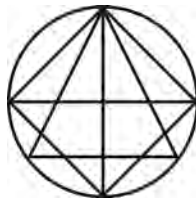


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A History of *The Vale*

*Schenectady's Historic
Rural Cemetery*

Don Rittner



Square Circle Press

Schenectady, New York

**A History of The Vale:
Schenectady's Historic Rural Cemetery**

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Dedicated to

Bernie and Barbara McEvoy

Two Tireless Volunteers

BOOK PREVIEW

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Preface

This book is divided into four chapters and four appendices. Chapter One explains the burial conditions of the city before the development of Vale, while Chapter Two gives a brief explanation of the Rural Cemetery Movement. Chapter Three is the story of how Vale became a reality, and Chapter Four describes some of the special areas in the cemetery.

Appendix 1 provides brief biographies and other information about 100 notable people buried at Vale. Appendix 2 gives a list of General Electric employees, while Appendix 3 lists those residents of the Union College plot. Appendix 4 has multiple lists of vegetation that has been planted in various sections of the cemetery.

Vale Cemetery is a working cemetery and is operated by a non-profit organization that maintains it, mostly by volunteers. You can help continue to make Vale successful by considering having Vale be your eternal resting place, or you can adopt a grave of one of the notables in the book by making a donation each year in his or her name. By purchasing this book you have already made a small donation to the cemetery, as all the royalties for this book go directly to the cemetery association.

I would like to thank Bernie and Barbara McEvoy for their trust in me to bring to light some of the eternal stories from a selected group of Vale residents. Acknowledgments also go to the Vale Cemetery Board; Chris Hunter, Archivist at Schenectady Museum of Science and Innovation; Brown School; Frank Taormina; Dr. Hargan Thomsen; Marlene DesChamps, Union College Archives; Paul Carnahan, Librarian, Vermont Historical Society; Brooke A. Manrique, Public Relations, SI Group; Laurie McFadden, Herrick Librarian and University Archivist, Alfred University's Susanne Greenhagen; Jim Gandy, Assistant Librarian/Archivist, New York State Military Museum; Timothy Ware; Mike Reid, KU Memorial Unions; Efner Research Center. Apologies to those omitted.

Don Rittner



Historic Postcard of original entrance to Vale Cemetery from Nott Terrace. The path to the left goes to the lakes.

Introduction

For death is no more than a turning of us over from time to eternity.

—William Penn

In the Capital District of New York State there exist three major cemeteries attributed to the “Rural Cemetery Movement” of the early 19th century: Albany Rural Cemetery (1844), designed by Maj. D.B. Douglass; Oakwood Cemetery (1848) in Troy, designed by John C. Sidney and John Boetcher; and Schenectady’s Vale Cemetery (1857), designed by Burton A. Thomas and John Doyle. All were expressions of a growing movement to rid urban areas of overcrowded and unsanitary graveyards, as well as create more “park-like” repose for the dead. They also provided a means for anyone who could afford a burial an eternal resting place that did not matter what religion or socioeconomic status one belonged to. Among the millionaires and notables could be found the small business owner, tailor, soldier or iron worker. It was a democratization of death.

When Vale Cemetery was originally designed it was located on the eastern end of the city of Schenectady, and indeed was rural. It was part of the sandy Pine Barrens that stretched all the way to Albany. There was little residential development in the area, and State Street and upper roads were impassable in the spring due to the soaked and rutty mud laid down by carriage wheels and, later, early automobiles. Expansion of residential and commercial development after the 1930s engulfed the area around the cemetery, and it is now an integral part of the city.

Vale is not only a beautiful and well laid out cemetery—it is also a history lesson. While many of the cemetery’s residents are spending their eternal rest in peace, many of the residents buried at Vale represent people that have made major notable contributions to American history in science, politics, military, literature, education, business and invention, and a host of other disciplines. Laid out among the 33,000 residents at Vale are many names found in history books. The purpose of this book is to illustrate one hundred of these notable figures, with their biographies and contributions, in celebration of the continued operation of the 100-acre cemetery—one biography for every acre.

There are many types of materials that make up headstones, and most of these types can be found in Vale. For an enjoyable geology lesson, try to locate ones made from sandstone, slate, limestone, soapstone, field stone (blue stone, graywacke), cast iron, stainless steel, granite, bronze, marble, field boulders, cast zinc or even wood. These monuments are usually inscribed with the name, birth and death dates, and sometimes a few words about the deceased, and often contain much more in the form of symbols or iconic forms, clues about what the deceased did, or was proud of during his or her lifetime. (See the images on the following pages.)

