



Nature Calls: Clifton Park Outhouses

By John Scherer

Before the days of indoor plumbing (and that was not so long ago in Clifton Park) an outhouse

era bathroom in the back yard of his property, and phoned the Museum. Curators came and retrieved the small closet sized outhouse, and it has already been featured in several exhibits.

Currently the Friends of Grooms Tavern are undertaking the restoration of the outhouse at the Historic

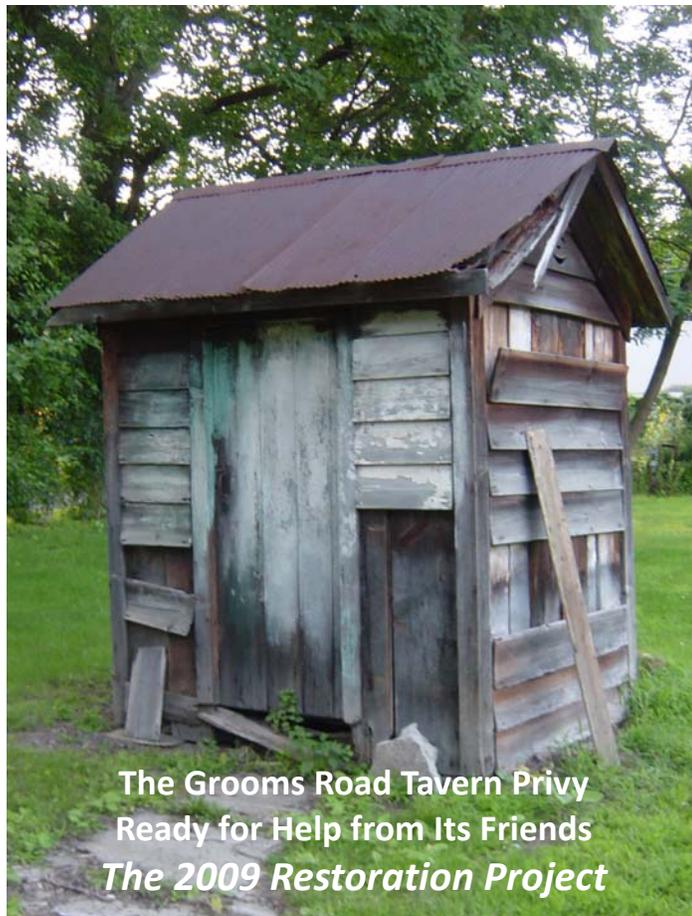
ing restored for use, the tavern has a great indoor handicapped bathroom. The outhouse restoration will enhance the interpretation of nineteenth and early twentieth century life.

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with it. Although the typical privy was a small wooden shed with a plank seat built over a shallow pit in the backyard, an upper-class privy could be palatial. Recently the elegant eighteenth century outhouse at Fort Johnson, near Amsterdam, NY, home of Sir William Johnson and his son Sir John Johnson was restored.

The early American privy was a convivial affair. Family privies frequently featured two, three, or more holes, usually of varying sizes, to suit different sized behinds. People often chatted in the privy. The first commercial toilet paper came on the market in 1857, but folks in the outlying areas continued to use leaves, grass, corn-cobs, rags and scrap paper of all sorts. Newspapers and the Sears catalog would also provide reading material.

Believe it or not, the beloved privy (derived from the Latin *privatus*, meaning to set apart) or outhouse is being restored at various historic house museums and collected by museums to interpret life before indoor plumbing. In November of 1990, the New York State Museum acquired an outhouse from Frank Demetrowitz who lived on Grooms Road in Clifton Park. He wanted to get rid of the old-time Depression



**The Grooms Road Tavern Privy
Ready for Help from Its Friends
The 2009 Restoration Project**

Grooms Tavern. A fund drive to raise four thousand dollars is underway for this purpose. The original three-hole seat still exists. Do not worry, the outhouse is not be-

ing restored for use, the tavern has a great indoor handicapped bathroom. The outhouse restoration will enhance the interpretation of nineteenth and early twentieth century life.

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(Continued from page 1)

Public places such as taverns, churches and schoolhouses provided gender-segregated outhouses. The crescent-moon cutout on the door was the symbol

for the women, and the men's privy usually featured a sun or star. These cutouts also aided ventilation.

The outhouse was usually positioned about one hundred yards behind the house. This seemed like quite a distance to go in the winter, but in the summer it did not seem far enough. Applications of wood ashes or lime would help, but periodic cleanings were necessary or the smell would be unbearable. Outhouses placed too close to streams and wells would cause outbreaks of dysentery, typhoid and cholera.

Chamber pots made of ceramic or pewter, also known as thunder mugs or slop jars, were often used during the cold winter months or at night. These pots would be placed under the beds or in bedside commodes. They sometimes had portraits of scorned public figures on the bottom or some clever verse such as "use me well and keep me clean / And I'll not tell what I have seen."

The privy, perched as it was over a tempting hole, also functioned as an all-purpose disposal bin. Today, it serves as a rich resource for archaeologists and those who research the way people lived by what they throw away.

Because outhouses have been such an intimate part of history, they have developed a following and become a part of folklore. Books have been written about them, as have songs, stories and poems, and of course, the inevitable outhouse joke. There are even societies dedicated to preserving them. My own family folklore relates to the early 1950s when my family rented a camp on Saratoga Lake every summer. I have a great photo of my sisters lining up at the outhouse, and I do remember at night using the thunder mug under the bed.

