

# Historically Speaking

The Newsletter of the Cobourg and District

Historical Society

May 2023 — Issue 340

## Trivia Night!

Mark your calendar to join us for our end of season get-together and first post-COVID, in-person, Trivia Night and Social. Sit with members and friends and answer trivia questions covering all categories from local to world events while enjoying a drink and treats.

Join us on **Friday, May 26, 2023 at the Legion Village Pub**, 11 Hibernia Street, Cobourg. Come early for the best selection of used books. Doors open at 6:30pm with questions, answers, nibbles and cash bar from 7pm to 10pm.

Tickets are \$10 and can be ordered in advance of the quiz by email to [cgrucelajones@gmail.com](mailto:cgrucelajones@gmail.com) or by calling Carla at 289-252-1684.



**FRIDAY 26 MAY**  
COBOURG &  
DISTRICT HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY

**TRIVIA NIGHT & SOCIAL**  
**FRIDAY MAY 26, 2023**

LEGION VILLAGE PUB, 111 HIBERNIA STREET  
7 P.M TO 10 P.M. - DOORS OPEN 6:30 P.M.

CASH BAR  
COFFEE, TEA, SNACKS  
\$10 PER PERSON

GIFT CERTIFICATES, DOOR PRIZES, 50/50 DRAW  
USED BOOK SALE

SOCIALIZE AND ENJOY THE COMPANY OF MEMBERS  
AND FRIENDS

TRIVIA IN MANY CATEGORIES

ENTERTAINMENT, SPORTS, LOCAL & WORLD HISTORY,  
FUN & SILLY

**Our Previous Meeting**  
**HMCS Cobourg**

Our distinguished speaker for the evening, Roger Litwiller, is a Canadian author, historian and lecturer. He has written two books, *White Ensign Flying* and *Warships of the Bay of Quinte* as well as numerous articles for magazines and newspapers.

Roger served in the Canadian Armed Forces Reserve, working with cadets and his civilian career was as a Paramedic for 37 years. Following his retirement from Paramedicine, the Canadian Coast Guard employed Roger under contract as their historian. Roger’s research has contributed to documentaries and several Canadian and International museums, providing information for exhibits and repatriating recovered historical artifacts. When Roger is on a lecture tour, he is



often introduced as “the storyteller, who can save your life.”

HMCS Cobourg was a modified Flower-class corvette that served with the Royal Canadian Navy during the

Second World War. She fought primarily in the Battle of the Atlantic as a convoy escort and was named for Cobourg, Ontario.

About two dozen uniformed officers and Skeena cadets sat in rapt attention as Roger described the exploits of HMCS Cobourg

Roger has a very active and popular online presence which you may want to join. Visit <https://www.rogerlitwiller.com/> or follow Roger on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/RLitwiller> for daily tweets on events in the history of the Royal Canadian Navy.

## Member Matters

### AGM

Please join me in welcoming Jennifer O'Rourke who has agreed to serve as our Secretary.

## Researching Families Using Community Resources

The Cobourg and District Historical Society, Northumberland County Archives, Port Hope Library, Cramahe Township History and the Sifton-Cook Heritage Centre/Cobourg Museum participated



in an event organized by the Lakeshore Genealogical Society and the Cobourg Public Library.

CDHS Executive members Brian Murphy, Carla Jones, Randy Barber and George Kamphorst participated in this event which was held on April 15, 2023.

# Grave Robbers in Our Midst

*by Joseph Palmer*

In the 1800s, medical research was often made possible through the workings of grave robbers, also known as body snatchers or resurrection men. In this area, they found a market at universities, particularly Queens in Kingston.

The first recorded case was in 1822 in Kingston when a man fell off a boat and was drowned. He was buried on a farm, but a few days later, his exhumed body was found covered by tree boughs in an apparent attempt to hide it. He was reburied and seems to have remained there. From that time on, however, occurrences started to increase rapidly, and for a time, Kingston was considered to be the body-snatching capital of North America.

Once these resurrection men had procured a body, they still had to transport it, and this was usually by means of a barrow or placed in a tea chest. Once they met with a prospective buyer, he would inspect the corpse, making sure it was fresh, and then a deal would be made. The resurrection men could make up to \$30 which, in current terms, would be about \$675. Quite a substantial pay for a day's work!

