



Hudson-Mohawk Vernacular Architecture

July – Sept 2022

Newsletter

Vol. 2, No. 3

Vernacular Documents X: A Contemporary Drawing of the Becker House, Germantown, Columbia County

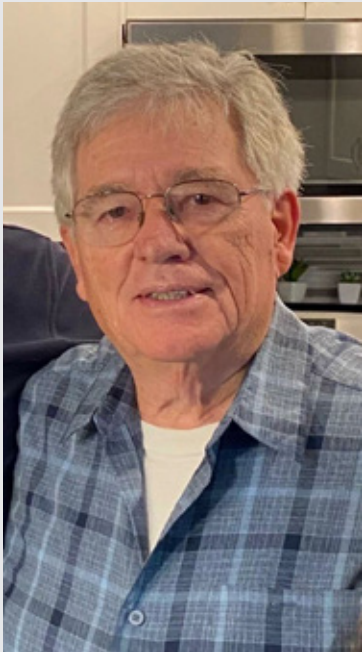
by Walter R. Wheeler



An early 19th century drawing found in the family papers of William Becker (1774-1838) and Catherine Margaret Blass Becker (1781-1824) of Germantown, believed to depict their house (Collection of Rachel Clothier). Typical of rural wood framed dwellings constructed in the Hudson and Mohawk valleys in the 1790-1825 period, structures such as this were commonly framed using a series of parallel H-bents, following New World Dutch building traditions. A contemporary example survives on Wood Lane in Salem, Washington County. (See below)



House, ca. 1800, at 159 Wood Lane, Salem, Washington County. The drawing depicts a house similar to this, although it is five bays wide with a leanto (Photo by Bill Krattinger, January 2010).



Obituary: William F. McMillen

William F. McMillen passed away at his home in Glenmont, New York, on November 9th. He was 81. Billy was born on Staten Island, and he lived there his entire life until he retired and moved to Glenmont in 2003.

Billy had a long career in the restoration of historic buildings. He supervised many of these as director of the restoration department at Staten Island's Historic Richmond Town, a site his father helped to found. He helped Don Carpentier move and restore many of the buildings at New York's Eastfield Village from its beginning in the 1970s. (He was still helping to restore Eastfield's buildings the week before he died.)

Billy was a master of many historic trades involved in the design and restoration of timber frame dwellings. But it was as a tinsmith that he excelled, and he could make the most intricate tin items. He trained and mentored tinsmiths across the country, and his knowledge was critical to the establishment of the thriving tin shop at Colonial Williamsburg, where he donated many of the tools used in the shop.

Billy and his wife, Judy, who passed away last year, were energetic supporters and generous donors of Early American Industrial Association (EAIA) for decades. Judy was EAIA's first woman President—a fact of which Billy was very proud. They also were both longtime members of the Brigade of the American Revolution and HVA and HMVA.

Billy had a generous, fun-loving personality. He was an ace at dominoes, made great rum punch, and could entertain with his stories for hours. He was a friend to all and always gave others his time, talent, and treasures. Donations can be made in lieu of flowers to Early American Industries Association and the Historic Eastfield Foundation.

Urban Vernacular: Anatomy of an Early 20th Century Residential Subdivision on Morris Avenue in Schenectady, New York¹

by Neil Larson

A short boulevard running south from Union Street to Eastern Avenue, Morris Avenue was one of a number of new middle-class neighborhoods developed in that part of Schenectady brought on by the rapid growth of local industry (Fig.1). This new development attracted not only newcomers moving into the city for white-collar jobs at the General Electric plant but also local merchants prospering from the swelling economy and removing themselves from older neighborhoods downtown, some in the path of commercial redevelopment. Morris Avenue built up between 1909 and 1915 with ten distinctive houses built in the Craftsman style. Half of the houses were designed by architects based in Schenectady or Albany; the rest were built from plans obtained from published sources by their owners or contractors providing new insight into the manner in which these and the hundreds of other up-to-date, stylish homes appearing in this period were conceived and realized.

