

by
D. K. RICHARDSON

FOREWORD

This account attempts to create a picture of the original Niskayuna Hamlet, its location, the personalities of the settlers and the role of the Van Vranken Family. The author is grateful for the valuable assistance and cooperation of the Niskayuna Reformed Church office, the Niskayuna Historic Preservation Review Committee, the staff of the Schenectady City History Center and the Schenectady County Historical Society. References used include "Rosendale" from the Recollections of Conrad C. Mesick, 1855-1933, "History of CA-NAS-TA-GI-O-NE" by Howard I. Becker, December, 1953, the souvenir program of Schenectady County's Sesquicentennial, 1959, "A History of the Niskayuna Reformed Church" by Elizabeth D. Shaver, April 1966 and "A History of Niskayuna" by Lloyd M. Brinkman, 1976.

D. K. Richardson
August 31, 1985

FIELDS of CORN

Part I

"CA-NAS-TA-GI-O-NE," the Indians said, when referring to the expanse of corn waving in the breeze. Numerous subsequent variations in the name, the number approaching that for Schenectady, included "Canestiguna, Nestigione" ending at last as Niskayuna, today's name for the easternmost township of Schenectady County.

Originally, the name referred to the north bank of the Mohawk River and included portions of Watervliet, Halfmoon and the first ward of Schenectady. By the time that the name, Niskayuna, identified the area the south side of the river had been included. The first settlement was made by an independent class of Hollanders similar to the pioneers of Schenectady. They located outside of the manor line in order to avoid the conflicting requirements of the Patroons and the trading government of the New Netherlands.

Alberstse Vedder and Barent Reynderste appear to have been the first landowners. Vedder obtained verbal Schenectady patents in 1664. Confirmation came in 1671, at which time he and Reynderste claimed lands on both banks of the Mohawk. On May 19, 1671 they acquired rights to over a mile of river frontage on the north side.

The future of the town of Niskayuna may have been assured on May 5, 1738 by a grant from King George II to the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Schenectady. The grant awarded 2540

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acres of woodlands to Arent Bradt and Jacob Glen "...INTRUST to and for the use and profitt of the Corporation of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church..." Located in the county of Albany between the manor of Renseleorwyck in the town of Schenectady it represented about one quarter of the area of the present township and was the largest single step in creating today's Niskayuna. Although generous as a grant, England's crown cannily reserved for its use the product of any gold and silver mines as well as "...all trees of the diameter of twenty-four inches and upwards of twelve inches from the ground for masts for our Royall Navy...and as may be fit to make planks...for our Army..."

Why would the English king grant land to the Dutch settlers? A likely explanation suggests that England was anxious to consolidate its position in America both economically and politically to the disadvantage of France.

According to Howard I. Becker's account, the first families located fairly close together on a picturesque sunny shore line well sheltered from the cold north winds. This location offered the advantage of a spring planting date one to two weeks earlier than that of their Schenectady neighbors. Their cabins were close to the river - in fact, too close. The frequent spring floods and consequent soil erosion forced the settlers to rebuild on higher land.

Apparently, the early families of the hamlet recognized the importance of guarding their health as defined by the beliefs of

