



# HISTORIC BRIGHTON NEWS

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*GIDEON COBB DAYS* FEATURES A

## FREE HISTORICAL TOUR OF CORBETT'S GLEN

AND THE PATRICK CORBETT HOME ON ALLEN'S CREEK

SATURDAY JUNE 24, 2006, 9:30 AM—1:30 PM



*Picnicking in the glen in earlier days and the Patrick Corbett house*

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 3<sup>RD</sup> ANNUAL CELEBRATION OF

### GIDEON COBB DAYS, JUNE 23 AND 24

**G**ideon Cobb Days kicks off with a History Luncheon and program entitled **"Brighton's Historic Natural Treasure: Corbett's Glen,"** presented by Andrew Wheatcraft on Friday, June 23 at 11:45 AM at Mario's Via Abruzzi, 2740 Monroe Ave. Wheatcraft, past president of the Genesee Land Trust, will explore the history of the glen from Indian days forward and the land trust's involvement with the Town of Brighton in making the glen, a spot of natural beauty, into a town park. Reservations are limited; call 244-0402 or 271-5531 before June 17 for information. Members of the Genesee Land Trust will also participate in the Saturday celebration in the glen.

On Saturday, June 24, 9:30 AM to 1:30 PM, festivities will move to Corbett's Glen itself. Come and bring all generations of your family to participate in the fun.

The Patrick Corbett house will be open for visitors. Read the article beginning on page 3 by Deb Bower, a present owner of the house. Some of the highlights that you will see include:

- A 171 foot long, hand-cut stone tunnel
- An 1880's Queen Anne farmhouse with Gothic appointments
- Period cast iron lighting fixtures

- Antique musical instruments consisting of hand-cranked barrel operated instruments, a pipe organ, player pianos and music boxes
- A Wurlitzer band organ
- Hand cranked kitchen utensils
- Original floor plan dating from the turn-of-the-century

A scavenger hunt is planned for children of all ages. Visitors will search for a "pastoral seating area," the "postcard falls," the depression and mill race remains, the girdled tree, the foundation and cement slab, the wooden bridge built as a Boy Scout project, the cattail marsh, and the "Alluvial Fan," commonly referred to as "the meadow."

"Fever Pitch," a barbershop quartet, will entertain from the steps of the Corbett house and throughout the glen on that day.

Light refreshments will be available.

Park your cars in the lot at the Linden Medical Campus, Building 10, 30 Hagen Drive off Linden Avenue/Rt. 441 between 9:30 AM and 1 PM. Shuttles will take you to and from Corbett's Glen for all of the festivities.

Come and enjoy an unprecedented emersion in Brighton's history. But first, read Leo Dodd's article about Brighton's "Death Valley" on page 2.

# BRIGHTON'S DEATH VALLEY

Compiled by Leo Dodd

Today's Corbett's Glen—site of fun and frolic—was once a very dangerous place. For 47 years, 1823-1870, gun powder, also known as black powder, was produced there. In 1823, Hubbard and Parsons announced: "Having erected a powder and tin manufactory, will keep constantly on hand the above articles of the first quality where merchants and peddlers can be furnished by large and small quantities, on the most reasonable terms." The following is an account of the only industry outside of Corbett's farm that was established in the glen. The glen was a natural hollow with 18 acres of flat land and running water, located a safe four miles from Rochester when it was selected by Marshfield Parsons as the location of the Parsons Powder Mill.

A quarter of a century later, the next chapter in our story of long-past horrors relies on the memories of one Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Herbert Cogswell, age 20 in 1848.

2 In the summer of 1848 while I was trying to learn to set type in Benton and Fisher's printing office in Reynolds Arcade, Rochester, I had a chance to ride home one Saturday evening with my uncle, Isaac Moore. After we passed Goodman Street, then the city line, and were abreast the John Culver Farm, a large portion of the lower sky almost dead ahead was lighted up by three great illuminations in quick succession, brilliant and beautiful; then came the sound of dull or subdued explosions. The story told itself. The Parsons' Powder Mill had blown up. I think there were no fatalities at the time and that the mills were not rebuilt. For the benefit of many whose memory does not go back of 1850, I would state these Mills were in a gorge a quarter of a mile below the Allen Creek Village, with no dwellings near enough to be affected by explosions.

