

# Spindle City Historic Society

Volume 9 Issue 2

Summer 2006

## DID YOU KNOW

...that the Spindle City Historic Society's new book, *Cohoes Revisited*, is now in print? If you haven't already purchased a copy, don't delay! See page 8 of this issue for details.

...that during the period since the 1920s, there were eight bowling establishments in Cohoes? These included the basement of St. John's Church (now the Cohoes Library), Cramer's Armory, Joseph Leque's Bowling and Billiard Parlor, the Elks Club at 69 Oneida Street, St. Agnes Lyceum, the second floor of the Harmony Hotel, the Jackson Avenue Alleys, and the Cohoes Bowling Arena. The Cohoes Bowling Arena is the only one of these still in operation and open to the public.

...that 2006 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the toaster? General Electric's D-12 was the first model made for home use.

...that between the years 1920 and 1930 there were 107 businesses in the city of Cohoes? These included 9 bakeries (including the Golden Krust), 8 haberdashers/men's and boys' stores, 8 women's clothing stores, 4 department stores, 7 drugstores/pharmacies, 6 coal and lumber companies, 4 restaurants, 5 meat markets and 4 barber shops.

...that 2005 was the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cohoes Elks?

...that the 1906 St. Patrick's Day Parade in Cohoes had 1500 marchers? At that time, many local communities joined together for a single parade. The parade location changed each year, rotating among the participating municipalities, which included Cohoes, Watervliet, Troy, Albany and North Adams.

...that current New York State law defines the endpoints of the Erie Canal as Waterford and Tonawanda, rather than the historically accurate endpoints of Albany and Buffalo? A bill has been introduced in the State Legislature to change this. See the center sheet in this newsletter to find out more and learn how you can support this effort.

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

The Spindle City Historic Society welcomes new members *Joan Kosek, Lisa Nocella, and Ray & Shirley Stevens.*

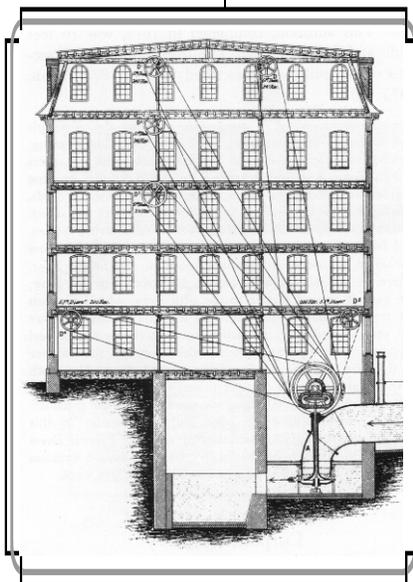
## HISTORIAN'S NOTEBOOK

### The Rev. Thomas Phelan

Thomas Phelan, a scholar, educator, and one of the area's leading preservationists, died March 31 at the age of 80. Phelan was the founding president of the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway, a nonprofit group formed in response to the loss of historic buildings and neighborhoods through the "urban renewal" programs of the 1960s. Since its founding, Gateway has been dedicated to promoting pride in and preservation of the local communities that played a major role in the Industrial Revolution, including Cohoes and Troy. Phelan was instrumental in creating a favorable climate for historic preservation in the region. He advocated the preservation and reuse of historic buildings, and emphasized that restoring these structures can promote a sense of community. In assessing Phelan's contributions, longtime associate and friend P. Thomas Carroll, now executive director of the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway, notes, "If it wasn't for Tom, all of Troy would have been turned into a strip mall. He's a giant."

Phelan, a native of the city of Rensselaer, was born in 1925. He was educated in area parochial schools and received an A.B. in English from the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, and entered the seminary at the Theological College at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. He was ordained in 1951, and later pursued doctoral studies in philosophy at Campion Hall, Oxford. Phelan spent much of his career at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. His first appointment at RPI, in 1959, was as its resident Roman Catholic chaplain. He created the Chapel and Cultural Center, opened in 1968, which hosts exhibitions and receptions as well as religious services. He served as Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences from 1972 to 1994. He is credited with developing a strong program and faculty in the school, creating links between the humanities and technology. His revamping of the H&SS curriculum, completed in 1988, was praised by the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as "one of the most creative and exciting curricular reform efforts." Phelan was named Institute Dean and Historian in 1995. In 2005, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute created the Thomas Phelan Endowed Chair in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

