A Brief History of the Broome County Historical Society

Today an upscale restaurant occupies the first floor of the old brick building at 99 Court Street in Binghamton. The upper floors have been remodeled and converted into loft apartments.

It was in this building nearly 100 years ago that a meeting took place. It was an historic meeting in more ways than one. The year was 1919, at that time the building was home to Alfred Lord’s clothing store and this was to be the first meeting of the newly incorporated Broome County Historical Society.

Little is known about the earliest years of the Historical Society, except that soon after that first meeting the organization fell dormant. 20 years later it was revived only to decline again.

Finally, in the 1950’s the Historical Society found its mission – it was off and running with purpose and a new intensity. A newsletter was proposed, and in June of 1953 the first issue of the Bulletin appeared. It carried a message from the president of the organization, Rollin L. Twining, to “please tell your friends about our objectives and invite them to become one of us.”

The friends listened. Since that first issue, the Bulletin has been published continuously for 62 years and today reaches an audience of over 800 followers of the Broome County Historical Society, including 400 members. Collections have continued to grow and currently consist of over 200,000 artifacts including 80,000 photographs. Attendance at monthly programs exceeds capacity, and the History & Genealogy Center attracts 20,000 visitors each year.

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A Brief History of the Broome County Historical Society


By Roger Luther

In 1969, the 50th anniversary of the Broome County Historical Society, an article appeared in the Bulletin detailing the history of the organization. As reported by then Board member, Dr. Clement G. Bowers, “the Broome County Historical Society, Inc., was organized during the summer of 1919 and subsequently incorporated. Its membership did not consist of over twenty-five or thirty men. The first meeting was held in the store of Alfred Lord (A.A. Lord & Son, a men’s clothing shop) on Court Street in Binghamton. The corporation did not acquire any property. No by-laws were adopted by the corporation, and membership was open to citizens having an interest in historical matters pertaining to Broome County.”

As stated in the certificate of incorporation, the purpose of the society was “to maintain and furnish (a) reading room, books, papers and magazines and clean entertainment, such as debates, mock trials, lectures on historic subjects, etc., and to study the history of Broome County, to preserve stories, legends, etc., of local interest, and to acquire and preserve landmarks of historic interest and to keep burning the fires of patriotism.”

Very little is known of these earliest years of the society. There is no record of activities or programs, and no indication of membership other than Lord and the original five incorporators. Meetings soon ceased being held and the Historical Society fell dormant.

Twenty years later, with only one of the original five incorporators still living, it was decided to reactivate the society. The first meeting of the revived Broome County Historical Society was held in the Broome County Courthouse and a Board of Directors was elected on April 18, 1939.

As Bowers reports, “The enlarged purposes and powers of the Corporation were made to include the following:

1- To promote and encourage original historical research in Broome County and vicinity.
2- To disseminate a greater knowledge of the history of Broome County and vicinity by means of lectures, meetings, addresses and the publication and distribution of literature on historical subjects.
3- To gather, own and hold books, manuscripts, maps, pictures and relics relating to the history of Broome County and vicinity, and to maintain a library and museum for their preservation.
4- To mark in a proper manner places of historic interest.
5- To acquire and hold for the purposes of inclosure (sic), preservation and the erection of monuments, but not for business purposes, the sites of old forts and battlegrounds, not exceeding six acres in any one locality.
6- To receive donations of articles of historic interest on the condition that this corporation shall not dispose of the same except with the consent of the donor, and that in case of dissolution of this corporation or inability to pay its debts otherwise than from its effects, such articles shall revert to the donors or their heirs.

7- To acquire by purchase, gift, devise or otherwise the title to or custody and control of historic spots and places, together with land and buildings for the purpose of the corporation, with power to manage, sell and mortgage the same for such purposes.

8- To acquire by purchase, gift, bequest or otherwise money or property for the use of the corporation in carrying on its purposes.”

Much of the society’s early activity centered around archeological research resulting from recent discoveries of Indian artifacts near the mouth of Castle Creek in the town of Chenango.

Bowers reports that several members made substantial contributions to support the society’s activities, and “additional aid was given by Broome County, which assisted in kind by furnishing storage space and display facilities in the Court House.”

