Albany Ablaze: A History of Fires Related to Ten Broeck Mansion

Smoke billowed from the basement of the Ten Broeck Mansion. The firemasters of Albany rushed into the house quickly dousing the flames. Smoke had traveled through the halls of the federal style home leaving an acrid scent in its wake. No, this fire did not happen in the late eighteenth century — it happened only two months ago. In the early morning of January 26, 2016, the Ten Broeck Mansion alarm system sounded. The source of the fire was a sump pump with a faulty wire located in the basement. Some stored ceiling tiles were ignited by the flames and soon the entire Mansion was filled with smoke. Luckily, the fire was contained by the Albany Fire Department.

Initially, the firefighters aired out the mansion by opening doors and windows and setting up large fans, but there was some trepidation that soot had seeped into items like rugs and draperies. Conservation experts from the Albany Institute of History and Art, Cooper Hewitt, the City Museum of New York, and the Williamstown Art Conservation Center were all consulted and the fire remediation company TechEast was hired. In order to purify the air, Hydroxyl generators and Activated Carbon generators were used throughout the mansion. By February 1st, the smell of smoke had completely dissipated. Thanks to the response of the firefighters and conservation experts, the Ten Broeck Valentine’s Day Dinner took place as scheduled.

The recent basement fire was not the first fire the Ten Broeck Mansion, or even the Ten Broeck family, had experienced. On Sunday, November 17, 1793, the inhabitants of Albany were “awakened by the alarming cry of fire.” The fire had broken out in the stable of Leonard Gansevoort, and it quickly spread to the buildings on the block of Market Street. The following month on December 31, 1793, Dirck Ten Broeck, the only son of Abraham Ten Broeck and Elizabeth Van Rensselaer, was named to a committee of the Albany Common Council to “report to this Board the most Expedient method to Supply this City with water.”

On August 4, 1797, a devastating fire consumed the North End of Albany. The 1797 fire destroyed 50 homes, including the original Ten Broeck home. According to an account published in the Albany Centinel, the fire began in a stable of widow A. Bradt on Montgomery Street. It destroyed “the very elegant, large brick dwellinghouse, storehouse, stable and other buildings belonging to Abraham Ten Broeck, Esq. Mayor of the city, occupied by him,” which had been located on Columbia Street. It was this event that prompted the subsequent construction of the Ten Broeck Mansion.

More recently, a fire broke out in the chimney of the rear parlor of the Ten Broeck Mansion in 1948. In the postwar years, Douglas Olcott, a descendant of Thomas Worth Olcott, owned the mansion. Olcott was the President of the Mechanics and Farmers’ Bank and offered one of his employees, Russell Johnson, the Ten Broeck Mansion as a place to live. From the fall of 1947 to the spring of 1948, the Johnson family, and two other families resided at the mansion. One evening in February, Russell and Marion Johnson attended a Valentine’s dance at the Aurania Club on South Allen Street. Nearby neighbors and the Johnson Family watched Albany firefighters haul their firehoses to the third floor of the mansion. They extinguished the fire with no resulting damage. In that same year, 1948, the mansion was presented to the Albany County Historical Association — and renamed the Ten Broeck Mansion.

ACHA Trustee Worth Gretter recently attended the 225th birthday celebration for the Albany Institute of History and Art where he ran into Mayor Kathy Sheehan. He thanked her for the fire department’s quick response, and Mayor Sheehan reported that Fire Chief Warren Abriel, Jr. had contacted her immediately after the fire was out. The fire chief felt the need to tell the mayor of the fire right away because of the Mansion’s importance as an historical landmark. The Albany County Historical Association is deeply grateful that Mayor Sheehan and Chief Abriel appreciate the Ten Broeck Mansion — its history and its place in the Arbor Hill neighborhood — as much as we do.

Hannah Gillis
Executive Director’s Corner

AS I PAUSE TO TAKE A BREATH DURING AN ALREADY WHIRLWIND 2016, I’d like to take a moment to thank all of our dedicated volunteers. Thanks to your time and expertise, the Mansion was able to quickly recover after the harrowing close call of the February fire. I would especially like to thank ACHA Trustee, Worth Grettet, who spent hours cleaning and securing the Mansion the day of, the Building and Grounds committee for their tireless planning for prevention of future catastrophes, and the Albany Fire Department for their swift response.