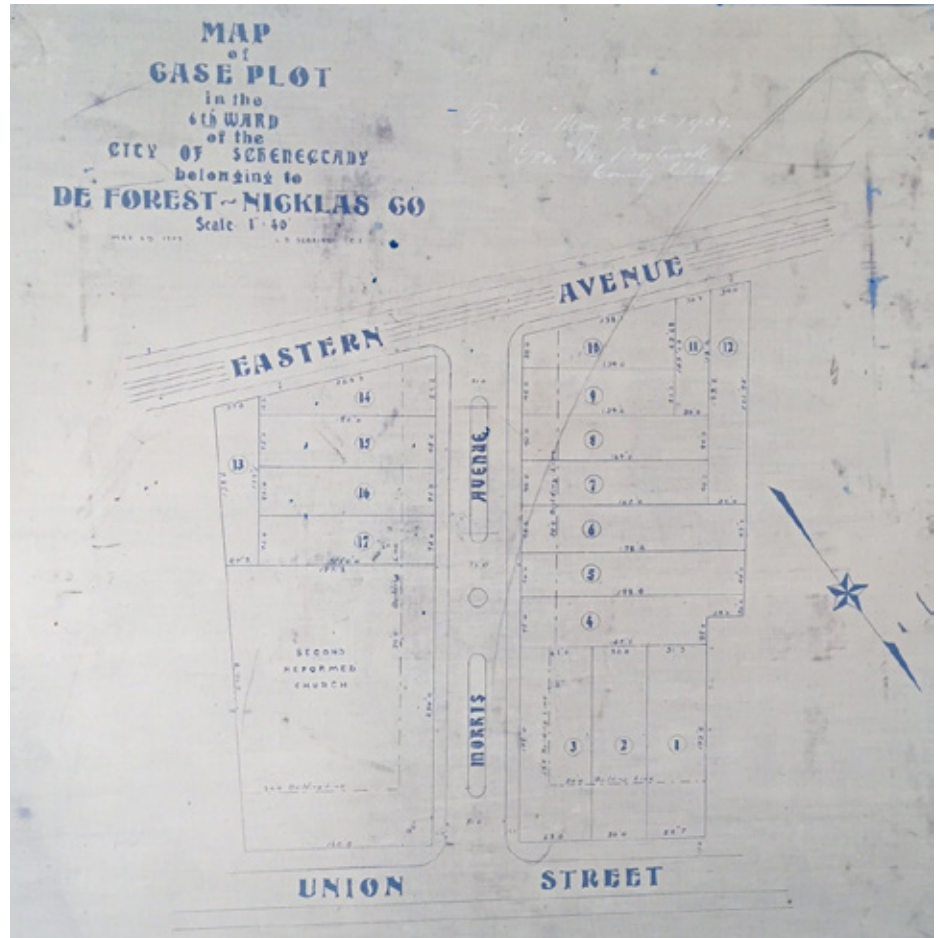


Fig.1 Plan of Morris Ave Lots

The neighborhood was created with the 1909 subdivision of a parcel known as the Case Plot, being the remaining undeveloped portion of land associated with the estate of Sarah L. Case, who had inherited it from her grandfather Henry R. Wendell, it being a portion of his suburban farm. The plan was filed by DeForest-Nicklas Co., a real estate development firm headed by Henry S. DeForest, who is credited with building over 1,200 homes in the city. He was a former mayor, who was a member of the U.S. Congress at the time the Morris Avenue lots were being sold. William G. Nicklas, 26 years DeForest's junior, was a successful Schenectady real estate agent at the time he became his partner. Morris Avenue was named for Henry S. DeForest's daughter Pearl DeForest Morris.

It does not appear that DeForest-Nicklas Co. had a direct role in determining the architectural program for Morris Avenue. Typical of developer's deeds of the period, they placed restrictions on properties they sold as far as use (no manufacturing or establishments distilling or selling liquor), setbacks and house values, in this case, the \$3,500 requirement would have discouraged the construction of lesser houses; apparently multiple family dwellings, particularly two-family houses, which were proliferating in working-class sections of the city, also were excluded.

