



The FERRYMAN

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DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
12 Elm Street, Dobbs Ferry, New York 10522 (914) 674-1007

APRIL 2003
2003

ANNUAL GALA TO BE CELEBRATED ON MAY 30TH HUDSON HISTORIAN TO SPEAK

The annual gala of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Association will be held on Friday, May 30, at 7 p.m. at the Dobbs Ferry Woman's Club. The featured speaker will be Col. James Johnson, formerly professor of history at West Point, currently Military Historian of the Hudson River Valley. This year the gala observes the 225th anniversary of what was one of the most joyful days of the American Revolution. On February 6, 1778 France became the first foreign power to recognize the United States.

Although the anniversary is being celebrated throughout the country, Dobbs Ferry has a special interest in it. Congress is exploring the possibility of turning the route of the first French march in this country into a National Historic Trail. It would begin in Newport, R.I. where the French landed, continue through Connecticut to its destination in the hills



above Dobbs Ferry where Washington awaited them. The state of Virginia has already designated part of its State Highway System between Mount Vernon and Yorktown as the *Washington-Rochambeau Highway* used by the two armies in 1781. The French army's return trip north in 1782 has also been commemorated. If the first part of the French march from Rhode Island is celebrated, the trail of the French will be complete and Dobbs Ferry will be right there.

Col. Johnson may describe experiences of the French on their march and later in their hillside encampment. Certainly he can tell us the steps that have to be taken to make an historic trail official. The only surviving sign of the French is Rochambeau's headquarters which still stands with the French flag flying in front of it.

Tickets for the gala are \$25.00 for a single ticket and \$45.00 for a couple. Please call 674-1007 for advance reservations and send a check to The Mead House at 12 Elm Street by May 23rd.

Spring In-Gathering

It's Spring Cleaning time! Have you found historical materials that you would like to donate or share with the Historical Society? If so, bring them to the Spring In-Gathering at the Mead House on May 10th between 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.

We're looking for such historical items as letters, postcards, photographs, advertisements, genealogical information or newspaper clippings

about Dobbs Ferry events or families. If you have such items to donate, we would be delighted to accept them, or make a photocopy of your treasures for our files so that you can keep the originals. We'll also have genealogical charts available for people who are willing to add information about their families. So do drop by, have a glass of lemonade, and share your historical memorabilia.

THE STORY OF THE DOBBS FERRY LIBRARY FROM 1899 TO 2003

On December 12, 2003 the new Dobbs Ferry Library opened for business at 55 Main Street, next door to the building that housed the first library in 1899.

Barbara Pearce, granddaughter of the first librarian, Margaret Pearce, said in an interview that the building now owned by Tarricone Fuel is the structure that housed our first library.

"The present building is nothing like the one in 1899 -- extensive renovations have been made over the years," Miss Pearce said.

In the late 19th Century, Miss Pearce's grandparents emigrated from Nottingham, England and settled in Brooklyn. Grandfather Robert Pearce was an installation technician employed by a lace and embroidery weaving machine manufacturer, and was brought to New York by his employer seeking an American market.



Margaret Pearce

America appealed to the Pearces, who subsequently moved to Dobbs Ferry. Grandfather Robert Pearce was an electrician at a time when homes and businesses were converting from gaslight to electricity. Grandmother Margaret Pearce became one of Dobbs Ferry's first career women as Village Librarian.

This is how it began. According to a history of the library written by Mrs. Simon Lissim, printed in *The Dobbs Ferry Register* on March 6, 1958, "The charter was granted at a Board of Regents on October 28, 1909, but the initial spark was kindled by a group of forward looking men and women at the turn of the century who, in 1899, joined together to organize the Dobbs Ferry Free Library and Reading Room 'under the charge of the W.C.T.U.' Among these pioneers were Mrs. Thornton M. Niven, wife of the Presbyterian minister and grandmother of Thornton Niven Wilder; Miss Eliza Masters and her sister Sarah, who had come to Dobbs Ferry to establish a school; and Mrs. Nathaniel Lawrence, whose husband conducted a grocery business on lower Main Street: 'Teas and Coffees a specialty, Flour, Feed, Hay and Straw.' "

It was then when grandmother Pearce became part of the history of Dobbs Ferry, after she and her husband arrived from Brooklyn with their three youngsters. The W.C.T.U. agreed to provide a rent-free house at what is now 59 Main Street to the Pearce family if the front parlor were to be used as a library, and if Mrs. Pearce would serve as the librarian.

