



Historical Society of the Nyacks

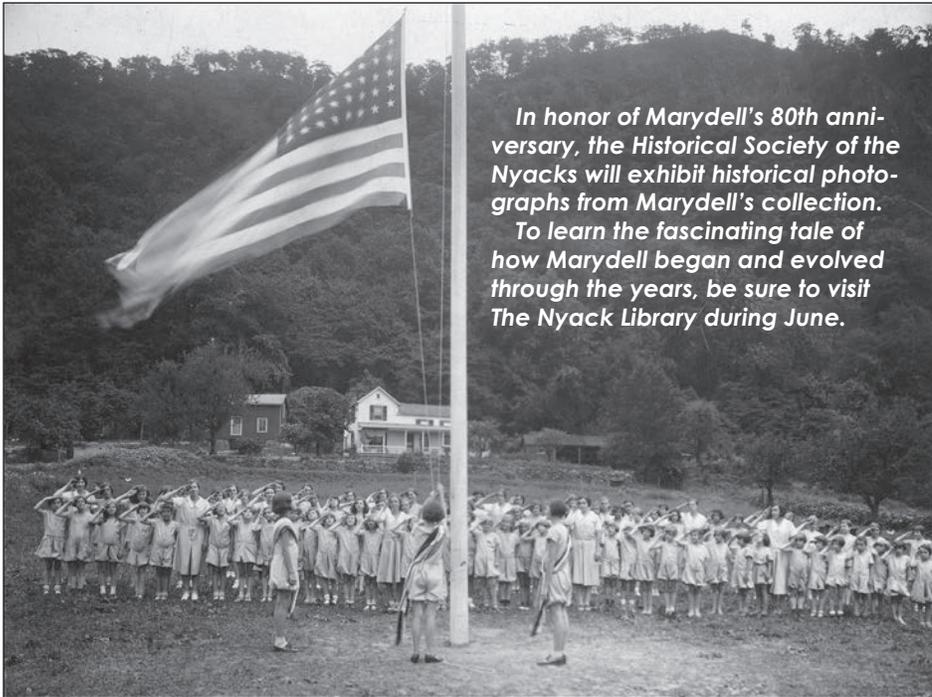
Newsletter

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The Marydell Story - June display at The Nyack Library



In honor of Marydell's 80th anniversary, the Historical Society of the Nyacks will exhibit historical photographs from Marydell's collection. To learn the fascinating tale of how Marydell began and evolved through the years, be sure to visit The Nyack Library during June.

Marydell campers raise the flag in 1925. Hook Mountain in the background.



Campers gather around evening campfire at Marydell along the Hudson, at the base of Hook Mountain.

Houses of Worship in the Nyacks

Fifth Article in a Series

1986: Grace Church's 125th Anniversary

Written and presented by Virginia Parkhurst in October 1986 for a talk to church members

The Rev. Franklin Babbitt would not have been the least surprised in 1861 to learn that Grace Church, the new Protestant Episcopal Church which he founded in Nyack the fall of that year, would survive to celebrate its 125th anniversary as it is doing today.

There were others in Nyack who would not have been as certain. The Civil War had just started and was occupying more and more of everyone's attention as many of the village's young men went off to join the Union forces. Secondly, Nyack already had four very well established Protestant churches. Thirdly, money is not plentiful with most people during war-time, as Mr. Babbitt was to find out. The collections taken at Sunday services during the church's first six months totaled but \$77.49. If it had not been for Mr. Babbitt's own generosity and that of his friends from outside the county (including Washington Irving) Grace Church might not have survived.

There had been an effort to establish an Episcopal church in Nyack the spring of 1861, but it was Mr. Babbitt, arriving in the village in October, who got it under way. His first service was held in Rutherford Academy, one of Nyack's several private schools. Two weeks later he was collecting money for a chapel and ground on which to build it. A lot on Franklin Street, near First Avenue, was chosen. Three months later, "the neat little
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Celebrating Over 120 Years: Thursday Reading Class

From the Nyack Evening Journal,
May 1895

"At an afternoon tea in the spring of 1887 some ladies were discussing over the teacups the subject of women's literary clubs and the pleasure and profit derived from the interchange of thought among the members."

And so began an accounting of the Thursday Reading Class of Nyack. Mrs. Arthur Merritt had the idea of the club and presented it to several friends. For three years they met informally in one another's homes at which time they decided to organize the club; Mrs. Merritt became the first president. The meetings were comprised of discussion of current literature as well as the reading of Shakespeare's plays. Their entertainments also included lectures by outside speakers on various topics.

Nyack, at that time, was a growing village with a mix of homes, businesses and factories. Its importance as a river port was evidenced by its boat yards, its passenger ferries across the Hudson and its proximity to New York City. Traveling by train to the city was also becoming more common.