Those that do contain symbols or icons can tell something about what the grieving family felt, or proudly promote a membership in a society, an award or recognition, a military affiliation or a religious or fraternal connection. There is a very good web site that describes the meaning of many of the symbols you will find as you explore the graves at Vale. Go to the United States Genealogy & History Network at <http://msgbn.org/usgbn/symbols.html>.*

There is also another good web site that explains the abbreviations found on graves at <http://msgbn.org/usgbn/abbreviations.html>.

The Vale (Vale Park), that is the wooded ravine of Cowhorn Creek that runs through the cemetery and is impounded into two lakes, is a great retreat for nature loving, hiking or biking. An extension of a county-wide bike trail now runs through the cemetery grounds, beginning at the Nott Street entrance, and exiting at Brandywine Avenue.

* All web site addresses in this book were accurate at the time they were recorded.



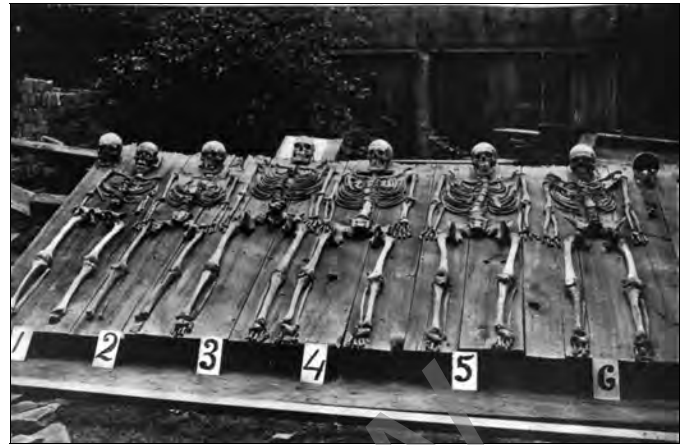
The James G. Haigh Monument. "Dog Lion" visited every day and when he died, workmen paid to have this statue of him.



The Magee monument allows you to rest and contemplate.

In May 1941, five skulls and assorted bones were found in a common grave in the backyard of 418 Paige Street. In 1943, four skeletons were unearthed on the old Shopmyer Farm on Van Antwerp Road.

Six of these skeletons (1, 2, 3) are Native Americans while the remaining are Dutchmen exhumed on June 24, 1902 near the site of the North Gate (Ferry and Church Streets), massacre victims.



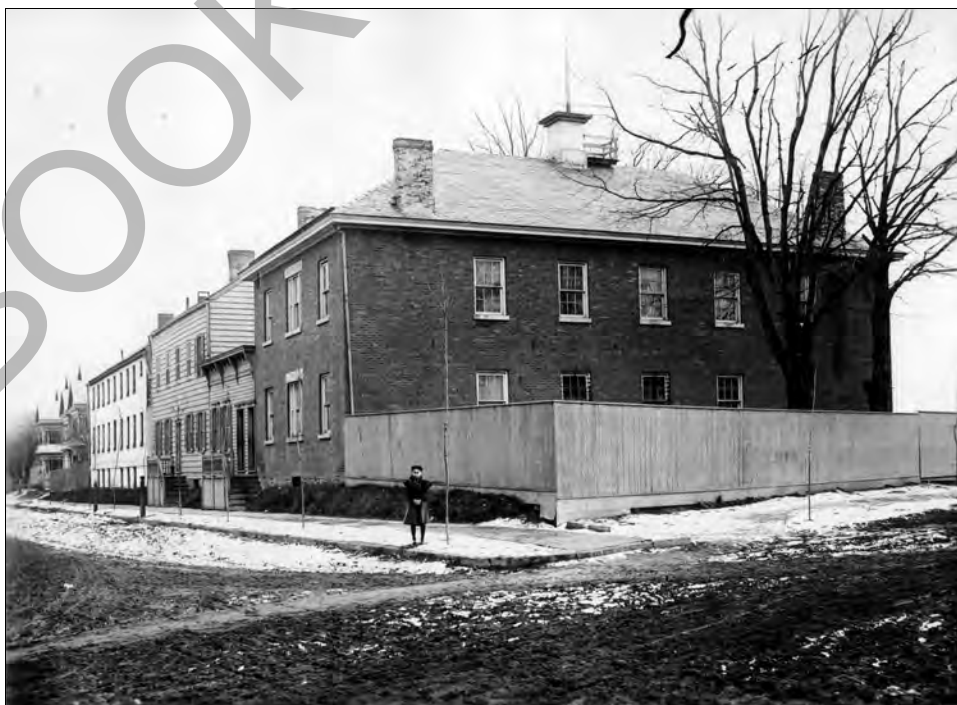
In June 1965, workers digging a trench for a natural gas pipe near the southwest corner of Broadway and State streets found parts of four skeletons. They were found in a flexed position with artifacts, a clay pipe with the initials “MG,” and layers of bark around them, more than likely indicative of being Native American. The Initials “MG” are puzzling because of two different attributions: one could be for Miggiel Gillisz of Gouda in 1667; the second supposition that it was for Thomas Sparnaay, whose burial was as late as 1865. If indeed they were from the earlier date, they were likely victims of the 1690 massacre, if not simple earlier deaths by natural causes.