Most rural privies were portable. They were free-standing and small so that they could be moved from place to place as the pits beneath them filled up. In fact the Grooms Tavern outhouse has only been located at its present site for about 50 years. This portability made the outhouse an easy target for pranksters who tipped them, stole them, or repositioned them in awkward places like the lawns of church deacons or the roofs of barns.

If you peer into the back yards of older homes, you can still spot outhouses in Clifton Park. However, they no longer serve the original purpose. Most have now been turned into tool sheds or wood sheds. Thank goodness for the conveniences of modern indoor plumbing.

FRIENDS TO HOST STORYTELLING PROGRAM

On Country Life -

***"Crescent Moons, Necessaries and other
tales of "Out Back"***

CLIFTON PARK, New York – The Friends of Historic Grooms Tavern will host a Storytelling Program with Alden (Joe) Doolittle on **Sunday afternoon, June 7, 2009 from 2:00 pm to 3:00 pm at the Grooms Tavern**, corner of Grooms and Sugarhill Roads, Rexford, New York. Joe Doolittle is known regionally as a storyteller of humorous and historical tales, and will weave stories of rural life, Clifton Park and yes "out houses" he's known and where's he's picked up splinters.



Joe listens for Story-messages in many aspects of life, family, travels and his volunteer role, as Chaplain at Albany

Medical Center. Joe directs the Institute for Behavioral Healthcare Improvement (IBHI) a not for profit organization, and the co-producer of the resident company StoryCircle at Proctors – producing successful venues, Story Sundays at the Glen Sanders Mansion, Tellabration, and Word Plays at Proctors and "Story by Story on SACC TV Channel 16. Mr. Doolittle holds a Bachelor's Degree in History from Colgate University and a Masters Degree in Medical and Hospital Administration from the Graduate School of Public Health, University of Pittsburgh. He has researched and developed tales of early Schenectady, the Revolutionary War and the Erie Canal. His connection with 'privies' stems from his grandfather's farm, and his aunt's three story stagecoach driver's "necessary". The public is invited to attend this fascinating review of our origins. Admission is free and refreshments will be served.

Call for Board Members

FOHGT is always looking for interested persons to expand and diversify our Board of Directors. If you are interested and would like more information please call Alex Verrigni at 399.2446 or Pat Haffner at 518-371.8503.

Volunteer Panel

Even if you do not feel you can commit the time to be a board member on the Friends' Board of Directors (although we are pretty flexible about that!), if you wish to become more active, there are many volunteer opportunities, including (but not limited to) baking for a reception, gardening / weeding our perennial garden, clearing and organizing artifacts from the Tavern barn, decorating the Tavern, and many more! The commitment could be as little as a few hours a year. If you would like to contribute your time, please submit your name for the volunteer panel and feel free to specify the type of activity you would like to do. Call Alex Verrigni at 399.2446 or Pat Haffner at 371.8503.

Arts and Culture Commission Liaison

The Town of Clifton Park Arts and Culture Commission has a board seat earmarked for a member of FOHGT. We are soliciting our membership-at-large for any Friends member who has an interest in the arts and would like to serve as the FOGHT Liaison on the Town of Clifton Park Commission for Arts and Culture. You need not be a Board member of FOGHT to serve, but may be from the general membership. If you are interested in the arts, a member of the Friends and would like to be considered for the Town of Clifton Park Arts and Culture Commission, please call Alex Verrigni at 399.2446 to discuss the possibility of representing the Friends on the Arts and Culture Commission.

Specialized charitable giving

We are hoping and expecting our outhouse restoration to begin in earnest in the summer of 2009; and, as you may remember, the first plants for the Tavern perennial garden were installed by Nancy Douglass last fall. In furtherance of our mission to develop and expand these projects, the Board of Directors has launched the

Calendar of Events



June 7th 2PM	<i>“Crescent Moons, Necessaries and other tales of “Out Back”</i> Storytelling with Joe Doolittle
Oct 2nd 7PM	<i>“The History of Tavern in the Mohawk Valley</i> Ronald Burch, Curator of Art and Architecture at the NYS Museum
Dec 7th 7PM	<i>“The Origins of Christmas Ornaments”</i> Open House, reception, holiday concert, holiday lecture on antique ornaments - watch for upcoming details
Monthly Meetings - 4th Monday of each Month	May XX June 22nd July 27th August 24th September 28th October 26th

All Meetings Held At The Grooms Road Tavern

Grooms Tavern **Outhouse Restoration Fund** and a **Garden and Landscaping Fund** to suit the charitable inclinations of any member who has a wish to contribute specifically to either project. We invite contributions or pledges of any amount and they may be sent to FOGHT at P.O. Box 1166, Clifton Park, New York 12065.

Friends to Host Lecture on Taverns

Mark your calendar! FOGHT is sponsoring a lecture on the subject of Taverns in the Mohawk Valley, Friday evening, October 2, 2009 at 7:00 p.m., at Grooms Tavern. The lecture will be given by Ronald Burch, Curator of Art and Architecture at the New York State Museum. His lecture will be in conjunction with festivities for River Days Weekend. In addition, FOGHT will hold its annual meeting that evening and conduct an ever-so-brief “business meeting” immediately prior to the lecture. More will be forthcoming on this event. We look forward to seeing you!



www.grooms-tavern.org

Friends of Historic Grooms Tavern

P.O. Box 1166

Clifton Park, NY 12065

