

Winter 2011

# Palatine Settlement Society

PO Box 183, St. Johnsville, NY 13452

www.Palatinesettlementsociety.org

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## Newsletter

### 1747 Nellis Tavern Restoration - 2010 Detective Work

BY DONNA RESTON AND RON BURCH

We thought it might be interesting for our members to read about the process that the Building Committee went through in order to reconstruct something in the building that was no longer in existence. The large room east of the entrance hall became the focus of our 2010 restoration efforts, partly because one of our long-time supporters had posed the question, "What is a tavern without a bar?" Realistically, it was the first chance we had had to address the former tavern area since most of our earlier efforts had focused on more pressing concerns of structural stability, including a leaky roof and rotting siding.

We knew that the building had once had a bar because of historical references to "the old Nellis Tavern" and because the inventory taken after the death of John C. Nellis in 1839 listed a bar, a bar room, and a bar "chamber," all located within the current single large room east of the entrance hall. Partitions between these areas had been removed in the past, but the ceiling had not been repainted, so we could visualize where the walls had been. Paint "tide lines" on the floor, visible in raking light, indicated where the doorways into the bar room and the bar itself were located.

The original intention was to reconstruct only the bar, but it became apparent that we should also deal with replacing the paneled fireplace surround and over-mantel because the two areas abutted and were integral to each other. It was common in formal mid-18<sup>th</sup> c. Georgian architecture to have a fully paneled wall encompassing fireplace and cupboards, or possibly an enclosed sleeping space (a "bed cupboard"). Markings on floor and ceiling beams indicated that there originally was a wall along the front plane of the fireplace extending along the entire east wall, north to south. This was the dimension of the original 18<sup>th</sup> c. space.

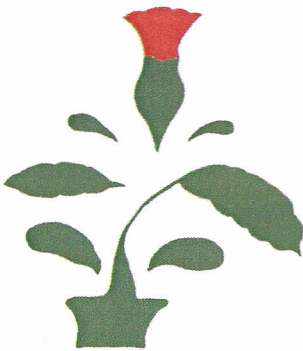
Prior to 1800, the tavern structure was only one-and-a-half stories high. The addition of a two-story section to the east in the early 19<sup>th</sup> c. necessitated removing the north cupboard area in order to cut a door into the new addition. A bar was apparently created in the south cupboard area, possibly by simply cutting the paneled wall in half horizontally and installing a plank shelf to create the serving surface.



Fireplace, Bar Area before (R.Burch)

Fortunately, we had an excellent late-20<sup>th</sup> c. photo of the fireplace wall with its raised paneling and over-mantel; thanks to history buff Dick Bellinger. We decided to replicate that, and create similar paneling for the lower half of the bar front itself. We were able to figure out the width of the half-door that provided entry into the bar because of a circular wear mark on the floor indicating that a doorway had pivoted there for a long period of time. Paint tide lines in the area also indicated the profile of the vertical moldings on either side of the door.

Donna created an outline and sketch of what we thought should be accomplished and submitted it to the trustees for approval. With their "go-ahead," Ron began photographing the whole area, with particular attention to areas that would end up being obscured by restoration work. He also began extensive research, gathering images of photos, drawings, and paintings that showed early 19<sup>th</sup> c. bars and bar rooms, past and present, with particular attention to New York State examples. Many early bars had a grill over head that could be lowered and locked (literally "barred") to protect the liquor supply. Ron and Donna combed the bar area, aided by stepladder and flashlight, seeking any evidence of such a device on walls and ceiling components. They found none. Such a "barring" device was not entirely necessary, however, and sometimes did not occur. In 19<sup>th</sup> c. views of Chauncey Jerome's tavern on East Canada Creek (NYS Library collection), for example, watercolorist Rufus Grider shows a regional bar room and bar without the usual grillwork. Open shelves behind the bar



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## 2010 Detective Work

hold bottles and jugs. In the Nellis Tavern, markings on ceiling and floor indicate that there was a wall separating bar and bar room from the bar "chamber" (possibly a sleeping area). This wall contained a door that was most likely lockable for protection of the liquor supplies.

