

Medina County Historical Society Newsletter



John Smart House

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 www.medinacountyhistoricalsociety.com
 mchs@zoominternet.net
 Established 1922



McDowell-Phillips House

C a p i t a l D r i v e U p d a t e

Thank you to everyone who contributed to our capital campaign for the new Medina County History Center. Construction will begin as soon as weather allows, and we are working to avoid supply chain delays. The new facility, located behind the McDowell-Phillips House, will be a significant addition to our community. The City of Medina will also reconstruct Blake Avenue, adding parking and sidewalks on both sides—an important improvement for the neighborhood. It will be a very busy time throughout this year,

2 0 2 5 H i g h l i g h t s

We ended 2025 on a strong note with several key achievements:

- **Northrop Award Recipients:** Gayle Foster, local columnist; Family of James Gowe (posthumous)
- **Board Updates:** New Trustees – Sheila Benson and Lisa Pettry; Retirements – Mike & Judy Davanzo and Maxina Frietas.
- **Community Engagement:** The Gingerbread Contest at the John Smart House was a success. Instead of admission fees, we collected canned goods for local food pantries.
- **The "Not Just A Pretty Dress Exhibit"** was a big success with much hard work to create and manage this exhibit.

M u s e u m M a i n t e n a n c e

While museums are closed for winter, we are completing essential upgrades:

- **McDowell-Phillips House:** Full rewiring to replace outdated knob-and-tube wiring.
- **John Smart House:** Fresh paint and a redesigned second floor featuring *History of Medicine in Medina County*, including YouTube recordings from our "Old Docs" series.

L o o k i n g A h e a d : 2 0 2 6 S e m i q u i n c e n t e n n i a l

This year marks the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding. Stay connected: Local communities will host programs throughout the year.

- Follow us on Facebook
- Get involved
- Make a difference:
- Volunteer at upcoming events
- Donate to support our mission
- Share our story on social media.

Together, we are preserving Medina County's rich history for future generations.
 Brian Feron, President

Follow us at: www.MedinaCountyHistoricalSociety.com or on Facebook

MCDOWELL – PHILLIPS HOUSE MUSEUM PLAQUE

Written by Mary Jane Brewer

One of the largest and most iconic houses in the city of Medina now proudly displays a bronze commemorative plaque on the wall of the front porch. It reads: “The McDowell-Phillips House Built in 1890 Has Been Listed in the National Register of Historic Places by the United States Department of the Interior.”

Medina historian Joann King began the process to earn the house’s recognition four years ago.

King painstakingly collected the documentation required by the Department of the Interior. With the help of the late photographer Eric Daiber, she recorded views of each room and all exterior features of the house.

She said the most time-consuming task was to gather the information about the home and its inhabitants. “The people are as important as the building,” she said. Although H.G. Blake never lived in the house, he was part of the McDowell family and his history made it possible for the McDowells to carry on the family traditions, particularly the founding and long-running success of the Old Phoenix Bank.



King collected geographical and technical maps of the county and city. “There was a lot of running around to get all the pieces together.” She recorded inside and outside architectural details.

After the information was collected, King’s hardest task was assembling the information and writing it correctly. Once the application was complete, it was sent to the State Preservation Statistics Office for approval. The process of approving the documentation was very slow; she contacted the state office every six months to check on its progress.

Once the application cleared the state, it took another year to be approved by the National Register. According to King, “It’s quite an honor to qualify. “



CHILDREN'S PROGRAM - CHRISTMAS 2025

Written by Mary Jane Brewer

Since 1890, the main hall of the McDowell-Phillips House has resounded with children's laughter and singing at Christmas time. Generations of McDowell and Phillips children gathered before the fireplace to sing holiday songs and listen to Christmas stories. That tradition continued this past year on the afternoon of Dec. 13th.

A dozen children sat on the rug in front of a gaily blazing fire while Society members Sheila Benson and Andrea Spickler read aloud from story books and led traditional holiday songs.

Each child was given a bracelet with bells to shake in rhythm with the songs. Fittingly, the first song was "Jingle Bells;" lots of bracelet shaking and smiles accompanied the well-known tune.

Next on the schedule was the reading of "Merry Christmas Mr. Mouse," a fun story with delightful illustrations. The children were quiet and attentive as they listened to the story and looked at the pictures.

Two more books were read – one the story of the nativity – and happy voices rang to "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Frosty the Snowman."

Following the songs and stories, the children and their parents moved to the kitchen for hot cocoa and gift boxes of candy treats. Next on the schedule was a visit from Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus. The children had the chance to talk with Santa in the dining room before they ventured out into a snowstorm.

