

# Warrensburgh Historical Society Quarterly

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Spring 2016

## Stephen Griffin (2<sup>nd</sup>) And his Legacy *by John T. Hastings*

**By John T. Hastings**

Throughout the history of Warrensburgh various individuals have become prominent for their contributions to society, not only in the local area but often on a regional, statewide or national level. Such people as Floyd Bennett, James and Louis Emerson, Albert and Seth Alden, or Randolph McNutt fall into this category. They have all had a distinct positive impact on the local region and the country.

Another individual that deserves recognition is Stephen Griffin 2nd. Mr. Griffin was born in the family homestead in Thurman on October 18, 1812 and was the third child of John and Catherine (McEwen) Griffin. Upon his father's death in 1828, Stephen took charge of the family farm, as well as working in the woods for the next 12 years. He married Maria Coman in 1838 and they moved into what would become the Adirondack Hotel and managed that business for over eight years. For the next 20 years he was involved with a number of businesses in and around Warrensburgh. In 1846 he

purchased interest, with Joseph Russell and Joseph Woodward, in the sawmill and store which would later become A. C. Emerson & Company. Sometime after this he became part owner of the Glen Tannery. This tannery was started in 1838 by Robert Gilchrist, but the 1855 Census lists the owners as Stephen Griffin and "Van Sote." The real estate and machinery was valued at over \$4,500. Ten men were employed with each having an annu-



*Tim Ward, Stewart and John Farrar explore the old Griffin Tannery site at The Glen.*

al salary of \$132. Eighteen hundred cords of bark and 8,000 hides were being used to produce sole leather in this location.

In 1866 Stephen purchased a large piece of property in the Town of Newcomb and for the next ten years undertook lumbering operations on these lands. Upon the completion of this job, the property was  
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## *From the Files of the Town Historian* **SHOE PEG FACTORY**

**[Or a lesson in how confusing history is to interpret.]**

*From one source the editor believes dated c.1885, the following was found:*

"Wyman Flint of Bel-lows Falls, Vermont started the Peg Factory still running in January, 1882. The buildings were erected at that time by I.J. Brill. The capacity of the factory is indicated by the statement that it turns out about 20 barrels of pegs daily. White, yellow and black birch are used exclusively, and are drawn from the forests in the vicinity. Charles White is the foreman. Two sets of hands are employed, one numbering 15 and the other about 27 or 28."



*Shoe pegs on display in Warrensburg Museum.  
Courtesy of Steve Parisi*

*On April 13, 1886 the Warrensburgh News printed the following: "It is with deep regret that the News chronicles the loss of one of Warrensburg's thriving industries removed from our midst. A manufacturing plant which furnished  
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## Society Page

### PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

This is the first issue done by our new Quarterly editor, Sharon Stone, who has accepted the torch passed on by John Hastings and Sandi Parisi before him.

It is also the first issue to be printed by the Warrensburg Chamber of Commerce. This is done at a considerable savings for the Society. As you can see, we now have the potential for color print and graphics.

We occasionally change the masthead photo. This issue's photo is interesting in that it shows the Emerson sawmill on the left and also John Smith's sawmill on the right, along with the booms that guided the floating logs to each mill. Smith built an electricity generating plant on the old tannery site just downstream from his sawmill. It powered the town's first electric street-lights. The lane leading to the plant is now named Electric Avenue.

The Society owns the property whereon stood the sawmill, generating plant, and tannery. We've been in discussions with the APA and hope to proceed this year with plans to create a park with walking trails along 1,000 feet of the river.

Our Education Committee, chaired by Rosemary Maher, has embarked upon another round of Enrichment Programs for the 4th grade. The popularity of the program among the students has led to the creating of an additional program for the 5th grade, in which we are also participating. Dr. Kathleen Bernhard is coordinating these programs at the school.

Our Historical Enrichment Program has begun with three after-school sessions on glacial landforms in Warrensburg by Paul Gilchrist and a session on stream erosion by Dean Moore using Soil Conservation Service's table model; then four sessions about museum and artifacts by Rosemary Maher, Mark Brown, and Elaine Cowin; Donne Lynn Winslow's four sessions will cover local architecture. All sessions will have much hands-on activity for the kids.

