Mysteries 2013

Work in local history constantly uncovers traces of people and places once familiar but now unknown. One question leads to another...sometimes across an ocean, sometimes close to home. Such a mystery can start with a single clue.

The Butler

Samuel D. Mandell’s “History of Houses in Aurora” includes a note on the Robert L. Zabriskie House (now Shakelton’s Funeral Home): “German Butler Drowned, March 11, 1905.”

No name or other details were given but bit by bit other pieces of the puzzle came to light.
Dr. Albert Leffingwell’s diary for March 1905 commented with shock on the sudden loss of the young butler who had served him at Robert’s dinner party just a few days earlier.

The back of this postcard reads: “Standing - Joseph __?, German butler of Alonzo Zabriskie [sic], drowned from the ice back of the Inn
Seated - Frederick Michael Müller, father of Lansing Miller.”
It took quite a bit of sleuthing to find newspaper accounts of the tragedy. The reporters all had trouble with his name.


However, another paper’s short note called him Joseph Hirsch Vogel. Records for St. Patrick’s Cemetery include Joseph Hirschvogel, March 19, 1888-March 12, 1905; Joseph died a week before his 17th birthday. The record adds that he was the son of A. and Anna Hirschvogel of Rosenheim.
An e-mail to the mayor of Rosenheim brought a reply from the city archivist. The archivist had no record of the family, and suggested that Joseph was from the surrounding rural region. A country lad might well see work in America as a great adventure.

But as it happens, the Rosenheim archives hold the work of the early twentieth century photographer Simson, and this fine photograph was labeled “Hirschvogel.” Did young Joseph leave a picture with his family before embarking for America? Is it the same youth? What do you think?
The next mystery began with a photograph from our collection. The men are carpenters and workmen about to build a house. Many of their faces are familiar from other old photos, so we know them to be Aurora men. But when was this taken? Who are they? And where are they?
“When” was easiest to decide. Electricity came to the village in 1895, and there are electric poles and wires in the background, so it was after 1895. The bowler hats and caps might put it at 1900-1910 or a little later.

“Where” was more difficult. The house in the immediate background doesn’t look like any current Village house. Members of the Aurora Historical Society proposed, and checked out, two possibilities for the house dimly seen on the right. The building on the left might decide between the choices.
There are not very many brick buildings in Aurora. If the frame house on the right is Riford house, then the brick building would be Wallcourt. But Wallcourt wasn’t built until 1910, and Robert Zabriskie’s house (1903-4) had long since replaced the older house on the same site.

Another possibility for the large brick building is the Library, built in 1899. The border between floors, the deep foundation and the railing seem right, but the dormer seems to project more than it should.
If it is the Library, that would make the building on the right the Arms-Avery house, a very old one two doors from the Library. In that case the workmen would be building a house for Martin Maloney Jr., around 1914, on the lot just south of the District School (today “Aurora Arts and Design.”)

But what is the white house behind them? The two-chimney style suggests 1820-1840; the porch and bay window are closer to 1860s in style. Is this Maloney’s earlier house, moved from Sherwood in 1848, with additions by the sculptor Erastus Dow Palmer, who rented it in the 1850s?

For now, that’s as close as we have gotten - except for the two tall young men half-seated on the wood. They are brothers: John and Eugene Maloney.
The Housekeeper

The third mystery began with a house and has taken off on the byway of one of its inhabitants.

In 1838, at the age of 55, Peter Fort bought the house begun by Daniel Shepard and finished by his son Charles Shepard in 1819 (above; today known as the Peter Fort house). Fort, son of a Revolutionary War soldier, sought and found his fortune in New Orleans, where he served with Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812.
Peter Fort never married. Sometime in the 1840s he brought to Aurora as his housekeeper Mrs. Mary E. (Cromwell) Devoe, a widow with two children, William and Mary Ann, still at home. Fort seems have known Mrs. Devoe from his years in Harlem; apparently he was able to conduct his New Orleans business from New York.

Fort and Devoe appear in a set of photographs circa 1860, when Fort was about 77 and Mrs. Devoe in her early or mid-60s.
Most photographs of women in the 1860s are posed face to the camera, often seated with hands folded. What a dramatic contrast Mrs. Devoe presents! She was vain enough to add only two years to the age she reported to census-takers in 1850 and 1860 - but in addition there seems to be a certain defiance and toughness in her expression that is difficult to read.
In 1875, upon Fort’s death at age 91, Mrs. Devoe moved to the center of a case involving his will.

Devoe and Pierson won the estate, which turned out to be small. In 1881, they sold Fort’s house to Edwin B. Morgan, who gave it to Wells College. And Mrs. Devoe disappeared, except for a date of death recorded by Henry A. Morgan: 1887.

Do you love a mystery? Please e-mail the Village Historian, Ischwab@wells.edu, for the day and time of the next meeting of the Aurora Historical Society.

Linda Schwab, historian, thanks Judy Furness (Town Historian), Linda Kabelac, Ginger Johnson, Nick Bogel-Burroughs, Catherine Burroughs, Marie Clements, Bill Maloney and all the members of AHS for their contributions to these stories.