

# Kanestio Historical Society Times

23 Main St - P.O. Box 35 - Canisteo, NY 14823  
(607) 698-2086 Wed - Fri 1-3 PM Monthly Meetings - 3rd Tuesday 7:00 PM

Summer 2016 [kanestiohs@gmail.com](mailto:kanestiohs@gmail.com) Gail Davis, Editor

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## Preserving our History

If you've driven into Canisteo lately you've probably seen some rejuvenated signs of Community pride in the history of our village. Our world famous Living Sign has been replanted and restored to its original splendor. Rotary Park has a new Indian carving paying tribute to the origin of the Village as an Indian settlement.



The newest resident of Canisteo is an eight-foot Indian Chief carved out of white pine standing on a mound in Rotary Park gazing across the field toward the Canisteo River and the valley beyond. The carving was commissioned by the Canisteo Rotary Club who feel visitors will sense both majesty and a bit of sadness as the Chief views his lovely valley.

## Indian Artifact Display



We have many Indian arrowheads and artifacts on display at the Historical Society. Most were collected locally and have been donated by area collectors. A recent addition to our collection came from Gary and Cathy Foster of Hornell. It consisted of a cased collection of points and other material reported to have been collected along the river in the Hornell area. A number of cultures and time periods are represented in the collection ranging from archaic to late woodland. Included in the collection are a number of points from arrow heads to spear and dart points. Also included are cutting stones, drills, club heads and an array of other items such as broken clay pots and stones used as hammers.

**Annual Picnic - July 19th. This year's picnic will be held at President Larry Stevens' home at 5296 State Route 248, Canisteo starting at 6:00. Bring your table service, drink and dish to pass. All are welcome.**



## Canisteo Living Sign

by John Babbitt

The “World’s Largest Living Sign” was recently re-vitalized.

The original sign was planted in 1933 by Harry Smith, a Cornell graduate, and his brother-in-law Ed Childs, a Civil Engineer, of Canisteo. It was thought that this early sign was planted to be a navigational aid to early pilots. Little is known about how the two individuals who undertook this enormous event actually accomplished it. Many questions remain today. Where did the trees come from? How did they lay the site out? How did they get the trees to the site? How did they dig holes in such rocky soil conditions? It was an amazing feat for that time in history.

The area, which contains the letters CANISTEO, is approximately 300 by 90 feet with each letter about 30 feet wide and 70 feet long. Originally some 250 Scotch Pines were used for the letters. The trees were planted on a steep hillside in shale-like soil. But as the trees grew, weaker ones were pulled out to make room for more healthy ones; storm damaged ones were removed, finally ending up with 260 trees.

The property was purchased by the school district in 1957 when they were looking for a place to build a new elementary school. As part of the purchase agreement the school was required to maintain the area around the sign. Every two years a group of school employees and summer youth helpers would clear the weeds and trim the trees. It was a two week endurance test for all involved.

In 1964, as a result of Brian Florence’s Eagle Scout project, the Chamber of Commerce erected a sign welcoming visitors to the “site of the World Famous Living Sign.” In 2003 many groups became united when it was apparent that the sign was in trouble. On July 16, 2004 the Canisteo Living Sign was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

However, it was in the Fall of 2015 when reality set in as school officials realized the trees were dying. The Canisteo sign was showing its age: weather damaged and diseased trees, twisted branches, letters losing form, and dead or dying trees were all signs the trees needed to be replaced - and soon!

A forester was brought in to study soil samples, experts from the State Department of Environmental Conservation and Cornell Cooperative Extension visited the site. After months of study it was decided the best option was to create a new sign. Bids were solicited and R.M. Landscape of Hilton, NY won the winning bid of \$196,551.

Six students from BOCES Wildwood campus in Hornell donated their time in clearing debris from the area below the sign. Hartsville donated a monster wood chipper and Empire Tractor donated a tractor. The cleared site will provide maximum visibility of the new sign. It was truly a community effort.

In Mid April the hills came alive with the sounds of chainsaws, wood chipper and tractors moving up and down the slope. The old trees were cut leaving a roughly four foot stump which allowed the backhoe to get a good grip in removing the tree roots. By April 16th the hillside was bare. Once all the debris was removed, a GPS layout of the new sign was completed.



