

## The Life and Times of Fairport's Doctor J.B. Cowles

*By Bill Poray*

*We shouldn't attempt to measure the worth of a person from our history, based on a few photographs and items in the newspapers. But often that is all we have.*

From what can be read, Fairport's Doctor J.B. Cowles was alternately respected and despised during his medical career of almost fifty years, about thirty of which were spent in this community. While local officials thought highly enough of Doctor Cowles to appoint him to the position of Health Officer, he was also seen as a troublesome thorn, one who on more than one occasion apparently overbilled the municipality for his services and filed suit when they refused to pay. In a prominent example, a jury ruled in his favor, but for a small fraction of the amount he sought.

Born in 1825, James Bennett Cowles was the oldest child of Norman and Eliza Cowles, who brought their family to Rochester from the shadows of the Catskill Mountains in 1836. Norman Cowles served in the New York Militia during the War of 1812. He first married Abigail Warner but she died at a young age. He remarried, learned the trade of a chair maker, and continued in this profession in Rochester until his death in 1880. And it seems he taught his son a thing or two about making chairs as well.



The Cowles home on East Church Street in Fairport, circa 1880s  
*Photo from the archives of the Perinton Historical Society*

As a young man, James Cowles operated a wood lathe in the Rochester furniture and piano making operations of Frederick Starr. A respected and successful member of the community, Starr was also highly philanthropic, and perhaps played a role in financing his employee's education. Cowles attended the University of Michigan in the early 1850s, and, as was typical in those days, also studied in the office of Doctor David D. Hoyt of Palmyra. We don't know if the doctor from Palmyra possessed a brilliant medical mind, but it is a fact that he operated a Palmyra drug store and, in addition to medicines, was a dealer of paint, eggs, candy, perfumes and liquors, "intended expressly for medical purposes."



~ Bob Hunt ~

## Comments from your President

**H**appy Valentine's Day! This is the third month in a row I sit to write my comments in the midst of a deep freeze, weather wise. One listens to comments about this year's winter weather and hears, "a lot colder than last year", or "worst winter ever". I tend to look at the heating degree days listed in the

newspaper each morning on the back of the sports section. A heating degree day is a unit which describes the number of degrees below 65 degrees it is on any day. In the U.S. we use the degrees in Fahrenheit. Heating degree days are used to estimate heating requirements in terms of fuel consumption. The assumption is that when the outside temperature is 65 or higher, no heating is necessary. In today's newspaper the degree days for the season to date was 4,244 and the normal for this date is 4,220, so the winter has been slightly colder than the norm. The degree days last year to this date was 4,481, so this year has been a bit warmer than last year. I find this a fun statistic to keep track of.

Last month I mentioned that the PHS board was holding a strategy session in order to provide direction for PHS's future, and I promised to let you know the plans discussed. We decided to break the process into five committees with the following areas of responsibilities and future planning. Here are the committees:

### 1. Museum Operations

(Includes accession, collections, acquisitions, exhibits and maintenance)

### 2. Finance & Legal

(Includes compliance, copyright issues, policies/procedures, insurance and financial)

### 3. Technology

(Includes information backup and storage, digitizing, QR codes, and equipment)

### 4. Programs, Marketing and Public Relations

(Includes communications, social media, events, fundraising, education outreach, website, scholarships, *Historigram* newsletter and house tour)

### 5. Membership and Growth

(Includes volunteers, members, board members, staff development, training and retention)

Each of the committees is to be chaired by an existing board member, with the supporting committee made up of PHS members and other board members. We are looking to

have a preliminary report and plan for our March 24<sup>th</sup> board meeting. If you have an interest in assisting with any of these committees as we plan for our future, please let me know.

Lastly this month, I want to tell you about a jardinière, which I inherited from my stepmother, or Grandma Betty as everyone called her. First, Grandma Betty gave to Cindy and me a beautiful Christmas cactus about thirty years ago. We've nourished and cared for it over the years and it usually rewards us with blossoms at Christmas time. The process we use is usually the same. We place the plant outside around Memorial Day, in a shaded spot where it can absorb some Mother Nature, or vitamin N as my granddaughter likes to call it. Then about mid October, we bring it back inside where it rests in an upstairs bedroom until about Thanksgiving. At that time we bring it down to our living room and instruct it to produce blossoms in time for Christmas. Like a child, sometimes it listens and sometimes it has a mind of its own. Like this year, we have a Valentine's cactus.



