



# Historical Society of the Nyacks

Newsletter

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Fall 2010

## Alvin S. Johnson (1874-1971)

by Gini Stoll Dorf

Scholar, teacher, humanitarian, and citizen of the world, Alvin Saunders Johnson's American roots began in northeastern Nebraska. In 1849, his father, Jen Jensen Deyrup, emigrated from Denmark and took up farming in the town of Homer (named after the Greek poet), which is where Alvin grew up. An immigration inspector thought the family name sounded 'hardly' American



and changed the old-world name to the new-world name of John Johnson.

When Alvin was thirteen, his father arranged to rent him the family farm.

The signed deal was to allow Alvin to take two-thirds of the profits, while his mother and father would take the remaining third. The end of the 19th century was not the best time to be a farmer—animal cholera and severe droughts insured that little profit was accumulated. But as Alvin would later write in his autobiography, it gave him a feeling of responsibility, patience, and a sense of humor that stayed with him throughout his life.

By age 18, Johnson felt he needed more schooling and enrolled in the University of Nebraska in Omaha. With his farm career over, he embarked on a life that would lead him into sociology, journalism, teaching, and editing. After University, he served in the Spanish-American War and upon his release from the Army moved to New York City and enrolled in the School of Political Science at Columbia University, where he received a Ph. D. and stayed on to teach economics. Over the course of his teaching career, he held positions at the Universities of Nebraska, Texas, Chicago, Stanford, and Cornell. During these years, he became an editor of *The New Republic* and contributed articles on economic and political matters.

By 1919, Johnson was back in New York state with his wife, Margaret Edith Henry, whom he had met at the University of Nebraska, and their family. Looking for a place to live to with their five children, they discovered Nyack (two more children would be born here).

As written in his autobiography, *Pioneer's Progress* (Macmillan 1952), their ten-year old daughter, Dorothy, had admonished, "Parents, when you have

*(continued on page 7)*

## Message from the President

by Win Perry, Society President

In 1933, when Frank Lloyd Wright publicized his famous Taliesin Fellowship for the training of his architectural disciples, he listed 120 "Friends of the Fellowship," outstanding leaders in many fields and from many countries. Among them were Sherwood Anderson, Robert Benchley, John Dewey, Albert Einstein, Buckminster Fuller, Walter Gropius, Rockwell Kent, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Lewis Mumford, Georgia O'Keeffe, José Ortega, Dorothy Parker, Diego Rivera, Eliel Saarinen, Carl Sandburg, Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, Leopold Stokowski, Norman Thomas, Mies Van Der Rohe, and William Allen White. Prominent on the list were two residents of North Broadway, Charles MacArthur and Alvin Johnson. That Wright included these neighbors of ours in his over-the-top exercise in name dropping illustrates two points about Nyack history.

While we all know about Charles MacArthur, it is less well known locally that Alvin Johnson was an intellectual of world class status with a wide variety of accomplishments to his credit. Our editor reminds us of some of them in this issue.

The other point is that Nyack has always attracted creative and accomplished people who often live among us as gracious but unassuming neighbors. MacArthur and Johnson are just two of our own long list of notables.

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New Armchair Tours: page 4

# Nyack's First Honorary Fire Chief

**ROCKEFELLER**

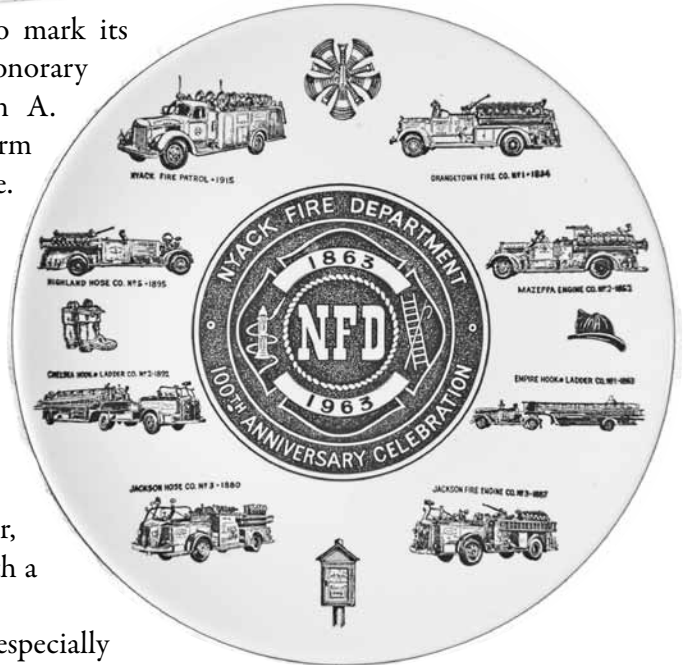
by Gini Stollendorf

In 1863, the Nyack Fire Department was founded and to mark its 100th anniversary in 1963 the first and, so far, only honorary fire chief was named. New York State Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, who had just been re-elected to a second term (and would be re-elected two more times), was the honoree.

