November 2013

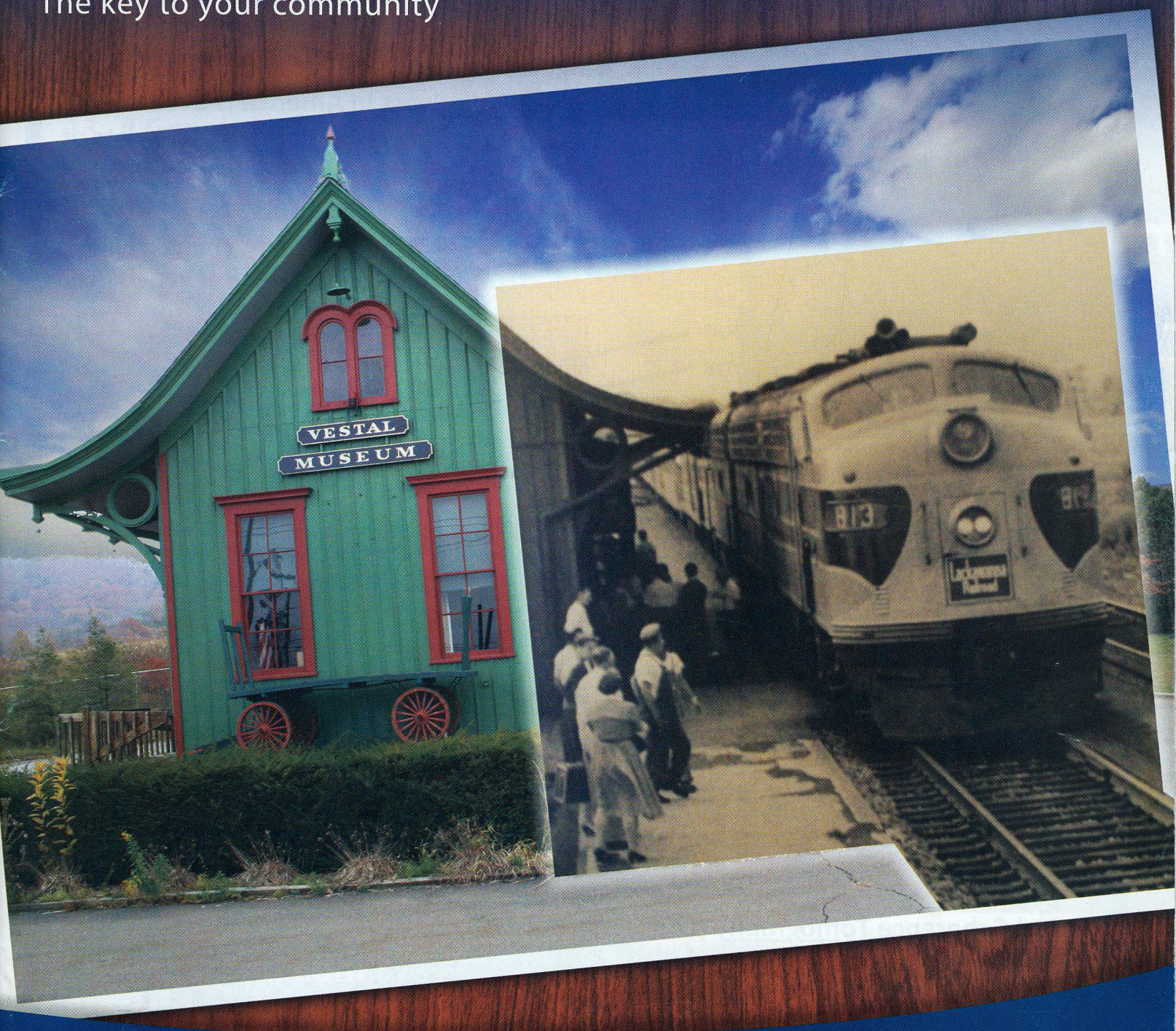
Sing-a-long at Gazebo
TREE LIGHTING

Community Band
AMERICANA

25th Anniversary
VESTAL'S CHORUS

Vestal Life

The key to your community



Historic Train Depot

How Railway History was Saved in a Unique Museum

When is a Train Depot not a Depot?

