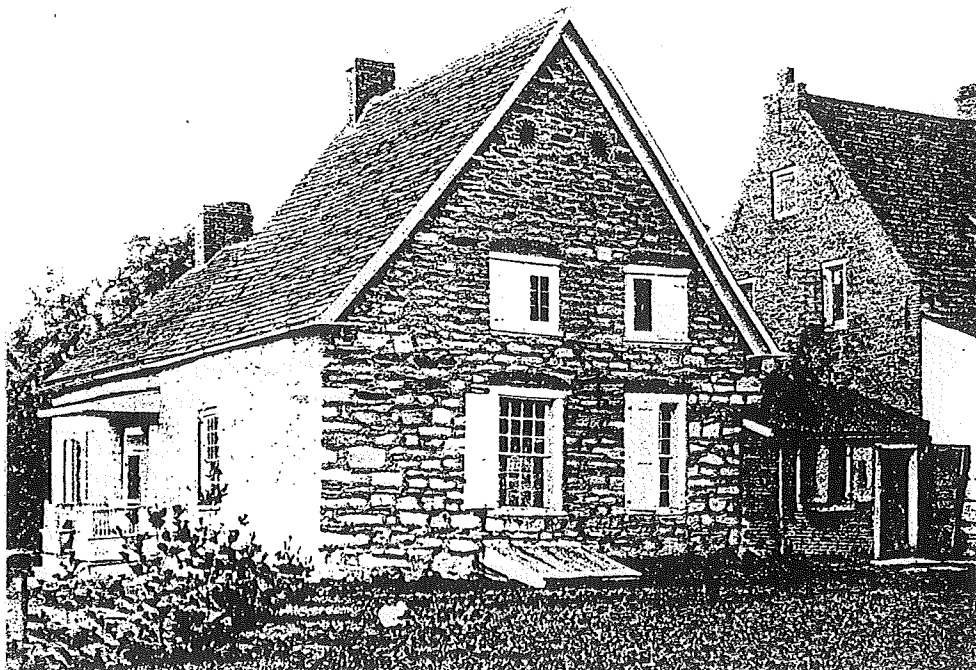


Influences on New York's Early Dutch Architecture

by Shirley W. Dunn



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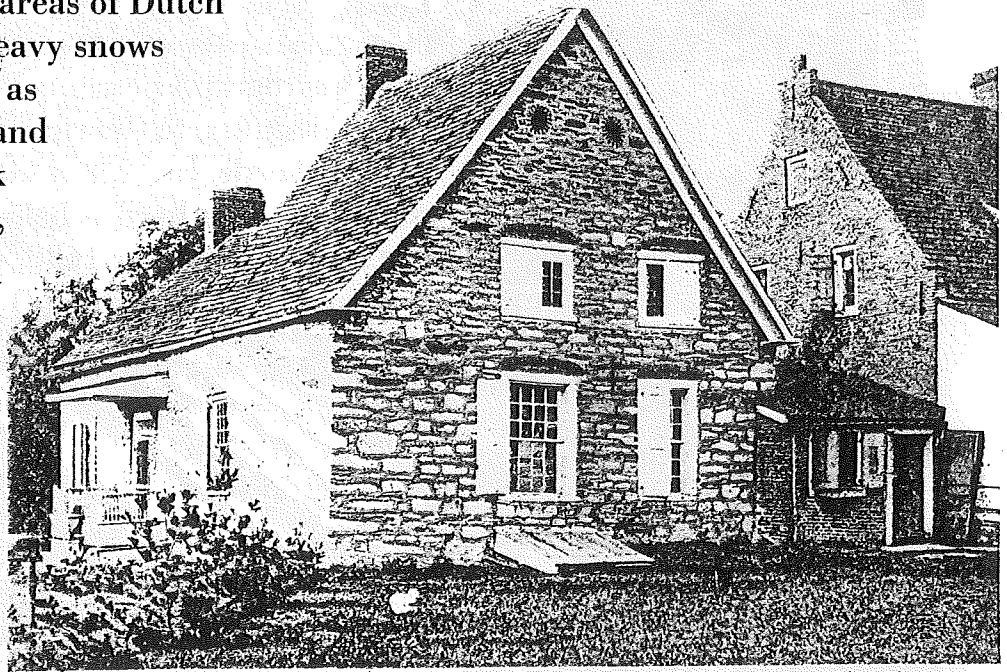


Presentation by Shirley W. Dunn,
Conference on New York State History, Bard College, June 6, 2003, 1:30 pm.

Influences on New York's Early Dutch Architecture

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The purpose of this paper is to give a voice to an architectural form that some readers may not know about. This form, one of the very first farm buildings built by early Dutch settlers in present New York, has disappeared, but it has had a striking influence. We must set the scene: When you think of a Dutch-style house, you have in mind steep-sloped Dutch roofs, originally developed to support thatch or tiles in the Netherlands. With a few adjustments, these proved practical in areas of Dutch settlement where heavy snows were common, such as the Hudson Valley and is the Pieter Bronck House at Coxsackie, probably built in 1663.



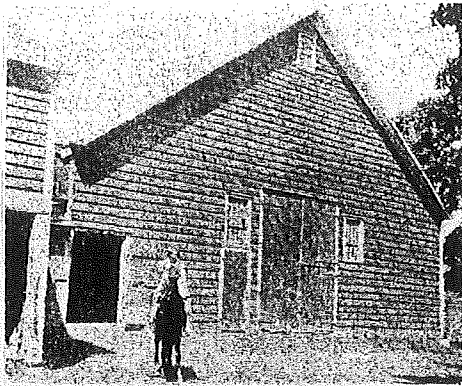
1. The stone house erected about 1663 by Pieter Bronck at present Coxsackie is now a museum supported by the Greene County Historical Society.