Why would a person participate in such a ghastly activity? In fact, the majority of grave robbers, at least in the Kingston area, were medical students themselves. They had a direct incentive to supply bodies to their professors. At that time, to study human anatomy, students had to dissect corpses to gain first-hand knowledge of how the body works. In the nineteenth century, families were not keen on donating bodies for research, so creative students went out to find them.

Closer to home, on November 17, 1889, Stephen Conger Johnston of the Tweed area passed away, and he was buried at Bethel Cemetery in Hungerford Township the following day. A few days later, a member of the family went to pay his respects and discovered that Mr. Johnston's body had been removed. The family was, quite naturally, horrified and placed an ad in the Tweed News offering a reward for information leading to the location of his body. A lawyer from Belleville contacted the family and struck a deal. If they would specify the amount of the reward, he would inform them where they would find their father's body, in perfect condition. Once terms were met, the lawyer informed them that the body was at the Kingston Medical College, and they would have to hurry as students were planning to dissect the body.

Accompanied by a Kingston police officer, Mr. Johnston's son, Thomas, went to the college and found his father lying on a dissection table. They had arrived just in time. As Thomas retrieved the corpse, one of the students said, "Be sure you have the right one." One mystery was where the body had been kept in the month since his death, but accounts indicated that it had been frozen.

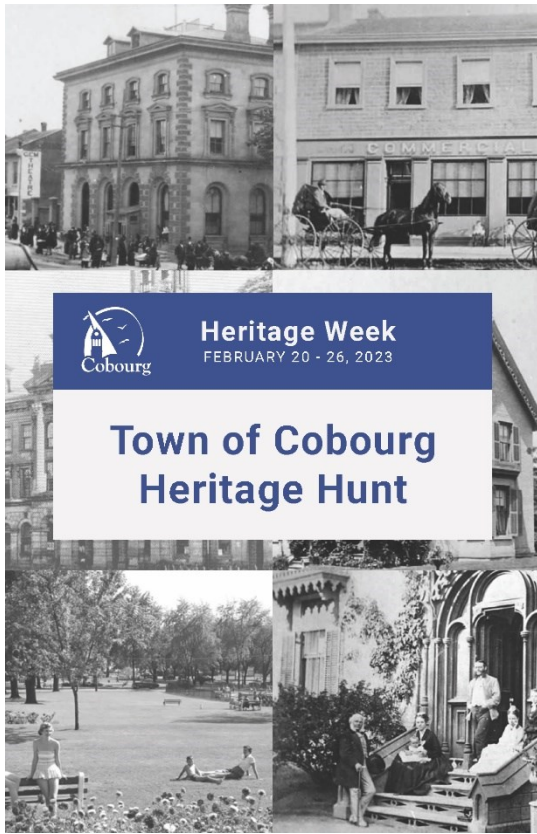
One would expect that Thomas would return home with his father to rebury him, but that was not to be. The students protested, claiming the body was not Mr. Johnston, but another person. The battle between the Johnston family and the Medical College began. The fight quickly grew more and more hostile between the two sides, culminating with two demonstrators of anatomy at Royal College, Kingston publishing an article in the Kingston *Whig* that stated that the body removed from the college was not that of Stephen Johnston and that in due time legal proceedings would be taken. In turn, Johnston's friends got together at his home and looked more closely at the body. Some agreed it looked strikingly similar to Mr. Johnston, while others were not so sure. Finally, the decision came down to Dr. Tuttle who was the doctor who had examined Mr. Johnston before he died.

Although this body bore a striking resemblance to Mr. Johnston, the final view was that it could not have been him as the corpse had a large abscess or fever sore on one leg near the ankle, but Mr. Johnston did not. The family was heartbroken but had to come to terms with the fact that this man was not who they hoped it would be. In fact, Mr. Johnston's body was never found.

Stephen Conger Johnston's grave can still be found at Bethel Cemetery, but to this day, it still remains empty — a reminder of this brutal and disturbing trade that took place in this area over 100 years ago.