The spectacular fireworks did not include any fatalities, so the horrors were postponed. Cogswell's memory was incorrect, however, in that the Parsons' Powder Mill *was* rebuilt and an Au-



*These two brass tumbling balls were found on the glen property by Jeff Vincent. They were used in the powder grinding process and possibly witnessed the last explosion. Their size can be compared to the nickel shown.*

gust newspaper stated that "the proprietor is ready to furnish the villainous saltpeter to all customers."

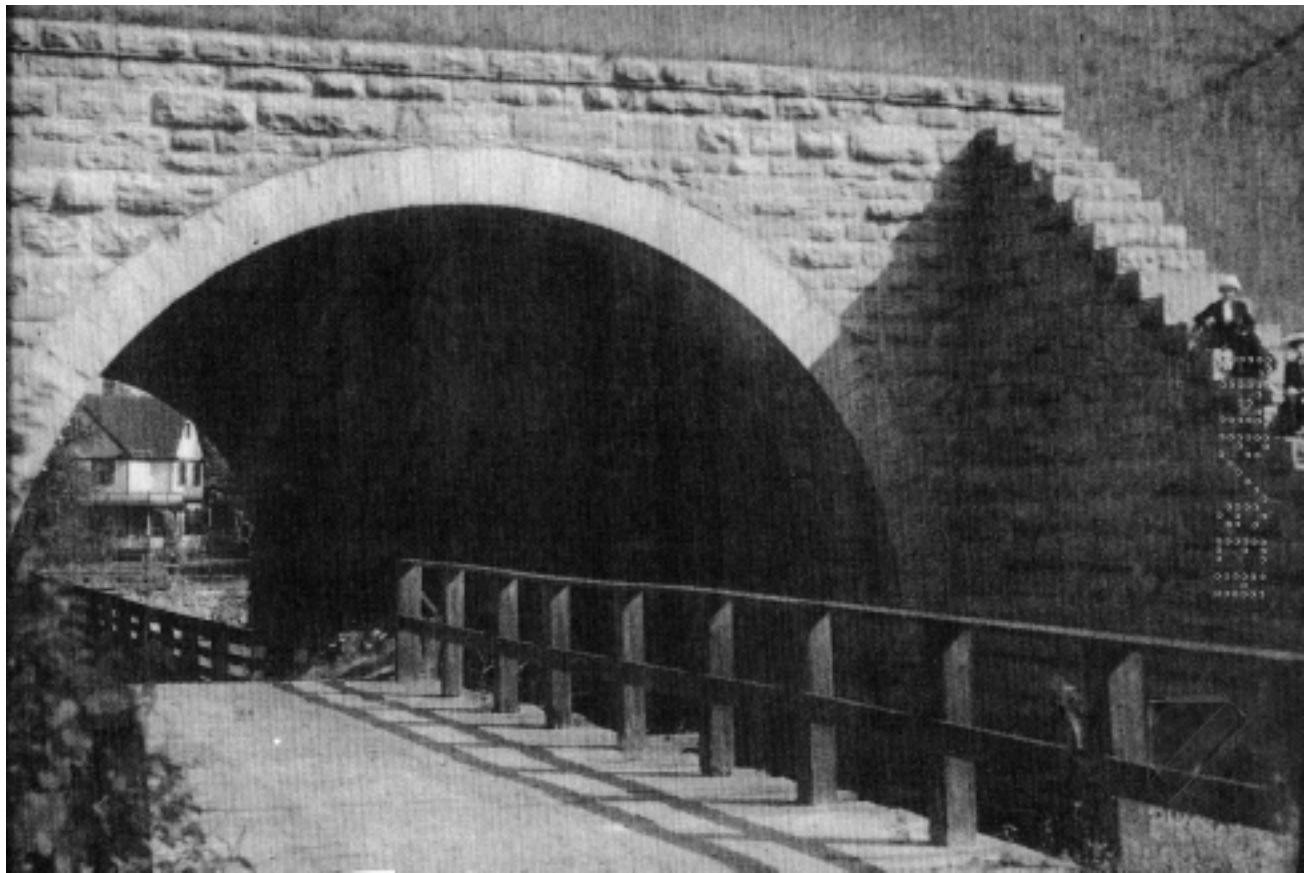
In 1849 the glen property was sold by Marshfield Parsons to William Stoneburner and became known as Stoneburner's Glen. The powder mills continued production as the Genesee Powder Mills, operated by J. Conolly, Fairbanks & Cromrie.

Fast forward to 1854 when the *Rochester Daily Democrat* reported

On Thursday evening at 9 o'clock, the powder mills of the Genesee Powder Co. ... at Allen's Creek, some five miles east of the city, exploded with a shock that sensibly affected all the buildings in the city, and was felt at a distance of over twelve miles. A good deal of surprise and some alarm was caused by the concussion. The cause of such an explosion cannot be known as the disaster leaves no traces of its origin. It is supposed that the cylinder mill first blew up, with its charge of 50 kegs of powder, and fired the grinding mill adjoining and connected with it by shafts, which at once burst, and caused the second detonation which succeeded the first almost instantaneously. The cylinders were of wood, about four feet in diameter, filled with small copper balls, and constantly

*(Continued on page 7)*

# AN OWNER'S VIEW OF THE PATRICK CORBETT HOUSE



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By Deb Bower

Little did we know when we purchased our house in Corbetts Glen that we would be walking back through the pages of time to uncover chapters of history from the horseshoes dug up in the gardens to the breezes that waft down the halls of our home on a hot summer's day. Our house, known to Historic Brighton as the Patrick Corbett house, was built in the early 1880s utilizing the discarded timbers from New York Central's 1853 wooden trestle. When the trestle was filled in to form an earthen embankment, trestle timbers were removed to allow for the construction of an arched, 171 foot long, 30 foot high, hand-cut stone tunnel that allows for passage of Allen's Creek and our driveway beneath the railroad's tracks. Those removed and discarded timbers are what hold our house up.

As one enters Corbetts Glen through the tunnel off of Glen Road, a large farmhouse can be seen peering through the tunnel. What might be easily noticeable right off is how the placement of the

house is offset from the imposing placement of the tunnel. Rather than honing in on the tunnel for aesthetic reasons as would be done in today's world, in 1881 the house was built offset from the north-south, east-west axis to allow for maximizing the prevailing westerly winds for natural ventilation of the house. As well, our house was built with the southern and eastern walls being festooned with windows while the northern and western walls are not. By building our house in such a manner, during the cold winter months when the sun is low on the horizon, the sun streams through the windows warming the interior. During the hot summer months when the sun is high in the sky over the house, the house interior remains dark and cool. A high, 12-foot peaked attic and full-length, deep cellar also aids in both ventilating and insulating our home.

Going up the walk towards the inviting wrap-around porch, you will notice two front doors. Many Victorian-period houses have two front doors; one for everyday use and one for special occasions or

## AN OWNER'S VIEW OF THE PATRICK CORBETT HOUSE



*Patrick Corbett on the porch of his house*

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for business use where visitors would not need to enter into the living space of the home, but would enter directly into the formal parlor to conduct their business, whether negotiating a financial deal or wooing the farmer's daughter. In our house another use for the extra front door was to facilitate getting a coffin into the house without having to negotiate corners and narrow hallways. Family members who have died were commonly laid out in the formal parlor. The Corbett family always referred to their formal parlor as the "death room." In this front parlor the original wallpaper is evident above the picture rail. An ornately designed pressed cork border material still survives along the top of the parlor walls. I have always been intrigued by the fact that, in our house, the common entryway door has a cast iron doorbell installed in the door, where as the business or formal doorway did not have a doorbell. A doorbell was not necessary on this door because the family would always know when a special visitor was to arrive, so the visitor did not need to announce his or her arrival by using a doorbell. Today, people go to the most readily available door and that being the formal entryway, we

have had to install a doorbell. The doorbell we installed is from the late 1800's and is a porcelain doorknob that is connected to a bell within the house by a wire that passes through the doorway molding. Pulling the doorknob away from the house causes the bell to ring on the interior.