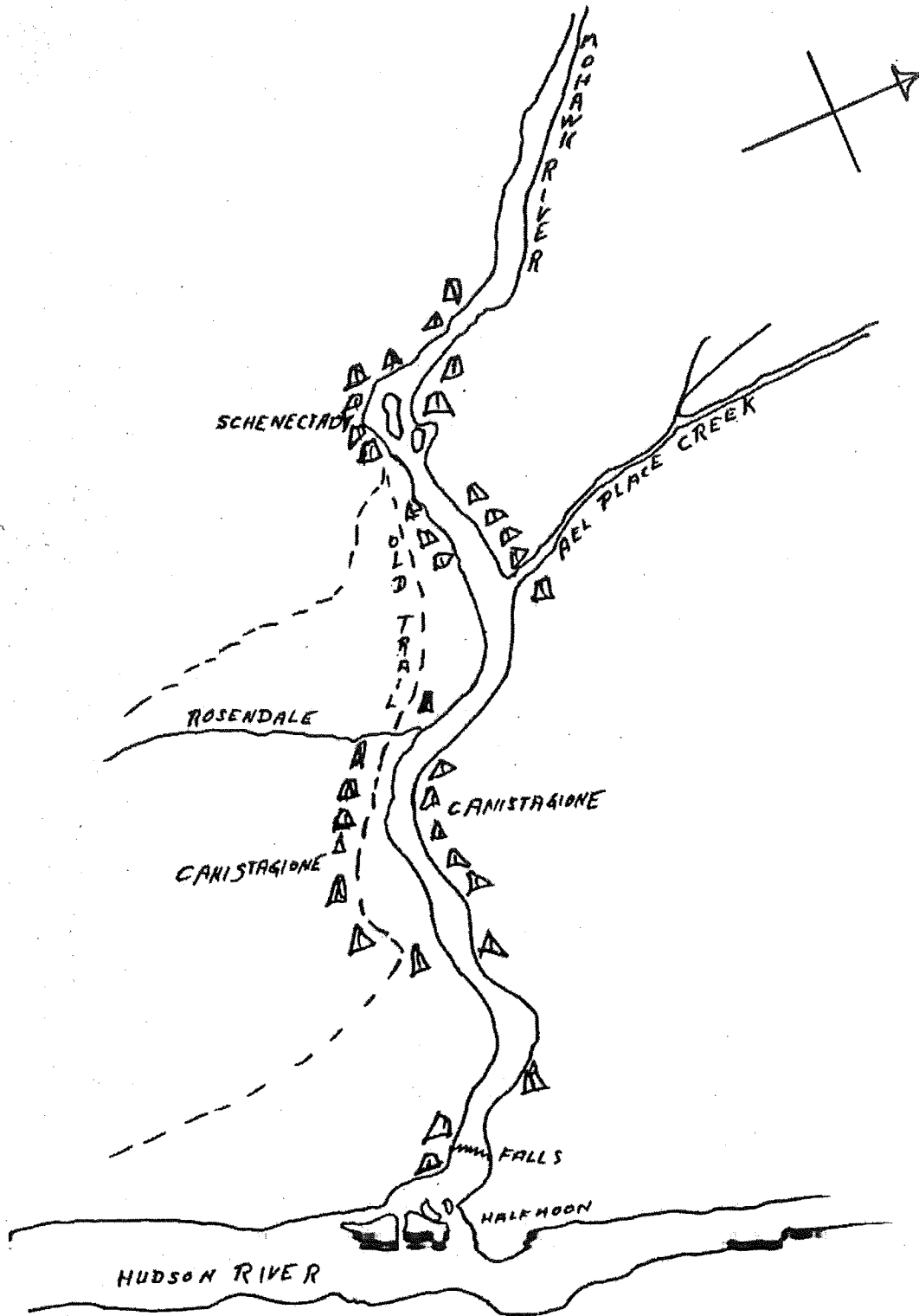
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the time. One account notes that bedrooms were arranged so that sleepers would be positioned north and south with the magnetic lines thus ensuring them a good night's sleep.

The following map, page 4, made from the Vischers Ferry map which was surveyed in 1762 adds dimension to the early settlement. The houses shown were the only known homes when the land was first surveyed. The map depicts the isolation of the few homes on the long trek from Schenectady to Niskayuna. One cannot but marvel at the ability, courage and dedication to a new life which motivated those pioneers to establish homes in an unknown wilderness. They created an atmosphere of cooperation and trust with the Indians which enabled the settlement to expand. Although the native Americans were reluctant to grant land to the newcomers, they did so with shrewd conditions. A case in point records the feelings of chief Ka-na-da-rakh-go-wa, whose name meant, "great eater." He and his associates were careful to insert in the deeds a provision that preserved to them the rights to hunt and fish. Despite this apparent concern for fair treatment, the chief extended aid, friendship and influence on behalf of the settlers. He even went so far as to instruct the boys of the settlement in the arts of war.

This Indian chief's influence may have spared Niskayuna the horrors of the Schenectady massacre. It was recorded that the area did not suffer Schenectady's fate because the settlers intermarried with the Indians. Folklore tales claim that the residents

FROM VISSCHERS FERRY MAP - 1762



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were warned of the attack at Schenectady by Indian friends. In contrast, another account states that two months after the massacre at Schenectady, French and Indians appeared in Niskayuna. Warned, probably, by the friendly Indians, the settlers gathered in one home considered as the most defensible. The enemy, suspecting that a warning had preceded their approach, hid quietly in a nearby swamp. The next morning the settlers saw no sign of trouble and returned to their homes. Their mistake resulted in the capture or killing of nine whites and two blacks. Based on the difference in population this attack was comparable to the one at Schenectady.

