On May 28, 2009, former Alumni Director and Rensselaer Historian Carl Westerdahl and Assistant Institute Archivist Amy Rupert treated more than 100 Friends and guests to an interesting and informative talk on “The Phantom Rensselaer of Yesterday.” Accompanied by photographs and sketches of buildings that no longer exist, they spoke about the history of these structures and related some amusing anecdotes about what went on in some of them.

According to Westerdahl, “Rensselaer, unlike most institutions our age, led a nomadic life in the city of Troy during the first 80 years of its history. A nomadic life that witnessed the Institute’s home destroyed not once, but twice by fire. These fires challenged the Institute’s leadership, alumni, friends, and even the city of Troy to renew their commitment to the dreams of Amos Eaton and Stephen Van Rensselaer. As a result, each time the Institute emerged from fire stronger and more vibrant than before.”

Rensselaer, which began 185 years ago as the Rensselaer School, consisted of one building, and was located on the site where Gendron’s Auto Sales is today at 700 River Street. Old Bank Place is so named because the building was erected to house Troy’s first bank before Amos Eaton, the Institute’s first president, acquired it in 1821. When the school opened three years later, the edifice not only functioned as a school complete with labs, lecture rooms, a library, an observatory, and housing for students, but it also provided living space for Eaton and his family. In a letter to Stephen Van Rensselaer, Eaton stated:

“I have fitted up the 1st story of the Old Bank. I removed the partition and put in folding doors so as to open the directors long room into the 20 feet square room in the rear. Now the three great windows which look into the back shop lock and the three great front windows, with our arrangement of cases, etc. give the whole the most elegant appearance of any school room I ever saw.”

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Folsom Library Welcomes New Students

Folsom Library held its annual open house and optional tour for freshmen and other incoming students on August 28. Librarians and staff welcomed newcomers and informed them of services available in the Folsom Library and the Architecture Library, which is located on the third floor of the Greene Building. The students learned how to make use of research databases and e-journals; obtain books and journal articles from other sources through ILLiad, the Rensselaer Libraries’ interlibrary loan system; and utilize the Rensselaer Digital Collections, a compilation of materials of intellectual, historic and cultural value to Rensselaer in a wide variety of image, audio, video and text formats. They were also given an opportunity to check out some memorabilia from classes of yore on display in Archives and Special Collections, located in the Fixman Room.

Those students who completed a tour of the Folsom Library were awarded goodie bags and their names were entered into a prize raffle. Give-away items and prizes were donated by vendors with which the Libraries routinely do business and by Troy merchants. Students were also invited to make ice cream sundaes, relax, and chat with others.

In addition to checking out their library, first-time visitors were also given the opportunity to meet the staff who run the Center for Communication Practices and Telecommunications, both of which are housed on the first floor of the Folsom Library.

Library Associate Anna Gardner explains borrowing privileges.

Students get the scoop on books, DVDs, and CDs available from Library Specialist Elizabeth Buckley.

Assistant Institute Archivist Amy Rupert points out some items from past Rensselaer student traditions.

Manager of Public Services Irving Stephens demonstrates searching the Rensselaer Digital Collections.

Operations Specialist Kathy Stebbins and Acquisitions and Electronic Resources Librarian Tanis Kreiger collect raffle cards.

Associate Clinical Professor of Language, Literature, and Communication Barbara Lewis speaks with a student at the Center for Communication Practices.

Nancy Williams, Manager of Telecommunications Customer Services, is always ready to greet users with a friendly smile.

Management Librarian Colette Holmes gives students a rundown on what can be garnered from the Reference Desk.
Board Changes

The Board is pleased to announce the appointment of three new Directors, but sadly must bid farewell to a fourth.

Ellen Esrock

Dr. Ellen Esrock is Associate Professor in Language, Literature and Communication. She holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from New York University and a B.A. in Philosophy from Washington University in St. Louis. Esrock's first book is a translation of Umberto Eco's The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Poetics of James Joyce (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.) In 1994, she published The Reader's Eye: Visual Imaging as Reader Response (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), which was supported by a Harvard Mellon Faculty Fellowship. Currently she is working on Touching Art: Empathy and the Somato-Sensory System, for which she received a grant from the Italian Academy of Columbia University.

Professor Esrock, who has agreed to serve a two-year term on the Board, teaches courses in twentieth century literature and visual art, psychology and literature, and theory/history of photography. She also has completed several community service documentary photography projects with graduate and undergraduate Rensselaer students.

Michael Zwack

Michael Zwack hails from Stephentown, NY, (named after Stephen Van Rensselaer!) and is a junior studying management law in the Lally School of Management and Technology. Besides his duties as Grand Marshal and chair of the Student Senate, Zwack is involved in the student alumni support group Red & White, enjoys playing piano, and is an avid hockey fan. Zwack, who hopes to attend law school after graduation, will serve a one-year term on the Board.

