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Vernacular Architecture**  
is a not-for-profit corporation formed  
to study and preserve vernacular  
architecture and material culture.

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# The Society for the Preservation of Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture

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## Newsletter

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The **Nicolas Haring House**, Rockleigh, NJ, recently visited by HVVA members. Shown here is a view of house's east elevation dated May 6, 1936, taken from it's HABS report.

## From the Editor

How quickly the year moves on! With summer at our heels, HVVA's planning and events go into full swing. Spring held many pleasant surprises some of which you will be reading about in the coming issues. Our recent tour of Northern New Jersey was enjoyed by 14 members and we thank Doug Johnsen for hosting our party and the planning for our visit. Doug is the present owner of the house pictured above. Several of our most popular events are coming up over the summer, like the *The Picnic*. Please visit our website to keep updated. Truly the highlight of membership is attending a study tour. The cutting edge of historic house research happens slowly by the collecting of data. This occurs during our study tours, which always prove informative and entertaining! Please be a part of the process by opening your home or barn, planning a tour of your neighborhood, or by submitting information to the HVVA archive.

I encourage our membership to be a part of the planning and celebration of the Hudson Quarto-centennial in 2009. Henry Hudson was English but, working for the Dutch, he is most responsible for introducing the Dutch culture to the New World. First perhaps only as a name on a map, but it was through his discovery and claim that later generations would build the very familiar Hudson Valley vernacular architecture we study today. So to celebrate our heritage of Dutch culture and Hudson as it harbinger, HVVA is planning a fundraiser and house tour open to the public that will highlight the significant contribution

of the Dutch to our local building tradition. Now what can you do? Perhaps offer to open your home? The HVVA office has already started to compile a list of members who have generously offered the use of their property for this purpose (20 so far). But more are needed! We have a plan, which although only in it's early stage will open forty houses for the tour. Twenty houses per day over the Columbus Day weekend in October 2009 to be exact. This is an ambitious undertaking, but with solid advance planning will proceed with great ease. This being a unique, once in a lifetime celebration, should we not do our part to make it memorable? Participation is key in our organization. Our heritage is too important to allow too slip away by complacency! Those of you who live in these historic houses know what a valued treasure they are so please won't you share that fortune, at least for one day? If HVVA members cannot sing the praises and virtue of such structures who will? Please contact me to find out how you can participate.

Best wishes to all those busy on summer restoration projects. Don't forget to document your doings. And how about sharing some of your project photos in our fall newsletter?

**Rob Sweeney** – *HVVA's sheepdog*



Exterior shot of the Schoonmaker eight-bay barn in Rochester Township, Ulster County. Additions at either side of the barn plus the windows at bottom of end wall are modern.

## Largest Dutch-American barn

### The circa 1860 eight-bay Schoonmaker barn

by Gregory D. Huber / Photos by Roberta Jeracka

In the more than 45 years since John Fitchen commenced his study of the New World Dutch Barn in September 1962, the great majority of barns of Dutch type have been found to be of three-bay and four-bay construction. Seven two-bay barns and about 15 to 20 five-bay barns have been found. Near the upper end 6 six-bay barns and one seven-bay barn (the non-extant Wagner barn near Troy in Rensselaer County) have been identified. Just one barn exceeds the Wagner barn in

bay number – the very large eight-bay barn at the Schoonmaker homestead in Accord just south of the Rondout Creek in Rochester Township in Ulster County, New York.

Any mention of special five or more bay barns should include a curious circa 1820 barn of variant five-bay construction that appears in central Dutchess County. In every bay there is a mid-span partial H-frame where the posts only extend to the tops of the

anchor-beams. These extra bents were included in the structure of the barn for the inclusion of a floor or loft where hay wagons could enter the upper loft area of the barn from a sidewall entrance.

A remarkable eleven anchor-beams thus appear in the barn but in no way should it be considered of ten-bay construction. The Schoonmaker barn remains unchallenged as to the barn with the most bays in either New York or New Jersey.



Top of H-frame post appears with upper tie beam and tie brace. At top of post are purlin plate and its braces. Above purlin are rafters.

The Schoonmaker barn is located at an ancient farm that has been occupied by the same Dutch family since before 1700. Apparently this three-century plus duration by one family can only be said of two other homesteads in all of New York State. Each one has been owned by the same family since before 1700 – one in Dutchess County and another on Long Island.

The Schoonmaker farm occupies land that is quite flat and must have been ideal for tilling, which explains the reason for the very early settlement of the family at the site. The present day barn that faces 25 degrees south of east very likely replaced the original Dutch barn at the homestead.

The barn is in “indirect” alignment with the house. That is, each building is not in line with each other – they were “pushed” to the side of each other. Therefore, two legs of a right triangle were created – a “barn leg” of about 25 feet and a “house-leg” of about 110 feet. Thus, the barn is located approximately 120 feet (in a straight line) from the stone homestead house.

