

# White Plains Historical Society

FOUNDED IN 1983 • SUCCESSOR TO THE BATTLE OF WHITE PLAINS MONUMENT COMMITTEE

Jacob Purdy House • 60 Park Avenue • White Plains, NY 10603 • [www.whiteplainshistory.org](http://www.whiteplainshistory.org) • Winter/Spring 2009

## REMINDERS:

- Sunday, February 15, 2009, Washington's Birthday Commemoration at Jacob Purdy House.
- Thursday, May 7, 2009, WPHS Annual Dinner at the White Plains Crowne Plaza Hotel.

Check our website for more details as they develop—  
[www.whiteplainshistory.org](http://www.whiteplainshistory.org)

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## WPHS Discovers Forgotten Revolutionary War Veteran Buried in White Plains

Researching the Historic Jonathan Purdy Cemetery in White Plains has already revealed tantalizing clues about the lives and patriotic valor of White Plains' earliest residents. Among those buried in this long neglected site is Hercules Wessels, who honorably served his country in the Revolutionary War. Research by WPHS led to information being provided by a living descendant of Israel Harriot, who was Wessels' uncle, and a resident of West Street. It is believed from old deeds and maps that Harriot is buried in the abandoned and overgrown cemetery on West Street near the intersection of Windward Avenue, but no identifiable headstone remains. Similarly, the headstones of Hercules Wessels and his wife Elizabeth (nee Addington) were destroyed long ago, however, their location was confirmed by initials on the remaining foot stones (the only two individuals with the initials "H.W." and "E.W." on William Eardeley's survey of the Jonathan Family Purdy Cemetery).

But the story does not end there. Harriot's descendant provided WPHS with documentation about Wessels' life and service in Revolutionary War. Hercules, born January 17, 1757, was the son of John Wessels and Elizabeth Wool who were New Yorkers of Dutch and Swedish descent. His uncle, Jeremiah Wool, was a leader of the Sons of Liberty, and in the fall of 1776 was a Captain in Colonel Lamb's New York Artillery. Joining Wool in this company were his brother-in-law Israel Harriot and nephew, Hercules Wessels. Wessels enlisted at West Point in 1776 and soon served in the battles at Flatbush and White Plains. He re-enlisted in 1777 and served with Harriot in Samuel Lockwood's and William Steven's companies in Lamb's Artillery Regiment. He was present at the Battle of Compo Beach (Westport, CT), and at the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. Wessels was honorably discharged by General Washington on June 9, 1783 at West Point, and was later granted a large land bounty in upstate New York. Wessels listed his occupation as a "chair maker." He was granted a veterans pension in 1818, and died in New York City on November 10, 1838.

To think, a young man who served alongside Washington at many of the most important points in the Revolution, lies forgotten for 170 years in an abandoned and neglected plot of land here in our very City of White Plains. He is forgotten no more.

Sources: Conklin Mann, "The Wool Family of New York," 1941.  
Division of Veterans' Affairs Administration Pension Claim S. 43274.  
Letter from A.D. Miller, Executive Assistant to the Administrator, Division of Veterans' Affairs, to Mr. Francklyn Hogeboom, Empire State Society, Sons of the American Revolution, February 8, 1936.  
"Jonathan Purdy Family Cemetery." (As recorded by William A. Eardeley April 4, 1907 and earlier by Robert Brown Miller).

## *WPHS Commemorates 232nd Anniversary of the Battle of White Plains at Jacob Purdy House*



On Sunday, October 26, 2008, the White Plains Historical Society held its annual commemoration of the Battle of White Plains at Jacob Purdy House; Washington's headquarters during the action on Chatterton Hill, October 28, 1776. The event, on a beautiful "severe clear" day, was attended by a large crowd of White Plains residents including many scouts from Cub Scout Pack 5-White Plains, El Centro Hispano Troop 2005, and White Plains Pack 5 - Webelos Den 2 (who helped raise the Stars and Stripes). The day started early with a Revolutionary encampment provided by the 5th New York Regiment and Pawling's Levies, who demonstrated for the public what it was like to live, camp, cook, and drill as a soldier during the Revolutionary War. The day's event's also included a commemoration ceremony honoring those White Plains residents who fought in the Battle, as well as our troops serving in the U.S. and abroad. Special thanks to our re-enactors and their families, the White Plains Department of Public Works, to Pastor Jef Gamblee of Community Unitarian Church for his invocation, and to Bridget Colgan for her beautiful renditions of "America the Beautiful" and "Taps" on trumpet. Photos by Lou DeGenaro and Robert Hoch

