

A CATHOLIC CHURCH NEAR HITCHCOCK CORNERS

Construction of the first Catholic Church building within the Sharon town borders came about through a series of rather bizarre events. Except for location, these events exhibited little relevance to the slow and often sporadic growth of Catholicism in Sharon. Yet some of the preliminary events would prove to be both of national and international significance for nineteenth century Catholics.

The little church, St. Genevieve Chapel, was dedicated on July 21, 1872. Located high on the hill south of Amenia Union, the structure faced south toward the present Clark Hill Road. From the rear the site overlooked the Oblong Valley and the Taconic Mountain Range to the northwest. The chapel of Saint Genevieve had been built through the efforts of Lizzie Saint John Eckel, known as Madame Eckel, a daughter of the notorious Maria Monk.

WHO WAS MARIA MONK AND WHY WAS SHE NOTORIOUS?

Born in St. Johns, Quebec, Canada on June 1, 1816, Maria Monk grew up in Montreal. Purportedly experiencing a head wound as a child, she suffered infrequent periods of mental derangement for the rest of her life. Because of promiscuous behavior she was placed in a Roman Catholic asylum for prostitutes. In 1834, Maria was dismissed from the asylum when it was discovered she was pregnant.[\[1\]](#)

Following the birth of a daughter Georgina, William K. Hoyte head of the Canadian Benevolent Society befriended Maria. This society was an organization that linked the strong anti-Catholic movement with Protestant missionary work. Hoyte took Maria to New York where he engaged the assistance of fellow anti-Catholic activists in writing the story of her time as a nun in the Hotel Dieu Convent in Montreal near the asylum in which she had been incarcerated. Published in 1836, as the *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, the book was subtitled *As Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Sufferings during a Residence of Five Years as a Novice, and Two Years as a Black Nun, in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal*. Telling a sordid story of priest and nun activities at the nunnery in Montreal, *Awful Disclosures* became an immediate best seller with 30,000 copies sold in the first printing. By the mid-1860s, a total of 300,000 copies had been sold. The book provided a strong force in the American anti-Catholic movement supported by the *Know Nothing Party* and the forces opposed to the growing rate of Irish and German immigration. To those forces it mattered little that it was very soon documented after publication that Maria not only did not write the book, she was not a Catholic, never a nun and had not even been in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery. She later acknowledged she wrote the book for the money, most of which she never received.[\[2\]](#)

Shortly after the publication of *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, Maria married a Mr. St. John, or at least appears to have married him. Little has been found regarding St. John. Some sources suggest he came from Amenia, New York but a relationship to the many St. Johns of Sharon has not been determined. From this union was born a daughter in New York City on March 17, 1838. She was named Lizzie and as a youngster nicknamed "Tick." Tick was

generally incorrigible growing up as her older sister (stepsister) became the favorite of the parents.

While Lizzie was still quite young her mother left the scene entirely living for a time in Philadelphia before moving to a New York bordello. There after filching the wallet of a customer, Maria Monk was convicted and incarcerated on Blackwell's Island, New York where she died on September 4, 1849.^[3] Despite her brief thirty-three years on this planet, Maria Monk well earned the title "notorious."

A DAUGHTER'S RISE TO GREAT HEIGHTS

After Maria's departure, Mr. Eckel lived a rather frivolous life moving the girls frequently through Flatbush and Manhattan to avoid meeting with their wayward mother.^[4] Finally he packed them up and traveled north by boat on the Hudson to Poughkeepsie. From there the trio traveled by horse and carriage to South Amenia and the home of Aunt Huldah, Maria Monk's sister. Lizzie's father left her to be shuffled back and forth between Aunt Huldah, Aunt Mercy and Uncle Horace Clark. Horace was of the family that gave the name to Clark Hill Road.

Lizzie soon fell in love with the hill country east of Wassaic in Sharon and Kent. Despite working in Kent and New York City, she continually returned to Wassaic and Sharon. Finally, a family that enrolled her in Monson Academy in Massachusetts took her in when she was eighteen. At a party in 1857, Lizzie was introduced to Samuel Eckel of Tennessee who had recently returned from Chile. Later that year the couple was wed.

