



This truss bridge overlooking Seneca Falls will be decked out for the holidays as part of the town's annual "It's A Wonderful Life" festival in December.

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## One-Tank Trip / Seneca Falls

# Seneca Falls: It's a 'Wonderful' town

By Joan Barone McDonald  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

When film director Frank Capra wandered into Seneca Falls in the winter of 1945 looking for a haircut, he found himself inspired by more than barber Tommy Bellissima's scissors. It is the town's claim that after seeing Seneca Falls, Capra modeled Bedford Falls, the setting of the Christmas classic "It's a Wonderful Life," after their little village.

What better time of year than the pre-Christmas season to visit and investigate not only Seneca Falls' similarities to George Bailey's fictional hometown, but to consider the impact real-life hero Elizabeth Cady Stanton had on our lives when she organized the first Women's Rights Convention.

Before beginning our journey, I watched "It's a Wonderful Life" and was struck not only by its endearing small-town setting, but by a parallel plot of today as George Bailey, head of Bailey Savings and Loan, faces financial ruin due to a run on the bank and the misplacement of \$8,000 in depositors' cash. Desperate and crestfallen, George declares that he wishes he were never born and considers suicide, only to recant that wish once he is shown by his guardian angel, Clarence, what life in Bedford Falls would have been like had he never lived.

As we arrived in Seneca Falls, we found ourselves on Fall Street, a typical small town main street. Spanning the canal of this old mill town stands the steel truss bridge, looking exactly like the

bridge where George stood contemplating what he considered his failed life, one end of the bridge road is named “George Bailey Lane” and the other, “Clarence Street.”

As we continued our drive through the town, we passed many Second Empire Victorian homes like those in Bedford Falls, one on Cayuga Street almost identical to the Granville mansion, the old house George and Mary fixed up in the movie. It turned out to be right next door to the perfectly lovely bed-and- breakfast we had booked.

We were greeted at the door of Barrister’s, a home built in the mid-to late 1800s, by Ken and Diane McConnell, who proved to be not only warm and enthusiastic hosts, but knowledgeable resources. From the foyer a huge wooden staircase, backed by a stained glass window stretching almost to the ceiling of the second floor, led to our bedroom. We booked the “Yellow Rose” room, which was complete with yellow rose wallpaper, an intricate leaded glass bay window alcove, a king-sized bed covered in sumptuous linens with ironed pillow cases, and its own cozy bathroom. After settling in, we shared a “spot of tea” in the chestnut paneled formal dining room with Diane and Ken and welcomed their suggestions for our itinerary.

One of our first stops was the Historical Society Museum right across the street at 55 Cayuga. We took a private tour of the Queen Anne-style home with Kathy Jans-Duffy, collections manager, as our guide. She explained the details of the house and graciously satisfied our curiosity about the annual “It’s a Wonderful Life” festival held this year Dec. 12 to 14, when Seneca Falls will be transformed into Bedford Falls circa 1946.

On Dec. 12, Christmas lights will festoon the truss bridge and Fall Street, while actors reenact movie scenes along snow-covered paths. Children dressed as angels, each ringing a tiny bell, will parade to People’s Park for a bonfire and Christmas carols. Antonina’s Italian- American Restaurant will become “Martini’s.” The movie, with live narration by Kathryn Grimes, who played Zuzu Bailey, will be screened at the Recreation Center.

Other events include train rides with Santa, free wagon rides, a Culinary Taste of Bedford Falls, the conferring of the “George Bailey Award” to a citizen for behind-the-scenes work on behalf of the village and a “By the Light of the Moon” dance.

We awoke the next morning to a stream of orange sunlight filtering through our stained glass windows. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee drew us downstairs, where we would share the table with a congenial group of guests. As we chatted, Diane and Ken served up a world-class breakfast: home-baked danishes, oatmeal pudding filled with dried fruit and nuts, and gourmet French Toast stuffed with egg custard, apples and cream cheese.

After saying goodbye to our hosts and new friends, we headed to the Women’s National Historical Park. At the Visitors’ Center, we watched a short film, “Dreams of Equality,” recounting the inequities women had endured by not being afforded the same freedoms as men. Not only were women not allowed to vote, we were forbidden to hold elected office, attend college or earn a living. If married, women could not enter into legal contracts, divorce an abusive husband, or gain custody of their children.

These injustices led Seneca Falls resident Elizabeth Cady Stanton to band together with Lucretia Mott to call for a convention focused on women's issues. The first National Women's Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel on July 19 and 20, 1848. Here, Stanton, a housewife with three sons, presented her "Declaration of Sentiment" which submitted that "all men AND WOMEN are created equal."

After the film, we visited an interactive installation housed at the Visitors' Center which follows the women's movement from its inception through the present day. We walked next door to what remains of the Methodist Chapel where Stanton delivered her speech some 160 years ago. Park ranger David Malone discussed the ongoing restoration work and later guided us through the home where Stanton lived from 1847 to 1862.

Unfortunately, the Women's Hall of Fame was closed during our visit, so we decided to check out Red's Place, a bar touted as the "Men's Hall of Fame. With moose antlers hanging behind a 30-foot oak bar, beer nuts and beef jerky suspended on a snack rack, and more than 20 beers on tap, it lived up to its billing.

On our way out of town, we stopped at an Amish/Mennonite enterprise, Sauder's Farmers' Market at 2168 River Road. As we pulled into the parking lot, we checked out the hand-carved gliders and rockers, some brightly painted wagons, and artfully crafted gazebos.

Inside, we wandered past bins of deep red raspberries, golden pears, mounds of green and purple grapes and baskets of rosy apples. We sifted through aisles filled with handmade soaps, paper dolls, jigsaw puzzles, Laura Ingalls Wilder books, cookie cutters, candy molds, wind chimes and canning supplies. We purchased Buffalo-style sliced turkey, some freshly baked wheat bread and a few local apples for a picnic on the way home.

We drove along Route 20 until we found a perfect spot on Canandaigua Lake to unpack our lunch and toast our trip with wine in plastic champagne flutes. I found myself thinking of George Bailey and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

In the movie, George learns how different his town would have turned out had he never lived. Although women were still 18 years away from securing the right to vote when Stanton died in 1902, I understood how different our world is as a result of her life. Because of the work of Stanton and others like her, our daughters can now say what our grandmothers perhaps couldn't – It's a wonderful life!

### **If you go**

For general information: [www.senecafalls.com](http://www.senecafalls.com), [www.TheRealBedfordFalls.com](http://www.TheRealBedfordFalls.com) Women's National Historical Park, 115 Fall St., [www.nps.gov/wori](http://www.nps.gov/wori) Barristers Bed and Breakfast: [www.sleepbarristers.com](http://www.sleepbarristers.com)