Once inside, all of the doors, moldings and the formal staircase are from American chestnut trees that came from the property surrounding the house. Luckily, the woodwork in the house was never painted and so the details are well defined and preserved to be just as they were when Patrick Corbett moved in circa 1890. The house is an example of late 19<sup>th</sup> century vernacular farmhouse with Queen Anne style details including gothic appointments such as turned urns topping the newel-posts both inside and outside the house. All of the floors are made of soft fir except for the original kitchen floor that is made of hardwood maple.

The original kitchen was the most lived in room of the house, hence the maple flooring. There were five doorways leading from the kitchen that provided easy access to all parts of the house and yard. There was a walk-in pantry and facility for a large

## AN OWNER'S VIEW OF THE PATRICK CORBETT HOUSE



cast iron wood-cooking stove. Gray water was plumbed into the kitchen from a large cistern located in the basement. The cistern collected rain-water from the large roof using Yankee gutters that shunted the water through the roof and down into the cistern. In about 1910, the Corbetts added a new kitchen onto the rear of the house and created a formal dining room of the original kitchen by adding an oriel bay window to the exterior of the house. The new kitchen had a bathroom, a walk-in pantry and a laundry area at the rear of the kitchen that was covered in wainscoting from floor to ceiling. The wainscoting was obtained from old railroad



cars; most probably from railroad cars that had plummeted over the embankment and landed in the Corbett's front yard during a train wreck in October of 1918.

Our house never had the benefit from natural gas as it was built out in the country and being rather secluded was well away from the newer developments. If you were to visit our house you would see authentic 1880's ornate cast iron kerosene chandeliers in the formal parlor and in the original kitchen room that is what we use as our living room. While complete and unobtrusively electrified, these chan-

deliers are not original to the house. The Corbetts never had any wall or ceiling fixtures installed. It seems they must have relied upon tabletop lamps and lanterns for lighting. As such, when the house was electrified, there were few outlets placed in each of the rooms and it remains a challenge today to plug in everything that we might want to plug in.

There are five bedrooms; one grandparents' bedroom on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor and four bedrooms upstairs all of which have walk-in closets that for the turn-of-the-century clothing storage was more than adequate as people did not have the amount of clothing that we have today. Patrick Corbett and his wife



raised eight children in our house. There is a more ornate front staircase that we almost never use and a smaller, plain rear staircase that we almost exclusively use to go up and downstairs. I can imagine the Corbett family having the same living patterns as we do. There is one exception, though. For us the small area above the front stairway is used for storage whereas, before electrification, the area above the front staircase would have had a desk and chair located for the purpose of writing letters and other correspondence because that is where the last vestiges of sunlight fall within the house.

There were no indoor toilet facilities and the family used a four-holer privy which was located outside a few paces away from the back kitchen door and mudroom. Today we have two bathrooms and have constructed a glass solarium where there was once a mudroom for changing one's footwear and clothing when coming in from the barn and fields.

Patrick Corbett was a dirt farmer and made a living by raising vegetables to be sold at the farmer's market in downtown Rochester. Patrick was known for growing celery that he was able to do because of the wetlands located within the glen combined with his mastery at creating an irrigation system

## AN OWNER'S VIEW OF THE PATRICK CORBETT HOUSE



*Postcard view of the Corbett house through the tunnel*

using water from Allen's Creek. In the days before refrigeration celery was a luxury commodity. Patrick had work horses and carriage horses from which we periodically dig up horseshoes in our gardens.

6 Living in a home that was designed as a modern, efficient-for-the-times of the 1880's home, it is interesting to think about how a family lived within the same walls over 100 years ago; what their daily lives were like and how they managed to enjoy and

thrive in the same living space as we are able to live today. I have been told that our house took four years to build; the foundation having been laid and left to settle for two years before the rest of the structure was built so that everything would be plum.

I think the extra effort really paid off, because if you were to come and see our house today, you would see that the ridgepole is as level today as it was when it was built over 125 years ago.



