

# The STATEN ISLAND HISTORIAN

Published Quarterly  
by the



Staten Island  
Historical Society

Volume I.

JANUARY, 1938

Number 1

## THE VOORLEZER'S HOUSE

By LORING McMILLEN

The word "Voorlezer" is Dutch and freely translated means "a person who reads aloud." In colonial days and even well into the 19th century in those settlements throughout the Hudson River valley and adjacent country whose antecedents were Dutch and whose religious leanings were toward the Reformed Dutch Church, the position of Voorlezer carried more honor and responsibility than any other with the exception of that of the dominie or minister.

The position of Voorlezer was chiefly ecclesiastical for in the early days of settlement when few communities could support a minister, the Voorlezer conducted simple services in the minister's place. To complete his means of support he occupied the position of sexton, school-teacher and, in many cases, town clerk as well.

Only one other example could be more typical of the proverbial economy of the Dutch than this combination of duties in the position of Voorlezer and that is the building usually erected for his residence and the performance of these duties and commonly known as the Voorlezer's House. For the Voorlezer's House was a church, a school, office, and residence built into one structure. Here under one roof the Voorlezer on Sunday led the singing and read from the scriptures, and on week days tried to instill in the young ones the simple rules of reading, writing and arithmetic. At night when his day's work was over he adjourned to his rooms leading from the meeting room to enjoy a domestic quiet, interrupted occasionally, perhaps, by the visit of a good neighbor dropping in to have a letter or legal document composed and written.

A Voorlezer's House which is the name continually used in old documents referring to a building of this sort was only

temporarily intended to be used for its many purposes. For when the village or town whose people it served became prosperous enough, separate buildings were erected for church, school or clerk's office.

Few houses were built for the Voorlezer after 1700, for by that time most of the Dutch settlements had become established and churches and schools built to replace the earlier Voorlezer's House.



*The Voorlezer's House*

Naturally one would expect to find none of these early buildings still standing. The discovery that the Voorlezer's House, built before 1700 at Richmond, Staten Island, was still standing, came, therefore, as a great surprise.

This important discovery is a result of the research work undertaken by Mr. Raymond Safford of the Staten Island Historical Society in connection with his model of the village of Richmond as of 1775. In the course of this work, the title of the property on which 63 Arthur Kill Road stands was searched. This property was found to be on or so near the original location of the Voorlezer's House as mentioned in the filed land records, that a careful study was determined upon to see if No. 63 could be the Voorlezer's House itself.

(Continued on page 2, column 1)

## A Brief History of the Staten Island Historical Society

By W.M. T. DAVIS

The Tompkinsville Lyceum, organized in 1842, and located on the Richmond Road (now Van Duzer Street) and Prospect Street, had aims and desires of an historical society. It was before the Lyceum that Raymond M. Tysen, on April 12, 1842, delivered an excellent address on the History of Staten Island, which was in the same year published in pamphlet form by the Board of Directors.

Mr. Tysen said, "Curiosity, one of the most useful principals of the mind, is ever busy about the history and antiquities of the place where we dwell. We are anxious to know what people have lived there before our own; what has been their history and destiny, . . . and imagination loves to linger upon pictures of former occurrences on the scenes of our daily walks."

There were other early Staten Island historians. The Rev. Peter J. Van Pelt had written: "A Brief History of the Settlement of Staten Island" as early as 1818, and later there was Gabriel P. Disosway, Dr. Samuel Akerly and the Anthon's, father and son. This popular interest naturally led to the formation of the Staten Island Historical Society, which was incorporated in 1856 under Chapter 319 of the Laws of 1848, and which, with several lapses of inaction, has continued to this day. The Certificate of Incorporation and other documents relating to our Society are considered in detail in the: "History of the Staten Island Historical Society," published in 1936.

The periods of inactivity twice extended for twenty years or more, but the laws of 1848 state: "In case it shall at any time happen that an election of trustees, directors or managers shall not be made on the day designated by the by-laws, said society for that cause shall not be dissolved but it shall and may be lawful on any

(Continued on page 3, column 2)

## Voorlezer

(Continued from page 1, column 2)

In a study to identify an old structure there are three steps: documentary, structural and traditional. These have been listed in the order of their importance and usually only the first two are necessary or of real value in an identification. For unfortunately it has too often been the case that tradition alone has been thought sufficient to identify a building. This step records the memories of old residents and with all proper respect to these worthy people, very often proves erroneous. Concerning the Voorlezer's House at Richmond, tradition carries it to the Revolution but unfortunately discloses no hint as to its former use.