Women, for the most part, were mothers at home with young children, unlike today's members who have had careers and now enjoy volunteering and/or retirement. New homes were usually Victorian in style with gingerbread trim. There were no cars in those years and the women drove to meetings in horse-drawn carts or they walked. Some of the younger members may have bicycled, as this was known as the "Bicycle Age." However did they manage those long skirts, one wonders? Their children walked to Liberty Street School (founded 1852). For the latest books the women went to the Nyack Library (founded 1903). The club, always interested in local improvements, was pleased to present the library with a large clock (1904) that hangs over the fireplace yet today with a

plaque beneath it.

Other favorite memories abound in the minutes of the club. On their fiftieth anniversary (1937) they met at the home of Mrs. John L. Swan (president) in Sparkill. At one hundred years (1987) they returned to the same house for their celebration. By then the house had become (and still is) the Swan House, official residence for the head of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, who at that time was Mr. Nash Castro. Mrs. Castro was president of the club and hosted that centennial event.

In 1993 the group took a one-day flying trip to Washington, D.C. from Westchester Airport. Leaving in the early morning they arrived in the capital, toured the city's monuments, had a private tour of the White House and returned home in time for dinner which they were probably too tired to prepare or to eat.

Mrs. Charles MacArthur was an active member for many years. One afternoon during the tea that followed every meeting (at someone's urging) she put down her teacup, straightened her spine and transformed herself into Helen Hayes, actress, to recite flawlessly her final soliloquy from "Victoria Regina." Though still seated she seemed to become taller, stronger and quite queen-like recapturing the role. It was a breath-taking moment for those present.

This year the Reading Class is studying several modern books with a theme of Defining Women as the criteria for the selections. Meetings are still held at each other's homes and tea is served after the program. On occasion there is a speaker, such as John Shields, Nyack's mayor, and historian Linda Zimmermann. Thursday Class is a call back to a quieter time perhaps, but still enjoyable to those who like to read, to learn and to discuss the timely topics.

In addition to the official Thursday Class minutes were these contributors: Priscilla Boylan, Isabel Wortendyke, Diana Saaby, Bette Castro and Dotty Larson.

Grace Church

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chapel" which was to be Grace Church's home for the next 18 years, was completed. Construction of the small wooden building had been expedited not only by Mr. Babbitt but by George Burd, a leading Nyack builder and one of the church's first vestrymen.

It soon became evident from notices in the Rockland County Journal that, in Mr. Babbitt's mind, the chapel was to be only a temporary home for the church.

On Sept. 24, 1864, a notice in the Rockland Journal stated that "the Bishop" (Horatio Potter) was to visit Grace Church on Sunday next "when there will be a confirmation and a collection towards land for a new church." By August 1865 the Journal was announcing that proceeds from the fair being held that month "by the ladies of Grace Church will go toward the building of a new Episcopal church in Nyack." So it went on with each succeeding year's fair until Grace Church's present beautiful English Gothic church was consecrated on May 30, 1881.

Not that everything went that smoothly. As the editor of the Journal commented in Mr. Babbitt's obituary Jan. 24, 1918: "It often seemed as if the rector stood alone in his determination to build such a stately edifice."

Stories have been told many times of Mr. Babbitt's trips to England to get ideas for Grace's new church from its cathedrals, and of his indignation when, returning from one such trip, he found that the vestry had decided to substitute Haverstraw brick for the gray limestone with which the church was to be built. Luckily for Grace Church, and for Nyack, he was in time to prevent it.

One of Grace Church's glories has been and is its music. During the church's first 15 years, not only was Mr. Babbitt its rector, but he was also its organist since there was no money to hire one. Since he loved music, serving as organist

Grace Church

Continued

could have been no hardship for him. One of his dreams for Grace Church from the very first must have been the establishment of a boys' choir, for on Jan. 28, 1865, the following advertisement appeared in the Rockland County Journal: "BOYS WANTED with good voices to sing in the choir of Grace Church. A small salary will be paid according to usefulness. Apply to the rector on Saturday of this week."

From then until his death, unless he was out of the country, or ill, Mr. Babbitt seldom missed a rehearsal of the boys' choir.

There was a men's choir, too. As did the boys' choir, it continued into the early 1930's. On one memorable occasion, in the early 1880's, when Bishop Potter had been at Grace Church for a confirmation service, the whole choir accompanied him on the ferry trip across the Hudson to Tarrytown, serenading him the whole way. Their songs enchanted not only the Bishop, but those living near the Nyack shore, as the sound of their music drifted back across the river.

Franklin Babbitt was not a priest to let a boy go after he became affiliated with the church in any way. Once, when Helen Essex complained to him that she could not keep the attention of the boys in her Sunday school class on their lesson that day, that all they wanted to do was talk about baseball, he replied: "That's all right. Just keep them there."

