

# Bethlehem Historical Association

## NEWSLETTER

Spring 2022



## Memories of 46 Elsmere



By Bill Ketzer

Periodically, a former Bethlehem resident is curious to learn more about their childhood home – its history, whether it still stands, and what the neighborhood looks like today. Such was the case with Dr. Denis Hammond from Bedford, NH, who heard that his parent’s house at 46 Elsmere Avenue was once the site of Bethlehem’s first fire department and hoped to confirm.

We were sorry to disappoint the BCHS ’65 graduate on that front – the first station of the 1911 Delmar Fire Company was located on the other side of Kenwood beyond Four Corners, while Elsmere Fire Company was not established until 1922. However, his tales painted a vivid picture of Atomic Age life in town, and our accompanying research walked us through the Civil War era and into the American Century with some of our better-known founding families!

Built in 1894, Hammond’s former residence remains in wonderful shape, sitting at the intersection of Kenwood and Elsmere avenues across from Bethlehem Cemetery, which according to him was “a great place for scamps to go sledding in the winter, even though it was strictly illegal.” He seemed surprised at the house’s condition. “My mother called the house a money pit and spent every weekend trying to keep the place from deteriorating,” he said. “The insulation in the house was cotton batting and old newspapers. Repairs and upgrades were constant.”

Like many kids, young Denis loved to explore the less-travelled spaces of his large home. “The attic was a treasure trove, and we discovered old paintings and even a Civil War-era cavalry saber,” he remembered. “The basement had a dirt floor with odd-shaped boulders in the foundation. Lots of old bottles and pot shards in an old fruit cellar too, as well as an abandoned coal bin. I always thought we’d find a skeleton, but we never did.”

Hammond also remembers several large pine trees on the property and lo, they are still standing proudly almost 70 years later. He and his pals would climb the one closest to Kenwood and peer right into his upstairs neighbor’s bedroom, hoping for a free show, but according to Denis “the main result of those adventures was to get covered with pine pitch.”

Before his house was there, however, John Bender owned about 65 acres of farmland on Elsmere that included that property. He was a grandchild of Revolutionary War sergeant Christian Bender, who is buried in the graveyard just 500 feet from the residence. The Bender legacy in



TOP: Denis Hammond and his dog Smokey. The barn/garage is now a 4-bay garage with the exact same roof.

BOTTOM: Denis and his mother Ruth. The chicken coop in back still stands (obscured by brush) as well as Mrs. Spencely’s house in the far background.

*Continued on page 2*

## 46 *Elsmere continued...*

Albany County extends far beyond farms (though Charles Bender's legendary muskmelons in New Scotland are high legend), to Matthew Bender's global legal resources empire, the philanthropic Bender Family Foundation, and even World War I veteran Norman Bender, who at 102 was literally the "last man" of Bethlehem's Last Man's Club.

But it was not Bender but William and Maria Van Wie that first occupied the home of Hammond's youth. They kept horses on the property, but Bill worked in the steel industry. His great uncles Henry and Peter owned the dock near Van Wie Point, which was the primary terminal for passengers coming to and from the city in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. All descend from Hendrick Gerritse Van Wie, the Dutch colonist and fur trader who built a home there in 1679, when the town was still part of the feudal manor of Rensselaerwyck. Today, the Van Wie family still owns and operates Meadowbrook Dairy in Clarksville.

By the Great Depression and into the 1940s, Charles Smallman owned the property. By this time the old Bender farm had been fully subdivided and developed. His father was a firefighter and lived on the first floor, so it is possible Dr. Hammond's firehouse history is derived from accounts of this family. Smallman's daughter Dorothy married BCHS classmate Norman Nichols of 26 Oakwood Avenue after graduation, but sadly he was killed by Japanese suicide planes in the Battle of Okinawa, just three weeks before the end of WW2's final major conflict.

Soon after, the house was sold to Hammond's grandparents Abraham and Bessie Brin, immigrants from Russia and Poland who founded the immensely popular Brin's Specialty Shop on Delaware Avenue in Albany. His parents Bob and Ruth soon took ownership of the well-known clothing and department store, which closed in 1990 after 60 years in business. Ruth attended the legendary Traphagen School in NYC, where renowned fashion designers like Anne Klein and Geoffrey Beene learned their trade. Like Dot Smallman and Norm Nichols, the Hammonds married prior to Bob's deployment overseas. Bob survived the deadly beaches of Normandy on D-Day and lived to be almost 100.

