

Oakville Historical  
Society  
since 1953

# Historical Society News

[www.oakvillehistory.org](http://www.oakvillehistory.org)



## In Memory of Hannah

Volume 57 Number 1

Spring 2023



## A Note from the Society President

George Chisholm

I am very happy to announce the appointment of three new members to our Board of Directors that were confirmed at the Annual General Meeting.

Susan Bowen, Brenda Chisholm and Carol Gall have all agreed to join the board for a three-year term. I'd like to thank Andrea Stewart for her many years of service to the Society and Board. Andrea has stepped down as a director but is staying on as a very active volunteer. At our last board meeting, Janet Godber agreed to take on the role of Vice-President. The Board comprises 12 members plus the Past President. If the Past President isn't able or willing to serve, the board may appoint someone in their place.

Plans are well under way for the return of the Annual Mayor's Picnic to be held at Lakeside Park on Sunday, 11 June. There's some great entertainment lined up, and admission is free. Further information will be made available as plans are finalized. Our thanks to Susan Bowen and her group of volunteers for taking this on. It is sure to be a fun filled day, so invite family, friends and neighbours.

I am also very pleased to announce that Brenda Chisholm has taken on the role of Newsletter Editor. If you are interested in writing an article for a future newsletter, don't be shy.

If you've visited the office recently, you may have noticed how clean it is. A Ukrainian refugee and her son have been cleaning as required. Their efforts show.

A few weeks ago, we opened the office for Family Day with a theme of games. Carol Gall worked closely with Museum staff on a collaborative event where visitors were able to play traditional games at our office including checkers and crokinole. It was a very successful day with about 200 visitors.

Steve Bysouth informed the board at our last meeting that there are now 50 videos available on our Youtube channel. If you haven't seen them, they're well worth viewing.

Mark Verlinden has submitted applications to the federal government for funding for two students this summer. Our applications have not yet been approved but we have a list of projects for them.

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# Victoria Day ends in Tragedy

Steve Bysouth

(picture front cover)

Recently, on a walk through the Palermo Cemetery I came across a memorial to Hannah Dennis, aged 29, who on died May 24th, 1881. Hannah's age at death is not unusual in a pioneer cemetery, but what caught my eye was the line: "who lost her life in the disaster to the STEAMER VICTORIA on the Thames near London". I had never heard of the Steamer Victoria disaster before. In doing a bit of research I came to discover that Lewis Dennis married Lydia Johnson (Hannah's parents) and they owned a farm just north of Palermo (Bronte and Dundas). It can be seen on this section of the 1877 map.



Location of the Dennis farm

Lewis and Lydia had 16 children, one of whom was Hannah. Hannah was in London (Ontario) on May 24th, 1881, and on the steamer Victoria which was offering trips up and down the Thames River. It was Queen Victoria's birthday, and people were out celebrating. A boat ride on the Thames seemed a lovely idea, and the namesake steamer was especially popular. Unfortunately, this was to become the worst maritime disaster in Canadian history to that date. Below is an extract of that story:

*On a sparkling Tuesday in May 1881, while Queen Victoria was celebrating her sixty second birthday in London, England, a steamboat, also named Victoria, was cruising on the Thames River near London, Ontario, crowded with more than six hundred exuberant excursionists. Suddenly, something happened. From his seat in a racing skiff less than a hundred yards off the Victoria's starboard bow, Harry Nicholls watched the boat wallow toward London. He saw her rock ponderously from side to side responding to the motion of the upper-deck passengers who were running from rail to rail. The unusual swaying did not startle Nicholls who was aware of the Victoria's shallow draft, but as he watched he saw the rocking increase until inches of water were shipped at each swing.*

*Suddenly, with a roar of hissing steam, the boat's huge boiler broke loose from its mounting and crashed through the bulwarks. Water poured through the opening and Nicholls was enwrapped in a cloud of live steam. With a slow, almost deliberate, movement the Victoria settled on her side. From both decks passengers were catapulted into the river. Nicholls heard the muffled screams of those trapped between decks. His slim shell was almost swamped in the wake as the Victoria went down.*

