

1811 Robert Jenkins House

The Robert Jenkins House is a significant example of Federal style architecture amid a streetscape of 18th and 19th century buildings. It is owned and maintained by the Hendrick Hudson Chapter of the DAR.



In 1783, whalers from Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard and Providence, left their homes to start a new settlement. A group of 30 were named to a committee called the Proprietors. Among their goals was to find a suitable settlement. They decided on Claverack Landing, and founded the City of Hudson. The purchase was made in the name of Thomas Jenkins and deeded by him to the Proprietors. Among the first families to arrive were those of Thomas Jenkins and his brother, Seth. By the spring of 1784, the rest of the proprietors arrived with their families. Seth Jenkins become Hudson's first mayor. He died in 1793 and the property went to his five children. Seth Jr. built his home on the property in 1795. In 1811 his brother Robert, the third and fifth Mayor of Hudson, built this house. The architect and builder remain unknown.

Robert Jenkins was born in Nantucket and was 11 years old when he came to Hudson with his family. He married Kitty Dayton and they had a daughter, Caroline. In 1819, while on a sloop en route from New York to Hudson, Robert was knocked overboard and died. He was 47 years old. His daughter Caroline married Dr. Samuel P. White in 1825. They moved to New York City in 1834, a year after their daughter Frances was born.

It is believed that Caroline's mother Kitty probably left Hudson around that time as well. It is possible that the house was rented as there is no firm record of any other family living there. In 1851 Isaac F. Bragg had a boarding school there. The Rev. Elbridge Bradbury had a school there in 1853. Names of those believed to be his students, including that of his son, are written on the attic wall. The DAR has a copy of the younger Bradbury's certificate of graduation from this school.

The house remained in the possession of the Jenkins family until 1858, four years after the death of Kitty Jenkins. Kitty's executors sold the house to Anson and Louisa Parsons, who lived there until 1862, when they sold it to George and Rosetta Freeborne. The next owner, Judge John Cadman, purchased the house in 1879.

In 1855 Robert Jenkins' granddaughter Frances married New York City businessman Marcellus Hartley, who was involved with Remington Arms, Union Metallic Co. and Washington Trust Co., and an arms dealer for the Union during the Civil War. In 1890 the DAR was formed in Washington DC, and Frances was a charter member. In 1899

Frances purchased the house where she had been born as a Chapter House for the newly formed Hendrick Hudson DAR.

After purchasing the house, Mrs. Hartley had it renovated by architect Michael O'Connor. The only changes to the outside front of the house were the addition of two wrought iron lamps at the entrance, a marble porch and shutters. A lighted clocktower atop the house never materialized, nor did three dormer windows on the third floor and a balustrade to replace the Palladian window.

Inside, it appears that rooms were enlarged, and bathrooms installed, although the plans for the 1900 renovation are missing. We speculate that the walls of the center hall were narrowed to make the two front rooms larger. In doing so, the sidelights on the front door were blocked, although the sidelights on the Seth Jenkins House next door are also blocked. At the back of the house, one can see where windows were bricked in as changes were made in the room arrangement.

The staircase with its cherry railing remains one of the beauties of the structure. It is unclear if this is its original location, although the staircase on the Seth Jenkins House is also in the back. But there are four chimneys on the roof, and only fireplaces for the front chimneys are evident. The two back fireplaces would have been where the staircase and kitchen/bathroom are.

Over the stair landing Mrs. Hartley installed a stunning stained glass window with the DAR insignia. The window commemorates "Mary and I Go To Europe," Dr. H. Lyle Smith's literary work based on his and his wife's trip abroad, whose proceeds were the foundation of the chapter's building fund.

A theater called Hendrick Hudson Hall was added to the back of the house during the 1900 renovations. Two entrances from the foyer, with handsome stained glass transoms, made access easy. The auditorium was fitted with all the requirements of a modern opera house: velvet chairs, stage, scenery, curtains, etc., and was heated by steam and lighted by electricity and gas. By 1967 the theater had fallen into disrepair and a decision was made to raze it.

Mrs. Hartley formally transferred the property to the Hendrick Hudson DAR in 1900 with a gala ceremony, with the stipulation that the house be used as a library and museum for the people of Hudson. The Hudson Area Association Library eventually took over as the leading lending authority in the city, but the library continues to house an extensive collection of Columbia County historical and genealogical records. The Chapter is responsible for the maintenance and preservation of the Robert Jenkins House. Only 18 of the 126 chapters in New York State own historic properties.

The Chapter would like your opinion on the following:

- There is a 2-foot section of 8X10 purlin that was removed at some time, resulting in settling of the southwest corner of the house. We don't know when that happened. Perhaps in 2006 when the back roof was redone, or in 1900 when the major renovation was done, with a theater added out the back. How should it be repaired? Everything put back to plumb? Or stabilized and monitored?
- Where do you think the staircase was originally? Where it is now, or in the center hall?
- What was the original footprint of the House? Just the hall and two front rooms? Or the dining room too, minus the semi-circle and fireplace which appear to have been added in 1900?
- When we did façade work recently, we took off the louvered shutters and decided to leave them off. We thought the House looked better. There are interior shutters. Do you think the House would have had exterior shutters (maybe paneled) originally or not?

Other comments?