

# **BENNINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY**



## **NEWSLETTER**

**JULY 2023 ISSUE**

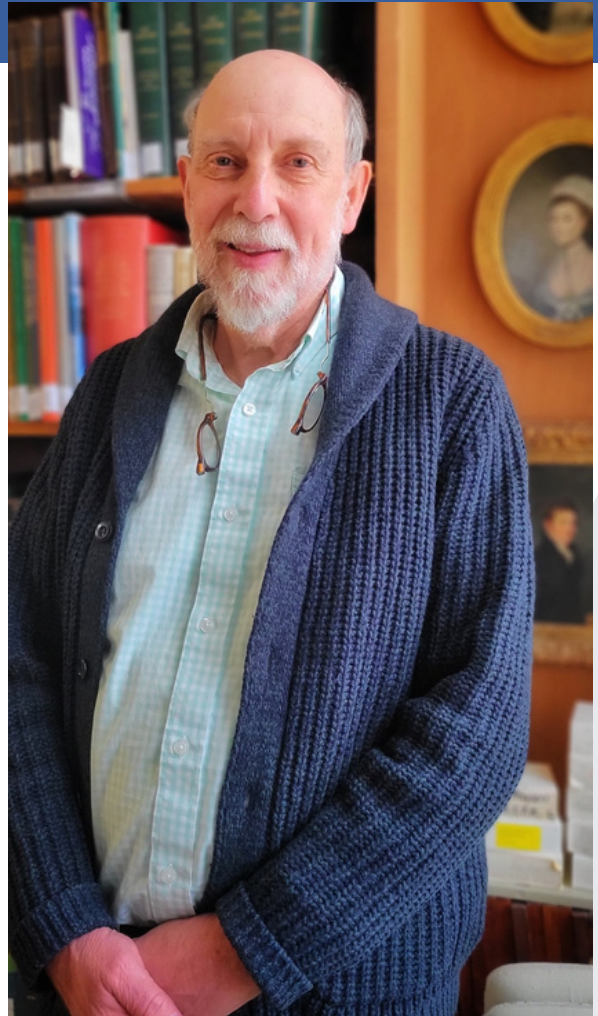
**Bennington  
museum**

# PRESIDENT HONORED

RAY RODRIGUES

Bennington Museum honored Historical Society President, Bob Tegart, by awarding him the Arnold Ricks Award at the Spring Party on June 3rd. This award is given to a person who has made outstanding contributions to the Museum and community. Bob has enthusiastically taken the leadership of the Regional History Room, guiding volunteers in reorganizing its holdings, helping individuals conduct research into their families and the community, and seeking volunteers, while also serving as the BHS president. The Museum's executive director, Martin Mahoney, presented the award saying, "Bob has been a key factor leading the way in revitalizing, modernizing, and infusing a positive and engaging attitude in the Regional History Room of Bennington Museum as we emerged from a post-COVID world, while at the same time leading the Historical Society, an important program of the Museum, into engagement with the various Vermont 250th committees, scheduling an engaging slate of speakers and representing the BHS throughout the community." If you'd like to join Bob in continuing to make the History Room a valuable community resource, do let him know.

**Contact Bob at: [library@benningtonmuseum.org](mailto:library@benningtonmuseum.org).**



## PAST PROGRAMS



### ROUTE 7A

On May 21, Paul Searles, Professor of History at Northern Vermont University, discussed how the planned construction of Route 7 as a four-lane highway was controversial. Displaying photos of newspaper articles from the time, he noted that those opposed to the proposed construction saw it as a threat to regular life as they knew it. For others, it represented progress and development. To view a video of this presentation, go to: [vimeo.com/833649069](https://vimeo.com/833649069)

### WALLOOMSAC INN VIDEO PRESENTATION

If you missed Callie Raspuzzi's presentation on the history of the Walloomsac Inn, it is available on YouTube: "The History of the Walloomsac Inn."

# NEIGHBORLY REFLECTIONS ON THE REHABILITATION OF THE WALLOOMSAC INN

RICHARD H CASWELL II

Folks in Bennington, and in the village of Old Bennington, have watched the surge of restoration work being done at the historic Walloomsac Inn, once run-down and in dire need of repair, with intensifying interest. The family undertaking this monumental task (local pun intended) has been kind enough to talk repeatedly to this Old Bennington resident -- an immediate neighbor to the still-distinguished-looking Inn. Over the course of our bantering, they've offered some very intriguing revelations.



