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DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
12 Elm Street, Dobbs Ferry, New York 10522

SEPTEMBER 1997

Architect Stephen Tilly Will Describe Oceana Building Restoration at September 26th Annual Meeting

The ongoing historic restoration of the Oceana Building will be highlighted at the annual membership meeting of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society on Friday, Sept. 26, 1997.



Stephen Tilly

Stephen Tilly, the architect supervising the restoration of this 19th century Dobbs Ferry landmark, will describe what is happening at the northwest corner of Main and Chestnut Streets, where the building is now surrounded by scaffolding. Mr. Tilly, a friend and advisor of the Society, will also discuss the challenges and satisfactions of the restoration. From his office on Main Street, Mr. Tilly has worked on many private residences in Dobbs Ferry, as well as commercial structures such as the Washington Theatre (also known as the Dobbs Ferry Playhouse), 59 Main Street (formerly Jimmy's Restaurant), and local government buildings such as the library, the ambulance building, the Ogden Firehouse and, currently, the old Embassy Club.

The Oceana Building was erected in the late 1890s on a parcel that was originally part of Vanbrugh Livingston's farm in the 1830s. At that time that section of Dobbs Ferry was called Livingston Landing. The land parcel, the Oceana Building and its predecessor structures had a checkered history until just after World War II, when it was acquired by Philip F. Cohen. (See separate article on that history.)

Mr. Cohen is the founder of the Oceana Group of publishing companies and, for more than a half century, has acted as publisher/printer/bookseller of legal reference works. In all that time, he and his colleagues have worked out of the Oceana Building serving legal libraries throughout the United States and abroad.

The business part of the annual meeting will begin promptly at 8:00 p.m. in the Parish Hall of Our Lady of Pompeii Church, at Palisade and Chestnut Streets, just one

block down the hill from the front of the Oceana Building.

This year emergency repairs and maintenance to the Mead House cost the Society \$23,686. To replenish the Society's capital reserve funds, additional financial support from members and the community is being sought. (See separate article on page 6 for details of the emergencies.)

Trustee Elections

Members will elect ten trustees -- six incumbents for new three-year terms ending September 30, 2000; three trustees for two-year terms ending September 30, 1999 to fill vacancies; and one trustee for a one-year term ending September 30, 1998 to fill a vacancy.

To be eligible to vote, a person must be a member in good standing, that is, he or she must have paid the dues for this current membership year ending September 30.

The Nominating Committee has offered the following slate for three-year terms: Bill Blanck, Muriel Brown, Charlotte and Hugh Frankenthaler, Anne Graham and Hank Walter. The following have been nominated for two-year terms: Gabriele Grunebaum, Dr. Cecil Jack, and Dr. James McCarthy. Jock Thronton, Esq., has been nominated for a one-year term.

The Board of Trustees consists of 18 members. When vacancies occur during the year, the Board itself usually fills them, but the appointed trustees must stand for election by the Society's members at the next annual meeting.

This past year, two trustees died -- Dr. Mae Pepper, who was also the Society's Secretary and Membership Chair, and Ray Willsea, who worked on a number of committees. Three trustees resigned -- Frances Tahnee Neill, Mary Walter, and Brian Kates. Dr. Pepper was replaced on the Board by Ms. Graham; Mr. Willsea by Ms. Grunebaum; Mrs. Neill by Dr. Jack; Mrs. Walter by Dr. McCarthy; and Mr. Kates by Mr. Thornton.

Members will also elect three non-trustees to one-year terms to serve on the Nominating Committee for next year. Those nominated are: Faye Delmerico, Peg Coffey, and Bradley Bolke.

History of Oceana Building and its Land

Part I

Dobbs Ferry's Oceana Building, stretching along Chestnut Street for the full block between Main and Palisades Streets, has been the home of the Oceana Group of publishing companies for the past half century. Owned by the Group's founder, Philip F. Cohen, the building was constructed by the Lawrence brothers of Dobbs Ferry, Nathaniel and John W., about a century ago as a grain elevator and mill.



Oceana Building, then the Lawrence Building, at the turn of the Century

But the history of the land supporting the building goes back, of course, to the various native American tribes that inhabited the Dobbs Ferry area for at least 2,000 years and enjoyed the lush oyster beds in the magnificent river a few hundred yards down the hill.

In colonial times, the parcel at what is now Main and Chestnut Streets became part of the vast holdings of Frederick Phillipse, stretching for many miles up and down the river. Phillipse, a Tory, was stripped of his land after the Revolutionary War by the leaders of the new nation and the land was sold. The Livingston family was one of the beneficiaries.

