

Editorial

Grasp local history

Local history is important because it is concrete. It's not someone else's far-off abstraction — it's ours.

Alice Begley held a piece of local history in her hand recently. She is Guilderland's indefatigable town historian. She helped spearhead the movement to save and restore the Schoolcraft House on Western Avenue.

Recently, she visited John L. Schoolcraft's grave at the Albany Rural Cemetery. She had to hunt to find the grave. First inquiry at the cemetery showed it had no record of Schoolcraft. Begley, who grew up in a nearby neighborhood, knew that during the 1860's graves at the Washington Park burial grounds were disassembled and bodies were moved to the Rural Cemetery.

She kept at it, doing research at the State Library, where she found records that show Schoolcraft did, indeed, have a lot at the Rural Cemetery, a very large one. Begley often acts like a detective, piecing the past together by pursuing leads and small clues. She has a sense of mission about her work, and takes it personally.

As she toured the Rural Cemetery, she called out with glee. "There's Thurlow Weed!" We thought she had spotted an old friend. In a way, she had. She had spotted Weed's monument. He was a nineteenth-century friend of Schoolcraft's whom she'd researched extensively. She excitedly told about his work as a journalist and his political life as spokesman for the Whig party, and also shared some conjectures on the personal life of his daughter.

Part of Begley's mission is sharing what she has learned with the public. Aside from exploring history in her columns, she has detailed on our pages the 34 state historical markers in town — all recently restored.

We remember in June being called out by Begley to photograph town workers installing a once-lost marker by the Vale of Tawasentha. The fact that it was pouring rain didn't discourage Begley; she eagerly recounted the history of the area and explained the meaning of the Iroquois word Tawasentha — "hill of the dead." She handed her umbrella to the town supervisor, who used it to shield the workers from the deluge.

Begley was disturbed on her recent visit the Albany Rural Cemetery to see pieces of the wrought iron fence around Schoolcraft's monument were fallen or missing.

She picked up a fallen, rusted chunk of fence top. Begley admired its Gothic detail, which matched the monument and the Guilderland mansion. In her column, she suggests that Schoolcraft's love of Gothic architecture may have grown from the sights he saw on a European tour in 1843. She reports that his travel journal focuses on the Cathedrals of St. John de Baptist and Notre Dame.

Begley was troubled by the condition of the fence, and brought the fallen chunk with her. She showed it to a cemetery overseer. He explained that there are no funds to restore crumbling monuments, commemorating those whose families are long since gone. Begley asked to borrow the piece, and has since checked into foundries that can reproduce the ironwork.

Her persistence has paid off in the salvation of the Schoolcraft House as well. Begley wrote in our pages in May, 1994, when the house was threatened with destruction or relocation: "The beauty of the house is unmatched for its style; it has been featured in nationally known architectural volumes."

Typical of her style, Begley talked with people whose memories formed a living link to the house's past. Katherine McGill Weeks, a former Albany school teacher, recalled visiting relatives there as a houseguest: "We ate well. Aunt Edna, Nellie, Alice, and Carrie were excellent gardeners and had a huge garden out back of the house. Thanksgiving was a great feast, and following dinner there was always a 'rest hour.'"

So besides being a beautiful part of our landscape, the Schoolcraft House is part of our heritage. We're glad it's being saved. In July 1994, the Guilderland Historical Society received a \$70,000 state grant which the town matched to buy the house, and in 1997, another \$29,000 was awarded by the state for restoration.

The latest fund drive is a "Buy a Brick" campaign where residents or businesses can contribute money to have their name engraved on a brick to form a walk, which replicates the old carriage road leading to the front door of the Schoolcraft House. Individuals pay \$75 and small businesses pay \$150. *The Enterprise* has bought such a brick, and we suggest you do, too. It's a concrete way to help preserve something important.

Old buildings remind a community of its history. In an era when, more and more, our towns look like every place else, old buildings give us an identity.

We're pleased, too, that the town's Planning Task Force, appointed by the supervisor, has a committee looking into historical and cultural resources. That group is, not surprisingly, headed by Begley. Among its early initiatives are promoting town history and culture for economic development and tourism; pushing historic preservation legislation; and inventorying all historic buildings, cemeteries, landscapes, and preserves in Guilderland.

We suggested in this space back in 1994 that the town draft a plan naming its important sites, to avoid a situation like the one that almost saw the Schoolcraft House disappear. We wrote then, and we still believe now: Guilderland should take a good hard look at itself to see what's worth preserving. The town should develop a plan in which owners of historic properties could enlist. The transformation could take years, but it would be worth the perseverance. With a carefully considered plan to preserve what's left of its past, Guilderland can move with pride to its future.

The Schoolcraft House could have become nothing more than a roadside marker and another fading memory. We're glad people like Alice Begley kept that from happening. We can learn from her persistence — all of us — to hold on tight to what matters. Grab a piece of local history, make it last.

From the historian's desk

Viewing a grave, reviewing a life

By Alice Begley

A 25-foot-high, slender granite monument in Albany Rural Cemetery marks the resting place of John L. Schoolcraft. It is as uniquely elegant as the house in Guilderland in which he lived.

Denoting the status of the man, the beautiful tall stone sits in the center of a sixty-plot enclosure confined by wrought iron and stone pillared fencing. Entrance steps lead from the north side of the burial plot to an original cart path where a woods creates a mid-nineteenth century Victorian aura. The Schoolcraft name carved on the monument is as simple as the stone's purity and richness.

John L. Schoolcraft's house in Guilderland has received much notoriety recently as it stands as a bastion against time, the elements, and modern-day progress that sought to demolish it. In June 1994, through the efforts of concerned citizens and the Guilderland Historic Society, New York State awarded a \$70,000 Historic Preservation Grant. With additional matching funds from the Town of Guilderland, efforts began to protect and restore the historic house to its original grandeur.

Queries arose concerning the man whose house had caused such a stir one hundred and sixty years after it was built. John L. Schoolcraft's wealth and industry were obvious in his house and his land holdings in the town of Guilderland and the nearby city of Albany. His large, ornate house on the Great Western Turnpike stands out amid the modest bungalows of the mid-1840's. His personal and family information was more obscure and more difficult to document. Even finding his grave was a difficult task.

The Schoolcrafts who migrated to Guilderland from Schoharie were the grandsons and great-grandsons of James Calcraft. The name was later Americanized to Schoolcraft. Calcraft emigrated from England to America and Schoharie County. The history of the Schoolcraft men and their families who settled in Guilderland is detailed and complex. Three of the four Schoolcraft men — John Sr., his son John L., and his brother, Lawrence — were all actively involved in governmental, educational, business and religious affairs of the town. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Lawrence's son, became famous as a glassmaker and writer.

John L. Schoolcraft, according to the bicentennial edition of *The Biographical Directory of the United States Congress 1774-1989*, was born in Albany County (Guilderland) in 1804. (Other records list his birthdate as 1806). His limited schooling did not deter his rise as a substantial businessman in the city of Albany nor as a conspicuous figure in Albany politics in the mid-nineteenth century. Schoolcraft was a close personal friend of Thurlow Weed, noted journalist, political spokesman of the Whig party, and publisher of the *Albany Evening Journal*.

In 1820, when John L. Schoolcraft was 16 years old, his elder cousin Henry Rowe Schoolcraft wrote a letter at the request of the younger Schoolcraft's widowed mother, to Captain David B. Douglass seeking an appointment to West Point for the boy. Douglass was a mathematics and military professor at the United States Military Academy.



The Enterprise — Melissa Hale-Spencer
With an aged oak behind it, the Gothic monument in the Albany Rural Cemetery marking the grave of Guilderland's native son, John L. Schoolcraft, is echoed by the column from a gate, where visitors used to approach by foot and horse. The monument's Gothic style and detail is similar to that of Schoolcraft's mansion on Western Avenue in Guilderland, now being restored.

Young John L. Schoolcraft did not receive the appointment. A rejecting letter from Secretary of War John C. Calhoun replied, "Though it would have given me great pleasure to have appointed your relative, John L. Schoolcraft, Cadet... with a full complement already, it is not in my power, which I regret."

Instead, Schoolcraft began a profitable mercantile business in Albany and launched his political career.

A close friendship with New York Governor William H. Seward (1839-1843), recognized as a leader of the anti-slavery Whigs, helped Schoolcraft's political career. Indeed, Schoolcraft defeated Erastus Corning, the elder of a renowned New York State political family, in one of the most hotly contested Congressional fights in the history of Albany County.

Albany City Directories from the mid-1800's list Schoolcraft as owning a wholesale grocery business at 14 Hudson Avenue and boarding at the City Hotel. His numerous business ventures are listed: 1833, Cook & Schoolcraft; 1836, Schoolcraft & Raymond; 1842, Schoolcraft & Hall; 1846, Schoolcraft, Raymond & Johnson; 1853, Schoolcraft.

In 1843, Schoolcraft embarked on an extended tour of Europe accompanied by his friend, Thurlow Weed. Weed left the trip in December of 1843 due to ill health and returned to his Albany home after only three weeks abroad.

Schoolcraft's handwritten journal of the trip begins in Paris on December 22, 1843. The pages are filled with descriptions of the Gothic cathedrals and architecture, the rivers, and the ancient cities. He described and compared the

Rhine and the Rhone rivers and gave picturesque accounts of the streets of Paris and Naples.

But Schoolcraft's main focus appeared to be the architecture of the Cathedrals of St. John deBaptist and Notre Dame and others described but not named. From his writings, it is possible to understand his Gothic choice of architecture for his mansion in Guilderland and the monument over his grave at Albany Rural Cemetery.

A rare personal remark by Schoolcraft in his journal reports that "The women (of Marseilles) are more beautiful than any other city in France."

It was only later in his letters to Thurlow Weed that the true purpose of his European trip was divulged. Numerous letters to Weed in America gave clear indications of Schoolcraft's political leanings and of other personal activities during his stay in Europe. He wrote also of his anticipated business dealings in the New York State banking community. He was, at the time, a vice president at the Albany Commercial Bank, the bank that was to become Key Bank, a century later.

The extension of slavery, anti-rentism, nativism and canal improvements were important political issues upon Schoolcraft's return from Europe. He built his Gothic house and became more deeply involved in the political affairs of Albany and New York State.

Albany was ravaged by a large fire in the summer of 1848. But, it continued to grow. The city that had been served by two steamboats on the Hudson River and three or four daily stagecoaches to Buffalo, was now serviced by railroad lines and by crowded wharves handling the heavy traffic of the

(Continued on Page 8)