

# Spindle City Historic Society

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## DO YOU KNOW.....

....that in years past, as many as 15 bridges were located within Cohoes, spanning two branches of the Mohawk River, the Erie and Champlain Canals plus power canals and railroads?

....that the ceiling of the Cohoes Music Hall was painted by Emanuel Mickel, renowned interior decorative artist? His work was done during the mid-19th century and included the Assembly Chamber of the NYS Capitol Building?

....that in 1958, nineteen congregations had churches in Cohoes with most of the 21,000 plus residents having an affiliation with one of them?

....that President Chester A. Arthur taught in Cohoes and, in 1854, was named principal of Cohoes Academy, located at Canvass and Oneida Streets?

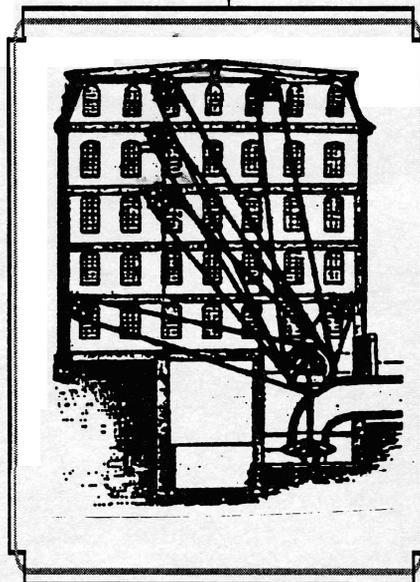
....that during the winter of 1885, Solomon Dotter harvested 20 million pounds of ice from the rivers, shipping much of it to New York City? His home and business were located in the vicinity of the present day Spring Street Exit of Route 787.

....that Hugh Graham, early Cohoes Historian, discovered that the area Native Americans called the Falls area "Coohs", meaning eroded, shallow, dish-shaped depressions in the stone riverbed? These depressions, shaped like potholes, were useful for cooking.

....that, in 1861, St. Bernard's Church began operating an evening school program for children who worked in the mills?

....that Benjamin Franklin, accompanied by General Schuyler and a group representing the Continental Congress visited the Cohoes Falls on April 9, 1776?

....that the next meeting of the Spindle City Historic Society is on August 25, 1999?



## WORKING ON THE ERIE CANAL

As you may have heard, the Cohoes Beautification Project is underway. The event, which runs from May to August 31, 1999, encourages individuals, neighborhoods, businesses and various groups to clean up a location of their choice. The Spindle City Historic Society has elected the Erie Canal Lock 15 area, which is off of Vliet Street behind the lot where Harmony Mill #2 once stood.

We invite you to join us on Saturday July 10 (Rain Date July 11) and follow-up date July 17, if needed. Bring your rakes, pruning shears, garbage bags, weed whackers, etc. to help clean-up a piece of Cohoes history. For additional information contact Walter Cherniak (237-5618) or Walter Lipka (235-7652).

## HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

The Cohoes Saturday Club, a women's social/cultural group, celebrated its 100th Anniversary on March 20, 1999 with a luncheon at the Century House in Colonie.

Speaking at the event was Walter Lipka, Cohoes City Historian and SCHS Trustee, who prepared a slide presentation for the group, which illustrated the history of the city of Cohoes.

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

The Spindle City Historic Society welcomes new members *Leamarie Brosen, Loretta Carney, Paul Dunleavy, Ellen K. Gamache, Floyd J. Hill, Diane Lanciault, Steve Macy, Joan Weber Matson and Frank & Esther McEvoy*. If any members have experience in transcription and would be interested in transcribing oral histories, please let us know.

**ANDREW "ANDY" MINCSAK**  
**1895 - 1999**

On November 20, 1998, Andrew "Andy" Mincsak was interviewed by Jayne Counterman, Spindle City Historic Society Trustee. He recalled with remarkable detail and humor his life in Cohoes. The following narrative is taken from tapes of their conversation.

Andy was born in 1895 in the Town of Colonie on Roff's Farm that was located in the Baker/Manor Avenue area. Mr. Roff was a wealthy Cohoesier who owned two farms in the Town and three clothing mills in Cohoes. He lived on Main Street next to the City Hospital. Andy's family was Czechoslovakian and he spent 7 years there with his mother before returning to America in 1907. The trip by freighter took a month due to frequent stops at various European ports and storms at sea.

