



*The McManus family and
their pugs, Archi & Bella*

Louise McManus

Bringing Together the Community

COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo

Photos by MarkBolles.com

Clifton Park hosts a wealth of historical sites. Once primarily a farm town, there are still many original buildings in the area that carry whispers of the days of old. Louise McManus, with a little help from her family, now runs an important piece of this history – the Vischer Ferry General Store.

Originally from Huntington, Long Island, Louise was always an avid reader. She knew she didn't want to work an office job, although she didn't know at the time she would eventually get to work what turned out to be her dream job, running a store. She went to the University of Scranton where she met her husband, Tom. After they were married, they lived in various places on Long Island, Virginia and New Jersey. They enjoyed it there, but were looking for a slower pace of life and settled here in the

Capital District. Louise found Vischer Ferry because of her children. "I discovered it when my kids were rowing on the crew team and I used to take the scenic route to get to the boathouse. I thought it was such a pretty and charming area," she explains. "Then one day I noticed a 'for sale by owner' sign on one of the houses. One thing led to another (thanks to my ever-patient husband who indulges most of my whims) and here we are. It's such a lovely place to live. Stony Creek borders our backyard and of course the nature preserve is across the street."

Louise had a customer service background with her experience in working at a bridal salon and making custom jewelry, but it wasn't until they moved into their current house six years ago that the idea for a store started to take shape. At the time, the building next to their house was being used as a tack shop for horseback riders. They always

thought it would be a great gathering spot for the neighborhood.

Come to find out, it was the original store for the area, built in 1787. A massive fire in 2013 nearly destroyed the local treasure, but Karen & George Donohue and Joanne & Paul Coons decided to buy the property and take on a full restoration process. Louise and Tom joined them in the venture soon after. Louise wanted to open a business in the building once the work was completed, so they brainstormed what would make a good community gathering spot. They decided a combination of retail and a café might be the perfect mix and the Vischer Ferry General Store was born once again.

As they worked on the restoration, they found out more of the history of the place, as well as unearthed some interesting artifacts. Most of the original 1787 structure no longer existed, but they did reveal large fieldstones at the entrance to the basement that they believe were part of the original walls. In 1856, the store was sold to Gerardus Clute, who also purchased surrounding lots and built the existing structure as well as a Greek Revival house next door, which now hosts a plaque labeling it as the "Shopkeeper's House" and is home to the McManus family. The plaque amuses Louise. "I thought that was a fun fact since everything comes full circle and the shopkeeper lives there once again!" she says. The store passed through several owners through the rest of the 1800s, also operating as the post office at one point as well.

In the meantime, Vischer Ferry began to grow with the construction of the Erie Canal and became a booming town



with a hotel, several stores, harness and blacksmith shops, a carriage maker, post office, multiple schools, church, doctors and several mills. Many of these buildings still stand. Eventually, the growth of the railroad replaced the canal as a primary transport system and things began to quiet down.

The store continued to grow and change hands until eventually Nels Olsen bought it in 1953 and was the last to run it as a general store. In the 1970s, the building was remodeled. The property was slowly divided up as the space went through several transformations including a bike shop, realtor office and the tack shop.

When they began the renovations after the fire, they found that many of the original period details were still in tact since the fire that started in the back apartment primarily destroyed the sheetrock that was added over

the years. The renovation, led by Paul Coons, took great care to restore the building to its original 1850s splendor, keeping the look as historical as possible while also including modern mechanical systems such as all new plumbing, electrical, septic and a geothermal system to heat and cool the place in a more environmentally conscious way. They were able to restore the 10-foot high wooden beadboard ceilings as well as the wide horizontal tongue and groove wainscoting and wide plank flooring. They found the original window molding around one of the windows and were able to use that as a template to recreate the look around all the windows. They added the back porch to replace the destroyed apartment and replicated the design of the original columns on the front porch.

Louise was interested in vintage items



Mother and daughter team, Louise & Hannah

from a young age after watching the way her dad treated his original tools. "Most of the tools and things he owned that I consider vintage were things that he probably bought new!" she says. "He knew the value in treating everything with care and maintaining things so that they last forever. Items were not thought of as being disposable the way they are now. If something broke, he fixed it, not replaced it. That way of life seems to now be the exception rather than the rule. Most things just aren't made with the same quality that they used to be. That's why vintage items hold a special place in my heart. I also love to think of all the people that used them before me."

During the restoration they did uncover a few artifacts including pieces of the old wallpaper, bottles and newspapers, some of which are now on display in the store. Louise has also enjoyed hearing memories from locals as well as from the Olsen family members themselves about the heyday of the Olsen's store. It is all a part of the charm of the current store and Louise treasures every moment of it.

The store is now a reflection of Louise's own personal taste, representing a collection of items that relate to nature, history and literature, and offers a selection of local, handmade and fair trade products and art that are often not found in other stores in the area. Currently open for breakfast and lunch, the café menu changes weekly,

offering daily specials as well. Everything is made fresh to order and all baking is done in house. They have a community book club that meets once a month and hold many special events including art classes, live music, author events, poetry evenings, history events and more.

Louise says the store is constantly evolving and improving. After a brief closing from July 29th to August 9th for a family vacation, the store will reopen again with new extended hours from Thursdays through Saturdays 8-7 and Sundays 8-3 to accommodate the requests they've received for later hours for the people that work days. They are also hoping to expand into dinner in the future and offer pick-up dinners as well.

Louise is excited that the store has turned into the community hub she has hoped, incorporating history and community within our modern everyday life. "Many locals remember coming here as kids. I love that it brings back a feeling of nostalgia. There's nothing better than sipping a fresh-squeezed lemonade on the front porch," she says.

Her family all has a hand in the store. Her daughter, Hannah (22 – a recent graduate of SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry with a degree in Wildlife Science) works with her in the store. Tom and their son, Finn (19 – currently attending Rochester Institute of Technology) act as her technical support, helping with the computer programs and inventory systems. One of her property partners, George Donohue, also helps out part time. When not in the store, Louise loves to spend time in the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve across the street. "It's such a gem in our town and so many people aren't even aware of it. There are miles of biking and walking paths that run along the old Erie Canal towpath and down to the Mohawk River." She also enjoys kayaking and still loves to read.

But her number one joy is being in the store and getting to interact with her customers. "I've met so many wonderful people in this community that I never would have met otherwise. The beauty of having a store like this is having the opportunity to get to know them. We have a communal table. It's very sociable and there are always conversations going on between people who have just met. It's like I imagine it was when the store opened in the 1800s – you come here to find out what's going on in the neighborhood, and to visit with your friends and neighbors."

For more information about the store, events or artisans, visit <http://vischerferrygeneralstore.com> to contact them directly. ■

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