

The Homestead Chronicle

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President's Message

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When I hear the symphony of peepers in my backyard, I know Spring is here and a new season has begun. When the maple trees are covered in red buds, I know that Spring is here, and a new season has begun. And guess what else has begun? Another exciting year in the Wappingers Historical Society! Our speaker series boasts new and interesting topics. Do you want to know about the history of bottles in our area or better yet, do you want to know if that old bottle on your bookshelf is valuable? Then you must join us on April 23rd. In May, John DiDomizio is returning with the fascinating story of Stoneco--a long gone community along the Hudson where Tilcon is now mining gravel. June will take us to a new venue at Obercreek Brewery. We will hear about the Quercus Cooperage from John Cox as he discusses the art of traditional coopering (barrel making.)

The work continues in the original portion of Mesier Homestead with the restoration of the fireplace and beehive oven. Part of this restoration includes using original bricks found in the walls that had been used as insulation during the late 1700's.

Of course, we continue to have our monthly tours of the Mesier Homestead and our personalized signature tours (by appointment).

As stewards of history, working together, we head into Spring and the season of renewal--and all things green. Green means GO! We are ready, are you? We are hopeful and grateful for your continued support in our shared mission and vision. Onward!!

Beth

Coming Events!

Speaker Series: Local Bottle History with Dani Masterson, Paul DiMarco and Alex Prizgintas

*Sunday, April 23th, 3pm American Legion Hall, 7
Spring Street Wappingers Falls*

We welcome back WHS Trustee Dani Masterson and Member Paul DiMarco to speak with us about bottle collecting. Whether they are apothecary, milk or drink bottles, they all have historical significance and tell tales of years gone by. Learn about the types of bottles found and used locally, how they were obtained, and how they are evaluated and dated.



WCSD Festival of the Arts in Mesier Park and village-wide art celebration.

*Sunday, May 13, 2023, Mesier Park , Village of Wappingers
Falls*

Artistic talent abounds in the our charming village – come enjoy the creativity of WCSD students and local artists, then stop in the Mesier Homestead gift shop to see what we offer from local artists. The gift shop will be open 11am – 3pm



Speaker Series: Stoneco Revisited: History of Clinton Point with John DiDomizio

Sunday, May 21st 3pm, American Legion Hall, 7 Spring Street Wappingers Falls

STONECO REVISITED A Continuation of the History of Clinton Point

Ten years ago John DiDomizio, lifetime member of the Wappingers Historical Society, entertained us with his presentations on the history of Clinton Point and Stoneco covering the time period from 1609 to 1919. In a new presentation, he will present some of his older material as well as his latest findings about the stone quarry along the banks of the Hudson River and what preceded it.

Coming Events, continued

Speaker Series: Cooperage Quercus History and Art of Barrel Making with John Cox.



*Presented at Obercreek Brewing, in Wappingers Falls
June 8th, Time TBD*

The making and use of barrels has a long history. Traditionally crafted for the storage and transport of both wet and dry goods, barrels made commerce possible. American white oak is the ideal wood for barrel making (Quercus is the latin name for the oak genus). Learn about the ancient art of barrel making from John Cox, who is an artisanal cooper and owner of Quercus Cooperage of High Falls, NY.

Festival at the Falls in Mesier Park

June 10, 12pm – 4pm Mesier Park, Village of Wappingers

The Mesier Homestead and Gift Shop will be open from 12pm – 4pm during the annual Festival at the Falls village celebration which is sponsored by the Wappingers Falls Business and Professional Association (they are WHS Business members!)

Save the date for these summertime WHS member events!



Annual member potluck picnic in Mesier Park. Tuesday, July 18th 5:30pm (rain date Wednesday, July 19th). More details coming in June!



Member Ice Cream Social in Mesier Park. Tuesday, August 15th at 6pm. More details coming in July!

Sneak Peek: Stones and Bones—Living History Tour with Dani Masterson

*Saturday, October 14th, Wappingers Rural
Cemetery Wappingers Falls*

This will be a new event for the Wappingers Historical Society. Join us for a tour of the Cemetery where we will meet a selection of local residents who have been laid to rest here. Watch for additional information as we get closer to the time of the event for more details.