The Eckels went to Washington, D. C. early in January 1858, presumably to enable Samuel to pursue a livelihood as a free-lance writer. According to her claim Lizzie quickly learned the magical power of woman over man and even over the destinies of state.^[5] Finding her way in the social sun, she became an adjudicator for political appointments and a go-between on government contracts. It was not long before her income surpassed Samuel's earnings.^[6]

Upon her return to New York in mid 1859, Lizzie visited the scenes of her childhood in the Wassaic area. It was on this visit that she envisioned building a church in her favorite hills. Back in the city a daughter was born to the Eckels but died within two months. Soon after Samuel separated from Lizzie. Then on October 5, 1862, another daughter was born. Only two months later Lizzie received word of the death of her husband.

Armed with letters of introduction and contact information from her Washington experience, in July 1863, Lizzie with her maid and surviving daughter set sail for France. She shortly established connections with the French aristocracy and the moneyed class including dukes, viscounts, princes and other royalty. Eventually Lizzie became enamored with Viscount de Laferriere. Though the relationship apparently was one of affection it never reached the level desired by Lizzie who wished to marry the viscount and bring him to the hills of Sharon. Yet, during this period her religious convictions grew steadily even to the point of having her

daughter baptized as a Catholic. Until then known as Mary or Marie the child became Marie Genevieve Dominique Ferdinande Lenore Eckel.[\[7\]](#)

By the spring of 1865, Lizzie was on her way back to the United States by way of Liverpool only to return to France the following year. As her religious commitment to Catholicism continued to increase and the relationship with Viscount de Laferriere slowly faded, she focused her concentration on the building of a church in the Amenia / Sharon hill country.

A CHURCH RISES AND FALLS IN SOUTHERN SHARON

On July 8, 1869, Lizzie purchased land extending from the northwest corner of what is today the junction of Knibloe Hill Road and Clark Hill Road.[\[8\]](#) Purchasing thirty acres (+/-) of land from George B. Lambert she began the process of collecting money for the construction of a church. Over time the property would be sustained through a series of mortgages.[\[9\]](#)

While in prayer in New York at St. Xavier's Church, a voice told her to dedicate the church to Saint Genevieve. Lizzie, frequently heartened by visions and voices, quickly decided to embrace the name of the patron saint of her church.[\[10\]](#)

In Amenia Lizzie talked to the parish priest concerning the building of a church. Ignoring the advice to see the Connecticut archbishop, since the property was on the Sharon side of the border, she contracted to have the hillside cleared and the foundation laid in place. From her cottage on what is today Clark Hill Road, the chapel would lie uphill to the northeast. At home Lizzie dreamed of a reunion with the Viscount de Laferriere hoping he would join her at the cottage. Instead the viscount mailed her a letter which proved to be his last farewell.[\[11\]](#)

Despite her disappointment, Lizzie continued working toward the construction of her church. On July 17, 1871, the frame of the building was raised. As work progressed Lizzie secured a meeting with the Archbishop of New York City in an attempt to have the church deeded. The New York Archbishop refused, stating that the church location was in the Hartford Dioceses and "I cannot change the boundaries of the diocese," to which she replied "I can"[\[12\]](#) And she did. Drawing up papers to change the borders, Madam Eckel had them signed by the Archbishop of New York and the Bishop of Connecticut and sent to her contacts in Rome who presented the request to the Vatican. Approved, this thirty-acre section of Sharon then became a part of the Archdioceses of New York.

Because of lack of funds and poor weather very little church construction occurred during the winter. But in the spring with an additional borrowed \$4,000, work was completed and the dedication planned for Sunday, July 21. Though the Archbishop of New York had previously agreed to celebrate the Mass at the church, he was (conveniently) called out of the city and was not available. But the first Mass was celebrated as scheduled. The story was printed later that week in the Amenia Times.[\[13\]](#)

ST. GENIEVIEVE CHAPEL

“This beautiful Catholic chapel, erected by Mrs. St. John Eckel, was opened on Sunday. The edifice is placed upon a lofty commanding eminence, and the prospect to the south and west is of great extent and most striking beauty. The temple itself is a model of good taste and artistic excellence, while the decorations of the interior are unexceptionable, even to the most fastidious criticism. The windows are of the choicest designs and most exquisite workmanship, while the alter-piece, representing the Saviour and St. Genevieve, is a painting so charming that the gazer upon its sweet outlines cannot refrain from the thought –

“‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever.’

“The music was given by the celebrated organist and choir from the Sixteenth Street Church of New York City sublime and thrilling harmonies of the Mass were of course rendered in fullest perfection.

