

**A Review of the History of  
The New York State Agricultural Society**  
July 2012 by Bob Bitz

The changes that have taken place in New York's agriculture, since the founding of the New York State Agricultural Society in 1832, undoubtedly extend beyond the wildest imagination of any of its founders. The purpose in founding the Agricultural Society was "to improve the condition of agriculture, horticulture and household arts," which is as valid and important in 2012 as it was in 1832.

In 1832, NY was an agrarian State. Agriculture was the livelihood of the majority of the State's residents, and most of the State's leaders had close ties to the soil. Additionally, NY was by far the leading state in agricultural production, producing the majority of agricultural products used by its residents as well as exporting a wide variety of agricultural products throughout the world. Although NY's agriculture isn't as dominant a force in the US today as it once was, it still is a vibrant industry that is on the cutting edge in innovation and in the production of high quality food for millions of people. Thus, the need for the NY State Agricultural Society continues and it is still playing an important role for agriculture today.

Change has been a continual process, not only for the agricultural industry but also for the Ag Society. The first State Agricultural Society was the *Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Arts and Manufactures*, organized in 1791. During the following years it held 13 meetings that covered a diverse variety of agricultural topics and in 1804, it was succeeded by the *Society for the Promotion of Useful Arts*, whose charter stated, "improvements in agriculture" was its chief aim. In 1819, the NY State Legislature established a *Board of Agriculture*, the third statewide agricultural organization, which was merged into the *Albany Institute*, in 1829.

A few agricultural leaders who had been members of one or more of the previous statewide agricultural organizations felt there was still a need for an agricultural society and in 1832 at a convention in Albany formed the *New York State Agricultural Society*, an organization that today is still actively serving NY agriculture. The first president was LeRay de Chaumont from Jefferson County who had been Vice President of the earlier Agricultural Society. Jesse Buel, a noted agricultural editor, was named secretary.

During the first 10 years there were no annual reports so little is known concerning their actions. They did, however in 1834, authorize the *Cultivator*, edited by Jesse Buel, to be the official mouthpiece for the Society. The *Cultivator* was merged with *The Genesee Farmer* in 1839 and the continued to be published until 1866 when it was merged with *The Country Gentleman*.

An annual book *Transactions of the New York Agricultural Society* was published each year, from 1841 through 1899, providing detailed information concerning each year's Fair, premium winners, other activities of the NY State Agricultural Society, reports of county agricultural societies and their fairs, general agricultural information,

and reports of agricultural experiments performed throughout the world. These books of *Transactions* are available in Cornell's library and some other libraries in the State. They are often found in old book stores or are offered at farm auctions.

County agricultural societies had proliferated during the early 1800s, especially after the State provided \$10,000 to the *Board of Agriculture* in 1820. This money was distributed for the introduction and enhancement of county fairs. Interest in local agricultural societies waned when State money was no longer available. Because of this, the NY State Agricultural Society was reorganized in 1841, and a new constitution was adopted in anticipation of legislation from the State providing money for fairs. In June of that year the NY State Legislature designated \$8,000, annually for five years, for "*the promotion of agriculture and household arts in the State.*" Seven hundred dollars was designated to the NY Agricultural Society and from \$34 to \$255 to each of the counties. The funds to the Ag Society provided the impetus for the first NY State Fair, which was held in Syracuse on September 29 and 30 of that year. The Ag Society continued to hold an annual NY State Fair until 1899 when responsibility for the Fair was assumed by the NY State Department of Agriculture and Markets.

Syracuse and Onondaga County welcomed that first State Fair with open arms. Even though the weather was a bit rainy the crowd was estimated to be from 10,000 to 15,000 people. Twelve hundred people attended the farmers' dinner during the first day, and 25 railroad cars of choice animals arrived from the Albany area. The two railroads between Albany and Syracuse provided free transportation for the animals. The Onondaga County Courthouse was used for the exhibition of some of the agricultural implements and farm products on display. There was not only a display of plows but also a plowing match that was well attended. Three yoke of fat oxen were on display with an average weight of almost 3,000 pounds each. Interestingly, reports noted that there were no wine or spirits available, and even without them the speakers were eloquent in their addresses.

