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FORUM: ARCHAEOLOGY AND PUBLIC HISTORY

I Know It's Only Rock 'n' Roll But They Like It! Community History, Popular Music, and Public Audiences

Stefan Bielinski

The theater lights dim. A milling, murmuring crowd begins to settle into its seats. While their eyes adjust to the darkness, swirling, synthesized sounds snap them to attention. As the volume builds, the chatting subsides. Heads turn to the large theater screen where the brightly colored words "People of Colonial Albany" suddenly appear, punctuated by the loud choral arpeggios "Re-mem-ber You!" — "Re-mem-ber You!" No, this isn't a stop on the Rolling Stones' "Bridges to Babylon Tour" but the start of a public history program entitled "Working People in Early Albany." Over the next five minutes, the audience absorbs a fast-paced offering of colorful and diverse images depicting life in an early American community. A catchy pop tune called "the Albany Theme"¹ accompanies the pictures. At the end of the offering, a now smiling audience invariably applauds—often enthusiastically. As the lights come up, everyone in the room leans forward in anticipation.

The theatrical introduction and the use of popular music and engaging visuals are resources from my days as an itinerant musician. They have helped the New York State Museum's Colonial Albany Social History Project bring cutting-edge scholarship in early American history to popular audiences ranging from the entirely apathetic to the totally engrossed. The Colonial Albany Social History Project is a model community history

program sponsored by the New York State Museum, as agency of the State Education Department. It intends to interpret community data-based historical and ethnographic scholarship for diverse audiences by utilizing a range of programming formats including publications, "on the street" exhibits, music, media, and particularly the Internet. Since 1981, the Colonial Albany Project staff consisting primarily of students and volunteers has been implementing a research design aimed at developing comprehensive biographies for every man, woman, and child who lived in the city of Albany and was born before the end of the year 1800. The project's principal resource is an in-progress data base of 16,000 biographies of early Albany people, a graphics archive consisting of several thousand images of the people of colonial Albany and their world, and a research document to support development and interpretation of the life-course biographies. Project ideology and all elements of its research and analysis, programming, and service initiatives are described in detail in *The People of Colonial Albany: A Community History Project* (1994 edition and supplements), a comprehensive guide that also lists staff, associates, graduates, clients, and benefactors. A number of articles describe functional aspects of the program. See, for example, Bielinski 1991, 1994.

For almost two decades now, I have applied a multidisciplinary community history approach to the question of why the people of a booming colonial community abandoned a way of life that seemed to work and became ardent supporters of the crusade for American liberties in 1776. I founded the Colonial Albany Social History Project as a vehicle for implementing the "history of the people, by the people, and for the people" approach of the community historian in the city where I grew up and have worked for the past 30 years. Several hundred students and scholars, friends and neighbors, and descendants worldwide have helped out since 1981. To humanize our understanding of community dynamics, we have been developing comprehensive biographies for each of the 16,000 men, women, and children who lived in the city of Albany, New York, prior to the Industrial Revolution. That ambition has mobilized

¹ I composed the "Albany Theme" over the winter of 1986–87. It was first used in November 1989 to introduce a public lecture series on the people of colonial Albany at the New York State Museum. Titled "Albany: A Song of Community" in its current CD format the song runs for 4 minutes 54 seconds. It has been recorded by my fantasy group "Duke and the Beverets."

a large number of disparately motivated researchers to labor for many years amid a sea of well-wishers, interested parties, and skeptics who demanded findings or at least evidence of progress in executing an ambitious research design.

As scholarly papers and subsequent journal articles began to validate the effort, we began to look for ways to bring what we had learned to broader public audiences. Initial products included: popular and news media articles; portable and drop-off exhibits and posters; TV and radio appearances; surprisingly successful Women of Colonial Albany Community History Calendars; city-as-artifact trolley bus tours; lectures; workshops; and other programs that brought the people of colonial Albany to more than a hundred schools, libraries, and other community centers. All of these programs were widely promoted by an interested and sympathetic local media.

