

Mansions for Albany's Merchant Elite

Center-passage houses for Albany's "First families," 1761-1797

A tour for Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture

18 May 2019

During today's tour we will explore Albany's three publicly-interpreted house museums, which were all constructed in the second half of the 18th century for some of the area's wealthiest families. These three dwellings remain from a group of about a half a dozen that were constructed within the city and in its suburbs during that period.

Albany in the Second Half of the 18th century

Albany of the post-1750 period was a community that had been transformed through its role as military outpost during the French & Indian War. The reduction of hostilities beginning in the early 1760s brought renewed construction, including houses for the city's recently-enriched merchants, who had profited from quartering and provisioning the British troops stationed there.

Albany of the second half of the 18th-century was an environment in which newly-mixing groups of people and building traditions came face-to-face in an era that would later bring large-scale movement of populations. After the Revolution this mixing was amplified by the movement of large numbers of New Englanders moving westward, escaping disenfranchisement caused by the observance of the right of primogeniture, and declining quality of farmlands. Some took advantage of bounty land grants established as a reward for serving in the Revolution, and located in northern and western New York and Ohio. A number of these New Englanders settled in the City of Albany and its environs. Their numbers were augmented by immigrants, chiefly from Great Britain. In 1767, 569 households were recorded in the City; the first Federal Census of 1790 recorded a population of 3,498 people; by 1810, the number of residents had nearly tripled to 10,762.¹

This significant population expansion, driven as it was by people who had no cultural connection to the New World Dutch Cultural Hearth that they moved into, helped to transform the local vernacular architecture in ways that 100 years of British rule had been unable to accomplish. Because of its relative isolation and, frankly, lack of importance (politically speaking, to the British, at least), Albany was largely left to its own devices in the late 17th and 18th centuries. When the British wanted to construct something in Albany, such as fortifications or barracks, they met with resistance from the local population, and resorted to New England carpenters and builders to execute the work, rather than local

¹ "1767 Tax List in Order of Tax Amount," typescript, collection of the author; 1790 and 1801 figures from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albany,_New_York accessed on 15 May 2019.

talent.² As a consequence of their close relationship with the military presence in the city, Albany's merchants became acquainted with these out-of-town builders. During slow periods, they began to hire these builders for private work. The Pastures (Schuyler Mansion, 1761), is an early example of this; extensive renovations to the Hendrick K. van Rensselaer house (aka Crailo, 1764) and construction of the Van Rensselaer Manor house (1765), are other examples.

The result was very much a "top-down" transformation, with Albany's wealthiest families choosing to build homes after English models from the 1760s onward. These houses shared center-passage plans, brick masonry construction, and were two-stories in height, reflecting a house form popular in Great Britain and New England during that period.

During the Revolution construction of new homes was largely halted. In addition to the post-war influx of population, the eight year period to the close of the war created a significant break in local building traditions, and further transformed urban dwellings in Albany that were built for its mechanics and tradesmen. The few houses that were constructed in the period 1783-1800 and for which documentation remains, all shared an English vernacular exterior which was frequently married to a New World Dutch frame (Figure 1). The last of the New World Dutch building traditions were eclipsed by the 1820s in urban Albany; they lingered for some time afterward in surrounding rural areas, however.



Figure 1. State Street, ca. 1805, by James Eights (collection Albany Institute of History and Art). This image shows the mix of New World Dutch and English vernacular forms that characterized the City of Albany at the turn of the century.

² Walter R. Wheeler. "Getting the Job Done: Construction, Builders, and Materials in the Upper Hudson and Mohawk Valleys, 1755-1765," *Proceedings of the Western Frontier Symposium* (Waterford, NY: New York State Bureau of Historic Sites, 2005).

A visitor to the city in 1798, Dr. Timothy Dwight, noted that

An essential change has taken place in Albany, a considerable number of opulent inhabitants, whose minds were enlarged by the influence of the revolutionary war, and the extensive intercourse which it produced among them and their countrymen and still more by education, and travelling, have resolutely broken through a set of traditional customs, venerable by age and strong by universal attachment. These gentlemen have build many handsome houses in the modern English style.³

Dwight was, of course, biased in favor of New England aesthetic tastes and values; Albany was not quite so provincial as he suggests, although it had been, as noted above, transformed by the events of the last three decades of the 18th century.

