

Annual Report of the Historian



2016



Town of Aurora and Village of East Aurora, New York

Robert Lowell Goller
Historian



The Aurora Town Historian's exhibit at the Erie County Fair, in August 2016, "The Toys of Toy Town," featured ToyFest commemorative toys, from 1987 through 2009.



OFFICE OF
THE TOWN HISTORIAN

Town of Aurora & Village of East Aurora, New York

18 January 2017

Town Supervisor James J. Bach
The Southside Municipal Center
300 Glead Avenue
East Aurora, New York 14052

Mayor Allan A. Kasprzak
East Aurora Village Hall
571 Main Street
East Aurora, New York 14052

Mr. Supervisor and Mr. Mayor:

Pursuant to Section 57.07 the New York State Arts and Cultural Affairs Law, which requires the Historian to file an annual report each January with his or her appointing officer and the State Historian, please find on the following pages my annual report for 2016.

January 8, 2017 marked my tenth anniversary as Historian. Thank you to the citizens of the Town of Aurora and Village of East Aurora for this high honor and privilege. This is the dream job I never knew I wanted. I never take my appointment for granted, so I thank you for your continued confidence.

This annual report serves as a means to officially share with you (and with the public and future generations) the activities of the Town and Village Historian in 2016, but I appreciate our open dialogue throughout the year. As always, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time if I can be of assistance with any project.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert".

Robert Lowell Goller
Town and Village Historian

cc: New York State Historian Devin Lander; Erie County Historian Douglas Kohler; Members of the East Aurora Village Board; Members of the Aurora Town Board; Village Administrator Bryan R. Gazda; the Aurora Historical Society; Town Clerk Martha Librock; Village Clerk Joyce Jezewski; Erie County Legislator Joseph Lorigo.

As with previous reports, this report for 2016 is divided into three sections, which represent the main functions and missions of the Historian’s Office:

- The Archives and Research Center at the Southside Municipal Center
- Community Outreach
- Events

In addition, we have also outlined specific missions and goals for 2017.

The Archives

A main function of the Historian’s Office is to assist residents with historical research and maintain the archives. The office and archives are open each Wednesday, from 1– 4 p.m., and by special appointments. This allows the office to be open at the same time as other museums throughout the community during summer months, enabling visitors to stop at all the historic sites throughout the community on the same day.

The number of visits to the office in 2016 decreased over the previous year, but the number of requests for information via email, Facebook message and U.S. Mail have continued to increase in recent years.

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Visits	157	189	253	231	189

These visits represent both office hours and special appointments. We keep a detailed log of visits to the office and the subjects that are researched. As has always been the case, most research requests involve genealogy and house histories, but other visits included assisting members of the village’s Historic Preservation Commission and other governmental boards with reviews of proposals under consideration; providing photographs and background information for local businesses, including Riley Street Station, Beulah’s General Store, Mambrino King, and the restored Calvin Fillmore House; and assisting several middle and high school students with class history projects.

In addition to in-office visits, we also continue to respond to requests via email and U.S. Mail. The number of requests continued to increase in 2016 and it was the highest number since I became Town Historian in 2007.

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Requests for information via email or U.S. Mail	51	112	75	133	156

Due to time constraints, the volunteers and I do not personally conduct genealogical research unless the information requested is easily accessible and brief. Much like a public library, the Historian’s Office is open for citizens to conduct their own research and we do our best to assist them in locating the information they need.

The office relies heavily on the generosity of volunteers. Two volunteers, Lucas Dana and Marian Halperin, have assisted in the office on a regular basis, sharing more than 200 hours of volunteer time in 2016. Thanks to these volunteers, we have been able to make a great deal of progress on several specific projects, including:

—Scanning the extensive collection of Roycroft photographs and documents.

—Organizing and cataloguing the collections related to President Millard Fillmore, the Hamlin and Jewett horse farms, and Fisher-Price. As a result of many hours of volunteer effort, these collections are now stored neatly in acid free binders rather than in loose folders.

