

# Historical Society of the Nyacks

Newsletter

Volume 6

Issue 3

Fall 2011

## Message from the President

by Win Perry, Society President

We spent the month of July and part of August “drying out.” Not alcoholism rehab, but from the historic Nyack flood of the last week in June, the one that ruined Riverspace Theater. A big brown river came down Depew Avenue, across Broadway, through the space between Nyack Library and Wright Brothers Real Estate, and into the Library’s new parking lot. Deflected by a parked car, a major stream shot into the window well of the boiler room in Depew House adjacent to our headquarters rooms. A door held back a foot-and-a-half of water and we got about three inches—enough to ruin the carpet but, fortunately, not much else. Our entire archival collection escaped damage as much of it is elsewhere in a watertight and fire-protected storage room. Other items were well up off the floor and we immediately moved them out of the building. We lost copies of some books we’ve published and hoped to sell, but there are plenty left.

Of course, the Board has seriously considered the implications of the flood and a possible recurrence. After looking at other spaces that are available in Nyack, we have decided, at least for the present, to give Depew House another try. It has the advantage of being a historic building that is centrally located and close to the Library with its Local History Room and our archival storage

**VISIT OUR NEW MUSEUM**  
THIRD SATURDAYS  
1-4 P.M.

**FEATURING**  
SIGNATURE QUILT FROM 1862  
TALLMAN FACTORY PIANO  
WILCOX & GIBBS SEWING MACHINE  
ST. GEORGE HOTEL RECEPTION DESK

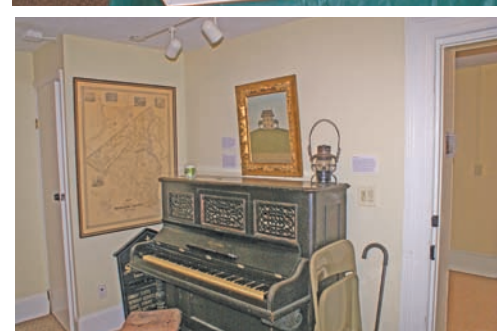
**BEGINNING OCT. 15**  
10 ENLARGED PRINTS OF EARLY GLASS  
PLATE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE  
LEWIS F. STOCKMEYER COLLECTION

**Across the Library Parking Lot**  
Suite L-2, Lower Level  
50 Piermont Avenue

**Volunteers needed during above hours**  
Contact Linda Greene  
845.353.2854  
[lindagreene@nyackhistory.org](mailto:lindagreene@nyackhistory.org)

room. The Library (our landlord) has replaced the carpet and is in the process of taking prudent steps to reduce the chances of future flooding of the building. And, of course, we will continue to be careful that our valuable collection is safely stored. Depew House Headquarters will be used as a work space and to display items related to Nyack history that are relatively immune to water damage or are replaceable copies. Any vulnerable items in the building will be stored in archival boxes and kept well above any possible water level. Most of our collection will remain in an off-site storage room.

So come and visit. We are again open third Saturdays from 1:00 to 4:00pm. See our interesting displays and share your thoughts on Nyack’s



past and future. And we solemnly promise, if you give us your local treasures so that others can enjoy them for years to come, we will keep them safe.

**Where Local History Lives: [www.nyackhistory.org](http://www.nyackhistory.org)**

## Julian O. Davidson: Painter of Ships and Boats

by Gini Stollendorf, Editor



Julian O. Davidson, *Breezy Day on Tarrytown Bay*

When Julian Davidson died in 1894 at age 40, the art world lost a preeminent marine artist. Observers of his paintings remarked that he had mastered the difficulty of painting waves (N.Y. Times, Obituary, May 2, 1894). The accuracy of his paintings revealed his early observation of the sea. While still in his teens, Davidson began working as a crew member on ships that traveled to the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and even the Suez Canal, serving as ship's boy, storekeeper, and assistant to the engineer, among other jobs. And on these voyages he kept diaries and filled sketchbooks with drawings.