Where was the original Niskayuna Hamlet? Who lived there?

The census of 1714 showed that there were 110 people in the "Precinct of Canastagione." The first families included Clutes, Groots, Kregiers, Pearses, Tymesens, Van Vrankens, Vedders. Located in the southeast corner of the town the hamlet contained the Reformed Church, a store, post office, a hotel kept by Wm. H. Miller plus a few dwellings. The first church was formed about 1750 in the "Gabat House," a prayer house used both for worship and as a school. There appears to be no other data on the first house of worship inasmuch as the first book of church minutes, facts and dates was destroyed by fire. The second church was built in 1760 at the foot of the hill near the intersection of Rosendale and River Roads. A larger building was erected in 1828 on the present site at 3041 Troy-Schenectady Road after

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destruction of the previous one, which resulted from the lack of a clear title to the land. The present church was erected in 1852.

One of the first homes was built in 1678 on river frontage of the George Willey property, 3493 Rosendale Road in the hamlet. Old deeds mention the path on the highlands which was the forerunner of the present Rosendale Road which became the main highway leading to Albany, the Albany Post Road. Another road through the woods to the Lisha Kill was probably the beginnings of the Troy Road. The Vischers Ferry map, shown earlier, locates the River Road crossing the Lisha Kill and the Rosendale Road for traffic from Niskayuna to Schenectady. The location of the Rosendale is shown, also. Becker's comment is not only descriptive, but may be the origin of the name, Rosendale. He wrote, "It doesn't take much imagination to picture the wild roses growing in the dahl (or dale) where they were sheltered from the cold winds and got the early morning sun." Adding credence to this possible origin of the name is the fact that the Dutch word, "rosendal," translates to "valley of roses."

How different is the attitude and reaction of today's folks compared to the way in which Niskayuna's pioneers regarded authority? They evidenced an almost reverent feeling toward the ruling class. The application for the Nestigione Patent, 1708, illustrates the point. It begins, "The humble petition..." (of those seeking the land). Following definitions of the area, "...Your Excellency's petitioners do therefore most humbly pray your Lord-

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ship will please in your great wisdom..." (to grant the patent.) The grant by Queen Anne dated April 22, 1708 underscores the relationship. "Anne, By the Grace of God of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, Queen Defender of the Faith...sends greetings, whereas our loving subjects..." (and then defines the grant.)

Today's legalese with its myriad verbiage and detail may be a carryover from those early times. Queen Anne's grant was explicit. It noted "...all that vacant and unappropriated parcel of land...together with all woods, underwoods, trees, timber... meadows...swamps, ponds, pooles, waters...rivers, rivolettes... fishing, fowling, hawking, hunting, mines and minerals...to be divided." It should be noted that the Crown exempted "gold and silver mined" from the division.

As noted before, America's Indians were zealous, also, in protecting what was perceived as being their rights and privileges.

One wonders, who learned from whom?

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Part II

VAN VRANKEN is the name of one of the families who were influential in the establishment and subsequent growth of Niskayuna although the present family name was unknown in the early days. Beginning with the second generation the probate of the will of Ryck Claessen in 1711 shows that the children took the surname of Ryckson, or Ryckse, which was customary. By 1713 there were so many family members bearing the same or similar names that the clan began using as its surname the place of its origin, which was the town of Franke in Holland. Thus, the name changed to van (from) Franke which became Van Vranken.

Claes Gerritse, who came to America from Holland about 1640, was the first member of the family to brave the unknowns of the New World. His son, Ryck Claese, bought land in 1672 from Harme Vedder and Barent Reyenderste. The total river frontage belonging to the Van Vrankens was nearly one mile extending from the Mohawk straight north to the southwest corner of the Reformed Church cemetery where the line between lots eight and nine in the first allotment contacts the back line of the Nestigione patent. Ryck Claes kept all his land for his descendants, who owned it for several generations. As late as 1953 about one-third of the original land which had not been taken over for the Barge Canal, was still in the hands of the Van Vranken family.