The hard work that went into preserving the Inn can be seen in the structural reinforcement, and in how much vegetation has been removed. The Inn itself, and many of the outer buildings, have weathered the forces of time and nature surprisingly well. Removing several large trees on the property, plus plenty of overgrown bushes, revealed much of the Inn's original façade. Besides mitigating fire hazards, taking out the scrub and weeds reduces the likelihood of further wood rot and damage to the Inn's distinguished features -- namely the porch, wooden siding, and the shutters.

Due to the ongoing groundskeeping and construction work, the owners have enclosed the property with a fence, and well-placed "No Trespassing" signs, to prevent curious passersby from venturing onto what is an active worksite. They ask all concerned to respect their wishes and abide by these restrictions.

In this regard, the family also wishes to inform the public that the Inn is not an abandoned building. Rather, it is still a family residence. No definite immediate plans have been made for the future of the Inn. The family recognizes the historic importance of the Inn and its surroundings, and they feel that, when the time comes, a proper decision will be made in the best interests of and wishes for the family, the village, and the town.

The family is also grieving the loss of loved ones who have passed on in the past few years, circumstances that make their endeavors even more challenging. They wish to thank the many individuals and groups within the Bennington area at large for their encouragement and support as they work on the preservation of the Inn.

One has to admire the devoted work that's gone into successfully refurbishing and stabilizing the Walloomsac Inn. Indeed, the restoration of this unique, historic building must also be regarded with some awe, considering how far it had fallen from its one-time splendor. The family will continue their work throughout the summer of 2023, and into the foreseeable future. Thanks to them, the Inn will once again stand as a magnificent example of Vermont's colonial architectural style. We wish the best to all concerned and for a fruitful outcome for the Inn in general.



# UPCOMING PROGRAMS

All programs take place Sundays at 2pm in Bennington Museum's Ada Paresky Education Center

## **Lucy Prince of Sunderland, and her Family: The Story of an Early Black Vermonter**

**June 25 @ 2:00pm - 3:00pm**

Lucy Terry Prince was born in Africa and brought to the colonies as a slave when she was five years old. When she was 70 years old, she moved to Sunderland, Vermont with some of her children. At that time only 0.2% of the people of Bennington County were Black. She struggled to obtain land that she felt was rightfully hers. Eventually many of the townspeople came to accept this loquacious woman, who is best known as America's first African-American poet. This presentation will cover Lucy's years in Sunderland, her fight to keep her land, and stories about her children and grandchildren.

**Avis Hayden** has been a hobby genealogist since 1990. After retiring from her career in health care, she delved deeper into that field, completing a program in Genealogical Research from Boston University in 2016. She has published five research articles and has presented at the New England Historical and Genealogical Conference. She volunteers at the Bennington Museum Research Library and with the Russell Collection of Vermontiana.



## **Mark Your Calendar**

### **A BUS TOUR OF HISTORIC SITES**

Mark your calendars for **October 22**, when the Historical Society will have a bus tour of historic sites. More information will follow in future news.



# VOICES OF THE FALLEN

PHIL HOLLAND

The headline in the May 31 Banner might have caught your eye: “Hear ye! Hear ye! Bennington Community Theater calls for actors for historical performances.” We are still auditioning, but we are hopeful that we will be able to fill out the cast of the ten actors it will take to present “Voices of the Fallen” at the Bennington Battlefield on August 5 and 6 of this year. The “we” is the Friends of the Bennington Battlefield. The fallen are nine participants in the Battle who died at it or later of wounds suffered at it. Our tenth performer and the sole female role is that of the wife of a Brunswick lieutenant who fell in the second engagement.

This production is in some respects a sequel to “Voices from the Grave,” staged two years ago at the Bennington Centre Cemetery, to which members of the Bennington Historical Society contributed research. Ingrid Madelayne, from Petersburg, N.Y., directed that production and will direct this one too. Her husband, Peter Schaaphok, is president of the Friends, and he asked us for a show at the Battlefield. Our show will also be a kind of sequel to last summer’s audio project at the Battlefield, which installed on the signage panels QR-code-enabled actor-voiced primary-source accounts of the Battle by those who lived to record their memories. This show gives a voice to those who couldn’t speak for themselves.

Welcome to the world of historical fiction. Some would say that’s a logical contradiction, others that history is fiction to begin with, “the lie we all agree to,” in the words of Napoleon. My own bias as a historian is to go where the evidence points (and not to go where it doesn’t point). But evidence itself consists of points that must be connected in sequences of causation, and imagination is needed to supply the links between and among them. History itself is an art, not a science: so bring on the Muses, Clio in particular. One current term for the art we’re practicing is “critical fabulation”; google it for the full story.

