

Bethlehem Historical Association

NEWSLETTER

Fall 2023



Historian's Corner

Heath's Shady Lawn Dairy

By Bill Ketzer



One word that almost always arises when recalling Heath's Shady Lawn Dairy Farm in Glenmont is "iconic." Its massive, monolithic tower silo at the northeastern corner of Route 9W and Wemple Road backed by a hulking complex of 19th century barns, and milking, processing and retail space is practically unavoidable on that side of town, regardless of which way a traveler is headed. It appears in the mind's eye before it's even seen. Aside from Delmar's Four Corners, I'm hard pressed to think of another intersection in town that evokes the public imagination and memory more than this site.

Many residents still remember William Herber ("W.H.") and Elvira Heath and family, as well as operations manager Dick Thayer and other employees who delivered dairy products directly to neighborhood doorsteps from 1920 well into the 1980s. They tell tales of treating their children to ice cream on the farm, grabbing a few dozen fresh eggs on the way home from work, watching cows being milked in the parlor adjacent to the retail shop on a 4th grade field trip, or renting a garden plot on the property to grow their own vegetables. The Heaths were at the front end of Agritourism, decades before that was even a word, and prior to community gardens being commonplace. They offered customers an experience, a personal connection to their food and the family that provided it.

In the spirit of that sentiment, the Town of Bethlehem recently acquired the farm in a 307-acre preservation initiative, one of the largest municipal land acquisitions in Hudson Valley history. The hope is that by honoring the land's legacy as open space and establishing an advisory committee to create a vision for the preserved lands, it will help uphold the values and innovation that the Heath family brought to bear in our area.

The story of Shady Lawn is certainly one of success in what remains a very difficult business, even by the grueling



TOP: An aerial view of the farm from the 1960s
(Town of Bethlehem Photo Archive)

BOTTOM: W.H. Heath aboard his tractor
(Heath-Thayer Family Archive)

Continued next page

Heath's continued from front page

standards of any agricultural venture. As almost anyone who milks cows for a living will say, dairy farming runs in the veins. It's not something that is chosen – it chooses you. Dairy farmers are typically not price makers but price takers, unless the entire chain of production (milking, processing, bottling, wholesale/retail delivery) is owned by the operator. The Heaths understood this from the beginning and did exactly that.

But theirs is also the story of Bethlehem, and ultimately, the story of colonial America. A 1976 *Agway Cooperator* article lists "William Heath of Glenmont, NY" amongst a list of Bicentennial Farms in the Northeast, and a little digging revealed that his 2nd great grandfather Samuel Heath fought the British in New Hampshire's 3rd Regiment at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775, a crucial early engagement of the American Revolution. This famous clash was the first true "uh-oh" moment of the war for British forces because of the enormous, unanticipated losses suffered at the hands of the Continental Army. The only reason they won the day was because their adversaries ran out of ammunition.

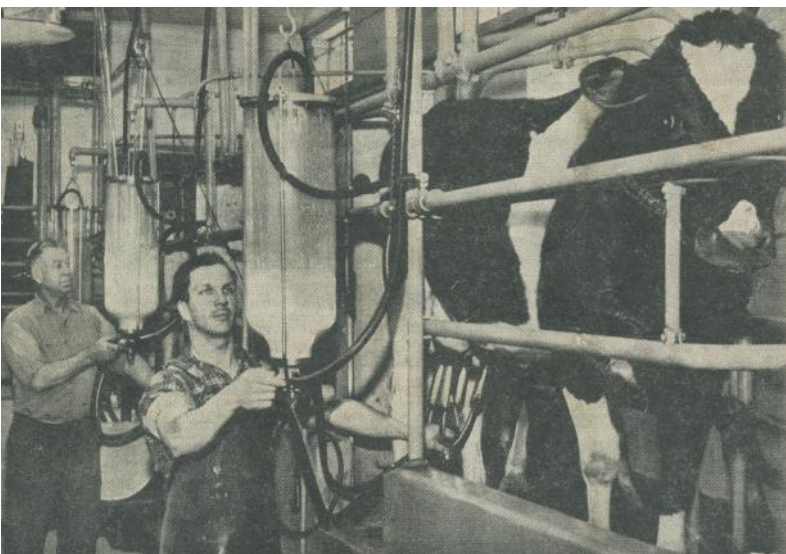
Looking back further, we learn that Will's British roots reveal an extensive colonial history that can be traced all the way back to the original Bay Colony Settlement during the Great Puritan Migration of the 17th century. His 7th great grandfather Bartholomew farmed American soils more than a century before the Revolution, settling in Newbury, Massachusetts sometime after 1632 (some speculate he came aboard the *Lyon* with John Winthrop, Jr. in 1631).