On April 19th the first planting took place in the letter O. When asked why they started in reverse their answer was that this was the driest part of the hillside and also less steep. For the next 20 some work days the public was able to see the sign move towards completion. A staging area for the new trees was behind the Elementary School where they were shuttled up the hillside as needed.

The new replacement trees were 6-8 foot White Pines. The planting of each new tree was methodically done. Creeping slowly up the hillside the backhoe would dig the hole, a worker would clean the hole out looking for sharp or loose rocks. Another trip up the hillside would deliver topsoil,

followed by the new tree. As each tree was planted numerous measurements were taken to make sure it was correctly placed. Finally a bag of fertilizer was added and additional soil to hold the tree in place.

Thursday May 12th was a milestone as the final tree planting took place in the letter C. Interestingly the new Canisteo Living Sign contains only 217 trees (original sign contained 260 trees).

Interest in this project has been ongoing with numerous newspaper articles in addition to postings on Facebook as well as many folks stopping in front of the elementary school to snap a picture of progress. Many contributions have already come in to the Canisteo-Greenwood Central School to help offset the cost. The Canisteo Living Sign has truly been a community effort, involving many segments of the community.

## **Historian's Corner by George Dickey** **A letter about the burning of Indian Canisteo.**

In the last issue of the newsletter I discussed the burning of the Delaware village at Canisteo by Montour. Following is a letter from Sir William Johnson, Crown Indian Agent for the colony of New York, to General Thomas Gage describing events along the Chemung and Canisteo Rivers. The letter is exactly as written. The spelling or misspelling of words is reflective of the times. The abbreviation Inst.(Instant) refers to the current month - in this case April of 1764.

*April 16, 1764*

*Last night two Indians arrived Express from Diaoga (now Athens, Pa) with letters of 7<sup>th</sup> Inst. acquainting me that about the 1<sup>st</sup> Inst. Captn. Montour with 140 Indians and some Rangers set off from Otsweningo (near Binghamton) & notwithstanding the ye great height of the Several Creeks & Rivers made an expeditious march to the Cayuga (Chemung) and other Branches of the Susquahana, which they found had been abandoned with ye utmost precipitation by the Enemy, they accordingly destroyed 2 well built large Towns, and then proceeded to the large Town of Kanestio consisting of 60 very good Houses which they burned, with a large quantity of Indian corn & provisions, Several new saddles, large kettles, Working utensils & other Articles taken from the Inhabitants, & killed a large number of Horses, cows, ca. Which from their poverty neither the Enemy or they were able to carry away.*

*At Kankaghto they destroyed 36 houses, at another town higher up 30, besides a number of smaller Villages & scattered Houses along both Banks of the River, in the whole amounting to near 200 houses most of which were well built of Squared loggs with good Chimneys. Capt. Montour sent off two parties by different routs who were in pursuit of the Enemy when the Express came off. One of the Indians who brought the lettes gave me a Draft of their Rout of which the enclosed is a rough cobby.*

*All the Enemy Towns & Villages on the Susquahanna now destroyed.*

## **MYTHS AND LEGANDS: by George Dickey** **THE LOST LEAD MINE**

The story of the lost lead mine seems to be universal in this area. Many villages seem to have a version of it varying only in which of the local settlers is shown the mine by an Indian.

Basically the story is that the local Indians seem to have an unlimited supply of lead to make bullets. Eventually a local settler becomes friendly enough with the Indians that they agree to show him the mine. He is blindfolded and led by a route that takes several days to reach the mine, but then returned in one day. The mine is dug into the side of a cliff and the Indians are able to dig almost pure lead out of the walls of the shaft.

If we look at this story from the stand point of geology it really doesn't make much sense. First the rock formations in this area are all sedimentary in origin. Lead ores occur in igneous rocks, so one would not expect to find lead ores in this area. Additionally lead does not occur in a pure state in nature. The ores must be processed by crushing and heating to produce pure lead.

Having said this there is no reason why gold should be found on Rock Run but it is there, in small amounts. The explanation being that the igneous rock that the gold was formed in was eroded away, the gold settled in sand bars in the seas that once covered this area millions of years ago. The sand was compressed into sandstone, which again being eroded away releasing the gold. This process would not be applicable to lead which has to be refined.

# The Back Page

*This newsletter is written in tribute to Virginia Dickey whose dream was a Historical Society to preserve and display local history for future generations.*

## Application for Membership 2016

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