Another offshoot of these programs is that

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### Quarterly Editor

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We welcome comments, corrections, articles, pictures, letters, and reminiscences. Send to:

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### Board Meetings

The Board of Directors meets at the Senior Center (May-October) or at Richards Library (November-April) at 7:00 pm on the FIRST Wednesday of each month. Call Paul to confirm at 623-3162

### Contributors to this issue:

**John Hastings  
Paul Gilchrist**

### Upcoming Events

### CURRENT MEMBERSHIP:

**245**

**Warrensburgh Historical Society**

**Website:** [www.whs12885.org](http://www.whs12885.org)

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### NEW MEMBERS:

The Morrison Family

Edward Taylor

Ann Stewart

Dot Langworthy

Margaret McMahon

Harry Alger

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### NOTICE

The recording of history is an interpretive and ever changing study. Therefore, the Warrensburgh Historical Society or its Board of Directors or members shall not be held liable for the accuracy or authenticity of the material herein.

**We welcome and encourage corrections, comments, and additional information.**

### Membership Information

If you would like to join and receive the Quarterly by mail, please send a check for the amount of the membership classification, with name, address, and phone number to:

**Warrensburgh Historical Society P.O.  
Box 441,  
Warrensburg, N.Y. 12885**

#### Membership Rates

| Students      | \$5.00  | Contributing           | \$55.00  |
|---------------|---------|------------------------|----------|
| Individual    | \$15.00 | Business               | \$50.00  |
| Family        | \$25.00 | Institutional          | \$100.00 |
| Senior (62+)  | \$10.00 | Life (Individual only) | \$300.00 |
| Senior Family | \$18.00 |                        |          |

(Griffin—continued from page 1)  
sold and 43,000 acres were purchased along the county line in Johnsburgh (Warren County) and Wells (Hamilton County).

In 1877 Stephen built, on the Johnsburgh lot, what would become the Oregon Tannery. The headquarters for this tannery was located east of Stuart Creek and was also the site of a blacksmith shop. The Oregon tannery was in operation until early 1892, at which time it was destroyed by fire. Up until this time the tannery was being run by McConnell and E. O. Shaw. After the fire temporary buildings were set up to finish production. Once this was completed, the remaining bark was sold and transported to the Faxon Tannery in Chestertown. After this property was sold it became part of the Richard Hudnut estate known as Foxlair.

A few years later, in 1880, Griffin sold the Oregon tannery and constructed a tannery seven miles west on the Sacandaga River in the town of Wells. This would be known as the Griffin Tannery.

The site of the Griffin Tannery was first settled in 1835 by Daniel Wadsworth, who built a sawmill in this location. This mill changed hands several times until James Moon purchased and ran it in the late 1860s and early 1870s. The community became known as Moon's Mills. In 1872 the firm of Catlin and Hunt purchased the site and constructed a mill for the extraction of liquor from the hemlock bark. This was located on a brook which would soon be named Extract Brook. The bark was ground with a grinding wheel and then boiled in three vats and stored in wooden barrels. Company teams would then haul the liquor to Amsterdam or Fonda.

However, in 1877, with the construction of the tannery by Stephen Griffin at nearby Oregon, a ready outlet for the liquor was available. Three years later when the new tannery was constructed just west of Extract Brook, Griffin moved his headquarters near the Catlin and Hunt Bridge just south of the river. The community, although first known as "Extract" soon became known as Griffin. He then contracted with Rice, Emory & Company of Boston for the management of the tannery. Extensive tannery buildings were

**Griffin Tannery on the far left, with bark piles (B), Sacandaga River (SR), and tannery homes (TH).**



present and consisted of a leach house (120 x 30 ft.), drying house (300 x 40 ft.), yard (300 x 30 ft.), boiler house of sheet iron (45 x 40 ft.), hide house (20 x 20 ft.), eight cooling vats (24 x 9 x 3 ft.), and 240 vats in the "yard." Power for the tannery came from two engines, 60 and 75 horsepower, with six boilers.

