The Gristmill
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Preserving the History of Saratoga County
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A Bit of History
Malta Man Goes on a Whaling Voyage

By John L. Scherer

I just finished reading *In the Wake of Madness: The Murderous Voyage of the Whaleship Sharon* by Joan Druett (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2003). I was surprised to learn that one of the crew had come from Malta, New York.

According to logbooks and journals kept by those on board, the Whaleship Sharon of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, set out for the whaling grounds of the northwestern Pacific on May 25, 1841. Whale oil was in high demand as fuel for lamps and whaling voyages often lasted three or four years before the kegs on board were full. A year after the Sharon set sail, while most of the crew was out hunting whales, Captain Howes Norris of Edgartown remained at the helm with four crew members, three of them natives of the Pacific Islands. When the men in the whaleboats spied the Sharon's flag flying at half-mast, a signal of distress, they headed back to the ship to discover their Captain brutally killed. His murderers, the Pacific Islanders, were covered in blood and brandishing weapons.

In the mid-nineteenth century, harvesting whales was a major American industry. The above illustration was from a 1856 advertisement for Mitchell &Croasdale, a Philadelphia dealer in whale oil.

In an astonishing single-handed recapture, the third officer swam through shark infested waters slipped through one of the cabin windows, and launched a surprise attack on the mutineers, killing two of them and overtaking the other. The first officer, Thomas Harlock Smith, Jr., became the new captain. When the Sharon returned home three years later, only four of the original twenty-nine crew were on board.

The crew list for the Whaleship Sharon lists 19-year-old John Moore of Malta, New York as a Greenhand (no prior whaling experience) as signing on May 15, 1841. According to the crew list he was born in Malta, was 5 feet 7 inches in height, had light skin, brown hair and blue eyes. His share of the profits from the voyage was to be 1/185. Other crew hailed from other places in New York including Salina, Newburgh, Franklin, Utica, Lockport and Lenox.

Why would these landlubbers from New York go to sea to hunt whales? In the early days of whaling there were plenty of willing recruits from New England seacoast towns, but as whaling became a big business and the number of whaling ships increased ten-fold, advertisements were sent inland to attract the necessary crew for a voyage. Of course, young men then, as now, were

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Whaling Voyage

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always ready for adventure and the opportunity to see new lands and cultures as well as the possibility to make some money.

Like the other Greenhands on board, John Moore was a foremast hand and his living space was the forecastle, a miserable hole set in the bows directly below the foredeck. Most of the crew was inexperienced and although whales were sighted, they had a difficult time catching any. The captain began to blame this on his crew and would take his rage out on them. For no apparent reason, Captain Norris began to frequently beat the steward, George Babcock, a mullato from Newport, Rhode Island. On the night of December 11, 1841, the situation exploded.

After the steward was flogged by the captain he was ordered to go back to work in the pantry, but instead he took refuge in the forecastle. Captain Norris was looking for the steward, while nine members of the crew were harboring him in the forecastle. These nine men including John Moore had defied the captain and eight of them were placed in irons. Moore was the last, and since they had run out of irons the captain gave him a slap in the face and tied him up with a piece of spun yarn. After flogging two of the mutiny participants, the captain asked the others if they wanted to plea for pardon. They all caved in and craved his forgiveness.

Often when whaleships moored at exotic islands some of the crew would desert and stay behind, and natives or those who had previously deserted from other ships would be recruited to take their place. In early April of 1842, the Sharon put in at the island of Rotuma north of Australia and New Zealand for much needed repairs. While there, twelve men including John Moore deserted the ship. However, John and fellow whaler, Jack Baker were recaptured after Captain Norris set up a bounty. The rest got away.

Steward Babcock and the crew continued to experience Captain Norris's brutality. Eventually Babcock could stand it no more and died at the captain's hand during an especially bad beating.

On Saturday, October 15, 1842, the Sharon anchored at Pohnpei Island and again twelve men deserted. Both John Moore and Jack Baker were included in this number. The locals, having heard the story of George Babcock's murder at the hands of Captain Norris, hid and protected the deserters. When the Sharon weighed anchor, Norris was so shorthanded that he had to pay some natives to help get the ship out of the lagoon.

Moore did not have to wait long when on November 25 the Wilmington & Liverpool Packet arrived in the harbor. It had left New Bedford on December 22, 1841, and was doing almost as badly as the Sharon, having taken less than two hundred barrels of oil in the eleven months she had been at sea. Captain Place hired four of the runaways from the Sharon including John Moore and Jack Baker.

