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DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

December, 2004

12 Elm Street, Dobbs Ferry, New York 10522 (914) 674-1007

THE HOUSE AT 12 ELM STREET

The Elm Street house that serves as the headquarters of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society is deeply connected to this village's heritage through the two families who lived there—the Willseas and the Meads. The Willseas occupied the house from 1865 to 1909 and the Meads from 1917 until 1991 when Clara Mead bequeathed the house to the Historical Society. Looking at the lives of these two families gives us a glimpse of changing patterns of village life.

Captain Abram O. Willsea was a third generation Dobbs Ferry resident. His grandfather, Daniel Willsea, had moved to this area shortly after the Revolutionary War and purchased 400 acres of the former Philipse property. He is buried in the White Church Cemetery. Abram Willsea was born here in 1821. At the death of his father, Frederick in 1846, Abram inherited a Hudson River freight business. He captained the freight sloop that

ran from Willsea's Dock between 1846 and 1862. According to *Scharf's Westchester County History*, "Willsea managed his father's enterprise . . . building up for himself by a slow but sure process of honest dealings both an ample fortune and a reputation for integrity and uprightness."

In 1847, Abram married Catherine Irving Odell, who came from another local Revolutionary-era family. On October 30, 1865,



Abram O. Willsea

Captain Willsea bought the house at 12 Elm Street, which had been built in the late 1850s, from Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Huebner. The four Willsea children (Frederick, Ida May, Amanda and Frances Eldorado) were brought

up in the in the home. "Frankie," the youngest

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You are cordially invited to join us at the Mead House on Sunday, Dec. 12th

In the latter years of her life, Clara Mead opened her house to friends and family for a festive holiday celebration. The Dobbs Ferry Historical Society is pleased to continue that tradition with the annual eggnog party for members. (If you are not a member, you are welcome to join that day at the door.) With a new sidewalk providing easy accessibility to the Mead House (12 Elm Street), no one should miss the festivities on Sunday, December 12th from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m.

Do join us to greet old friends and meet new ones and, of course, to sample Clara Mead's famous eggnog. After this event it is but a short walk to Zion Episcopal Church for the annual Washington Irving Holiday Celebration that begins at 5:00 p.m. The Reverend Richard McKeon has assembled an intriguing collection of readings from Irving's works that, interspersed with familiar holiday carols, will entertain one and all. A reception follows the program in the parish hall. Admission is free and open to the public.

(The House at 12 Elm St. continued from page 1)

daughter, was married there in June, 1894 to John H. Kemp of Delhi, New York. Sixty guests attended the wedding supper, spilling out onto the porch on the warm spring day.

Captain Willsea was a public spirited citizen, who served at various times as Commissioner of Highways, School Trustee and President of the School Board. In 1864 he was elected Greenburgh Supervisor and held that post for the next seventeen years. It was said of him: "Probably no gentleman in or about Dobbs Ferry had more to do with its substantial progress or good government."

The Captain was also involved in many village activities. He was a founder and first Master of the Masonic Diamond Lodge No. 555, a Trustee of Summerfield Methodist Church, founder and first treasurer of the Greenburgh Savings Bank and, at the time of Village incorporation in 1873, a partner with George B. Taylor in a coal and lumber business located at Besson Dock near the railroad station. After the Captain's death in 1896, ownership of the house passed to his children who eventually sold it the Mead family.

Herbert Mead's family, early 17th century arrivals from England, settled in Connecticut and eventually moved to the northern Westchester



Herbert Mead

hamlet of Waccabuc, in Lewisboro (South Salem). A relative on Herbert's mother's side was Richard M. Hoe, inventor of rotary printing press. Herbert's uncle, Ned, was a partner in the Dodd, Mead and Co. publishing firm. His sister Alice Mead, was a librarian. Books, education, culture history held prominent places in the Mead household.

In 1905, Herbert married Clara Camp of New York City. Two daughters were born: Clara and Theodora. They lived in Hastings, then moved to 12 Elm Street in 1917. He was Vice-President of the Indiana Quartered Oak Company on Vanderbilt Avenue in Manhattan. Clara attended the Masters' School

from 1919-1922, after having been a student in the Dobbs Ferry public school.

Clara was a schoolgirl of outstanding achievement, earning straight A's in math and science. "Clear-headed and practical, honest, appreciative, considerate and loyal" was how her teachers evaluated her. Her education continued in like vein at Wellesley College, from which she graduated in 1926. Her academic prowess was encouraged by her mother, who had earned a Masters Degree at New York University before she married Herbert Mead.



Clara Camp Mead

When Clara graduated from Wellesley, she went to work at her father's business, the Indiana Lumber Company of Long Island City and continued there for many years. Her sister, Theodora, worked in the Department of Social Services in the Town of Greenburgh. Her mother was a member of the Hudson Valley Needlework Guild, the Dobbs Ferry Woman's Club and South Presbyterian Church. Community involvement was important to the Meads; Mrs. Mead had begun as a Red Cross volunteer during World War I and devoted years to that organization, serving as chair of the local fund drive each year from 1942 to her death in 1953.

After her mother's death, Clara remained at home to keep house for her father until he died in 1956. She continued her mother's tradition of community service and was known for her gracious hospitality. Her commitment to the value of historic preservation led her to bequeath her home to be used as the site of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society.

- Mary Donovan

Source: Most of the information presented here came from Tema Harnik's article, "The Willseas and the Meads," in the Historical Society Archives.

PVT. FLOHR'S TIME IN ROCHAMBEAU'S ARMY

It was my very great pleasure to work with Gaby Grunebaum on her translation of Georg Flohr's account of his three years as a mercenary in Rochambeau's army.

Her translation was a truly remarkable achievement. She overcame obstacles that were enormous: she worked from a print copy of a microfilmed copy of that document. Furthermore, Flohr wrote in 18th century Alsatian German, which is somewhat different from the modern German in which Gaby was fluent. Flohr's handwriting was also in 18th century Gothic script. His text also contains many confusing inconsistencies and inaccuracies.

Gaby's translation project began in the latter part of the 1990s, after former Society president Bill Blanck learned of the Flohr manuscript. Knowing that two armies, one under Rochambeau, the other under Washington, camped and crossed the Hudson River near Dobbs Ferry, Blanck mobilized the Society to acquire a copy of the Flohr text. Trustee Mavis Cain then corresponded in French with the Strassbourg library to attain a microfilmed copy of Flohr's account. Print copies of the microfilmed Flohr manuscript were laboriously made and Gaby agreed to do the translation. Now the Society has decided to print selected excerpts from her translation.

Flohr and his German compatriots in the "Zweibruecken Regiment" were not on the same level as the French soldiers under Rochambeau who teamed up with Washington's army in central Westchester in July of 1781. They did sail with the French in May 1780, settled in Rhode Island for a year and marched across Connecticut to meet Washington's army. They left Westchester together, crossing the Hudson River near Dobbs Ferry, and headed south to engage the British army under Cornwallis and defeat it at Yorktown. The Germans were paid to be "grunts," serving

the French and Americans in various ways. At Yorktown they dug trenches for French and American soldiers who moved ever closer to Cornwallis' army. As they dug, they came under fairly constant fire, losing men on a regular basis.



Rochambeau

Although he did not have a "university" education, Flor kept daily notes of what he saw and what happened. He also painted about 30 extraordinary watercolors of some of the cities in which he was garrisoned. Three years after he returned to his home in Alsace, he wrote his "travel account," a lowly "private's" view of the Revolutionary War. The title of his report in Alsatian German was "An Account of Travels to and in America by the Highly Regarded Regiment from Zweibruecken." The following is the first installment of selected excerpts.

- Hank Walter

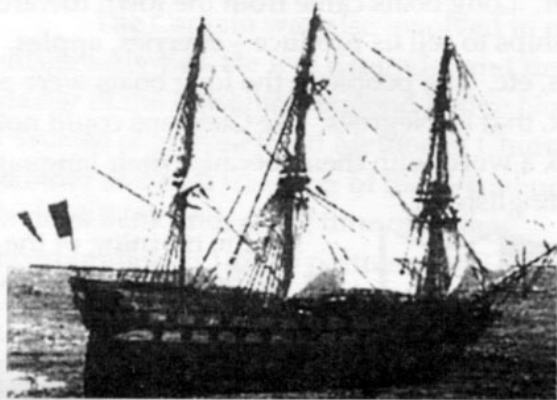
FOREWORD

I wrote the following description of America during the war between England and America conscientiously and accurately as the days during and after the war went by. I also wrote about the towns, villages and gentlemen's estates and all the areas through which I passed while I was in America.

{The French armada of 32 troop transport ships, 11 war ships, and perhaps 12,000 men left the

French port of Brest on May 2, 1780. The 12,000 consisted of 5,800 soldiers under the Comte de Rochambeau and some 6,000 sailors under the Chevalier de Ternay.}

About 2:00 p.m. we lost sight of the French coast, so that we saw only sky and water. We entrusted ourselves to God Almighty. Most of the mercenaries with me wished they had never signed up to be soldiers and they cursed the recruiting officer who hired them. That, however, was only the beginning of a miserable time that became more miserable from day to day . . .



Model of Le Superbe, one of the ships that brought Rochambeau's army to Newport

On the 11th of May, the horizon turned cloudy and we experienced a strong wind. By noon, a violent storm overtook us and the sailors had barely time to lower the sails. The storm grew stronger by the hour and drove us toward the Spanish coast. The storm became so strong that our men, who had never been to sea, felt awful. The ocean waves were so high that they could not see the high points of the Spanish coast. The men acted fearfully, like chased chickens. Some held on to barrels that were positioned on the deck, others on to the railings, or whatever else was on the deck, just to be able to stand, as the ship pitched from side to side and successive waves broke over us. Half the time, we felt near death. The sailors tried to console us, saying that they had often experienced this before in this difficult life on the sea.

