

The Half-Shire Historical Society, 48 years of growth

By Shawn Doyle, Half-Shire President

In the early 1970s, as the nation's 200th birthday was approaching and being planned for at all levels, a group of old friends and near relations in northern Oswego County began to talk about forming a Historical Society "on the east end" as they felt there was little attention paid to the rural region by the Oswego County Historical Society. The first meeting to discuss forming a historical society was held on Wednesday, November 22, 1972, at the home of Floyd Kent on Frazier Rd. in Sandy Creek. Present were: Floyd Kent, his adopted daughter Marie Kent (later Parsons), Floyd's cousin Avis Donovan Widrig, Avis's son George Widrig, Betty Carey, and Helen Hastings. All agreed that an organization on the eastern side of Oswego County was needed. A few notes were taken and another meeting was planned for after the Thanksgiving holiday.

Right—The current 15 towns of the Half-Shire Organization, outlined on an 1877 map of the region.

The next meeting, which formally organized the group, was held on December 6, 1972. At this meeting, there were present as charter members: Floyd Kent, Marie Kent, George Widrig, Avis Donovan Widrig, Louis Tryon, Betty Martin, Betty Carey, and Helen Hastings. The sticky topic in early discussions was where the lines would be drawn geographically and what to call the group.

The 3rd meeting of the group was held on Jan 3, 1973, at the Ainsworth Library in Sandy Creek. Officers were elected: President Marie Kent, Vice-President Betty Martin, and Secretary/Treasurer Louis Tryon. Coverage in the *Pulaski Democrat* and *Sandy Creek News* discussed the early progress. The fourth meeting rotated to Orwell, where 25 people were in attendance. On March 7, 1973, the group first met in what would later become our headquarters, in the old Richland School. Biweekly meetings continued through 1973, rotating around the eight northern Oswego County towns of Albion, Amboy, Boylston, Orwell, Redfield, Richland, Sandy Creek, and Williamstown. In early 1973, the name "Half-Shire Historical Society" was selected to reassert the fact that Oswego County is a Half-shire county with two county seats—Oswego and Pulaski. This name not only reasserted the importance of the concept of Oswego County having two county seats since 1816 but asserting an independent and differing course of study from a much more rural and agrarian sector of the county.

The founder's goals were set out "to preserve, protect and present the rich history of the eastern end of the county." It was felt by the founders that the Oswego County Historical Society had neglected this region. The early leaders soon turned to the County Board of Supervisors to try to get a "slice" of the then generous public allowance for Oswego County Historical Society to operate. There were some tense public meetings reflected in the records of our organization, news accounts, and town meetings.

In late 1973, the Town of Richland turned over the old elementary school in Richland, which had closed in October 1969, to the group. The old school had been built in 1926 to serve the Hamlet of Richland, and following its closure, the town had retained ownership and not been able to find proper use. Mary White, a retired teacher from the area, was one of the leaders in the effort to secure this building. Others in the organization were split, with some favoring the acquisition of the old Richland Railroad Depot down the road, a classic 1909 building that was admired by many.



Half-Shire began with coverage of eight towns: Albion, Amboy, Boylston, Orwell, Redfield, Richland, Sandy Creek, and Williamstown. An interim charter was soon acquired from the New York State Department of Education in December 1973, and in February 1978, a permanent charter was granted. In the run-up to the American bicentennial in 1976, the organization held monthly meetings, offered programs in the building and in the community, and held fundraising dinners to continue works to restore the old Richland School. The beginning years saw growth and promise. The early movers and shakers of the organization shared a common purpose and similar backgrounds and interests.

One of the greatest legacies of these early years was the six-town cemetery survey and census completed by members and YCS (Youth Consultation Service) workers obtained from a grant. This survey was detailed and edited heavily with few errors ever detected. Fifty years later some of these stones examined have vanished or deteriorated beyond reading.

