

Hides & Hemlocks: The Tanneries of Dunraven

"At one time there was a village in Middletown that was almost a rival of Margaretville as the town's business metropolis."

That village, explained an article in the June 29, 1929 *Catskill Mountain News* (CMN), was Clark's Factory, an area known generally today as Dunraven. The 'Clark' was Dr. Adam Clark, an émigré from Connecticut. The 'Factory' was a giant leather tanning complex on the banks of the Plattekill stream. The source of the hamlet's prosperity in the mid-19th century? Dense forests dominated by hemlock trees, whose tannin-laden bark was the key to transforming cow hides into fine leather.

But let's back up a bit. There were at least three other successful tanners who preceded Dr. Clark to this stream-crossed locale.

The community was settled in the early 1800s by intrepid pioneers who trekked to the Central Catskills from the Hudson Valley. An 1817 map of the proposed route of the Delaware & Ulster Turnpike shows residences of Col. Grant, Major Vanwagenen, and Col. G. H. Sands along the East Branch of the Delaware River, as well as a store. By 1820, a stone schoolhouse was built in this area, reportedly to replace two earlier wooden ones that had burned. The school remains an historic landmark.

The 1817 turnpike map shows several buildings in a second cluster, below the confluence of the Plattekill and Canada Hollow streams, including "Smith & Schultz's Leather Factory and Store," believed to have been operated by Samuel Smith and Abram I. Schultz.

FORTUNE SEEKERS

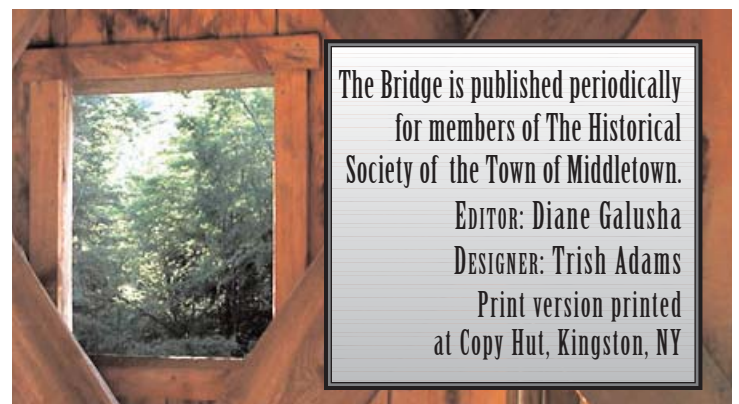
Samuel Smith and his brothers Jackson and Elkanah were young men seeking their fortunes when they emigrated in 1804 from Westchester County and helped develop this area of Middletown. Samuel, "a farmer, inventor, tanner, builder and millwright . . . owned a large farm, a sawmill, grist mill and tannery, and at one time owned 1,000 acres of land in Delaware County," according to the Smith family genealogy. The handsome house he built in 1856 was acquired by Jane Burns McMurray in 1874 and is still occupied by her great-great-granddaughter, Barbara (and Roy) Moses.

Abram Schultz hailed from Dutchess County and came to Margaretville, lured, as many were, by the dollar signs he saw in the seemingly inexhaustible supply of hemlock trees.

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A map of Clark's Factory, 1869. "Fairview St." at lower left is now Ben Meeker Rd., "Dinglehill St." at upper left is Jones Hollow Rd.



The Bridge is published periodically
for members of The Historical
Society of the Town of Middletown.

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Print version printed
at Copy Hut, Kingston, NY

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Research done by Mary Ann VanBenschoten reveals that, by 1831, his tannery was processing 16,000 sides of leather and was shipping them to New York City. Hides, culled from vast herds of South American cattle, were transported by boat to New York, and thence up the Hudson, to be hauled from Kingston to the tannery on horse drawn wagons along narrow dirt and plank roads.

The nation's economy took a nose dive in 1833, and Schultz put his tannery up for sale, advertising in the *Catskill Recorder* of September 12 that year. When the economy recovered in the late 1830s, he established a leather store in Manhattan, and then moved to Ellenville, Sullivan County, where he developed a new tannery.

