

The Colonie Historical Oracle

Quarterly Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie

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The Bacon Family of Loudonville and the Loudon Plank Road



The Bacon home and family members

Submitted by Kevin Franklin, Colonie Town Historian

This could easily become Part I of a series of newsletters. In the vast collection of materials in the Historian's Office in Colonie Town Hall rests a cache of wonderful memoirs of the Bacon family of Loudonville and the Loudonville area compiled by Catharine Mather Bacon and other Bacon family members. Catharine Mather married into the neighboring Bacon family. The Mather name also appears in Volume 7 No. 2 issue of the Colonie Historical Oracle newsletter which I will happily email to those who wish a copy. (I have added editorial comments in parenthesis.)

The Bacon Family Papers are "Dedicated to the next generation of Bacons who never knew the old house in Loudonville" and contain about 100 pages of text broken into over twenty chapters of recollections of Bacon family members. The chapters include: Park Place (the name of the Bacon estate); The House; The Halls; Grandma's Parlor; Mama's Parlor; The Sitting Room; The Dining Room; The Kitchen & Pantries; The Cellar; Our Bed Rooms; The Smoking Room; Newton's Room & the Bath Room; Grandma Bacon's Rooms; The Third Floor; The Tower; The Barn; Winter and The Ice House; Holidays; Play; and finally, The Loudonville Road. Park Place was situated on a few acres of land in the point where Old Niskayuna Road meets the Loudon Road across from what is commonly referred to as the "Loudonville Triangle". The home was said to at one time to have been some sort of an inn prior to the time Samuel Newton Bacon purchased the property in 1870. (The claim of the old house being an inn may or may not be true and will require additional research when time allows.)

Judging by the number of rooms described in the chapters and looking at a photograph of the old home, it must have been quite spacious. It would be nice but not realistic to try and copy word for word all of the wonderful descriptions in the Bacon papers but there is simply not enough room here. A small book could easily be printed, and indeed should be along with any photographs that would do justice to the Bacon family papers and life in the Loudonville area during the late 19th Century, but we'll begin here with some short renditions from several of the chapters.

Introduction: "This is the picture of a house; a picture that has been recalled from memory and set down on paper forty-two years after the Bacon family left, following the death of Grandma Bacon in 1910, after having lived there for three generations. It is written for the eight members of the fourth generation of Bacons particularly for those who have expressed an interest in the house as it was in the early days of the

century. Photographs of the house in Loudonville are few; no picture remains of the inside of the house. --- It presents the impressions that were made on a child who lived there in the early years of the Twentieth Century and is a nostalgic memory of a way of life that no longer exists. --- If there is any value in the reminiscences for any of the fourth generation, thanks can go to Dick, the third son of Newton (Bacon) whose questions about the house and an often repeated desire to have known it, made me realize that the memory of that fine old house on its triangle of land in Loudonville, as well as its surroundings, should be written down so that it could be passed on to this next generation and, in this way, become part of their heritage." [By: Catharine Mather Bacon, summer of 1952.]

Park Place Described: "The house was large and square, three stories high, built of brick with two good sized square wings on either side. Facing south, it stood back of a large circle of grass separated from it by a broad gravel driveway. There was a dignity to its simple lines that was pleasing, though a considerable amount of Victorian Gingerbread Trim had been added. From the front piazza there was an uninterrupted view of the front park and the Loudonville Road beyond --- the house's massive mansard roof was obviously a later addition, probably put on by Grandpa Bacon, for he fixed his new home up in true Victorian style. --- (Catharine goes on to describe in great detail a unique mechanical double gate with some sort of device in the ground of the driveway on either side of the gate that when run over by the wheels of the carriage would cause the gate to swing open and then shut again after the carriage passed through....all of this done without benefit of any kind of electric motor!) --- - Near the side gate we used to stand to wait for Dave Jeram's stage to Menands."

Also: "In the center of the lawn was a large fountain consisting of a statue of a naked child holding a small basin over its head, acted as a type of bird bath where water constantly flowed out of the basin and into the fountain reservoir below." Water to the fountain was obtained by a "ram" located behind Gove's Store (present day Genoa Importing Co.) which apparently



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forced water beneath Loudon Road and up to both the Bacon home itself and the fountain. (In later years the Bacon's built a large water tower directly behind their home where quite possibly the aforementioned ram device (whatever that was) forced water up to the holding tank in the tower where the water then flowed by gravity to the home.

