

THE FERRYMAN

DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



KEEPING THE MEAD HOUSE ALIVE for Community Archives and Events

We're so fortunate that our Dobbs Ferry history is at home in the beautiful Mead House which, as you may have noticed, is looking better and better.



...with much enthusiasm and some "sweat equity"...

LOOK AT WHAT WONDERS OUR VOLUNTEERS HAVE ACCOMPLISHED!

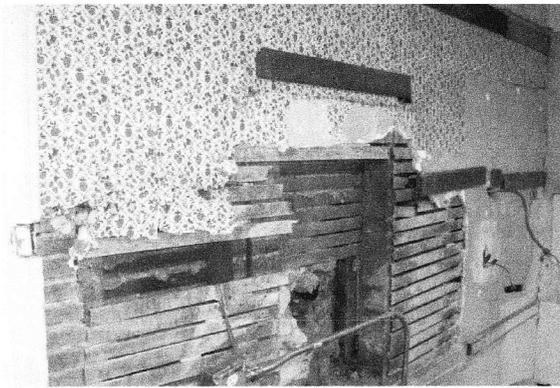


OUR PARLOR IS TRANSFORMED!

We are so grateful to those in our village that made this possible. But there are some things that cannot be done by volunteers...

CAN YOU HELP US ?





WE NEED YOUR HELP !

Respond today.
The need is urgent.

Like the archival room, the kitchen is vital to the operation of the Historical Society. We use it for community events, of course. And the groups who use the house for meetings and classes, need a kitchen.

The presence of these groups is important to our mission of maintaining an atmosphere of welcome to the groups that serve this village.

This fall Columbia University Press donated a "gently used" refrigerator and stove to the Mead House, a gift for which we are very grateful. But when we moved the old appliances out, we discovered that their presence had hidden rotten floor boards and a disintegrating back wall. SEE ABOVE PHOTO OF THE WALL BEHIND THE REFRIGERATOR. Replacement has demanded major construction that totally depleted our Preservation Fund.

So we must appeal to friends throughout the village for financial assistance. We are so grateful to the volunteers who have already helped us. But there are some tasks that demanded more than volunteer labor.

If you enjoy reading the history presented in *The Ferryman*, if you have attended the programs on village history that the Historical Society has presented this year, if you liked being a part of the reenactment of the Continental Army's march through Dobbs Ferry this summer, please consider an end-of-the-year donation to the Mead House Preservation Fund. Your gift is tax-deductible; your support of Dobbs Ferry's history is priceless!

Yes, I would like to join the effort to save the Mead House. Add my name to those who are contributing to the Preservation Fund.

I enclose a check made out to the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society
 \$500 \$250 \$100 \$50
 Other

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip _____

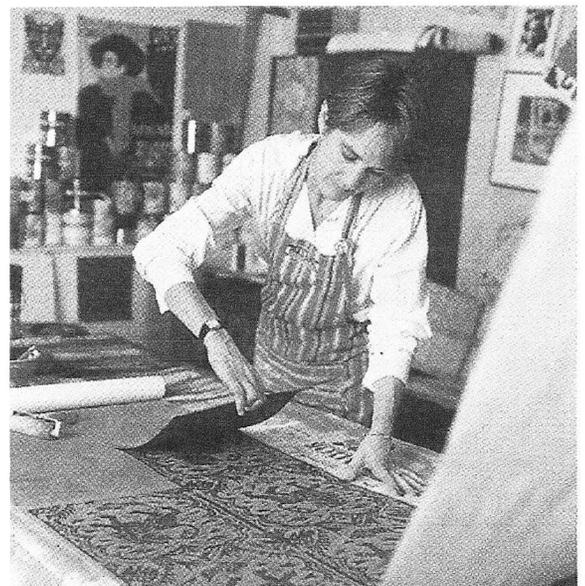
Please mail your tax -deductible contribution to :
 The DF Historical Society 12 Elm St Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522

Local artist Joanna Rock created special wallpaper for the Mead House parlor

With a wonderful eye for color and design, Rock finds inspiration in sources that range from floral tapestries to the geometric designs of ancient Greek tiles. She carves the designs into linoleum blocks that she uses to transfer the design to the long wallpaper strips.