The Governor and his wife, Margaretta "Happy" Rockefeller, arrived in Nyack from their home, *Kykuit*, in Sleepy Hollow (now a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and open to the public; see [www.hudsonvalley.org](http://www.hudsonvalley.org)). The ceremony took place on June 13 at 3:00pm at the St. George Hotel on Burd Street.

Fire Chief Everett "Smokey" Wanamaker presented the Governor with the fire chief's helmet and badge (part of Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection, The Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY). The Rockefellers were also presented with a commemorative plate and coins to mark the occasion.

The Rockefellers' visit brought a lot of area residents to Nyack, especially in and around the St. George Hotel. At the time, Nyack had its own police



Jackson Hose Company. L. to R.: driver Richard Kendall, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, Chief Everett "Smokey" Wanamaker, Deputy Chief George DeJong, Battalion Chief Raymond Munn. Photo James P. Celentano (*The Journal-News*). Collection of Marion Wanamaker.



1963-64 Nyack Fire Department 100th Anniversary. L. to R.: Battalion Chief Raymond Munn, Commissioner Gomer Morgan, Chief Everett "Smokey" Wanamaker, Deputy Chief George DeJong, Margaretta "Happy" Rockefeller, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller. Photo James P. Celentano (*The Journal-News*). Collection of Marion Wanamaker.

department and the force was busy on foot and in patrol cars making sure that all ran smoothly. Many children were brought into the hotel to meet the Governor and Mrs. Rockefeller, and those with autograph books left with a special memento. "Smokey" and Marion Wanamaker remember how crowded the streets of Nyack were that day. They thought the Rockefellers were interesting people—affable, very friendly, and interested. In fact, they thought of them as "just being part of the crowd."

Following the ceremony at the hotel, Governor Rockefeller boarded the Jackson Hose Company fire truck for more picture taking. A few weeks later, the Nyack Fire Department received a letter from the Governor thanking them for the honor they had bestowed on him and for the wonderful time he and "Happy" had in Nyack (letter in collection of Nyack Fire Department).

## Jean Pardo—Local Historian

by Leontine Temsky, HSN Trustee



Jean Pardo, who served as Nyack Village Historian from 1996 to 2009, has for so long been regarded as a primary source of information about Nyack that it's hard to believe this smiling, energetic, diminutive woman did not always live here. In a recent interview, she told me that she grew up in Minneapolis, attended the University of Minnesota, and then came east to study at Smith College School for Social Work. In 1945, she was placed in an internship program at Rockland State Hospital. Jean arrived at the Orangeburg railroad station and remembers her first taxi ride—the driver chose a very roundabout route to a place that she knew to be very close, but, as he explained, he had to drive completely around Camp Shanks. Jean lived in the interns' quarters at the hospital for a year, where there was very little to do in the way of amusement. The only recreation, she said, were two nearby bars. Not having a car, Jean didn't get to see much of the county during that year and made only occasional trips to Nyack and Pearl River to shop.

After receiving her master's degree, Jean worked for several years as a social worker in the New York area. In 1951, though they both lived in Manhattan, she and Alan Pardo chose to be married in Stony Point at "A Bit of Sweden Inn." Some time later, they moved to Paris where Alan had been offered a job, but returned to the U.S. in the fall of 1955.

In 1957, the couple and young daughter, Carol, moved to Blauvelt where they lived for twenty years,

the last year in a Dutch sandstone house with a three-story barn. Jean worked part-time at the Mental Health Association of Rockland County, the Jewish Family Service of Rockland County, and the Child Advocacy and Advisory Council. She retired as Director of Social Work at the Rockland Children's Psychiatric Center.

Soon after moving to Blauvelt, Jean became involved in local activities. She served as president of the board of the Blauvelt Free Library, helped organize a tour of Dutch sandstone houses, and oversaw the gift of a Dutch sandstone house as the Library's permanent home. These activities sparked her interest in local history, which became an important part of her life.

Jean's first project in retirement was to research her family history, which took her to Scotland, Ireland, England, and Canada. For ten years, she and her family lived in Piermont, in a house built for them on Clausland Mountain. In 1988, the family moved to Nyack and Jean worked in the Local History Room of the Nyack Library. She recorded oral histories of many longtime residents, including Virginia Parkhurst, Dorothy Hand, Hezekiah Easter, and Winston C. Perry Sr.

