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A Blacksmith Business at Its Peak Isaac Ensign's Second Account Book

Isaac Ensign's first daybook, which recorded the first seven months of his blacksmith business, was the subject of the article published in the Spring-Summer 2002 issue of this publication. The fortunate discovery of the blacksmith's second account book allows a look at how Isaac Ensign's business prospered in the wake of the Revolutionary War and casts some light on what daily life was like in Simsbury from 1784 to 1805.

When Isaac Ensign began his blacksmith business in Simsbury in 1770, he was a bachelor just shy of twenty-three years old. The town enticed him here with the offer of the "Blacksmith Lott" in the center of town just north of the "Burying Yard."¹ He had undoubtedly learned his trade from his older brothers Moses and Samuel, who were both blacksmiths. Moses (1734-1805) had his shop in Hartford, apparently in the part of town that became East Hartford in 1783, and Samuel (1740-1819) carried on his business in the parish of Litchfield called South Farms that eventually became the town of Morris. The three brothers were great-great-grandsons of James Ensign (or Ensing) who was born in the county of Kent in England, and who was among Rev. Thomas Hooker's congregation which emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He and his wife Sarah came with Rev. Hooker's group in 1636 to found Hartford, Connecticut.

Moses, Samuel and Isaac were the only children of their parents Moses Ensign and Love Andrus (or Andrews) to survive to adulthood. When Isaac was just three, his father died and was buried in Hartford's Ancient Burying Ground. After a widowhood of seven years, his mother married Capt. Benjamin Kent of Suffield.²

Isaac Ensign married Lurannah Pettibone of Simsbury, oldest child of Jacob and Jemima Pettibone, on December 29, 1771.³ By the time he began his second account book in 1783, the Revolutionary War had been fought and won. According to the couple's great-granddaughter, Nellie Goodrich Eno, Isaac Ensign was lame and that kept him from being accepted for service at the beginning of the Revolutionary War. He shod the soldiers' cattle and horses free of charge, though, and this influenced the militia to allow him to enlist. In October 1777, he marched as far as New Hartford before news came of British General John Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga. He spent only about three hours in the army, she wrote.⁴ She also wrote that her grandfather Moses Ensign (1754-1864) was six feet tall, but shorter than his brothers.⁵ That leads one to believe that their blacksmith father, Isaac Ensign, also must have been tall.

When he began his second account book, Isaac and Lurannah Ensign had four sons and two daughters and would eventually have four more sons. As they became old enough to help, the names of the older sons, Isaac, Jr., Isaiah, Ariel and Zebe, began to appear in the ledger. Lurannah was recognized for her weaving.

The book has accounts for 331 individual customers. At least 110 of them were Revolutionary War veterans and another fourteen were women, either widowed or single. Asher and Champ Negro were the only black customers. Also, seven companies maintained small accounts.

In appreciation

Bruce and Stacy Rovinsky of Meriden, Connecticut, discovered Isaac Ensign's account book at a tag sale. The Simsbury Historical Society and author Mary Jane Springman are indebted to them for realizing the historical value of the document and allowing Alan Lahue to take digital photographs of its pages for the historical society. Mr. and Mrs. Rovinsky retain ownership of the account book.

The Case family is most numerous, with fifty-three persons of that surname having accounts. The Humphrey family is second with twenty-two accounts, followed by the Barber family with seventeen, Tuller with fifteen, Phelps with fourteen, Andrus with twelve and Wilcox/Willcocks with eleven.

Everyone farmed to some degree, whether they were millers, quarrymen, doctors, music composers, judges or generals. Of interest to descendants researching family history, the customers' non-agricultural skills and trades are often apparent from the debits and credits Ensign recorded. The ledger is also a place to look for an ancestor's signature, as people usually signed when they settled their account with the blacksmith.

In those days everyone depended on horses and oxen for transportation for themselves and their products. Over the years Ensign shod horses for 222 people. Just making horseshoes (rougher on the bottom for winter than for summer) must have kept him busy. A few customers brought their horse to him only once, perhaps when they were in town on other business or had a particular problem with the horse's hooves that he might correct. Regular customers brought a horse to him to be shod several times each year and very few seem to have had more than one horse. In contrast, Ensign shod oxen for only seventy-six customers.

