

# O.K.

A Historical Overview of Old Kinderhook  
from the Beginning of the World until the  
Near Future in the Context of Its Folklore,  
Legends and Supposed Actual History

by Christopher Kline

2017

*A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and to pervade the very atmosphere... The whole neighborhood abounds with local tales, haunted spots, and twilight superstitions; stars shoot and meteors glare oftener across the valley than in any other part of the country, and the night-mare, with her whole ninefold, seems to make it the favorite scene of her gambols.*

Washington Irving in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow", 1820

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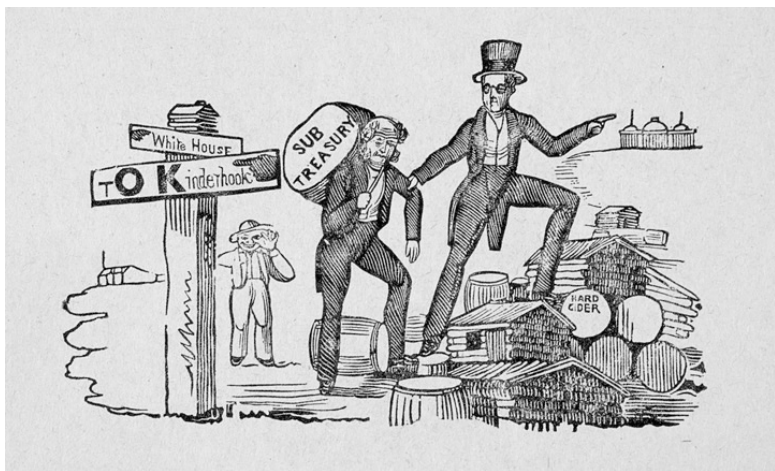
This guide serves to provide a general overview and a non-definitive, in-process excavation of Old Kinderhook's past which may serve as an introduction into countless, more detailed accounts. Its unwieldy title is an homage to local history books of the past.

O.K.

O.K. is perhaps the most widely used and understood word in the world. While many people have heard one tale or another as to its etymology, the preeminent theory is that it arose as part of a Boston language fad in which an abbreviation was given, followed by its comical misspelling in parentheses. For example, "everything's O.W. (oll wright)". Ha. Ha.

This fad included limitless combinations and was used widely in print in the 1830s. O.K. (oll korrekt) was one of many, and it would've died out like the rest of the trend if it weren't for the 1840 US Presidential reelection campaign of Martin Van Buren. Nicknamed Old Kinderhook after his hometown, his supporters latched on to the use of O.K., and called themselves the O.K. Club, sloganeering that "O.K. is O.K.!" Though he failed to win re-election, the term stuck.

Here, O.K. serves as a starting point and metaphor for how small-town peculiarities find their way into broader cultural forms.



*Political cartoon depicting Martin Van Buren's burden of the subtreasury on his difficult path back to the White House in the 1840 US Presidential election.*



## THE MUSICAL

I began working on *O.K.* in late 2013 as an artistic research project. Its first realization, as a multi-room installation and performance in Berlin, provided an overview of the basics of Kinderhook's history and lore. In developing the project I wanted to avoid imposing my own aesthetics onto a community's history, so I looked to the town itself for methods and forms of its own. I found out early that the term "artistic research" carries very little traction in Kinderhook, with people beginning to doze off even before getting to the word "research".

In searching for an aesthetic base I found that the most prominent craft group, Kinderkrafers, had long disbanded (Americana isn't in fashion anymore, I was told), and that other locally notable aesthetics like that of the Shakers, or the Hudson River School Painters or Dutch Colonial architecture were difficult to lay claim to and too far removed from people today.

Perhaps the most produced art form in the area, somewhat unexpectedly, is musical theatre. Local schools put on musicals regularly and several area theatres stage them exclusively. Due to the format's potential for inclusivity, and its combination of visual, written, performance, technical and musical elements, it began to seem only natural to utilize and develop the history project in that format, not just as a play, but as the creation of an entire evolving "theatre company", growing slowly and deliberately over many years, inviting people from all over to kick up the dust of history and then give it time to settle and be reevaluated. New scenes will be born, weak songs will be culled, and the story will expand until it feels like a cultural export of its own.

A friend once called *O.K. – The Musical* "Community Theatre as Community Theatre". The process of assembling people to take part, of writing, making, rehearsing, interacting becomes the core of the work itself. But just as "man cannot live by bread alone", no community or musical deserves to be relegated to the dregs of one person's "artistic process" and must be equipped with the correct spirit, infectious songs, and a gratuitous, climactic spectacle that it can feel proud of.

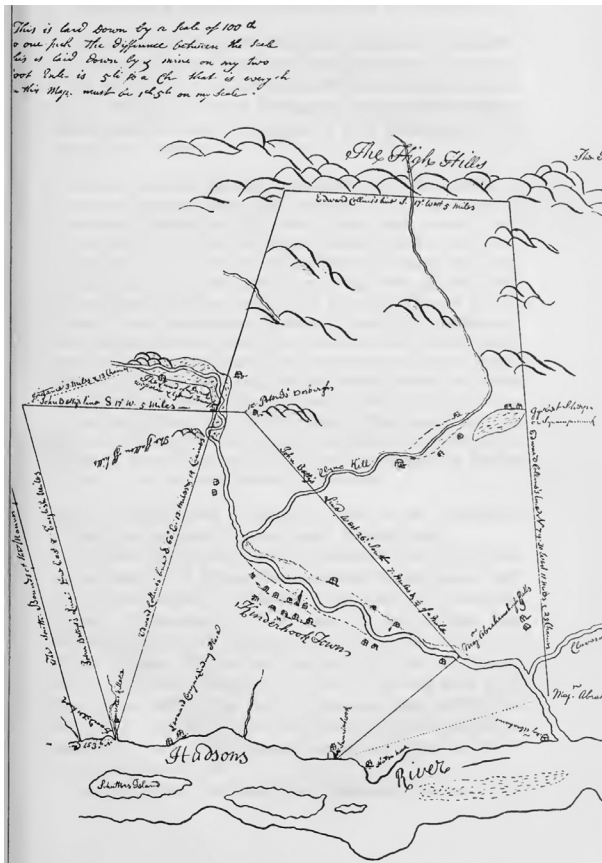


Crane Acting Troupe performing "Peter Pan Jr."



cast and crew of the Crane Acting Troupe's 2010 production of "The Wizard of Oz"

## A Note on Scope, Borders and other Demarcations



It could be said that a local history is defined by its scope. While strictly limited in terms of geography, a micro-history often knows no limit in its delving into the depths of minutiae. With this in mind, I've set out four categories of "scope" which shape the project.