Plate 16 from H. Reynolds, Dutch Houses in the Hudson Valley Before 1776, (1929)

The Bronck House seems to be the oldest nearly intact house in the Dutch style remaining in New York State. It undoubtedly survived because it was built of stone, rather than wood. My guess is the stone was chosen for safety, in consideration of Peter Stuyvesant's war against the Esopus Indians, a war being waged only a few miles away near present-day Kingston. The Bronck House is wider than deep, which makes it doubly special. The original front door was in front, in the location of the present right front window, shown in the picture. As evidence of the doorway, there is the trap door to the cellar, with a stair below it, which remains in the floor where the door was located.

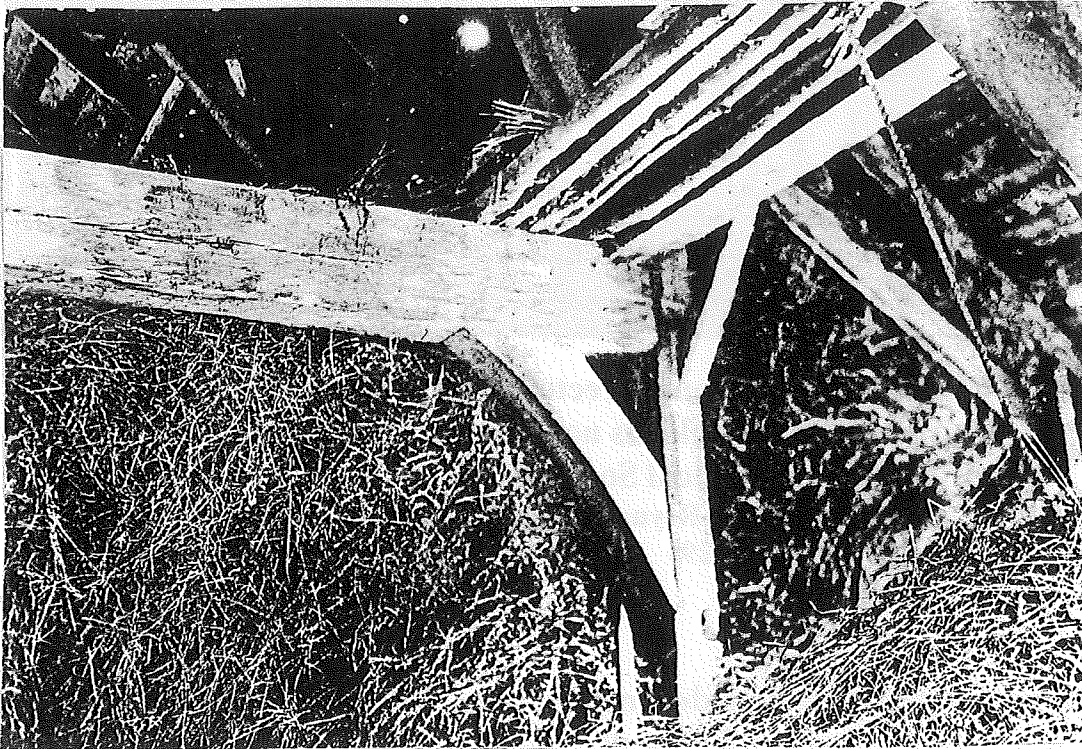
2.

Special barns that we associate with Dutch framing styles also were built in the seventeenth century - and some from the eighteenth century, erected by Dutch descendants, still survive. They all seem to have the same underlying framing pattern, which is surprising, because barns in the Netherlands exhibited great variety. These special "Dutch" barns of the Hudson Valley and Long Island and New Jersey were practical for storing and threshing wheat, at one time the major crop of upstate New York. As a result, we often say that this barn was a wheat barn, but it was used for other kinds of grain in the Netherlands.



2. The Van Bergen Dutch barn at present Leeds, New York, as it appeared in 1928. Photo courtesy Dorothy Scanlon.

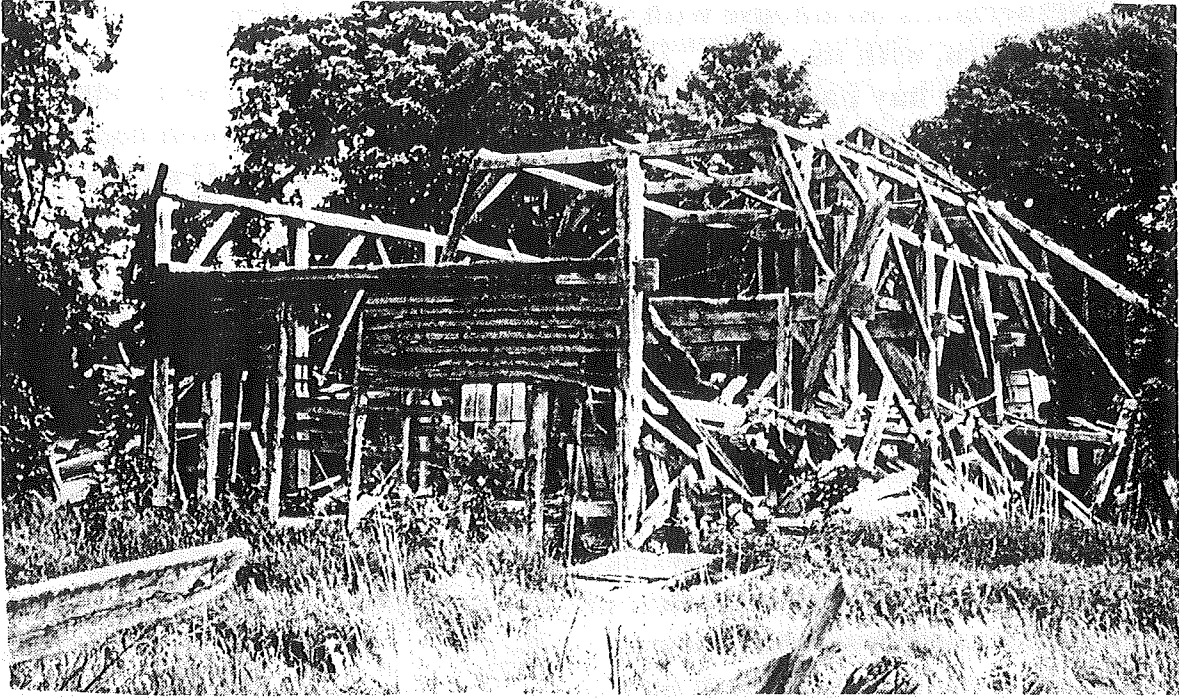
This photograph presents the exterior of the ancient Marte Gerritsen Van Bergen barn in Leeds. In 1928 it was still in good condition. This barn is believed to be the one built by the year 1680, when it was mentioned in a contract.(1)



3. The interior of the Van Bergen barn of c. 1680 shows curved soffits on the anchorbeam braces.

Photo by Vincent Schaefer, date unknown.