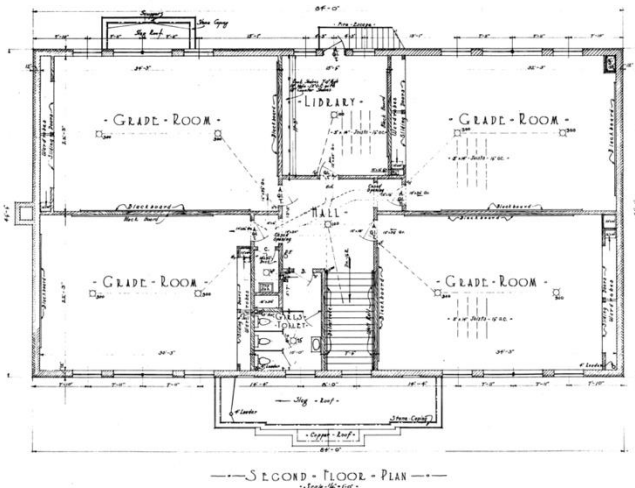
The Old Richland School

The structure that the Half-Shire leaders acquired in 1973 looked quite impressive and would suit the plans of the organizers well...or so they thought. The Richland Elementary school was built beginning in the winter of 1925, after a devastating Thanksgiving-break fire destroyed the former wooden school on the same grounds in 1924. One early officer of the society, the late Frances Carr Riley, (1913-2007) used to recall the old school building fondly. Frances was an elementary student the day of the fire and was selected to ring the bell that morning the school burned (an act she never performed). That earlier structure had been built in the 1860s and had served the hamlet well, educating students in two rooms through grade 8. The new structure continued to do this with four classrooms, and over the years as part of the centralized Pulaski School, the specific grades varied (K-3, 1-4, and in 1968 1-6).



The architect of the Richland school building was Gilbert VanAuken, who worked out of Syracuse at the time. Van Auken was born in Fair Haven, NY in 1887 and worked in Syracuse and later Albany. His public works, such as schools, took up much of his portfolio; however, he designed several homes in New York state also.

Van Auken designed three schools in Oswego County in the 1920s. In 1924, he designed and built the Pulaski School Annex on South Jefferson Street that still stands (surviving the 1937 fire that destroyed the old Academy), and the Redfield School built in 1927 that now houses Senior apartments in that Hamlet. Each of these structures are similar in design on the outside, with some variances of the original floor plan inside.



Left- The second-floor layout of the building has remained substantially the same over the years. In our current arrangement, the old classrooms on the upper left and right of this print are currently storerooms. The classroom on the lower left is the headquarters of the Pulaski Lions Club and the classroom on the lower right is out upstairs research and display room.

Van Auken's design of Richland took advantage of the level location and the natural light from the south, east, and west. The two-story brick structure surrounds an iron

center column and arms that extend from the center into the outer wall. Including the outer brick, inner hollow bricks, and poured concrete created walls that are 18 inches thick. The Richland School operated from 1926 until October 1969. With the construction of the high school on Salina Street (Rte. 11) south of Pulaski, the formerly overcrowded district decided to shutter the Richland school and house the full K-12 population in two buildings, K-6 on Hinman Road and 7-12 on Salina Street.

Half-Shire acquisition and early management of the old Richland School

In 1973, when the Half-Shire Historical Society acquired the old Richland School, the organization numbered over 100 paid members (at \$2 dues each!). From that moment, the deed was turned over the officers and volunteers knew it would take much more than membership dues to insure, maintain, and operate the large building. From closure to 1973, the old school had been operated as a sort of community center by the Richland Lions Club. The Lions had taken over a building with an old boiler that was soon inoperative. Without the heat and air circulation system moisture quickly becomes a problem in the structure that is built into the ground with a 1st floor six feet below grade.¹

The Richland Lions had taken up the hardwood flooring in the main room downstairs due to moisture issues. In 1971, they poured a concrete floor over the old concrete piers that had supported the hardwood. This floor was painted for many years until we were able to overlay it with a nice wood-tone vinyl laminate in 2017. The greatest issue that faced the Lions, as well as Half Shire, after 1973 was the condition of the original roof, which began to leak. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the roof was patched annually and cleared of leaves to keep the drains flowing. Without heat inside, the drains cracked and later broke, causing damage. In 1990, the society put a new rolled roof on with side emptying scupper drains. This system with maintenance worked with some mishaps until 2018-19, when we finally tore off the old roofing and replaced it with a rubber roofing system under the watchful eye of one of our most valued trustees, Marcy Newman, who is a USDA Engineer.

