



# The Ferryman

*Fostering an awareness and appreciation for the history of Dobbs Ferry and all the people, noted and humble, who transmitted the good things of the past to the present and the future.*

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Matthew Couzens, a 19th-century engineer, played a pivotal role in historic preservation in Dobbs Ferry.  
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In his winning entry in our essay contest, last year's valedictorian reflects on how we have all adjusted to the pandemic.  
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In the early 1960s, Dobbs Ferry residents were bitterly divided about the future of the Little White Church Cemetery on Ashford Avenue.  
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## The Ferry Sails Into The Age of Steam

By Jim Lockett

*Note: The author gratefully acknowledges the work of four local historians whose work he drew upon heavily: Alice Munro Haagensen, Alice Haagensen Gerard, Sam Gerard, and Margaret Travis Lane.*

In the nineteenth century, the ferry to Dobbs Ferry reached its peak of prosperity, as steamships and railroads arrived in the Hudson Valley and the economy boomed.

We've been telling the story of the Dobbs family and the ferry as an imagined narrative by John Dobbs, the first Dobbs man to settle here. John died in the eighteenth century, so we continue the story as a message from his ghost.

The Sneden family owned the ferry for most of its life. It is generally believed that Mollie Sneden, matriarch of the clan, was John's daughter Mary, so we adopt that conjecture as fact and let John introduce the various Sneden characters as his descendants. This installment, the eighth in the series, will cover the first half of the century.



*The view of Dobbs Ferry, from an 1846 panorama.  
 Credit: Wade & Croome's panorama of the Hudson River from New York to Albany.*

### John's narrative resumes:

The nineteenth century: What a grand century it was in the Hudson Valley! Industry thrived and the population grew. Steam power on the river and the rails drove the economy forward.

The ferry remained wind-powered and muscle-powered, but it was far from obsolete. It was a way to get to the steamboats at mid-river or at the Dobbs Ferry dock, and when the train came to Dobbs Ferry, it was a way to get to the train.

As we entered the century, the ferryboats were still big pettiaugers (a.k.a. "periaugers"), two-masted barge-like sailboats designed for shallow waters, with pivoted leeboards on the sides instead of a keel, and lots of open deck space for passengers and cargo.

I'll begin by listing the captains of the era, with the date each started and ended his term at the helm:

### John the Patriot, 1776 - 1821(?)

As you may recall from the last installment, my one Patriot grandson — and namesake — John Sneden emerged from the Revolution as sole owner and operator of the ferry. My other Sneden grandsons, all Tories, were banned from the ferry. Most went to Nova Scotia.

In 1807, John bought a 15-year-old pettiauger named the Tappan Packet. It was 55 by 16 feet — about as long as one of your modern 18-wheeler tractor-trailer trucks and twice as wide. At just \$80, it was cheap, so it must have been in poor condition.

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## The Ferry Sails...

*Continued from page 1*

### **John Sneden Jr. ("Boss" Sneden), 1821(?) - 1829**

By 1821, John's son John Jr. was in command. In addition to being a ferryman, "Boss" Sneden, as he was called, built ships in the nearby settlement of Tappan Slote (today's Piermont), about two and a half miles north of Snedens Landing. "Slote," from the Dutch word "sloot," meaning ditch, referred to Sparkill Creek, which joins the Hudson there. The creek penetrates the Palisades and was navigable some distance inland, making it an important shipping route.

**S**neden descendants have an 1822 invoice showing John Jr. buying a brand new pettiauger named "Friendship," built at Tappan Slote, for \$1,250. Clearly, the ferry was highly profitable if it could justify such a big outlay.

We can calculate how much that was to him thanks to some invoices that survive from 1795. John Jr. and three other Sneden men (his brother and two cousins from Nova Scotia) billed Philip Van Cortlandt and John Acker for building the sloop "Success" on the Croton River. Their rate was half a British pound per man-day, the equivalent of \$2.50 a day. Thus the new pettiauger cost John Jr. the equivalent of 500 days labor.

### **Lawrence Sneden, 1829 - 1869**

The next ferryman was my great-great-grandson Lawrence J. Sneden. Like his great-



LIVINGSTON MANSION



VIEW NEAR HASTINGS

*Credit: From "The Wilderness to the Sea,"  
by Benson J. Lossing.*

grandmother Mollie, Larry stands out as a giant in the ferry's history. He ran it for about 40 years (1829 - 1869), taking it to its zenith as a business concern. He also served one year (1848) in the state Assembly.