At about this time, Chauncey Woolcott operated a tannery, perhaps taking over the Smith & Schultz site. "It was a small venture, using hides acquired from the surrounding country, and supplying the local requirements for leather," reported the 1929 *CMN*. Those needs ranged from horse harnesses to machinery belts, to boots and shoes.

ENTER DR. CLARK

It's not clear how long the Woolcott tannery operated, but in the mid-1840s Dr. Adam Clark, a physician, relocated from Connecticut and built a large tannery where the John McMurray and Schebesta residences now sit.

The main building was 220 feet long. There was a 30 x 90-foot roll house and an expansive storage yard for cords of bark provided by area farmers and lumbermen.

Clark had four sons, Egbert, Henry, George and Wheeler. George became a lawyer, but his brothers all participated in the tannery and associated businesses. Egbert was named postmaster when the first Clark's Factory Post Office was established in 1849. When their father died sometime in the 1860s, Henry and Egbert left the area to operate their own tanneries in Callicoon and in Binghamton. Wheeler remained at the helm of the local tanning operation, and became quite wealthy in the process.

In addition to the tannery, the Clarks owned a store, a boarding house and several tenant houses on what is now Jones Hollow Road where laborers lived. The 1850 and 1860 census records show as many as 32 tannery workers, natives of Ireland, living in the boarding house.

Clark & Sons Tannery employed 50 or more men. Company records preserved by John McMurray show that much of what they earned (\$12 to \$16 per month in 1850) was spent at the company store, or at the company-owned boarding



Dunraven, New York, Toll Booth, Post Office and Store, 1917

A toll booth was erected at Clark's Factory to collect fares from travelers on the Ulster & Delaware Turnpike. It still stood when this photo postcard was produced in 1917. By then, the place had been renamed Dunraven.

house (25 cents a day). Some earned a bit more, depending on the job. One account ledger contains an 1844 agreement in which Michael Lane agreed to "take charge of the sweat pits at all times," for a year, to be paid \$19 a month.

HOW IT WORKED

This was miserable work. First, the hides were soaked to remove the salt in which they had been preserved through their long journey from South America. To loosen the hair, hides were soaked in a lime solution, and/or hung in damp air for several days ("sweating"). In the beam house, workers scraped away the hair and remaining fat. The actual tanning occurred in a series of vats filled with hot water and hemlock bark. Hides spent six months in the vats, whose contents were periodically refreshed with more water and bark. Sides of leather were then finished in a rolling mill.

This process required a lot of water, so a dam was constructed to hold back the Plattekill which could be diverted through a race and over a waterwheel that turned machinery such as bark mills, which ground the hemlock bark into uniform pieces.

Wood to heat the vat water was also used in large quantities. A stone chimney that once belched smoke from this process stood on the tannery site until about a decade ago, when its remains were taken down for safety reasons.

Since it took a cord of hemlock bark to cure ten hides, huge amounts of bark were harvested and area lumbermen and teamsters lined up to supply it. On April 27, 1852, Jesse Tompkins contracted with A. Clark and Son who agreed to pay him 10 shillings per cord to "peel from four to six hundred cords of hemlock tan bark on such places on Millbrook as A. Clark and Son may direct. The bark is to be peeled, piled and saved in a good and workmanlike manner and good and convenient roads made to draw said bark with a wagon. . . .

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this contract to be completed before the first day of October next." (Evidently the British monetary system was still used periodically even as late as the 1850s. However, an 1848 contract paid 'Elmendorf and Chamberlin' \$2 per cord for hemlock bark.)

Clark & Sons Tannery flourished through the Civil War, when leather was in high demand. It was still in operation in 1870, but it folded a few years later. The hemlocks in this area had been depleted and new technologies were being employed to cure leather.