# Donation of "Welcome" Medal Turns Back the Clock on White Plains Railroad History



By: David Buchwald

It was 1910. Red, white, and blue flags and bunting were everywhere. Local dignitaries were on hand. And, we have now discovered, souvenir medals marked the occasion – the ushering in of a new era in transportation for White Plains and Westchester County. But when the fanfare died down, when the bunting was removed and the honored guests returned home, it was the medals, with their picture of shaking hands and the word "Welcome," that remained to trigger a search through history 98 years later.

Earlier this year, Mr. John Douglas of White Plains sent to us an item given to him by Ms. Mae Adela Murphy MacAleenan, a former White Plains resident now living in Charlotte, North Carolina. Neither of our donors was sure what event the medal commemorated, but Ms. MacAleenan believed that it was connected to White Plains.

The medal (pictured above) contained few clues as to its origin. At its top was simply the date March 10, 1910, but armed with a date and a place, the White Plains Historical Society approached our local historians at the White Plains Public Library. They discovered a *New York Times* article from March 6, 1910 announcing that electric train service to White Plains would begin the following week.

The Harlem Division of the New York Central Railroad created the electric service and used new steel train cars to connect Grand Central to Mount Vernon, Bronxville, Tuckahoe, Crestwood, Scarsdale, Hartsdale, White Plains and North White Plains. It is easy to recognize these as the stops on today's Harlem Line of the Metro-North Railroad. On March 14, 1910 a ceremonial inaugural train stopped at each of these stations where speeches were made by the local mayor or village president, representatives of the railroad, and members of the Westchester Chamber of Commerce.

White Plains held the biggest of these celebrations. The train was greeted by a rousing welcome and when the event ended the train turned south and made an express trip to Grand Central, several minutes faster than any prior transportation option. It is that sort of express service that thousands of White Plains commuters take advantage of today.

Despite the four day discrepancy between the date on the medal and the date of the ceremony (perhaps the opening of the electrified service was delayed after the order for the medals was placed), it is extremely likely that the medal provided by Mr. Douglas was issued to celebrate the start of electrified train service to White Plains. The welcoming hands provide a perfect symbol for White Plain's enthusiasm for its new transportation option.

The excitement of the people of White Plains was understandable. This was an opportunity for the community to expand and prosper. Just two years later, the New York, Westchester and Boston Railway, extending to the present day site of the Westchester mall, was opened with a similar celebration, complete with a parade and fireworks. And in 1916, White Plains was incorporated as a city after having been a village for fifty years.

The White Plains Historical Society is always happy to receive donations of items connected to White Plains' past. They open a window on the events that shaped our city. Our special thanks go to Ms. MacAleenan and Mr. Douglas for sending us the medal and to White Plains Librarian Miriam Varian and White Plains City Archivist Elaine Massena for helping us to unearth the events of March 1910.

Sources:

"Electric Trains to White Plains Mch. 15," *New York Times*, March 6, 1910.

Elaine Massena, "The New York, Westchester and Boston Railway," *White Plains Times*, March 8, 2006.

## Opinion

By Phyllis DeGenaro

The headstones are tall and narrow, with elegantly scrolled tops. One is as upright as the day it was put in place: Elijah Purdy's. The other has settled slightly into the earth and leans against its partner: Elizabeth Purdy's. Both hover in watch over a third, smaller stone. This small stone marks the grave of a child who was buried, according to colonial custom, at the feet of its parents. The child's name has been worn away.

This is a sad spot, yet like any graveyard it is peaceful. And, as in any graveyard, the visitor feels a strange sense of being watched.

Sixty-three Purdy relatives lie close by, many of them youngsters, all of them buried between 1760 and 1889. Their stones have toppled and become engulfed with weeds and scrub, their inscriptions all but invisible.

