



THE SENTINEL

Vol. 31, No. 4

The Newsletter of the New Scotland Historical Association

Summer 2023

A CRIME MOST FOUL: THE DUNBAR HOLLOW MURDERS, PART II: THE CONFESSION Compiled by Judy Kimes

On Wednesday, October 2, 1850, the body of 8-year-old Steven V. Lester was found on the Lester (Dunbar) farm, two bare feet exposed, the rest of the body buried under some leaves with a large stone resting upon his chest. Nearby a bloodied swingle was found under a rotting log. It was the fourth day of the search for the missing boys, and Reuben Dunbar, as the last person to see the boys alive, went from leader of the search party to prime suspect. Almost immediately, Reuben was arrested, charged with murder and, within the week was brought to the county prison in Albany, "which he never left till he was carried to his long home."

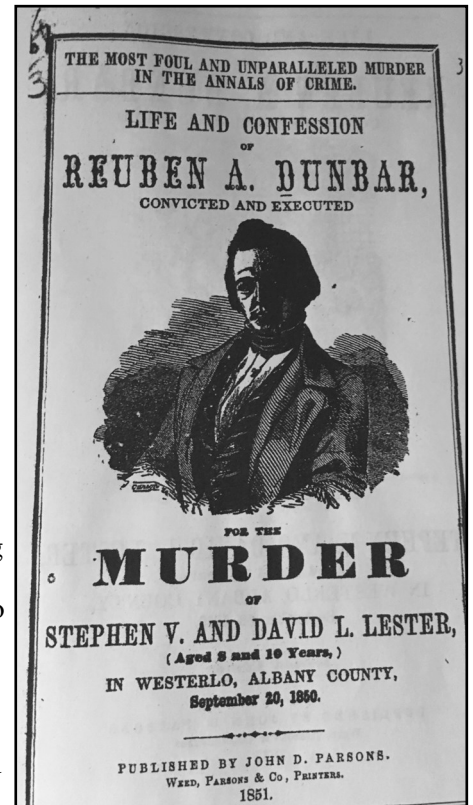
On Thursday, October 3, Gilbert Wagner of Clarksville, part of the search party now consisting of more than 100 men, noticed some excited crows circling a hemlock tree up on a high ridge. He came closer and saw the body of 10-year-old David L. Lester hanging from the tree, the cap he had been seen wearing hanging on a nub of a branch.

From the beginning, Reuben Dunbar proclaimed his innocence. During the trial, which began on November 26, "he kept up unusual good spirits, under the strong hope, and the insurance of his counsel that he would not be convicted." However, when he heard the jury's verdict, "Guilty," his hopes were dashed. Anxious to see his counsel, the following day his lawyer came and told Reuben there was nothing more he could do for him. Reuben then talked much of a petition to the Governor. But when told, "as he valued his life and his soul, not to let that petition contain one word which was not strictly true, he seemed to lose hope from that source, and began to plan ways of effecting his escape." Reuben did succeed in breaking the shackle by which he was chained to the floor, but his hope of being aided in his escape by a fellow prisoner went unanswered.

He then seriously considered taking his own life, but "his courage failed him." He still had not given up hope of a pardon from the Governor but was unwilling to have his sentence changed from death to imprisonment for life. He would only accept a full pardon.

On Friday, December 20, Dunbar was visited by the Rev. L.B. Beecher, D.D., pastor of the North Street Baptist Church, whom Dunbar had chosen to be with him. Here, for the first time, he seemed ready to consider making a full confession of his crime. "The scriptures were read and explained to him, the portions particularly, which speak of the necessity of confession, in order to pardon." Reuben asked that writing materials be brought to him that evening.

At six o'clock that same evening, Reuben set about making his confession to the Rev. Beecher. The only place in the cell on which writing materials could be laid was on a plain prison chair, the "hard oak floor the most convenient seat." The narration lasted four hours. The confession was written out and afterwards copied and signed.



Title page of the pamphlet written by the Rev. L.B. Beecher, spiritual adviser to Reuben Dunbar from the time of his imprisonment to his execution.

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Annual Meeting President's Report—May 2, 2023

The Trustees, officers, and committee chairpersons have been very active during our June 1, 2022 - May 2023 year. The following highlights the four major areas of activity.