In 1871, he returned to the United States to live with his parents in Fordham (Bronx) and began painting marine scenes. At this time he discovered Nyack, "the gem of the Hudson," where steam-powered river boats and yachts and Hudson River sloops were built and launched from the many boatyards here. With its close proximity to New York City, Nyack had become a popular summer residence and resort for many city dwellers, so it seemed natural that Davidson would have been attracted to it. The year also marked the completion of his painting titled *The*

*Hudson River from the Tappan Zee* (Hudson River Museum, Yonkers). He was not yet eighteen years of age.

A year later, Davidson became a student of the Dutch-American marine painter Mauritz F. H. De Haas, whose studio was located in the famous Tenth Street Studio Building in New York City. It was here that young Davidson came in contact with some of America's leading artists, such as Winslow Homer, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Church. In 1874, he acquired his own studio in the building, which was coveted by many artists, and by 1876 was exhibiting and selling his paintings. He was considered "one of the coming men in art circles" as recorded in *The Aldine: The Art Journal of America* (pub. 1868-79).

It was also in 1876 that Davidson began spending a lot of time in Nyack, where he rented rooms at



Avalon Hotel



the Avalon Hotel, which stood at the corner of South Broadway and Mansfield Avenue. He attended Grace Episcopal Church, where he met Edward and Mary Merritt and their family. In 1877, he married their eldest daughter, Cornelia, in a ceremony at Grace officiated by The Reverend Franklin Babbitt. It is believed that Cornelia's brother, Arthur Merritt, had introduced them as he and Davidson were friends and had developed a mutual interest in rowing. The two would remain friends for the rest of their lives. Davidson subsequently purchased a small steam-powered launch *The Princess*, which he kept in Nyack.

In 1881, Davidson and Arthur Merritt were the forces behind the formation of the Nyack Rowing Association (see Klose, *A Historical Perspective of Rowing in Nyack* in this issue). The New York Times often chronicled the events of the club under such headlines as "Rowing on the Hudson," "Rowing Contests in Nyack," and "Annual Regattas of the Nyack Rowing Association." The names of Davidson and Merritt were often cited due to their skill in rowing.

All during this time and for the rest of his life, Davidson continued

*Continued on page 6*

## A Historical Perspective of Rowing in Nyack

by Peter Klose, Director/Secretary of the River Rowing Association



Rowing Association Boathouse, completed in 1882

In the late 1800s, rowing became very popular on the Hudson and Nyack became the home of the Nyack Rowing Association. On May 2, 1881, the fledgling group held its first meeting in the old Nyack Armory, where 25 charter members agreed to create a rowing association dedicated to the sport of sculling (two-oared rowing) and immediately set to work planning a grand boathouse.

Julian O. Davidson, local artist and marine painter, and his brother-in-law, Arthur Merritt, founders of the Association, were instrumental in the planning and design of the original boathouse, which was one of the most beautiful in the country.<sup>1</sup>

By August 1881, the association had raised nearly \$5,000 (roughly \$98,000 today (CPI) to begin construction of

the boathouse, which commenced in January 1882 and was completed on May 30, 1882, for an estimated cost of over \$8,000. Opening with a gala reception on June 14, the new boathouse brought much notoriety to Nyack and its grand rowing center.

Designed by William Smith and built in the “Stick Style” architecture<sup>2</sup> common of many river homes in the village, the boathouse contained the latest amenities, including running water, gas for heating and lighting, and electricity. The building consisted of three levels, including a 34- by 60-foot ballroom, two huge fireplaces, a central ventilating cupola, as well as a four-story tower.

