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# Spindle City Historic Society

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## DID YOU KNOW

...that in March of 1859, Malachi Wiedman and John Gilmore set out from Cohoes for Pikes Peak to make their fortune in gold? In June they returned a bit sullen when they declared: "The gold excitement in that location is a stupendous humbug."

...that, in 1859, the area on the hill bounded roughly by Garner Street on the east, Vliet Street on the north, Willow Street on the south and the bike path on the west was a cricket playing field?

...that in June of 1860, a group of Sioux Indians gave a performance at Egberts Hall?

...that there were 152 saloons in Cohoes in 1895?

...that an 1896 report by the State Factory Inspectors stated that Cohoes was one of the worst industrial centers in the state in terms of employing children?

...that a cannon placed on the grounds of the Johnston Mansion fired a salute as the funeral train of President Ulysses Grant passed through Cohoes?

...that in 1914 Cohoes' first reservoir was turned into Sunset Park playground? In addition to that, Depot Park (Grand Central Park) was created at the foot of Younglove Avenue. Both parks are still there.

...that one of the people instrumental in establishing the first reservoir in Cohoes was Egbert Egberts? Egberts was inducted into the Cohoes Hall of Fame this March.

...that Boudrais St. ran from the present Elm St. to Columbia St. from the 1890s to 1931, when it was changed to Stratford Court?

...that an original wood carving of the Cohoes Mastodont was made for the Spindle City Historic Society by Bruce Scruton of Pumpkin Primitives? It is on display at the Visitor's Center and will be the first prize in our annual raffle. Come in and see this unique piece and buy tickets for the raffle.

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

The Spindle City Historic Society welcomes new members *Cheryl Bryant, Alice English, Alice Habura, Helen Hampel, Patricia Jacques, Robert Kwiatkowski & Family, and Renato Tameta & Family.*

## HISTORIAN'S NOTEBOOK

### "David John"

David John Johnston, together with his father Robert, developed the Harmony Cotton Print Cloth Mills of Cohoes into one of the giants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American textile industry. They worked for Garner and Company of New York City and through their diligent stewardship made millionaires of Thomas Garner, his son and daughters.

In 1850, The Garner Print Cloth Company purchased the small bankrupt Harmony Mill located on the outskirts of the village of Cohoes. Forty-three year old Robert Johnston, an expert mulespinner, was appointed by Garner to manage the mill with the hope that he could make it profitable. His son, 16-year old David John, accompanied him. Thus the genius of an unparalleled father-son tandem was set in motion.

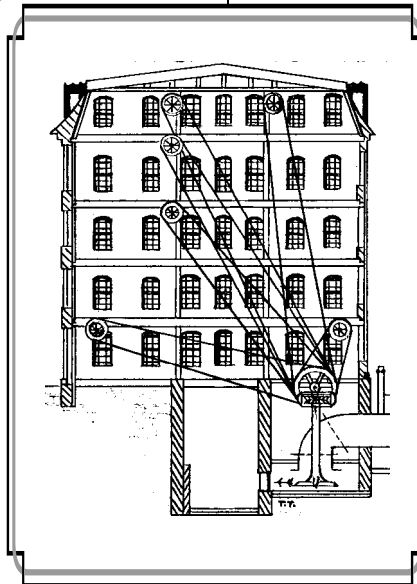
Four years later, the age of twenty, David John was officially appointed by the company to the post of Assistant Manager. By then a large addition to the original mill had been built, as well as new tenement buildings near the Falls and a multi-purpose office building. Also on

the drawing board was another massive mill. By 1872, the original mill building, once surrounded by trees, pastures, clay gullies and the Erie Canal, was now in the heart of a small city. David John, now Superintendent of the mills, could look out from his mansion high atop Harmony Hill, confident that he really had no equal in Cohoes.

Robert died in 1890, after forty years as General Manager of the Harmony Mills. Over time, the father and son had developed a splendid production system that provided employment for poor immigrants, comfortable housing, spiritual opportunities, and the chance to advance and achieve the "American Dream."

October 1894 marked the 28<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary of David John and his wife Anna. They decided to retrace the steps of their honeymoon in Quebec. It was one of the very few vacations Mr. Johnston had permitted himself during his career. Early on the fifth day of their trip, David John, according to Anna, experienced an excruciating pain between his shoulders. He said, "get a doctor" and then collapsed. The doctor's verdict was that he died immediately.

