



## The Delesserts of Geneva, Lyon, Paris . . . and Rosendale? by Marc MacDonald

**M**y guess is that most of the historians who write in the *Natural News* or belong to the Century House Historical Society possess a personal interest in the history of Rosendale, New York. Indeed, the Society indicates on its website that it is "dedicated to the industrial history of the Rosendale natural cement region." I'm also interested in industrial history. However, I must sheepishly (this pun should make sense by the end of the article) admit that until very recently I'd never heard of Rosendale. For my PhD dissertation in history, I am exploring scientific and industrial traffic flowing over the English Channel and Atlantic Ocean around the turn of the 19th century. Specifically, I look at Benjamin Delessert and his family in Paris, vital proponents of this international traffic. Originally Swiss, they moved from Geneva to Lyon in 1725, where they opened a commerce house. Benjamin's father moved his family to Paris in the late 1770s [1], but they maintained their Swiss and Lyonoise links and property while developing new ones abroad. The Delesserts developed links with prominent figures through their industries, philanthropy, salons, education, and bank. Besides industrial pioneers Matthew Boulton and James Watt, this included Benjamin Franklin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham, and Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours.

# The Century House Historical Society

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## Welcome New Members!

Cheryl Neary, *Patchogue, NY*

Joe Tantillo & Maura Shaw Tantillo, *Rosendale, NY*

## Let There be Light!

Special thanks to member Kevin Towle for the donation of a brand-new 3000-watt generator to the Society!

During the last season, a storm took out several poles that fed the utility service to the mine. This generator is the perfect solution for lighting the mine should candle luminaries not quite fulfill the need. To replace the traditional electrical service, a large swath of trees would need to be cut through site, which would not only be costly but would sacrifice the beauty we enjoy. Falling limbs are the biggest enemy to dependable electrical service.

There have been discussions about "going solar". The power needs of the Widow Jane Mine are minimal. Most of the usage is for tours and events occurs during the time when the power that can be generated by the sun is at its peak. The area above the mine provides good exposure and would be the perfect site for solar panels. It would be a unique demonstration project. A solar home is interesting but a solar mine is something else!

## A Message From the President:



In this year of great transition, we must have gratitude for small victories. The latest isn't so small.

The Society had a mortgage on the historic site that needed to be renewed every five years. For the last time, we've obtained financing involving a swap of the mortgage for a term loan. The Snyder Estate Historic Site no longer serves as collateral! Be sure to read the full story on Page 4. Gayle navigated the treacherous waters (and arduous paperwork) of the Great Recession. In five years (or sooner we hope!), the Society will be done with the loan and onward and upward toward planning capital improvements here at the Century House.

A large victory!

Also note that the Society was gifted a small parcel of property at 29-33 Dietz Court in Kingston, NY, in late 2009, by Lorraine T. Goldman of Florida. Ms. Goldman donated the parcel and joined the Society after she came across an article in the *Natural News* written by Dietrich about her father and his life in Tillson, NY. Upon reading the article, she called the Society and said she wanted to do something special to support the organization by gifting the parcel. The property (with a potential view of the Hudson River) is now for sale through Westwood Metes and Bounds (phone: 845-687-0232 x115). Please help us spread the word so that we can sell this property.

Between Dietrich's passing, and Route 213 in front of the Snyder Estate collapsing (related? hmmm . . .), it's been quite a year. We're open for the season on Sundays from 1:00 AM until 4:00 PM, and by appointment, if you'd like to stop by. Make sure you've seen the special exhibit in our museum gallery, *Abandoned Mines of Rosendale: Photographs by Dan Lopez*. By the time this year is done, our visitors will have included the Rockhounds, fencers, and poets, as well as individuals both nearby and far flung.

In the Year of the Volunteer we've had so much help so far. Volunteers have plowed snow, mowed lawns, acted as docents, and helped with roofing the museum and archives.

We exist only through your help. If you have not renewed your membership, please do. If you'd like to tuck in a little extra toward the loan, please do.

