

Historical Society of St. Catharines

NEWSLETTER

JUNE 1993

P. O. Box 1101, St. Catharines, Ontario L2R 7A3

Editor: Dennis Gannon

THE MERRITT BICENTENNIAL



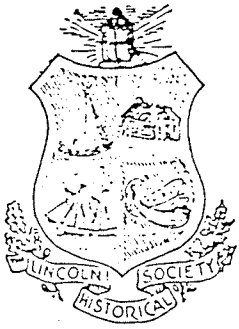
**William Hamilton Merritt
(1793-1862)**

It was astonishing to learn we are nearing the 200 anniversary of the birth of . . . William Hamilton Merritt! How is it that such a significant event in the history of St. Catharines has not been more widely remarked and planned for? What would this city be if there had been no William Hamilton Merritt? It might be a slight exaggeration to suggest that Paul Shipman's tavern would still be standing and would be the main attraction in our tiny village of Shipman's Corners . . . No, we would **not** have remained frozen at our stage of development in the mid-1820s, but our town would surely have been different than the one we know today. We can reasonably assume that **SOMEONE, SOMEDAY** would have built a canal to bypass Niagara Falls, linking lakes Erie and Ontario . . . but without the peculiar genius and drive of Merritt, **WHEN** would that have taken place . . . and **WHERE?** The canal could just as well have descended the escarpment at

some place much farther west -- perhaps along the Grand River and then overland to reach Lake Ontario near Hamilton. But Merritt **DID** live and history **WAS** written differently as a result. (Those considerations only take the measure of Merritt the entrepreneur -- they ignore his role as a hero in the war of 1812 and as a statesman who represented this area in the Upper Canada assembly, 1832-1860.)

Plans are now being made for a proper celebration of the birth of Merritt. Included will be the following **two events on July 3:**

1:00 p.m.: a wreath laying ceremony at the Merritt Statue, St. Paul and McGuire streets (across from CKTB Radio). Wreaths will be placed at the base of the statue by representatives of this Society, the St. Catharines Museum, the Canadian Canal Society, and members of the Merritt family.



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dignitaries. The Society's President reviewed the life and achievements of Dr. Oille and then introduced two honoured guests: our potter for the day, Leslie "Bud" Oille, and our assistant potter, Malcolm Campbell, likewise a descendent of the Oille family. This year we were able to add a new element to the ceremony: the reading of a poem about Dr. Oille and his fountain that John Jackson and Sheila Wilson gave us on page 156 of their St. Catharines: Canada's Canal City. A good time was had by all!

Thanks are owed to Linda Smith and Bob Kennedy of the city's Parks and Recreation Department for arranging for some soil to be put into the pot on top of the fountain (we tried doing the potting ceremony last year **without** having any top soil up there and found it did not work out well in the long run). IF the geranium survives until autumn to lend a splash of red to that corner of downtown we can thank Wayne Bailey, the gardener who makes City Hall and vicinity so beautiful. Thanks to all our you -- our potters, our helpers at Parks and Recreation, and the Society members who joined us in the ceremony! (And let's not forget McNamara and Reynolds Paints, who, as always, supplied us with the all-important ladder!)

OUR APRIL 1 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING:

April 1 saw the Society's Annual General Meeting. The fifty persons in attendance were treated to a talk about "Growing up Downtown" delivered by popular cable channel 10 TV talk show host Barbara Gosen. Barbara started right off by correcting our publicity person who had described her talk as "Growing up **Downtown**". "WE never would have talked about our neighbourhood as being "downtown" -- we were "UPtown!" said Barbara. She then went on to regale us with stories about the beginning of her own stage career at age 4 at the former Griffin Theatre on St. Paul Street, . . . the daily trek of one neighbourhood resident walking his cow across the old canal to graze where the St. Catharines Country Club now stands . . . her parents' warnings to stay away from the St. Paul Street fire hall and the blacksmith's shop . . . and much more.

One index of the audience's reaction to Barbara's talk came after the meeting was adjourned: along with the many Society members who came forward to renew their memberships there were five or six people entirely new to the Society who stepped forward to join up. In a thank you note to Ms. Gosen a few days later the Society's President told her about those new members and said that when they signed up they were saying, in effect: "Hey, if that's the kind of presentation that the Society regularly makes, then I want to become a member!" Many thanks to Barbara for a delightful presentation!

So much for the fun part of the evening. There was also the business of choosing the Society's executive for the next year and its president for the next two years. The

members present accepted the slate of candidates as drawn up by Past President Al Holden, who had been pressed into service as a one man nomination committee.