Those customers who had him put shoes on their yokes of oxen generally lived closest to the blacksmith shop. They would bring their oxen to him for shoes as winter began and bring them back in the spring to have the shoes removed, or "pulled," as he said. One historian explained that an ox needed shoes in the winter "to give him a sure foothold on icy or slippery roads."⁶

Since an ox has a cloven hoof, it generally requires a pair of shoes on each foot, one on each side of the cleft. For youngsters who happened to be in the blacksmith shop, Ensign and his sons shoeing an ox must have been a thrilling spectacle. A 19th-century New England historian gave this account,

Swings for shoeing oxen, I think were not used much, if any, before 1810, and not uniformly used until a much later date. A bed of straw was prepared, the ox was thrown down and turned upon his back; a man sat and held his head; the fore and hind legs were drawn and lashed together, so that they crossed each other between the knee and ankle, and were shod in that position.⁷

The reason for shoeing oxen in this manner is that an ox's ankles are too weak to be able to support its weight if the smith lifts a leg to shoe the hoof, as he would with a horse. The "swing" that is mentioned was an apparatus with a wide band that went under the animal's midsection and pulleys that lifted him off the ground. By 1795 Ensign was using one because during that year he charged Capt. Joseph Humphrey for damage done to his ox swing.

Back then every successful farm had at least one yoke of oxen. These draft animals are bulls that are castrated after they mature. William Andrus was the Simsbury man to whom Ensign gave credit in exchange for "cutting" his bulls, calves, hogs and boars and "spaying" sows. People's yokes of oxen pulled their plows and carts. In 1805, a veterinarian made these observations,

An ox-team ploughs an acre in eight hours, performing a day's work with full as much ease and dispatch as a team of horses. The oxen are exceedingly handy, and may be driven with a heavy load to a hair's breathe. My informant is in the habit of carting lime from the distance of seventeen miles, both with ox and horse teams, and the former usually beat the horses by about an hour in the journey, taking the carts faster up the hills.⁸

Given this information, it's safe to say that many of the trips Ensign recorded for hauling goods to and from Hartford over Talcott Mountain were made using ox-drawn carts.

These wooden two-wheel carts were the most common vehicle on Simsbury's narrow dirt highways at this time. Ensign made iron parts for sixty-three of them. In addition, he recorded working on ten horse carts and one tin cart. Tinsmith Thomas Barber owned the latter. An indication that roads were improving in width and smoothness is that some people were also using wagons. Ensign made parts for ten wagons owned by individuals and one owned by a company.

Two of Ensign's customers were fortunate enough to own a chair, the term used for the two-wheeled, one-horse vehicle that accommodated one or two passengers and that was later called a shay. "Shay" is a

Continued on page four.



Photo courtesy of the Simsbury Historical Society

Customers from all parts of Simsbury and towns nearby came to Isaac Ensign's blacksmith shop on this property on the west side of Hopmeadow Street just north of Simsbury Cemetery. They brought their horses and oxen to be shod and had him make or repair an impressive variety of metal products, from plow irons to steel traps to brass buckles and more. He aided their businesses by making iron parts for their gristmills, sawmills, fulling mills, cider mills and quarries and by accepting as payment their products like shoes, saddles, shingles and hundreds of pounds of charcoal.

Lurannah Ensign's parents, Jacob and Jemima Pettibone, built this house for Lurannah and Isaac to have when they married on December 29, 1771. Their ten children were born here, as were the seven children of their youngest child Moses and his wife, Martha Tuller Whiting. Moses and Martha's youngest child, Ralph Hart Ensign, born in 1834, later became the president of Toy, Bickford & Company, which was renamed Ensign, Bickford & Company.*

Grieving townspeople came to this house to arrange for Isaac or Moses Ensign to dig graves for their dead. The fifty or so members of the Hopmeadow subscription library, which was active in the early 1800s, came to the house to exchange borrowed books for other ones. On the right side of this photo there is a glimpse of the white wooden Methodist Church that preceded the stone church there today. Although they belonged to the Congregational Church, in 1840 the brothers Moses and Bildad Ensign donated the land for the church to the Methodist trustees.

In his article in the *Connecticut Quarterly* published in the spring of 1895, Rev. John B. McLean wrote about places of interest to see in Simsbury. He included a photo of the Ensign house and praised the lilacs and cinnamon roses that grew in the yard. By the time Rev. McLean wrote this, Horace J. Humphrey owned the property and was in the process of building the Maple Tree Inn behind the house. In May of the following year, the *Hartford Courant* reported that Mr. Humphrey was taking down the old house.

* In 1837 Moses Ensign moved his family into the house that his brother Ariel had built in 1812. Presently it is 835 Hopmeadow Street, known as the ABC House.