Discover the charm of that little green "museum" building near the library.

by Margaret Hadsell
Community contributor

In the late 19th century, sprawling farms along the south bank of the Susquehanna River had barely recovered from the abandoned attempt to construct the Chenango Canal Extension. That's when the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad began purchasing land for the construction of its Buffalo Division, a New York Lackawanna & Western route between New York City and Buffalo.

The D.L. & W. Railroad's construction schedule was as fast as their trains. During 1881, the railroad constructed an iron bridge over the Susquehanna at Willow Point, laid tracks as far west as Waverly, and built five depots along the way — including the Vestal Depot.

Although sometimes referred to as a station, in railroad terminology a station is a physical location, while a depot is the building designed to accommodate passengers, freight or both. Depot agents such as Vestal's first, Fayette L. Rounds, helped operate the railroad by coordinating train movements.

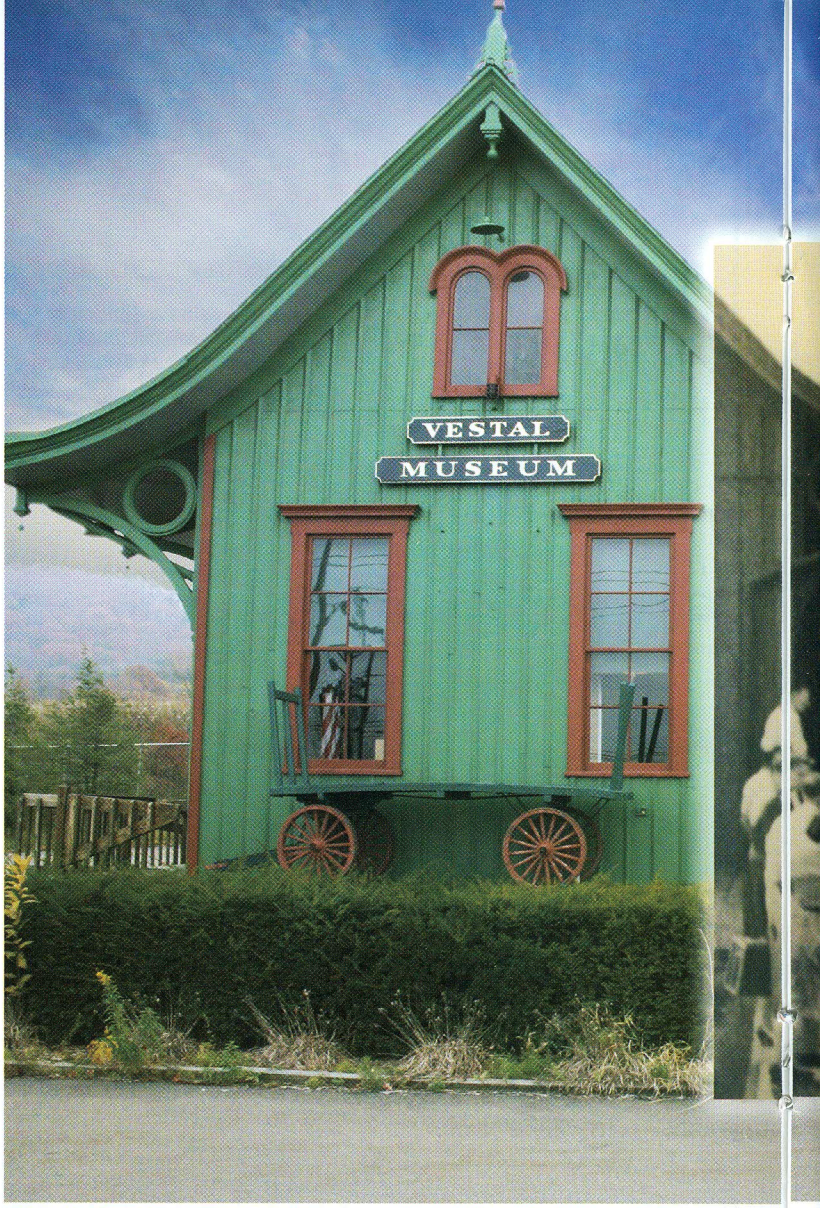
While the D.L. & W. built several types of depots, the most interesting was a Gothic Revival style with board and batten siding and an unusual pagoda-style slate roof.