In July 1974, workers digging for a new sewer pipe found the remains of a mass burial ground on Hamilton Street near Hulett Street. The burial ground was thought to have been a mass burial of cholera epidemic deaths of 1832. The remains were brought to Vale.

An abandoned cemetery with nineteen headstones was found on Florence Street, north of Albany Street, on what was the old Vrooman Farm. The oldest headstone was dated 1811, the newest 1902.

Many of the headstones from the old Dutch cemetery on Front and Green streets never made it to the Vale re-internment. Several can be found in the gardens and walkways of the homes of Stockade residents, such as 48 Washington Avenue and 3 Front Street.

It is likely that more remains will be found over the years.



The Schenectady Poor House had its own burial plots not far from the Hamilton Hill burial lots of the 1820s. Some of these may have been reburied at Vale’s Potters Field.

The secondary object of cemeteries, that of improving the moral feelings, will be one of the results of the decorous attainment of the main object; graveyards lose their monitory virtue when they are covered with weeds, and left to nature. “Why,” says Washington Irving, “should we thus seek to clothe death with unnecessary terrors, and to spread horrors around the tomb of those we love? The grave should be surrounded by everything that can inspire tenderness and veneration for the dead, or that might win the living to virtue. It is the place, not of disgust or dismay, but of sorrow and meditation.

His third point was that churchyards and cemeteries were scenes not only “calculated to improve the morals and the taste, and by their botanical riches to cultivate the intellect, but they serve as historical records.”

By the mid-nineteenth century the rural cemetery movement was widespread in America. “Rural” actually meant a burial ground located on the outskirts of a city that was based upon the romantic idea of the English landscape gardens that were popular at the time in Europe. Unlike the previous views of burial grounds, the rural cemetery was considered a regular and must-do adventure for a tourist—especially in the early days, when it was more park-like than graveyard—with winding roads, wrought iron bridges and plenty of nature to enjoy.

The development of Vale Cemetery was made possible due to the partly growing rural cemetery movement, but also because of the deplorable conditions of existing cemeteries in the city.



Postcard view of Valley Lake emptying into a new lake to the west towards Nott Terrace.



A heron fishing on one of the small lakes in The Vale. (Photo courtesy of Richard Vang.)



The 1875 Bailey & Company Map of Schenectady shows one entrance to Vale from the corner of Eastern Liberty Street (now Eastern Avenue) and Nott Terrace along with the Nott Terrace first entrance. Upper State Street was then East Avenue. The State Street entrance is not on the map. The cemetery lakes are shown.



Topographic view of Vale lakes in 1927 showing location of bridges and road system. The eastern most lake had already disappeared.

Special Areas in Vale Cemetery

The Vale

Cowhorn Creek, which originally began in the sandy pine barrens to the west, flows through Vale Cemetery, eventually finding its way to the Mohawk River. It is one of many such streams that drain the sandy pine barrens that sit between the Mohawk and Hudson Valleys. It is likely that it was in the area around the Vale that Arendt Van Curler, founder of Schenectady, first saw the beauty of the Mohawk Valley and wrote it was “the fairest land the eyes of man ever rested upon.”

This valley of the Cowhorn Creek, with its abundance of native wildlife and flora, has been modified over the years with the building of the lakes, sewer lines and other human disturbance. However, it still retains much of its natural setting, and is a great place to commune with nature, hike and take photographs. In 1973, 37.5 acres of the Vale on Nott Terrace were sold to the City of Schenectady as a park.

