



THE SENTINEL

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The Newsletter of the New Scotland Historical Association

Spring 2023

A CRIME MOST FOUL: THE DUNBAR HOLLOW MURDERS

From reports compiled by Judy Kimes

“Over the steep Helderberg railing southwest of Clarksville lies a deep valley that slumbers in a forgotten pocket of time. It is called Dunbar Hollow and a century ago it was the scene of a crime that aroused public opinion to a fever pitch.”

“Today Dunbar Hollow is a place of old apple trees... crumbling stone fences and deep quiet. But there are men in Clarksville to whom the name Reuben Dunbar calls up memories of stories told by their grandfathers, and the details of the Dunbar murders – and how the circling crows led to discovery of a little boy’s body hung high in a hemlock tree – are sometimes recalled around the stove in Myron Earl’s store.”

So begins a 1949 **Knickerbocker News** article featuring this all-too-true event.

The date was Saturday, September 28, 1850. Reuben Dunbar was 20 years old, living and working on the farm which was his birthplace. The youngest of seven children, Reuben’s father, Alexander, died when he was about three. Left with all those children and with caring for a farm of 180 acres, Reuben’s mother, Hannah, hired David Lester, then about 23, to work the farm for her. This he did until December 1833, when he married Mrs. Dunbar and took over the farm and became the guardian of the children. Prior to this, Mr. Lester had no property of his own. He eventually came into the possession of the entire farm, valued at \$6,000 (\$236,000 today).

When David Lester’s brother died and his widow was unable to care for their 3 children, David took in their two boys to raise – David and Steven, ages 9 and 7. Since David Lester was now the owner of the Dunbar farm, this meant that on his death, ownership to the farm would likely pass to his 2 young nephews.

On the morning of September 28, David Lester loaded up his buckboard and left the farm to go to Brigg’s grist mill in what is now Alcove. As he waved good-bye, David and Steven were standing near the wagon house with Reuben Dunbar. Lester was never to see the boys alive again.

Returning at dusk, Lester was met by Reuben who told him he was searching for the boys because they had not come home for supper, and he did not know where they could be. Lester went about caring for the horses, bedding them down for the night, then returning to the house where his wife, (Reuben’s mother), and Reuben’s new bride of 4 weeks, Betsy, were washing the supper dishes. As they prepared supper for Lester, they tried to figure out where the boys could be. A sleepless night ensued.

At dawn the following morning a search began. It was Sunday and, as word went out, neighbors came around to help find the boys. By nightfall, no trace of the boys had been found. On Monday more men joined the search without success. The same for Tuesday, except more and more men joined in the search. Reuben, himself, helped lead the search. Reuben was repeatedly asked to recall the details of the last time he saw the missing boys. As he added various circumstances he had not told before, some began to be suspicious of the way his story kept changing. Some of the searchers also noticed that he seemed to lead them toward some areas while keeping them away from others. He would say, “What’s the use of looking there? We’ve been all over that section before.”

LOST CHILDREN!

In Westerlo, on Saturday, Sept. 28th, strayed or taken, two little brothers, from the premises of Mr. DAVID LESTER, 10 or 11 o'clock A. M. The elder was in the 10th and the younger in the 8th year of his age. The elder one was spare, light complexion, light brown hair and eyes; the younger had dark brown hair and eyes. The elder one was without coat or shoes; a light summer vest, blue striped cotton pants and cloth cap. The younger wore a Nankens frock coat, a light vest, two pair of Cotton pants, the under ones white, the other changeable, a sea-washed hat, without boots or shoes. The elder child's name was David Lester, the younger one Stephen Lester.

Whoever will find or return these two little brothers to the subscriber dead or alive, or give information where they may be found, shall be liberally rewarded.

DAVID LESTER.

Westerlo, October 2, 1850.

Flyer describing the “strayed or taken” children and offering a liberal reward for their return, “dead or alive.”

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**NEW
SCOTLAND
HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION**

P. O. Box 541
Voorheesville, NY 12186

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Sarita Winchell 518-765-2133

Vice President

AnnMarie Hess 518-229-4750

Corresponding Secretary

Laurie Lysenko 518-765-2029

Recording Secretary

Alan Kowlowitz 518-765-4212

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Electronic Communications

Alan Kowlowitz 518-765-4212

Town Historian

Robert Parmenter 518-765-4652

Voorheesville Historian

Dennis Sullivan 518-765-2468

Museum Coordinator

Brittany Albright

Sentinel Committee

Sherry Burgoon 518-225-0797

Judy Kimes 518-768-2607

Web Page

www.newscotlandhistoricalassociation.org

Email: newscotlandhistoricalassoc@gmail.com

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear Members and Friends:

The New Scotland Historical Association will be reopening the museum at the Wyman Osterhout Community Center starting April 2nd, and will remain open Sundays, 2-4 p.m., for the months of April, May and June. The museum will be closed July and August, reopen again in September and remain open through June 2024. We plan to maintain the September through June schedule in the future.