We begin with the Mohawk chief who was shot at Baum’s arrival at the bridge in the hamlet of Walloomsac on the 14th of August, 1777. Then comes Benoni Tisdale of the New Hampshire militia, shot through the lungs of the morning of August 16 in the Tory ambush of the men returning from driving cattle to the Patriot army at Stillwater. Then comes Lt. Col. Baum, then Loyalist leader Francis Pfister, (you’ll recall that they died together of wounds a day or two after the Battle). Then Thomas Joslin, 19, from the Leominster Mass. militia. Then New Hampshire’s Jeremiah Post (whose bones lie in the “common grave” in the Bennington Centre Cemetery); you may recall the story of his wounding by Loyalist John Peters, his one-time schoolfellow in Connecticut, as later recounted by Peters in vivid detail. You may be less familiar (as I was) with Nathan Clark, Jr., one of four sons of Bennington who died at (or in consequence of) the Battle; he had served as a delegate to the Westminster Convention in January 1777 at which the territory that would become Vermont in July declared its independence. Then comes Sipp Ives, the Black soldier in Warner’s regiment who fell in the second engagement. And Lt. Carl Anton Muhlenfeld, whom I mentioned above. And lastly his wife, who wrote him a letter, discovered in the Massachusetts Historical Society archives by Lion Miles and used by him in his 1981 Battle Day address at the re-dedication of the common grave monument; we use excerpts, translated, of course, from that letter to conclude the program.

cont. on page 5...

We chose these subjects out of the several hundred who died at or after the Battle, including thirty-some Patriots; the rest of the dead were Germans, Loyalists, British, Canadians, and Native warriors from the St. Lawrence region. We wanted to represent the range of participants; we wanted subjects about whom there was enough historical documentation on the basis of which to tell a story with a high enough degree of accuracy or plausibility; and we wanted to tell the story of the Saratoga campaign and Bennington's place in it to boot, while not sacrificing dramatic interest. We want to humanize the historical actors, moreover, and use individual stories as a way to make history accessible to a general audience (historians themselves use the same technique, of course).

The story of the Battle is no less than the story of America to 1777 if you look closely enough. How did Benoni Tisdale come to die at the Battle? I admit that it was simply his name that first attracted my interest, and then I recognized him from Mike Gabriel's article on the cattle ambush in the *Walloomsack Review*. Where does his story begin? With an ancestor who came to Plimoth Plantation in 1637. Four generations later Benoni is headed from Taunton, Mass., to Lexington and Concord and is signing the Solemn Oath and Covenant. And moving to Westmoreland, New Hampshire, on the Connecticut, enlisting in the militia, responding to the mobilization under Stark and dying on the morning of the Battle. His family history, his name on muster rolls and on the Oath, and accounts of his death recorded by members of his company supply the raw material for a 4-minute first-person monologue. And how did Benoni know the family history that I learned about on Ancestry? He had an aunt (more than one, but I chose Deborah) who – get ready for fiction -- often spoke to him about it. One historical detail is especially evocative: Benoni was his company's fifer; why or how that was we don't know. What might have made him suitable for that role? He wasn't young (33). Fifers gave signals in battle – but could plausibly have had a feeling for music. There were lots of dots to connect in his case, but I had to supply motivation, as for example why he left Taunton behind (that one was easy: "There were too many Tisdales in Taunton"). I came to feel that I was seeing this fallen Patriot in three, if not four, dimensions, the 4th being time. Speaking of which, our subjects' consciousness ends with their deaths, though they can imagine the future.

Conveniently for storytelling purposes, some of the fallen lived long enough to learn the outcome of the Battle, and Nathan Clark, Jr., even heard about Burgoyne's surrender before he died of his wounds in November. As to what language they use, we've given them one that is neither contemporary nor archaic. Baum speaks English, of course, which we know he "understood not one word of," according to Wasmus. These are the dead speaking, so their language should have a somewhat spectral quality, achieved in part by enhancing the natural rhythms of spoken English (a technique Robert Frost was so adept at). For costumes: the clothes they died in, minus the blood.

Two figures pose special challenges. How do we present the Mohawk chief? Who writes for him, and who acts for him? The answer to the latter question, in New York State, on state property, is a member of a Native nation recognized by the state. That is the official policy of the NY Department of Parks and Recreation. Historically, non-Natives have typically