The barn has been so much altered that it is difficult to say with complete authority if the barn is a classic or true form barn – that is, if wagon entries appeared at both gable or end walls. It is unquestionably a three-aisle barn but it remains possible that side entrances existed in its original

construction. The exterior dimensions are just over eighty feet at each side or eave wall and 50½ feet at each end wall. Both the barn length and the 4,000 square footage of the barn floor are the greatest seen in any Dutch related barn.

With the modern alterations that have been made, a sidewall entry is now included in the fabric of the barn. Original siding was vertical and the boards were about 15 inches wide. The barn now has horizontal siding in place.

As might be expected the barn has a very high number of rafter pairs – a staggering fortyone. All rafters – about six by three inches in cross section at their bottoms –



H-frame post is joined to high longitudinal ties. At lower left is a high side aisle tie. Pencil marks to denote placements of mortises are easily seen.

are milled and they actually break up over the purlin plates. Thus each rafter pair actually consists of four rafter lengths – two per each roof slope. Rafters are very likely un-pegged at their tops. Nailers or roofers over the rafters appear to be original and a few

are up to about 20 inches in width. They are not straight sided but have “waney” curved edges. The wood species is likely hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*).

Each purlin plate has a single scarf joint and each joint appears

over each middle H-frame. Plates are also softwood and have dark pencil mark scribe lines, which are not at all often seen in Dutch type barns. When pencil marks are seen, red is the usual color. Purlin braces are milled and are joined at their ends without pegs. This is not an uncommon trait in the post 1850 building era in the northeast. Braces are set three feet by three feet.

H-frame posts that are all milled average about 10” x 8” in cross-section. Verdiepingh is a rather long 11 feet 8 inches. A single raising hole per H-frame post appears 29 inches below the soffits of the purlin plates. Holes have the normal 1½ inch diameters. Each H-frame post to purlin plate juncture is secured with one peg. Normally such timber unions are joined with two pegs with the exception that one peg is quite often seen at the end wall bents. Plates that sit atop each sidewall are also spliced in one place.

Each H-frame has an upper tie beam. In such barns that have this feature, they are usually of post 1800 construction. The tops of these ties appear about 12 inches below the soffits of the purlin plates. Very high longitudinal ties (struts) that stretch from adjacent post to adjacent post in an H-frame post range (at each side of the nave) appear about 6½ feet below the soffits of the plates. Such ties are very unusual and signify extra longitudinal strength that was desired by the builder. Each tie in the Schoonmaker barn is braced at each end. In addition, it appears that each tie was joined to an anchor-beam by two evenly spaced vertical studs.

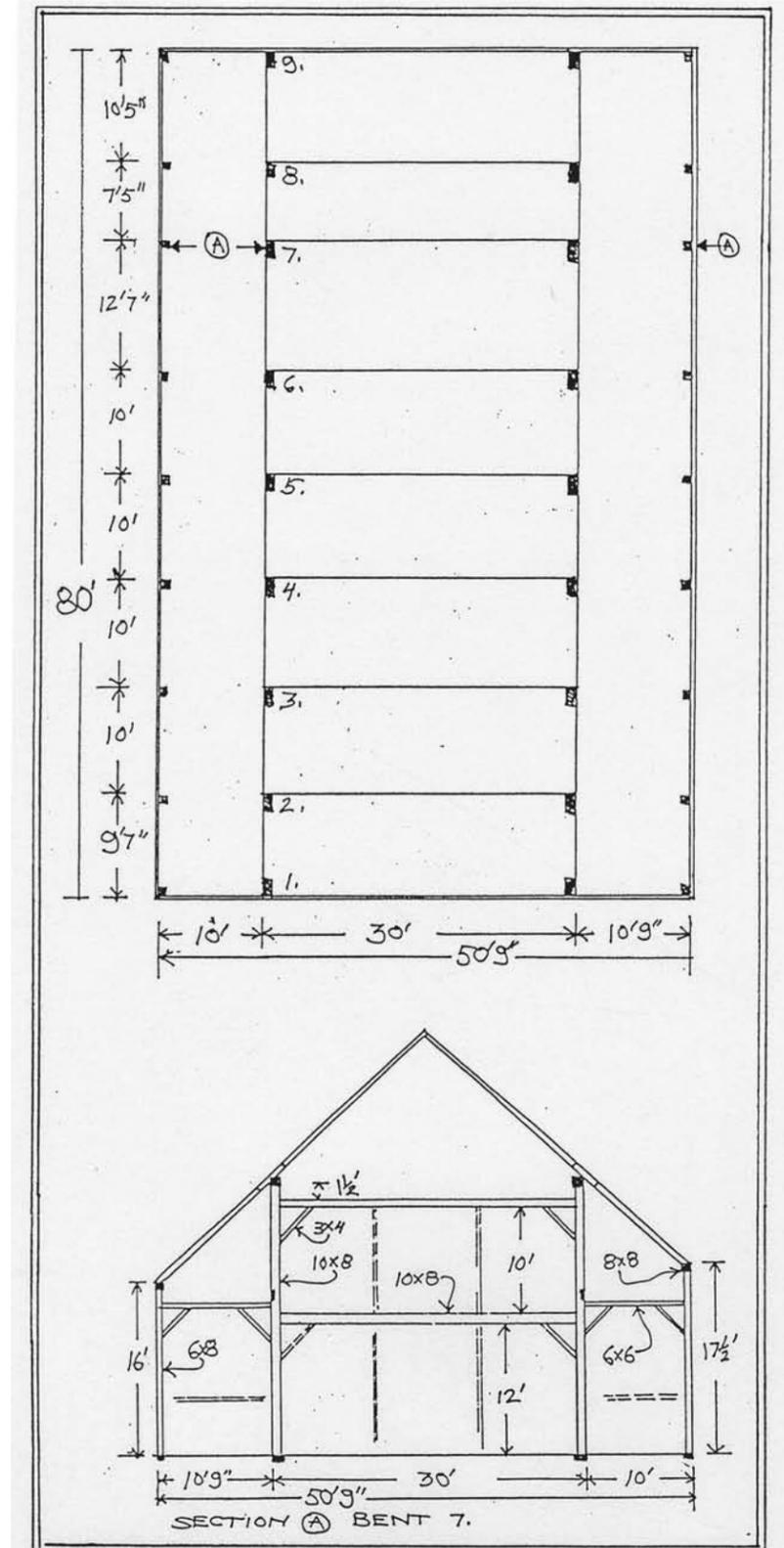
Drawing made by Peter Sinclair.

