



The Roost

VOLUME 10, ISSUE 2

IRVINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

FALL 2009

IRVINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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2008 -2009

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Peter Oley—A Retrospective

By Francis D. Campbell & Pat Ryan

"The Irvington Historical Society is back in business after almost a decade of dormancy." Thus read the opening sentence of Teresa Walsh's account (The Enterprise, April 21, 1995) of the Society's 1995 reorganization meeting held at the Village Recreation Center. Although 60 people packed the recreation center that night, the primary force behind the revitalization of the Society was the man who organized the meeting, Peter Oley.

Upon learning that Peter had recently retired from teaching and that he was interested in local history, Adele Warnock, an avid supporter of the Society, who was to become an honorary fellow, requested his assistance in resurrecting it. Although founded in 1972, in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of Irvington, the Society, after an active period of some 10 years, saw a period of lesser activity and decreasing membership. Oley was soon to set events in motion that laid the foundation for the active and well organized Society that now calls the McVickar House its home.

As Board member Doug Wilson recalls, "So one day in the early 1990's the phone rang. It was Peter Oley, teacher, coach, and legendary part of Irvington's school system. Mr. Oley was part of my sons' educational experience. So why was he calling? 'Doug, I see you are one of a handful of life members left of the Irvington Historical Society. I'm the village historian now and would like to have a meeting and see what we can do about revitalizing the Society.'

And so it began. The first meeting Peter chaired was attended by about nine people around a lonely table in the spacious Isabel K. Benjamin center. The project seemed a bit hopeless. There were a few dollars left in the dormant savings account and the future was unclear."

continued on page 2

Peter Oley—A Retrospective *continued*

Board member Lenore Munigle also remembers those early days. “Pete Oley was a man of many accomplishments but some members may be unaware that he was our first president and one of the driving forces in re-establishing and recreating the Irvington Historical Society. A respected teacher, coach, family man and a local legend himself, he was the ideal role model and spokesperson to promote enthusiasm in the community. I was fortunate to serve on that first board with Pete and found him eager to share information and offer encouragement.”



Peter Oley and Mary Beth Perillo at Family History Day, October 1995, Westchester County Center

Soon the revitalized Society began to emerge. At the April, 1995 meeting of the Society, Munigle, and Barbara Sciulli, currently Curator, focused on the history of the Odell Tavern. Munigle dealt with the history of the 17th century tavern, while Sciulli provided architectural information. The tavern is the oldest building in Irvington, and the second or third oldest in Westchester, serving as a rare example of Dutch architecture. It was a subject to which Oley would return many times during his years as President of the Society and as Village Historian.



Peter speaking to a group of visitors to the Odell Tavern.

In May of 1996, Peter organized a hiking tour to the Hermit's grave. The grave was that of Johann Stolting. During the 1880's Stolting was seen often on Irvington's streets, and along the banks of the Saw Mill and Hudson rivers, where he went for his daily bath. A well educated individual, Stolting is said to have been born in Heligoland (Germany) and supported himself teaching languages and selling wooden buttons that he produced on a homemade lathe. Historical Society Curator, Barbara Sciulli, fondly recalls that hike.

“Peter Oley devoted a lot of time and energy to researching the history surrounding our local Hermit's Grave, as well as fostering efforts to maintain the site and make it accessible. I helped Peter escort people on many hikes to the grave; one is particularly memorable.

At the time, he had discovered that a large tree had fallen across the grave and damaged the surrounding metal railing: the tree had to be removed. Peter and Joe Festa cleared some small limbs and made a plan to remove the offending tree. Peter then organized the hike of Historical Society members to implement it.

continued on page 3

Peter Oley—A Retrospective *continued*

A group of several dozen folks met at the high school parking lot and accompanied Peter to the site. The group was a varied lot, from toddlers to octogenarians, and included one woman in high heels and another who had recently been released from the hospital. In his usual way, Peter lectured as we hiked, pointing out the flora, fauna, terrain, hydrology, and geology, interspersed with stories related to local archaeology, history, and stories of past hikes.