However, as described below, the documentary and structural story proved without question that 63 Arthur Kill Rd. is the Voorlezer's House.

The documentary identification is based entirely on the chain of title and property descriptions as recorded in the Richmond County Clerk's Office and the State Archives at Albany. On Dec. 30, 1680, Robert Rider received a patent for 320 acres at the head of the Fresh Kills. This is the first record of a land transaction covering part of the village of Richmond and was followed shortly afterwards by grants to Aaron Prall and to Capt. James Hubbard which three grants included all the village.

The early history of Richmond, its founding and growth is lost. We can be certain, however, that in 1679 when Dankers & Sluyter, Labadist Missionaries, made a trip through our sparsely settled Island, Richmond at that time did not exist, since they mention New Dorp at South Beach as the only village. Nor in the Rider, Prall or Hubbard patents is there any mention made of a village. However, it is evident that by 1700 a hamlet had sprung up, for by this time a road record describes the laying out of a road leading to "Coccles Town" by which name, often spelled "Cuckoldstown," the village of Richmond was known before the Revolution. The origin of the name, Coccles Town, is a matter of conjecture as history fails to record it. The abundance of oyster and clam shells found in the waters of the Fresh Kills nearby and called "Coccle" shells in the early days, might account for the name. The central location of Richmond at the junction of roads from the south, the east and the west undoubtedly led to its settlement and with the building of the Voorlezer's House before 1696, St. Andrews Church, 1712, the county jail 1709, and the court house 1729, Richmond was established as the county center and the leading village.

By subsequent division, the northern 80 acres of Rider's patent of 320 acres (Liber B. p. 162) by July 17, 1696 had descended to James Hans Dye who on this date mortgaged it to James Fitchett. The recorded document reads in part, "Beginning at a flat rock below the Voorlezer's House." This is the first mention of the Voorlezer's House and shows it to be standing at this date.

On March 6, 1697 James Hans Dye and James Fitchett leased to the Dutch Congregation for 50 years a small tract of the above 80 acres lying on the west side of Arthur Kill Road and, as the property search discloses, lying nearly opposite where Center Street joins Arthur Kill Road. In this interesting document, brief and to the point, Fitchett states that his children are to receive free schooling and the property is to be occupied by no person other than the one serving the congregation, not naming but meaning the Voorlezer.

It is not possible to locate the Voorlezer's House by a direct examination of the title of the property, as the title is obscure. However, the property and more important, the house itself can accurately be located by the chain of title of the adjoining piece of property known as the one acre lot, now occupying the bed of Center Street. This property is described as, "Beginning at the southeast corner of the house formerly belonging to the Dutch Congregation," obviously meaning the Voorlezer's House which had been built by the Dutch Congregation.

The location of this one acre piece was accurately determined by The Rev. Lefferd Haughwout of the Staten Island Historical Society from maps and records in the county clerk's office, and by comparing these with present land-marks, notably the Rezeau family burial plot at the entrance to the County Jail, the north side of which was found to coincide with the south line of the one acre lot. This same south line when prolonged, met exactly the corner of 63 Arthur Kill Road, as described in the records.

This established the site of the Voorlezer's House but as several houses could have successively occupied this site, it remained to prove that 63 Arthur Kill Road was and is the Voorlezer's House.

This brings us to the second method of identifying an old building wherein a careful examination is made of all the architectural and structural details.

This part of the identification of the Voorlezer's House fell to the writer as this subject has been a particular study of his for some years. Not much is known and much less is written on this fasci-

nating subject as our builder ancestors left very little in the way of written records of their work, and it is only largely through a comparative study of many details of dated structures that an unknown building can be dated.

One finds that upon studying a great many dated buildings, certain details are found to have been used at specific periods. Such details as the raised or Georgian panel were used from circa 1710 to 1800, the sunken panel 1790 to 1840, bricks measuring  $4\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{4} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$  inches from 1700 to 1790, and hand wrought nails from 1790 to 1820.

