Bethlehem Historical Association
NEWSLETTER
Fall 2026

Can the Great Flood of 1913 Occur Again?

How did I learn about the Great Flood of 1913? It started with a kayaking trip and curiosity.

I have been curious about the concrete barriers that line the shores of the Hudson River in the Henry Hudson Park. When were the barriers built? Why were they built? During a kayaking trip this summer, I came across a clue that provides a path to the answers. The clue is a concrete slab labeled “U.S.E.D. 1915”.

What was U.S.E.D.?

President Jefferson established The United States Engineering Department (USED) in 1802 and headquartered it in West Point, NY. USED became the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). Its primary mission spans many assignments which include reducing risks from disasters. USED and USACE designed and built civil works projects for navigation channels, dams, and flood control. This includes the Hudson River, which is a federal waterway under the jurisdiction of the US Coast Guard.



Hudson River Erosion Protection

Why 1915?

In 1915, USED executed several projects in the Albany area following the devastating Great Flood of 1913. Massive federal and state efforts to control the river's flow, prevent sandbars, and expand commercial navigation involved erosion protection and shoreline engineering along the Hudson River near Albany and Bethlehem.

The Great Flood of 1913

The Great Flood of 1913 occurred from rainfall of 6 to 9 inches between March 23 and March 26. The heavy rain caused flooding along major rivers in the central and eastern United States. Related deaths and damage were extensive and widespread.

The Great Flood of 1913 remains one of the worst natural disasters in the history of New York's Capital Region. Following days of torrential rain on top of melting Adirondack snowpack, the Hudson River crested in Albany on March 28, 1913, at an unprecedented 21.45 feet – which is the height of a typical two-story house with a pitched roof. The river has a tide that normally crests at just four feet.

Damage in Bethlehem, NY

- Transportation Washouts: Water undermined coastal roadways and segments of regional railroad tracks which became unstable. This isolated rural residents from the city center and services.
- Submerged Farm and Agricultural Land: Bethlehem sits lower along the riverbanks directly south of Albany. The river completely swallowed the low-lying agricultural flats, islands, and shores. Silt, debris, and raw sewage ruined early-season crops and drowned livestock.
- Severe Bank Erosion: The sheer volume and velocity of the water moving south significantly eroded the banks of the Hudson. It washed away private docks, boat launches, and structural shorelines like seawalls. The flood also carved out large sections of earth near the mouths of local tributaries like the Normans Kill and Volmans Kill.



Arch and South Pearl, Albany in 1913

Downtown Albany Damage:

- Shutdown of the Business District: The Hudson River overtopped its banks and completely submerged Broadway, State Street, and the South End. Roiling water filled the cellars and first floors of hundreds of homes, factories, and retail shops.
- The Typhoid Epidemic: A catastrophic impact was the flooding of Albany's riverfront pumping stations and water filtration facilities. Raw sewage and industrial runoff from upstream mixed directly into the public drinking water supply. This triggered a severe typhoid fever epidemic just weeks later, killing over 180 people and sickening thousands more.
- Complete Grid Paralyzed The city lost all electricity and gas lines ruptured. Railroad tracks washed out, and the trolley system stopped working. These disruptions suspended schools and commerce.

- Stranded Residents: Police and emergency volunteers had to use rowboats to rescue families trapped on the upper floors of buildings in the South End. For days, food baskets passed between buildings using improvised clotheslines to feed stranded survivors.

Can the Flood Reoccur?

This recent July gave us record rainfall, raising concerns about flood control. On July 29, 2026, Albany recorded 5.45 inches of rain in a single day. For the month of July, Albany had 9.59 inches of rain, making it the second wettest July on record going back to 1826. These amounts are comparable to the Great Flood of 1913!

However, the USED's flood prevention projects continue to exist and function today. To keep the shipping channels open and protect the banks from severe tidal and flood-related erosion, the U.S. Engineer Department deployed a system of heavy structural interventions:

- Concrete and Stone Shoreline: USED installed heavy concrete embankments and caps to harden the shoreline, dramatically altering the natural sloping wetlands of the area into stable, vertical banks.
- Shore-Protection Dikes: USED heavily engineered the banks in Albany and Bethlehem (particularly near what is now Henry Hudson Park and the Normanskill creek mouth) by constructing parallel rows of timber-and-stone dikes. These dikes narrowed and straightened the river channel to utilize the natural current to "scour" away silt while physically preventing soil from settling in the shipping lanes.
- Closing Offside Channels: Major engineering took place to close off marshy side channels and fill the space between natural islands using dredged materials. Around Bethlehem, the addition of fill around areas like Cabbage Island and Castle Island merged them with the mainland to stabilize the western riverfront.
- The Troy Lock and Dam Completion: Just upstream from Albany, USED completed the construction of the Troy Federal Dam in 1915. While its primary goal was navigation, it also functioned as a major hydrological control point that stabilized water levels, helping mitigate the fierce, eroding currents of seasonal floods.

Chlorination: The devastation of 1913 directly changed how New York managed its drinking water. The typhoid epidemic caused the state to mandate the chlorination of all public water supplies.

Great Sacandaga Lake: The physical damage to Albany and Bethlehem directly motivated the state legislature to create river regulating districts. This led to the construction of the Conklingville Dam for the massive Great Sacandaga Lake reservoir system that provides the primary flood defense that Bethlehem relies on today. Also, the creation of other smaller lakes provides supplementary support to control flooding.

The flood control measures ensure that a disaster like the Great Flood of 1913 will not happen again. The USED and NY State projects in 1915 and shortly thereafter continue to protect Albany and Bethlehem – as tested and proven by the heavy rains in July.

Recommended Sunday Outing

In the spring on a Sunday, take a picnic lunch to the Henry Hudson Park and then visit the BHA museum.

Henry Hudson Park offers several amenities for both historic interest and recreation. Of historic interest are the 1915 concrete barriers along the shoreline of the river, and a plaque on large stone in the middle of the park commemorating Henry Hudson's landing on September 18 and 19, 1609. Recreation includes kayaks for rent, picnic tables, grills, playground, fishing dock, boat ramp, pavilion, and more. Since the Coast Guard has jurisdiction of the Hudson River below the Troy Federal Dam, a NYS Fishing License is not required when fishing. This includes Henry Hudson Park.

Then visit the BHA museum. Across River Road from the park, the museum is open most Sundays from 2 to 4 PM – check the calendar on the website bethlehemhistorical.org.

The Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Survived

The historic schoolhouse (then known as Cedar Hill School) that later became BHA's Museum sat directly in the flood-prone corridor along River Road. Because the building is on a slightly elevated terrace just uphill from the absolute lowest marshy flats of the Hudson River, it escaped destruction and continued as a school for decades. Since 1965, it has housed the Bethlehem Historical Association's museum.

- *Ralph Rio*



Kayak and Canoe Put IN

Revolutionary History on Jolley Road

Have you ever wandered east past the Glenmont roundabout, over the Thruway and noticed Jolley Road on the left? Have you been silly like me and wondered what they were so happy about to name a road Jolly? Turns out, like many roads in Bethlehem, it was named after the Jolley (or Jolly) family. While modern-day Jolley Road leads past Our Lady Help of Christians Cemetery and ends at the Legends subdivision, 100+ years ago it led to Samuel Jolley's Chrystal Hill Farm. 150 years before that, it led to Hugh and Eleanor Jolley's farm and then down the hill to the old Abbey Hotel.



Hugh Jolly (1721-1804), his wife Eleanor Key (1736-1823) and several of their children arrived in our area from Scotland in the early 1770s. Hugh's 1802 will lists seven children: Samuel, Hugh, James, Jane, Jennett, Barbara and Mary. It appears that Mary, the youngest, was born here about 1780.

During the Revolutionary War years, Hugh ran the old Abbey Hotel, described in one document as a tippling house two miles south of Albany. Hugh is also noted as a soldier of the American Revolution. He is listed in the book *New York in the Revolution* as being part of Capt. John Vanderheyden's Third Regiment, Albany County Militia (Land Bounty Rights).

The men listed in the Land Bounty Rights section might, or might not, have served actual terms of duty. They signed up and agreed to serve but were either never called up, or their service has not been documented. While the book doesn't use this exact phrase, it basically says more research is needed to prove their service.

What I do have documentation for is the time when Hugh Jolly was called up before the Albany County Committee for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies on March 11, 1777.

Below is the direct quote:

> "Hugh Jolly and his Son in Law having been apprehended by order of this Committee for harboring Negroes and being Persons Inimical to the Cause of America and it having appeared that the Son in Law does not reside at Jolly's but accidently came there Resolved Thereupon That the Son in Law be discharged from Confinement, and that Jolly remain in Confinement till the farther order of this Committee."

Despite his confinement against the cause, Jolly did sign up for Land Bounty Rights, essentially agreeing to the revolutionary cause. Individuals had individual responses to the call to rise up against the king. Some chose uprising, and we call them Patriots. Some remained loyal to the crown, and some switched back and forth, making the best decisions that their present and personal circumstances required.

I imagine that someone like Hugh Jolly, an older man (he would have been in his upper 50s) relatively newly arrived from Scotland, would make different decisions compared to a younger man like his son James. James, who was about 20 during the war, is listed as having service as an enlisted man with the Third Regiment under Col. Philipp P. Schulyer. I imagine a 20-year-old wanting adventure and an older family man attempting to protect his family and property.

Hugh and Eleanor Jolly lived and worked and raised their family in Bethlehem before being laid to rest at the Nicoll Sill Cemetery in Cedar Hill. Their many descendants were integral parts of Bethlehem history.



Hugh Jolly is remembered as a Revolutionary War soldier on this plaque at the Nicoll Sill Cemetery on Dinmore Road. At some point the family added the e to their name, Jolley. (Courtesy of Tim Beebe)

Side note #1: You might be curious to know that the Son in Law mentioned above was either Jane's husband John Crumb, Jennett's husband James Alexander, or Barbara's husband Robert Henry.

Side note #2: Hugh Jolly's last will and testament is available online and is very interesting. The will, dated 1802, just a couple years prior to his death, lists monetary bequests to his "dearly beloved wife Eleanor" and all of his children. Sons Samuel and Hugh are listed as receiving "all the residue of my estate, after the above legacies are paid to wit Bonds, Bills, Notes & Book debts, Horses, Horned cattle, Hoggs, Sheep & all farming utensils to be equally divided betwixt them and I give to my wife Eleanor the Choice of a cow out of my Stock if she wishes to have one." I wonder if Eleanor picked out a cow. Samuel and Hugh are listed as executors along with their sister Mary as executrix. That's the first time I've seen a daughter listed in that capacity.

Side note #3: Two of Eleanor and Hugh's sons appear in a death notice published in the *Albany Argus* February 6, 1851. "At his residence, in Coeymans, on the night of the 31st … Samuel Jolly, aged 87 years, brother of the Rev. Hugh Jolly. The Messrs Jolly emigrated to America from Scotland with their parents on or before the commencement of the American revolution, and the family continued residents first of the town of Bethlehem and since (for nearly half a century) of the town of Coeymans. When followers of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church first came into the county of Albany, Samuel and Hugh Jolly became early converts…"

-Susan E. Leath

- Historian Susan E. Leath has been researching Bethlehem's Revolutionary War soldiers. Read more on her blog *BethlehemNYHistory.blogspot.com*



This portion of the 1854 Peace map shows the Heirs of H. Jolly and The Abbey. Note Jolly Island as well. (The complete map can be found online in the New York Public Library's digital collection.)



This portion of the 1891 Beers map clearly shows the farm lane that would become Jolley Road. (The complete map, Section 32, can be found online in the New York Public Library's digital collection.)

Help Us Make History - Volunteer with BHA!

The Bethlehem Historical Association thrives because of people who care about preserving our community's history. Whether you enjoy connecting with others, sharing your knowledge, organizing behind the scenes, or lending a helping hand at events, there's a place for you at BHA! We have several exciting opportunities to get involved, and we would love to welcome some new faces to our volunteer team.

Membership Chair or Co-Chair

Help us keep our BHA family growing!

Do you enjoy meeting people, staying organized, and helping others feel welcome? We're looking for a friendly, organized volunteer (or two!) to help lead our membership efforts beginning in the new year. This role includes welcoming new members, coordinating annual renewals, maintaining membership information, and keeping our members connected. You'll also have a voice in BHA leadership by participating in executive meetings. This is a wonderful opportunity to make a meaningful difference, and the responsibilities can be shared between co-chairs!

Young Historians Program

Inspire the next generation of history lovers!

Are you a retired teacher, educator, or someone who loves working with children? Help bring Bethlehem's fascinating history to life for local fourth graders! Volunteers assist with educational history kits and engaging school sessions that introduce students to the stories of their own community. It's a rewarding way to share your enthusiasm for history and spark curiosity in young minds.

Hospitality Volunteers

Help us make every gathering feel special!

Love baking, welcoming guests, or creating a warm and inviting atmosphere? Our hospitality volunteers help make BHA events memorable by preparing refreshments, setting up welcoming spaces, and lending a hand during gatherings. Whether you enjoy baking a favorite treat or simply helping things run smoothly, we'd love to have you join us!

Schoolhouse House Manager

Help keep our historic Schoolhouse welcoming and ready for visitors!

Our beloved Cedar Hill Schoolhouse is at the heart of so much that we do, and we're looking for someone who takes pride in keeping things organized and welcoming. This behind-the-scenes role involves helping maintain supplies, keeping track of everyday essentials, and coordinating simple checklists for our Sunday hosts. It's a great opportunity for someone who enjoys organization and wants to help care for a treasured piece of Bethlehem's history.

Every Helping Hand Makes a Difference!

You don't have to be a history expert to make an impact at BHA. All you need is a little time, a willingness to help, and an appreciation for our community. Interested in learning more? We'd love to hear from you! Reach out to Jeff Lurie at jeff@bethlehemhistoricalny.org to explore an opportunity that fits your interests and availability.

Together, we can preserve Bethlehem's past and inspire its future!

-Jeff Lurie
President

From the Collection Committee

One of our most important - and challenging - responsibilities is interpreting the past accurately while also presenting it in an engaging way. We like to visit museums because exhibits featuring authentic objects from designated time periods transport us and help us to understand and appreciate the past.

To that end, we continually seek such additions to our collections. Ordinary everyday items are as important as unique ones. Although Bethlehem has a long history, its more recent stories are just as interesting and important to tell. Sometimes we forget that we are making history every day. Your family photographs or letters might tell a local story in a way that newspaper accounts could not do.

At the same time, however, we must be disciplined because our storage space is very limited. Like all New York State chartered museums, we are required to have a Collection Management Policy. Each proposed acquisition is evaluated against established criteria to ensure that we build the collections responsibly.

If you have something that might help us share Bethlehem's history and would be interested in donating it to BHA, we would like to hear about it. For your convenience, we have a new mailbox just for that purpose. Send us your thoughts, and we will reply promptly.

-

-Karen Beck

Donations@bethlehemhistorical.org

"Wat is er?" (What is it? in Dutch)

Have some fun with our historical guessing game.

See p. 10 for the answer



From “The Spotlight”

March 3, 1966

Governor To Be Guest

Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller will be the guest speaker at the testimonial luncheon for Miss Ruth Miner, given by the Women's Republican Club, Town of Bethlehem, at the Delmar Methodist Church on March 8, at 12:30 p.m. The Ron. Louis J. Lefkowitz. Attorney General of the State of New York will introduce the Governor. The event marks the 40th anniversary of the Women's Republican Club. Miss Miner served as President for 25 years.

November 24, 1966



Thanks to the Bethlehem Public Library, an archive of The Spotlight is available at https://webapps.bethlehempubliclibrary.org/spotlight.asp

The business sponsors for this newsletter are:

Pratt & Associates LLC

Vadney’s Underground Plumbing

SABIC

Wat is er? (What is it? in Dutch)

Our “Wat” is a late 19th- or early 20th-century miniature glass oil-burning lamp known as a “courting lamp”. According to legend, when a young suitor came courting, he was allowed to stay as long as the oil lamp was burning. As he arrived at the home of his sweetheart, the lamp was lit. When it burned out, it was a quiet but firm reminder for the suitor that it was time to end his date.

Our example of a courting lamp is just 4 inches tall and 3 ¾ inches wide. To light the lamp, the tin cap is removed to reveal a small wick. Lamp oil or alcohol is poured on it, then travels down a tube onto the wad of cotton inside the glass. Can you imagine how long the little lamp might stay lit before it went out?

The father would light the lamp in the parlor when a young man came to call on his daughter. Folklore says that if a father liked the suitor, he would have a high level of oil. If he disapproved, he filled it with just a little oil so it burned out more quickly for a short stay.

But this little lamp still has another story to tell. The letter "W" is pressed into the bottom of the glass, a maker's mark that stands for Wheaton Laboratory, a manufacturer of laboratory supplies. The wick on this small lamp was used to sterilize equipment such as needles and scalpels. Wheaton still exists today as part of DWK Labs (Duran, Wheaton, Kimble).

The courting lamp is currently part of the “Flickering Lights” exhibit at the Museum. The exhibit features several oil-burning lamps of various shapes and sizes, including a “Columbian Exposition Lamp” from the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Look for the tiny courting lamp next time you visit the Museum.

-Jeanne Biggins



Courting Lamp



The letter “W" is a maker's mark that stands for Wheaton Laboratory

From the Publisher

Advances in technology have enabled us to improve the publication of our newsletter. With this issue, we have moved to a cloud application called 'Click2Mail' that automates the printing, addressing, folding, and mailing. This service improves our workflow and provides faster delivery while also reducing our costs. If you would like to provide feedback, please send me a note at riorp@verison.net. Thank you.

-

Upcoming Events

Waterford Historical Museum and Cultural Center. Sunday, November 8 at 1:30 PM
Old Stone Fort Museum. Saturday, November 21 at 10:00 AM.
Holiday Open House - Sunday, December 6
Holiday Open House - Sunday, December 13
Cabin Fever Social - Sunday, February 7
Afternoon Tea Fundraiser - Saturday, April 24
Annual Meeting - Thursday, May 27
Memorial Day Parade - Monday, May 31
Ice Cream Social - Sunday, July 18

Speaker Series at the Bethlehem Public Library

- Bethlehem and the Revolution: Veteran Stories - Susan Leath. - Tuesday, November 17 · 6:30 – 8:00 pm
- Japanese American Incarceration - Jeffery Urbin. Tuesday, February 16, 2027 · 6:30 – 8:00 pm
- The Battle of Normanskill and the Battle of the Flockey - Mark Stolzenburg. Tuesday, March 16, 2027 · 6:30 – 8:00 pm
- Ice Harvesting - Tom Ragosta. Tuesday, April 20, 2027 · 6:30 – 8:00 pm

Call for Objects: Upcoming Hudson River Exhibit ("Big Wall")

Our Exhibits Team is hard at work preparing a major new exhibit on the Hudson River, set to open on the Museum's "Big Wall" in early 2027. We are seeking historic artifacts or detailed replica models to illustrate local river life, including:

- **Ship and Boat Models:** Dau liners, schooners, river sloops, or half-hull wall models.
- **Early Aviation:** A c. 1908 bi-wing airplane model (illustrating Glenn Curtiss's historic Hudson River Flight).
- **River Wildlife:** A mounted Hudson River fish (such as sturgeon or striped bass).

If you have items or family artifacts you would be willing to lend or donate, please contact Exhibits Chair Susan Leath at 518-209-5855 or SusanLeath2011@gmail.com

Bethlehem Historical Association
Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum
P.O. Box 263
Selkirk, NY 12158

The Bethlehem
Historical Association
Cedar Hill Schoolhouse Museum

1003 River Road
P.O. Box 263
Selkirk, NY 12158
(518) 767-9432
info@bethlehemhistorical.org
BethlehemHistorical.org

Follow us on Facebook!

Officers for 2025-2027
President - Jeff Lurie
Vice President - Don Klime
Recording Secretary - Barbara Castle
Treasurer - Susan Leath

Trustees/Term
Andrew Reilly 2027
Sharon Sestak 2027
Karen Beck 2028
Ralph Rio 2028
Jeanne Biggins 2029
Tim Beebe 2026
Linda Schacht 2026
Bill Ketzer, Town Historian, Ex-Officio Member
Jeff Lurie, President, Ex-Officio Member
Newsletter Editor - John Berninger and Ralph Rio