Santa stayed at the museum for the next 3 hours to greet more than 50 visitors who had come to see the beautiful holiday decorations all through the house.



(MCHS Board member Sheila Benson reading to the children)

FEBRUARY PROGRAM



Special Historical Retrospective of Danny Greene and the 1970's Cleveland Mob Scene

The Medina County Historical Society is sponsoring a special presentation on Danny Greene, the well-known Irish-American mobster. Learn from Historian Dennis Sutcliffe how Greene rose to prominence in the Cleveland underworld during the 1970s by challenging the Italian-American *crime family and creating his own* brutal gang that resulted in Cleveland being known as Bomb City USA.

The one hour event will be held Saturday, February 21st at 1:00pm in the Root Candle's Bee Culture Conference Room, 640 West Liberty, Medina. Parking is available across the street. The event is free and open to the public.

For additional information, email mchs@zoominternet.net or by calling 330-722-1341.

T H E I N F A N T W H O S U R V I V E D

Written by Kathy Petras

(For clarity, the older Harrison Blake will be referred to by his name "Harrison" and the younger Harrison Blake will be referred to by his initials "H.G.".)

H.G Blake's story is well known in Medina County History. He was a businessman, lawyer, politician and entrepreneur. His accomplishments contributed so much to Medina that we now have an elementary school named after him.

But not as much is known of his very early life and his family. Born in 1818 in Newfane, Vermont, H.G. was the fourth of five children born to Harrison Gray and Lucy (Goodell) Blake. He lost his mother at the age of 3 in an incident that was recounted in song and poetry for decades.

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CURATOR'S CORNER

A Fresh Start for a New Year

As the new Curator of the Medina County Historical Society, I am excited to welcome the new year with new energy and fresh spaces! Over the past weeks, our museum has been busy with a new coat of paint, updated fixtures, and preparations that are setting the stage for an exciting year ahead. We're thrilled to be giving the building a refreshed look that better highlights the stories we share with our community.

Our first major project of 2026 will be a brand-new History of Medicine exhibit, scheduled to open in March. This exhibit will explore how medical practices, tools, and beliefs have evolved over time and how they shaped life in Medina County and beyond.

We can't wait to share more progress updates and welcome you in to see the transformation in person!

Crystal



We're also excited to introduce a new feature called Whispers from the Attic. This special section will highlight fascinating artifacts and stories uncovered from within the museum — items tucked away in storage, overlooked for years, or simply forgotten over time. From unexpected discoveries to mysterious objects with stories waiting to be told, Whispers from the Attic will offer a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the hidden treasures of the Medina County Historical Society. Keep an eye out — you never know what might be uncovered next!

THE INFANT WHO SURVIVED

Continued from page 3

By 1821, his father, Harrison Blake, had already moved his family to Salem, New York. Harrison was preparing to move his family further west and wanted to see his parents one last time before heading west. On December 19, Harrison, his wife, Lucy, and their youngest child, Rebecca, departed Salem via horse and sleigh to go visit his parents across the Green Mountains in Marlboro, Vermont. The other children were left with friends in Salem. By noon they had reached Arlington, Vermont. The landlord at the tavern where they stopped assured them that the mountains were passable. The first several miles were easy going then encountered heavier snow and found it difficult to proceed. Night fell and their horse gave out. Exchanging his heavy great-coat and mittens for his wife's mantle, Harrison continued on foot determined to find help for his wife and child, calling to his wife as long as he was able. Once she could no longer hear his calls, Lucy wrapped the baby up in blankets and the great coat, and leaving the baby behind in the snow, followed her husband on foot. Neither parent made it very far.

Harrison was found the next afternoon by a party in search of another man thought waylaid on the mountains. He was senseless, hands and feet frozen and, in the grips of hypothermia, was trying to remove his clothes when found. His rescuers took him to shelter and by 4 p.m. he was able to tell them that his wife and child were still on the mountain. The rescuers found Lucy less than 200 feet beyond where they had found her husband. Upon raising her up, she breathed a couple of times and died. Continuing, they found the infant snugly wrapped up. Upon looking into the faces of her rescuers, the baby smiled. Only one toe was partially frozen. Harrison lost four toes on his left foot. The two survivors were taken to Harrison's parents to recuperate. The story was retold in newspapers of the time, recounted in children's readers, made into songs and into poems. Rebecca was the infant who had survived.