On arrival, we observed a long tree with a trunk at least three feet in diameter. As the group rested, Joe and Peter rigged ropes in a specific way around the fallen tree; the ropes passed over standing trees and extended back along the trail. The hikers, meanwhile, were enjoying the respite with talk and refreshments – and somewhat skeptical that this huge tree could be moved by this group.



Hikers attempt to remove a log from the Hermit's Grave during visit organized by Peter Oley in May 1996.

We were instructed to form a single line along the rope, all on the same side; then to pick up the rope and pull on the count of three. Our first effort was uncoordinated and unsuccessful. Peter gently chastised us: we were to stop talking and laughing. He had us

put down the rope, and then to practice the move several times in pantomime. Ultimately the quieted (and now well-disciplined) group picked up the rope, and waited for his command.

This time we pulled in concert. Amazingly, the tree flew forward roughly ten feet to clear the gravesite. We cheered in disbelief. Mechanic advantage can work for you! The coordinated effort of this ragtag group got the job done (with some leadership). All along, Peter had no doubts that it would.”

In December of 1995, Peter initiated an Oral History project with a program held at the Presbyterian Church, at which time a film was produced of 10 residents who told of their experiences during World War II, both abroad and in the Village. Doug Wilson, a Trustee of the Society and former producer of sports programming at WABC-TV, produced the film. Years later (2008), Peter's exhibit at the Society entitled, "Those Who Served," would reflect his continuing interest in the local history aspects of the War years.

In early 1996, Oley oversaw a drive which increased the membership total to 500. That spring, the Society also met some of its institutional needs with the purchase of insurance, a successful application for a New York State charter, and the ratification of an entirely rewritten constitution. However, tours and programs continued with a visit, in April, to the William Moller house, a gothic revival mansion built in 1854, at South Broadway and Sunnyside Lane, the present home of the American Booksellers Association. Coincident with the visit was an historical present-

continued on page 4

Peter Oley—A Retrospective, *continued*

about the Moller house by Oren Teicher, Chief Operating Officer of the ABA. "The Hudson and the Irvington Waterfront" was the title of a talk given in May, 1996, by long time Irvington resident Ray Beckley.

Just a month later, the spring program included an afternoon at "Nevis," a home built in 1835 for James Hamilton, son of Alexander. Talks were delivered by Frank Sciulli, Professor of Physics at Columbia University, and Kate Buford, an IHS trustee, as well as an author and commentator.

These programs were followed in September with an illustrated slide lecture on "Industry and Ethnic Change on the Hudson River," by Karolyn Wrightson, author of the Gannett column "Hindsights." Joseph Pell Lombardi, historic preservationist, hosted an October tour of his home, the Octagon House, which is recognized as one of Irvington's historic gems.

"Peter Oley never lost faith," Doug Wilson recalls. "His love of this village and its history inspired everyone to become involved. Through his initial motivation and continuing inspiration, his intensity and sharp focus, and—oh yes, his cajoling and arm twisting—the society grew."



Peter Oley with Historical Society curator, Barbara Sciulli, at the 125th celebration of the Village of Irvington held in Matthiessen Park, September 1997.

During 1997, the programs continued with an illustrated lecture by Charlie Bates on Villa Inanda, one of the residences on the Cyrus Field estate. Bates, a relative of Cyrus Field, presented the lecture at St. Barnabas Church.

At the annual meeting of the Society in 1998, Peter Oley stepped down as its president. The meeting, which included a lecture by Henry Steiner, author of "The Place Names of Historic Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown," saw Oley provide anecdotes on some of the great Irvington names, such as Dearman, Buckhout, and Cottenet. Oley, who would continue to serve as Village historian, assured the membership that he would remain active in the Society.



Peter Oley with Gordon W. Brown at the Silk, Satins and Sequins Fashion Show done in cooperation with the Tarrytown Historical Society in March 1998.