Unfortunately, all seven inner anchor-beams were removed at one time. They were each about 10 by 8 inches judging from two recycled beams that were each most likely originally an anchor-beam.

Anchor-beam tenons did not extend, which is common for a late date barn. Very oddly, only one peg secured each anchor-beam to each H-frame post. In the majority of barns, two pegs were used. However, in many barns of the pre-1790 era, three pegs were utilized. Remarkably, in only two barns seen to date, no pegs were used at all – one in Dutchess County and the other in Somerset County, New Jersey. However, this trait is virtually non-existent in New Jersey barns.

The middle aisle or nave was just over 30 feet in width and this is very wide by Dutch barn standards. Very often this upper end width is reserved for pre-1790 barns. The side aisle toward the house side is 10 feet 4½ inches and the other side aisle is 10 feet wide, which are both normal widths. Three bays at one side aisle were eliminated when a twentieth century barn was constructed next to the eight-bay barn.

A modern loft level was built a few feet below the level of the anchor-beams and little of the original timbering of the barn remains between the barn floor and the loft.



### Eight-Bay Dutch Barn

circa 1860-70

#29 Schoonmaker Farm, Saunders Kill  
Accord, Rochester, Ulster County, NY



Two beams seen at bottom half of photo are likely the recycled anchor-beams.

Six of the bays are all within a few inches of 10 feet wide – measured lay-out face to lay-out face. The sixth bay is 12 ½ feet wide and the seventh bay is 7 ½ feet wide. It cannot be stated what the reason was for the disparity of the widths of these two bays.

### Summary and Date of Construction

The Schoonmaker barn, although much changed from its original construction mode, retains enough authentic appearance that many of its original dimensions and timber sizes are known. The storage capacity was tremendous and served the needs of a homestead family around the time of the Civil

War. It cannot of course be known if such very large barns of Dutch type were common at that time. However, at least three other barns of late vintage of somewhat similar size – 60 to 65 feet long – are known – two in Ulster County and one in Dutchess County. The seven-bay Wagner barn with a remarkable 18-foot verdiepingh was of tremendous capacity but was an earlier barn – about 1820. The superb circa 1760 Wemple barn near Schenectady has large dimensions but has only about two-thirds the square footage of the Schoonmaker barn.

There are a few very good indicators of the age of construction of the Schoonmaker barn. One is the apparent un-pegged condition of

the rafters at the peak. They are very likely butted and nailed at their tops. Purlin braces are also un-pegged at their ends and such a condition is not unusual in post 1850 or 1860 barns. Another general sign of rather late construction is the lack of anchor-beam tenon extension. Also the rafters are broken up at the purlin plates. Another trait is the fact that all timbers are milled. All things considered it is readily apparent that the Schoonmaker barn is a definite late barn and quite likely built not more than just a few years from the start of the Civil War thus making the barn about 150 years old. It is also one of extremely large size – the biggest in the entire Dutch barn realm. Of what remains is in excellent condition.



A happy company enjoying the pleasures of friendship.



#### Above:

A motley group of HVVA members who gathered at Peter Sinclair's home after the Teller Tour this past Autumn. Peter continues to enjoy the fellowship of HVVA and is always interested in what we are up to.

Photo by Roberta Jeracka

#### Left:

Peter Sinclair and Roberta Jeracka examine old wagon jacks at Jon Dogar-Marinesco and Manuela Michailescu's *Old Brick House Antiques* in Kerhonkson.

Photo by Manuela Michailescu

Your cards and notes offer Peter great encouragement as he progresses in his recovery. His address is:

**Peter Sinclair**  
83 Spillway Road  
West Hurley, NY 1249



## Adam Eckardt's House?

by John R. Stevens

On March 15th members of HVVA visited the home of Molly O'Gorman, located on Fox Hollow Road, Rhinebeck New York.