An interior view of the Van Bergen barn shows the anchor beam braces with lightly curved soffits (undersides), typical of early Dutch construction. The large horizontal anchor beams of this barn were about twenty inches deep. On the saplings overhead hay or grain was stored. The Van Bergen barn survived until a few decades ago, but by the 1970s its roof was off and after that the building tumbled down. It is now gone, the site bull-dozed.



4. The exterior of the Van Bergen barn shows the exposed frame with roof alterations that raised the side walls and lowering the roof pitch. Photo by Vincent Schaefer, date unknown.

Despite a popular impression, the steep-roofed houses and the Dutch barns were not the only important forms established here by the Dutch. To understand this perhaps surprising statement we can go back to the beginning of Dutch farm settlement in the Hudson Valley in the seventeenth century. Much of what we know about the farms comes from the many letters of Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, a Dutch merchant who established Rensselaerswyck in the area of present Albany and Rensselaer counties.

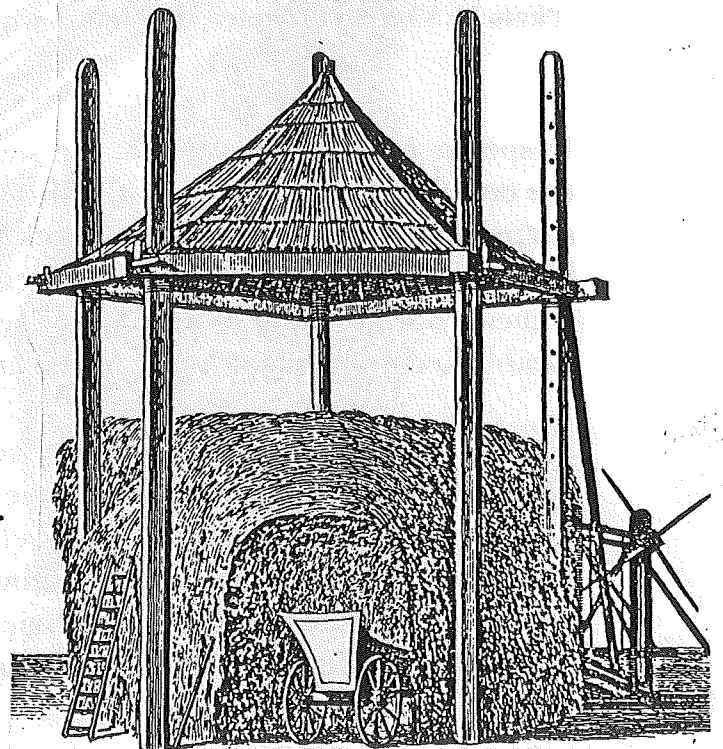
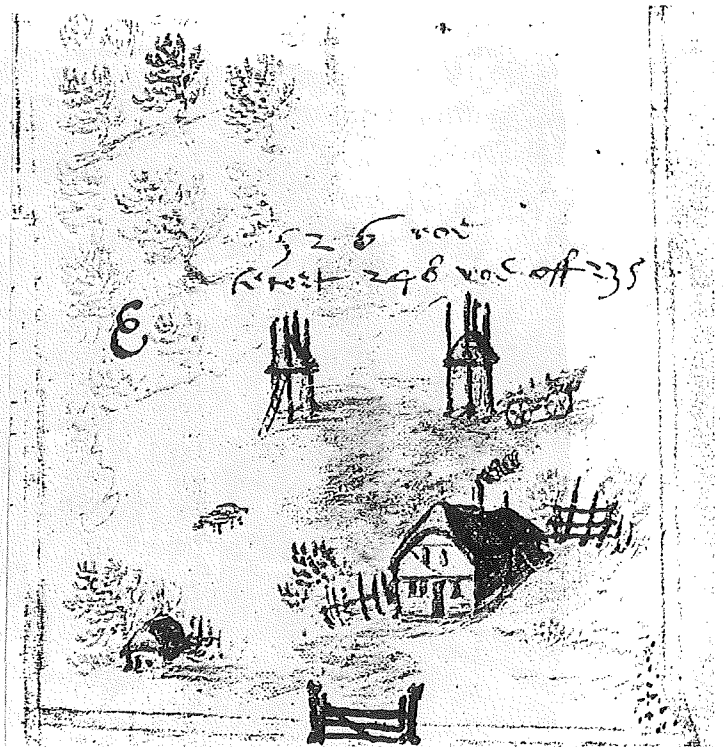
The first upstate farm was established in 1631 by agents of Van Rensselaer on fertile Castle Island, now the location of the Port of Albany. There one large farmhouse was built in 1631 for Kiliaen Van Rensselaer's first upstate farm family and a few farm helpers. This farmhouse was described by Van Rensselaer as "a convenient dwelling, the sides and gable built up with brick, the dwelling [as] long and wide as required."⁽²⁾ He also wrote in a letter about this building, "The house was furnished with all kinds of implements and necessaries for the animals and the comfort and support of the people and what further was needful."⁽³⁾ Surprise! The structure contained not only living quarters for the farm family and the farm help but for animals in their stalls, as well as storage and work areas. More than thirty years later, this large frame and brick farmhouse on Castle Island was washed away in the flood of 1666.

4.

