

# Town of Onondaga Historical Society Newsletter



Tel. 315-214-2383

[www.townofonondagamuseum.com](http://www.townofonondagamuseum.com)  
[townofonodagahistorical@gmail.com](mailto:townofonodagahistorical@gmail.com)

Winter 2026

## *Isa Ashton Cowels: Our Own Grandma Moses*

Teresa Melnick

Isa Ashton was 14 when her father gave her a set of paints, brushes, and canvases, a gift that unleashed a creativity Isa carried with her throughout her life. Without ever taking an art class, Isa's early paintings showed a true natural talent.

Unfortunately, Isa became quite ill as a young girl. Though she doesn't say what the illness was, she does mention surgery. Her poor health put a halt to her painting. "I didn't touch brush again for 50 years; illness prevented it, but I yearned every day to start again. I just loved it."

Born in 1886 to Edward and Lillie Ashton, Isa joined two brothers, John and Royal. The Ashtons owned a 33-acre farm on the corner of Kasson Road and Seneca Turnpike. In a handwritten memoir, Isa recalls fascinating details of rural life in the Town of Onondaga in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, where she enjoyed a very happy childhood with her close-knit family. She attended school at the District 8 one-room schoolhouse with her brothers. In winter, all of the children would gather around the school's wood stove and try to dry their snowy clothes and thaw their frozen lunch pails. Religious life was important to her family, especially her mother, who instilled a lifelong faith in her children. Her family attended services at the Cedarvale Methodist Church.



**Isa Ashton Cowels**



Isa loved animals and was a familiar sight riding her father's prize horses, Billie and Dandy, all over town, her waist-length blonde hair flying out behind her. "I had a lamb that followed behind me everywhere, a pigeon that rode on my shoulder, a black crow which said several words and mimicked the cats." She also had a toad that sat on her knee and a pet hen that slept in her bed, under the covers! She doesn't say if her mother knew about it...

*The Story of South Onondaga.*

Early days are memory days, and the memory of these days is the matter of this story, from records and hearsay they started began over 200 yrs ago. One's dream come true, often our mind will wander back to happenings of years, perhaps to ages before our time, that had been related by some of older friends or relatives. They are so intertwined in our thoughts, we are inspired to put it all down in words to let others be informed by the personal knowledge of people, every day occurrences and memories of our youngest days and acquaintances. This book of facts will be centered around the country and town of Onondaga of which I was more familiar when a youngster, and later many things of early days and memories of the Erie Canal. My story begins down on the flat below the old red brick in the Onondaga road leading almost directly in front of the Methodist Church. My mother Lillie Hodgkins Ashton how so often took me of her family, friends and early life in the little village. The elderly folk of her time are resting in the cemetery at peace together as they lived in life. They lived not an exemplary "today" where it seems there is so much woe and unhappiness, they always made the best of their lot and left the rest to his judgement. This little suburb should be recorded for it had memories which should be recorded for it had grown from a wandering few to a thrifty and well cared town and community.



In her early 20's, while visiting friends in Amber, Isa met their neighbor, Vernon Cowles. The first time they met, Isa noticed Vernon staring at her. When she asked him why he was looking at her so intensely, he replied, "I was thinking that someday you would be my wife." His prophecy proved true. They were married in 1912 and went on to raise three girls, Lillie, Alta, and Carol, and one foster son, R. Harvey Prunner.

In her 60's, with child rearing behind her, Isa again picked up her paint brush. She hadn't lost any of her talent or enthusiasm for drawing and painting. Over her remaining years, she produced a prolific body of work, even though she was plagued with double vision and had to paint with one eye closed! "I became quite a famous artist. Painted pictures of all kinds, scattered all over the United States."

Best known for her sketches and paintings of local landmarks, 24 of her Syracuse themed paintings were displayed on the walls of Merchants National Bank and Trust Company for years. Through the 1980's and 90's, the bank went through a series of mergers. In the shuffle, Isa's paintings were taken down, but where they went is a mystery. Onondaga Historical Association has 6 of her paintings, two of those are of Cedarvale landmarks. Here at our TOHS museum, we have a notebook of her original sketches and her handwritten memoir.



Isa Ashton Cowles died in 1984 at the age of 98.

# This and That

## Our Annual Membership Issue -



The first newsletter of each year will be a hard copy mailed to everyone to encourage renewing membership for the upcoming year. Enclosed is a return envelope for your renewal. Check your mailing label for membership status as the labels note the last year of paid membership that TOHS has on file for you. If you have an asterisk \*, you are a lifetime member. If you know of family, friends and neighbors who would like to support TOHS with a membership, please pass membership information along.