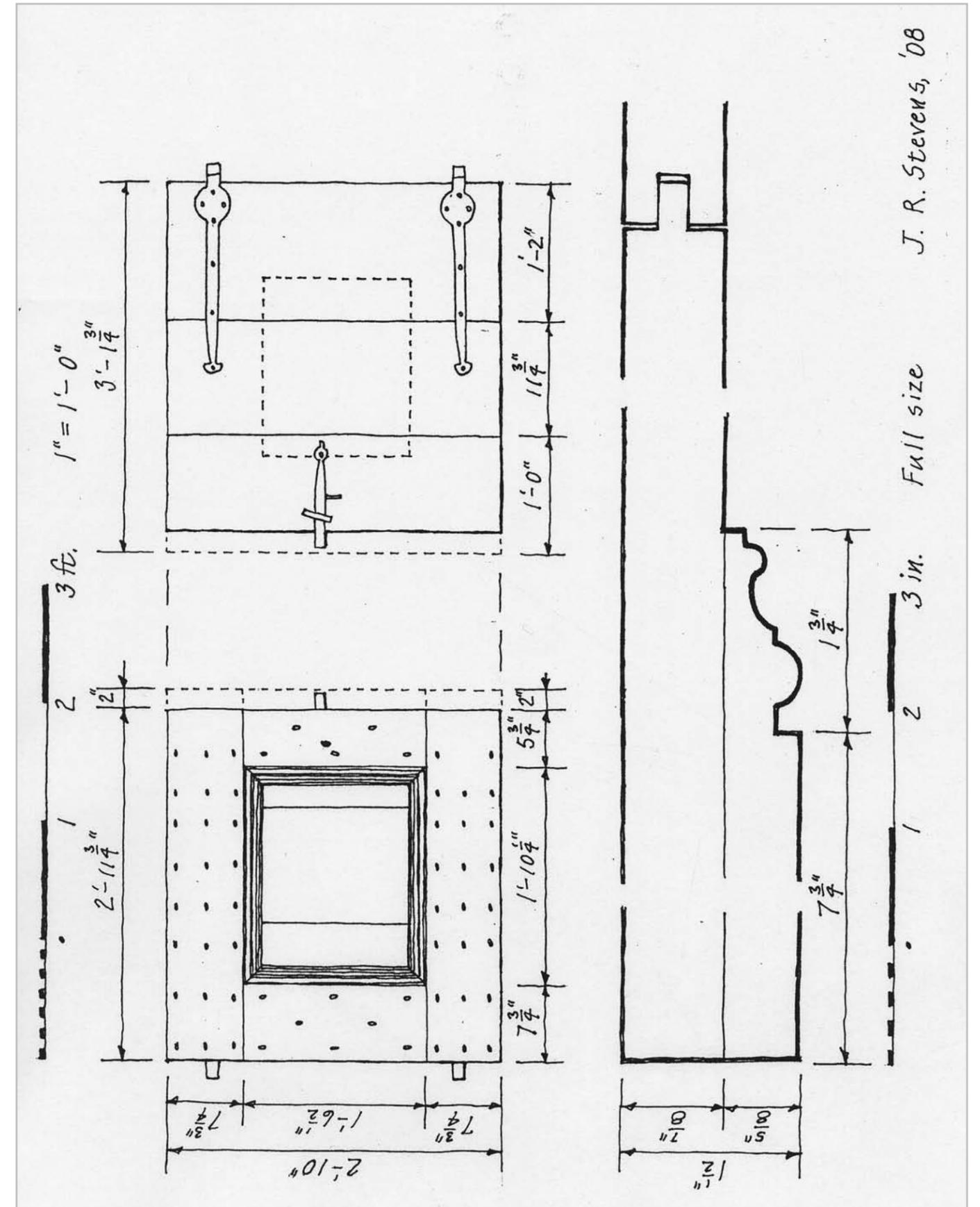
We found a remnant of an early house presently encompassed by a mid 19th century farmhouse. The original stone structure – approximately 22X40 feet – still stands, but like many houses remodeling and re-fashioning has clouded its original plan. The house is believed to be that of Adam Eckardt, and in good Palatine style has a basement kitchen.

A date stone inscribed (AE 1719) is located on the east side of the house. The house stands a typical 1½ story tall. Exposed beams are present in the two principal first floor rooms. They are planed smooth but have neither molded or chamfered edges.

A basement hearth remains on the south wall. The first floor fireplace and the double flue chimney has been removed from the first floor up.

Only the hood beam and its trimmers remain to testify to the original setting. Where the chimney piece was, a window has replaced it. There are a few old molded wooden headers over replaced window sashes. Large stone lintels support most openings.

One notable find was half of a "Dutch Door" located in the south wall of the basement now configured as a window. The door, constructed of vertical boards and molded battens, seems to possess its original hinges with pancake nailing pad and thumb latch. The evidence suggests that this door originally hung with its false panel facing outward. Perhaps this was once part of the front door?