Andy's father ran Roff's dairy farm until 1912 when he purchased Charlie Lansing's farm. The Baker/Manor Avenue/Boght Corners area was largely undeveloped and land was cheap at \$75 an acre. Andy remembers that there was a store, a blacksmith shop and, at the present location of the Freihofer store, a saloon with rooms and stables in the back.

Andy attended the Boght Corners schoolhouse and helped with the dairy cattle. In 1916, he was drafted for World War I; however, his father was able to obtain an exemption for him as he was needed on the farm. In those days, Andy tells, the cows were milked very early in the morning and the cans of milk held down the well to keep them cold. Dairy farmers were independent and peddled their own milk - his territory being primarily Willow and Mangum Streets.

With his farm chores completed in the morning, Andy looked for additional work and applied for a job at the Harmony Mills. He apprenticed there for 2 weeks, from 7:00AM to 6:00PM with no pay. He broke cotton to make thread for the manufacture of cloth. After his apprenticeship, he was told "we'll send after you" but according to Andy "I'm still waiting". He then got work with Mr. Dooley paving North Mohawk Street, formerly the canal. Andy mixed concrete by hand making 10 cents an hour.

From there, he worked in various shops that made clothes - sometimes only staying for a few days to fill in for workers that had been injured on the job. Eventually, he was hired by the Star Woolen Mill at 50 cents/hr., which was considered a good wage. He continued at Star until one day, as he was going into the mill, he was told that he would no longer be allowed to work there as he didn't belong to the union.

Andy's next job was working on building the high school, wheeling mortar up a plank for the bricklayers. When a co-worker died from a fall on the south side of the school, Andy quit, not wanting to meet the same fate. He went back to working at

various mills until his father died which required that he run the farm.

Andy remembers Cohoes as a bustling place, calling it a "ladies' city" because of the many women who worked in the mills. He also remembers when the brickyards loaded their bricks by elevator into the canal boats and when, the New York Central Railroad eventually replaced the Erie Canal for moving freight. He knew Abram Lansing and Mr. Cramer. He recalls how Cramer's opened "on a shoestring" across from the Harmony Hotel. Mill workers would come to Cramer's to buy work clothes and shoes, making their selections from pictures. Mr. Cramer would then go to Troy to buy the goods necessary to fill the orders.

In 1929, Andy bought a large truck and recalls the time he used it to bring the Ringling Bros. Circus "to town" from the New York Central Depot to Continental Avenue. Andy recites, in detail, the locations of many businesses and buildings in the city, among them Peterson & Packer Coal Co., Fitzsimmons Lumber Yard, John English Wholesale Grocery, Sinclair Oil & Gas Tanks, Geroux's Bakery, Rolling Mill, Oak Hall and Bullock's Bakery plus shirt factories, a grist mill, ice houses, electric car barns, coal yards, an ax factory and foundry. In addition to locations, he knows the history of many of these places as they changed hands over the years.

Mary Hickey, Andy's younger sister, also participated in the interview. Growing up on their farm, she helped with the garden and attended St. Agnes School. Originally working in a Cohoes shirt factory, her true interest was in health foods and that became her career; for 35 years she worked in health food stores in Albany and Troy.

Andy Mincsak died on May 26, 1999. We wish that he could have seen his story in print. Our thanks to Jayne and Andy's daughter, Andrea, for their help in bringing us this first-hand account of Cohoes history.



**"IMAGES OF AMERICA"**

Images of America are pictorial histories of local cities, towns and villages published by Arcadia Press. Book stores in our area carry "Images" for Troy, Schaghticoke, Ballston Lake, and Clifton Park to mention a few.

The Spindle City Historic Society is forming a committee for the preparation of a Cohoes "Images". We need pictures, with brief descriptions, and volunteers to compile the photos and information necessary for publishing. Anyone interested in participating in this project may contact Walter Lipka at 235-7652.

## THE SUMMER OF 1899

At the first light of day June 21, 1899, dark, moisture laden clouds were stacking up over Cohoes and the surrounding region. By 2:00PM, the heat had risen to 92 degrees. Suddenly, the sky disintegrated into torrential rain. "A fierce wind with thunder and lightning" developed. Weak branches fell to the ground, entire trees were uprooted, slate shingles were lifted and scaled into streets and yards. Within 2 hours the wind subsided and the temperature dropped to 68 degrees. A cool breeze persisted as the only remnant of the storm, refreshing the mill workers as they emerged from their sweltering workplaces. Hard at work that first day of summer, Cohoesiers considered themselves fortunate to have jobs and were more than willing to meet the demands of their employers; hard economic times taught lasting lessons.