Hoping you are having a great summer,

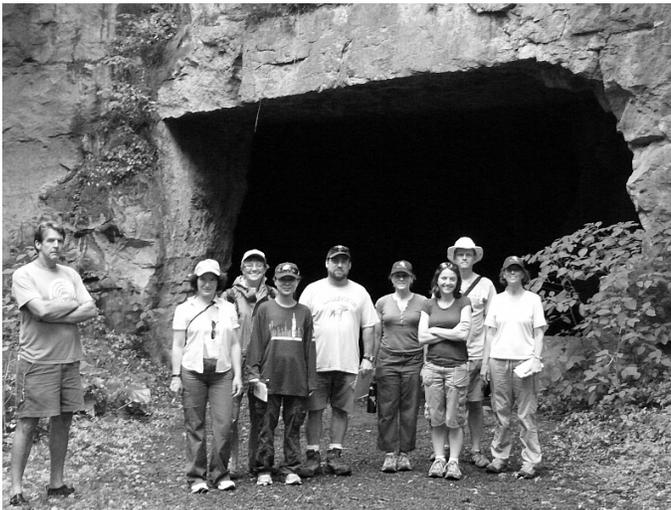
- Anne Gorrick



## Educators Visit Widow Jane Mine

On July 20, geology professor Steven Schimrich from Ulster County Community College led a small group of faculty members and environmental educators to the Widow Jane Mine as part of a field trip on the history of geologic resources in the mid-Hudson Valley. While here, they discussed the geology of the local rocks and the history of the Rosendale cement industry.

The group was participating in a program called River Summer (riversummer.org), an interdisciplinary field course which uses the Hudson River and surrounding watershed area as an extended laboratory and classroom. This year's theme for the program, sponsored by the Environmental Consortium of Hudson River Colleges and Universities, was "Navigating Sustainability – the Hudson and Beyond."



## Rockhounds Visit and Enjoy Pedestrian Walkway

When the Rockhounds had made their plans to travel from Long Island to visit, giving directions to the site was pretty easy. It looked like the only really big planning would involve what should be on the lunch menu.

Then came the collapse of Route 213!

The bus detour would have taken our visitors on a very lengthy trip. There were many other community activities including several bicycle events that were planned along Route. 213. What to do?

The NYS Department of Transportation came to the rescue!

An impressively designed pedestrian walkway/bikeway was constructed between Turco Brothers Water Facility and the Snyder Estate entrance. Turco Brothers graciously accommodated the Rockhounds and their bus in their parking lot. There were several bonuses: the walk over to the Snyder Estate included an appreciation of the geological features along the way and a rare opportunity to enjoy the blasts of

## “En Garde!”

One of the more unusual events that the Widow Jane Mine has seen in its more than one-hundred-year life took place on August 15 when the Fishkill Fencers held a tournament there. Twenty-one competitors from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut met to cross swords in the “8th Circle Épée Open”. The initial rounds were held outside and the final eight fought it out amid the limestone pillars of the mine.

When the dust settled, Andrey Chushko of the host club emerged victorious. In keeping with the underground “8th Circle” theme (think Dante’s *Inferno*), the finalists received trophies representing the Seven Deadly Sins. Our thanks to Alexander Turoff for patiently explaining the intricacies of the sport and for providing this picture.



cool air from the Lawrenceville Mine, which one can not safely venture to enjoy when the road is open.

The car detour to visit us is posted on the Society’s website. Set aside a little time, park in the Snyder Estate lot, and take a stroll on the walkway.

The collapse and road closure has truly impacted the Society’s season. Thousands of vehicles generally pass our Brooklyn Bridge gates each day. Our colorful banners which announce events are packed away. We look forward to the opening of the road but many will surely miss the walkway!



## Success, Silent Preservation, And An Appeal To Our Members

**R**ecently, through the hard work of Gayle Grunwald and after several months of negotiations, the Society's mortgage was renegotiated with a positive result.

The Society has received a "business" loan with a fixed interest rate of six percent. The monthly payment is comparable to the previous mortgage payment and this loan has been used by the bank to pay off the previous mortgage. The fee for the transaction was \$1040. The structure of this loan, which no longer has the site as collateral, shows faith in the integrity of the Society.

Receiving this loan was a joint effort between members and friends of the Society who worked to see that our mortgage payments had been paid faithfully over the years, and the work behind the scenes that you could not see or hear. Ira Cohen, Ross Grifkin, and Mark Spetelunas of Bank of America developed the proposal.