The following year, the Fair was held in Albany, and in 1843 it was held in Rochester. The Fair was moved from city to city each year to provide greater access to farmers in various parts of the State until 1890 when Syracuse was designated as the permanent site.

Most of the money provided by the State was used to provide significant cash prizes to the various winning exhibitors. In later years bronze, silver and gold medals were awarded, with appropriate engraving on the back, to winners in some categories.

During the middle of the 19th century, the Ag Society established a museum and library near where they met in the Capitol at Albany. The museum items became part of the larger State Museum and in the 1920s the Ag Society encouraged the State to build a larger agricultural museum at the NY State Fairgrounds. In 1928, the State provided the funds, and the Museum named for Daniel Parrish Witter, a prominent farmer and member of the State Legislature. Later, a carriage museum was constructed nearby, which was named for Jared van Wagenen, Jr.

The Ag Society's involvement with the Witter Museum continues today. In 1996, the Board of Directors of the Ag Society formed a committee to work with NY's Fair administration to improve the Museum and to develop high quality educational exhibits. This committee formed a nonprofit corporation, the *Friends of the Daniel Parrish Witter Agriculture Museum*. The *Friends* have brought new life to the Museum with a variety of educational exhibits and continues to educate NY's city and suburban residents in the rich history of NY agriculture and its ongoing importance.

Almost immediately upon the formation of the NY State Agricultural Society, it requested that NY State government leaders establish an agricultural college in the State. The various fairs in the State were a major source for new agricultural knowledge but scientific agricultural experiments and a college for agricultural education were sorely needed. Repeatedly, petitions and requests for an agricultural college were made by the Society to State leaders before Cornell University was finally established in 1865. There were over 200,000 farms in NY before an agricultural college, Cornell University, came into existence. The persistence of the NY State Agricultural Society had finally paid off! It was another 39 years before the Cornell College of Agriculture became the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University. In recognition of the importance of NY agriculture and the benefit to Cornell University of agricultural representatives on its Board of Trustees, the Cornell Charter called for the President of the Ag Society and a representative from the NY State Grange, the other key agricultural organization of that time, to be Cornell Trustees. Today, there continue to be two Cornell Trustees, nominated by NY agricultural organizations, that represent agriculture and who are Directors of the Ag Society.

Ezra Cornell, the founder of Cornell University, was one of many prominent NY leaders who have served as president of the Ag Society. In his speech as retiring president of the Society in 1863, he succinctly points out how important the Society had been to NY agriculture. "*Much of this improvement*" (mechanization and improved efficiency in agriculture) "*and many of these new inventions may be traced to suggestions and encouragements held out by this Society, or to the ideas or thoughts which were quickened into active inquiry and directed to inventive channels by visits to our annual Fairs, or occasional implement trials.*"

A generally overlooked and immensely important contribution by the Ag Society to NY's agriculture began about two decades after Cornell's founding. In 1886, mainly due to the efforts of Cornell Agricultural Professor Isaac Roberts and J.S. Woodard of the Rural New Yorker, a three day Farmers' Institute was held at Cornell University. It was a huge success with farmers coming from every part of the State to listen to the lectures and discussions. The NY State Agricultural Society was asked to hold the Institutes the next year. It appropriated \$1,050 to fund the Institutes with one day each in Lockport, Ithaca and Batavia. These sessions were also very successful and continued to be sponsored by the Ag Society for a number of years. Over the next few years they became quite extensive with about 275 institutes held in 1895. Also in 1895, the Ag Society had about 2,000 lifetime members. Beginning in 1909, the Institutes

evolved into Farm and Home Week at Cornell University. The need of bringing knowledge to the farmer, initiated by the Institutes, was reinforced with the formation of Farm Bureau and the Cornell Cooperative Extension System in 1911.