This story was originally published in *The Tweed News* for November 28, 1889 and was reprinted in their June 12, 1968 edition. The entire article was recently republished in Issue 370 of *Outlook*, the newsletter of the Hastings County Historical Society (<https://hastingshistory.ca/>).

# Cobourg Heritage Hunt



European settlers first started arriving in the Cobourg area in the 1780s. Cobourg, originally several smaller villages including Amherst and Hardscrabble, was founded in 1798 by United Empire Loyalists and was later named Hamilton. In 1818, it was renamed Cobourg in recognition of the marriage of Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales to Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld.

By the 1830s, Cobourg had become a regional centre due to its harbour on Lake Ontario. From the 1840s to the 1860s, Cobourg's future seemed exceedingly bright – some even believed in might be a contender for the capital of Upper Canada. However, these outsized ambitions led to the community overextending itself in investments and infrastructure. An economic downturn in the 1860s and 1870s led to a drop in the town's

population and prospects. Luckily, the development of the harbour, the short-lived railway, and the resulting trade in iron ore with the U.S. led many Americans to discover the delights of summering in Cobourg.

In addition to tourism, Cobourg's harbour was the site of industry for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After several decades of coal and oil shipments in and out of the harbour, a decline in demand for coal and other changes led to an ambitious plan to reimagine Cobourg's waterfront into a boating and recreational centre. In addition to this, the residents of Cobourg and the town worked hard to preserve Cobourg's built heritage. Today, both things contribute to Cobourg's unique character and sense of place.

The Town of Cobourg's Planning Department has prepared an interesting selection of information on 16 sites in Cobourg. Details of the various sites are presented as a quiz question about each location.

You can get a copy of the booklet by visiting the Town Clerk's office in Victoria Hall or you can download it from [https://www.cobourg.ca/en/resources/Planning-Attachments/Heritage/Cobourg-Heritage-Hunt\\_Digital\\_.pdf](https://www.cobourg.ca/en/resources/Planning-Attachments/Heritage/Cobourg-Heritage-Hunt_Digital_.pdf).

## Announcements

### *Cobourg Museum*

The Cobourg Museum's website has been updated to include "Harbour Story" with two pages on the ferries. It includes a first-person story of a young boy's trip across the lake. Visit their website at [https://www.communitystories.ca/v2/cobourg-harbour\\_port-de-cobourg](https://www.communitystories.ca/v2/cobourg-harbour_port-de-cobourg).

The Cobourg Museum's YouTube channel now includes a short video showing one of the ferries docking in Cobourg. To view this and more than a dozen other Cobourg related videos visit [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdTovcVcpHN\\_Wgc-WMuDRBQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdTovcVcpHN_Wgc-WMuDRBQ).



The flyer features a dark blue background with teal accents. At the top left is the Hastings County Historical Society logo, which includes a stylized tree and the text "EST 1957" and "HASTINGS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY". To the right of the logo, the words "PUBLIC PRESENTATION" are written in large, bold, white capital letters. Below this, the text "By researcher" is followed by a teal box containing the name "SHEILA REESOR" in white. To the right of the name is a circular portrait of Sheila Reesor. The title of the presentation, "The Aylward Murder, Trial and Hangings at Belleville in 1862", is written in white. Below the title is a paragraph of white text describing the event. At the bottom left, a teal calendar icon is next to the date and time: "Tuesday, May 16, 2023 7:30 p.m.". At the bottom right, the location "Maranatha Church Auditorium 100 College Street West, Belleville" and the instruction "Enter by main front doors" are written in white.

**HASTINGS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**EST 1957**

# PUBLIC PRESENTATION

By researcher

**SHEILA REESOR**

## The Aylward Murder, Trial and Hangings at Belleville in 1862

An altercation over free-ranging chickens led to the death of William Munro and the public hanging of Mary and Richard Aylward in Belleville. Sheila Reesor takes another look at the Aylwards' trial and explores life in Doyle's Corners (Maynooth) at the time of the incident.

**Tuesday, May 16, 2023 7:30 p.m.**

**Maranatha Church Auditorium  
100 College Street West, Belleville  
Enter by main front doors**

## CDHS Executive for 2022 – 2023

President	Carla Jones	<a href="mailto:cgrucelajones@gmail.com">cgrucelajones@gmail.com</a> (289) 252-1684
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