The hamlet retained the name Clark's Factory until it was changed in 1890 to Dunraven. In her history of Margaretville, Ethel Bussy claims it was named for the Earl of Dunraven, an aristocratic moniker that gives no hint of the furious industry that had once taken place there. Mr. Clark's factory stood well into the 20th century, but was eventually torn down.

For more on the post-tannery history of Dunraven, visit our website, www.mtownhistory.org.

Sources used for this article: Original tannery records held by John McMurray; the Smith family genealogy, courtesy Barbara Moses; *The Catskills, From Wilderness to Woodstock* (Alf Evers); *Making Mountains: NYC and the Catskills*, and other research by David Stradling; Robert Steuding's *The Heart of the Catskills*; Pat Millen's *Bare Trees*; Ethel Bussy's *History and Stories of Margaretville and Surrounding Area*; "The Schultz Legacy" by Mary Ann VanBenschoten in the *Timeline* newsletter of the Terwilliger House Museum, Ellenville, Fall 2002; the *Catskill Mountain News*, June 28, 1929; and the US Census.



The sprawling Clark & Sons Tannery is shown in a photograph of an undated drawing. Now known as Dunraven, this area was once called Clark's Factory for the facility that so dominated this stretch of the Ulster & Delaware Turnpike. The house at right may be the former Myrtle Fairbairn home, which still stands, now surrounded by pine trees.

CLEARING THE CATSKILLS

Bark peeling employed hundreds of men during tanning's heyday – 1820-1870. The hemlocks were felled and their trunks stripped of the bark by gangs of men who often lived in shanties in the woods while they worked. The timber was sometimes used to make plank roads or to build structures. Dunraven sawmill owner Marcus Whitcomb reportedly sawed some of the fallen logs into lumber and rafted them to Philadelphia, "receiving some times the then fabulous price of \$6.50 per thousand feet," said the *CMN* of 1929.

Still, most of the stripped hemlocks were left to rot. Forest historian Michael Kudish estimates that as many as 70 million trees were cut down to satisfy the demands of dozens of tanneries in the Catskills. (In Margaretville alone there was a tannery at both ends of the village in 1869.) Entire mountainsides were denuded. This, and the damage to waterways caused by the dumping of lime- and tannin-polluted water into streams, left parts of the Catskills looking "like Sherman's march to the sea," as one writer put it. Deforestation also changed the nature of the Catskill forest, which is now largely made up of hardwood species that were able to take root once the hemlocks were gone.

UPRIGHT AT LAST



The toppled monument to Alex and Deborah Dean Austin, who died in 1861 and 1880, was ever so slowly returned to its original position in the Arkville Cemetery last fall. The laborious undertaking was actually accomplished over two days, with the multi-tiered foundation first leveled and secured, and then the VERY heavy monument hoisted into the newly grouted base. Wooden braces that have been supporting the stone this winter will be removed in the spring, when the restoration of some 25 other stones will commence. Pictured are Brian Wheaton, coordinator of the two-year cemetery project; Rudd Hubbell, Joe McKeon, Gary Atkin, Bill Stanton, Willa DeSilva, and, in the mini-excavator, Jim Campbell.

Cemetery Friends will meet March 19

All those interested in helping to repair, research or record local burial places are invited to a meeting of Friends of Middletown Cemeteries Saturday, March 19 at 10 a.m. at Fairview Public Library's Community Room. There are lots of projects that need doing and only a couple of them involve shovels and heavy lifting! Join us, and bring your suggestions for projects you'd like to see accomplished.



ART FOR A GOOD CAUSE – AND A GOOD TIME!



A bidder at HSM's fundraising art auction November 26 peruses one of 27 paintings offered for sale (right), while an upbeat group of artists (from left, Carol Steene, Oneida Hammond, Patrice Lorenz and Sumiko Patrone) enjoy the holiday spirit that was everywhere evident at the event. Members of the East Branch Delaware River Plein Air Painters offered half of the proceeds of their work to HSM, which will utilize the funds to install another historic marker somewhere in Middletown this year. The auction was held at The Commons, Margaretville.

Time & Time Again

HSM will sponsor an unusual photographic project this year that will show us how the past becomes the present.

