



# Historical Society of the Nyacks

Newsletter

Volume 10

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## WILLIAM H. HAND OF FRANKLIN STREET

by Gini Stollendorf, Editor

William H. Hand was born in 1900, a member of the third generation of Hands to live in the Gothic Revival stone house on the west side of Franklin Street in South Nyack, originally known as the Hand Manor by the family, now referred to as the Hand Mansion. Hand (known as Bill) was a scientist and inventor. At the time of his death in 1978, he was the last surviving research scientist to have worked with Thomas A. Edison.



*This portrait of William H. Hand was painted by Elizabeth Shoumatoff (1888-1980), who emigrated from Russia with her family in 1917 and lived in Long Island, N.Y. Shoumatoff had an extraordinary talent for portraiture. She received many commissions in the U.S. and Europe, including portraits of Henry Clay Frick, Andrew Mellon, and Harvey Firestone, among others. She was painting a portrait of Franklin D. Roosevelt in Warm Springs, Georgia, when he suffered a fatal cerebral hemorrhage. The portrait is known as The Unfinished Portrait of F.D.R.*

Hand was born and raised in Nyack. He graduated from Liberty Street School in 1920. In an interview conducted by the *Rockland Journal News* in 1965, Hand stated that the school had good science equipment and that he was encouraged by the school's principal, Charles Hooker, "to be inventive." He also stated that he often conducted experiments in his home and that his parents "were very supportive." Upon graduation he went on to Haverford College, a liberal arts school in Haverford, Pennsylvania.

In 1924, during his last year at Haverford, he took the Edison Intelligence Test (a test sponsored by the Edison Laboratory in West Orange, N.J., and given at many colleges and universities at the time). One usually heard back from Edison with results and/or a job offer within two weeks. When Hand did not hear back, he wrote Edison a rather, in his words, "sharp letter" stating what "I thought of his test and everything else that came to mind." He subsequently received a letter from Thomas Edison's secretary, William Meadowcroft, inviting him to the Edison Laboratory. Hand was hired and became a personal research assistant to Thomas Edison from 1924 until 1930 (Edison died in 1931).

Hand worked on many projects for Edison. One of the earliest projects was the development of a new type of plastic that would almost completely eliminate background noise in phonograph records. Over time, this discovery would net Edison and his company over \$8 million. Hand also worked on finding a domestic source of rubber in the northern temperate climate as Edison and his friends, Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone Sr., were afraid that a second world war could prevent the importation of rubber from India to the United States.

After leaving the employment of Edison in 1930, Hand established the Hand Laboratory for Electro-Chemical Research and Development on the grounds

## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

by Win Perry, AIA, Society President

The Historical Society is a co-sponsor of Nyack's Toni Morrison Bench by the Side of the Road project along with the Nyack Commemorative Committee, Village of Nyack, the Nyack School District, and others. When asked why she wrote *Beloved*, Ms. Morrison said it was her memorial to slavery because there is no monument, not even a bench by the side of the road, to commemorate the role of Africans, either in bondage or free, in the history of our communities. Just as a group of local citizens were discussing how to replace Joseph Mitlof's impromptu memorial to the Underground Railroad in a collapsing garage in Nyack, committee member and HSN trustee, Bill Batson, became aware that the Toni Morrison Society had picked up on Ms. Morrison's remark and is allowing local communities to sponsor a Toni Morrison Bench by the Side of the Road to commemorate their African Americans in general, and a specific individual in particular. At Bill's suggestion, the Nyack Commemorative Committee applied to the village and was granted the right to erect a Toni Morrison bench in Memorial Park. It will commemorate Cynthia Hesdra, who, with her husband, owned a house a short distance south of that location in the 1850s, and is credited with being a conductor on the Underground Railroad. You will hear much more about the project in the months to come. Preparations will be made in the park at a spot where the Hudson River and the Nyack Brook are beautifully framed by a shady tree. The spring exhibit in our museum across the street will feature Toni Morrison and Cynthia Hesdra. School classes will be participating. The bench itself will be dedicated on May 18 of this year by Toni Morrison herself. Let's all be there. You can learn more and contribute to the cost at [nyackbench.org](http://nyackbench.org).

of the family home in South Nyack. During its lifetime, Hand employed up to six research assistants. It was here that Hand experimented with lead batteries, the research and development

*Continued on page 5*

## 82 NORTH BROADWAY

by Arthur H. Gunther III

When you paint in a great artist's childhood bedroom, in space where the Hudson light seems a direct path from Heaven, off the river and straight up Second Avenue, you are humble. Humble even if you are simply covering a wall with latex, part of a sprucing-up after a fairly serious renovation.