The museum is an important resource to the local community. NSHA maintains a collection of several thousand physical items that are tied to the history of the Town of New Scotland, and provides the space and care to properly preserve them. We are willing to show items to visitors privately when the museum is closed, and are glad to accommodate visitors' special requests. Contact us at newscotlandhistoricalassoc@gmail.com if you would like a private meeting.

Mark your calendar for two upcoming programs: "Enterprising Waters: The History and Art of New York's Erie Canal" on April 4th to be presented by Brian Utter, Senior Historian and Curator at the New York State Museum, and "The Gilded Age Rises in Troy, NY" on May 2nd to be presented by Kathryn Sheehan, Rensselaer County & Troy City Historian. Both programs will be presented on Tuesday nights at 7:30 p.m. at the Wyman Osterhout Community Center. The membership annual meeting will also be held on May 2nd before Ms. Sheehan's presentation. This is a time for the membership of NSHA to approve our June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024 slate of officers and budget. We keep it very short.

The NSHA Officers, Trustees and Committee Chairs all send best wishes for a pleasant Springtime, and send many thanks for your support.

Sarita Winchell, President

**REMINDER:
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING
May 2nd at 7:30 P.M.**

The meeting will start right before the scheduled program "The Gilded Age Rises Again in Troy." Our by-laws say that the membership votes on the Trustees, Officers and the budget at the membership meeting.

**MUSEUM RE-OPENING
Sundays 2:00 P.M.- 4:00 P.M.
April Through June**

(Except Easter Sunday & Memorial Day Weekend)

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Finally, on Wednesday, the fourth day of the search, some of the men went to a site from which Reuben was trying to divert them. Suddenly they came upon the body of Steven, two bare feet exposed, the rest of his body buried under some leaves, his head battered, and a large stone laying upon his chest. Nearby, a blood stained swingle – a part of a flail – was found under a rotting log.

Reuben would not go near the body saying, “I can’t do anything for him now.”

Word was sent to Albany to the Sheriff, William Beardsley, who at once set out for Dunbar Hollow by buckboard.

Meanwhile, the search for David intensified. Reuben had disappeared.

When the Sheriff arrived, he had with him Dr. Samuel Ingraham of Clarksville and Attorney Orville Chittenden of Rensselaerville. He dropped them off and went in search of Reuben, whom he found in Reidsville, a small nearby hamlet. He arrested Reuben for the murder of Steven and set out with his prisoner, his wrists in chains, for Albany’s jail.



Albany’s Old Jail, on the third floor of which Reuben Dunbar was hanged. Torn down in 1941 to make space for a parking lot.

By Thursday morning, more than 100 men continued the search for David. After several hours, Gilbert Wagner of Clarksville noted some agitated crows circling a hemlock tree up on a high ridge on the farm. As he came closer, he saw the body of the boy hanging from the tree with the cap he had been seen wearing hanging on a nearby nub of a branch. Wagner shot off his shotgun, signaling that the search had ended. David was lowered from the tree, brought to the house, and his body was laid beside that of Steven’s.

The now angry searchers noted that the trunk of the tree in which David was found bore the marks of hobnailed boots of the kind Reuben often wore.

On November 26, Reuben Dunbar was indicted by the grand jury, and his trial began immediately.

The trial lasted for 18 days. Nine days were filled by the testimonies of witnesses called by the State. The trial made for sensational news. The local daily newspaper, the Daily Albany Argus, covered the trial in great detail.

At 1 p.m. on December 10, 1850, the jury retired to deliberate. Two hours later they returned with their verdict – “Guilty.”

Court was adjourned for the day, reconvening the next morning. Attorney H.G. Wheaton, addressed the bench saying, “Counsel for the defense have come to the conclusion to part with the defendant at this point and leave him to the sentence of the court.”

Dunbar stood when asked if he had anything to say. In tears, he proclaimed his innocence.

Judge Wright then sentenced Reuben Dunbar to be “hanged by the neck until dead, dead, dead” on Friday, January 31, 1851, “between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.”