Besides roof troubles the worst calamity to affect the building was the October 8, 1983 earthquake centered near Saranac Lake, New York which registered 5.3 and caused enough movement of our center iron I-beams that all of the second-floor hardwood floors buckled to some degree. From this point, much of the 2nd floor was not used until recent years. (As of this writing, we have repaired and replaced most of the damaged flooring with the center hallway just having been laid with new hardwoods this past summer).

In the 1970s, especially during the bicentennial in 1976, Half-Shire flourished and drew good support. While the officers struggled to stay on top of maintenance with drop ceilings and partitions in rooms, the decay of the unheated building was becoming an issue.

Right-A walk through display on the Tug Hill Family Farm with small room mock-ups was set up in the late 1980s in the SW classroom. Drop ceiling hid the falling old plaster ceiling, but the cement walls peeled lead paint each year...



¹ The builders had used a steam-heat system and a hybrid air circulation secondary system that sucked air from each closet in the classrooms and from under the 1st floor stage. The system kept the air flowing through the building and eliminated dampness. Children reported that they could hang their wet coats in the closets and they would be dry by the time school was out!



Left—Half-Shire owns a good collection of old clothing and millenary from the 1800s. These items were often displayed each summer on dress forms and hat racks amidst the fallen plaster walls in our old classrooms. In the early 2000s, member Penny Schott worked a summer to conserve and properly store these items, which are still brought out for display at fairs and on-site as needed.

While summers allowed for limited building use with some memorable events, by September of each year the waterlines were drained and windows sealed for the following winter. The aftermath of the 1983 earthquake saw the removal of many delicate items to the Sandy Creek Town Hall, library, and the private homes of officers. Marie Kent Parsons was a regular officer and also served as Sandy Creek historian. During the winter months, Marie represented Half Shire with a column and working with other officers such as Mary White, Betty Blodgett, Martin, Dorthea Butts Blodgett, Ruth Crossett, Harold & Esther Olin Woodard, Margaret Wright, George and Avis Widrig, Juanita Pretory, Mildred Drake, Dan and Regena Simonson, Eloise Grant Jones and sister Phyllis

Grant, Lucinda Lattimer, and several others. Meeting were held by the dedicated core members from April until October each year at the building,

1990s Plans for Restoration and Revival

In the mid-1990s, the organization had dwindled to about 30 members. The 1992 death of long-time treasurer and Society cheerleader Mary White was a huge blow to the group. Discussions over the next couple years involved giving up the charter and dispersing the collections. Historical Societies in Pulaski and Williamstown soon were formed taking over some of our members and doing a much better job at the mission we had set out on. A handful of officers and volunteers kept the torch lit, and by the mid-1990s, some new members came on board to assist.

Right—Home cooked dinners in the old kitchen were a staple of annual fundraising in the summer months. Some of the early members are seen in this 1970s image working amidst the fallen plaster in the old kitchen. The current kitchen is entirely new and continues the tradition of good meals for special events and regular activities.²

Jim and Cindy Wilson from Richland owned the grocery store and came on the board at this time. Dave Riley and his mother Frances (who had been denied the chance to ring the bell of the old school) also joined. In 1994, I also came to a meeting and joined. My involvement had begun when I was eleven in 1977, and Mary White had inspired me to write about



² Avis Donovan Widrig, Mildred Olmstead Drake, Betty Blodgett Martin, Ruth Crossett, Dorthea Butts Blodgett are pictured here in the old kitchen

Colonel Meacham's great cheese and the connection with my grandmother's Rte. 11 property. I had talked with members in 1992 at Mary White's wake, and it had taken me to settle into my own home and job before I felt I had the time to devote. Soon after my arrival, Bill and Jean Brosnan from Richland came on the board also. By 1997, the new group had a plan...or at least some new ideas.