Although few meetings were held, much was accomplished by the Society over the next few years. Most significant was the establishment in 1942 of the Historical Society museum which filled three rooms on the top floor of the County Court House. As described by then receptionist Maude C. Zimmerman, “Not only the fine display of Indian relics and the lovely pieces of furniture, silver, glass and other articles from the Joshua Whitney home and family, but innumerable other objects are here to inform and interest. In addition to linens made from flax grown locally, beautiful china dating back two centuries, period articles of dress and furniture, there are many individual pieces associated with persons of local and national interest. For instance – the old cradle in which Daniel S. Dickinson was rocked, the Civil War uniform of General Edward F. Jones, and among John Broome relics, the yellow-white handkerchief carried as a flag of truce in the Battle of New Orleans.”

Unfortunately, the level of activity would not continue. As Bowers stated, “World War II and its aftermath absorbed so much of the time and attention of the whole community that matters pertaining to past history were greatly curtailed insofar as the organization was concerned. Annual meetings were held, usually attended by relatively few members, and after the war there were a few special events. But aside from the operations of some individuals who were especially interested in certain projects, such as the Indian collections and the assembling of local antiquities for a museum which was being given temporary housing and storage in the upper floor of the Court House, there was not a great deal of activity during the post-war period.”

Eventually, however, “people began to talk about a new home for Binghamton’s two cultural collections – the art gallery, housed in the upper floor of the Public Library, and the Historical collections which the Society was storaging (sic) in the Court House attic. Beginning to recover from its wartime lethargy, it was quite obvious that a time had now come for a revival of activity on the part of the Historical Society. Such a renewal of vigor was to come in the early 1950’s.”
That “renewal of vigor” was due primarily to the efforts of two men, Broome County Clerk William E. Flook and a local portrait photographer Foster Disinger. As Society member Jefferson Meagher recalled in a 1969 tribute to Flook and Disinger following their recent passing, “with each man, an interest in local history, which started as an avocation, became a life-long passion. At first sight (they) seemed to have nothing in common, yet their concern for local history drew them together with magnetic force and the merger of their energies produced for our community its Historical Society.”

In June, 1953, the first issue of the Broome County Historical Society newsletter, the Bulletin, appeared. In August of that year following the death of Margaret Roberson, the Roberson Mansion and Estate was released for development as an educational center as specified in the will of her late husband Alonzo Roberson. The following year the Board of Directors “Resolved, that the Broome County Historical Society, Inc. move its physical properties and functions to the facilities of the Roberson Memorial, Inc. with purpose of integrating its activities with the program of the Roberson Educational Center.”

Since opening at the Court House twelve years earlier, the museum had attracted more than 25,300 visitors. It closed in December 1953, in preparation for a move to its new home at the Roberson Center on Front Street.

Meetings of the Historical Society Board of Directors were now held at the Roberson Center.

Past president of the society Foster Disinger set up the museum. One room was devoted to Castle Creek Indian artifacts, Joshua Whitney and Daniel Dickinson collections filled a second room, and a “Broome County Room” was filled with collections of military, Fire Department and other material. Disinger then turned his attention to creating elaborate dioramas depicting a French and Indian War fort at Onoquaga, Iroquois longhouses and a fortified Owasco village.

Historical Society activity picked up immediately and steadily increased over subsequent years. Several programs were presented at the new Roberson Center and in 1957 a schedule was established to present “a series of brilliantly conceived seminars” to be presented on the third Wednesday of each month. There were workshops and field trips as well, in the form of bus tours, or “Seminars on Wheels,” exploring historic properties throughout Broome and Tioga Counties, and walking tours in Downtown Binghamton.

In his 1969 tribute to Flook and Disinger on the occasion of the society’s 50th anniversary, Jefferson Meagher stated “most institutions are the long shadow of a single strong personality. Our Historical Society in its 50th year casts the shadows of two founders, responsible for its renaissance 30 years ago. They labored together to give us our heritage and find it a home. No finer memorial for them could be conceived than continued devotion by their successors in the Society to the great vision which drove them, year in and year out, to collect and preserve the story of how people live and have lived among our hills and along our lovely river valleys.”
Binghamton’s Early NAACP – A New Look

By Richard White

In 1924, the Binghamton Press asked over 20 local leaders to identify the top events to occur in the city in the last 20 years. In its April 14 issue, Rev. Alexander Carroll, Pastor of the A.M.E. Zion Church, made three selections. One of his choices was “the advent of the [local NAACP], which stands out as a promising medium for the promotion of a better understanding between the two races….” Recent research reveals that this “advent” occurred earlier than previously thought.