I can’t help but imagine what could have become of our beloved 1798 Ten Broeck Mansion if we weren’t so fortunate. Just days after the fire we were able to host a successful Valentine’s Dinner and served over 45 people a delectable six-course meal in the Mansion’s elegant parlors. Following that we had a packed lecture by Dr. Susan Goodier on the Women’s Anti-Suffrage Movement and a sold out History Happy Hour where a few lucky riddle solvers got the chance to leave their mark on the Mansion by autographing the 2nd floor bedroom wall before wallpapering is complete.

We have an exciting schedule of events planned for this spring and summer, including our free annual Living History Day on May 1, a Murder Mystery Dinner theater on May 20, and the always popular Garden Talks and Teas throughout the summer. This July will also mark the completion of major renovations at the Mansion, and the reinterpretation of two rooms on the second floor. I invite you to stop by for a tour and see the exciting progress we’ve made or go to our website, www.tenbroeckmansion.org, for a calendar of events. I look forward to seeing you and showing off the beautiful Ten Broeck Mansion.

Jillian Altenburg
jillian@tenbroeckmansion.org

New Hire

GREETINGS! My name is Sarah Johnson and I’m thrilled to introduce myself as the new Education Coordinator here at the Ten Broeck Mansion.

A bit about me: I grew up right here in the heart of Albany and was lucky enough to have parents who instilled in me a deep appreciation for the historical significance of the area. As a child I spent many hours happily roaming the corridors of the Albany Institute and the New York State Museum. After quite a bit of traveling around after college, I moved to New York City where I received my master’s degree in elementary education from Teachers College, Columbia University in 2008. I spent the next seven years teaching 4th grade at a public school in Manhattan and then pre-K at a Montessori School in Brooklyn. After nearly a decade in the Big Apple, my husband and I decided to make the move back upstate and a sold out History Happy Hour where a few lucky riddle solvers got the chance to leave their mark on the Mansion.

In the meantime, I am thoroughly enjoying learning the fascinating history of this beautiful site and the surrounding neighborhood. I am very honored to have this position and look forward to meeting and working with you.

Please feel free to contact me anytime at sarah@tenbroeckmansion.org.

In Memoriam: Albert Zeppieri

ACHA IS SADDENED to announce that long time Trustee and volunteer, Al Zeppieri, passed away on March 27, 2016. He was a steadfast member of the Collections Committee, deeply engaged in collections and preservation work. He underwrote the annual performance of the Madrigals for our Holiday House festivities. He held numerous fundraisers for ACHA and his fundraising and influence in the community resulted in the acquisition of the piano in the front parlor as well as the gold chairs that we routinely use for our meetings and events. He also brought many friends to our organization, who have generously supported the ACHA with time, talent and treasure.

Al’s passing is our loss.

Dr. Jennifer Dorsey, Ph.D.
Ask ACHA
Welcome to our new feature where we answer our readers’ most pressing questions about Albany County history!

Q: The Ten Broeck Mansion recently experienced a fire and hired a professional restoration team. I have a lot of valuable historic objects in my own home. What advice would you give to someone for salvaging these items after a similar incident?

A: In many ways Ten Broeck Mansion was a good case study on what to do once the fire is put out and the fire department gives the ‘all clear.’

* Assess the situation. What was damaged, how much was damaged, how was it damaged? Take pictures.
* Call the insurance company and discuss the scope of the incident. In some cases your agent will help plan a path forward.
* Call in the specialists to assess and abate the damage. Partner with a fire restoration company. Contact art conservators to assess personal collections. This step is time sensitive!

Thankfully the collections in the Ten Broeck Mansion were not exposed to heat or sustained water damage. However, smoke and soot migrated throughout the interior. Staff knew that they needed to plan for professionals to arrive quickly in order to have soot removed from architectural and household items.

