

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

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Garth Bryant: the Matt Dog, Tuttle

Good early 2026, Greenville Historians,

I trust the post-holiday period finds everyone in good health and in good company.

Some five years ago (already!), the Covid era instigated what is now a GLHG regular – the winter newsletter. Back then, it was a stop-gap measure but now has proven to be a useful and enjoyable outlet for local history. An additional newsletter allows for other items to be shared that had been waiting in a queue, a queue that usually takes a back seat to a detailed

description of the monthly program during our regular season.

This first Winter 2026 newsletter allows two of Garth's writings to be viewed in this venue. PorcupineSoup readers will have seen the first one earlier in the year.

A hearty thank you, Garth, for continuing your series of articles that I know so many of us look forward to. In this issue, two of Garth's contributions:

-Tommy's Home of the Matt Dog
-The Admirable Life of Rebecca Tuttle

Tommy's Home of the Matt Dog

by Garth Bryant

In my 70 years of life, I have met many people. No matter where I go or what I am doing, one question eventually comes up with the people I meet and talk to. Where are you from?

My normal answer is, "I'm from a tiny little town in upstate New York you never heard of called Greenville."

On an incredible number of occasions, the reply is, "Oh, I've been there, that's the town with the great hot dog truck." This reply, or something similar, is so common that by now I should expect it. Indeed, it is practically the only answer ever given by anyone who has ever visited Greenville. Without a doubt, Tommy's hot dog truck is the iconic symbol of Greenville.

Not only is Tommy's widely known and loved by Greenville's residents and visitors, it has become an almost pilgrimage-like site for those of us who do not live in Greenville full time anymore. When we are in town for any reason, the one must-do event is going down to Tommy's and getting our fix of the best hot dogs in the world. I know this tradition is shared not only by my own family but by hundreds of other former Greenville residents and visitors.

To know the whole story of Tommy's, we have to go back more than 100 years and tell the story of a man named Matt Chesbro. This is the man who started it all.



Matt was born in Greenville in 1920. After graduating from Greenville Central School, he enlisted in the US Army Air Corps. He served in England as a mechanic in the Eighth Air Force during World War Two. This job required him to help repair the bombers shot up in the dangerous bombing raids over Nazi Germany. After the war, he returned to Greenville and married Nettie Denton on September 4, 1946. They had four children - Diane, Sandy, Charlie and Matt III.

To support his family, he took up cooking for a living. For many years, like many Greenville residents at that time, he split his year between two jobs. In the summer, he cooked in the boarding houses - early on at Colonial Manor and later at Sunny Hill. The rest of the year he cooked in the cafeteria at Greenville Central School.

For people my age this is where we first met Matt. We remember him cooking our lunch at school. He would be on the other side of the cafeteria counter serving up whatever he had cooked for us that day. To the students he was Matt, never Mr. Chesbro, and I really

can't explain why. It was not a sign of disrespect. It was like he was our friend who made us lunch and he was there for us every day.

In 1967 Matt opened a side business to help support his family. He went into the hot dog business. In the beginning this was done weekends out of the back of the family station wagon at various local events.

Shortly after this humble beginning he bought his first truck for \$600.00. In 1969 he parked his little blue and white truck on a lot he rented at the crossroads in Greenville and started selling hot dogs out of it. This lot was owned, at that time, by the Stevens' family who also owned the adjoining Mobil gas station being run by Bob Pierce.

Matt continued driving the truck to fairs and other events to sell hot dogs. When these events were over, the truck was returned to its home on the corner in Greenville, although on occasion it had to be towed back. Eventually Matt gave up the traveling circuit and the truck was parked full time at the corners. From that point on Matt would continually operate his hot dog truck at this location. It was open full time in the summer and on weekends in the winter. When he retired from Greenville School he went full time into the hot dog business.

Very early on the term Matt Dog came into being. I don't believe it was through any plan or advertising by Matt. Matt cooked the hot dogs. Everyone knew Matt. The saying "let's go get some of Matt's hot dogs" was shortened to "let's go get Matt Dogs" by his customers who loved them.

Shortly before Ruth Stevens passed away,



A 1993 photo taken by Historian Don Teator, used in the 1994 calendar

Matt purchased the lot his truck was parked on from her. This would turn out to be a furtuous decision.

A few years later, some Greenville citizens tried to pass a law outlawing vendors in Greenville. This was directed, at least in part, at Matt's business. Apparently, these misguided citizens felt vendors diminished the stature of the Town in some way.

Because he owned his own land he was protected from this effort. Thank goodness for this. Forcing Matt's out of business would have been a huge loss for Greenville. I have to believe the many Matt Dog fans would have caused a riot at any Town Board meeting trying to outlaw Matt's.