With the public program becoming an effective means of reaching out to the public, we tried to make each presentation more meaningful and user friendly, supplementing and softening each with illustrations of early Albany/American life. Project historians culled and adapted illustrations identified during a systematic search of collections of historic portraits, maps, views, and other period renderings, material remains, and documentary resources. Included in this sweep were listings, signatures, and other textual representations, contemporary illustrations of activities in other communities, and a still-growing archive of modern recreations of community life that would help us visually characterize individuals, activities, and themes. In 1985, I began working with the historical artist Leonard F. Tantillo, first on a Tricentennial exhibit called "Government by the People" which yielded four pen-and-ink drawings of life in Albany in 1686. These representations: an overview diagram of the city based on a British army engineer's map, property records, and descriptions of individual buildings; and three activity scenes (the first common council meeting, the fur trade, and street life) also got me thinking about spatial issues and inspired the social geography approach taken in my Tricentennial publica-

tion (Bielinski 1986). Since then, the architect-turned-artist has called on us for support in the production of more than a dozen paintings of historic Albany that have become the most engaging and useful mainstays of our visual interpretations. I believe Len is Albany's most effective historian. His work and paintings are chronicled in *Visions of New York State: The Historical Paintings of L. F. Tantillo* (Wappingers Falls, 1996).

Finally, photographs and video recordings dating from the mid-19th century to the present provide yet another dimension. That long-term and still ongoing effort has yielded several thousand images mostly captured on slides, for us the most efficient means of storing and exhibiting our new "collection." Visuals have become staples of our public programs with artistic questions and issues entering the mix in ways I would not have thought possible just a decade ago.

The use of music sprang from an internal discussion in 1987 over just what background music should warm up the room before the start of a lecture. I found myself uncharacteristically passive in initial discussions but did feel put off by the suggestion of using Enlightenment-era classical music or romanticized folk songs. After all, I founded and dedicated the Colonial Albany Project to the recovery and celebration of the lives and contributions of the so-called "other 98%"—the ordinary people whose exclusion, we were told, has made history personally irrelevant for many people. To use music intended for elite ears and egos seemed a betrayal of our basic purpose. I needed to sensitize our students and associates to that fact and also to try and use what I sincerely believe is the universal language in a purposeful way! Calling on my great experience as a MTV watcher, I began to dream about how music might help make the people of colonial Albany come alive for public audiences. Ten years later, those dreams continue!

I confess to quickly overcoming an acquired reluctance to mix media, resolved to employ music, and laid plans on how to begin. Our first offering was titled "Faces of the City" and featured six dozen black-and-white portraits on black backgrounds that faded in on top of each other. The images were selected to

portray diversity and were periodically punctuated by somber text slides pointing out the racial, class, and gender biases of surviving portraiture. As musical accompaniment, I surprised my associates by selecting Antonin Dvorak's symphony "From the New World," a perfect choice because of its inspiration and spirit, and because—with some rearranging—the attitude of individual portraits could be linked to the mood of each musical movement. I was overjoyed! Played just before the start of public lectures in our museum theater, "Faces of the City" was a complete success. It settled and sobered the audience, reminded them that history was about people, and provided some feel for the parameters of life in the past. From our first musical offering in 1988, all project members understood that no presentation on the people of colonial Albany would be complete without some musical accompaniment.

A few years earlier, a silly song called "Let's Have a Party Albany" had won a contest to select an official theme for the Albany Tricentennial—a well-endowed, year-long celebration of the 300th anniversary of Albany's chartering in 1686. I was embarrassed and incensed that again my hometown had managed to trivialize its rich heritage. My anger quickly was translated into action! After two decades of performing other people's music, I finally was moved to write a "history song" of my own.

What became the "Albany Theme" asked the listener to "turn back the pages" to consider the fundamental roots of the community and the trials and triumphs of the diverse peoples who came together and "made a city strong to last for 300 years." Each verse introduced essential elements and issues related to Albany's founding, growth, and initial development. A long coda identified 39 individual people of colonial Albany who were selected to represent the community across class, racial, ethnic, and gender lines (Anna Cuyler, *Samuel Schuyler*, Jacob Maas, and Mary Tyler).² After singing it a few times as a folk song and

recording our children chanting the names (Matthew Visscher, Rachel Douw, Barents Mynders fixed a plow) to iron out rhyming problems, I moved on to other substantial matters.

By 1988, thematic offerings by the Colonial Albany Social History Project had become a mainstay of public programs at the New York State Museum in Albany. Our presentations were so frequent that additional musical expositions were needed. The Albany Theme would be a tailor-made starting point. First, I recorded the chorus:

Al-ban-y, city on the water,
your sons and your daughters can be proud of you.
Al-ban-y, child of the ages,
let's turn back the pages and remember you,
re-mem-ber you, re-mem-ber you.³

Then I skipped to the end part with the rhymed historical names. That 90-second abridgment was backed with a bouncy pop beat and guitar/bass/keyboards instrumentation; I performed all instrumental and singing parts myself and recorded the 13-part presentation in my basement. The selection was synchronized to two dozen images that included community panoramas and details from them, portraits, comparative visuals, signatures, and other representations of the named individuals. During that winter I used the musical spot on a number of occasions—much to the amusement and delight of my audiences. After more than a decade of reading academic papers to typically passive and/or indifferent audiences, I experienced the instant gratification of audience approval that I had not experienced since stepping out of the musical spotlight a decade earlier. Upon learning that I planned to continue down that road, my fellow historians and some museum professionals voiced fears that I had taken yet

² Images used here, for example, were a beautiful pastel of Anna Cuyler Van Schaick (1685–1743) by itinerant artist Henrietta Deering Johnson from a painting in the collection of the New York State Museum, and a line from the Albany city directory for 1815 listing Samuel Schuyler, skipper 204 S. Pearl—the italics denoting a "free person of color."

³ Images for each line of the chorus change but follow this sequence: "Albany"—the city seal or a map or artifact with the word "Albany" engraved on it. "City on the Water"—a historic or modern historical panoramic (Tantillo) water-level view. "Your Sons and your Daughters"—family portrait grouping. "Child of the ages"—image of the city's 18th-century churches/community centers. "Let's turn back the pages"—portrait of a city father (or mother) presented in chronological sequence.

another plunge into flaky and unorthodox waters.

By the next spring, I had recorded a full version of the theme, expanded the visual presentation to cover the music, and used it to introduce all public programs on the people of colonial Albany. Because it included the best 80 images of life in early Albany and raised the most significant historical and social themes, I began referring jokingly to the package as "Early Albany 101"—a five-minute overview history. What I understood early on (but dared not say) was that the audio-visual presentation also was the most comprehensive, meaningful, and effective history of the community produced to date. In the years that followed, several thousand local people saw and heard the production in its original introductory venue or as an entertaining supplement to a broader public program entitled "Peopling Colonial New York." As requests for general audience programs increased and the mention of a visual and/or musical component invariably met with an enthusiastic response, I finally realized that, with just a little modification, the "Albany Theme" presentation could become an effective program by itself.

In the meantime, I had enlisted the aid of Tim Lynch, a former student intern and performing musician. He offered his new sound studio to re-record the music using much more sophisticated equipment than in the past. Tim's production skills and encouragement were largely responsible for a new recording that sounded good when played on my daughter's portable player and terrific on the State Museum's theater sound system. We simply adjusted presentation volume to suit particular audiences. Over the years, the visual component has evolved continuously to include newly "discovered" historical images, the recreations of historical artist L. F. Tantillo, and views, portraits, and maps from our graphics archive that better illustrated community themes. These changes were necessary because, by 1993, I was using the music/slide package as the program itself. As in the past, we began with the slides accompanied by the song. The major criticisms of that offering had been the inability of the audience to see the images for more than a few beats and that

there was no opportunity to ask questions before being confronted by the next image. The new format provided relief for audience anxieties and frustrations. After the musical presentation, the slides were re-set and I began to interpret each image. Some were considered in depth. Others were skipped over or just mentioned, depending on the stated theme of the particular presentation, my other *agendas-du-jour*, and audience curiosity. For example, for a program supporting my current book project, *The Other Revolutionaries*, the community setting, actual and symbolic participants, the specific sites of the armory, docks, hospital, and jail as they were during the 1770s are discussed at length. Images of Fort Orange, the fur trade, and first city council meeting in 1686, however, are treated only briefly to hold the program time to under an hour. That format has worked well in all settings as audiences were given a crash historical orientation with the initial slides and song. By revisiting the images, I am able to speak to items on my list and those in the audience can pursue their interests in the informal image and question format. The program ends when everyone is satisfied and we all come away from the experience feeling better and more connected to the community and our more personal forebears as well.

In 1998, this initiative gathered new momentum. Because of the response to a newspaper feature story about my work on African Americans and in celebration of a recently published journal article on Albany's first African-American families, I expected to be in some demand during February—Black History Month. After the first request, I created a program titled "Dinah Jackson's Albany." The promotional flyer advertised it as a musical and visual overview of city life 200 years ago and celebrated the emergence of Albany's African-American families—focusing on the life of Dinah Jackson, Albany's first black matriarch—who died in 1818. The formula was simple: start with "Early Albany 101"—music and slides. Replace two dozen of the images with illustrations depicting African Americans at work, home, and in the community. Use each of the images and the lyrics to involve the audience and to illustrate parts of the African-American experience in Albany.