The Arts & Crafts theme running through the houses built on the street is characteristic of this early 20th century period, it being the current architectural taste of the day

and popular with many of the young professionals moving into the city. Local architects and builders in Schenectady were experienced working in the Craftsman mode, much of it promulgated by architectural journals, trade publications, building supply catalogs and mail-order houses. Most middling houses were based on Four-Square plans with Arts & Crafts materials and millwork; others were more progressive in forms following the introduction of the Bungalows and Craftsman Cottage.

In this period and in planned subdivisions such as this, pushing out into and past the old city limits (gobbling up farmsteads in their paths), a new urban vernacular

emerged with the collaboration of landowners, real estate speculators, architects, building contractors and millwork manufacturers. (This dynamic was not unlike that which existed in the 19th century, just significantly multiplied in scope.) One historian has referred to this early decentralized practice of single-family home development in the early 20th century as “entrepreneurial vernacular,” making it an apt subject for presentation here.² By means of an introduction, thumbnail descriptions of the ten houses constructed on Morris Avenue between 1910 and 1915 follow below. Builders and architects have been identified for the properties based on building permit records.



Fig. 2: Lindsay-Holtzmann House, 2 Morris Ave., 1912, from south.

2 MORRIS AVENUE

A building permit for lot no. 4 of the Case Plot was issued to James Lindsay on April 17, 1912.³ Lindsay owned Lindsay Bros. Co., a shoe store at 311 State Street with his brother, John, and Edward A. Quiri, the prior owner. They also had a store in Amsterdam, New York, where James and his family had lived before moving to Morris Avenue.

The Four-Square house with a stuccoed first floor and shingled second and a distinctive Classical porch is believed to have been built by Lewis E. Jeffers, a carpenter and building contractor.⁴ He was born on a farm in Rotterdam, and by the time he was 19 years of age he was working in that town as a carpenter with his older brother Allen Jeffers. Lewis E. Jeffers is recorded as the builder of three other houses on Morris Avenue at nos. 5, 9 and 15.



Fig. 3: Alfred E. & Isabelle E. Gregg House, 4 Morris Ave., 1915, from east.

4 MORRIS AVENUE

Lot no. 5 of the Case Plot was sold to Isabelle E. Gregg in 1909.⁵ Her husband, Alfred E. Gregg, was born on a farm in Rotterdam, graduated from Union College and was employed at the electric works. Their Four-Square house had stucco and shingled walls and a Craftsman porch. Records indicate the house was built by Henry J. Fuller, a carpenter-builder residing on Anthony Street in the city. Born in 1886 in Amsterdam, New York, he was the son of carpenter George H. Fuller and Mary C. Fuller. By 1910 Henry and his wife, Bessie Mae, were living in Schenectady. No other buildings associated with him have been identified.



Fig. 4 & 5: William F. & Anna L. Hardstock House, 6 Morris Ave., 1910, from south.

6 MORRIS AVENUE

A building permit was issued on 14 April 1910 for the house to be built for William F. and Anna L. Hardstock at 6 Morris Avenue. Born in Schenectady to German immigrant parents, William F. Hardstock (1868-1927) was a master plumber and vice president of the Levi Case Co. at the time. The elaborate brick and stucco house with a half-timbered second story was designed by the Albany architectural firm Fuller & Robinson Co. Albert W. Fuller (1854-1934) had already reached prominence when he partnered with William P. Robinson in 1910, towards the end of his long career. Known more for his schools, YMCAs, commercial buildings and elegant urban residences, the small-scale Hardstock House is an unusual example of his recorded commissions, which may reflect the work of Robinson and other younger associates in the office.⁶ William T. Thorpe was the builder of record. His business and home were located at 316 Lenox Road in the Schenectady Realty Plot, in which he likely constructed other houses. Born in England, he immigrated to the U.S. and Schenectady as a teenager in 1895 with his father John Thorpe, a carpenter with whom he apprenticed. Thorpe disappears from Schenectady directories after 1918.