Continued from page two.

corruption of the French word "chaise," which means "chair." Ensign spelled chair as "chear," which probably reflects the way he pronounced the word. Likewise, he spelled "share," as in plowshare, as "shear" and wrote the verb "get" as "git." He consistently spelled "potato" as "partato" and rendered Widow Martha Barber's first name as "Marther." (Other people used this spelling, too; she is "Marther" in a document filed in the settlement of Dr. Jonathan Bird's estate.) Likewise, Ensign often replaced the "y" at the end of a word with an "e," so quarry is spelled quarre, Amy is Ame and Terry is Terre. The historical phonetics and spelling in the account book would likely be of interest to a linguist.⁹

John Calvin Owen inherited a chair from his father, John Owen, Esq., who had served as Judge of Probate among other town offices.¹⁰ The appraisers of John Owen's estate in 1783 called his vehicle a "Riding Shay or Chair." Revolutionary War veteran Capt. Jonathan Eno's account shows a charge for "a gripe for Chear." In his will, probated shortly after his death in December 1813, Capt. Eno left to his wife Mary "the riding carriage & White Horse."¹¹ Ensign charged William Williston for "2 Lins Pins for Caradge," so it's possible that he had a carriage (one that needed linchpins to hold the wheels to the axle). Mr. Williston's probate records are not available, but *Green's Annual Register and United States Calendar* of 1821 listed him as one of three practicing attorneys in Simsbury.¹²

Winter brought out the sleighs, which didn't need roads, just ample snow cover to cut across open fields. Fifty-three customers paid for repairs to sleighs (which both Ensign and the *Connecticut Daily Courant* spelled "slays"). Tom pungs (or pungs) were popular, too.¹³ Ensign tended to twenty-three of them. They were box-like vehicles, something like carts or wagons on runners. Later these one-horse transports were known as "cutters."¹⁴ The blacksmith also made repairs to seven sleds.

If there had been a contest for who among Ensign's customers brought him the most types of vehicles to repair, Noah Amherst Phelps would have won. This son of General Noah Phelps had a cart, horse cart, wagon, tom pung, sleigh and sled. Most customers had just one or two types.

Although these vehicles were made primarily of wood, the blacksmith's services were needed for several iron parts. The carts had iron bands around their bodies to add strength. Ensign made a set of cart bands that weighed fifteen and a half pounds for Lt. Phineas Noble, but those that Benjamin Farnham ordered were only thirteen pounds.

Ensign recorded putting tires on carts and wagons using "strakes." Blacksmiths in his day tired a vehicle's heavy wooden wheels by nailing curved iron strips about two feet long to the felloes. The strips were called strakes. Some decades later smiths began using single bands of iron as tires around wheels.¹⁵

Ensign used the term "clavea and pin" for the fastening device that customers needed to couple a plow

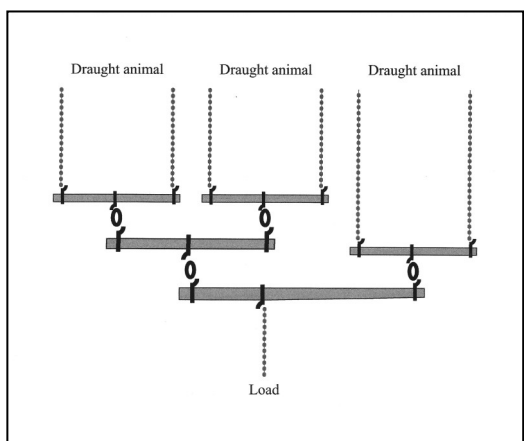


Illustration from Wikipedia

A set of whippetrees for a three-animal team.

or cart to an animal's harness. These were probably about the same as the U-shaped clevis and pin used today to hitch a small trailer to a vehicle. He made and repaired dozens of these, and also created rings, clasps, hooks, and staples for whippetrees, the horizontal bars to which draft animals traces were attached to evenly distribute the weight (force) of a load on two or more animals pulling a cart, wagon, sleigh, plow and so forth. The traces were generally iron chains since he often jotted down that he had made whippetree chains for a customer.

He produced chains of all sorts, pricing them by weight rather than by length. However, most of this charges were for mending rather than making chains and sometimes he made individual links and what he called Eses or "S" links. In addition to whippetree chains, he recorded working on draft chains, horse chains, sleigh chains and plow chains. He also made the iron parts necessary for the yolks worn by pairs of oxen. They included rings, staples, rivets, bands and keys.