This he did and the pace of activity which he established was to continue under his successor, Betsy Wilson. "Following in Peter's footsteps was a daunting and challenging task. But Pete was right alongside with help and encouragement. His enthusiasm was catching! We had the same goals and successfully helped the Society grow to be a vital part of the Irvington community."

Continued on page 5

Peter Oley—A Retrospective, *continued*

One exciting new undertaking that next year was "Irvington 2000: Portrait of a Community," an oral history project involving close to 200 Irvington residents and a number of Irvington High School students. Still on the horizon, was a goal that Oley had set for the Society as early as 1997, the search for a permanent home.

In the late 1990's, the Irvington Historical Society used a storeroom at Bridge Street for the dual purpose of storing its collections and holding meetings.



Peter Oley with Society Board member Joan Lobdell at the Archives Open House, October 1999.

Seeing that this arrangement was totally inadequate, Society members cast about for a suitable home to display its collections and hold its meetings. This effort, led by then president, Betsy Wilson and Irvington Landmarks Preservation President, Doug Wilson, focused on a dilapidated structure at 131 Main Street that had been an eyesore in the village for over a decade. The building was then owned by Con Edison and had been vacant since 1992. With the help of the Village government, Con Edison sold the building to the Village in 2002 with the understanding that it would be used to house the Historical Society.

Betsy Wilson recalled this time, "Creating a home for the society was a long and sometimes tedious project and Peter was one hundred percent supportive."



Irvington Village Administrator, Lawrence Schopfer, Peter Oley, Earl Ferguson, architect, Doug Wilson, president Irvington Landmark Preservation Inc., and Betsy Wilson, president of the Historical Society.

As an historic site, the building had much going for it. It was one of the earliest buildings on Main St having been built in 1853 by Rev. John McVickar, a neighbor of Washington Irving, as part of a church school affiliated with nearby St. Barnabas Church. As a structure, it was a disaster. It needed a new roof, porch, siding, windows, heating, plumbing and electrical systems to name just a few items.



Village historian, Peter Oley, and local Architect, Earl Ferguson, at an early inspection of the McVickar House.

Continued on page 6

Peter Oley—A Retrospective, *continued*

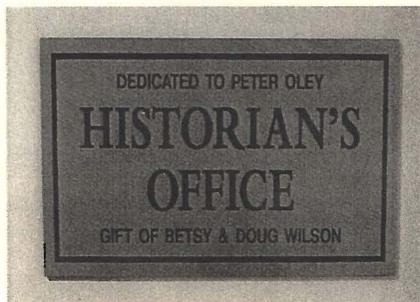
The Society organized a fund-raising drive that in the next three years raised close to \$500,000 needed for the repairs.

Peter was active throughout the fund-raising drive. For the first major event, a celebration of Louis Comfort Tiffany and his intimate connection with the village, Peter was instrumental in arranging for a profusely illustrated slide presentation by Michael Burlingham, a great-grandson of Tiffany's at the Town Hall Theater.



Board President Andy Lyons, Peter Oley, then Board president and Thursday Club member, Betsy Wilson, Marianne Oley, Charlotte Lyons and Michael Burlingham at the Thursday Club Annual Event in 2003. The event benefitted the Children's Room at the McVickar House.

The Irvington History Center at the McVickar House opened in November 2005. Now the Society had a home and Peter Oley, the Village Historian since 1996, had an office.



It was here that Peter fulfilled his role of historian and teacher. One would often find him seated at the center table in the Trustees room surrounded by piles of books, printouts, newspaper articles and maps, searching for some little known fact or obscure connection buried in Irvington's history: the origin of a stone carved with the initials "F.H." in a wall on West Clinton Avenue, the story of Philip McGovern, a World War I hero, the identity of a small structure found on an old Irvington map. And he loved nothing more than sharing his knowledge with others.