Haris Khan

Haris Khan is from Jericho, NY, and is a junior studying computer and systems engineering. He chairs the Rules and Elections Committee on the Student Senate and is a member of the Institute Library Advisory Committee. Khan is an active member of the Web Technologies Group, which is responsible for developing Concerto, the Institute’s open source digital signage system. He also is an officer of Rensselaer’s completely volunteer, student-run television station, RPI TV.

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Spotlight on Library Operations: Public Services
Contributed by Irving Stephens, Manager of Public Services

This is the first in a series of four articles by department heads within the Rensselaer Libraries describing their activities and services.

Sixteen years ago in 1983, I wrote a piece for the Friends’ newsletter describing what was then called “Building Services.” Since 1983 much, of course, has changed at Rensselaer and especially at the Folsom Library. “Then” was the age of print; “now” is the digital era. Today the department is called “Public Services,” a change that better reflects a wider customer orientation and expanded duties. Although the department is still responsible for overseeing the use of collections and facilities, Public Services staff also handle interlibrary loan and document delivery, as well as an expedited borrowing program with the 13 other libraries comprising the ConnectNY library consortia.

Some long-established services, such as class reserves and photocopying—maybe some of you remember the long lines of students—have almost disappeared. The daily challenge of re-shelving hundreds of books and journals is also gone because the library now subscribes to the digital libraries of the IEEE, SPIE, and the ACM, and almost all of its research journals are received only in electronic format. However, “over-the-counter” loans of library material actually remain close to 1983 levels. The difference is that movies on DVDs have supplanted book checkouts!

In 1983, Building Services had 14 full-time staff and typically about 75 part-time student assistants working in three separate offices. Today, there are only six full-time staff in Public Services and usually 12 to 15 part-time student assistants, all based in the main floor’s circulation work area behind the colored “sails” of the Hobo-Dyer maps.

Information technology has enabled Public Services staff to be more productive and, I think, made their jobs more interesting. Everyone is cross-trained and by necessity functions together as a self-directed workgroup. Each day they take turns scanning, searching the Internet, contacting other libraries for materials, or showing students how to use different resources. One important element that has not changed since 1983, however, is that Public Services staff still make the first and last impressions of the library to visitors and researchers.

Board Changes
(continued from page 3)

When not busy with school work and extracurricular activities, Khan enjoys hanging out with friends and playing video games. He will serve on the Board for two years.

Susan Orton

Last month, Susan Orton resigned from the Board and her position as Senior Advancement Officer at Rensselaer after accepting the position of Director of Foundation, Corporate, and Government Relations at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. During her time here, she initiated and built relationships with several major private foundations. Chief among these is Rensselaer’s new relationship with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has provided support for the Empire State STEM Education Initiative, with Rensselaer as the primary lead. Orton had been at Rensselaer for three years, the last two serving on the Board and the Friends’ Events Planning Committee. We wish her the best in her new appointment.
Over the next four decades, the school changed its name twice—to Rensselaer Institute in 1834 and then to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1861. During this period, it moved into previously occupied buildings while also building a few. With the exception of the Winslow Building, these either succumbed to fire, were sold, or were eventually razed. It wasn't until 1905, when the Institute purchased the ten-acre Walter Phelps Warren estate, that a real campus was created on the hill overlooking the Collar City.

You can read all about the Institute’s early buildings and its progression from Old Bank Place to the modern campus of 1990 at [http://www.lib.rpi.edu/Archives/buildings](http://www.lib.rpi.edu/Archives/buildings). For plenty of interesting snippets about Rensselaer, visit RPI History Revealed at [http://rpiarchives.wordpress.com](http://rpiarchives.wordpress.com). Rupert, aka “amythearchivist,” continually adds items and information she uncovers from the Archives and Special Collections to this blog and encourages readers to respond and ask questions.

Because the response to “The Phantom Rensselaer of Yesterday” luncheon/lecture/bus tour was so overwhelming, a second bus tour was arranged for June and a walking tour was led by Rupert in July. The popularity of this type of event indicates that Friends and others have a keen interest in Rensselaer’s history. For that reason, the Friends’ Events Planning Committee is busy working on future programs relating to Rensselaer’s past.

I think the health of our civilization, the depth of our awareness about the underpinnings of our culture, and our concern for the future, can all be tested by how well we support our libraries.”

Carl Sagan
Want to get to know some PROMINENT PAST PRESIDENTS of Rensselaer?

Then plan to attend the Friends’ next luncheon, followed by a lecture given by Rensselaer historian Carl Westerdahl and Assistant Institute Archivist Amy Rupert.

Date: Thursday, November 19, 2009

Time: 12:00 noon – 1:00 p.m.

Place: Heffner Alumni House, bottom floor

Price: Free for RPI students, $5.00 for Friends members, $12.00 for all others

RSVP by November 11, 2009 to Adrienne Birchler (276-8329; bircha@rpi.edu).