Of all the agricultural tools used on Simsbury farms, the plows needed the most attention from the blacksmith. In those days, the body of the plow was made of wood. A farmer fashioned the moldboard, handles and beam from a suitable hardwood tree he found in his own woodlot. Then Ensign attached iron parts. He recorded making and mending plowshares, landsides, coulter, plates and bands, as well as the nails and bolts with which to attach the iron parts to the wooden ones.

Inventive people, including Thomas Jefferson, were at work trying to improve the design of the handheld ox-drawn plows, but they were still rather primitive. The coulter, which was mounted on the beam in front of the plowshare, sliced through the topsoil vertically like a knife. Then the share sliced through it horizontally and raised it to the moldboard which turned the soil, small rocks and weeds to one side, creating a furrow. The landside, a long, rather narrow pointed piece of iron, was attached to the share on the side opposite the moldboard; its job was to counteract the force created by soil passing against the moldboard so that the plow would travel in a straight line.

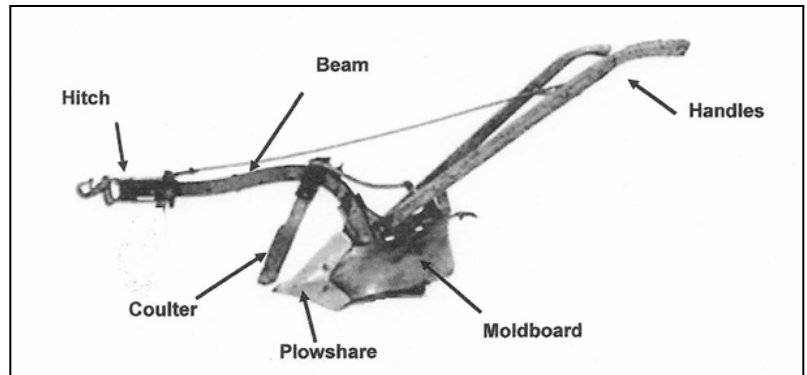


Illustration from <http://www.teachengineering.org>

These are all the plow parts named in Isaac Ensign's account book except the landside. For the hitch, he made a clevis and pin.

Ensign attached the plates and bands to wooden parts of the plow to protect and strengthen them. To make those lesser parts, his accounts show that he had hundreds of pounds of "old iron" that customers traded in for credit. Blacksmiths were known to accept old horseshoes, worn hoe blades and cast-off implements of all

sorts, but Ensign never noted what kinds of things he accepted. He did name a few old items that were resold rather than being melted down or modified for other uses. For example, On Monday January 15, 1798, he credited Azariah Stebbins with one shilling, ten and a half pence for "12 old ox shews" and that same day he sold them for the same price to Capt. John Gridley Terry and, adding four new shoes, shod Terry's yoke of oxen, charging him one shilling, six pence.

Ensign made and repaired the metal parts of plows using iron and occasionally steel. Most of the time Ensign provided the metal, but occasionally a customer brought his own. He charged Elisha Humphrey £1.1.0 for "making a Pare of Plow Irons" that weighed twenty-one pounds. Jonah Moore was debited only nine shillings for plow irons that weighed thirteen and a half pounds.

"Putting Nose to Share," a frequent notation in Ensign's ledger, is interpreted to mean that he restored the sharp point at the end of the plowshare. Much less often he recorded putting a nose to a coulter, which may mean that not all plows had them.¹⁶ "Sharpening Plow Irons" was by far his most frequent notation pertaining to farm equipment, indicating that farmers brought their plows to him quite often to be sharpened. They paid him from seven to nine pence each time. He also recorded "Laying Plow Irons" which meant he forged more iron or steel onto parts that had worn thin.

After a field was properly plowed a farmer would pulverize any heavy clods and smooth the ground with a harrow or drag. Both had iron teeth set in a frame that raked through the soil. Ensign made teeth for both, and it seems from his accounts that the local farmers used drags more than harrows. Rakes are mentioned only twice, when he repairs them by adding teeth.

Once the crops were growing, farmers needed hoes to slice weeds at their roots. Ensign made several types, including broad hoes and stub hoes. The latter had a short handle and curved blade and was used for particularly tough weeds.