The 73-foot-long Vestal Depot is a fine example of this style. It has three separate areas — a passenger room at the left, an agent's room containing a bay for his desk and a ticket window in the middle, and a large baggage or freight room on the right. The bay allowed the agent or stationmaster a clear view of approaching trains from both directions. Sliding doors on the track side and rear of the baggage room provided easy access for freight.

Brackets supporting the roof overhang feature a circular motif that is complemented by drop ornaments. Similar style stations with a slightly different bracket design and reversed passenger and freight rooms are found in other small towns in New York and Pennsylvania.

A large water tank to service steam engines was located to the west of the depot. During the late 1930s, a large wooden coal tipple, sometimes referred to as coal pockets, was built behind the station.

The Oct. 5, 1881, issue of the Broome Republican newspaper reported they had just printed the new time table cards which took effect on Oct. 3. On the schedule were four daily passenger trains, two in each direction between Binghamton and Owego, stopping at Willow Point, Vestal and Apalachin.



This composite photo by Roger Luther, produced in 2008, represents the two "lives" of the Vestal Depot. On the left, the restored depot serves as the Vestal Museum, while the inset on the right shows passengers boarding a train.
Photo courtesy of Roger Luther

Thomas Taber writes in "The Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad" that: "The first regular passenger train of the N.Y.L. & W. left Owego at 6:10 a.m. on Monday, Oct. 3, 1881, and arrived here (Binghamton) at 6:55 a.m." The flag-decorated train was made up of Engine No. 6, a baggage car and a passenger car holding 22 passengers. By April 6, 1882, the line was finished to Elmira.

A hub of the community

The Vestal Depot became the hub of this small community, the place where commerce flourished and personal adventures began. The trains brought raw materials and supplies to local farmers and businesses, and then transported finished goods and products for distribution and sale.

During wartime, young men and women left from the depot to begin service to their country. Families sat on benches in the pas-

senger room waiting for the train that would take them on a trip to visit relatives or faraway places. Others used the train as a convenient way to commute between nearby stops.

This well-built building survived the explosion of five tons of dynamite when a wildcat train crashed into the rear of train No. 61 approximately 700 feet east of the station in 1901— although the windows didn't. A lightning strike in 1904 damaged phone lines and knocked the agent unconscious, but did not harm the depot. In spite of minimal maintenance, the building served the community well for 78 years.

The famous Phoebe Snow carried passengers between Buffalo and New York City until its final stop at the Vestal Depot in August of 1959. The following year, the D.L. & W. merged with the Erie Railroad to become the Erie-Lackawanna, resulting in the end of rail service between Binghamton and Corning on the south side of the river.

Preserving Vestal history

Used as a warehouse for a time, the depot had been left to deteriorate until then Town Supervisor Edwin Crawford began a campaign to preserve this important piece of Vestal's history.

Initially the railroad had no interest in selling the building to the town, but later reversed its decision by holding a sealed bid auction. The town's winning bid of $201 in March of 1971 came with the stipulation the building be moved by October of that year. Extensions were granted by the railroad while the town looked for a place to put the depot.

Even though the thunder of iron horses on the tracks has been replaced by the muted footfalls of walkers on the Rail Trail, the carefully restored 132-year-old Vestal Depot continues to be your ticket to adventure.

Finding a new location for the depot that was once described as "so ugly, its beautiful," proved to be a problem until the former Loblaws Grocery store, sitting on 4.5 acres along the Parkway, was purchased to be the new public library. The new library campus had enough space for the depot and ample parking. The forlorn depot was placed on two steel beams, its windows boarded, in preparation for the trip.

It had already snowed by moving day on Dec. 19, 1972. The weather was cold and the skies were overcast as the 63-ton depot crawled along North Main Street before making the turn to travel east to its final destination on the library campus.