Another son, Claes Gerritse, was born in 1683. He married

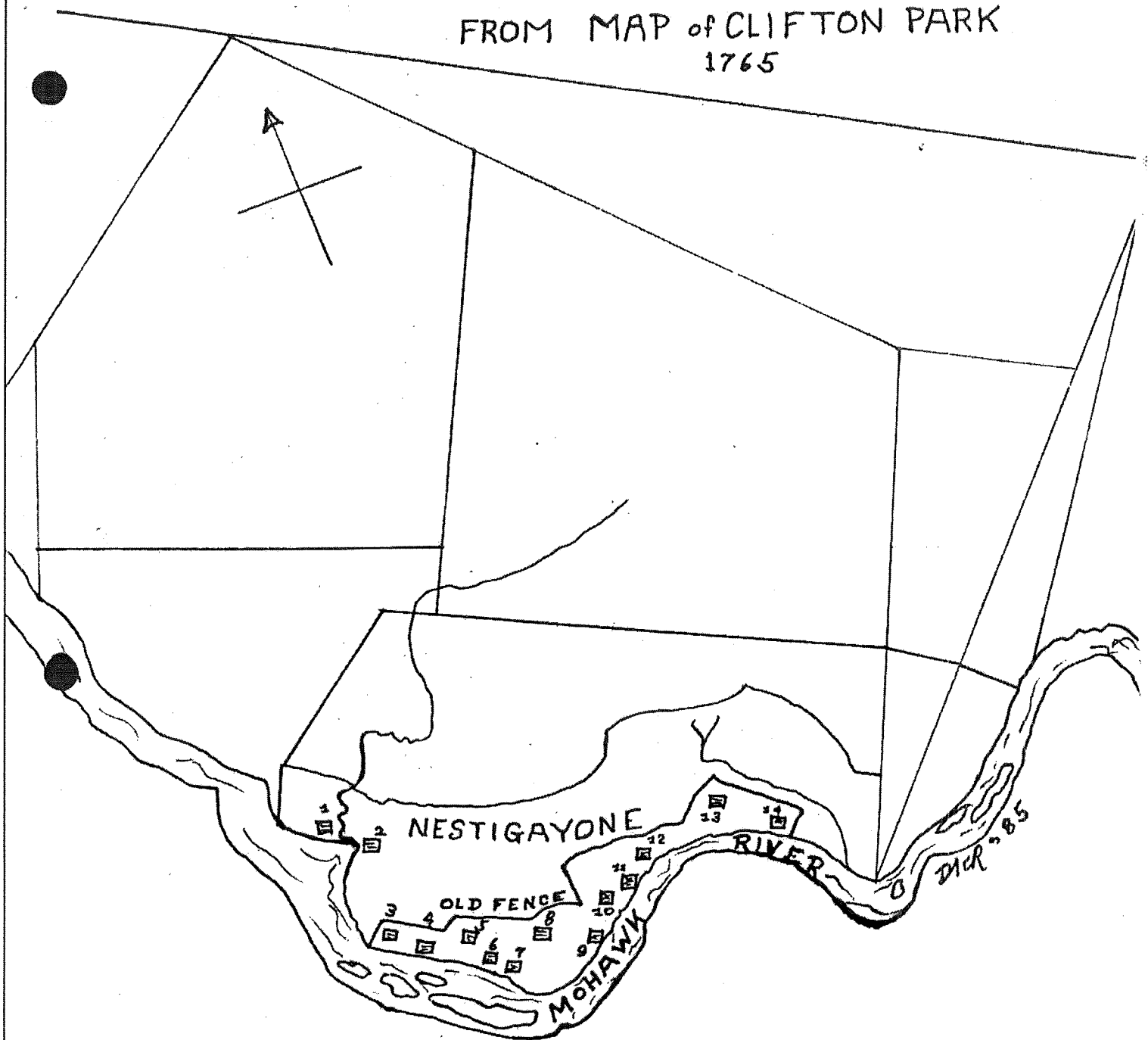
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Gertrury Quackenbos. They lived on the south shore of the river having bought land from Johannes Clute in 1710. Their thirteen children displayed what might be termed an ecumenical attitude - the first eight were baptized in the Albany Reformed Church beginning in 1721. The rest were baptized in Schenectady's Dutch Reformed Church. Marriage with several of the early families occurred. The Van Vrankens occupied several farms near the mouth of the Lisha Kill. In 1791 when the Niskayuna Reformed Church had become organized as a church with a regular minister, twenty-seven families of Van Vrankens transferred membership from Schenectady's Dutch Reformed Church. These families came from both the north and south shores of the Mohawk. In 1792 Claus I. Van Vranken became treasurer of the church. He was elected a church master in 1802. The family members continued their support holding various offices for many years.