In June, 1883, a surveyor named George W. Cartwright drew up a map of the area rising up the hill from Willow Point, from which the William Dobbs family had operated a ferry service across the river since 1724. The terminal on the other side of the river was sometimes called "West Dobbs Ferry" and sometimes "Snedden's Landing" (named after the in-laws of the Dobbsses).

The land parcel along Chestnut Street between Main Street, then called "High Street", and Palisades Street, originally called "First Street", was designated "Lot number 25" on the Cartwright map. It was "part of the northwest corner" of the Livingston farm.

On July 13, 1883, about a month after the Cartwright map was drawn (later filed with the Westchester Register's Office, now the County Clerk's Office), Vanbrugh Livingston and his wife, Harriet, sold "Lot number 25" to Daniel and Ann B. Conklin, of New York City, for \$50 "in hand paid."

No Liquor on Premises

Two conditions binding the buyers were expressed in the deed: neither the Conklins nor their "heirs or assigns . . . or tenants" could "sell or permit to be sold on any part of the lands and premises . . . any strong or spirituous liquors under any pretence whatsoever"; and the Conklins had to "erect and keep in repair the line fences" between the parcel and the rest of the Livingston farm.

We found no letters or other documents stating what the Conklins (or their tenants, if there were any) did with, or built upon, the land. Subsequent deeds mention "appurtenances," but do not describe them. But 22 years later, on April 2, 1855, the Conklins, still described in a new deed of sale as being "of the City and County of New York," sold the property to a George Schmidt, of the Town of Greenburgh, for \$900.

We do not know who George Schmidt was, what he did with the property, how long he owned it, or to whom he sold it.

The next transaction we found is dated 33 years later: on June 29, 1888, Joseph H. and Henrietta Lester, Jr., "of the City of Brooklyn," sold the parcel to Charles G. Storms, of Dobbs Ferry, for \$10,000 in "lawful money of the United States." The parcel was described as being 120 feet by 40 feet and "being the same premises that was conveyed to George Schmidt by Daniel Conklin" on April 5, 1855, and being "Lot number 25" on Cartwright's map, which is now designated as "Map No. 304 . . . now on file in [Westchester's] Register's Office."

From Storms to Lawrence

Charles and Emma Storms then sold the property six years later to Nathaniel and John W. Lawrence on March 31, 1893 for \$5,000. The deed mentions both the Conklin-Schmidt and Lester-Storms transactions, but leaves to one's speculations how Schmidt relinquished title and Lester acquired it.

The 50% drop in the parcel's value undoubtedly had its roots in the Panic of 1893, which triggered a four-year economic depression. The panic began with a drain of gold from the United States caused by the effects of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, of British investors unloading American securities, of the stock market crash of June 27, 1893,

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Oceana Building -- continued from page 2

collapse of a boom expansion of railroad construction, dissipation of a U.S. Treasury surplus through what has been described as "reckless pension legislation" and a run on banks throughout the country. By the end of 1893, 491 banks and more than 15,000 businesses went bankrupt, and before the end of the depression in 1897, nearly a third of the total railroad mileage was controlled by court-appointed receivers in bankruptcy proceedings.

Mass Unemployment

On March 25, 1894, "Coxey's Army" of jobless men began its march on Washington to seek relief from mass unemployment. Six days later, the Storms couple sold the parcel on Chestnut and High [later "Main"] Streets to the Lawrence brothers. Whether Coxey's Army had anything to do with the family's decision to sell is not known.

The N. Lawrence Co. began in the early 1870s as a grocery store elsewhere on Main Street. By the late 1890s, their business had grown to the point where they decided to construct a large new building on the property they had bought from Charles Storms in 1894.

The structure, now the Oceana Building undergoing an historic restoration under the supervision of architect Steve Tilly, was three stories high on Main Street and four stories high on Palisade Street (because the block-long Chestnut Street side of the building runs down a steep hill).

Wide Variety of Merchandise

The building was a grain elevator and mill. The brothers became wholesale and retail dealers in grain, flour, animal feed, hay and straw. They also sold agricultural implements, stable supplies, grass seed, "fine foreign and domestic groceries, choice table delicacies, hardware, crockery, wood and willow ware . . . a specialty being made of teas and coffees." The Lawrences were also the local sales agents for Pillsbury Flour.

An article in a 1902 issue of the *Dobbs Ferry Register* says of the brothers, after listing the products they had for sale, "All these are sold strictly on their merits at a price in accord with the lowest market rates. As they buy for cash in large quantities, thereby giving their customers the benefit of discounts, which enable them to quote the low prices they do. Messrs. Nathaniel and John W. Lawrence are gentlemen of energy and enterprise, who have built up a large patronage. They are held in high esteem by the community for their honesty and business-like methods in all their dealings."

The brothers held the property until after the end of World War I, when the building became a shoe factory.

-- Hank Walter

(research by Warren Gardner and Bill Blanck)

Next: *The Oceana Building after World War I*

Happy Buyers at Auction Brave Threatening Weather

On May 17 Dobbs Ferry shoppers with an eye for one-of-a-kind treasures had the opportunity to attend an auction at 12 Elm Street, home of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society. Chairs were set up on the lawn for prospective buyers while two professional auctioneers, Paul Marinucci of Bedford and Dorothy Knapp, presided from the porch. Each attendee was given a numbered paper plate which was to be raised to indicate entrance into the bidding.

Unfortunately, the skies threatened rain; nevertheless, the bidding was spirited for such diverse items as antique tools, artwork, linen, chinaware, a music stand, a wet bar. Friends of the Historical Society generously donated many of the items, while some had originally been in the possession of Miss Mead. The largest single piece was an antique French piano. The smallest may have been an antique log splitter. In any case, people went home apparently pleased with their acquisitions. Some were carrying plants on sale by the Garden Club. Some were still consuming hot dogs and soda generously provided by Ogden Engine Co. #1 of the Fire Department Volunteers.

Clock Turned Back 100 Years at Gala

Attendees at the Society's April 26th Gala were treated after dinner to an unusual history program, "Dobbs Ferry One Hundred Years Ago".

News stories selected from the pages of the Dobbs Ferry Register of 1897, 1898, and 1899 turned the clock back to the way it was.

The program was conceived, researched and coordinated by President Bill Blanck, Trustee Jean Fritz, and Gloria Blanck. Readers were Trustees Mavis Cain, Charlotte and Hugh Fränkenthaler, Warren Gardner, Terry Luckett and Fred Staats. Hank Walter provided an introduction and connective narration between different parts of the program. Pam Strachan gave musical punctuation to the readings at the piano and played an accompaniment for a sing-along of turn-of-the-century songs.

The president thanked the Elders of the South Presbyterian Church for once again permitting the Society to use Fellowship Hall for its gala.

Gift certificates were donated as raffle prizes by the following merchants: Crown Cleaners, Dan's Sport Shop, Flowers by Carole, John Richards Restaurant, Michael's Barber Shop, Reader's Hardware and Sam's Restaurant. Complete lunches for two were donated by Chart House and Eagle's Nest. Four bottles of wine were contributed by Rochambeau Wines and Liquors. And the Dobbs Ferry Woman's Club donated a planter, a bonbon dish, two porcelain decorative molds and three quilted pillows.

Public Health Was a Matter of Life and Death in Dobbs Ferry: The Early Days

-- by Warren M. Gardner

In the early nineteenth century, there were few "environmentalists" in Dobbs Ferry, or anywhere else in the world, for that matter, and there was little awareness of the need for public health measures. Land was to be used for men's financial and personal benefit, and in sparsely settled areas, the land and adjacent waters could easily absorb human and animal waste.

Before the railroad and the New York City aqueduct were built along the Hudson River, the Dobbs Ferry area was a sleepy river hamlet with pleasant orchards and farms. By the time it was legally incorporated as a village in 1873, a half century or so later, conditions had changed drastically. People had clustered their homes and businesses along Main Street and the denser humanity generated a host of problems there.

There were some water mains, but no integral water delivery system. At least one public well and several private wells also provided water. There was no sewage and drainage system, there were many outhouses and human waste entered the earth on private land or spilled over onto sidewalks and streets. At times, household garbage and commercial waste also found their way on to the streets. The stench of excrement, urine and rotting garbage was a commonplace along Main Street.

As a result of this clustering of people and their byproducts, and their lack of cleanliness, diseases like typhoid fever, cholera and smallpox began to spread. So did the awareness of the need for government intervention on behalf of the public health.

It was hardly as bad in Dobbs Ferry as the conditions in New York City, where a team of doctors conducted a block by block survey of health problems in 1869, four years after the Civil War had ended. The doctors' "Sanitary Report" shocked the city into public health and housing measures that became models for other large cities.