New Members

We welcome our newest members who joined the Wappingers Historical Society since our last edition of the Homestead Chronicle!

Individual membership

Patrick Cafaro

Pam Cotto

Family membership

Dino Alexander & Family

New History Display at Town of Wappinger Town Hall



Thanks to a grant from the Town of Wappinger in 2022, the Historical Society purchased a display cabinet which has been installed in the lobby of Town Hall. Scheduled to be unveiled this month, our current exhibit focuses on the practice of medicine in the 1800's. Nancy Piscitello, Wendy McNeil, and student intern Lauryn Hoff created this display from artifacts in our collection. A big thank you to these volunteers! Stop by the Town Hall during business hours to see our display. This display case will have rotating exhibits curated by our volunteers. Coming this summer-see the tools used by local Native Americans while farming, fishing and hunting.

The 1939 New York World's Fair

The Grand Opening was held on April 30, 1939, in Flushing Meadows, Queens. The New York World's Fair was a vision of the future - the "Dawn of a New Day" and the "World of Tomorrow." President Franklin Roosevelt and Albert Einstein gave opening day speeches. A time capsule containing such items as Life magazine, a Mickey Mouse watch, a Gillette razor blade and a pack of Camel cigarettes was buried, to be opened in the year 6939. Sixty countries filled the 21 pavilions which showcased each one's culture and economics. Locally, many residents from the area took advantage of the closeness of the Fair's location. This photo, donated by Alice Hamilton Herring, shows a group of Wappinger highschoolers preparing for a day trip to the Fair.



Florence Scardefield, Vivian Townsend, Margurite Camely, Agnes Hamilton, Francis Manfredo, Dorothy Smith (teacher), Marguirite Townsend, Jim Ruf, Rose Camely, Craig Edgar, Ray Bisagna.

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Joseph Owens
Wappingers Falls, NY World War II Hero
By KEN CERINO

Little did Joe Owens know that when he graduated from Wappingers Central High School in 1942 he would be shot down in a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber over France during World War II less than two years later and survive to tell the story.

The Village of Wappingers Falls, NY native was 19 at the time and on his second mission as a ball turret gunner on the 10-member crew that was on its way to bomb sites around Le Bourget Field in Paris on June 14, 1944.

Joe's unit was part of a squadron of 60 aircraft for this important mission. The bomber, nicknamed Dry Run, was nearing its target when a pair of German attackers shot his plane out of the sky. Joe was among nine airmen who bailed out and were rescued by members of the French Resistance. (Only the pilot, Lt. Russell Schroeder, didn't make it.)

Now 98, Joe is a celebrity of sorts at the retirement community where he lives in Florida following an article about that historic mission in The Orlando Sentinel on Dec. 13, 2022. "Many people here know Joe, but his reputation was greatly enhanced following the publication of the story," said his good friend Dee Lore.

On Feb. 2, 2023, my wife Kelly and I (and two other family members) visited Joe to thank this remarkable hero from the Greatest Generation for his service to our nation.

Joe has an easy-going personality, quick wit, and great sense of humor. He moves easily with a walker that is hooked to an oxygen tank. Joe is refreshingly articulate and speaks clearly although he admitted that both his hearing and eye sight are diminishing.

"The Good Lord gave me the years, but not the ears," he laughed.



Joseph Owens , continued

The Kid from Wappingers Falls, NY

Joseph John (Joe) Owens was born on July 6, 1924, the son of John and Philomena Contelmo Owens. John's father passed away a month before Joe turned seven in 1931. Philomena remarried a second time to Carl Van Benschoten in 1937. "He was a good man," recalled Joe. (Carl passed away in 1981 at the age of 81 while Philomena died in 2002 at 99.)

During the summers Joe worked at Hand Prints, Inc., a Village textile factory, the same place as Eugene Darrigan, who would become the first Village soldier killed (Mar. 11, 1944) in World War II. Joe also enjoyed taking plane rides out of Dutchess County Airport as a youngster. He liked living in the Village "because it was a small town and everyone knew one another."