For the Mead House, Rock chose an adaptation of a nineteenth century William Morris design rendered in a specially blended color that reflects, yet enhances the gold of the house's exterior walls. Her willingness to not only produce but also help hang the wallpaper inspired all our volunteer crew. We are most grateful for her help.

Joanna Rock is a native of London who transferred her wallpaper business to Dobbs Ferry in 1986. She currently lives in the little red house on Broadway that is among the oldest homes in the village.



A TRIBUTE TO REBECCA BROWNING RANKIN

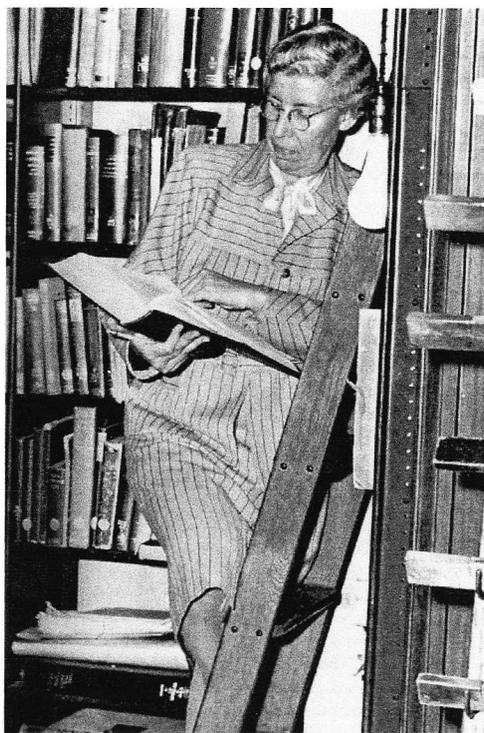
Celebrated Librarian and
Dobbs Ferry Historian

BY MARY S. DONOVAN

As the Dobbs Ferry Public Library celebrates its Centennial Year, it is only fitting that this month's *Ferryman* feature a prominent librarian who lived in Dobbs Ferry. Rebecca Browning Rankin was the Municipal Reference Librarian of the City of New York from 1920 until 1952. As such, she dealt with politicians—mayors and council members and legislators—as well as with civic reformers, political scientists, and ordinary citizens. In her long tenure, she developed extraordinary methods to work with this clientele and established the Municipal Reference Library as an essential ally for governmental bodies. After she retired from the New York Library, her life took a new focus: writing the history of Dobbs Ferry. For that work that we celebrate her today.

Rebecca Rankin was born in Ohio in 1887 but as a teenager, moved with her family to Ann Arbor, Michigan and subsequently attended the University of Michigan. Though she majored in Education, she worked in the university library to cover college expenses and after graduation, took a full time position in that library. She found the work there extraordinarily fascinating and quickly decided she'd found her career. In 1912 she moved to Boston for an advanced degree in Library Science at Simmons College. Upon graduation, she moved west to direct the Washington State Normal School Library where she took special pride in training potential teachers to establish school libraries in their future placements.

Five years later, Miss Rankin took a leave of absence to come to New York City to help her sister care for their aging mother. Applying for work at the New York Public Library, she was quickly hired as the assistant to the director of the central branch on 42nd Street. The year was 1918 and the effects of both the World War I mobilization and the "Spanish influenza" had depleted the library staff. Though she loved working



at the Central branch, her time there was short. Within the year, she had moved to the Municipal Reference Library as assistant librarian and the next year she was named to the top post.

New York's Municipal Reference Library was the product of the reforming impulses of the Progressive era. Politicians, stressing "civic reform", quickly found they needed a source for accurate, current information about governmental agencies and practices in order to design better systems. They established the library in the Municipal Building that straddles Chambers Street in City Hall Park.