On June 16, 1843, during a mid-sea visit with the William & Eliza, the contrast between life on the Wilmington & Liverpool Packet and existence on the Sharon was brought home when Moore and the others learned that only a week after they were left behind on Pohnpei Island, three Pacific Islanders recruited by the Sharon killed Captain Norris off of the Group Islands.

It appears that John Moore may have been a son or brother of Gideon S. Moore of the Town of Stillwater, Saratoga County. Stillwater is adjacent to Malta, and according to the 1840 census, Gideon is the only Moore in that area who had a person living with him the right age to be John Moore.

One wonders if John Moore returned to the area after his adventure. The 1850 census does list a John Moore for Town of Stillwater, age 28, with wife Elizabeth, age 39, and daughter Lydia, age 1. His occupation is given as farmer. By 1880 we find John S. Moore, age 59, and his wife Elizabeth, age 64, living in Glenville, Schenectady County with their daughter Catharine J., age 27. His occupation is still farmer. I'll bet he enjoyed regaling his family and friends about his "adventure" on the Whaleship Sharon.

Factoid: Merritt DeVoe from Halfmoon was assigned to the Headquarters of the 406 Telegraph Battalion as a telephone operator during World War One. He overheard General Pershing's voice on the wire to Washington saying that Germany had surrendered and that the war was over. He was ecstatic but could not share the news with his buddies, otherwise he would have betrayed his trust. Merritt served in the famous Rainbow Division, composed of units from many of the state's National Guards and when he returned home started DeVoe's Rainbow Orchard in Halfmoon which is still operated by the family today.

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Roosevelt's Road

By Sandy McBride

Sandy McBride is a freelance writer with a passion for history, which led to her writing a series of 78 articles over 4 years entitled "This Month in the Civil War", recounting the signature events of that war on the 150th anniversary. She has also written many articles on local history with much of her work appearing in her hometown newspaper, The Express. The following appeared in the July 30, 2015 issue of that publication.

The Battles of Saratoga from September to October of 1777 is recognized as one of the 15 most decisive battles in the history of the world. Indeed, it was a vital victory for Continental troops who stopped the invasion of British General John Burgoyne as he sought to put down the rebellion of those who would create their own nation from a cluster of English colonies. With the success at Saratoga, France recognized American independence and came into the war as an ally.

General George Washington, in command of the rebellious armies, was so impressed by the patriots' success here in our own neighborhood that in 1783 he visited the grounds where the fighting took place as a guest of General Philip Schuyler. He would be followed in time by future presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and a retired president, John Quincy Adams, all of whom recognized the importance of this win.

But the president who had the greatest impact on preserving for posterity the site of this great victory was Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The rolling farmlands and woodlands overlooking the valley of the Hudson River where the battles of Freeman's Farm and Barber's wheat field took place in September and October of 1777 had been designated a New York State historic preserve in 1927 on the 150th anniversary of those battles. The following year, a huge pageant was staged, with a cast of thousands performing near the John Neilson farmhouse and a newly-constructed blockhouse museum. The park welcomed 160,000 visitors that year.

Roosevelt was elected governor of New York State two years later, and in the course of his term he would bring the governors of five states with him to tour the battleground.

Elected president of the United States in 1932 at the depths of a crippling economic depression, Roosevelt took unprecedented measures to lift his nation out of it with his program called the New Deal. One of the projects he created to give work to the able-bodied and unemployed was the Civilian Conservation Corps which gave unskilled manual labor jobs geared to conservation and the development of natural resources to young men in rural areas of the country. The nine years of its existence provided 3 million young men shelter, clothing and food along with a small wage, most of which they were required to send home to their families.

The CCC was working in the newly-created Saratoga National Historic Park in 1940 when the president, who had been nominated to run for an unprecedented third term, decided to make yet another of his many visits. A site for a proposed visitor center had not yet been selected, although several options were on the table. Given his ongoing interest in the park, Roosevelt wanted to have his say in the choice. On October 7, the anniversary of the second battle, he decided to bring his wife, Eleanor, along with New York governor Herbert Lehman and Mrs. Lehman up the road through Mechanicville and Stillwater to view the sites and offer his opinion on where the center should go.

An article in *The Battlements*, Volume 5, No. 1 published in the summer of 1992, based on an article written by Richard Beresford and contributed by Andrew Tweedie, CCC Senior Foreman at Saratoga National Battlefield Park, gives a vivid picture of the events of that day.

Early that morning Al Kress, project superintendent of the CCC, got a telegram advising him that the president was coming, and he and his party would arrive at the park at one o'clock that afternoon to tour all the visitor center sites. Kress, who happened to be Eleanor Roosevelt's godson, knew the president well enough to know that he would insist on visiting each site personally, and Kress certainly did not want to disappoint him. There was one problem. One of the prime sites was on Fraser Hill, which offered a beautiful, panoramic view of the battlefield. But there was no road leading to it. The president, crippled by polio, was wheelchair-bound. There was no way to get him to the top of the hill to inspect the site.