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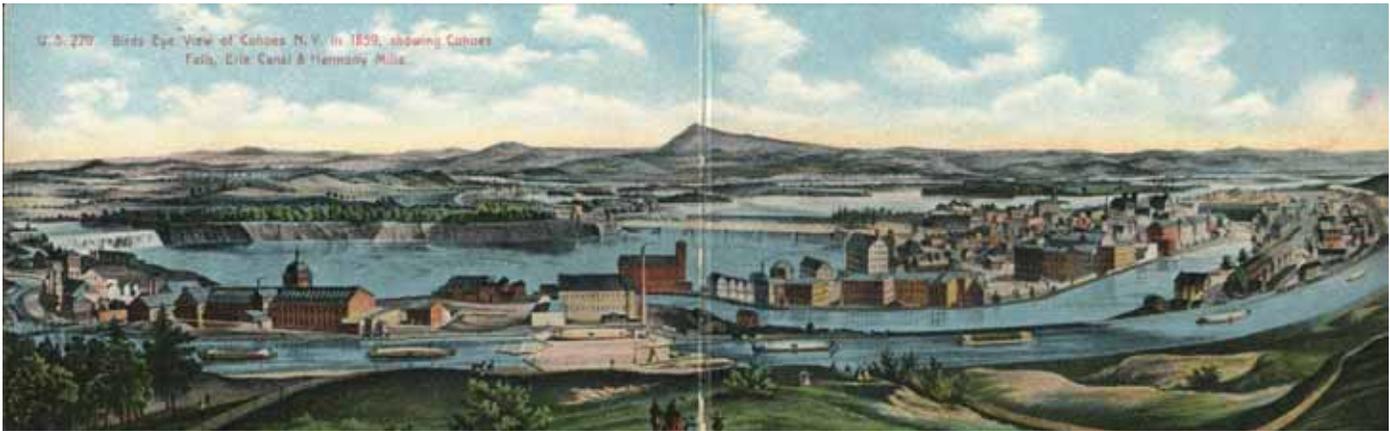


# An Essay on the Erie Canal: Creating the First Tech Valley

by Denis Foley and Andrew Wolfe

If you were a 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century traveler to Upstate New York, a visit to the Cohoes Falls would be on your tour. Jasper Dankers, a Dutch missionary, wrote in his journal on April 23, 1679, “Mr. Sanders having provided us with horses we rode about nine o’clock to visit the Cahoos [Cohoes Falls] which is the Falls of the Maquaas Kill [Mohawk River] which are the greatest Falls in New Netherland, but in North America, and perhaps as far as it is known in North America” (Van Zandt , 1992).

Because of the Cohoes Falls, Cohoes was home to twenty-five percent of the locks employed on the Erie Canal. Today Cohoes has the greatest number of intact double locks of the Enlarged Erie Canal among Locks 5 through 18. Some of these locks have been buried or partially destroyed, but many can still be visited and the art of their engineering appreciated. Lock 18 is the westernmost lock and has spectacular views of the foothills of Rensselaer County and the rapids of the Mohawk River. Just above the river, across from Lock 18, stands the power canal for the School Street hydroelectric plant. This may be the last watered vestige of the original Erie Canal (1825–1842), also known as Clinton’s Ditch.



1859 View of Cohoes, looking east. The Cohoes Falls are to the left. The Enlarged Erie Canal runs across the lower third of the image. The power canals for the Harmony Mill complex, once part of the original Erie Canal, are just beyond, closer to the Mohawk River. Harmony Mill #3 had not yet been constructed.

Walking in the double lock, you can imagine the packet boats traveling on the daylong journey through Cohoes. Canal Boats traversing Locks 5 through 18 went west, filled with manufactured goods from Troy, Albany, and New York City, and east with the raw materials needed to make those manufactured goods. Immigrants were able to go west cheaply with their household and farming equipment to establish settlements in the New World. French Canadian and Irish immigrants could also find work in Cohoes with spindles and looms powered by water diverted from the Cohoes Falls to turbines through seven levels of power canals. Canvass and Hugh White’s power canal design allowed Cohoes to become the cloth manufacturing center of America, with the largest textile plant of the nineteenth century at the Harmony Mills complex. The power canals were built using sections of the original Erie Canal, obtained in a land swap between the Cohoes Company and the State of New York. The State gave the Cohoes Company the existing canal in exchange for land on which the Enlarged Erie Canal would be built. Remnants of Locks 37 and 38 of the original canal still exist under the pump house and picking house of the Harmony Mills complex. Additional locks from the original canal may also exist under Main Street.