In addition, Joseph “Potts” Stapleton visits the office on a nearly weekly basis and has digitally scanned a number of photographs and articles from the collection, many of which have been well received on Facebook.

Community Outreach

A major focus of the Town Historian is to “get out of the office” and take our community’s history out on the road. This is accomplished in a number of ways, including public presentations, the Historian’s Facebook page and the Historian’s monthly column, which is featured in the *East Aurora Advertiser* and on the Internet.

FACEBOOK PAGE...The Town Historian’s Facebook page (“Aurora Town Historian”) has been a great way to share photographs, old newspaper articles and other tidbits of local history with a much broader audience. In 2016 we started a daily posting, which features an interesting newspaper clipping, photograph or artifact from the past. The popularity, of course, depends on the subject matter of each post, but the posts on average reach more than 1,000 people each day.

MONTHLY HISTORY COLUMN...The monthly “Historian’s Corner” is usually featured in the *East Aurora Advertiser* on the last week of each month.

Topics of the monthly “Historian’s Corner” column in 2016 included:

January: Historic Riley House Saved from the Wrecking Ball in 1964

February: Frequently Asked Questions About the Town Historian and the Historian’s Office

March: Daylight Saving Was a Time for Confusion in 1920s and 1930s

April: ‘Parade of Cars’ was a Sign of Spring

May: The Ball Block (Current Home to the East Aurora Cooperative Market) Opened a Century Ago

June: *No Article*

July: Aurora’s Other Presidential Connections

August: Community Pool Marks Its 50th Anniversary

September: 100 Years Ago—Towns Finally Surrender to Sinking Ponds and Build Girdle Road

October: How the Town of Aurora Has Voted in Every Presidential Election Since 1876

November: The Christmas ‘Avalanche’ at the East Aurora Post Office

December: EA’s Community Caroling is a Century-Old Tradition

I also continue to make myself available for interviews, and encourage local newspapers to use the Historian’s Office as a resource for historical material.

SPEECHES AND PROGRAMS.... Throughout the year I continued to offer programs on a variety of topics at local civic group meetings and other events, including historical societies and the Road Scholar program, which consists of history enthusiasts from across the globe who visit East Aurora a few times per year. In 2016, I presented more than a dozen programs to a variety of groups. I also travel regularly to present programs at Fox Run in Orchard Park, where many East Aurora residents now live. *(A list of available programs is included on the Town Historian's website.)*

Following is a full list of programs presented in 2016:

January 20—"The History of West Falls"—*presented at the Fox Run Retirement Community*

February 17—"East Aurora and the War of 1812"—*presented at the Fox Run Retirement Community*

February 18—"A Tempest in the Village Teapot: East Aurora's Love-Hate Relationship With Elbert Hubbard"—*presented at the Aurora Senior Center, as part of Winterfest.*

March 10—"The Roycroft After the Lusitania"—*presented at the Fox Run Retirement Community*

March 17—"Who Were the Roycrofters?" —*presented at The Roycroft Campus*

March 31—"Why Did Elbert Hubbard Pick East Aurora?"—*presented at The Roycroft Campus*

May 27—"A Tempest in the Village Teapot: East Aurora's Love-Hate Relationship With Elbert Hubbard"—*presented to the Road Scholars at The Roycroft Inn*

July 13—"A History of West Falls"—*presented at the Fox Run Retirement Community*

