

Newsletter

Historical Society of Shawangunk & Gardiner

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Spring 2012

THE WALLKILL PAPER AND HAT FACTORY DISASTERS

By Libby Antarsh Ross

Fire, explosions, electrocutions – over time, violent events have wrecked buildings and lives on the banks of the serene Wallkill River. Before the story begins, even before the middle of the 19th century, there was a saw mill on that same site that cut logs for the earliest buildings in the Basin (the first known name for the hamlet of Wallkill).

By the 1870s, three industries were operating in the Basin: the James B. Crowell & Son Brick Mould Company (still in business today), an ax handle factory, and Condit's Paper Mill, a large brick and frame building with two wings, constructed on the site of the old saw mill, alongside a bridge that linked the North Plank Road (now Wallkill Avenue) with the west side of the Wallkill River.

The Condit Paper Mill produced a high grade of rag paper whose entire production was sold to print the popular magazine, *The Saturday Evening Post*. The process involved boiling straw and rags by means of pressure boilers. Central to this operation was a "digesting boiler," 20 feet long and 7 feet in diameter.

This structure was mounted on an axle which went through its center. Workers packed the boiler with rags, added chemicals and water, ran steam through the axle, and turned the boiler in a circulating motion, end over end, in a deep pit. The motion reduced the rags into a thick pulp. The pulp was bleached, the water drained and the pulp smoothed by steam-heat rollers, cut, counted, and wrapped for shipment.

The busy paper mill operated on two 12-hour shifts, each staffed by 20 employees. A great whistle blew at 5 a.m. to wake the workers and again at 7 a.m. for the night crew to end work and the day crew to begin.

On Saturday, May 4, 1874, just before 6 p.m., the digesting boiler in the paper mill exploded, tragically killing 6 men and 2 women. The revolving boiler head, along with a piece of the boiler, blew out, went through the roof, hit the top of a 100 foot brick smoke

stack, knocked off the top, and landed in the middle of North Plank Road.

The entire mill was reduced to ruins, completely demolished as if blown up with gunpowder. The boiler had been unsafe and leaking for months, according to a boiler inspector. It was considered so bad that several men left their jobs. But the mill was run night and day and the absentee owner, Isaac Condit, from Millburn, N. J., would not permit a halt for the necessary repairs. He was quoted to say that he would run it until a new boiler could be brought in. Many blamed the explosion on a superintendent drinking too much applejack, but from the evidence, the main cause was managerial negligence.

The next day, thousands of people journeyed to view the disaster. People were outraged that the boiler had been kept running after its condition was known to be dangerous. "Criminal recklessness," reported *The NY Times*. There was an inquest but thus far no evidence found of formal charges against the mill owner. The mill was rebuilt and opened under new management as the Wallkill Paper Mill. (continued, page 3)



The Wallkill Paper Mill (undated photo)

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and Toni Gagan

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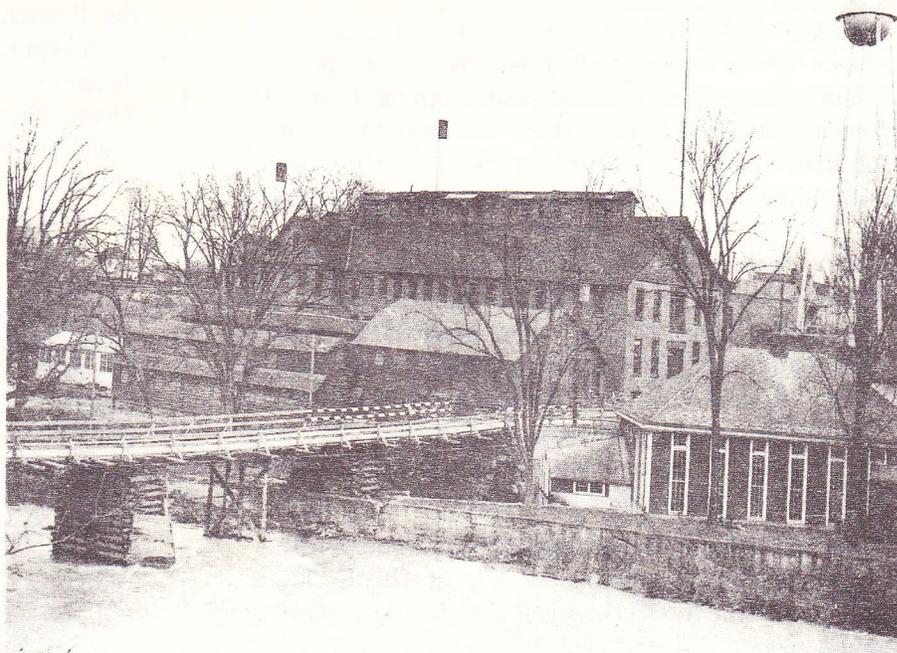
Letter from the Co-Presidents

Dear Members and Friends,

With spring has come the opening of the Andries DuBois House on Wallkill Avenue, Saturday mornings from 10 -12. Unusual activity at the site has caught the interest of local residents who are appearing to view the weekly changes to the inside of the building that is the work of energetic Board members (see article below for what has been accomplished). This is inspiring our visitors to become members! We hope that the increased level of member participation and the response from the community will better our chances for grants to make improvements at the house. It all works together.

We are also enjoying our review of a new collection of graceful and informative photographs donated from the estate of the late Helen Lyons, a Wallkill resident/librarian at Wallkill Central School and member of the Wallkill Reformed Church. Our photograph collection continues to grow and can be viewed on the website of the Historical Society of Shawangunk and Gardiner (wallkillhistory.com). We know you will enjoy a look.

Carolyn Crowell and Toni Gagan, Co-Presidents



The Wallkill Hat Factory in 1937

The Wallkill Paper and Hat Factory Disasters (continued)

The explosion coincided with dramatic changes already under way in the paper industry. In the 1830s and 1840s, men on two different continents (Charles Fenerty in Canada and Friedrich Gottlob Keller in Germany) invented a new technique to produce paper by pulping wood instead of rags. By the end of the 19th-century almost all printers in the western world were using the new machines. In 1890 there were 25 pulp mills in Maine alone.

It is no surprise that the Wallkill Paper Mill lost its contract with *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1894 because of competition from larger mills in Massachusetts using the newer technology. The mill closed the next year.

The production of fur-felt hats was next on the Wallkill River bank, under ownership of another N.J. Jersey industrialist, I.C. Hedden. He owned the plant from 1903-1911 until three local men – C.W. Smith, Henry Geyer, and George Halliday – bought him out. The company expanded to 150 employees and at its height produced \$500,000 worth of hats each year, shipping to every state in the union, plus South America, and Mexico. Its best seller was the wide-brimmed, high-crowned sombreros traditionally revered by Mexicans.

When George Halliday, husband of Wallkill's great benefactor, Marion Borden, took over sole ownership, he modernized the plant, providing "every sanitary and safety device." But in a freak accident in 1930, he died touching a high tension electric wire. The Ruffelt Hat Company bought the business and kept it running until 1952, the end of the hat business in Wallkill. The Transition Metals and Chemicals Company bought the building and the business operated until November 5, 1971 when it was destroyed by a devastating fire. It was the last unlucky industry over a 100 year period to have occupied that site by the Wallkill River. Sources: *NYTimes*, 5 May 1874, Fred Mentz, *Shawangunk Hearths*.

PROGRAMS

March 6. How to Trace Your Family Tree.

Hal Van Aken gave a slide presentation in the Shawangunk Town Hall Community Room on tools to search for one's ancestors: birth, death, and marriage certificates, census records and where to find them, using free and subscription on-line sources. He illustrated his talk by tracing generations of the Crowell family back to the earliest ancestor who

arrived in the Shawangunk area in 1703 and settled at the junction of rock-cut road and route 300 in the "wilderness."

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April 4. Local History: Journey Through the Village of Wallkill. The audience at the Shawangunk Town Hall Community Room enjoyed an hour-long video history as seen through the eyes of long-time residents, **Mary Wright** and **Iris Bellarosa**, the result of a drive through the Hamlet recorded by **Hal Van Aken**. Street by street they described who had lived where, what the buildings used to be, and told stories of "olden days." A second video follows in the Fall.

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What's Going On at the Andries DuBois House?

Have you noticed the Open House/Work Sessions at the Andries DuBois House Saturday mornings between 10-12? We are attracting visitors who take a little tour and converse with Historical Society volunteers working there. Some have become new members and some have made generous donations! Others want information about what they can do to help. For all of you who have given time on Saturdays, thank you.

In April, **Freda Fenn**, **Bob Mooney**, and **Toni Gagan** worked on the gardens around the house and Bob and **John Ross** sifted dirt to fill in the front section of the foundation trench. **Hal and Mary Lou Van Aken** and **Alan White** secured the upstairs northwest room for materials storage. Hal and Alan worked on two doors leading to the room and added a lock so that we can keep materials safe while they are stored in the house.

Rob Petito, an architect for Historic Preservation, met with the Restoration Committee to discuss progress and review future plans for gutter and eave restoration and roof repair. Rob provided valuable information about the original DuBois House report, took pictures and inspected the project. He will assess plans, talk to Ken Betz, and make recommendations in the next few weeks. We are also discussing a temporary bathroom either inside or outside for use when the House is open.

Ken Betz of Architectural Mouldings. Hardwoods and Supplies in Montgomery, has given the Historical Society an estimate of \$30,000 to restore the gutter and overhang. This will include a built in system using copper to line the gutter and flash the roof area and to temporarily re-secure the bottom edge of the existing metal roofing material until the decision about the roof is made. Expensive, but necessary to protect the integrity of the building.

**Historical Society of
Shawangunk & Gardiner
Spring 2012 Programs**

Monday May 14. 7 p.m. Speaker: William B. Rhodes, author of Ulster County New York: The Architectural History & Guide. Gardiner Town Hall.

Wednesday, June 6. 6 p.m. PotLuck on the Andries DuBois lawn. Bring covered dish and your own settings. Drinks provided.

Saturday, June 9. 2-4 p.m. Annual Historical Society Benefit Tea. \$20: limited seating. Call 895-3933 or 895-3986. Performance by Wallkill High School Men's Choir. Shawangunk Town Hall Community Room.

Saturday, June 23. 9-3. Plant Sale at the Andries DuBois House, Wallkill Avenue in Wallkill, plants donated by local nurseries.

REMEMBER YOUR 2012 DUES!

Individual: \$20 Business: \$50
Family \$30 Patron: \$100
Supporting: \$50 Benefactor: \$250

Checks payable to Historical Society of Shawangunk & Gardiner. P.O. Box 570, Wallkill, NY 12589

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