*Patrick Corbett and the 1918 train wreck from which he obtained wainscoting*

## BRIGHTON'S DEATH VALLEY

*(Continued from page 2)*

revolving, at the rate of fifteen or sixteen revolutions per minute. In these the powder was ground, and afterwards passed to another mill for grinding. The men had left the mills—which are carried by water-power and kept in motion day and night—at about 6 o'clock, and there was no person in or near them at the time of the eruption. Consequently, no one was killed or injured. The percussion shook the houses in the vicinity, some about a quarter of a mile distant, but aside from the breaking of glass and disturbance of equanimity, no damage resulted to others than the mill owners. The railroad bridge, some 700 feet distant was not hurt. A building 12 rods distant, belonging to the company, and used for preparing charcoal, was somewhat shattered by the blast, the locks were torn from the doors and the rafters split. A storehouse, in which some 5,000 kegs were deposited, took fire and burned, with its contents. The light caused an alarm of fire which drew out the firemen.

This is the fourth time in twenty years that these powder works have exploded. ...The mills now destroyed were new. Some four years ago a man named Ross was killed by the blowing up of the works. It is deemed impossible to construct them to be proof against such accidents, and hence they are not permitted near where people live or where property can be destroyed by their explosion."

Worse was yet to come. An 1855 newspaper account details the horror in the Glen's worst recorded disaster

About twenty minutes past four o'clock PM yesterday, the city was shaken by three successive explosions a few seconds apart. It was soon ascertained that the powder mills on Allen's Creek in the Town of Brighton, four miles from the city, had blown up, involving the loss of five lives.... Some of these men leave families. Of course nothing is



known of the cause of the calamity as all who were in the mills were instantly killed. The shock was very great shattering the windows in surrounding buildings, though doing no material damage beyond the limits of the premises occupied by the powder makers.

The powder mills were owned by E. Gilbert & Co.... They had five buildings but a few rods apart—two of these were mills, one a corning house another a packing house and the last a drying house. All the buildings were destroyed except one mill, which was running with cylinders filled only two hundred feet from one of the buildings that exploded. The first explosion took place in the corning house, as a driver states that was going to the mills and was only some 40 rods distant when the explosion occurred. The quantity of powder destroyed is estimated at from 300 to 400 kegs of 25 pounds each.

The bodies of the unfortunate men were scattered in all directions, some of them were torn in pieces and all denuded and blackened so they could scarcely be identified. The unfortunate men bore an excellent character for industry and sobriety, and some of them had accumulated considerable property. The funerals will take place in Brighton this afternoon.

This is the fourth time explosions have taken place at these mills within a half a dozen years and it is only a few months since the last one occurred, but it fortunately involved no loss of life.

These mills were making about 1500 pounds of powder per day for which the demand is quite active. We presume the enterprising proprietors will rebuild the mills at once. Their loss by this disaster is estimated at \$1,500.

Coroner Pullis held an inquest... The jury returned the following verdict..

That the said five men came to their death

## BRIGHTON'S DEATH VALLEY

by explosion, the employee or owners having men employed and about the mills and works not being men of experience and not proper for to work about the said powder mills and that such might be the cause of the explosion.

The final explosion came in 1870. There were no known fatalities but the mills were closed forever.

As Leo Dodd writes, "The natural beauty of today's glen is highly contrasted with yesterday's horror in explosive disasters."



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*Call Betsy Brayer at 244-0402 to contribute articles or letters*

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### HISTORIC BRIGHTON ADDRESS

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## HISTORIC BRIGHTON HONORED BY BRIGHTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



The Historic Brighton board and membership were delighted to receive the Organization Community Service Award for 2006 presented by the Brighton Chamber of Commerce at the chamber's annual awards luncheon on May 18.

Receiving individual awards at the same luncheon were Mary Jo Lanphear, Town of Brighton Historian, and Arlene Wright for her work with the Brighton Historic Preservation Commission.



### HISTORIC BRIGHTON MISSION:

*Celebrating the town's history and  
Educating our community about  
Brighton's past*