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# The Society for the Preservation of Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture

October – December 2015 **Newsletter**

Vol. 18, No. 10-12



HVVA Holiday Luncheon – Saturday, December 12, 2015

Another productive and fun-filled year is behind us. We can look back on 2015 with satisfaction. If you recall, it started out with our annual meeting in January at the Elmdorpf Inn in Red Hook and the momentous presentation of the first HVVA Sheepdog Award. We honored our dear departed member, Maggie MacDowell, by inaugurating a winter lecture series named for her. Renowned Hudson Valley historian Faith Haring Fabend gave a presentation to a full house at Woodland Pond in New Paltz. The first number of the newsletter included an article on Jacob Wynkoop, an African American house builder in New Paltz written by Ellen Mosen James, who lives in one of the dwellings he constructed in 1892.

In April Elliot Bristol conducted a tour of the Reformed Dutch Church and some 18th-century houses in Claverack, Columbia County. Wally Wheeler organized a May visit to a group of 19th-century rowhouses in Troy showing the range of design and living conditions. And, after many ups-and-downs in scheduling, Ken Walton finally got the group to Putnam County in June. The second issue of the newsletter contained an article written by Michael Rebic on hall-and-parlor houses in Austerlitz in Columbia County that provided a perspective on the origin of the so-called “coffin door” found on the ends of New England houses. As usual, the HVVA Annual Picnic occurred after Stone House Day in Hurley graciously hosted by Jim Decker.

More old houses were visited in Red Hook, Clermont, Shawangunk, Gardiner and Plattekill on tours this fall. And our third issue of the newsletter contained an article on front gable Dutch houses by our stalwart scholar John Stevens. This month, as you can see here, we have articles by a frequent and favorite contributor, Walter R. Wheeler, and by a newcomer to our ranks, Emily Majer. While we are grateful for the continued submissions from our core members, we have, this year, benefited from the studies of new writers and hope to see more new names in print next year.

# The William Pitcher Farmhouse Upper Red Hook, Dutchess County

By Emily Majer



Fig.1 – View of the William Pitcher Farmhouse from Pitcher Lane (south). A barn complex is barely visible behind it. Photo by author, 2014.

## Historical Background

William Pitcher may or may not have been the builder of the original section of the old farmhouse on the north side of Pitcher Lane in Upper Red Hook, but his name is the first that can be verifiably associated with it (*Fig. 1*). On March 17, 1746 his father, Peter Pitcher, a Palatine immigrant, purchased Lot 7 from a partition of land owned by Barent Van Benthuyzen and his heirs for the sum of 550 pounds current money of the province of New York “together with all and singular the houses barnes buildings lands meadows pastures commons feedings trees woods underwoods profits advantages and with all the appurtenances to the said lott number seven.”<sup>1</sup> Van Benthuyzen, a Kingston merchant, had acquired his tract from Peter Schuyler of Albany who was patented a portion of Livingston Manor in 1688. The Schuyler Patent comprised what today is the Town of Red Hook.<sup>2</sup>

At the age of 71, on 13 May 1768, Peter Pitser [sic] divided his property in half, north and south. He deeded his own dwelling house and 275 acres to his younger son Adam (*Fig. 2*). Two weeks later Adam, only 30 years old but “weak in body but of sound and perfect mind,” willed all his property to his wife, Anna Maria Richter, but gave his father continued use of half of the farm. The southern half of the property Peter deeded to his older son William “in consideration of the natural love and affection which he hath and beareth to his son...also for the sum of five shillings.” The deed specifies “the parcel of land...or farm now in the possession of William Pitcher.”<sup>3</sup> In 1768 William Pitcher was

43 years old. According to the Rhinebeck tax records, he had been paying property taxes there since 1753; he had been married to Magdalena Donsbach since 1748.<sup>4</sup> After Adam Pitcher’s death, also in 1768, his brother, William Pitcher married his widow and apparently incorporated Adam’s half of the farm into his.

At the time of his death in 1800, William Pitcher’s house and farm were valued at \$4,370 and his personal property at \$824.<sup>5</sup> In his will, William left the farm to his sons John W. and Phillip who divided the property, with John W. remaining in their father’s house and Philip building a house next door to the east. But the division was not recorded until 1860, after both brothers had died.

By the early 19th century, Pitcher Lane had become part of a major regional thoroughfare leading from Hudson River landing at Barrytown, through Upper Red Hook and northern Dutchess County and into Connecticut. John W. Pitcher had inherited a large agricultural operation and increased its acreage. According an 1816 tax list, the assessed value of John W. Pitcher’s farm was \$6,700 and he had personal property of \$400. Until the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, farmers in the Hudson Valley, along with taking care of their own and local needs, grew wheat for flour production as well as potatoes, onions, and other sturdy crops that could be easily shipped. Afterwards, competition from the West combined with a wheat blight in the mid-1830s, shifted local farming towards dairy products, sheep, which supplied the woolen mills on the nearby White Clay Kill and

