Cemetery Lovers

Silas J. Truax - Butternuts

By Dale and Tina Utter

Dale and Tina Utter are members the of Guilford Historical Society and have an active interest in cemeteries.

A few weeks ago, we were preparing for a gravestone-cleaning workshop at Evergreen Cemetery at White Store. As we wandered the cemetery looking for interesting things to point out during the tour portion of the day, we observed an 1876 marble stone. It was very nice and in excellent shape. At the top was a pair of clasped hands. From the detail of the cuffs, we could tell one was a man's and the other a woman's. Over the years, this detail often erodes away.

As our gaze moved down the stone, we noted that every line was written with a different font. The cursive writing for the date and "wife of" was particularly fancy and beautiful. Then at the bottom of the stone, we saw a name. We are always on the lookout for signed stones and thought this would be a good talking point during the tour. The name was S.J. Truax - Butternuts. This was a carver's name we had not seen before and we were really intrigued.

A couple of days later, we were in Gilbertsville's Brookside Cemetery looking over some work we had done the previous year. We noticed a name on the side of one of the stones, S.J. Truax - Butternuts. Checking the front we saw it was very similar to the stone at White Store. A stone in back of this one revealed another signed marble. Now he really had our attention. We wondered if he signed every stone.

It was time for a road trip. We found one signed stone in Morris and maybe two unsigned stones in Mt. Upton. A publication we have showed one of his stones at Flax Island Cemetery of Otego. We found three there that were signed and most likely two others unsigned.

At our next stop at Sand Hill Cemetery, we discovered one more. A closer look at Brookside Cemetery revealed four more, probably done by him. Of the signed stones, the dates ranged from 1869-1876. Some were signed Truax and Son, even though his son would have only been about 7 years old. We look forward to the time to check out other cemeteries and document our findings.

We wondered about Truax the man. Before telling his story, I would like to say a signed marble gravestone does not have the same significance as a signed sandstone marker. All sandstone, as well as early marble gravestones, would have been carved entirely by hand and represented the individual's artistic ability and skills. But by the 1850s-1860s, gravestone blanks were coming by catalog or directly from marble companies. The only carving that would have been done locally is lettering or dates.

With so many fonts on one stone, perhaps Truax used some type of template or tracing. Regardless, we believe his work is exceptional and beautiful, representing the last of those great local carvers. This makes him special and significant.

We visited Leigh Eckmair, historian at the Gilbertsville Library. She had a folder of information on Truax and referred to him as "one of hers." She was most helpful. S.J. Truax provides us an interesting but sad story. Finding information about someone from long ago can be difficult and frustrating. Census records and available military information can be invaluable, as well as newspaper articles, especially if you locate an obituary. Often you may find little to no information at all.

The 1850 census shows Silas was born in 1839 in Oneida County. His father was Jacob Truax and mother Lucretia; he had two older sisters. In 1861 and 1862, he was found in a trade publication living in Utica and listed as a marble cutter. He married Elizabeth (Lizzie) M. Johns and had a son, Adelbert, in 1862. He joined the Union Army in October 1862 as a second lieutenant. For his last two years in service, he was in a heavy artillery unit and was mustered out in August 1865 as a first lieutenant. The 1865 census as well as an 1869 trade publication show him as a marble cutter in Utica. He had another son, William, in 1870.

Things start to get interesting as he comes closer to home and is shown at a boarding house in Butternuts in 1870. We do not know why he moved here; perhaps he had a job offer to work here. In April 1872 he leased the old stone school on Commercial Street, now the library, for a marble business. His home in Gilbertsville was destroyed by a fire in May 1874, as were many other structures, and he built at a new location in 1877. At some point he sold his marble business to Park & Ward and became an employee there.

Here the story takes an unfortunate turn. At some point in time, Silas developed a drinking problem. His inebriety resulted in Park & Ward firing him. In retaliation, he tried to poison Mr. Ward's cows by putting Paris green inside potatoes and burning down his barn. He was caught in the act of arson and sent to jail in April 1884. In May, he and two others escaped from the Cooperstown jail. He was caught two days later in Utica when he asked to have a drink with someone who turned out to be the deputy sheriff from the jail from which he's escaped.

He was tried and convicted in June 1884 and sent to Auburn State Prison to serve out a two-year sentence. He died in November from apoplexy (stroke) and is buried in the Soldier's Circle at Brookside Cemetery in Gilbertsville. After his death, his wife and youngest son moved to Scranton, Pennsylvania to live with his oldest son and this is where she lived out the rest of her life.

We wonder if his drinking problem was caused by his experiences during the war. The mental and physical challenges our men and women face when returning from war are unfathomable to those who have never had those experiences. Some lives are never the same.

One newspaper described Silas as "naturally possessed of considerable genius." We are most blessed that he displayed his genius in marble and left us with beautiful gravestones. In our opinion, he is the last of the great carvers in our area. We look forward to going to Utica to see if we can identify any of his work there. As a tribute to Silas, we were honored to straighten and clean his military gravestone.

Good Old Days

SIDNEY
25 YEARS AGO
June 23, 1993

Sidney Municipal Airport announced that Delaware Enterprises added charter services to its maintenance and flight instruction business, meaning people and things could get where they were going more quickly and conveniently.

According to a report at the time: "The new charter operation provides individuals and small businesses with a personalized charter service that can save the customer time and money. Bernie Ford, owner-operator of Delaware Enterprises, said the charter will allow customers to suit his or her own plans and schedules."

The air charter service was likened to "air taxi," with all the convenience of on-the-ground services.

