

# RHS: Summer 2011

SAVE THESE DATES

**Saturday, May 21st, 10:00 am – A Walking Tour of Rhinecliff  
(Meet on the steps of the Morton Library)**

Michael Frazier will conduct a tour of historic Rhinecliff.  
(Wear comfortable walking shoes)

**Saturday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 12 Noon – A Picnic at The Locusts**

Warren Temple Smith will take us on a tour of the barns and house  
Picnic lunch provided by the Rhinecliff Hotel  
(See flyer inside of this newsletter)

**Saturday, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 5:30 pm – Sunset Supper at the Rhinecliff**

Stephen M. Melley will lecture on the life of General Montgomery  
(Please save the date and stay tuned for details in the August newsletter)

## President's Message Summer 2011

On the icy cold night of February 25<sup>th</sup>, Bud Rogers, sexton of the Rhinebeck Reformed Church, gave us a warm reception, regaling us with the history of the church and a tour of sanctuary. In spite of the weather, 35 people attended and we all enjoyed a delightful evening together. RHS member Leigh Anne Bishop filmed the event and graciously presented us with a DVD of the lecture. In the future, we plan to film our events for preservation in the archives.

I attended a document preservation class given by Duane Watson at Wilderstein on March 30. Duane taught us several methods of cleaning and repairing archival documents. I plan to put my new skills to use working on some items in our archives.

On Sunday, April 3 The Chancellor Livingston Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, The Museum of Rhinebeck History and The Rhinebeck Historical Society sponsored an exciting performance called *Rendezvous with Treason*. More than 100 people filled the Beekman Arms dining hall to see actors **Gary Petagine** and **Sean Grady** bring Benedict Arnold and John Andre to life in an entertaining, interactive, and dramatic program.

On a personal note, my retirement last fall has given me lots of time to devote to projects for the RHS. On most Thursdays I can be found working with Mike Frazier in the archives assisting visitors with their

research. Currently, I am working on several articles for the newsletter, one of which is included in this newsletter.

The past few months have been busy times for RHS program committee trustees, Joy Gross, Beverly Sloan and John Lavin as well. We have been developing many exciting events for the coming year. Trustee Barbara Kraft has been spearheading our efforts to increase both personal and business membership.

Trustee John Lavin has brought up our new website [RhinebeckHistoricalSociety.org](http://RhinebeckHistoricalSociety.org) and has been working with RHS member Michelle Donner on our newly developed **Facebook** page to publicize our events and let the public know what a wonderful resource RHS can be for anyone interested in learning more about our town.

Please stay tuned for details about our annual Sunset Supper on September 10<sup>th</sup>, featuring lifelong Rhinebeck resident Stephen M. Melley, Esq., who will present a lecture on the life of General Montgomery—a prominent figure in Rhinebeck's history whom Mr. Melley has been studying for many years. He is an entertaining speaker and should provide us with a fabulous history lesson while we enjoy another great meal at the Rhinecliff Hotel.

Have a safe and happy summer!

**David Miller, President**

**Violets in Rhinebeck: A Personal View**  
**By David Miller**

When I moved to Rhinebeck 8 years ago I knew nothing about violets. The only violet I had ever seen was the one on the corsage that I gave to my date at the senior prom. The first summer in my house I noticed this 'weed' growing in my back yard. It had small green leaves and purple flowers. It began spreading amongst the plants and lawn. Each summer I would go out and pull up these weeds that were ruining my garden. As an avid gardener, I spend the snowy winter days developing strategic plans for waging war on the weeds that attack every spring. My latest plan would rival Patton's march across France or Sherman's march through the South. These purple 'weeds' would not stand a chance.

My well thought out plans flew out the window when a Suzanne Hauspurg of the Ulster County Historical Society contacted me about coming to the archives to do some research for a Mother's Day Tea at the Stone Ridge Library that she was sponsoring on the importance of violets and Rhinebeck. Violets in Rhinebeck! There aren't any violets in Rhinebeck. What was she talking about?

I typed in 'Violets and Rhinebeck' into both Google and the NY Times archives and what I discovered really opened my eyes. I was right, there are no violets in Rhinebeck but that was not always true.