After taking into consideration differences due to locality, transportation, communication, nationality, and station in life, which factors would affect the use of building methods, we find we have a list of dated details. Armed with these we can examine an undated structure and by comparing the detail found therein with the known dated ones, arrive at a date of construction and also dates of subsequent alterations or additions.

In this manner 63 Arthur Kill Road was carefully examined with the purpose of placing its date of erection before 1700 and thereby establishing it as the Voorlezer's House.

The building is set close to the Arthur Kill Road facing the road and the southeast. As one would expect, it is a simple and plain appearing building, yet somehow pleasing, as all old structures are, due to some indefinable quality arising from good proportions and faintly sagging lines. The building is two stories high with an attic and a basement kitchen below the street level. The window openings on the first floor front have been altered but on the second floor they appear to be the original small openings, three in number, not equally spaced, as was common in buildings before 1700. The original covering appears to have been clapboard over a hewn frame.

The peaked roof with gable end to the side is an unusual feature, rising two feet higher in the front than in the rear, giving a roof of unequal pitch which terminates in the front with an upward curve or flare at the eave. This is characteristic of many Dutch houses, and in this form without a projection over the eaves was common before 1750.

The plan of the house measures 25 feet in width and 28 feet in depth and upon close examination was found to have been identical on the first and second floors. The original plan contained a room partitioned off in one corner, apparently for living purposes, leaving an L-shaped room wherein it is assumed meetings were held, as this room on both

(Continued on page 3, column 1)



## Voorlezer

(Continued from page 2, column 3)

floors had access to the stairs or the outer door. A conclusive detail in favor of this assumption was found when some modern boards on the first floor ceiling were removed by the enthusiastic museum staff, and the second floor beneath the upstairs meeting room was found to have twice as many floor beams as the private room of the same floor. Obviously, the master carpenter thought it necessary to give more support to the floor of this room, having in mind the fact that it would have to support a greater number of people than the private rooms.

The plan of the two floors is unlike anything found in a private house at any similar period and seems to bear out its dual use as a residence and a public building.

The partitions dividing the private from the public rooms are of two kinds: one, mud-filled between hewn studs, a method not used after about 1790, the other, wide vertical, planed and edge-molded boards, a method not used after approximately 1700 for partitioning rooms in other than the attic or cellar. This latter detail is an important one in dating the house before 1700.

Every room, other than the second floor private room, was heated by plain brick fireplaces, around which there later had been placed mantelpieces and paneling. When these were removed the painted surfaces of the original brick work were disclosed. This type of fireplace, with no ornamentation other than a mantel shelf above the opening, was a common Dutch type prior to about 1700 and little used thereafter.

The cellar kitchen fireplace is still another interesting type, found only in exceptional instances later than 1700. A large oak beam is set on the stone sides of the fireplace spanning an opening of about six feet. This beam supports the brick chimney above. At the back of the fireplace, which is constructed of stone and brick, is the oven. This opens directly into the fireplace at the right rear, and in this form precedes the later type which could be reached directly, as it was built into the brick side of the fireplace.

The vertical board paneling and the fireplaces are the only items of construction which place the building before 1700. Other details were examined, and, while they are found to exist in buildings as late as 1790, they are, however, details which were all in common use before 1700. Such details as hand wrought nails and hardware, hewn frame, exposed ceiling beams, 12 to 18 inch hand sawed floor boards, mud filled walls, and split lath are not found later than about 1790 in this section.

(Continued on page 4, column 3)

## Historical Society

(Continued from page 1, column 3)

other day to hold an election for trustees, directors or managers, in such manner as may be directed by the by-laws of such society."

On August 11, 1922, the Historical Society and the Antiquarian Society were merged by order of the court. The Historical Society gained strength and influence and the Antiquarian Society gained a name, descriptive of its purposes, when the two societies became one. The Staten Island Antiquarian Society had been incorporated in 1914, and among its objects then stated were the promotion of popular appreciation of the history of the



*The Stillwell-Perine House*

Photograph by Miss Eliza H. Lake, 1933

Island; the collection and preservation of articles and information connected with the same. Its first accomplishment was the purchase of the old Stillwell - Perine House, 1476 Richmond Road, on February 15, 1915.