His first name honors his grandmother Ellison Lawrence Dobbs, of the Lawrence family that lived in the Big House up the hill from the ferry landing. I told you about them in the last installment. Larry married Nancy Tallman (a.k.a. "Taulman") in 1825. Tallman Mountain and Tallman State Park bear the family name.

In 1850, business was so good that Larry built a big new ferry dock that ran 500 feet out into the river, wide enough for three wagons abreast. "Wagons of farm and garden produce ... often stood in a line from the top of hill to the end of the pier, waiting their turn to unload," Ella Coates (1861 - 1949), Larry's granddaughter, is quoted saying in "The Story of the Ferry," a rare book found at the Palisades Free Library.

### **The Steamboats**

The North River Steamboat, also known as the Clermont, which began operation in 1807, was the first commercially successful steamship anywhere.

The steamboats that soon proliferated on the river were a boon to the ferry for two reasons: (1) The ferry carried passengers and goods directly to and from steamboats in the middle of the river, and (2) there was a steamboat dock at Dobbs Ferry, giving west-shore residents and businesses another reason to cross the river. By mid-century, when a steamboat stopped at Dobbs Ferry, it might leave 100 passengers bound for the ferry to the west bank.

Ever wonder where that name "Clermont" came from? It was the name of a vast estate on the upper Hudson owned by Robert R. Livingston, who provided the financial and political muscle necessary to make Robert Fulton's steamboat a success.

The Livingstons of Dobbs Ferry, for whom Livingston Ave. and the Hyatt-Livingston House (now gone) were named, were his cousins. To me, though, their name is mud, because one of them promoted "Livingston's Landing" as a better name for the village than "Dobbs Ferry."

The sleek, beautiful side-wheeler steamboats were fast, ran on a schedule, and carried passengers in comfort and cargo in great bulk. They



VIEW AT DOBBS FERRY.

*Credit: From "The Wilderness to the Sea,"  
by Benson J. Lossing.*

revolutionized life on the river, but they didn't stop at Snedens. So the ferry was a link to the steamboats for local residents and businesses.

Cruising up and down the river by steamboat was entertaining as well as practical. In 1845, the enterprising duo of William Wade and William Croome prepared a fold-out book, small enough for your pocket or purse, but 10 feet long when unfolded, providing a detailed panorama of the entire length of the river. You bought it as you boarded and used it as a guide to the passing scenery. (A section of the panorama appears on Page 1.)

**E**ach page depicted both sides of the river, in perspective, from an elevated vantage point. If you unfolded the book completely, you saw two long, narrow strips of landscape depicting 140 miles of river, each upside down relative to the other. It's quite surprising: You might be looking at the nice depiction of the Palisades and Piermont, and notice a bunch of lines across the bottom of the page that make no sense to the eye. But turn the panorama upside down, and suddenly Dobbs Ferry pops into realistic 3-D and the Palisades become a meaningless jumble. See this 1845 panorama online: <https://tinyurl.com/panorama2U>

Steamboats co-existed with sailing craft on the river throughout the century. At Dobbs Ferry, Captain John King operated a sloop. Married to my great-great-great-granddaughter Eliza Ann Dobbs, he named the sloop Eliza Ann. They lived at the waterfront from the year of their marriage, 1827, to about 1841. According to family lore, the little farmhouse I built over 100 years earlier there at Willow Point, near the present train station, was still standing and was their home. That would be the same little house where, in 1775, Jasper Stymus sold John and Sam Adams dinner and "ferryage."

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# Matthew K. Couzens: Preservationist by Design?

By Gerard W. Coffey

**M**atthew Knapp Couzens was a surveyor, civil engineer, and developer in the days between the Revolution and the Civil War, when being all those things was a big deal in Dobbs Ferry.

Surveyors and engineers were in high demand during one of the most explosive periods in America's growth. New York State led the nation in industrial production between 1840 and 1860. New York City was the largest city in the nation and its financial capital. Expanding railroad networks eased the delivery of products to other states.

Couzens is by no means a household name in Dobbs Ferry. With little paper trail available, our knowledge of him is based on

only a few touchstones:

- A report of his audacious attempt at about age 13 to stop what he viewed as reckless development by speculators;
- The house he designed and built at 12 Chestnut that helped to set a stylistic tone for housing after the speculators retreated;
- And a survey map he drew that appears to be the first to show in detail the boundaries of private and public property of the western side of the Village in 1860.