## 1. Geographical Borders

*O.K.* focuses specifically on the region once known colloquially as “Old Kinderhook”, an area which extended from the eastern bank of the Hudson River west to the rising Taconic foothills. This territory was slowly chipped away and incorporated into the present day towns of Kinderhook, Stuyvesant and parts of Ghent, Stockport and Chatham. The sometimes fuzzy borders of the project generally stretch to include most of rural Northern Columbia County, especially in the case of a notable group, person or event (i.e. The Shakers, or Ellsworth Kelly, who both resided nearby).

These geographic limitations are also sometimes ignored altogether to briefly follow individuals and repercussions out of Old Kinderhook and into “The World.”

## 2. Historical Relevance and Audience

O.K. generally focuses on Old Kinderhook’s most “famous” cultural exports and figures (i.e. President Van Buren, the word O.K., *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*), but also encompasses lesser-known events, people and stories which offer deeper insights into the past that may be useful today. Since the audience for O.K. varies significantly depending on its iteration (unlike that for most local history books which could be considered “inside jobs” geared towards the locals themselves), attention is paid to anecdotes and moments which may speak to a more universal condition, yet whose essence is still quintessentially “Kinderhooker”.

## 3. Subjectivity and Sentimentality

I lived in Kinderhook until the age of 18 and so it would be foolish on my part to claim that this project lacks any sort of personal nostalgia, but it’s expressly not autobiographical, and many of the stories and historical “facts” herein are things I’ve come across only after further research into Kinderhook. Having lived away from Kinderhook for an equal duration, I’m often able to view this place which helped to craft the lens through which I see the world as a veritable outsider. This frees me in some ways from local preconceptions, pressures, and self-censorship. It also allows for a certain uninvolved curiosity which can transcend the limitations of rivalries, ideology, dominant narrative, and personal interest. Still, as they say, you can’t be neutral on a moving train.

## 4. Folklore, Legend, Myth, and Historical Fact

When dealing with a small town history, the overlap between folklore and historical fact is excessively blurry, to the point where there may be no difference at all. What “actually” happened may likely never be known, and perhaps cannot be known in any contemporary, objective sense. It can be a refreshing reminder that any society’s world-view and greater mythology is only seen as “common sense” from within. Today a large part of our mythology is called “science”, and we see it as indisputable as other societies have seen their own mythologies for millennia. Just as concepts of “history” or “culture” or “time” are human-created systems of understanding which will eventually expire, however useful and beloved, so too is the concept of “fact”. The denial of this has a name: ethnocentrism. But I digress. Let’s move on before this snake of logic eats its own tail. Suffice to say that in places such as Kinderhook, the paranormal often deservedly requires equal attention as the normal.

## KINDERHOOK



Kinderhook, New York is a township in the Hudson River Valley about 130 miles (~210km) upstate from New York City. It consists mostly of forest and farmland, the two small villages of Kinderhook and Valatie (pronounced Va-lay-sha) and the hamlet of Niverville.

Population: 8,500

Area: 32.4 sq mi (83.9 km<sup>2</sup>)

As it is sometimes customary to judge the size of an American small town by its number of traffic lights, the entire township contains, by my count, three, and one hotly contested roundabout.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD

The pedantic nature of New York State's historians has been a source of ridicule for over 200 years, ever since Washington Irving skewered them in his book (written partially in Kinderhook), *A History of New-York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, by Diedrich Knickerbocker (1809). And so no good upstate small town's history would be complete without going back to the very earliest point possible.

Thankfully Kinderhook was also the home of New York State Paleontologist Emeritus Donald Fisher (†2012), who ran the O.K. Rock Shop in the village. He wrote a book called *The Rise and Fall of the Taconic Mountains* which traces the area's geological history back nearly 5 billion years.

With him as our guide here is a summary:

- For the first 4.5 billion years, the earth was just forming and was a molten hellscape. Present-day Kinderhook's bedrock was formed when it was south of the equator.
- 460mya (million years ago) The Taconic Mountains were formed, and towered higher than the Himalayas, covered in snow.
- 380mya The area is a shallow, tropical ocean teeming with life.
- 300mya The continents are drifting around and collide into a single, vast continent called Pangea.
- 200mya Valley fills with mud, Dinosaurs leave footprints. Soon Pangea begins to pull back apart again.
- 65mya A massive meteor strikes the earth, leading to the extinction of the dinosaurs and an ice age.
- 10mya The continents are more or less in a familiar formation to today, and several more ice ages occur, Kinderhook is under one mile of ice.
- 21,500ya The ice begins to recede, eventually leaving glacial valleys and deposits.
- 12,000BC The glaciers are retreating, and the land is an arctic tundra on which mammoths and mastodons begin to live.

The first humans to live in the area migrated there between 10,000-13,000 years ago from the west, possibly following woolly mammoth migrations. When the mammoths went extinct after 2 or 3,000 years, humans migrated elsewhere. By 3000BC nomadic people had returned to the region, and by 1000AD farming had become widespread.

The Mohican Confederacy of five tribes developed from these earlier people, and they believed that the world was formed and carried on the back of an enormous turtle.