Michael Musante, a photographer and an artist from Deposit, will produce "Time and Time Again," 12 photo collages assembled from old photographs or postcards of a scene, and contemporary photographs from the exact same perspective. The old and new photos are perfectly sized and aligned in the computer, one image is revealed through the other, creating a juxtaposition of old and new. Explains the artist, "It is a visual investigation into the effects and consequences of the passing of time."

The resulting images will be exhibited at a reception during HSM's Annual Meeting, to be held in October, date and location to be announced.

A grant to HSM from the Decentralization program of the New York State Council on the Arts, administered by the Roxbury Arts Group, will help make this project possible. The award will be presented at a ceremony Friday, Mar. 11 at 4:30 at RAG in Roxbury. Everyone is welcome!

HOME, SWEET WEBSITE

Have you visited our new online home? Designed by Joanie Merwin of Fleischmanns and constructed by CSM Internet Solutions of Bovina, the site was funded by HSM member contributions.

The only website devoted to the Town of Middletown and its history, www.mtownhistory.org includes dozens of photographs, capsule histories of nine communities, and a Features page where you can read about the Blind Poet of Arena, for example, or the Elliott Brothers of New Kingston who died in the Civil War.

Links to the searchable *Catskill Mountain News* 1902-1937, and other sites will be of interest to area history lovers.

Find out about coming HSM events and projects, and read *The Tin Horn*, a blog containing observations and discoveries like the 1847 Kingston *Freeman* article, found by Burr Hubbell, that offered a new explanation as to the naming of Bragg Hollow.

Use the "Contact Us" button to submit your own submissions to the *Tin Horn*, or to comment on anything else on the site.



Vols complete Sanford Cemetery inventory

An inventory of the Sanford Cemetery on County Route 6, Dunraven, has been completed and can be found on the Delaware County History and Genealogy website (www.dcnhistory.org, go to Cemetery Compilations).

Inscriptions from an estimated 300 monuments were copied by volunteers last summer. Tina Greene transcribed the hand-written entries into a list that can now be read by anyone anywhere with access to a computer.

The cemetery is still active and is maintained by the Sanford Cemetery Association. It contains burials dating back to 1803 (Nancy Grant, age 14). During the construction of the Pepacton Reservoir, the remains of an estimated 125 people were moved from Arena and other locations to this cemetery.

Thanks go out to Gary and Barb Atkins who spearheaded the effort; Jean Ackerley, Karen McMurray, Jean Dorman and Diane Galusha.

I'll Vote to That!

Bob and Carolyn Hubbell, and Lou and Bev Hamway (below) had a good time at the HSM Annual Meeting October 23, when balladeer Linda Russell (right) performed "Songs America Voted By," a lively romp through presidential campaigns of the past. The event was held at LaCabana Restaurant, Fleischmanns.



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REPRISE

THE 44¢ POST

THE 44¢ POST is an exclusive feature for members who receive *The Bridge* via e-mail. Because your newsletter requires no postage or label, you get an "extra"!



Wherever he is, Leo Korn must be smiling to see his name installed once again above the door to the men's clothing store he operated from 1927 through the 1940s. The Main Street, Margaretville storefront was recently opened as – what else – a men's clothing boutique by Jon and Tiffany Kalupa, who have a wholesale fashion business, The Avalon Group, in Manhattan. They found this stained glass window in the building and resurrected it in the doorway. Leo Korn, a cousin of Milton Berle, was a son of the locally famous Sam Korn, who ran a huge retail business in Arkville for more than 50

years. Leo opened his own haberdashery just before Christmas in 1927. His wife later had a women's clothing store in the shop next door (now Tone Locasto's jewelry store.) Howard Etts, Jr. recalls that as a kid he was paid a quarter by Leo Korn to polish the copper front of the store until it shone. The Kalupas, in an interview published in Watershedpost.com, said they named their store Reprise, because it is "a reimagining of what was once old, and is now new. Everyone connects on the essence of looking backward to find the future."