These are the members of the Historical Society executive for 1993-1994:

President: Dennis Gannon
Past President : John Burtniak
Vice-President: Wes Turner
Secretary: Dee Dickman
Treasurer: Avril Brass
Councillors: Cliff Baker, Doris Bates, Gail Benjafield, Elizabeth Finnie, Sam Heaman, Donna Murphy, Lorna Robson.

EXECUTIVE MEETINGS:

On May 8th, right after the Oille Potting Ceremony, the new Executive held its first meeting, followed by a second one on June 3rd. Here are some of the items dealt with at those meetings:

1. In response to a new presentation by the Opera House Book Steering Committee, the Society's Executive passed the following motion at its June 3rd meeting:

The Society approve in principle Phase 1 of the project to research the Grand Opera House and , further, that a committee composed of a representative of The Society and a representative of the Opera House Committee will draw up terms of reference defining The Society's involvement and to further define the project."

The committee to draw up the terms of reference has already met once and has made good progress in its task. The scope of this undertaking is summarized in the opening paragraph of the draft terms of reference:

"The Committee of the Historical Society will undertake and manage a **research project on the origins and history of the Grand Opera House and its role in the life of the community**, with the aim of preparing a reproducible research report by September 1994."

Our involvement with this project will NOT involve any financial commitment by the Society.

2. The Society's President has proposed that the Society **publish a 1994 St. Catharines historical calendar**. Our initial attempt at such a project would be kept simple: 13 historic photos of St. Catharines (one for the cover, and one for each month), limited text accompanying the photos, and a printing of only 250 copies. Cost: approximately \$1500. Problem: how the Society with its small bank account (see below, item 5) could possibly afford such an undertaking. It could not possibly loan more than \$500 to this project, and that with the understanding that the first monies recouped from calendar sales would be used to repay that loan. The balance of the necessary funds would have to be raised elsewhere, perhaps from **loans** by interested members of the Society. **No decision has yet been made about this proposal, which has been only briefly discussed thus far.**
3. The Executive has **drawn up a list of proposed speakers for the 1993-1994 speakers series**, and has also decided to lengthen that series by TWO months. For the 1993-1994 programme year we will be presenting EIGHT speakers, from October to MAY, INCLUDING January. Our meetings will still take place in the St. Catharines Public Library at 7:30 p.m. on the first Thursday of the month.
4. **Membership report:** as we go to press [June 15th] the Society has 58 paid up members as compared with only 38 as recently as our February 1993 meeting. **We're growing!**
5. **Financial report:** we have approximately \$1300 in our bank account.

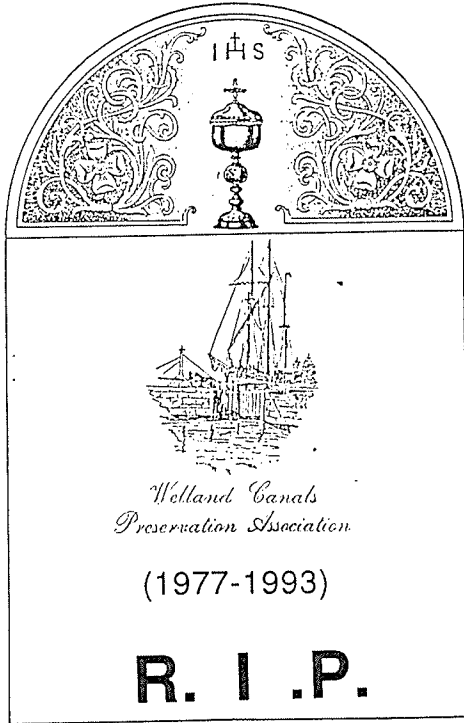
1993-1994 SPEAKERS SERIES:

It would be premature to publish our entire list of 1993-1994 speakers now -- we're still awaiting confirmation from most of them. See the September issue of the *Newsletter* for final details. However, we can announce the speaker and subject for our first meeting of the 1993-1994 season:

Thursday, October 7, 1993:

Janis Barlow, restoration architect, will talk to us about "The Grand Opera House and Its Place in the Cultural Life of St. Catharines."

Ms. Barlow's reputation in the Heritage and theatre communities in Ontario and her credits in recent years for restoring the Elgin and Winter Garden theatres in Toronto suggest that October 7 will be a rich evening for our audience.