Soot is an oily, carbon based material made up of incomplete combustion materials. It consists of finely divided particles that ranging in size from the small, yet visible, to the molecular sized. Due to the fineness of the particles, it is dispersed and is found deposited on all surfaces after a fire event. Soot binds readily to porous surfaces with time and/or any pressure. Therefore the length of time soot is left in contact and whether surfaces are touched influences the outcome of the cleaning process.

A fire restoration company helped with absorbing the odor that pervaded the house while Williamstown Art Conservation Center conservators moved through the affected areas of the Mansion and reduced/removed soot with on decorative art objects using dry methods. This included vulcanized rubber ‘soot sponges’ and closed-cell cosmetic sponges rolled and wiped over surfaces. Textiles were methodically vacuumed with low suction.

Answer generously provided by Gretchen Guidess of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center
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.

Meet our Intern

Name: Marta Kelly
Hometown: Greenville, NY
Current Enrollment: Dual Master’s degree in History and Information Science at the University at Albany
Intern project: researching and designing “Lions to the Front: Selected objects on Women’s History and Women’s Suffrage from Albany County Historical Association,” a public exhibit now on view at King’s Place Gallery.
Favorite Milkshake Flavor: Chocolate

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

I began the project by searching ACHA’s collections for items relevant to women’s history and began to build the exhibit around what I had found. After that, I examined those items and restructured the exhibit from an initial focus on Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s relationship to the Ten Broeck family to centering around the fight for suffrage in the local Albany area, since that was more along the lines of the story the artifacts were telling. Once I had the basic outline for the exhibit in place, I reached out to other museums and historians in the area to see if they had artifacts that would fit into the exhibit. We received some photographs from a 1914 Albany suffrage parade from Kevin Franklin, the Colonic Town Historian. A trip to the State Archives got us a digital image of a pro-suffrage handbill presented to then Governor-Elect William Sulzer at the end of the 1912 Suffrage Hike from New York City to Albany.

As the preview for the exhibit grew closer, I was also part of planning the layout and assembling the item displays, as well as mounting the item text. During the preview event, which opened alongside a lecture on the anti-suffrage movement by historian Susan Goodier, I was in the exhibit room, ready to answer any questions people had.

Overall, I’m very grateful that I got to have the opportunity to work at Ten Broeck Mansion. I think that it has not only been a positive experience, but that it also gave me a taste of a lot of the skills I’ll need and tasks I’ll need to be able to do if I choose to continue on in this field.

The exhibit will be open to the public May through July, 2016 on Thursdays and Fridays from 12-3pm at King’s Place Gallery – 29 North Swan St.

Upcoming Events:
Friday May 20, 6:30pm - Murder Mystery Dinner Theater at the University Club
Saturday June 4, 10am - Quarterly Meeting of the Albany County History Collaborative at Ten Broeck Mansion
Thursday, June 9, 4:30pm - ACHA Annual Meeting
July 11-14 - Annual Archeology Camp
August 5-7, & 11-4 - Theater in the Gardens, “A Comedy of Errors,” presented by Confetti Stage.

To find more information on events and purchase tickets go to our website.

Photo Contest
Spring is finally here! And history in Albany County is always all around us. Do you have a photo that captures both? We’d like to see it. Post your best Albany County History in Spring shot on Facebook or Instagram and tag us and hashtag #spring-into-history. Make sure to follow us and we’ll select a few winners to share on our page. The lucky photographers will receive a free year membership and tour of the Ten Broeck Mansion. Follow us on and @tenbroeckmansion.
HELP US PRESERVE A RICH HERITAGE

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

We cordially invite you to join ACHA and enjoy the benefits of membership, including free admission to the Mansion, newsletters and advance notice of upcoming events. Please visit our website for complete membership opportunities.

Name: ___________________________ Email: ___________________________
Address: ___________________________ Phone: ___________________________

Membership: NEW (   ) RENEWAL (   ) Amount Enclosed $ ________________

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

CORPORATE MEMBERSHIPS

- Corporate $ 200.00

Complimentary use of Mansion for 6 hours. *reservations required

Make checks payable to: ALBANY COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
Ten Broeck Mansion, 9 Ten Broeck Place, Albany NY 12210