Jean is a founding member and trustee of the Historical Society of the Nyacks. As Nyack Village Historian, she was actively involved in publishing projects initiated by the Society and the Nyack Library. She was the general manager and chief writer of *Nyack in the 20th Century: A Centennial Journal* and edited, proofread, and prepared for publication Carl Nordstrom's *Nyack in Black and White: Race Relations*



James Mahoney, Director of Nyack Library, after naming Jean and Alan Library Volunteers of the Month.

*Over Three Centuries*, a history of African Americans in Nyack.

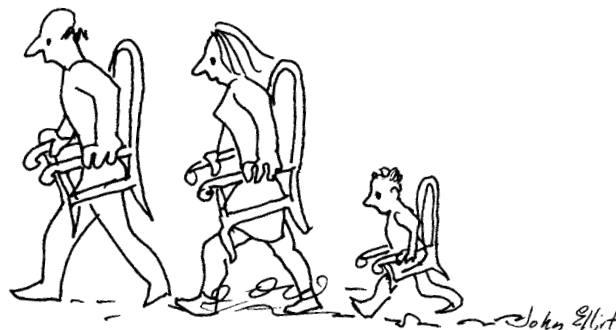
Though she recently retired as Village Historian, Jean's interest in local history and in writing has not diminished. She recently finished writing a history of the Blauvelt Free Library as part of its centennial celebration. This year, she received an honorary award from the Orangetown Historical Museum and Archives for her work.

Jean told me that her future plans include writing histories of the early retail stores in Nyack and the Nyack school district. Her recording of oral histories lends insight into small-town life and how people related to each other. Jean has provided a rich resource for us and future generations.

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## John Scott Armchair Walking Tours — Our 15th Year

This enormously popular program, now in its fifteenth year, features slide and DVD presentations on local history, architecture, and related cultural subjects. The Armchair Walking Tours are dedicated to the memory of John Scott, Rockland County's great historian. The programs are produced by Bob Goldberg and co-sponsored by the Historical Society of the Nyacks and the Friends of the Nyacks.



### A Virtual Walking Tour Through Historic Tappan

This fabulous program was presented by Janet and Gil Galloway in September.

The Galloways have resided in Tappan for over 44 years, and among their many other accomplishments, are professional videographers.

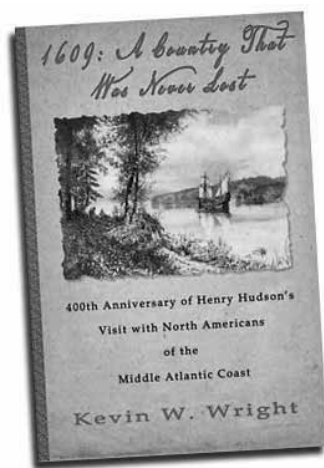


They led us on a virtual walking tour of their historic village, including the sites of British spy John Andre's trial, imprisonment, and hanging; the De Wint house, the oldest building in Rockland County and which was often used by General George Washington as his headquarters; the Tappan Dutch Reformed Church; the Yost Mabie House where the Orangetown Resolutions were adopted on July 4, 1774, and several other significant sites associated with the American Revolution.

*If you did not see this marvelous presentation, you missed a doozer! To be informed in advance of future programs, please join our e-mail list at [www.nyackhistory.org](http://www.nyackhistory.org) and become a Society member (page 6).*

### The First Peoples Of Nyack and Rockland County

To be presented by Kevin Wright, curator at the Steuben House Museum of the Historical Society of Bergen County. He is a noted local historian and specialist of the lives and culture of native Americans of Rockland and Bergen Counties.



Kevin Wright is also the author of several books, including a recently published book, *1609: A Country That Was Never Lost*. The program will describe the tribal life of the eastern Rockland and Bergen native Americans and their relationships with the newly arrived Europeans.

*The program will be presented first at the Nyack Center on Wednesday evening, October 20th at 7:30 PM and will be repeated the following afternoon, Thursday, October 21st at 2:00 PM at the Congers Lake Community Center in Congers Lake Park.*

### Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic In Early Rockland County

To be presented by Doris Goldberg. Doris has been a secondary school teacher in Rockland County for over 20 years and recently retired as Adjunct Professor at Rockland Community College. Experience what it was like to be a student or teacher in early Rockland County beginning with the first school founded in Tappan in 1694.



As you can imagine, there is a great contrast between school life in the "good old days" and school life today. The story of our early schools, students, teachers, curriculum, books, disciplinary measures, and means of transportation provides an interesting and amazing journey.