Recently, I was the artist in an artist's bedroom, not doing artist's work but trying to be artistic. I am a trustee of the Edward Hopper House Art Center and, along with Lynn Saaby, Dave Sirois, and Brian Levine, we of the House and Grounds Committee try to offer as much volunteer repair work as possible. Giving free labor and, often, materials has been the secret of success in affording maintenance of the 1858 house where Edward Hopper, the famed American realist painter, was born in 1882.

Ever since the once-deteriorating home was rescued by concerned citizenry and refurbished largely through volunteer work in the 1970s, the mantle has been passed from crew to crew to keep the iconic village structure in top shape. While these days that cannot always be accomplished with volunteer expertise and labor alone, and focused fundraising is necessary for infrastructure concerns, such as the ongoing drive to waterproof the basement, Hopper House continues to rely heavily on what labor and materials can be offered. I have been privileged to be among the volunteers, all of us taking cues from Win Perry, Upper Nyack historian and architect, and his original 1970s restoration crew.

Those volunteers and early trustees saw to rewiring, heating, structure and wall repair, flooring, and other work so that the art center could begin to offer space for artistry of all design and taste, and to honor Hopper, as well as to rescue an old Nyack house. The mission continues more than four decades later.

For whatever reason, a portion of Edward's childhood bedroom, a particularly sunny part of the house on the southeast side, was never fully repaired. A long-

ago water leak had deteriorated the original horse-hair plaster on wood lath, and the wall on the south side, including the fireplace surround, had been removed down to the full-size 2 x 4 inch balloon framing, made of locally milled wood, which runs from the basement sill to the roof line.

Over the years, the bedroom had been rented to various artists to help supplement Hopper House income. Those painters did not mind the rustic nature of the exposed wall, which included Haverstraw brick infill for mass and early insulation.

Last year, the room was taken off the rental list and opened up to visitors eager to see Edward's bedroom, where most likely he was conceived as it was the master bedroom until just after his birth, when an addition was put on the north side.

The Hopper House board decided then to complete the long-overdue repairs, which included new wall work, period molding, improvement of the fireplace hearth, and paint. I got the job and spent about two weeks wonderfully enjoying the tasks.

Each day, and some nights, it was inspiring to see the effects of both sunlight and moonlight in the room and to again realize that Edward, whose paintings are so very much about light, was obviously affected by constant nature in his bedroom. The birth of a great artist took place in this room, literally and figuratively.

Repair work was made easier by a large table, perhaps 4 by 12 feet, which Edward built in his Washington Square, New York City, studio to dry printed black-and-white line drawings from copper-plate etchings. (Hopper House was given the table by Edward's neighbor, a professor, after the man retired a few years ago. He had received it from Jo Nivison, Edward's wife and fellow painter.) I was careful not to damage the rustic oak



Photo: Art Gunther

table, and it sure came in handy.

The wall repair was quick enough, using drywall and a finish that mimics plaster. The moldings required extra work since we had to match them to what might have existed, or at least come close. I mixed this and that profile and hand-milled some pieces to achieve the desired result.

In the end, the restored wall fits the original bedroom, itself the inspiring scene of several Hopper paintings. It may not be perfect, for I am but a volunteer craftsman, but I took pains to respect the house and the artist.

No, I did not channel Edward Hopper, which might seem a temptation, especially when in the bedroom at 8am on a bright, sunny day and the light streams up Second Avenue through the large windows and onto the walls. But neither can the fact of his existence, his childhood and early adulthood, be ignored in that room. As a writer, photographer, and painter, I can call myself an artist, though that definition bears no resemblance to artist Edward Hopper. Yet if there is kinship at all, it was a bit brotherly to be working in the great man's bedroom.



Arthur H. Gunther III is a retired newspaper writer/editor/photographer for the original Journal-News. He lives in Blauvelt, N.Y.

## THE DEPEW HOUSE — AN ARCHITECTURAL GEM WORTH SAVING

by Win Perry, AIA, Society President

The Historical Society of the Nyacks has its little museum in the basement of Depew House, back of the Nyack Library, and the library is our landlord. It's temporary. It doesn't meet our ultimate criteria: it's not accessible to people with disabilities, not above grade, not fireproof, has no sprinkler system, and is not in a prime location to catch the eyes of visitors. Nevertheless, with the budget we have after twenty years of fundraising and growth, we are lucky to be able to afford it. It does have one prime attribute: historical significance.

