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Saturday, March 27, 2010

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Celebrating the Palatine heritage 300 years later

By Robert Lachman
 Published:
 Saturday, March 27, 2010 2:13 AM EDT

In the year 1710, 1,200 Palatine refugees from the Rhineland set up their "East Camp" in the spot that is now known as Germantown. They were refugees from the German Palatinates and were farmers and barrel makers.

Since this is the 300th year of the Palatine's arriving in what came to be known as the District of Germantown in 1775 and a township in 1778, celebrations will be held throughout the summer with the biggest one coming in the fall, culminating in a two-day Oktoberfest event.

What may not be as well known is that the Palatine's not only settled on the east bank of the Hudson River, but also settled on the west bank in the town of Saugerties.

"These were skilled farmers," said Richard Montague, a Germantown resident and long-time newspaper man from New York City. "They were men who were used to working the land and they were also barrel makers. They came up here looking for pitch pines, trees that they supposed were boilable into pitch and tar for their barrels. Unfortunately, they were the wrong kind of trees on this side of the water."

As part of the 300 celebrations, Montague has launched a monthly newsletter called "The Palatine Packet". Named after the busy courier boats that brought news and mail through the rivers of Europe and across the Atlantic, it is published by the Germantown and Saugerties Historical Societies. The first edition is filled with informative and historical facts about the Palatines in New York, as well as a calendar page outlining the coming eight months of celebrations planned by both towns.

"We are going to have something like this every month," Montague said. "We'll be reporting on volunteer projects with home grown pictures and soon we'll publish an email edition." Montague is hoping to sell subscriptions to the newsletter for \$10 each with very attractive rates. "This not a non-profit situation, it's a negative profit situation," he said. "Every subscription is good for 300 years."

All kidding aside, the year-long celebration theme for the two towns is "Reaching Across the River," and in 1710 the native American name for the Hudson River was "muhheakantuck," which in the Lenape language means "The River That Flows Both Ways." When the two settlements began, the West Camp had 92 families in three locations, while at the East Camp, there were 196 families at four sites. "Some went to Jersey, some went to Old Rhinebeck," said Montague. "These were bold people who came from Europe and spent two harsh winters here."

According to Montague, one of the Palatine men who never came up the river was John Peter Zenger, who owned the New York Weekly Journal in New York City. He attacked British interests in the press, causing a sensational libel trial when it was decided The Journal had defamed British Governor William Colby. Zenger eventually won the case, with the help of Andrew Hamilton, and helped to establish a free press in what was then still a British colony.

Some of the upcoming joint projects that will help celebrate the Palatine history of the two towns include, welcoming visitors to the historic Kiersted House in Saugerties and the Maple Avenue Parsonage in Germantown where a monument to the original settlers will be dedicated outside the Parsonage.

"The Hover Foundation is funding a monument to the founders of Germantown," said Montague. "It will be a bronze plaque mounted on a large rock with the names of the original

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settlers engraved on it."

The Palatine Packet newsletter is looking for letters, e-mails and articles up to 400 words long from residents from both sides of the river to include in future issues. These can be Palatine family reminiscences or thoughts about the upcoming celebrations.

Montague, who's house was once owned by descendents of the original settlers, the Shulteis family, has been inspired to do his part for the upcoming celebrations by bringing both sides of the river together. "Did you know, that Route 9G was once known as the Apple Blossom Trail because of all the orchards? The founders knew there was good land here."

To contact the Palatine Packet call 518-537-3091 or e-mail Richard Montague at wordshop@valstar.net.

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 - Online Photo Gallery
 - Special Sections
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