



The original location of the First Baptist Church was at the corner of Main Street and Temple Place, left, before the church on Porterville Road was built. The Griffins Mills Presbyterian Church has met in the same location on Mill Road since 1810. Both congregations celebrated their 200th anniversaries in 2010.

Annual Report of the Historian for the year 2010

Town of Aurora & Village of East Aurora

Robert Lowell Goller

Town and Village Historian

Research Library and Requests for Information

The Town Historian's Office serves as a research library of town history and includes many photographs, original documents, books, school yearbooks and a comprehensive collection of the community's newspapers.

As in past years, I kept a log of visitors to the office during 2010. There were **156 visits** to the office throughout the year, both during Friday office hours and during special appointments. This averages slightly more than three visitors per week. Some are simple requests for information; others are more involved, such as special projects that require more time pulling and copying files.

These logged visits do not include requests for information sent via e-mail. On average, the Historian's Office receives two to three e-mail requests for information per week. This does not include general e-mails that have included requests for general information about East Aurora, directions to various historic sites and referrals to other agencies.

More and more people are using e-mail to contact the Town Historian's Office to request information. **In 2008, we logged more than 50 requests for information via e-mail or U.S. Mail. (This does not include follow-up requests or office visits). There were more than 70 in 2009. In 2010, there were almost 100.** In most cases I am able to provide information within one week of the request. If I cannot find the answers or help someone, within a week I try to refer the requestor to the proper agency in the community. I work closely with a volunteer from the Church of Latter-day Saints' Family Research Center in Orchard Park to assist people with their requests. The Western New York Genealogical Society has reached out to local historians to build a network, as well. Town Clerk Martha Libroch and I work closely to assist with requests, as New York State Health Dept. regulations place responsibility for Vital Statistics records with the town clerk and the town historian handles newspaper, cemetery and other similar records. Though records are accessed through two different town departments, we do everything we can to simplify the process for someone who is looking for genealogical information. Due to time constraints, I do not personally conduct genealogical research unless the information requested is easily accessible and brief. The office is open for citizens to conduct their own research.

On a weekly basis volunteers and I continue to clip and file newspaper articles, including news articles by topic, obituaries and marriage announcements. A volunteer continues to log obituaries, which are added to a searchable database. In 2010, I caught up with the microfilming of The East Aurora Advertiser to preserve the newspaper of record for future research.

Though my official office hours are only on Fridays, I stop in a few times per week, and I access e-mail daily in order to provide timely responses to requests.

A major project in 2010 was assisting the Margaret Wendt Foundation and those working on the archeological studies and restoration of The Roycroft Campus with their preliminary research. Representatives from a firm working on the project spent several weeks in the office examining files and photographs in preparation for their excavation on The Roycroft Campus over the summer.

Beginning in January, an intern from the history department at the University at Buffalo will be assisting me up to 10 hours per week in the office. He will be of great help in digitizing more files and cataloguing and filing the recently donated archives of the Toy Town Museum, which disbanded last year.

Outreach to the Community and Beyond

The Town Historian serves as a liaison to the Aurora Historical Society Board of Trustees and offers input where appropriate. I sit on the society's Programming Committee and help line up speakers and presenters for various programs. I attend the monthly Board of Trustees meeting and a monthly general meeting of the Historical Society membership.

When asked, I also attend meetings of other historical organizations in the community and assist with research where appropriate.

The town historian also represents the town and village government at historical events in the community. In August, I attended the ceremony for the 200th anniversary of the Griffins Mills Presbyterian Church (originally called the Congregational Church), and with Supervisor Jeffe I attended the bicentennial festival hosted by the church in September, which included Civil War re-enactments and African American slave history. (Articles about these events appear at the end of this report.) I also assisted the town supervisor with town proclamations for both the Griffins Mills commemoration and the 200th anniversary of the First Baptist Church, which was held in October.

Each year, weather permitting, the town historian and members of the Aurora Historical Society attend the graveside service at Forest Lawn Cemetery in honor of President Millard Fillmore's birthday on Jan. 7. East Aurora was well represented at the most recent commemoration in 2011. The annual event is sponsored by the University at Buffalo, of which President Fillmore was the first chancellor.

Outside of my duties as town historian, I take an active role in the Aurora Historical Society's annual Millard Fillmore Dinner, playing the part of the singing "guest celebrity"! This event attracts more than 120 guests to The Roycroft Inn, a majority of whom come from outside East Aurora.

Pioneer Cemetery

With the leadership of East Aurora citizen Bob Warhus, the Town Board in 2009 established a committee to investigate ways to revitalize the Pioneer Cemetery, which is located behind the Aurora Theatre. Under New York State law, when a cemetery association disbands, the town is responsible for maintenance. Mr. Warhus continues to head this committee and I will assist where I can. The Town Historian's Office will step up to help especially when it comes time to begin researching and telling the stories of the citizens who are buried in the cemetery.