The Union College Plot

Known as the College Plot, one of the most unusual benefits of teaching at Union College is a free burial plot. Nestled among pines and oaks and overlooking Valley Water Lake, it was not the first choice of Union College. Urania, the wife of college president Eliphalet Nott, wanted the site to sit along the Hans Groot Kill east of the North College. President Nott decided on the Vale Cemetery location in 1863 when he sold the land totaling 17 acres to the cemetery association for \$200 an acre, and reserved the 3.5-acre site for college use. There are currently over 200 plots and several notable figures who reside there.

Local historian Frank Taormina, a 1950 graduate of Union, compiled a list of the residents and they are listed in Appendix 3 with his permission.



Entrance to the Union College Plot.

Vale Urban Farm

An innovative urban farm is being tried in the newest section of the cemetery by Transition Schenectady, a group of people that have created local initiatives based on ideas by Transition US, a grassroots, non-profit organization that provides inspiration, encouragement, support, networking and training for Transition Initiatives across the United States. People, mostly from the Vale neighborhood, contribute eight hours per month of garden work in exchange for a percentage of what is grown. Each person who contributes volunteer work on the large plot is given a 10-foot by 10-foot plot. Produce from the garden, grown without pesticides and herbicides, is also donated to the Schenectady Day Nursery and City Mission's meal programs. Crops include tomatoes, collard greens, peppers, cabbage, radishes, lettuce, broccoli, arugula and spinach.

Vale Park

In 1973 the city purchased 37.5 acres of the "Vale" from the association for \$300,000 for park purposes. It currently has swings and other accommodations for children. The first burial vault was located here when the cemetery opened in 1857.



Nott Street entrance to Vale Park. (Photo courtesy of Richard Vang.)

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community

The newest area of the cemetery is dedicated to the Pakistani Muslim group and is in the eastern section of the cemetery. There is currently one burial.

Appendix 1: 101 Notables in Vale Cemetery

This section contains biographical information on 101 notable residents of Vale Cemetery. They are given in alphabetical order, with the known birth and death dates, and their locations (if known). The plot locations are somewhat problematic, as the catalog is maintained on file cards and over the years different notation systems were used to record them. In addition, Union College uses a different notation index for their plot.

Ernst Frederick Werner Alexanderson

January 25, 1878 - May 14, 1975

Location: M1 #87 A

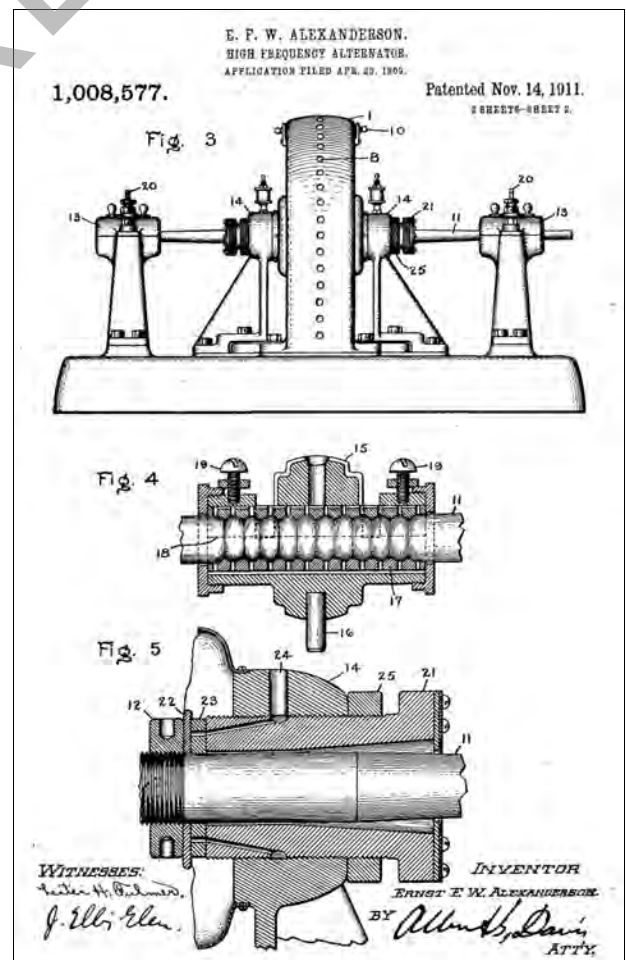
Ernst, who went by the name Alex, was born in Uppsala, Sweden, the son of a judge and professor of Greek. He graduated from the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm in 1900 and did post-graduate work at the Technical University in Berlin. He came to America in 1902. While in Germany he read books on AC current written by Charles Steinmetz; he wanted to work for Charles Steinmetz and moved to Schenectady to meet him. He worked for the C&C Electric Company as a draftsman before he found his job at General Electric in 1902. He is considered to be “the father of radio and television.”