Matt would face additional government challenges. The State of New York would question the bathroom accessibility of Matt's over the years. This required him to first enter into an agreement with the gas station to

use their facilities and finally installing a port-o-let.

In the beginning Matt was also sharing the electric service with the gas station. This was also at one point banned. Because he owned the lot he was able to put in his own service. Through it all Matt would persevere. He kept cooking up and serving those delicious hot dogs, the whole town loved.

In 1985 Matt was ready to retire.

He offered to sell his business to his son-in-law Tom Briggs. Tom was born in Queens in 1947. His family moved to Potter Hollow in 1957. After graduating from Saint Patrick's High School, Tom enlisted in the Navy. After completing his enlistment, he returned to Greenville and married Matt's daughter, Diane.

Photo from
GCS yearbook



Tom would have ten different jobs in the next few years as he balanced raising his three sons and finishing his college degree. As in most family businesses, both Tom and Diane pitched in to help at the family hot dog truck during these years. In 1975 Tom graduated from Albany Business College.

After a couple of other jobs, he became the Treasurer of Greenville Central School District in 1982. He was still working in this position when Matt made him his offer for the truck. Even though some thought he was crazy, Tommy was sure the truck offered him a better future. He insists it was the best decision he ever made. On January 1st, 1986 Tom became the owner of the hot dog truck.

For a while Matt helped at the truck as he eased into his retirement. This retirement would last thirteen years and Matt passed away in 1999. Tommy went on to grow the business. He changed trucks and added menu items like fries, Philly cheese steaks, and hamburgers. He increased hours to include breakfast.

For 34 years he met each and every one of us that stopped in with a smile, a kind word, and a delicious hot dog or two or three. The image of Tommy dressed in a white tee shirt and a bandana cooking over that hot grill on a scorching summer day is embedded in the

memory of anyone who was a customer during those years. In fact, this iconic image is painted on the side of the current hot dog truck.

In 2020 Tom's son Tom, Jr. took over the truck. Tom, Jr., known as TJ by everyone in town, had just retired from a career in the Navy. As Matt had done earlier, Tommy passed on the truck to the next generation.

So, Tommy's the Home of the Matt Dog continues on as strong as ever. It is now on its fourth truck. It has served multiple generations of Greenville residents and visitors. A number of these residents have found employment at the truck.

Over the years the Town of Greenville has seen tremendous changes. The hot dog business was born during the now long-gone years of Greenville's booming tourist trade. In those years, approximately 10,000 tourist a week visited the Greenville area in the summer. For this reason, I always assumed that the Fourth of July or Memorial Day must have been their busiest time.

Tom explained to me that it was another mostly forgotten yearly event that was always the single busiest weekend of the year – the opening weekend of deer season. This

November ritual brought thousands of down state hunters to the Greenville area in the second half of the twentieth century. To illustrate how big an event this was I remember reading a DEC report that showed that one year more bucks were shot per square mile in Greenville than any other Township in the State.

This was a mostly male event in those days. Rather than cook for themselves these men, young and old, flocked to the hot dog truck for their lunches and dinners. This tidbit from Greenville's past would never have occurred to me without Tommy's reminder.

Through all of Greenville's changes the one constant has been Tommy's hot dog truck. For almost six decades Tommy's has thrived and prospered while cooking the

dogs and making the customers smile every time they bit into another delicious Matt Dog.

Meanwhile, the business continues to evolve. Recently I met a new cook grilling my favorite order, two with mustard, onions and peppers. She was TJ's daughter Paige – a fourth generation serving up Greenville's favorite treat. Paige is planning to start nursing school at Russell Sage this fall. I wish her well in this dream, but somehow, I wouldn't be surprised that someday in the far future she could be the next generation to own and run the truck. When your family is the best there ever was at something, it's hard to give it up. Thanks for reading. See you all soon at Tommy's.

The Admirable Life of Rebecca Tuttle: One of Greenville's Early Residents

By Garth Bryant

Rebecca Tuttle was born on November 27, 1782 into a country torn by war. The American Revolution was in its seventh year and wouldn't end until the signing of the Treaty of Paris on September 3, 1783. Her parents were Jonathon Tuttle and Sarah Warren. Her family of American Patriots had already paid a heavy price in the fight for independence.

Her mother was related to General Joseph Warren who is considered a Founding Father of the United States. He had served as President of the Revolutionary Massachusetts Provincial Congress. He was also the person who enlisted Paul Revere and William Dawes to spread the alarm that the British are coming. He then fought in the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

While serving in the siege of Boston he was killed at the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775. Even though he had been commis-

sioned as a Major General in the Colony's militia, he refused to exercise his rank and fought as a private soldier. He was killed at the battle's end when he refused to retreat as the hill was overrun. He is considered by many as America's first military hero.