Fig. 6: Homer J. & Florence S. Borst House, 7 Morris Ave., 1913, from west.

7 MORRIS AVENUE

After being sold in 1909, lot 17 of the Case Plot changed hands a number of times before being bought in 1913 by Homer J. Borst of Amsterdam, New York, for whom the Four-Square house with brick and stucco walls was built.⁷ Borst was a Harvard-educated lawyer and the son and partner of Henry V. Borst, an attorney in Amsterdam. It appears that Homer and his wife, Florence S. Serviss, and their infant son, Vroman, moved to Schenectady to open a second office for the family law firm. A building permit filed on 14 June 1913 identified William H. Putnam as the architect and builder of the house, although he was a harness merchant by trade who was engaged briefly in real estate, including the year the Borst house was built.



Fig. 7: William S. & Elizabeth M. Frame House, 8 Morris Ave., 1910, from south.

8 MORRIS AVENUE

William S. Frame, chief clerk for American Locomotive Co., and his wife, Elizabeth Stewart Frame, purchased lot no. 7 and the northerly two feet of lot no. 8 from DeForest-Nicklas Co. on 18 August 1910, although a building permit had been issued on 31 December 1909.⁸ Schenectady architect Cornelius Glen Van Rensselaer (1869-1944) reputedly designed the brick and wood shingle dwelling and its substantial Craftsman porch. He was the son of Visher Van Rensselaer of East Greenbush and a descendant of Killian Van Rensselaer, the legendary Dutch patroon of the manor of Rensselaerwyck. Among his documented commissions are the Veeder House, Union Street at Elmer Avenue (1904); Center Street School (1918); Draper Free School, Rotterdam (1920); Methodist Church, Alplaus (1929); Pleasant Valley Market, State Street (1931); and a three-story, fire-proof apartment block, Union Street at Park Avenue (1925). The builder, John Erickson, was born in Sweden and immigrated to the U.S. as a young man in 1888. He appears in Schenectady censuses and directories from 1903 to 1920, living with his wife, Anna, and son, Wendell J. Erickson (a civil engineer educated at Union College).



Fig. 8: Henry C. & Hattie J. McLean House, 9 Morris Ave., 1914, from north.

9 MORRIS AVENUE

House builder Joseph H. Clements, Jr. purchased lot 16 and a portion of lot 15 in the Case Plot on 29 October 1909 and sold it to Henry C. and Hattie J. McLean in 1914, apparently with the wood shingled Bungalow with sweeping front roof.⁹ Henry C. McLean was a reporter (clerk) for the Supreme Court in Albany. He moved to Morris Avenue from Gloversville, and he and his family are listed in the 1915 Schenectady city directory. Documentation for the property compiled by a later owner cites Joseph H. Clements, Jr. as the architect and Lewis E. Jeffers as the builder.¹⁰ Clements was not known to be an architect. He was a builder himself and by 1914 he had become secretary treasurer for Peckham-Wolf & Co., a dealer in lumber and interior trim located on Dock Street. He likely was provided plans from an unidentified outside source. Jeffers also has been credited as the builder of houses at 2, 5 and 15 Morris Avenue.



Fig. 9: Gifford-Faust-Cramer House, 10 Morris Ave., 1913, from west.

10 MORRIS AVENUE

George Gifford obtained a building permit on 18 December 1913, a few months after he purchased the southerly 38 ft. of lot 8 and the northerly 2 ft. of lot 9 from lumber yard foreman William S. Mischler.¹¹ However, Gifford, a teller at the Mohawk Bank, was unmarried and lived with his parents at 303 Lafayette Street, renting the house for the entire time he owned the property. The building permit identifies William Gifford, George's father and a civil engineer, as the architect, which may explain the conservative design enlivened by a stolid porch. Carpenter Charles Weaver is listed as the builder. Like many contractors of that era, he left the family farm in Glenville to benefit from Schenectady's building boom.