## THE MOHICANS

As with most land in the Americas, Kinderhook was once populated by “Indians”, namely the Wiekagjoc, a part of the Mohican confederacy which were a sub-group of Eastern Algonquin tribes. Not to be confused with the nearby Mohawks, with whom the Mohicans were not friendly, or the Mohegans, another Algonquin tribe from eastern Connecticut (all of these names actually stem from Dutch or English appropriations), the Mohicans were supposedly welcoming to the first colonists.

They called themselves *Muhhekunneuyuk*, (People of the Waters That Are Never Still) after the Hudson River which flows both upstream and downstream daily with the tides. They lived in wigwams, often in the style of multi-family longhouses, and hunted, fished and farmed corn, squash, tobacco and beans.

The European trappers and traders brought many diseases with them to which Native Americans had no immunity, and in some areas of the Northeast between 1615 and 1630 up to 95 percent of the population died from epidemics of smallpox, measles, and tuberculosis, among others.

For those who survived, the beaver fur trade began to dominate the region with tribes warring over trade access to the Dutch. After gradually being coerced or forced from their land for several generations since the Dutch first arrived, by the 1780s the tribes native to the Kinderhook area were largely settled in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The US government’s policy of ethnic cleansing called “The Indian Removal Act of 1830”, executed by the

8th US President, Kinderhook’s own Martin Van Buren, sent them from Stockbridge to a shared Wisconsin reservation. The Munsee-Stockbridge community still exists there with a population of 1,565 people, though the last speaker of the Mohican language died in 1933. Today only one registered Mohican descendent lives in their historic territory of the Hudson River Valley.



*Etow Oh Koam of the Turtle Clan, mistakenly labeled in this portrait as Emperor of the Six Nations. Though the Algonquian-speaking Mohican people were not part of the Iroquois Confederacy, Etow Oh Koam traveled with three Mohawk chiefs to England, where they were received as diplomats. They went requesting military aid against the French.*

painted by Jan Verelst, 1710



## HENRY HUDSON

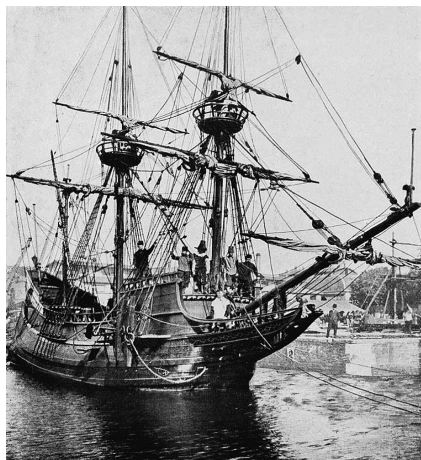
Henry Hudson was an Englishman who sailed for the Dutch East Indian Company. In 1609, captaining the *Half Moon*, he was tasked with finding an easterly passage to the West Indies over the top of Russia, yet when he encountered impassable ice in the Arctic Ocean he disobeyed his company's wishes and abruptly headed west, following rumors he'd heard of a Northwest Passage. Instead he ended up "discovering" what was later named the Hudson River, a wide-mouthed body of water which he and his crew sailed up, believing it may connect to the Pacific Ocean.



*All likenesses of Henry Hudson were created after his death, so it is not known what he looked like.*

Hudson and some of his men anchored somewhere near Kinderhook (most towns along the Hudson River claim The *Half Moon* stopped there despite, or because of, a lack of concrete evidence) and went ashore to meet the Mohican people. The Mohicans were friendly, offering gifts to the sailors, and when they saw that Hudson did not wish to stay the night, they broke their arrows and threw them in the fire so that he would not be afraid.

A popular legend has Hudson himself naming the area "Kinderhook" ("Children's Corner" in Dutch), after seeing Mohican children playing along the banks. This is most certainly untrue, but it is not known who exactly named Kinderhook.



*A replica of the Halve Maen or "Half Moon" sails the Hudson River in 1909, donated as a gift from the Dutch to celebrate the 300 year anniversary of Hudson's voyage.*

Hudson returned to Europe and after many complications set sail again, this time for the British. His quest for the Northwest Passage landed him in the icy waters of what is now known as the Hudson Bay in the north of Canada, a treacherous path which he refused to abandon, forcing his crew into mutiny. They turned back, leaving Hudson, his teenage son and several other (mostly ill) crewmen adrift in a small open boat, never to be seen again. The mutineers avoided punishment back in Europe by falsely claiming they had in fact found the Northwest Passage and promising to lead further expeditions there.

## DUTCH PATROONSHIPS, THE ENGLISH TAKEOVER, THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND WAR WAR WAR

The Dutch colony of New Netherland was a private venture designed around exploiting the fur trade. The Dutch symbolically peopled their colony in order to lay claim to it before other European countries, putting large swathes of land under the control of “Patroons” who enacted a sort of feudal system.



*A Dutch map of New Netherland, 1614. Note the location of the “Mahicans” and small drawings of their houses.*

The Dutch Colony only lasted from 1614 until 1674 when the English finally overtook it. Today many people credit the open, multicultural make-up of New York City to the Dutch who were considerably more religiously and ethnically tolerant than their zealously puritanical New England neighbors at the time. New York was one of the Thirteen British Colonies until the American Revolutionary War.

As you may have heard, there were a lot of other wars which have taken place in the 13,000 years humans have lived in the region, most notably the French and Indian War (part of the Seven Years' War). Most of the wars were probably very dramatic. Kinderhook and its villages sent soldiers to every major war in colonial and US history, but for the moment this is beyond the scope of this project.



THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW  
(ICHABOD CRANE AND THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN)



*The back of an Ichabod Crane Central baseball dugout. Photo by Elaine Kline*

Writer Washington Irving lived in Kinderhook for a mere eight weeks in 1809, and based several characters in his famous story, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” on acquaintances of his from the town. His tale’s anti-hero, the lanky and frightened Ichabod Crane was based on school teacher Jesse Merwin, and the Van Tassel homestead in the story is said to be based on that of the Van Alen family in Kinderhook.

Though the short-story explicitly takes place near Tarrytown, another town about 150km towards New York City, Kinderhook has long staked its claim to the story, citing the correspondence between Jesse Merwin and Irving as well as signed, written testaments by no less than President Martin Van Buren.

In 1954 Kinderhook planned to centralize its public school district from seven community schools. Due to stark rivalries between Valatie, a more working-class village, and Kinderhook Village, regionally known for its snobbery (though not necessarily the opinion of your innocent author), a bold, if unlikely diplomatic solution was reached to instead name the school district after the fictional, cowardly and superstitious school teacher mostly remembered for being chased out of town by a decapitated ghost on horseback.

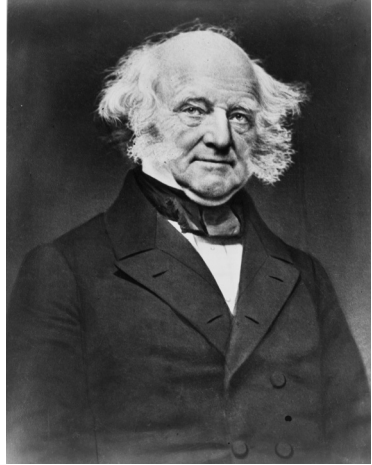
Thus, the “Ichabod Crane Central School District” was born and The Headless Horseman has been a familiar sight since as the school mascot.

## MARTIN VAN BUREN

Of all of Kinderhook's residents of past and present, none has had such widespread impact as Martin Van Buren. Born in Kinderhook in 1782 to a Dutch-American tavern keeper, he was the first US President born in the United States (previous presidents had all been born in the pre-Independence colonies), and the only president for whom English was a second language.

Known to be a masterful politician, he rose to Governor of New York State and was later selected as Andrew Jackson's Vice President. His many nicknames included: The Red Fox, O.K. (Old Kinderhook), The Little Magician, Matty The Enhancer, The Careful Dutchman, The American Talleyrand, and Martin Van Ruin.

Van Buren helped to pioneer what came to be known as "political machines"—a system of behind-the-scenes deals and private campaign promises also known as the "spoils system" in which political support is rewarded with high-ranking positions, money and other advantages. A true politician, he was shrewd in making his ideology public, constantly keeping his allies and enemies wondering. During his presidency he attempted to balance the country's divisions over slavery, forming many allies in the slave-owning south, while also disallowing the annexation of Texas or admitting Missouri as a slave state, which would throw off the balance of pro- vs anti-slavery states. Yet he expressed his emphatic opposition to abolition in his inaugural address. He is also credited with creating the Democratic Party, now the longest running political party in existence.



*Van Buren, though mostly forgotten, is sometimes remembered for his mutton chops.*

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 was passed during the presidency of Andrew Jackson while Van Buren was Jackson's Secretary of State. The act was designed to remove tribes from the south-western US to land west of the Mississippi River despite previous treaties granting them autonomy. Of particular historical note is the forced removal of the Cherokee people from their land in Georgia and bordering states. White southerners were eager to claim vast tracts of property considered by the tribes to be their ancestral homeland, especially after gold was discovered there in 1828.

Cherokee Chief John Ross petitioned President Van Buren with 16,000 signatures, nearly the entire Cherokee tribe, but Van Buren, eager to please his southern allies and voters, ignored the petition and called for their immediate removal with military oversight. Between 2,000 and 6,000 Cherokee men, women and children died during

the “forced march” from disease, exposure to extreme weather, and lack of rations.

Van Buren also famously intervened during the court case *United States v. Schooner Amistad* (later made famous by the Stephen Spielberg film *Amistad*), appealing the ruling for the release of the group of Africans who had been illegally kidnapped in Sierra Leone and sold into slavery. The group had mutinied and tried to set sail back to Africa, but ended up in Connecticut in one of the most famous Freedom Suits in US history which they eventually won at the Supreme Court, despite Van Buren’s efforts.

Today in Kinderhook, most of Van Buren’s political legacy is forgotten and he is mostly remembered as a lovable scamp, a cute old man with a big fancy house and big tombstone. While it may be tempting to excuse Old Kinderhook as simply a “man of his time”, it is worth considering the open letter to Van Buren penned in 1838 by esteemed writer and thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson regarding the Cherokee Removal in which he asked:

“Will the American government steal? Will it lie? Will it kill? (...) now the steps of this crime follow each other so fast, at such fatally quick time, that the millions of virtuous citizens, whose agents the government are, have no place to interpose, and must shut their eyes until the last howl and wailing of these tormented villages and tribes shall afflict the ear of the world.”

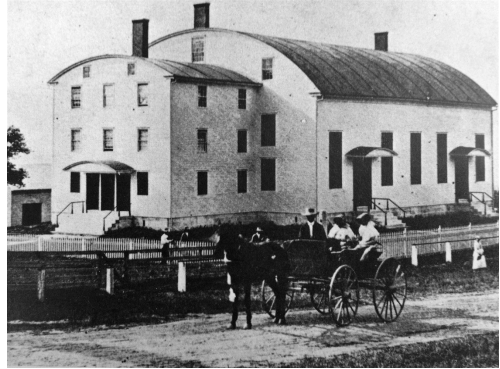


*Lindenwald, Van Buren's historic home, today preserved as a National Park, famously haunted.*

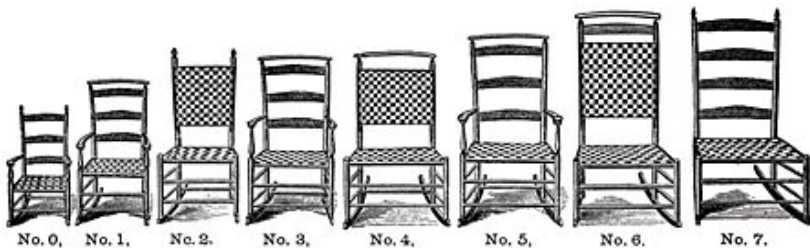
## THE SHAKERS

The Shakers are a religious sect which had their central ministry at Mount Lebanon, New York during their height in the mid-late 1800s. Formally known as The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, they were founded in 18th century England as an off-shoot of the Quakers and were moved to America following a vision from their leader Mother Ann Lee. Originally known for their transcendent and wild worship services which featured energetic convulsing, the Shakers later toned down their meetings after much public scrutiny and curiosity.