The Depew House was built by Peter Depew in 1850 on the footprint of an older brownstone farmhouse built by his father or grandfather. It was the grand manor house of a farm that occupied the southern third of the present Village of Nyack and the northern part of South Nyack, down to Division Avenue, and extended from the Hudson River to the top of the mountain to the west. Peter had inherited the farm after his father's death in 1834, subject to lifetime rights for his mother, and he enthusiastically put his energy into the effort to build the community of Nyack. He sold lots to residents and to businesses. One of his early sales was a riverfront lot on Piermont Avenue to Cynthia Hesdra, a former slave, who we believe used it as a station on the Underground Railroad. Peter gave land for the Presbyterian Church, now Nyack Center, and either gave or sold land for Liberty Street School and later for the railroad that came to Nyack.

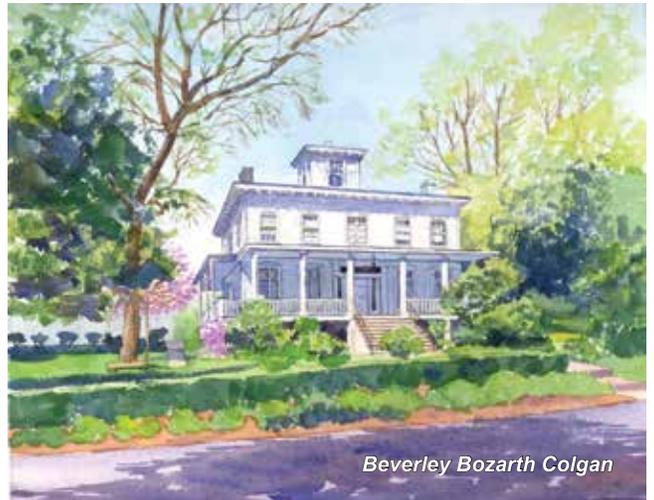
Replacing a humble sandstone farmhouse with an impressive home in the latest style in 1850 was emblematic of the greater change in which Peter Depew participated: helping transform Nyack from part of a row of pre-Revolutionary farms to a thriving commercial, retail, and manufacturing center and Hudson River port. Meanwhile, his farming gradually morphed into a commercial florist business with greenhouses on what is now the upper level of Memorial Park.

The lower level of the park was sold or leased for the Storms Brothers wooden pail factory, probably powered by the Nyack Brook.

In 1989, when architectural historians from Columbia University surveyed the buildings of Nyack, they found the Depew House to be "one of the most architecturally spectacular and historical(ly) significant homes in the village... a rare early Italianate dwelling."

About ten years ago the Nyack Library bought the Depew House because its generous backyard was needed as a parking lot for the large addition planned for the library building. The interior was beautifully restored as rental office space, but needed work on the exterior has been repeatedly ignored and deferred. By the beginning of this year roof leaks were damaging the interiors of second floor offices and had caused rotting that made the north end of the east porch sag noticeably and threaten to collapse. People were asking whether it was safe to come to the Historical Society's door under the porch, or were staying away entirely.

A delegation of six, including Historical Society members, a fellow tenant, and a principal of Visit Nyack attended the annual meeting of the library board in December to urge them to face up to their responsibility as custodians of a local historical treasure. While we were unsuccessful in getting them to budget for the needed rehabilitation this year, I was invited to a subsequent meeting with the Treasurer, Executive Director, and Business Manager at which the director assured me that the roof would be patched and the porch would be propped up securely. Indeed, this was done almost the next day. The Treasurer said that significant money will be available to the library in two or three years at which time the plan is to make all necessary



repairs to both the Depew House and the Stevenson House, home of the Art Café, south of the library. In the interim they will engage a professional to inspect both buildings, identify needed work, prepare specifications, and assist in getting bids.

While we wish that the roof could be replaced and the building painted sooner, we support the library in its efforts to preserve the Depew House, one of Nyack's treasures.

### SUPPORT LOCAL HISTORY

Please take a few moments to benefit local history. Your support helps us to maintain and enhance our museum in the DePew House and enables us to continue popular activities such as our acclaimed Great Nyack House Tour, our John Scott ArmChair Walking Tours, and other special lectures and programs. See the mailing label on this page for your membership status.