(Continued on p.7)



## Notes on the Prehistoric Indians of Peebles Island and the Cohoes Area

*By Paul R. Huey*

On Peebles Island there is abundant evidence of prehistoric Indian occupation scattered on the ground. These artifacts, including flint chips, worked flint blades, scrapers, projectile points, and hammer stones, each provide important archeological clues about the Indians who once lived on the island before the arrival of Europeans. In 1922, Arthur C. Parker reported the discovery of "chipped red slate" projectile points at the southeast end of Peebles Island. A collector named Albert C. Hurd of Troy had also found sites at the northeast end and on either side of the railroad tracks. On neighboring Van Schaick Island, the burial of an Indian woman and her child was uncovered on the golf course, and in 1926 Homer Folger of Lansingburgh, a carpenter employed at the Matton Shipyard, discovered an Indian burial and artifacts near the Shipyard. They were found north of the Shipyard, not far from Peebles Island. Each of these burials was apparently reinterred following its discovery.

More discoveries followed in 1933, when Folger discovered another well-preserved Indian burial, and in April 1938 he found two burials that had been exposed by the high water of the river at the north tip of Van Schaick Island. The bodies had been buried in a fetal position. He claimed that a projectile point was embedded in the skull of one skeleton. One of those skulls found by Folger in the spring of 1938 has been reburied in a ceremony conducted by the Stockbridge Munsee Indians on July 24, 1994, at the Grafton Peace Pagoda in Rensselaer County. An examination of the skull by Brenda J. Baker and Lisa Anderson of the New York State Museum prior to its reburial suggests that the individual was a male of approximately 35 to 40 years of age. Scars and cavities in the skull and other symptoms of disease indicate a likelihood that the individual suffered from treponemal disease. The man was probably infected in childhood and lived long enough for many of the bone lesions to become wholly or partly healed.

Indian burials were also found in the Matton Shipyard during World War II when a new frame building was being constructed. North of Peebles Island other Indian burials have been found. In 1981 prehistoric human bones were uncovered during the digging of a sewer connector to a house on Hudson River Road, 0.9 mile north of Broad Street in Waterford. Flint chips, fire-cracked rocks, and a single sherd of pottery were present. Also north of Peebles Island, across the Mohawk River channel, at least three burials were uncovered in Waterford in 1995 by archeologists working in advance of sewer line construction. These too were in a fetal position. One skeleton was of a female of perhaps 35 to 45 years of age. Enamel hypoplasia of her teeth indicated a stress-related event during childhood, and the condition of her lower leg bones was indicative of infection. The second skeleton was of a male of about 18 to 20 years of age. This person also had enamel hypoplasia of the teeth as well as lesions indicative of a more serious and/or chronic infection. The fill of the feature was radiocarbon dated at ca. 995 A.D. The third skeleton was a female about 35 to 45 years of age. She had minor arthritis as well as enamel hypoplasia, and the fill with the burial was radiocarbon dated at about 1435 A.D. The remains were reburied in a private Indian ceremony on Peebles Island in July 1996.

The Matton Shipyard area on Van Schaick Island has produced many other prehistoric artifacts and remains of interest. The stripping of topsoil from the area north of the Shipyard revealed extensive evidence of prehistoric Owasco occupation, with concentrations of mussel shells and sturgeon plates. Near them were large pit features containing fragments of Late Woodland Iroquoian castellated pots. Unfortunately, the topsoil stripping immediately north of the Shipyard fence was very deep and probably destroyed almost all archeological evidence east of the road. The site probably extends under the road and west of it to the west shore of Van Schaick Island. In March 1980 Joseph E. McEvoy, an archeologist with the Bureau of Historic Sites, discovered prehistoric flint chips, a stone net sinker, and the base of a Meadowood point in the area between the former railroad bed and the west shore of Van Schaick Island opposite the Shipyard. The Meadowood point would date probably from as early as about 2400 B.C. to 550 B.C.

Further discoveries occurred in 1985 within the Shipyard itself. A hole dug to remove previously installed fuel tanks exposed remains of Indian hearths. A charcoal sample was carefully taken for dating from a lens-shaped hearth containing fire cracked rocks but no noticeable flint chips or pottery; this hearth was exposed about 14 feet west of the north building. On the opposite (west) side of the hole, another hearth was observed almost 3 feet below the ground surface. Above this feature, at a depth of 21 inches, was found a perfect Late Woodland

quartzite Madison point dating from the late prehistoric to early historic periods, or after about 1350 A.D. This Madison point would probably be consistent in date with the triangular point that R. Arthur Johnson recorded finding around 1963 at the north tip of Van Schaick Island, about where the burials had been found in 1938.

The number of prehistoric burials that have been found both north and south of Peebles Island indicates the strong likelihood that there are also prehistoric burials on the east point of Peebles Island, although none have yet been reported there. In 1978, McEvoy recorded the presence of prehistoric Indian artifacts on the east point of Peebles Island where they had washed out of the bank. The river shore at the point was scattered with fire cracked rock, and a possible occupation stratum was visible along the length of the eroding bank less than 2 feet below the ground surface. The artifacts included a notched net sinker, a double-pitted hammer stone, a sherd of Late Woodland pottery, and flint chips. Fire-cracked rock and a small chip of Coxsackie flint were also found in another area to the west on the south side of the point.

Excavations in 1997 on the eastern point of Peebles Island occurred at the proposed location of a new picnic pavilion building. Although prehistoric occupation strata were found, no definite features were discovered. Flint chips, Late Woodland pottery sherds, fire-cracked rock, and several projectile points were recovered. A broken Vosburg point of the Archaic period was found in one area, which would date perhaps from as early as 2500 B.C. A Madison point was found in another area, and there was also a Levanna point that would most likely date from the Late Woodland period between about 900 and 1350 A.D. The Madison point could date from about 1500 or later. Other evidence of Archaic occupation was found in 1998 when a Bare Island point was uncovered at a site near the southwest point of Peebles Island. Bare Island points are believed to date from the Late Archaic period from about 1500 to 1000 B.C. These points are found mostly in southern and eastern New York State, and this specimen represents an occurrence near the northern limit of its geographic range.

Other extensive archeological testing and rescue excavations were conducted at Peebles Island in 1978 and 1979 on the alluvial flat adjoining the north side of the Island northeast of the Collections Care Center prior to the construction of the new waste water treatment drainage system in that area. A number of hearths were completely uncovered and excavated on the flat, but no dateable or diagnostic artifacts were found associated with them. The hearths may be evidence of the drying of fish by the Indians. No human burials were found.

The area below Cohoes Falls was the nearest point on the Hudson River from which the Indians of the Mohawk Valley could obtain fish species such as American shad, sea-run alewives, blueback herrings, striped bass, and shortnose sturgeon. The Cohoes Falls is of great significance in Iroquois tradition. When Dekanawida was sent to establish the Great Peace among the Iroquois, he demonstrated his power by allowing himself to be plunged into the chasm of Cohoes Falls from a tree overhanging the precipice. The next morning he was discovered by the warriors in an empty bark cabin still alive and cooking his morning meal.



*Prehistoric artifacts excavated at Peebles Island State Park in 1997. Left column, top to bottom: 1 - Vosburgh projectile point base, ca. 2500 B.C.; 2, 3 - Late Woodland pottery sherds. Middle column, top to bottom: 1 - Levanna projectile point, ca. 900-1300 A.D.; 2,3,4 - Late Woodland pottery sherds. Right column, top to bottom: 1 - Madison projectile point, ca. 1300-1600 A.D.; 2,3,4,5 - Late Woodland pottery sherds. Courtesy of the Bureau of Historic Sites and Saratoga-Capital Region, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.*



## Off the Top...

Our Annual Presentation featured Mark Thaler, who shared insights on the adaptive reuse of historic buildings in the age of high technology, important considerations for our future while preserving the past. Cohoes' recent past was on display in the Visitor's Center in May and June with "Images of Cohoes Life," a photography show, featuring the work of Tom Bessette.

Our upcoming second Saturdays are exciting. July will feature **Keepers of the Eastern and Western Doors**. Explore the history and culture of the Mohawk and Seneca Nations as illustrated through the work of early twentieth century regional artists with Dr. Denis Foley and Jaré Cardinal. In August you can explore the **Erie Canal** by taking a **Virtual and/or Actual Tour**. This is a joint venture with the Hudson-Mohawk Industrial Gateway and the Cohoes Multi-Service Senior Citizens Center. The cost for this event is \$12.00.

We still need your help with our September event. In mid-September, the touring Vietnam Memorial will be showcased at Lansing Park. SCHS would like to pay tribute to all Cohoes Veterans and Gold Star Mothers. We plan to post photos (formal or casual) of as many Cohoes Veterans as we can. You can provide us with a copy of a photograph and a brief caption, or we can arrange to make copies of your pictures for use in this exhibit and for our archives. Please see the back page of this newsletter for more information.

SCHS elections this spring brought about change of Secretary. On behalf of SCHS, I would like to thank Helena Keilen for her years of hard work in this position and welcome Tor Shekerjian as our current "scribe." I would also like to thank the other officers, the trustees and the members for another year of hard work and support. Additional thanks go to Mayor John McDonald and the City of Cohoes for providing a place to hang our hat.

Many people have donated Cohoes photographs, memorabilia and artifacts. Each piece makes a difference and together they are providing us with a collection. If you have photos of Cohoes but don't wish to part with them, please call us at 237-7999 and leave contact information. We will arrange copying for you.

Our regular meetings are the last Wednesday of the month at 7 PM (6 PM for July and August) in the Cohoes Visitor's Center at 58 Remsen Street (the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the historic Cohoes Music Hall). Keep Cohoes' memories alive, come to a meeting or presentation, and meet others who wish to do the same.

Paul D. Dunleavy  
President

## Think Spring! Art Show

From March 18 through 28, the Visitor's Center hosted a glimpse of Spring. A group of oil pastel drawings of flowers done by Cohoes High School 9<sup>th</sup> grade students helped banish thoughts of the long winter. The works were inspired by the art of Georgia O'Keeffe. We thank the students for their creative efforts, and their teacher JoAnn Johnson.

## Revitalizing 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Industrial Architecture in the Age of SEMATECH

The SCHS Program on April 12 featured a presentation by Mark Thaler, a Cohoes native and SCHS charter member who is an architect and historic preservation principal at the Albany-based firm of Einhorn, Yaffee, Prescott Architecture & Engineering. In his talk, he examined the infrastructure and space needs of both high-technology companies and potential spin-off development that may come with the arrival of SEMATECH and the growth in areas such as nanotechnology and biotechnology. He outlined ways in which the redevelopment of existing historic buildings from the first Industrial Revolution can help meet these needs and revitalize our cities. His presentation highlighted examples of successful adaptive reuse, and considered the approaches to be taken in matching historic buildings to modern uses and promoting these strategies for development.

## Tom Bessette - "Images of Cohoes Life"



May 10 was the opening of an exhibit of Tom Bessette's photographs of contemporary Cohoes. Tom, born and raised in Cohoes, holds a BA in Photography from the College of Saint Rose and an MFA in Photography from SUNY New Paltz, and has exhibited his work throughout the region. His subjects include people of Cohoes at work, views of mill interiors, the city's varied architecture, infrastructure, and street scenes. The show will be on display in the Visitor's Center through June 21.

## Rockville Centre Students Adopt a Lock



*Hewitt students Leah Winfield (l) and Kathleen Leonardo (r), who initiated the Erie Canal project, with teacher Joseph Paluseo.*

As noted in our last issue, 5<sup>th</sup> grade students at Hewitt and Riverside Schools in Rockville Centre, Long Island, have taken a great interest in the Erie Canal and its history and decided to adopt lock sites in Cohoes. The students have organized a variety of fundraising projects, including a benefit concert. They also created presentations and wrote songs and poems about the canal.

Earlier this spring, SCHS had the opportunity to share in their enthusiasm with a pair of exchange visits. On March 22, Hewitt School Principal Joanne Spencer visited Cohoes, and was given a tour of Erie Canal sites and the Visitor's Center by a contingent of SCHS officers.

On April 4, SCHS President Paul Dunleavy and Tor Shekerjian attended the canal benefit concert held at the Hewitt School. The concert featured a folksinger playing canal and other water-themed songs, student presentations, as well as a brief "virtual tour" of the lock sites from SCHS and a reading of a letter from Mayor John McDonald honoring the students' efforts.



The funds raised by the students will go toward a plaque for one of the locks and ongoing restoration of

the canal sites. We are truly appreciative of the involvement of the students and their interest in the Erie Canal, and thank teachers Joseph Paluseo and Maureen Dockery, and Hewitt and Riverside School principals Joanne Spencer and Tricia Bock. We are also grateful to Amy O'Shea, who helped in getting us connected with the schools. We hope that some of the students will have the opportunity to visit the historic Erie Canal in Cohoes, and we plan to maintain contact with the schools and work together on future projects and programs.



*Paul Dunleavy, in Victorian attire, thanks Hewitt School Principal Joanne Spencer at the benefit concert.*

## Creating a New City Park - A Roundtable Discussion

On March 8, the Spindle City Historic Society organized a roundtable discussion about the new city park to be developed across from City Hall. The Mayor, other city officials, business people, representatives of civic groups, and other Cohoes citizens participated and generated many interesting ideas for creating an attractive greenspace to complement City Hall and grace the city's historic downtown and one of its main thoroughfares.

The afternoon session also included a slide presentation about Horace Silliman, his accomplishments and lasting legacy in Cohoes and beyond. A Cohoes civic leader and philanthropist, Silliman was in part responsible for many advances in Cohoes, including its hospital, water system, schools, and firefighting force. He guided the construction of City Hall, and gave of his time and wealth to support the Presbyterian Church and organizations benefiting young people. His generosity extended to other parts of the country and as far as the Philippines, where his philanthropy permitted the founding of Silliman University, now one of that nation's major centers of higher education.

## **The Sangamon Mills**

The Sangamon Mills were established in 1922 by Daniel J. Cosgro, and have outlasted dozens of larger and more famous knitting companies in Cohoes. It is the oldest operational mill providing wholesale mail order dishcloth products to customers in the United States, and is the only dishcloth manufacturer on the East Coast. The business, located in a two story building at 58 Columbia St. once called "Dan's Tin Can" because of its unique metal siding, houses seventeen of its original knitting machines on its first floor. The machines, made at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, still function well and are in constant use; only one other of its kind exists outside of Cohoes. The first floor of the mill contains the packing and shipping operation as well. A dumbwaiter, also dating from the company's beginnings, transports the knitted material to the second floor for processing. On this level, a high-speed machine seams and cuts the material in one operation. Once 30 cloths have been cut, a bell alerts the operator to move the cloths and two stacks are passed on to the seamer, who clips the connecting seam chain and seams the two cut edges; the cloths are then ready for inspection and bundling. This one-of-a-kind machine was designed 50 years ago by the manager of the business, Edward Carroll Fisher, who was Dan Cosgro's nephew.

The company originally made many other products, including towels, metal dish scrubbers, and infant wear. In 1960, a separate company, Swanknit, was formed to manufacture the baby clothing. Production of the dish scrubbers ceased during World War II when the metal was required for the war effort. Exclusive dishcloth production began in the 1940s, with cloths made in all white or with a variety of colored stripes in shades including blue, green, red, yellow, tangerine, and flamingo. The mill once had a staff of thirty with night and day shifts, but today the workforce numbers thirteen, with employees working Monday through Friday on a day shift. All steps of the operation, from knitting to boxing and shipping, are performed on site, with a production of 500-600 dozen cloths per day, or approximately 95,000 dozen Sunflower knit cloths per year. The cloths are used for car polishing, dusting, and shoe shining as well as on dishes. The company's largest customer is the Campfire Girls; others include schools, churches, community organizations, and companies that use the cloth products for fundraising purposes. Sangamon's continued success is due to the exceptional quality of its product and the dedication of the company's employees, who truly enjoy their jobs. Since no inventory is maintained, each order is filled specifically at the customer's request. Demand is greatest from September to June when schools are in session.

A few years ago, the company had a reputation for its cats. This was due to employee Maggie Abbott, the "cat woman", who collected strays and brought them into the mill, where they were cared for, seen by a veterinarian, and then given to neighborhood cat lovers. The cats patrolled the mill day and night, and were credited with controlling rodents and other pests in the mill. Maggie no longer works there, but four cats remain in residence at the mill today.

The Fisher Family still runs Sangamon Mill. Ella Fisher is President, and her son, William Fisher, is Vice President. He has managed the mill for thirty one years and sees to its continued success. We wish them well in maintaining this manufacturing tradition in Cohoes.