The cemetery sits on a wooded ridge on Mamaroneck Avenue, at the southern end of White Plains. A realtor's sign is just visible among the weeds. Jack Harrington, past-president of the White Plains Historical Society, is my guide. He warns me to watch my footing as we climb the hill.

At first glance, this could be any vacant lot, any piece of prime real estate slowly returning to the earth while the owner holds out for his price. The ground is littered with trash: weathered boards, plastic soft drink bottles, a roll of rusted chicken-wire. If Mr. Harrington and some fellow preservationists hadn't come up here recently to clear a path through the brush, the Purdy graves would be invisible.

This land belongs to the pianist William Wolfram, whose family has owned it since 1949. Mr. Wolfram now lives in Manhattan. He hopes to sell the 3.7 acres of land for roughly a million dollars an acre. The land is not zoned for commercial use, so a potential buyer would probably build houses here—most likely *not* of the low-income variety.

But preservationists recently discovered an 1828 deed to the Wolfram property which includes a clause preserving the cemetery site and guaranteeing access "to those who may have occasion of any necessary intercourse with said burying ground." Even so, Mr. Wolfram is hoping to disinter the Purdy graves and move them to a cemetery at the other end of the city.

The first Purdy ancestor arrived here from England in 1632, and the family went on to help settle southeastern New York State by building mills, churches and schools. George Washington used a Purdy farmhouse as headquarters during the Battle of White Plains. A town in Northern Westchester County bears the Purdy name, as do streets in several other communities. Today, Purdy descendants can be found throughout the United States.

Most Americans are immigrants, whether we reached the New World in 1632 or in 2007. We tend to be forward-looking people. We like progress. We may enjoy the aesthetics of an old house, but we want to get a new kitchen in there right away, with good lighting and wireless internet. Old things make us feel restless, restricted, maybe even a little depressed. Old things remind us of the places we started out from, with their attendant hunger or oppression.

But in our great rush forward, we sometimes stomp unthinkingly on the spine of our nation. As New Yorkers we are well aware of the World Trade Center site, but we forget that we live surrounded by history—places where radical ideas were born, battles fought, blood spilled. Some of these places are marked by memorials or plaques, most are not. We drive by, as is only natural, caught up in creating our own lives.

When we want to instill a sense of history in our children, we bring them to preserved Colonial villages like Sturbridge and Old Bethpage, where people in period costume harvest corn and churn butter. But we could experience history at almost any time if we only knew where to look for it. In the cemetery on the Wolfram property we have a tangible piece of the past, the resting place of real people who did the early work of building our country.

Here then is my suggestion to Mr. Wolfram's potential buyer: Maybe you were hoping to build sixteen houses on this hill. Why not build fifteen instead, and leave the Purdys where they lie? Why not bestow on some future householder the sense, as she sits on her deck at night mulling over these old stones, that she is part of an unbroken chain of humanity? Think of the cost of one house as your donation to history, to the people who made the place of your prosperity possible.

## Volunteers Wanted

*Do you have an interest in history, writing, research, music, art, cooking, craft making, gardening, historic restoration, carpentry, collecting, event organizing, etc? We want you as a volunteer! Contact the White Plains Historical Society at (914) 328-1776 or email at [whiteplainshistory@gmail.com](mailto:whiteplainshistory@gmail.com)*

# WHITE PLAINS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*"...to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance..."*

Come celebrate the 277<sup>th</sup> Birthday of

## George Washington

Commander in Chief of the Continental Army -  
First President of the United States – Citizen

Sunday, February 15, 2009, 1:00PM- 3:00PM

at

Jacob Purdy House

(Washington's Headquarters)

60 Park Avenue, White Plains, N.Y.

WITH SPECIAL PRESENTATION:

**"Rochambeau—the Other Founding Father"**

**by John Savage**

(see reverse for more details)

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*Jacob Purdy House is a National Historic Site*

## Filmmaker John Savage to Speak about Washington's ally Rochambeau at Jacob Purdy House, Sunday , February 15, 2009 in honor of Washington's Birthday