**OPINION: THE WEL-
LAND CANALS PRESERVA-
TION ASSOCIATION: MAY
WE NOT REST IN PEACE!**

Another heritage organization has finally succumbed to the lingering effects of neglect. In its youth, the Welland Canals Preservation Association (1977-1993) constructed miles of bicycle and walking trails along the old Welland Canals and was focus for the promotion of canal related heritage issues. We are sad to inform you that the W.C.P.A. was laid to rest on May 11th at a meeting in the Cellar Bench Restaurant, with six mourners in attendance.

This appears to be a normal life span for heritage activities in St. Catharines. In 1985 the Historical Society of St. Catharines published Rob Taylor's book Our Great Age of Destruction describing some of the fine buildings lost in the name of progress and development and pleading for the conservation of our built environment; one shudders to think how large a second edition of that book would be! At about the same time, Heritage St. Catharines, which had worked so hard and done so much, faded. Where were they when the Locktender's House on Glendale Avenue was replaced by Jumbo Video? Did anyone notice when the St. Catharines Historical Museum dropped the word "Historical" from its name and became simply the St. Catharines Museum? Why did we only gather for the Opera House when it was time to mourn its passing? Where are those who will speak on behalf of the Russell Hotel or the Welland House or the Y.M.C.A. or the Merritton Library? Or will we only notice when they, too, are gone?

If we care about what little is left of our past, it is time for those interested in heritage to begin working together to more actively preserve it. Could the Historical Society of St. Catharines serve this role?

Dee Dickman

UPCOMING HERITAGE EVENTS

June 19 (Saturday), 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Welland:

A workshop on "Ontario's Industrial Heritage", exploring the past, present and future of our industrial heritage, co-sponsored by the Ontario Historical Society and the Welland Historical Museum. At the Welland Historical Museum, 65 Hooker Street, Welland. \$30 for OHS members, \$40 for non-members. Further details: Welland Museum (416/732-2215); the OHS/Toronto (416/226-9011).

June 19 (Saturday), 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Niagara-on-the-Lake:

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Garden Tour -- yes, gardens (10), but also a nice chance for an up-close view of the Heritage homes many of them surround. A fund raiser for a good cause, the Niagara-on-the-Lake Conservancy. Tickets: \$10. Call 468-5519 for further details.

June 20 (Sunday), 10:30 a.m., Beaverdams/Thorold:

Annual church service and celebration commemorating the 1813 Battle of Beaver Dams, with a display on local and church history (at the Beaverdams Church, Thorold). (Further information: Esther Summers, 892-3418.)

June 21 (Monday), 6:30 p.m., Thorold:

John Theisen of Thorold LACAC will give an illustrated talk about the 1813 battle of Beaver Dams at the annual Thorold and Beaverdams Historical Society pie social (at Chestnut Hall, Vine and Ormond Streets, in Thorold). Free -- everyone welcome!

July 3 (Saturday), 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m.:

Events commemorating the 200th anniversary of the birth of William Hamilton Merritt. (For details, see above, pages 1 and 2.)

July 9-11 (Friday-Sunday), Niagara-on-the-Lake:

N-O-T-L celebrates the bicentennial of the Emancipation Act (see next page for details).

July 10 (Saturday), 4:00 p.m.:

The unveiling of the Harriet Tubman plaque in its permanent location at the B.M.E. Church, 92 Geneva St., St. Catharines, to be followed by a dinner at 8:00 p.m. at St. Paul United Church. Everyone is welcome. (Further details from Mrs. Helen Smith, 934-4175).



July 11 (Sunday), 6:00 p.m., Niagara Falls:

John Burtiak leads a walking tour of old Drummondville in Niagara Falls. Meet at the Lundy's Lane Museum, 5810 Ferry St. in Niagara Falls 6:00 pm. (Free.)

July 25 (Sunday), 12 noon, Niagara Falls:

Commemoration of the Battle of Lundy's Lane, at the Lundy's Lane Cemetery, Niagara Falls. There will be wreath layings by groups from both Canada and the United States in honour of those who fell in that pivotal battle in the war of 1812.

Aug. 7-8 (Saturday-Sunday), 10:00 a.m. to 5 p.m.:

A craft, chopping and grist show at Morningstar Mill on DeCew Road, St. Catharines. (For further information, call Gary Konkle at 384-2530.)

Sept. 4-6 (Labour Day Weekend), Wainfleet Village, (9:30-5:30 Sat. and Mon., 12:30-5:30 Sunday):

The Marshville Heritage Festival, Wainfleet Village; perhaps the most popular heritage event in the Niagara Peninsula: an art and craft show along with all manner of historical demonstrations taking place in and around a cluster of restored 19th century buildings. A special feature this year: a town criers' competition. Admission: \$4, children under 12 free. (For further information call 416/899-3646.)