It was a good deal for Village residents, as the library was open every day and evening except Friday. Under Margaret Pearce's tutelage, the library grew and residents were very happy with the management. Books included sermons of Phillips Brooks and Henry Ward Beecher, classics, popular novels, and Horatio Alger's "Tattered

Tom". When Barbara Pearce's grandmother Margaret, then 88, was interviewed by Mrs. Simon Lissim, she remembered "a hand-carved cherry fireplace where every winter night a fire was blazing."

It is interesting to note that the first sponsors of the Dobbs Ferry Library were temperance people -- W.C.T.U. are the initials of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. While the women in this group were interested in the cultural aspects of establishing a library, would it be wrong to assume that they hoped this would coax patrons of local saloons away from "demon rum"?

There was, in fact, a booming saloon business in Dobbs Ferry in 1909. State Senator Charles McClelland, in his short history of Dobbs Ferry, first published in *The Dobbs Ferry Register* July 6, 1923, wrote "From memory I can count ten licensed places where intoxicating liquors were sold when the village was incorporated (1873) and as the population increased, the number of these places also increased until we had no less than twenty. For a number of years one of them was shamelessly named after George Washington. -- There was throughout the years, until the 18th Amendment to the Constitution was adopted, one saloon in our village to about every 200 of our population". And according to *The Dobbs Ferry Register*, a village brewery was producing 100,000 barrels a year -- though not all for local consumption.

W.C.T.U Financial Difficulties

While local bars were prospering, by 1909 the women of the W.C.T.U. were having financial difficulties. *The Dobbs Ferry Register* of December 17, 1909, reported that "finding it too expensive, the Union last Spring voted to hand it over to a responsible association." The temperance women conducted a canvass "to learn what resources the library could count upon and the response was generous. It was not sufficient, however, to do as the (W.C.T.U.) committee wished, as the site for the library was the most important matter to contend with. On learning this, Col. and Mrs. Brown generously offered the rooms in their building, (on the corner of Main and Cedar Sts.). A meeting was called in September and the offer was accepted".

In the same building, not far from the bar trade, Mrs. Ada Eldridge Brown was busy organizing the William McKinley Free Kindergarten, another of her several philanthropies. Still another of Mrs. Brown's pet projects, the Mothers' Club, was located there as well.

In the middle of a snow storm on December 15, 1909, 1,510 adult books and 340 books for children were moved to the building on the corner of Main and Cedar Sts.

Those battling the snow storm were Col. Franklin Q. Brown, William T. Ferris, Ellery E. Albee, Miss Eliza L. B.

Masters, Rev. Fr. John T. Smith, and Mrs. Henry (Fannie) Villard, whose dramatic story has been told in earlier issues of *The Ferryman*.

In appearance, the exterior of the library in 1909 was far different than it is today. A photograph in the Historical Society archives shows the architecture of the building was similar to that of neighboring buildings. The facade was not English Tudor.

After research, Mrs. M. G. Muller, in an article in *The Reminder Weekly News* of April 5, 1971, wrote "the structure of the present building is very old and can be traced back to 1842, when the mortgaged premises were bought at public auction by Amos W. Gates --- furthermore, a description of the building can be found in the sale of lot number 48 from John J. Storms and wife, to James Parnell and recorded in the year 1864. --- This document contains a diagram of the building showing also the location of the well that once served as the source of water for numbers 47 and 48. This is also mentioned in the deed when, in 1951, Col. Franklin Q. Brown, President and benefactor of the library for many years, donated the building and property as a gift to the Village in memory of his wife."