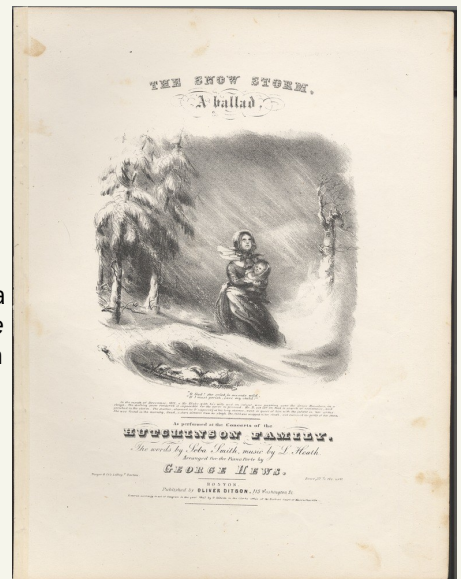
Within two years, Harrison remarried, a necessity for a man with four young children to care for. As he started a second family, he eventually moved west, first to Albion, New York and then Cleveland, Ohio.

We know that H.G. Blake was taken in by the Jesse Rhoades family and moved west to Medina County with them. But what about his sister?

The little girl, barely 13 months old was named Rebecca. She was born November 4, 1820, the fifth child of Harrison Gray Blake and his wife Lucy (Goodell). Accounts differ, some saying she also was taken in by the Rhoades family, others saying she was cared for by her grandparents. But it is likely she was with her father, because in the 1830 Census for Oswego County New York, 3 young females under the age of 20 are living in his household, most likely including Rebecca and her older sister Lucy. By 1840, the family was in Ohio City, Cuyahoga County, Ohio. Lucy had married Ezra Dean in 1833 and they also moved west. And one girl, aged 15-19 is most likely Rebecca.

In 1839, Rebecca visited H.G. in Medina for some time. In 1842, she wrote a very formal letter to HG. urging him to visit their father, "*if you wish again to see your father alive*". We don't know if H.G. made the visit, but the elder Harrison lived on for another 26 years.

On June 5, 1844, Rebecca married Captain Stephen Courtland DeGroat in Ohio City. He went by these initials, SC, he was a ship builder and a ship's captain. He was born in Canada in 1811. He built schooners and brigs that traversed the Great Lakes. Some of the boats he built were schooners: Biddle, Outward Bound, Judge Hopkinson, Nevy, Kenosha; brigs: John Hancock, Green Mountain B'Hoy, Courtland. During the 1840-50's, he was buying and selling property in the Ohio City Fulton Road area.



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THE INFANT WHO SURVIVED

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DeGroat was also active in Ohio City and Cleveland politics. He served as a councilman for Ohio City 1848-49; he was on the Ohio City Finance Committee in 1850. In 1854, Ohio City was annexed to Cleveland Ohio. S.C. then served as the Fire Warden for the west side in 1854. He ran for Cleveland City Assessor on the Democratic Ticket in 1855.

In the 1848-49 Tax Lists for Ohio City, S.C. owned 4 city lots at the intersection of Fulton Road and Franklin Place.

By 1850, S.C. and Rebecca and their children were living in Brooklyn Township, Cuyahoga County, Ohio. The three children were Ellen, aged 5, Naomi, aged 3, and Harrison aged 1. He and Rebecca had two more children between 1850 and 1856; Lydia Rosana, born 1852, and Della Alba born March of 1856. S.C. is listed as a shipwright, aged 39, born in Canada. His personal property is worth \$1,800 or nearly \$75,000 in today's money.

Early in 1857, Harrison Blake, J.W. Blake, R.C. Sprowl and Dr. W.B. Prentiss took S.C. to court and had him judged insane. The judge ordered him to the (Northern) Ohio Lunatic Asylum (the Newburgh Asylum) for treatment and appointed Thomas Dixon his guardian.

In 1858, *The Plain Dealer* ran an advertisement for unclaimed letters that listed S.C. DeGroat. That is the last mention that has been found for him. No death record, estate record or obituary was found. He is not listed among the inmates of the asylum in the 1860 Census. He has a tombstone in Monroe Cemetery in Cleveland, but no dates are inscribed on it.

Most likely S.C. died sometime between 1857 and 1860. Shortly after S.C.'s commitment, Rebecca sold his property on Fulton and started acquiring property in her own name. In the 1860 Census, Rebecca appears in the 10th Ward of Cleveland with her five children. She is listed as a washwoman and her real estate is worth \$500, or about \$20,000 in today's money. That same year she borrowed \$10 from a man, promising that her brother, H.G., would repay him. Harrison wrote to his son reminding him of this debt, as H.G. had been too busy serving in the U.S. House of Representatives to attend to such a small matter.