Kress sought out Tweedie, senior foreman of the CCC contingent working at the battlefield. He informed him that the president was coming that afternoon, and told him that he and his men had to build a road to the top of the hill so the president's car could be driven up to see the site.

Tweedie was aghast. He gave Kress a number of good reasons why it could not be done in half a day. But Kress would hear none of his excuses.

Governor Lehman had shortly before announced that an additional 900 acres was going to be purchased to add to the park, but the sale had not yet taken place. Fraser Hill was included in that 900 acre purchase, but the state did not yet own it. The east side of the hill was too steep even for a tractor to climb, Tweedie knew, but the back side, while also steep and heavily wooded, could be climbed by building a gradually-inclined road along the hillside. It was just a thousand feet of road, but in five hours? On land they didn't even own? Said Kress,

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Source: City of Mechanicville Historian

President Franklin Roosevelt's motorcade passed through Mechanicville on it's way to the Saratoga Battlefield.

Road

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"Don't bother me with details. I am only the superintendent, you are the engineer. You have a couple of hundred CCC boys available, a dozen or more trucks, all kinds of tools and about five hours. So get up there and get the job done. I'll be up there at 12:30 and expect to drive my car right up to the top without any trouble. I have lots of problems getting organized for this visit. You only have one problem! Now get that darned road built!"

Tweedie sought out the farmer who owned Fraser's Hill, hoping to get his permission to go up on his land and build the road, but he was not at home.

They did have the farmer's permission to go on the land to survey and clear brush, so Tweedie decided he would take a chance and proceed. He would call the trees "brush". The trees could be cut in an hour, but pulling stumps and bringing in gravel loaded into the trucks by hand to create a road bed navigable by automobile would take way too long.

But the resourceful Tweedie came up with a solution. He had on previous occasions hauled in cinders from the paper mill in Mechanicville. The mill had a power shovel to load his trucks, thus eliminating the hand labor and speeding up the process. A thick layer of cinders would provide a stable road bed, and better yet, the cinders were free! So Tweedie sent the trucks off to get loads of cinders while his men cut the trees as close to the ground as possible, eliminating the need to dig out stumps. Luckily, it turned out that only six trees had to be cut and none were more than 6 inches in diameter.

Assigned this seemingly impossible task, the CCC crew had jumped into the mission with enthusiasm. After all, President Roosevelt was the one who had provided them with work in the midst of the Great Depression. They would do it for him.

Trees fell, brush was cleared away, truck after truck dumped their loads of cinders onto the cleared path. A crew with rakes spread and smoothed the cinders. Trucks rolled back and forth on each section as it was laid to smooth and pack down the road.

By high noon, the task was finished. The road was done!

Park personnel gathered at the lower end of the new road at 1:00. At 1:30, Superintendent Kress arrived to check it out. Shortly after, a cordon of motorcycles appeared followed by several cars. As the president's car pulled up alongside the gathered park personnel, Roosevelt called out, "Hop on and we'll ride up the hill!"

To the dismay of the president's body guard, several people did climb onto the running boards. One was Tweedie. He got the spot right next to Roosevelt. The president looked over at him and said, "This road appears to be recently constructed."

"Yes, Mr. President," replied Tweedie. "Very recently."

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Road

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And so the president's car traveled up the cinder road to the top of Fraser Hill. Impressed with the magnificent view and the array of points of interest visible from that vantage point, Roosevelt declared "This is it!"

The Saratoga National Historic Park Visitor Center would soon be built high atop Fraser Hill, and it is indeed "it". With its magnificent view of the valley below the hill, it sits on that well-chosen site, attracting thousands of visitors annually, commemorating what those long-ago patriots accomplished, providing insight and education into this key part of the legacy of the United States of America. And all because of a president who cared about the park, a foreman with a "get it done" attitude and a crew of workers who were not afraid to take on a monumental task.

An article in The Battlements*, Volume 5, No. 1 published in the summer of 1992, based on an article written by Richard Beresford and contributed by Andrew Tweedie, CCC Senior Foreman at Saratoga National Historic Park, gives a vivid picture of the events of that day and provided much of the information.*

Do you really know your history?

It is generally believed that the first Europeans in our area were Dutch fur traders, who operated out of fortified trading posts, because they feared the natives.

Both beliefes are wrong!

The first Europeans in the area were French fur traders from Samuel Champain's colony in Canada, who setup a seasonal trading post on Castle Island, near present-day Albany, before the arrival of the Dutch traders.