In the 1700's the "Van Vranken Settlement" on Rosendale and Lock 7 roads was an important part of the early community. They operated a saw-mill and were expert carpenters. Five of the original homes survive. The original manor house on Lock 7 road was owned by Howard Goldstock as of 1976. The builder of this home was ahead of his time! Water was piped into the kitchen thus doing away with carrying water from a nearby spring or stream.

An excerpt from a map of the Clifton Park Patent, 1765, on page 10 shows a graphic illustration of the early settlement and the predominance of Van Vrankens. The old fence line was the ori-

FROM MAP of CLIFTON PARK
1765



1-Nic VISSCHER

2-CHRIS CHRISTINSE

3-EVERT VANVRANKEN

4-GERRIT VANVRANKEN

5-MAUS VANVRANKEN

6-ADAM VANVRANKEN

7-ANDRIES BRADT

8-.....PERSE

9-WIDDOW PERSE

10-ANDRIE VANVRANKEN

11-JCH FORT

12-JOHANNES VANVRANKEN

13-DIRK BRADT

14-JACOB YOLWYSER

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ginal depth of the land from the river as sold by Vedder and Reynderste in 1673. Queen Anne's grant of 1708 added an additional mile north of the old fence line. This seems to be the original Niskayuna Patent. Note that of the fourteen original homes shown six of them belonged to members of the Van Vranken family.

Conrad Mesick's "Recollections" contains several insights of these early Niskayunans. He notes that one of the leading homes of the community then was the "wonderful farm" of John B. Van Vranken on what was called "Rosendale," which now is the location of Lock 7 of the Barge Canal. The little settlement contained five homes occupied originally by Van Vrankens of three distinct families. Each farm comprised a strip of Mohawk Flats and extended to the river plus a portion of high ground and woodland. Much of the flat land produced a fine quantity of broom-corn which probably contributed to the homes' appearance of real prosperity.

Mesick continues to record highlights of the family. There was the fine brick residence of James Van Vranken. This house was one of the show places of the area. Another of the many branches of the family deserving mention is the family of "Captain Bill" who lived on land occupied by the Shopmyer and other families. He represented the county in the State Legislature and frequently served as justice of the peace and as town assessor. A measure of fame visited them. The daughter married Fred Cleveland. While residing in Chicago, they developed the baking powder known

as Cleveland's Baking Powder. Its acceptance did nothing to diminish the Cleveland's comfortable circumstances.

The Van Vrankens exerted considerable influence in the area from the beginning as well as down through the years. The following examples illustrate the scope of their contributions as well as some of their problems, which are not dissimilar to today's difficulties.

Garret G. Van Vranken was one of the largest contributors to the upkeep of the Amity Church between 1812 and 1815. The number of descendants of Claas Geritse, the son of Gerrit Claas who first settled the south side of the river equalled or exceeded the number of all those who resided on the north side. Becker notes that "...without that one link, there would have been many less Van Vrankens in Albany and Schenectady Counties..."

Murphy's Law must have been operative as early as 1853. It was recorded that two Van Vranken brothers bid against each other when the Middle Farm was put up at public auction. They bid conservatively in order to keep the price on the low side, while at the same time attempting to keep it high enough to eliminate outside bidders. The brothers stopped bidding, thinking that the other was successful.

Murphy's inexorable law intervened awarding the farm to a third party, John J. Fellows!

About this time a portion of one of the original farms was up

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for sale. A "Philadelphia Lawyer" might have been helpful at that point. In order to get a clear title to the property it was necessary to obtain "sign-offs" from approximately 30 related members of the Van Vranken family.

Fagan's map of Niskayuna, 1856, locates some hitherto unknown interesting landmarks. See page 14. The portion of the map shows Winnie's brickyard south of the railroad station. Also, it places the two saw-mills on the Lisha Kill, one of which was operated by John Van Vranken and the other by N. Winnie. Note the concentration of Van Vrankens on the road to Lock 7 as well as in the adjoining area.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