The publications of the Antiquarian Society prior to 1922, and the later publications of the Historical Society are listed in a folder issued in 1937, entitled: "The Work of the Staten Island Historical Society and the Historical Museum."

The History of the Society published in 1936, gives in some detail the circumstances connected with the assignment by the Borough President of the one time County Clerk and Surrogate's office building in Richmond to the Local Historian under the Laws of 1919 and 1921, to be used by the Historical Society as a museum. The building is under the jurisdiction of the Borough President.

We quote from the History: "Commencing with 1933, many kind friends of the society believing that historical objects could be better and more usefully preserved in the museum than in the attic or barn have presented them to the Society. As a result Mr. McMillen, Mr. Howard R. Hill, Mr. Burton A. Kollmer, Mr. Charles F. Vreeland, Mr. Raymond Safford, Mr. Ross Barteau, Mr. Nicholas F. Galante, and Mr. Charles C. Stoddard, the

librarian, as well as others, have been busy arranging the acquisitions. The extent of the collection already made, and on exhibition, is ever a surprise to visitors, and naturally leads them to make contributions. It is evident that an object may have but slight interest in itself, but when placed and compared with allied material may serve as a useful illustration.

"The building of the Historical Society is also the headquarters for the extensive research work now being carried on by the Society under the direction of Mr. Loring McMillen and the Rev. Lefferd M. A. Haughwout, with the co-operation of the Works Progress Administration of the Federal Government."

While Richmond is but a village, it is located nearly in the center of our Island, and is at the junction of several bus lines. As a consequence the Historical Museum is easily reached and the number of visitors is rapidly increasing. Number one of Historical Pamphlets, recently published by the Society, is devoted to the village of Richmond, and twenty-nine buildings or places of interest are mentioned. The old red Court House opposite the Museum, built a hundred years ago, the Voorlezer's House built prior to 1696, and the Church of Saint Andrew, with its ever interesting old grave-stones, are all attractive and interwoven with the history of our Island.

### *The Society has For Sale the Following Publications:*

The Story and Documentary History of the Perine House, by Charles Gilbert Hine, 1916 (unbound) \$2.00.

History - Story - Legend of the Old King's Highway, now the Richmond Road, by Charles Gilbert Hine, 1916 (booklet) \$ .25.

The Church of St. Andrew, Richmond Staten Island, by Davis, Leng and Vosburgh, 1925 (cloth) \$3.00.

Legends, Stories and Folklore of Old Staten Island, Part I. The North Shore, by Hine & Davis, 1925 (unbound) \$1.75.

The Conference or Billopp House, Staten Island, New York, by William T. Davis, 1926 (cloth) \$3.00.

The History of the Staten Island Historical Society, by William T. Davis, 1936 (booklet), \$ .25.

Historical Richmond and Vicinity, *Folding Pamphlet, with Map*, 1937, \$ .10.

Days Afield on Staten Island, by William T. Davis, \$1.25.

Orders for any of the above publications, or requests for membership applications should be sent to the Staten Island Historical Museum, Richmond, Staten Island.

## STATEN ISLAND BASKETS

By BURTON A. KOLLMER

What is probably the earliest reference to basket making on Staten Island is found in the statement of the final sale of the Island by the Indians in 1670. Possession was given to Governor Lovelace by 'turf and twig' with the exception of two kinds of wood, ash and hickory, by which the Indians reserved the right of cutting such wood required for the purpose of making baskets. It is stated on good authority that several bands of Indians did at long intervals visit the Island thereafter and exercise their reserved right to the woodland.

In the Colonial days when usefulness was the predominant note in the handicrafts of early America, the basket proved its worth in many ways. There was a basket for each particular use: carrying the seed for planting and grain to the stock, winnowing chaff, straining cheese, carrying bread, eggs, fruit, and a hundred other uses within the home. An odd basket is the so called 'cap basket' used to hold the shuttle spools of the weaver and hung conveniently from the loom.