Joe was an altar boy at St Mary's School where he graduated in 1938. He still remembers two of his teachers, Sisters Margaret and Louise. Joe lived on West Main Street and then on South Remsen Avenue while in high school. Active in several school activities at Wappingers Central, Joe served as the manager of the boys' basketball team (that featured class president Nick Cafaro, Joe Pigliacampi, and Jim Riley, among others) his senior year.

That same year Joe met an attractive woman from Wiccopee named Helen Dotterer who would become his future wife. Helen actually was a year ahead of Joe but missed most of her senior year after suffering a severe leg injury in a car accident in 1940. Now classmates, Joe and Helen attended the Senior Prom together and fell in love.

On June 22, 1942, a little more than six months after Pearl Harbor, Joe and Helen were among 83 graduates who received their high school diplomas from Board of Education president Frederick J. Neumann.

Off to War

In the summer of 1942, many Wappingers Falls native sons answered the call to join the military.

On his 18th birthday on July 6, 1942, Joe enlisted the U.S. Army Air Forces. There was a headline on the front page of the Poughkeepsie New Yorker that read, "Yanks Map Big Air Blows," predicting how American bombers would take to the air to fight the Nazis in Europe.

Joseph Owens , continued

Joe Owens would soon be part of that fight.

Joe was on inactive duty for six months before he reported to the Army Air Forces Classification Center in Nashville, TN. From there, he received training in several places around the United States learning how to be a gunner and operate radio equipment, among other things. It was tough being away from home, but Joe's spirits were buoyed from a visit by his Mom and Helen in 1943.

Joe returned home on leave in December 1943 before heading out for additional training. One of his final stops was Langley Air Force Base in Virginia "to recheck aircraft and radio equipment as they arrived in preparation for D-Day," he said.

In New York City, Joe met three of his future crew mates, Chuck Avery, Don Grimble, and Dick Nyberg for dinner at Jack Dempsey's Broadway Restaurant. Several days later, they arrived in England for more gunnery and shooting training and to meet the remainder of their new crew mates.

Joe was assigned to the 401st Bomb Group, 615th Squadron, 8th Air Force, and given the job of ball turret gunner, considered one of the most important positions on the B-17 Flying Fortress. He barely managed to squeeze his 5-8 frame into the tight space located under the belly of the bomber. "I paid extra for the view," Joe stated.

On D-Day, Tuesday, June 6, 1944, Joe and his crew arrived in Kettering, England to await their assignment. He remembers "the sky was black with planes flying overhead on their way to France."

Eight days later on Wednesday, June 14, Joe Owens' life changed forever.

Mission 90 – Le Bourget Airfield, Paris

The B-17G Flying Fortress Crew on June 14, 1944

Pilot – 2nd Lt. Russell Schroeder; Co-pilot – William Mountain; Navigator - Erroll Rice; Bombardier – Eugene Crawley; Radio Operator – Chuck Davis; Top Turret Gunner – William Bryant; **Ball Turret Gunner – Joe Owens**; Tail Gunner – Chuck Avery; Right Waist Gunner – Donald Grimble, and Waist Gunner – Dick Nyberg

Two days after their inaugural mission, Joe and his Dry Crew mates were among 60 aircraft of the 401st that took off again from Deenethorpe, England to bomb airfields, supply

Joseph Owens , continued

depots, and oil refineries in the Paris area. As things turned out, it proved to be one of the most successful missions in terms of bombing accuracy.

Only one aircraft was lost – Joe Owens’ Dry Run B-17 Flying Fortress.

As Joe said later in the book written about him, “We were given the ‘Purple Heart Corner,’ which meant our flight position was the most vulnerable to attack and assigned to the least experienced crew. The pattern had 12 heavy bombers flown in a tight formation (five boxes) to protect the bombers and to concentrate the bomb power on the target.”

Following a briefing at 0115 hours, Dry Run took off at 5:15 am and flew for approximately two hours and 45 minutes before a pair of German Messerschmitt-109s shot down Joe’s bomber not far from its intended target. U.S. fighter aircraft immediately destroyed the German planes

With Dry Run’s right horizontal stabilizer destroyed, Joe was the last to bail out (barely getting the escape hatch of his gun turret to open) at approximately 20,000 feet. Everyone survived the jump, except pilot Lt. Russell Schroeder. Pulling his ripcord, Joe saw his beautiful silk parachute open and the beautiful French countryside as he floated down. He also saw German patrols in the distance.