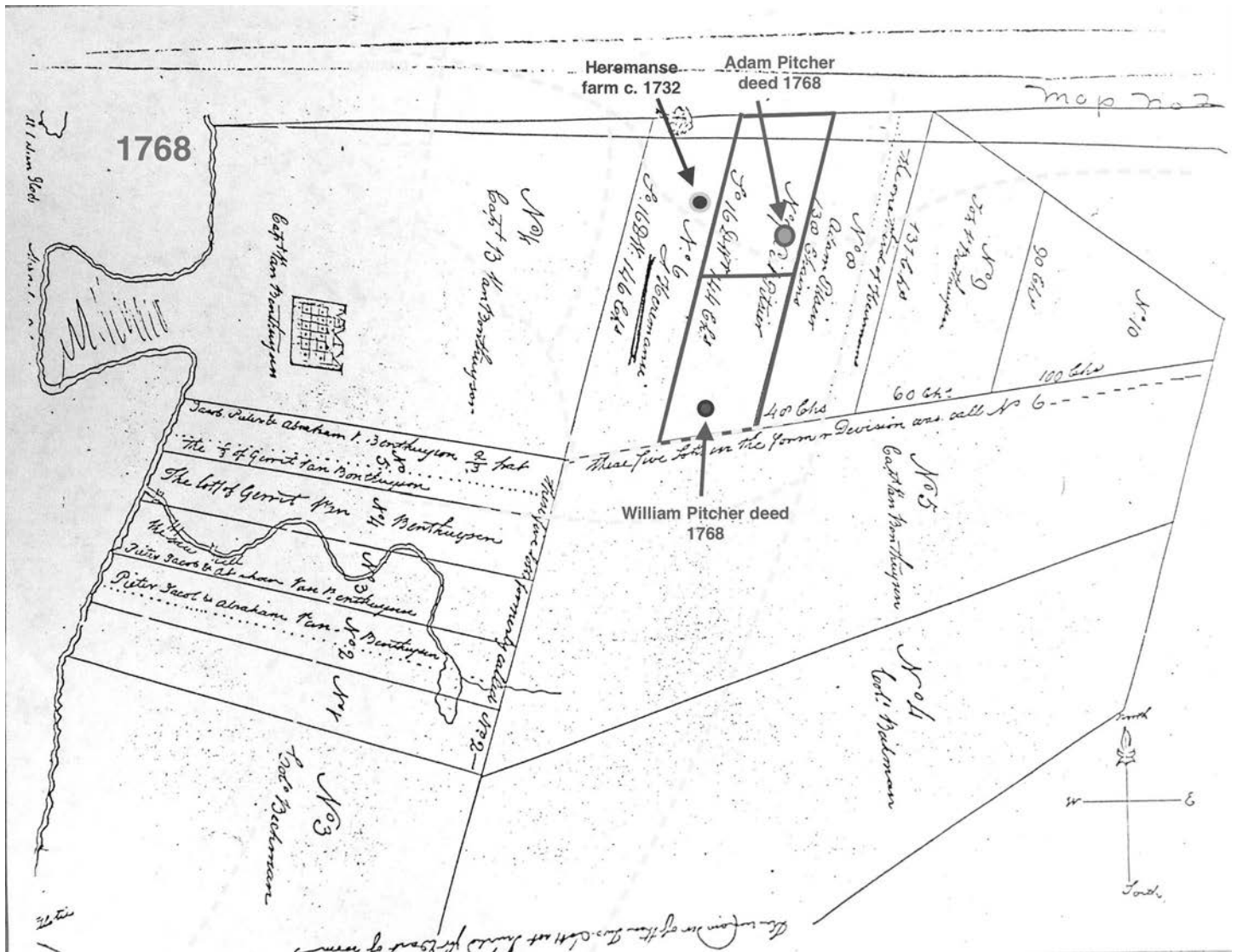


Fig. 2 – Map showing division of Van Benthuyzen tract, ca. 1725. The Pitcher’s Lot No. 7 is outlined and depicted with the division line of 1768.

Sawkill creeks, and fruit, to which the loamy soil of the area proved well suited.

John W. Pitcher’s household reached a peak population of 14 in 1820 when the census listed him and his wife, Catherine Kip; children John H., Abraham, William, Andrew and Helen; one unidentified free white male over 45 (a laborer or father-in-law); one unidentified free white female 26-44 (a servant or other relative); one male slave under 14; one male slave over 45; and two “foreigners.”

In 1850, according to the census, John W. Pitcher shared the house with his son Andrew (38), Andrew’s wife Mary Ann Hoffman (36), their children Laura (5), and William (2), and his mother-in-law Susan Hoffman (66). John W. had by then transferred his farm to his son. Andrew Pitcher’s property was valued at \$7,000 in 1850. He had 78 acres of improved land and 10 acres unimproved and husbanded 2

horses, 6 milk cows, 22 sheep, 5 swine, all valued at \$422. He was growing rye, corn, and oats, mostly for animal feed. The farm produced 700 pounds of butter and 80 pounds of wool in 1850. After John W. Pitcher’s death in 1859, Andrew lived in the farmhouse with his wife, five children, one 28-year-old female domestic servant, and a 50-year-old farm laborer, John Millham.

Andrew Pitcher remained in the house until his death in 1885; the farm was owned by the family until 1942. Six generations of Pitchers and their descendants had lived on the original 550 acres purchased 200 years before, although not in the house. Andrew was the last Pitcher to live there. After his death the house was inhabited by tenants. The house has been vacant since 2000, but much of the land is still under cultivation, providing feed crops and produce for local consumption and farmers’ markets as far south as Manhattan and into southwestern Connecticut.



Fig. 3 – View of William Pitcher Farmhouse from southeast. Photo by Neil Larson, 2015.

## The Evolution of the House

The Pitcher house is a one-and-one-half story, Dutch-framed wood structure with a gable roof and five-bay front façade. A cross-gable ell is appended to the east end of the rear and a one-story wing has been added to the west gable end (Fig. 3). The main house, which faces south, and the rear ell sit on foundations of dry-laid bluestone, and both are clad in cement-asbestos shingle siding. There is an inboard brick chimney at the peak on the east gable end and a patch on the west gable end, where a brick stack was removed following a chimney fire in the late 20th century. There also is a brick chimney at the north gable end of the ell that serviced a cook stove in the mid-19th century (Fig. 4). The hand-worked, standing-seam metal roof was added in the early 20th century.

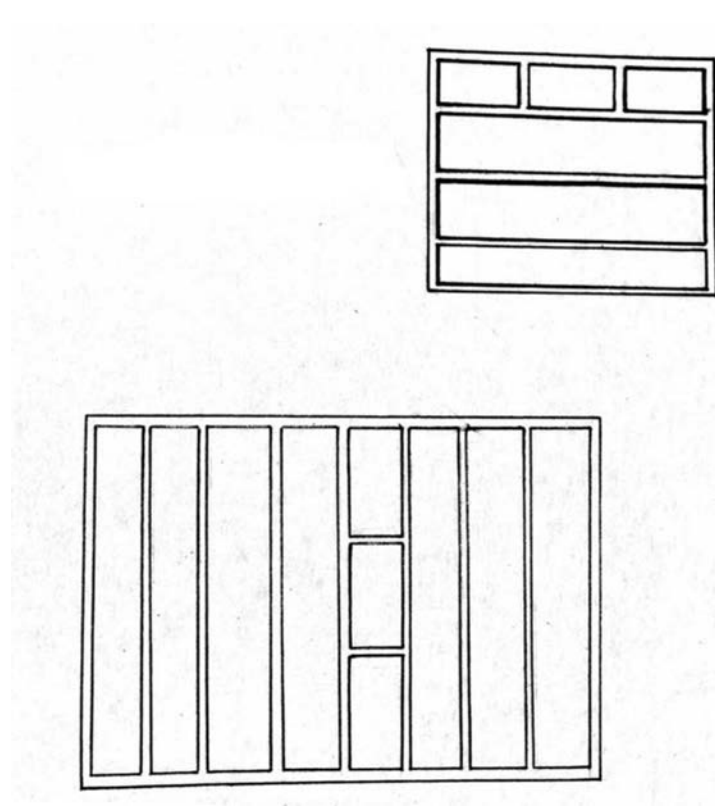


Fig. 4 – View of William Pitcher house from northwest. Photo by Neil Larson, 2015.

Fig. 5 – Plan of bents, ca. 1753 for front and rear buildings. Drawing by author, 2014.

The existing conditions represent three major construction campaigns, each corresponding to changes in ownership, household composition and responses to evolving architectural design and lifestyles in the Hudson Valley during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The house appears to have originated as a nine-bent structure with a two-room plan, possibly built by William Pitcher in ca. 1753 (Fig. 5). It was erected on a partially excavated basement and had jambless fireplace built against the center partition (Fig. 6).<sup>6</sup> A portion of the rear ell is a five five-bent 18th-century structure with one room and a jambless fireplace that was a free-standing building either in this location functioning as a detached kitchen or as an independent dwelling in another place. It does not have a basement and is sited about eight feet to the north of the house and staggered eight feet to the east of its original end wall (Fig. 5). The two structures were joined by additions constructed during the second stage of development near the end of the 18th century.

The house was substantially enlarged and renovated sometime during the last quarter of the 18th century either by William Pitcher in response to his growing household in the late 1770s or when his son John W. Pitcher was married in 1797 and took over as head of the household. In William's case, the confluence of the death of his father, becoming the owner of a substantial farm, and the increased population of his household, could have spurred the improvements. However, it also is possible that John W. Pitcher enlarged and formalized his father's house to bring it in line with the new taste and pretensions of his post-war generation.