If you have a business and would like to support TOHS with a \$25 a year business membership, please email us at [townofonondagahistorical@gmail.com](mailto:townofonondagahistorical@gmail.com) and we will send a business membership form out to you. Businesses are highlighted in our quarterly newsletters as well as featured on our website, [townofonondagamuseum.com](http://townofonondagamuseum.com).  
*Donations are Welcomed*



## And These Are....?

Our Parents and Grandparents would have known the answer!  
WWII Ration Stamps from  
*Helen Alexander's*  
scrapbook.

According to Helen's notes,  
the blue ones were for  
canned goods and the red  
ones for meat, butter and  
cheese.

## Thank You Thank You Thank You

In the spring of 2025, the TOHS was given a beautiful hand made quilt by our TOHS secretary Judi Garrett for us to raffle to our members and community. Funds raised were to go towards preservation materials. Thanks to everyone's generosity, the TOHS was able to purchase several preservation boxes to house our Nedrow/Sarazin Collection, our Partridge Family letters, articles of vintage clothing, and replace older boxes that had seen better days.



# FROM THE GIFT SHOP



Just a reminder that our museum is open from 1-3 Tues, Wed, and Thurs manned with our volunteers. We are there to help visitors research their own history within the Town, look through our books, both research and informative, and to help visitors become new members of the TOHS.

Are you up on the tragedy in 1918 of the Split Rock explosion? If not, we have the complete set of Richard Miller's books on the subject. He earned the reputation as an expert on all things related to Split Rock after 40 years of research.

Are you aware of the role the Poorhouse played in Town history? We have 3 DVD's that cover the history of the Poorhouse, as well as Split Rock explosion and 200 years of Town history.

When you come into the Town Hall-don't turn right-take a left to visit us at the end of the hall and get immersed in local history.

Janice Pellegrino



We are sad to learn of the passing  
of long time historian

**Laura "Jane" Tracy**

Jane shared her wealth of historical  
knowledge and talents with us and  
was instrumental in the success of  
the 1998 Town Bicentennial  
Celebration. As an avid and talented  
quilter, her efforts created the  
Bicentennial Quilt on display at the  
TOHS museum.



## *True Devotion: Louise Fitch and "Billie"*

In the early 1920's, Louise Fitch did not have a car. That didn't stop the 77-year-old woman from walking nearly two miles every day to care for her 15-year-old horse, Billie. "Billie never deserted me, nor did he ever do an unkind act," she said, when asked what prompted her to make the long trek every day.

When Louise Smith married Charles E. Fitch, editor of the *Syracuse Standard*, the couple moved from their home on Loomis Hill (Howlett Hill) to Taunton. Louise was forced to leave her beloved horse behind. But she refused to sell him, instead choosing to board him with a former neighbor, Frank Sherwood, at his farm, very near her own childhood home.

Louise and Billie shared a bond that could not be broken, and the horse always nickered when he saw Louise, clearly enjoying her attention and the treats she always brought him. At 15, Billie was still sleek and healthy, even able to take Louise on the occasional carriage ride around the Howlett Hill fields. But Louise was prepared for the time Billie might start to fail and had made arrangements with her friend, O.R. Robinson Casey, founder of the SPCA, to see that Billie would have a humane ending when the time came.

Louise Fitch died in 1930 at age 84.

# BUSINESS MEMBERSHIP DIRECTORY

## *Please Patronize These Services*

### *Attorney*

**SAM BEARDSLEY, LAWYER**  
EXPERT LEGAL SERVICES: DIVORCE,  
ESTATES, WILLS, TRAFFIC  
7106 S. Salina St., Nedrow, NY 13120  
315-469-3232  
email: sblawyer@twcny.rr.comz

### *Food*

**THE CIDER MILL**  
4221 Fay Road, Syracuse, NY 13219  
315-487-0647  
Located at the former Morey's Mill  
[www.THECIDERMILL.US](http://www.THECIDERMILL.US)

**MARCELLUS NURSERY INC.**  
LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR,  
GARDEN CENTER  
5062 Onondaga Rd., Syracuse, NY 13215  
315-488-2632 [www.marcellusnursery.com](http://www.marcellusnursery.com)  
email: MARNURSERY@aol.com

### **DAGUE LAW OFFICE**

Raymond J. Dague, Esq.  
ATTORNEYS & COUNSELORS AT LAW  
4874 Onondaga Rd., Syracuse, NY 13215  
315-422-2052  
[www.DagueLaw.com](http://www.DagueLaw.com)

### **GREEN HILLS**

GROCERIES, MEAT, PRODUCE, BAKERY,  
DELI & PREPARED FOOD  
5933 South Salina St., Syracuse, NY 13205  
315-492-1707  
[www.greenhills.com](http://www.greenhills.com)