Lacking evidence for a grill (which can be added if the evidence turns up), we decided to create three simple shallow shelves on the back wall of the bar, where we found nail holes and two very long early nails, possibly part of a shelf support (which we left in place). For the present, the partition between the bar room and the bar chamber is represented by two small sections of railing to give the visitor an idea of how the original 18<sup>th</sup> c. space was divided up in the 19<sup>th</sup> c.

Investigation of paint colors in the area reinforced the decision to paint the reconstructed components. The original paint color for the whole area appeared to be the pale grey green color seen in the south half of the entrance hall. After 1800, when the new turnpike was constructed north of the building and the structure was converted to more primary use as a tavern, a bright Federal Period blue was introduced into the entrance hall, in several areas upstairs, including the landing, and in the newly created bar and bar room. The back of the north (now the new entrance) door was painted a bright yellow, as was the baseboard in the bar and bar room. It seems that most of these newer components in the building presented quite a colorful appearance. At some point later in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. the tavern ceiling was painted a pumpkin orange. Plaster walls remained white until probably late in the 19<sup>th</sup> c., when there is evidence that wallpaper was applied and wainscot was added in the tavern area below the earlier chair rail. Because the east room is still "opened up" we decided to paint the bar paneling the same grey green as the over-mantel, the same color that the room had been painted originally. As interpretation of the space progresses, the paneling may always be repainted. We are leaving the ceiling and floors as-is as evidence of the historical changes.

Research and a restoration plan in hand, we sought a contractor who would faithfully execute the plan and be willing to work



*Fireplace and Bar Area after (R. Burch)*

within guidelines for an historic structure. Karl Schmaeh of Tribes Hill and his assistant Bob Seelow of Johnstown fit the bill. Having decided that using 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century lumber would make the restoration feel more authentic, we were fortunate that friends Rick and June Rogers were willing to donate all of what we needed. Karl agreed to use the old wood and to mortise and tenon the components so that we could more accurately replicate the paneled areas. Bob fortunately loves history, loves to work on old buildings, and was extremely cooperative.

As the Nellis family adapted to changing social and economic needs, this mid-18<sup>th</sup> c. building experienced many changes in the course of its 260+ years. It grew from a one-and-a-half to a two-story building with additions and many outbuildings. All were part of a thriving commercial enterprise encompassing a tavern offering beds, food, and drink, plus a store that sold everything a frontier community would need. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c., as business declined from the advent of new and faster modes of transportation, the Nellis family returned to its original agricultural livelihood.

## Shutter Reconstruction 2010

BY DONNA RESTON AND RON BURCH (PHOTO)

For some time, the Palatine Settlement Society had been wanting – and needing – to replicate the blind-paneled Federal Period shutters for the ground floor of the north side of the NELLIS TAVERN. In the winter, snowplows often kick up small stones from the highway edging, and some of the windowpanes have suffered thereby over the years. For several years we have covered these windows with unsightly plywood for seasonal protection. In 2010, thanks to Amish master carpenter Eli Kurtz, who copied the one remaining original early 19<sup>th</sup> c. shutter, we now have a full set of shutters flanking the lower windows on the road side. PSS friend Willis Barsheid had previously donated to the Tavern five early 19<sup>th</sup> c. shutter hinges originally on the old Christman Tavern near the Palatine Church. Willis' Amish friend, wheelwright Emmanuel Byler, copied the old hinges for authenticity and provided enough hardware for the project. The painstaking task of fitting the shutters to the windows, since no two openings remain the same, was accomplished through the combined skill and effort of both Eli and Willis. Our heartfelt thanks to them both!

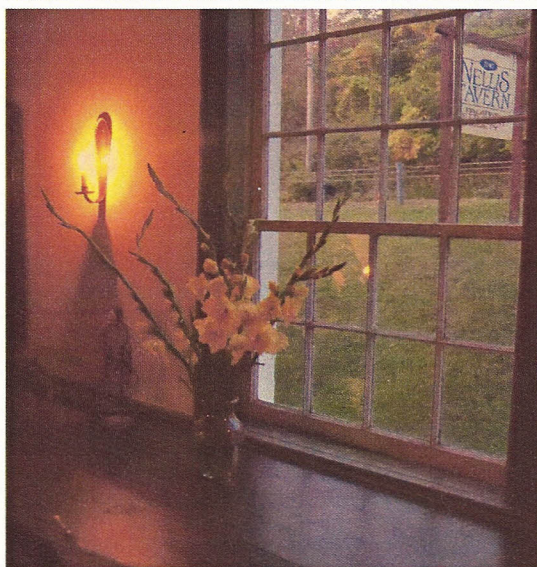


## Evening at the Tavern 2010

Our well known fundraising tavern event was held in September to show off the new bar area, well and signs that have been installed on the property. The Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor facilitated the production of the lovely sign by the street showing a Rufus Grider rendition of the original Christian Nellis home. Ron Burch provided period music.



Photos by Sally Nellis Kuehl  
&  
Sandy Nellis Lane



## 2011 Events for 1747 Nellis Tavern

**ANTIQUÉ SHOW & SALE** at Arkell Museum, Canajoharie – Saturday, March 12 – 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM Admission \$4.00. See page 4.

**15<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL RHUBARB FESTIVAL** - Sunday, June 5, 11:00 AM – 5:00 PM at Tavern. Pie baking contest will be held. Rhubarb treats and lunch available. Free entertainment and lecture by Dave Ruch: "Traditional and Historical Songs of New York State" as sponsored by the New York Council for the Humanities at 2:00 PM.

**EVENING AT THE TAVERN** - Sunday, September 25, 4:00 - 7:00 PM. Admission \$15.00. Annual candlelight event with hors d'oeuvres, wine and period music.

(Annual Nellis Assoc. Reunion will be at John Nellis Farm, Nellis Rd., Ft. Plain, Sunday July 17, 2011 at 12 noon. 518-993-2978)



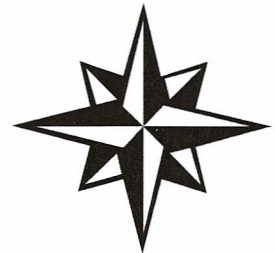
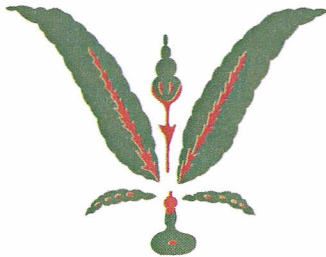
1747 Nellis Tavern

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*Newsletter*



**ANTIQUÉ SHOW & SALE at Arkell Museum to be held March 12, 2011**

COME ONE, COME ALL! Get behind this Saturday event. Whether you come to survey some affordable antiques, own an antique and wish to find out its worth, or want to visit the museum, come on down.

The PSS will hold its 6th annual indoor ANTIQUE SHOW & SALE at the Arkell Museum, 2 Erie Blvd., Canajoharie, NY, on Saturday March 12, 2011, from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM.

Dealers will be exhibiting and selling furniture, quilts, books, postcards, paintings, toys, jewelry, early brass and iron, etc.

Admission is \$4 or a combination ticket for \$7 will also include admission to the museum exhibits. There will be an appraisal booth with a \$5 charge for 2 items.

A light lunch will be available for purchase.

The show saw a decent increase in attendance last year, we received some really favorable newspaper notice so we can consider this one of our major fund-raising events – the other being the annual Rhubarb Festival on the first Sunday in June.

NBT Bank, thanks to the advocacy of Palatine Settlement Society former Trustee Carolyn Williams, Manager of the local NBT branch, will once again sponsor this show with a donation towards our advertising expenses.

Donna Reston is Show Manager and can be reached at (518) 843-1601.