In June of 1892 the tract of timber in Johnsburgh and Wells, including the buildings and other personal property (a store, a dwelling, two blacksmith's shops, and 15 log houses, tools, etc., worth \$5,000) were sold to Jones Orway of the Morgan Lumber Company. The purchase price was \$50,000. It was estimated that the land had 500,000 market logs (approx. 100 million board feet) and 60,000 cords of hemlock bark.

Under Rice and Emory the tannery prospered and became one of the largest in New York State. Its primary product was sole leather for the use in shoes. Over 200 (6 x 8') vats were needed to hold the skins in the hemlock liquor, which took 6 months to cure. Skins came from all over the U. S. and South America. Annual production was expected to be 75,000 hides which would require 6,000 cords of hemlock bark.

To produce the liquor, the bark was first peeled from the tree and then ground into a fine dust. It was next dumped into vats or "beechners." Water was added and the liquid was boiled to produce the extract for the tannery. Each vat held 11 cords of bark.

When the hides arrived at the tannery, they were stewed to prepare them to have the hair and flesh removed with an 18 inch beaming knife. The hides were next

hung in lofts for sprinkling and softening. A fish oil was used to help in the softening process. Six months later, the hides were scrubbed, rolled and finished. Employees received \$1.00 to \$1.50 per day. Forty five men were employed at the tannery and twenty six houses were also provided by the tannery. These were rented to the employees with families at a cost of 50 cents per week. All of the houses were painted a reddish brown (Possibly from the paint beds on Crane Mt.). Lumber was sawn on site and over 900,000 board feet of lumber were used in the construction of the buildings. Stove wood was provided at a cost of 65 cents per day. One of the workers at the Griffin site was Charles E. Lavery, who would later move to Warrensburgh and purchase the Halsey Herrick store on Lower Elm Street.

Griffin soon became a "boom town." There were two stores, two hotels, a telegraph office, a school house, and a saloon. A stage ran to Wells and North Creek and a dam was built about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile above the rapids. A post office was established in October of 1880 and Charles Griffin served as postmaster from 1885 until 1893. At its height, Griffin had a population of 330 persons.

Morgan Lumber Company built their barns and a boarding house on the south side of the river and Stephen's nephew, Charles, was appointed overseer of the operations for the Company. In 1882 Henry Girard moved to Griffin and became employed as a night watchman for the tannery. Three years later, he, and his wife Eleazer, would buy and run the boarding house. This building is still present on the south side of Route 8 in the town of Wells. Henry's daughter, Ouida,

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*(Shoe peg—continued from page 1)*

steady and remunerative employment for nearly 40 people. It is indeed a heavy blow to the business industry of the town and one to be deplored. Nearly every branch of trade will be either directly or indirectly affected. It is now a settled fact that J.R. Foster's Shoe Peg Factory is to remove to Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts this summer. This has been contemplated by Mr. Foster for some time. For the past two or three years there has been a scarcity of peg wood in this vicinity and more recently, the quality has been so deteriorated and the quantity become so limited that a removal has become imperatively necessary."

*From a 1963 article by Egrynwen R. Whitacre:* "During the latter part of the nineteenth century there existed in Warrensburg a Shoe Peg Factory. This factory was located on the Schroon River near the present Pasco's Hardware Store (Curtis Cash and Carry). Shoe pegs were made from white birch and were used in the making of shoes. The pegs, about 1/2" long, were used to hold the heels on."

The Warrensburg factory was owned by J.P. Foster and their products were called "Blue Star Shoe Pegs." In 1893 the factory was forced to move to Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts because the raw material, white birch, became scarce.

The Peg Shop flourished in that community until 1904 and was once more forced to move because of the material shortage, to Plymouth, New Hampshire. They continued in this business until the blockade

of World War I put them out of business. Germany had been a good market for the Foster's Blue Star Peg as this article from the Warrensburgh News, February 4, 1892 states:

"The S.S. Eider which left New York for Bremen, January 23rd and was wrecked off the Isle of Wight Monday carried as a portion of her cargo 123 barrels of Blue Star Shoe Pegs, the products of our local factory. The value of the pegs was about \$325. At last reports the vessel was going rapidly to pieces and the entire cargo will doubtless be lost."