Fig. 10: Veeder-Swick House, 12 Morris Ave., 1913, from south.

12 MORRIS AVENUE

Eugene W. Veeder, who operated a coal and lumber yard on State Street, purchased the southerly 40 ft. of lot 9 in the Case Plot from DeForest Nicklas Co. in 1912.¹² He was the son of Henry Veeder and Helen B. Newkirk and was born on the family farm in Rotterdam. The Veeder family has deep roots in the region; Eugene's brother Charles F. Veeder was one of the developers of the Union Triangle. Eugene married his second wife, Alice H. Dyer, in 1912, the year he hired architect Cornelius G. Van Rensselaer to design an elaborate stuccoed Four-Square house in a Craftsman style. (For more information on C.G. Van Rensselaer see entry for 8 Morris Avenue.) A building permit was issued on 19 October 1912 with Charles E. Varney recorded as the builder. Born on a farm in Kingsbury, Washington County, Varney worked as a carpenter in Glens Falls before moving to Schenectady. His business and home were located on Lenox Road suggesting he had a role in the construction of similar houses in the Schenectady Realty Plot.



Fig. 11: William F. & Helen Skinkle House, 14 Morris Ave., 1913, from south.

14 MORRIS AVENUE

A small, stuccoed bungalow was built for William F. Skinkle on lot no. 10 in the Case Plot, which he bought from DeForest-Nicklas Co. in 1913.¹³ Skinkle was a traveling salesman for the Pioneer Broom Company; he and his wife, Helen, were in residence in time to be listed at the address in the 1914 city directory. A building permit dated 1 May 1913 identifies John G. Smith as the architect and builder. Obviously, he had purchased plans for this simple cottage from another source, as it is a classic catalog house. John Gottlieb Smith was born in Pennsylvania to German immigrant parents. He appears as a carpenter in Schenectady directories in 1905 and by 1910 had graduated to contractor status, implying he ran his own business.



Fig. 12: Rubenstein-Carl-Veeder House, 15 Morris Ave., 1910, from west.

15 MORRIS AVENUE

The most elaborate house on the street, situated on a large lot on the corner of Morris and Eastern avenues, was constructed in 1910 by building contractor Lewis E. Jeffers on a lot he acquired from DeForest-Nicklas Co. for speculation purposes.¹⁴ (For information on Jeffers, see entry for 2 Morris Ave.) At the time of the closing, Jeffers already had plans in hand drawn by architect William T.B. Mynderse (1871-1931), son of Barent A. Mynderse, a prominent local physician, and Albertina Sanders Ten Broeck. The Mynderse family could claim myriad ties to the region's Colonial patriarchy. They resided on a large estate on the Scotia side of the Mohawk known as Lake Hill in a gambrel-roof house probably also designed by William T.B. Mynderse, as well as "Holland House", a Dutch-styled house built on the family's Scotia land for his own house (1916).

He also was the architect for the Schenectady Day Nursery (1912); St. Andrew's Mission Church, Scotia (1915-16); the McClellan Hospital in Cambridge, NY (1918-19); an addition to the Mohawk Bank, in the Stockade (1924); and Union College gate (ca. 1925).

As the house was being finished, Jeffers sold the "land with buildings" to Lazarus Rubenstein, formerly a jeweler but by then a real estate investor. He was born in 1874 to Polish immigrant parents in Syracuse where his father, Rufus, was a retail grocer. Twenty years later he was listed in the Schenectady city directory as a jeweler, apparently having spent some time in New York City. By 1906 he was engaged in real estate. Within a week of purchasing the house at 15 Morris Avenue, he flipped it to local lawyer Samuel Levy, who six months later transferred title to Lily S. Carl, wife of Charles W. Carl, president of the Carl dry goods company.¹⁵



Fig. 13: Morris Ave. streetscape, westerly side from south.



Fig.14: Morris Ave. streetscape, westerly side from north.

ENDNOTES

¹ This article is based on research done in 2017 to provide documentation for the designation of a local historic district. All photographs by John Ham.

² Carolyn S. Loeb, *Entrepreneurial Vernacular: Developers' Subdivisions in the 1920s* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

³ Schenectady County Deeds (SCD) 210:304, 20 Mar. 1912.

⁴ Schenectady NY, City Archives, NYS Building Inventory Form for 2 Morris Ave., 2000.

⁵ SCD 190:128, 3 June 1909. Alfred E. Gregg's name was added to the deed in 1913 (224:133 & 135).

⁶ T. Robins Brown, "Albert W. Fuller," in Diana S. Waite, ed., *Architects in Albany* (Historic Albany Foundation, 2009), 34-36.

⁷ SCD 223:2, 1 May 1913.

⁸ SCD 194:585.

⁹ SCD 190:507; SCD 233:75, 1 April 1914.

¹⁰ Schenectady NY, City Archives, NYS Building Inventory Form for 9 Morris Ave., 2000.

¹¹ SCD 223:204, 8 May 1913.

¹² SCD 216:129, 12 Sept. 1912.

¹³ SCD 221:103, 21 Apr. 1913.

¹⁴ SCD 194:153, 25 Feb. 1910 and 194:233, 25 Mar. 1910. The deeds covered lot 14 and part of lot 15 of the Case Plot.

¹⁵ SCD 199:122, 17 Oct. 1910; SCD 206:38, 13 Apr. 1911.

The Petrus & Cathariena Hoffman House in Tivoli *Another piece of the puzzle falls into place...*

by Donna M. Brown



In 2003 Neil Larson and Jill Fisher researched and wrote a report on the history of our house, the Petrus & Cathariena Hoffman House. We had met Neil several years earlier when he drove up our driveway, looking for another address. On that occasion, Neil glanced at our house and asked if that was an old stone house. You know that special way we all say “old.”

We had bought the house in 1980. It was a dump, literally. We took 19 pickup truck loads of junk to the local dump -- that was back when dumps still existed. Over time we worked on critical systems, such as redoing the kitchen and bathroom. Much more detail is available in the HVVA

newsletter for October-December 2014 at <http://hmvarch.org/news/2014-10-11-12-news.pdf>

So, when Neil asked if it was old, we said, yes, it was. Neil was determining the eastern boundary for the Hudson River National Historic Landmark District preparing for its official designation. Until that moment, no one was aware of its existence, disguised as it was by later additions. As it happens, the house was recorded in HABS, but it was marked NV (not visited). He gave us his card and in 2003, frustrated with our inability to research the house ourselves, we gave him a call.

In their report on our house, Larson/Fisher wrote:

There will probably always be ambiguity as to the identity of the builder and first occupant of the stone house, as the public records are inconclusive. Based on the fact that Jannetje Hoffman Grier, the only child of Petrus Hoffman and daughter-in-law of Martinus Hoffman by marriage to his son Zachariah, was owner of the property in 1800, there are three reasonable scenarios to consider:

1. The house was already present when Zachariah and Jannetje Hoffman set up a household there after their marriage in 1772. The property descended to Zachariah from his father Martinus Hoffman. In this scenario the house is estimated to have been constructed 1721-1750; or
2. The house was built by Petrus Hoffman around 1752 and inherited by his daughter Jannetje; or
3. The house was built by Zachariah Hoffman about 1772 when he and Jannetje were married."

The house could have been built as early as 1720, given the jambless fireplaces and basement kitchen, and those features also argue the unlikelihood of the house being built in the late 1700s. It seemed that the second scenario was most plausible, but we could not prove it. Petrus Hoffman had inherited land upon the death of his father, Nicolaes, in 1750, and he married Catharina Van Alstyne shortly after; their daughter, Jannetje, was baptized January 23, 1753. Such circumstances could well have triggered the construction of the stone house in the local Dutch style of that time.