Village Gets Serious About Public Health

On a much smaller level, the Dobbs Ferry village government recognized that it, too, had to begin intervening into private matters on behalf of the public health. When the village was incorporated under an 1870 state law, that law provided for the annual election of a "president" (now called "mayor"), three trustees, a treasurer and a collector. The law also empowered the board of trustees to appoint a clerk, a street commissioner and such other officials as it deemed necessary.

One of these appointed officials was a Health Officer who, with the president, constituted a Board of Health of the village. The health board possessed the powers conferred by, and was subject to, the provisions of an 1850 state law entitled "An Act for the preservation of public health."

The meetings of the Board of Health in June, July and August 1882 were concerned with the preparation, printing and adoption of Dobbs Ferry's Sanitary Code and a Health Officer. This gentleman was Dr. Joseph Hasbrouck, with a \$10.00 a month stipend, sometimes declined.

This Sanitary Code consisted of 13 pages, and in addition to concerns with specific human contagious diseases, authorized the Health Officer to enter, at his discretion,

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During the Water Famine of 1910, potable water was brought in by horse and wagon for the residents. Note the gutter backing up into the street. While auto pollution wasn't a great problem early in the 20th Century, horse pollution was.

any lots, yards, or premises and to issue orders for correction of insanitary conditions.

Rules were established stating that any privy, vault, cesspool or reservoir into which drains from a privy, water-closet, stable or sink flowed, must be water tight and not be within 25 feet of a source (well, spring) of water used for drinking or cooking. Sewers were to be similarly tight and away from potable water.

No garbage or refuse from habitation, as well as food merchants' wares, were to be thrown or left on our streets. Cellars and outbuildings were to be free from all putrid and decaying animal or vegetable matter.

All food products for human consumption were to be fresh, wholesome, and safe and proper. No meat or fish from any animal which died from disease or accident was to be brought into the village for sale, display or charity.

No house offal, swill, garbage, refuse or the contents of any sink, privy, watercloset, urinal or cesspool was to be thrown or permitted to be thrown into streams and brooks or streets of the village.

Public Health an Early Federal Matter

Actually, the Federal government made health a public issue before the United States was a nation. Indeed, the issue was formalized as early as two years into the colonies' revolutionary war against England.

The U. S. Congress established the Public Health Service in July 1778, authorizing marine hospitals for the seamen in the U. S. Merchant Marine, and in time added treatment of Coast Guard and some other Federal employees. A part of this Public Health Service provided assistance and consultation to States and localities establishing uniformity in the registration of vital statistics and in the control of pollution of drinking water.

The vital statistics of Dobbs Ferry, deaths, by age and causes, marriages, and births had to be reported to the Dobbs Ferry Board of Health under the village's Sanitary Code and Orders and Regulations issued by the Board of Health. Also required was the reporting of any incidence of a contagious disease: cholera, yellow fever, typhus or typhoid fever, scarlet fever, diphtheria, smallpox, membranous croup, and measles. These diseases are listed in the code and regulations published August 18, 1882 and again in the code and regulations of February 24, 1899.

The required reports for the Board of Health were to be filed by any householder in whose dwelling there occurred one or more of these diseases. All physicians and other attendants upon a person so stricken were responsible for filing written notice and were to itemize residence, sex, age, disease, number of families living at the residence, how the disease was contracted (if known), the patient's or parents' occupation, and condition of premises.

The Board of Health could quarantine the premises and no clothing was to be removed from the quarantined premises.

All persons were forbidden to bring into the village

any person having these diseases. All persons infected with any contagious disease were not to enter Dobbs Ferry, nor was clothing of such people allowed to be brought into Dobbs Ferry.

There were to be no public funerals of those deceased, attendance at the rites was to be limited to as few as possible, and only if known to the survivors of the proscribed diseases. Gatherings after the funeral services were not to be held at the places of death.

The owners of premises where the diseases were found could be ordered by the Health Officer to be cleaned, ventilated, purified and disinfected. Clothing could be seized and burned and hopefully the family might receive some small payment.

Vital Statistics

Deaths from other causes were also reported to the Board of Health as described above. Undertakers were issued burial permits by the Health Officer and no human body could be legally buried in Dobbs Ferry or elsewhere without a permit.

Births were to be reported by parents or other persons present or assisting at a birth. A marriage was to be reported by the person performing the ceremony or by the groom. The required information included data as above, but in addition, births required the marital status of the parent(s).

The Board of Health sent these vital statistics to the New York State Board of Health at Albany, where they were, and still are, compiled as directed by the (Federal) Public Health Service in 1798.

