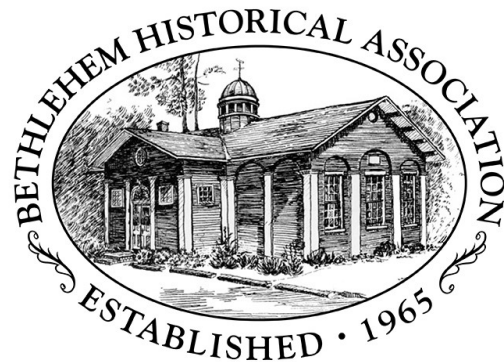


# Bethlehem Historical Association

## NEWSLETTER

Fall 2019



## New Acquisitions

# *The Letters and Diaries of Maria Becker*



By Karen Beck and Chris Philippo

An 1886 “History of the Township of Bethlehem” that was included in the *History of the County of Albany* was introduced as “brief” and “incomplete.” Author Jacob S. Markle regretted that “records are few, and personal reminiscences are buried with those who have departed from the scenes.” Even when records were many, however, aspects of history were typically neglected in such works - the lives of women, for one.

It was with special interest, therefore, that BHA recently discovered, and was able to purchase, the 1854, 1855, and 1860 diaries of Bethlehem resident, Maria “Ritie” Becker Miller (1832-1920) along with over 200 letters she’d saved, as well as a daguerreotype, believed to be Maria.

This collection promises to provide a rare window into the lives of women in 19<sup>th</sup> C. Bethlehem, and in particular that of a young woman in a prominent old family in the hamlet named for it, Becker’s Corners. Markle’s “History” profiled her brother, Albertus W. Becker (1834-1917), who was elected Supervisor in 1862 and was responsible for helping meet the town’s quota of volunteers for the Civil War. The A. W. Becker school on 9W in Selkirk is named for him.

Two of Maria’s most prolific correspondents were Charles Milton Rowley (1838-1915), an ardent suitor she never married, and Philip A. Miller (1837-1890) whom she eventually did wed.

Phillip Miller is of particular interest to us as he came to Bethlehem in 1859 as the first teacher at the Cedar Hill School. We, in fact, have his class register in our collections. Maria’s diaries record her meeting “Mr. Miller” who comes to call with increased frequency in her 1860 diary. Miller’s letters touch on such things as the massive Troy fire of May 10th, 1862 and his personal struggle as he considered joining the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment for a nine-month enlistment.

A letter by her friend, Kitty Lasher, teased, “Now Marie I think it would be quite as well for you to write to me a littler of-tener and not devote so much



Top: Maria Becker about 1860.

Middle and Bottom: The home where Maria Becker was raised, built circa 1800, still stands on Bridge Street at Becker’s Corners. The middle picture shows the home circa 1899, after the home had passed out of the hands of the Becker family. Below is the home today.

*Continued on next page.*

# The Bethlehem Historical Association

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*Live for Today  
Dream for Tomorrow  
Learn from Yesterday*

TOP: Maria Becker saved the letters she received and annotated the envelopes. On this one, sent to Maria in care of Veeder & Selkirk in Albany, she noted that she received it August 9, 1860. She wrote: This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> letter I have received since Charles went back to "Warsaw" I wish Charles was only well again & happy I am sad to think of him when I read his letter.

BOTTOM: A page from Maria's diary: Tuesday, November 6, 1860  
Today is Election at Leedings. Mr Veeder came here & took father to vote for Lincoln. Mr Miller & Will Niver called. I took tea to Aunt Hesters.