Rebecca's mother Sarah, who is thought to be General Warren's niece, had married Jonathon Tuttle in Massachusetts around 1762. Jonathon also served in the American Army but survived the war. During the war, Jonathon and Sarah decided to move their family away from the war-torn coast. They relocated to the frontier and ended up in Ulster County, New York.

Rebecca was Sarah and Jonathon's fifth child. She was raised in Windham which was part of Ulster County until the formation of Greene County in 1800. She somehow met and fell in love with a young man named Aa-



This oft-used photo is a reminder of Garth's interest in the Lake family, of which he is

ron Lake who was living in Greenville. How they met and how they carried on their courtship is unknown.

Riding on horseback from Greenville to Windham in 1799 had to take at least a day, maybe more. It wasn't like Aaron could just stop in at the Tuttles and claim he happened to be in the neighborhood. These long-distance courtships were remarkably common in colonial America. The details on how they were carried out is not completely clear to me.

It seems that people with eligible relatives living in distant towns would spread the word to their local neighbors and friends of a similar age. Perhaps it was Aaron's cousins who lived in Windham who helped in this matchmaking. Maybe it was as simple as one teenage girl telling her best friend "you have to meet my

cousin Aaron from Greenville, he is so good looking".

Regardless of the details, Aaron's courtship was a success and Aaron and Rebecca were married May 25, 1800 at the Greenville Presbyterian Church.

The Lakes were also a patriot family. Many had fought for and supported the cause for American Independence. Three brothers, Edward, David and Aaron's father Mathew, all came to Greenville with the very first settlers.

Like almost all the first settlers, these three would lose their land claims through the intervention of Aaron Burr on behalf of British Major Augustine Prevost. Prevost was the nephew of Burr's wife Theodosia. For people who had fought and sacrificed for their freedom it had to be a bitter pill to swallow to see the land awarded back to a British officer who had fought against them and their Country.

By the time Rebecca joined this family, the legal battle was over. The settlers had lost title to their lands and Prevost had taken possession of them. In order to stay in Greenville, the next generation of Lakes, Aaron, his brothers and cousins, were forced to buy back small pieces of their families' original claims from Prevost.

Almost all owed Prevost money for these lands. Aaron was farming 50 acres which was part of his uncle Edward's original 600-acre claim. Aaron bought it back from Prevost in 1798 as a 19 year old. He had a mortgage on it with Prevost and it was a struggle to make the payments. It wasn't going to get any easier.

Rebecca gave birth to her first child, Sophia, in January 1803. She would be followed in quick succession by 12 brothers and sisters: Philo - January 1805, Alfred - March 1807, Mary - July 1809, David October 1811, Sarah - March 1814, Lucena -

October 1815, Abigail - April 1817, Arabella - July 1821, Thomas - July 1823, Warren - July 1825, and Gideon - 1829.

With every new mouth to feed, Aaron and Rebecca's task became more difficult and their financial situation became more dire. For fifteen years Rebecca was almost continually pregnant or nursing a child. During this entire time she was not only mothering the children but helping Aaron on the farm.

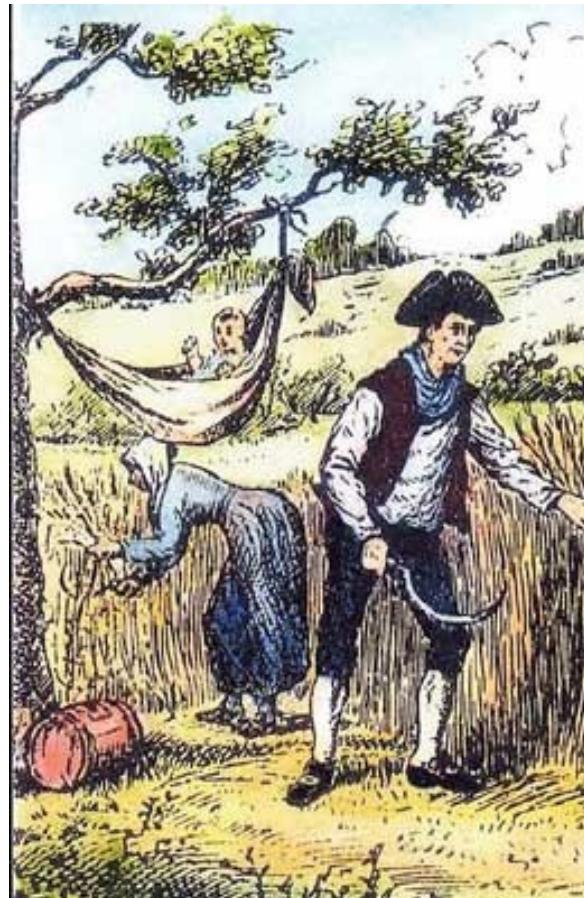
The expense of raising and feeding this large family got Aaron in trouble with Prevost. He couldn't stay current with his mortgage payments. He started to show up in Prevost's journal. Without exception, every entry was bad news.

