

The Colonie Historical Oracle

Quarterly Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie

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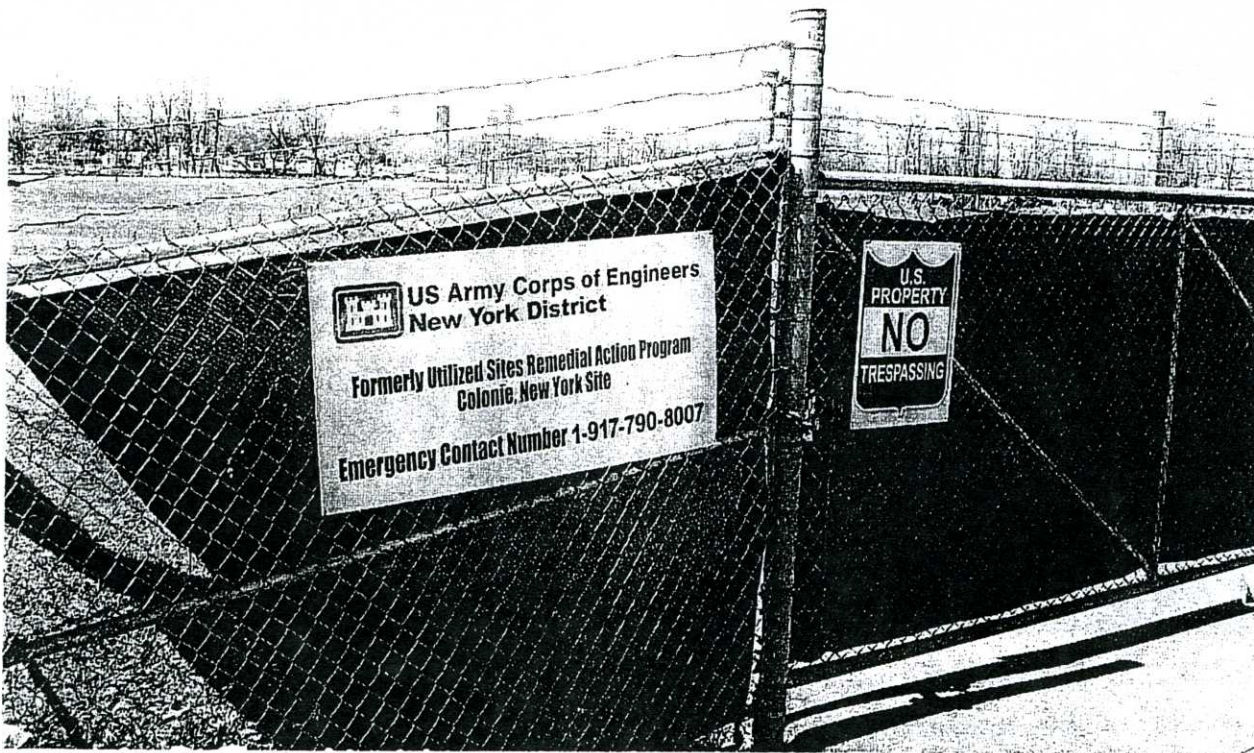
April – June 2008

A Colonie Calamity

Radioactive Dusts at the Former N. L. Industries Site

1130 Central Ave., Colonie, N.Y.

Submitted by Kevin M. Franklin, *Town of Colonie Historian*



The ominous, shrouded site of the former National Lead Co. at 1130 Central Ave. (Photo 2008).

N.L. Industries has been in the news over and over again. Chances are you will be reading more about the former N.L. Industries site as time goes on, or at least as long as the half-life of depleted uranium, which is about 4.5 billion years,⁵ give or take a couple million years; if you live that long.

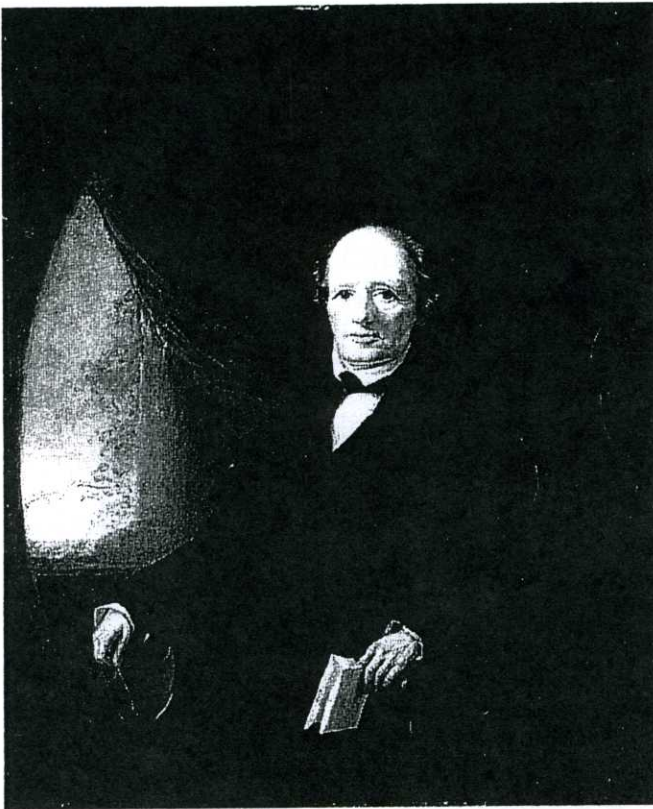
Staff writer Jordon Carleo-Evangelist of the *Albany Times Union* has written several articles about the former National Lead Industries (N.L.) site. The recent articles of December 6th, 2007 titled *Poison From N.L.. Site Lingers*, and March 13th, 2008 titled *N.L. Tests Spur Call for*