*At least 181 persons drowned on the May 24 excursion; of these, 110 were children. It was the blackest day in London's history, the result of an almost incredible series of blunders that could easily have been averted. By nightfall the flags that bedecked London homes and businesses to mark the Queen's birthday were lowered to half-mast. For eight days afterward, the dead who had been hooked from the river were carried to their graves. Funeral directors started work before dawn and were still conducting services long after dark. The supply of coffins in London was exhausted the first day and one infant was buried in an adult casket. All London's nineteen thousand residents lost relatives or friends. One family, the Fryers, lost five members. By official decree a black armband became a Londoner's badge of mourning for a thirty-day period. Business firms and schools closed for two days. ....*

Sadly, the young man in the racing skiff may have been partly the cause of the tragedy. He and a friend decided to stage a race alongside the Victoria, and the passengers rushed to the rail to watch. This caused the ship to list dangerously and resulted in panicked people rushing to the other side. The steamer, with a maximum capacity of 400, had 650 rowdy passengers onboard. The crew had asked some to disembark and wait for the next boat but were told by many "the river is so shallow, if anything happens, we will walk to shore". When the boiler broke loose on the lower deck, the steam and scalding water were a death sentence for anyone in proximity. Its tumbling motion smashed the support beams for the upper decks, and many were trapped and crushed. More people fell onto the riverbed when the ship heeled to port and were fatally trapped beneath debris or crushed by the ship. The ship, having disgorged so many onto the riverbed, was lighter and righted itself, but then began to sink. The upper promenade deck trapped the passengers below it and they drowned. Many people of the time could not swim, and the ladies were hampered by the layered Victorian era dresses and heavy bonnets which quickly pulled them under. The two young men in the racing skiffs reacted quickly and rescued 15 people.



*Typical Victorian lady's day dress*

A male passenger saved his family by taking his wife and daughter under each arm and holding his infant granddaughter's clothing in his teeth while he made his way to shore. Other survivors were thrown clear by the explosion or had abandoned ship by jumping overboard before the tragedy and were witness to both the celebratory atmosphere and the horror that followed.

Hannah Dennis was one of the almost 200 people who died that day in about 12 feet of water and it is noted on a gravestone in Palermo Cemetery along with the rest of the Dennis family memorials. There is a blue Ontario Heritage Plaque along with the anchor from the Victoria at the site of the tragedy in London, Ontario near an off-leash dog park.



*The Victoria aground in the Thames  
London, Ontario*

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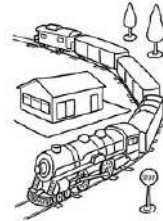
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# GOINGS ON....

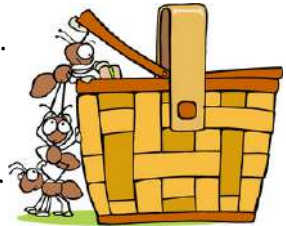
## Mayor's Picnic



After 4 long years the Annual Mayor's Picnic is back! You are invited to join us on **Sunday, June 11 from 12 Noon to 4:30 pm** at Lakeside Park for an afternoon of music and activities. There will be lots of fun things to do – children's games, clowns, face painting, displays, balloons and a stilt walker. New this year... a model train set up.



Entertainment for the whole family - includes musicians and dancers! Bring a picnic lunch and lawn chair and enjoy an exciting afternoon in a beautiful setting! For more information please visit us at:



<https://www.oakvillehistory.org/>

We look forward to seeing you there!



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# ...THIS SUMMER!

## *Yard Sale*

Spring Cleaning? Sorting out the garage or shed? Culling games or toys post-holiday extravaganza? Downsizing?

**Saturday July 22**

**9:00-2:00**

We will happily take your saleable items for our summer yard sale. Please deliver to 110 King St on Tuesday or Thursday afternoons beginning May 2, or leave a message at the office to arrange an alternate time, or to volunteer day of sale.