Fundraising was a crucial first start. There was one meeting in the late 1990s that the proceeds in the "cigar box" amounted to some \$30, with some shares of bad stock that the board was trying to sell at a loss. Bill Brosnan is a noted singer in our region and began a concert series on summer weekends that brought people to the building and new members and money into the books. True to our mission and charter, George Widrig and Marie Parsons resumed work on publications and articles on history. A newsletter was resumed in 1995 with an annual calendar, which for a time brought in good money each year.

One of the more productive things we did at this time was to rewrite our bylaws to make sure all of our covered towns had representation. During the months our building was under renovation in the late 1990s, we began to reach out to our surrounding communities by moving meetings around each month, working with the town historian, and presenting programs of local interest. This brought much-needed regional support and slowly our membership grew.

The new board had some differing opinions about what to do with the large building we inhabited. We all agreed to a lease with the Pulaski Lions Club on one of our most dilapidated rooms, which under Bill Brosnan and Lion's officer Cliff Hilton was renovated to a very usable space that is still home to the Pulaski Lions. Bill Brosnan and others also negotiated a lease on the old coal storage room with the town of Richland, which needed space for inactive records. From 1997-2019, the town paid annual rent on this space.³

In 1997 the old inoperative furnace was removed, and a new forced air oil system was installed that for many years heated the downstairs. This unit was never ducted properly and many will remember the building being drafty in the cooler months. The greatest benefit to this was lowering the humidity level. To assist in this effort an industrial dehumidifier was purchased and placed in the Town of Richland room. Beginning in 1997 the southwest classroom and upstairs hallway was gutted. It would be several years before these areas were completed but at least the fallen plaster was removed. We now have a restored Library in the center of the 2nd floor, lovingly rededicated to Allison Regner Balcom in 2016, and our Southwest Classroom restored as a display and research room.⁴

By 1997 when we marked our 25th anniversary, the malaise of the previous fifteen years had disappeared as plans for the restoration of the building began to take shape. Bill Brosnan and I were each able to leverage some grant monies from our employers that boosted the capital budget. In 1998, The Snow Foundation, impressed with our efforts awarded us a substantial grant that enabled us to remove the last of the old wood floors on the ground level and pour new concrete. Additionally, the main hall, stage, and entryway was renovated with new sheetrock walls and fresh paint.

In 1999 we began removing the old industrial metal windows and entered into an agreement with PACE Window and Door of Victor. It took ups twenty years and over \$50,000---much of which was raised by individual sponsorships, and we have now replaced 36 windows and five doors have been replaced and are under a lifetime warrantee. Four once blocked up windows on the back wall of the stage are planned for 2021 replacement.⁵

³ This room has now been entirely renovated again and is now the William Pomeroy Genealogy Library housing our genealogical collections and the original Oswego newspapers collection recently acquired.

⁴ We hope to renovate the old southeast classroom next. The northeast classroom is in good condition, we use this for storage.

⁵ several back-wall windows have been permanently sealed and blocked up

Several years later, Randy Crawford of Crawford and Stearns in Syracuse conducted a thorough study of our needs for restoration. We have closely followed his plans, and since that time have raised and invested over \$100,000 into the work. We are indebted to the John Ben Snow Foundation, The Greater Pulaski Community Foundation, Entergy Corporation, Verizon, Walmart, Exelon Corporation, The William Pomeroy Foundation, and many, many key individuals among our membership who have assisted us financially. A bequest of \$23,000 from the estate of the late Phyllis Grant paid for over half of the roof replacement in 2019.

As I write from the main auditorium, which is now serviced with central air and nicely appointed in appearance, I am confident we have not only turned the corner on the building restoration, but we are planning for future needs.

Half-Shire's revised mission statement and expansion

How we reached the point we are at was quite unforeseen in 1997. Besides large capital projects to secure our building and make it both sustainable and affordable, we also had to retool our mission. When we set out on this journey, we had many ideas but were unsure of how we would be able to succeed.