Then-longtime Sidney Town Supervisor Walter Johnson was announced as the guest speaker at Sidney's commencement exercises.

A retired farmer, Walt and his wife Millie owned and operated a farm on West Main Street for many years.

Walt occupied leadership roles in Sidney's Rotary, chamber of commerce and the Sidney Board of Education. In 1984, he was named Citizen of the Years by the Sidney Chamber of Commerce.

GILBERTSVILLE
25 YEARS AGO
June 23, 1993

Voters in the Gilbertsville-Mt. Upton Central School District approved the proposed $4,782,136 budget for the 1993-94 school year, with 232 votes in favor and 154 opposed.

A second proposition, to donate school-owned lands to the town of Guilford and village of Gilbertsville for recreational use, was also approved, 323 to 66.

SIDNEY
50 YEARS AGO
June 26, 1968

The Sidney Rotary Club was presented with a Significant Achievement Award by Rotary International. This was the only award of its kind being presented in the 40-club district.

The award honored the Sidney club for a project wherein the club sent used equipment from The Hospital and the Burian Clinic to a new hospital ion Floriano, Brazil.

UNADILLA
50 YEARS AGO
June 26, 1968

The proposed Unatego Central School budget for the 1968-69 school year totaled $1,786,383. The resultant tax increase was due to the start of construction on the new junior-senior high school building.

BAINBRIDGE
75 YEARS AGO
July 1, 1943

Mrs. A. P. Hohreiter was the first local woman to complete the nurse's aide course and received her cap and pin at during a June 24 ceremony. She received her training at Wilson Memorial Hospital.

UNADILLA
75 YEARS AGO
July 1, 1943

At the 62nd annual Unatego commencement exercises, 15 diplomas were presented to graduates.

Masonville News

This week's quote is from Thomas Carlyle: "A loving heart is the beginning of all knowledge."

Congratulations to all Sidney Central School seniors graduating Saturday. Good luck to all for a great future.

Here on the farm the fellas are making progress with the chopping of grass fields and the bunk is getting full and ready to be covered for winter feeding.

We have been moving the equipment from field to field and we hope people are being cautious when following the machinery on the roads. I follow behind with the flashers going to warn cars of moving equipment. Be sure to watch all the roads when traveling – trucks with loads of grass will be going from fields to farms all around while grasses are being transported.

We are watching for more calves due to be born soon and all through the summer.

The cows are due for testing soon, at which time the milk production of each cow is taken with a sample to be analyzed for butterfat, protein and other solids.

Our vet comes next week to check the health of the cows and determine if any are pregnant with calves.

As always, keep all of our farmers in your thoughts for a good harvest and better milk prices. Please keep on buying those dairy products that our dairy princess and her dairy ambassadors are out promoting.

There is a federal primary for Democrats next Tuesday. The polls will be open at the town hall on Route 206 from noon to 9 p.m.

Birthday greetings go out to Shawn Forster on June 27; Wilber (Stub) Nighols and Rose Beismer on June 28; and Betty Scott on June 29.

For July, we have Liz Foster and Anna Tomeo on July 1; Pat Nichols, Robin Church Little and Josie Howland East on July 2; and a big bangup for Cody Ruff planned for July 4. Have a great day, everyone.

Masonville Federated Church Sunday services are at 11 a.m., with adult Sunday school at 9:45.

Thursday at 12:30 p.m. is Bible study, with the theme "Unlock the Bible" and, at 6:30, "How's Your Soul." Both take place at the church.

Sunday will be Baptism during the regular church service.

A congregational meeting following worship Sunday will vote on the dissolution of the relationship between the Federated Church of Masonville and Pastor Tom Vance.

An 11 a.m. worship service on Sunday, July 1 will include a dish-to-pass luncheon honoring Pastor Vance for his service to the church.

July 9-13, 2018 is Vacation Bible School, with the theme "shipwrecked."

Help Frances Lee celebrate
Happy birthday!
her 90th birthday July 1st

You can send her a card to
286 King Rd.
Greene, NY 13778

Odds & Ends

UNADILLA – Free tai chi classes for arthritis, balance and strength are being held at the First Presbyterian Church, 156 Main St., Unadilla. Classes will be held on Mondays and Wednesdays from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. and are made possible through a grant from the Otsego County Office of Aging.

ONEONTA - On Sunday, June 24 at 2 p.m., the Greater Oneonta Historical Society will host Chuck D'Imperio to speak about and sign his latest book at the History Center, 183 Main St.

"Graves of Upstate New York: A Guide to 100 Notable Resting Places" is a revised and expanded version of D'Imperio's 2007 "Great Graves." Copies of all D'Imperio's books are available for sale at the history center.

For more information, contact 432-0960 or info@OneontaHistory.org.

BAINBRIDGE - The village of Bainbridge zoning board of appeals will hold its regularly scheduled monthly Meeting Monday, June 25 at 7 p.m. in the Village Clerk's Office, 33 West Main St., Bainbridge.

Letters to the Editor are appreciated. However, because of space and subject considerations we are limited in the number of letters we can publish. Our long standing policy is that we do not publish letters that are printed free of charge on the editorial page supporting or in opposition to any candidate seeking public office or any item up for public vote in the last issue before the vote; only paid ads can be accepted. All letters must be signed and represent the opinion of the letter writer and not necessarily that of the newspaper. The deadline for submitting a Letter to the Editor is Monday at 4 p.m. of the current week.

Deadlines for all ads is Tuesday @ 4pm