

Ghosts of Winters Past – 1876-1886  
By Peg Ross  
Town of Greene Historian pogr@aol.com

The days of 2007 are dwindling down and I thought it would be interesting to see what was going on at this time about 125 years ago. So I took one event that had occurred during each winter season in Greene from 1876-1886 and reported in the *Chenango American*. Then I decided to give a brief history of the event described.

28-Dec-1876 – *The boys are now coasting down old Potash Hill (West Juliand) just as we used to do long years ago.*

Sledding, or coasting, has been very popular since colonial times. In 1861, Henry F. Morton began building sleds that were hand painted by his wife. He formed the Paris Hill Manufacturing Company in Maine. These were probably what the boys used as the Flexible Flyer that could be steered wasn't patented until 1889. Sleds could be used by all children – a cheap wintertime entertainment.

29-Nov-1877 – *Good skating – canal is covered with boys*

Ice skating is also a very old sport. Remember the story of Hans Brinker using ice skates in Holland. In 1865, Jackson Haines, a famous American skater, developed the two plate all metal blade which was attached to his boot. He also added the first toe pick to skates in the 1870s.

24-Dec-1878 – *Died of typhoid pneumonia – Georgiana, eldest daughter of Samuel A. and Emily Tremaine Martin (Her mother, Emily, died Dec 27, 1878 and father, Samuel A., died March 2, 1879, both also of typhoid pneumonia)*

The age of bacteriology was from 1864-1910. In 1864, Louis Pasteur developed pasteurization that killed bacteria in food. After he published his book in 1876 regarding germ theory of disease, the identification of pathogens began. Cases of malaria, anthrax, pneumonia, typhoid, tuberculosis and diphtheria were identified. Pasteurization of milk was recommended, and vaccines were developed. The term typhoid pneumonia is not used now but it was pneumonia that had typhoid-like symptoms.

25-Dec-1879 – letter written from L.R. Elliott to Kansas during a visit to Greene to the Isaac Sherwood farm on Indian Brook Road. In 1853 he had worked there and helped construct the wagon barn. He continues to say that in 1853, "I taught my first term in this School District. Three of the scholars were teachers of several years' experience to my embarrassment. They never knew how many hours of hard study were needed for this teacher to keep a little in advance of his class day by day! This was done under great difficulty as I boarded 'round. The old schoolhouse burned down many years ago and a new one is in its place." On 11-Dec-1879, the *Chenango American* reports that *the schoolhouse on Indian Brook is about completed and will be plastered this week.*

In New York State, a Compulsory School Attendance Law was passed in 1874 for all children from 6 to 16. It's refreshing to read an account where the teacher had to work hard to keep up with some of the pupils.

18-Nov-1880 – *Greene has four of as fine church bells as any town of its size in the State. Services in all churches are at 10:30am. There was really "music in the air" Sunday am.*

The four churches were the Zion Episcopal (at that time the church was the building next to the Ball Flats entrance), Congregational (burned in the 1980s), Central Baptist (burned in 1900) and the Methodist Episcopal (now called the First United Methodist). The bells in the first three churches were put into the towers of the new buildings when they were constructed. It would be interesting to know more about the bells – who made them

and when they were purchased. The Baptist church in McDonough that was dismantled and taken to Texas had a Meneely bell. The Meneely Bell Foundry was started in 1826 in Troy, New York and made about 65,000 bells until it closed in 1952. Almost 70% of the church bells in the U.S. were made by the Meneely Company.

24-Nov-1881 – *E. G. Cowles has just finished piping water from a large spring in his meadow, about 80 rods west of his house, near the old Stone Quarry, to his premises. (His farm was where the present High School is situated.) The spring was dug out and a large stone reservoir, laid up in water lime, was built on it. This is covered with large flat stones to keep dirt out. The water flows to his house and barn through two penstocks.....There is water enough in the springs on Mr. Cowles' and his brother's farm adjacent to more than supply our village for all purposes.*

Basic survival requires a safe water supply. Villages were located near good water supplies and the development of public water systems grew with advances in technology such as the manufacture of water pipes, pumps and control devices. Probably the one most important breakthrough was the understanding of how certain diseases were capable of being transmitted by drinking water. Recently the Book Club at the Moore Memorial Library read a fascinating book, *Ghost Map* by Steven Johnson, of how cholera was traced back to the first victim whose human waste had been dumped into a water supply for a London neighborhood in 1854. Dr. John Snow had a theory that cholera was spread through contaminated water, not through miasma, or smells in the air. This proved to be correct and revolutionized the understanding of disease and its spread and the importance of clean water.

7-Dec-1882 – *Joseph Spanle and Eva Harrinton are married.* These are Ben Spanle's parents.

The wedding descriptions in the *Chenango American* were much more detailed than they are nowadays. In one article, every present given to the couple was listed and who gave it. Can't you just see the town wags poring over that to see who was a cheapskate.

20-Dec-1883 – The Chenango House (now the Sherwood Inn) has a large new ice house.

By 1830, ice was being used to preserve food. In the 1840s, it began to be used in the production of beer. In 1861, the icebox was developed and soon after ice was delivered to homes in urban centers. The storage of ice during the summer was done differently; often it was stored in a covered well. Then many ice houses were built. A. B. Robinson's building on Genegantslet Road, constructed in 1875, used ice as a refrigeration unit for eggs and poultry.

Frederic Tudor (1783-1864) was Boston's "Ice King", the founder of the Tudor Ice Company who became rich shipping ice to the Caribbean, Europe and India. In 1806 he cut ice from ponds around Boston and shipped 80 tons to Martinique. The first trip wasn't too successful but he obtained a monopoly in the Caribbean islands and made a fortune shipping ice there, especially to Cuba. He also sold ice to southern U.S. cities: Charleston, Savannah and New Orleans. By 1840 ice was being shipped all over the world.

I mention Frederic Tudor because he had ties to this area. His wife was Euphemia Fenno and the Fennos lived in Mt. Upton. Euphemia's sister, Frances Fenno, married Richard Morris who had a grand house built for Frances as a wedding present in 1817. Built between Mt. Upton and Gilbertsville. it was called "the Castle" and was still standing although vacant well into the 1950s. It is now gone but Bea Lobdell told me that she lived there for a year when she was young while her father's company was lumbering in the area. It was a very spooky place for a child.

Another interesting fact is that Frederic Tudor's great granddaughter is Tasha Tudor, a famous writer and illustrator, who lives in Vermont, is now in her 90s and has chosen to live as one in the 1830s.

18-Dec-1884 – *Races are a feature at both rinks now with prizes. Young and old participate.* (Roller skating rinks. One was just north of the Zion Episcopal Church and the other one was on the third floor of Reid's building on the corner of South Chenango and Genesee Street.) In January there is a further report about the skating: *Greene has turned out a first class trick roller skater: W. A. Ashley, the instructor at the rink.* (I find this a very interesting and sad item as in later years, W.A. Ashley was called "Crip" Ashley. He lost part of his leg in a railroad accident which certainly had to have happened after 1884 when he was 24 years old. He and W.P. Ashley were twins born in Greene in 1860.

Roller skating became very popular in the 1880s. Ball and roller bearings were patented for use in the skates.

It's been estimated that there were more than a million pairs of roller skates in use, many of them being rented in more than 3,000 rinks.

22-Dec-1885 – *Business blocks burn on south side of Genesee Street.* (This is the block that now is east of the Moore Memorial Library, all the buildings made of brick.)

31-Dec-1885 – *Burnt district visited by thousands of people since the fire. It is said that cinders from the fire were carried by the wind five or six miles to Page Brook.*

In 1867, D. A. Sanborn began creating maps for fire insurance purposes. So many cities and towns had devastating fires through the years that these maps detailed the location and material composition of all buildings, noted the location of water and gas mains and labeled most public buildings by name, including the churches. There are Sanborn Maps of Greene for 1887 and 1892. The 1887 map shows the new brick buildings that replaced the aforementioned burnt district.

24-Jun-1886 – The tanners are now at work on the roof of the Harrison block. (When you're in the village, look up and see which building says Harrison.) The other three buildings are going up rapidly. The brick work is completed. There are 200,000 bricks in the structure (made on Wheeler Street) and the building is a beauty, the most costly one in the village.

Brickmaking was hard work until the steam shovel was invented in 1879 to dig the clay. Then the clay was exposed to the weather so that the freeze-thaw cycle of winter could break down the clay so it could be worked by hand. It was mixed with water to the right consistency for moulding. It was pressed into the mould with the hands. Sand was used to prevent the clay from sticking to the mould. The bricks were dried for several days and then burned with wood and coal. The burning process was where the experience and knowledge of the brickmaker made the difference between excellent bricks and poor ones. I have read that Ezra B. Wheeler, who made bricks on Wheeler Street, was a master brickmaker. His bricks were tops.

On this upbeat note, I will end this article. I hope you enjoyed this review into the past and that it makes you appreciate this lovely town.



1899



Greene N.Y.