They, like subsequent Dutch and English fur traders DID operate behind wooden walls, but that had little, if any, connection to the attitude of the natives. They were simply following standard European practices.

In Europe, mainly in Russia, when a group of businessmen wished to set up a fur receiving operation, they sought a monoply on trade from the governing authorities and enforced this monoply by restricting the buying and selling of furs to the confines of a marked-off area, either insde a building or inside an enclosure. The most famous of these companies, among the Europeans who also conducted fur trading exterprises in our area, was the English Muscovy Company, which operated from 1553 to 1648.

The major fur trading enterprises in the New World all attempted to follow some variation of this model.

1913 Easter Flood Brought Devastation

The battle against severe weather is nothing new.

By Steve Williams

First published in the Daily Gazette March 30, 2013

By some accounts, the weather on Easter Day 1913 started out beautifully. But by evening it was raining, and the rain didn't let up for nearly a week.

That heavy, steady downpour was landing on frozen ground and running off into streams, then rivers. Rivers that were already mighty grew to five times their size; the resulting flooding brought historic devastation to Albany and Troy and took out bridges all along the Hudson and Mohawk.

The impacts linger still, a century later.

Upstate New York that spring was on the fringe of what they didn't yet call a "superstorm." Nationwide, more than 1,000 people were killed and 250,000 left at least temporarily homeless across 14 states, mostly in a path from Nebraska to Ohio. Some of those places – Dayton, in particular, where 360 people died – got national and even international headlines.

"Upstate New York also suffered record flooding that under different circumstances would likely have drawn greater national attention," researcher Trudy E. Bell wrote in a paper prepared for a New York state history conference in 2009.

It was an early Easter that year, too, falling on March 23. An Arctic front bearing sleet hit on Good Friday; there were reports of 90 mph winds at Buffalo. Then, on Easter, the torrential downpours began. An inch of rain per day kept falling over the Hudson and Mohawk watersheds, right through the following Thursday.

At Corinth, the dam at the Hudson River paper mill washed out. Water was running 9.5 feet over the top of the Spier Falls Dam in Moreau. A log boom broke at Corinth and thousands of hydro-powered logs took out the bridge between Glens Falls and South Glens Falls, killing two.

"It was more rain than had ever been seen before, throughout the area," said Corinth town Historian Rachel Clothier, who gave a talk at the Brookside Museum in Ballston Spa.

On Friday, March 28, the Mohawk and Hudson crested at the same time near Waterford, which was bad news for Albany and Troy. The Hudson reached 24.4 feet in depth at Albany, less than an inch short of its highest level ever, Bell found. Streetcar lines were submerged, railroad embankments were undermined by the surging water and police in rowboats were rescuing the stranded. Albany's riverfront water filtration plant flooded and raw Hudson water swept into the filtered-water reservoir behind the plant.

Sewage contamination from the river caused an outbreak of typhoid fever in the city – and back then, before antibiotics, typhoid killed 10 percent of the people who caught it, and those who didn't die could linger ill for months. With 180 cases reported by mid-April, desperate measures were taken. City workers loaded a small boat with bags of chlorinated lime and spread it across the city reservoir by dumping the bleach-like powder

Flood

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over the side.

The outbreak subsided. The incident would later be widely cited as proof that chlorination of water – even haphazard chlorination in crisis – worked effectively to kill disease-carrying bacteria.

The 1913 flooding was also the final impetus for construction of a flood-control dam above Hadley on the Sacandaga River.

The idea of damming the Hudson's tributaries had been discussed for at least a decade before that. Less-severe flooding was nothing new, but perhaps just as significant was that the lumber and power mills along the Hudson wanted a controlled, steady flow of water, even in the dry summer months.

It took the flooding of 1913 – and then flooding almost as severe in 1914 – to get the state Legislature to act. Voting just blocks from where streets had flooded, lawmakers approved an amendment to the state Constitution in the fall of 1913 that allowed up to 3 percent of the state forest land in the Adirondacks to be inundated for new flood control reservoirs; dams on the Black and Sacandaga rivers would become centerpieces of the plan.

A final plan for the reservoir system was approved in 1923, and work soon started. There were 12,000 acres of timber cleared in the Sacandaga Valley, 3,800 gravestones were relocated and more than 40 miles of new road were built around the rim of the new reservoir being created in Saratoga and Fulton counties.

The gates at the new earthen Conklingville Dam were closed on March 27, 1930 – the event that impounded what is today the Great Sacandaga Lake.

Source: Saratoga History Center

South Glens Falls during the flood of 1913.

Source: Saratoga History Center

Photo of Mallory St., Corinth during the flood of 1913.