Albany was both the eastern terminus and portal to the west for the 363-mile canal. The canal connected the Great Lakes with the Hudson River. The Port of New York, long behind Boston and Philadelphia in commerce, soon became the nation’s premier port. Albany became a major transportation center for the canal, with the Great Basin in the Hudson River used for steamer traffic and a train station at the corner of Broadway and Colonie Street. Albany’s population grew from five thousand residents in 1800, reaching sixty-two thousand on the eve of the Civil War. Lumber from the Adirondacks transformed Stephen Van Rensselaer’s pastoral land into an industrial area and North Albany’s lumber district, with Van Rensselaer having his own private slip adjacent to the weigh station.

Troy now had access to raw materials, both coal and iron ore, via sidecuts in the canal south of the Watervliet Arsenal and south of the West Troy Weigh Lock (at Twenty-Third Street in Watervliet). Foundries and paper mills opened. Benjamin Marshall dammed the Poesten Kill in 1840. A 600-foot tunnel through Mount Ida powered Troy's mills. In South Troy the Burden Iron Works manufactured several million horseshoes. The Industrial Revolution had come to upstate New York and America. Locks 53 through 38, from Albany to Cohoes on the original Erie Canal, were part of the original Tech Valley corridor in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

What was the cultural and economic climate that produced such a structural innovation? Five interwoven cultural forces coalesced in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in both Albany and New York City. The perception of distance shrank. Innovators' persistence prevailed. Decision makers tolerated failure. Power brokers maintained an uneasy political alliance between the common good and individual greed. An environment of tolerance and diversity of opinions was the cauldron within which the science of engineering developed along with the new capitalism.

Travel by canal between the two terminals at Albany and Buffalo proceeded at a stately three to four mile an hour pace (Larkin, 1998). It took ten days to travel eastbound from Buffalo to New York Harbor. Traversing the crowded locks was slow. The 28 mile journey between Albany and Schenectady took two days and required traversing 27 locks. The eighteen locks in Cohoes required to get above the falls caused a bottleneck. The bottleneck was due to two problems with the original canal. First, the locks on the original canal were all single-chambered, so only one boat could pass through at a time. Second, the distance between locks was short, which meant that boats could be stalled at an available lock due to lack of room on the other end of the lock.



*Juncta, the junction of the original Erie and Champlain Canals.*

Nonetheless, it became possible to travel from Albany to Buffalo much faster and much cheaper than before the canal. Upwards of 90 passengers could travel on an 80 by 14 foot packet boat. Freight boats could carry one hundred tons of goods. Inexpensive transport existed to the vast interior of western New York and beyond. Both man and freight could travel easily east and west. The Atlantic and the Great Lakes were joined. The Appalachian barriers were overcome. Thomas Jefferson (who refused to fund the canal while president and preferred river improvements to artificial rivers) noted a month before his death that although New York had virtually no canal building experience, it still managed to build the world's longest canal in the shortest time for the lowest cost. The Erie Canal was the Internet of its day.

Stone locks, waterproof cement, aqueducts, massive double locks, and Whipple truss bridges were the 19<sup>th</sup> century's routers and modems.



*De Witt Clinton*

The Erie Canal was not just an engineering endeavor; it was also politically and economically driven. Key to the political success of the canal was De Witt Clinton, a Democrat. He used his tremendous political power to push the New York State Legislature to fund the canal and fought a political fight each year until the Canal was complete. He also sat on the Canal Board which oversaw the route, construction and operation of the canal. The Canal Board was made up of five powerful men: DeWitt Clinton, Stephen Van Rensselaer, Samuel Young, Joseph Ellicott and Myron Holley. But the Erie Canal was not the first canal into central New York. In 1792, General Peter Schuyler, a Federalist, started the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company as a way to reach his holdings in western New York. The company used the Mohawk River and Wood Creek to access Oneida Lake. Schuyler died in Oneida Indian Country of pneumonia trying to build locks of wood and brick for the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company. His canal could

*(continued on p. 6)*



## Off the Top...

“At Cohoes there is a great fall; about a mile above the falls, the river, broad and deep as it is, has been hemmed in by a dam, and a great portion of its waters drawn off by a water-power company. The little town of Cohoes is entirely manufacturing. It is the Lowell of New York. Here are the great Harmony Cotton-Mills; and here, also, are some twenty-five woollen-mills, besides paper-factories and other industries. The falls of Cohoes are quite close to the Harmony Mills; and a capital view can be obtained of them, either from the bank in the rear of one of the mills, or from an island in the river, at some distance below. Very much depends upon the season of the year as regards the impression which the falls make upon the mind of a traveller. In the dry season there is but little water, and hence the upper part of the falls appears like a series of grand rapids. In the early summer there is one tremendous descent of water, falling over seventy feet. The banks on either side are high and shaly, crowned generally with dark pines at the summit, and showing, below, a diagonal stratification, as if they had been upheaved.”

This is an excerpt from an 1872 book called *Picturesque America*. This book was issued as the American Centennial approached and it was an early attempt to give readers an understanding of the size and beauty of America. Most people reading this newsletter are probably local (or were local) to Cohoes. When was the last time each of us has visited the Falls for the sake of seeing the Falls? A secretary in my building was coerced into taking her daughter to see the Falls. Neither of these Troy residents had seen them. The SCHS recently had a group from Diamond Ridge tour the Visitor's Center. June and Walter, two of our devoted members, convinced the group to take the time to swing by the Falls - they were thrilled. Some of them had never seen the Falls and some had not seen them in years. When was your last time?

Go ahead, make a visit. Better yet, stop by the Cohoes Visitor's Center and pick up one of our tour maps that include the area of the Falls (Harmony Mills Historic District or the Erie Canal in Cohoes) and make a morning or afternoon of it. Don't forget to see the rededicated Col. Robert Craner Veteran's Memorial Park while you are in that area. As the summer approaches we are all making plans to get away and see things, yet we often overlook what is in our own backyard. So find the overlook to the Cohoes Falls and see what we do have. Enjoy your summer!

Paul D. Dunleavy  
President

## 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Cohoes High School Art Show



On Saturday May 6, SCHS hosted an opening reception for a show of artwork by Cohoes High School students. The work included drawings, paintings in watercolor, acrylic and oil, mosaics, computer graphics, sculptures and calligraphy.

The show was up through the month of May. This is the fourth year that SCHS has sponsored this event.



*A group of student artists at the show opening with teacher JoAnn Johnson. From left: Jabreel Smith, JoAnn Johnson, Keri Bushey, Chelsey Sturtevant, Dan Pertierra.*



*Melissa Salway with her artwork.*

## Cohoes Recalls a Hero – Remembering Col. Robert R. Craner

This spring, the Cohoes Remembers Veterans Committee sponsored several events to honor the memory of Cohoesier Col. Robert R. Craner, a Vietnam veteran who was held for five years as a prisoner of war. Among the events was a commemorative dinner on March 23 for “Robert Craner Day” which marked the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the day Craner was welcomed by the citizens of Cohoes following his release from captivity. On the same day this year a retrospective exhibit chronicling Robert Craner’s life was opened by SCHS at the Visitor’s Center. The collection of photographs and newspaper articles was up through early May, and there are plans for an additional showing in the fall.



*A panel from the Robert Craner retrospective with photographs and newspaper articles from Robert Craner’s homecoming to Cohoes on March 23, 1973. Other panels show Robert Craner’s early years in Cohoes, his days as a pilot, and later years as a military attaché.*

On May 20, Craner Park, located a block from Craner’s boyhood home on Church Street, was rededicated as Col. Robert R. Craner Veterans Memorial Park. The park, formerly Devlin Street Park, was originally renamed for Craner on Memorial Day 1974; its new name now honors Craner and all Cohoes veterans. New additions to the park include a group of flagpoles, each bearing a flag of one of the armed services, a wall, park sign, paved plaza and pillars at the northern entrance of the park, a refurbished stone monument, and an interpretive sign telling Craner’s life story.

Among the participants in the park dedication ceremony were several members of the Craner family, veterans who served with Colonel Craner,

and local dignitaries. Events at the dedication included the landing of a Black Hawk helicopter, ceremonial flag-raising, parade of Saratoga National Cemetery Honor Guard and Albany mounted police, and the unveiling of the interpretive sign.



*A group stands with the Craner interpretive sign on the day of the park dedication. Some in the photograph are MISTYs, an elite group of pilots who flew some of the most dangerous missions during the Vietnam War. Craner, a skilled pilot, was also a MISTY. First from left is Don Jones. Second from left is Guy Gruters, who was a prisoner of war with Craner. Garret Van Ripper is third from left and Ray Bevivino is on the right. Also in the photograph are Robert Craner’s son Lorne and daughter Charys (fourth and fifth from left).*

*The sign was sponsored by the Cohoes Remembers Veterans Committee and designed by Paul Dunleavy, Tor Shekerjian, and Daniele Cherniak.*

## Tours of Cohoes and the Visitor’s Center for Niskayuna and Diamond Ridge Seniors

On Saturday April 1, SCHS offered a guided tour of Cohoes to a group of residents of a retirement community in Niskayuna. The group started with a tour of the Visitor’s Center and a viewing of the film “A Day in the Life of Cohoes.” They took a tour of the city’s sites led by Bernie Ouimet. Highlights included the Harmony Mills District, the Falls, sites of the Erie Canal, and the city’s historic downtown, all accompanied by a vivid narrative of Cohoes’ history and stories of the many immigrant groups that have given the city its character.