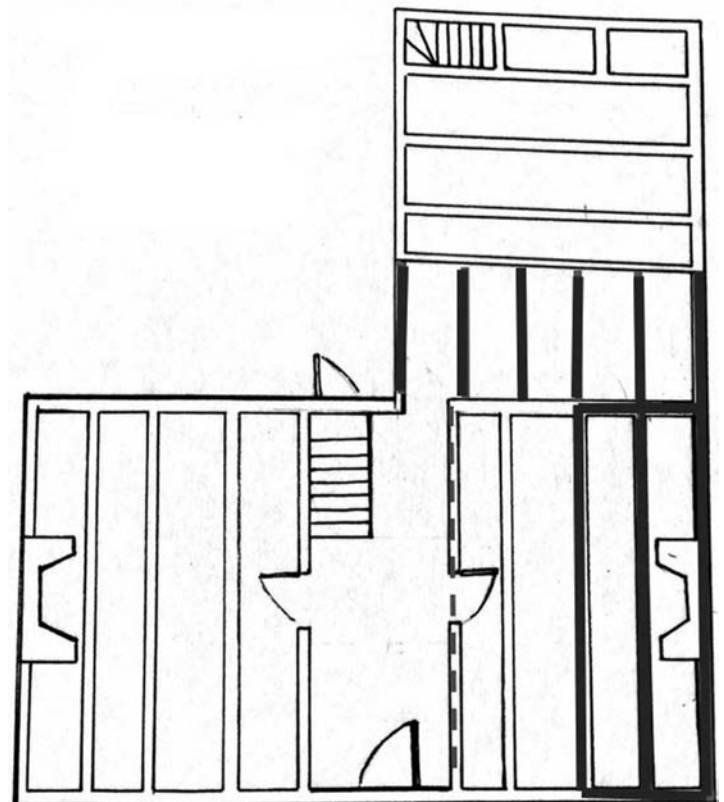
The most significant alteration involved removal of the center chimney, shifting the third anchor bent two feet east, removing the fourth anchor bent entirely, and creating a center hall (Fig. 7). This change of configuration from center chimney to center hall was a fairly common update to mid-18th-century houses in the area. To account for the space taken to create the hall, two bents were added to the east gable end of the house restoring the east room to an appropriate dimension and increasing the total length of the house from 38 to 46 feet. This extension brought the gable end in line with the east wall of the detached kitchen, if pre-existing, which was attached to the house by a hyphen of new construction (Fig. 7). The front façade was reorganized in a symmetrical manner around a new central entrance with sidelights. English fireplaces were constructed on the east and west ends and in the kitchen ell and Federal-style windows and trim were installed.

The expanded house contained two principal rooms on the ground floor (Fig. 8). Rooms 102 & 105 separated by a center hall with a stair (103 & 104) in the main section of the house with a dining room (106) and a kitchen (107) in the rear ell. Room 107 and the northern four feet



Fig. 6 – View of post in center partition (now west wall of center passage) with empty mortise for trimmer beam in beam above and ghost of jambless hood molding. Photo by author, 2014.

Fig. 7 – Plan of bents after renovation of house, 1775-1797. Drawing by author, 2014.



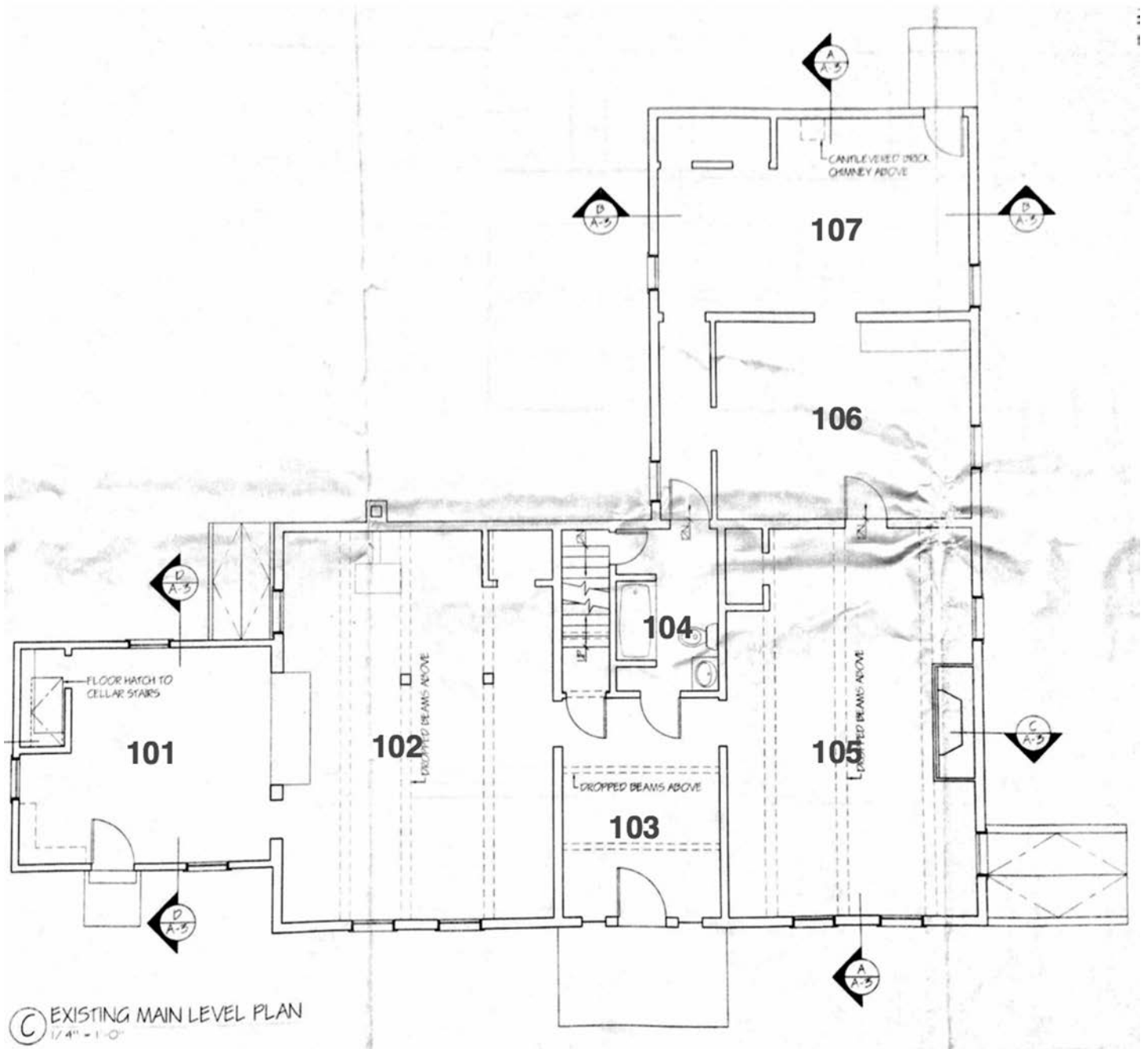


Fig. 8 – First floor plan. Drawing by Diane Reimer, 2004.

of Room 106 are contained within the frame of the pre-existing kitchen; the rest of room 106 is in the connecting hyphen. (Rooms 101 and 104 were added later as likely was the passageway along the east side of the ell connecting the kitchen with the center hall.)

The second story has a plan similar to the first (Fig. 9). Door hardware upstairs – HL hinges and the ghosts of HL hinges, and Norfolk latches – suggests that existing rooms were partitioned in this second campaign. The east partitions of Rooms 102 and 201 are aligned differently and the second floor level is a step lower on that side. Flooring

here has been replaced indicating a later alteration, although the reason for this has yet to be determined. Room 202, located above the front of entry hall was partitioned later. A fireplace is extant in the east room (204) suggesting that it was the best chamber. A closet was created under the north slope of the roof (205); it is accessed by a door in an awkward passageway connecting the upper stair hall (203) with the garret of the ell.

The roof structure appears to be consistent throughout the main section of the house, implying that a new roof was constructed to cover the expanded plan. The rafters are

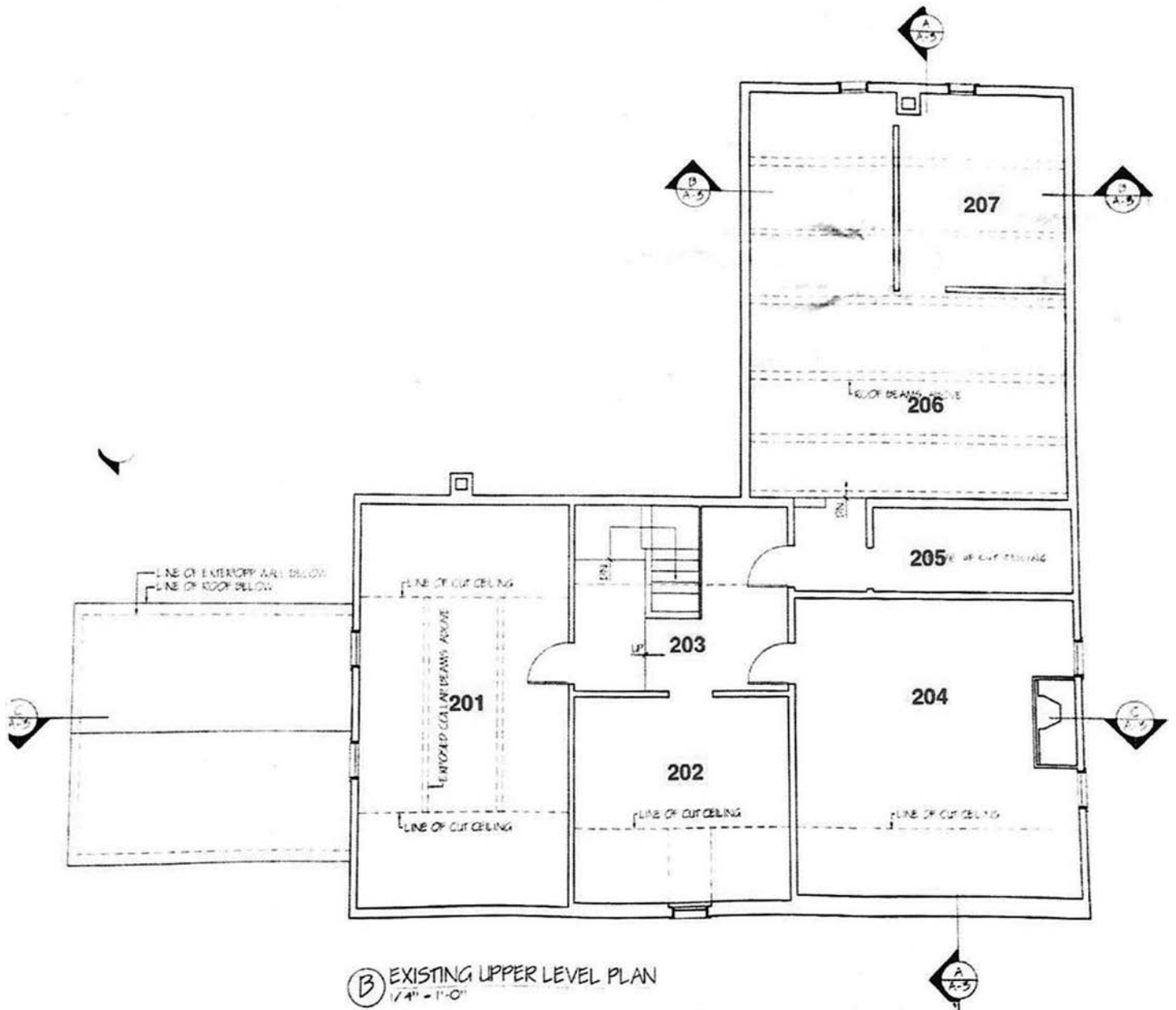


Fig. 9 – Second floor plan. Drawing by Diane Reimer, 2004.

slightly tapered to a bridle or lap joint and are nailed to the plates without bird's mouth joints. Collar ties are attached to the rafters with lapped half-dovetail joints. Except for the western end of the attic, where planks form the ceiling for Room 201, ceilings are constructed of lath and plaster, added later to enclose rooms in what likely had been open storage space under the rafters.

The garret of the ell is largely unfinished space (206) with a room (207) partitioned off at the northeast corner with split-plank walls (Fig. 10). It had been accessed via a steep staircase or a ladder in the northwest corner, which was

removed at a later date. Flooring in the garret is random width pine, up to 25 inches, lightly fastened with wrought nails. The rafters in the old section are slightly tapered to a pegged lap or bridle joint at the peak and either pegged or nailed to the top plate; there is no bird's mouth. The collar ties are lapped and pegged. The southernmost rafter in this section has nail holes corresponding with siding once on what had been an exterior gable end. There are knee braces at the four corners of the original building. The hyphen addition joining the kitchen with the house is distinguished by different rafter materials and the change in flooring direction from north-south to east-west. The roof of

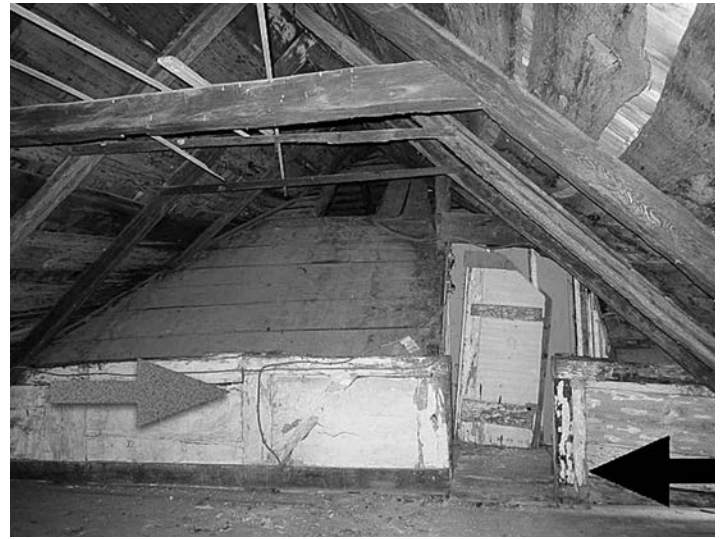


Fig. 10 – View of kitchen ell garret looking north. Photo by author, 2014.

Fig. 11 – View of hyphen section and rear of house looking south. Photo by author, 2014.

the hyphen overlaps a section of the roof of the main house exposing sheathing with no evidence any roofing having been nailed to it (*Fig. 11*). This would indicate that both roofs were contemporaneous. The exposed kneewall of the house contains evidence of alterations to the building. A post to the right of the opening leading to the passageway to the front of the house was moved two feet to the east with the beam shifted to create the east wall of the center hall. The corner post of the original house is also visible to the left of the opening (*Fig. 11*).

The last significant change made to the house is represented by the wing added to the west end of the house around 1850, after ownership of the property was transferred

to Andrew Pitcher (*Fig. 12*). In that year, the household contained, in addition to Andrew, his wife and two young children, his father and mother-in-law. The addition probably served as living space for one parent or the other. Plain beaded door trim and baseboard on the main floor rooms in the north ell reflect the taste of that time suggesting that alterations and the hallway bypassing the so-called dining room (106) were linked to creating another private space. The parents were deceased by the time the 1860 census was taken and the household consisted Andrew and Mary Ann Pitcher, their five children, an African American farmhand, age 50, and an Irish-American female domestic servant. The rough garret room above the kitchen (205) is typical of those created for farm laborers in the period.

Fig. 12 – View of house from south. Photo by Neil Larson, 2015.





## Existing Conditions

The Pitcher house has been unoccupied since 2000 and received little attention in the century prior to that due to its use as a seasonal worker or tenant farmer dwelling. The condition of the building is fair. The roof has been recently recoated with fibered-aluminum paint. The chimneys are in need of significant repair, having been compromised by biological growth, human intervention, and the sacrificial nature of lime-based mortars. There is a layer of asphalt shingles under the asbestos cement shingles, apparently as an underlayment because it is applied to historic beaded weatherboard siding removed and reapplied flush at the seams (Fig. 13). Sills, particularly in the northeast corner of the ell and on the south side, are likely in need of total replacement. The stone foundation appears to be in largely good condition under the main house, with the exception of a bulging area in the south wall of the cellar that may be an infill of an earlier bulkhead doorway.

The interior condition appears far worse than it is. The structure is solid, but the finishes are damaged. The plaster walls downstairs, made of a fragile blend of clay, slaked lime, and animal hair (likely ox), have suffered at the hands of vandals. The earliest walls are filled with mud packed around riven slats, wedged into v-profile grooves cut into the inside faces of posts and studs. In some places, notably the last eight feet of the east gable end of the main house, and the eight-foot hyphen connecting the front and rear sections of the house, the infill is poorly fired brick and clay mortar. Walls upstairs in the main section of the house are finished with a combination of wallboard, horizontally applied hand-planed tongue-and-groove planks with a quirked bead, and a lime coating applied directly over plaster. These walls are infilled as below, except for in Room 103, directly over the front hall. This room has no infill at all along 2/3 of the south wall due to the reconfiguration of the house in 1775-1797, when the center hall was created where none had been before.

One charred trimmer beam is visible as evidence for a jambless fireplace in the old kitchen at the north end of the ell. Here, too, the walls are filled with riven slats packed with mud and straw as in the other undisturbed walls of the house.

## The Future

The Pitcher Farmstead presents a unique opportunity as a model for a sustainable rehabilitation to balance the retention of its significant historic fabric with “green” technology and efficiency. And due to the structure’s 20th-century use as an auxiliary building, it has been passed over for modern interventions. From this perspective, it would be possible to insert some modern systems, strategies, and materials while preserving those that have worked for more than 250 years.



Fig. 13 – Detail of siding layers on north end of kitchen ell. Photo by Neil Larson, 2015.

The property, along with the nearby Heermance Farmstead, is one of the earliest established farms in northern Dutchess County. Not mentioned here is a significant barn complex with components dating from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries, which presents a greater challenge for preservation (Fig. 14). For more than 250 years, the agricultural use of this property has been maintained; the land is still providing food crops for New York City as it did in the 18th century. The house may be the oldest surviving example of Dutch-style timber framing in the Town of Red Hook. Alterations to the house in the second half of the 18th century are consistent with local patterns reflecting an influx of German immigrants after 1710 and the improvement of fortunes that extremely good soil allowed them.

*Emily Majer is a restoration craftsperson living in Tivoli. She has just completed a Masters in Historic Preservation from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. This article was derived from a historic structures report she completed on the Pitcher house as part of her degree work.*

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Dutchess County Deeds, Liber 2 Page 349, 17 March 1746.
- <sup>2</sup> James H. Smith, *History of Dutchess County* (1882), 172-173. Also see HVVA Newsletter, Vol. 17, No. 10-12 (Oct.-Dec. 2014)
- <sup>3</sup> Dutchess County Deeds, “Peter Bitcher” to “William Bitcher,” 25 May 1768
- <sup>4</sup> Clifford M. Buck, *Dutchess County New York Tax Lists 1718-1787* (Rhinebeck NY: Kinship Press, 1991).
- <sup>5</sup> “Assessment of all the Real and Personal Estate in the Town of Rhinebeck” 1799-1803, Series B0950, New York State Archives, Albany, New York
- <sup>6</sup> There is also a possibility that the original house was a smaller 5-bent structure with one room having a jambless fireplace at the west end. Invasive exploration will be needed for conclusive determination.

# Vanished Vernacular I: Two 18th Century Ferry Houses in Albany, Albany County, New York

By Walter Richard Wheeler

## Introduction

Although a substantial number of early structures in the Hudson Valley and adjacent areas have been razed in the past 100 years, we are fortunate that documentation – however rudimentary – is available for a number of well-known but now gone vernacular landmarks. The nascent historic preservation movement slowly gained adherents during the course of the 19th century, resulting in a number of buildings being saved for our enjoyment and education. Many of those buildings which were not saved were recorded in photographs, descriptions, and by salvaging parts – either for placement in private or public collections, or for incorporation into a new building. On rare occasions, buildings whose appearance is otherwise undocumented are documented through the survival of original construction documents such as specifications, contracts, invoices, or drawings.

The passage of a century or more has buried these observations, descriptions, photographs, drawings and fragments in archives, newspapers, museums, and aging history books. Community memory of the reuse of parts of these structures – frequently lauded when undertaken – has all but vanished.

This article initiates a series of monographs on a number of these structures; buildings which caught someone's eye in the 19th century as worthy of saving, because of historical associations, or more frequently simply because of their advanced age, but for which inadequate support was in place to guarantee their physical preservation. Some of the articles will focus on preservation efforts made on behalf of these structures, and thus illuminate the history of the historic preservation movement in our region. The documentation collected at the time is reflective – and informative – of 19th century interests and priorities. The same observation will surely be made by those who come after us, with respect to our work.

## Two 18th century Ferry Houses

Although Albany has lost the vast majority of its 18th century structures, descriptions of two of Albany's ferry houses from this period survive, providing us with information on construction techniques used ca. 1751 and in 1786. It is perhaps a misnomer to identify them as "ferry houses" – in fact they were ferry master's houses. Although each may have had a room given over to book-



Fig. 1 – Detail from A Plan of Albany, as it was in the year 1758, by an unidentified cartographer (Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

keeping and ticket sales, their principal function was as dwellings and their forms reflect that fact.

## Bernardus Bradt house

The earlier dwelling, occupied in the middle decades of the 18th century by Bernardus (aka Barnardus) Bradt and his family, survived until the early 20th century, albeit in a greatly modified form. Its construction date is unknown at present; Paul R. Huey believes it to have been built for Bradt ca. 1751.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, possible that the structure was built before that date; Bradt was described as living at the foot of Gallows Hill – to the west of the site of this building – as early as 1737.<sup>2</sup> Bradt (1704-1786) had served as ferry master as early as the 1740s, when he moved troops across the river.<sup>3</sup> This may be an indication that he had served as ferry master for some time before 1751, and supports a possible earlier construction date for his house. The style of the house is one which was popularly constructed in the City of Albany throughout the first half of the 18th century.

A map of the city and its environs "as it was in the year 1758" depicts the house as one of three located along the river road leading south from the built-up portion of the city (Fig. 1). A map of the city by Robert Yates, dated 1770, depicts the house on its riverside site (Fig. 2).