"Keep them there" he did. He took them hiking and camping, a tradition carried on in later years when Albert E. Clark became choir director. At first the boys camped at Rockland Lake, later at Matamoras, PA.

Most of the 30 boys in the choir went on to become members of the adult choir and later the Grace Church Choir Alumni Association. Some, like Douglas Johnson, became members of the Servers' Guild.

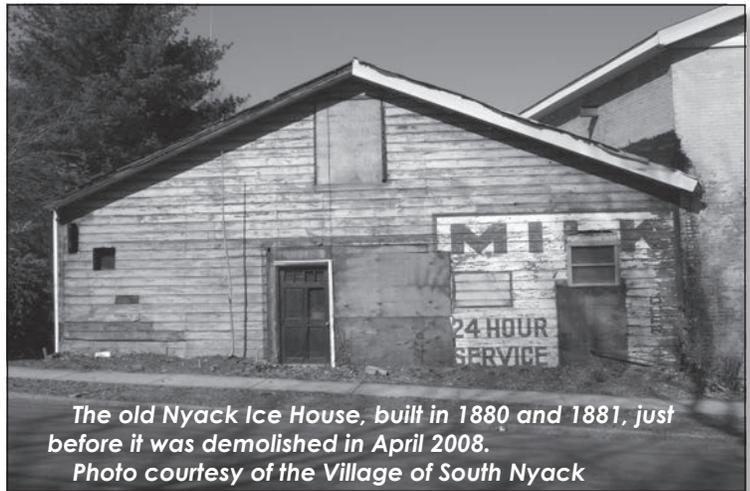
By 1910 the church was boasting of having "a well-equipped gymnasium." It was here that in 1932 the Grace Church Rangers' basketball team won all but one of the games it played. It

hadn't hurt, of course, that Glen Ausbury, athletic coach at the Nyack High School, and Tom Hutchinson, his assistant, were members of the team.

Justin Kaney, who played with the Rangers, recalls that "it wasn't the best basketball court in the world. The floor wasn't that great. We were up against the wall when we played, but we had fun."

If the boys' choir was Mr. Babbitt's particular joy, St. Andrew's Guild, the men's organization which he founded early in his pastorate, was one of his mainstays. Because of the annual steamboat excursions to Rye Beach or Coney Island, which the guild sponsored every summer from 1893 to shortly before World War II, it was also the best known in the community. If possible, the excursions were held on a Wednesday afternoon, when Nyack stores were closed. Not only Nyackers but people from the surrounding communities enjoyed the trips. The biggest was probably that held in July 1933 when 1,300 excursionists embarked on the steamer "The City of Keansburg" for Rye Beach.

Mr. Babbitt had been married to Emily Tillou of Nyack and New York in Trinity Church, New York, on April 9, 1866. Not a word about the wedding appeared in the Rockland Journal, but years later in the Journal, in an account of the surprise party and luncheon given by the Ladies Guild of Grace Church



The old Nyack Ice House, built in 1880 and 1881, just before it was demolished in April 2008.

Photo courtesy of the Village of South Nyack

for Mrs. Simon Strack in honor of her golden wedding anniversary, was this paragraph: "Mrs. John Harrison baked the wedding cake and decorated it with the same gold satin leaves which had adorned the wedding cake of the late Rev. Franklin Babbitt."

A list of the women's and girls' organizations which over Grace's 125 years have worked for the church, earning thousands upon thousands of dollars toward its support, and friendship with other members of their groups, would fill a long paragraph. One of the most important of their enterprises has been the Grace Church Thrift Shop.

There is no longer a boys' choir nor is there a girls' choir, such as the St. Cecelia's choir which was formed by Marian Brown-Serman, wife of the Rev. Stanley Brown-Serman, one of the church's rectors. The adult choir is no longer an all men's choir. Women became members of the choir in the 1930's. Responsible for the change was Ruth Churchill, wife of the Rev. Ernest Churchill, also a rector of Grace Church.

Grace Church has had eight rectors and five assistant rectors since Mr. Babbitt died. Among them have been the Rev. Robert Jewett, the present rector, and the Rev. Janet Vincent-Scaringe, present assistant rector. Each of the 13 has greatly enriched Grace Church and the lives of its parishioners.

Virginia Parkhurst, October 1986



Pulling cow, Main Street and Broadway, circa 1900



Boat off Nyack Pier with children, circa 1900

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Volunteers Sought

Interested in volunteering? Contact Linda Greene and tell her what you are interested in. We could also use some help with the membership data base and with historical markers. Linda can be reached at (845) 353-2854, and lindagreen@nyackhistory.org.

Like to Write an Article for Our Newsletter?

Contact Gini Stoldorf, (845) 358-7910 or ginstoldorf@nyackhistory.org

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Historical Society of the Nyacks

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