

# Bethlehem Historical Association

## NEWSLETTER

### Summer 2025



## Trees - A Natural History

By Bill Ketzer

As history lovers, our primary focus is generally on either people or places. When it comes to the latter, we tend to place a lot of focus on our built environment, like that 18<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse painstakingly crafted from Helderberg limestone, or that old Dutch-style barn on the outskirts of town (or sometimes hidden in plain sight). We don't always consider the landscape – the trees primarily, whether, sown by nature or nurture. This is too bad, because how much more sublime can our treasured historic properties be under a lush and verdant overstory of arboribus!



*White Oak, Slingerlands*

I'm not kidding when I say we must have just about every major species of tree that can grow in the Northeast on our property. We've got red maple and red oak. White ash, white poplar and white oak. Black walnut, black willow, black cherry, black oak, buckthorn, boxelder and beech with bark smooth and cool as snakeskin. Cottonwood, dogwood, and basswood. Apple, Sycamore, sugar maple, silver maple, sassafras, sweet birch, swamp oak, shagbark hickory and hornbeam. We even have a stand of quaking aspen, which is really an enormous single organism that grows in clones, reproducing primarily by sending up sprouts from its roots. The oldest known specimen, in Minnesota, is over 8,000 years old.

We also have several majestic catalpa trees in our front yard, with their twisting trunks, massive heart-shaped leaves, enormous white blossoms and seed pods longer than drumsticks. No one seems to covet these anymore, probably because they're so messy for half the year, but I could just about cry when I gaze long enough into an early summer setting sun as it back-lights their collective canopy in full bloom. They transport me back to my childhood home, where I'd sit in my little sandbox beneath the shade of a young catalpa, waiting for my father to come home from work and build sandcastles with me.

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Then come the conifers. Red pine, pitch pine, jack pine, Douglas fir, Eastern hemlock, and who knows how many varieties of spruce and cedar. And of course, the majestic and mystifyingly fragrant White pines, primitive beauties that can live to be over 400 years old, and were everywhere in this area before the bulldozers really brought the hammer down in the Mid-20th Century. A doctor from New Hampshire who came of age here in the 1950s (see our Spring 2022 newsletter) tells of climbing one near his house to spy on the family that lived above. When we visited it together, I half expected him to climb it one last time.

We host dozens of American elms (in reality, they host us), impressive because most died off when Dutch Elm Disease ravaged their numbers in the 1940s-50s. Maybe it's because our back woodlot has remained untouched since that era, when the Wehrle family bought the property from Bender family descendants to build their empty-nest compound here, at the dawn of the Atomic Age. Who knows? Most are scraggly and we have lost a few for sure, but there's still a handful of majestic midlife and senior specimens on our six acres, and scores of younger adults. They're kind of like The Waltons of woods here.

Then there's the stock deliberately planted here, including several types of apple and crabapple trees, Japanese maples that look almost like kinetic sculptures, and the little leaf linden that came courtesy Bethlehem's forward-thinking Street Tree Program in 2017. This land also has a legacy in Red mulberry trees, a specimen which author Richard Powers calls, "older than the separation of yin and yang, the Tree of Renewal, the tree at the universe's center, the hollow tree housing the sacred Tao."

This was one of the first things Karen Hunt – the middle daughter of former landowner G. Howard Goold – asked about when she visited me unexpectedly in the summer of 2018. She mentioned a particularly large one in the front yard which I assumed was long gone, but a year later a long dead mulberry tipped to the ground behind an overgrown knoll, a space owned by the O'Hern family on the corner of Norge and Elsmere. "We would eat all the fruit that fell from those trees in the summer," Karen, now almost 80, explained during her visit. "Between those and the raspberry rows out back, we kept ourselves pretty busy."

Brenda Unright recalls that there were many more than now when she and her husband-to-be Lou moved here in 1978. The Unrights have a long history in town and the couple lived their whole married life in our home. "There was one right behind the garage and more across the yard toward the next house over," she told me. "In July of 1979, I think 80 out of the 86 people at our outdoor wedding had mulberry stains somewhere on their clothes."



*White Pine Bark, Slingerlands*

But the trees that captivate my imagination most are those that line our gravel drive from Elsmere Avenue, which is more likely than not the same entrance to the property that existed when its original owners arrived and departed by horse and carriage, before the road was connected to Delaware Avenue. There is a sugar maple, two silver maples, one red maple, one Norway maple, one Siberian elm and one Himalayan birch. These trees were planted sometime before the dawn of the 20th century, making them approximately 125-140 years old. They live lives of patient providence. Of Horus, of healing and making whole.

Together, their all-seeing eyes have witnessed so much, the ravages of seasons, the merciless and endless lash of human convention. Of living and dying, of soaking in the inimitable weight of consequence, of mistaking miracle for just another cross to bear. Generations of children ascending into and leaping from their branches. Weddings, anniversaries, high school reunions, birthdays. Regarded as if in repose by teachers, administrators, accountants, farmers, firemen, field workers, lawmakers, diners, enforcers,

contractors, ideologues, soldiers, socialites, salespeople, students, gardeners, grease monkeys, hairdressers, headbangers, mothers, fathers, fighters, lovers. Drinkers, thinkers and tinkerers. At 3 AM I can hear them breathe if press myself against them in stillness on the grit, joined, as Herman Hesse once said, "in a longing for home, for a memory of the mother, for new metaphors for life." They stop the mind and never ask for the time, for not long after the first flower opened its petals to the sun in primordial bliss, their ancestors figured out how to persevere, thrive, rooted in place with crowns at the mercy of blistering cold and sweltering sun. Drought and flood. Without judgment and bereft of the excessive and destructive burden of projection or regret.

