BI-ANNUAL NEWSLETTER
ALBANY COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
PROSPECT
Ten Broeck Mansion, 9 Ten Broeck Place, Albany, NY 12210  518-436-9826 www.tenbroeckmansion.org

FALL 2016

Yes, Virginia, There is a Sinterklaas

When in 1897, the editors of The Sun answered eight-year-old Virginia O’Hanlon’s question with “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus,” in the interest of historic accuracy they should have added, “and, in fact, we created him right here in New York.

Descendant of Saint Nicholas and precursor to Santa Claus, the Dutch figure of Sinterklaas is little known outside of the Netherlands and former Dutch colonial centers such as New Amsterdam and Fort Orange. The Dutch version of St. Nicholas, dressed as a bishop and accompanied by his white horse Schimmel and evermore controversial helper Swarte Piet (Black Pete), comes to Amsterdam harbor by ship from Spain each November, performs good deeds and returns to Spain after his feast day of December 6. He has no connection with Christmas. But where did he come from?

The actual historical figure who gave rise to the St. Nicholas legends was born in Asia Minor (now Turkey) around 271 CE. He became the bishop of Myra, supposedly gave away his parents’ wealth to the poor, and attended the most important gathering of the early Christian Church, the Council of Nicea. He has been credited with many miracles and legends. This Eastern Church prelate was accepted as a saint by both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

The problem in knowing anything for certain about St. Nicholas is that the first surviving biography of Nicholas dates to around 700 CE, more than three centuries after his death and this biography has been shown to have been plagiarized from a much earlier story of a pagan philosopher.

Nicholas became the patron saint of sailors, children, the countries of Greece and Russia, and the cities of Moscow and Amsterdam. By the time Saint (or Sint in Dutch) Nicholas became Sinterklaas, he had developed a new routine far from his Asia Minor roots. Besides residing most of the year in Spain and doing his travelling by boat and white horse, this version of St. Nicholas traded in the devil-like, disciplinarian companion variously known as Krampus, Peltznickel, and Knecht Ruprect, across most of Europe for a young Moorish helper. Swarte Piet was originally portrayed as a handsome pantaloon-dressed assistant, but soon after this mid-19th century depiction, he was redrawn as a derogatory stereotype with fright-wig afro, gold hooped earing, and exaggerated bright red lips. He is quickly retired in the Netherlands as more and more protests have risen in recent years.

On Saint Nicholas Eve (December 5), Dutch families feast and celebrate with poems, songs and often small or gag gifts, after which the children put out shoes filled with treats for Schimmel. In the morning, the hay and carrots are gone, replaced with candy and nuts, and in more recent times, presents for the children. Sinterklaas has nothing to do with Christmas.

Sinterklaas begins to morph into Santa Claus in late 18th century America. In James Rivington’s New York Gazeteer on December 23, 1773, we find the phrase “St. a Claus” when referring to a celebration of the feast day of Saint Nicholas held by some Dutch descendants in New York City. Many think Rivington was trying to approximate the Dutch “Sinterklaas.” In 1809, on Saint Nicholas’s feast day, Washington Irving published his book Dietrich Knickerbocker’s History of New York. This humorous caressing parody of the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam is full of Saint Nicholas. In a dream, Nicholas tells the sage Oloff van Kortlandt where to build the new city and gives him the sign of St. Nicholas, laying a finger beside his nose and winking with one eye. And this section appears, “At this early period was instituted that pious ceremony, still religiously observed in all our ancient families of the right breed, of hanging up a stocking in the chimney on St. Nicholas Eve; which stocking is always found in the morning miraculously filled; for the good St. Nicholas has ever been a great giver of gifts, particularly to children.” A year earlier, Irving had actually referred to Saint Nicholas as “vulgarly called Santaclaus” in his magazine Salmagundi.

The slow creation of a new entity continues. In 1821, “The Children’s Friend” is published anonymously in New York City and begins, “Old Santeclaus with much delight, /His reindeer drives the frosty night.” But this poem was specifically intended as a New Year’s gift.

There was still no connection between Saint Nicholas/Santa Claus and Christmas. The image of a roly-poly Dutch burger piloting a flying reindeer sleigh is emerging, and in 1823, a poem entitled “A Visit from Saint Nicholas” (we know it as “The Night before Christmas”) appears in the Troy Sentinel. Finally, Saint Nicholas/Sinterklaas has been wrenched from his own feast day and attached to Christmas. Then, all it took were some cartoons from Thomas Nast in the mid-19th century and some advertising from Coca-Cola in the 1930s and Santa Claus and Christmas conquered America and the world.