Digitizing Project

In 2009, I began preliminary work on a project that will be a priority in 2011: digitizing the newspaper records. Currently, in order to look up anything in the local newspapers, one most often turns to microfilm. The process is tedious, and microfilm machines are becoming more and more time-consuming, especially when it comes time to print a selected article. I have met with the firm that produces and stores our microfilm records to determine the feasibility of converting the microfilm to digital .pdf files that will be accessible on any computer. The best part of the digital format is that newspapers will be searchable! This will allow a citizen to look up a particular name (family, business, street or otherwise) and find all mentions of it in more than 130 years of our community's newspapers, particularly The East Aurora Advertiser. This will be much quicker and fool-proof than the current process, which includes separately searching through family, obituary, marriage and other records. Finding dates of events will be much easier; currently, if someone does not know the date of a particular event, finding it in the newspaper records is almost impossible. This could also assist in leading citizens and public officials to official records and documents, because a search could be conducted to find specific dates in the newspaper of official proceedings and notices.

A good example of how this system works can be found on www.nytimes.com, where all the articles that have ever appeared in the newspaper are searchable.

In the next few months I will meet again with Biel's Document Management to discuss logistics and cost. I am confident that I have secured full funding for this important project from local historical societies (and other groups) allowing the project to proceed without the need for any outside grants or tax dollars. I will keep the Town Board and Village Board apprised of the progress. This project will be my priority in 2011.

State/Regional Activities

I continue to serve as the Erie County liaison for the Government Appointed Historians of Western New York group. In that capacity, I do my best to keep the group's historians from Erie County in the loop about the organization's activities and items of interest in the region and across the state. This year I was asked to serve as the organization's Nominating Committee chairman. GAHWNY hosts two daylong workshop meetings each year, one last spring in Batavia and an-



Church's anti-slave heritage celebrated

Griffins Mills marks its 200th anniversary

By Jay Tokasz

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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Members of Griffins Mills Presbyterian Church believe their congregation once helped fugitive slaves escape to Canada. The Liberty Party, which advocated for Abolition in the early 1840s, is said to have had its earliest beginnings inside the church's hall. In 1868, Sojourner Truth made a stop at the sanctuary on Mill Road in the Town of Aurora to discuss women's rights. Wednesday will mark 200 years since the founding of the Griffins Mills Church, which is among the oldest congregations in Western New York.

Yet, despite all of that rich heritage, the congregation today operates in relative obscurity.

"Most people never heard of this place, and when they come they say, 'Wow . . . it should be on the [historic] register,' " admitted Pat Petrie, a longtime member.

Petrie lives across the street from the white clapboard church, built in 1832, on Mill Road in the Town of Aurora.

The congregation hosted a small commemoration following its Sunday morning service and plans a closer examination of its longevity and role in the Abolitionist movement on Sept. 11.

Members hope the bicentennial milestone will spur interest in the congregation's growth and preservation of the church.

The fact that the congregation has continued for so long is "pretty remarkable" given that so few people know about it, said Robert Goller, Town of Aurora historian.

"I would say it's not forgotten, but it's often overlooked," said Goller.

Aurora is home to the internationally known Roycroft campus, which draws plenty of interest from history and architecture buffs. But the church, which started out as West Aurora Congregational Church, even predates the town, which wasn't founded until 1818.

Its ties to the Abolitionist movement seem clear, based on church historical records. In 1846, the congregation passed a measure that eventually was sent on to the Presbytery of Western New York, calling slavery a "violation of every command of the Decalogue: An intolerable disgrace, a horrible curse to our nation, and especially to the church." The resolution also said that silence on the issue should be "justly construed as an approval of sin."

Whether Griffins Mills hid slaves and assisted in their quest for freedom is not entirely certain, given a lack of any written documentation — a common reality among many Underground Railroad sites.

But the church's location along a verifiable Underground Railroad route makes the scenario more likely, said Goller.

"That area was an Abolitionist stronghold," added Kevin Cottrell, a member of the Underground Railroad Area Heritage Commission and coordinator for the Northstar Project, which is creating an Underground Railroad interpretive center in Niagara Falls.

Cottrell would like to see places such as Griffins Mills Church thoroughly researched and authenticated by scholars for inclusion in a network of Underground Railroad stops in Western New York.

"With so many Underground Railroad sites, a lot of it is conjecture, folklore, that kind of stuff. We have not formally told the stories like we want to," said Cottrell.

On a tour of the church's creekside property, Davis pointed out the steep cliff walls that church members believe effectively hid slaves as they canoed from Cazenovia Creek in Griffins Mills to the Buffalo River, on the way to Canada.

"From here, all the way to Southgate Plaza, it's like this, even higher," Davis said of the gorge walls.

Two nearby houses also purportedly had a tunnel between them that was filled in by town highway crews back in the 1970s, said Davis.

While membership has never been huge, these days the congregation operates on a shoestring. It spends about \$15,000 per year on utilities, maintenance and a part-time lay minister, Clayton Adams, who leads Sunday services. The church hasn't had its own minister in more than a decade, and it also shares an organist with a nearby Lutheran congregation.