Catharine further describes the various large trees on the property and a row of spruce hedges, barely penetrable, with a small opening made by people who came from "the road over the West Albany Hill" (now called Osborne Road). She also recalls looking through the break in this hedge line to view Halley's Comet in 1910. The "Park Place" chapter alone consists of twelve pages plus a diagram of the floor plan of the house. It also mentions that on the northwestern corner of the property was a path that led to the home of Edward Rockenstyre (also spelled Rockenstire) where the faithful coachman and man about the place, lived with his family. (Note: The Rockenstire name is prominent in the Latham area and their cemetery is situated behind the area of Bella Napoli Bakery and the small strip mall at the intersection of Routes 9 and 155 in Latham.)

Chapter XXII - The Loudonville Road:

"The whole east side of our place was bounded by the Loudonville Road, always a busy thoroughfare. This road had been opened by Sir William Johnson during the French and Indian War days as a military supply road (to Lake George) and when in 1870 the name of the village was changed (from Ireland's Corners) to Loudonville in honor of Lord Loudon, an English General who had been Sir Johnson's superior officer.

"This main road ran north from Albany to the Mohawk River where there was a ferry (Note: Originally there was no ferry at this point. Troops and supplies forded the river in the vicinity of the present day New York Power Authority Plant on the Cohoes Crescent Road. The rope ferry came later and was located farther west). The old Loudonville Road was a plank road ---- of wooden posts laid crosswise, and was owned by the Palmer family ---- Uncle George Stedman, who was the County Lawyer at the time, persuaded the Palmers to give the road to the County."

"In our day the road was of dirt and periodically, in the summer, the Town spread oil to lay the dust and provide a surface for the road ---- the first few days the road was very messy ---- carriage and bicycle wheels had to be wiped off with kerosene ---- many a shoe was ruined in crossing the road at these times. (Note:

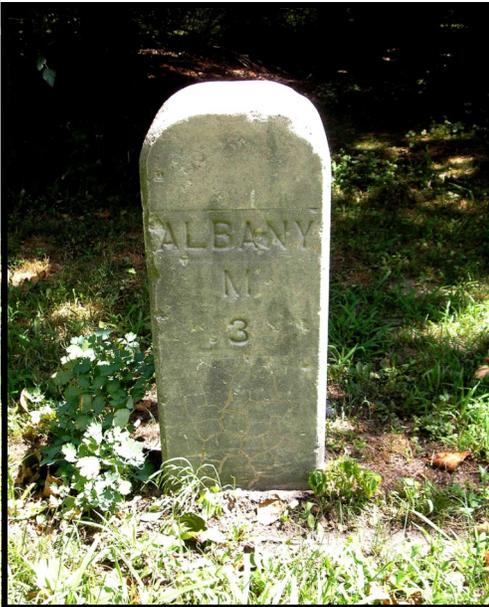


Years ago the old Loudon Plank Road was lined with Elm trees which were prone to disease. I think there are only two "healthy" Elm trees remaining along the entire route. This photo shows an elm tree on the east side of the old Loudon Plank Road. The tree is about 3 feet in diameter at its base.

The paragraph mentions the road to Menands where the trolley cars traveled on what was then called the Troy Road, or present day Broadway, but apparently there was a plan to construct a trolley line on the Loudon Road as well). Early in our childhood there was agitation for a line through Loudonville and piles of rails lay beside the road for a number of years ---- the residents of Loudonville fought this innovation both vigorously and successfully and the rails eventually rusted and were taken away."

"Public transportation was by stage. In Papa's and Mama's youth the stage was an old black covered one known as 'The Black Maria' that went down the corduroy (plank) road to the north part of the city and ---- used by them and their friends who went to the Academy, the Albany Female Academy and St. Agnes

If anyone has the book "Town of Colonie: A Pictorial History", and/or the book "Wolf Road: A Century of Development" that they'd like to donate to the Society, we'd gladly accept all offers. Please contact Mark Bodnar at 459-5147. Thank you!



A short distance north of the majestic Elm tree shown on the previous page is an old mile post marker, the only one left in Colonie along the Old Loudon Road which once displayed many of these stone markers.

School. In fact, Aunt Clara's (Clara Mather) first introduction to Uncle Newcomb Cleveland was on this stage when it jerked suddenly and she was thrown into his lap." (Note: This is not the way the meeting of Newcomb Cleveland and Clara Mather was explained in the book: "Susan and Mather" written by their son, Dr. Mather Cleveland and privately printed in 1974. In the book, the schools of Albany and the stage are

talked about, but Newcomb's and Clara's encounter went a bit differently when one day two new girls began riding the stage, or bus as it was also called, and Newcomb decided to introduce himself to Clara.) "I remember my desire to become acquainted with this one girl and finally bought a fan about the size of a man's hand, and getting on the Loudonville bus, timidly offered it to her so that she might have some way of enduring the heat which we had on that particular day ---- Her refusal to accept the loan of the fan was sufficiently cool to make the balance of the stage journey, for me, requiring no use of the fan."

The remainder of the chapter about the Loudon Road describes the stage of David Jeram with its large yellow colored wheels and row of seats facing each other and how it used to go down the Old Menand Road to meet the trains at "Menands Station". The Old Menand road was quite a bit steeper than today's Rt. 378. On the downhill trip the stage driver used a lever to activate large brakes on the rear wheels of the stage. Horses struggled on the uphill trip back to Loudonville & Newtonville. The stage also picked up mail and mail deliveries were announced by Mr. Jeram who blew an "old battered bugle" to signal his approach. (See Railroad Station photo, below.)



“Sometimes a band of Gypsies came through with their brightly colored carriages and brightly colored clothes, but their horses always looked underfed and the men rough and uncombed. Children kept a safe distance from the Gypsy bands as we heard that they took children and stole things in villages. Residents would watch the men on their high seats on the enclosed wagons, driving tired horses, or walking beside the wagons while the women and children in bright colors, often wearing hoop ear rings, hung out of the wagons and called as they passed.”

“Horseless carriages caused more commotion than any other thing ---- these noisy, mechanical carriages and also the early automobiles put horses in a panic, as they did the riders in the carriages. Horses would move their ears forward and then backward as they heard one approach; then they would begin to prance sideways, finally rearing up on their hind legs with a wild look in their eyes, or they would jump suddenly sideways into a ditch. (Note: Deep ditches are still evident along much of the Loudon Road.) In our day the Loudonville Road was used almost exclusively by horses, though automobiles became increasingly prevalent after 1904-05. It was about 1909 that Grandma Bacon counted a hundred automobiles passing the place one Sunday afternoon in the summer.”

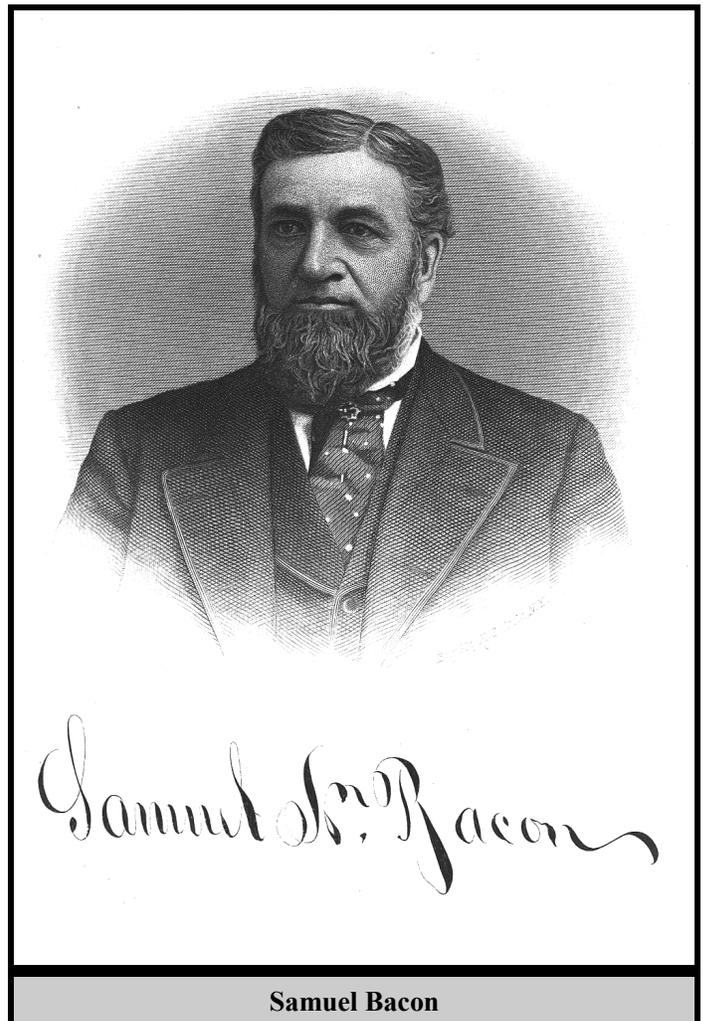
The writer also noted that an early automobile had made a cross country trip from New York City to Buffalo and drove past the Bacon property: “All day long, and it may have been two days or more, we watched for that automobile and we took chairs out onto the circle (lawn within the front driveway) for the long vigil.” The chapter concludes with other exciting events of the early 20th Century including the site of the first airplanes or flying machines including one from “Brate’s Hill as it followed the Hudson River from New York.”

