

# The Colonie Historical Oracle

Quarterly Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie

Volume 16, No. 2

April — June 2021

## Tobin's "First Prize"

Submitted by Kevin Franklin, Historian, Town of Colonie



Situated on 32 acres of land in the West Albany area of the Town of Colonie, and long a prominent landmark in the Albany area, sits the forlorn behemoth concrete building of Tobin's "First Prize" meat packing facility, soon to be demolished. Long before the construction of Tobin's, or of Interstate-90, this West Albany area was known as Spencerville. In 1854, Erastus Corning, grandfather of the late long-term Albany mayor Erastus Corning, was president of the New York Central Railroad. Corning purchased land that was still in the Van Rensselaer family estate and began to construct railroad shops and a rail yard known for years as the West Albany Shops on 350 acres of land in the area west of the Tivoli

Hollow.

With the construction of the West Albany Shops of the New York Central Railroad, the area soon became a staging point for herds of cattle, swine, and sheep that were "driven" through areas of Colonie to the West Albany Cattle Yards to be loaded on the New York Central's trains and sent westward to Chicago or south to New York City to be slaughtered for market. An 1890's photograph seen in the "Pictorial History of the Town of Colonie" shows the large cattle yards at West Albany.

The driving of cattle and other livestock was once a concern for the Loudonville area residents of yesteryear and documented by the late Allen Bacon

of Loudonville in his memoirs. Bacon's descriptions of the drives were quoted by the late Betty Shaver, a researcher in the Colonie historian's office, in a booklet authored by her describing different hamlets in Colonie including West Albany: *The cattle were fed and watered before being loaded onto railroad cars to continue their journey to market. West Albany was once as wild as some of the towns in the West, as seen in the movies. It was common to see cattle being driven down nearby roads heading for West Albany. The Shakers in their journals tell of droves of cattle or sheep stopping near their village at night so the drovers could rest. Allen Bacon, in his reminiscences of Loudonville, described the scenes: Every residence had fences in front of their property and gates giving entrance. This was of a utilitarian necessity because of the tremendous droves of cattle, driven along the Loudon Road on their way to West Albany. These big droves of cattle, swine and sheep diminished in the 1870s and by 1890, the fences were all down. Flocks were also driven over the Crumitie Road. Men would pick the kids up and put them over the fences to get them out of danger from the animal hooves.*

**Welcome New Members!**

The Historical Society of the Town of Colonie would like to welcome our newest members: Elisa Pruden, Ken Johnson, Allan Rea, Lynn E. Armstrong and Sarah & Rana Mukerji

***Welcome Aboard!***

Prior to the construction of the Tobin facility in 1924, the West Albany area had its own share of family owned and operated butchers. The Bennett family had a wholesale butcher shop on Sand Creek Road at Roessle Road. John & Michael Bennett are seen sitting in their GMC truck proudly placarded with their family's company name on the side. An old receipt from the Bennett Company was embossed with the image of a large swine at the top, along with the company address.

By 1924, construction began on the Tobin meat packing building. By the 1920's, concrete had become a means of constructing very large structures, and thousands of yards of concrete went into the building of the Tobin facility including its huge smokestack towering over the complex. The facility employed hundreds of men and women in a variety of positions. The company employed many