While the parent NAACP was organized in 1909, the exact date of the local chapter’s founding is uncertain. The earliest reference in the Press appeared on June 5, 1919—approximately 10 years before the commonly accepted date—apparently after the chapter formed. The brief article does not name its officers but simply read, “the Binghamton branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People will hold a meeting in Zion A. M. E. Church tonight.” There was no follow-up article or editorial in the newspaper, and there were no other local newspapers at the time to provide additional data.

What factors contributed to the founding of a local NAACP? Certainly it was the national organization’s vigorous, and inspiring, fight for racial justice, and its struggle for the adoption of federal anti-lynching legislation. A second factor was the need in Binghamton for a new civil rights entity to replace the faded, if not defunct, Colored Civic League. This was an activist organization formed in 1912 by Fred C. Hazel (who will emerge in the late 1920’s as the branch’s next President). A prime goal of the League was the improvement of the local racial climate. For example, in early 1916, it forcefully but unsuccessfully tried to prevent the showing of the movie, “Birth of a Nation,” part of which portrayed the KKK favorably.

In early 1922, the local branch’s President was Leonard L. Thomas and its Secretary was Miss Marie Hazel. On February 21, the Press named these two officials in an article on the branch’s “special meeting” scheduled for February 26 in the Carroll Street School to awaken “the general interest in the community in the efforts of the society to improve the condition of the race.” In addition, the meeting was called to “celebrate the passage” of anti-lynching legislation recently adopted in the House of Representatives.

Thomas had been a civil rights activist since 1900 when he helped organize the city’s observance of the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. In April, 1912, he was elected as Secretary of Binghamton’s Colored Civic League. Later in 1912, he won the post of Secretary of the Broome County Colored Progressives whose goals included the reversal of Jim Crow laws across the nation. In late 1921, Thomas was Secretary of the Emancipation Day Committee for which W. E. B. DuBois spoke in early 1922.
The Spring of 1922 was eventful. At St Paul’s A.M.E. church in April, Rev. T. H. Lawrence addressed an audience with a speech entitled, “Justice To The Negro: The Test of Christianity in America” which was requested by the local branch. At its meeting the following month, the stagnant membership roll was an issue.

To garner support, nationally renowned orator, Mrs. Mary B. Talbert, was invited to speak at the A.M.E. Zion Church on May 2. The day after, the Morning Sun quoted the church’s pastor, Rev. William C. Anderson, as saying that her address was about the value of good citizenship, and additionally “was a spark that would spread into a great fire” to ignite interest in branch’s membership. But there is no information on the immediate impact of Talbert’s oration.

Thomas was still President in 1924 when enrollment figures were low. Once again, a notable guest was invited to speak. William Pickens, the NAACP’s Field Secretary spoke on the local chapter’s needs at the Colored Citizens’ Hall on January, 9. Two days later, the Sun observed that in his address, Pickens “endeavored to interest white and colored people of this city to join the association.” Instead, it appears that Binghamton’s first national chapter for racial equality became low key, if not inactive, until it was resurrected in the late 1920’s by the founder of the Colored Civic League, Fred C. Hazel.

Shortly before Pickens’ speech, Thomas expressed his dream for America. According to the Press on January 7, he called it “the readjustment of the national life.” This quote aptly expresses a chief goal of the NAACP then and now.
Now you can get daily Tweets of Binghamton news items from 100 Years Ago Today.

Twitter.com #100yearsagotoday

100 Years Ago Today
Accessing 30 million pages of on-line newspaper articles at fultonhistory.com opens myriad possibilities. For instance, by entering today’s date one hundred years ago, you can read the local newspapers as they appeared on that date.

Following are a few interesting items from local newspapers during Spring and Summer of 1915:

- July 23: Hiram Goldsmith, ardent admirer of George F. Johnson, asks people of Lestershire to change name of community to “Johnson.”
- July 9: Worst July flood visits City; police and firemen rescue many. Area threatened with flood never before equaled in July.
- June 28: AME Zion Church protests prejudice against colored people, unjust discrimination shown by those in power.
- June 26: Binghamton’s growth in the next five years will smash all records.
- June 16: Binghamton hotels charged with violation of liquor law. Christian Society bought whiskey on Sunday.
- June 5: Endicott, Johnson and Company receives army orders for 2,000,000 pairs of shoes.
- April 25: Telephone conversation over 63 miles between Binghamton and Scranton sets new distance record for wireless telephony.
- April 13: Cigar firm plans addition. Binghamton now shipping 150,000,000 cigars a year.
- April 10: $5 reward for 50 pound cannon ball stolen from soldiers and sailors monument on Court House Square.
- March 27: Made in Binghamton trademark adopted by Chamber of Commerce promoting goods manufactured here.
- March 12: Monument for victims of the Binghamton Clothing Company fire to be erected in Spring Forest Cemetery.
- March 10: Mayor to Chamber of Commerce: Get more new industries for city… people will come and Binghamton will grow.
It was early 1997 when the telephone rang at the History Center. The caller identified herself as a real estate agent, calling from Danbury, Connecticut. She went on to say that while preparing a property for sale, boxes of old documents were discovered. Noticing many references to Binghamton, she thought our historical society might have an interest in the find.

What the realtor had discovered was the personal collection of documents of Joseph Edward Turner, founder of the New York State Inebriate Asylum, the National Historic Landmark built in Binghamton in 1858.

Turner left Binghamton in 1867 and relocated to Wilton, Connecticut, sixteen miles from Danbury, where he passed away in 1889.

After receiving the call, the Turner collection was transferred to Binghamton, indexed, and now fills several archival boxes in the BCHS vault. Included in the collection are numerous letters, correspondence with building and locating committees prior to construction, a site survey, original subscription certificates and inebriate case studies. Turner’s diaries record trips to Binghamton with architect Isaac Perry and meetings with many of Binghamton’s most prominent citizens at that time. Court proceedings from Turner’s unsuccessful attempt to regain control of the asylum after his return to Connecticut are also included.

It could have been lost forever, but thanks to the foresight and concern of a realtor in Connecticut, this collection of enormous significance to the history of Broome County has come home.
Selected items from the Joseph Edward Turner Collection:

Turner’s diary, 1858

- Wednesday, April 14: Rode around with committee appointed by the citizens of Binghamton to look for a site for the institution.
- Thursday, April 15: The citizens of Binghamton had another meeting upon the subject of a site. Daniel S. Dickinson presided.

1858 Broome County Clerk’s Office:
“200 acres and 117 rods known as the Lyon Farm presented by the committee of the citizens of the Village of Binghamton to the Locating Committee of the Inebriate Asylum of New York State.”

List of first patients admitted to the New York State Inebriate Asylum in 1864.
(Individual identities masked for this article)

Subscription certificates for contributions of $10 each for the proposed New York State Inebriate Asylum, signed by Joseph Edward Turner.
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find and explore
historic sites near you…

wherever you are, whenever you want!!!

named for the ancient greek muse of history, clio puts history at your fingertips. similar to locator ‘apps’ that help you find a nearby restaurant or repair shop, clio utilizes gps technology to pick up your present location and then guides you to nearby landmarks, museums, and historic and cultural sites. it also acts as a virtual time machine, allowing a user to see images and videos and hear and read about historic events that happened around them. each day, historians throughout our area are adding more sites to the growing collection.

clio is not only a website and mobile application, but also a collaborative research, interpretation, and map-building project. entries are created by museum professionals, local historians, and educators and their students. each day, this partnership of local history experts and professional historians is building a comprehensive, dynamic, and interactive map of american history.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2015 – 2016 Programs</th>
<th>Local Historical Societies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEPTEMBER 16</td>
<td>Town of Binghamton Historical Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>Meets at Fellowship Hall, Old Hawleyton Methodist Church, Binghamton, 1st Tues, 1:30PM, Apr-Oct.</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCTOBER 21 &amp; 22</td>
<td>Binghamton Civil War Historical Society</td>
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<td><em>That Happened Here? Forgotten stories of Broome County Lore</em></td>
<td>Meets at Hillcrest American Legion near Chenango Bridge exit off Rt. I-88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gerald Smith, Historian; George Basler, Author</td>
<td>3rd Tuesday at 7PM except June – August.</td>
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<td>NOVEMBER 18</td>
<td>Town of Colesville</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abandoned Asylums of Upstate New York – A Brief History and Photo Tour</td>
<td>Historian’s Advisory Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roger Luther, Preservationist/Photographer</td>
<td>Historian: Val LaClair, <a href="mailto:lac49rings@aol.com">lac49rings@aol.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Held at Binghamton University Art Museum</em></td>
<td>Meets at Colesville Town Hall</td>
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<td>JANUARY 20</td>
<td>2nd Monday, March - November at 7PM</td>
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<td><em>Harvest – the History of Agriculture in the Southern Tier and Northern Pennsylvania</em></td>
<td>Deposit Historical Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brian Frey, Director of History &amp; Heritage – WSKG</td>
<td>Museum open year-round Tuesday 9:30 to noon for research, and Thursday &amp; Sunday 2-4PM</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Held at WSKG Studios, Gates Road, Vestal</em></td>
<td>Memorial Day – Columbus Day for exhibits.</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEBRUARY 17</td>
<td>Information: <a href="http://www.deposithistoricalsociety.org">www.deposithistoricalsociety.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>The Closely-Knit Multicultural Community of Binghamton’s Susquehanna Street</em></td>
<td>Kirkwood Historical Society</td>
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<td>Brenda Cave-James, African-American historian, poet, singer.</td>
<td>Meets at historic Kirkwood Schoolhouse, 2nd Tuesday, April – December at 1PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>MARCH 16</td>
<td>Iroquois Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>An Exhaust-ing 75 Years! The Life of the Parkway 75th Anniversary of the Vestal Parkway</td>
<td>Contact: Dolores Elliott, 729-0016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Margaret Hadsell, Vestal Town Historian</td>
<td>For information visit <a href="http://www.otsiningo.com">www.otsiningo.com</a>.</td>
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<td>APRIL 20</td>
<td>Nanticoke Valley Historical Society</td>
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<td><em>Rod Serling’s Binghamton – How Binghamton Shaped his Career and Influenced his Writing</em></td>
<td>President: Sandy Rozek</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brian Frey, Director of History &amp; Heritage – WSKG</td>
<td>Meets 3rd Tuesday, 7PM</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Held at WSKG Studios, Gates Road, Vestal</em></td>
<td>Museum open Sunday afternoon, thru Sept 23.</td>
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<td>MAY 18</td>
<td>Old Onaquaga Historical Society/ Colesville-Windsor Museum</td>
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<td>World War II Corporal Margaret Hastings – Owego Native and Member of Women’s Army Corps</td>
<td>President: Eileen Ruggiero, 775-1190</td>
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<td>Emma Sedore, Tioga County Historian</td>
<td>Meets at St. Luke’s Church Museum in Harpursville, 3rd Monday at 7PM, May to October.</td>
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<td>JUNE 15 &amp; 16</td>
<td>Museum is open 2nd Sunday, 2-5PM, May – November.</td>
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<td>Vanishing Schools of Broome County – From the One-Room Schoolhouse to Modern-day Re-purposed Buildings</td>
<td>Old Village of Union Historical Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gerald Smith, Broome County Historian</td>
<td>Historian: Ted Warner, 785-9427</td>
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<td>Refreshments at 6:30 p.m., followed by the program from 6:45-8:00 p.m. Programs are held in the Decker Room, Broome County Library unless otherwise specified.</td>
<td>Meets at 407 East Main Street, Endicott, 2nd Monday of each month at 7PM.</td>
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<td>Vestal Historical Society and Museum</td>
<td>Vestal Historical Society and Museum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Historian: Margaret Hadsell</td>
<td>Museum Director: Ramona Kacyvenski</td>
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<td>Museum exhibits ongoing</td>
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MEMBERSHIP

To become a member of the Broome County Historical Society (BCHS), fill out the form below and check one of the following:

__ $20 Individual
__ $50 Sustaining Individual
__ $30 Family
__ $75 Sustaining Family
__ $10 Student (K-12)
__ $100+ Corporate
__ $100-$499 Patron
__ $500-$999 Benefactor
__ $1000+ Memorial

Please Consider
JOINT MEMBERSHIP
To join both the Broome County Historical Society and the Roberson Museum and Science Center, add $40 to your selected category.

Name

Address

email

Please mail this form with payment to Broome County History & Genealogy Center
185 Court Street, Binghamton, NY 13901