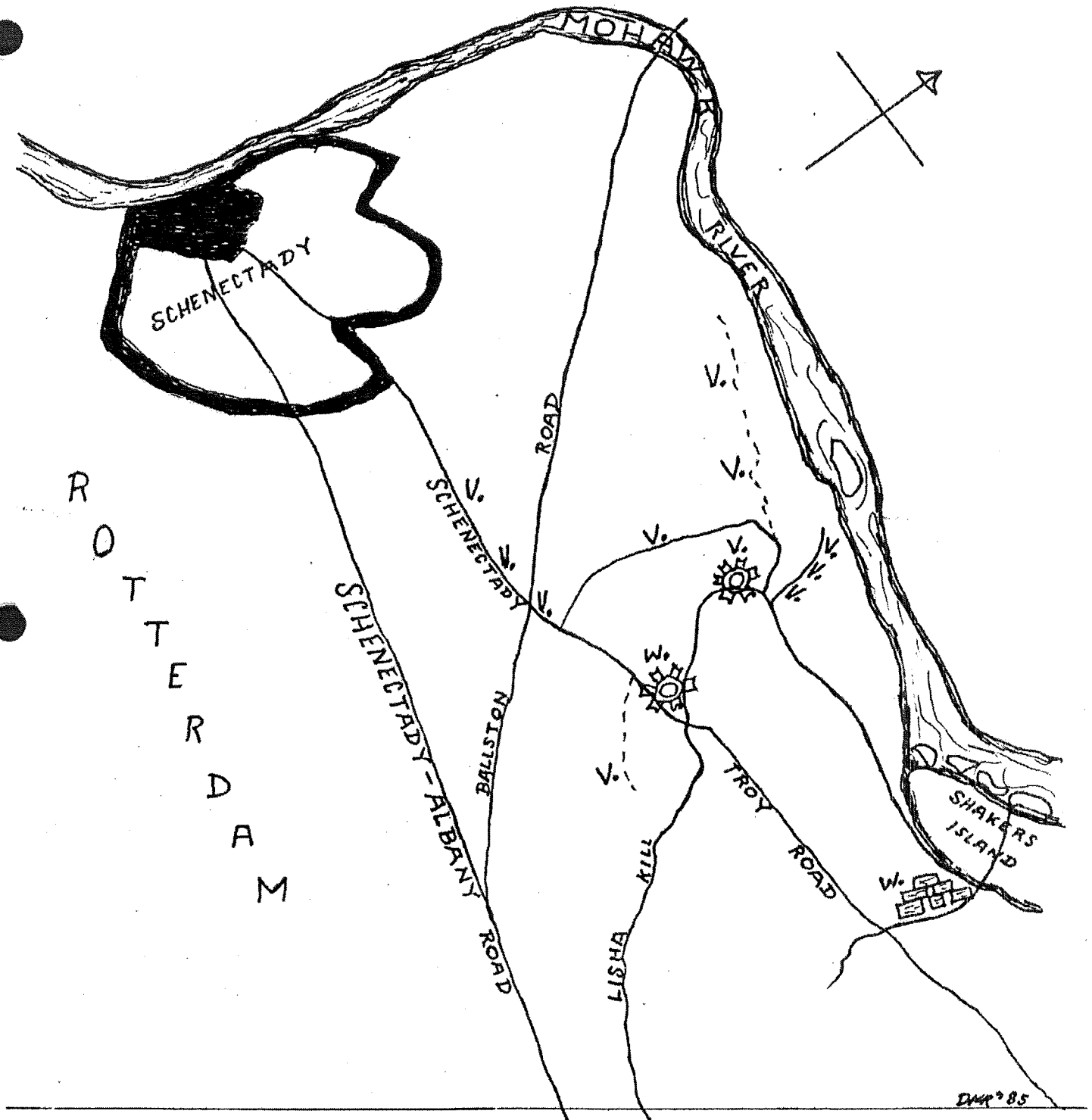
...beginning in 1822 through 1889 there were nine terms of Niskayuna supervisors which were administered by Van Vrankens. The name of the runner-up was the Pearse family who served for six separate terms.

...the old Troy and Schenectady railroad station built in 1843 was erected by the Shakers and the Van Vranken family.

...according to data in Schenectady's History Center Van Vranken Avenue in Schenectady was probably the old road to the farms. This road was opened in 1883. The name may reflect that fact plus recognition of alderman Van Vranken who served in 1883. Family members ownership of land in the University and Park Place locations seems to support the choice of the street's name.

...the Schenectady Savings Bank (now Northeast Savings) "where

FROM FAGAN'S MAP
1856



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Clinton crosses State" replaced in 1905 the Van Vranken residence which was razed in 1904.

...Mrs. Grace P. Van Vranken was curator of the Schenectady County Historical Society from 1926 to 1956.

There is little doubt that the town of Niskayuna and its neighboring city of Schenectady owe a vote of respect to those early Hollanders and their progeny who immigrated to America "van Franke."

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