Couzens was among those who flourished with the coming of the Hudson River Railroad, which extended south from Rensselaer, N.Y., in 1846 to New York City in 1851. He and his younger brother, John, had significant holdings in Dobbs Ferry.

Evidently, to Couzens reckless speculation was one thing; investing in your own community was something else entirely.

**H**e was born in New York City on Nov. 17, 1824, the son of John Couzens, a shoemaker, and Mary M. Knapp, who moved to Dobbs Ferry when Matthew was a child. Couzens's grandfather and namesake was born in London in 1760, later immigrating to the Colonies and serving in the 4th Company, 3d Regiment of the New York (Continental) Line, from Feb. 25, 1779, to the end of the war. He died in New York City on Sept. 17, 1810.

## **The Preservationist**

The story of Couzens's early foray into *Continued on page 4*

## **The Ferry Sails...**

*Continued from page 2*

You could say Captain King competed with the Sneden ferry a little bit, because he would take folks across the river before continuing down to New York City to sell the cucumbers he and Eliza Ann raised on their plot by the river.

**F**rom Willow Point they move to the place you now call Ardsley, Eliza Ann's birthplace. They had a successful pickle factory there at the corner of King St. and Ashford Ave. (So named because King came from Ashford, England.) For another theory on the origin of the Ashford name, see the article on Page 6.

Eliza Ann's father was another John Dobbs, the one buried in the Little White Church cemetery on Ashford Ave. Though Eliza Ann didn't quite match the 100-years-plus lifespan of my mother, Mary, my Aunt Sarah, and my daughter Mary (Mollie Sneden), she did make it to 91 (1805-1896).

## **Here Comes the Train**

The coming of steam railroads to the Hudson Valley influenced the ferry as profoundly as the steamboats did. In 1832, the first line was announced: The New York and Erie, which was to link Lake Erie to the Hudson. Its tracks extended 4,000 feet out into the river at Tappan Slote on a landfill pier built for the purpose in 1838. (It's still there, today's

Piermont.) The line opened in sections as they were completed, culminating in a grand celebration attended by President Millard Fillmore in 1851.

A ferry ran from the pier to Dearman (today's Irvington). Waters are shallow on the west bank, but the pier reached deep water, so big ships could dock. The Steamboat "Orange" made a regular run from Nyack to New York City, stopping at Piermont.

These new transportation links that bypassed Snedens Landing had to be a severe threat to the economic well-being of Larry Sneden's ferry, but the railroad part of this threat soon passed: Passenger service ended in 1853 and freight service in 1861 because the railroad company obtained rights to a better route to the river further south, terminating at Jersey City.

**I** don't know how long the Piermont- Dearman ferry service lasted. When a new ferry service on that same route was announced in 1929, newspapers made no mention of the earlier service, suggesting it was long forgotten.

I can't fathom why the developments at Piermont, just two and a half miles north of Snedens Landing, did not immediately kill the Sneden ferry. Having steamboat service to Nyack and New York City, a ferry across the river, a water route inland, plus, for a time, rail service going west, all coming together a few miles

from Snedens would seem to render the town obsolete as a transportation node. But it didn't.

Apparently Larry Sneden was not discouraged by the competition because it was in this same era that he built a 500-foot pier at Snedens. That's a big investment! His optimism was probably fed by the coming of the Hudson River Railroad to Dobbs Ferry in 1849. Now the Sneden's ferry was a way to get to and from a railroad that would soon stretch from New York City to Albany.

**T**he same train line bestowed the same advantage on Dearman and the Piermont- Dearman ferry, of course, but for some reason Larry was undaunted.

The ferry business did begin to shrink in the second half of the nineteenth century, but it survived and remained in the family. Even after a north-south rail line going right past Snedens began operation in 1859, the ferry business didn't end; it just scaled down to smaller boats.

Miraculously, the ferry lasted well into the twentieth century. We'll see the foundation for that put into place in the next installment with the arrival of a second Lawrence family, bringing a baby girl, Mary, who would grow up to be the final towering figure in the history of the ferry. My daughter Mary and this new Mary (Mary Lawrence Tonetti) would be the bookends on the ferry's long history on the west bank.

## Matthew K. Couzens..

*Continued from page 3*

historic preservation is told in a one-column account included on a page of an otherwise unidentified periodical. It was discovered inside a file labeled “Scrapbooks, Vol. 1” included in the papers of Alvah P. French, editor-in-chief of the five-volume “History of Westchester County, New York.”

The story relates how in 1836, as speculators descended on the Rivertowns ahead of the railroads, the young Couzens was unable to dissuade developers from plowing over a fort that Washington had ordered built overlooking the Hudson near where Livingston Avenue now meets Broadway. Couzens “regarded their performance in obliterating so important a monument of the great struggle for independence as little less than sacrilegious [sic].”

Young Couzens “sent word to General James A. Hamilton, then in Washington, D.C.” Hamilton, a major (not a general) in the War of 1812, was the son of the nation’s first Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton. A “highly indignant” Hamilton returned to Dobbs Ferry and, unable to stop the destruction, denounced the new owner, George Sanford, and his associates as “Hogs, ‘Goths’ and ‘Vandals.’” The venture failed a few years later.

### The House

Larry and Peggie Blizard, the current owners of 12 Chestnut, are demonstrably proud of Couzens’s yellow-and-white three-story six-room house that sits on a quarter acre. The front faces south to the street, and a wraparound porch has views west to the Hudson. There is also a renovated barn the two artists — she a painter, he an illustrator, cartoonist, and retired art teacher — now use as a studio.

Peggie said Couzens designed and built the house in 1855 and lived here with his wife, Susan Charlotte Knight, their son, Robert, and their baby girl, Mary Helen, born on March 10, 1860.

“Sadly,” Peggie said, “Mary Helen died at age one and a half on August 24, 1861,” probably the victim of one of the many then incurable childhood diseases. Three years later, Susan Charlotte died June 23, 1864.



12 Chestnut as it appears today, left, and as it appeared before 1960.

Couzens sold the house not long after and moved with his 10-year-old son to Yonkers. His wife may have been in declining health for some time. Couzens took out two Help Wanted ads in the New York Herald in 1858 and again in 1860. One read: “Wanted — A girl for general housework in a small family residing up the Hudson River at Dobbs Ferry. Apply M.K. Couzens, 192 Broadway, on Monday, from 10-12 o’clock.”

Couzens may have also built the Mead House around the corner at 12 Elm, now the home of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society. And those may not have been the only homes he built. Several homes on and around land that belonged to Couzens and his brother have common characteristics: stair arrangements and exterior porches, mansard-style roofs with dormers, favorable positioning from the street, etc. — almost as if Couzens wanted to leave a template for others to follow.

### The 1860 Dobbs Ferry Map

As a surveyor, Couzens had frequently been called on to measure and draw boundary-line maps associated with small, private land sales, large proposed developments, and occasionally large land tracts. The most extensive topographical map, signed “M.K. Couzens” — his name as it appeared on every map he drew — was an 1880 “Map of Part of the Manor of Philipsburg in the County of Westchester, N.Y.” It is unclear what use the map was put to, given that the Philipsburg Manor holdings were broken up not long after the Revolution.

But the M.K. Couzens survey map of most interest to the Historical Society is likely his 1860 Map entitled “Map of the Village of Dobbs Ferry and Vicinity. 1860.” It shows the western “developed” part of the Village.

The map details property ownership throughout the downtown area just before the Civil War. What today is known as Broadway or Route 9 was then called “The New York and Albany Post Road.” Our Main Street was then High Street, and Palisade Street was First Street.

The map shows the property holdings of M.K. Couzens and by “J. Couzens,” most likely his younger brother John (Couzens had two brothers and six sisters). In addition to his own house at 12 Chestnut, the map shows he owned six and a half lots on the southwest corner of Oak and Broadway. He may have already designed, built, and sold 11 Elm Street (now 12 Elm Street) to Anthony Huebner, the first owner of the Mead House. A few other homes in the vicinity are likely but unconfirmed Couzens projects. Records at both the County and Township level seldom have construction origination dates that are complete, and frequently show simply “Before 1870” on their property records.

The holdings of John Couzens show ownership of 12 apparently undivided lots within the block bordered by what today are Palisade, Main, Chestnut, and Walnut streets.

The father and brother’s appetite for real estate investing never ended. Records show several such transactions conducted in and around Yonkers, either as individuals or in partnership with others. M.K. continued to draw survey maps throughout his life, including for clients back in Dobbs Ferry.