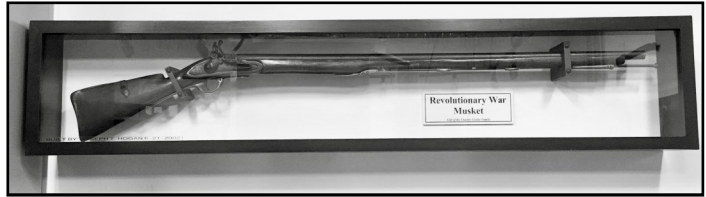
In the third-floor execution chamber of the old jail at Eagle and Howard Street in Albany, at 11 a.m. on January 31, Reuben Dunbar was hanged in front of 100 or more invited witnesses.

(continued on page 5)

FIVE HISTORICAL ANECDOTES

By: Robert E. Mulligan, Jr.

Editor's note: Mr. Mulligan attended the March presentation by Mr. McMaster on the Battle of Oriskany and planned to share the information from this article at that time. Due to time constraints, he did not get the opportunity, therefore we have included his article here.



Musket on display at NSHA's museum of the kind which would have been used in the Revolutionary War, although the barrel has probably been shortened.

to

Let me tell you one of my favorite stories, that I trot out to emphasize the role, I will not quite say "importance," but the role of oral tradition in history.

During a field trip by the local chapter of the Company of Military Historians to Oriskany during the 1970s, Gilbert Hagerty spoke, a quiet, gentle man, who later "excavated" the site of Montcalm's Camp on the playing fields of Lake George High School. He said that at the beginning of his career as a teacher in the 1930's, his Mohawk Valley high school students -related family stories that the trees at Oriskany were shot up. So much so that they were "stripped of their leaves" during the battle. Uh huh. Gil, they were pulling your leg. The group was quiet in a semi-embarrassed silence for Gil's credulity.

Then a member who collected Mississippi rifles spoke. "Yes, and they were using buck and ball." Wow! OK, so multiply some of the shots during the battle, by four, a musket ball and three buckshot, to get an effect that could indeed denude the trees. As the ambush was tripped when the American column was at the bottom of a ravine, the attacking Indians and Loyalists were above them. Shooting downhill, the tendency is, for some reason, to aim high. Through the trees.

Later I came to believe that Gil's students were right. The quote that confirmed this questionable story for me is from Frank Wilkeson's account; Turned Inside Out. University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

As a teen age soldier at Spotsylvania in 1864, Wilkeson said that as he walked down a road to the firing line, "I suppose I heard the hum of bullets as they passed over the trees. Then I noticed that small limbs were falling in a feeble shower in advance of me. It was as though an army of squirrels was at work cutting off nut and pine-cone laden branches." p60-61

The density of projectiles flying through the air is confirmed by a similar account of a soldier at Antietam who said that he noticed dust spurting up from the road ahead of him, as if it was the beginning of a summer shower, with heavy drops of rain. He thought it was starting to rain. It was the end of the flight of long range bullets falling to earth on the road.

A further, similar quote from Antietam, emphasizes just how damned dangerous these battles could be. "I was lying on my back, idly wondering how long it would be, if I stuck my finger in the air, before it was shot off. Then I heard the Colonel order us to stand and form ranks. I quickly turned over, thinking he had gone mad." Private Thomas Galwey, 8th Ohio

We today are just not equipped to visualize the guts needed for soldiers to stand in ranks and reload, or advance under such fire. TV and Hollywood have the hero firing once or twice and hitting the target. They seldom show the hail of bullets (Saving Private Ryan being the exception.)

Wilkeson also describes another phenomenon pertinent to Oriskany's stripped trees. The Confederate entrenchments at Petersburg in 1864 had been attacked the day before. The defenders were raw militia. "At sixty feet in front of the captured works I saw pine trees which had been struck by Confederate bullets thirty feet from the ground. This told, better than words the nervous condition of the men who pretended to defend the line."

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The murders were committed on Saturday, September 28th, the prisoner was arrested the following Wednesday, placed on trial November 26th, was sentenced on Wednesday, December 11, and the execution order carried out on Friday, January 31. A quick chain of events moving from the mundane routines of life to tragic ends.

Reuben Dunbar is buried in a tiny cemetery on Dunbar Hollow farm in which the double graves of the murdered children, David and Steven Lester, are also found.

In the next Sentinel, Reuben Dunbar's telling of these events as recorded and then published in 1851.