A description of the house, replete with lore of the day, records its appearance in 1886:

This ancient building is now located at 114 Church street, or at least what there is left of it. As most people know, when these old mansions were erected they were located on the then extensive farms of the builders, much as farm houses now are built and situated. The old Shakespeare inn, as it was called years ago, was built so that it faced the river and stood on the bank of it, that is, the front door or entrance was at that side of the building which is now the rear, and the rear of the original opened out toward the present Church street, and went off into the farm. Grain and other farm products were then raised where now the numerous boiler and machine shops are located. When Church street was cut through, after the city had grown so much that new streets were demanded, this old building was cut into, and the half standing in the proposed street, torn down to make the thoroughfare. The result was that it made necessary rebuilding the rear wall, which now became the front, and the original front entrance became [the] "back door."

Fig. 2 – Detail from Plan of the City of Albany about 1770, by Robert Yates, depicting the Bradt house (original in the Gerrit Y. Lansing Papers, NYSL-MS, Albany, NY; lithographed and published in O'Callaghan's The Documentary History of the State of New York in 1850).

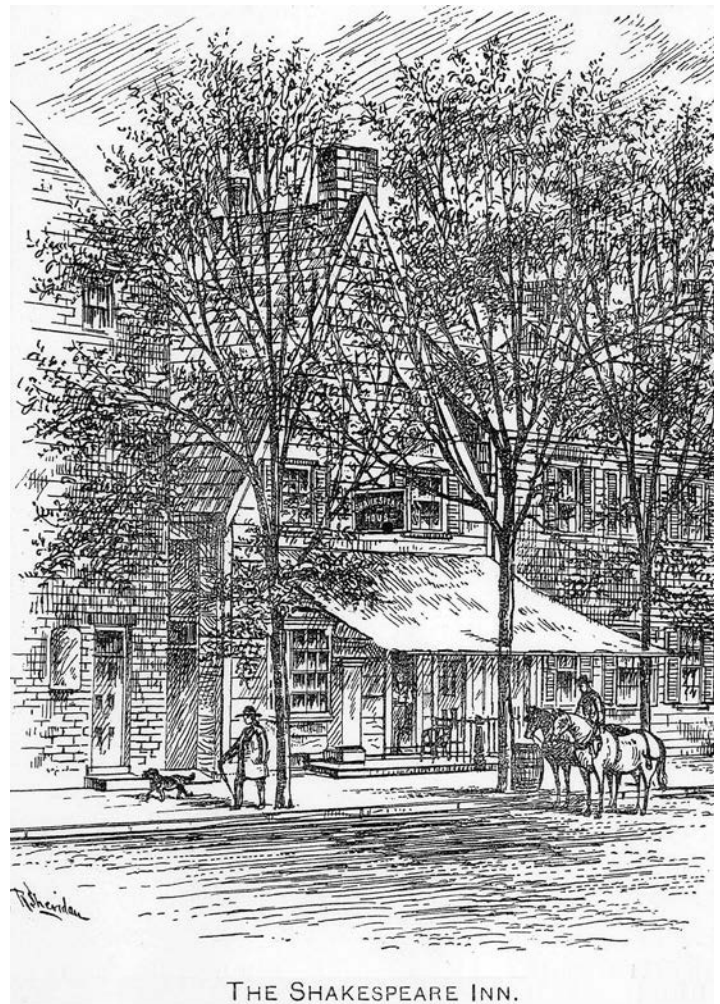
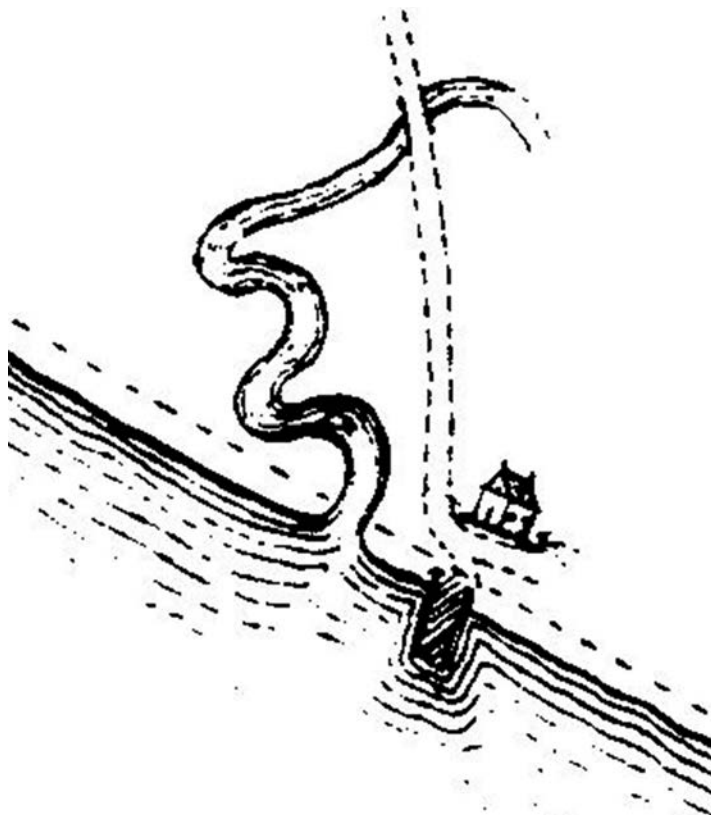


Fig. 3 – Drawing of the Bradt house, published in a supplement to The Argus of 18 July 1886. (Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, NY).

Through the courtesy of Mr. Watson, the present owner and occupant, the back can be seen from a ladder set up against the adjoining building which he erected and attached. This side (the one toward the river), retains all its original features. When looking at it, one can almost imagine it still occupied by the old Dutch lot, and can see the first Albanian sitting about the old doorway, smoking the then new weed, tobacco, and relating reminiscences of the fatherland; or calculating the prospects of good crops from the original soil.

The style of architecture at once attracts attention. The roof runs up at an angle that would startle a modern builder. It is, of course, built from the old Dutch bricks imported from Holland for the purpose. One notices that next [to] the roof, the wall is what we must call a "saw-tooth" one, for want of a better word; that is, on the gable end, when finishing up the wall preparatory to erect-



Fig. 4 – Photograph showing the Church Street side of the Bradt house, ca. 1905, (NYSL-MS, Albany, NY).

ing the roof itself the bricks were laid in saw-tooth fashion. This was to strengthen the wall. The windows are of very peculiar shape, the one in the garret being a very elongated oblong. The next two below are of the same shape, only lying on their sides. On the ground floor, there is but one window and the old door. The latter has been taken down and the hole filled up with brick.

The house is ornamented with old Dutch irons, of ornamental shape. The chimney on this end is a false one, but still shows the manner in which the Hollander built them.

Inside the house, there are still found all the original walls and ceilings. A view of the garret reveals a most interesting study in the first attempts at architecture in Albany, and indeed in this country, for here were some of the first attempts made at a settlement. The rafters are of hewn yellow pine, about four inches square, and nearly five feet

apart. The roof boards are also of hewn yellow pine. These boards were evidently produced by the hand of a master hewer. They are now neatly white-washed, but scraping this away, the board in its white, was seen. Standing from a distance these boards look like modern sawed timber. They are from eight to fourteen inches wide, a most remarkable width for hewn lumber. Originally the roof was covered by tiles; now modern shingles replace them.