In 1906, on Christmas Eve, he played his experimental alternator and broadcast Christmas music, which could be heard by Navy ships and shore stations as far south as Arlington, Virginia. He even played the violin, making it the first AM radio broadcast in entertainment. The alternator in Varberg Sweden is still fired up each July 4th, Alexanderson Day, in his honor. It was placed on the UNSECSO World heritage list in 2004. His Alexanderson alternator was used between 1906 and the 1930s for long distance radio transmission.

During WWI he perfected a 200-kilowatt alternator that was installed at the transatlantic Marconi Company station in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Both President Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, then Assistant Secretary of the Navy, used it for transmitting messages to the war theaters in Europe.

On October 20, 1918, the first important practical test was conducted with the transmission of President Wilson’s ultimatum to Germany that helped bring the war to a close. Wilson then asked G.E. to organize an American company to use the alternator, and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) was created, with Alexanderson named as its chief engineer in 1919. He later went back to G.E. before he retired in 1948.

In 1923, Alexanderson was the first to use what we now call an “Amber Alert,” when he recovered his 6-year-old son Verner from kidnappers near the Canadian border. He and his wife went on WGY radio and pleaded for his release, and a caretaker in a resort in northern New York



Patent drawing for Alexanderson's alternator. (Image courtesy of Museum of Science and Innovation, Schenectady.)

His home, which he built in 1857 and died in at the corner of Lafayette and Smith Streets, has served as the Rectory for St. Josephs Roman Catholic Church since 1928. His daughter Catherine etched her name on the second floor window, which is still there. His business establishment was located at the northeast corner of State and Ferry streets, now owned by the Schenectady County Community College. George Westinghouse Jr. also rented office space in the building.

He was a trustee of the YMCA, and as assemblyman helped get \$30,000 to build an armory, \$30,000 to survey for a railroad to run to Canada, and a \$100,000 appropriation for an observatory for Union College that got vetoed. He also helped raise money for the Home of the Sisters of Charity and the Old Ladies Home. He also helped get Vale Cemetery started.

During the draft riots in 1863, he raised a regiment called the Washington Continentals at the request of the governor, and his buffalo regiment went to the front against General Lee. He got his Colonel designation from this regiment, the 83rd New York.

He also represented Schenectady in the New York State Assembly in 1868.

Carroll A. “Pink” Gardner

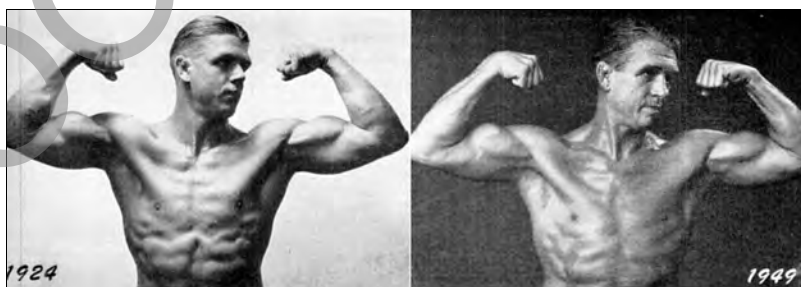
1894 - September 28, 1969

Location: 1 F N

Carroll “Pink” Gardner was born in Poughkeepsie and moved to Schenectady with his family when he was 13 years old.

He was the owner of the Chas. N. Gardner & Sons monument company that specialized in building memorial headstones, and was located at 918-920 State Street. His father started the company in 1900. Carroll was President of the New York State Retail Monument Builders Association and built his own elaborate headstone in 1951. It shows two ancient Roman wrestlers from 300 B.C., and a statement about wrestling. He also owned the Gardner School of Physical Culture.

A former world-class wrestler, he started wrestling with the Schenectady YMCA in 1911. While only 5 feet, 8 inches tall and weighing 162 pounds, he had a neck of 16 inches, a chest of 41 inches, 14-1/2-inch biceps, forearms of 12-1/2 inches, thighs of 22 inches and a calf of 14-1/2 inches. His titles included World Middleweight Champion in 1921 and 1922 and World Heavyweight Champion in 1932. He made the carnival circuit and traveled the country. He stopped fighting at age 42 but was still in great physical shape throughout his life. He taught wrestling and jujitsu during WWII at the Marine barracks in Scotia.