5. A Netherlands farmhouse with attached barn, with its accompanying hay barracks and a wagon, was drawn on a Dutch land survey about 1600. From *Van vlechtwerk tot baksteen*, by J.J. Voskuil, Stichting Historisch Boerderij-Onderzoek, Arnhem, 1979. Used with permission.

Having the house and barn under one roof occasioned no special comment in the 1600s because such buildings were common in northern Europe and, in fact, are still erected, especially in The Netherlands. Such a farmhouse, with its hay barracks and even a nice Dutch was drawn on a land survey in the Netherlands about 1600. A closer view of a Dutch hay barrack shows how a farmer stowed a similar wagon in one.

Diagonally across the Hudson River from present Albany, the second Van Rensselaer farm was established that same summer of 1631 near a pine grove in an area called the Greenbush, meaning the pine woods. The location is now within the City of Rensselaer. In 1631, *Roelof Jansen* from the coast of Sweden became the first farmer at the Greenbush farm. Roelof Jansen came to the area in 1630 after a stop in the Netherlands. With him were his wife, the now famous *Anneke Jans*, and their three daughters. A son, known as *Jan Roelofsen*, was born after Roelof and Annetje arrived. Aiding Roelof Jansen and his family with farm work were two farm helpers, *Claes Claesen* and *Jacob Goyversen*, both from Fleckero, Norway, who came over in 1630 with Jansen.(5)



6. A Dutch hay barrack, also called a "haystack."

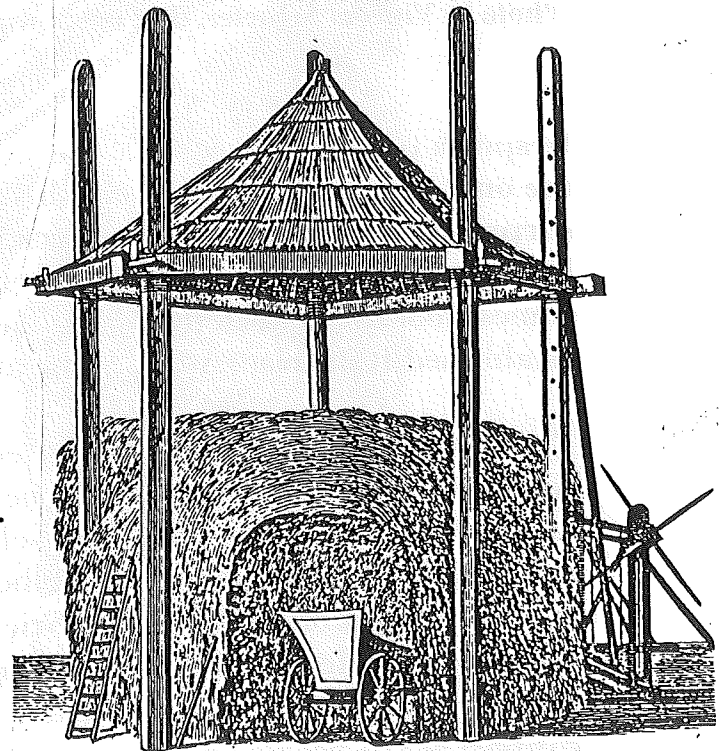
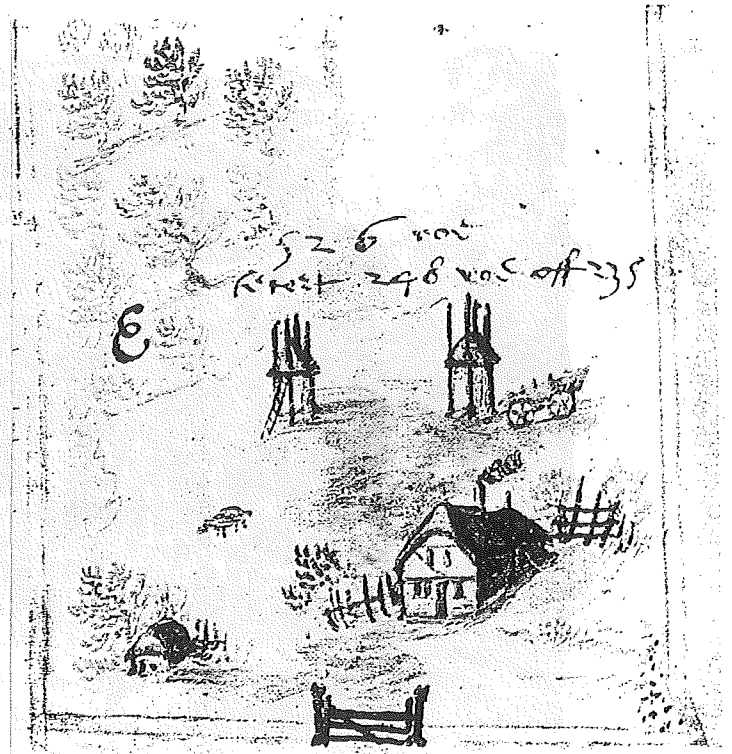
From J. le Francq van Berkhey, *Natuurlijke History van Holland*, Vol. IX, Part I (Leiden, 1810).

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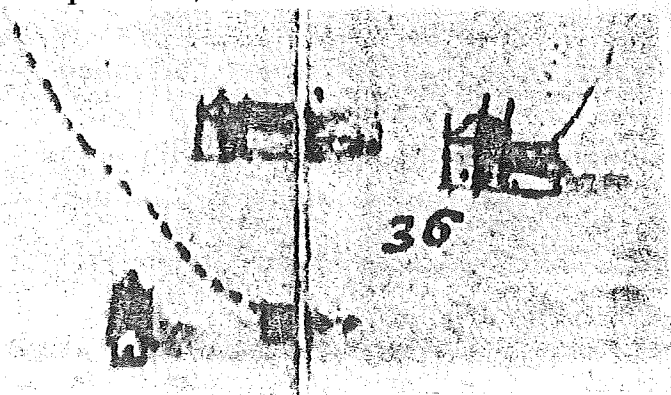
6. A Dutch hay barrack, also called a "haystack."