The lower level had boat storage for

<sup>2</sup> “Stick Style” buildings were an important but relatively rare style in American Victorian architecture dating from 1860-90. The buildings are noted for a number of unique features all united by the use of “sticks,” flat board banding, and other applied ornamentation in geometric patterns that adorn the exterior clapboard wall surface. Similar to their European counterparts, many have asymmetrical floor plans with steeply pitched slate roofs topped by iron cresting. Porch posts, brackets, and other support beams are square with chamfered edges. (Courtesy [www.lib.umassd.edu/digicoll/stickarch/stick\\_architecture.html](http://www.lib.umassd.edu/digicoll/stickarch/stick_architecture.html)).

<sup>1</sup> Julian Davidson married Cornelia Trimble Merritt in 1877, niece of George Merritt (d.1830), the once famed owner of the magnificent Gothic Revival house known as Lyndhurst, in Tarrytown, N. Y. (now a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation [www.lyndhurst.org](http://www.lyndhurst.org)). See Berman, Lynn S., Julian O. Davidson (1853-1894), *American Marine Artist, The Historical Society of Rockland County*, September 14-November 16, 1986, p. 69 (Appendix II). This book may be purchased at the Nyack Library for \$15.00.

sculls (one-person shells or rowing boats) and other vessels, including large ten-oared rowing barges, which members used to row lady friends on moonlight rows across the Hudson to the Tarrytown lighthouse and Yonkers. Built at the end of Spear Street, the first level provided access to the Hudson across a 90-foot gangway.

The second floor consisted of a main salon, or ballroom, which was decorated with a crystal gaslight chandelier suspended from a domed, highlighted ceiling of painted canvas designs. The glass transoms over the doors showed various nautical scenes, including one titled *Knights of the Oar*, a painting depicting eight “stalwart knights of the oar” gliding through the water. At the outskirts of the salon were a janitor’s room and “ladies boudoir.” The east end of the salon opened through French doors to beautiful views of the Hudson River from a wide veranda surrounding three sides. The grand parties, hosted in the shadow of Hook Mountain, were some of the most talked about events of the era.

The third floor contained dressing and bathing facilities for male members. The tower’s fourth story is reported to have contained a very popular billiard table and, in April 1890, the Association added a billiard table, pool table, and bowling alley to the first floor.

In addition to rowing races, which were held to great fanfare and adoration from the press, the club pursued other athletic endeavors, merging with the Outings Club in 1892. In keeping with the amalgamation, the Rowing Association also maintained a

*Continued on page 6*

## When Nyack was the Car Capital

by Tom Hackett, HSN Board Member



Tom with his Olds Rocket 88

Following World War II, many people were anxious to buy a new car. No new cars had been manufactured since 1941, except those vehicles made for military and emergency use. Men and women were returning from the services, had saved a few dollars, and along with civilians were waiting to buy automobiles.

In 1946 and 1947, cars were starting to roll off the assembly lines again and new cars were appearing in the showrooms. In Rockland County, Nyack became the place to look for a car. Many of the buyers were so anxious to be the first to have a new car that they were willing to pay above list price (known as “under the table”). In 1946, average car prices for a Chevrolet and a Ford were between \$1,150 and \$1,250.

By the late 40s and early 50s, Nyack was the place to shop for almost any make of automobile. There were around 13 dealerships. Starting on Route 59 in Central Nyack there was Ned Besso’s Lincoln-Mercury (now Audi-VW). At the corner of Route 9W and High Avenue one could buy a Chevrolet from C. R. Jones Chevrolet (later Manly Chevrolet). Also located on 9W, near Catherine Street, one could shop for a car at Buchanan’s Studebaker.

Crossing to the west side of Route 9W was Frahn Motors, the Dodge

Plymouth dealership, and the Locke Chrysler-Plymouth dealership at the corner of 9W and Route 59.

Moving down Main Street, next to Highland Hose Company, was a Kaiser-Frazer dealer, and a few doors down, Faulkner Ford. On the corner of Main Street and Midland Avenue, cars and trucks were on sale at Burnweit Pontiac and International Trucks. Further down Main Street was Nyack Buick where, in 1951, I bought my first car—not a new car, but a 1941 Buick!