When crops of grain like rye, oats, wheat and buckwheat were ready to be harvested farmers needed scythes. Ensign's customers brought him suitably curved slender wooden poles called snaths and he provided

iron parts. He recorded making "thoal Irons" (more commonly spelled "thole"), rings and wedges for scythes. His iron tholes were peg-like handles with a band at one end that encircled the snath. These handles, one for each hand, were positioned according to the user's height for optimum efficiency. The ring held the scythe blade to the snath and the wedges held the iron pieces firmly to the wood, which naturally wears, expands and contracts.

While he sold these parts individually, he also sold them in sets that he called "tacling." He and his contemporaries used this term in the same way that we refer today to fishing tackle. One thing a set of scythe taeling did not include, apparently, was the blade. Ensign never recorded making or selling scythe blades, so they must have come from another source and may well have been imported.

The inventory of customer Shubael Case's estate, probated in 1814, lists "old scythe, two tholes, ring and wedge." Two of Ensign's other customers had him repurpose their scythes for different uses. Moses Grimes had a cart band made from his and Stephen Terry had a shave, a woodworking tool, made. Ensign also made complete bush scythes for four of his customers, charging them seven shillings or more for each, quite a bit more than the two shillings and six pence charged for sets of taeling for reaping scythes. And in a turnaround, Ensign credited both Shubael Hoskins Jr. and Capt. Jonathan Eno six shillings for selling him a grass scythe.

By Mary Jane Springman

To be continued in the Fall 2019 issue of the Simsbury Free Library Quarterly.



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Notes

1. Simsbury Town Records, Book 11, 306. The "Burying Yard" is Simsbury Cemetery on Hopmeadow Street.
2. "Ensign and Whiting," by Nellie Goodrich Eno in William Inglis Morse, ed., *Genealogiae or Data Concerning the Families of Morse, Chipman, Phinney, Ensign and Whiting* (Boston: published by the editor, 1925), 93. Martha Eunice Ensign Nelson, comp., *Record of the Descendants of James Ensign and His Wife Sarah Elson, 1634-1939-1960* (Moline, Illinois: published by the compiler, 1960), 33-34.
3. Albert Carlos Bates, *Simsbury, Connecticut, Births, Marriages and Deaths Transcribed from the Town Records* (Hartford: published by the author, 1898), 219.
4. Morse, 94. None of the official records of Revolutionary War soldiers include Isaac Ensign, but some family histories state that he served.
5. When she was seventy Nellie Goodrich Eno, the great-granddaughter of Isaac and Lurannah (Pettibone) Ensign, contributed a chapter of information and stories about the Ensign and Whiting families for publication in William Inglis Morse's 1925 book. Lurannah Pettibone Ensign lived to be ninety-five, dying in 1845 when her granddaughter Martha Ensign Goodrich (Nellie Eno's mother), was twenty-two. So, Lurannah Ensign was able to share her reminiscences with Martha, who must have passed them on to her daughter Nellie. Nellie Goodrich Eno was particularly interested in history. She was a charter member of Simsbury's Abigail Phelps Chapter, DAR, and one of the founders of the Simsbury Historical Society.
6. John Gustaf Holmstrom, *Standard Blacksmithing, Horseshoeing and Wagon Making* (n. p.: Webb Publishing, 1907), 191.
7. Benjamin Chase, *History of Old Chester from 1719 to 1869* (Auburn, N. H.: published by the author, 1869), 431.
8. Thomas Boardman, Veterinary Surgeon to the Third (King's Own) Regiment of Dragoons, *A Dictionary of the Veterinary Art: Containing All the Modern Improvements....* (London: Printed for George Kearsley, 46 Fleet-Street, 1805). Page labeled CAU.
9. In his book *The Pioneers: The Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West*, published in 2019, David McCullough commented on the spelling of "get" as "git" (page 214) and the reaction of foreign travelers like Charles Dickens to American speech (page 225).

News of the Times: 1784 - 1808

Blacksmith shops have always had a reputation for being gathering spots where people could talk about whatever was on their minds. Isaac Ensign's shop, little more than a block north of Simsbury's meetinghouse, would have been a prime spot for sharing the news of the day. Revolutionary War veterans could reminisce about the months or years that they had served. Everyone must have been wondering how their new country would take shape.

When Isaac Ensign began his second account book in 1784 the British surrender at Yorktown was just three years in the past and the Treaty of Paris had just been signed. The Congress of the Confederation was in the process of drafting the constitution of the new United States. George Washington wouldn't become president for another five years. During the twenty-four years that Ensign made entries in this book, our new country saw not only Washington, but also John Adams and Thomas Jefferson elected and the formation of the first two political parties.