### *Metaphysical*

**"AFTER GLOW TAROT"**  
CLAIRVOYANT READINGS  
4905 Grolier Road, Syracuse NY 13215  
315-925-1243 text only  
email: AfteGlowTarot@yahoo.com  
After-Glow Tarot on Facebook Page

### **THE WALSH LAW FIRM**

D.W.I. & TRAFFIC MATTERS  
5108 Velasko Rd. Syracuse, NY 13215  
315-579-3117  
email: syracusedwiattorney@gmail.com

### *Funeral Services*

#### **BUTLER BADMAN FUNERAL HOME INC.**

FUNERAL & CREMATION SERVICES  
4504 W. Seneca Tpk., Syracuse, NY 13215  
315-492-4264 email: [butlerbadman1@aol.com](mailto:butlerbadman1@aol.com)  
[www.butlerbadmanfuneralhome.com](http://www.butlerbadmanfuneralhome.com)

### *Physician*

**"MY COUNTRY DOCTOR"**  
PERSONALIZED PRIMARY CARE  
INCLUDING HOUSE CALLS, WOUND  
CARE, MINOR SURGERY  
5695 Bull Hill Rd., LaFayette, NY 13084  
315-396-8185 – [www.mycountrydoc.com](http://www.mycountrydoc.com)  
email: pferenchak@gmail.com

### *Automotive*

#### **VALLEY AUTO**

QUALITY PRE-OWNED CARS,  
TRUCKS, SUVs  
6201 South Ave., Syracuse, NY 13205  
315-218-5177 – [www.valleyautopro.com](http://www.valleyautopro.com)  
email: valleyautopro@gmail.com

### *Garden Center*

#### **SOLLECITO LANDSCAPING NURSERY**

HARDY SUSTAINABLE PLANTS – some  
with historical ties to the Town of Onondaga  
4094 Howlett Hill Rd., Syracuse, NY 13215  
315-468-1142 [www.sollecito.com](http://www.sollecito.com)  
Visit Sollecito Landscaping Nursery on Facebook

### *Real Estate*

#### **MYTown REALTY**

RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE  
BROKERAGE  
344 South Warren St. Suite 202  
Syracuse, NY 13202  
315-497-6500  
[www.Mytowncny.com](http://www.Mytowncny.com)

### *Dentists*

#### **CARROLL DENTISTRY**

THOMAS J. CARROLL, DM  
5110 Velasko Rd., Syracuse, NY 13215  
315-474-4232 Fax: 315-474-4249  
[thomascarrolldmd.com](http://thomascarrolldmd.com)

### *Landscaping*

#### **GASPARINI'S LANDSCAPING CO., INC.**

PLANTING, PATIOS, WALKS, FENCING  
5072 Smorol Rd., Camillus, NY 13031  
315-488-4261 [www.gasparinilandscaping.com](http://www.gasparinilandscaping.com)

### *Wine & Spirits*

#### **SHADY BROOK LIQUORS, INC.**

RETAIL WINE & LIQUOR SALES  
4800 McDonald Rd., Syracuse, NY 13215  
315-475-0227  
[www.shadybrookliquors.com](http://www.shadybrookliquors.com)

## ADDITION TO OUR COLLECTION

Mary Lou Michalec, Curator

**Mary Ryan**

\*Town of Onondaga Campaign Material

### *Spring Cleaning?*

Think about donating old labeled and dated  
photographs, scrapbooks and diaries. Once  
scanned, photographs can be returned.

## *Thoughts to Ponder*

Submitted by Richard Giarrusso

"Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose  
you were a Member of Congress.  
But, I repeat myself."

**Mark Twain**

**DUES TIME** – If you haven't paid dues, now is the time. Fill in the form below and return it to the museum. Check your mailing label for date and fill in the year below.

*Town of Onondaga Historical Society Membership Dues*

Membership Year: 20\_\_\_\_ Jan. - Dec.

Annual Dues

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Individual: \$10.00 \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Life Membership: \$200.00 \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Donation: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL Enclosed: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Renew: \_\_\_\_\_ New: \_\_\_\_\_

Clip and mail form to: TOHS-Membership, 5020 Ball Road, Syracuse, NY 13215



Think of the Museum store for  
great gift ideas!



Town of Onondaga  
Historical Society

**TOWN OF ONONDAGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
5020 BALL ROAD  
SYRACUSE, NEW YORK 13215**



**Please check your mailing label to see  
if your dues are up to date. If the date  
underneath your address is not 26 or \*(life member)  
your membership has expired.  
Please send in your dues and bring your  
membership up to date.**