### **Daniel J. Cosgro**

"Danny" Cosgro was born in Cohoes, the only son in an Irish family of four children. He attended Cohoes schools, working after school in a drugstore and a grocery store. His boyhood ambition was to become a lawyer. He attended the Curry School in Boston, worked in the law office of John McLean, and was admitted to the bar. When his schooling at Curry was complete, he returned to Cohoes to practice law and served as City Court judge in 1917-1918. His residence and law office were located at 89 Congress St., where he lived all of his adult life in Cohoes.

In 1922, Cosgro was elected Mayor of Cohoes for a 2-year term. He was repeatedly re-elected, becoming the city's first 4-term mayor, serving until 1929. During his years in public office, he was quite progressive, bringing about many changes and improvements, including a street paving program and the first year-round recreation program for the youth of Cohoes. Spurred on by the alarming numbers of children who died each winter skating on the canals, the city contracted with the owner of the Ship Street ice rink to provide free ice skating for schoolchildren every winter afternoon. To discourage swimming in the canals, Cosgro developed a plan with noted recreation authority Burns W. Beach to construct a pool and establish recreation programs at Lansing Park. While serving as mayor, he also was a regional leader in providing low-cost housing in the city, erecting a score of city-sponsored homes on municipal land at the head of Vliet Blvd. Cosgro attracted nationwide attention to Cohoes when he purchased a replica of Henry Hudson's ship the *Half Moon*. The ship was mounted on an elevated site overlooking the Hudson River, and attracted thousands of visitors over several years. Unfortunately, the ship later fell into ruin and was subsequently destroyed by vandalism and fire.

Following his departure from the Mayor's office, Cosgro turned his attention more exclusively to manufacturing. He had organized the Sangamon Mills in 1922. The company was characterized by employer-employee relations unusual for the day. He insured his workers free of charge, paid them four holiday bonuses per year, and during the war years assumed



## UPCOMING EVENTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

**Saturday, June 14** - Meet the artist - Tom Bessette, 1 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center. Meet photographer Tom Bessette, whose "Images of Cohoes Life" show will be on display in the Visitor's Center May 10 - June 21.

**Wednesday, June 25** - Spindle City Historic Society monthly meeting, 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Saturday, July 12** - The Keepers of the Eastern and Western Doors, 1 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center. Jaré Cardinal and Denis Foley present an overview of the history and culture of the Mohawks and the Senecas - the Keepers of the Eastern and Western Doors.

**Wednesday, July 30** - Spindle City Historic Society monthly meeting, 6 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center. Please note special summer hours for July and August meetings.

**Saturday, August 9** - Tour of the Erie Canal in Cohoes, 9:30 a.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center. Visit the city's historic canal sites on a guided tour on foot or by bus. The program will also include a slideshow "virtual tour" of the sites, the history of the canal in Cohoes, and discussion of ongoing preservation efforts. Co-sponsored by the Hudson-Mohawk Industrial Gateway and Cohoes Multi-Service Senior Center. \$12.

**Wednesday, August 27** - Spindle City Historic Society monthly meeting, 6 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Saturday, September 13** - A Tribute to Cohoes Veterans and Gold Star Mothers, 1 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center. Photos and memories of Cohoes veterans of all wars and military service, as well as those of Gold Star mothers will be on display. There will also be a presentation at 1 p.m.

**Wednesday, September 24** - Spindle City Historic Society monthly meeting, 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Saturday, November 9** - Art Show opening, featuring works by Bob Gullie. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Collecting Veterans' Memories** - In conjunction with the visit of the traveling Vietnam Memorial Wall to Cohoes in mid-September, the Spindle City Historic Society wishes to recognize the history and memories of Cohoes veterans of all wars and military service, as well as those of Gold Star mothers. If you have photos or memories of your own experiences, or those of a relative or friend you would like included in a display in the Visitor's Center, please contact us at 233-8613 or 237-6643. Photos will be reproduced and returned unless you wish to donate them to the society.

### WANTED

- ☞ Photos or information about M. Adelaide Dickey (La Petite Adelaide) 1884-1960
- ☞ Information about Maggie Attridge (married to John Deno around 1891)
- ☞ Information about the Piche or Fisher families (Peter, Matthew, Della Flatley, Ophelia Cara Field)
- ☞ Information about the Cohoes Wheelmen (bicycle club)

Spindle City Historic Society

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