The NY State Agriculture Society has continually been a leader in promoting the needs of agriculture. It worked to establish the Agricultural Experiment Station at Cornell, the Geneva Experiment Station and the NY State Department of Agriculture and Markets, all of which are still vital to agriculture today.

Each year, from its very beginning, the Ag Society met in Albany. In 1976, it moved its annual meeting to Syracuse but returned to Albany to celebrate its 150th anniversary in 1982. For many years, NY State's Governor spoke at the annual meeting but after World War II, as the State became more removed from its agrarian roots, the Governor's attendance became less regular. Syracuse provided convenient access to more of the State's agriculturalists.

The esteem in which it was held and the importance of the Ag Society to NY is exemplified by an act of the State Legislature and Governor in 1931 to commemorate the Ag Society's 100th Anniversary when they authorized the writing and publishing of, *A History of Agriculture in the State of New York*. It was written by Ulysses Prentiss Hedrick, Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station at Geneva and published by the State in 1933. The book provided an excellent history of the dramatic changes that had occurred in NY's agriculture from the time the State was a forested land to the time of the book's publication.

In 1937, the Ag Society instituted the Century Farm Awards. Each year since then, several farm families have been honored who have owned and operated the same farm for over 100 years. Over 250 NY farms have received the Century Farm Award. In 2000, it was decided to honor NY farms that had been owned and operated by the same family for 200 years or more. Surprisingly, there were 26 farm families honored that year and 10 more the next year. Recognition during the second year was due to the large number of bicentennial farms. Eleven additional bicentennial farms were honored in 2007 and five more in 2012. The oldest farms honored were the Halsey Farm, in Suffolk County, settled in 1640 and the Schoonmaker Farm, in Ulster County, settled in 1670, both settled by their respective families long before NY became a state.

An action by the Ag Society in 1985 that continually reaps benefits for members of the agricultural community and NY agriculture was the formation of the *Empire State Food and Agriculture Leadership Institute*. (LEAD New York) LEAD New York was formed by the Society in conjunction with the NY State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and Cornell Cooperative Extension. Every two years a group of about 30 young men and women involved in a broad range of agriculturally related professions are chosen to participate in an intensive two year program designed to broaden their leadership skills. There have been over 300 graduates of this program and it is gratifying to see the positive effects that have come from it.

The Distinguished Service Citation, an award to honor persons who have given a lifetime of service resulting in outstanding contributions to New York agriculture, originated in 1956. Since that time over 50 of New York's great agricultural leaders have been honored.

Agriculture has always received a substantial amount of press coverage but unfortunately many of the positive achievements of agriculture have been overlooked. In 1978, the Harold "Cap" Creal Journalism Awards, annual awards to inspire increased coverage of the positive aspects of agriculture, originated. Each year since then, several members of the media have been honored for their skills in presenting a great variety of positive agricultural information to the public.

The Ag Society offered another new award in 2001, entitled the Business of the Year Award. Each year two of these awards are given; one to a farm and one to an agricultural business. The winners are chosen in recognition of their quality, leadership and innovation. Winners of this award have come from scattered locations around the State and exemplify many examples of innovation as well as success, which is prominent throughout NY's agricultural community.

In celebration of the Ag Society's 175th anniversary in 2007, it cooperated with Public Broadcasting Station, WCNY, to produce a documentary about present day NY agriculture. This hour long program was viewed on all of NY's Public Broadcasting stations with a potential audience of over 18 million people.

The Agriculture Promotion and Education Award has been given by the Ag Society each year, since 2009. This recognition of individuals or groups, for their efforts to improve the understanding of agriculture in their communities, is one more example of the Society's dedication to education. Because most New Yorkers have few ties to agriculture, other than what they see in the supermarket, it has become increasingly important for agriculture to help consumers understand, agriculture's problems and needs.

Farm Safety Awards given by the NY State Agricultural Society recognize the continual importance of stressing safety on the farm. Farmers are continually working under a variety of pressures in addition to the weather. Because haste and carelessness can create unfortunate accidents, emphasis on safety through these annual awards to farm operators, who have unique and successful safety programs for their employees, brings innovative ideas to other farmers. These ideas help farmers create programs to prevent accidents on their own individual farms.