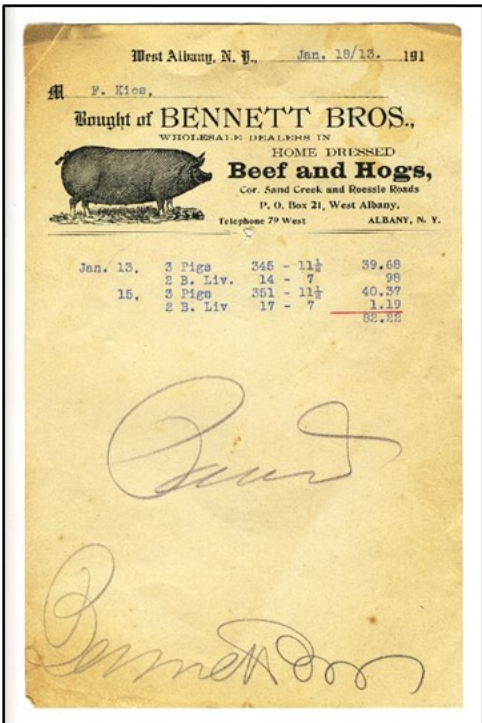
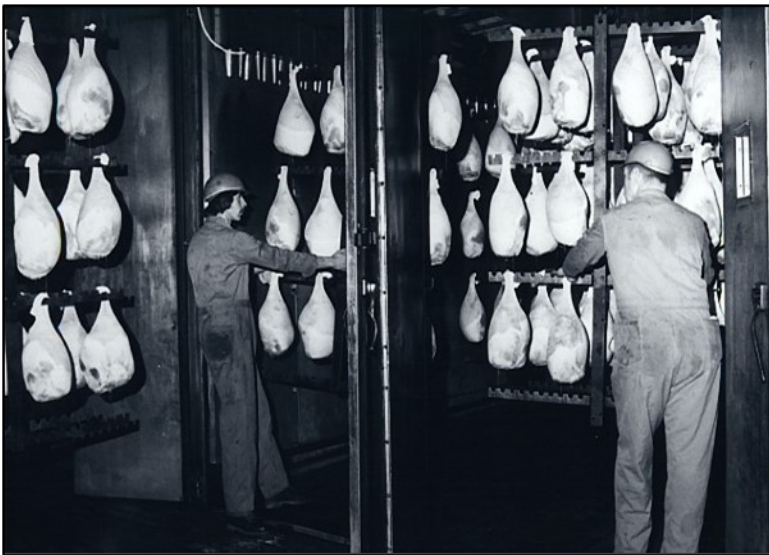


Photo credits: The author would like to thank Mr. Tony Stelatto, former manager at Tobin First Prize, for donating the images used in this newsletter.

salespersons using company owned sedans. An aerial view of the Tobin facility shows a double railroad siding on the south side or rear of the building with several rail cars and employee parking lots filled with hundreds of cars.

During the Great Depression, many families, including my own father's, relied on homegrown vegetables and some would bring their own animals to the facility to be processed. My late father described what his father did to keep his family fed during these times.

The story appeared in “Growing up in Polack Town”, Volume I No. 3 of the Colonie Historical Societies Historical Oracle newsletter: *These were difficult times during the Great Depression with my father only getting a couple days of work per week, sometimes three, sometimes none. He had a family of five to support, which meant having a couple of vegetable gardens to produce fresh vegetables, many of which were canned in glass Mason jars for the winter months. There were some Czech farmers who farmed the land in the Castleton/Schodack Landing area, plus a couple in the Helderberg’s, who raised pigs and cows, plus fruit trees. My father and others would buy piglets in the spring and the pig farmers raised them all summer and into the fall when they were 200lbs. or more. These were then loaded onto a truck and taken to Tobin’s Albany Packing Co. in West Albany to be slaughtered and eviscerated for a fee. The pigs were then dropped off to the various parties in the enclave (Polack Town, Menands) and elsewhere. [C. J. Franklin]*



Tobin’s survived the Great Depression years and when World War Two erupted after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, thousands of men throughout the Nation including thousands in the Capital District Region joined various branches of U.S. Military Service. Newsletters of the Tobin Packing Company during the war era listed the many names of company employees who went off to war. Many never made it back. A war memorial in the West Albany Pocket Park is dedicated to those who served from the West Albany area.

Various articles found using the “Old Fulton Post Cards” free newspaper search engine revealed that the Albany Meat Packing (Tobin’s) facility provided guided tours of the plant, which prided itself with cleanliness throughout its processing steps. Several articles showed

that some tour groups were provided with a lunch or dinner, compliments of the company at the end of the tour. I found one tour to be of particular interest, documenting a group of senior girls in a school economics class. The tour began with witnessing the actual killing of a pig, through the processing of its various meats, and ended up with a lunch provided by the company! (I wondered how many squeamish stomachs survived the tour to eat lunch after witnessing the process!)