In 2020, under the sponsorship of Historic Red Hook, we applied for a Pomeroy Foundation grant for a historical marker for our house, and were turned down, because we couldn't prove a ca.1750 construction date. Pomeroy suggested that we use dendrochronology to substantiate the date. In 2022, almost 20 years after the Larson/Fisher study, we engaged William J. Callahan and Dr. Edward R. Cook to undertake a dendrochronological analysis of the beams in our house to help confirm which scenario was valid.

After spending a day with Bill and Ed, we began to understand something of the science behind dendrochronology. We all learned in grade school that counting the rings tells you how old a tree is, but how could the number of rings identify the year it was cut? As we came to understand, the pattern of the width of annual tree rings corresponds to annual climate variations, establishing a pattern of dry seasons and wet seasons. Comparing wood cores to known profiles allows for precise dating of when the tree was growing. And having the bark edge in the sample identifies when the tree was cut.

Bill and Ed have been doing dendrochronology analysis together for 35 years and have built up "master chronologies" — profiles of trees of different species from different regions. The wood samples collected from the Petrus Hoffman House were processed in Dr. Cook's Tree-Ring Laboratory at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University, following well-established dendrochronological methods. The core samples were carefully glued onto grooved mounts and were sanded to a high polish to reveal the annual tree rings clearly. The rings widths were measured under a microscope to a precision of ± 0.001 mm. The cross-dating of the obtained measurements utilized a revised and modernized COFECHA computer program, which employs a sliding correlation to identify probable cross-dates between tree-ring series. Experience has shown them that for trees growing in the northeastern United States, this method of cross-dating is greatly superior to the traditional techniques. It is also very similar to a highly successful program employed by Irish dendrochronologists to cross-date European tree-ring series.

As explained in the report, COFECHA is used to first establish internal, or relative, cross-dating amongst the individual timbers from the site itself. This step is critically important because it locks in the three relative positions of the timbers to each other and indicates whether or not the dates of those specimens with outer bark rings are consistent. Subsequently, one or more internally cross-dated series are compiled from the individual site samples, and these are compared in turn with independently established tree-ring master chronologies compiled from living trees and dated historical tree-ring material. All of the regional "master chronologies" are based on completely independent tree-ring samples. During study of our

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house, species specific, regional composite master chronologies from living trees and historic structures from Central New York state and other near-lying regions were referenced primarily.

Bill and Ed sampled all seven cellar beams, all white oak, and got good bark edges from four. Two were cut the winter of 1751/52, numbers 5 and 6, and are at the south end of the basement. Two were cut the winter of 1752/53, numbers 1 and 4, and are in the north end. Was the house built in multiple sections over multiple seasons? Looking at the basement, there is no indication of the house being built in more than one stage, although it may have taken that long to construct it.

Consulted on that question, Neil said not to make much of the beams being cut a year or so apart, that there are any number of plausible explanations. Perhaps, he said, the builder got them from two different sources or had been stockpiling them. We don't know how the supply chain worked. The one account book known to exist for building a stone house (one room) in 1751 has payments going to two men in the previous year for "rough cutting" and "squaring" beams. They were paid for their time doing the work. not by the beam or the foot, suggesting that Bevier owned the wood. Later in 1751 they would go out and rough cut wood for rafters and door cases; the door cases would not be squared until the carpenter arrived in May 1751. Workers didn't begin digging the cellar hole until six months after working on the beams.¹

So, we can now say with some certainty that scenario two is confirmed, that the house was built ca. 1753. Petrus died August 15, 1754, at the age of 27. Was it a construction accident that killed him at such a young age? We'll probably never know.

The full dendrochronology report can be found at <http://hmvarch.org/dendro/ny-dutchess-petrushoffman-tivoli-dendro.pdf>.

ENDNOTE

¹ Neil Larson, "Building a Stone House in Ulster County, New York, in 1751," *HMVA Newsletter*, Vol.15 Nos.4-6 (April-June 2011), 5-11.

SAVE THE DATE:

HMVA Annual Meeting and Elections

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