The Shakers lived communally, though separated by gender, living in women's and men's buildings and even entering their Meeting Halls through separate paired doors. Women and men were considered equals, in leadership and daily life, in line with their belief that God had created man and woman, and was embodied by the biblical Christ and later by his second coming in the form of Mother Ann. She was the first to instate a strict code of celibacy for all Shakers, believing that sexual intercourse was the greatest sin and what led to the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Shakers grew throughout the 1800s solely by way of conversion and adoption. Many single mothers converted in that period due to having few other options for sustenance.



*Shaker Meeting House, Mount Lebanon, New York*



Shakers are known largely for their furniture which was finely made and simple yet elegant. A popular misconception is that the Shakers, like the Amish, forbade the use of new technology. In fact, although the Shakers championed 'simple living', they were very innovative and industrious, supposedly claiming over 100 patents for their inventions.

The Shakers found great prosperity in their farms, seed business and manufacturing of furniture. Yet competing with the Industrial Revolution proved difficult, and as their wealth diminished toward the end of the century, conversion became more rare. Adoption also became more difficult due to a new nation-wide awareness of child welfare, and membership decreased rapidly as older Shakers died out and child converts often left the community when they turned eighteen. The Shaker Village at Mount Lebanon was sold in the 1940s, and today the last two remaining Shakers live and work at another village in Sabbathday Lake in Maine. New converts are still welcome if they can manage to make it through a lengthy trial period.

The Shakers were ahead of their time in regards to their ideology surrounding the equality of men and women, as well as towards race. They accepted people from any demographic, adopting or converting many former slaves as well as American Indians. Similar to the Quakers, Shakers were also vehement pacifists, believing it wrong to kill other human beings even in times of war and were first pardoned from conscription in the US Civil War by Abraham Lincoln.



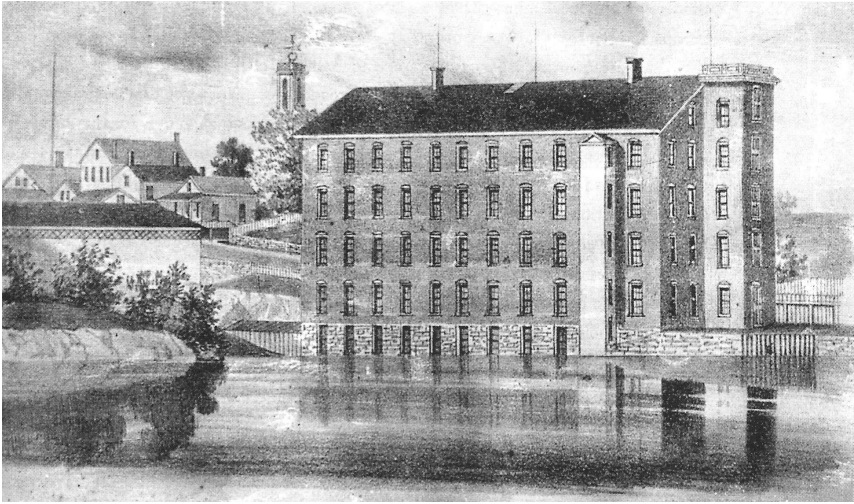
Worship services were focused on communal experience with men and women facing each other in rows or circles, lacking a central preacher. Their beliefs focused on communion with God, and early services were unstructured and chaotic, later developing into tightly choreographed dances and songs. Ecstatic worship could be seen as a way of dealing with unfulfilled sexual yearnings, their flailing and jerking motions exhausting them in trance. At Mount Lebanon they sometimes conducted “Mountain Meetings” at night in the forest. The focal point was a “visionary fountain whose waters could be seen rising to the very heaven of heavens by those with spiritual eyes.” \*

Musically the early Shakers forbade harmonization as they found it vain. Later songs include four part harmonies, but remained void of musical instruments. Instead songs are often characterized by clapping and stomping.

\* Benson Lossing, “The Shakers,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine (1857)



## THE GREAT BLIZZARD OF 1888



Valatie (pronounced Va-lay-sha, originally from the 17th century Dutch “Vaaltje” or “Little Falls”) is one of two villages in the town of Kinderhook. By the mid-1800s it was a thriving mill town, drawing English, Irish, German and Italian immigrants with prospects of mill jobs.

On March 12, 1888 Valatie was in the midst of what came to be known as the Great Blizzard of 1888 which dumped 48 inches (120cm) of snow on the village over four days. Snow drifts were up to the rooftops, and all roads into the village were closed. People, snowed into their homes and places of work, began to notice a strange pink and orange glow in the sky. Some residents believed the world was ending. At 5:45pm a fire had started at the Beaver Cotton Mill, likely set off by static electricity at the head of a mule spinning frame.

The fire spread quickly, and the alarm was slow to spread across the village due to the blinding snow and heavy drifts. Finally the fire department were able to pull their hand pump and engine cart through the blizzard to the mill, only to find the pond frozen to the bottom. They managed to open the upper dam to let water through and fought the fire through the night, sparing the rest of the village, but losing the mill. With temperatures below 0°F (-18°C), firefighters were covered in ice with some even freezing to the metal fire escapes of the mill.

224 looms were destroyed and 150 jobs burned up, wages which supported roughly 500 residents, leading to an exodus of workers and the eventual closing of shops and other businesses frequented by the workers.

## CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT HISTORIES

### People of Color

Although most physical traces of their existence have long eroded away, any written history of the region carries its obligatory mention of the Mohicans or other New York State tribes which once nobly occupied these lands before Europeans made contact. Since the method by which the Mohicans were pushed from their land was seemingly far less violent than many other tribes across the United States, the question of what happened to them is generally answered with a shrug, saying they just sold off their land and eventually left, leaving behind only caches of arrowheads.