On May 9, residents of the Diamond Ridge retirement community visited the Cohoes Visitor’s Center, and enjoyed the permanent exhibits, film and the Cohoes High School art show on display. They also visited the Cohoes Falls and were thrilled to see this natural wonder enhanced by recent rains.

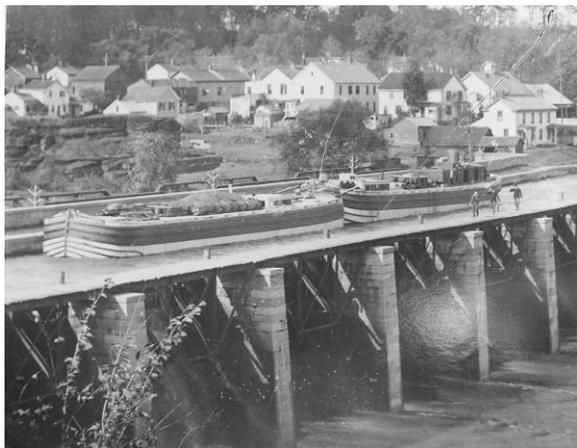
*Erie Canal (continued from p.3)*

only handle boats of up to 15 tons, and was in constant need of repairs; by 1808 the company was bankrupt. Stephen Van Rensselaer, founder of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and a Congressman, was also an entrepreneur with major land and resource holdings in the central New York area – near where the Erie Canal would pass. Stephen Van Rensselaer became one of the original Canal Commissioners, whose duties included planning the route of the canal through New York. Van Rensselaer had land holdings in the Seneca Nation, interests in the salt mines in Salina (now Syracuse), and in the Cohoes Company in Cohoes. Each man forged alliances and secured state and local funding to get a quick, cheap transportation system to the west. They persevered.



*Stephen Van Rensselaer*

Many remnants of these historic advances are still to be found in the area. The original canal, a ditch 4 feet deep, 40 feet wide at the surface and 28 feet wide at the bottom, initially had 83 single locks accommodating a water level rise of 568 feet between the two terminals of Buffalo and Albany (Phelan and Carroll, 2001). The eastern terminus, Albany, had both a big basin in the Hudson River and a small basin adjacent to the upstream end of Lock 53 of the original canal. Along with Lock 53, this area also contained Lock 52, Locks 1 and 2 of the enlarged canal, collector's houses and weigh locks for the original and enlarged canal as well as bridge abutments, private slips and the stone-lined canal trough. In the 1950s this area was infilled so that today many of these structures are about 4 feet underground. To date, researchers have uncovered the weigh lock and collector's house for the enlarged Erie Canal, both located below John Treffiletti's Warehouse parking lot adjacent to Erie Boulevard above Lawrence Street, and Lock 1 at the site of the Modern Press building. Lock 2 is buried at the northern end of Erie Boulevard. The remains of other original Erie Canal structures may still be located underground in North Albany.



The Industrial Revolution in America was an age of experimentation. New technologies were created and Union College and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute developed engineering curricula to meet the demand for new transportation systems, new machines, and new innovations. Students entered the new field of civil engineering. Ideas were discussed. As long as you were hard working, opportunity and failure were available. You could always move on. The west's waters beckoned.

What of the West? Was it to become allied with Canada, which possessed what was then the gateway to Europe through the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River? The Erie Canal united the Port of New York with the West. The

cultural imprint of New York State's rich heritage diffused westward. The New York experience included unfettered capitalism, religious tolerance, acceptance of ethnic diversity, and freedom of the press. The Erie Canal offered America more than technological progress. This artificial river irrevocably bonded the West with the original thirteen seaboard colonies through one port, New York City.