Karl Felsen

Captivated by Sinterklaas after reading this fascinating history? You can learn more and even meet the legend in person at our various Holiday House events beginning in December. There will also be live music, teas, lectures, a children’s story house and yes, visits from Sinterklaas himself. See back page for list of upcoming events or visit our website.

Left, Illustration from Dutch children’s book Sint Nikolaas en zijn Knecht ("Saint Nicholas and his Servant"), written by Jan Schenkman in 1850. Top, ACHA’s own Sinterklaas portrayed by Karl Felsen
Executive Director’s Corner

I am so pleased to share the exciting news with you, ACHA’s 2016 tour season has been the busiest in years! We welcomed over fifteen hundred people to the Ten Broeck Mansion, many of them visiting for the very first time!

In addition to our scheduled events, the Mansion is open for guided tours every Thursday through Sunday, from May until October. That’s a lot of tours to give! Luckily we have an incredible team of volunteer docents, without whom we would not be able to operate such an extensive tour season. These individuals gave their time to learn the history of the Mansion inside and out and share that information with our many visitors.

On behalf of the TBM staff and Board of Trustees, I’d like to extend our deepest appreciation to our wonderful Docents: Erika Adams, Wendy Burch, Dorothy Davila, Paul Hemmings, Aaron Holbritter, Trudy Hutchinson, Bill Johnson, Lydia Nightengale, and Suzanne Waltz

Jillian Altenburg

Something New Growing in the Garden

If you’ve been in our gardens recently, you may have noticed two raised flower beds in the southeast corner of the grounds bursting with color and marked by two hand-painted butterfly houses. The Mansion is proud to present our new Children’s Garden!

This summer, Ten Broeck Mansion hosted a youth gardening program in collaboration with the Trinity Alliance Arbor Hill Community Center and Master Gardener volunteers Christine Saplin, Edward Noel Wilson and Pat Godlewski from the Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE). Campers from the Center, ages 8-12, visited us once a week for five weeks, built the bed frames, transported the soil to fill them and planted a variety of flowers and vegetables. When asked why she volunteers for programs like this, Ms. Saplin said that, “it gives me the opportunity to use gardening as a vehicle for teaching young people about the world they live in, the foods they eat and their roles in their community.”

The CCE teaching team spent time with the campers at the Center, preparing them for each garden session with lessons on basic botany and plenty of tasting things that grow in the ground. After sampling some beets, one participant said, “they were chopped up and looked like cranberry sauce from Thanksgiving.” Honesty was encouraged and another participant commented, “the radishes were a bit spicy and I wasn’t a fan of them.” After a brief discussion at home base each week, the campers made their way to the Mansion for some hands-on garden work.

In addition to creating and caring for the beds, the kids got an introduction to the history of Ten Broeck.
Meet our Intern

Name: Kathryn Christensen
Hometown: Clifton Park, NY
Current Enrollment: Double major in History and Asian Studies at SUNY New Paltz
Intern Project: Create a school field trip tour package that aligns with common core standards to bring elementary students to the Ten Broeck Mansion.

Here’s what Kathryn had to say about her time at ACHA:

I was so excited to have the opportunity to have an internship at such an amazing historical landmark, and found the experience to be extremely valuable. Looking back, my project was very much a journey, and an incredible one at that! I started out with an empty slate, and dove straight into researching and accumulating information. I did not only historical research, but also spent time getting familiar with different teaching strategies and common core standards. I also went out and observed other programs used at museums, such as Historic Cherry Hill, which I got to go see in action at the Albany Visitor’s Center.

After I gathered all my information together, I settled on a plan to have an interactive tour with little “pit stops” of interactive lessons in the mansion that connected with the common core standards. Lesson one focused on voting rights during the time the Ten Broecks lived there, lesson two on gender roles, and lesson three on slavery within Albany during the turn of the 18th century. I put a lot of thought into each of these, making sure that they did not just correlate with the common core standards, but also would be engaging and interesting for the students.

I found the experience to be not just enjoyable, but also a great way to hone in on my research skills that will hopefully help me as I continue with my schooling. I am currently considering graduate school after graduation; perhaps going straight for a PhD. I am also considering taking a bit of a break before continuing in my education, and teaching English overseas for a while. No matter where I choose to go, I know for sure that the things I learned at my internship here at the Ten Broeck Mansion will help me. Most importantly, I gained an experience and memories that will last a lifetime.

