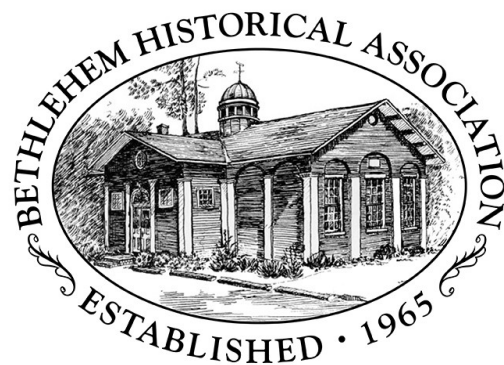


Bethlehem Historical Association

NEWSLETTER

Fall 2020



Farewell to the Diner on Route Niner *Johnny B's and the End of a Long Era*

By Bill Ketzer

When our boys were toddlers, there were few restaurants that would happily tolerate the hard wake of egg yolk, ketchup and jelly we would leave from entrance to exit when we visited. Our oldest was prone to tantrums and the other was simply bombastic in his zeal for food – even though he freely distributed most of it anywhere but into his mouth. We had them late in life and were woefully unprepared for the moxie required to get them through each day. Even the most basic act of parenting young boys – preventing them from accidentally killing themselves, essentially – was exhausting.

Mercifully, there was Johnny B's Glenmont Diner. John Behiri's Mid-Century roadside eatery is hard to miss on the 9W corridor into Bethlehem from Albany's South End, where it has stood since 1962. There, we were welcomed by the owner and his family with huge smiles, open arms and *lots* of chocolate-chip pancakes. He'd scoop up the lads and let them grab his nose as he bounced them on his knee, demanding they tell him everything. It was like Christmas every weekend. Waitresses laughed and swooned and coddled, making sure there were cupcakes for every birthday, and John's father Nick would always be there with lollipops at checkout. Best of all was Johnny's golden rule of "No crying at Johnny B's," which was, to our amazement, steadfastly obeyed.



Miss Glenmont, 1950s. Prior to purchase of Silk City diner.

friends we made along the way. Almost 16 years."

For us, Behiri's decision to sell the diner hurt even more because we loved how he honored the diner's legacy, and his passion for keeping it alive into the 21st Century was obvious, from the vinyl 45s on the walls to his keen interest in the history of the place. He was always glad to share his knowledge of the diner's humble beginnings.



John "Johnny B" Behiri, July 2020

These memories are still fresh in mind but suddenly became bittersweet this spring, when Behiri announced that Johnny B's would be closing its doors for good. The COVID-19 pandemic hit many local businesses hard, and the popular diner was no exception.

"We had some very costly, unforeseen expenses in 2019, and we were only serving breakfast and lunch with 12 tables, six days a week," Behiri explained. "Being forced to close during the COVID outbreak was just the final nail in the coffin, so it's time for a

new chapter. I'm so thankful to my family, staff and all the

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Johnny B's continued

"The first diner was actually on the other side of (Route 9W) and was called Bassett Diner, one of two owned by the Vaughn family," Beheri said. "It was one of two in the area and opened around 1950."

Indeed, in May 1949, John and Marjorie Vaughn formed a corporation to operate "a diner at 80 Bassett Street in South Albany" (which was formerly one of several Miss Albany diners in city proper) and "open a new diner on Route 9W, near Corning Hill, town of Bethlehem," according to a Times Union article announcing the deal. The earliest mention in local papers comes in February 1957, when the Albany County DA raided "Bassett Diner No. 2 in Glenmont" and removed its pin-ball machine as part of a county-wide raid because children were "playing the machine for prizes."

It is not clear when the diner was relocated across 9W to its present location next to Hannay Lane, but sometime before 1961 the site was prepared, and the business renamed Miss



The first "Silk City" Miss Glenmont, pre-fabricated and delivered in 1961 to the current Johnny B's location near Hannay Lane.

Glenmont Diner. That was the year new owner Dick Clark from Selkirk purchased a Silk City dining car from the Paterson Vehicle Company in New Jersey, and its iconic stainless-steel façade was a beacon to travelers heading both north into the city and southbound toward Bethlehem Center and beyond. Only about 1,500 Silk City diners were built over a 40-year span until 1966, and today less than 100 remain. Most of these can be found in New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, but others are as far-flung as France and the Netherlands.