As Lenore Munigle recalled, "A conversation with Pete was a truly unique experience, and, as I discovered, required some mental agility on my part. A talk with him could turn into a verbal marathon of encyclopedic proportions. I am astonished to this day at his ability to recall facts, names and dates regarding so many subjects. I know my memory will never serve me as well as Pete's served him, but it will always be easy remembering Pete Oley. He was a mentor, guide and local history coach to many of us."

Peter often organized programs for Society members and residents of the village: John Steele Gordon on the laying of the first trans-Atlantic cable, the Blackest Dye, a documentary of the Arnold/Andre 1780 conspiracy, the history of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. As Betsy Wilson points out "Working on all those programs with Peter was one learning experience after another. As did so many others, I listened in amazement to his recollections of Irvington years ago—the people, places and events."

Continued on page 7

Peter Oley—A Retrospective, *continued*

Peter's culminating contributions to the village was the "Those Who Served" exhibit, dedicated to Irvington residents who served at home and abroad during wartime. This exhibit spanned the years from the War of Independence to the present and the extensive research, displays, and memorabilia, served as a survey course in American history.



Peter with Board President Andy Lyons at a reception honoring his work on the "Those Who Served" exhibit.

But perhaps Peter's greatest love was imparting the history of his beloved village to its children, whether through programs in the schools, walking tours or visits to the McVickar House.



Peter with a group of fourth graders visiting the McVickar House.

Board member Pat Ryan recalls, "It was my first image of Peter back in 1983 when my son was in his class at Dows Lane. Peter standing before a group of children, always moving, arms outstretched, reaching out to them, drawing them in, weaving a story of living history. It is our enduring image of him."

As former Board President Betsy Wilson so poignantly states, "Peter Oley was a giant of a gentle man. His legacy to the Historical Society and the Village of Irvington lives on in the hearts and minds of its children."

Francis D. Campbell and Pat Ryan are Trustees of the Irvington Historical Society



Annual Membership Renewal

The membership year for the Society will now coincide with the calendar year—January to December.

Renewals for the 2010 year will be sent in October. The Society depends on your generosity and is grateful for your continued support.

Please watch for your upcoming renewal notice.

Curator's Corner

By Barbara Sciulli



THE QUADRICENTENNIAL and IRVINGTON 1909

The New York Hudson Fulton Celebration of 1909 comprised sixteen days of educational events and presentations. It was a free celebration that attracted throngs of spectators along the shores of the Hudson from lower Manhattan to Albany.

When the first meetings for the 2009 Quadracentennial were planned by the state, Peter Oley represented the Irvington Historical Society and was an active contributor to the History and Education committees. He encouraged the Society's full participation, including suggesting our exhibit "Irvington 1909". He wanted even more participation from the village. Andy Lyons championed the cause and now Irvington has planned a substantial Quadracentennial celebration for the weekend of September 11, 12, and 13.



The year 1909 is remembered in history as an era of peace, progress, and prosperity. William Howard Taft succeeded Theodore Roosevelt as president of the United States. Styles were changing from "Victorian" to "Modern." Electricity and the telephone were becoming more and more commonplace. The

airplane and automobile were setting distance records and speeds as high as 60mph.



Isabel K. Benjamin and her dolls is one of many photos on view as part of the exhibit.

"Irvington 1909" will roll back time to those "good old days" with maps, photos, stories, fashion, and objects of everyday life. Then, as now, Irvington life was shaped by hard working citizens in our government and on community committees.



Peter would have been proud of our exhibit but, in his coaching mode, would probably have asked himself and us to do more. For this exhibit and for the future, we strive to meet the goals Peter set: excellence in History, Education, Research, Curiosity, and Persistence. The files and research materials Peter left the Society constitute a valuable legacy; these are being surveyed, organized, and maintained.

THE BRIDES ARE COMING

A bridal fashion show will be planned for June 2010. Do you have a gown you would like to share? We will also have an exhibit at the McVickar House of wedding photos, as well as gowns too fragile to be worn. To share your gown or photos or join one of our committees please call the McVickar House (914) 591-1020, or email www.curator@irvingtonhistoricalsociety.org. We look forward to hearing from you.



Guseppina Gianelli, mother of Anna Maria Sabatino, September 23, 1928

COLLECTORS PLEASE NOTE

Do you have a collection you would like to share? The McVickar House exhibit January 2010 will feature special objects collected by our members along with the stories that accompany them. It will be fun to see what has been collected and to hear why it was collected. To participate please call the McVickar House (914) 591-1020, or email us at www.curator@irvingtonhistoricalsociety.org. We look forward to your call!

The **Historical Society Photo Contest** is now mounted for viewing at the McVickar House

Come in and vote for your favorite photos!

Thursday and Saturdays 1 to 4 P.M. through October 10.

Join us for a reception honoring our winners

Saturday, October 17th

1 to 4 P.M.

Upcoming Event

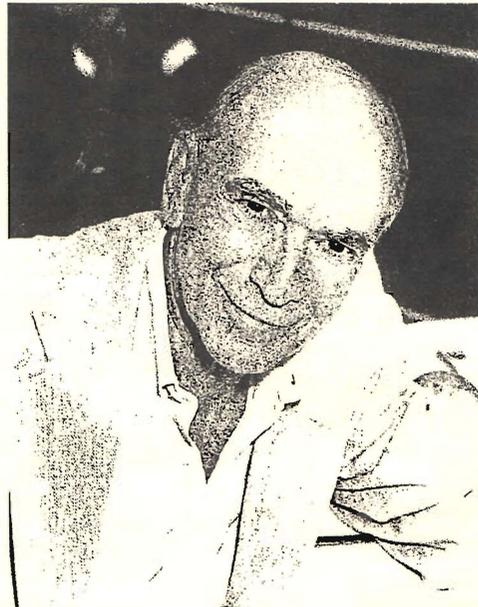
Save The Date!

Friday October 30th 7:30 P.M.

Irvington Town Hall Theater

The Irvington Historical Society is proud to host
a special celebration honoring

Peter A. Peyser



Former mayor and the only person from Irvington to serve in
the United States Congress

The event is free of charge. However tickets will be required.
They can be picked up at the theater box office or at the
Irvington History Center.

Tomorrow's Historians

On Thursday, April 16, 2009, the Irvington Historical Society and the Social Studies Department of Irvington Schools hosted a joint program entitled "Tomorrow's Historians: A Symposium Showcasing Exceptional Research by Irvington Students in United States, European and Global History." The students presented excerpts from their research papers, discussed their findings, and addressed audience questions about their historical research and the practice of history. Students presented their papers in a series of panel discussion moderated by Dr. Erik Weiselberg. High School topics included *Image and Reality in Nazi Ideology*, *Dutch Resistance in Film and Reality*, *The Mythology of the American West*, and *Cool Sophisticated, Glamorous and Vital; Motown and the Civil Rights Movement*. Middle School students conducted a panel discussion on the achievements and limits of Progressive era reform.

This very successful evening was dedicated to the memory of Peter Oley, and High School students were presented with the "Peter K. Oley Young Historian's Award" and a copy of *Wolfert's Roost*. As Historical Society Board Member and Social Studies teacher Weiselberg wrote of the event, "Of course, the spirit of Pete Oley was behind it - making connections between the history of Irvington, the people of Irvington, and young people in the schools. One of my colleagues said that this event is exactly the kind of thing that Pete Oley would've wanted to see, and is probably in general the kind of goal that motivated Pete to nominate me to the Historical society in the first place. So, it felt nice to carry out that vision, especially at that moment in time."



High School and Middle School presenters at the "Tomorrow's Historians" program.

The Roost

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Irvington Historical Society House Tour

Saturday, October 3, 2009

1:00 to 4:00 PM

Reception

5:30 to 7:30 PM

Tickets available at the McVickar House