## Kearney Stone and Frame House in Alpine, New Jersey

by Gregory D. Huber

The HVVA represented by eleven members on April 19, 2008 made a visit to the Kearney stone and frame house that is only within about two hundred feet of the Hudson River. The house – believed to be a tavern in the mid nineteenth century and perhaps beyond – is located in the New Jersey section of the Palisades Interstate Parkway in Alpine not far from the New York border. The visit was part of a full-day tour that took members to a few other local sites that included the excellent John Haring and the Concklin-Snedden homesteads – both in Rockleigh in Bergen County, New Jersey – and the wonderful 1700 DeWindt brick and stone house in Tappan in Rockland County, New York.

### Kearney Family

The Kearney house was formerly called Lord Cornwallis Headquarters and was later erroneously known as the Black Ledge home. The James and Rachel Kearney family assumed ownership of the property in 1817. Three children from Rachel's first marriage and five children from the Kearney's marriage added eight people for a total of ten in the house. James died not long afterward, in 1831. Rachel later adopted a child. She then established a tavern at the site. It was not until 1907 that the Interstate Parkway acquired the property.

### Two-Section Building

#### Earlier South Section

According to Eric Nelsen, the curator who conducted a tour of the building, the original section of the house has been thought to date from about 1760 but it appears to date from a number of decades later, that is, if certain features are original to the house. The house is actually of two distinct sections and the most easily seen evidence of this appears at both the front of the house and in the interior in the attic. Both sections are gable ended two story buildings. It is the south end of the complex that is the earlier of the two sections. This section has stone walls



but the top ends of the stone terminate at the top of the two first floor windows at the front of the house. A side entry door appears at the right. Frame construction appears on the second floor where three windows appear. Thus the façade is of three-bay construction. The south end wall is also of stone and contains a chimney. North wall is also partly of stone.

The north section is entirely frame and of two-bay construction. Both first and second floors have a door at the left and a single window at the right. A chimney appears at the north end wall.

The basement of the older section is the location of a kitchen. Ceiling joists of tulipwood (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) are exposed. Lamont Doherty Labs tried to dendrodate certain timbers but their efforts were to no avail. The kitchen occupies the entire basement level along with the staircase to the second floor. The second level consists of just one room that was likely used as a bedroom. A staircase found on this floor ascends to the attic.

It is in the attic in the main section that the most interesting architectural feature or element appears. First to be said is that are nine pairs of rafters. All rafters are hewn and are small sized as would be expected, as the house is

rather diminutive in size. Two pairs of rafters – not adjacent to each other – and about evenly spaced in the middle of the attic originally had collar beams. Possibly an original transverse partition wall appeared and this is denoted by the non-white (no white-wash) several inches wide strip on the one roof slope. It appears about mid-way in the attic. Thus one or possibly two rooms were created. One of the rooms may have acted as a bedroom or possibly as a general utility room.

The floorboards appear to be original and they are of fair width – over ten inches. A number of the end wall studs appear to be original. The nails may be of the wrought variety but it is actually difficult to tell their exact nature.

### A Remarkable Feature in Attic – The Roof Board

The truly remarkable feature in the attic is one roof board that appears about one-half way up the west roof slope. Never in any vernacular building in North America – be it a house or barn or mill – has the author ever seen such a large dimensioned roof board. It is certainly original to the building. No other roof board in the Kearney house even remotely compares in size to the board. In fact it appears that all the roof boards on the east roof slope are not even original. The board is nineteen feet long. It is widely known by architectural historians that nearly all sawn (milled) boards in most vernacular buildings have a maximum length of sixteen feet.

Even the famed folklorist Henry Glassie has discussed why sixteen-foot boards are the maximum seen in so many buildings. He did not have any real answer. It is interesting and curious that this length is a one-half foot shy the length of a rod or 16½ feet. Through the last number of years the author has seen only a few boards or planks actually over 16 feet in length. One plank (two inches thick) in particular was very impressive. It had a 19 foot length as part of a threshing floor in a Standard circa 1820 bank barn near the Oley Valley in Berks County, Pennsylvania.

It appears that the reason that the maximum length boards most often achieved – 16 feet – was that carriages in saw mills could not accommodate a log any longer that would yield boards over 16 feet long.

The Kearney roof board also has an unusually substantial width at its south end – 24¾ inches. At the north end the board width is just over 24 inches wide. Any board with such a width in any situation in any building is very impressive.

Another very unusual feature of the roof board is that the one lower edge at the north end is more than a quarter inch thicker than the lower edge at the south end. The upper edge of the board could not be closely examined. The discrepancy in edge widths is not easily explained.

There are two other very odd traits found in the board. The first is the presence of two notches within a few inches of the south end of the board on each of the upper and lower edges. The notches are about a square inch in size. Only speculation can be provided for their presence. They may have acted as attachment points for ropes or some other means of securing the board to other boards during a transport on a waterway from the source of cutting at a mill site. Certain boards such as flooring in attics of houses or roofing boards in barns had prominent holes where layers of logs in units called rafts that were transported down rivers were connected by substantial size pegs or thin poles driven through the holes. Later the logs were cut into boards and where the holes were located the boards *in situ* can be seen that retain the holes. The notches in the Kearney roof board may have functioned similarly to these holes.

