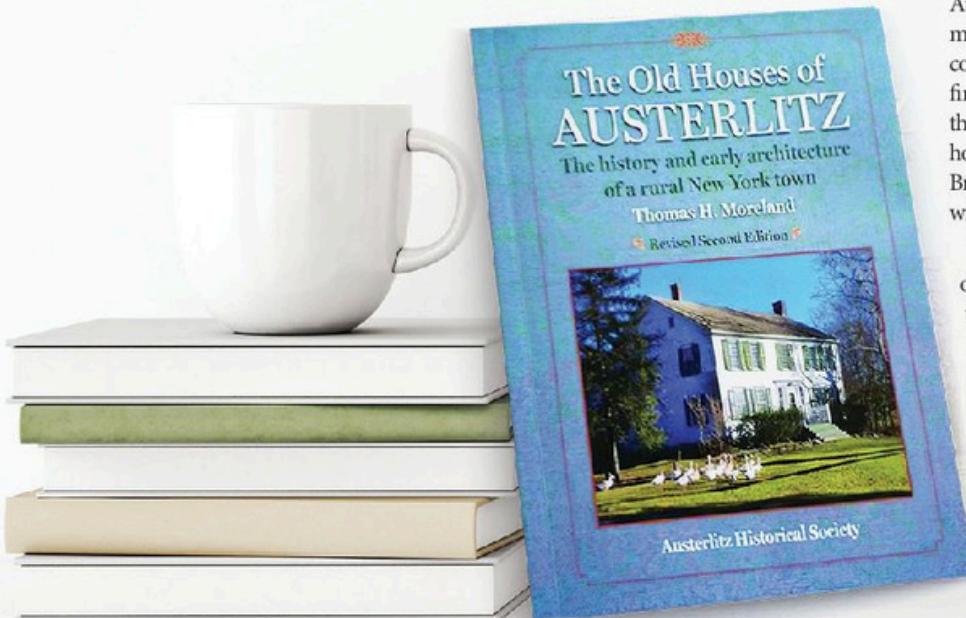


# The Secrets Behind The Walls

BY LIZ GARGER



The Austerlitz Historical Society has just published the second edition of *The Old Houses of Austerlitz* by Thomas H. Moreland, written while serving as town Historian. It is a remarkable and fascinating portrayal of a community, seen through the lens of the 168 surviving pre-twentieth century structures in the hamlets of Spencertown and Austerlitz, NY. But the title is a bit misleading. Not merely an architectural study; it is the history of a community and its people. Today, apart from the firehouse and the Old Austerlitz Historical Society, the hamlet of Austerlitz consists of just a few dozen houses. Once, there was a tavern, a hotel, and Brown's general store. People came together at places within a walk or short wagon ride from home.

Tom Moreland is a meticulous researcher and one can only guess at the hours he has devoted to creating a richly detailed history of each of the houses included in this study. The original version of the book was the product of six years of research and has been updated over time.

A town resident since 1980, Moreland retired this year as town historian, a post he had filled since 2016. He discusses not only the architectural elements of each house, but provides information about the succession of owners and what is known about the lives of

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the occupants. One typical entry includes details such as the owner "was a very good surgeon for the age," another occupant of that house was "first lady Nancy Reagan's great-great grandmother." In addition, there are entries about such notables as renowned artist Ellsworth Kelly, Oscar Beckwith (the Austerlitz Cannibal), horse thief and gang leader Ambrose F. Woolley and escaped enslaved person Peter Wheeler.

The houses themselves are the central focus of the book, revealing so much about who we were and who we are today.

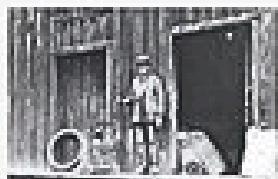
Along with the architectural analysis of co-author Michael Rebic and the photography of Dan Permentier and Gail Cashen, the book takes you, in the words of Ruth Phoenka, on a "sublime journey through valleys, over hills, across time." The book, priced at \$40, may be purchased at the Chatham Book Store or by contacting the Austerlitz Historical Society at [admin@oldausterlitz.org](mailto:admin@oldausterlitz.org), or by calling 518-392-0062.



The oldest house in Austerlitz – Pratt house in Spencertown, c. 1760s.



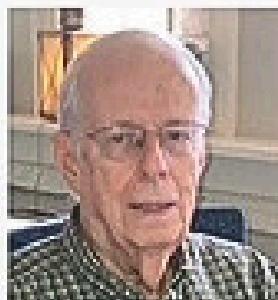
Dud Brown sitting in his Austerlitz general store, 1924; on counter is the store's bookkeeper, Florence Westover Whiteman (courtesy Robert Heron).



Frank Oles, the last miller in the Punsuit valley, at his mill c. 1930 (courtesy Jack Howes).



The William Powers house, 1787, at Morehouse Corners (intersection of Routes 9 and 203, north of Spencertown), with resident flock of geese.



Tom Moreland, Austerlitz Town Historian (2016 - 2024), author of *The Old Houses of Austerlitz: The History and Early Architecture of a rural New York Town*.



Sylvanus Hand house, Reed Road, c. 1865

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