“The sermon was delivered by the Rev. Father Bapst of the Order of Jesuits, and was a clear and eloquent exposition of the cardinal doctrines of the Catholic Church.

“At five o’clock p.m. the chapel was opened for the beautiful vespers, and again the sweet music peculiar to those evening devotions was given the most charming effect. The service concluded with an excellent sermon by Rev. Father McDonnell, and all who attended both services could not but have been pleased with what they saw and heard of the ritual and the worship.”

Although the church was filled for the Sunday service, with few Catholics in the immediate area and a regular priest not assigned, Masses were only held on occasion and soon not at all. Lizzie continued work on her book, a long and sometime tedious autobiography. She sold many of her possessions to pay back loans and was helped by friend’s donations to complete payments on the \$4,500 it cost to build and decorate the chapel.

In 1874 Lizzie’s autobiography *Maria Monk’s Daughter* was published. The title of the 604-page volume was obviously selected to capitalize on the notoriety her mother’s book had garnered.[\[14\]](#) But such was not to be the case as sales of the book never came close to those of her mother’s *Awful Disclosures*.

In May 1875, Lizzie’s cottage burned to the ground as she and her daughter narrowly escaped into the night. Surviving both physically and financially, she again married in 1877, on that occasion to a Mr. S. B. Harper. In 1878, Mrs. St. John (Eckel) Harper published a fiction titled “*St. Peter’s Bride*.” With that her writing career ended, and the Harpers crossed the Atlantic and disappeared from the historic record.. Back in the southwest hills of Sharon, St. Genevieve Chapel slowly deteriorated. Then on the night of July 4, 1894, three imbibing revelers, either accidentally or intentionally, set fire to the remains, an action that earned them fines and incarceration.[\[15\]](#)

Lizzie Saint John Eckel Harper died in Europe, perhaps Italy, in either 1916 or 1917.[\[16\]](#) In December of 1918, Mary Eckel, Lizzie’s only remaining heir, sold the southwest Sharon twenty-nine or thirty acre property to Alanson O’Dell.[\[17\]](#) Today the cellar foundation of Lizzie’s home can be viewed on the north side of Clark Hill Road, 0.2 miles west of Knibloe Hill Road. Northeast up the hill the foundation stones of Saint Genevieve Chapel remain (all private properties).

The full story of Lizzie St. John Eckel Harper is shrouded in mystery. Frequently the line between fact and fiction is considerably blurred. But, no matter what her real character may have been or how she may have been viewed by those who knew her, or knew of her, Lizzie was truly a remarkable woman.^[18] She had her own church constructed and apparently even persuaded the Vatican to alter archdiocesan boundaries. One must wonder if the little thirty-acre plot in southwest Sharon remains today as part of the Catholic Archdiocese of New York or whether the Catholic hierarchy of Hartford has reclaimed the serene location.

[1] Encyclopedia Britannica, “Women in American History”
http://search.eb.com/women/articles/Monk_Maria.html].

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Eckel, L. St. John, *Maria’ Monk’s Daughter*, New York, 1874.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Twynham, Leonard; *The Weird Sister of Sharon and Amenia, Madam Eclke*, Privately printed, 1932.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Sharon Land Records; V33-184, July 8, 1869; George Lambert of Sharon, County of Litchfield and State of Connecticut to Lizzie St. John, City, County and State of New York, on the highway leading from Hitchcock’s Corner to Kent, 30 acres +/- for \$3,000, July 8, 1869.

[9] Sharon Land Records; V 34 – 477; January 1871; V35 – 243, QC, April 1871; V 35 – 535; June 1875;

V 39 – 77, AC, Margaret Bouillon received \$2,000 from Lizzie St. John Eckel, September 1885.

[10] Eckel, L. St. John; *Maria’ Monk’s Daughter*, New York, 1874.

[11] Twynham, Leonard; *The Weird Sister of Sharon and Amenia, Madam Eclke*, Privately printed, 1932.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Amenia Times, Amenia, New York, Thursday, July 25, 1871.

[14] A copy of *Maria Monk’s Daughter* is available for review at Sharon’s Hotchkiss Library.

[15] Twynham, Leonard; *The Weird Sister of Sharon and Amenia, Madam Eckel*, Privately printed, 1932.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Sharon Land Records V 46 – 562, Mary Eckel to Alanson O'Dell for \$300 4/26/1918.

[18] This will be left to the reader's imagination.