Despite almost all written histories of the Mohicans being positioned in relation to the first Dutch settlers, there is remarkably little written about their way of life, even from a colonial perspective. Since the Mohicans didn't have a written language, the common method of dealing with their history lies somewhere between helplessness and assuming not much important happened in the ten thousand years prior to 1609.

Perhaps similarly, rarely mentioned today is the presence of an established African-American community in Kinderhook. In the "North" slavery is presented as a "Southern thing", something our forebears fought a Civil War to end. Or, maybe, if there was any connection at all, then Kinderhook was probably a stop along the Underground Railroad. In fact, Kinderhook was one of the earliest agricultural communities in the colonies, and its economy and development benefitted greatly from slavery, especially in the 18th century. The 1790 federal census shows us that Kinderhook, New York, had 4,661 residents, of whom 638 (14%) were slaves, a total exceeding that of every other township in the county.

While there is no proof, despite imagined local tales, of any Underground Railroad safe-houses in Kinderhook, there is plenty of evidence of reward offers for runaway slaves.

### RUN AWAY

from the subscriber, on the night of the 17th inst. *July*, a NEGRO MAN, named FORTUNE, is about 40 years old, of a very black complexion, is much pitted with the small-pox, has one crooked middle finger.—Also, a NEGRO WOMAN, named DEAN, about 28 years old, of a yellow complexion.—Stole when they run away, TWO MARES, who have left their sucking colts at home; both the mares natural trotters, the one a bay, and the other a black—also stole a saddle and bridle, some pork and bread.

Whoever will take up the said man and woman slaves, and the mares, saddle and bridle, and bring them to me, or secure the slaves in some gaol, so that the owner can have them, shall have THIRTY DOLLARS reward, and for the slaves only, TWENTY DOLLARS.

ABRAHAM VAN ALLEN.  
KENDERHOOK, July 17th, 1788.

*Runaway slave advertisement in the Berkshire Chronicle published July 31, 1788.*

Slavery was slowly abolished in New York State between 1799 and 1827 through a process of Gradual Manumission. In this time many New York slave owners sought to protect their investments by selling their slaves to southern slaveholders before it became illegal. There is little documentation of the black communities which once lived in Kinderhook, but this quote from a 1914 local history is perhaps telling:



*Above: The original Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1851, photo 1914*

*Poverty is a thing unknown in the village, unless it be in solitary instances, where willful idleness and alcohol are its immediate causes; even the colored population is neat and well cared for. This, however, cannot perhaps be said of Guinea Hill, a settlement of negroes at a little distance from the village. The huts are of very rude construction, some of them partly underground; and here have lived men of considerable fame in town. "Old Mink" died some time since, but "Dandy Pete" and "Woodchuck Pete" still flourish, gaining their scanty subsistence from the forests' game and the finny inhabitants of the creek.\**

By the 2010 census just 0.68% of Kinderhook's population was black.



The Persons of Color Cemetery in Kinderhook was recognized on the National Register of Historic Places in 2016. The cemetery was on land donated by a sympathetic Irish businessman in 1815 and was used by the local black community until it was overfilled. The cemetery fell into disrepair and became overgrown with many stones being removed over the years. In the 1970s a group of Boy Scouts cleaned up the cemetery and gathered the headstones, arranging them in the strange formation they're in still today, ordered by height, and uncomfortably close to each other for a standard burial plot. No descendants of those buried there have been located.

\* *A History of Old Kinderhook*, Edward A. Collier, 1914



## DAUGHTERS OF COLUMBIA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A casual leafing through of this booklet will also reveal another, even more conspicuously absent demographic: women. As is often the case, the history of Kinderhook is littered with mentions and images of “great” men: Henry Hudson, Martin Van Buren, Washington Irving and even more recently Serpico and Ellsworth Kelly. But as anyone from a small town can likely tell you, communities are most often held together by women, albeit invisibly.

Remarkably, the history of Columbia County and Kinderhook has largely been preserved by women. Following World War I, and the explosion of nationalism at the time, there grew a widespread interest in “heritage”, partially steeped in xenophobia and the desire to prove one’s genealogical claim to their home in contrast to newly arrived immigrants. In 1916 a group of women who summered in Kinderhook formed “The Daughters of Columbia County”, which was later transformed into the Columbia County Historical Society. The historical society continues to administer a library archive, museum and several historic properties.



*The Columbia County Museum and Historical Society Library, now housed within the former Mason’s Lodge, Kinderhook*

Another locally prominent group founded by women was Kinderkrafters, remembered for their annual craft fair and quilt raffle. Founded in 1946 as the Kinderhook Home Demonstration Unit, the group later shifted from home-oriented activities like baking, child care and nutrition to a focus purely on arts and crafts. The group met regularly at members’ homes to do various craft projects, including reintroducing “heritage crafts” like tole painting, pysanky eggs and quilting.



### **Quilters ready for craft fair**

Kinderkrafters Karen Tomashosky, left, and Deborah Scalzo say the club’s red, white and green quilt is ready to be raffled off at the Kinderhook Village Craft Fair May 20. Scalzo said the Kinderkrafters will donate the money raised from the quilt to the Valatie Rescue Squad for a defibrillator.

*Kinderkrafters displaying a quilt to be raffled off to raise money for a defibrillator*

## CIVIC GROUPS

Civic groups have long played a central role in small town American social life. Kinderhook has chapters of national groups like The Elks, The Lions Club, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts, but also some more eccentric ones which still exist today.

*The Valatie Santa Claus Club* was founded in 1946 by Bill Farrell and other friends who had just returned from service in World War II and were inspired by a terminally ill girl's wish to see Santa. Their continued objective is to provide Christmas gifts, in costume, to all of the children of the village. Each year on Christmas Eve Santa rides into town on a fire truck with Gene Autrey's "Here Comes Santa Claus" playing loudly from the engine's speakers, just as it was the very first time in 1946.



*Bill Farrell, founder of the Valatie Santa Claus Club and also its first Santa.*

*The Schodack, Stuyvesant, Kinderhook and Chatham Society for the Detection of Horse Thieves* was formed in 1823 and has met annually since. Members paid \$1/year to cover the cost of riders to find their stolen horses. Some of the notable amendments to the Society's bylaws include: In 1831, widows of deceased members were allowed to become members as long as they remained unmarried but "did not have to attend the annual meetings". In 1884 membership was increased from \$1 to \$3 per year. 1917 was the last time the group tried to recover a stolen horse. In the 1930s a mule went missing, but came back by itself. In 1946 a resolution was soundly defeated to add cars as protected assets. In 1949 Oyster stew was added to the menu. In 1950 Clam



Chowder added. In the 1980s two horses were stolen from a local breeding farm, but the police didn't call on the society for help.

*2014 meeting with Kinderhook resident and actor Stephen Lang as guest speaker. He brought a real human skull in a round box to show the group as they prepared to eat Minced Ham Salad Sandwiches.*

## WOMEN'S CONCEALED CARRY FASHION SHOW

Local sportsmen's clubs generally revolve around facilitating hunting and fishing trips as well as providing grounds for trap and target shooting for members. Traditionally geared towards men, recently a new type of gun-owner advocacy group has sprung up in the area called WCC (Women's Concealed Carry). Founded by Trish Cutler in 2012, the group focuses on making firearm ownership and carrying less daunting for women. Their main work is hosting an annual fashion show accompanied by presentations on women's self-defense and situational awareness.

Trish says:

"The idea for the Women's Concealed Carry Fashion Show began on January 24, 2012 after my third attempt to shop for a holster at the local gun stores failed. My quest to conquer this dilemma prompted me to find another way. I decided to invite some of my gun gal pals to my home for nacho night and to go online and discuss and demonstrate concealed carry with my friends. I asked them to bring as many holsters as they could beg, borrow or steal for the evening. Having actual holster fittings in a comfortable, non-intimidating atmosphere saved us the embarrassment of asking the male store clerks for their opinions and definitions of IWB, OWB, AFBH, etc.\* and allowed us to try on and figure out how to wear these foreign objects instead of "trial and error purchasing" a.k.a. "cash and trash".

"For the fashion show, the ladies of all shapes, sizes and ages wore holsters with different attire including everyday casual, athletic clothing, evening-wear, and career wardrobes. They modeled to demonstrate the draw and re-holstering using training guns for each particular type of carry. This runway presentation made decision making about the ultimate fashion accessory fun and easy."



\*Inside the Waistband, Outside the Waistband, Ambidextrous Flat Belt Holster.



Trish Cutler

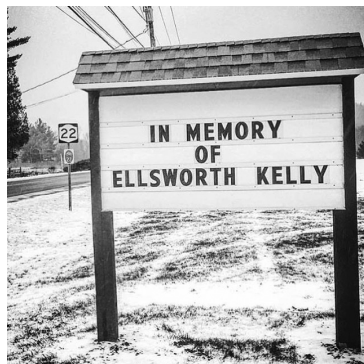
## NOTABLE IMPORTS: ELLSWORTH KELLY AND SERPICO

Beginning around the 1970s, Kinderhook became a “bedroom community” for the nearby New York State capital of Albany, meaning that many people moved into the new suburban developments in the town (built on former farmland) and commuted to work 30 minutes away. Meanwhile it also became a popular “weekending” destination for the wealthy from New York City. Locally sometimes termed “cidiots” for their rude behavior, the region is increasingly settled by those from “the city” who now reside upstate permanently. Both their liberal politics and their quest for an idyllic country life often run afoul with conservative locals.

Fearing that the hustle of New York City was affecting his work, minimalist painter Ellsworth Kelly moved upstate to Spencertown in 1970. He found a former theatre on Main Street in Chatham for a studio and began to create his widely celebrated ‘Chatham Series’ soon after.



*Kelly crossing from his studio on Main Street in Chatham, 1970*



*A message from the local firehouse at the time of his death in December 2015*



*Inside Kelly's studio on Main Street during the "Chatham Series"*



Frank Serpico was a New York City police officer who was the first to testify against wide-spread police corruption. During his attempts to report illegal police activity such as organized shakedowns and systematic bribery, he was shot in the face while on a drug bust. It was widely supposed that he was set-up by fellow officers who left him bleeding in the hallway. He survived despite the ill-wishes of the hate-mail he received from anonymous officers while recovering in the hospital.

Serpico moved upstate to Stuyvesant in the early 70s, just as a major Hollywood movie starring Al Pacino was being made about him. He has been a charismatic local fixture since then, often frequenting the Kinderhook Memorial Library to check his email. A true lamp-lighter (a term he prefers to ‘whistle-blower’), Serpico continues to support officers wishing to report corruption as well as other civil liberty causes. He still suffers chronic pain from the bullet fragments lodged in his brain.



*Serpico in 1971 testifying in front of the Knapp Commission*



*Serpico in 2013 showing where developer Frank Paladino allegedly cut down 12 of his trees*



In 2015 Serpico ran for Stuyvesant Town Council. He was quoted by the Times Union, an Albany newspaper as saying:

“In this town, if the ticks don’t get you, the politics will” and said he was running to drive out the Republican “old boys’ club” that he said dominated local politics.

Serpico lost to his closest Republican challenger 321 to 265 votes.

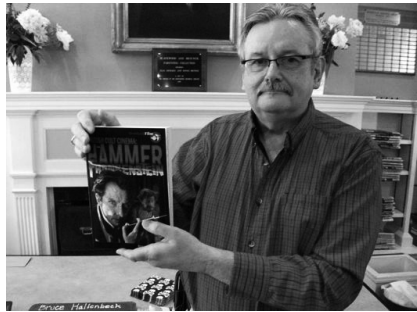
## THE KINDERHOOK CREATURE

Kinderhook, as described by local author Bruce G. Hallenbeck, is a Halloween town. It's known for its hauntedness, and its brushes with the paranormal go beyond *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, with the ghosts of Aunt Sally and Aaron Burr haunting the grounds of Lindenwald, and countless homes claiming ghostly residents. Regionally there are the stories of the girl in the coffin with the glass window, the floating blob in the trees, and the legend of Spook Rock in nearby Claverack, which is said to roll over by itself when the church bell tolls.