represented Natives in re-enactments, with varying degrees of historical accuracy in terms of dress, ornaments, and weapons. Look up the racist caricatures of the Bennington Historical Pageant of 1911 if you want to see how far that can go wrong. We are still working with the state to find a suitable actor. And what will he say? Our current draft is largely drawn from a powerful speech by Sagoyewatha (Red Jacket), a prominent Seneca warrior, diplomat, and orator of the latter 18th and early 19th century, in which he reflects on the history of Indian-white relations. I have the Sawyer Library at Williams (and Dave Pilachowski) to thank for books like *Native American Speakers of the Eastern Woodlands* and other volumes on Indian history for acquainting me with the materials I needed to get started. Is it legitimate to transfer part of an 1805 speech by a Seneca leader into the mouth of a 1777 Mohawk chief? They were both members of Iroquois tribes allied with the British, and both of advanced years when they spoke (or “spoke,” in the case of the Mohawk chief). I asked a current Mohawk leader what he thought of my idea and was pleased to see that he saw it, as I did, as acceptable poetic license. I didn’t trust to my own words alone to tell the Native story, although in fact I have invented the parts of the monologue that frame Sagoyewatha’s words in the current draft. We will see if they ring true for our Native actor.

For Sipp Ives there was less to work from, as thus far the only thing we know with historical certainty is that he enlisted in Warner’s Continental regiment in what is now Cheshire, Mass., on Feb. 14, 1777, and was killed in the Battle of Bennington six months later. We do know what Warner’s regiment was doing during that time, however, and about its pivotal role in the second engagement of the Battle. I drafted a monologue based on those known facts as well as plausibilities gathered from Ives family history and Lorenzo Greene’s *The Negro in Colonial New England* (1942, but not superseded). Ingrid found my work somewhat flat, and I myself was uneasy at how much I’d had to invent. My solution was to rewrite the story with less invention and in the idiom of rap. You might have raised an eyebrow (or two) when Ingrid made a reference to rap (as well as Shakespeare) in the Banner. The audience may need a break from blank verse by the time Sipp steps forward. Can white men rap? Of course. Haven’t you heard of Eminem and Macklemore? If Lin-Manuel Miranda (in *Hamilton*) can rap like Tupac, so can I. I’ve written plenty of rhymes over the years, so I tell myself I know what I’m doing. It’s an artistic risk, I know, and perhaps a political one as well: two risks that we’re willing to take. We will use a Black actor, as we did in the case of Richard Henry Greene in “Voices from the Grave.” The man we have cast read both scripts for us, and we all preferred the rap version (he also introduced me to Macklemore).

How will it all turn out? Performing *al fresco* at the Battlefield in August is itself a risk (we’ll have an interior space at the Battlefield as backup). We’ll try to separate fact from fiction in notes in the printed program. It’s been a stimulating project thus far, and one consequence is that I’ve become aware of (and have been spreading the word about) the need to honor Bennington’s own worthies who gave their lives at the Battle (besides Nathan Clark, Jr., there’s Henry Walbridge, John Fay, and Daniel Warner) as we think about memorials in connection with the 250th. If you miss the August performances, we’re planning a November 11 show at the BPAC (Oldcastle) theatre downtown. Wish us luck!

## **VOLUNTEERS IN THE BENNINGTON MUSEUM'S REGIONAL HISTORY ROOM**

A number of our members have provided help in reorganizing the Regional History Room (RHR), which benefits all who use its resources for their research. For their generosity, we thank them:

**Avis Hayden, Bill Morgan, Bob Tegart, Cianna Lee, David Pilachowski, Jane Moriarty, Jill Fortney, Jo-Ann Irace, Joe Hall, John Kennedy, Kristen Marcoux, Michele Pagan, Rick Caswell, Suzi Youatt, Tyler Resch**

**For more information about using the RHR or to volunteer, contact:**

Robert Tegart, Administrator, Regional History Room  
802-447-1571 x 210, [Library@benningtonmuseum.org](mailto:Library@benningtonmuseum.org)

---

**THE BENNINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEETS ON THE FIRST MONDAY OF EVERY MONTH FROM 4PM - 5:15PM AT BENNINGTON MUSEUM.**

### **Bennington Historical Society**

A volunteer-operated program of Bennington Museum

#### **Officers:**

Bob Tegart, President; Don Miller, Past-President; Bill Morgan, Secretary; Robert Ebert, President-Elect

#### **Committee Members:**

Jackie Marro, David Pilachowski, Ray Rodrigues, James Thatch, Anne Bugbee, Joe Hall

**Associate Members:** Rick Caswell, JJ Williams     **Emeritus Members:** Charles Dewey, Bev Petrelis

**Newsletter Editor:** Ray Rodrigues

RHR and BHS programming is made possible in-part thanks to support from:



All BHS donors will receive a copy of the newsletter and other BHS announcements via email, and are invited to attend these monthly meetings.

Make a gift to the BHS today to help keep our programming and newsletters free and frequent this coming year!

75 Main Street, Bennington, VT 05201  
[benningtonmuseum.org](http://benningtonmuseum.org)