September 19 (Sunday), 2:00 p.m.:

Annual fall St. Catharines LACAC walking tour, with Luigi Marcantonio leading a walk along Welland Avenue and the Queen Street Heritage District. Free -- everyone welcome! (Further details: call Dennis Gannon at 682-6053.)

Sept. 25 (Saturday), 10:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m., Simcoe, Ontario:

The annual Norfolklore Genealogy Fair, Eva Brook Donly Museum, Simcoe. Cost: \$4.00.

Sept. 25-26 (Saturday-Sunday), Brock University:

All day: The fifteenth annual Brock History Conference. Subject: "The Niagara Peninsula and Lake Ontario" -- conference papers given on Saturday, and a field trip on Sunday. For further information, call John Burtniak, 688-5550, x3264).

Oct. 7 (Thursday), 7:30 p.m., Centennial Library:

Janis Barlow speaks to the Historical Society about St. Catharines' former Grand Opera House and its place in our cultural life in the late 19th century.

N-O-T-L BICENTENNIAL, PART IV: THE BICENTENNIAL OF THE EMANCIPATION ACT:

The very enlightening series of celebrations of events during the "Capital Years" of Niagara-on-the-Lake, 1792-1796, ends on July 9-11 with a celebration of the bicentennial of the Emancipation Act of 1793.

Would it be hyperbole to call that Act one of the landmarks of western civilization? I don't think so. In 1793, just 20 miles or so from where you sit reading these words, the Upper Canada Legislature under the leadership of Governor John Graves Simcoe enacted legislation that foresaw the end of slavery in their lifetimes. That was 70 years before Lincoln emancipated the American slaves in 1863 or Czar Alexander emancipated the Russian serfs in 1861, and was fully 40 years before the British emancipated the slaves throughout the British Empire.

CELEBRATION OF
EMANCIPATION ACT



Niagara-on-the-Lake
Ontario, Canada

The three days of commemorative events will include the following:

Friday, July 9, 2-4:00 p.m., Simcoe Park:

a commemoration and partial re-enactment of the legislative debates about the anti-slavery legislation.

Saturday, July 10, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Navy Hall:

a day-long lecture series on "The Simcoe Legacy: His Legislative Agenda", sponsored by the Ontario Historical Society. One or more presentations will focus on the anti-slavery legislation. Registration fee (all sessions, lunch, and a kit of resource materials): \$25 for members of the Ontario Historical Society, the Ontario Black History Society, and the Friends of Fort George, \$40 for non-members. Registration deadline: Wednesday, June 30. Call Lorraine Lowry (O.H.S. in Toronto) at 416/226-9011.

Sunday July 11th, 2-4 p.m., Simcoe Park:

a Black revival service and gospel choir singing in honour of emancipation.

On all three days there also will be a black history exhibit at the Platoff Street Community Centre.

POOLE: "A TINKLE OF GLASS" (RESPONSES)

The Newsletter has gotten two responses to Sheila Wilson's March 1993 article about the destruction of the legacy of photographer Edwin Poole. Corlene Taylor sent in a page of interesting information about Poole and his family, including mention of a Standard article dated January 15, 1920, that reported on the donation of Poole's negatives to the St. Catharines Library and also noted that the Poole gift included the negatives of other photographers, including J.T. See (active here ca1870-1878) and George F. Maitland (active here ca1868-1874). Corlene suspects that the destruction of Poole's glass plate negatives probably took place while they were stored in Rodman Hall, during the time that the Society stored its artifacts and records there.



Edwin Poole

Another local researcher found the following paragraph in the 1929 Annual Report of the Lincoln Historical Society, forerunner of our Society:

We have listed **892** of the negatives from the collection from Mr. E. Poole's studio. These comprise buildings, general views, vessels, waterways, official and society groups, personal portraits and miscellaneous subjects. . . .

Eight-hundred ninety two glass plate photos of St. Catharines, 1870 to 1920 . . . all destroyed in that "tinkle of glass" . . . I feel ill . . .