Funding, spurred a couple of calls to my office inquiring about the history of the company and the site. One caller said that he grew up near there.

I started and trashed this article no less than six times. How do you wrap your arms around the story of a Texas-based company that became a huge problem for Colonie? How does one connect the dots between 1130 Central Avenue, the Adirondack Mountains, the defense industry of the United States Government, and a 19th century burial plot in the Albany Rural Cemetery, in order to make an interesting story? I found the inspiration in an epitaph on

a gravestone in the Albany Rural, which gave me a bit of a chill.

This was not the first time I heard or read about National Lead Industries. Back in 2003, I received an e-mail from a party in Texas seeking information on two old Albany families by the names of Adam Cook and Archibald McIntyre. The Cook family owned a company that produced harness leathers. There was more than one Archibald McIntyre of Albany. One is related to this story, the other is not. The Archibald McIntyre of our interest was born in Kenmore, Perthshire, Scotland on June 1, 1773, who came to America and settled at Albany.



Archibald McIntyre

McIntyre led a successful and interesting life. He was connected with Albany politics of the early 19th century. In 1806, he was elected to the office of Comptroller of the State of N.Y., whose duties at that time included managing money for the State, and collection of taxes and payment of expenses. McIntyre was also the head of the Bureau of Canal Affairs, *ex officio* of the Land Office and of the Canal Fund, a member of the Canal Board, and of the Board of State Canvassers. He was also a Trustee of the first Idiot Asylum (originally located where Mid City Shoppers Plaza is in Menands), and of the State Board of Equalization of Assessments.¹

McIntyre was also appointed by the N.Y. State Legislature to act as a Presidential Elector representing the Congressional District that included Albany, in 1844. He

was also a member of the firm of Yates & McIntyre of Albany that managed lotteries, which were popular in both Europe and the United States. Lotteries were a form of raising money for capital projects, both public and private. The firm operated from about 1821 to 1834.¹ The firm even bought a lottery established and sold by the Christ Church of New Orleans, La. for \$25,000 to help the church relieve itself of a \$45,000 debt.²

McIntyre was also a member of a group of prominent persons who met in Albany in 1816, to urge the Legislature to support building a canal "*between the navigable waters of the Hudson River and Lake Erie and the said navigable waters of Lake Champlain*". McIntyre was also a founding member of the St. Andrew's Society, Albany's oldest benevolent society, founded in 1803. (The St. Andrew's Society is still viable and is located at 150 Washington Avenue.) He was also a member of the original committee to form the incorporation of the Albany Rural Cemetery in 1841.¹

Much of the information about McIntyre comes from Howell & Tenney's Bicentennial History of Albany and Schenectady Counties published in 1886. But strangely, the book does not mention that McIntyre and his son-in-law, David Henderson, located deposits of quality iron ore in the middle of the Adirondack wilderness in 1826.³ By 1827, they established the Adirondack Iron Mine, and the tiny community known as Adirondac* was formed. Operations soon began to extract iron ore from the ground and ship it overland to Lake Champlain where the iron was forged.³ By the late 1830's, a blast furnace was erected at the mine site. Blast furnaces required huge amounts of fuel to operate, and it was estimated it took up to 70 cords of wood per day to make charcoal for the furnace. It also took an ample source of water to operate the huge mechanical bellows used to heat the furnace.

The Adirondack Calamity

In early September 1845, David Henderson hired local guide, John Cheney, to explore ways to bring more water from the upper Hudson River to the iron mine. Henderson, along with his young son and Cheney came upon a small pond occupied by some wild ducks. The story is related in several versions, including one that Henderson handed his pistol to Cheney to shoot a duck, possibly for a dinner meal. Cheney did not get a shot off and handed the pistol back to Henderson who placed it in his backpack. Upon putting the pack down on a rock, the pistol discharged striking Henderson, who died within minutes. They were in the middle of nowhere.