Back to the jardinière, home for the cactus for the last 15 years or so since I inherited it. One can see from the photo above what a beautiful piece it is. It belonged to Grandma Betty's mother before her. While going through paperwork relative to the estate, we found the original receipt when the jardinière was acquired. The price for the jardinière and pedestal was \$15, obtained from James McCreery and Co. of 23rd Street. No sales tax at that time. It was purchased on December 28, 1905 by Mrs. F.D. Rhodes, 193 Garfield Ave., Jersey City, New Jersey. It is a treasure we enjoy.

Thanks for your continued support. It is always appreciated. We will chat with you again next month.

Bob Hunt, President

585-415-7053 ~ rhunt1@rochester.rr.com





## HISTORIGRAM

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# 2015 House Tour to feature Potter Place

## Save the date!

*Mark your calendars for October 4, 2015  
for a tour of Potter Place homes. This is the first time that  
the Perinton Historical Society is featuring this charming  
village neighborhood. It promises to be unique!  
Stay tuned for details to follow  
in the coming months.*



36 Potter Place

## Potter Place Nostalgia

The 2015 House Tour Committee, busily planning the October 4 tour of Potter Place, recently enjoyed reading a full-page Potter Place article, which included several family photos in the Rochester Times-Union newspaper, February 8, 1950 edition. Titled “Meet the Folks,” the article detailed an “Ozzie and Harriet” world in Fairport: children and their parents watching *Howdy Doody*, painting pictures, reading, and building model airplanes. The street was described as having a “country-village atmosphere,” and with Fairport’s superior

bus service and roads, villagers could get into the city of Rochester whenever they “have a yen for the bright lights.”

The House Tour committee would like to hear from anyone who grew up on or near Potter Place and would be willing to share information or stories of their childhood as it relates to this charming street. An exhibit of the Potter Place neighborhood memories will be on display at the museum during the house tour. If you have information to share, please contact Elaine Shepardson Lanni, this year’s chair, at [ellaannii@gmail.com](mailto:ellaannii@gmail.com) or by phone at 585-766-5467.

Everyone loves stories, and we’d love to share yours!



Potter Place on a sunny February day  
2015 photo by Bill Poray

## Yearning to get involved?

We can always use docents in the homes on the house tour. Training is provided. Please contact Elaine Shepardson Lanni at [ellaannii@gmail.com](mailto:ellaannii@gmail.com) or 585-766-5467.

### **Raise Money For PHS!**

*Drop off your deposit cans and bottles to EZ Bottle and Can Return, and tell them you want to donate the deposit to the*

## **Perinton Historical Society**

### **EZ BOTTLE and CAN RETURN**

1259 Fairport Road  
Fairport, NY 14450  
585-377-9140



*"Fairport's Dr. Cowles" continued from page 1*

By 1860 Cowles was living with his father in Rochester, and had established a practice specializing in homeopathic medicine. After he married Addie Jones of Syracuse in 1863, the couple soon relocated to Toledo, Ohio. The doctor was employed not as a physician, but again in the manufacture of furniture. Two children were born while in Toledo, and within a few years the family moved back to Syracuse. In 1868, after only five years of marriage, Addie died and the widower was left alone to raise his young children.

Now 43 years of age, Cowles no longer labored in the manufacture of furniture, and instead focused on his medical career. He left Syracuse to open a small medical practice in Macedon Center, while living in the home of Caleb Gardner and his wife Maria. Mr. Gardner likely never required the medical services of Doctor Cowles, for his marvelous physical condition was well known. When no other means of transportation was available, the 79 year old retired farmer was known to walk the entire distance from Rochester to Macedon Center, almost twenty miles.

Doctor Cowles wasn't a widower for long, for he married Miss Elizabeth Steinhouser of Walworth in December of 1872. His second wife was less than half his age, just twenty two years old. Although some newlyweds might be inclined to stay close to home, apparently Doctor Cowles' devotion to his profession was his utmost priority, for he traveled to Brooklyn to attend a post-graduate course in medicine at the Long Island Hospital College.