From depot to museum

For four years, the town and the Vestal Historical Society (VHS) worked to restore the building for use as the Town's Museum. In addition to replacing rotted siding, a bathroom was installed, the original potbellied stove was replaced by a furnace, stairs to the new basement were constructed, and decking was installed to provide easy access. A good coat of paint and, later, repairs to the slate roof completed the work.

The community celebrated with an ox roast that preceded the June 4, 1976, dedication, at which the town turned over the operation of the Museum to the VHS. Volunteers from the society assisted a part-time curator in the operation of the museum between June 1976 and May 2000. Afterward, the town hired a part-time director and a part-time curator to expand the museum's hours and increase community involvement.

Railroad history and more

Today, with the continued help of the Vestal Historical Society and other community volunteers, the museum staff has done just that. From March through December, the museum offers:

- Four major historical exhibits that are complimented by smaller or short term exhibits such as the display of artwork by Vestal High School students.
- Elementary school programs that teach students local and railroad history;
- Tours for scout troops where they experience the current exhibit and learn railroad history;
- Collaboration with the farmer's market, library book sales, pie sales, crafts and "Music at the Museum" sponsored by the historical society;
- Displays of crafts, artwork and archaeological artifacts by local

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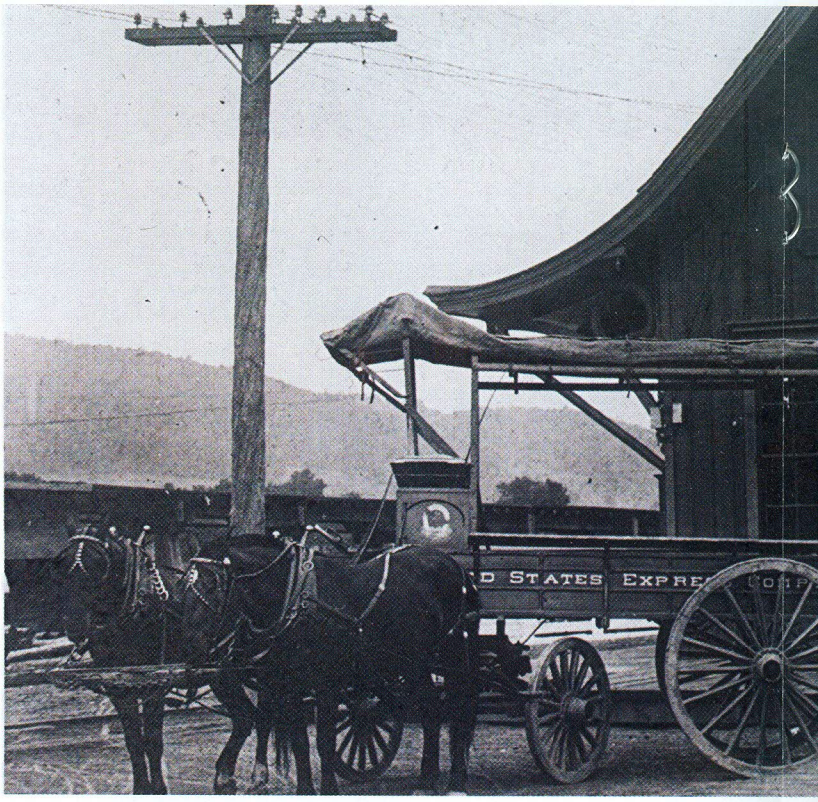
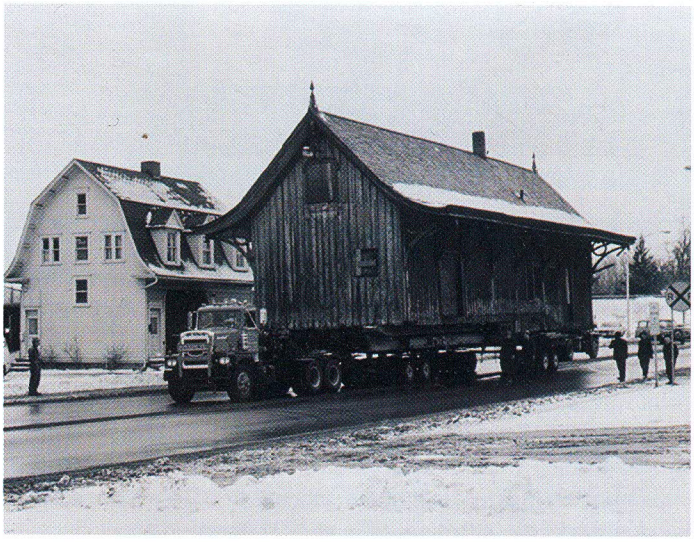
Right: Stationmaster Fayette L. Rounds, in light colored slacks, stands outside the Vestal Depot in this c. 1901 photo. Photo courtesy of Vestal Museum © Images of America - Vestal