Off of Main, on South Franklin Street, was Kurland DeSoto-Plymouth and on Burd Street, Caglione Nash Inc., along with Worby Motors. I purchased my next car from Martin Oldsmobile-Cadillac on the corner of Broadway and Cedarhill Avenue, a ’50 Olds Rocket 88 that I drove on my honeymoon in 1953.

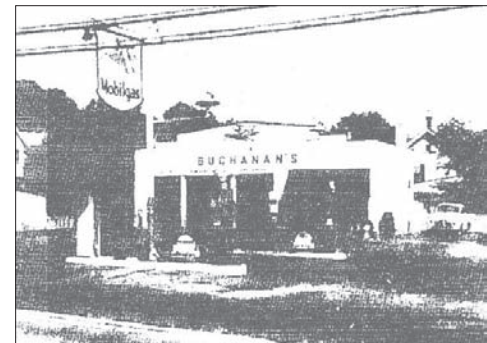
As a car buff, when new models arrived, I tried to visit all of these dealerships and got to know most of the owners.



Nyack Buick, Main Street, then and now



Kaiser-Frazer on Main Street



Buchanan’s Studebaker was on 9W near Catherine Street



Martin Oldsmobile-Cadillac, Broadway and Cedarhill



*Audi-VW on 59, formerly Manly Chevrolet, and before that Ned Besso's Lincoln-Mercury*



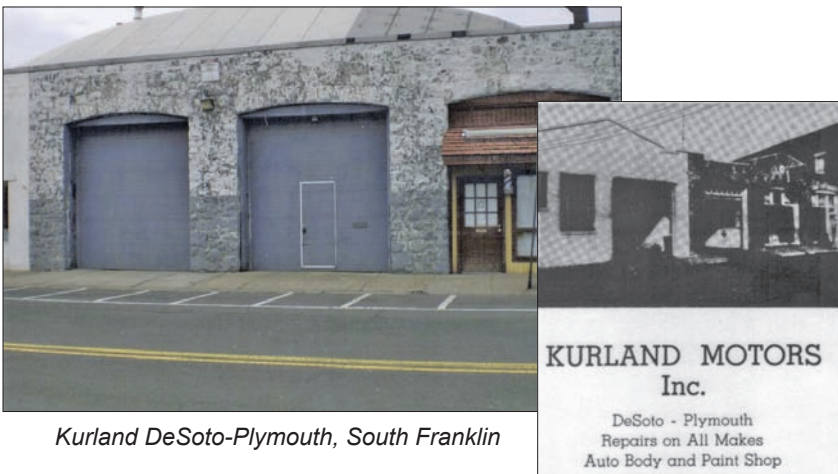
*C. R. Jones Chevrolet (later Manly Chevrolet) was here on 9W*



*Locke Chrysler-Plymouth on 9W & 59*



*Caglione Nash and Worby Motors, Burd Street*



*Kurland DeSoto-Plymouth, South Franklin*



*Faulkner Ford on Main Street*



*Frahn Motors Dodge-Plymouth was here on 9W*



## Rowing in Nyack, continued

baseball team, which, in 1893, was proudly undefeated through five games.

As time and fashion saw a decline in socially and athletically popular rowing, the membership and activities declined until around 1910, when the club disbanded and the boathouse was sold to Julius Petersen Inc. for construction of fashionable steam yachts.

In 1938, a huge September hurricane rolled up the Hudson River and badly damaged the boathouse, which was ultimately destroyed by a northeaster in 1950.

Nyack once again has a rowing club, the River Rowing Association (RRA). The organization has been systematically returning Nyack to its once prominent position as a venue for all things human powered, particularly rowing! Anyone interested in rowing, volunteering, coaching, or helping in another capacity is strongly encouraged to contact the River Rowing Association at [www.riverrowing.org](http://www.riverrowing.org) or [klose@riverrowing.org](mailto:klose@riverrowing.org).