Please mail your donation to Historical Society of the Nyacks, P.O. Box 850, Nyack, NY 10960 or go to [nyackhistory.org/support.html](http://nyackhistory.org/support.html)

- Family/Joint \$28
- Individual \$15
- Business/Professional \$50
- Donation \$\_\_\_\_\_

# HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE NYACKS - WHERE LOCAL HISTORY HAPPENS

## IN OUR MUSEUM

### TOYS OF THE PAST — OUR CHILDHOOD MEMORIES THROUGH FEBRUARY 28



This popular exhibit includes dolls, dollhouses, stuffed animals, puppets, children's books, games, toy soldiers, model cars, trucks, planes, trains, and other interesting items enjoyed by children before 1955. Thanks to the enthusiastic response to our call for toys, we have an extensive and eclectic collection of beloved playthings on display - not just priceless dolls or vintage miniature trains, but the quirky and much-adored playthings from our youth.

### AN UNDERGROUND RAILROAD MONUMENT COMES TO NYACK OPENING MARCH 14

Inspired by Toni Morrison, honoring Cynthia Hesdra, this exhibit will showcase the upcoming Nyack monument to the Underground Railroad and will explore the history of Cynthia Hesdra (1808-1879), a Nyack woman who rose from slavery to become an entrepreneur and abolitionist and who is listed as a conductor on the Underground Railroad in Nyack. The life of Nobel Prize winning author and local resident, Toni Morrison, whose quote inspired the Toni Morrison Society's *Bench by the Road* program, will also be highlighted in the exhibit. Photos and text that describe bench projects from around the world will create a compelling narrative about slavery and freedom. The bench will be installed in Memorial Park on May 18, 2015. For more information, visit [nyackbench.org](http://nyackbench.org).



**The Historical Society of the Nyacks Museum**  
Saturdays, from 1 to 4 pm and by appointment  
Across the library parking lot, lower level  
50 Piermont Avenue, Nyack

### HELEN HAYES, FIRST LADY OF NYACK NYACK LIBRARY EXHIBIT THROUGH MARCH

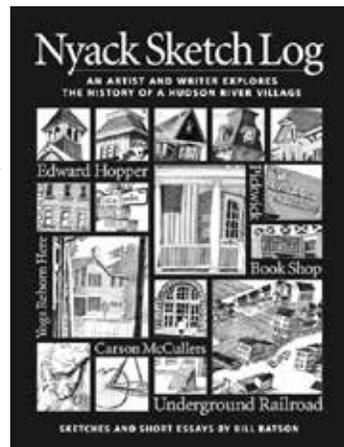


*Helen Hayes, First Lady of Nyack*, is the subject of our new display at the Nyack Library. Beloved actress of stage and screen, Helen Hayes, and her husband playwright, Charles MacArthur made their home in Nyack from the early 1930s until her death in 1993. They lived on North Broadway in a house they named *Pretty Penny*, the subject of a painting they commissioned Edward Hopper to

make. Come by the display cases in the Carnegie Room, the original stone part of the library, to revisit this charming and gracious lady who once walked with us and shared life in our community.

### JOHN SCOTT ARMCHAIR WALKING TOUR THE HISTORY OF NYACK IN 55 SKETCHES

Bill Batson, author of *Nyack Sketch Log* and the Artist-in-Residence at the Nyack Farmers Market, will present *The History of Nyack in 55 Sketches*. Bill's recently published book, with drawings and essays about this one square mile village where his family has lived since the 1890s, will be available for purchase.



Wednesday, April 8, 7 pm, Nyack Library  
Thursday, April 9, 2 pm, Valley Cottage Library

## A SOUTH NYACK FOUNDATION

by Myra Starr, South Nyack Village Historian & Planning Board Member

An application by the current owners of a house on Glen Byron Avenue to build an addition to their house was on the agenda for a recent meeting of the the South Nyack Planning Board.

The address looked familiar, and consulting my files, I found it on my “Thruway Houses” spreadsheet. It was one of the houses moved in the 1950s to make way for the N. Y. State Thruway.

Whenever a property has some interesting history, I make copies of the file and any appropriate maps to bring to the Planning Board for the edification of my fellow members, the owners, and often their architect. So for the Glen Byron house, I had my spreadsheet showing that Everett M. Bush was the owner when this house was moved from Mansfield Avenue to the “..Elton Lewis development...” according to the Journal-News of June 22, 1953. I had copies of the 1910 and 1919 Sanborn Insurance Maps of Nyack, which showed the houses then existing on Glen Byron, which was later extended to the south to accommodate the Thruway houses.