Articles from the April 17, 1890 Warrensburgh News state that Mr. B. W. Sherwood of Thurman has contracted to furnish 50 c. of peg wood to the factory and Ames Austin has also 50 c. wood ready which he will draw to the factory as soon as the ferry across the West River is in operation. The "West" River mentioned no doubt, is the Hudson River.

In July 1893 Mr. Foster was forced to close his factory here as previously stated. The following article from the Warrensburgh News of July 13, 1893 relates the story of the last days of the factory. "At J.P. Foster's peg factory yesterday afternoon each one of the male employees sawed a portion of the last log that will ever be worked up into "Blue Star" shoe pegs in Warrensburg. The machines were all shut down yesterday at 3:30. It will probably take the balance of the week to finish the pegs by hand screening, bleaching and barreling them, and in the meantime the work of preparing the machinery

for shipment to Shelburne Falls, Mass. will be vigorously pushed. Mr. Foster's new building in Shelburne Falls is rapidly nearing completion and the factory will probably be in full operation there early in August. That this thriving business is lost to Warrensburgh is to be regretted but all will join in wishing Mr. Foster the greatest measure of success in his new home. With improved facilities for production and his unequalled knowledge of the business he will have no difficulty in maintaining the position now occupied by the "Blue Star" peg as the best in the world and supply the great demand."

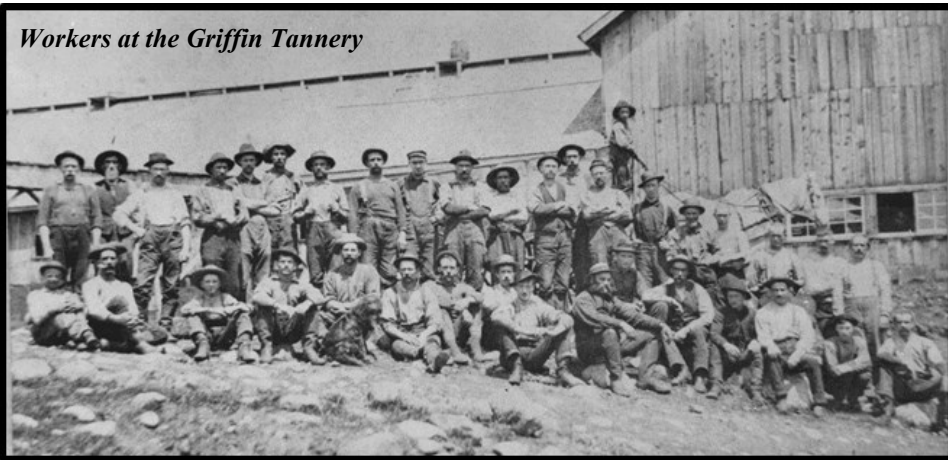
A community in order to thrive and grow must provide work for its members. It is interesting to note that 70 years ago our community was faced with the same economic problems that concern us today.

In addition to the information gleaned from the old editions of the Warrensburgh News special thanks is extended to Thomas W. Watkins of Shelburne Falls, Mass. for his most valuable information concerning the Peg Factory and the Foster family.

*Editor's note: Steve Parisi had a guest at his B&B back in the early 1980's who owned a shoe factory in Germany and said that shoes in their museum could have been made with "Blue Star Shoe*



*Workers at the Griffin Tannery*



*(Griffin—continued from page 3)*

later authored a book on Griffin and other tales.

In 1893 the tannery closed. Three years later in 1896 the smoke stack was removed and taken to the Faxon Tannery in Chestertown where it replaced the old one there. Seventeen years later the furnace boilers were removed and taken to Wells, where the flues were removed, cut to length and used for culverts for road repair.