### Historical Society of the Nyacks

To join, renew or donate,  
mail a check to the return  
address below, or go to:

[www.nyackhistory.org](http://www.nyackhistory.org),  
Membership Tab.

\$12 per year individual  
\$24 per year family



## Davidson, continued

to paint maritime themes. His works were thoughtfully composed and attention to detail was incredible. One can actually become engaged with the movement and vitality in his paintings. He mastered the technique of painting waves as few others in his day were able to do.

In 1885, the Davidsons purchased a plot of land on 117 South Broadway in South Nyack from Tunis De Pew (see HSN Newsletter, Spring 2011). They hired local architect James Bird Simonson to design a house, which still stands with its wide veranda facing the street and a series of porches facing the Hudson River. It was one of the first homes in Nyack to have central steam heat. The couple quickly became part of Nyack society. In addition to church events, they joined in evenings of poetry readings, musical events, and amateur theatrical performances. Davidson would often lend his artistic skills to scenery design and theatrical backdrops.

His 18-foot-wide painting, *The Battle of Lake Erie* (1885-87) was chosen as the visual on the 1997 Pennsylvania automobile license plate, which generated over a half million dollars for the Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission. Davidson's works can be found in a number of public collections: *Monitor and Merrimac—First Fight Between the Ironclads* (1886) at the Mariner's Museum in Newport News, Va.; *The USS Constitution Escaping from the British, July 1812* (1884) in the USS Constitution Museum in Boston. A number of chromolithographs are at the FDR Library in Hyde Park,

N.Y., and The Historical Society of Rockland County also owns some of Davidson's works.

Nyack will soon have a Davidson in a public space—*Breezy Day at Tarrytown Bay* will be on display in the very near future at the Nyack Public Library, according to library director James Mahoney.

### Historical Society of the Nyacks

A not for profit organization

#### Officers and Committee Chairs

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### In the Nyack Library through October 31st:

*Nyack's Main Street  
Through the Years:  
Postcards and Photographs  
from the Collection of  
The Nyack Library*

Do You Miss us Between Newsletters? Visit our Website: [www.nyackhistory.org](http://www.nyackhistory.org)

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# **HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE NYACKS PUBLICATIONS**

## **LIFE AT THE CLARKSTOWN COUNTRY CLUB, A PLACE WHERE THE PHILOSOPHER MAY DANCE AND THE FOOL BE PROVIDED WITH A THINKING CAP—\$15**

Reprint 2010, Historical Society of the Nyacks. Originally published in 1935 by the Clarkstown Country Club.



## **OLD NYACK – AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORICAL SKETCH OF NYACK-ON-THE-HUDSON—\$10**

2009 facsimile reprint of the original 1928 publication by the Nyack National Bank. It covers the history of the community from prehistoric times through the nineteenth century.

## **NYACK IN BLACK & WHITE – RACE RELATIONS OVER THREE CENTURIES—\$10**

by Carl Nordstrom, 360 pages, December 2005, Historical Society of the Nyacks and the Nyack Library.

## **THE NYACKS—\$20**

128 pages, October 2005, Historical Society of the Nyacks and Nyack Library. From the series *Images of America*, Arcadia Publishing.

## **NYACK IN THE 20TH CENTURY: A CENTENNIAL JOURNAL—\$25**

155 pages, 2000, Historical Society of the Nyacks.

## **THE NYACK STAR QUILT – 1862—\$4**

by Regina Haring, Firth Haring Fabend, and Winston C. Perry, Jr.  
23 pages, 2011, Historical Society of the Nyacks.

These publications may be purchased at the Nyack Library, 59 South Broadway and during open hours at the Historical Society of the Nyacks Museum, 50 Piermont Avenue. If ordering by mail, add \$3 per book for shipping and handling and mail your check to Historical Society of the Nyacks, P.O. Box 850, Nyack, NY 10960.

**PRICES INCLUDE SALES TAX**



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**Newsletter of the  
Historical Society of  
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