Programs: The May 2nd program, *The Gilded Age Rises Again in Troy*, presented by Kathryn Sheehan, Rensselaer County and Troy City Historian, marks the end of our program series for 2022-23. The other six programs presented October through April covered a wide range of topics, and were well received by the public. Thanks to Alan Kowlowitz, who is the Program Chairperson, for carefully choosing the topics and enlisting the speakers on these popular presentations.

Historic Markers: Two new Historic Markers have been installed over the past year, with a third marker slated for dedication May 10th. In addition to the new markers, several older markers were repainted using NSHA funds. Chris Albright heads NSHA's Historic Sites Committee.

Robert Horton (Krumkill Road): The site of the laboratory of Robert Horton, a major contributor to modern hydrology, and known for the empirical rules in hydrology referred to as "Horton's Laws."

Tory Robbery (Picard Road): The site of a Tory robbery at the Jacob Cooper farm, and where the Albany based Committee for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies met on June 20, 1779 to investigate Tory activities in that area.

IOOF Hall (Voorheesville Avenue): erected by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, it provided a place for the organization to meet, and provided community use space for many organizations.

The Sentinel: NSHA's newsletter continues with quarterly publications, edited by Sherry Burgoon and Judy Kimes. The newsletter's articles many times enlighten the readers to past events in the Town of New Scotland's history that otherwise would for most people be long forgotten. It is the major outreach to our membership who receive it as part of the benefits of NSHA membership.

Access & care for the museum: Thanks to generous donors, NSHA received some very interesting items to add to its museum collection. They were highlighted in the Spring issue of *The Sentinel*. Lea Foster and the Collection Committee continue to prepare these items for proper storage and recording in the museum's database. The museum is open on Sundays, 2-4 p.m., for April, May and June. It will close for July and August and reopen for September through June of 2024.

Along with these four main areas are the behind the scene activities: genealogy research, publicity of events, preparing exhibits, electronic communications including the website, plus the administration of NSHA as a whole. Thank you to NSHA officers, Trustees and committee chairs for their dedication to furthering NSHA's mission to "preserve, protects and promote history in the Town of New Scotland."

Sarita Winchell, President

MUSEUM UPDATE

The Museum will be closed for the months of July and August and will re-open in September.

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Reuben was “greatly moved, even to long weeping, while narrating the parts which referred to the outcries made by the oldest boy” and whenever reference was made of his wife of only four months. Already a frail woman, Reuben, afraid that the confession would be too much for her, made the Pastor promise to withhold publication of his confession until after his death.

On February 1, 1851, the Rev. Beecher published the pamphlet, **The Most Foul and Unparalleled Murder in the Annals of Crime. Life and Confession of Reuben A. Dunbar, Convicted and Executed for the Murder of Stephen V. and David Lester (Aged 8 and 10 Years,) in Westerlo, Albany County, September 28, 1850.***

Its preface reads, “Having had unusual opportunity to learn, as the Spiritual Adviser of the prisoner, from the day of his sentence to the day of his execution, his real motives and prevailing states of mind, I have been urged to give the results of my observations, together with the facts which have been revealed by the prisoner to the public. The object of this pamphlet is to comply with that request.”

What follows are excerpts from Reuben Dunbar’s confession as printed in this pamphlet:

Confession of Reuben Dunbar of the Murder of Stephen V. and David L. Lester

Having had full opportunity for reflection and with a clear sense of the importance of the act I am about to perform I hereby declare that I and I only am the murderer of Stephen V. and David L. Lester.