Around this time, Harrison, along with his son, John Wesley, were working with H.G. to help Rebecca who was described in a letter as "very hard up". They purchased several lots on Courtland Avenue in the old Ohio City area and then resold them to Rebecca for \$1. Rebecca wrote to Elizabeth, H.G.'s wife asking for a box of clothes (hand me downs) but Elizabeth was unable to help her as she and their daughters were wearing out the clothes they had and Elizabeth mentions that the girls' bonnets would have to be "made over" or they would not be able to attend church. In 1861, Harrison bought her one ton of coal and one load of wood to help her through the winter months. Rebecca told him she needed \$50 immediately and another \$50 next September in preparation for the following winter.

Throughout the 1860-70's, Rebecca appeared in the city directories and tax lists as living on Courtland Avenue. But by 1880, she was living with her daughter Naomi's family in Rockport, one of the townships of Cuyahoga County. Currently it is the area of the West Park neighborhood of Cleveland, along with Lakewood, Fairview Park and Rocky River. Rebecca's father died in 1868 and H.G. died in 1876, so she had to rely on her children.

Rebecca died in 1898 of "paralysis". Her passing revitalized the story of her mother dying in the snowstorm to protect her baby Rebecca. She is buried in Monroe Cemetery in Cleveland next to S.C.

(citations available upon request)



NEW MEMBERS

Welcome

Matthew Raineri

Brenton, Brittany, Gabe & Wesley Kimble

John & Dottie Kimble

Ben & Amie Crawford & Family

Labyrinth Management Group

William Shingledecker

Barbara Gabel

DOCENT TRAINING – FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS
AND A REFRESHER

We will conduct training for Docents at both museums on the same day. Saturday, February 28th from 9:00 am - 10:30 am at the John Smart House Museum, 206 N. Elmwood, Medina and 11am-12:30 pm at the McDowell-Phillips House Museum, 205 S. Prospect St., Medina.

There are new exhibits to talk about and some minor changes in tour flow at McDowell-Phillips. If you are unable to make this training, please notify us at mchs@zoominternet.net or call 330-722-1341.



OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Medina County Historical Society Honored with Ohio Local History Alliance
Outstanding Achievement Award

We are proud to announce that the America 250 book publication titled **Voices of the Revolutionary War** project has been selected for an **Outstanding Achievement Award** in the category of Media & Publications by the **Ohio Local History Alliance (OLHA)**.

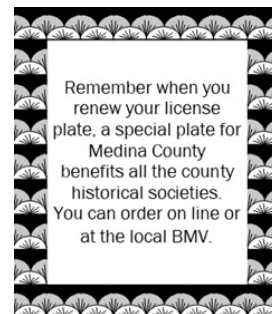
The Ohio Local History Alliance is a statewide organization dedicated to supporting local history organizations and professionals. OLHA provides resources, education, and networking opportunities for its members while also promoting the importance of preserving and interpreting local history.

This prestigious award recognizes the exceptional quality and historical significance of this Revolutionary War Veterans and Family History project that researched 45 soldiers buried in present day Medina County. The research and book publication was coordinated by volunteers over a 10-month period.

The **Outstanding Achievement Award** will be formally presented at the OLHA Annual Meeting Awards luncheon in 2026.

We have copies of the book for \$10 at the John Smart House Museum.

FUNDRAISING OPPORTUNITY



Visit our website at www.medinacountyhistoricalsociety.com

WE'RE ON THE WEB!

WWW.MEDINACOUNTYHISTORICALSOCIETY.COM

**Membership Categories:
Membership Year is Jan 1st – Dec 31st**

Student/Senior	\$10.00	Organization	\$30.00
Individual	\$20.00	Patron	\$50.00
Senior Family	\$20.00	Corporate	\$100.00
Family	\$25.00	Life	\$300.00 (per person)

2025 Officers	Board Members	Emeritus Members
Brian Feron-President	Lisa Pettry, Brian Tome	Joann King
Charles Ramer -Vice President	Sheila Benson, H. Linn Mast,	Richard Clark
Pieri Levandofsky-Secretary	Sarah Tome, Beth Biggins-Ramer,	Tom Hilberg
Dave Arbogast-Treasurer	Andrea Spickler, Carole Feron, Bill Parker	

Medina County Historical Society
1922-2026

206 North Elmwood St.
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MEDINA COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY