



The FERRYMAN

Become a member of
The Dobbs Ferry Historical Society.
Join the exciting exploration of local history.
A membership form is on the back page.

VOLUME XI, No. 1

DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
153 Main Street, Dobbs Ferry, New York 10522

JANUARY 1992

CLARA MEAD LEAVES 12 ELM STREET TO SOCIETY



Exterior view of property bequeathed to Society

Clara Mead, a resident of Dobbs Ferry for more than 68 years, has bequeathed her home at 12 Elm Street to the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society. Miss Mead, a contributing member of the Society, died on September 19, 1991 at the age of 85.

Miss Mead's will stipulates that the house "shall be preserved and be used for historic exhibit and preservation purposes." In addition, Miss Mead bequeathed \$10,000 to the Society.

Members of the Society and its Board of Trustees enthusiastically welcomed the bequest. The Board formally accepted it on December 11. Candace Shuluk, President, said the Society hopes to establish part of the \$10,000 bequest as the start of an endowment whose income would be used to maintain the three-story, 14-room house.

The handsome, yellow clapboard residence, with its graceful first floor and second floor verandas, stands on about an acre of tree-shaded lawn between

Broadway (Route. 9) and Main Street. Mrs. Shuluk said that, with Board approval, it would house most of the Historical Society's constantly expanding collections.

Now in the basement of the library, these include historical artifacts, oral history tapes, photographs, slides, maps, books, brochures and other publications, as well as certain newspapers and the *Dobbs Ferry Register*, an invaluable historic resource which the Society has microfilmed from its beginnings in the 1880s up to 1970, the year when it ceased publication.

The Society plans to continue to make its collections accessible to the public in its new home for local history research. If enough money can be raised for a repair and maintenance fund to strengthen the house for public uses, it can also be used for public programs sponsored by the Society.

--continued on page 2

MEAD HOME LEFT TO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

(continued from page 1)

Miss Mead attended Masters School in Dobbs Ferry and graduated from Wellesley College in 1926. She was interested in local history, belonged to the South Presbyterian Church and was an active member of the Dobbs Ferry Woman's Club.

Her father, Herbert Mead, ran the Indiana Mahogany Company, located at the time in Long Island City. Some of the interior woodwork of the house is mahogany.

Thornton Tells of Bequest

Jock Thornton, co-executor of the estate, announced the bequest to the Society's 18-member Board of Trustees at an organizing Board meeting on October 9, shortly after the Board elected its new officers for 1991-1992. Title to Miss Mead's house may pass to the Society before February, 1992.

The Board elected Mrs. Shuluk president, Henry Walter vice-president, William M. Tackett treasurer and Gail Benson secretary. Mrs. Shuluk immediately appointed the trustees as chairpersons and members of various committees, including an ad hoc "house committee".

CHORES GALORE FOR SOCIETY

Being a homeowner requires efforts to solve all kinds of problems. The Ad-Hoc House Committee of the Historical Society is learning this truism with almost painful quickness. With the Society unexpectedly learning in October that it had been named heir of Mead House, the House Committee has already had separate structural and architectural inspections made of the house by five experts who donated their time and recommendations.

Still to be done are investigations of the needs and costs of insurance, security and utilities; researching local building codes that apply to a residence whose use is being changed from private to public purposes; establishing the priorities of necessary repairs; determining future routine maintenance schedules and their costs; working with the executors, when required, to settle the Mead estate; recommending to the Board of Trustees specific uses of various parts of the house; and developing and implementing a plan to set up an endowment fund to meet all the costs of owning and running the house.

That's for starters. The future looks very busy for the Society and its House Committee. Volunteers are needed to share the workload.

-- Barbara Pearce



Warm, hospitable front parlor of Mead House

ISSUE EDITOR - Henry Walter

HOUSE PHOTOS - Bill Blanck

The Society's office hours in the library basement, 153 Main St:
Mondays and Tuesdays, 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Thursdays, 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.; and by appointment.
At other times, call 693-7766
and leave a message on the answering machine.

MEAD HOUSE, BUILT IN 1850s, CHANGED OVER 140 YEARS

Mead House reveals many layers of architectural and family history.

The clapboard, "vernacular" Village residence at 12 Elm Street was built by an unknown architect in the 1850s -- just after the Hudson River Railroad came to Dobbs Ferry, but well before the Village was incorporated in 1873.

There were far fewer homes then in Dobbs Ferry than now. But you could find them dotted along Broadway (then the Albany Post Road), or, like this one, between Broadway and the Croton Aqueduct. Along Main Street today, occasional, distinctive mansard roofs indicate an architectural style which houses like 12 Elm Street were just introducing to the river towns at mid-century.

The "bracketed" "Hudson River Style" of architecture is foretold in this house. Grandeur estates of the same period, like Ingelside (1854) on Broadway at St. Christopher's School, expressed the castle-like Gothic preference of celebrated regional architects like A. J. Davis.

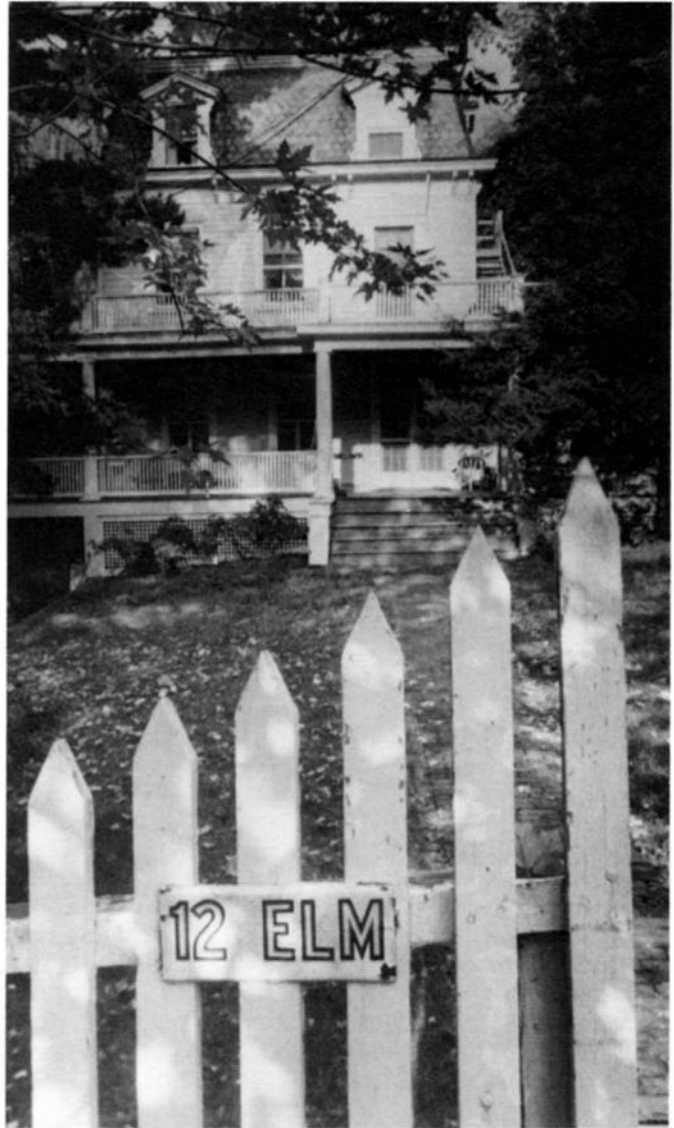
At 12 Elm Street, paired brackets peer out from under the projecting gable roof dormers, themselves decorated with wooden scroll brackets. Small, "progressive" architectural detailing appears on the Mead House -- at the back door overhangs and in the beaded trim and window design. Still, it is clear that the house has changed over time to serve the changing needs of the two families who occupied it for most of its existence: the Wilseas (for more than half a century) and the Meads (for almost three quarters of a century).

Captain Abram O. Wilsea was a third generation Dobbs Ferry resident. His grandfather, Daniel, died in 1832 and is buried in the White Church Cemetery.

Captain Wilsea was a well-known merchant in the Village between 1846 and 1862 when he ran the freight business he inherited from his father, Frederick. His sloop, "Diamond," provided a name for the Masonic Lodge (Diamond No. 555) chartered here June 18, 1865 -- with Captain Wilsea as its first Master.

Probably by the time A. O. Wilsea began his 17-year tenure as Greenburgh Supervisor (1864-1881), he, his wife and four children had already moved into the house at 12 Elm Street. The *Dobbs Ferry Register* reported the wedding of Wilsea's youngest daughter "Frankie" (Francis [sic] Eldorado Wilsea) at the Elm Street house in June of 1894. Main Street caterer Desperrins served dinner to 60 guests at the Captain's house that summer evening.

Herbert and Clara Camp Mead and their young daughters, Clara and Theodora, moved to 12 Elm Street in 1917. Once again a young family settled in the center of Dobbs Ferry for a long span. As years passed, they watched the building of Village Hall to their west and saw a village theater established down at the corner of Elm and Main.



For Clara Mead the house was close to many institutions she would come to know well: South Presbyterian Church, The Masters School and the Dobbs Ferry Woman's Club.

Her father, Herbert Mead, Jr., ran the Indiana Mahogany Company in Long Island City. As the Mead girls grew up, their home was improved and altered with graceful wood doorways and colonial revival fireplaces. One small room was completely paneled in mahogany.

For almost 75 years, Clara Mead's bedroom window provided her with an overview of Main Street and its daily life and bustle, as well as a longer and broader view of the majestic Hudson River. Clara saw a river that was no longer sloop-filled with the passing of Captain Wilsea's time, but rich in the continuing history of Dobbs Ferry, the other river towns and Westchester County -- a history which the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society hopes to "frame" in the windows of 12 Elm Street.

-- Tema Harnik

CLARA MEAD, "A GRACIOUS LADY OF THE OLD SCHOOL"

By all accounts, Clara Mead was "a lady."

"She was a lady in the fine sense of the word," says Peter Oberdorf, an attorney whose parents were friends of the Meads. "She was proper and dignified."

"She was always interested in learning your opinions and feelings," adds his wife, Mary, a teacher of handicapped children who was a tenant in the Mead House for four years. "She was modest and proper, yet unaffected."

Dr. Mae Pepper, chair of the nursing department at Mercy College and a next-door neighbor, calls Clara Mead "a grand, sophisticated, well-educated person. She always dressed as though she were going out to business every day. She was an elegant lady, an amazing lady."

Carol Lofstedt, recently retired professor of nursing at Bronx Community College and also a next-door neighbor, says of Miss Mead, "She was a lady, very refined, very cultured, generous with her time for the (Dobbs Ferry) Woman's Club, a fun person, always interesting, well read."

Anne Zincke, a psychotherapist who lives on Oak Street behind the Elm Street Mead House, calls her, "a nice woman, a lady, the last representative of a way of life, a nice way of life, unspoiled. She was strong, staunchly independent, had strong opinions about politics, was well informed about school budgets and where taxes went. Yet, she was a gracious woman."

Lucy Voulgaris, a retired journalist and a close neighbor on Oak Street next-door to Ms. Zincke, says, "Clara Mead was unique in Dobbs Ferry, being of the 'old school,' so principled, absolutely, unvaryingly gracious, even the night before she died. She treated everyone with equal respect, from her closest friends to the kid who'd rake her leaves. She had a great sense of family and family history and the place her family held in the history of Westchester."

Judy Holzer, Dobbs Ferry Village Historian, conducted a phone interview of Miss Mead last summer while doing research into the Needlework Guild of America, of which Miss Mead's mother, Clara Camp Mead, was an active member. Ms. Holzer recalls, "She was very helpful in my research. She was quite a lady, very warm, friendly, unpretentious and chatty."

Miss Mead agreed to expand on her memories of Dobbs Ferry at a later date and to allow herself to be recorded by Ms. Holzer on oral history tapes. Sadly, the oral history interview never took place. She died

before the interview date could be set.

Whoever, of whatever stripe, knew Clara Mead, and is asked about her, invariably uses the word, "lady," -- a remarkable consensus. But, in the recollections of those who knew her, there was much more to Clara Mead, many more remembrances of a woman who was, at the same time, complex and simple, elegant and plain, warm and distant, open and reserved, much more than can be written about in this article, much more that will be written in future issues of *The Ferryman*.

Clara Mead's four immediate neighbors have different backgrounds and travel in different circles. A professor, a psychotherapist, a journalist,

and a higher education administrator, they probably would not have become involved with each other, had not Miss Mead brought them together.

"We're all different," notes Ms. Zincke. "The one thing we had in common, especially in the last few years of her life, was Clara Mead. Clara kept us together as a little neighborhood."

As she became more fragile because of her illness, one neighbor did her shopping, another performed chores around the house, another took her back and forth from the hospital for outpatient treatment. One is now sorting through Miss Mead's papers, letters and records (at her re-

quest) to determine what should be left for her distant cousins as purely family matters and what the Dobbs Ferry and Westchester Historical Societies might be given to add to and illuminate the histories of Dobbs Ferry and Westchester.

And yet, complementing her interest in the past and in preserving it, Clara Mead was just as interested in the present. According to Peter Oberdorf, she read the *New York Times* every day. "Whenever I stopped by in recent years," he says, "she had questions for me about what was happening at the time, questions that she had clearly saved up for me, to learn my opinions about what interested her."

Indeed, it was Anne Zincke's recollection that Miss Mead read the *New York Times* "every day from cover to cover" and also never failed to do the crossword puzzle.

Mary Oberdorf recalls that Clara Mead, unlike some of her contemporaries, never complained about the oncoming, new generations and that "she was wonderful with young people."

--Henry Walter



Young Clara Mead

REPAIR AND MAINTENANCE ENDOWMENT FUND NEEDED

One of the tasks of the Historical Society's Board of Trustees is to develop a repair schedule and a schedule for routine maintenance.

Money will be needed to implement both agendas. Proposals are being developed for a series of fund-raisers to pay for specific projects. It is clear to some Board members that a permanent endowment fund will be needed.

Some steps have already been taken to find out what repairs are needed in the near future and in what order they should be made. Candace Shuluk, Society president, asked a group of experts to inspect the house on a *pro bono* basis and provide the Society with informal findings and recommendations.

Five separate inspections were made of the house in October and November. The experts were: Lewis L. Zickel, a civil and structural engineer; Patrick Steinschneider, an architect and developer; Robert Burton, an architect and architectural historian; Joseph Trapani, an architect and real estate broker; and Stephen Tilly, an architect.

They approached the house from different backgrounds, expressed varied viewpoints, held differing opinions and proposed alternative priorities. But they all agreed on one point: the house, while needing repairs, was not in a dangerous condition and could continue to be used as a private residence with a minimum of repairs.

Four of them, however, said that varying amounts of repairs were needed to transform the house from residential to public use, while one would have no qualms about throwing a hypothetical "cocktail party for 100 people in the house next week."

According to the experts, there are many conditions that need correction. Among them:

- Some bricks and mortar in the basement are crumbly or powdering and should be repointed or raked out and consolidated with concrete;
- At least two support columns in the basement need to be replaced or buttressed;
- Beams under the living room are "too slender" for a "public use" building and should be supplemented by a new, thick, heavy beam supporting the entire length of the living room;
- Three large trees are too close to the house and should be cut down to prevent further damage by tree roots of underground portions of the house.

Meanwhile, the House Committee has instructed some of its members to obtain estimates of what it would cost to insure the house, install a security system and continue using gas and electricity (the house is heated by gas).

The Board of Trustees passed a resolution at its November meeting, thanking Messrs. Zickel, Steinschneider, Burton, Trapani and Tilly for contributing their time, expertise and recommendations.

Mrs. Shuluk has written to the experts, informing them of the Board's resolution of acknowledgement and thanks.

-- Henry Walter



MEMBERS GRATEFUL FOR BEQUEST

The first reaction of Society members to Clara Mead's bequest was overwhelming gratitude for a generous and heartfelt gift. Many viewed it as a validation of the role of the Society. They were pleased by Miss Mead's recognition of the importance of preserving the history and fabric of Dobbs Ferry and her trust in the Society as the most appropriate agency to further those aims.

There were numerous suggestions on how the property could be used to preserve, interpret and focus awareness on our community's history and the multiple lessons it teaches: housing the Society's offices, providing a more ample and publicly accessible home for the Society's research archives and, in keeping with Miss Mead's express wishes, creating exhibits and programs that push the importance of preserving our Village's handsome older structures.

Among the more innovative house-specific programs suggested is that of using the Society's restoration of 12 Elm Street as the basis for on-going public classes and workshops to help Village residents learn about the aesthetic and financial rewards of practicing careful, preservation-oriented repairs and renovations to their own homes.

In addition to the wealth of ideas for the potential use of the property, the bequest generated a wide range of questions:

What is the condition of the house? What are the immediate steps that need to be taken? How much will it cost? What about taxes? insurance? security? furnishings? Where's the money coming from?

Perhaps the most succinct response to the bequest came from the member who commented that 12 Elm Street was a sort of "challenge grant" whose requirements would be arduous, but whose rewards in realization would have a profound effect on the vitality of the Society and the fabric of the Village.

-- Rusty Russell

IF YOU ARE NOT A MEMBER, PLEASE USE THIS COUPON TO JOIN US!

Dobbs Ferry Historical Society

Name _____
 Address _____
 Town _____ Zip _____
 Phone(day) _____ (eve.) _____

MEMBERSHIP		<input type="checkbox"/> New	<input type="checkbox"/> Renew
<input type="checkbox"/> Patron.			\$100
<input type="checkbox"/> Supporting.....			\$50
<input type="checkbox"/> Business/Professional. . .			\$30 & \$50
<input type="checkbox"/> Contributing.....			\$25
<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining.....			\$18
<input type="checkbox"/> Family.....			\$12
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual Adult.....			\$8
<input type="checkbox"/> Student/Limited income..			\$3
<input type="checkbox"/> Residents over 80			Honorary

Please make check payable to and mail to:
 DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
 153 Main Street (Library Building)
 Dobbs Ferry, New York 10522
 Tel. (914) 693-7766 (24-hr. answering)

Membership contribution	\$ _____
Cemetery Preservation Project contribution	\$ _____
Newspaper Microfilming Project contribution	\$ _____
TOTAL enclosed (TAX DEDUCTIBLE)	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> My employer's matching contributions form is enclosed.	

For office use							
Date paid	Date received	<input type="checkbox"/> New <input type="checkbox"/> Renew	Last prior	Date entered	By	Date deposited	<input type="checkbox"/> Cash <input type="checkbox"/> Check # _____

WANTED: INFORMATION ABOUT CLARA MEAD

If you happen to have home movies of Clara Mead, or photographs, or audio tapes, or video tapes, the Society would like to see them and make copies of them for its archives. We also want to collect any letters you might have received from Miss Mead and other records, including newspaper clippings, you might have about her. If you have remembrances and favorite stories about Miss Mead, write them down and send them to the Historical Society. Information is skimpy at this time about her childhood and parents, and her activities in the Village when she was a young woman. If you have such information, the Society would greatly appreciate hearing from you.



Recent photo of Miss Mead

DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

153 Main Street (Library Building)
 Dobbs Ferry, New York 10522

Non Profit Org.
 U.S. Postage
 PAID
 Dobbs Ferry, NY
 Permit No. 15

Resident
 Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522