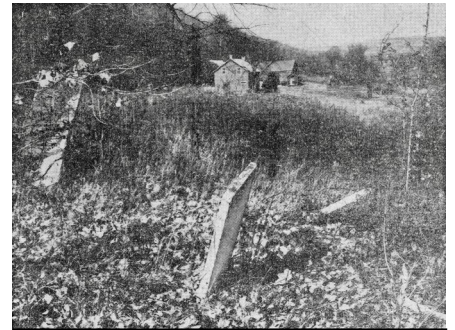
Many of the facts in this piece come from a Times Union article published on March 9, 1941, reviewing in detail the events surrounding this case, as Albany's old jail at Eagle and Howard Streets, where Reuben Dunbar was imprisoned and hung, was being demolished to make space for a parking lot.

Credits:

"Slayer Dunbar's Spectre Flees Old Gaol," Times Union, March 9, 1941. "The Knickerbocker News Visits a Neighbor....

Today It's Clarksville," Knickerbocker News, Nov. 14, 1949. "Trial of Reuben Dunbar, for Murder," Daily Albany Argus, Nov. 27-Dec. 12, 1850. "Wickham Farm Burial Ground," <https://history.altamontenterprise.com>

With thanks to Chris Albright for the loan of the Daily Albany Argus articles and to Don Slingerland for his help with the graphics.



Scene of the Dunbar Murders— This lonely farmhouse in Dunbar Hollow was the home of Reuben Dunbar and the two Lester boys who figured in the Dunbar murders. At the front is the burying ground, now gone to weeds where the murderer and his victims lie. The inscription on the boys' stone reads: "Lively and pleasant in their lives, in death they were not separated."

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Remember that Oriskany was the first battle of the Revolutionary War for many of the British, Loyalist and German soldiers, as well as many of the Indians present.

Remember again, that besides the natural tendency of men to shoot high with shoulder arms, the attacking Tories and Indians were on the hillsides overlooking the American militia in the bottom of a ravine. This would certainly send many of their bullets well above the heads of the Americans

So there you have it; a very improbable tale from the Revolution, corroborated by four eyewitness anecdotes from the Civil War. I am always conscious when speaking to buffs who know a very great deal about this battle or that battle in the Civil War, to wonder how much he knows about any battle from any other war. Without this broader knowledge, the buff lacks a certain perspective which would allow him to think more critically about what he is being told, by book historians, and indeed, by eyewitness accounts.

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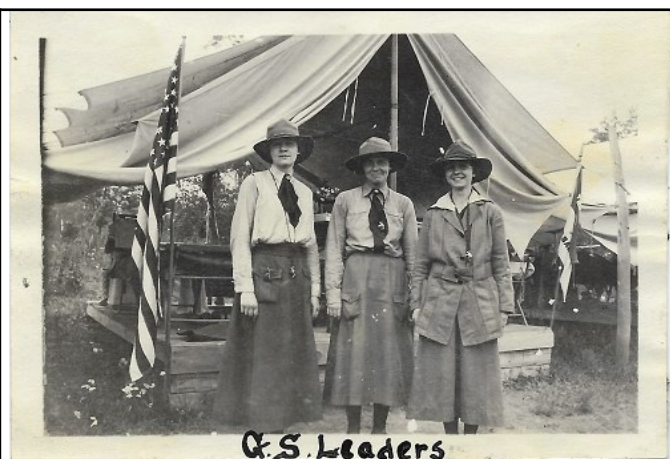
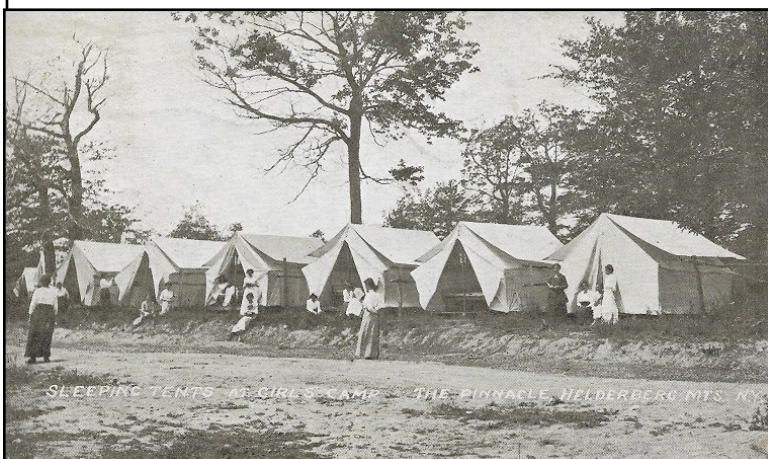
With Gratitude: Collection Updates and Acquisitions of 2022

By Lea Foster, Collections Chair

The Collections Committee was very busy in 2022. Two dedicated volunteers, Sarita Winchell (NSHA President) and Lynne Samuel (NSHA Trustee and Finance Chair) completed a multiyear inventory and digitization project. The ENTIRE collection has now been digitally recorded into the museum database, PastPerfect. Although data refinement and enhancement never truly end, thanks to Sarita and Lynne NSHA has catapulted into a better realm of collection care. THANK YOU!