*The program will be presented at the Nyack Center on Wednesday evening, December 1st at 7:30 PM and will be repeated the following afternoon, Thursday, December 2nd at 2:00 PM at the Congers Lake Community Center, in Congers Lake Park.*



*The Old Mill, circa 1890*



*Salisbury Manor, circa 1900*

*Photos courtesy of Lewis F. Stockmeyer Collection, all rights reserved.*

## SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS

**LIFE AT THE CLARKSTOWN COUNTRY CLUB, A PLACE WHERE THE PHILOSOPHER MAY DANCE AND THE FOOL BE PROVIDED WITH A THINKING CAP—\$17**

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



**GUIDEBOOK TO THE GREAT NYACK HOUSE TOUR—\$3**

2010. A companion to *Life* and an attractive souvenir of the Tour. Replete with paintings of the houses by Beverley Bozarth Colgan.

**OLD NYACK – AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORICAL SKETCH OF NYACK-ON-THE-HUDSON—\$11**

Facsimile ed., 1983, Village of Nyack. Originally published in 1928 by Nyack National Bank.

**NYACK IN BLACK & WHITE - RACE RELATIONS OVER THREE CENTURIES—\$17**

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

**THE NYACKS—\$22**

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—\$27**

155 pages, 2000, Historical Society of the Nyacks.

These publications may be purchased at the Nyack Library. If ordering by mail, add \$3 per book for shipping and handling (\$2 for Guidebook) and mail your check to Historical Society of the Nyacks, P.O. Box 850, Nyack, NY 10960.

**PRICES INCLUDE SALES TAX**

### Publicize Your Local History Events

We encourage organizations to post events directly to the Local History Calendar on our Website for all to see.

Contact Jim Hershberger, 845.268.9087  
jimhershberger@nyackhistory.org

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Members receive the satisfaction of supporting local history and receive our newsletter while enjoying discounts on special events.

Thank you

Judy Martin 845.358.7797  
membership@nyackhistory.org

**Vic DelRegno** is doing a documentary of his father's **WWII experiences** and asks if anyone has a picture of the **USO Club in Nyack**, (present day **Runcible Spoon**). Contact Win Perry, 845.358.0552, winperry@nyackhistory.org.

**Fall 2010, Historical Society of the Nyacks, P.O. Box 850, Nyack, NY 10960, [www.nyackhistory.org](http://www.nyackhistory.org) -6-**

## Johnson, continued from first page..

found a place that suits you, buy it, so that I can have a garden." One day, he saw a newspaper advertisement for a "Gentleman's Estate on the Hudson." Having always wanted to live near a river, he found it in Nyack. So, he packed up the family and

*" . . . drove over to look at the house. It was big and in bad repair, of Norman architecture; there were 3 acres of grounds running down to the river with grass so tall that my children, running through it, were just progressive waves in the grass. There I have lived since 1919, there I will live until 'the Master' of all good workmen calls me to work anew. There we have noble trees of our own planting, and gardens and gardens, violets and daffodils and hyacinths, tulips and peonies, roses and roses and roses, and lilies, chrysanthemums and all the wealth of the westerly year. There we are at home."*

Also in 1919, Johnson co-founded, along with other Columbia scholars (historians Charles A. Beard, James Harvey Robinson; philosopher John Dewey; economists Thorstein Veblen, Wesley Clair Mitchell), the New School for Social Research in New York City (now The New School). It was a progressive center for adult and continuing education where academic formalism was discarded in favor of free inquiry into controversial matters.

With the growth of Fascism and Nazism in Europe in the 1920s and 30s, liberal and Jewish scholars were being dismissed from teaching positions in Italian and German universities. Johnson was well known for his lifelong opposition to all forms of discrimination. He attempted to help the refugee scholars by organizing the University in Exile,

a specially created division of The New School. A collaboration with the Rockefeller Foundation garnered the resources to help scholars find positions in other American universities as well. This partnership enabled over 200 scholars from Germany, France, Norway, Italy, and other countries to come to the United States. (More about the University in Exile in the Winter 2010 edition of this newsletter.) Johnson retired from The New School in 1945, but went on to serve as elder statesman and president emeritus.

Throughout his life, Alvin Johnson wanted little for himself. He became best known for helping others. He did, however, receive accolades and awards from around the world. In 1942, at a dinner held in his honor under the auspices of the League for Fair Play, Eleanor Roosevelt said of Johnson, "The greatest thing we can say of this famous man is that we can be grateful for his courage and for his inspiration, which allows other people to give the best they have to give." He was decorated by Danish King Christian X and given the *Officier de l'Ordre de Leopold II* by Belgium. On his 75th birthday, he was made an Officer of the Legion of Honor by the French government.

On his 80th birthday, he said that the horizon still excited him. He could remember how at the age of 14 he would eagerly climb a hill on the farm in Nebraska and look out as far as he could see. When in June 1971 he died at the age of 96 in his beloved home in Nyack, New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller hailed Alvin Johnson as a "creative educator and humanitarian."

## Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Nyacks

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