The wonderful memories and detailed descriptions of events found in the Bacon Family papers are an important documentation of life in the Loudonville, Newtonville, Menands areas of the Town of Colonie. The hamlet of Loudonville and the Loudon Road were also worthy of mention in the book: “Bicentennial History

of Albany and Schenectady Counties 1609-1886” by Howell & Tenney which aptly describes the area in a single paragraph.

You will note that the first name mentioned in praising the hamlet of Loudonville is **Samuel Bacon**: “This is the finest and most desirable suburb of Albany, and with Newtonville, is a closely populated district. The Loudon plank road offers easy access and delightful drives. The surroundings possess many attractions and as a quiet rural resort, or place of residence, many of the business men of the city have fine mansions, beautiful lawns, gardens and green houses, which are much admired for their cheerful and home attractions. These, with the surroundings of the neighborhood and the natural scenery quite diversified, possess many striking features. Among those who reside here, and have done so much for the permanent benefit and encouragement of a higher order and cultivation of the beautiful in nature and art, are Samuel Bacon, P.K. Diedrick, George L. Stedman, and John C. Hughson.”

And so it remains.



Welcome New Members!

The Historical Society of the Town of Colonie would like to welcome our newest members:

Gerri & Kim Cuva, Colleen Noble & Peter Kounoupis and Donna Gates.

Welcome Aboard!!

Samuel Bacon

Yes, I would like to become a member of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie, New York, Inc. in the classification I have checked or renew my membership as noted.

My annual dues payment in the amount of \$ _____ is enclosed.

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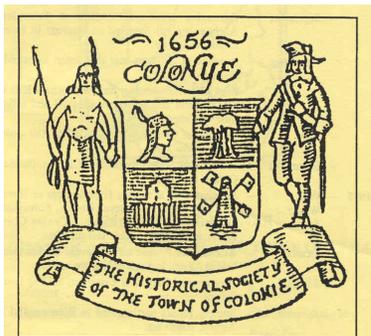
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Kevin Franklin: Town Historian

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Thank you for electing me as your new president. The Society has changed considerably since I was president in the mid-nineties. We are preserving the heritage which is as valuable and important to our residents as it has ever been.

I would like to thank immediate past president Mark Bodnar for the excellent job he has done in leading the Society for the past four years. He has been ably supported by a hard working Board of Trustees. Jennifer Paley has retired as a trustee, but we are grateful she will continue as the manager of our Face Book page. Have you checked the intriguing items she posts?

Our next membership meeting will be Sunday, October 30, at 2 p.m. at the Library. Robert Reilly, our former Assemblymember, will be presenting a program, "Saving Rare Breeds: For Our Past and Our Future." Mr. Reilly will argue that when we lose these rare breeds we lose part of whom we were and who we are today. Looking forward to seeing you.

Fran McCashion, President