The Pastures, Cherry Hill and Prospect all survivors of this group of center-passage, five-bay wide brick masonry buildings that were constructed for Albany's merchant elite beginning in the 1760s. The type has its origins in the Italian renaissance; for example, Serlio in his *Tutte L'Opere d'Architettura et Prospetiva* presents examples of several houses with symmetrical five-bay wide facades, the plans having central through-passages.⁴ However, the arrangement of rooms, with parlors flanking the central hall, was a later development, and instead relates to the evolution of townhouses in northern Europe, in England in particular. The three-bay wide rowhouse that became a convention in many American cities in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was, at an early date, called a "half house." This term alluded to the fact that the side-passage plan of these dwellings derived from a (by implication) "full house" of five bays in width, and having a symmetrical plan. A small number of houses of this type were constructed in the compact portion of the city, in addition to those built in its suburbs. The Ten Broeck family home on Columbia Street is likely to have been of this type. Urban examples built in Albany included the Stephenson house, on State Street (Figure 2), and the Spencer house, on Madison Avenue (Figure 3).

³ Quoted in the 1975 Historic Structure Report by Mesick-Cohen-Waite, 15.

⁴ Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks, trans., *Sebastiano Serlio On Architecture, Volume Two* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001).



Figure 2. The Stevenson house, State Street, Albany, seen in a painting by James Eights (collection Albany Institute of History and Art). This house, known as “the rich man’s house” in its day, was begun near the beginning of the outbreak of the Revolutionary war and so took about five years to complete in the depressed local building economy. The house was among the first of the larger center passage houses that were built in the city, ca. 1780-1825.

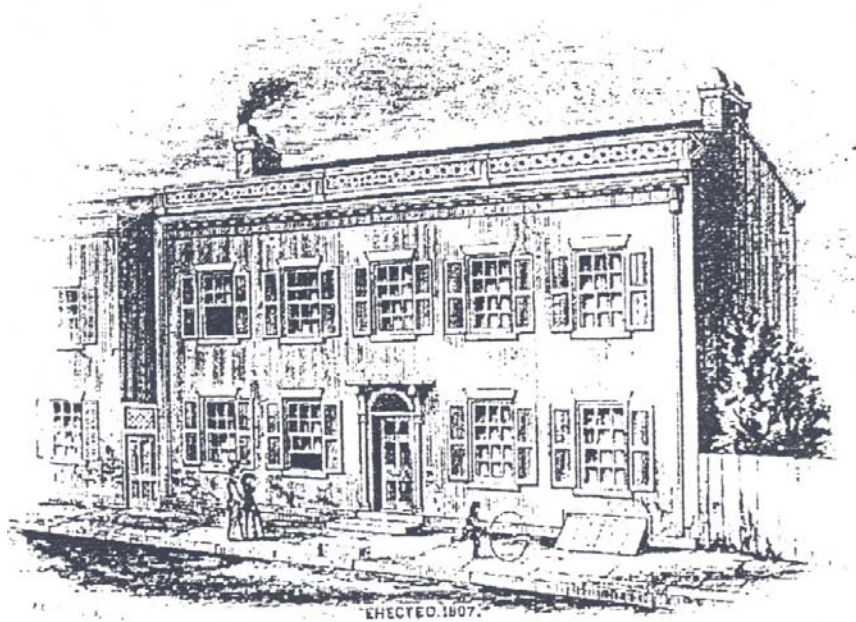


Figure 3. The Spencer house, built in 1807, on lower Madison Avenue in Albany. This house still exists, although greatly altered, at 100 Madison Avenue (collection of the author). The house is one of a few of the center passage type that were constructed in the built-up portion of the city that survive today.

The original floor plans of these three houses incorporated both a main staircase—extending from the first to the second floor only—and a secondary service staircase, which typically extended from the basement to the second floor, or perhaps the attic.

The end of slavery in New York in the 1820s reduced the need to isolate circulation between the two different populations occupying these houses—slave and free—and the removal of the service stairs typically facilitated the expansion of living space for the family. Depending on when, or if, the houses were renovated, the service stair either remained in place, was taken over in the creation of more spacious rooms, or was converted into bathrooms, as at Cherry Hill, and the Van Alen house (1793-94), in nearby DeFreestville, Rensselaer County. The Schuyler Mansion (1761-63) retained this secondary stair (Figure 4).