In 2002, when the village decided to sell the old library structure, Rev. Richard R. McKeon, Jr., in researching it's history, wrote "Col. Brown commissioned one of the prominent architects of the early Twentieth Century, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, for the conversion of the building into a library. Mr. Goodhue, then with the firm of Gram, Goodhue & Ferguson, of New York and Boston, was responsible for such famous landmarks as the Los Angeles Public Library, the chapels at West Point and Princeton, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City ---".

In his book "*American Architecture: Westchester County, New York, Colonial to Contemporary*", Frank E. Sanchis wrote " -- the library in Dobbs Ferry was remodeled from an existing building in 1923 by Bertram Goodhue -- his medieval design inclinations come through in this simple structure --

in the half-timbering of the facade and the treatment of the ground-floor entrance level which features heavily mullioned windows and transoms. The entrance ramp is a modern edition replacing an earlier stoop."

Col. and Mrs. Brown had decided that English Tudor architecture would be just right for the library.

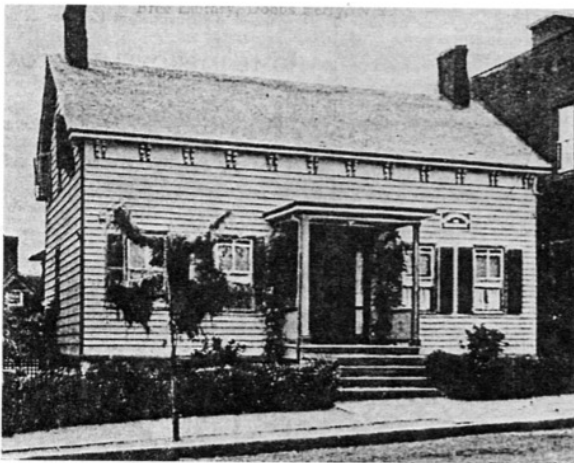
It is interesting to note that the English Tudor style residence of Col. and Mrs. Brown conforms with the Tudor style of the former library, as well as the Washington Theater on Main Street, now occupied by Steven Tilly's architectural offices. The theater was another of Mrs. Brown's philanthropic endeavors.

In 1909, in a much simpler building, according to the Lissim history of the library, "Mrs. Louise V. Miller taught kindergarten upstairs in the morning and ran the library downstairs with an assistant in the afternoon and evening. Her salary was \$30 per month, and even this was hard to come by. Although the Brown's gave the building rent-free -- still all the operating expenses had to be met by annual subscriptions, it being an association library. The following plaintive note was sounded by the trustees in their report of 1910 -- 'it is hoped that in the near future a small annual appropriation may be voted by the Village of Dobbs Ferry for the benefit of which it primarily exists', and small indeed it was -- beginning in 1911 -- but \$150."

Years of financial struggle were part of the picture in keeping the library open. In 1957, the Village Board of Trustees assumed full financial responsibility for the library and voted an appropriation of \$12,000, a figure that has greatly increased over the years. The Village Library budget for 2001-02 was \$264,176. And the Village's new library was built at a cost of over \$5,000,000.

In the next issue of *The Ferryman* we will continue the story of the library, including a defeated proposal to demolish the old building in 1971. We will also include an interview with Bruce Richards, purchaser of the old library building, and his plans for its future.

-- Bill Blanck



This building housed Dobbs Ferry's first library in 1899.



Above is the Dobbs Ferry Library after the Browns' renovation in 1923.

DOBBS FERRY: THE BEGINNINGS

How did Dobbs Ferry get its name? The Dobbs family, one of the first to settle here, liked the looks of the area, so they stayed. We first meet them, however, when they are still in England, listening to tales of the New World. They were a large family and a close one: Walter Dobbs, a mariner, married to Mary Merritt; Mary's brother, William Merritt and his wife, Margery, William's widowed sister, Sarah Crabbe and her three little Crabbes; Edward Meeks, a son by a previous marriage, and John Dobbs, the twenty-three-year old son of Walter Dobbs. William Merritt had the most money and seemed to be the most adventurous, so one can guess that he was the one who organized the family for their voyage to the New World, specifically New Amsterdam.