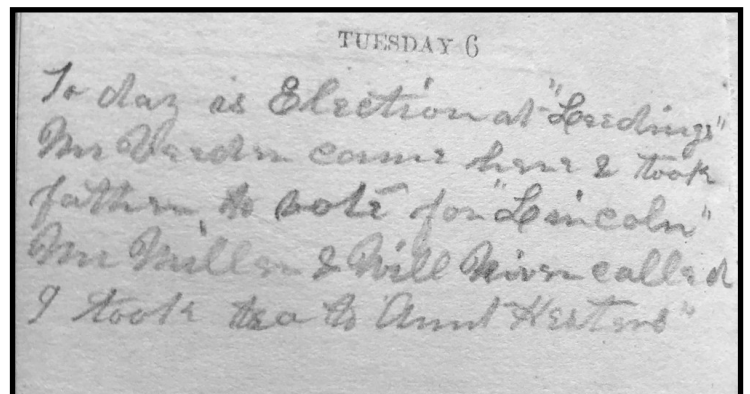
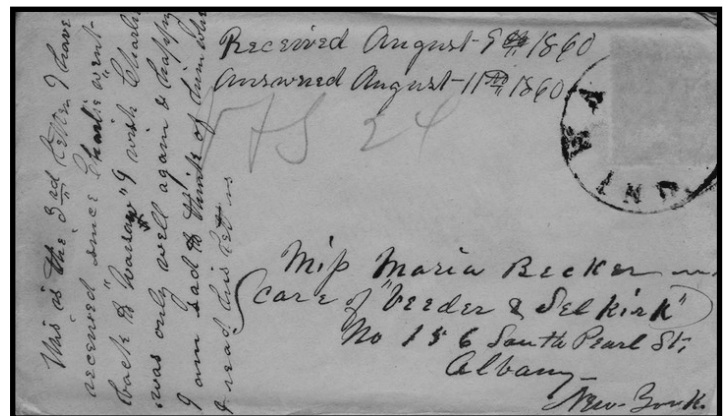
*Continued from front page...*

*time to Military Gentleman: what do you think about it. I think you quite patriotic of late I trust your union sentiments will not result in anything serious." Is that a marital double entendre? Perhaps, though other correspondents included her cousin John Gurnsy Van Der Zee (1827-1884) writing in 1862-1863 from such points as Camp Butterfield, Halls Hill, Virginia; Off Fortress Monroe, Steamer, Georgia, and Army of the Potomac, Virginia. From Georgia he confided, "I have been promoted to Lieut. I have not told my folks yet but will have to now so as to get my letters. The 44<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> were together at Camp Butterfield so I get my mail there. I was made Lieut. Jan. 10<sup>th</sup>."*

In another letter from Saratoga Springs, on a much more serious note, Kitty dramatically expressed her distress over the inevitability of the impending war. Her moving words of despair from May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1861 in some respects could have been written today:

*Ritie what do you think of this outburst of the south. This glorious peaceful country that was so dearly bought with the blood of our forefathers and which for eighty years has been a house for the exile and an asylum for the oppressed and where thousands and tens of thousands has been greeted yearly to our shores to enjoy this peaceful free and happy land is now thrown in utter confusion and brother is ready to strike brother and father against son. It is enough to strike terror into every heart to think of the terrible conflict that will certainly ensue.*

If you are as intrigued as we are, to get acquainted with Maria Becker and her world, you will be pleased to know that it is our intention is to eventually make this important collection accessible to the public. It will take some time to study, transcribe, copy and prepare it for that purpose.



# Adventures of a History Nerd:

## A Delmar Estate Sale or A Forest Through the Trees

By Bill Ketzer

T. S. Eliot called April the cruelest month, and for New Yorkers coming out of a long, cold winter only to have the longer days of spring greet them with 30 days of torrential downpours, this past spring was a real parade killer. It was also, however, perfect weather for a good estate sale, and there were some big ones in Olde Delmar.

Ann Friedman's May 1st article in *Curbed* ("The Magic of Estate Sales") called these events "a going-out-of-business event for one person's life," since unlike a garage sale – where the public picks over items the homeowner no longer wants – it's more like suburban anthropology. You walk through the house and see it pretty much as it was before the person downsized, died or otherwise relocated. You see, intimately, everything that had meaning to total strangers – their music, art, books, clothing – right down to the dinner plates they used every single day, often for many decades. We all have these deceptively provisional hoards, and it's a stark but mystical reminder that, in the end, all we really possess are our actions. Someday, somewhere, someone will be figuring out what to do with *our* stuff, because you literally can't take it with you.

We owe our neighbors the courtesy of remembering this when performing this bittersweet ritual. To honor their time in the home, the neighborhood, the community, the universe, because we're essentially, albeit with consent, plundering their most private, safest spaces. So I try to know them a little – where they worked, how they lived, their origins – because the deeper you dig, the more connected you become.

This was definitely true for me when I hit a large sale at 36 Forest Road, which was originally built for Charles and Mildred Probes in 1938. A little digging revealed that Charles hailed from the Finger Lakes and headed up the NYS Education Department's Publications Bureau for 37 years. A Cornell University graduate, he worked as a reporter in Elmira and Binghamton before coming to Delmar for his lifetime gig, which paid a mere \$12,000 annually when he retired in 1960. Mildred was a regent of the Tawasentha Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and also attended Cornell (perhaps the couple met on campus).



36 Forest Road, Delmar. 2019.

The couple's only child, Bianca, graduated from BCHS in 1951.

The second owners were Philip and Anna Cline, who lived there from 1957 until Anna died in 1968 at only 57 years old. They raised two children in the house – daughter Sue and son Dick (BCHS classes of 1958 and 1966 respectively). Sue married longtime area physician Almer T. George and they resided at 396 Wellington Road for many years before relocating to Florida. Phil spent his entire ca-



Mildred and Charles Probes, 1954. (Times Union)

reer at New York Telephone as an accountant and in 1971 he would remarry – to Anna's sister Margaret!

Information on these owners was easily found in newspaper archives, obituaries, census data and old yearbooks, but before our visit to 36 Forest on that drizzly April morning I found very little on the current seller, who bought the home in 1969 and remained there until this spring. All I had was a family name – Dering – and it was their cookbooks, gardening tools and glassware I was about to peruse.

Like other houses on the block, the home is a classic 1930s-era cottage, with asymmetrical architecture, steep roof pitches, small windows and storybook character that is getting harder to find in the suburbs these days. I couldn't wait to see inside; many on that road have seen very few exterior upgrades, so the neighborhood looks much the way its planners and developers envisioned it over 80 years ago. I was hopeful that, except for the inevitable post-war kitchen upgrade, we'd probably be walking into that coveted "time machine" experience – the sights, smells and sentience of the Silent Generation. And so we were!

Although staged in typical fashion by the company handling the sale, every living space was awash in natural light and devoid of bad remodeling. An interesting feature of any cottage-style home is their ability to easily reconcile varying tastes in decor. Old/new, simple/ornate. No exceptions here; the living spaces at 36 Forest were accessorized with lovely converted oil lamps, Early American stoneware jugs and some Victorian-era furnishings, but there was a utilitarian practicality to much of the décor that effortlessly blended with these treasures.

To my delight, the entire basement was a professionally-outfitted woodworking shop, the lair of someone who came of age when money was always tight and you could probably do it yourself better than the next guy anyway. Oh lordy, life



Philip Cline, 1956.  
(Times Union)

-after-forty there were saws, sanders, clamps and ramps; meticulously sorted and labeled drawers of rivets, nails, screws, bolts, washers and wingnuts; compressors, welding guns, planers, wrenches, hammers; greases, glues, mineral spirits, polyurethanes and paints. I thought about hiding in a crawlspace so they'd lock me in overnight!

I forgot all about that, however, once I snapped up an old metal filing cabinet and got it home for cleanup. I'm always on the hunt for these beasts, and one drawer came with a thick mess of hanging folders, under which I found an envelope marked "BOAC" (British Overseas Airways Corporation). I expected old boarding passes but found a 57-year old time capsule instead; one that detailed the first days of married life for Elmer C. Dering and Virginia Niven Lyons.

Inside was a hotel bill from Castle Harbour Hotel in Bermuda, shopping receipts from St. George and Hamilton for pillowcases, hats, earrings, pins, sweet dishes, bud vases, ashtrays and all sorts of clothing. We can literally trace the path of the newlywed's first adventure as husband and wife. Though the hotel was razed in 2002, most of the shops they perused together almost 60 years ago are still in business today. History. Nerd. Gold.

But what tripled the "wow" factor was a small collection of news clippings announcing the marriage. One was trimmed from the August 14, 1962 edition of the Sullivan County Democrat and indicated the nuptials took place at Lyons family farm on Route 17 in Monticello. My wife's family was from Monticello – heart of the Borscht Belt Catskills – and my mother-in-law immediately recognized Virginia. They went to high school together and her father James ran that old farm, where the family home still stands today. He was elected to the NYS Assembly from 1939-42 and again in 1945-50, later serving as a deputy commissioner at the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets. Here was another interesting nexus since I also worked for both agencies during my career.

I contacted the couple's son (also named James) to return the accidental treasure to its rightful owners, and I was privileged to hear more of his father's story when he came to reclaim it. Elmer traded his place on 36 Forest for an apartment attached to Jim's own home in Delmar. He grew up in Cambridge, Washington County, and after graduating from Russell Sage in 1951 he joined the US Navy, serving on the USS Nautilus – the world's first operational nuclear-powered submarine and the first submarine to sail *under* the North Pole. After discharge in 1956, he met Virginia in Monticello as a newly-hired lineman for New York Telephone – just like the man from which he purchased his Delmar home. The 1950's were a period of rural expansion for the company, and like many NYT guys in that era he was deployed to the Catskills to usher in the era of dial-phone service. He lived in a small trailer near the Lyons Farm at the time and young love blossomed as it will.

Elmer and his bride moved to Albany a few years later and bought 36 Forest in 1969. He became a programmer at NYT and retired in 1992. Virginia, a SUNY Postdam graduate, took a job at Saint Gregory's School for Boys in Loudonville but also worked frequently as a substitute teacher in Bethlehem schools. Sadly, she too died at only 57, the same age as Anna Cline and a few short years after Elmer's retirement. He never remarried and remained in the house where I carefully rummaged through drawers of lock rings, drill bits and unused welder's contact tips for 20 more years.

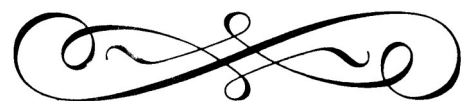
Jim told me that most of the antique wares in his father's home belonged to Virginia's family (I learned that my hand-made 18th Century trunk was once an old toy chest), and described the stress and sadness that came with navigating

the timing of emptying the home with the property sale. On the afternoon prior to the estate sale, surrounded by the entire contents of his dad's house staged and tagged to move – from precious family heirlooms to dishwashing detergent – he sat down on the living room sofa and cried. "It was just completely overwhelming," he said.

And so it was not surprising that tears welled in his eyes again when I handed him the Ziploc of clippings, receipts and boarding passes that commemorate perhaps the most sacred and difficult commitment one can make in life – the formation of a true partnership with another human being. "I'm sorry," he said, as we stood there in my gravel drive on that warm and sunny morning. As if an apology was necessary. As if he didn't realize I was crying too.



Elmer & Virginia Dering on their wedding day, August 12, 1962. (Sullivan County Democrat)



## News & Notes

### Farmers Market

The Saturday Delmar Farmers Market moves indoors to the Middle School cafeteria in a few weeks. We look forward to being a part of this wonderful community asset again this year. Please stop by our table to take a look at our vintage photos and chat with us. We enjoy “talking history” with you!

### Speaker Series

On October 16, an audience of 109 came to the Delmar Reformed Church to enjoy listening to Dick Brooks talk about the Hudson River day boats. We have just one more talk scheduled this fall. On November 21, Dr. Margaret Lynch-Brennon will speak on the interesting topic of “The Irish Bridget”, those Irish immigrant women who lived in American homes as they were employed as domestic servants. We hope you will attend and bring a friend with you.

There are no talks scheduled for December or January. Our talks will resume in February when we begin our spring series. Note that the spring series is also at the Delmar Reformed Church but at a different day (Wednesday) and time (7 PM). We hear you, working friends!

Wednesday, February 19, 7 PM

*Native American Site Along the Dowers Kill*

presented by Adam Lusier of the Hartgen Archaeological Association

Wednesday, March 18, 7 PM

*American Folk Art*

presented by Marilyn Sassi

Wednesday, April 15 at 7 PM

*Washington Park: The Moral High Ground in Albany*

presented by Dr. John Pipkin

### Memorabilia

Elsewhere in this issue, we report on a significant addition to our collections, “Maria Becker’s 19<sup>th</sup> c. Diaries and Correspondence”. We are extremely fortunate to have been able to acquire these items, which had somehow become separated and scattered. Some were in Maine, some in Pennsylvania. One has to wonder if there aren’t more of them someplace.

Often, we do not recognize the value of seemingly everyday letters, business related memorabilia, and of course photographs that are in our own homes.

If you have any such items you think might be of interest, we sure would like to speak with you. We completely understand if you do not want to give them up. We can often photocopy. Items do not have to be over one hundred years old to be of value. The twentieth century has slipped into history taking the stories of those who lived and worked in Bethlehem with it. A BCHS yearbook from the 60’s would be a treasure to us.

If you have anything you think might be of interest, please contact us. [BethHist1965@gmail.com](mailto:BethHist1965@gmail.com) or call Karen 518 439 9260

## Museum Closed for Restoration Work

Immediately after Election Day, our Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum will close its doors temporarily to enable both BHA and the Town to complete some improvements.

As previously reported, after several years of planning, we had begun to restore the back room closer to its original 1909 condition. The 1969 drop ceiling, soffits, and dark wall coverings were skillfully removed by three members: Charlie Fuller, Don Newkirk, and Bill Seyler.

While we were planning the next steps and arranging for needed electrical, carpentry and painting work, it was learned that there is an asbestos issue in the basement that demands attention. The Town has assumed responsibility for that work. Progress slowed as access to the basement was necessarily curtailed and the Town complied with its mandated procurement process. We reluctantly came to the realization that we could not manage to hold the traditional Silver Tea this year.

At this time, we are happy to report that everything is in place for the work to begin. We plan to reopen as soon as possible after the first of the year and look forward to welcoming everyone to enjoy your brighter, cheerier, and more historically accurate building.



### Wat is er? \*

BHA has lots of strange looking objects in our collection. What is this? And why the spout? Look for the answer in this issue!

\* *Dutch for What is it?*

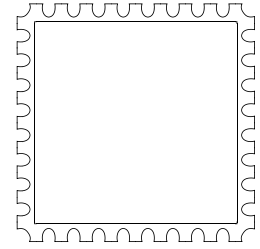


## Bethlehem Historical Association

Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum

P.O. Box 263

Selkirk, NY 12158



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### NOVEMBER & DECEMBER EVENTS

Tuesday, November 5

***Election Day Bake-Sale***

Stop by while the polls are open for some homemade baked goods!

Thursday, November 21 at 2 PM

Place: Delmar Reformed Church

***The Irish Bridget***

Presented by Dr. Margaret Lynch-Brennon

Friday, December 6, 10 AM

**OUT & ABOUT** at

***The Hart-Cluett Historic House Museum*** in Troy

Please contact Vicki Folger to register.

[vhf49@yahoo.com](mailto:vhf49@yahoo.com).



The Cedar Hill Schoolhouse, October 20, 1957.  
Photo taken by Bill Tenney.

**What is it?** It is a charcoal-heated clothes iron. Patented circa 1852, one added hot coals into the spout to heat up the iron. Bequest of Joan E. Stahlman, Glenmont.