The Hammonds rented their 2<sup>nd</sup> floor to James and Rosemary Mulholland. Originally in pharmaceutical sales, Jim was appointed Delmar postmaster when John F. Kennedy was elected president. He was a perpetual candidate for town board and a member of Elsmere Fire Company, Bethlehem Central Men's Club, Blanchard-Adams American

Legion Post, Tri-Village Little League and the Holy Name Society at St. Thomas Church.

Denis's best bud was Mullholland's son Jimmy, and their main activity most days was to beg neighbors for food! A favorite target was their next-door neighbor Edith Cole Spensley, whose house at 275 Kenwood was a rest home for the elderly well into the 1970s. "She was a very kind old lady and would invite us in and give us candy," he recalled. "Before she got her nursing license, she taught in the old one-room schoolhouses in town. We went there often, though her house smelled very bad."

As the boys got older, they'd walk to Elsmere Elementary past Louis and Maria Barachini's general store, which still stands at the D&H underpass near the rail trail. "We occasionally bought candy, but I think mostly we were pests to Mr. Barachini," Hammond admitted. "The other important activity to be done there was putting pennies on the railroad tracks and retrieving the flattened coins the next day."

There were several other important destinations on Elsmere Avenue for the boys, including George and Edna Lauer's place at 40 Elsmere. "Mr. Lauer was building superintendent for the school district and kept homing pigeons," Denis explained. "They were very fast and watching them fly was a great treat. He also had chickens that he occasionally butchered... frightening but fascinating."

Then there was Buzzy Lennan and his brothers. "Buzzy was our age but his brothers were teenagers who occasionally had girls down in their basement bar... a strange and interesting event for kids our age," Hammond said. "I remember hearing 'Susie Q' and 'Blueberry Hill' for the first time there. They also enjoyed torturing us in various ways, like shooting us with their BB Guns. They thought this was hilarious."



We're so thankful that Dr. Hammond took the time to walk us through his early years in Bethlehem and give us a glimpse of what growing up in town was like during those booming postwar years, as well as a great history lesson. With family still in the area, we hope he will look us up next time he's here!

# The Museum is OPEN

For the first time in recent memory, we opened in the early spring for regular Sunday hours. February 6 to be exact! We are **now open** every Sunday afternoon (except Easter) until the fall. Per usual, there is no admission fee, but donations are gratefully accepted. There are enjoyable interactive activities to challenge all ages, scrapbooks and photo albums for reminiscing, and friendly hosts who look forward to meeting you.

## Current Exhibits include:

*River, Roads and Rails*  
*History of Bethlehem Schools*  
*Mohican Presence in Bethlehem*  
*Seven Days - Women in the 1920's Home*  
*Anna's Century, and more!*

In order to keep the museum open, we rely on **volunteers**, at least two per Sunday. We are in need of someone to schedule all of those volunteers. This task is done at home at your own convenience. If you are organized and like talking with to people, this could be an enjoyable opportunity for you. Interested? Call Karen 518-439-9260.



## News & Notes

The **Collection Committee** has been hard at work. Their latest project is to photograph each item in the collection to add to the database. Nancy Newkirk reports that hundreds of pictures have been taken so far.

Susan Leath, our publicity chair, is looking for members and friends to share their **Local Lights**. What are you currently thinking about history-wise? Why not share it with other like minded folks? How about sharing some snapshots or a short write up? Pop over to our website for recent articles, BethlehemHistorical.org. Email Susan, sel7@juno.com or give her a call if you are interested, 58-209-5855.

Vicki Folger, our **Out and About** coordinator, is planning a walking tour of **Washington Park** with John Pipkin for June 18. We heard his wonderful talk about the history of the park back in September. Stay tuned for details!

BHA decided to send all donations collected at our March program to **Save the Children - Ukraine**. Between the money collected that evening and generous donations by others who were unable to attend the performance, we were able to send \$800 to that very worthy cause.

*More News & Notes on Page 4*

## Wat is er?

What is this item in our collection?

Here's a hint:

The top stripe is orange, then white and then blue.

Answer on page 5



ABOVE: We resumed our Holiday Open House this year. Over 100 guests came to see the exhibits, visit with friends, and enjoy the decorations which featured Scherenschnitte, the German art of paper cutting. We expect to schedule a class soon for this interesting craft work.

LEFT: Front Porch of 46 Elsmere with Hammond's paternal grandfather Herman Hammond in foreground, maternal grandfather Abe Brin on steps, grandmother Bessie Brin and father Robert on porch around 1947.

## More News & Notes

Do you know that the **Cedar Hill Schoolhouse** is a town owned property? In 1965, shortly after the town acquired the building, the Bethlehem Historical Association was formed and given the use of the building for its functions and the establishment of a museum. The Town agreed to be responsible for the upkeep of the buildings and grounds with the exception of the interior rooms that were to be used, and maintained, by BHA.

This year, the Town of Bethlehem and the Bethlehem Historical Association updated and formalized that long standing agreement. In February, a **Memo-randum of Understanding** was finalized.

We thank Supervisor David VanLuven for his support of this effort and Town Board member, Dan Coffey, for his guidance throughout the process. We also thank the Town Highway and Parks and Recreation departments for their cooperation and maintenance of the property throughout the year.

We are most appreciative of NYS Assembly woman **Pat Fahy's efforts**. She recently secured a sizable **grant** that will enable the Town to do much needed repairs on the historic Schoolhouse.

We could not exist without the support that results from these long-standing partnerships. They enable us, an all- volunteer organization, to continue our mission to educate and enrich the lives of our fellow residents.



Roland Van Liew entered the U.S. Army shortly after graduating from Bethlehem Central in 1942. In the right hand picture above, Roland is shown in uniform and the back of the photo is inscribed "1944 Camp Chaffee Arkansas." The photo of him at the beach is inscribed "3 June 44" and he is sitting on a beach chair at Carolina Beach, N.C. We believe he was stationed at Fort Bragg at the time.

## 1940s Bethlehem Memorabilia Sought

The newly formed Exhibit Oversight Committee is exploring **Bethlehem in the 1940's**. As our inventory for that decade is sparse, we need your help. Won't you be on the lookout for home furnishings, routine household items, and memorabilia to donate or loan?

We want to tell the stories. Twelve hundred Bethlehem residents served in WW II. Was someone in your family involved? What do you remember from your growing up years in the forties? How did the war affect day to day life in the town of Bethlehem? Maybe you have letters, photos, or other related items to share with us? This is a community effort. We hope to hear from you! Email us: [BethHist1965@gmail.com](mailto:BethHist1965@gmail.com) or call Susan Leath, 518-209-5855.



Newly elected to the Town Board, David DeCancio visited the museum and requested an historic Bible on which to take his oath of office. That event is shown here with Mr. DeCancio being sworn into office by Honorable Town Justice Ryan Donavan on a 19th c. Bible once used by the Clapper/Vanderpoel family.



War Rations booklets and U.S. Savings Bond coupon booklet belonging to the Paige family of Delmar.

## Annual Meeting and Social Time

**Thursday, May 19 at 7 PM**  
Delmar Reformed Church

Entertainment by Tamarack

\$10 per person donation requested at the door

After a two-year lapse, we are very pleased to plan an in-person annual meeting event. As a non-profit chartered museum, we are required to hold an annual membership meeting. This gives us an opportunity to publicly accept new officers and share BHA news, but best of all, it is a chance for members to meet and socialize.

Following a brief meeting, we will be entertained by popular local musicians, *Tamarack*. This engaging trio performs toe tapping traditional fiddle music we feel sure you will enjoy. There will then be time to get up and circulate: to stop by the tempting dessert table and to visit with friends old and new.

Please plan to join us!



**Wat is er?** It is a replica flag of the Dutch East India Company!

In 1609, Henry Hudson began his third voyage of discovery under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company. As the New Netherland Institute writes:

Beginning around 1622 and for forty-two years thereafter, the flag of the Dutch West India Company served as the symbol of the dominant power in and around present-day New York, with some 100 ships at sea by the 1630s. The initials G.W.C. stood for the Dutch *Geocroyeerde Westindische Compagnie* (Chartered West India Company).