From J. le Francq van Berkhey, *Natuurlijke History van Holland*, Vol. IX, Part I (Leiden, 1810).

One large rectangular house for all these people and for their livestock, grain storage, and work space was erected. It was, apparently, similar to its mate built on Castle Island. The Greenbush farmer began with four horses. Cows for his farm were detained downriver, but a few arrived the next year. Other buildings on the farm included a Dutch-style hay barrack of four poles, fifty feet high, a barn or shed, and a sheepcote.

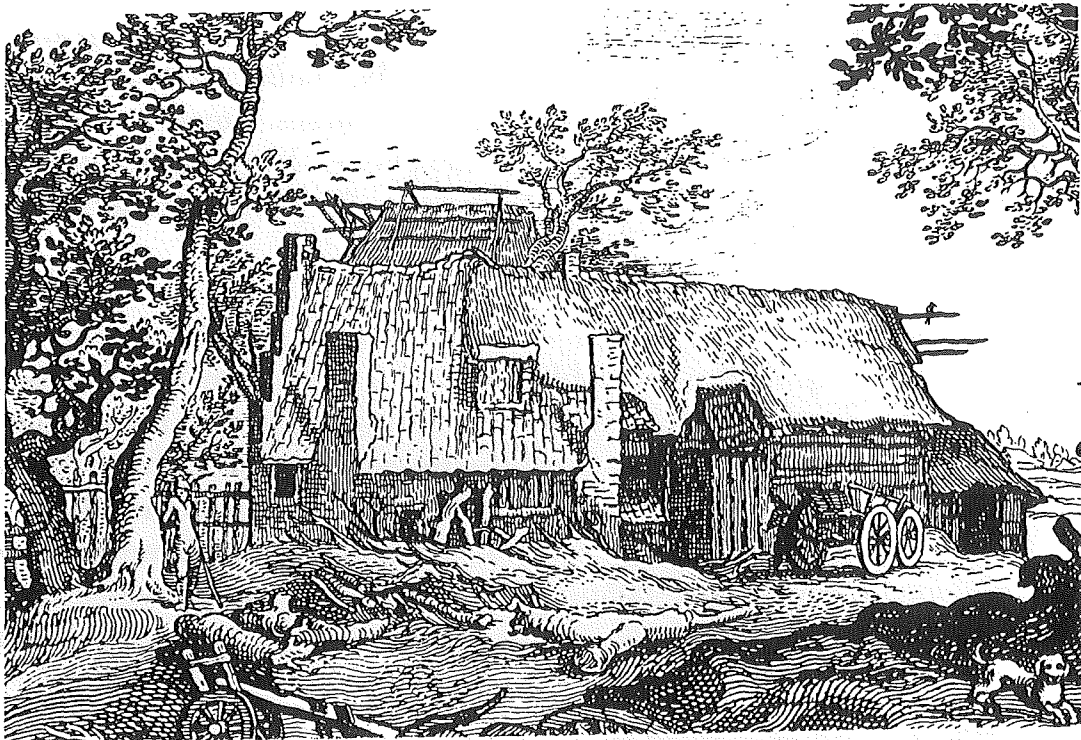
This brand new Greenbush farmhouse accidentally burned in 1632, but a replacement was built as quickly as possible. Fortunately, Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, writing from the Netherlands, described this new building: He said the people "... built again another brick house, 80 feet long, the threshing floor 25 feet wide and the beams 12 feet high, up to the ceiling." (6) The description states that the replacement building was similar to the previous one at Greenbush, and suggests it also was like the one built on Castle Island across the river in 1631, which had the sides and gable end built up with brick. The buildings were to be as long as needed. As the Dutch foot was shorter than today's measure, the actual length of the Greenbush building was about 72.5 feet and the threshing floor was just short of 23 feet across.

A few other farmhouses of this European type were erected in the present Albany area within a few years. A small one burned down on an east side farm south of Greenbush in 1640. Although the farmer was not injured, the horses (mares, actually) in this building were killed with the loss of their expected foals. (7) On the other side of the river, archeological evidence of a building over one hundred feet long, thought to be the one described in a 1643 letter by Arent Van Curler, was unearthed about 1974 by archeologist Paul Huey and others at the farm called the Flatts, north of Albany. Van Curler's letter included valuable details about arrangements: his farmhands were to sleep in an attic room over the family's living quarters, while the foreman would have his bunk in the barn section. (8)



7. Detail from the Manatus Map of c. 1639 (copied in the 1660s), shows the two farms of Wolfert Gerritsen in present Brooklyn. Harriette Collection, Maps, Library of Congress.

In addition, there are reports of similar buildings from the first farms at Manhattan, where some of the men employed by Kiliaen Van Rensselaer worked in 1630 before they came upriver. In particular, Wolfert Gerritsen was in charge of assembling livestock at Manhattan and shipping it up to the Fort Orange area for the new Van Rensselaer farms. Two farms, each with a rectangular long farmhouse as well as a hay barrack, were identified on a 1639 map of Manatus (Manhattan) and environs as those of Wolfert Gerritsen.



8. Detail from an engraving, "Tobias and the Angel," by Abraham Bloemaert, 1620. A seventeenth century barn in the Netherlands, in the Gooi region, suggests the likely appearance of the farmhouses built by Kiliaen Van Rensselaer at Greenbush and on Castle Island.

Fortunately, similar farmhouses were occasionally depicted in the Netherlands. A Dutch artist, Abraham Bloemaert, in 1620 sketched a farmhouse from the region called the *Gooi* or *Gooiland*.⁽⁹⁾ The long building fits the description of those planned for Greenbush and Castle Island. Bloemaert has been criticized for making fun of the farms by making them look run-down. Nevertheless, his picture is invaluable. The stepped gable he showed was made of brick, as were the walls and chimney of the living section on the left hand side of the picture. The resemblance to the farm houses built by Van Rensselaer's orders is clear. Van Rensselaer had noted that the gable end of his farmhouse on the island was to be made of brick. In the picture, the roof of the living part was covered with tiles, while the attached barn section on the other end had wood siding, with a thatched roof. Looming behind the living section was a hay barrack – this one with a gable roof high in the air.