During her 32 years as municipal librarian, Miss Rankin vastly expanded the library's collection, saving public funds by making it the central repository for documents stored throughout the city. She revamped personnel policies, carefully training employees in their responsibility to serve the public. In 1936, in collaboration with Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, she wrote *New York Advancing*, an authoritative guide to New York's government that became the reference desk's mainstay for answering caller's questions. That year, she was honored by the Women's City Club for "distinguished service to the city government without much public recognition." In 1947 she and journalist Cleveland Rogers wrote a second volume to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the consolidation of Greater New York. Called *New York: the World's Capital City*, the book featured the development of industry, transportation, commerce and culture in the nation's largest

metropolis. She was instrumental in establishing New York's Municipal Archives and Record Center—the vast repository of city records at 31 Chambers Street that continues to be open to the public daily.

Though Miss Rankin initially lived in New York City, in 1927 after her mother died, she moved to Dobbs Ferry to live with her friend Alice Bunting in the Bunting family home at 31 Lefurgy Ave. When she took mandatory retirement from the Municipal Library in 1952, she simply transferred her library activities to her Dobbs Ferry home. As a volunteer, she began to direct her research and cataloging skills towards the library's Dobbs Ferry history collection and quickly saw the need for a more comprehensive program. She was appointed village historian and gathered a group of twenty-five citizens who became known as the Local History Group. Together they gathered information on the growth of Dobbs Ferry—its commercial development, land usage patterns, educational and cultural institutions and political life. The information was finally assembled into a history of Dobbs Ferry, chapters of which were published serially in the *Dobbs Ferry Register* from July 1957 until April 1958. Though the group tried to have the history published in one volume, they did not find a publisher willing to take on the task. However, when the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society published *Life of a River Village* for the village centennial in 1975, the authors drew heavily on the previous work of the Local History Group.

Meanwhile, Miss Rankin also worked to organize the Westchester County Library System and help it obtain state funding. "I don't know why but it seems I always got involved in all the organizations of librarianship," she said later in an interview, "I have all of those satisfactions in my professional life in addition to all the fun I had on my job." She continued to be an active presence in village life, entertaining local children at library programs or cultivating new flowers in her beloved garden on Lefurgy Ave. until her death in 1965 at the age of 78.

One among many tributes to Rankin would probably have pleased her most. Margaret Kehl, who worked for her at the Municipal Reference Library, wrote "To you I owe my feeling for the library profession. Your watchword was 'Service.' I try to teach that today."

See Barry W. Seaver, *A True Politician: Rebecca Browning Rankin, Municipal Reference Librarian of the City of New York, 1920-1952* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004). Available at the Dobbs Ferry Public Library.



THE “NATHAN HALE” HOUSE

*...or did Nathan Hale
really live here?*

BY MADELINE BYRNE

Driving up Clinton Avenue you may not notice a small red house, set behind a curved stone wall and an old weeping beech just before Judson Avenue. According to the files in the archives of the Historical Society this is the Nathan Hale House. Could Nathan Hale or a member of his family have lived in this house?

From our history books, we all know Captain Nathan Hale was caught and hanged as a spy by the British in September of 1776. He is famous for his alleged last words, “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.” His family lived in Coventry, Connecticut and built at least one house of the Hale property in 1776.

So where is the connection with the Dobbs Ferry house?

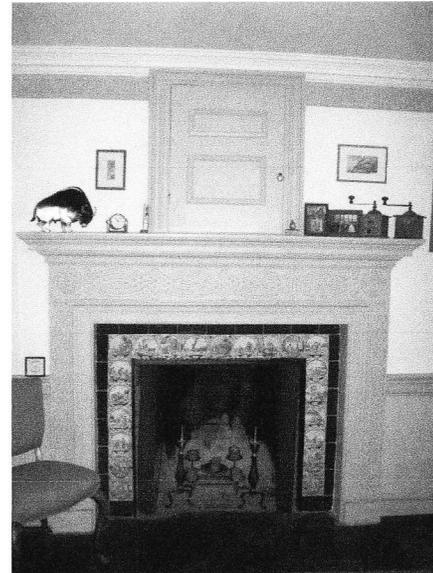
When owners of the red house applied for a historic plaque, the Historical Society researcher found that the house was erected in 1937 on Clinton Avenue on the former Villard estate, a huge piece of land at the crest of the hill past the Masters School. There the financier and journalist Henry Villard and his wife Fanny Garrison Villard had built their mansion, Thorwood Park. Henry died in 1900 but Fanny, continued to live in the house until 1928.



After Fanny’s death, the property was sold to Bento Realty for \$300,000. The Historical Society has an advertisement for the sale of the Villard house in the magazine, *Country Life*, in 1929. We also hold the actual check payable to the estate of Fanny Villard in the archives. The property was divided up into building lots and all the streets past the Masters School were laid out and named.

The real estate company, Cooley Realty, sold the building lots in this new development. Advertisements were in the *Westchester Magazine*,

House and Garden magazine and local newspapers. We have a copy of the letter indicating that six building lots were sold in November 1937. One sale was to Clifford J. Nuttall, the publisher of *Westchester*, the monthly magazine of the Westchester County Realty Board, who purchased a lot for \$3,262.25.



On the title transfer it lists as improvements: “A 2-story New England farmhouse of wide clapboard siding and slate roof is being erected on the property to the plans of Frederick L. Porter. It is a conventional layout with study, maid’s quarters, an recreation room additional. Much of the material has been brought down from Connecticut from the Nathan Hale house; some of the trim is especially interesting. In the basement recreation room there has been erected a splendid stone fireplace which will add great charm.”

From the microfiche in the Village Building Department we have the original building permit dated September 1937 issued to C. J. Nuttall but no mention of material being moved from Connecticut. In 1945 permission was given by the village to Mr. Nuttall to erect a porch which is attached to the rear of the house. In order to find some information about parts of the house being moved down from Connecticut, research was done using the microfiche of the Dobbs Ferry Register from August 1937 to January 1938, but no mention of the move was made in the local newspaper during that time.

In 1989 the owner of 140 Clinton Avenue applied to the Westchester Inventory of Historic Places. It was decided that there was not enough documentation to prove the house had been occupied by

Nathan Hale or moved from his homestead in Coventry, CT. In 1999 the owners contacted the Nathan Hale Homestead for information. They were then told it was possible a small house was sold off the property in the 1930's. Some old-timers in Coventry confirmed this. In our latest email dialogues with the staff no one could find any proof of the house being sold or moved off the property. The owner of the Nathan Hale Homestead at that time was George Dudley Seymour. He was a patent attorney from New Haven. He restored the Hale home, the Strong Porter house and another house where the body of Nathan Hale was prepared for burial. It is believed that he would have never parted with anything that concerned Nathan Hale.



The current Nathan Hale Homestead is located just outside Hartford in the village of Coventry. On a visit to the homestead you could see the similarities in the two homes. The Hale

Homestead was built in 1776 by Nathan's father, Richard. His six sons then left for war with only Nathan not surviving. This was the second home built on the property. When Mr. Hale purchased the property there was a house already there, erected sometime in the 1750's according to the Hale Homestead staff. The Hale Homestead property today includes the remains of the foundation for another building but the staff has no documentation for what building might have stood on that foundation.

After further research—including contacting the Coventry Historical Society, Connecticut Landmarks, the Connecticut Sons of the American Revolution and the Manuscript and Archives Division of Yale University Library—the Historical Society has decided that there is a valid case for deciding that the house (or pieces of it) was moved from the area of the Nathan Hale homestead. We base our decision on these facts:

- The prevalence of the 1937 local testimony that the house was moved from the Nathan Hale Homestead. Nowhere in the local press was this claim challenged when the house was originally advertised for sale.
- The fact that the remains of a foundation for another house exist on the present Nathan Hale Homestead.
- The fact that the beams that support the house are hand-hewn—axe marks are clearly visible in many places.
- The fact that notches in those beams indicate that the house had originally been constructed in a different configuration and later dismantled and then reassembled.
- The similarity of the upstairs cabinet work and fireplace to that in the current house on the Nathan Hale Homestead. The design of the fireplace with its side oven and plate-warming cabinet reflects 18th century New England styles rather than 20th century New York styles.

Thus the historic plaque will date the house at circa 1776. But we still would love to know whether the patriot, Nathan Hale, actually ever set foot in this building.

CAN'T WAIT TO READ MORE ABOUT THE RICH HISTORY OF DOBBS FERRY ?

We are proud to offer "*GEORGE WASHINGTON at 'Headquarters Dobbs Ferry' July 4 to August 19, 1781*" Written by local resident and historian Dr. Mary Sudman Donovan with original drawings by local resident Larry Blizard; this exciting new book chronicles the historic events of the Summer of 1781 in Dobbs Ferry.

Please ship my book(s) to:

NAME
 ADDRESS.....

 PHONE:

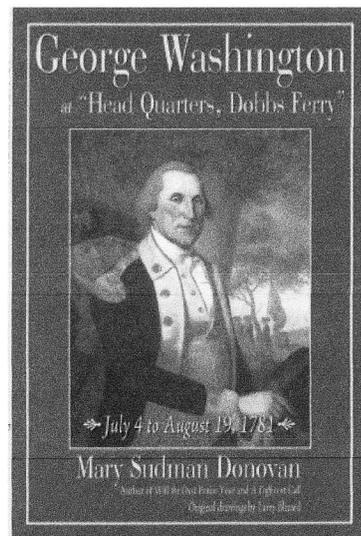
\$12.95 for PAPERBACK please send mecopy(s)
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I have included an additional \$ 3.00 PER BOOK for postage
 Enclosed is my check, payable to The D.F. Historical Society for \$.....

Send this order to :
 The DF Historical Society
 12 Elm Street Dobbs Ferry , NY 10522

Email: dfhistory@verizon.net
 Web: www.dobbsferryhistory.org
 Phone (914)-674-1007

Sales of this book go to the Mead House Preservation Fund—we thank you for your support!



MAIN STREET MYSTERY: *Still Unsolved!*

BY LARRY BLIZARD

On an autumn day in 1776, a young man approached a barn made of rough boards with a foundation of fieldstone. The day was crisp, and the crushed stalks of corn crunched beneath his feet.

Nervously, he looked around. Seeing no one watching him, he carefully removed a loose stone in the foundation wall, creating a crevice, into which he placed a bundle. He then replaced the stone and quickly moved away from the structure.

As he strode toward the King's Highway, a low indistinct rumble told him that British troops in great numbers were moving into a ravine that surrounded nearby Wicker's Creek, their intention evidently being to bivouac at that place. Earlier he had learned that British General Howe and his staff had taken over Tom Hyatt's house a little to the south.

The young man had a troubling decision to make: whether to stay home and help his parents, or rejoin his mates who, having stood up to Howe at White Plains, were retreating with the rest of General Washington's army somewhere to the north.

Fast forward to November 24, 1917 the stone wall is now part of the foundation of a building on lower Main Street in the village of Dobbs Ferry. The building is in the process of being remodeled into a garage by its owner, Michael Lavista. According to the report in the *New York Times*, the building is "near Chestnut Street". Thus, a likely candidate for the site might be either 60 or 62 Main Street (Number 60 still features a prominent garage door). The King's Highway is now known as Broadway. Tom Hyatt's little farmhouse has been expanded into a mansion (eventually to burn down in 1974 and become the site of the Washington Headquarters Townhouses.) The ravine where the British army camped is called Gould's Ravine after Edwin Gould, owner of the surrounding property. (Today, the ravine is bordered by the residential area known as The Landing.)

In the course of the construction work, a loose stone is dislodged, revealing a crevice, in which a workman finds a faded flag, rolled in a buff-colored waistcoat. The coat, which is moth-eaten and all but in shreds, was the type that was worn by George Washington's Continentals.

The 24" x 36" linen flag is in "a splendid state of preservation, writes a reporter for *The New York Times*. The words "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" are painted across the top and, on the left, is a motif of two daggers with a red hat on the tip of one. The *Times* article further states that "the flag is believed to have been one carried by the Continental Army in the Battle of White Plains. It must have been wrapped in the waistcoat and secreted in the wall crevice by a patriot soldier."

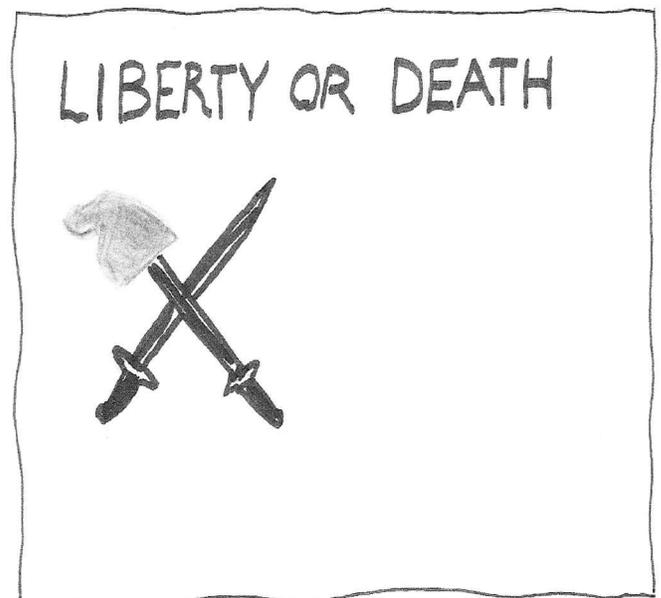
Both objects are then placed in the "museum" of the Dobbs Ferry Public School by the Principal B. M. Sheppard, after Mr. Lavista offered them to the school for display.

Then, one day --- they disappear!

The mystery is, who took them? Where are they -- in a room in some house in the village? In a museum somewhere upstate? Have they been on Antiques Roadshow? These artifacts are part of the common heritage of our village! Please notify the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society if you have any information regarding these items!

(Note: the above is a fictionalized account of the events relating to an actual occurrence: The discovery, and subsequent display and disappearance, of the Continental Army artifacts.)

This is a drawing of the flag on record as having been carried by Continental troops during the Battle of White Plains. It bears a strong resemblance to the flag unearthed on lower Main Street. Source: *American Boys Book of Signs, Signals, and Symbols*, 1918.





Did you remember to
renew your annual
membership?
Please do
so today!

DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP - 2009-2010

Name _____
Address _____
Phone / Email _____

- | | |
|---|-----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Historian | \$1000.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor | \$500.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Patron | \$100.00 |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Senior (over 60) | \$10.00 |

Please make check payable to & mail to :

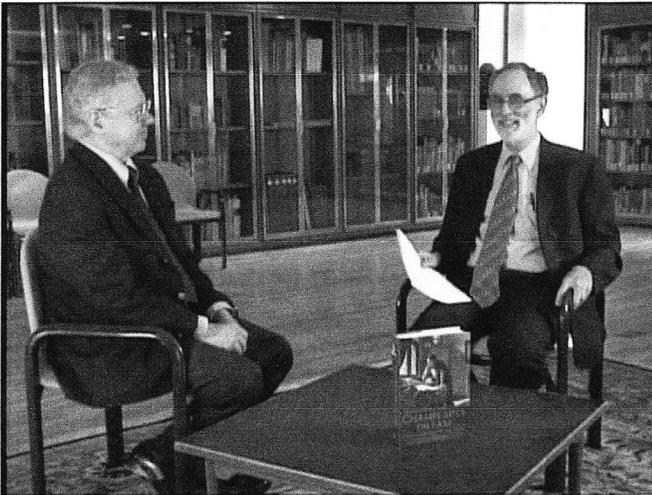
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Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522

Additional gift \$

Total (tax deductible) \$

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HISTORICAL HAPPENINGS: INTERVIEW WITH A PULITZER PRIZE WINNER



This fall, Village Historian Dr. Richard Borkow interviewed Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Dr. David Hackett Fischer, the Earl Warren Professor of History at Brandeis University. They spoke about the 1781 encampment of American and French troops in the Dobbs Ferry area.

This interview is now available on the website:
<http://www.villagehistorian.org/>

Do watch this interesting interview, which was made possible by a grant awarded to the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society by the New York Council for the Humanities.



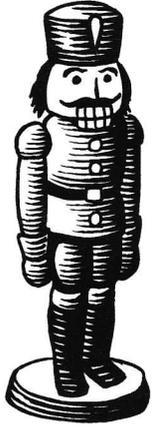
In 1776, Americans were less interested in pulling down a monarchy than in raising up a new republic.

Washington's leadership was becoming a major part of that process within the army. Men who came from different parts of the continent were beginning to understand each other. And Washington was learning how to lead them. He learned that the discipline of a European regular army became the enemy of order in an open society. To impose the heavy flogging and

capital punishments that were routine in European armies would destroy an army in America. The men would not stand for that abuse. When the back country riflemen were convicted for mutiny, Washington did not impose the death penalty that was customary in the British service. He fined the guilty riflemen twenty shillings each and appealed to honor, reason, pride, and conscience. They in turn declared themselves "heartily sorry" and promised to reform, at least a little. Slowly this army of free men was learning to work together.

They were also coming to respect this extraordinary man who was their leader, if not quite their commander-in-chief. They had come a long way toward forming an army, but was it enough? George Washington knew that they were about to meet some of the most formidable troops in the world, and the outcome was very much in doubt. --

*David Hackett Fischer's
Washington's Crossing, Oxford
University Press, 2004, p.30.*



You are cordially invited to our
**New Year's Clara Mead
 Egg Nog Party**

**Sunday, January 10th, 2010
 from 2-5pm
 At the Mead House
 12 Elm Street
 Dobbs Ferry**

Each year the Historical Society hosts a holiday party for its members both old and new—in honor of our benefactor Clara Mead, who bequeathed her house to be used as the Historical Society Headquarters.

This year we will gather in January to welcome in the new year. Please join us at the Mead house on January 10th from 2-5pm for an afternoon of hospitality and conversation.

Come meet some new friends, see the beautiful Mead house; enjoy a cup of Clara's Mead's famous egg-nog—a closely guarded secret recipe! and nibble on some delightful edibles made from old-fashioned recipes especially for the occasion

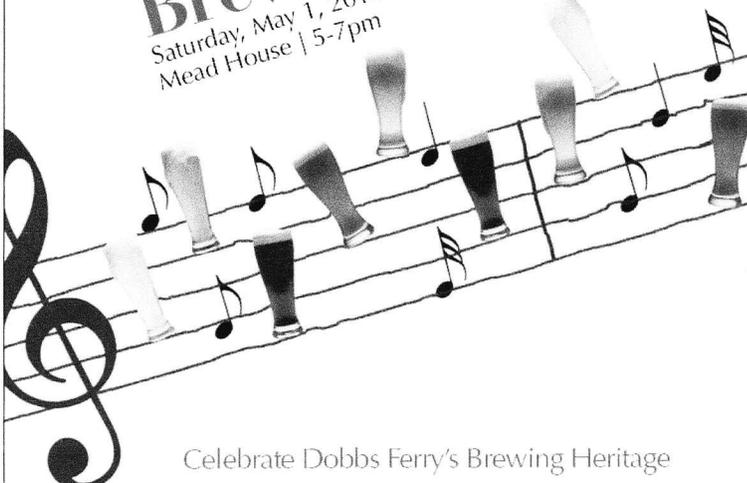
We welcome and encourage all our members to attend and urge new members to join at the door. ! Everyone is invited. Please bring your friends!

It's a Dobbs Ferry village tradition –
 We'll see you there!

SAVE THE DATE

BrewLaLa

Saturday, May 1, 2010
 Mead House | 5-7pm



Celebrate Dobbs Ferry's Brewing Heritage

- Sample beers from Captain Lawrence Brewery
- Enjoy appetizers from Half Moon Restaurant
- Learn about the Biegen and Anchor Breweries
- Join in singing old drinking songs

Watch for details

DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY | THE MEAD HOUSE | 12 ELM STREET | DOBBS FERRY, NY 10522
 914-674-1709 | DFHISTORY@VERIZON.NET | WWW.DOBBSFERRYHISTORY.ORG

***MARK YOUR CALENDAR
 FOR A VERY SPECIAL
 HISTORICAL SOCIETY GALA***

Our Spring fundraiser will celebrate
 Dobbs Ferry's brewing history.
 Did you know that until Prohibition
 there was a brewery
 where 145 Palisade St. stands today?

JOIN US ON MAY 1, 2010 TO LEARN MORE.



The Mead House
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