DR. BONKALO REPLIES:

At our February meeting Peggy Willis noted the passing of the wife of Dr. Ervin Bonkalo, who had served the Society as curator of artifacts back in the 1960s, before the artifacts were taken over by the new St. Catharines Historical Museum. She urged that the Society write him a letter of condolence. We did so, and in late March we received a reply, excerpts of which follow (emphasis added):

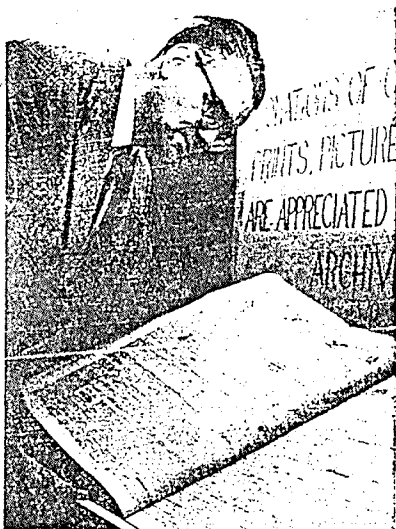
Thank you so much for your condolence: what touched me deeply, is that there are some Historical Society members who remember me: after 30 years!

Despite the difficulties we as "New Canadians" had during the first ten years or so and even so, I 'reached the top' in my teaching profession: 'High School Specialist,' department head and senior lecturer at the Faculty of Education of Lakehead University in Thunder Bay until retirement in 1982: my happiest time was in St. Catharines in the circle of Historical Society members, trying to preserve the present for the future.

About 15 years ago I visited friends in St. Catharines, have seen the Museum and got acquainted with Mr. [Phair]. . . . At 77 I am active in the field of cultural history. Research, publish and give talks at conferences. . . .

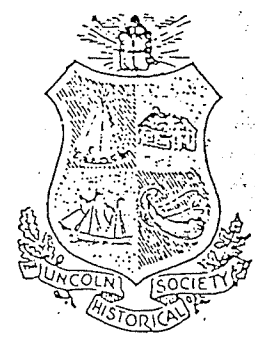
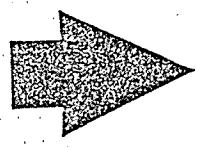
Would somebody make me happy writing me?

Dr. Bonkalo was obviously moved to hear from the Society -- "after thirty years", as he put it -- and would love to hear from Society members and other persons whom he may have known during his time in St. Catharines. His address is **257 Autumnwood Crescent, Sudbury, Ont., P3B 3Z5.**



Dr. Bonkalo examines 1866 area newspaper

The Historical Society's President has sent Dr. Bonkalo a letter updating him on recent heritage developments in St. Catharines and enclosing copies of the Society's newsletter as well as the Downtowner, which also regularly prints articles relating to Heritage. Dr. Bonkalo should be happy to learn that Heritage is still alive and well in St. Catharines as we build on the legacy that he carefully tended for us some thirty years ago.



Historical Society of St. Catharines



Historical Society of St. Catharines
NEWSLETTER
 WINTER-SPRING HISTORICAL SOCIETY EVENTS
 Feb. 5, 1988 (Thursday, 7 P.M.) - *Genealogy Lecture*
 This month we have a special treat for those who are interested in their family history. Please remember that the more you know about your family, the more you know about the history of the area. The speaker will discuss the importance of genealogy and how to use the resources available to you. The lecture will be held at the St. Catharines Public Library, 1000 Lakeshore Blvd. West, St. Catharines, Ontario L2R 7A3. Tickets are \$5.00. Reservations are required. Call 427-1111 for more information.

March 5, 1988 (Thursday, 7 P.M.) - *Genealogy Lecture*
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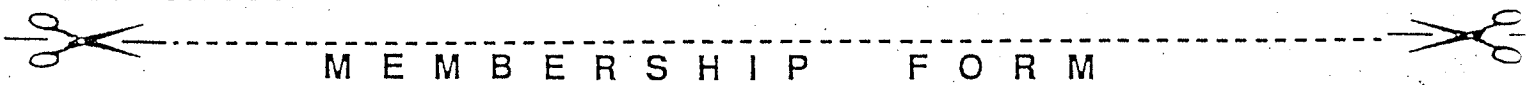
April 5, 1988 (Thursday, 7 P.M.) - *Genealogy Lecture*
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SOLUTION:

IF YOU GIVE US \$6 A YEAR AND BECOME A MEMBER OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF ST. CATHARINES, WE CAN CONTINUE PRESENTING SPEAKERS AND SPECIAL EVENTS ABOUT OUR LOCAL HERITAGE.

READ ON . . .



M E M B E R S H I P F O R M

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

TELEPHONE NUMBER: _____

Please fill out this form, enclose a check or money order for \$6 (made out to the Historical Society of St. Catharines) and mail them to: Historical Society of St. Catharines, P.O. Box 1101, St. Catharines, Ontario L2R 7A3.