The first indication of the arrival of Doctor Cowles in Fairport is an advertisement for his practice in the December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1874 issue of the Fairport Herald. His initial office and residence was located at 26 Sanford Street, now East Avenue. A short time later the Cowles family relocated to a prominent home on East Church Street, across from the Congregational Church. While his specialty was the treatment of diseases of women and children, Doctor Cowles was often called upon to provide his services to travelers on the canal. One such occurrence in 1880 resulted in the Village Board hiring Doctor Cowles to attend to the case of passengers on a canal boat from Buffalo who were stricken with smallpox.



Doctor James Bennett Cowles

*Photo from the archives of the Perinton Historical Society*

**Dr. J. B. COWLES,**  
*Homœopathic Physician,*  
**Office and Residence, No. 5 Church St.,**  
**Opposite Congregational Church.**  
**OFFICE HOURS:—8 to 9 a. m.; 2 to 3 p. m.; and**  
**to 8 p. m. dec4-tf**

The doctor was a faithful Republican, as was his mentor, Frederick Starr. Doctor Cowles participated in county caucuses of the party, and also as a trustee of Fairport's Union Free School. Although he sought the elected position of Monroe County Coroner several times without success, newspaper accounts referred to Doctor Cowles in glowing terms: "A physician of skill and experience, a gentleman in every sense of the word, and an ardent Republican whose personal services are worthy of consideration."

Despite the newspaper's praise for Doctor Cowles, two fateful events left a mark on his reputation. The first occurred in 1896, when Cowles was indicted, along with Patrick Devlin, by a grand jury on a charge of criminal malpractice. At the time, he held the position of Health Officer in the village of Fairport. The doctor's bail was set at \$2,000, and was paid by his children. The indictment was related to an alleged abortion performed four months earlier,

J. B. COWLES, M. D.	
1902—To quarantining house and inmates of Henry Salzer for smallpox, and keeping sanitary control over same from Dec. 5, 1902 to Dec. 16, 1902.....	\$ 50 00
Dec. 6—Securing Mrs. Mitchell as nurse for Mrs. Salzer.....	10 00
Dec. 7—Services as messenger to and from H. Salzer, obtaining goods of Cramer.....	6 00
Dec. 8—Services as messenger to and from H. Salzer, obtaining goods of Cramer.....	6 00
Dec. 9—Services as messenger to and from H. Salzer, obtaining goods of Cramer and of S. Morey & Son ...	6 00
Dec. 10—Services as messenger to and from H. Salzer, obtaining goods of Cramer.....	6 00
Dec. 10.—Quarantining house and inmates of Edwin Jefferson's for smallpox.....	10 00
Dec. 11—Hired Mrs. Will Klsbey as nurse for Mrs. H. Salzer.....	10 00
Visited E. Jefferson's to see that the quarantine and sanitary laws were observed.....	6 00
Dec. 12—Services as messenger to and from H. Salzer, obtaining goods of Cramer.....	6 00
Visited Ed Jefferson's to see that quarantine was observed.....	6 00
Purchased goods of Stillwell for H. Salzer.....	0 00
Dec. 13—Services as messenger to and from H. Salzer, obtaining goods of Morey & Son and Cramer.....	6 00
Dec. 14—To services arranging for and superintending the burial of Mrs. H. Salzer.....	128 00
Dec. 15—Fumigating the house of H. Salzer.....	56 00
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>\$312 00</b>

An itemized bill submitted by Doctor Cowles.

The village refused to pay.

although Cowles claimed he had never known either Devlin or the woman in question. The story was covered briefly in the local newspapers, and just as quickly disappeared, never to surface again.

The second matter concerned the billing practices of Doctor Cowles, for services related to the care of a patient with smallpox, who subsequently died. Beginning in early in 1903, the doctor, now 78 years of age, sought reimbursement of \$70 from the village trustees. The accepted practice was for the Village Board to act, based on a recommendation from the local Board of Health. In this case, the recommendation was to not reimburse Doctor Cowles, based on the belief that the responsibility for payment belonged to the family of the patient, not the local government. And there was evidence that

## DR. COWLES ARRESTED

Indicted by the Grand Jury for Malpractice.

An unfortunate affair developed last Friday, when Deputy Sheriff Perkins placed Dr. J. B. Cowles of this place, under arrest, on an indictment charging him with criminal malpractice.

the family had already made payment to the doctor.