The second feature is the presence of two very rare carved in numbers toward the north end of the board. The numbers are “8” and “6” as “86.” The reason for the appearance of the two numbers is unknown. Adjacent to the number are carved in lines that appear like a tic-tac-toe mark expanded to include an extra few lines. These carvings may represent as Rob Sweeney suggested tally marks of some sort that was kept at the saw mill or perhaps somewhere else.

One interesting aspect of the roof board is that the location of the board is almost exactly in the middle of the roof slope. Perhaps the greatest point of strength or support for the roof made the most sense for the board to be placed where it was. The placement of the board may have been dictated by the seemingly relative ease for its positioning by the builders – not too low and not very high. Other possibilities exist.

The species of wood of the roof board could not be easily determined. It is likely either pine or less likely hemlock or even tulipwood. It is probably not oak.

Why was such an unusual board placed in the attic of the earlier section of the Kearney house in the first place? Only speculation can be provided here. Perhaps it was a leftover board from the dismantling of another nearby building that had other very long and wide boards. Perhaps a shipment of newly milled boards at the original building site just happened to contain such a board that may have come from the middle of the tree where the board originated. A middle of the tree location might help explain the great width of the board. The appearance and size of such a roof board in such a relatively small building is quite an extraordinary occurrence.

Finally, clearly seen in the attic are the side wall plates that sit atop each sidewall. The main wall posts connect to the plates by means of one peg. This wall area in the attic may be considered a variation of a knee wall. Knee walls generally extend above floors by three to three and one-half feet. The “knee wall” here is about three feet high. Post-plate connections in many frame houses are often seen without any pegs.

### Original Wall Weatherboarding

The original north end wall of the south house section is now covered with intact horizontal weatherboarding. The boards are about eight inches or so in width. They all are secured with cut nails with square heads. If these boards are original and they very likely are as the north house section covered the end wall likely only 20 to 30 years after the south house section was constructed then a good general estimate of date of construction may be attempted.

### Date of Construction of South House Section

The best general indicator of construction age is the cut nails seen on north end wall as described above. Based on the nail evidence it appears that the age of the south house section is likely in the 1820 to 1840 era. But it is more likely that the section is closer to 1820. It is good to keep in mind that stone house construction in general expired in Bergen County about the year 1825 although there are definite exceptions to this rule such as the superb Old Huyler Homestead stone house in Cresskill built in 1836. In addition, since the Kearney family bought the land in 1817 it may well be that the house was built only a short time thereafter – hence the date of 1820 seems quite reasonable.

### North House Section

The north house section was little examined. A single room appears on each of the two floor levels. This area greatly expanded the living space of the Kearney home. It is thought the upstairs room may have been for boarding of patrons at the tavern.

The general construction is obviously of a later date than the north section by about 10 to 30 years or so. It is probable that the house addition was constructed to accommodate the growing tavern business that Rachel Kearney was overseeing. It may also have been built for a rather large family. In any event the frame house section was likely built after the Bergen County stone house building tradition ran its course.

### Summary

The Kearney house is a distinct rarity in that it is one of very few early type stone houses of probable Dutch origin in either Bergen or Rockland Counties that is located very close to the Hudson River. That the house was a tavern makes very good sense in that many travelers passed by during their sojourns. The house while considerably changed from its original conditions on both its interior and to some degree on its exterior it largely retains its authentic dimensions and a number of its original features.



## Making a (Historic) House into a Home

by Eric Nelsen

This brief article will, I hope, encourage other historic property owners to think about the past lives lived in their dwellings and to perhaps learn by living! The following pertains to the Kearney house which was recently visited by HVVA members. At one point, there were about thirty people in the house, almost all of them in the two small rooms downstairs. We'd begun the evening as five staff dressed in nineteenth-century clothing, lighting candles and getting things ready. Then there came our twenty paying guests (in twenty-first-century clothing), as well as Mr. Thaddeus MacGregor, our "tavern musician," in his corner with his top hat and guitar. Then, out of the blue, three or four of the crew of the sloop Clearwater, docked that evening at Alpine boat basin, happened to wander over to the house, curious as to what was going on. (This was minutes

after I'd told our guests about how the crews of sloops of old used to stop at this very place.) And then a woman came in who had been walking her dog by that afternoon – she'd asked me why I was opening up the house. Now she'd come back to see if what I'd told her was true: Were we really attempting to recreate a nineteenth-century Hudson River tavern at the Kearney House?

The one thing most people comment on when they enter the Kearney House for the first time is how "small" it is. Indeed, by modern standards it can seem a tight space in which to live. Then we tell them that Rachel Kearney brought up at least nine children in this space – before they added on the northern half of the house around 1840 (each half, old and new, has two rooms – one downstairs, one upstairs – and an attic

space, for a total usable floor space of around 1,500 square feet). Then we tell them that Mrs. Kearney also ran a tavern here.

Even for me – someone who had told about the nine children and the tavern more times than I'd probably care to admit – it could seem like something of a stretch. Until that evening, when thirty people were in that space, their modern eyes adjusting to candlelight. Yes, the house felt full – but it didn't necessarily feel crowded. It's one more lesson that the house has taught us over the past year, since we had the fireplaces restored and operating. Our perceptions of space – "living space," "working space" – at least here in suburban New Jersey, have changed some over the generations since Mrs. Kearney ran a tavern from her house beneath the "Closter Mountain."