Unfortunately, that dining car was destroyed by a fire in its first year of service. It was a massive blaze, started by a broken gas valve, and 50 firefighters from Elsmere, South Bethlehem, Glenmont, Selkirk and Delmar companies responded to put it out. While the damage was estimated at \$125,000 (about \$1 million in today's dollars) Clark was up and running in March 1962 with Silk City Diner #3671, which he operated as a 24-hour establishment for 30 years and remains at roadside today. The 24-hour format served Clark well in an era before convenience stores, when there weren't as many dining options and people were generally less mobile.

Many a longtime Bethlehem resident speak fondly of those times. Dale Hilchie, whose father Alan owned Hilchie's Terminal Hardware at Four Corners for many years, recalls going there regularly in the 1970s, during early morning hours after seeing bands or being out with friends on weekends. "I always got a cheese omelet with home fries," she said. "Breakfast of champions at 4 AM!"

Well-known area musician Rick Bedrosian – whose NYC food tours are also the stuff of local legend – would frequent

Miss Glenmont in the wee hours, after gigs with his band. "We were usually at least a couple sheets to the wind and I was the polite wise guy, ordering, 'two farm fresh eggs any style' because that's exactly how they were described on the menu. Hilarity often ensued. The food wasn't gourmet, but they were always open!"



The second, near-identical Silk City replacement of Miss Glenmont in Spring 1962. Fire destroyed the first after less than a year in service.

In 1992, Milton Pappas took over the establishment and ran it as Uncle Milty's Diner until 2004, when Behiri took over without closing for a single day. "On November 16, 2004 we became Johnny B's Glenmont Diner," Behiri said. "The day before, it was still Uncle Milty's."

Over time, upgrades were made – custom-built booths installed, countertops and tables resurfaced – but to see the diner both inside and out today is to see it in the 1960s. All that stainless steel, the Mid-Century aesthetics, the reassuring, Rockwellian row of Art Deco counter stools. But Beheri's family still adopted anyone who ventured in as one of their own.

Bedrosian never stopped venturing in, and regularly brought his elderly father along. "My Armenian father and the restaurant's Greek patriarch (John's dad Nick) hit it off right away." He explains. "He said, 'Do you know what the Greeks and the Armenians have in common?' 'Democracy?' my dad asked, and he said, 'No. We both hate the Turks!'"

Moving forward, however, Bethlehem's post-game and after-church crowds will look elsewhere for that throwback vibe (and my son, for those chocolate chip pancakes). While it is no secret that several prospectors have long coveted the Johnny B's footprint, Behiri explained that he wasn't ready to disclose the buyer's identity. He did however confide that a separate offer is on the table, from a different buyer, for the vintage diner itself.

"Let's just say we're working out the details," Behiri said with a smile. "If things go as planned, a part of Johnny B's will live on, even with a new name, in a new place."



Original Miss Glenmont owner Dick Clark, date unknown.

Four Thousand Torches

Karen Beck

As we sit at home with the television bombarding us with seemingly endless political ads and around the clock information, it is curious to think about the presidential election in 1860. We have little local information, but we can imagine the newspapers arriving and avidly read, meetings at local inns and talks around the diner table.

Bethlehem resident Maria Becker (1838 -1925) gave us a hint of an event in her 1860 diary:

Tuesday, September 11 Bert, Anna and the baby gone to Albany tonight to see the torchlight procession, 4000 Wide Awakes will turn out.

Lincoln's supporters were known as the "Wide Awakes". Maria's brother, Bert (Albertus), who later serves as Bethlehem town supervisor, was among them.

But 4000? The New York Times provides us with an account of that amazing event:

ALBANY, Tuesday, Sept. 11.

A grand demonstration of the Wide-Awake clubs of Albany and adjacent cities took place to-night and was fully equal to the anticipations of its projectors, and the grandest display yet made during the campaign of uniformed political clubs. A large number of persons were congregated in the city to see the torchlight parade, and many buildings on the line of march were illuminated.

The appearance of the Procession was most brilliant. The line was formed at about 8 o'clock, the numbers being so large as to occupy over an hour in forming. Visiting clubs from Kingston, Hudson, Valatie, Ghent, Stuyvesant, Saratoga Ballston Troy, Lansingburgh, Kinderhook, Chatham, Schenectady, Johnstown, Waterford, Canajoharie, Mohawk, Gloversville, Rondout, and most towns of Albany County were present, some with large delegations. The whole procession numbered to the neighborhood of 4,000 torches.

In the afternoon a handsome banner was hung across State-street from the Journal office, bearing a handsome device and the names of the candidates. The clubs were accompanied by several bands of music and torches, decorated with flags and bouquets. The Albany clubs were under the command of their President, J. MEREDITH READ, and made a handsome appearance, and the whole affair reflects great credit on the President and his assistants.