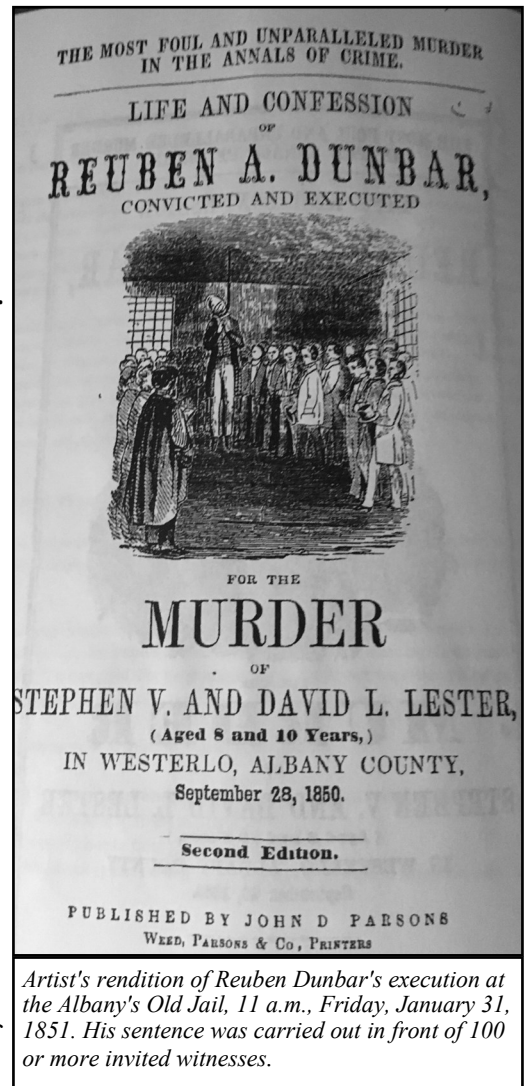
For a short time and a short time only, before the morning of the murder, I occasionally thought if these children were out of the way, I should stand a little better chance to get at Mr. Lester’s property, but I don’t remember having formed any distinct purpose to put them out of the way until Saturday, the day on which the fatal deed was done.



Pamphlet’s sketch of the bludgeoning of Stephen Lester by Dunbar. For a while, Dunbar had embarked on medical studies. Some felt that informed him on where to direct his blows most effectively.

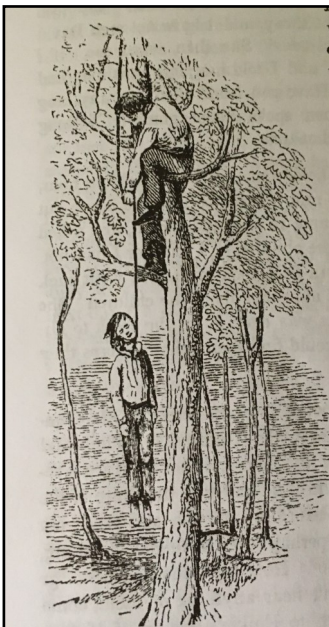
I had seen Stephen, the younger boy, around the place. (I told him he had better go and gather butternuts.) But when he said he did not want to go after butternuts the thought came across my mind that I could get him out into the bushes and kill him. I then asked if he would like to go with me up toward the line fence and catch a woodchuck. He replied that he would like to do that.

We started together, and went towards the barn, when I took up a swingle.... When we got into the bushes, we walked till we came to the place where he was later found. I then told him to look out towards some bushes to see if he could see the woodchuck, and as he stood looking, I struck him a heavy blow with the swingle just over the right eye. He fell senseless upon his side, he made no struggles, and uttered no cry. I stood and looked at him about a minute, and then struck him another blow across the back of the head. I then covered him up hastily with stones and leaves as he lay, carried the swingle and stuck it under the end of a log...and then returned to the house....I do not remember to have had any feelings at the time about what I had done, or at least did not as I realized it afterward.



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Pamphlet's illustration of the hanging of David Lester by Dunbar, who "had often stated he loved the older boy sincerely...and chose the way in which he was killed in preference to any other because he thought he would die the easiest in this manner."

When I left to go to the house, I went for the purpose of getting David, that I might put him also out of the way. I found him standing at the table and asked him to go with me to the wagon house....He followed me to the door, when Mother came out of the bedroom and asked David to get her a pail of water. He took the pail, and I went to the wagon house. I watched him, saw him carry the pail to the door and saw Mother take it and then he came out where I was. I took a small apple basket and put onto it two pieces of rope tied together. I gave him the basket and we went out together ...to the butternut tree, which stands near the edge of the bushes. He took the rope out of the basket and laid it on the ground, and commenced picking up butternuts. I picked up the rope and asked him, "if he did not want to go up on the hill and look for a crow's nest." He replied, "I will go if you want me to." We went up the hill till we came to the tree where he was afterwards found. I told him to climb up and see if he could see the nest. He climbed up the tree some fifteen or twenty feet, and I climbed up after him, taking the rope with me. I tied one end of the rope around the tree, and then told him "to look out into another tree" to see if he could see the crows, and as he was looking, I prepared a slip-noose on the end of the rope, and slipped it over his head, when I shoved it up, close around his neck, he cried out, "DON'T, Reuben, DON'T," and as he cried out I shoved him off the limb on which he was standing. He dropped but a short distance, with his arm over the limb on which his hand was resting before I pushed him off. He did not struggle, that I noticed, after I pushed him off. I took off his cap, hung it on a limb just over his head, came down from the tree and left him. I left the tree, and he hung perfectly still, and I never saw him again afterward.