In 1662 they left for America and were dropped off (as probably all the passengers were) on an island in Jamaica Bay off the shore of New Amsterdam. Barren Island, it was called and indeed it was barren. Still, the Dobbs and Merritt families managed to live there for almost ten years. By this time William Merritt was growing restless so he bought a house on Broad Street in the city (no longer New Amsterdam, now New York) and quickly found his way into the business and social life there. He dabbled in real estate, was elected an alderman, a collector of taxes, a justice and a vestryman at Trinity Church to which he gave 5s., 6d. toward a steeple. He didn't always have an easy path. In August, 1689, he was "wrongfully" jailed for twenty-one days but it couldn't have been too serious. Six years later he was elected mayor for three terms. What did he accomplish? At least he got the streets lighted – after a fashion. Householders were now required to place a lighted candle in each window that faced the street.

Moves Up The Hudson

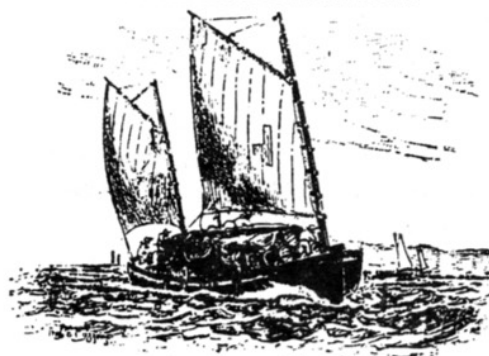
Apparently at the end of his three terms he had had enough of New York or New York had had enough of him. Perhaps he was just restless again. In August, 1698, he moved to 3,410 forested acres on the west bank of the Hudson (now Snedens Landing). Now William was able to move his family away from

Barren Island. They all came with him with the exception of Walter who had died in 1689, the year William moved to the city. And not Walter's wife, Mary, who had quickly married Nathaniel Pittman and refused to leave the island.

William Merritt went to the west bank of the Hudson and built a large house which he called Chear Hall. John Dobbs went to the east side of the Hudson and leased 252 acres from Frederick Phillipse, the largest landowner in the area. Here he built a small farmhouse near the site of the present railroad station.

On the next piece of land south of John's property lived the Hyatts who had also recently arrived. Perhaps John knew them and in any case it was not long before he married Elizabeth Hyatt and in due course had two sons, William and John.

Since John Dobbs, Sr. and Elizabeth were both English, they had no intention of joining the Dutch church (Sleepy Hollow) in Tarrytown, the only church in the neighborhood. Still, for purposes of baptism, a Dutch church was better than no church. So in 1706 they bundled up William, our village hero, and traveled probably by water up the Hudson to Pocantico Creek where they tied up their boat and walked across the road to the church.



History books talk of periaugers (or pettiaugers), canoe-like boats dug out from tree trunks and indeed this may have been what the Dobb family first used. But a periauger could also be a more sophisticated craft, described as a "large, flat-bottomed boat, without keel, but with lee-board,

(continued on next page)

Dobbs Ferry: The Beginnings *con't.*

usually decked over at ends and open in the middle, propelled by oars or sails on two masts which could easily be struck.

John Dobbs' second son, John, would certainly have needed such a boat when he decided to run a ferry across the river. This was a strategic location for a ferry, since there were always travelers going east or west and this was the first point north of New York City where roads could come down to the river, making a crossing possible. Unlike his older brother, William, however, young John probably did not make his first boat trip to the Sleepy Hollow Church. At least there is no record of his baptism at the church, perhaps because his mother, Elizabeth Hyatt, died either at his birth or soon after.