After a few months, Doctor Cowles again appeared before the Village Board for the same case as before, this time seeking the reimbursement of \$95, and again the Board refused. Several additional months passed, and in December of 1903 Cowles again addressed the Village Board, this time demanding \$312 for his services related to the smallpox patient, more than four times the original request. Again the board refused to pay. Trustee William Beeton stated, "The village has as zealous a Board of Health as it ever had, and it would be an insult to pay this bill." George Watson, a member of the Board of Health, commented that "he would fight the matter to the bitter end, if it cost him his farm, and would never compromise."

In January of 1904 a Supreme Court summons was served on village President T.R. Prichard. Cowle's attorneys sought full payment of \$312 for the doctor's services regarding the smallpox case of two years earlier. The Village Board resolved to vigorously fight the case and secured the services of attorney George A. Harris. Months later, the doctor's suit against the village was finally decided when the jury returned a verdict in favor of Doctor Cowles. Although he won, he couldn't have been happy, for the jury awarded him only \$55, even less than the \$70 he initially sought.

Doctor Cowles again filed suit in 1905 to seek additional payment for the smallpox case that began years earlier. This time the jury ruled against Cowles, now 80 years old. His reputation diminished, by 1908 he and his wife left their East Church Street home and Fairport. He spent the last five years of his life in Rochester, and was interred in the family plot at Mount Hope Cemetery in 1913. His second wife, Elizabeth Steinhouser Cowles, lived on for another three decades. With the passing of time, the name of Doctor James Bennett Cowles has faded from the collective memory of the community where he was both respected and despised.







## The Slave Experience and the Underground Railroad

*Presented by Jerry Bennett*

*Tuesday, March 17*

*7:00 p.m. at the Fairport Historical Museum*

**F**ollow the slaver's ship from England to West Africa. Drop down into the ship's hold as she sails across the Atlantic's Middle Passage toward the Americas. Witness the sale on the auction block in the South. View life on the plantation, imagine the escape and envision life on the run

while meeting the many heroes on the Underground Railroad's routes to freedom. Join Jerry Bennett, Underground Railroad enthusiast, as he shares maps, songs, books, hand-outs and stories to round out this unique presentation.

Pittsford native Jerry Bennett attended elementary school in a former Underground Railroad safe house. Encouraged by his daughter's illustrated children's books on slavery and the Underground Railroad, this American history buff began researching the Civil War and Underground Railroad related sites along the East coast. He currently works as a youth development and drug prevention professional.



### Perinton Historical Society

#### EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

<i>President</i>	Bob Hunt
<i>Vice President</i>	Vicki Profitt
<i>Secretary</i>	Doug Whitney
<i>Treasurer</i>	Linda Wiener
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#### TRUSTEES

Keith Boas	Lucy McCormick
Bill Poray	Jim Unckless
David Wild	George Wolf

#### MUSEUM

<i>Director</i>	Vicki Profitt
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## Museum Opens for the Season on March 1

**T**he Fairport Historical Museum opens for the 2015 season on Sunday, March 1, and we are always looking for volunteers to staff the facility. If you can give of your time for one two-hour shift per month, please contact our Volunteer Coordinator, Sue Scheirer, at 585-377-3789 or by email at [dscheir1@rochester.rr.com](mailto:dscheir1@rochester.rr.com).

~ The Early Days ~

### 100 Years Ago

From the *Fairport Herald* Newspaper  
March 3, 1915

### Silo Accident

While getting feed out of a silo a few days ago Herbert Garnham was struck on the head by a door which fell from above, cutting a severe gash. Dr. Fox dressed the injury, which is doing well now.

### Perinton Historical Society

#### *Mission*

To provide interest in preserving and sharing local history through education and accessibility.

# Upcoming Events

*All programs are at the Fairport Historical Museum*

**Tuesday, March 17, 7:00 p.m.**

Program: The Slave Experience and the Underground Railroad

Presenter: Jerry Bennett

**Tuesday, April 21, 7:00 p.m.**

Program: An Evening with Andersonville Survivor Oliver P. Clarke

Presenter: Steve Trimm

**Please note that all PHS programs now begin at 7:00 p.m.**

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## Special Recognition Level Memberships