Customers undoubtedly discussed the pros and cons of having the Salmon Brook and Turkey Hills Ecclesiastical Societies split from the town of Simsbury in 1786 to form the town of Granby. Canton, then called West Simsbury, split away in 1806.

Throughout the years there were floods, good and bad years for crops, new pests like the Hessian fly, outbreaks of influenza and scarlet fever and religious revivals. Isaac Ensign and those gathered in the shop also would bid goodbye to many who came to settle their accounts because they were moving from town. These departing customer sought new land and opportunities nearby in Litchfield County and upstate New York and as far away as the Connecticut Western Reserve.

♦ ♦ ♦

Many things that affected Simsbury people during this period of time are stated in a concise list titled "Notable Events" at the back of Abiel Brown's 1856 book *Genealogical History with Short Sketches and Family Records of the Early Settlers of West Simsbury, Now Canton, Conn.* The Simsbury Free Library's copy was owned by both of the local historians Lucius A. Barbour and John E. Ellsworth and it contains many useful penciled notations and corrections.

A Much Appreciated Gift

Newbold Le Roy III has donated sixty volumes of history and genealogy. The Board of Trustees and staff thank him for his generous gift and invite all of you to come to peruse the new titles.

10. Owen's Brook that runs beside the present Owens Brook Boulevard is on property once owned by John Owen. John Owen's last account book is featured in articles in the Spring 1999 and Spring 2001 issues of this publication.

11. Capt. Jonathan Eno lived in the house now 12 Eno Place. It was built by John Case in 1756 and bought by Capt. Eno in 1774. See pages 90-98 in *A Record of the History of Some of the Old Homes of Simsbury* compiled by Abigail Eno Ellsworth and the Abigail Phelps Chapter DAR in 1936. Unpublished MS in the Simsbury Free Library.

12. Connecticut probate records from 1607 through 1999 are available on microfilm at the Connecticut State Library and on Ancestry.com.

13. The Oxford English Dictionary explains that "pung" is a shortened form of "tom pung," a term that came from a Southern New England Algonquin word.

14. "Reminiscences of an Octogenarian" by the Old Angler, *Forest & Stream: A Weekly Journal of the Rod and Gun*, vol. 59, December, 1902, 493.

15. Holmstrom, 50. Nathan Bailey and John Worlidge, *Dictionarium Rusticum, Urbanicum & Botanicum: Or A Dictionary of Husbandry, Gardening, Trade, Commerce and All Sorts of Country-Affairs*, in two volumes, third edition, (London: James and John Knapton, et al, 1726), page labeled CAR. *The English Dialect Dictionary*, vol. 5: R-S, ed. Joseph Wright, (London: Henry Frowde, Amen Corner; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 802, 823. "Fundamentals of Fitting Tires" by Dr. Gordon S. Cantle in *The Carriage Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1, Summer 1989, 10.

16. Several of the vintage plows shown on the Old Sturbridge Village website do not have coulters. You can access photographs of the agricultural tools that Old Sturbridge Village owns at collections.osv.org/home. Also, when Ensign needed wooden handles for his plow, he got them from Elias Vining; for a plow beam he turned to Martin Humphrey.

Upcoming Programs at the Simsbury Free Library

The Saga of New-Gate Prison

Morgan Bengel, Site Manager, speaker

Thursday, September 19, 6:30 p.m.

As the first state prison, New-Gate was a trial and error experiment, one that included many prison escapes. Join Morgan Bengel to explore how these exhilarating escapes shaped New-Gate's history and contributed to the ever-evolving prison system.

A History of Climax Fuse: A Step into the Fuse Industry

Luke Villani, speaker

Thursday, October 17, 6:30 p.m.

Avon's Climax Fuse Company competed with Simsbury's Ensign-Bickford Company. UConn history major Luke Villani will explain how safety fuses were made and why the two companies became one. Now Avon's town hall and police department, the brownstone buildings on Route 44 have their own unique story.

The date of this program may change. Please check the library's website or call before coming: 860.408.1336.

A Tale of Two Railroads: The Iron Horse in Tariffville, 1850-1938

Bob Belletzkic, speaker

Thursday, November 14, 6:30 p.m.

Railroad historian Bob Belletzkic will return to tell us about the trains that ran through Tariffville and the depots that the railway companies built there. Please watch for more information in the local press and on the library's website: simsburyfreelibrary.org.

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Mary Jane Springman, Editor, SFL Quarterly