At the turn of the century cotton cloth production in the Harmony Company's mills and the production of assorted knit goods in the downtown mills dominated the Cohoes economy. The population of approximately 23,000 lived in two sections of what we consider Cohoes today -- downtown (to the present Price Chopper market) and on "the hill". This hill area could be included in a line east along Columbia Street starting at the Erie Canal (Stewarts Store near the underpass), then to West End Park, north to Johnston Avenue to Garner Street to the "Orchard", looping back to the Harmony Mills and its housing that radiates from Vliet Street. Building lots beyond West End Park and on Adams Island (Van Schaick Island) were selling "like hot cakes". Vliet Street Extension was essentially a plan with "Baker's Avenue", a dirt road leading to Mr. Baker's house and farm.

Eleven neighborhood schools had released the students for the summer. Egberts High School graduated 19 seniors while St. Bernard's Academy celebrated its first graduating class of 10 scholars. Eighteen clergymen rendered spiritual guidance in 12 places of worship. Ninety-five grocery stores and 30 meat stalls fed the city; 50 dressmakers plied their craft customizing apparel even though about half the ladies in the city wore ready-made clothing. Eight-nine saloons slaked the thirst of the working class; 47 of them in what now is considered the Downtown Historic Districts. Three of these establishments were given the elevated status of "restaurant". Ten furniture stores decorated flats and tenements; 9 wood and coal dealers provided fuel and 3 carriage makers customized transportation needs. Twenty-seven doctors and 9 druggists administered to the sick and suffering in a city where severe mill accidents were prevalent, drownings in canals common, assaults a major arrest statistic and outbreaks of smallpox and typhoid fever expected.

With the advent of warm weather, outdoor activities were prevalent although leisure time by today's standards was at a premium. During the cooler months Cohoesiers attended the meetings of 55 fraternal and social groups as well as union functions. During the summer, fishing, hunting, swimming, picnics, lawn parties and teas, ballgames, bicycle trips, hiking and camping were squeezed into short weekends. The high point of leisure time was "vacation week", the period of time the Mohawk River was at its driest, when the Cohoes Company drained the water from its power canals for yearly repairs. What a relief for the mill workers! It was the one-week that Cohoes literally shut down. The following excerpt from the *Cohoes Republican* newspaper expresses the sentiments of the day: "Those who have been toiling hard for the past year will now have an opportunity to take a weeks rest. The people can thoroughly enjoy it knowing that there is plenty of work this year and they can well afford to go out of town for a change of scene". Cohoesiers did just that. On Sunday, August 16 at 5:30AM, 2,000 lined up at the New York Central passenger depot at the foot of Younglove Avenue. Thirty-two passenger cars were also lined up to accommodate the vacationers. Their destination was Sylvan Beach on Lake Oneida; other day trips included local places such as Riverside Park in Troy, Lagoon Island near Albany, Sacandaga Park or a bevy of other smaller lakes and groves.

Situated at the Cohoes Falls throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a "resort" called the Cataract House. The *Cohoes Republican* reported this description: "a magnificent view of the Falls and the Mohawk River extending to the Cohoes Company's dam could be seen. The spot was shady and cooling breezes were refreshing and appetite producing. Fancy cut watermelon, crisp white celery, cut cucumbers, tomatoes on ice and baskets of steaming clams were brought at frequent intervals plus mackerel, sweet and Irish potatoes, chicken with gravy, sausage, lobster and unlimited beer".

Symbolically the summer of 1899 ended with Labor Day celebrations. A parade sponsored by the Amulet Association of Jack Spinners was a showcase of unionism in Cohoes. The parade formed at 10:30AM at the corner of Factory (Cayuga) and Remsen Streets. The ranks were filled with all city union members. Led by Grand Marshall Charles B. Alderson and the City band, they marched to Mohawk Street, up to Harmony Hill, across Garner to Broadway to Columbia, Remsen and back to Factory Street. Afterward a picnic was held at Powers Grove in Lansingburgh. Prior to the parade the following newspaper notice set the tone for the event: "All Spinners that fail to partake in the parade will be fined \$2.00" - a hefty fine as some mill workers were only making \$4.00 per week.