Cheney recalled the incident years later while guiding another person near the same area and came to the spot where Henderson died. "*There*", he said, *I sat all night and held Mr. Henderson's little son in my arms. It was a dreadful night.*" The loss of David Henderson was a terrible calamity to the McIntyre clan and the mining operation.



David Henderson

The small pond and stream near where Henderson died was named Calamity Pond and Calamity stream.⁴

The McIntyre Mine Closes

Besides the death of Henderson, several other things caused the McIntyre mining operation to close in 1857. The mine found it hard to compete with other mining operations because a proposed railroad to transport the ore from the mine to Champlain did not get built. The workforce for the mine had to be imported from the Albany area, and roads were practically non-existent. An unwanted element in the iron ore identified as titanium continued to pose problems with the operation. Archibald McIntyre was by then, an old man, and died on May 5, 1858 at 85 years of age. The mine was abandoned and sat for the better part of a century.

Site History of 1130 Central Avenue

1130 Central Avenue is on the south side of Central, just west of the Albany City line near the railroad overpass for the Penn Central Tracks. During the early to mid 19th century, the Elm Grove Hotel sat about where Fairfield Avenue intersects with Central, or across the road from about where 1130 Central is. The family of Leland Stanford operated the Elm Grove when Central Avenue was known as the Albany-Schenectady Turnpike; but that's for another story.

In 1923, a firm called the Embossing Company established a plant there and made wooden products, including toys. In 1927, the Magnus Metal Company bought the property and converted the facility into a

foundry to make cast brass components for the railroad industry. In 1937, National Lead Industries purchased the property and continued the brass foundry operations. N.L. was previously known as the National Lead Company, maker of lead based paints including the famous Dutch Boy paint line. A short time before 1941, N.L. bought an adjoining lot containing a portion of nearby Patroon Lake and began filling the lake with used casting sands which contained high levels of lead and other heavy metals.⁶

When it became apparent that the United States would be dragged into WWII, the government would be in need of titanium, which was used in paint pigments for Naval vessels. Titanium was known to exist in large quantities in certain areas of the Adirondack Mountains, so N.L. Industries leased 6,000 acres of land in the Adirondacks that included the old McIntyre Iron mine then owned by the Tahawas Club. The Federal Government built a railroad to the old mine, so that N.L. could ship the ore out.¹⁰ After WWII, N.L. continued to mine titanium ore from the site. Titanium was now being used in the production of jet aircraft and even Polaris missiles. The bothersome ore that McIntyre knew very little about was now being called affectionate names such as the *Glamour Metal* and *Cinderella Metal*.

In 1958, N.L. Industries Nuclear Division began producing items manufactured from uranium and thorium under license from the Atomic Energy Commission. From 1958 to 1984, N.L. continued to use radioactive materials such as depleted uranium, which is used in a variety of ways, including the manufacture of munitions projectiles,⁷ like those used in the nose gun of the A-10 attack aircraft, also known as the "Warthog". The A-10 was designed to use bullets made with depleted uranium to chew up Soviet tanks.

The words uranium, depleted uranium, and radioactive, associated with N.L., are a far cry from the wooden products and toys made by the Embossing Company years ago. One of the biggest problems with anything that is radioactive is that you can't see, smell, taste, or hear radiation. You need a Geiger counter to detect and measure it. In 1979, depleted uranium particles were found to be associated with the N.L. plant when found in sensitive air filters at the Knolls Atomic Lab in Niskayuna, miles away. This triggered a long list of events and investigations surrounding the use of depleted uranium at the N.L. site.

In 1982, local historian Don Rittner and friend Raoul Vezina were creating "Naturalist at Large" cartoons for the *Knickerbocker News* and wanted to run the following cartoon about N.L. Industries, but the paper decided not to print it. However, it appears on a Web site called www.themesh.com/naloon.html. It seems Don and Raoul's cartoon might have been deemed by the paper as too sensitive to print at the time.



Cartoon by Don Rittner and Raoul Vezina

The cost of cleaning up the radioactive wastes from within the area of the former N.L. site has approached 200 million dollars. What has not been cleaned up are the depleted uranium dust particles outside the site that wafted across surrounding neighborhoods throughout the years from the incinerator stacks at N.L. The dust associated with depleted uranium munitions is suspected of sickening many people in war zones, such as Iraq, where these munitions were used.⁸

A bullet containing depleted uranium is considered “pyrophoric”, meaning that it burns on impact and can set a target on fire. When the round strikes a target it creates a firestorm or uranium dust particles, which are toxic and can be “spread by the wind, inhaled and absorbed into the human body and absorbed by plants and animals, becoming part of the food chain.”⁵ So, if the N.L. plant was releasing similar radioactive depleted uranium particles into the atmosphere, could the nearby garden that uncle Joe or grandpa doted over and kept weed free, been the source of contamination, and what about the nice clean bed sheets that mom hung out on the clothes line?