"Albany— a Song of Community"

**words and music by
Stefan Bielinski**

**as performed by
Duke and the Beverets**

Sometimes when we try, to picture days gone by
How they came together, stayed forever
How they laughed, and cried
And how they tried, and how they cried, and how they tried

CHORUS

Albany, city on the water
Your sons and your daughters can be proud of you
Albany, child of the ages, let's turn back the pages and remember you,
remember you

From a fur trading post on a bank by the Dutch
Came a new expectation for a life they could trust
From over the ocean came and found a new home
Drew a ring around it and they made it their own
Got a charter from the king, eased the peoples' fears
Made a city strong to last for 300 years
Families set down routes, best in service and trade
Germans, Irish, Africans, best of all of them made

CHORUS

Folks worked in their homes then, they baked, brewed, and sewed
Sailed crops down the river, brought life back to the fold
In sickness and danger, not a family was spared
With neighbors and strangers, together they shared
A life in this city meant bending and change
All ways a great center we just got to reclaim
From the Quay at the river to the fort on the hill
Opportunity sets the rhythm and the beat goes on there still

CHORUS

Remember you, Remember you, Remember you,
Remember
Anna Cuyler, Samuel Schuyler, Jacob Maas, and Mary Tyler
Matthew Visscher, Rachel Douw, Barent Mynders fixed a plow
Magda Stevens, Patrick Clark, Rachel Radcliff walked the dark
Rutger Janse, Lydia Fryer, Stewart Dean, and Gerrit Heyer
Elsie Staats and Goose Van Schaick, Caesar, Pomp, Doctor Van Dyck
Chancellor Lansing, Neeltie Pruyn, Ezra Ames and Jan Alstyne
Collins, Kidney, Yates, McClallen,
Winne, Cooper, Wray, Van Allen
Sara, Peter, Rachel, Dirck
Wendell, Fonda, Bogart, Turck
Remember you, you, you Albany
Remember you, you, you Albany
(repeat 14 x and fade)

Answer questions and modify subsequent presentations to anticipate newly raised issues. Presented with new sound equipment, that program was a smashing success. Local groups including agencies of municipal and county government (sponsors of a Black History Month art and essay contest based on my Afro-Albanian families article), the city schools, colleges and universities, churches, libraries, and historical and genealogical societies were appreciative recipients of "Dinah Jackson's Albany" during February. Since then, I have modified the imagery for public programs entitled "Tinkers, Tailors, and Traders: Working People in Early Albany" for Labor History Month, "The Schuyler Family in Early Albany" for the annual meeting of the Friends of Schuyler Mansion, and "Boys and Girls in Early Albany" for in-school presentations. Although this program seems to have almost limitless utility, I have been developing more subtle instrumental variations of the theme and have continued work on new songs on the impact of the colonial wars called "Peace and Freedom," and on the sickness and death of a brewer's daughter in a ballad called "Sara."

To date, the Colonial Albany Social History Project has presented adaptations of the program to a wide range of audiences: school children, walk-in museum visitors, heritage tour groups, professional historians, and other special interest assemblages. Whatever the topic or theme, audiences of all ages and backgrounds invariably come away from what has become a participatory experience with some satisfaction and appreciation for life in an early American community. During the fall of 1997, a presentation of "Early Albany 101" at a professional conference held at the State University College in New Paltz, New York, ended with a loud ovation, but not before a skeptical professor was moved to ask "What do you expect an audience to get out of that?" (Meaning, how could a bombardment of so many images and phrases have any real impact?) Without thinking, my quick retort: "Five minutes of community history. But five minutes most people won't soon forget" made all of us pause to reflect. Then, another

member of the audience ended the session when he spoke up saying "I know it's only rock 'n' roll. But I liked it!"

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Stefan Bielinski is the founder and director of the Colonial Albany Social History Project. He is the author of *Abraham Yates Jr. and The New Political Order in Revolutionary New York* and of other monographs and articles on the people of New York in historical perspective. Currently, the Colonial Albany Project is studying how six groups of Albany people lived through the 1770s and 1780s. New learning informs Bielinski's book project *The Other Revolutionaries: The People of Albany and American Independence, 1763–1783*. This work vies for project energy with escalating requests for public programs and ongoing development of the project website—which introduces people of colonial Albany to the world.

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