

County Historians Lead New York State History Efforts

By Carolyn Bennett
New York State takes its history very seriously. And, to prove it—by law since 1919— the State Legislature appoints over 1600 local historians, including 62 county historians. Amazing support for our growth from New York’s original 12 counties created after the British took over the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam in 1683!

From the discovery of New York State harbor in 1583 through September 11, 2001 to the present, New York is replete with history—and doesn’t want to lose it.

Who are New York State’s 62 county chroniclers who serve with little or no compensation to preserve our history? And what are some of their activities?

Three area county historians, David Dorpfeld, Greene; Gabrielle Pierce, Delaware; and Ted Shuart, Schoharie, recently signed on as County Editors for Catskill Tri-County Historical Views, a new bi-annual publication. With an impressive group of nearly two dozen historical Contributing Editors, Catskill Tri-County will reach out to new and established writers for local history stories. But that is only part of the picture.

Many people don’t know what a county historian does. Many more aren’t even aware of the valuable service these individuals render. Among a County Historian’s many duties are collecting and preserving county material; identifying materials

for preservation; and collecting nongovernmental historical records,” according to Devin Lander, NYS Historian, on the New York State Museum website.

David Dorpfeld has served Greene County for the past 8 years after 30 years as Greene County Historical Society Treasurer and Board of Trustee member.

When asked about his role as Greene County Historian, Dorpfeld turned the light away from himself and back onto the importance of local historians.

“I cannot stress enough the importance of local historians! We are so often the link between those seeking to know so many facets of local history, genealogy, documents, assisting folks in finding what they seek, or at the very least, offering guidance towards those answers. We remind our communities of the importance of what came before us, we shed light on the often shadowy hints of what existed long ago. We do our best to preserve our history and to encourage others to do so as well. Often not an easy undertaking, but always, always worthwhile, Dorpfeld said.

According to Dorpfeld, he was humbled by the invitation to become Greene’s fourth County Historian. “I considered my three predecessors to be real giants,” he said, referring to Jessie Van Vechten, Mabel Parker, and Raymond Beecher. “All had major achieve-



County historians Dave Dorpfeld (on right) and Ted Shuart (on left) confer with Contributing Editors at a recent editorial meeting for Catskill Tri-County Historical Views, Delaware Greene and Schoharie. Due out in the spring of 2018, the new publication will support and feature the work of historical writers, societies, museums, and presses. Photo credit: Gerry Stoner.

ments and set the bar high for their successors.”

Delaware County’s historian Gabrielle Pierce accepted the responsibility in 2010. “I was very pleased that the Board saw the wisdom of filling this important position and that I was selected,” Pierce said, adding, “I surely did appreciate that the public acknowledged the importance and value of having a County Historian.” Pierce, a photographer and journalist, is also owner/operator of Nest, a guest house in Hamden.

Ted Shuart was appointed Schoharie County Historian following service as Cobleskill Town and Village Historian. He is a Master Interpreter in the Farmer’s Museum in Cooperstown, since 1996, and has been a member

and Board member of the Cobleskill Historical Society for nearly 30 years.

“I was asked to be the County Historian in the winter of 2013 after Harold Zoch retired. I was flattered to be asked,” Shuart explained. “Harold Zoch was the historian before me. I met Harold on several occasions but didn’t know him. He focused mainly on research. The project of his that I am familiar with was his re-survey of County cemeteries. The cemeteries were first documented in the 1930’s and Harold did a recount that showed that seventeen of the cemeteries were gone.”

All three County Historians are very busy in their public service.

One of Gabrielle Pierce’s current projects

is the recognition and restoration of the Delaware County Poor House cemetery. “Like most poor house cemeteries, this one has suffered major neglect through the decades and that needs to be rectified. Recently, it was returned to the ownership of the County, and it is the responsibility of this County to be committed to taking care of this sad chapter of our history,” she said.

Ted Shuart’s current efforts are focused on military history and missing historic markers.

“I am currently putting together a roster of the men from Alden’s Massachusetts regiment who were present at the Battle of Cobleskill. This will be part of the information inscribed on a monument to be placed on the battlefield. I am also on a mission to refurbish, restore and replace damaged and missing historical markers. I have also formed a committee and have the materials needed donated to build a replica block house at the Old Stone Fort museum,” he said.

David Dorpfeld has just finished working with a group of Cocksackie residents to plan and execute a 150th anniversary celebration of that Greene County town.

“I am also working with a woman from Cocksackie to recognize the Mansion Street Cemetery on the National Historic Register and am always available to help the 16 Greene County Municipal Historians and local history groups with their work,” Dorpfeld said.

A new project all three County Historians share is Catskill Tri-County Historical Views, an historical publication for 2018 highlighting Delaware, Greene and Schoharie history.

“I hope this new publication will make people aware that Schoharie County has played an important role in the development of the state and the nation and I hope people will visit the area to see some of our scenic and historic sites,” said Ted Shuart.

Gabrielle Pierce agrees. “I am very excited about the idea of this “Tri-County” publication and I look forward to both being a contributor and to enjoying and learning from what my fellow historians and contributors submit and share!”

Said David Dorpfeld, “I am very excited about this publication. There is strength in numbers and by joining the three counties in this venture; I feel the publication will succeed.”

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