The Colonie Calamity

The recent *Times Union* articles of 2007 and 2008 address similar issues. However, the indenture between N.L. Industries and the United States of America made on the 28th day of February 1984, did not. N.L. sold, for the consideration of \$10.00, all of the property known as 1130 Central Avenue “together with the buildings, improvements, machinery, equipment, and all other personality of every kind and description located thereon the closing date, including without limitation, **radioactively contaminated wastes and residues**, and all rights, hereditaments, easements, and appurtenances thereunto belonging.”⁹ It says nothing about radioactive dust particles **outside** the site itself.

A single bullet accidentally killed David Henderson in the middle of the Adirondack Mountains over 160 years ago causing a terrible calamity to the McIntyre-Henderson families and the mining operation. The dusts left by tens of thousands of spent bullets made with depleted uranium are suspect in causing various cancers and death to people in war zones, especially children, who play in or around the

burned out hulks of enemy tanks and vehicles destroyed by these munitions. The Colonie calamity is that similar dusts once emitted by N.L. are accused of contaminating neighborhoods close to the former plant, and suspect in causing unusual cancers and illnesses in the area.

Individuals and families in areas close to the old N.L. site have formed neighborhood groups and some have filed class action lawsuits over exposure to radioactive dusts. The poisonous dusts raise very serious health issues and former workers and neighbors continue to sing out loud and clear over concerns for their health, and rightfully so. So how does the Adirondack calamity relate to the ongoing calamity surrounding the old N.L. site in Colonie?

Engraved at the bottom of David Henderson's gravestone in the McIntyre Plot at the Albany Rural Cemetery is the following epitaph taken from a line in the King James Version of the Bible, Isaiah; 26:19 -

"AWAKE AND SING, YE THAT DWELL IN DUST."

I think they heard you Mr. Henderson.

Sources:

- ¹ Bicentennial History of Albany & Schenectady Co.'s Howell & Tenney, 1886.
 - ² Kendall's History of New Orleans (Internet).
 - ³ History of the McIntyre Mine (Internet).
 - ⁴ Heydays of the Adirondacks, Desormo.
 - ⁵ Criticalconcern.com (Internet).
 - ⁶ Patroon Creek Contamination Migration Investigation Report (Internet).
 - ⁷ ATSDR [Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry] (Internet).
 - ⁸ Informationclearinghouse.info (Internet).
 - ⁹ Deed, Albany County, 2256/590.
 - ¹⁰ Lake Placid News 8/29/03 (Internet).
 - ¹¹ McIntyre Portrait, courtesy of the Adirondack Museum Library.
- * Adirondac Village is spelled without a "k".

DAVID HENDERSON
 BORN IN SCOTLAND,
 DIED AT ADIRONDACK, N. Y.
 30. SEPTEMBER, 1848;
 AGED 52 YEARS.

AWAKE AND SING, YE THAT DWELL IN DUST.

The epitaph on Henderson's monument which is in the McEntyre plot in Albany Rural Cemetery.

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.

Classification	Annual Dues	Classification	Annual Dues	Classification	Annual Dues
<input type="checkbox"/> Students, Grades K-12	\$1.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Family	\$10.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor	\$250.00 & Up
<input type="checkbox"/> Senior Citizen (62+)	5.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Business	25.00		
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual	8.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Corporation	250.00		

Name _____

Address _____

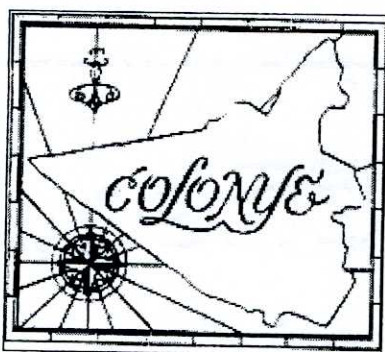
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Please mail to Membership Chairperson c/o Historical Society, Memorial Town Hall, Newtonville, N. Y. 12128-0508

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



Historical Society Founded 1971

MEMORIAL TOWN HALL
NEWTONVILLE, NY 12128-0508
518-782-2693

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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

Kerry Nelson, Curtin Archeology, gave an excellent presentation of **Retention of Ethnic Identity in a German American Family Farmstead 1790-1998**, using results of the dig, letters and official documents. If you missed the meeting, Kevin Franklin, Town of Colonie Historian, has a copy in his office.

Future programs include:

May 21 – 37th Annual Dinner – with “Gospel Train” entertaining, Century House, 6:30 PM.

June 21 – Oakwood Cemetery Tour, “A Soldier from Every War”, 9-11:00 AM.

We will send a post card June 1st. You can register at www.oakwoodcemetery.org for this and other tours, including “Tiffany Windows” and a Halloween Flashlight Tour.

Bebe Morehead