Remembering a Pillar of the Community

By Patricia Brhel

The death of Molly (Margaret) Adams of Brooktondale on June 23 has left a big hole in the community, not only among her family and friends, but throughout the Town of Caroline and Tompkins County.

While she only held one paying job in her life, the term she served on the Caroline Town Board, Adams' enthusiasm for her family, for history and preservation gave a focus to the energy she possessed and resulted in a lengthy list of projects and accomplishments, as her husband, Barry, revealed.

Born in Colorado to a forester father and a mother who was a nurse and the oldest of three children in a close-knit family, Adams met her husband when they were both PhD candidates at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. A move to Brooktondale in 1963, before she had completed her dissertation, interrupted her education and resulted in only one doctorate degree in the family, but Adams became very involved in her new community.

Adams started a cooperative nursery school when her two daughters, Emily and Katie, were young, organized a food purchasing cooperative in Brooktondale, and became such an authority on local history that she was sought out by professional historians.

Organizations that benefited from her enthusiasm include the Brooktondale Community Center, the Clinton House and the State Theatre in Ithaca, the City of Ithaca, the Town of Caroline, Robert Treman Park (especially the mill) and Historic Ithaca, of which she was a former member of the board of directors.

Adams Molly served as the unofficial historian for the Brooktondale Community Center, keeping track of the paperwork and when the center didn't have space for an office. She also headed the creation of the annual Brooktondale Apple Fest Quilt for many years and the group met to design the quilt, appliquéd the top and finish the quilting at Molly's house.

Several times she was instrumental in keeping the organization going and most recently, along with Peggy and David Dunlop, helped the center purchase the old Fire Hall, which allowed it to expand both in space and services at a critical juncture.

With her friend Art Volbreck and the help of various town historians, Adams recorded local history, organized tours of local houses, including a recent event hosted by Historic Ithaca, and worked hard to make sure that local history was preserved.

She arranged for highway marker signs to preserve the location of the old railroad trestle and a marker for the site of the Bethel Grove school. She worked to preserve the West Dryden Community Center and made sure that the Caroline Town Hall was listed on the National Historic Register.

She was also a source of help when St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Slaterville made its successful bid to make the register and supported the effort by St. John's Episcopal Church in Speedsville to do the same.

Adams helped in the preservation and remodeling of the Clinton House in downtown Ithaca and with the preservation and renovation of the State Street Theatre. "Not always," as her husband notes, "by wielding a paint brush herself, but by encouraging others to do so. I recall one afternoon when I was on a ladder with a plumber, helping to drain a big vat of water that may have been catching the drainage from a roof leak, and I'm not a guy that likes heights." Other jobs, such as planting flower beds at the Caroline Town Hall, were hands-on projects. Adams not only designed the flower beds around the sign near the road, but made sure that the flowers and bushes were set in at the right time and in the correct spacing.

Treman Park, especially the historic mill, was of great interest to Adams, and she worked hard to restore it and make sure that the labels were informative and interesting and that included collecting cans and bottles, using the redemption funds to further the cause.

The community is mourning her death, and as Adams was the unofficial keeper of Caroline and Tompkins County history there will be many questions that will go unanswered, something else will have to take over organizing house tours.

Brookton's Market has a collection container on the counter for those who would like to make a donation in her memory. Owner Aaron Snow recently sent an e-mail stating, "Molly was a very special lady and a friend in the Brooktondale Community. Our prayers and love are with Barry and her family at this time of sorrow."

There are two memorials planned, one at Robert H. Treman Park in the mill at 3 p.m. on July 22 and another at the Brooktondale Community Center, 526 Valley Road, tentatively set for 2 to 4 p.m. on July 27.