Among the procession were several Clubs of Rail splitters, wearing blue shirts and carrying mauls. They were apparently one thousand strong. The procession will not close until a very late hour.

Teddy Shows Bethlehem

(hat tip – Bill Seyler)

Theodore Roosevelt entered state politics in January 1882 when he was sworn in as the youngest NYS assemblyman. It is known that "Teddy" determined to overcome his small stature and sickly childhood by assuming a physically challenging lifestyle and a feisty attitude.



He brought all of that when he visited Hurst's Roadhouse, a popular gathering place for politicians located in Hurstville, then a Bethlehem hamlet in the New Scotland Avenue /Krumkill Road area. It was accessed by Albany in the mid 1960's.

Doris Kearns Goodwin recounts the scene in her book, *Team of Rivals*.

Late one winter afternoon Roosevelt entered Hurst's and was greeted by three jeering bullies, who raucously mocked his appearance and lack of a winter coat. "Why don't your mother buy you an overcoat? Won't Mama's boy catch cold?" A reporter present noted that Roosevelt ignored them until it was clear they would not let up. Finally, he confronted the three. "You – little dude" taunted one, while his companion took a swipe at Roosevelt. "But, quick as lightning, Roosevelt slipped his glasses into his side pocket, and in another second, he had laid out two of the trio on the floor. The third quit cold. The story soon made the rounds in the statehouse, along with the significant fact that once the men got off the floor, Roosevelt invited them to join him in a glass of ale.

On the line of march several handsome displays of fireworks took place, and visiting clubs were loudly cheered. Persons thronged the streets to witness the parade, winch has been thus far the largest and handsomest parade of the campaign.

One can only marvel at the thought of such an enormous crush of people, horses and carriages, trains arriving - all converging in Albany that evening. Then try to imagine everyone many hours later, gathering up, sorting out and leaving the city to travel home on long dark roads only to take up the farm chores early in the morning. For not the first time, we are awed by our 19th century ancestors' strong sense of community, social responsibility and zest for life.

Comprehensive Plan Update

Did you know that the Town of Bethlehem is updating its comprehensive plan for the first time in over 15 years?

Do you know how many opportunities have been missed to preserve or document historic homes, properties and other cultural resources have been lost during that time? Neither do we!

That's because during Bethlehem's last comprehensive planning process, which recommends changes to how our town plans for its future in terms of housing, zoning, transportation and other infrastructure, never delivered on its original goal to survey and inventory our historic and cultural resources.

Supervisor David VanLuven and the Town Board have created a Comprehensive Plan Update Committee (CPUC) to bring community members from all parts of town together for input and recommendations to address challenges in future development, including historic preservation.

Several members of CPUC are looking at this issue closely. In addition to the survey, they are considering the possibility of creating a Historic Preservation Commission to advise town planning and building department officials in identifying and investigating opportunities to preserve historically significant or irreplaceable landmarks inside Bethlehem's borders.

The committee will be working to establish a schedule of regular public outreach events to *hear directly from you* about what matters our community. Please sign up at <http://www.townofbethlehem.org/List.aspx> to receive email news alerts from the town for dates, times and agendas for these important meetings. Simply check "Main (Home Page) News" in the News Flash section, and "Public Meetings Calendar" in the Calendar section.

Please consider participating. The voices of BHA members are absolutely essential in finally moving historic preservation forward in our community.

Thank you.
Bill Ketzer

Bill is a member of BHA and frequent contributor to our newsletter. He is also a member of the Comprehensive Plan Update Committee. Contact him at labratsrock@gmail.com or 518-475-0762.

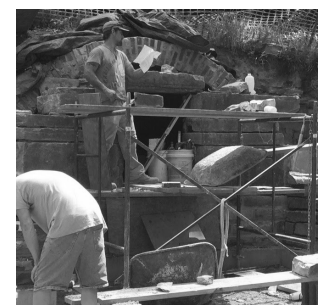


Slingerland Family Burial Vault



Have you been by the historic Slingerland Family Burial Vault lately? Tucked behind the former Mangia restaurant on New Scotland Road, the site is no longer an overgrown tangle of trees and falling down stonework. The trees have been cleared, the right of way opened, and the masonry rebuilt. The Friends of the Slingerland Family Burial Vault are raising funds for the remaining work

which includes replacing the door to the vault, landscaping, and informational signs. Please visit their website, SlingerlandVault.org, for details about the 2021 calendar that features then & now pictures of houses in the historic district, and for a link to our new video, *A Slingerlands Walking Tour*, which features actors portraying members of the Slingerlands community including John I. Slingerland, his mother Leah Britt Slingerland, Adam Mattice and James Dickson. *The Friends of the Slingerland Family Burial Vault seek to preserve the final resting place of a prominent Bethlehem family by restoring the physical integrity of the vault, improving landscaping and public access, and maintaining the site into the future as a memorial, educational resource and green space.*



Above: Chris White works to clean the monument.
Right: Masons from Gannem Contracting at work.