A couple of examples are, "In settling Aaron Lake's sawing account he has omitted giving me credit for several pieces." "Ordered Israel and Aaron Lake to take back a horse they sold Fredrick (Prevost's son) as I wouldn't pay a farthing for it." "Dr. Talmadge offered to take Aaron Lake's obligation at a discount. Refused!" Finally, Prevost had Aaron Lake arrested for failure to pay his debt. Prevost mentioned that on August 11, 1814 the Sheriff stopped at his manor with Aaron in tow as he took him to the goal (jail).

On that day, Rebecca was 31 years old and had six children between five months and 11 years old. The picture that comes to mind of Rebecca standing there holding the baby and surrounded by the other five children clutching her skirt as their dad was led away in irons is almost Dickensque.

What thoughts raced through this woman's mind as she watched him being led away? Would she ever see Aaron again? Would anyone take her large family in? Would her children have to be split up among her various relatives? There is one thing that we can be sure of. At that moment Rebecca knew the very future of her family hung in the balance.

What she did next is lost to history. Did she go



A generic photo showing the challenges of colonial life, even if romanticized here.

to her husband's family and beg for financial help? It's doubtful as they were all very poor. Did she go to one of her neighbors and arrange a new loan? Did she leave the kids behind and trudge through the night to Prevost's Manor house and beg for her husband's freedom? How and to what extent she had to humble herself we will never know. Whatever happened, Prevost changed his mind and dropped the charges resulting in Aaron being released from jail.

Cowed by Prevost's actions that had almost destroyed their family, Aaron and Rebecca paid him off the following year on September 20, 1815 when that year's crop came in. They managed this in part by taking out another mortgage with neighbor Henry Talmadge.

Over the next few years, they were once

again unable to stay current with this new loan. They tried to stave off disaster one more time by borrowing \$190.10 from Truman Stanford. This would be Aaron and Rebecca's last gasp effort. Unable to pay these loans they would lose their farm in 1821. It would be sold again seven years later for seven times what they owed when it was taken from them.

Aaron and Rebecca had spent more than twenty years of back breaking work on their farm. Rebecca had birthed and raised ten children while they were there. Every year they had made the agonizing calculation of how much of their farm production they could sell to pay their bills and how little they could get by with keeping so they didn't starve to death over the winter. In the end, they left with almost nothing to show for their efforts. Aaron would go on to find work as a cooper in Westerlo.

Aaron and Rebecca would be gone from Greenville's records for the next 33 years. In 1854 they would move back to Greenville. Aaron would die shortly after their return on June 19, 1854. He was the last Lake family member to die that participated in the great migration that settled Greenville in the winter of 1781- 1782. He would have been around two years old at the time of the migration.

Rebecca would live in Greenville 13 more years as head of her own household until her own death just shy of her 85th birthday on November 20, 1867. During these years her daughter, Arabella, would live with her along with a young girl named Mary E. Lake, whose parentage is unknown. Both would disappear from Greenville records after Rebecca's death.

I found myself admiring Rebecca as I learned about her life. I also can't help but think about how fickle the winds of fate can be. If General Warren had survived the war he could very well have been among America's historical giants like Washington, Ad-

ams, and Jefferson. How would that have affected Rebecca and the rest of the Warren family?

If Aaron Burr had not gotten the Lake families' land claims nullified, she would have married into a family that owned a couple of thousand acres of farm land free and clear instead of a deeply indebted family. If she had married a man from almost anywhere else, she wouldn't have found herself in the infuriating situation of having a former British officer in a position to imprison her husband.

But this was her life and she made the best of it. She labored for more than twenty years on her family's farm. She dealt with years of good crops and bad crops, flood and drought and whatever other natural disasters came along. All this time she struggled to raise enough crops to feed her family and pay the mortgage.

After losing her farm and home she raised all her 13 children to adulthood. They all lived exceptionally long lives averaging 73 years in an era where a forty something average was normal. This is an incredible feat when you consider how their poverty must have made them continually short of food and medicine.

Her life spanned both of the defining moments of the nation's founding, the American Revolution and the American Civil War. Members of her family fought in both. Right up to the time of her death she was still providing a home to some members of her family. The children she raised would give her at least 38 grandchildren. This generation would not only populate Greenville but later spread across America.

She also managed to outlive every other member of her generation in the Lake family in Greenville. Perhaps most importantly on that one fateful day, when everything was on the line, she somehow saved her husband and her family. All in all, I find her a most admirable women and I am pleased to tell her story.