## MATTON SHIPYARD

Many residents of Cohoes and the surrounding areas can remember the sound of the "fog horn" announcing the starting, break and quitting times at the Matton shipyard. Established in 1902, the company originally built and repaired wooden barges navigating the Erie and Champlain Canals; Matton's wood barges were reputed to be the finest money could buy. Founder of the firm, John E. Matton, was born in Schuylerville in 1879 and located his business on the old Champlain Canal, north of Waterford. Construction of the new enlarged Barge Canal forced "John E." to find a new location in 1916 - Van Schaick Island in Cohoes, off of Delaware Avenue; its Grand Opening was celebrated in 1918. The Matton shipyard had the distinction of being the only privately owned dry-dock, between here and Buffalo, with the facilities for repairing tugs and barges damaged in the canals. When son, Ralph, took over the management of the business, the tradition of producing high quality tugboats, police boats and barges continued and the repair work performed at the yard was held in high esteem.

At its peak, during World War II, John E. Matton & Son, Inc. employed approximately 400 people at the shipyard. The company had a number of Navy and Army contracts, to build submarine chasers, minesweepers and tugboats. The yard's complex of ten plus buildings housed, at various times, a sawmill, blacksmith forge, Navy barracks, carpenters' shop, draftsmen's loft and government supply buildings. As a non-union shop, cross-training could be done among the trades, i.e., burners, painters, pipe-fitters, which helped to avoid lay-offs during the various stages of building a tug and in slow times crews were rotated, 2 weeks on, 2 weeks off, also to avoid layoffs.

After the death of the founder in 1959, the Matton Shipyard continued as a family run business until 1964. At that time, Turecamo Coastal & Harbor Towing Co. of Brooklyn bought it out, continuing the tradition of excellence in workmanship. Turecamo produced ocean-going tugs for major oil companies and their boats were known from the Great Lakes to the Caribbean, from the Panama Canal to Peru. SCHS member, Alexander Urquhart, was a foreman at the shipyard from 1972 until its closing, his duties ranging from engine maintenance to participating in trial runs of newly launched tugboats. He tells of sections of submarines being towed to Canada, and, in 1957, a Matton tugboat helped in the retrieval of a B29 plane that crashed into Lake Champlain on approach to the Plattsburgh Air Force Base. Boats heading north on the Hudson River stopped at the shipyard to have their masts removed - and then re-erected on the return trip south. In 1976-77, three of the Tall Ships that had participated in the Bicentennial celebration in New York Harbor came through the shipyard, on their way to Cape Vincent, to have their masts taken down. The range of Matton vessels ran from their largest oil barge measuring 210'x43'x15' to small row boats for the Little Sisters of the Poor, a religious order.

Eventually, cost factors adversely affected the Cohoes shipyard and there were problems with ice jamming the lock at the Federal dam plus difficulties with the operation of the Lansingburg Bridge. Its last and 345th boat was launched in October 1982 - the "Mary Turecamo", a \$5,000,000 tugboat. At 4,300 horsepower, the tug was capable of towing a fully loaded barge with 103,000 barrels of oil. Finally, after 81 years in business, the Matton shipyard shut down in 1983. The New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation now owns the vacant facility.

Our thanks and appreciation to Al Urquhart who donated Matton memorabilia and pictures to the Spindle City Historic Society and contributed to the telling of this story of one of Cohoes' notable businesses.



*Photograph courtesy of Al Urquhart*

# *Spindle City Historic Society*

## OFFICERS & TRUSTEES

Linda C. Christopher, President	Walter Cherniak
Craig Bock/Helena Keilen, Secretary	Jayne Counterman
June Cherniak, Treasurer	Walter Lipka
Daniele Cherniak, First Vice President	Janice Tracey
Dennis Rivage, Second Vice President	Harry Woods, Sr.

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## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

___ Individual Membership	\$10.00	___ Institutional Membership	\$25.00
___ Senior Citizen Membership	\$ 5.00	___ Contributing Membership	\$35.00
___ Student Membership	\$ 5.00	___ Sustaining Membership	\$50.00
___ Family Membership	\$15.00	___ Tax-Deductible Donation	_____

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY, STATE, ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_

Mail completed form with membership fee, payable to Spindle City Historic Society, to:

June Cherniak, Treasurer, 415 Vliet Boulevard, Cohoes, NY 12047

Spindle City Historic Society

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