For Joe Owens, it was his first and last jump.

The French Resistance and Joe’s “Tour of France”

Defying the odds, Joe suffered only a sprained ankle when he hit the ground. He remembers a “big man” literally picking him up and taking him through the woods to a nearby farmhouse. The man was a member of the French Resistance. Crew members Chuck Avery and Errol Rice were already there. Underground members took their names, confirmed their stories, and told them they landed about 50 miles east of Paris.

For 79 days (until Aug. 26) Joe and his group would move from safe house to safe house to avoid the Germans. Joe knew that if they were caught, their French friends would be killed and the Americans taken as Prisoners of War.

At first, Joe dressed as a farmer with a French beret. He later wrote in his Military Transport article that on June 19 (Day 6), he moved to a private residence “in the back of a small truck covered with mail sacks.”

Joseph Owens , continued

On July 5, 1944 (Day 22) Joe wrote, “We left the farm aboard a horse drawn cart hidden under cheese odor sacks. We arrived at the same grain mill we had been in on day two. At this time, there was myself and four other members of the crew. Since no private vehicles were allowed on the highways, we were transported by police car, with two French gendarmes as escorts, the three enlisted men (including Joe) decked out in gendarmes uniforms and the two officers were ‘our prisoners.’”

Joe celebrated his 20th birthday on July 6 by walking “to a private residence in a wall-in area.” He lived there for seven weeks with an elderly couple named Monsieur and Madame Ernest Bernard in Livry-Gargon, Seine et Oise “who were like mother and father to me.” Joe’s name with the Bernard’s was Jean Martin and his ID stated that he was deaf and dumb.

As Joe would later write, “I gave my money from the escape kit to my French helpers and distributed the other things from the box as souvenirs. I was briefed on escape and evasion by officers at my base in England and also in the States before going overseas.”

On Aug. 26, 1944, Joe changed residences one final time gathering at a place where others were also awaiting the arrival of American troops. They took a pickup truck to Paris and then to Chartes where a plane took them to London.

“Thus ended my time with the French Resistance, for which I continue to be grateful all my life,” Joe said.

“Get the ravioli ready”

After being interrogated by an Intelligence Officer on August 30, 1944 and completing his Escape and Evade report on September 1, Joe sent a telegram to his mother later that month saying, “Get the ravioli ready, I’m coming home.” He arrived back in the United States on Oct. 9, 1944, and slept in his own bed in the Village two days later.

Joe Owens returned home thankful to be alive and forever grateful to the French Resistance for helping him evade from the Germans. He sent a large box filled with non-perishable food items to the Bernards as a small token of his appreciation. The families also exchanged letters with one another for many years. “Their unmistakable generosity stayed in my heart all my life,” he stated.

Joseph Owens , continued

Joe enjoyed his mother's cooking (especially her pasta) and a trip with Helen to Central Park in New York Central Park on his last day on furlough.

While home, Joe was among three speakers who spoke about their war experiences at a luncheon of the Community Chest War Fund at the Poughkeepsie Presbyterian Church on Oct. 24, 1944. The Chest Drive was a big success, eventually raising \$163,519 by the fall.

Joe spent the final months of active duty doing radio work and helping GIs with their discharges. While on furlough, Joe married Helen on June 17, 1945 at St. Joachim's Church in Beacon, NY. Five months later he was discharged on Nov. 14 after three years, four months, and eight days in the Army Air Forces.

Joe and Helen lived with Philomena and Carl Van Benschoten in the Village for a year. During that time, Helen presented the family with a daughter Sandy born on July 19, 1946.

A few months later Joe took advantage of the new GI Bill to attend Clarkson College in upstate New York (the school he originally wanted to attend out of high school), graduating with a degree in Civil Engineering in 1950.

Returning home, Joe worked briefly at V.J. Constanzi, an excavating company in Poughkeepsie, and as a field engineer at Sordoni Construction, the company that built the IBM Plant on South Road in Poughkeepsie.