In 2011, the Ag Society created the NYS Agricultural Society Foundation, a 501(c)3 charitable organization. It will strive to plant and cultivate the seeds for agriculture's future by advancing agricultural education, expanding leadership development and recognizing industry innovators and innovations. The Foundation is partnering with the CNY Community Foundation to receive gifts while providing significant tax advantages to donors.

Each year in January, the Ag Society holds an annual meeting, attended by several hundred people, that explores topics critical to the needs, both present and future, of NY State's agricultural industry. Attendance ranges from high school students who are members of the Future Farmers of America, current and past members of LEAD New York, representatives from agricultural businesses, NY State Agriculture & Market representatives, farmers and educators. Networking at this meeting, among all segments of NY's broad agricultural interests, provides the opportunity for long time members to interact with old friends and to make acquaintances with newer members of the agriculture community.

With 180 years of efforts "to improve the condition of agriculture, horticulture and household arts," the Ag Society has accomplished much that has been beneficial, not just for those involved in agriculture but for the many millions of NY State residents during these past years. Most of the Ag Society's efforts have been directed toward the immediate benefit of agriculture but ultimately the fruits of these benefits filter down into the lives of all NY State residents. Volumes could be written concerning the rich history of the Ag Society. Suffice to say, actions speak louder than words, and one has only to look at the current actions of the Society to realize that it stays true to its original objectives. A new generation of men and women continually steps forward to continue the efforts instigated by the Ag Society's leaders of over 180 years ago.

### ***Bibliography for the Preceding Material***

*Address Delivered to the NY State Agricultural Society, February 12, 1863 by Ezra Cornell*

*A History of Agriculture in the State of New York, 1933, Ulysses Prentiss Hedrick*

*Four Hundred Years of Agricultural Change in the Empire State, 2007, Robert W. Bitz*

*History of the New York State Agricultural Society, 1916, In the January 1924 Agricultural Bulletin published by the Department of Farms and Markets of the State of New York*

*New York Agricultural Society, Halsey B. Knapp in the January 7, 1950 Rural New-Yorker*

*New York State Agricultural Society, Howard Sidney, Dean of SUNY Ag & Tech at Cobleskill written for the local Cooperative Extension News in 1978*

*The Cultivator, 1841, page 169, Cattle Show and Fair of the New York State Agricultural Society at Syracuse Sept. 29, 30, 1841*

*Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society, Various years from 1841 to 1899*

## **Sources of Historical Material of the Ag Society**

when researched by Robert Bitz in 1991

Olin Library at Cornell University, Seven boxes of material with last added in 1988.  
Also a book *The New York State Agricultural Society: its place in the History of American Agriculture*, Albany 1890  
Additionally, volumes 1-10 of *The Cultivator*, 1834-43, volumes 1-9 1844-1852 and volumes 1-13 1853-65  
Plus numerous other reports and papers.  
*NOTE:* Transfer of numerous records from the files of Ag & Mkts in Albany were made to Olin Library in November 1991 primarily from the years 1947 to 1991.

Cornell University Library Annex (In the orchards)  
Many other papers and records

Geneva Historical Society Museum  
Also papers dealing with Rose Hill and Robert J. Swan

Albany Institute of History and Art, Mc Kinney Library, 125 Washington St., Albany, NY  
A box containing 10 folders of essays, letters, records and papers dating from 1792 to 1840, including an official letter to the NY Legislature giving the purpose and duties of the New York State Agricultural Society.

New York State Historical Society, Cooperstown (Adjacent to the Fennimore Museum)  
In Archives, two boxes of records from 1936 through 1940 and two volumes of Proceedings of the Executive Committee from February 1861 thru June 1887.  
In Library, addresses to the Ag Society by its presidents in 1858 and 1859, a paper by John Norton and an 1867 report on plow trials.