Our day in the RHS archives was spent working with our archivist, Elaine Cruickshank. Elaine started with a Museum of Rhinebeck History booklet 'Violet Notes' by Kay Verrilli which is for sale at the Starr Library Local History Room for \$3. It contains the complete story of violets in Rhinebeck. Elaine then checked our archive database to find any materials on Violets. You can access the archives from home by going to our website [Rhinebeckhistoricalsociety.org](http://Rhinebeckhistoricalsociety.org). and searching the database by keyword, surname, full name, format (for example photograph) or title. Elaine explained that the archives are not arranged like a library by subject or author, but by collections as they are received. As the collections are entered into our database it is very important that 'key' words are used to describe their contents so that individual items can be found at a later date. We did find a folder with many newspaper and magazine articles about violets. However, there are individual violet entries in collections donated to us that contain a lot of material on other topics. You too can

search our archives at home or come to the Local History Room in the library and do your own research any Thursday from 10am to 4pm. We would love to have some of you submit articles on your own history in Rhinebeck.

An amazing thing happened the following week at the archives. Marcela and Gordon Briggs called to ask if the RHS would like a box of materials related to violets in Rhinebeck. I drove over to their house and spoke with them. It turns out that Gordon's grandfather and his entire family worked in the greenhouses and they both knew a lot about the growing of violets. Marcela gave me a copy of an article about violets that she had never finished. So I am including some of it here:

*"Every spring, after the blooms and leaves were harvested, the summer program began. This involved cleaning the bed of used soil and removing it to the farms where it was exchanged for new soil. Outside of the greenhouses would be a pile of dirt sometimes fifty feet high. Next to that pile would be the fertilizer pile. Before the advent of indoor plumbing, the men would go about the town cleaning the necessary houses and this would be mixed with sheep manure to make adequate fertilizer for the coming year. Cow and horse manure could not be used as it was too full of weeds.*

*The soil was mixed shovel for shovel. It was a long and tedious job as there was no mechanization in the early days. At the time this work was being done other men would be busy cleaning and sterilizing the interior of the houses. After all of last years greenery had been removed, the men would make a solution of limewater and salt and scrub the walls, the heat pipes and the beds. This was to kill any bugs and diseases that might be harbored there. Then the buildings would be gassed. Very early on the main gas used was from burned tobacco leaves but as time went on, the growers resorted to cyno-gas and formaldehyde, as this was more efficient in control of disease and insect."*

Marcela went on to tell me that one would think that walking through the greenhouses should be a fragrant and pleasant experience. But, remembering what the flowers were growing on that was not the case. They gave me a box of material including the photo of the Trombini greenhouses seen later in the article and I had them sign a 'Deed of Gift' form for us. We will be going through the material and entering the individual items into our database and adding the material to our

collection. This is how we receive new material in the archives.

Anyway, back to my violet research and what I discovered. First of all I found out that the RHS has an artifact from the age of violets, an actual wooden box that was used to transport Violets. I put a pencil on top for scale.



The side of the box lists the name of the grower.



When we opened the box we found purple stains on the underside of the lid from where it pressed on the tops of the plants.

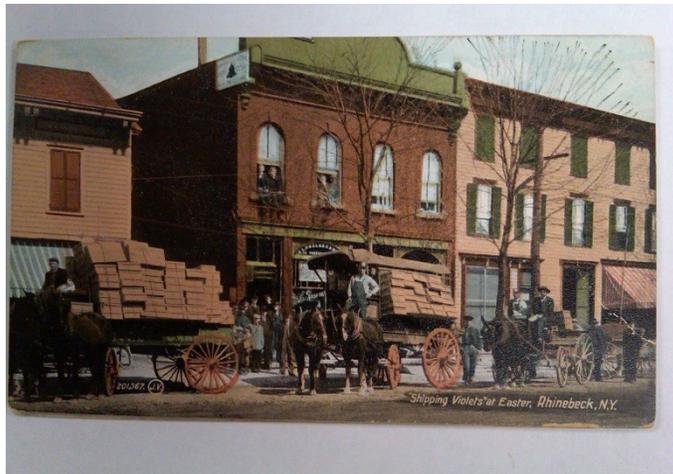
And now for the history of violets. An Englishman named William G. Saltford came to America in 1872. He began growing violets in greenhouses in Poughkeepsie. His brother George opened Rhinebeck's first greenhouse in 1890 and the business took off throughout the town. Rhinebeck benefited from a good supply of topsoil which needed to be replaced every year, cold nights, sunny days and access to the railroad for quick shipment to the city. The railroad also made it possible to deliver large quantities of coal to heat the greenhouses. Over the next 10 years over 400