I went back to the butternut tree, took up the basket partly filled with butternuts, carried them to the wagon house and then went into the house. I called to (Mother) and told her it was dinner time. She replied she did not feel well and did not care about eating but I could go to the buttery and eat. I did so, went out after eating, fed the hogs, got my sickle, and then went into the field and commenced cutting corn. I then began to be conscious of what I had done. These were the first feelings of sorrow or regret which I remember to have felt. I thought, "What would my wife say if she should find out what I had done." I thought she

would mourn herself to death if it should be found out. I felt as if I would give the whole world if I could only bring the boys back to life again....

From the time of the murder till the evening of December 20th, I have uniformly denied all knowledge of it that I might have a fair trial and that I might have a better chance of getting clear of punishment. I did not confess my guilt to either of my counsel, but uniformly insisted that I was innocent. I am very sorry that I have brought this terrible disgrace upon my family, and especially upon my wife, for whose sake I would be willing to suffer any infliction and to spare her feelings as much as possible. I have directed that this paper shall not be made public till after my death. And now, all that remains for me to do in this world is, to commend myself to the mercy of that God whose laws I have so shamefully violated, and beg that he will make this, my humble confession, prove the means of effectually deterring all others from following me in the paths of evil.

Having carefully considered all that this paper contains I hereby declare that I have kept back nothing, nor have I knowingly misstated anything and by my signature, in my own name, declare this to be my only confession.

Reuben A. Dunbar
Albany December 21st 1850

I hereby certify that this confession is printed from the original copy, made by Reuben Dunbar previous to his execution.
Albany, January 29th, 1851

William Beardsley
Sheriff, Albany County, NY

*This pamphlet is part of The Making of Modern Law collection through the Harvard Law School Library.

It can also be downloaded in its entirety for free, "Courtesy of Cornell University Law Library, Trial Pamphlets Collection." (digital.library.cornell.edu)

With thanks to Don Slingerland for providing the pamphlet

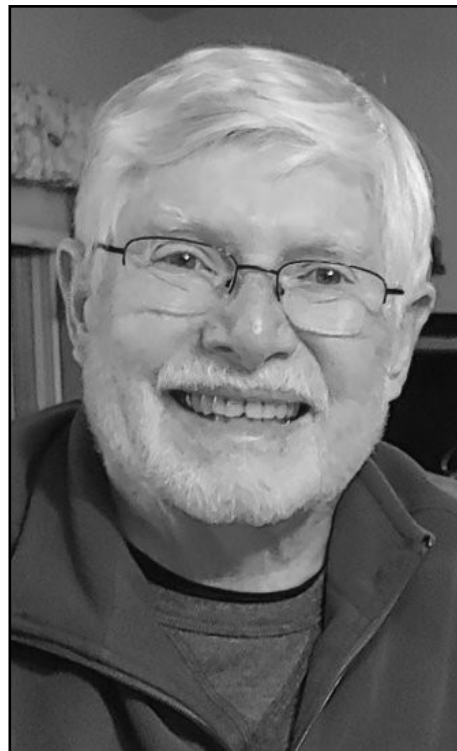
IN MEMORIUM

By Sherry Burgoon

The New Scotland Historical Association was saddened to learn of the passing of sustaining member Donald Meacham. Don's father became manager of Indian Ladder Farm after moving from Peru, New York, when Don was eight. He graduated from Voorheesville High School and Colgate University before serving in the United States Army. After attending Albany Law School, Don settled in Voorheesville handling all kinds of legal matters.

He believed in serving his community representing several organizations including the school and library board, as well as being a member of NSHA's board. He served as a trustee from 2007-2013, and was the program chair Spring 2014-Spring 2015. Alan Kowlowitz credits Don for recruiting him to the association. Don had a profound impact on all who met him and will have a lasting legacy in the community.

The Altamont Enterprise Milestones, 6/01/2023
NSHA archives



VOORHEESVILLE IOOF/ AMERICAN LEGION HALL HISTORICAL MARKER DEDICATION

By Judy Kimes

On May 10, the New Scotland Historical Association dedicated a new historical marker to honor Voorheesville's IOOF Temple/ American Legion Hall.



Dan Leinung, Chris Albright, Sarita Winchell, Dennis Sullivan, Dick Berger and Doug LaGrange.

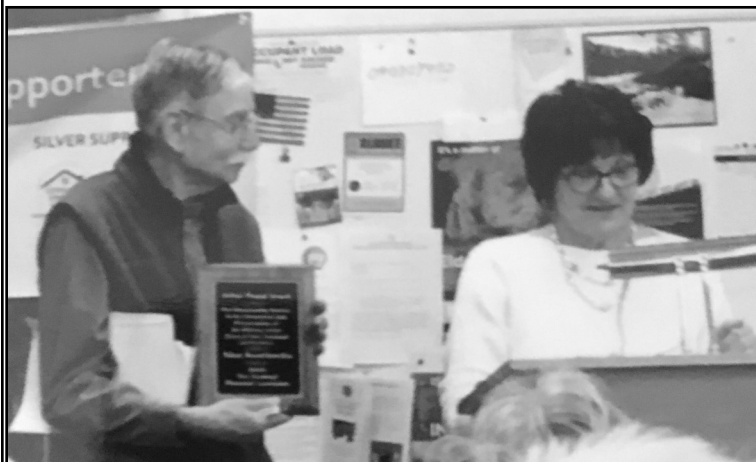
The Voorheesville Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows was organized in 1893. The current building was completed in November of 1909 and quickly became the community's new social center. The building offered a large capacity for seating, a dance floor, and a stage for plays, concerts and debates. In his book, *Voorheesville, New York – A Sketch of the Beginnings of a Nineteenth Century Railroad Town*, Village Historian Dennis Sullivan tells of the many and varied activities held at the hall. In 1982, Donald Otterness and a group of Voorheesville Elementary students conducted interviews with many local residents. These interviews were compiled in a booklet entitled, *SALT – Preserving the Past – A Personal History of the people who have lived many years in the Town of New Scotland*. When asked what special memories they had of this area, many of those interviewed fondly recalled going to Saturday night movies and dances at the Odd Fellows or, as it later became, the American Legion Hall. The Hall still provides a place for village residents to gather and for events that benefit the community.

The IOOF/American Legion Hall is located at 31 Voorheesville Ave., Voorheesville 12186.

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Arthur Pound Award Recipients

By Sarita Winchell



Alan Kowlowitz receiving the Pound Award from Sarita Winchell at the annual meeting in May.

The New Scotland Historical Association states in its mission that it will: “preserve and promote history in the Town of New Scotland”. To carry out this mission our organization relies solely on volunteers to perform the duties necessary to maintain a vital presence in the township.

The Board of NSHA has unanimously approved **Alan Kowlowitz** as a recipient of the Arthur Pound Award for outstanding service to NSHA.

In 1979 Alan started working in the New York State archives at the State Museum, moved on to the office of technology, and then into electronic records. In 1990 he and his family moved to Voorheesville, and with **that** the Town of New Scotland gained a great lover of history. Alan became a NSHA member, and connected strongly with our local community.

Alan first became a Trustee for NSHA June 2010. He became president of the organization the next year in June 2011, and served a 4-year term as President. He left the Presidency in 2015 but continued as the Program coordinator, and has maintained serving in that role. The reason NSHA offers such fine programs is through the efforts of Alan, and all of the connections to people of note that he has cultivated over the years.

While continuing as program Chair, Alan provided leadership again as President for NSHA from June 2017 to June 2021.

In May, 2018 Alan arranged for a program called “Preserving History in a Growing Suburban Town” presented by John Sherer who helped develop a Historic Preservation law in Clifton Park. This was a lightbulb moment for Alan.

While actively engaging in his time consuming activity as NSHA’s President, Alan lead a sub-committee of NSHA that developed the wording for a proposed law, ratified by both the Town of New Scotland and the Village of Voorheesville, that created the **Joint Preservation Commission**. Alan is now the chairperson of the Commission. This new advisory commission, although separate from NSHA, has specific duties and responsibilities that align with the mission of NSHA. The first item of note that the Commission has completed is a professionally developed historic survey of areas within the Township, and a recommended list for a Village and Town registry of Historic Places.

Starting in June 2023 Alan will again take on the President’s role and provide leadership for our organization.

Alan, on behalf of the NSHA Board, it is my pleasure to present you with the Arthur Pound Award. It reads

For outstanding Service
In the Promotion and
Preservation of
The History of the Town of New Scotland
Presented to Alan Kowlowitz, 2023
New Scotland Historical Association

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The Arthur Pound Award reads

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At the historical marker dedication of the Voorheesville IOOF/American Legion Hall, NSHA President Sarita Winchell took the opportunity to honor another recipient, in her words, "A site is worthy of a marker when it signifies something or someone that has become special to **our history**, the people's history in a place. We lose much if we do not take the time to remember how real life unfolded. And, in Voorheesville, no one has illuminated Voorheesville's unfolding story as **Dennis Sullivan**.

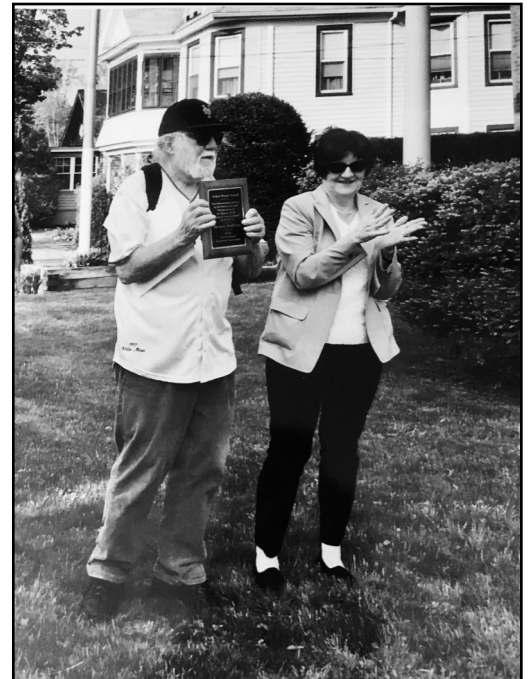
I had to get some help from Dennis's wife, Georgia, for some biographical details. She expressed his accomplishments in four threads: teaching, --- writing, ----history---- and a feel for the local. Dennis has taught over 50 years at all levels from elementary to graduate students. His writing ranges from "Field Notes" in the *Enterprise* to internationally known books on restorative justice, he writes poetry, hundreds of poems. He is known for the written word. Hot off the press is his new history book, "Caesar the Killer." His feel for the local is exhibited in his numerous pamphlets and materials pertaining to the Capital Region."

But personally, I think of him in the local as the wonderful illuminator of our past in this place. To me Dennis is "Mr. Voorheesville." His book "**Voorheesville, New York : A sketch of the Beginnings of a Nineteenth Century Railroad Town**" has since its original publication become the authority for those who want to know about Voorheesville's past. Right on pages 100 – 102 is a section on "A new Social Center" where you can find the history for this exact site being acknowledged today.

Dennis is the Village of Voorheesville' Historian, but is also a member of the New Scotland Historical Association where in past years he has made many significant contributions.

On behalf of the New Scotland Historical Association I would like to present to you this plaque for the Arthur Pound Award, which signifies the appreciation of our Association of your unique, authoritative knowledge and contribution to keeping history alive in our township, and particularly your dedication and contribution to the Village of Voorheesville.

It reads: Arthur Pound Award---For outstanding Service in the Promotion
And Preservation of the History of the
Town of New Scotland
Presented to Dennis Sullivan, 2023,
New Scotland Historical Association



Dennis Sullivan receiving the Pound Award presented by Sarita Winchell at the IOOF/American Legion.

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