Today Dobbs Ferry's report is sent to Albany by our "Recorder of Vital Statistics," Mr. Kenneth Graham, who is more widely known as the Deputy Village Clerk. Mr. Graham told *The Ferryman* that there have not been any births or communicable diseases reported for Dobbs Ferry in many years. He issues death certificates. Undertakers provide him with other death certificates and he issues burial permits (but not for burials in Dobbs Ferry). Greenburgh's Town Clerk's report to Albany is similar. Births occur in hospitals which are in other localities, not in Dobbs Ferry. Greenburgh issues marriage licenses.

The "Rules and Regulations of the Board of Health of Dobbs Ferry" were expanded in 1899. The expansion included Regulations for Plumbing and Drainage, and consisted of 61 pages, 33 for sanitation, 24 for plumbing and drains, and 4 for an index.

The Dobbs Ferry Board of Health was in existence until the creation of the Westchester County Department of Health on January 1, 1930. The Village's population was 5,745. In 1931 the Village was included in health district #5 with the Town of Greenburgh and the Villages of Irvington, Dobbs Ferry and Hastings-on-Hudson. Dobbs Ferry had an assigned public health nurse whose office was in the building at 50 Cedar Street. The Village is now subject to county public health regulations.

[Next: Selected highlights from the meetings of the Dobbs Ferry Board of Health during its first three years of existence.]

Society Begins Fund Appeal in Wake of Costly Emergency Repairs

The Board of Trustees of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society is appealing to its members and the community for additional contributions this year to help compensate for major drains on its capital reserve fund.

The reserve fund had to be tapped for major emergency repairs to the Society's headquarters, the Mead House, costing \$23,686 and leaving a reserve of only \$24,326 as of the middle of August.

The largest expenditure was \$11,000 for installing a new sewer line from the house to Elm Street. The Mead House was one of a few residences in Dobbs Ferry which had not been connected to the village's sewer system. In May the drain to the cesspool on the grounds ruptured and had to be replaced by a sewer line to the street.

The list of emergencies began in the summer of 1996, when a tree next to the house had to be removed because its roots threatened the brick masonry of the cellar. This cost \$1,150.

Last October the furnace was replaced after the boiler ruptured. This cost \$6,575. In November, the roof was damaged by torrential rainstorms and repairs amounted to \$2,600. Interior painting and ceiling repair, made necessary by the leaking roof, accounted for another \$2,000. In January 1997, pipes froze in a storeroom off the kitchen, and this cost \$361.

The Mead House at 12 Elm Street has become the history center of Dobbs Ferry and must be maintained in good repair. The three temperature and humidity controlled archival rooms on the second floor contain the Society's collections of documents, letters, maps, books,

other printed records, audio and video history tapes, photographs, slides, microfilm records of *The Dobbs Ferry Register*, *The Greenburgh Register*, and recent years of *The Enterprise*, as well as selected archival material: all of which pertains to, contributes to, and illustrates the history of the village and its people. The archives serve students in village schools and have been used by college students for graduate work. They also provide a wonderful resource for our newsletters.

The Board will seek to increase membership and will consider future fund-raising programs.

IN MEMORIAM

Joanna R. Kavanagh, one of the founders and later a director of the Historical Society, died June 5, 1997.

Her efforts were untiring and her oral history interviews are an important part of our collections. With the Board, she helped plan new programs. The Society is indebted to her for getting the fledgling organization off to a good start.

Recently she was a free-lance writer and was also employed by the Greenburgh School System. Previously she was an advertising copywriter for a major New York agency. For two years, in 1954 to 1956, she was employed by the North American Treaty Organization in London.

She was a graduate of Dobbs Ferry High School and Pennsylvania State University.

Her husband, Dennis, died in 1971.

She is survived by four daughters, Deirdre Kavanagh-Silsbee, Brigid Kavanagh, Amanda Kavanagh and Lydia Kavanagh, as well as a brother, Richard Roraback.

THE DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ESPECIALLY NEEDS YOUR SUPPORT

Dobbs Ferry Historical Society

IF YOU ARE NOT A MEMBER, PLEASE JOIN US NOW.

Name _____
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<u>MEMBERSHIP 1996-97</u> [] New [] Renew	
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 12 Elm Street
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TOTAL enclosed (TAX DEDUCTIBLE).....	\$ _____
[] My employer's matching contributions form is enclosed.	

*Persons under 16 years of age must show parent's or legal guardian's consent for membership. Thus, if you have checked Junior membership above, please provide signature below.

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Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian