In 2015, \$621.50 was invested in cutting back encroaching growth to widen trails and improve visibility. As new projects are developed further investments will be made using these funds that are being saved for that purpose.

Another important part of having a community event like this has been the involvement of students. Two students have been given scholarships each year to work with the planning committee. They in turn have involved their classmates in helping out on race day. Involving youth in outdoor nature activities and building leadership skills is also an investment in the future.



Canal Clean Sweep - 2011...help teaching youth the importance of taking care of our environment.

We must do more than talk about the importance of nature; we must ensure that the children in every neighborhood have everyday access to natural space, places and experiences. To make that happen, the truth must become evident: we can truly care for nature and ourselves only if we see ourselves and nature inseparable, only if we love ourselves as part of nature, only if we believe our children have the right to the gifts of nature undestroyed.

Thomas Berry, author of the Great Work

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

—Margaret Mead

Each year our volunteers have joined the State-wide clean up effort in the Park for Canal Clean Sweep. MHS organizes this event and has involved Scouts and other youth groups in joining our efforts. These youth are learning to respect nature, and feel proud when they help to keep parks and public spaces clean.

So, when I get asked what have we done and where does the money go we raise with the 5K proceeds and bake sales, I hope this helps to answer these questions. What haven't we done — from feeding volunteers, from scrubbing



One of 13 memorial benches made and installed by volunteers in Heritage Park in memory of loved ones.

artifacts with toothbrushes, to down on our knees picking up broken glass, from up on ladders scrubbing and painting walls and ceilings, to forging new trails. We continue to do it in spite of doubters that think preservation is a waste and our heritage doesn't matter, We do it, because we believe in our hearts it's important to the future of our community, it respects nature, our pioneers who paved the way for us, and leaves a legacy for future generations.

I'm so grateful for the wonderful volunteers that are making a difference in our community. Some days its like building the canal — the naysayers, too, said it was a waste of money, and never could be done, but they persevered, dug a ditch that forever changed our nation. This investment of hours of volunteer time for the Town needs to be counted as a tremendous asset to the town.

I've held onto to a dream with this quote on the left by Margaret Mead to honor all the work of those individuals who have invested in the community.

So what are we looking forward to next year and beyond in addition to our regular programs?

Plans are being made for a movie night in collaboration with Lock 52 Historical Society and the Port Byron Library. The movie stars one of our residents, Steve Wunder, who made his career on the canal. This documentary film chronicles the economic cycles and the American Dream in ***"Boom or Bust, America's Journey on the Erie Canal."***

The New York State Canal Society will be holding its 2016 conference in Auburn, October 6-8, and plans are being made to visit the new Port Byron Erie Canal Heritage Park and tour Montezuma Heritage Park.

The 2016 Mural Global Conference will be held in Fairport, September 18-25. Visitors will be touring mural sites all along the canal in NYS, including ours.

Montezuma "wheat" or flag, better known as cattails was an important industry in Montezuma. Cattails are a naturally grown versatile plant with many uses. The Montezuma Fibre Mill located along the Enlarged Erie Canal produced a cardboard like paper from



Montezuma Fibre Company

thousands of acres flag in the marshes. We will be looking to develop a program with Wells College students on making paper using cattails that will highlight this ancient art and the history of this industry in our community.

And, looking ahead to 2017, we will celebrate the building of the Erie Canal with the World Canal Conference in Syracuse, NY. More will be planned as the coming year unfolds, and we look forward to serving the community.

**Meetings:**

Programs are offered at the Historic Mentz Church or at other posted locations.

Monthly board meetings are held on the second Thursday of each month at 1:30 PM at the Historic Mentz Church (May-September) and the Montezuma Town Hall (October-April). All members and guests are invited to attend.

**Board Members**

- Mellony Carner, Pres.
  - Barbara Black, V. Pres
  - Kathleen Decker, Treasurer
  - Jim Decker
  - Shirley Gillmore
  - Cynthia Laraway
  - Edward Laraway
  - Stanley Longyear
  - Robert Melvin
- Secretary/Newsletter Editor  
Cheryl Longyear  
Town Historian

Please take a moment to join for the 2016 year, and help us continue to support the town in preserving and protecting the heritage of our community.

**2016 MEMBERSHIP FORM**

Name (s): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

*Our mailing and printing costs keep increasing. Newsletters can now be received via email and posted on our website. We would appreciate adding \$2 to your dues if you would like a copy mailed.*  
*\_\_\_ Yes, please mail the newsletter.*

General Membership Categories:

- \$10 Individual
- \$25 Business Basic
- \$15 Family
- \$50 Business Supporter
- \$50 Supporter
- Other Donation

**Please make check payable to:  
Montezuma Historical Society  
PO Box 476  
Montezuma, NY 13117**

Yes, I'm interested in Volunteer Opportunities with MHS;  
please contact me!

*The Montezuma Historical Society is a Private 501(c)(3) organization, and your donations and contributions are tax deductible. Thank you for your support!*

The Story  
Teller

**MONTEZUMA  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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Montezuma Heritage Park