In the early 1980s there was a cycle of Bigfoot sightings in Kinderhook, leading a regional paper to term it "The Kinderhook Creature". Central to investigating the sightings was local paranormal aficionado Bruce G. Hallenbeck. Hallenbeck is an author, actor and filmmaker born, raised, and based in Kinderhook, NY. A leading expert on Hammer Films and other areas of cult horror and sci-fi, Hallenbeck is also known for his long-standing interest and research in cryptozoology on which he continues to lecture and publish.



*Still from The Quarry written by Bruce G. Hallenbeck as part of director Joe Bagnardi's Edge of Reality anthology film, 2008*



*Hallenbeck [Left] acting in Shadow Tracker: Vampire Hunter, 1999 and [Right] at a more recent book signing at the Kinderhook Memorial Library*

## KINDERHOOK POLITICIANS SINCE VAN BUREN

In 1999 a Village Trustee was thrown through the Valatie Village Hall's plate glass window by the Assistant Fire Chief over a heated disagreement on how to update Valatie's water infrastructure. This dramatic event led 19 year old Jason Nastke to run for mayor in an effort to bring a fresh approach to local politics. He won handily as the Republican candidate and became the youngest sitting mayor in the country, leading to appearances on The Late Show with David Letterman, CSPAN and countless national media outlets including Seventeen Magazine.



*Gibson congratulating Faso*

Kinderhook has recently produced two congressmen for NY District 19; Republican Chris Gibson, (2011-2017) and John Faso who was elected on the same Republican ticket as Donald Trump in 2016. Faso is currently facing protests in front of his home and office in Kinderhook Square over his stance on repealing the Affordable Care Act, his position on abortion and Trump's travel ban as well as past lobbying work.

Another notable local politician was Martin H. Glynn, the first Irish Catholic governor of New York State (1913-14). Glynn ascended to governor following his predecessor's impeachment but failed to be reelected. While he was a progressive and pro-women's suffrage, his wife Mary Glynn was not and served as vice president of the Women's Anti-Suffrage Association in Albany. Glynn took his own life with a gun in 1924 due to chronic back-pain from a spinal injury, but local media reported that he died of a heart attack which was public belief until his death certificate was reexamined in 1994.



## THE HISTORY OF THE FIELDS ORCHARDS, CORNFIELDS, BALLOON MEADOWS, SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENTS



photo: Barb Mayer



photo: Phil Boucher

Hot air balloons were a common sight in the skies around Valatie and Kinderhook due to Balloon Meadows, a take-off site, being located across the street from Ichabod Crane High School. These photos are of specific balloons that flew in the area in the late 80s-early 90s.

In the 1850s nearly 80% of Columbia County was covered with farmland, though today over 60% is forest. Disused farmland has also been the site of a boom in housing construction and cul-de-sac-style neighborhood development since the 1970s, though the period of rapid expansion ended in the 1990s.

Today the main types of produce in the region are apples and corn. Farm jobs have long attracted migrant workers from Latin America, leading to many Mexican



*workers picking apples in Kinderhook*

families settling in the area in the last 20 years. While dairy farming continues its long decline, “niche” farms such as grass-fed and organic have grown.

Sociology, rather than ecology, will likely continue to determine the lay of the land.



## ANTI-MUSLIM DEATH RAY PLOT

In 2013 Eric J. Feight, an engineer and high-standing member of the local Elks Lodge in Kinderhook was charged with “conspiracy to assist terrorists” and sentenced to 15 years in prison after he conspired with proclaimed Ku Klux Klan member Glendon Scott Crawford to build a silent, portable device which could deliver lethal doses of ionizing radiation from the back of a parked van. The pair had planned to use it to target Muslims and Muslim organizations who they deemed are “contributing to the demise of the United States”.



*ABC News graphic depiction of proposed death ray in use*



*Video surveillance of FBI sting operation to arrest Glendon Scott Crawford, Feight's accomplice*

In a meeting on November 14, 2012, Crawford (the plot's mastermind) unwittingly introduced Feight to two undercover FBI agents posing as Southern-based rock quarry businessmen with Klan connections. At a meeting on November 14, 2012 in an area coffee spot, Feight was recorded saying that he was nervous about being involved in Crawford's plot, but changed his mind with the “direction things were going and then certainly” after President Barack Obama was re-elected to a second term.

“It's like, OK, you know that old saying is right, you know the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing,” Feight said. “I've done nothing for a lot of years but shoot my mouth off, and see how effective that's been.”

Feight went to an Elks Club meeting in Kinderhook later that night.

## NEW YORK STATE HISTORIC MARKERS



Most New York State historic markers were erected between 1926 and 1936 under a program to commemorate the “150th Anniversary of the American Revolution”. Funding for the project ran out as early as 1939. They are a frequent sight in upstate New York, though there is little official oversight and no inventory of the markers anymore. There are many markers erected by local governments, individuals or organizations without any state involvement. They are identical in appearance and function to those funded by the early state program, leading to a large variety in the relevance and phrasing of the signs, and in effect generating an organic and locally subjective legacy.

Increasingly, as public recollection fades, these markers are often the only remnant of the local history they represent, particularly where archaeological sites are involved. Over the past decades more than once a significant archaeological site has been saved from inadvertent damage during public construction and development because a marker announced its existence where no other evidence of it remained.

Responsible residents wishing to restore a marker may do so themselves following certain guidelines. “Repainting is usually all that is required for restoration purposes. When restoring the blue and gold state colors, you may use standard Rustoleum® colors for gloss finishes on exterior metals as follows: “#7727 Royal Blue” and “#7747 Sunburst Yellow”. You may also use other commercial rustproofing paints in colors that match or approximate the original state colors on the sign.”

text adapted from a Summary History by Philip Lord Jr.