Far right: Family, friends and the American Legion gathered at the Depot to support the young men and women waiting for the train that would begin their wartime service. Middle left: On a cold, overcast day, the deteriorated Depot is pulled down North Main Street past the Round Coal Company building as it travels to a new location along the Vestal Parkway and a new "life" as the Vestal Museum. Middle right: The popular "Cobblestone Crossings" played folk, blue grass and country music for over 100 fans at a free "Music at the Museum" event. Bottom left: Local scout troops have the opportunity to be a "brass pounder" by tapping out Morse code at the stationmaster's desk. Bottom middle: Passengers purchased their tickets at this ticket window before sitting on benches to wait for their trains. Bottom right: Brackets with a circular motif enhanced by drops support the pagoda style slate roof. Photos courtesy of Historian Margaret Hadsell's Collection





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organizations and artists;

- Celebrations of family history by participating in family reunions;
- Complimentary displays in support of community events; and
- Children's activities on Saturday during the summer.

An open house is held for each major exhibit where you can meet those associated with the exhibit, hear the stories behind the exhibit, and enjoy light refreshments.

Holiday open house

The final social event of the year is the annual Vestal Historical Society Holiday Open House sponsored by the historical society. This year, the Holiday Open House will be held on Sunday, Dec. 1, from 1 to 3 p.m., at the Vestal Museum. In addition to an exhibit featuring a collection of toys from the mid-19th century, there will be music and light refreshments. This convivial social event is open to the public and admission is free.

The museum closes for the months of January and February, reopening in March with new exhibits and activities sure to delight young and old.

Each year, more and more people discover the charm of that little green building near the library. Visitor's comments range from, "I've always wanted to see what was in here," and "I remember taking the train from this depot," to "This is wonderful, I'll be back."

Director Virginia Wood and Curator Kate Ellenberger welcome everyone to visit the museum from March through December, Wednesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Admission is always free.

Even though the thunder of iron horses on the tracks has been replaced by the muted footfalls of walkers on the Rail Trail, the carefully restored 132-year-old Vestal Depot continues to be your ticket to adventure. In 2012, the Vestal Historic Preservation Commission designated the Vestal Museum a Local Historic Landmark.

So when is a depot not a depot?....when it's a museum, of course!

Margaret Hadsell is the Town Historian for Vestal.

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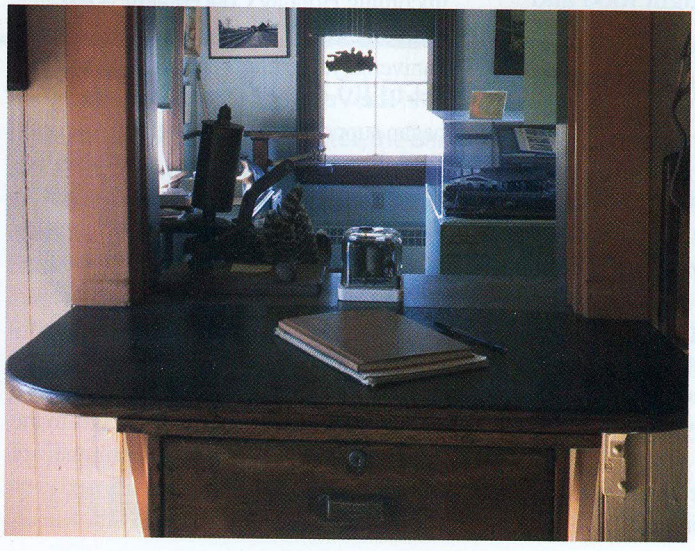
VESTAL

Cobblestone Crossing



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