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## Thomas House

Mary Davidson

The Thomas House will open for the season on May 20 from 1:30-4:00 Saturdays and Sundays until July 1st after which it is open Tuesday-Thursday and Saturday, Sunday and holiday Mondays through Labour Day.

We are looking for volunteers to be interpreters and welcome both youth and adults. Training and costumes (if desired) are provided.



## Membership

Marie Descent

We are pleased to welcome 8 new members to the Society. New members since December are:

Ms. Sheila Goodin, Mr. Peter Stevens, Ms. Daliah Brown, Ms. Janet Ngo and family, Ms. Lauren Willoughby, Mr Azmin Khosravi and family, Mr. Steven White, Ms. Milana Seperac.

# Volunteers needed!



We are in need of a few high school students to assist with heritage activities. Eligible for high school volunteer hours.

### Contact us:

905-844-2695

information@oakvillehistory.org

110 King St.  
Oakville, ON

## Kudos



*Andrea Stewart receives a plaque in recognition of her many years of volunteer service!*



Our very best wishes and congratulations to Madison Carmichael, our former intern, on her new position as Programming and Collections Manager at Sharon Temple National Historic Site. The Temple has operated as a museum since 1918, and is well worth a visit.

[www.sharontemple.ca](http://www.sharontemple.ca)





## AGM 2023

Brenda Chisholm

In March 2020, our AGM had to be cancelled, and rescheduled to June 24, while the world sought ways to continue with business, and our Board learned how to use ZOOM! For the next two years we continued with this platform, but this year we were able to meet in person. We decided to provide a light supper of soup, sandwiches, pickles, cookies and squares. The meeting was very well attended by just over 40 members. People seemed to enjoy socializing before supper, and it was wonderful to see so many familiar faces again.



## Lights, camera.....action!



On a very snowy Friday recently, a group of Sheridan College students used the OHS office to film a short video assignment. Toby (the lad with no flesh) was looking for clues to his ancestry! They used our facility for several hours before moving on to the Welland area to complete his investigations. We wonder if he found any fellow skeletons in the closet.....



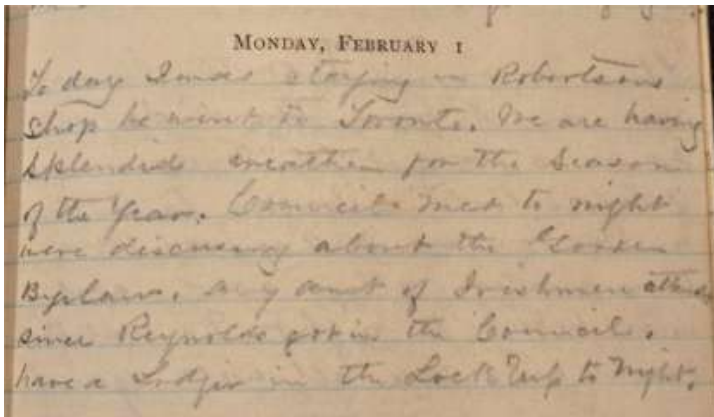
# Decoding the Sumner diaries

Mark Verlinden

The work to transcribe George Sumner's diaries continues, and at times leads to unusual places indeed.

George Sumner was Oakville's Chief Constable for many years and kept a diary from 1867 to 1909. George had many other duties and jobs around town, including tax collector, Health Inspector and Harbour Master. His diary entries are short, pithy and often very mundane. A day's entry might cover three or four different subjects in a few short lines. Very literally, he might cover the condition of the roads and sidewalks, the reward he hopes to get for capturing a criminal, the weather today and the dying man he sat up with through the night. Sometimes, figuring out what he is writing about can be quite a challenge, as you can see in the entry below.