Going down into the cellar, again an interesting view is opened up. The floor is laid on the original sills [the author probably means joists], which are all of hewn timber. Those old Dutchmen evidently knew how to make secure foundations for their houses, for massive stone walls underlie all the sills.<sup>4</sup>

It must be said that it's highly unlikely that the bricks used in the construction of the house were brought from the

Netherlands; that story was almost universally applied to houses using brick of “Dutch size”; an honest enough conflation of facts. Albany had a resident brickmaker by the 1620s. Few shipments of brick from the Netherlands actually occurred (although there were some); fewer still after ceding New Netherland to the English in 1674.

The article is illustrated with a pen-and-ink drawing, which shows the Church Street elevation of the building (*Fig. 3*). A photograph taken about 1905 depicts the house near the end of its existence, when it was known as 114 Church Street (*Fig. 4*).<sup>5</sup> In it, we can see the plate and bottom of the brick-filled stud wall constructed when the house was truncated in the early 19th century and the wide clapboards covering the north face of the building. The roof appears to have been covered with wood shingles. The back side of the east gable parapet wall can be seen as well. At some point before 1886 a second door was constructed on the Church Street elevation, likely to facilitate using the first floor as a shop.

In the 1980s, Rod Blackburn was first to identify the iconographic image of an unidentified house with a forelorn-looking woman in the gable-end window as showing the former street front of this dwelling, although until now the attribution and photo have not been published together (*Fig. 5*).

The appearance of this façade accords with the 1886 description reprinted above, and shows the house to have had a “spout gable” of the type most commonly constructed in Albany starting in the very late 17th century and continuing into the 1720s; the most well-known of the examples surviving into the era of photography being the Lansing-Yates-Pemberton house, which was constructed in 1710, and occupied the northeast corner of North Pearl and Columbia streets until its removal in 1893 (*Fig. 6*). A surviving example of this type is the ca.1726 Abraham Yates house at 109 Union Street, in Schenectady (*Fig. 7*).

Additional features can be picked out from the image, which is preserved in the HABS collection (as a copy photo), identified only as “Dutch Gable, Albany.”<sup>6</sup> These include the pad hinges supporting the garret shutter, and moulded window frames showing the former location of their combination shutter and sash openings. Scars in the brickwork show where the original front door was (at lower right) and the second floor loft door, between the two remaining casement windows. Unlike the Lansing and Yates examples, the ironwork at the finial features three sets of “leaves” rather than two. Also differing from those examples, the builder of the Bradt house made use of simple bar-form wall ties, rather than the more commonly seen (at least in the 17th and early 18th centuries) fleur-de-lis type wall ties. This detail supports a later (that is, second quarter of the 18th century into the 1750s)

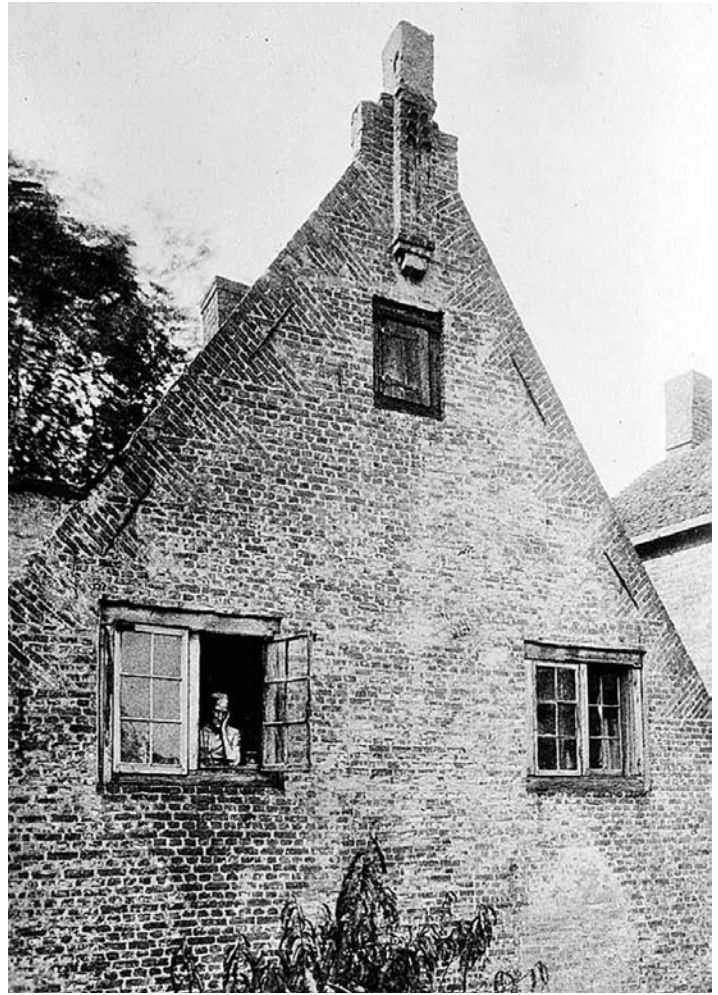


Fig. 5 – Copy photograph in the HABS collection, showing the original (east) front facade of the Bradt house (Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

construction date for the Bradt house. The photos also make it clear that the house had a central chimney, making it similar to the majority of examples of this house form dating before the Revolution.

### 1786 Ferry house

On 15 July 1786, the City of Albany contracted to construct a new ferry house according to the following “schedule” or specifications:

The House to be Fifty feet by forty, of Two Stories high, viz: The Lower Stories 10 feet High, the Upper an attick Story of 7 feet high; 4 Rooms on each Floor; a Pitch Roof; 4 Stacks of Chimneys at the Gavel [sic, gable] Ends; To be a Board Building, filled in with Brick. Carpenters and Masons to be allowed Six Shillings per Diem and Labourers three Shillings per Diem, and Each Six pence per Day for Liquor. The Work to be all in the



Fig. 6 – Woodcut engraving of the Lansing-Yates-Pemberton house, ca. 1840 (Author's collection).

plainest manner. The Foundation to be Laid on the Ground. The Whole to be done under the superintendence of such persons as shall be thereto appointed by this Board; the Whole to be completed in a Twelve Month, with a Piazza to be in the Front.<sup>7</sup>

A revised version of the specifications is dated 7 November 1787, and provides for the second floor having eight foot high ceilings, and an "Entry of 10 feet."<sup>8</sup> The specific meaning of this last phrase is unknown; whether it describes a room of ten feet in depth, a hall of that width, or a vestibule attached to the front of the building, remains

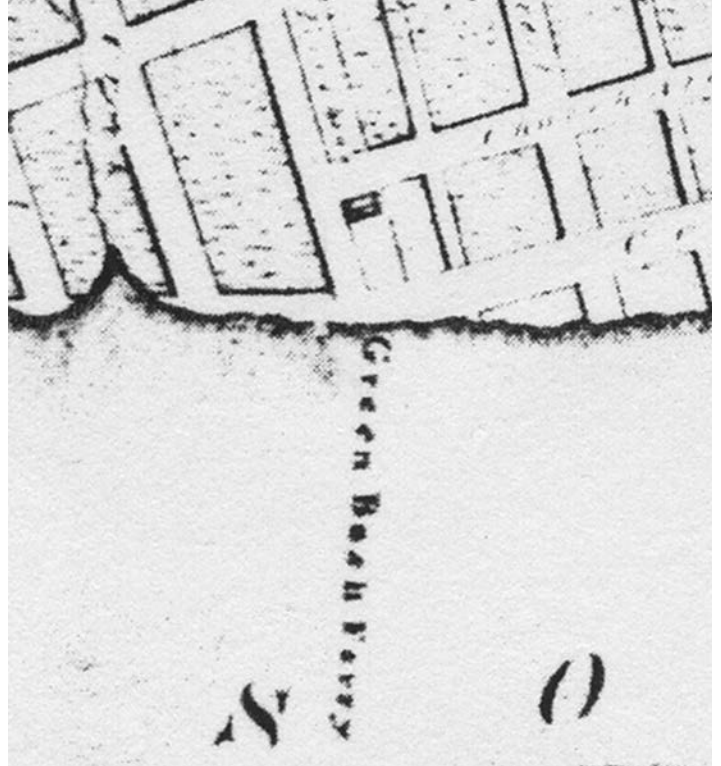
unknown. There are no known images of the late-18th century ferry house.