In February of 1882 Griffin's wife, Maria, died. He retired from active business pursuits and returned to Warrensburgh and his homestead on lower Hudson Street. In his absence an overseer was in charge of the Griffin farm. These overseers included Joseph McKnight, Henry Tripp and his brother, Duncon Griffin. During his life Stephen was very active in civic affairs. In 1837 he was elected trustee of the First Presbyterian Society of Warrensburgh and Athol. He had been Warrensburgh postmaster in 1843 and 1853, as well as a trustee for the Warrensburgh Academy. In 1875 he served as a member of the New York State Assembly. He also served as town supervisor in 1857-58, 1869 and 1879 and often served as an officer on the Warrensburgh Union Agriculture Society. Later he was appointed state agent for the timber lands of Warren and Hamilton Counties. Stephen Griffin died December 31, 1893. He was survived by a daughter, Mary Ellen, who became the wife of Dr. Cyrus S. Merrill. His granddaughter was Grace Merrill (Magee), which is the source name for his former homestead, the Merrill Magee House.

**Note:** Only the Griffing genealogy book spells Mr. Griffin's name with the "g." All other sources spell it without. Why

some "Griffings" use the "g" and others do not is unknown.

#### **Sources & further reading:**

- *A History of Warren County* by H. P. Smith, 1885
- *Stephen Griffing Ancestry and Descendants*, Edith West, 1911,
- *A History of Hamilton County* by Ted Aber and Stella King, 1965,
- *An Adirondack Archive* by Elizabeth Hudnut Clarkson, 1993

*President—continued from page 1*

the Museum now has use of one of the large display cases upstairs in the elementary school (remember those?) for exhibits that will change several times a year - see the photograph and caption elsewhere in this issue. The display cases have been mostly unused for decades, but now have the potential for us to bring the museum right into the school.

School Board member Robert Frazier, a colonial period re-enactor who does work at Fort William Henry, has been inspired to use the other display case to exhibit colonial period artifacts.

We feel the Education Committee is involved in something that can grow and increase our interactions with the elementary and Jr/Sr high schools. It is often said our state educational system needs more focus on local history. Our Society is helping to fill that need.

We remind our readers that our website ([whs12885.org](http://whs12885.org)) now has all the old Quartermasters going back to the 1990s, so until next time, keep looking backwards.]

*Paul Gilchrist*

## EXTENSIVE IMPROVEMENTS

Work of Beautifying Grounds of the Griffing) Homestead Now Under Way. The work of improving the grounds of the Griffing homestead, which the owner, Dr. C. S. Merrill, of Albany, has entrusted to John T. Withers, a well-known landscape architect and forester, of Jersey City, was begun Monday by Dr. Merrill's overseer, James Harrison, and a force of men under the supervision of Mr. Withers forestry superintendent, George Paige. The plans provide for an elaborate decoration of the extensive lawn with flower beds and shrubbery, and a tennis court will be laid out in the rear of the house.

Mr. Paige is now engaged in doctoring sick trees on the place and cutting away some which are past help or for some other reason undesirable. Several apple trees on the lawn, which were gnarled and unsightly, have been removed. The row of maple trees in front of the property on Elm Street were found to be in very bad condition. Mr. Paige is a skillful tree surgeon and his diagnosis is quick and unerring. When it is completed his men attack the tree with axe, saw and chisel and every decayed part is separated from the sound wood and the wounds are treated so that nature may begin the work of renewal.

The maples mentioned were badly damaged by the big fire across the street about fifteen years ago and have since been decaying. However, Mr. Paige thinks he will be able to save all of them and that in time their symmetry will be fully restored. While Mr. Paige is in town residents who have trees in front of their property would find it to their advantage to have him look them over and prescribe treatment for those that are beginning to decay.

A beautiful tree is beyond price and no effort should be spared to preserve it. A number of fine shade trees on Main Street have been removed during the past few years and others are decaying rapidly. When they are gone it will take years to replace them. It is the duty of the present owners to preserve them for future generations.

*From November 12, 1908 Warrensburg News*



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Member Address

Mystery Photo