Building and Refining Our Collections

By Karen Beck

One of our most important roles, and perhaps our greatest challenge, is creating exhibits for our museum. To tell the stories of times gone by requires research and study. To then visually present those stories in context depends on having historically accurate objects, such as household furnishings, tools and equipment, clothing, photographs and documents. We are on a constant quest to find and procure such items for our collections.

Since our appropriate space is very limited, we must be disciplined and selective. New York State requires all chartered museums to have a Collection Management Policy. These policies are designed to ensure that museums “properly and ethically” manage their collections. Our policy, which is administered by the Collection Committee, outlines our procedures. Perhaps if you have been a donor, or might become one, you would be interested in the process?

When a donor approaches BHA, the Registrar first does a preliminary screening to see if the item appears to be something of interest for the museum. If that is the case, a *Temporary Custody* form is completed for the donor and the item is left at the museum for consideration. Every item is subject to the same objective consideration. The committee uses the following criteria:

The item must adhere to the Association’s mission statement. It must be historically relevant to the Town of Bethlehem, its people and its institutions.

BHA must be able to provide adequate storage space and proper conservation of the item. The committee will consider whether BHA is able to properly store items of size and delicacy.

The item must be in adequate condition for display, education, or research.

The Committee must consider the existing collection before accepting any duplicate items.

The item must not be encumbered by any restrictions imposed by the donor, or in any way suspected to have been illegally acquired.

Objects that meet the criteria are recommended to the Trustees for their approval. Given their agreement, the donor is then given a *Deed of Gift* form to sign, which transfers ownership of the item to the organization. It is then accessioned into the collections.

Responsible management also includes occasionally removing objects from the collections. Such decisions are not taken lightly. The item is also subject to a process and requires approval of the Trustees. For example, a hay rake might be replaced by one in better condition. A hat might be replaced by one that is similar but is distinguished with a local connection, as a hat once owned by a Bethlehem resident is of much greater value to our museum.

The disposition of a de-accessioned item is also decided by the Trustees. It might be sold at auction, donated to another museum, or even discarded if the condition is so poor it can no longer be displayed, or is infested and a threat to other items.

The collections continue to grow and be refined, mostly due to generous donors. If you think you have something that might help us more effectively share Bethlehem history with the community, we would love to hear from you! Perhaps you have memorabilia connected to local businesses? Schools? Organizations? a “poodle skirt”? An early telephone or vintage radio?

Contact us either by e-mail: BethHist1965@gmail.com or call Linda Schacht (518-767-2924). Donations are generally tax deductible.



Above: Some recent donations include early yearbooks, late 20th c. press photos, an ad for the Toll Gate, an 1920's toaster and a model of the Elsmere train station.

Left: Catherine Weiner, Barbara Orton and Christine Kertzman recently traveled from Warrensburg and Cape Cod to see the Wilkie exhibit currently on display at the museum. The sisters are great granddaughters of Henry Wilkie and Agnes Beggs Wilkie who owned the farm on Beaver Dam Road. They enjoyed reminiscing about the farm and family as the exhibit prompted many memories. Barbara donated the collection to the museum a few years ago.

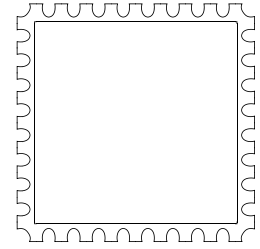


Bethlehem Historical Association

Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum

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Karen Beck & Susan Leath

Museum news...

In September, we were elated to finally feel confident enough to open the museum for a few months before winter. Then the October 7 storm came along. A falling tree took down wires and the electric service to the museum. Repairs required electrician Chris Kot, the Highway Department and their bucket truck, National Grid and Verizon to put it back together again. We thank them all for their efforts. – and a special thank you also to Supervisor VanLuven, who noticed branches on the parking lot when he was driving by and took time to drag them to the side.

Guess we can all agree that these are most trying times. Stay well and stay strong, everyone!

For now, the museum is still closed on Sunday afternoons, however you can make an appointment to visit by calling Dawn Pratt at 518-767-2285