Some of the other lessons the house has taught my staff and me have been more workaday. For one thing, the house has shown us how we should arrange its furnishings, for one thing. Before we started doing our tavern programs, we treated chairs and tables like props. "Where would this one look good?" we'd ask each other. But when you're expecting twenty hungry and thirsty guests in an hour or two, the question becomes, "Where the heck are we going to put them all?" And the next morning, the furnishings would seem right. They were where they were supposed to be.

Since we've been cooking at the hearth on a regular basis (we cook most Sunday afternoons now, dressed in our period garb), the house has also shown us how to arrange the kitchen and its tools and supplies. Before we cooked in the house, for example, we'd hung all our ladles, spoons, forks and so on across the front of the hearth because, well, because they looked cool hanging there, all spread out. Then you start cooking, and every time you bend down to stir a pot, you slap your face on a ladle or a spoon, and before you know it you've moved them out of the way to the sides of the hearth where they belong.

The house has also confirmed some of the things we've been telling peo-

ple over the years, helping to move us beyond educated guesswork. The ceilings in the house aren't low, we've been saying for years, because "people were shorter back then." They were built that way because it made the house that much more efficient to heat. Now that we're the ones splitting the firewood and hauling it inside, it makes blatant, obvious sense. We run fires only one or two days a week. But it's that much easier for us to imagine what it must have been like to keep those fires going for months at a time, throughout all the long winter (and without the benefit of a chainsaw to get the wood to the proper length to split!). The low ceilings make perfect sense, even if someone in the family might have had to get used to ducking his or her head.

Where should we place the candles? What about the spare candles? What's the best arrangement for doing the dishes, inside or outside? (It depends on the weather, we've learned.)

We've also come to see certain items as particularly dear to our lives at our little home-away-from-home, and not always those we would have expected. A large, cast iron kettle that was donated to us last year now seems indispensable, for example. It holds about two gallons of water, which we can bring to a boil – if we've got our fire burning well – in about half an



hour. When we pour some out, we immediately refill it. This is not for tea or coffee (we have smaller kettles for those), but for plain old hot water. (Think how many times in your day you turn a knob or push a lever for hot water or run a dishwasher or washing machine.)

Something else that people comment on now: the smell of the wood smoke in house, the aroma of cooking. And so a house becomes a home. We're not kidding ourselves. We don't live at the Kearney House. We're not there day-to-day, four seasons a year, as was Mrs. Kearney for so many of her nine decades on this earth. But we are learning a bit more about what her life must have been like. And that's the great thing about the "living history" approach to historical interpretation, an approach we've adopted under the capable guidance and encouragement of John Muller and his talented staff at Fort Lee Historic Park. It has opened unexpected doors, for us and for our visitors and guests alike. It's like having a chance to turn up a corner and peek behind the fallen curtain of the years. To see – and hear, and smell, even to feel – for a moment or two what used to be.



# Hortus

## How-to: Finding the Ghosts in Your Garden

“

Before you do a thing – make a plot plan, buy a bush or plant a petunia – do your garden a big favor. Go outside and take a hard look at what you have. Look especially for the venerable old presences in your garden – plants or features that have been there for a long time.

Some will be obvious – apple trees, oaks, and sprawling lilac bushes are all hard to miss. But some will be overgrown or covered over – these are the ghosts in your garden, and they're not only wonderful, they are important clues to your garden's history. Archaeologists know that one of the best times to look for ghosts in the garden is in high summer during the dry season. Buried and forgotten objects or features of your garden such as old foundation walls, walks and drives will typically retain moisture long after the surrounding areas are dried out. The grass that covers them will remain visibly green, in contrast to the surrounding browned-out sections. The placement of old trees often gives valuable clues as well – chances are, if you have a line of old oak or apple trees, they once marked a boundary or drive of some sort.

As you review the various existing features of your garden, keep in mind a lesson I first learned from Thalassa Cruso, the great garden guru of the 1960s and '70s, who saved me from one of the biggest mistakes of my gardening career. In her book *Making Things Grow Outdoors*, she relates a story about how she was tempted to cut down a large tree on her property shortly after moving in because it darkened the house. She thought



better of it, though, and decided to wait awhile. Thank goodness she did, for that very tree has been carefully planted to shield the house during the summer – the shade that had seemed so unwelcome in the early spring actually kept the house from turning into an inferno during the warmest months.

I had a similar situation here in Southborough, Massachusetts, shortly after I moved into my 1852 house. There were two large spruces about 25 feet off the north side of the house that at the time seemed stranded in the middle of nowhere. My immediate temptation was to take them down and design a new garden in the area. I had just reread Cruso's work, however, and I decided to wait and follow her advice. The following winter proved her point: not only did those two spruces shield the house from terrific northerly blasts all winter long, they also provided vital interest and refuge for a host of wildlife during the winter. As the Romans said, *festina lente!*

The point is, you need to determine what you have to begin with in your garden and treat it as the framework for your improvements. This does not mean that you can't cut something down just because it's old. It does mean that you need to move cau-

tiously. Here is some good advice on the subject, which is as true today as it was when it was written centuries ago.