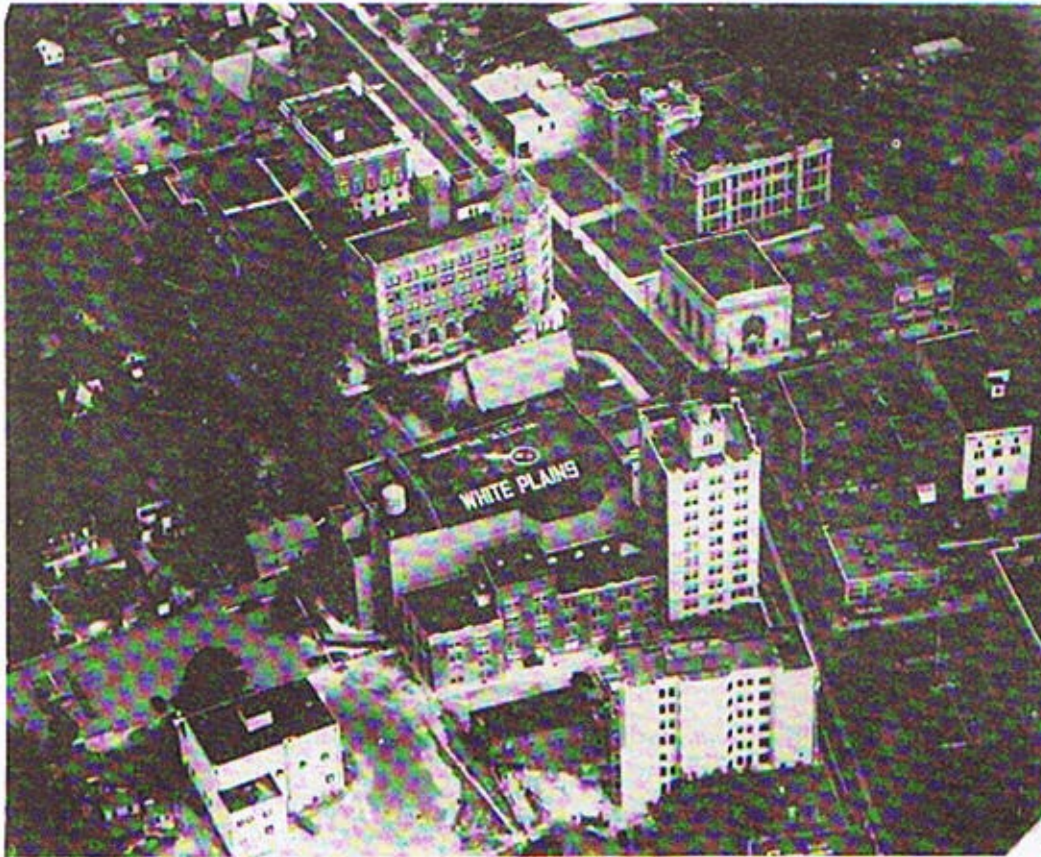


Every year, throughout this region, they celebrate a special event of the American Revolution: the march by thousands of French troops, on their way to join George Washington and the American forces.

Local historian and film-maker John Savage has created a new video to tell the story: how an army general named Rochambeau came from overseas to support our cause with soldiers, supplies, ships, all of which were desperately needed by the Americans. It's an important part of our local history that Rochambeau marched with his thousands of soldiers to join up with General Washington in White Plains and that their two armies went on to defeat the British at Yorktown in Virginia.

The details of this event (Lafayette's contribution; the Rochambeau encampments; etc.) are fascinating, because the Yorktown victory effectively brought the long-fought revolutionary war to a close and allowed the united colonies to become the United States.

John Savage, of Old Greenwich, Connecticut, taught at the University of Connecticut and Fairfield University. For years he taught English, specializing in Shakespeare, at Adult Education classes in Greenwich and Westport. During his career as a professional film-maker, he wrote and produced motion pictures for major film companies – Paramount, United Artists, Warner Brothers – as well as for major corporations.