The original Survivor Series.



*American Sycamore, Slingerlands*

So, as spring arrives, I'm paying tribute and looking out for survivors, for the witness trees of Bethlehem, which somehow remains loaded with ancient specimens hiding in plain sight, beckoning to an earlier era when developers took pains to build neighborhoods around legacy trees, as opposed to sending them to the chipper. Won't you join me?

Photos by John Berninger

## Bethlehem Historical Association

Annual Report for June 1, 2024 to May 31, 2025

The volunteers of the Bethlehem Historical Association take many paths in their effort to connect our community with its past and to ensure that future generations have access to that heritage.

Our primary community connection is through our museum. During this season, the Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum was open Sunday afternoons from February until October as well as several other days when we were open for special events and groups.

Special events started with our Annual Ice Cream Social in June, followed by a visit with Bethlehem Seniors, a book signing, Puzzle Party, Path Thru History Day, a visit with homeschoolers, our annual Holiday Open Houses, Winter School Vacation Week and an exhibit opening. One can add a few days when volunteers were working at the museum and welcomed the random walk-in visitor. While the numbers are clear (51 days open to the public, 575+ visitors), they really don't tell the whole story or reflect the hundreds of hours volunteers donated to make them happen.

And what did visitors enjoy at the museum? We like to say "local history at its finest." Highlights include our themed exhibits *Dear Maria...Voices from the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, *Bethlehem in the 1940s*, *Rivers, Roads, and Rails*, and *Bethlehem's One Room Schoolhouses*. New in March 2025 was *Fun and Frolic: Sport, Recreation, Competition and Community*. Long running favorites include our dollhouses, a railroad diorama of Slingerlands and a feature panel on the 3 Farms Dairy. And we shouldn't forget the building itself; an architecturally significant schoolhouse originally built in 1859 with many improvements over the years including its expansion designed by noted architect Marcus Reynolds. This past season we were also able to have our outbuildings (the tollgate, carriage house and outhouse) open for designated Sundays.

Other community connections included our Young Historians who brought local history to all of Bethlehem Central's fourth grade classrooms as well as Becker Elementary. We partnered with the Bethlehem Public Library to present our lectures series where participants (440+ over six talks) enjoyed topics ranging from the hay press to the railroad, Victory Gardens to Albany Fire Houses. We partnered with the Town Historian's office on the Bethlehem Oral History Project. In April we hosted a very successful Afternoon Tea that featured a visit with Eleanor Roosevelt. Almost 100 community members enjoyed that event. Throughout the year, we built community through our active Facebook page.

BHA also strives to connect future generations with our historic heritage. This past season, we did that by supporting the Town Historian's efforts to create a Historic Preservation Commission. BHA also supported the Historic Heath Farm initiative. We strove to preserve our collection of historic artifacts, ephemera and photographs for future generations.

Of course, all is not sunshine and roses. Our historic buildings continue to be an upkeep issue, especially the basement of the schoolhouse and the tollgate building roof. Our collection storage spaces are bulging at the seams, and yet there are so many wonderful artifacts out there that we want to accept. Each item contributes to the story of Bethlehem, yet we struggle to find room. Volunteers need to be recruited and nurtured along to leadership roles. Funds need to be raised to support our activities and pay the bills.

This annual report would not be complete without a huge thank you to the Town of Bethlehem. The town owns the Cedar Hill Schoolhouse building and takes its care seriously. The Highway Department has made several improvements this year including upgrades to our handicap ramp and walkway. In addition, work has begun on the tollgate building. Highway also takes care of routine needs like snow plowing and lawn mowing. Currently, the Supervisor and Public Works department are working diligently to put our vestibule improvement grant into action.

We here at the Bethlehem Historical Association are proud to stand as stewards of our community's history, both today and into the future. Our annual meeting this year celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our endeavor. We look forward to 60 more!

Respectfully Submitted,

Susan Leath

President, 2023-2025



# News and Notes



Tim Bebee's photographs capture the fun and excitement of the BHA's 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner which was held on May 22 at the Normanside Country Club.



## Museum Closed for August Inventory and Cleanup

The Bethlehem Historical Museum will be closed to the public throughout the month of August as we conduct an inventory review and deep cleaning. This important behind-the-scenes work helps us preserve and care for the many artifacts, documents, and exhibits that tell the story of our community's rich history.

We appreciate your patience and understanding during this brief closure and look forward to welcoming you back in September!

**We are asking those members who have not yet renewed to get their renewal in to PO Box 263, Selkirk, NY 12158. Thank You.**





## Bethlehem Historical Association

Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum

P.O. Box 263

Selkirk, NY 12158

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Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum

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