Gardner in 1924 and 1949. From *The Rotarian*.

He became County Sheriff in 1930-31, the first Democrat in 30 years. He was a controversial official to say the least. When he became County Clerk in 1936, it took him three months to decide to use photostat machines instead of typewriting public records. The Motor Vehicle Bureau of which he was in charge was late in submitting records to the state DMV. He also had 17 extra employees on his payroll that were unexplained.

Gardner, undefeated as County Clerk, held the position for 11 terms from 1936 to 1969. He was the leading vote-getter in the county's history, but lost bids for Congress three times, the last in 1934 to Mayor Sam Stratton in a primary, and Stratton had every Democratic leader against him. Stratton won heavily anyway by 68% of the vote.

PLANTING LIST,
VALE CEMETERY, SCHENECTADY N. Y.
SECTION A N.

TREES

SCIENTIFIC NAME COMMON NAME,	ABV. HGT OF TREE	HGT OF TRUNK	CAL. IN INCHES	BB or R	DIAM OF BALL	SPR OF ROOT	QUAN.
Cornus mas Cornelian Cherry,	Cm 7'-8'	3'	1½"	BB	24"	—	3
Prunus serrulata Oriental Cherry (Var. Kwanzan)	Pk 9'-10'	4'	2"	BB	24"	—	2

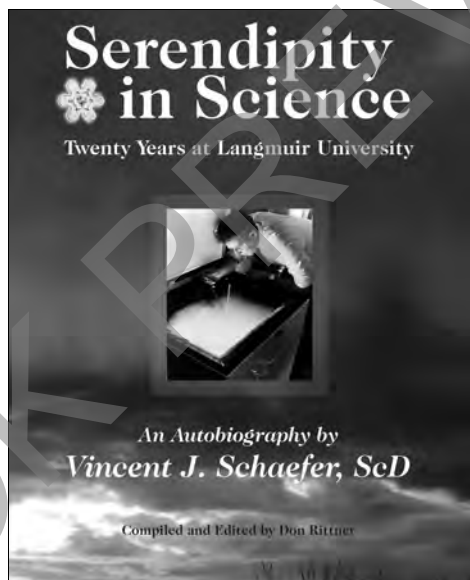
S H R U B S

SCIENTIFIC NAME, COMMON NAME	No. of CANES	WEIGHT IN FEET,	B.B. or R	SPREAD OF ROOTS,	ABV.	QUANTITY
Rosa hugonis Hugonis Rose,	6	2'-3'	R	14"	Rh	4
Prunus glandulosa, Double Pink Almond,	5	3'-4'	R	18"	Pg	2
Hydrangea aborescens, Snowhill Hydrangea,	8	2½'-3½'	R	14"	Sh	4
Euonymus Alatus, Winged Euonymus,	5	5'-6'	B&B	24"	Ea	2
Rhodotypos kerroides Jet Bead,	5	2½'-3'	R	15"	Rk	5
Syringa persica, Persian Lilac,	5	4'-5'	R	20"	Sp	2
Kerria japonica pleniflora, Kerria Double Flower,	6	2'-3'	R	16"	Kj	8
Deutzia lemoine compacta Dwarf Lemoine Deutzia,	6	1½'-2'	R	14"	Dl	16
Spiraea vanhouttei, Vanhouttei Spiraea,	6	4'-5'	R	22"	Spv	3
Syringa josikaea Hungarian Lilac,	6	5'-6'	B&B	24"	Sj	2
Philadelphus virginialis, Mock Orange (Double)	5	4'-5'	R	22"	Pv	2
Philadelphus avalanche (Variety of Lemoinei)	5	1½'-2'	R	14"	Pav	18
Chaenomeles japonica Dwarf Japanese Quince,	4	1½'	R	15"	Cjm	6

About the Author

Don Rittner is an author, environmentalist, documentarian, historian and archeologist. He has authored close to 40 books and over 1000 articles in science, history, computers and the Internet. He was the former Schenectady County and City Historian (2005-1013) and Albany City Archeologist (1972-79). He headed the construction of The Onrust, a replica of the first fur trading ship built in America (2005-2014). Rittner was the owner of The Learning Factory, an alternative education center from 1996-2001. He was the producer of award winning documentaries, *The Neighborhood That Disappeared* and *ECHOES From The Neighborhood That Disappeared* that documented the displacement of 9000 immigrant families from Albany's South End during the construction of the Empire State Mall during the early 1960s.

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