Left: Aerial photo of Main Street, White Plains cir. 1930, from the collection of 1920's White Plains High School Football/Baseball all-star Roger Quick. Buildings include (clockwise from top right) White Plains High School (demolished in 1940's for Macy's); Home Savings Bank (now Zanaro's); the fourth Westchester County Courthouse (demolished 1977 for the Galleria Mall); Realty Building (demolished); Bar Building (landmarked 2007), R.K.O. Keiths Theatre (site of the Ritz Carlton); Grace Episcopal Church (constructed 1865); County Trust Company (Now Chase Manhattan Bank; City Hall; and the 1903 Methodist Church (demolished 1959 for Sears).

Gift of Andrea Soukup.

# WPHS SPORTS PAGE

## SAL YVARS -White Plains Baseball Giant

Editor's Note: Sal Yvars passed away on December 10, 2008, after this story was written but before it went to press. WPHS salutes his bravery in going public with the facts about one of the greatest moments in baseball history.

At 3:58PM, October 3, 1951, Bobby Thomson's home run crushed the Brooklyn Dodgers and sent the New York Giants into the Fall Classic. Known as 'the Shot Heard Round the World' Thomson's going yard off pitcher Ralph Branca made baseball history as the Orange and Black became the first team to overcome a three-run shortfall in the ninth inning of post-season play and achieve victory.

Now, we know a superb White Plains athlete had a key role in one of Major League Baseball's most dramatic moments. That day Sal Yvars, Giants back-up catcher was in the Polo Grounds right-field bullpen. At the strict direction of his manager, Leo "Nice Guys Finish Last" Durocher, the Westchester resident was doing his ordered task, relaying opponent signs to Giant batters. The elaborate scheme, which broke no baseball rule at the time, was first illuminated in 2001 on the Wall Street Journal's front page.

Salvador Anthony Yvars was born February 20, 1924 in New York City to Joaquin and Lena Yvars. In July 1924, his family moved to Valhalla, NY. Joaquin worked at Kensico Cemetery and Lena maintained a laundry service for various homes in White Plains. At eight years old, Sal was a Diamond star in the local Midget League. He was, at fifteen, a three-sport starter on the White Plains High School varsity basketball, football, and baseball teams. Although he captained the Hoops and Gridiron squads, Baseball clearly was his best sport. As a senior, the 5' 10" 160+lbs shortstop batted .500 for Coach Glenn Loucks White Plains Tigers. In June 1942, the *New York World-Telegram* named Yvars as a finalist for the top high-school player in New York City, Westchester, Long Island, and New Jersey.

Upon graduation, Yvars was signed by NY Giants scout Nick Shinkoff. Assigned to the class D minor league club in Salisbury, NC, Yvars was drawn to a greater duty. On December 7, 1942, he enlisted with the U.S. Army air force. In January, 1946, with a honorable discharge, his pro baseball career resumed. New York sent him to Manchester, NH where he batted .318 and slugged eight home runs. The next season the twenty-three year old was moved to the Giants top affiliate, Jersey City and became the starting catcher.

On September 27, 1947, Yvars made his major league debut in a 10-7 loss at Shibe Park against the Philadelphia Phillies. The next day he donned a tuxedo and was married in a White Plains church to a high school classmate, Ann D'Aleo. October 10, 1951, he was called upon to pinch hit in Game Six of the World Series against NY Yankee hurler Vic Raschi. In June 1953, the Giants sold Yvars to the National League's western outpost-the St. Louis Cardinals. He played his final Major League game September 26, 1954, in a Redbird 2-0 shutout over the Braves at Milwaukee's County Stadium.

One of the first White Plains talents to succeed in the Bigs, Sal Yvars plied his athletic skills when there were only eight teams to a league and during Baseball's Golden Age. He played with Hall of Fame members, Mel Ott, Stan Musial, Ernie Lombardi, Wille Mays, Monte Irvin, Leo Durocher, Walter Alston, Red Schoendienst and Enos Slaughter. Yvars vied against Cooperstown entrants Jackie Robinson, Joe DiMaggio, Roy Campanella, Duke Snider, Ralph Kiner, Yogi Berra, Warren Spahn and Mickey Mantle.

JOHN VORPERIAN, White Plains Historical Society First Vice-President is Host & Producer of BEYOND THE GAME, a sports history program shown on White Plains Cable TV Channel 76 Tuesdays 10PM and Fridays 9PM

*White Plains Historical Society*

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