*References:*

- Larkin, F.D.(1998) *New York State Canals: A Short History*. Purple Mountain Press, Fleischmanns, NY.  
Phelan, T. and P.T. Carroll (2001) *Hudson – Mohawk Gateway: An Illustrated History*. American Historical Press, Sun Valley, CA.  
Van Zandt, R. (1992) *Chronicles of the Hudson: Three Centuries of Travelers' Accounts*. Black Dome Press, Hensonville, NY

*The authors wish to thank Joseph Sullivan, a doctoral candidate at the University at Albany specializing in the sociology of computerization, for his insights into the interplay between technological innovation and social change.*

*For further information on Cohoes, consult the website [www.timesunion.com/communities/spindlecity](http://www.timesunion.com/communities/spindlecity).*

Historian's Notebook (continued from p. 1)

Phelan also provided leadership in numerous community organizations. He was chairman of WMHT Educational Telecommunications, chair of the Architecture and Building Commission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany, and president of the Catholic Art Association. He was a member of many ecumenical, educational, charitable, and historical societies, including the Spindle City Historic Society.

Thomas Phelan was a scholar with broad interests, writing on historical theology, higher education, industrial archaeology, architecture, American material culture and decorative arts. He is perhaps most noted for his writing on the American Industrial Revolution and examination of the ways in which these technological and concomitant social changes affected the course of American history, with the Troy area as an example. His wide-ranging scholarship includes a landmark publication on the evolution of Christian liturgical garb, and a significant work on the making of Windsor chairs. Phelan also authored *The Hudson-Mohawk Gateway: An Illustrated History* (1985), highlighting the region's rich past; he later co-authored a new edition of the book with P. Thomas Carroll.

In 1972, Phelan was elected a fellow of the Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture (other fellows in the society include Ralph Ellison, Marianne Moore, Yehudi Menuhin, Phillip Johnson, and Margaret Mead). Other honors he received include the Albany League of Arts Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Arts, the Albert Fox Demers Medal for Distinguished Service to RPI (in 1986), and the Academic Citizens Laureate Award from the State University of New York at Albany Foundation in 1988. In 1987, he was the first recipient of the Community Service Award from the Hudson-Mohawk Consortium of Colleges and Universities.

The Spindle City Historic Society honors Rev. Phelan's life of intellectual inquiry and service, his many accomplishments and his legacy in historic preservation throughout the region.

Sources for this article include a report by Dan Higgins for the Times Union and information from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

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### ***Spindle City Historic Society Membership Application***

[www.timesunion.com/communities/spindlecity](http://www.timesunion.com/communities/spindlecity)

[www.spindlecity.org](http://www.spindlecity.org)

President - Paul Dunleavy

First Vice President - Daniele Cherniak    Second Vice President - Tor Shekerjian

Secretary - Linda C. Christopher    Treasurer - June Cherniak

<input type="checkbox"/> Individual Membership	\$10.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Institutional Membership	\$25.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Senior Citizen Membership	\$ 5.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Contributing Membership	\$35.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Student Membership	\$ 5.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Membership	\$50.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Family Membership	\$15.00		

*We have great things planned in our home in the Cohoes Visitor's Center!*

*Please help if you can with an additional donation to support our upcoming programs:*

\$5.00     \$10.00     other

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

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

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Mail completed form with membership fee, payable to Spindle City Historic Society, to:  
June Cherniak, Treasurer, 415 Vliet Boulevard, Cohoes, NY 12047

## ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

***Cohoes Revisited*** – The Spindle City Historic Society’s new book, *Cohoes Revisited*, has been published. If you’d like to purchase copies, please call us at 518-237-5618 or e-mail us at [cherniak@nycap.rr.com](mailto:cherniak@nycap.rr.com). We can also mail books (for an additional charge) for those who cannot pick them up. Please purchase your books directly from SCHS. Doing so provides over 40% of the cover price to SCHS in support of our exhibits, programming, and other activities, as well as this newsletter.



**Wednesday, June 28** - Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Saturday, July 15** – Tour of Albany Rural Cemetery, 10 a.m. The tour will feature stops at the gravesites of noted Cohoesiers and others with Cohoes connections, along with the cemetery’s magnificent statuary and monuments to numerous notables from around the region. A picnic will follow the tour. For more information, call 518-237-5618.

**Wednesday, July 26**- Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 6 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center. Please note 6 p.m. meeting time for July and August only.

**Saturday, August 12** – Opening reception for a showing of oil paintings by Joseph Viola. His work includes landscapes of Cohoes, still life and portraiture. Reception 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center. The show will be up through September.

**Wednesday, August 30**- Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 6 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Wednesday, September 27**- Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

*Photo credits this issue: Walter Cherniak, Tom Donnelly, NYS Museum, Tor Shekerjian*

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Spindle City Historic Society

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