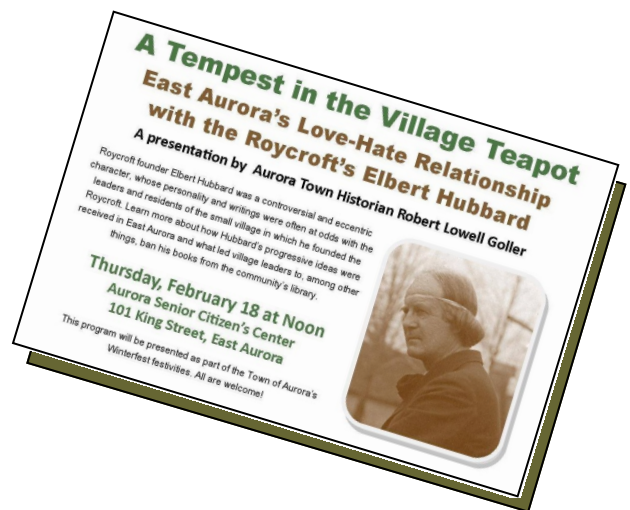
September 23—"A Tempest in the Village Teapot: East Aurora's Love-Hate Relationship With Elbert Hubbard"—*presented to the Road Scholars at The Roycroft Inn*

October 21—"A Tempest in the Village Teapot: East Aurora's Love-Hate Relationship With Elbert Hubbard"—*presented to the Road Scholars at The Roycroft Inn*

November 10—"The Politics of Elbert Hubbard"—*presented at The Roycroft Campus*

November 15—"Abolition in Aurora: A History of the Underground Railroad in Our Community"—*presented to the Holland Historical Society*

*I also was honored with an invitation to speak at the Eagle Scout Court of Honor on June 16. Regrettably, due to a family emergency, I was unable to attend, but I sent along a letter to be read at the event.



HISTORICAL AGENCIES...Throughout the year, I meet in an advisory capacity with historical agencies in the community. I attend the monthly meetings of the Aurora Historical Society board and general membership, and in the fall I was invited to join an advisory committee to help plan an exhibit of Roycroft artifacts on The Roycroft Campus.

GOVERNMENT APPOINTED HISTORIANS OF WESTERN NEW YORK...I continue to serve as treasurer of the Government Appointed Historians of Western New York, and I attend (and help organize) the group's twice-a-year training meetings in the region. The group consists of municipal historians from 10 Western New York counties. At the spring meeting in Batavia on April 23, I was invited to present a program to other historians on the topic of Maintaining Your Independence (Political and Otherwise) As Town Historian. The fall meeting was held Sept. 24, in Geneseo, where we met with the new State Historian, Devin Lander, who shared his plans for connecting with and providing training opportunities for municipal historians throughout the state.



New York State Historian Devin Lander at the fall GAHWNY meeting

Events and Other Highlights of 2016

January

FILLMORE'S BIRTHDAY...Annually, on January 7, I join members of the Aurora Historical Society and others from the Western New York community at the graveside service sponsored by the University at Buffalo at Forest Lawn Cemetery, to commemorate the birthday of President Millard Fillmore. On the President's birthday in 2016, I joined the Aurora Historical Society at the Millard Fillmore Presidential Site for an early-morning interview on WGRZ-Channel 2.

February

MILLARD FILLMORE DINNER...On February 11 at The Roycroft Inn, I once again had the honor of providing the political satire, as "President Fillmore" and "a surprise singing guest," at the Millard Fillmore Dinner, an annual fundraiser sponsored by the Aurora Historical Society for the Millard Fillmore Presidential Site in East Aurora.



April

NEW YORK PRESS ASSOCIATION CONVENTION...The New York Press Association, which represents community newspapers across New York State, invited me to speak at its annual convention in Saratoga Springs, April 8-10, on the value of internships, as well as the value of a journalism education, even in careers outside of the journalism field.

August

ERIE COUNTY FAIR...The Aurora Town Historian's Office was invited to provide exhibits at the Erie County Fair's Historical Building. One exhibit, "The Toys of ToyTown," (pictured on the cover of this report) featured commemorative ToyFest toys, from 1987 to 2009, from the personal collection of the Town Historian. The topic of the other exhibit was presidential visits to The Globe Hotel, and featured a visitor's log from the hotel that includes what is believed to be President Grover Cleveland's visit in 1890. (The visitor's log is now on exhibit in the Town Historian's Office.) At the fair this year, we also honored Wales Town Historian Dee Zeigel, who marked her 25th anniversary as superintendent of the Historical Building. With hundreds of thousands of visitors, the Erie County Fair is a great way to share Aurora's history with a large and diverse audience, including many children.