George would sometimes clerk in a store downtown if the proprietor was away or ill. That explains why he was in Robertson's shop. Councillor Reynolds it turns out did not actually win the election, but became a councillor when the winner, William Orr, backed out. But what is the 'Goose Bylaw' all about? The first transcriber of the diary included the "?" since they were not even sure they read that correctly. I checked back to George's original handwritten diary entry and it does seem like he wrote "Goose Bylaw." See for yourself:



*February 1, 1869: Today I was staying in Robertson's shop. He went to Toronto. We are having splendid weather for the season of the year. Council met to night were discussing about the goose [?] bylaw. Any amount of Irishmen attends since Reynolds got in the council. Have a lodger in the lockup tonight.*

*Sumner's diary entry, Feb 1, 1869*

**February 8, 1869:** *This morning I had 18 men removing the snow from Colborne St. to station. Cost \$5.40. Council met tonight. They passed the license law. The goose question was again laid over for another week. Has been thawing all day. Irish ball tonight in Town Hall.*

This goose bylaw seems to be quite a big deal. It's now passed its second reading.

**February 15, 1869:** *Council met tonight. Goose Bylaw comes in force 1st of January 1870.*

George still gives us no hint of what this "Goose Bylaw" might be about.

The Goose Bylaw trail next led to the Minutes of Oakville Town Council for 1869, a copy of which we have in the archive.

The minutes for February 1, 1869 tell us that Mr. Cyrus H. Moore, (a Councillor for Ward 2), "moved for leave to introduce a By-law to prevent Geese from running at large within the Town of Oakville, which said By-law was received and read a first time." Apparently, Mr. Moore felt this was a big enough problem to put at the top of the new Council's agenda.

At the next meeting, the draft By-law was discussed and amended. It provided that "any Geese found at large on the public streets of the Town...."shall be impounded, and if claimed by the owner or owners within six hours from the time of such impoundment, they shall be entitled to receive them on the payment of ten cents per head and if not claimed within that time they shall be sold by Auction or disposed of in such a manner as the Chief Constable shall think proper"....

Perhaps we now know why George Sumner was so interested in adding "Goose Wrangler" to his list of duties. People could find that their loose goose was well and truly cooked and on George's table!

Alas, it was not to be so. The final text of the Goose By-law only provides that George can seize geese running at large and auction them off the next day. It did not take long after the bylaw came into force for the long arm of the law to snag its first criminal:

**January 7, 1870:** *This has been a very fine day but quite cold. I had Michael Murphy up today for allowing his geese to run at large which is contrary to By Law N. 81. Mayor fined him \$2.00 & costs, and one week to pay it.*

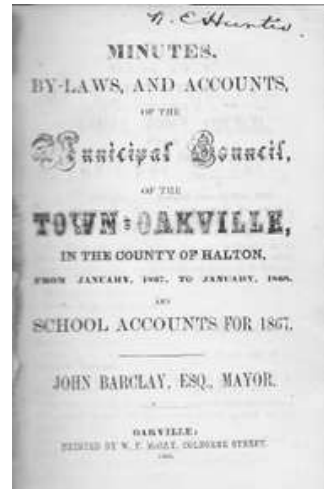
The first sale of wayward geese came about a few months later.

**July 16, 1870:** *Was picking some cherries over at R.K. Chisholm's. I put 14 Geese in the pound this P.M. Do not know who they belong to. Some say they are Quinn's. It is a fine night but the weather looks very unsettled. Appearance of war. France and Prussia.*

Quinn could have had his geese back for ten cents each, but they were sold two days later to a Mr. Ward for twelve and a half cents each.

It seems that there were even bigger animal problems to deal with in Oakville in 1870. Without the benefit of street lights, George often comments on how dark the nights are. Free-running farm animals could be a real problem, as happened to George himself:

**September 16, 1870:** *I was working again today making some more spouts & putting them in. It is a fearful dark night. Cannot see at all. Fell over a cow.*



# The way things were...



## Do you know...

We have a number of animal pictures in the collection. We've titled this photo "laughing dog" with good reason! We would like to know if anyone has any information to share about it!

From Dec 2022 **The way things were...**

Winter 1944...during the Second World War, an enormous snowfall left the main street impassable. Since most men were overseas, the high school students were given the day off and were paid to shovel!



### Archive Hours:

Tuesday & Thursday 1:00 to 4:30 pm  
Third Sunday of the month 12:30 to 4:00 pm

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