After the war, many of the men returned to their old jobs at Tobin. The Capital Region continued to grow and Colonie, being the crossroads of the capital district, experienced a surge of housing and commercial development. Interstate highways under the Eisenhower Presidency began to cross America and the railroads slowly gave way to the flourishing trucking industry. Modern refrigerated boxcars and trailers replaced earlier use of icing down meats and hoping the ice would last throughout the journey to keep processed meats from spoiling. The Historian’s Office has photos of ice being harvested on the Mohawk River and loaded into railroad boxcars of the nearby Troy to Schenectady branch of the New York Central Railroad. Some of that ice was likely used for such purposes.

The New York Central Railroad began a downward spiral after WWII including the use of, and continued maintenance of the huge steam engines, which slowly gave way to diesel electric engines. The last steam-powered locomotive serviced at the West Albany Yards was Engine 5270, which pulled out of the West Albany’s Shops in 1952. By the late 1960’s, half of the old West Albany’s Yards had been sold to commercial developers.

The neighboring Tobin Packing Company was experiencing its own financial problems during this same timeframe, and beyond. When company founder Frederick M. Tobin passed away at age 90 in March 1978 the company finances were in the red. A Times-Union newspaper article of November 8, 1981 described “How Tobin Died.” The first sentence of the article written by Gerard Bray, described the

atmosphere of the first closing of the plant: “Tobin Packing Co. died Friday, and everybody close to the debt-ridden meatpacker says it’s a shame.” One woman employed at the plant for 22 years said she had been crying all day long at the news.

The article contained statements of William Ashplant, a wealthy financier who had been overseeing the company’s finances after Mr. Tobin’s death. Contacted at his home in the Bahama’s, Ashplant said: “The collapse (of Tobin’s) was a bloody tragedy.” --- “It was losing six figures a week.” The union president representing 350 of Tobin’s 600 workers reflected that Tobin’s management was “Operating in the horse and buggy days” and that “they were out of touch with marketing and sales and promotion.”

The several newspaper articles related to Tobin’s closing revealed long-term loans, different banks and financial organizations, and union contracts, which Mr. Ashplant said: “Over a period of years, the union got its way with everything --- the contract had so many bells and whistles that Tobin was the highest cost producer in the industry.”



In addition, that “Union benefits were 45% on top of wages.” Of course, Ashplant’s negative union comments are debatable.

Despite finger pointing and efforts to save the company, Tobin’s ended up closing. At its height, the company employed about 1,600 people, many from Colonie and in the West Albany area. By the 1990’s the building lay mostly vacant and other investors viewed the property as having potential for mixed use retail and residential development. The property was approved as a Brownfield Cleanup site.



Type the below link into your browser to view a short drone video of the Tobin Packing Company:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrGW5mOBfEU>

Articles appearing in both the *Colonie Spotlight* and *Albany Times-Union* revealed that Mr. Bill Hoblock, President of Richbell Development, had secured a \$14.4 million dollar loan that included refinancing the purchase of the old Tobin plant, abating hazardous materials inside and around the plant, and finally knocking down the old building.

Apparently the very thick concrete walls of Tobin's stood up to the first attempt of a wrecking ball at the beginning of demolition of the structure: "When a crane swung a wrecking ball into a wall of the hulking concrete and steel relic, it bounced off twice!" said Bill Hoblock in a February 7, 2019 Times Union article. "That was a decade ago --- that was the last time any type of demolition was attempted to the building -- it's a fortress."

In the coming weeks, the battle between the wrecking ball and Tobin's old sturdy fortress will begin and be witnessed by the public and undoubtedly by many of the past employees of Tobin's who still call West Albany home who will reminisce about the "good times" at Tobin's First Prize.

## IN SEARCH OF...

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The Historical Society of the Town of Colonie is searching for a newsletter editor.

Our current Editor, Mark Bodnar, is stepping down at the end of 2021 after nine years to assume other duties.

*The Colonie Historical Oracle* is a staple of historical significance for our Town. Please give due consideration to our plea so we may continue to keep our membership informed and educated in the rich history of our Town.



Please visit our Facebook Page:  
**Historical Society Town of Colonie**

## How About It?

### Want to Be Considered as a Trustee on the Board of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie?

The Historical Society of the Town of Colonie (HSTC) is a volunteer organization focused on the History of the Town of Colonie. Members of the HSTC receive our quarterly newsletter and can attend the historical presentations we organize for the Capital District community.