Life goes on

For four decades, Joe worked in the construction industry, primarily in Lock Haven, PA where he became a partner with Mike Irwin in Irwin-Kuntz Construction, and later after Mr. Irwin passed away, the owner of the company. Joe didn't have to look far for good help because Helen was his bookkeeper and office manager. Two of the buildings that his company built were Immaculate Conception High School where his daughter attended school and St. Agnes Catholic Church where Sandy married Ed Meyer in 1968.

Joe and Helen finally retired to Haines City, FL in 1994 where they quickly made new friends. They enjoyed playing cards with their neighbors and Joe stayed active by riding his bicycle around their Heartland Estates community. Five years later Joe spoke with his old crew buddy Chuck Avery for the first time in 57 years. Joe attended reunions to meet other World War II escapees and family members from the French Resistance.

Joseph Owens , continued

Helen passed away on Sept. 9, 2007 at the age of 83. She and Joe had been married for over 62 years. As Sandy remarked in Joe's book, "My mother made it very clear to my dad that she did not believe he was meant to live alone after she passed away. In other words, she had given her blessings to find someone to make him happy."

New companion

Among Joe's friends in Florida were June and Roy Hauer (who served in the U.S. Army in the Pacific during World War II). Bud passed away in 2008, and as fate would have it, Joe and June started seeing one another, then moved into a new house together in November 2009. They enjoyed 13 years with one another until June passed away in 2022.

Another neighbor was Pam Lottinville, a writer from Illinois who continues to spend winters with her husband Rich in Haines City. She encouraged Joe to let her write a book about his life. At first, he declined, but then gave his permission.

Pam's wonderful book, "The French Resistance Saved Me from Capture: The Life and Times of Sergeant Joseph Owens, A World War II Escapee," was published in 2019. A big thank-you to Pam for allowing me to use information about Joe's life in this article.

Some final thoughts

Meeting Joe Owens was one of the best days of my life. How many people get to visit with a member of The Greatest Generation and hear about their war experience? As a teenager growing up in the Village, I wasn't aware or appreciated the sacrifices made by our native sons in World War II. Joe told me, "I would do it all over again and enlist if I were 18." Joe was unflinching in his desire to stay alive while in France and remains forever humble and thankful he was one of the lucky ones who made it back home. Seeing how much his fellow residents at The Glades respect and sincerely care about him was gratifying. As good friend and fellow resident Dee Lore (his unofficial publicity agent) notes, "Joe is very engaging and still a Ham who likes to make jokes. People love him."

Dee, at times, plays the piano for the residents and Joe has been known to join in and sing "God Bless America," "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," and Broadway ballads at various holidays. "He will be sitting at a table and just breakout with a tune," she noted.

Joe on moving Florida - "I'll never live north of the Mason-Dixon line again."

Joseph Owens , continued

From his daughter Sandy, “My dad was always a prankster. One time when Mom and Dad were dating, he told Mom that he was one of a set of twins. He showed her a picture and said it was his brother.”

I asked Joe over the phone if he knew how long it took from the time he bailed out of the plane to when he hit the ground. He said, “How the hell do I know? I wasn’t looking at my watch.”

Thank you, Joe, and all our veterans, for your Service to our Nation.

Special thanks to ...

Sandy Meyer for sharing photos and family information, and editing this article about her Dad. Dee Lore at The Glades Retirement community for arranging the visit with Joe. My late brother and Vietnam veteran Tony Cerino (who passed away on Feb. 16, 2023) for sending me the article on Joe Owens which appeared in the Orlando Sentinel on Dec. 13, 2022.

The Village of Wappingers Falls, NY has another well-known World War II Army hero in 97-old-year Henry (Hank) Hochlowski who was held as a POW in Germany from November 1944 until May 1945. Thank you, Hank, for your Service to our Nation as well.



Joe stands next to his photo on the Wall at The Glades Retirement community in Florida on Feb. 2, 2023.



Joe with three of his crew members (from left): Dick Nyberg, Chuck Avery, and Don Grimble at Jack Dempsey’s Broadway Restaurant in New York City, December 1943, before leaving for England