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GROOMS TAVERN GAZETTE

Fall 2015

Friends of Historic Grooms Tavern

P.O. Box 1166 Clifton Park, NY 12065
www.grooms-tavern.com

History's Friend

By John L. Scherer

Ernie Haffner, Long time Clifton Park resident and active civic leader, passed away on July 29 after a brief illness. He was instrumental in establishing the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve in 1977 and was a charter member of the Town's Historic Preservation Commission in 1992 and the Friends of Grooms Tavern in 2000. He served on the Preservation Commission until last year, and continued on the Friends Board until the present.

Ernie grew up in Brooklyn, but his family later moved to Springfield Center, Otsego County, New York, where he graduated high school. He would often speak of the restaurant and bar that his aunt and uncle owned in nearby Fly Creek. While he was stationed in Trieste, Italy during the Korean War, he learned the art of photography which became a lifelong interest. After the War he graduated from Mohawk Valley Technical Institute and went to work for General Electric and later the newly formed M.T.I. in Latham.

My wife, Martha, and I moved to Vischer Ferry in 1971. It wasn't long before we met Ernie and his wife, Pat, through the Vischer Ferry Civic Association. The impetus to form the organization in 1973 was the fact that Niagara Mohawk Power Corp. wanted to cut down a number of trees along Riverview Road. Although the newly formed Association was unable to prevent the removal of the trees, it remained an active force in Clifton Park for over fifteen years. Neighbors got to know one another and there was a sense of community pride. A newsletter was sent out, and public programs on a variety of informative subjects were held at the Amity Church Hall. An annual square dance at the firehouse brought everyone together in the fall, and for a number of years in the mid-1970s the Vischer Ferry Association sponsored Canal Days in the Vischer Ferry Hamlet. This annual event held in June featured a parade, historical displays, hay wagon rides on the canal towpath, house tours, antique cars, horse drawn vehicles and historical programs.

Ernie served as Treasurer for the civic association and was very active. The Association's first major project was to create the Vischer Ferry Historic District and nominate it to the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. Ernie and other members of the Association worked for several years filling out inventory forms for the historic homes in the hamlet. My guess is that Ernie's involvement in the Vischer Ferry Association stimulated his interest in local history and preservation.

In 1977, when there was talk of putting in tennis courts, swimming pools and boat launches along the old Erie Canal lands by the Mohawk River, Ernie led a committee of the Vischer Ferry Association to come up with a counter proposal forming the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve. He later served on various Town committees to manage this area.



Ernie Haffner behind the store counter at the Historic Grooms Tavern during a Farm Fest celebration.

Note his popular "What Is It?" Contest.

**FOHGT invites
you to join us in
a Farewell to
Lincoln and
Grant at the NYS
Capitol**

**Presented by
Stuart W. Lehman
from the NYSOGS**

Admission is Free

**Annual
Meeting
October 18th
2 pm**

Vol 8.2

FOHGT Monthly Board Meetings are on the Fourth Monday of each month and held at the Grooms Tavern from 7 pm to 9 pm. Meetings are open to the public.



The American Revolution Bicentennial Celebration in 1976 and the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution Celebration

1983 to 1987 provided additional opportunities

for Ernie's continued commitment to historic preservation, he became a founding member of the Commission. When the involvement. In 1992, the Clifton Park Historic Preservation Commission was established, and because involvement. In 1992, the Clifton Park Historic Preservation Commission was established, and because of Ernie's continued commitment to historic preservation, he became a founding member of the Commission.

When the Town's Register of Historic Places was instituted in 1996, he served as the Commission's official photographer in documenting the buildings placed on the Town Register. He also supplied the plaques for the annual preservation awards.

In 1997, Ernie used his photographic skills to document the dismantlement of the Whipple Truss Canal Bridge in Fonda and its placement over the canal in the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve. He also videotaped a number of oral interviews and recorded historical events and programs. These videos are now in the Clifton Park History Collection, and are being transferred to digital media.

Perhaps, Ernie's favorite task was his participation on the Board of the Friends of Historic Grooms Tavern. The Tavern was acquired by the Town in 1999, and Ernie was placed on a Town Committee to oversee its restoration. Later when the friends group was formed, he served on their board. Again, using his photographic skills, Ernie documented the restoration of the building and put together several power point shows. He was eager to embrace the new digital forms of photography.

Ernie's most famous presentations were during the annual Farm Fest celebrations, when the Tavern was open for tours. He put together a very popular "What is it? Contest," in which were used common artifacts that were difficult to identify.

As Town Historian, Ernie was my right hand man, assisting me in so many projects. Our weekly Sunday morning visits at MacDonalds were often discussions about the status of various history or preservation projects.

For all these important efforts, Ernie was presented the Town of Clifton Park Key Award in June of 1999.

Because our children were the same ages and because we had common interests we became friends with Ernie and Pat. Ernie



Upcoming Events

October 18 - Sunday

Annual Meeting

December 6- Sunday

Holiday Open House

and I shared an interest in old cars and he also collected antiques, especially old cameras and photographic equipment. We would often frequent flea markets and antique shops together and compare notes. We also traveled together with a third couple, Cliff and Betty Kleiner (ironically Betty passed away three weeks before Ernie). In March of 2007 we took a memorable Caribbean cruise that included a hilarious incident that I wrote about for the *Community News*. The story bears repeating. In the article I used fictional names to protect the innocent, but I will now reveal that Mr. and Mrs. Jones were Ernie and Pat and that Mr. and Mrs. Smith were Cliff and Betty.