Missions and Goals for 2017

BICENTENNIAL IN 2018-2019...A great deal of 2017 will be devoted to planning the 200th anniversary of the Town of Aurora. I look forward to leading the planning committee with Town Councilman Jeff Harris, and I look forward to working with a variety of community leaders and organizations, some of whom have already stepped forward to help. Thank you to the Town Board for establishing the committee, which will begin its work in January or February. We will aim to regularly update the Town and Village Boards, as well as the community, throughout 2017. Town Supervisor Bach and I have already attended joint meetings with the planning committees from the towns of Holland and Wales, which will also mark their bicentennials in 2018-2019, and we are making plans to host several events with our neighbors from the other two towns. We agree with the *East Aurora Advertiser* that the bicentennial will be a great opportunity to honor our community organizations, re-engage our citizens, and “honor our past by building our future.”

East Aurora Advertiser, January 5, 2017 >

EDITORIAL

Remembering Our Roots

The towns of Aurora, Holland and Wales will mark their bicentennials in 2018, milestones that were recently brought to the attention of the Aurora Town Board by Historian Robert Lowell Goller. It seems community anniversaries aren't as “big” as they once were, perhaps a reflection of a more mobile society, perhaps a result of the changed nature of most small town business centers, or maybe it's just that people are spending their time on other things. But there is value in community as a place beyond a zip code. Remembering our municipal roots is a reminder that people worked together to build a community for mutual good and we still benefit from their work.

Official formation of a town in 1818 was, in some sense, recognition of the survival of those who had arrived in prior years and prevailed in the harsh reality of the frontier. Community building then meant physically building; a school, a church, a road, a mill. Today, most residents are much removed from community building. Writing a tax check for services is the community involvement for many. Checking in on social media consists of virtually gathering instead of actually gathering.

There is something to be gained from community building that goes beyond

a project or activity. In a time when polarization seems to rule, community building can create common ground on some issues, respect of differences on others. In a time when the ease of communication has done more to isolate people than bring them together, community building opens a renewed sense of belonging.

The celebration the three towns held in recognition of their 150th anniversaries is “history” to many residents. The men grew beards, women sewed period costumes, souvenirs were created, proclamations signed, program books printed and much more. In 2018 it's likely a celebration will look much different.

Today, most traditional community builders, the service organizations, fire departments, churches, etc., aren't what they once were in terms of membership and participation. So our suggestion for the bicentennial celebrations is to make 2018 a time to recognize organizations and the work that they continue to accomplish and at the same time redouble efforts to re-engage citizens in community building. Let's honor our past by building our future.

(Ed. Note: Publisher Grant Hamilton's father, Charles F. Hamilton, was chairman of Aurora's Sesquicentennial in 1968.)

DIGITIZATION...Thanks to generous donations, \$1,000 remains earmarked for digitizing our newspapers. With previous donations, we were able to digitize the *East Aurora Advertiser* through 1969. With these funds in 2017, we plan to complete the digitization of the *Advertiser*, as well as digitize other newspapers, including the *Aurora Standard* from the 1830s, the *Weekly Times* from the 1880s, *The Orbit* from the 1960s, and begin digitizing the *Shopping Guides* from the 1930s-1970s.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT...A few decades ago, the Town Historian's Office, in conjunction with the Aurora Historical Society, conducted an oral history project, in which local residents were interviewed about their recollections of life in East Aurora. In addition to taking additional steps to better preserve these interviews from a few decades ago, a goal for 2017—with the help of the entire community—is to launch another oral history project using modern digital recording technology to interview today's longtime residents. More details will be announced in the coming months.