

HISTORY



Frank Taormina portrays 19th century Schenectady mayor and New York Gov. Joseph Yates in a previous Stockade Walkabout.

Stroll into the past

BY BILL BUELL
Gazette Reporter

If he weren't so personable, Frank Taormina could probably do a better job of portraying New York Gov. Joseph Yates in Saturday's 47th Stockade Walkabout and Waterfront Faire. But then, how educational and entertaining would that be?

"Yates was a remarkably closed-mouth individual who kept his opinions to himself," said Taormina, who will dress up in early 19th century garb and impersonate Yates for the seventh consecutive September. "He was honest and hard-working, but he just wasn't very flamboyant."

A former social studies teacher who became a high school principal at Niskayuna in 1968, Taormina has continued to share his love and knowledge of history long after leaving the classroom. Also a past president of the Schenectady County Historical Society, he keeps busy making presentations to local groups, often about the Erie Canal or the American Revolution, two of his favorite

Former social studies teacher Frank Taormina gets kick out of portraying Gov. Joseph Yates

subjects. For the Walkabout, however, he tells visitors the story of Yates, a former mayor of Schenectady whose historical claim to fame is that his two-year stint (1822-23) as governor was sandwiched between the two terms of DeWitt Clinton.

"Clinton had the type of temperament that alienated him from some people, but anyone who knew him probably considered him a brilliant man," said Taormina. "He was second to [Thomas] Jefferson or maybe just as smart as. That couldn't be said of Yates. But he was the kind of man who paid attention to what he was doing and was never

involved in anything dishonest. I like him, and to get dressed up and walk around the Stockade talking to people about him is fun. I really enjoy it."

The best place to find Taormina during Saturday's Walkabout, which begins at 11 and concludes at 5 p.m., is somewhere in the vicinity of 17 Front St., Yates' home for much of his later life, including the two years he served as governor.

HISTORIC CHURCHES

It is one of 17 sites on this year's Walkabout, which, along with several houses,

47th annual Stockade Walkabout and Waterfront Faire

WHERE: Schenectady's Stockade section.
WHEN: 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday
HOW MUCH: \$15 through today. \$20 Friday and Saturday
MORE INFO: 377-9430

includes three historic Stockade churches; the First Reformed, St. George's and the First Presbyterian. The Waterfront Faire, meanwhile, will be held at Riverside Park along the Mohawk River and will offer a variety of activities for the family, including the Schenectady Heritage Foundation's "Preservation Faire," and the Schenectady County "Historic Flaire," hosted by Schenectady County and city historian Don Rittner.

Stockade: Homes, historical figures share the spotlight in Walkabout

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Taormina's interest in history began at an early age, soon after his family moved from New York City to a farm in Marlboro in the Hudson Valley. He was too young to serve during World War II, but after graduating from Union College with a degree in history, he spent two years in the Army during the Korean War. He began his teaching career at Broadalbin in 1954 and was at Niskayuna a year later in September of 1955. He retired in 1986 as the assistant superintendent and in 1987 became president of the Schenectady County Historical Society.

His interest in local history was heightened a few years earlier when the town of Niskayuna decided to widen Balltown Road and encroach on what he thought was his property.

"My wife and I felt they weren't

compensating us properly. So I set out to do some research and prove that we were right and they were wrong," remembered Taormina. "What I found out was that they were right and we were wrong. But I learned a lot about the history of Balltown Road, and I started coming down to the historical society and talking to people. I learned there was some very interesting history in this locale, and many fascinating individuals."

SON OF A WAR HERO

Among them was Yates, whose father, Christopher, distinguished himself in both the French and Indian War and the American Revolution.

"From the French and Indian War into the first third of the 19th century, the Yates family was very influential in New York politics," said Taormina. "I'm not going to say they reached the stature of the Clintons, but they were a very im-

portant family, especially in this immediate area."

It was Sylvie Briber, a past chairwoman of the event and this year's chair of the house selection committee, who asked Taormina to play Yates for the Walkabout.

"We were looking to infuse the Walkabout with some new, fun things, and that's when we started offering the carriage ride and the historical characters," said Briber. "We were looking for somebody who would sort of welcome visitors on the street, and Frank seemed to be the perfect ambassador. He has a wealth of information about the Yates family, and he's very easy to talk to. People immediately feel comfortable around him."

Taormina's knowledge of area history and his knack at telling a good story make him a valuable teaching tool, according to Kate Weller, curator at the Schenectady County Historical Society.

"His knowledge and pleasant per-

sonality make history accessible to many people that might not already have an interest in the subject, and his expertise in local history makes him a treasure trove for historians trying to look deeper into Schenectady's contribution to larger historical events," said Weller. "He's one of our well-tapped assets at the historical society, and we're very lucky to have him."

Along with Taormina, also dressed up in period costume and touring the neighborhood will be Bill Hickman as Simon Schermerhorn, a hero of the 1690 Schenectady Massacre, and Robert Petito as Arendt Van Curler, Schenectady's founder.

Advance tickets for the Walkabout can be purchased through today for \$15 at the Schenectady County Historical Society or the Downtown Schenectady Improvement Corporation. Tickets purchased Friday or the day of the event will be \$20.

TOUR STOPS

Here is the list of stops on Saturday's Walkabout Tour.

No. 1 — 10 Front St., home of Mr. and Mrs. John Chequer.

No. 2 — 17 Front St., apartment of John Samatulski.

No. 3 — Pump station, at end of Ferry Street on the Mohawk River.

No. 4 — 108 Front St., home of Don Mealy.

No. 5 — 137 Front St., Riverside Condominium, #210, home of Christine Angione.

No. 6 — 137 Front St., Riverside Condominium, #304, home of Susanna Sherwood.

No. 7 — 112 South College St., Clinton's Ditch, owned by Tim Trier.

No. 8 — 232 Union St., Studio 232, home and business of Diane and Ron DeMeo.

No. 9 — 209 Union St., First Presbyterian Church.

No. 10 — 207 Union St., home

of Gloria Kishton and Robert Lemmerman.

No. 11 — 30 North Ferry St., St. George's Episcopal Church.

No. 12 — 109 Union St. (exterior only), home of Miodzianowski Family. On display will be archaeological excavations from the backyard gardens of what was the Abraham Yates House.

No. 13 — Union and North Church streets, the First Reformed Church.

No. 14 — Union and North Church streets, the Stockade Inn, owned by Jack McDonald.

No. 15 — 44 Washington Ave., the YWCA.

No. 16 — 32 Washington Ave., the Schenectady County Historical Society (the Dora Jackson home).

No. 17 — 22 North Church St., home of Beth and Mike Petta.

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