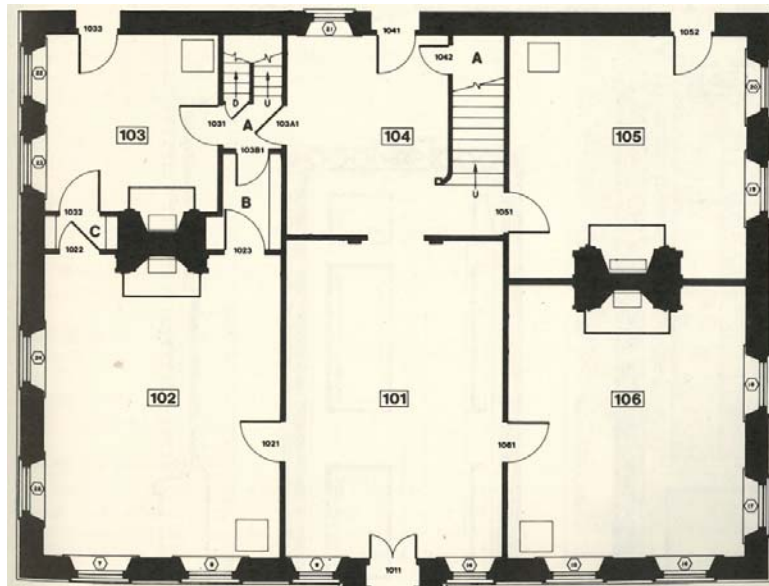


Figure 4. First floor plan of the Schuyler mansion, 1761 (adapted from the *Historic Structure Report* produced by the New York Bureau of Historic Sites in 1977).

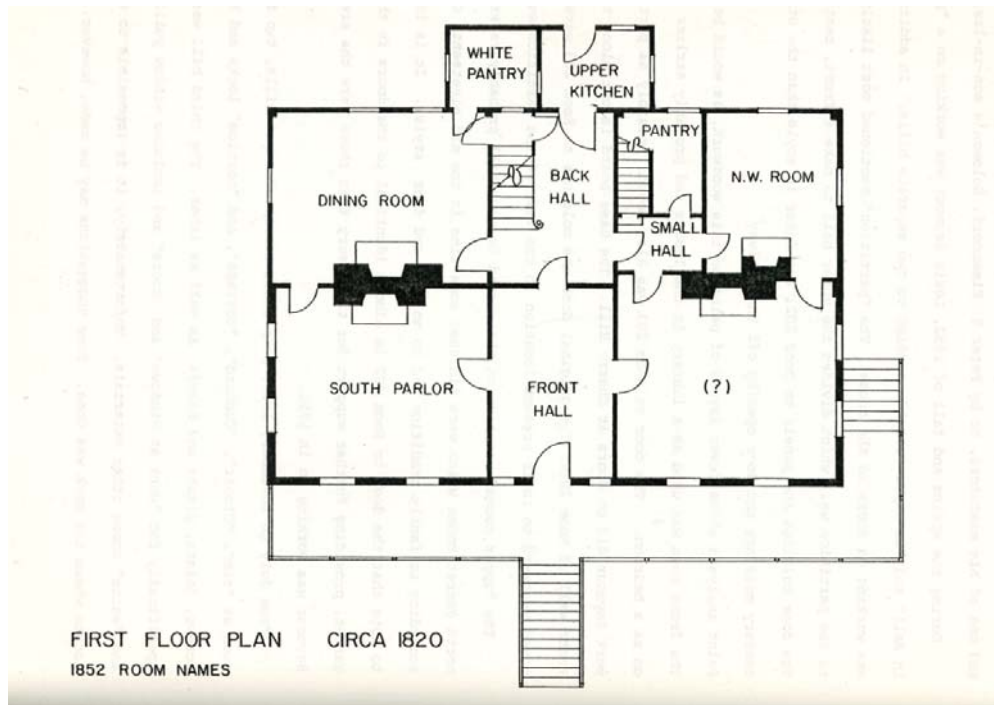


Figure 5. First floor plan, Cherry Hill, as it was in 1820.