Matthew Knapp Couzens died at his Yonkers home at 110 Ashburton Avenue on October 17, 1897.

## Good News Amid The Pandemic!

By Daniel Schwartz

*Daniel Schwartz is the Dobbs Ferry High School Class of 2020 valedictorian. Alert readers will also recall his name as the first-place recipient in the Historical Society's first-ever essay contest: "Why Monuments Matter," in 2017. Daniel is attending Tufts University, majoring in history.*

*Betsy Hunter & Jeanne Cronin Ceccolini,  
Essay Contest Co-Chairs*

If you look around you, I think it's pretty safe to assume that none of us could have expected to be where we are at this very moment. We never would've guessed that this is what our graduation would look like: masks, six feet apart, all fenced off like this. But as hard, and restricting, and boring as these past few months have felt, I want to say that I'm proud of all of us for the way that we've been handling it. We've learned to wear masks everywhere, we've come up with new ways to socialize like Netflix parties and parking-lot gatherings, and we've given up a lot of senior-year festivities to protect the health and safety of our community.

When the threat of the pandemic became really serious back in March, there was so much uncertainty surrounding our daily lives. On top of the obvious fear of getting sick, we were scared of things like adapting to online classes — especially since a lot of us quickly started going to sleep at 3 a.m. and waking up at noon. There was also the concern over how some of our more technologically challenged teachers would manage from their computers... but you did a great job, Mr. A.

Being seniors, we also had the fear of losing our second semester and missing out on the really fun parts of high school. The way I see it, though, us being upset that we couldn't live out our senior year together is, more than anything, a testament to how much we care about each other and how close we've all become over these years. In the words of the legendary philosopher Winnie the Pooh, "How lucky am I to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."



*Dobbs Ferry High School*

We started kindergarten, most of us at Springhurst, in 2007. That was thirteen years ago. It feels like forever, but I also have no clue how I got from blue bus to blue robe so quickly. As individuals, we've all changed and matured so much over that time. We each grew up and became our own person, and I think that's an accomplishment that should not be overlooked.

We haven't just grown alongside each other, though, we've grown with each other. There are so many people that I met long before I can remember that are still my closest friends today, as I'm sure most of you can relate to. I'm also sure, though, that each of us has at least one friend who we weren't close with until recently, and those friendships are just as meaningful. So even though we might be going our separate ways in the fall, the relationships that we have will not be forgotten, and social media now allows us to stay in touch super easily... or block people if that's what you want to do.

Today we have the luxury of taking our social media for granted, but it's worth remembering that this stuff is pretty new to the world. The first iPhone was released in 2007, the year we started kindergarten, and Instagram didn't come out until we were in third grade. We've lived through world-changing technological developments, landmark social reform, the short but sweet life of Vine, and even at this very moment we're in the middle of a global pandemic and a powerful racial justice movement. To me, all of these changes that we've lived through set our generation apart and have

helped bond us together, through that overall shared experience.

Our class is obviously unique, too, because of how the pandemic has aligned with one of the biggest moments in our lives, graduating high school. On top of that, though, we have plenty of other things that make us special. For one, we were in kindergarten when Mr. Berry kissed the pig, making us the last grade to say that we were there for that. We were also in Springhurst when Silly Bandz got outlawed and that time when there were like four fire drills in one day. In middle school, we were the first incoming class to have the new Commons, and we also had the D.C. trip with those infamous buses. In high school we had Mac Field Days and clubs and sports games. Last year we had formal, and this year we had the shared stress of figuring out what our plans were for next year. And now, after all that, we're finally here, graduating high school.

I would like to thank all of the teachers, administrators, and staff for getting us here today and all they've done to celebrate us over the past few weeks. I would also like to thank all of our families for supporting us. And, most importantly, I would like to thank all of you for being a great class and a great group of friends to have gone on this journey with us. It may seem like we missed a lot these past few months, but really there's nothing else I could ask for.

Congratulations to everyone, and even though this moment might feel bittersweet, just remember... this isn't "thank u, next," it's "see you later."

# The Road to Dobbs Ferry, Ashford Avenue

By Madeline Byrne

Quick, name the main streets of Dobbs Ferry.