Half-Shire was founded by a group that was committed to preserving, research and present the unique history of the region it encompassed. The interest in American and local history that peaked during the American bicentennial period of 1976 was a core driver in our founding. As we looked at our collections and our former displays, many of us were reluctant to again return to a museum-based approach.

At the same time the United States celebrated its 200th year of Independence, an African-American writer, Alex Haley, published a book "Roots," documenting his family's history from slavery to the present. In 1977, this book was serialized on a widely viewed television mini-series. "Roots" was truly an inspiration to people of all races and backgrounds; it captured the imagination of the nation as well as many of us who now form the core of Half Shire.

Marie Kent Parsons and George Widrig always worked on their family trees and helped many others. The Grant sisters, Phyllis Grant and Eloise Jones, developed the 1st Half-Shire genealogy file system and carried around from meetings to County Fair and Old Home Day venues in a white plastic milk crate. These files gradually grew to a file cabinet of their own. By the early 2000s, many of us at Half Shire found we were focusing more and more on genealogy research and compilation of trees based on pioneer families who settled the region.

Central New York Genealogy Society was the true pioneer in this field here in our region. "Tree Talks" have formed the core of our research files since the early 1970s. Genealogical societies were later formed separately in Jefferson and Oswego Counties. When the Oswego County Genealogy Society disbanded in 2006, many of us at Half Shire jumped at the chance to take over their files, and soon incorporate their mission and work. Genealogical research became a focal point in our newsletters and our public venues such as the Oswego County Fair and Redfield Old Home Days.

As we found success with our new focus on genealogy, we looked at the map and began to add territories to our coverage area. The town of Parish was added in the early 2000s, with Osceola, in Lewis County, and Florence and Camden in Oneida County later added. In 2019, the Lewis County town of Montague was added and twinned with Osceola sharing a board seat. The Oswego County Towns of Mexico and New Haven were also added and twinned with a board seat. The focus of research activity has migrated now quite firmly toward genealogical research while still maintaining museum collections and a solid base of local history.

Our principal donors and movers and shakers have been cited above, but the true success in our recent past, as well as the promise of our future, lies in the composition of our board of trustees. I have served on many boards, from unions to government bodies and a host of non-profits. Never have I served with a board better

qualified and engaged as our board. At the August meeting amid the COVID pandemic, 12 of our 16 officers and trustees were present, with the other officers either on Facebook live feed then or later in the day.

Most of our Officers and Trustees have unparalleled knowledge of their towns and the history of that region. They are truly the “go-to” people for each region. Our Vice President, Greg Monette, and his sister Barb, who serves as a trustee at large, each brings a great deal of knowledge about Central New York families, the Great Migration, and also brings a love of family history research. Our secretary, Fay Ann Colvin, is regularly engaged in research as well as the lead person on our weekly obituary collection/filing project. Our Treasurer, Betty Warren, while not as active in research manages our funds expertly, and has a true love of our building as she began her teaching career in the southeast classroom upstairs! Our Librarian, Sharon Turo, who was a well-known and respected employee and researcher at the New Canaan Connecticut Historical Society, has charge of the new William Pomeroy Genealogy Library here.

Trustees Florence Gardner, Glenna Gorski, Leona Cheresnoski, Becky Kennedy, Venita Ackley, Rose Graham, Margaret Kastler, Liz Grant and Julie Litts-Robst know their regions very well and are essential first contacts for any researcher. Trustees Robin Warren Philips, Lori Dunn and Louise Meyer are newer to the board, but very involved in research and historic preservation in their communities they represent. Trustee Marcy Newman, a USDA Engineer has been essential for review and guidance of all work that we have done in recent years. Trustee Doreen Tilton is my right hand in planning and hosting events along with Secretary Fay Colvin and volunteer Stephanie Pierce. Our late curator Erma Schroeder deserves significant remembrance for her ten years of daily service. After her unexpected death in 2018 we finished the kitchen renovations and rededicated it to her memory, and endowed a youth community service scholarship also.