One is often in great straits when an old garden is to be set to rights without wholly destroying it. In such a case, an exact plan should be taken, and every part of it examined one after another before we condemn it. Above all, we should conform the buildings, wall basins, and canals, already made, unless they are exceedingly ill-placed and without destroying too much, in order to rectify every fault, redress only those that are most necessary, preserving as much as is possible, especially the Wood, Hedges, and Walks of High Trees, which are long in raising and which in this renewal should be looked upon as sacred, and be very little, if any at all, meddled with. This indeed requires a very provident and skilled hand, not such as are for cutting down and destroying everything to make way for their whimsical designs, of which one sees too many sad instances.

”

**Dezallier d'Argenville**  
*The Theory and Practice of Gardening*  
(1709)

## The Unbearable Excitement

Then came the spring, and the almost unbearable excitement – which can only be enjoyed in an ancient garden – of discovering where the previous owners had planted their bulbs. Of all the treasure hunts in which men have ever engaged, this must surely be the most enthralling... to wander out on a February morning, in an old garden which is all your own and yet is still a mystery, and to prowl about under the beech trees, gently raking away a layer of frozen leaves in the hope of finding a cluster of snowdrops... to scan the cold hard lawns in March for the first signs of the fresh green blades of the crocuses... to go through the orchard with a thin comb, putting a bamboo to mark every fresh discovery of daffodils.

**Beverly Nichols**  
*Merry Hall (1951)*

Photos by Manuela Michailescu



“

Finally, keep your eyes open for other features of your garden that may be more reclusive. Certain plants are extremely long lived and often give indications of what the garden looked like years ago. Once when I was doing a historically correct garden plan of an 1870s Italianate mansion in Boston, I was faced with considerable uncertainty as to the historical accuracy of my final design, since very little documentary evidence existed for the property. I had first seen the property in winter, and I returned to meet with the clients on a beautiful March day, brisk but sunny.

As I approached the house in my car, I noticed that there were a few small white specks waving in the lawn. Curious, I got out of the car and in the still-brown grass found circles of the tiniest snowdrops. There was no clue in the current lawn that there had ever been beds, nor were there any old pictures of the house that we knew of. But there, like silent ghostly witnesses, stood the hardy little snowdrops, still blooming after almost a century of neglect. When viewed from above, the pattern of bulbs showed that there had existed an elaborate layout of beds along what had once undoubtedly been a semicircular drive. With this evidence, I was able to recreate the original layout with complete confidence, all due to the faithful testament of those tiny snowdrops.

So be on the lookout for something old in the garden – you never know when it may teach you something new.

”

**Michael Weishan**  
*The new traditional garden: a practical guide to creating and restoring authentic American gardens for homes of all ages*  
The Ballantine Publishing Group  
New York, 1999

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### Calendar

**PLEASE NOTE:**

*No third Saturday Meeting or Tour planned for July.*

#### Tour of a Northern Dutchess County Barn

Sat., June 21, 2008 – 10:00 AM

HVVA and DBPS combine forces for a barn tour of northern Dutchess County, lead by Bob Hedges. Tour leaves from the Quitman Resource Center located at 7015 Route 9, Rhinebeck, NY.

#### Hurley Stone House Day

Sat., July 12 – 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM

HVVA will host a table of photographs and artifacts to promote awareness of our organization's goals. Please volunteer your time as members are needed to man the table for various times throughout the day. Jim Decker (845-527-1710) will coordinate the day. For more event information visit: [www.stonehouseday.org](http://www.stonehouseday.org)

#### Austerlitz Blueberry Festival

Sat., July 27 – 9:00 PM to 4:00 PM

HVVA will again set up a display and promote preservation issues at this event. Volunteers needed! Alvin Scheffer (518-828-5482) will coordinate

the HVVA table. The event will feature 19th Century craft demonstrations and wares, antiques, live music and entertainment for children, a blueberry recipe contest and blueberry pancake breakfast.

**Rain or shine!**

Austerlitz Historical Society  
Old Austerlitz Site, Route 22  
Austerlitz  
[www.oldausterlitz.org](http://www.oldausterlitz.org)

#### HVVA Picnic

Sat., August 16 – 10:00 AM

HVVA picnic will be at Shadow Lawns, the home of HVVA members David Cavallaro and Dan Giesinger. The house and barn complex is located at 2233 Lucas Ave Turnpike just north of the village of High Falls, NY. HVVA picnics are not to be missed. They start at 10:00 AM with a tour of an historic site and return back to the place we started from for a potluck picnic. All members are encouraged to participate. Rob Sweeney will coordinate the event. RSVP [Gallusguy@msn.com](mailto:Gallusguy@msn.com)

**The Austerlitz Blueberry Festival**

Artist: Bonnie White Image No. BB1061 Contact [info@nextdayart.com](mailto:info@nextdayart.com)