Call to the Public for Help in Curating our New Exhibit Rooms

The Ten Broeck Mansion is seeking donations of several furniture and decorative arts items from a range of time periods and styles to fill the Olcott Dining Room and two bedrooms upstairs. If you have a relevant piece you’d like to see immortalized in a museum, please visit our website or Facebook page or email jillian@tenbroeckmansion.org for more information and specifications.

In Memorium

In many ways the past few years were full of triumphs for the Albany County Historical Association. Unfortunately we were also met with the loss of several of our good friends, people critical to the organization and committed to history, education and philanthropy. The memory of these generous patrons live on at Ten Broeck Mansion, and we’d like to take a moment to acknowledge them.

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ACHA Welcomes Its Newest Hire

Dave Altenburg, formerly Big Boy, comes to us from Jackson, TN. After recovering from a long trip in Companion Pet Rescue’s transport van and some residual heartworm disease, Dave is settling into his new position very nicely. His specialty is looking cute and soliciting belly rubs. During his time at ACHA he will be responsible for entertaining visitors to King’s Place and keeping the staff company while they toil away. Dave is delighted to be on board and wants people to know his favorite treat is Beggin Strips.

ASK ACHA

Welcome to our feature where we answer our readers’ most pressing questions about Albany County History. This week our subject is a timeless one.

Q: What gardening activities can I involve a young gardener in during the fall?

As the air chills, leaves fall and the colors in the garden turn to yellow and brown, there are still many opportunities for gardening. Even if you have been working on “putting your garden to bed” autumn can still provide you with interesting gardening adventures to share with young gardeners.

A wonderful way to note the change of season and the natural progression of things in the garden is to keep a journal of drawings and/or pictures of things observed in nature. A simple journal can be created from a single sheet of paper. Folded in half and then in half again. Pages can be used to list or draw things seen, heard, touched, smelled and tasted.

Take a walk through the beautiful gardens at Ten Broeck Mansion or in your own garden at home. A young gardener can learn about the difference between an annual and a perennial. Use your senses to observe what is happening. What are the birds doing? Can you identify the song of the chickadee? Have the plants set seeds to ensure that they will return in the spring? Can you hear the geese in flight to a warmer climate? Is the leaf of the Lamb’s Ear still soft and fuzzy? Crush a mint leaf between your fingers, describe its scent.

Raking up leaves? Observe their shape. Collect some of the colorful sugar maple leaves and press the leaves between two sheets of wax paper to preserve them. Leaves can lead to discussions about composting or mulching.

As winter nears, the plants are focusing their energy on producing and distributing their seeds. Those seeds are the promise of more plants in the following growing season. Collect some seeds and observe their shapes. Does the shape of the seed give you a hint about how the seed travels? Who helps them? The wind, birds, people, pets? On a walk thru the garden, collect various seed pods, such as milkweed, and pine cones. This collection could be used to create a collage or even a mobile.

Plan for the future and plant some daffodils, crocus or tulips that will grow in the spring. The young gardener can learn that each bulb provides enough food for the plant to grow and blossom. If you have some space in the garden, plant a patch of spring bulbs to delight a young gardener in the spring. Or, if you do not have the garden space, plant some bulbs in a container and “force” them to blossom during the late winter months when all of us are anxious for beauty and promise of spring.

If it is rainy and cold, find a cozy place and read a book about a garden or a gardener!

Answer generously provided by Christine Saplin, Master Gardener with the Cornell Cooperative Extension.

If you have a question pertaining to the Ten Broeck Mansion or Albany County History please email sarah@tenbroeckmansion.org. One question will be selected and answered in our next newsletter.
Help Us Preserve a Rich Heritage

The Albany County Historical Association (ACHA) is a private non-profit chartered in 1942. ACHA’s mission is to preserve, present, and promote the rich history and culture of Albany County. Membership proceeds go towards educational programming and preservation of the historic Ten Broeck Mansion.

Membership Application

We cordially invite you to join the ACHA and enjoy the many benefits of membership, including free admission for Mansion tours and lectures, newsletters and advance notice of upcoming events, discounted ticket prices to a variety of events, and much more! Please visit our website for complete membership opportunities—www.tenbroeckmansion.org.

- Student $25
- ACHA Partners $25
- Individual $40
- Family $50
- Patron $100
- Sustaining $250
- Benefactor $500

Membership: NEW ( ) RENEWAL ( ) Amount Enclosed: ____

Name: ____________________________ Email: ____________________________ Phone: ____________________________

Address: __________________________ City: ____________________________ State: ______ Zip: ____________

Make checks payable to Albany County Historical Association, 9 Ten Broeck Place Albany, NY 12210

Follow us on Facebook and Instagram @tenbroeckmansion to stay updated on ACHA and Mansion news and events!