*As of February 10, 2015*

### Business (\$100)

**Ed Bradford, Liftbridge Financial Advisors**

6 North Main Street, Suite 400w, Fairport  
Website: <http://liftbridgefinancial.com>

**Suzanne Lee Personal Histories**

33 Chesham Way, Fairport  
Phone: 585-267-6189  
Website: <http://SLeePersonalHistories.com>

**Joel Cuminale, Turning Point Signs & Design**

3 Railroad Street, Fairport  
Website: <http://www.tpsigns.com>

**Fairport Village Inn, Wayne and Patty Beckwith**

103 North Main Street, Fairport  
Phone: 585-388-0112  
Website: <http://www.thefvi.com>

**Robert Ruhland, Keller Williams Realty**

2000 Winton Road S. Bldg. 1, Rochester, NY 14618  
Phone: 585-303-6607  
Website: <http://bobruhland.yourkwagent.com>



*Photo courtesy of Nancy Loughran*

## PHS Receives Grant from FACET

The Perinton Historical Society is pleased to announce that it has been awarded a grant from FACET. The grant, which included 25 clipboards and 60 pencils, was submitted by Gina Herendeen, Lead Teacher at Brooks Hill Elementary. Gina, who saw the need for the grant, has worked closely with Fairport Historical Museum Director Vicki Profitt and Perinton Town Historian Bill Poray for the last few years to facilitate the district-wide fourth grade visits to the museum.

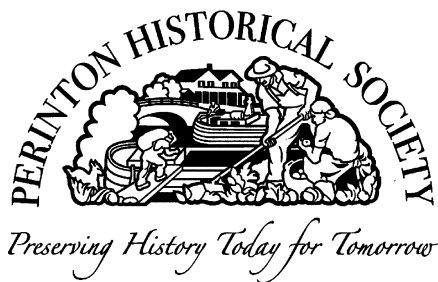
Special thanks to Gina Herendeen and to Nancy Loughran of FACET for providing these useful items for our young visitors, as well as others, to enjoy.

FACET is a non-profit, independent education foundation established in 2012 by Fairport residents to benefit students and faculty of the Fairport Central School District. FACET partners with local businesses, alumni, community organizations, staff, students and residents, providing opportunities for all aspects of our community to contribute to public education. You can find additional information about FACET on its website, [www.FairportFACET.org](http://www.FairportFACET.org).

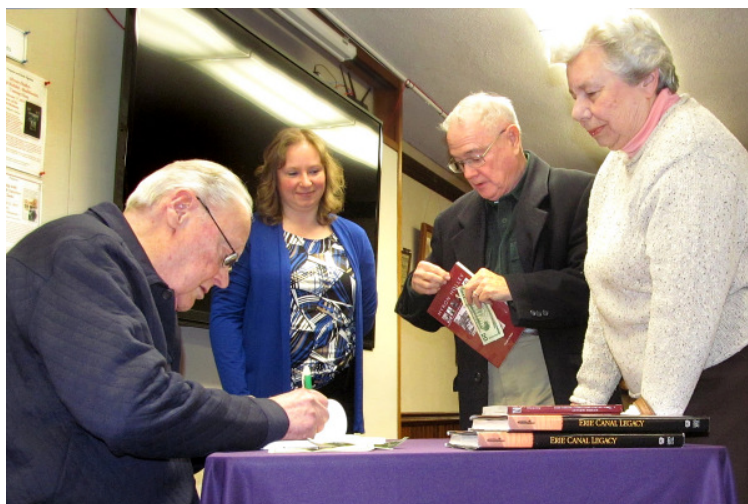


## WANTED!

We need both hanging folders and the frames used in filing cabinets to support them. Both standard and legal size are desired. If you have any to donate, please contact us or drop them off at the museum at your convenience. Thank you!



**Non-Profit Organization**  
**U.S. POSTAGE PAID**  
**Permit No. 149**  
**Fairport, NY 14450**



Richard Reisem signs copies of his book, *Myron Holley: Canal Builder, Abolitionist, Unsung Hero* after his interesting program at the museum on February 17<sup>th</sup>.

## **Fairport Historical Museum**

18 Perrin Street, Fairport, NY 14450

The museum is open to the public on Saturdays, Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays at the hours below:

Saturday 10:00–Noon	Tuesday 2:00–4:00 p.m.
Sunday 2:00–4:00 p.m.	Thursday 7:00–9:00 p.m.

Group tours, presentations and special projects are by appointment. Please call and leave a message at **585-223-3989**.

**[www.PerintonHistoricalSociety.org](http://www.PerintonHistoricalSociety.org)**