A separate article twice this size could be written on each of our trustees and their incredible contributions and volunteerism, as well as several past officers and trustees that continue to be involved. We also have a solid volunteer base, with several members who actively contribute to our research collections and our ongoing publications from books to the quarterly newsletter.

One of the things we are known for at Half-Shire is our hospitality. Trustee Margaret Kastler taught us early on that you get a lot more out of guests when you offer them a cup of coffee and food. We often do more than that, and our monthly lunch meetings are well attended by normally 40-45 (pre-covid) while our annual dinner dances bring in over 100 guests. We also use our kitchen and hall to host class reunions, tour bus lunches, family reunions, weddings and funeral lunches.

Right-A view of the Allison Regner Balcom Library on the second floor.

Work is ongoing to retool our website and create more of a virtual footprint. We use Facebook extensively for posts of interests to the public as well as to communicate and meet with our officers on a private account. A recent partnership with the local DAR and SAR has augmented our research holdings as well as brought their knowledge and resources to our organization.

As we continue to navigate the COVID pandemic and look to a post-COVID world, we are confident of our future...a future based on preservation, protection, and presentation of the rich past of our communities and our peoples here in Central New York.



The Half-Shire Historical Society

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Founded on November 15, 1972; NYSED charter: Provisional-Dec. 1973; Permanent-Feb. 1978

Officers (2018-2020) with terms of office expiration

- President (2020)** Shawn P. Doyle, 85 Lake St, Pulaski, NY 13142 315-298-3620 spdinpul@hotmail.com
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- Librarian** Sharon A. Turo, P.O. Box 256, 11 Park St. Sandy Creek, NY 13115 315-387-3112 slturo@earthlink.net

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- Amboy (2020)** Lori E. Monette, 1847 Co. Rte. 6, Fulton, NY 13069 315-657-3579 gratefullyadopted@yahoo.com
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- Redfield (2022)** (Vacant)
- Richland (2022)** Robin Philips, 102 Ivans Rd., Pulaski, NY 13142 315-298-7279 designsofelegance@netzero.net
- Sandy Creek (2022)** Margaret Kastler, 1695 Co. Rte. 15, Lacona, NY 13083 315-387-5209 kastlerm@hotmail.com
- Williamstown (2022)** Glenna Gorski, P.O. Box 54, Co. Rte. 17N. Williamstown, NY 13493 315-964-2393 glgorski@frontiernet.net
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Liz Grant, 722 Co. Rte. 47, Redfield, NY 13437 315-599-7735 (no email)

Presidency of Half-Shire 1972-present

Name	Date elected	Date out of office	Reason	Reason
1-Marie Kent Parsons	December 6, 1972	July 3, 1974	Resignation	19 months
2-Betty Blodgett Martin	July 3, 1974	August 21, 1974	Resignation	1 month
3-George O. Widrig	August 21, 1974	September 4, 1974	Election	1 month
4-Daniel Simonson	September 4, 1975	September 12, 1977	Election	2yr term
5-Dorthea Butts Blodgett	September 12, 1977	September 1981	Election	2-2yr terms
6-Marie Kent Parsons	September 1981	September 26, 1983	Election	2-year term
7-Dorthea Butts Blodgett	September 26, 1983	August 1985	illness	2-year term
8-Eloise Grant Jones	August 1985	September 9, 1985	Election	interim as VP
9-George O. Widrig	September 9, 1985	c September 1989	Election	2-2-year terms
10-Lucinda Lattimer O'Donnell	September 1989	July 1991	Resignation	22 months
11-Esther Olin Woodard	July 1991	May 26, 1992	Resignation	10 months
12-Juanita Olin Pretory	May 26, 1992	August 27, 1994	Resignation	2 years, 2 months
13-Marie Kent Parsons	August 27, 1994	September 16, 1995	Election	one year, 20 days
14-Shawn Doyle	September 16, 1995	November 18, 2017	Resignation	22 years, 2 mo. 2 days
15-Greg Monette	November 18, 2017	September 29, 2018	Election	10 months, 13 days
16-Shawn Doyle	September 29, 2018			