

New leader of Wappingers Historical Society 'addicted' to Falls information

By Rich Flaherty

WAPPINGERS FALLS -Sandra Vacchio has been a Wappingers Falls resident for 25 years and spent 15 years volunteering at the Mount Gulian Historic Site, but you'd never know that she was not that enthralled with history. She became a member of the Wappingers Historical Society in 2008 and was elected president in 2009, replacing Janice Hildebrand who moved to Florida. Vacchio wasn't familiar with village history, but that was about to change.

"I spent hours on the computer, reading these stories, finding these books," said Vacchio.

"I have about three or four books downloaded to our (historical society) computer." The books focus on Wappingers Falls history, the Peter Mesier family, Native American tribes that lived in the area, local industry and development that transpired over several hundred years.

"I'm addicted to all information, Wappingers Falls," she said with a smile. "Now, I'm turning into a historian, which I wasn't when I started." On most weekends and a couple of nights during the week, you can find Vacchio at the Mesier Homestead doing research, organizing displays, tidying up and updating the historical society website at www.Wappingershistoricalsociety.org.

"We're turning the house (Mesier Homestead) more into a museum," said Vacchio. She said the volunteers are helping to conduct tours, fundraise, organize paperwork and to obtain more local history.

"We're doing video interviews of the senior residents of the village in conjunction with Roy C. Ketcham High School," said Vacchio. The students are learning about the village legacy and perhaps some will join the historical society in the future. "Make the information available to the people," said Vacchio.

Documents, photos and post cards were found on the second floor of Mesier Homestead and efforts are being made to conserve the artifacts by obtaining acid-free boxes and storage containers for preservation.

About 100 postcards are on the website currently and the Ketcham students are scanning 100 photographs for the website, Vacchio said village residents will be able to go to the website and get a chance to see and potentially identify the pictures and postcards. "That's what we want, because a lot of the pictures don't have descriptions and don't have names." Most of the photos were donated over the years without any history associated with them. "There's a lot to do and we're looking for volunteers," said Vacchio. You can access the historical society website for more information about volunteering.

To mark a local historical event, the historical society is holding a fundraiser next weekend. We're all familiar with the Boston Tea Party of 1773, when opponents of high priced English tea, tossed containers of tea into Boston Harbor. That wasn't the only episode of opposition to high priced English tea being sold in America.

On May 19, 20 and 22, 1777, soldiers, men, women and other local residents attacked the Peter Mesier house in Wappingers Falls, disputing the price of tea he had for sale in a small store inside his home. Mesier was a tea merchant from New York City. Mesier's political sympathies were with England and although he was a peaceful person, many local citizens didn't appreciate his allegiance. The angry mob struck Mesier, beat his slaves and drank wine stored in the cellar. They also took the tea and left money behind, but much less than what Mesier would have charged. Dutchess County had a "tea party" all its own. The activity is recorded in the minutes of the Committee and of the First Commission for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies in the State of New York.

The house remained in the possession of the descendants of Peter Mesier until 1891, when it was conveyed to the Village of Wappingers Falls with the surrounding property set aside in perpetuity as Mesier Park.

In recognition of the 1777 tea party, but much more sedate and tranquil, the Wappingers Historical Society is hosting a Victorian Tea Party at the Mesier Homestead on Sunday, May 23, from 2:00 to 4:00. Tea, tea sandwiches and desserts will be served. The cost is \$20 for historical society members and \$25 for non-members. There will be a presentation by the Hudson Valley Ladies Aid Society, including period women's clothing on display. Tours of the homestead will be conducted following the tea party. To make a reservation, call 845-838-1498.

Wappingers Falls Village history is sought after by the real estate industry. Vacchio receives a few emails each week about parcels that are for sale, with real estate agents seeking information on historical background and prominent families that lived in the area.

The historical society wants to establish a database for fundraising in the future, attract additional volunteers to serve as tour guides, and to look through old documents a couple of hours a week or month. "Whatever you can give," She's asking area residents not to discard old maps, photos, documents and other

material that may have accumulated in attics, closets and basements. "Don't throw that away, please give it to us (historical society) and let's see if it's something important."

The original Sweet Orr factory that produced clothing was located in Wappingers Falls and the Mesier Homestead has a few items on display. The historical society is always looking for more. Sweet Orr items found on eBay command very high prices. "We have limited resources and we don't have that many members yet," exclaimed Vacchio. "We're working our way towards getting all these things before they're sold and gone and we can't replace them."

Some electrical work was recently performed in the Mesier Homestead and the electrician found a pair of Sweet Orr pants and some documents, with the pants to be displayed in the future. She said there was a Sweet Orr sign selling for \$7,000 on eBay. She contacted the seller to see if it could be donated, but the seller, said "we really need the money."

The Mesier Homestead has a copy of the Bleachery Gazette, a periodical that was issued to their employees. Some of the sections are printed in Italian, reflecting the large immigrant population that worked in the area. Vacchio purchased a book on sharing management with employees that highlighted local manufacturing. The book was entitled, "The Story of the Partnership Plan of the Dutchess Bleachery, Wappingers Falls, New York."

Recreation was important to the residents of the village and Vacchio is trying to gather information on the many baseball leagues during the spring and summer months, swimming, fishing and boating on the Wappingers Creek, plus skating and sleigh riding during the winter.

A large collection of Native American arrow heads and artifacts were donated to the Mesier Homestead by the Taylor family. "It was one of the largest collections in the east," said Vacchio, The donation contains over 2,000 items.

The next step is to make Mesier Homestead a community resource, educate local residents about the importance of the area and let the public know the site is open for tours.

"It's a misconception as to what is the (Wappingers) Historical Society," added Vacchio. "I don't know what it was 10 years ago. I'll tell you what it is now; it's an organization that's saving your future."