greenhouses owned by more than 100 growers were cultivating violets in Rhinebeck representing 25% of all the violets grown in America and employing 20% of Rhinebeck's population. Most of the greenhouses were 20 feet wide by at least 100 feet long. Many of the larger greenhouses were on Violet Avenue and were placed so they would benefit from the southern sun. The greenhouses were very simple and were kept warm with hot water circulated through heating pipes. Workers would crawl out on 12 inch wide planks to insert the cuttings into the soil/manure mixture. The cuttings were taken from last season's plants and stored in root cellars over the summer. As the violets grew the workers would pull off the early flowers to encourage root growth leading to larger flowers later in the season. Some of the flowers were the size of half dollars. A good worker could pick 30 bunches in one hour and would earn \$1.50 to \$2.00 for a long day lying on a board working on the flower beds.



They were moved from the greenhouses to the packing room where they were placed into cold water. The 'leafers' put leaves around them and could finish 75 bunches in an hour. They were then placed into the shipping boxes and stored in coolers at 34 degrees until shipping time. The violets were easy to grow because they are very cold tolerant needing temperatures between 40 and 50 degrees. The main goal was to keep them from freezing. Indeed, an article in the March 14, 1920 NY Times talks about the snowy winter blocking the tracks thus preventing the delivery of coal to the greenhouses and jeopardizing the \$250,000 violet crop (worth \$5 million in today's dollars). The violets were grown in the winter to supply the needs of New York City and Boston with fragrant flowers from September to Easter. This fit in perfectly with the Rhinebeck

farming community giving them employment in the winter. Over 100,000 flowers were shipped weekly with over a million shipped Easter week. Every morning the violets were delivered in the boxes pictured earlier to the Railway Depot in the village on what is now the parking lot of Rhinebeck Savings Bank. They were then taken to Rhinecliff for their 3 hour train ride to the flower markets in the city.



The business flourished for several decades. The Victorian ladies loved having violet corsages pinned to the waists of their heavy Victorian clothing. The industry began to go downhill in the 1920's when the fashion changed to lighter 'flapper' clothing on which women preferred to wear lighter corsages on their shoulders. In addition, methods were developed for producing commercial orchids, gardenias and roses which became more popular than violets. So the industry became a victim of changing fashion. Several mini revivals happened such as Eleanor Roosevelt's love of violets, wearing them to Franklin's inauguration and having them shipped from Rhinebeck to the White House. Also, Mrs. Vincent Astor was photographed with some violets in a local greenhouse trying to promote the business. But that failed to stem the tide and, eventually, the ladies moved on to other flowers.

The actual end of the violet business is documented in an article in the NY Times on April 15, 1979 that states that Mr. Eugene Trombini will be closing his violet greenhouses, the last ones in Rhinebeck, tomorrow, the day after Easter. Citing rising fuel oil prices and low demand because women have swapped their dresses for blue jeans he said "They just don't go for corsages anymore, it's time to give up the business." And so ended the violet business in Rhinebeck.



Trombini Greenhouses

This summer it is going to be very different in my backyard. The violet assassin is now reformed. I plan on creating a space to allow these wild violets to grow so that I can have a yearly reminder of their importance in our local history.

Lastly, along the way I read that violets were also sent to the Rhinecliff train station via the railroad that ran through Rhinebeck. But wait a minute, there is no railroad in Rhinebeck! But, once again, that was not always true. Stay tuned for my next article on the history of the Rhinebeck and Connecticut railroad.

**The RHS board would like to take this opportunity to welcome our newest members who joined this quarter**

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|----------------|----------------------|
| Ralph Acampora | Leigh Ann Bishop     |
| Mimi Carroll   | Peter Guardino       |
| Kathleen Miles | Donna & Per Paulsson |
| Amy Scorca     | Lois Winston         |

**New Business Members**

- Dutchess County Fairgrounds
- Kosco
- Old Mill Wine & Spirit
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