You probably said Main Street and Cedar Street, and today you'd be right. But a few hundred years ago you might have mentioned the old trail between the Hudson River and the Long Island Sound. Created by Native Americans, the trail connected their village here in Dobbs Ferry, at the site of Wickers Creek, and another encampment near what is now the Ardsley Middle School. It crossed the Saw Mill River, known to the Native Americans as Nepperhan, just north of today's Ashford Avenue Bridge.

Our Ashford Avenue had its beginnings with this trail.

The earliest image of this trail that I found was on a map: *A plan of the operations of the King's army: under the command of General Sir William Howe, K.B. in New York and east New Jersey, against the American forces commanded by General Washington from the 12th of October to the 28th of November 1776, wherein is particularly distinguished the engagement on the White Plains the 28th of October.*

Here we see the King's Army camped on the trail: <https://collections.leventhalmap.org/search/commonwealth:q524n800r>

Another important map showing this trail is Robert Erskine's *Road from White Plains to Dobbs' Ferry. No 9*, a military topographical map. Erskine was appointed by General George Washington as Geographer and Surveyor General of the Continental Army.

## FERRYMAN STAFF

Larry Blizard  
Peggie Blizard  
Maria Harris  
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Ellen Klein  
Judith Doolin Spikes  
Teresa Walsh



You can see his map here:

[https://maass.nyu.edu/servlet/ShowResultsSvlt?xmlIn=n000007.xml&xslIn=results\\_sd01\\_ss.xsl](https://maass.nyu.edu/servlet/ShowResultsSvlt?xmlIn=n000007.xml&xslIn=results_sd01_ss.xsl)

### So, when did the trail take on a name?

In the late 1800's, Ashford Avenue was called the "The Road to Ashford" on various maps and atlases. The name came from the original name of village of Ardsley, which was Ashford.

So, you might wonder, how did the village of Ashford come by its name, and why was its name changed?

One account has it that the Indian trail *forded* the Saw Mill River at a place marked by an ash tree, presumably inspiring the naming of the village.

Another story starts with Captain John King. He was married to Eliza Dobbs, daughter of John and Deborah Lawrence Dobbs (who are buried in the Little White Church Cemetery). When his days as a sloop captain on the Hudson River were over, he opened a pickle factory at King Street. Family stories say he was born in Ashford, Kent, England; it seems he named the village for his birthplace.

The 1872 map shows the Road to Ashford running east from Dobbs Ferry. The OR on the map is the intersection of Ashford Avenue and Broadway.

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In 1883 the village of Ashford applied for a post office. Since there already was an Ashford Post Office in New York State, the story goes that the village honored Cyrus W. Field by naming itself after his estate, Ardsley, located in Irvington and originally named for his ancestral home in England.

For whatever reason, the name of the "road to Ashford" did not change.

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## Paradise ... Or Parking Lot?

By Ellen Milhan Klein

Long before the heated debates over The Landing and Rivertowns Square, there was a time that Dobbs Ferry residents were acrimoniously divided over the future of the Little White Church Cemetery.

Old-timers may remember those days in the early 1960s, but the issue was news to me until I happened upon a folder in the archives of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society. Readers of previous histories of the cemetery will remember that the one-acre site had been deeded by the Lefurgy family to South Presbyterian Church in two installments for use as a community burial ground. The original South Church was a white clapboard structure (a “little white church”) on the site of today’s Dobbs Ferry Lutheran Church, and thus the cemetery, officially the Presbyterian Cemetery, came by its nickname. After the congregation’s move to its current grander quarters on Broadway, the church retained the cemetery, and burials continued until around 1894.

Fast forward to the 1960s. The cemetery still belonged to South Church, which could



*Duke Coffey unearths and arranges stone fragments for future conservation efforts, October 2020.*

not afford to maintain it. Despite occasional efforts to tidy the grounds in preparation for a Memorial Day or other ceremony, the property had fallen into disrepair so great that passers-by could not see beyond the brambles. In 1957, Rebecca Rankin, Village historian, sounded the alarm; in her white paper entitled “The Burying Ground,”

Rankin railed against the deplorable condition of what she called “the most historic spot in Dobbs Ferry.” Reiterating that the original deeds of 1823 and 1842 restricted the property forever to use as a burial ground, she proposed that title be transferred to the Village to be maintained as a memorial to the “former residents who labored to shape” the community.