*Myra Starr continuously updates the Village's files on the properties taken by the Thruway in the 1950s. If you have information to share, please contact her at [mstarr146@gmail.com](mailto:mstarr146@gmail.com).*

I gave my brief report at the meeting, adding that if the Zoning Board of Appeals had any reservations about the needed variances they could be reminded that at the time the Thruway Authority was to take at least 144 properties, 120 or more in South Nyack. The village trustees, concerned that our tax base would disappear, encouraged owners to move their houses to sites within the boundaries of the village. Hence, the “Elton Lewis development” and, most likely, permission to waive front and side yard requirements to fit in as many houses as possible.

At the meeting, members of the Planning Board asked the current owner if he had known that his house had been moved to its current location. “Yes,” he said, adding, “when I was considering buying the property I hired a building inspector to examine the house to determine its condition. The guy kept shaking his head.”

“You said this house was built in 1917, but the foundation is much later. They didn’t build foundations like this in 1917.” That was when he and I discovered that the 1917 house had been moved and placed on a 1953 foundation.

## HOUSE HISTORIES AT THE NYACK LIBRARY

Carol Weiss advises us that the Local History Room of the Nyack Library has received house histories for these addresses, compiled by Hugh Goodman.

Stop by and take a look:

Aldine Park (2, 4, 26)	Marion St. (83)
N. Broadway (90, 207, 251)	Midland Ave. (33)
S. Broadway (43, 93-95)	New St. (30, Westgate Development Corp.)
Burd St. (62, 82)	Orchard St. (1, 5, 15, 49)
DePew Ave. (14, 20, 85, 196)	Piermont Ave. (48, 85, American Legion Hall)
Fifth Ave. (24, 44)	Rockland Place (3)
First Ave. (145)	Second Ave. (6)
Gedney St. (59, Nyack Boat Club)	Sixth Ave. (26, 98)
Hart Place (15, 24),	Summit Ave. (38)
High Ave. (38, Nyack Express Building)	Tallman Ave. (20)
N. Highland Ave. (60)	Tallman Place (31)
Highmount Ave. (124)	Third Ave. (59, 88, St. Ann’s Convent)
Jefferson St. (47, 52, 56)	Washington St. (35, 82)
LaVeta Place (3, 31)	
Lydecker St. (40)	
Main St. (84, Johnnycakes Restaurant, 98, 100, 112 Sign of the Times)	

## W. H. Hand, continued from Page 1 ...

of which would make them the longest lasting storage batteries of the time—ca. 15 years. The batteries were subsequently used in sea rescue boats during WW II. As they became more available, ambulance, police, and fire departments started using them, as well as the general public. It was also at the Hand Laboratory that it was discovered how to produce pure iron that would not rust.

Hand was very involved in Nyack and Rockland County. He served on the board of the Nyack Public Library and as a trustee of the Historical Society of Rockland County. He lectured on scientific subjects in local schools and taught at times in northeastern schools operated by the Edward Harkness Foundation, whose teaching method, the Harkness Table Method, involved students sitting in large groups discussing ideas in an encouraging, open-minded environment with only occasional teacher intervention. Many colleges and boarding schools were using the method, which encouraged classes to be held in a discursive manner.

Hand received an honorary degree of Doctor of Science from St. Thomas Aquinas College and was listed in *Who’s Who in America*. He donated the land and helped build the Orangetown Fire House on Depot Place in South Nyack.

William (Bill) Hand was named for his grandfather, William H. Hand, the first generation of Hands in the Nyacks. This William Hand (1830-98) worked in construction in New York City for such firms as McKim, Mead and White, and for Richard Morris Hunt. His buildings can be found on the campuses of Columbia and New York Universities, as well as at Bellevue Hospital.

In 1882, Hand left New York City and moved his family and business to Piermont. In 1884, he purchased a partially completed stone house in South Nyack. It had been started by a Nyack contractor, Azariah Ross, and was to be called *Rossmere*. (The building at the corner of Main Street and Piermont Avenue, known locally as the *Vanilla Factory*, is one of Ross’s buildings in Nyack.)

Before completion of the house, Ross died. The landscape lay idle for a number of years until it was purchased by Hand who reconstructed and completed the house.

Hand subsequently proceeded to buy up the property around the house to prevent encroachment. He continued in the construction business until his death in 1898.

## Newsletter

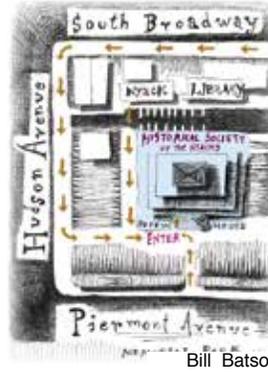


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Our museum is open from 1 to 4pm on Saturdays and is located in the lower level of the Depew House, 50 Piermont Avenue (directly east of the Nyack Library).



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