We usually think of preservation in terms of seeing a new roof going up on the museum building, hearing the "ding" of lids being pried off of paint cans of historic colors, or listening to the sounds of a front loader lifting stone blocks to repair a failing wall. But this preservation story involves nothing you would have seen or heard as you walked the grounds of the Snyder Estate. In fact, this preservation effort is virtually invisible. But is of the greatest importance. Because our original mortgage required a balloon payment in the amount of \$76,968.17 on July 1, 2010, or a renewal (refinance) with new terms, it was vital that the refinancing be accomplished at terms the Society could afford.

This past spring, the Board authorized Gayle to handle our negotiations. She thought long and hard about the fact that a lump sum payment (though ideal in the abstract) was impossible at this time, and how she could best advocate for a renewal with terms beneficial to the Society. During the initial conversations, it was important to stress our perfect

payment history, made possible over the years by thousands of hours of volunteer time devoted to tours and events, and by your donations. Every member and friend of the Society must recognize how important their efforts would prove to be in the final outcome of this saga.

Anxiety mounted for several months. We worried about whether we might have to reconsider our previous decision not to log the property's rare, old growth forest – or perhaps deaccession and sell the Snyder Carriage and Sleigh Collection or other irreplaceable collection items to obtain funds for the balloon payment. Gayle initiated many calls, each providing an opportunity to stress the educational benefit of the site, the importance to the community, the economic benefit, and our years of commitment to cover the mortgage payment of \$1500 each month. Finally, and at the last minute, Bank of America made the offer outlined above, which the Board has accepted on behalf of the Society.

Yes, the monthly payment obligation to the lender is still there. Yes, we so wish that these monthly payments on the loan were available to the Society to do tangible things at the site as there is so much to do. Yes, if this story inspires you to donate toward the goal of chiseling away our debt to the bank that would be wonderful as we would like to conduct preservation activities that can be seen and heard!

Therefore, we are asking for contributions above and beyond membership dues in order to retire our loan as soon as possible, and free our funds for much-needed preservation projects to restore the buildings on our property to their original beauty. Please help by adding a special donation towards the reduction of our business loan so that we can begin to tackle future preservation projects that we can all be as proud of as we are of Gayle's successful negotiation of a new financial footing for the Society.

*Thank You!*

*- The Board of Trustees*

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### Dietrich Werner Memorial Fund

Many contributions in the memory of Dietrich E. Werner in support of his years of dedication to the Society have been received. The list continues to grow! With these donations, the Society seeks to continue his good work. With great appreciation to:

Jean L. Klais  
Carol Perez  
David Drinkhouse  
Ed Williams & family  
Ron Weiss  
Peter Genero  
John & Dorothy Henderson  
David Maher  
Gail & Bruce Whistance  
Dennis Greco  
Dennis Howe  
Tim & Kristina Pavlov-Leiching & family

Lorraine T. Goldman  
Barbara Epstein & Kevin McEvoy  
Dianne P. Bridges  
Linda Tantillo  
Kerry McCarthy & Kate Mann  
with a matching donation The NY Community Trust  
Nickolas & Linda Jo Miles  
Susan & Richard Lewis  
Stone & Lime Imports  
David Prentice  
Dr. David Rosenbaum

## Get Ready For the Next Treasure Bazaar Mega-Sale!

Rosendale Wares, 416 Main Street

Saturday, September 4, 2010

10:00 AM — 1:00 PM

Spread the word, invite your friends and come to the next Treasure Bazaar Sale. This sale will feature tons of books and records, collectibles, housewares, fabric and trims, and a grand assortment of items that make the Treasure Bazaar Sale worth waiting for.

As you count down the days until the sale, please take the time to search your closets as we need your donations to make this the most successful sale yet! Call the Society (845-658-9900) for drop-off or we will arrange a pick-up. Volunteers will be at the storefront on Friday evening, setting up from 6:00 — 8:00 PM, making it convenient for you to drop off your treasures so we can arrange them for the sale on Saturday.

The rule of thumb is that if you love the item, or, in some cases, hate it (those oversize faux zebra matching pillows?) but need to downsize or have given up clutter as a way of life, it will be welcome at the sale.

But please, no electronics, large furniture, or clothing.

Remember our giant bag sale and the need for those smaller items that make going through the boxes great fun.

Practical is good too!