Many important and unique items have been accepted into the collection during 2022. Here is a list of the newest acquisitions.

Janet Klopp of Clarksville, NY donated two color photographic prints depicting the members of the Voorheesville Area Ambulance Service.



John & Sally Ten Eyck of Voorheesville, NY donated two Indian Ladder Farms paper product tags, and two glass milk bottles. One bottle is from Meadow Brook Farm Dairy, Clarksville, NY and the other from Youmans Farms, New Scotland, NY.

Matthew Farina of Southern Pines, NC donated a ledger book belonging to John H. Mathias with entries between January and March of 1900. Mathias owned a grocery store in Unionville, NY.

Andrea Gleason of Voorheesville, NY donated one plastic Picard's Grove cup, a Nichols' Market grocery card, and a photocopy of Smith's Tavern menu.

Judy Kimes of Clarksville, NY donated two books, **Beverwijck: A Dutch Village on the American Frontier 1652-1664** by Janny Venema, and **Carnival of Blood: The Civil War Ordeal of the Seventh New York Heavy Artillery** by Robert Keating.

Joyce Hallenbeck of Columbia, SC donated two items, an account book issued by L. Wood to William Smith with entries starting in 1899, and a silver metal Russian Orthodox triple barred cross coffin ornament. Engraved on the ornament is "Died Oct 30 Eve Mlinarik 1916" and stamped at top is "ihui" (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews) and "icxc" (Jesus Christ). Both items were found in the wall of John E. and Florence S. Hallenbeck's home at 75 N. Main St., Voorheesville, NY.

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Kristina Flanders of Averill Park, NY donated a Severson Diary glass milk bottle.

Judith Wing of Feura Bush, NY donated the administrative and historical files from the now closed Feura Bush Neighborhood Library. The donation is still being processed.

Lastly, but most definitely not the least, Timothy and Susan Albright of Altamont, NY donated a large collection of objects, photographs, postcards, and documents. A significant portion of the donation consists of 65 binders of archival material pertaining to Indian Ladder Farms, Thacher Park, Helderberg Workshop, and the Town of New Scotland in general. The archival material, which is still being processed, will be organized as the Timothy and Susan Albright Archive. The binders contain a treasure trove of historical and contemporary information and NSHA is honored that the Albrights have entrusted the association with the collection's preservation for generations to come.



Silver metal Russian Orthodox triple barred cross coffin ornament donated by Joyce Hallenbeck.

Other items in the Albright donation include: the publication "Johnson of the Mohawk" by Arthur Pound 1930; 88 photographic prints, and 110 postcards pertaining to Camp Pinnacle; 71 postcards pertaining to Clarksville; a canvas cattle blanket printed with "Indian Ladder Farms"; and a large framed, 1920's surveyor map and associated parcels for sale sign pertaining to the Helderberg Mountain Park. The private park was organized by homeowners residing along Rt 157 on the southern border of Thacher Park.

Although only a small portion of the Albrights' donation has been processed the sheer scope shows how passionate they both feel for the area and ensuring its history is captured, promoted, and preserved. Mr. Albright has been involved with NSHA in various capacities since 1982. He served as the NSHA president from 1994-1966 but more importantly applied his encyclopedic knowledge of the region's history as NHSA's historic sites chair. Mr. Albright has worked for 30 years to designate Thacher Park as a National Natural Landmark; a program managed by the National Park Service. While the designation was given committee approval two years ago the ultimate decision by the advisory board has not been made. Many locals might know Mr. Albright best from his 41 harvest years at Indian Ladder Farms, 23 of which were as farm manager.

The NSHA Board would like to thank all of the 2022 artifact donors. Each acquisition requires time and monetary resources to properly preserve. NSHA is therefore also appreciative of funds received from NSHA members and others which directly assist collection care. THANK YOU.

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New Scotland Historical Association
P. O. Box 541
Voorheesville, New York 12186