On the 6th of June, we ran into another storm as strong as the previous one. Again, there was misery on top of misery. At such a dangerous time, even the most godless will call to God to rescue them. But as soon as the weather clears, you hear them cursing and swearing constantly, as one would search for his clothes here, another one there, which they had lost during the storm . . .

All our food was virtually indigestible, really bad enough to harm us. Our daily ration consisted of 36 "lot" [18 ounces] of hard tack that was given out in three portions: mornings at 7:00, at 12:00 noon and at 6:00 p.m. As for meat, about 8 ounces a day of either salted horse or beef were prepared for each man for the midday meal. But this meat was so heavily salted, it made us more and more thirsty and did not ease our hunger.

Evenings we had to make do with a poor soup made with oil, black beans and other stuff like that. Anyone who had never seen such cooking would completely lose his appetite. But when you cannot get anything else, you appreciate even this, because, as the proverb goes, "Hunger is the best cook." So, we had to be satisfied with whatever the cook put before us, after which he would scold us like children.

As for beverages, the wine and liquor were excellent and consisted daily of one and a half "Schoppen" {pints} of good red wine, also distributed in thirds. If it was liquor, a quarter of a pint a day per man. As for water, there was very little: most of the time, half a pint a day. So, our thirst was always greater than our hunger.

The sleeping arrangements were not very comfortable. Some slept in hammocks made from linen material, tied up at the corners with ropes. They swing back and forth. Of those who slept in them, two men were assigned to each hammock. But the majority had to lie on the floor. The saying was, "whoever wants to lie comfortably should have stayed home." . . .

(Continued on page 5)

(Pvt. Flohr continued)

On the morning of the 20th of June at daybreak, one could see two big ships approaching us from the south. The *Eurelle* and the war ship *Leveiller* left us to chase them. The Commandant gave orders that all of our royal frigates should immediately get themselves battle ready. About 2:00 o'clock, these English ships came very near us, so we could speak clearly to them through a signal horn. Our Commandant called them, but did not receive an answer. They passed along our entire line to gain wind, whereupon we made a counter maneuver. They immediately fired their batteries at us. Shooting then ensued on both sides. This battle lasted from half past two until nightfall, intensifying on both sides as the hours went by. Three English ships were so heavily damaged that they had trouble getting away. On our side, four ships were also heavily damaged.

On the 21st of June, we were near Chesapeake Bay. We sailed toward Charlottetown in South Carolina. When we heard from a corvette that Charlottetown had capitulated to the English. Immediately we changed course for the northern part of America . . .

On July 10th, the fog was so thick you could not see clearly at 10 or 12 steps. To keep all the ships together, drummers on each ship drummed so that the ships could follow each other. They also fired their guns, so that the ships, by following the gunshot sounds, would not lose each other. In spite of all these precautions, eight of our ships lost their way. The fog, however, served us well: had it not cloaked us, we could have been easily caught.

On the 12th, we were so close to land that our cannon shots echoed back to us from the land. Toward noon, the horizon cleared and you could see land. That made us all happy – an easy thing to fathom, given that our misery was pervasive. I mean some of us were suffering the illness called scarlet fever. On many of the ships, 200 to 300 men were infected.

The instant they heard that land was in sight, those who were suffering from the fever were overjoyed and felt no more pain. Jubilation overwhelmed the soldiers so much that they did not go to eat the noonday meal. They were so glad to look at the green land of America and wished only to be standing on it. The land looked strange to us because of its unrecognizable vegetation.

About noon, we entered the harbor. We dropped anchor and now had a panoramic view of the town of Newport, which is embellished with a very beautiful town hall and a church tower. Long boats came from the town towards our ships to sell us produce – cherries, apples, pears, etc. The people in the long boats were all black, that is, Negroes. We Germans could not speak a word with them, because their language was English.



Shield showing the Union between the American and the French Forces

On the morning of the 14th, we began to leave the ships. We wanted very much to see the inhabitants. But as soon as we entered the town, we saw only a few Negroes here and there. We surmised that Negroes populated the whole town. But that was not so. It turned out that the white inhabitants had hidden themselves, because they believed us to be enemy troops. But as soon as they heard that the fleet was French . . . and we were their friends and could protect them, they came back by and by into the town.

We thought that we would be lodged in town; but, no, the way shown to us went through the town to a place near it where we had set up camp. The next day we worked hard to move our sick comrades from the ships to the shore. We took them to the town hall and to a church, because the inhabitants agreed that we could use those buildings as hospitals.

- *By Gabriele H. Grunebaum with Hank Walter*
(to be continued)

Wanted: High School Yearbooks



Football captains, prom queens, drama stars — those old high school yearbooks have a wide range of interesting information about life in Dobbs Ferry at any

particular year. So the Historical Society is trying to assemble

a complete collection of yearbooks from both the Dobbs Ferry High School and the Masters School. If your old yearbook is gathering dust or taking up needed space on a bookshelf, do consider donating it. Call us at 674-1007. If you cannot bring it over, we will make arrangements to pick it up.



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Great Holiday Gift!

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12 Elm Street
Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522

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