Above is the modern replica of the *Half Moon* flying the flag.  
(NewNetherlandinstitute.org)



## News from the Nomination Committee

Bill Seyler is finishing his second three-year term as a trustee, which is the limit set by our by-laws. We thank Bill for his dedicated service. Fortunately, Bill continues his wonderful work as Buildings and Grounds chair.

Nancy Newkirk is resigning as recording secretary, effective at the end of this fiscal year. Nancy assumed the position of Registrar in January and has wisely chosen to concentrate on the demands of that position. We thank Nancy for all she does for BHA.

We are pleased to introduce the two candidates who are recommended to fill these important positions.

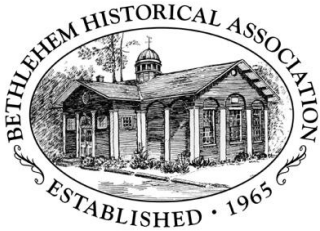
The nomination committee recommends Bill Ketzler to join the Board of Trustees.

*Bill and family have lived in Bethlehem for 20 years, but his father's ancestors settled in town as blacksmiths and wheelwrights after emigrating from Germany in the early 1850s. He is a longtime lobbyist for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and previously oversaw government affairs for the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets, as well as farm and animal welfare policy for the NYS Assembly. A proud product of SUNY Albany's English/Journalism programs, Bill serves and creates content for numerous local and statewide causes, including the Hamagrael Elementary PTA, Delmar Farmers Market, NYS Animal Protection Federation and Bethlehem's Comprehensive Plan Update Committee. He is also not a bad drummer, which should not, however, imply that he can dance (he cannot).*

The nomination committee recommends Sue Peters to be our new recording secretary.

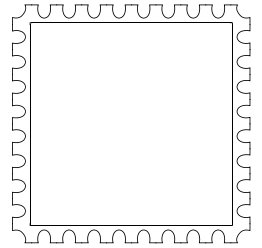
*Susan is a lifelong resident of the Town of Bethlehem, having grown up in Glenmont, and when she married, moving to an historic old Victorian house in Slingerlands that had been in her husband's family for over 40 years. She has lived in this house for 49 years. She worked as a secretary for the Bethlehem Central High School before marriage and was a stay-at-home Mom while raising her children. During those years, she ran a home-based typing business, handled the office work for her husband's electrical contracting business, and served as Secretary to the Slingerlands Fire Department Board of Fire Commissioners for ten years. She also was active in the local Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops when her children were young. For several years she was a member of the local Antique Study Club. She has been a member of Preserve Historic Bethlehem for the past few years, working to save the historic buildings and farmlands in town. She has three children and six grandchildren.*

We thank Bill and Sue for agreeing to serve and are pleased to have such well qualified nominees to present for your approval. Formal confirmation will take place at the Annual Meeting on May 19.



## Bethlehem Historical Association

Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum  
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### The Bethlehem Historical Association

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#### OFFICERS

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Vice President: Vicki Folger  
Recording Secretary:  
Nancy Newkirk  
Corresponding Secretary:  
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Treasurer: Mary Ann Shubert

#### TRUSTEES

Debbie Croscup, Linda Davies, Vicki Folger  
Chris Philippo, Andrew Reilly, Bill Seyler,  
John Smolinsky

Newsletter Editors  
Karen Beck & Susan Leath

### EVENTS Calendar

Thursday, April 21 7 p.m.  
Location: Delmar Reformed Church  
*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*  
*Alexander Hamilton's True History with Slavery*  
A talk presented by Jessica Serfilippi

Thursday May 19, 7 p.m.  
**BHA Annual Meeting** and performance by **Tamarack**  
Details Inside

Monday, May 30  
**Memorial Day Parade**  
Details pending but BHA plans to walk this year!

Sunday afternoon, June 12  
**Ice Cream Social** at the  
Cedar Hill Schoolhouse  
Details coming soon.

Saturday June 18, 10 a.m.  
**Out and About**  
Walking Tour of Washington  
Park. Details coming soon.