Clues to the interior arrangements of the farmhouse include the front chimney serving the fireplace in the residence, which, in the Dutch style, would not have a built-in oven. Rather, an extra chimney at the center of the building served a separate oven for baking. Documents suggest the farmhouse at Greenbush also had such a special baking oven. In the early 1640s, Willem Juriaensz, a baker, was paid for baking on the farm at Greenbush and for going around to bake at Van Rensselaer's other farms. Willem Juriaensz also visited and baked at the farm of Arent Van Curler, with its long farmhouse on the Flatts, mentioned above.⁽¹⁰⁾

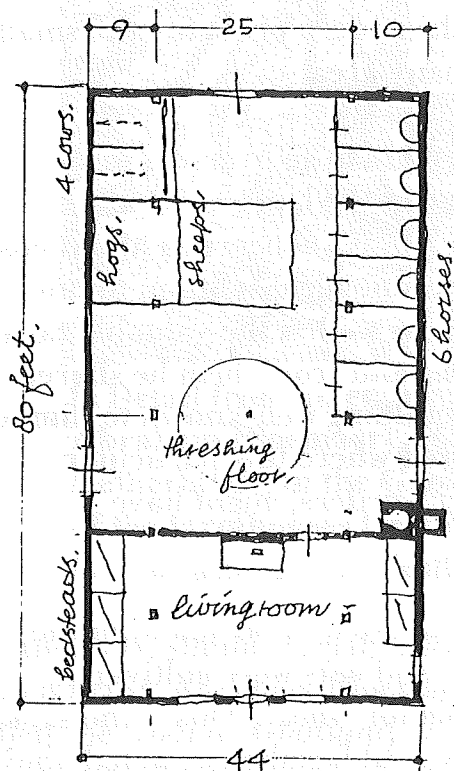
The reference to brick in construction changes common notions of architectural history. Father Isaac Jogues had said of a visit to Fort Orange in 1643 that the houses were "merely of boards and thatched. As yet there is no mason work except the chimneys." (11) His description is widely quoted as a snapshot of the wooden housing of the period. However, Jogues, rescued from the Mohawks, was hiding within Fort Orange. He did not notice that the large farmhouses in the distance at Greenbush and on Castle Island were constructed in part with bricks. The bricks, sent by Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, were probably the small yellow ones found on very early sites in the Albany area.

Van Rensselaer, who contracted with Dutch farmers to go overseas to the Hudson Valley to work on his farms, never let go of the land, as we all understand, and he definitely pinched pennies. Always concerned about costs in his overseas colony, Van Rensselaer wanted an economical solution to housing his tenant farmers, their families and their help, as well as the valuable farm animals. These animals he supplied for the farms and from them he shared the increase. It is not surprising that he selected a building well-known to him to meet these requirements. Scholars have wondered where this particular farmhouse type, built on Kiliaen van Rensselaer's orders, might have originated?

A land speculator, Kiliaen van Rensselaer had invested in farmland in the Gooi, the Dutch region of sandy soils where rye and oats were cultivated. Interestingly, the poor soil there was not suitable for wheat. This is the same region where Abraham Bloemaert sketched a typical farmhouse, noted above. The special farmhouses built there combined the tenant's home with stables, threshing floor, and overhead crop storage under one roof. These rectangular Gooi farm buildings were called longhouses. I believe these familiar and practical structures of the Gooi were the ones Van Rensselaer copied in the Hudson Valley. Such inclusive structures would be an efficient and economical solution for new farms anywhere.

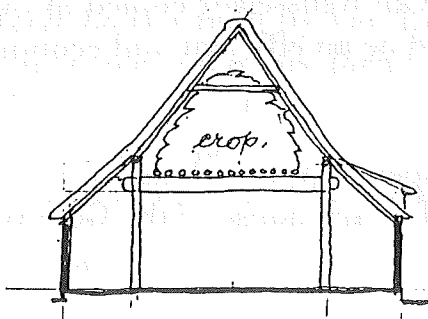
Restoration architect and historian Jaap Schipper of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, prepared a few sketches for me of a farmhouse of the Gooi type. The typical Gooi farmhouses known to Schipper echo the early 1600s drawing by Abraham Bloemaert amazingly well, both inside and out. The brick living section with its parapet gable front was roofed with tile while the barn at rear was thatched. (Brick was practical and fire-safe, but it also was used for show.) Schipper, moreover, shows the interior plan. A bakeoven is located at the

partition, just as it was in Bloemaert's sketch. However, in Schipper's drawing, the main chimney happens to be at the back of the living section, where there was a wall. The circle indicates the threshing floor. The family home is at the left front, and boxes around the walls depict built-in bedsteads. The workers probably slept above in the loft room over the family dwelling.

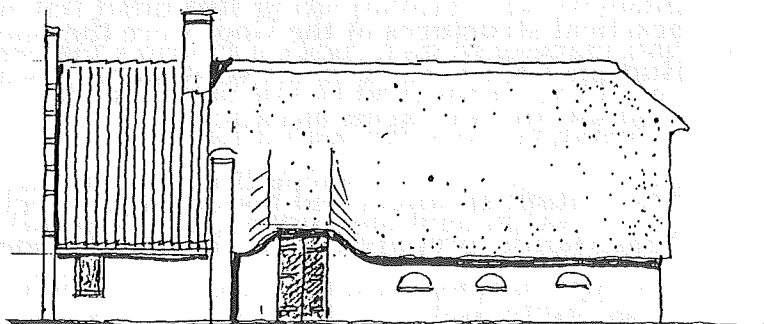


Ground floor.

One detail of Schipper's drawing shows a cross-section of the framing of the barn. The crop was placed on saplings just as it was in later Dutch barns in America, as you saw in the Van Bergen barn. The anchorbeams were supported, not by the outside walls, but by posts on each side of the threshing floor, also as it was done in American Dutch barns. Note that a raised section of the roof on the side accommodated the height of the wagon door. Most importantly, outside aisles for stalls flanked the threshing floor on both sides. These aisles are specifically mentioned in early Albany area barn contracts. The roofs of some early barns, including possibly the Van Bergen barn which you saw, may have had a roof slope of two different pitches, with a "break" over the aisles. The Bloemaert sketch hints at a curve or change in the slope of the roof, but it may merely reflect the sagging of the rafters.



