



HISTORY

# First architect of the Mohawk Valley



Walter Wheeler stands outside his workplace, Hartgen Archeological Associates in Rensselaer. Wheeler, an architectural historian, will give a presentation on architect Samuel Fuller on Saturday at the Schenectady County Historical Society.  
BRUCE SQUIERS/  
GAZETTE  
PHOTOGRAPHER

## From St. George's Church to Johnson Hall, Samuel Fuller put stamp on region in 18th century

BY BILL BUELL  
Gazette Reporter

Stockade residents who enjoy the look and feel of Schenectady's historical district have always been big fans of 18th century architect Samuel Fuller, and Walter Wheeler strongly shares that interest.

A cultural resource specialist and architectural historian with Hartgen Archeological Associates in Rensselaer, Wheeler will speak about Fuller and his work Saturday at 2 p.m. at the Schenectady County Historical Society. However, some of what he has to say may come as a surprise to Fuller fans.

"There are a lot of buildings out there that have been attributed to him that we don't know for sure he actually built," said Wheeler, who will offer an hourlong PowerPoint presentation and then a question-and-answer period. "There's also a lot we don't know about him, like when he died. It was sometime just before the American Revolution, and I suspect, given his long association with the king's work, that he might have been a Loyalist. His family stayed in the area, but it's curious that there's no record of when he died."

Fuller's ancestors came to America on the Mayflower. He left Boston and showed up in Schenectady in March of 1758 during the height of the French and Indian War. He was employed in the king's service as a builder of ships, and was also responsible for the construction of wagons, shelter and log houses used by the army of Gen. James Abercrombie.

### BUILDING A REPUTATION

He's first credited with building the home of Niskayuna merchant John Duncan in 1761, and many historians also give him credit for the Nicholas Herkimer house out in the western regions of the Mohawk Valley. Wheeler isn't so sure.

"There were attributions made during the latter part of the 19th century that we can't be sure of," said Wheeler. "People in the 1870s in this area latched onto his name and then assigned projects to him based on a certain style of architecture. It

### 'Building Samuel Fuller'

**WHO:** Historical architect Walter Wheeler  
**WHERE:** Schenectady County Historical Society  
**WHEN:** 2 p.m. Saturday  
**HOW MUCH:** Admission is free; donations are welcome  
**MORE INFO:** 374-0263

was how they perceived things in the 19th century."

Fuller has generally been recognized as the first architect of the Mohawk Valley, and Wheeler reports that there is plenty of documentation to support some of the structures attributed to him, such as St. George's Episcopal Church in the Stockade, completed around 1762, and Johnson Hall, the home of Sir William Johnson in Johnstown, built in 1763.

"Architecture has been around since the Egyptians, but in terms of upstate New York there weren't any practicing architects until the end of the 19th century," said Wheeler. "Fuller, while identified as an architect, isn't one, at least not in the modern sense. He was a talented carpenter, a master builder."

That distinction doesn't at all detract from Fuller's work, according to Wheeler.

### WORK STANDS OUT

"He used patterns from books, and his houses weren't that different from other major structures in America at that time," said Wheeler. "But in the context of the Mohawk Valley, his buildings were outstanding. His work stands out when you remember what else was being built in this area at that time."

Fuller is also credited with building the Yates House on Union Street, the Johannes Glen House on Washington Avenue, and the Campbell Mansion, which was at the corner of State and Church streets, as well as Guy Park Manor in Amsterdam.

"He may have, but I'm very suspicious of those buildings, especially the



St. George's Church built 1759, Schenectady, N. Y.

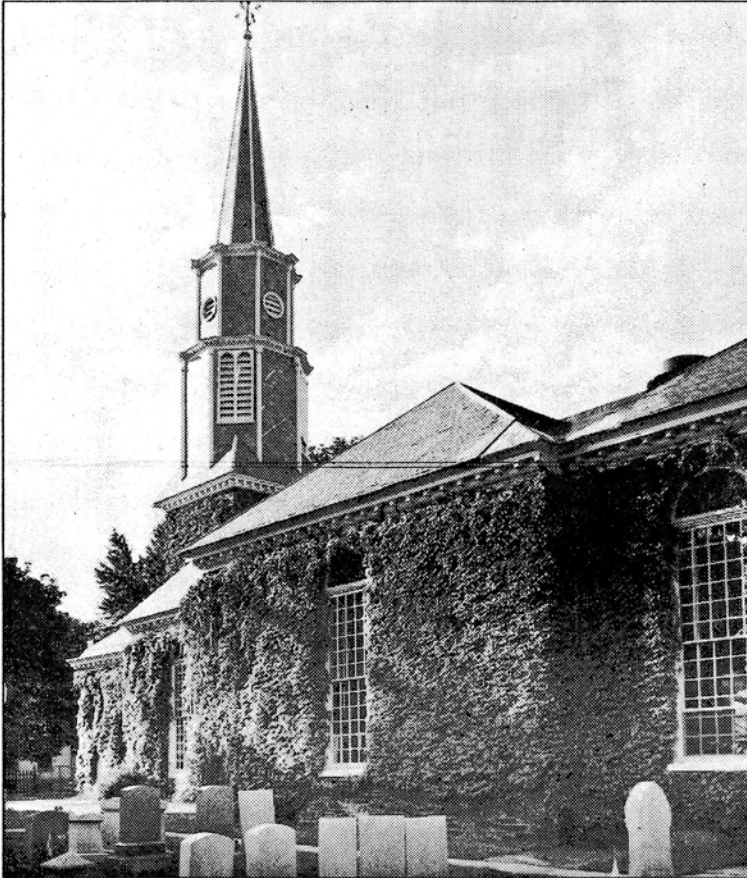
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This is a postcard of St. George's Episcopal Church, one of 18th century architect Samuel Fuller's creations.

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# Fuller: Architect's influence still evident



St. George's Church in Schenectady was designed by architect Samuel Fuller.

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Campbell Mansion," said Wheeler. "Back in the 18th and 19th century, people didn't know who was the builder of these houses. It wasn't talked about until historians tried to determine these things later in the 19th century, and we can't be sure that they were accurate."

Wheeler graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1986 with a degree in building sciences, and also picked up a second degree in architecture in 1987. While he's always had an interest in how things are built, his curiosity concerning historical architecture became a passion after writing a book on Philip Hooker, the man who built Albany Academy, the Dutch Reformed Church and five other churches in the Albany area.

"In 1991, I was hired by Hamilton College to co-curate and write a book on Philip Hooker," said Wheeler. "That's what really got me interested in architecture in the 18th and early 19th century. The Capital District has some wonderful pockets of architecture that are really fascinating. The Stockade is one of those, and it's fairly unique because of the way the city devel-

oped, to the south and east of it. It escaped a lot of destruction in the 20th century. So it's a very well preserved neighborhood. It's fairly intact; so it's a very special place."

## **INSIGHT ON FULLER**

According to Schenectady County Historical Society curator Kathryn Weller, those interested in history and architecture won't want to miss Wheeler's presentation.

"Samuel Fuller's designs helped bring Georgian architectural principles to this area," said Weller. "This change in architecture gives tangible evidence of English design taking over the earlier Dutch styles.

"Walter Wheeler has researched Fuller's life and architectural exploits extensively, and his insight into the overall trends of Anglomania throughout this area will help put Fuller's influence at the dawn of the American Revolution into context."

Refreshments will be served at 1:30 p.m. There is no admission fee.

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