

The Colonie Historical Oracle

Quarterly Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie

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Part 1 of 2

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Rediscovering Benjamin Prescott (1755-1826) & the Albany Water Works: Soldier, Engineer, Surveyor, Administrator, Entrepreneur, Patriot



Submitted by Kevin M. Franklin

The Wolfert's Roost Country Club owns and maintains a small dam and pond with a pump house in a hollow on the west side of VanRensselaer Blvd. across from the Dutch Village Apartment Complex in Menands. Wolfert's Roost pumps water from this pond onto their golf course lawns and greens to avoid the cost of using metered water from the City of Albany. In the late 1980's it had to excavate tons of silt that accumulated over time in this small pond. This pond is fed by the Maezlandtkill which originates in the Loudonville area of Colonie west of the Sky Hollow area of Menands. The stream (two forks) runs through Sky Hollow and turns south beneath MacAffer Drive before emptying into the Wolfert's Roost pond. During the winter excavation project, workers uncovered and removed several sections of ancient wooden and very



Wooden & Cast Iron Pipes of the Albany Water Works
Excavated by Wolfert's Roost Country Club

early cast iron pipe along with iron bands from the side of the pond embankment.

What were these ancient pipes used for? Where did they lead to? The excavation project continued and the enlarged pond was ready to water the grounds of Wolfert's Roost come the summer months. The pipes were placed in the woods near the tennis courts of Wolfert's Roost and forgotten.

As early as the 1670's Albany had both public and private wells. These public wells were supplied from a fountain or pond, formed by constructing a dam across a creek, or near the outlet of a spring on the hill adjacent to the present Capital. The condition of water from the city's public wells may have differed from that of private wells. Wells dug in one's backyard were sometimes subject to cross contamination from privy pits of nearby outhouses. Deadly diseases often resulted from consuming tainted water. According to the Federal Census of Albany County in 1790 there were 3,506 people living in the City of Albany. By the census of 1800 that number nearly tripled to 9,356. The growing population of Albany demanded a reliable source of fresh drinking water.

In 1747, Peter Kalm, a Swedish naturalist and botanist, was commissioned by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences to explore and report on the American Colonies and to collect seed and plant specimens during his visit. He and an aide arrived in this country in 1748. His travels took them to Albany by June 1749, where he documented nearly all aspects of life, trade and conditions there including the city's well water. Kalm's description of the water was less than flattering: "The water in several wells in this town was very cool about this time, but had a kind of acid taste which

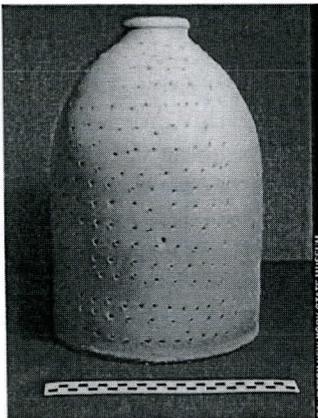
was not very agreeable. On nearer examination I found an abundance of little insects in it. Their length was different; some were a geometrical line and a half; others two, and others four lines long." Note: A line was a 17th Century unit of measure. One line is equal to $\frac{1}{4}$ the length of a grain of barley corn. Three barley corns equals one inch.

Kalm further describes the insects as having black heads with bodies pale in color, and when they swam they "proceed in crooked or undulated lines, almost like tadpoles." He experimented by mixing about 25% of rum to a glass of well water and watched as the insects continued their swim, seemingly unaffected by the rum. Kalm's report stated that both he and his aide experienced different adverse effects after drinking the water including a burning sensation to Kalm's throat and chest pains to that of his aide.

In 1796, a report of Morse's *American Geography* stated that: "The well water in this city (Albany) is extremely bad, scarcely drinkable by those not accustomed to it. It oozes through stiff blue clay and it imbibes in its passage the fine particles common to that kind of soil."

Morse's report claims that all of the inhabitants of the city use river water to cook with and some families drink it, but the City's well water "is unwholesome, being full of little insects, except in size like those which are frequently found in stagnated water." Others took exception to Kalm's criticisms of Albany's water including that of visiting Englishman John Maude in 1800 who found drinking water from Hudson's river to be dirty and preferred water from the public pump or the City's well water instead, proclaiming that: "My palate cannot find fault with, nor my eyes perceive in it those animalcules Kalm speaks of."

Archaeological examinations of wells and cisterns in and around Albany have revealed some of these contained large pottery "filter jugs", with more elaborate cisterns having several interior compartments or walls where water would flow into one compartment allowing any sediments to fall to the bottom as the water rose to the top of each compartment before flowing into the next where the process was repeated. Pea stones or charcoal surrounded the filter jug which was pierced with hundreds of small holes which allowed only the smallest of any sediment into the jug where a pipe was inserted into the mouth of the jug and water pumped out of it. Of course this method would still not prevent dangerous microbes or bacteria from entering the drinking water. It would not be until after 1854 that the City of Albany would construct its first official sewer of brick and cement beneath Madison Avenue.



Filter Jug: photo courtesy of Hartgen Archaeology

Prior to that, and especially in the Colonial era, household and human waste was emptied into ditches on the sides of streets and the streets of the city were "often filled with mire and filth" which could easily contaminate well water.

By 1793 the Mayor and Corporation Council of Albany decided it was time the City attained a modern water supply system for the purpose of obtaining wholesome drinking water and a reliable source of water for fighting fires. Their desire was to bring water to the city from a fresh water spring near the Five Mile House (a tavern along the King's Road between Albany and Schenectady) through a series of wooden pipe referred to as "aqueducts" in the official records of the Albany Water Works System on file with the Albany County Hall of Records.

On December 31, 1793 the Albany Common Council formed a committee of three men to report to the Council on the best method and costs to bring water into the city. The committee consisted of John Jauncy, Dirck Ten Broeck, and Jacob J. Lansing. By May 1794 they advertised the city's need to have a water system constructed. Only one proposal was submitted, and no action taken on it by the city.

In October 1794 the Common Council selected another committee consisting of Mr. Henry, Mr. Douw & Mr. Jauncy to submit another report of how to bring water into the city. By November 8, 1794 the city again advertised for proposals to bring water into the city from the spring at the Five Mile house by constructing a reservoir there and supplying another reservoir to be constructed at the public square in Albany "should it be thought necessary."

Several proposals were received. One individual even responded with a proposal to build, or supervise the construction of a log boring machine that would require the power of one horse and a boy (apparently to take care of the horse) but no mention on how to construct a system to bring water into the city. Other proposals included that of Mr. Elijah Church who constructed a small system for a private individual in Chenango, N.Y. and another system in Cooperstown, N.Y. (attested to by William Cooper in a letter written to the Common Council.) Mr. Church's submission of January 29, 1795 included specifications and estimates related to the Five Mile House idea but his letter included an interesting suggestion that if a closer spring could be found "it would be more to your advantage and mine also."

Church's suggestion may have influenced the City to form yet another committee on or about February 11, 1795 which included Mr. Graham, Mr. VanRensselaer, and Mr. Henry "to confer with such persons as may have any estates in the ground thro which the conduits for leading the water into this city will probably run, or in which the fountains may be." The City also wished the committee report the "most expedient mode of obtaining a right to lead the water from such fountains & conduits thro' such grounds with free ingress and egress to make all necessary repairs."

This statement and the fact that VanRensselaer is now a member of the committee is of great importance. The spring at the Five Mile House was situated within a long rectangular shaped piece of land owned by the city and known as the "Freedom of Albany" which stretched westward out of Albany almost to the city of Schenectady. This swath of land was exempted from inclusion into all the other lands surrounding Albany known then as the Manor of Rensselaerwyck. One of the reasons for this exemption was the protection of forests used for firewood to heat homes in Albany. The great majority of these lands in the Manor were owned by and under the control of the VanRensselaer family. Use of the land for agriculture, timber, mineral rights and the use of streams for mills or other purposes all required a lease be signed with VanRensselaer. Among the several proposals sent to the Common Council included one by Mr. Benjamin Prescott, of Northampton, MA, dated April 25, 1795. Many of the proposals received by the Common Council were very short, some being only one paragraph or one page in length. Prescott's proposal was several pages in length, well written, and *very detailed*.

The Common Council finally chose Benjamin Prescott of Northampton, MA to design the City's first municipal water system dubbed; "The Albany Water Works", but who was Benjamin Prescott? What were his credentials? Did he have previous engineering experience or experience in large construction projects? His proposal was not accompanied by letters from persons attesting to his abilities or character as had other proposals submitted to the Common Council. Why then was Prescott chosen for such an ambitious project? There seems to have been an untold connection between the hierarchy of the State and Federal Government and that of Prescott, who is sometimes referred to as "Major Prescott of Northampton" or "Colonel", depending on which source of material being read. He is also later in life referred to as "Esq." (Esquire), a term given to people of high social status and respect.

Research of 18th Century Prescott's of the New England area showed the Prescott name to be very prevalent in both Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Two Benjamin Prescott's were of nearly the same age. Both men served during the American Revolution. One was born in Lancaster, MA. on October 3, 1755 and the other born near or at Jaffrey, N.H. on March 15, 1754. The Jaffrey, N.H. Prescott died there in 1839, but there was nothing on the Internet regarding where or when the Lancaster, MA. Prescott died. The Jaffrey, N.H. Prescott was known as "Colonel". The Lancaster born Prescott called Colonel and sometimes "Major".