Hopefully you have also seen our website at:

<https://www.colonie.org/departments/historian/historicalsociety/>

and our Facebook pages at:

<https://www.facebook.com/HistoricalSocietyTownofColonieNY>

We hold our annual elections for officers and trustees at our May meeting. The officers, who are elected for a two-year term, will be elected to serve until 2022. The trustees, who are elected for a three-year term, will be elected to serve until 2024.

The Board of Trustees conducts all activities of the Historical Society. Board Members participate in periodic Board meetings during the year, and can get involved in a variety of committee activities that foster wider knowledge and engagement around the history of Colonie. Note that due to COVID-19 all HSTC activities and meetings are conducted virtually via Zoom right now.

We have a few openings on the Board this year and would welcome individuals who want to volunteer as a Board Member. Interested? For more information contact our Recording Secretary, Laraine Gillette, at:

[historicalsecretary@hotmail.com](mailto:historicalsecretary@hotmail.com)

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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|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Classification</b>                                 | <b>Annual Dues</b> | <b>Classification</b>                       | <b>Annual Dues</b> | <b>Classification</b>                         | <b>Annual Dues</b> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student and Senior . . . . . | \$10.00            | <input type="checkbox"/> Family . . . . .   | \$15.00            | <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting . . . . . | \$100—\$250        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual . . . . .         | \$12.00            | <input type="checkbox"/> Business . . . . . | \$50.00            | <input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor . . . . . | \$250.00 & Up      |

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

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

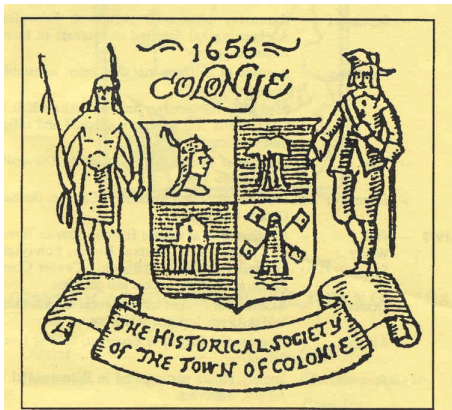
City/Town \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_ Home Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

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Please mail to Membership Chairperson c/o Historical Society, Memorial Town Hall, 534 New Loudon Rd, Latham, N. Y. 12110-0508

CHARTERED BY THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

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



Historical Society                      Founded 1971

MEMORIAL TOWN HALL  
534 New Loudon Rd., Latham NY 12110-0508  
518-782-2601

**Kevin Franklin: Town Historian**

**Current Officers of the Society**

- President:** Dr. Michael Radlick
- Vice President:** Mark Bodnar
- Treasurer:** Marcia Codling
- Recording Secretary:** Laraine Gillette
- Corresponding Sec:** Kristie Schimpf
- Past President:** Francina McCashion

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**Membership Chair:** Karen Senecal

**Newsletter Editor:** Mark Bodnar

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

**PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE**

We are coming to the close of my first year as HSTC president. Unquestionably it has been a very difficult year, with all of our lives impacted by COVID in so many ways. At the outset, I had hoped to accomplish more by getting HSTC members, along with the community, more engaged in our history. However, our primary vehicles for engagement have been largely reduced to communicating via this newsletter, as well as our presentations. Despite the constraints of COVID, we have tried to continue our outreach as much as possible using virtual presentations and meetings. However, as we move forward into another year, I hope we can do more. To accomplish that we need you. I would ask that each HSTC member volunteer to get more involved to support our mission—for example writing a short newsletter article or volunteering to develop historical resources.

Note: Our May annual meeting is scheduled on Sunday, May 16th at 2:00 P.M. as a virtual Zoom meeting. It will include the presentation Historic Albany Rural Cemetery by Paula Lemire, the Historian from Albany Rural. For more information check our web site or Facebook. Finally, If you have thoughts or suggestions, let me know via email at: [historical.society.town.colonie@gmail.com](mailto:historical.society.town.colonie@gmail.com)

*Michael S. Radlick, PhD, President*