## Be Part of Fall Clean-Up Day

Sunday, October 17 from 10 AM — 2 PM

It does seem far away but a few chilly mornings predict that leaves will soon fall! Put the Fall Clean-Up date on your calendar today. There are projects to accomplish and a great lunch to enjoy. Bring rakes, gloves, and a dish to share. We don't know what kind of winter we're in for but during Fall Clean-Up Day, we can try to do our best to prepare the site for it. Please contact the Society and let us know you can join us. A big turnout would be a wonderful thing!

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Despite such impressive and extensive connections, the family has been largely neglected, especially in English-language scholarship. The slight attention they have garnered looked at Benjamin's massive plant and book collection. He died in 1847 and with the death of his brother François in 1868, the library went to the *Bibliothèque de L'Institut de France*. This institutionalization of a collection once celebrated for its openness was lamented at the time by botanists and in recent decades by historians of botany. [2] However, for me it marked the start of my research. Last year, it took me to Europe where I spent a month searching for remnants of this long-neglected family. Initially my efforts met with little success as there was little practical information in France's lauded libraries. Fortunately I was tipped off to two auction-house catalogues from 2001 and 2007. [3] After a trail through the streets of Paris to auction-houses and manuscript experts' shops, I learned that much of the family's letters were purchased by *Les Archives de Paris*. My examination of its *Archives Delessert* provided great insights into their activities in Europe and directed me to their American undertakings.

Currently, I am in Delaware at the Hagley Library exploring the American side of this traffic. Through this, and past work I have completed, I now have a rough sketch of the Delessert's period in New York. Benjamin's older brother Etienne (or Stephen) was forced, like P.S. and E.I. du Pont, to hide from the mob during the French Revolution after defending the monarchy in 1792. He set up a commerce house in New York, but it closed with his premature death in 1794 from Yellow Fever. Another brother, Alexandre, continued organizing the firm and became an American citizen. Prior to Stephen's death, however, he and his father had taken the initial steps to buy land in New York. This process appears to have begun in 1793, but they did not purchase it until 1798. Around 1805, they began renting the property as it had not been as successful as they had hoped.

The location and some of the general details of the Delessert's Rosendale farm were set out in a letter from Etienne Delessert to Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours. In the letter, dated April 21, 1801, Delessert explains that he sent Dr. Jean Jacques Cart to the United States with the goal of buying land. He was to seek out land on the banks of the Hudson, around thirty leagues from New York that allowed for commerce with Albany. The land purchased in conjunction between Dr. Cart and Delessert totalled about 1,700 acres in the County of Ulster. It was made up of several parts, three of which were in the township of Pultz [*sic*] and were developed and cultivated. Another was in the township of Springtown. These were dairy farms that produced Gruyere cheese which was sold by a company in New York. The last section, made up of about 680 acres, had a good house, great barn, and much cultivated land. It was situated three leagues below Kingston, ten from the village of Hudson and thirty from Albany. Etienne describes it as being at the confluence of the Rosendale river and the Rondout Kill and Wallkill creeks. These bodies emptied into the Hudson about 4 miles from the farm. They were able to travel from Rosendale to

New York in 24 hours. He also describes it as being close to Marbletown and Rochester. [4]

Delessert was providing its location more to promote its potential for commerce than to explain exactly where it was situated. However this and similar letters should help me determine the location of the farm, especially after I improve my sense of their meaning and New York's geography! To date at the Hagley Library, I have found many documents relating to the Delesserts endeavours at Rosendale. These include inventories, contracts, detailed instructions, legal documents and numerous letters. However, much of it is in difficult handwriting and in French making the processing of the large quantity of information time consuming and difficult. Nevertheless, I have learned that their plan was to produce Swiss forms of cheese as well as Merino sheep for manufacturing fine wool. This of course precipitated the arrival of Don Pedro in America in 1801.

The story of Don Pedro, probably the first full-blooded Merino sheep successfully introduced to the United States, is legendary. Etienne Delessert led efforts, after reminding the French government of their importance, to select a herd of Merino sheep from Spain following the Treaty of Basle. Spain had maintained its monopoly on them as long as it could, however this changed, along with many other things in Europe, as France attained greater power on the Continent. [5] As part of the treaty, 4,000 fine sheep of a herd of 6,000 were selected to go to France and Don Pedro was among this number. It was determined that four young rams of this larger herd would be sent to America to improve the breeding of sheep. Two rams were to go to Delessert's farm in Rosendale, one to the du Pont farm in Good Stay near New York, and the last was to go to President Thomas Jefferson. The four sheep were loaded on the ship *Benjamin Franklin* along with some other cargo that would become the stuff of legend. [6] E.I. du Pont had returned to France at this point to assemble the proper machinery and equipment as well as raise the necessary capital to start his powder manufactory along the banks of the Brandywine river in Delaware. The *Franklin* set sail from Le Havre on May 1, 1801, however it was detained by the British navy before it made it out of the English Channel. The ship did not reach Philadelphia until July 16, as the detention at Portsmouth and rough seas combined for a long voyage. The machinery weathered the delay better than the rams as Don Pedro was the only one of the four not to perish crossing the Atlantic. [7]

The importation of both sheep and machinery was intended to strengthen American manufacturing and to lessen its dependence on Europe. In this capacity, Don Pedro surpassed all expectations. He was paired with nine ewes on the du Pont's farm in 1801 and from 1802-4, was bred with a large herd on the Delessert farm in Rosendale. Unfortunately the "Merino mania" was still a few years off and the Delesserts decided to begin renting their land as well as put their flock up for auction. The prices went below that of common sheep and E.I. du Pont's agent purchased Don Pedro at auction for \$60. The ram was then taken to the du Pont farm near

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Wilmington and his services were offered free to neighboring farms. The fine Merino wool was still not recognized and only a small number of farmers went for the offer. After 1805, a number of factors combined to greatly increase the demand for Merinos. First were the efforts of Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, who learned of their value as Minister to France, and after returning purchased what was left of the Delessert flock in New York at a premium price. In 1808, du Pont began paying high prices for sheep originating from Don Pedro's line to raise the value and to increase their flock as for a wool manufactory the du Ponts were building. [8] Finally, Livingston published a text in 1809 praising the merits of the breed. [9] Besides the nearly one hundred head of sheep resulting from Pedro in the Delessert's flock, he came to breed with between sixty to eighty ewes annually in the area around Wilmington until his death in the Spring of 1811. Even with his death, his story did not end as the Merino sheep in his line went on to fetch very high prices at auction as the "Merino mania" swept America around 1810. [10] His legend also lived on within the du Pont family as tales were told of him saving the DuPont company and of having knocked over his portrait artist after the bribery bread had run out. There were also two wooden statues of him placed atop the gates leading to the DuPont property. One is believed to possess his actual horns and the family told of the pair coming down at midnight on New Year's Day, locking horns and then thinking better of it before returning to their post. Cement statues eventually replaced the wooden ones and today one of each is at the Hagley Museum.

Don Pedro's endurance and fine wool made him, if only briefly, Rosendale's most famous resident. Unfortunately the Delesserts sold their farm and returned to France before the "Merino mania" hit America. [11] Had things gone differently, perhaps they would be as well known in New York as the du Ponts are in Delaware and the largest statue in the state would be of Don Pedro and not Lady Liberty.



Instead, Pedro's life-sized statue and the lion's share of documents on the Delessert's time in Rosendale are safely held on the Hagley grounds where the DuPont company had its start. (Photo courtesy of the author)

**About the author:** This research is all part of my dissertation which I am working on at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada. My wife and I are originally from Prince Edward Island, but now live in "the West" with our six-month old son, Samuel. I am traveling to Rosendale on August 21 to see if I can locate the farm or information relating to it. If any readers have a means of assisting me, it would be greatly appreciated. I can be reached at [jmamacdonald@hotmail.com](mailto:jmamacdonald@hotmail.com). Some of the locals connected to the farm were David Golay, Jean-Jacques Cart, Jean Baptiste Orsèle, Abraham Helm and Henry Jacob Bornard.

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## ***20th Annual Subterranean Poetry Festival!***

Saturday, August 28, 2010

1:00 PM

in the Widow Jane Mine

Featured Poets & Performers include:

- Cara Benson
- Steve Cotten
- Geof Huth
- MaryRose Larkin
- Sharon Mesmer
- Wayne Montecalvo
- Lori Anderson Moseman
- Michael Peters
- Richard Rizzi
- R. Dionysius Whiteurs
- David Walach

Suggested Donation: \$5.