Five More Dobbses

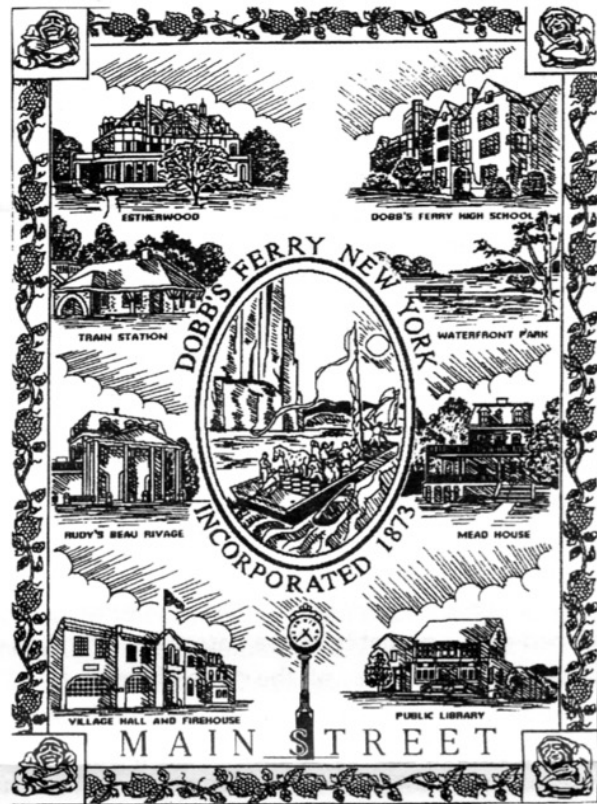
John, Sr. promptly married Abigail (last name unknown) and produced five more Dobbses, the oldest being Maria (nickname Mollie) just a year younger than John, Jr. and probably closer to her two half brothers than to her own siblings who were much younger. Mollie has a large role in our story and although it cannot be absolutely verified that Maria Dobbs and Mollie (later Sneden) were one and the same, I will assume, like most historians, that they were. I give the Merritt genes credit for the fact that Mollie lived to be 101, almost as long as her grandmother, Mary Merritt Dobbs who lived to be 104, and her aunt, Sarah Merritt Crabbe who lived to be 102.

But Mollie is not quite ready to move to center stage. First John, Jr. has to establish his place on the east bank, farming, collecting taxes, running the ferry with his brother, William. In 1729 William married a seventeen year old Dutch girl, Lea Van Waert and by 1734 when his brother John moved to New York, William and Lea had two children. Abraham and Belitje (two more still to come). William's family, however, didn't travel to the Sleepy Hollow Church only when the children were born. William joined the church where Lea was already a member and they went as regularly as possible. Moreover, William was now the official ferryman and the settlements on both side of the river had names: Dobbs Ferry East and Dobbs Ferry West.

--- Jean Fritz

Need a Great Graduation Gift?

A perfect gift for the college-bound teen!



Evoking pleasant sentiments and fond memories of living here, each afghan depicts the High School, the Railroad Station, Waterfront Park, the Mead House, Village Hall and the Firehouse, the old Public Library, Washington Theatre, national landmark Estherwood, and the Main Street sidewalk clock. These scenes surround Jon Neilsen's well known woodcut of William Dobbs and his Ferryboat sailing towards the Palisades.

Dobbs Ferry Historical Society
12 Elm Street
Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522

I would like to order _____ throw(s) @ \$45 each. Enclosed is my check for \$_____.

Name _____

Address _____

Telephone _____

Check color: Williamsburg Blue Cranberry Red

Your Raffle Donation will help the Historical Society maintain it's home at the Mead House and provide expanded programs for the membership

Return completed tickets to the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society. Mail to 12 Elm Street, Dobbs Ferry, NY, 10522 by May 23th or bring them to the registration table at the Gala on May 30th at the Dobbs Ferry Woman's Club, 54 Clinton Avenue.

Prizes will include gift certificates from our local restaurants, the Society's popular Afghan and other great prizes donated by local merchants and Society members.

<p style="text-align: center;">\$1 each, 6 tickets for \$5, FREE LUCKY BONUS -13 FOR \$10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">FREE LUCKY 13th TICKET with \$10 donation for page of 12.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">FREE EARLY BIRD 14th TICKET With \$10 for 12 through May 23rd</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>EARLY BIRD BONUS!</i> With \$10 for 12 by May 23rd</p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>City _____ State _____</p> <p>Zip _____ Phone _____</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>FREE BONUS!</i> with \$10 donation for page of 12.</p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>City _____ State _____</p> <p>Zip _____ Phone _____</p>
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