We boarded our plane in San Juan, Puerto Rico for the trip home, amongst reports of an impending Nor'easter. When the plane reached the Philadelphia area, the storm was so bad it could not land, so returned to Charlotte, North Carolina. The Charlotte airport was bedlam, because of all the flights to the Northeast had landed there. We sent the three women in a shuttle to a hotel indicating we would join them later, after we claimed the bags. Unfortunately, however, U.S. Air would not let us claim our bags. The three men got a shuttle to join the women at the hotel. The women were not there! Where had they gone?

Pat had a cell phone, but Ernie did not know the number. He phoned his daughter back home in Clifton Park to get the cell phone number. His daughter was taken aback when Ernie blurted out "We lost your mother." Pat and my wife, Martha, had decided to go to another hotel and had sent Betty back to baggage claim to let us know. We took the hotel shuttle back to the airport to pick up Betty, complaining to the driver about our lost wives. Having found Betty, we boarded another shuttle to join the other two women at the hotel. We no sooner got in to the shuttle when the driver began telling us the story of these three men who had lost their wives. I guess we are now urban lore!

Ernie is now also a part of the history that he once preserved and promoted, but his legacy survives in the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve, the Historic Grooms Tavern and the many historic structures throughout Clifton Park that he helped to preserve. He was truly a friend to History.



Please remember to pay your dues if you have not already done so.
The address is **P.O. Box 1166 Clifton Park, NY 12065.**



A BIT OF HISTORY

by John L. Scherer

Clifton Park Has Ties to Lincoln

April 14th marked the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination by John Wilkes Booth in 1865. This tragic event, like the assassination of John F. Kennedy, had a tremendous impact on the nation. There was a period of twenty days of mourning from the time Lincoln was shot to the time he arrived by train for burial at his home in Springfield, Illinois. The first of his twelve funerals was in Washington, then his funeral procession began by train across the land to Illinois, stopping at major cities for additional funerals. It was the mightiest outpouring of national grief the world had yet seen.

The funeral train arrived at Albany the night of April 25th, and Lincoln's coffin was moved to the Capitol where it lay in state. At noon the following day, Albany's grand parade got under way with a specially built catafalque, marchers, bands, and tolling bells. One wonders if Mercy Harris Garnsey was present at this mournful occasion. Her niece, Clara Harris, had been sitting in the box seat at Ford's Theatre with President and Mrs. Lincoln the night the President was shot.

Mercy Harris, a sister of Albany lawyer, Ira Harris, married Cyrus Garnsey of Clifton Park in 1825. They built and lived in the brick farm house on Route 146, now owned by Emmor and Anne Caldwell. Cyrus was the son of Nathan Garnsey, Jr., who in 1829, became the second supervisor of Clifton Park.

Mercy and her two young children, Lucy and Cyrus, moved to Albany to live with her brother, Ira. Ira's eldest daughter, Clara, was born in 1835, and after her Aunt Mercy moved with her son to Seneca County in 1848, she was a frequent visitor to their home.

Ira Harris handled Cyrus' estate for Mercy. He gradually advanced in his profession, and eventually was named a NYS Supreme Court Justice in 1847. In 1860, when Senator William Seward was named to Lincoln's cabinet as Secretary of State, Ira Harris filled his seat as US Senator. As a senator in Washington during the Civil War, and became a good friend of Lincoln's.

Originally, General Grant and his wife were to accompany to accompany the Lincolns to Ford's Theatre, but when they could not make it, Clara Harris (Ira's daughter) and her fiancé Major Henry Rathbone were invited instead. In a letter written from Washington, April 29, 1865, Clara tells a friend:

"We four composed the party that evening. They drove to our door in the gayest spirits; chatting on our way--and the President was received with the greatest enthusiasm. They

Holiday Open House Presents "Victory Turned into Mourning"

This program will explore these solemn events around the farewell to Lincoln and Grant and their connection to the NYS Capitol

Presented by Stuart W. Lehman *dressed in uniform of a First Sergeant of the Veterans Reserve corps, a Guard of Escort on the Lincoln Funeral Train.*

say we were watched by the assassins, as we alighted from the carriage. Oh how could anyone be so cruel as to strike that kind, dear honest face! And when I think of that fiend barring himself in alone with us, my blood runs cold. My dress is saturated with blood; my hands and face were covered. You may imagine what a scene! and so, all through that dreadful night, when we stood by that dying bed. Poor Mrs. Lincoln was and is almost crazy."

Clara's fiancé, Henry Rathbone received a knife wound to his arm in his attempt to tackle John Wilkes Booth. Although Clara Harris and Major Rathbone were step-brother and sister, he being the son of Ira Harris' second wife, they were married in 1867. They were wealthy and lived in Europe with their children, but he became mentally unstable. In 1883 he went crazy and murdered Clara, stabbing and shooting her. He then spent the last thirty years of his life in an insane asylum.

According to Garnsey Family historian, George Hubbard, who brought the Garnsey-Harris connection to my attention, Mercy Harris Garnsey never remarried. She lived with her son Cyrus in his home "Lakeholme" near Lake Cayuga, Seneca County until her death, in 1887, at age 83. She was returned to Clifton Park, for burial in the Garnsey family cemetery, on the north side of Route 146 near Rexford. Here she lies today, a mute witness to the tragic events of April 1865.



Drawing by George Hubbard of Mercy Harris' tombstone in Garnsey Cemetery

Donations Needed! We need donations toward the restoration of the Black Smith Shop!
Volunteers Needed! To help decorate for the holidays and to provide refreshments at events.
Members Needed! We are always looking for new members!



www.groomstavern.com

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P.O. Box 1166

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Friendsofhistoricgroomstavern@yahoo.com