Petrie noted the church was organized by a Rev. John Spenser on Aug. 18, 1810, with 10 charter members — the same number of people that now regularly show up for services.

In a country full of mega-churches, it is a quaintness that members appreciate.

But they also would prefer to see some growth, so that the congregation lives on more than just its storied history.

"We like our smallness — not that we don't want more people," said Davis.



Local officials and members of the Griffins Mills Presbyterian Church celebrated the church's 200th anniversary on Sunday. Pictured are Nancy Bassett, moderator of the Griffins Mills Presbyterian Church; Alan Davis, clerk of session for the church; Connie Lockwood, moderator of the Presbytery of Western New York; and Robert Goller, Town of Aurora historian.

Griffins Mills Presbyterian Church, Underground Railroad Stop, Anti-Slavery Leader, Celebrates Bicentennial

by Rick Ohler
EAST AURORA ADVERTISER

Drive through the tiny hamlet of Griffins Mills where the Cazenovia's west branch flows northward under Mill Road, and you will probably remark that it is a quiet and charming residential enclave, a suburb so to speak, of East Aurora. Two hundred years ago it was just the opposite: Griffins Mills was the area's bustling center of commerce and East Aurora was barely a place to water your horse on the new Big Tree Road.

In the early 19th century, if you had visited Griffins Mills, or Griffinshire as some called it, you would have discovered many clapboard homes, farms, a gristmill, a sawmill, a tavern, a distillery, a general store, a brick hotel and an ashery, where hardwood ashes were turned into lye for soap-making and potash. And, as of Aug. 18, 1810, there was the West Aurora Congregational Church.

The businesses, 200 years later, have all vanished into history, but the church remains, standing proudly on Mill Road (once called Main Street) and now named the Griffins Mills Presbyterian Church. On Aug. 15, the oldest church in Aurora and the oldest Presbyterian church in Erie County celebrated its 200th anniversary before a gathering of 50 church members and guests.

After Sunday's regular worship service, led by Pastor Clayton Adams, Connie Lockwood, moderator of the Presbytery of Western New York, issued a proclamation praising the small congregation for its 200 years of service to its parishioners and community. Robert Lowell Goller, Town of Aurora Historian, offered a similar proclamation on behalf of the Town Board and supervisor.

"As town historian," Goller said, "I have been to many centennial celebrations, but this is the first bicentennial." The church, he noted, predates even the Town of Aurora, which incorporated in 1818.

Alan Davis, trustee of the church, added some historical notes. He explained that it was the creek that brought the first settlers to Griffins Mills, and the anxiety about the War of 1812 and Buffalo's role in the impending conflict that brought even more. At one point U.S. Army troops were quartered in the hamlet's tavern. In August 1810, the Rev. John Spencer organized the West Aurora Congregational Church with 10 charter members, including Obadiah Griffin. As the congregation grew, the present day church building was erected with the finishing touch, the 48-inch brass bell installed in 1844.

Many of the early church members were abolitionists, and in 1846 the congregation presented resolutions denouncing slavery, one of the first area churches to do so. The church was also an important stop on the Underground Railroad. In 1868 Sojourner Truth lectured about slavery at the church.

Nowadays the Griffins Mills congregation numbers 14 families and 29 members with two visiting pastors, Adams and the Rev. Alan Graffam. To honor its past, the church has become active in the Civil War reenactment movement, hosting several encampments over the last decade.

On Sat., Sept. 11, they will host a 200th anniversary daylong program. Featured will be a Civil War encampment, an Underground Railroad tour, Civil War fashion show, music, chicken barbecue and an evening program with Denise Reichard recreating Sojourner Truth's 1868 lecture. For information call Pat Petrie at 652-5165.

other in the fall at Holiday Valley in Ellicottville. The \$25 registration fee (which includes lunch) is worth every penny, and I thank the Town Board for continuing to allow me to attend these meetings each year. In addition to taking advantage of an important opportunity to meet with fellow historians, there are workshops on a variety of topics, including preservation of documents, filing, historic preservation and cemeteries. The group often hears from state experts on these topics, which has greatly helped me with projects here in East Aurora.

Facebook Page

In an effort to share photos and historical trivia with a wider audience, this year I created a Facebook page, on which I include old photos of the town. It has been surprisingly successful after only a few months. It has been a good way to get our younger citizens interested in local history. I try to update photos on a weekly basis. Some of the Town Board and Village Board members have already become “fans,” but if you have not, the page can be found under “Aurora Town Historian.”

‘Aurora Revisited’

Separate from my duties as town historian, I am writing a book about the history of the Town of Aurora. Arcadia Publishing, the same company that published “Images in Aurora” by Don Dayer, and Harold and Janet Utts; and “Images of the Roycroft” by Kitty Turgeon and Robert Rust, will publish “Aurora Revisited” sometime in 2011. This is a personal project that I am working on outside my regular duties as town historian, but I hope the book generates excitement about local history and highlights the Town of Aurora and Village of East Aurora. More information will be available as the release of the book nears.