Meanwhile, the congregation of the adjacent Dobbs Ferry Lutheran Church, on the site of the original South Church, had outgrown their building. Sunday school classes were held in makeshift locations — the kitchen, the choir loft, even a cloakroom. And there was no space for their youth activities and programs that benefited the greater community. Oh, if only they had more land!

Possibly moved by the intermittent bad press deploring the condition of the cemetery, South Church welcomed the opportunity to rid themselves of the responsibility. In a letter dated June 20, 1961, the clerk of session at South Church wrote to Mayor John H. Ritch informing him of the church’s intent to transfer the cemetery property to the Lutherans — unless the Village agreed to assume title as

The Rev. Marie Meeks, pastor of Dobbs Ferry Lutheran Church, was taken aback to see a small group of people armed with shovels walking about the Little White Church Cemetery the Sunday before Halloween. No, we assured her, we were not graverobbers up to some mischief, but rather trustees of the Historical Society along with some family and friends. Our goal that day was to continue the process of documenting and restoring the historic cemetery.

Wearing masks and maintaining social distance, we worked individually or in small groups on our assigned portion of the property, referring to the master map prepared by an Eagle Scout in 2013. We noted any damage to stones since our last formal inventory in November 2019. We unburied fragments covered by soil and thatch and moved them onto pallets, where they would be more visible to DPW personnel and await the attention of a conservator. And in anticipation of Veterans Day, we applied cleaning solution to the stones of two Civil War veterans that had darkened considerably over the last year.

More information on the Little White Church Cemetery can be found on the Society’s website: <http://dobbsferryhistory.org/wordpress/ongoing-projects/little-white-church-cemetery/>. Additionally, some burial records are available on Find A Grave: <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/863857/presbyterian-cemetery>

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THE MEAD HOUSE  
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## Paradise... or Parking Lot?

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a historic site. What the Lutherans had in mind was revealed later in a letter to the mayor dated Oct. 1, 1961; they planned to move the graves on the half-acre nearest their church, erect a "suitable memorial," and, as they could afford it, increase the size of their building.

The Dobbs Ferry Board of Trustees was hardly enthusiastic about assuming ownership. Mayor Ritch was in favor, as were trustees John F. Nanna and Raymond J. Ruble, but trustees Clifton Foote, Carl Kaimowitz, Ted Bird, and Leo F. Carroll were opposed, believing the Lutherans would do a better job of maintaining the property. When the measure came up for a vote, it lost 4-2. (The mayor could vote only to break a tie.)

What followed was a months-long public outcry. Alice Denike, a local historian and resident of nearby Devoe Street who deplored the plight of the cemetery in frequent letters to the local papers, begged the board to reconsider. Proponents of village ownership went door to door amassing 1,600 signatures on a petition. Commander Paul W. Quigley Jr. wrote to the board on behalf of American Legion Post 1048 urging that "this area should in no manner shape or form be used for any other purpose" than for what it was originally intended. Quoted in a Nov. 29, 1961, article in the *Herald Statesman*, former Mayor Warren D. Benedict exhorted the trustees to prevent the Lutherans from "disturbing the remains of our heroic dead and others" and warned, "I'll take this matter to the Supreme Court and higher if necessary to stop this thing."

The future of the cemetery became a key issue in the village election of March 1962. Democratic candidates pledged their support and managed to gain one



*The Little White Church Cemetery in ruins, in an updated photo, and as it appears now.*



additional seat on the board. When the matter came up for a vote again on May 8, 1962, Village trustees bent to the will of the people and voted unanimously to accept the property. The final steps were accomplished quickly. South Church agreed officially to convey the cemetery to the Village. A committee made up of Ms. Denike, Ms. Rankin, former mayor Benedict, Stewart Storms, and former village trustee Earl Shinn began planning the future of the site. Finally, on Sept. 10, 1962, the deed was transferred, for "no consideration," to the Village of Dobbs Ferry.

Until recently the Little White Church Cemetery suffered a long period of decline. A community-wide volunteer effort to rescue it in the 1990s led to some fleeting improvements, but the decline persisted, with fallen branches, broken and uprooted stones, and areas too overgrown to access. That sorry trajectory ended when, in 2013, former Mayor Hartley Connett made the cemetery a priority; under his leadership, overgrowth was removed, a new fence installed, and entire sections of gravestones re-installed. The village Department of Public Works does seasonal maintenance. As the locals in 1962 had envisioned, this unique historic

site is now open for us to experience an important piece of Dobbs Ferry's past.

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