The Heath Dairy legacy is also one of resilience, starting over, and second chances. William's mother Elizabeth "Libbie" Herber was a toddler when she came from Germany with her family to Bethlehem Center in the 1850s, during a time of famine and vast political uncertainty in their homeland. They worked fields along Jericho Road (now 9W) with scores of other German families starting fresh in a foreign land. As a young woman she was employed as domestic help by Samuel Ames of Albany, relocated with the family to Canterbury, New Hampshire. She met her future husband Alfred ("Fred") Heath by chance while he visited his brother in town, and they married in 1888. They settled at Fred's family home Bristol, which remains in the Heath family today. She saw her family in Feura Bush (then called Jerusalem) at least semi-regularly. In fact, Will was born there on one such visit.

When Alfred died suddenly at 48, Libbie returned home with her teenage children to rebuild. The 1910 U.S. Census lists her as both head of household and a farmer in Bethlehem Center – not unique but certainly unusual for that period in history – so it's a decent bet W. H. Heath built his business, and his character, on lessons learned directly from his mother, who never remarried. When he finally bought Shady Lawn from Marcus Lasher in 1920, Libbie lived there with Will's family for the rest of her life. While she is buried with her husband in Bristol, Will and his wife are at Elmwood Cemetery, along with other family members and longtime farm hands.

So began the modern era of agriculture at Shady Lawn, more than 60 years of breeding heifers, cutting hay, machinery maintenance, and milking two times daily no matter what life had in store. Cows don't milk themselves, and Heath did it despite serious health problems, numerous barn fires, equipment failures, the Great Depression, World War 2, ever-changing consumer tastes and on and on. Add to those six decades another 170 years that these soils fed Bethlehem, and Shady Lawn's legacy of stewardship, the deep-rooted ties to the land and everything it provides, becomes self-evident, from Germantown's Lasher family settling on the site after the American Revolution; to the Kelderhouse family who were the likely builders of the property's 1840s barn; to the Sagers, and back again to Lasher descendants who constructed the larger Victorian barn from the 1880s, both of which still stand strong today.

An excellent opportunity exists to carry this legacy forward, upholding traditions that sustained, promoted, and elevated the very best of what makes our community so special. Town leaders have taken the first crucial steps in preserving this remarkable history, and I wish them the very best as they seek out the next chapter for this land.



Note: A wonderful chronology of Shady Lawn exists in the town archives along with many photographs, news clippings and other memorabilia. Much of it is copied from the collection of Will's youngest daughter Margaret Heath Thayer, who was active in the Bethlehem Historical Association for decades.

Bill Ketzer is Bethlehem's Town Historian and a longtime member of BHA.

ABOVE:
W.H. Heath loads milk bottles in an undated photo.

LEFT:
The milking parlor, W.H. is on the left.

Both courtesy of the Heath-Thayer Family Archive

News & Notes

Speaker Series Updates

The last talk in our Fall Speaker Series is on November 15. Justin Wexler speaks on the *Land Between Waterfalls: Documenting Five Centuries of Indigenous Land Use in the Town of Bethlehem*. Native place names reveal that the Town of Bethlehem lay in a contested region in the 17th Century. Historic documentation is scarce, but careful analysis of what is available can tell us much about a nearly vanished world. Join us for this presentation to get a glimpse of the Bethlehem area in the era before Euro-American settlement.



Our spring 2024 series is finalized as follows:

February 21: Mike Engle speaks on the *History of Diners in New York*.

March 20: Michael T. Lucas speaks on African American families in the Bethlehem and Albany area and the transition from slavery to freedom following the Abolition of slavery in NY in 1827.

April 17: Robb Haberman gives his talk *Writing in the Service of His Country: The Revolutionary War Memoir of James Selkirk*.

All talks take place at the Bethlehem Public Library at 7 p.m. Be sure to register via the library's website, Bethlehem.LibraryCalendar.com or by calling 518-439-9314. Registration opens one month prior to the talk.



Exhibit News

Archaeologist and BHA member Dan Mazeau has been working on identifying the stone artifacts in our Native American exhibit case. Look for updates to this display in the spring.

Also this spring, for the "Big Wall" display space, say goodbye to Anna Hoffman Clapper and hello to Maria Becker. Karen Beck and her team of Dear Marias have been transcribing Becker's letters and researching their context in 1850s and 60s Bethlehem for quite some time now. We look forward to how they will transform the documents into a lively exhibit.



Top two images: Historic Cherry Hill and Philip Van Rensselaer. Bottom images two images by Tim Beebe



YOU HAVE TWO OPPORTUNITIES TO VISIT OUR

HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE

**SUNDAYS DECEMBER 3 AND 10
12 TO 4 P.M.**

**AT OUR CEDAR HILL SCHOOLHOUSE MUSEUM
1003 RIVER ROAD, SELKIRK**

**ENJOY THE MUSEUM DECORATED FOR THE
HOLIDAYS FEATURING *WINTER BELLS***

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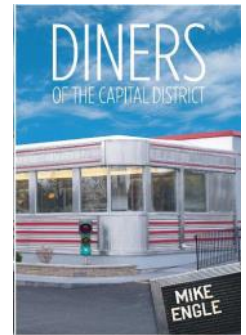
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Rivers, Roads, and Rails will be transitioned to our new moveable exhibit panel. The glass exhibit cases will be filled with a themed costume exhibit. Come to the Holiday Open house to find out what the theme will be!

Many thanks to Tom Burzesi for lending us his Slingerland 1907 railroad diorama. We hope to keep this historically accurate display through the spring time.



Top to Bottom: Engle's book about New York diners; Anna Hoffman Clapper; At home in 1940s Bethlehem; Close up of Tom Burzesi's railroad diorama. Bottom two courtesy of Ralph Rio

Thank You Volunteers

Have you read this newsletter and marveled at all that BHA does? I certainly appreciate everything our committees and individual members do to keep this organization vibrant. For our program year ending May 31, 2023, we averaged 234 volunteer hours per month. That's a lot of time and talent! Won't you join us as a member and a volunteer? I'd be happy to hear from you. Susan Leath, BHA president, SusanLeath2011@gmail.com



There are many historic markers around town. How many have you spotted?

The Bethlehem Historical Association and the Town Historian are embarking on a project regarding our town's historic markers. Here's a note from BHA member John Berninger about his experience so far.

It's been a great year of traveling for me and it's nice to be able to settle back into the comforts of my home in Slingerlands. I've started working with the Bethlehem Historical Association on a project to catalog, photograph, and map the markers which have been placed by various historical organizations, municipalities, and individuals. The area will include not only the current Town of Bethlehem, but also the Town of New Scotland and the southern part of the City of Albany, which were originally part of our Town. I'm really excited about this project and looking forward to learning more about our history and making it come alive.

Stay tuned for details about this worthwhile project! All photos courtesy of John Berninger.



An article from the January 20, 1943 Knickerbocker News about farming difficulties during World War II illustrated with a photo from the Heath Dairy.



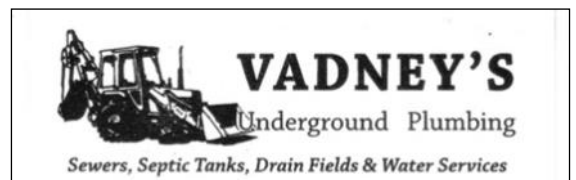
Above left: Heath Dairy barns about 2008.



Below left and above: Heath Dairy barns today.

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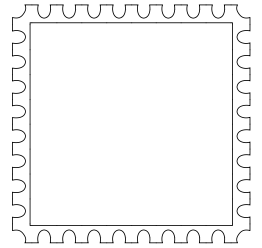
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John Berninger & Susan Leath

*Live for Today Dream for Tomorrow
Learn from Yesterday*

EVENTS Calendar

Tuesday November 7– all day!
Election Day Bake Sale

Friday, November 17, 11 a.m.
Out and About at Historic Cherry Hill
Please R.S.V.P to Vicki Folger
518-439-1824 or email vhf49@yahoo.com

Wednesday, November 15, 7 p.m.
Fall Speaker Series at Bethlehem Public Library
Justin Wexler speaks on the *Land Between Waterfalls:
Documenting Five Centuries of Indigenous Land Use in the
Town of Bethlehem.*

Sundays December 3 and 10 12 to 4 p.m.
Holiday Open House

Saturdays in November and December
We are at the **Delmar Farmers Market** from 9 to 1 a.m.
In the cafeteria of the Middle School, 332 Kenwood Ave.