The Internet site of:

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~silversmiths/makers/silversmiths/188055.htm>

indicates that the Lancaster born Benjamin Prescott had married Ruth Crocker, who was born at Northampton, MA (where Prescott's letter to the Albany Common Council

was mailed from). Their marriage took place at Waterford, N.Y. on December 11, 1780. The Silversmith's web page lists only one child; Henry Prescott, a Silversmith, born in 1781 at Waterford, N.Y. and died on Dec. 20, 1810 at Springfield, MA. Ruth Prescott died at Waterford, N.Y. in 1821.

In the book: "*The Genealogy of the descendants of Henry Kingsbury of Ipswich and Haverhill, Massachusetts*" lists Prescott as Colonel, son of Ebenezer and Jerusha (Matthews) Prescott, born in Lancaster, MA Oct .3, 1755, an officer of engineers, U.S. Army; he surveyed Niagara Falls, 1796; brought water into Albany in 1803; he was for ten years from 1805-1815 in command of the U.S. Armory at Springfield; he went to Cohoes, N.Y. about 1816; in 1825 he superintended the building of the stone dam between Troy and Waterford, N.Y. Mrs. Ruth Prescott died at Waterford, N.Y. 1821 and having had five children. (None are listed however.)

The book: "*The Prescott Memorial – Genealogical Memory of Prescott Families in America, written by Dr. William Prescott, M.D. in 1870*"; corroborated the Rootsweb Silversmith web page about Prescott being born at Lancaster, MA in 1755 and marrying Ruth Crocker, etc. This genealogy book also stated that: "He was for ten years, overseer of the U.S. Armory at Springfield, MA, he went to Cohoes, Albany Co. N.Y. in about 1816, surveyed Niagara Falls in 1796, brought water into Albany in 1803. In 1825 he superintended the building of the Stone Dam between Troy and Waterford, N.Y." I was now certain I was researching the correct Benjamin Prescott but curiously neither the Prescott Memorial Book nor the Kingsbury Descendants book made no mention of his being involved with an earlier and very important engineering project at South Hadley, MA which I discovered while researching his name.

In 1793 the State of Massachusetts Legislature wished to improve navigation on the Connecticut River and to devise either a canal or inclined plane to move boats around the water fall at South Hadley, MA. Twenty persons were appointed by the Legislature to form a Proprietors of Locks and Canals including Engineer Benjamin Prescott of Northampton who was appointed Superintendent of this project.

Prescott is credited with designing the very first mechanical inclined plane used in America to haul boats up and down to river levels above and below the falls at South Hadley. Inclined planes would later be used on other canal and railroad systems in the country. Operation of Prescott's inclined plane began in April 1795. (See diagram of the inclined plane on Page 4.)

Welcome New Members!

The Historical Society of the Town of Colonie would like to welcome our newest members: Mary Durgee, Marie & Joe Erkes, Brian Fitzpatrick, Scott Holub, Susan Latham, Michael Hayes, Harold Feisthamel, Russell Oathout, Prentiss Carnell, Ms. Greer Fitting and Mark & Claudia Rosenholz. Glad to have all of you aboard!

Prescott's design of the first inclined plane in this country was highly successful and widely admired. The mechanics of it also included the construction of a dam on the Connecticut River which powered two water wheels connected to pulleys that raised or lowered boat sleds a distance of 230 ft. along the inclined plane beside the falls at South Hadley. Perhaps it was Prescott's design of the inclined plane and the construction of the water system which powered it that induced Albany's Common Council to contract with him to design the city's first municipal water system. Or were there other Albany connections?

A person with Albany connections who was certainly familiar with Prescott and who surveyed portions of the Connecticut River in 1792 was Christopher Colles, a respected surveyor and engineer who was also a proponent of constructing an inland canal system in New York State. Colles surveyed the Mohawk River Valley in 1784 in a proposal submitted to the NYS Legislature to remove obstructions and provide an inland water route to Wood Creek and eventually the Great Lakes. Albany's General Philip Schuyler was a proponent of canals in New York. The Mohawk River was used extensively during the American Revolution. Water transportation routes were vitally important before the construction of toll roads and turnpikes in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Prescott's letter of April 1795 to the Albany Common Council was quite timely as his inclined plane at South Hadley became operational by April 1795. In fact, the first tolls on the inclined plane were collected in April 1795, so Prescott seemed free to involve himself in other projects. The City wished to utilize the fresh water spring near the Five Mile House along the old Kings Road to Schenectady. Prescott surveyed the spring and the route and proclaimed that the site was not desirable for the following reasons: A.) The supply was inadequate. B.) The water was hard and not suited for washing. C.) The springs on the hill could not be collected into a reservoir as the height (above the City) and any reservoir built there would not have sufficient pressure to enable the owners of different houses in the city, particularly westward, to "raise the water into the different stories of their houses."

Prescott's obviously negative assessment of the Five Mile House idea was overruled by the committee founded by Albany and declared that the water on trial "answers every purpose of domestic consumption, that it is soft and proper for washing with --- and --- the quantity which the spring will yield from an experiment made by Mr. Prescott is at least sixty gallons in one minute, or about seven hundred and eighty five hogsheads (a hogshead was a barrel usually containing a volume of about 145 gallons of liquid) in twenty four hours which your committee think will be fully adequate to the supply of the city." The committee selected by the City had their way and a contract was signed between the City and Benjamin Prescott on Sept. 10, 1795 and work would soon begin on this system which was to be

completed by Nov. 1, 1797.

Prescott reported to the committee his estimate of the number of pitch pine logs that would be required to build the system. Each log was to be "at least fifteen inches in diameter at the butt end and thirteen inches diameter at the smaller end ---- and ---- shall be secured at each joint by an iron band of twelve inches in diameter, one inch and one half broad and one fourth of an inch thick on the thickest side to be made wedge wise and inserted and well secured by staples in the butt end of each piece of timber." (See photograph on page 2.) He estimated it would require up to ten miles of wooden pipe to construct the aqueduct. Prescott's contract with Albany wasn't signed until early September 1795, and he continued his work surveying a proposed route for the aqueduct (pipe) which now included bypassing or excavating through some of the obstacles which his first assessment of the Five Mile route deemed impractical.

Although Prescott was awarded the contract to devise the construction of Albany's water system, it may not have required his constant physical presence as long as the work and workers were proceeding as planned. The Prescott family genealogy book provides clues and gives a short timeline about other projects and positions involving the Lancaster, MA born Benjamin Prescott. The book claims that Prescott surveyed Niagara Falls in 1796 for a possible canal route around the falls. Some of the paperwork regarding Prescott's survey of the Five Mile route are marked simply as "Undated" or "Circa 1796". He could not have possibly been at Albany and Niagara Falls at the same time.

While the "Treaty of Paris" ended the American Revolutionary War, issues still remained between America and Great Britain and tensions decreased some when U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Jay negotiated a "Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation between His Britannic Majesty; and The United States of America.", commonly referred to as the "Jay Treaty" signed by both countries in November 1794. Prescott's Niagara survey would probably not have occurred were it not for the Jay Treaty. The Jay Treaty presents an interesting question: Did Benjamin Prescott just head to the area of Niagara Falls of his own accord or was he directed to proceed there by the United States Government to conduct his survey? This writer has not been able to locate any information in regard to Prescott's survey of Niagara. A well drawn plan to construct a canal around Niagara Falls could not only have great commerce value to a new America, but military importance as well.



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

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Please accept my additional donation of \$ _____ as a gift to the Historical Society. *The Historical Society is a not-for-profit corporation.*

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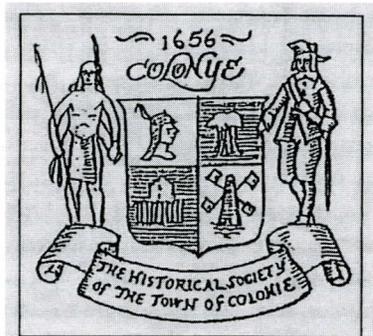
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**THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF THE TOWN OF COLONIE**



Historical Society Founded 1971

MEMORIAL TOWN HALL
NEWTONVILLE, NY 12128-0508
518-782-2601

Kevin Franklin: Town Historian

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**Support the Society's efforts to stimulate an appreciation
of the historical heritage of your community. Join Now!**

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Your Historical Society was busy at work this summer, as we unveiled an Interpretive Sign at the Schuyler Flatts Cultural Park to commemorate the deeds of Arent Van Curler and Father (later Saint) Isaac Jogues. Thanks to the volunteer Members of both committees and also to those who were invited to speak. The event was superb.

Newsletter: in this issue our Town Historian, Kevin Franklin, has once again put together deeply researched information for us. You'll find Part 1 is a very interesting read, and the second installment will be published in the next issue. Looking forward, we're anticipating a future newsletter of one of our members and her relationship to many people connected with local and national history. Who's the member? Who are the people? Sorry, you'll have to wait.....

We are in need of a volunteer to assume the duties of Program Chair. A guideline is written and we will train, guide and assist anyone who steps forward. Please volunteer! Devoting a relatively small amount of time to this important community service is highly rewarding. Why not give it a try?

We hope to see you at our upcoming meeting on Sunday, November 16th: "Russell Sage: The Money King" by Michael Barrett, Director of the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway. Hope to see you there!

Mark Bodnar, President