The description of this gable-ended structure, which was (judging by its dimensions) a five bay wide building with center hall and end wall chimneys, indicates that it was to be wood-framed and clapboarded, with nogged walls, filled with brick. It is curious that such a sizable building was to be placed on such a meagre foundation; the text of the specifications suggest that it likely rested on a few courses of stone simply resting on the ground. A seventeenth-century example of this type of foundation was found on a similar site close to the river, during



Fig. 7 – Detail of the spout gable on the Yates house in Schenectady (Author's photo, 2008).

Fig. 8 – Detail of the map of the city of Albany, 1794, by Simeon DeWitt (NYSL-MS, Albany, NY). The roof of the 1786 Ferry House can be seen in this detail.



excavations for a parking garage in downtown Albany in 1999-2001. The 1787 ferry house was located at the corner of Church and Ferry Street.<sup>9</sup> The 1794 map of the city depicts its gable roof, oriented roughly north-south, the building facing Church Street (Fig. 8). The later history of the building is not known; it may be the same as that identified at the northeast corner of those two streets in 1876 and owned at that time by C. McDonald.<sup>10</sup>

*Walter R. Wheeler is Senior Architectural Historian with Hartgen Archeological Associates, Inc. in Rensselaer and a frequent contributor to this newsletter. He invites readers to share suggestions and information pertinent to future articles.*

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Paul R. Huey. "Early Albany: Buildings Before 1790," in Diana S. Waite, ed., *Albany Architecture* (Albany: Mount Ida Press, 1993), 44.
- 2 Stefan Bielinski. "Bernardus Bradt." Accessed online at <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/albany/bios/b/bebradt4335.html> on 11 June 2015.
- 3 Ibid. William Johnson. *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Judicature...in the State of New-York* (New-York: Alsop, Brannan and Alsop, 1808), 298.
- 4 "The Shakespeare Inn," *The Argus* (Albany, NY), special supplement, 18 July 1886, 11.
- 5 PRI 1607, New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Albany, NY.
- 6 <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hh/item/ny0881.photos.114412p/> accessed on 12 June 2015. Some time ago I saw a reference to the original as being in the collection at the Baker Library at Harvard, but I haven't been able to confirm this.
- 7 Joel Munsell. *Collections on the History of Albany 2* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1867), 269.
- 8 Ibid., 303-304. The original of one of these specifications is preserved at the Albany County Hall of Records, in Albany (SARA box 14, item 4, 90-01342).
- 9 Robert Wynkoop Lansing. *The Autobiography of Robert Wynkoop Lansing* (1878), 2. Transcribed by Chris Wynkoop at <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wynkoop/webdocs/rwlansng.htm>, accessed 11 June 2015.
- 10 Griffith Morgan Hopkins. *City Atlas of Albany, New York* (Philadelphia: F. Bourquin, 1876).

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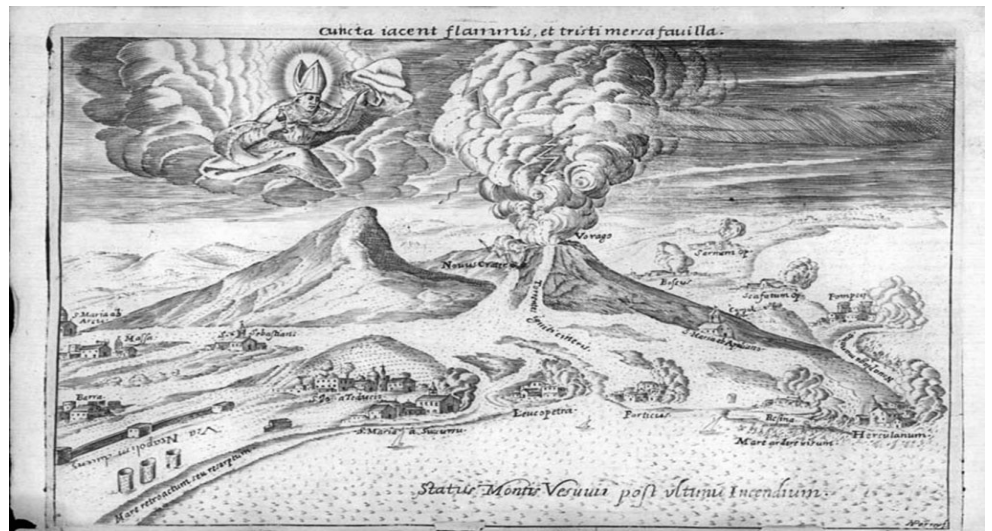
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### Deciphering fragmentary clues to past lives and cultures



Giovanni Battista Mascolo, "Mount Vesuvius after the eruption," 1633. Loyola University Chicago Digital Special Collections, accessed December 6, 2015 <http://www.lib.luc.edu/specialcollections/items/show/53>.

Not long ago, on an overnight trip, dining with the 16 November 2015 issue of *The New Yorker*, the editor came upon John Seabrook's article, "The Invisible Library," which concerned itself with the question: "Can digital technology make the Herculean scrolls legible after two thousand years?" It was a fascinating piece (at least more than the hockey game on the TVs) relating the enormous scientific and intellectual efforts dedicated to deciphering and interpreting the petrified papyrus texts buried under the effluent from the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79. One passage caught my attention. Its relevance here should be obvious.

Papyrology is a study that combines aspects of textual scholarship, philology and archeology. It requires Olympian patience to find letters and words amid such badly damaged material, and immense learning to divine the meaning within. It's unusual to get three words in a row without lacunae [gaps]... A single line can easily take six months to decipher. Sometimes educated guesses about missing bits are wrong, causing the reader to arrive at different meanings from what was intended. [Recent scholarship has revealed] how wrong many of the earlier readings of the scrolls were. Some editors were essentially making up their own texts.

Substitute "vernacular architecture" for "papyrology" and the tasks of deciphering meaningful information in historic artifacts are remarkably similar. Our studies also share the challenge of overcoming the flawed characterizations of previous scholarship, typically that which established that vernacular objects had no essential meaning. The excerpt cites philology as a means of study. Perhaps not familiar to some of us, philology is the branch of knowledge that deals with the structure, historical development, and relationships of language. While the subject in this case pertains to written language, we can approach architecture as a language and add that aspect of study to our multidisciplinary toolbox.

### Calendar of Upcoming HVVA Events

- January 16** Annual Meeting at Elmdorph Inn, Red Hook
- February 20** Maggie MacDowell Speaker Series: Kate Johnson, expert in Hudson Valley decorative arts, Woodland Pond, New Paltz
- March 19** Helen Reynolds archives, Dutchess County Historical Society, Poughkeepsie

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