

# Students create exhibit on Tompkins landscape

Donna Eschenbrenner and Keith Millman 6:07 a.m. ET April 27, 2017



(Photo: Benjamin A. Gallegos / Provided)

Of all the constituencies we serve at The History Center, one of the most rewarding for us is local student groups.

Foremost, of course, is our living history program for fourth-graders at our beloved Eightsquare Schoolhouse, where students spend a day at school in 1892.

Annual research projects with Ithaca College environmental history and graduate education students have taught critical research skills working with primary source materials. High school students from all over the county have learned about historical research and writing in our Student Historian Program. Cornell University students get worthwhile professional experience doing archival and museum internships.

And in 2016, we embarked on a pilot program with Tompkins Cortland Community College students: an intensive, yearlong program teaching them research, writing and curatorial skills, having the students create a major exhibit for The History Center's main gallery.

Opening on May 5, "The Altered and Preserved Landscape" examines the local landscape and is part of the larger celebration of the 200-year anniversary of Tompkins County. The artworks the students produced explore the visual and functional conditions of Tompkins County over time by drawing on primary source materials from The History Center's collections.

Divided into small groups, the students chose a broad array of topics highlighting the county's unique characteristics: Stewart Park, local railroads and Groton bridges are among the many subjects explored. Sophisticated technology enables viewers to see the Six Mile Creek area change over more than 100 years of time, while low-tech and engaging puzzle blocks teach about the county's great industries. Other projects delight and inform as well, showcasing the students' ingenuity and creativity.

What makes Tompkins County a unique place is answered, in part, by the growth and changes to the area through geological time, human activity and social conditions. Using contemporary and historical images and texts, this show investigates two questions: Why does the county look like it does, and from what era did certain built features originate?

The projects were created by traveling back in time through rich documents, including historical photographs, texts, letters and paintings in The History Center archives. In addition to research in the collections, students went into the community to photograph and gather visual data, to investigate how the unique local landscape has impacted the development of the county.

In all, the show offers a look at the altered and preserved landscape of Tompkins County, and ultimately provides a few glimpses of what gives this wonderful area a sense of place.

"The Altered and Preserved Landscape" opens on First Friday Gallery Night, from 5 to 8 p.m. May 5. From 6:30 to 8, professors and students will be on hand to talk about the projects.

Special thanks are due to the Tompkins County Bicentennial Commission for their support for this project.

*Donna Eschenbrenner is the archivist at The History Center in Tompkins County. Keith Millman is professor of new media at Tompkins Cortland Community College.*