Section



Gable

9. Drawings by Jaap Schipper, show the appearance of a Gooi "loughouse" of the seventeenth century. The interior layout includes a bakeoven at the partition. Another sketch shows the framing, which Dutch barns of the Hudson Valley followed for two centuries. The brick living section with standing gable was roofed with tile, while the barn at rear was thatched.

The big Gooi-style farmhouse at Greenbush after over fifty years became very dilapidated. When Jeremias Van Rensselaer, who became Director of the Rensselaerswyck colony, in 1660 took over the farm at Greenbush for his own use, and named it *Crailo*, he refused to use the old farmhouse because of the expense of maintaining it. But he did not tear it down. In 1661 Van Rensselaer leased the farmhouse at Greenbush, (but not the farm) to Willem Bout for six years, on the condition that repairs to the building were to be at Bout's expense. Bout, to whom the Greenbush sawmills belonged, complained often that he did not care to live in the run-down farmhouse because of the costs. Jeremias van Rensselaer noted, however, that the house was conveniently located for Bout because it was close to the mill on the present-day Red Mill Creek. Bout was not allowed to build any new structure close to the mill nor to pile firewood or hay near the mill.

In November, 1662, Van Rensselaer and Bout altered their agreement into an arrangement for rent of a small part of the farm. Bout was to keep the house and outbuildings at Greenbush as he had previously had them. He was also to have a good workhorse and a heifer. In 1670, a complaint was made that Willem Bout's horses at the mill sometimes got into the Greenbush farmer's fields. About the time Bout died in 1683 the decrepit farmhouse of 1632 may have been abandoned. (12)

The Greenbush farmhouse did not wash away in the famous flood of 1666 which destroyed many buildings, including the matching farmhouse on Castle Island. Because it was rented, the old farmhouse at Greenbush probably lasted longer than most of the others of its type. By 1668, the one at the Flatts fell in and had to be rebuilt. (13) It appears the big Gooi farmhouses were not practical in the cold Hudson Valley climate of the 1600s. On the additional Rensselaerswyck farms, residences began to be built separately from the barns.

Cellars, at first merely holes in the ground framed with boards under the living area of a farmhouse, were needed to provide frost-free storage for root crops and fruit. For example, in Arent Van Curler's long farmhouse on the Flatts, there was to be a small cellar under the dwelling section. As the free-standing farm residences became common, full cellars made of stone gradually replaced the partial cellars. These stone foundations now supporting the residence avoided frost heave and rot, which probably had afflicted the large farmhouse combinations.

The Dutch barns, I believe, in being separated from the farm residence, retained the framing shown in Jaap Schipper's sketch of the Gooi barn, with possibly the elimination of an angle in the roof slope over the side aisles. Vincent Schaefer's photograph (Figure 4., page 3) shows the altered framing of the roof of the 1680 Van Bergen barn. Whether this change was merely to raise the roof for more hay storage, or whether it was to eliminate the break in the pitch is not known.⁽¹⁴⁾ In the Netherlands, there was a shortage of long timbers for rafters, while here, due to the long timbers available, there was no need for a rafter splice over the side aisles. In another adaptation after residences were separated from the barns, the big wagon door was brought around from the side of the barn to the gable end, thus avoiding the need to raise the eaves for a wagon door.

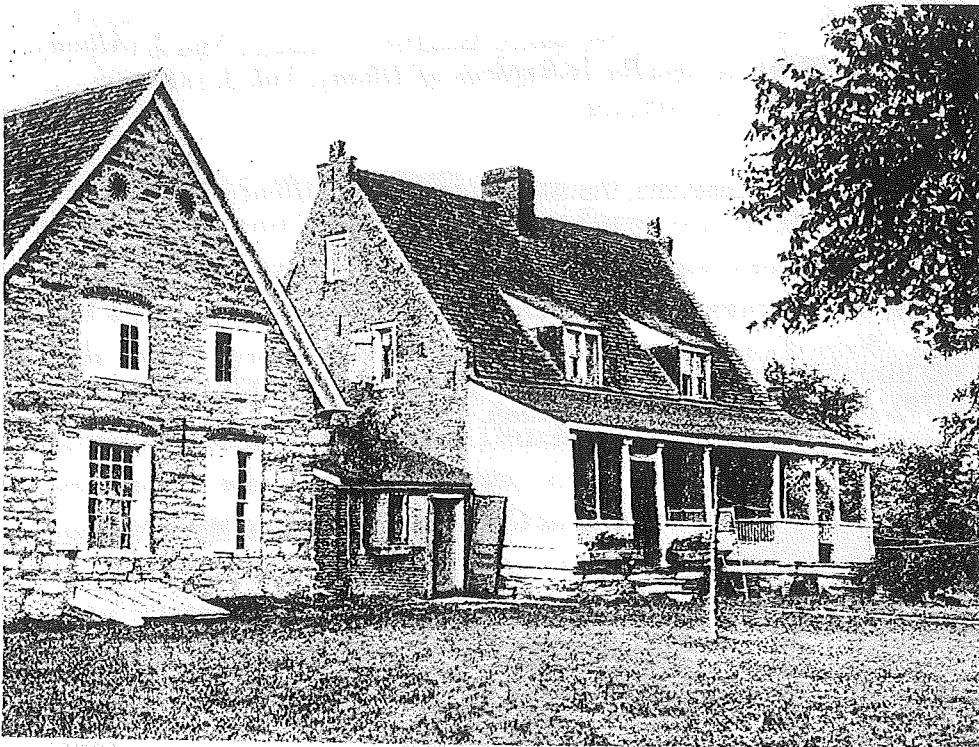
The Gooi barn and Kiliaen van Rensselaer's letters help us to understand why some house contracts of the seventeenth-century in the Hudson Valley called for houses which were wider than deep. The Bronck house of 1663, for example, is 26 feet across the front, while it is only 22 feet deep, modern measure. I am not suggesting that this particular house once had a barn attached at the rear, although it might have, since it has the right proportions to be the residence part of a longhouse. In another example, the living section of the long farmhouse built on the Flatts by Arent Van Curler was to be 28 feet wide by only 20 feet in depth, again wider than it was deep. Thus, the wider than deep pattern in houses may reflect proportions established when Van Rensselaer's Gooi longhouses were erected.