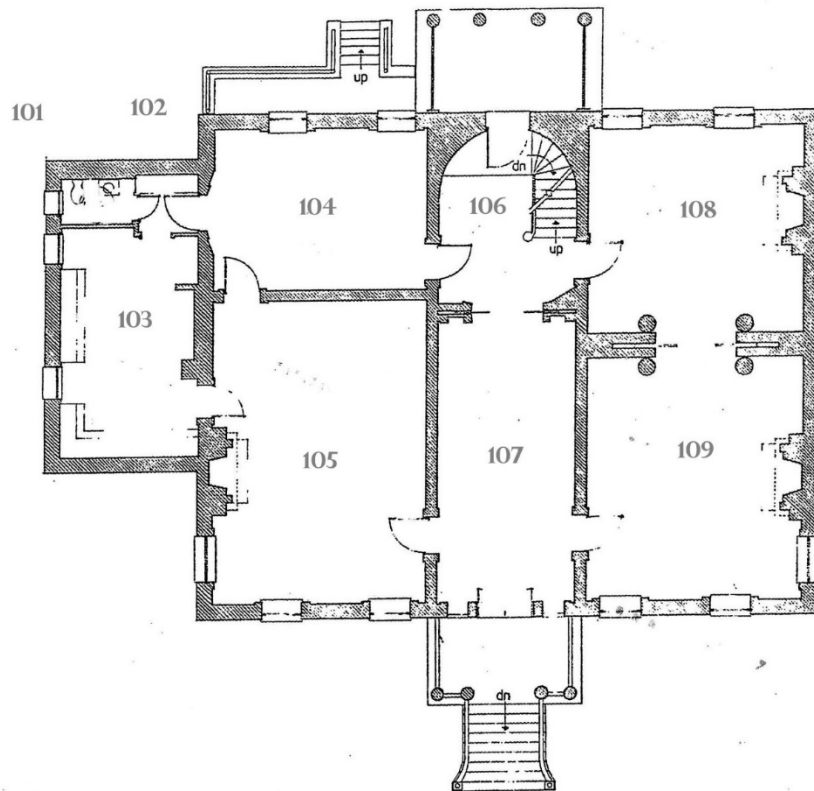


Figure 6. First floor plan of the Ten Broeck mansion (Prospect), as it is today, after removal of the service stair.

One of the features common to many of these dwellings was a rooftop porch. These were more common to urban houses in New England in the early 18th century, and can be particularly found in the Boston area. By the third quarter of the 18th century, they had become a common feature on Hudson Valley houses, constructed on dwellings that were given gambrel roofs with shallow upper slopes, but later adapted to other roof forms. Cherry Hill had a rooftop porch, and the upper slopes of the roof of the Schuyler mansion may have been used in this manner as well. Both were originally encircled by an upper balustrade (Figure 7). The Ten Broeck Mansion retained it's rooftop porch until the end of the 19th century (Figure 8).

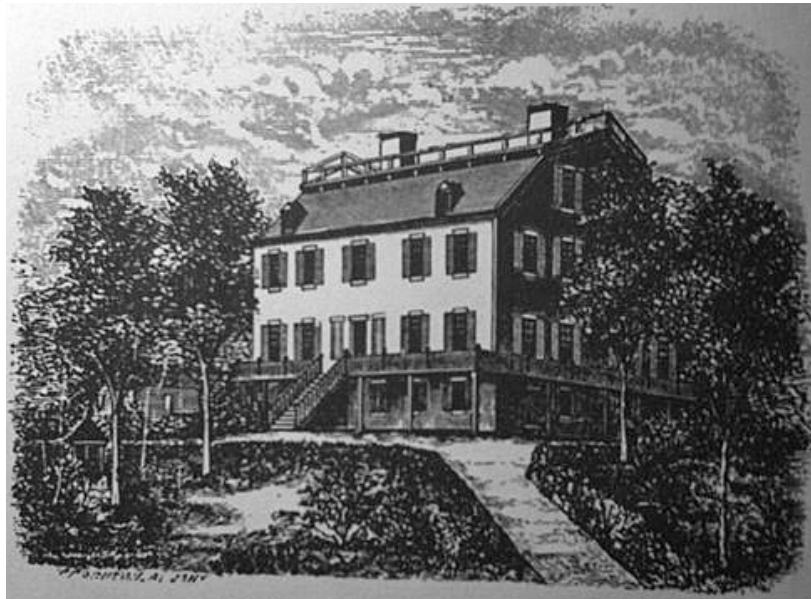


Figure 7. A mid-19th century view of Cherry Hill, showing its rooftop porch (collection of the author).



Figure 8. Detail of an 1887 view of the Ten Broeck mansion, showing the rooftop porch (ACHA archives).

Tour Itinerary (all sites in Albany)

The Pastures (Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site), 32 Catherine Street

Cherry Hill, 523 South Pearl Street

Lunch at Uncle Dan's Restaurant, 240 Church Street

Prospect (the Ten Broeck Mansion), 9 Ten Broeck Place