This brings into question our assumption that any Dutch-style house with its front door in the gable end is an urban-style house, while houses such as the second Bronck House of 1738, with a ridge running parallel to the road, are thought to be "country-style." Actually, the tradition of a gable end to the road is an ancient one, not limited to cities. As we have seen, country farmhouses with attached barns in the Gooi style had to be entered from the gable end and this may explain why the occasional Hudson Valley Dutch country house gable faces the road.

* * *

Summary

The longhouses of Gooiland were, just as Kiliaen Van Rensselaer intended, one big efficient rectangle. They served their purpose, providing quick shelter for farm families, farm help, stock and crops in the first years of farm settlement here. These special European farmhouses of the Gooi once were a part of our landscape. They are documented by letters, by archeology, and by Dutch architectural studies. Moreover, their framing style set the pattern for the Dutch-American barns of the next two centuries, and influenced house shapes as well. This large, influential (but little appreciated) European-style building lurks in the background of our architectural history.



10. The two side by side Bronck houses surviving at Leeds, New York, show two different styles for country houses. The older house of 1663 is at left.

Addendum

In 1632 an unpopular man, Hans Joris Hontum, was selected to be commis of Fort Orange. The Mohawk Indians hated him because a decade earlier he had cold-bloodedly murdered a captive Mohawk chief after the chief's ransom had been paid. When he arrived at Fort Orange, the Mohawk Indians rose up in violence, killed cattle (including at Greenbush), and burned a yacht. They threatened to kill Hontum, and refused to trade with him.

More violence followed the appointment of Hontum. Within a year he was stabbed to death in Van Rensselaer's farmhouse at Greenbush by Cornelis van Vorst, chief officer of Pavonia, a patroonship near New Amsterdam. The details were given by Cornelis Maesen (Van Buren), who returned to the Netherlands in 1634 after three-and-a-half years as a farmhand in Rensselaerswyck. Cornelis Maesen, who had gone outside just before the fight began, heard the details from others present. He explained that Hontum, by order of the Dutch West India Company directors, had posted a placard restricting trade with the Indians. Cornelis van Vorst resented this regulation and held it against Hontum. When van Vorst visited Hontum at Fort Orange in April 1634, they began to drink together. Then the pair crossed the river to visit the "dwelling and farm of Rensselaer where he, the deponent [Cornelis Maesen] resided." The two officials entered the house on the Greenbush farm, in which, after drinking some more, van Vorst made insults against council members. When Hontum struck him in the face, van Vorst drew his sword and fatally stabbed him.

Notes:

- (1) Jonathan Pearson, trans. and A. J. F. Van Laer, ed., Early Records of Albany, Vol. 2, (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1916), p. 154; Early Records of Albany, Vol. 3, (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1918), pp. 508-509).
- (2) A. J. F. Van Laer, trans. and ed., Van Rensselaer Bouwier Manuscripts (Albany, NY, 1908), p. 308 [hereafter cited as VRBM].
- (3) *Ibid*, p. 309.
- (4) From J. J Voskuil, Van vlechtwerk tot baksteen, (Stichting Historisch Boerderij-Onderzoek, Arnhem, The Netherlands, 1979), p. 35, copied with permission.
- (5) "Settlement Patterns in Rensselaerswijck: The Farm at Greenbush," de Halve Maen Magazine, Summer, 2002, Vol. LXXV, No. 2, p.23).
- (6) VRBM, p. 309.
- (7) VRBM, p. 520.
- (8) Paul R. Huey, "Archeological Evidence of Dutch Wooden Cellars," in New World Dutch Studies: Dutch Arts and Culture in Colonial America, Albany Institute of History and Art, 1987, pp.14-16; A. J. F. Van Laer, "Translation of the Letter of Arent Van Curler To Kiliaen Van Rensselaer," Dutch Settlers Society of Albany Yearbook, Vol. 3 (1927-28), p. 21.
- (9) Shirley Dunn, "Settlement Patterns: the Farm at Greenbush," de Halve Maen, Summer, 2002, Vol. LXXV, No. 2, p. 23.
- (10) VRBM, p. 820.
- (11) J. Franklin Jameson, Narratives of New Netherland (1909) reprint, New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1967, p. 262.
- (12) For details given in this paragraph, see Dunn, "Settlement Patterns: Greenbush," de Halve Maen, Fall 2002, p. 50. For Bout's death see Jonathan Pearson, Contributions for the Genealogies of the First Settlers of the County of Albany, reprint, Genealogical Publishing Co. 1978, p. 5.
- (13) In 1666, the patroon's house in Albany where Jeremias and his wife, Maria, lived was washed away by a catastrophic April flood on the Hudson River. Almost all their possessions and papers were lost as well as the colony's grain stored for shipment. Many other buildings on shore, as well as barns and houses on the islands, were destroyed, but the Greenbush houses were exceptions. A few days after the flood, Jeremias Van Rensselaer wrote, "My farm in the Grene Bos is, thank God, saved beyond all hopes which I had of it. I lost there not more than two cows and one heifer, one half of my hogs and a large part of my fencing." Correspondence of Jeremias Van Rensselaer, A. J. F. Van Laer, trans. and ed. (1932), p. 106. For the need to reconstruct the house at the Flatts, see *ibid*, 407.
- (14) John Stevens, "A Last Look at the Van Bergen-Vedder Barn," Dutch Barn Preservation Society Newsletter, Spring 1995, Vol. 8, Issue 1.