Basket making was an early industry on Staten Island and in May 1825 John Read, listed as a willow basket maker of Castleton, purchased some twenty acres in the vicinity of the old Perine House on Richmond Road in Southfield. A little northwest of this old house over a rise or ground was a swampy depression called 'Reads Hollow.' Here grew in great numbers the willow used for making baskets and here, each Spring, Read and his son went to cut the straight slim saplings for their trade. In 1842 Read is reported to have had a 'plantation' of native and foreign swamp willows. As the saplings of four to eight feet were cut in the early spring, they were bundled and set in the water until the buds began to open. The bark was then easily stripped off and the sticks re-bundled and made ready for use or sale. The Reads prepared more material than could be used by themselves and they sent the surplus to the New York market. While it is only conjecture that they peddled their products throughout the villages, they did, as a fact, supply the general stores. That philosopher and genial keeper of the general store at Swan and Bay Streets, J. C. Thompson, used to handle the Read baskets and through the kindness of William T. Davis, some of these old Staten Island willow baskets may still be seen at the Historical Museum in Richmond. It may be noted that up until 1882 willows were

still grown for basket making by Edward Herrmann in the vicinity of Prospect Street in West New Brighton.

About 1840 John Merrell had a farm below Bulls Head on the Turnpike and raised a quantity of strawberries and raspberries. These berries were packed for market in baskets of his own making. He made hundreds of these baskets and marked them with his initials, J. M. in black. They were made of black ash, woven well, with a small handle; quart



*The Basket Maker*

size for strawberries and pint size for raspberries. Black ash was favored for these baskets because of the comparative ease with which this wood could be stripped after hammering out with a wooden beetle. The interest in the Merrell baskets lies in the fact that so many hundred baskets had to be made. Old Farmer John probably could be seen on a rainy day or between crops, seated on a bench in the barn diligently weaving these carriers, small yet strong, to prevent crushing the fruit of his labors.

With the development of the oyster industry the demand for oyster baskets became so great that local basket makers could not supply the demands of the planters and many of the oystermen made their own baskets. To list the names of the oystermen here would be difficult because almost everyone who lived near the water was engaged in this industry at one time or another. The oyster baskets were generally alike, some of oak and others of ash, usually about a bushel size and the larger ones with 'wearing strips' along the bottom. The baskets for C. C. Jones, oysterman, were made of white oak by Obadiah Jones, basket-maker, who worked in the basement of the old Pier-son house on the corner of Union Avenue and Richmond Terrace. These baskets sold for \$5.00 a dozen for the bushel size. They had to be made strong with stout handles to stand the rough use, and still today in the homes of many of the old oystermen may be seen these husky

baskets now serving in the role of waste basket, wood basket or vegetable basket.

The tools of the basket maker were few: a shaving horse, draw knife, measuring stick, felling ax, various sizes of wooden beetles, wooden mallet, wedges, and forms. Such were the tools used by James Morgan, basket maker, at Dock Road, Karle's Neck, 1842-1880, who made baskets with and without forms. He used white oak for the large, and maple for the small baskets. A sappling would be selected, felled, quartered and stripped by means of the wedges and wooden beetles. The strips were next cut to various lengths: 8 foot strips for the siding, 6 foot strips for the hoops, and 4 foot strips for the ribs. Further splitting would now take place and then the final shaving and trimming on the 'shaving horse' with the draw knife. The strips were bundled and placed in clear water ready for use. James Morgan made many types of baskets. The bushel oyster basket he sold for 50 cents apiece up to the Civil War. During the conflict they sold for 80 cents and 90 cents returning to 50 cents again at the end of the war. The half bushel baskets sold for 30 cents and as high as 80 cents. It was possible to make 3½ to 4 dozen such baskets a week. Bread baskets 2 feet by 3 feet brought \$2.00 and a baker's 'wagon basket,' 4 feet by 8 feet brought \$8.00 or \$9.00 from 1870-1880. Berry baskets he made and sold for 3 cents to 10 cents apiece. This gives a fair idea of sizes and prices, and with a small bit of reasoning the cost of various baskets might readily be judged.

James Morgan's tools and some of his baskets are preserved in the Historical Museum at Richmond. To the visitor these Staten Island hand woven baskets tell a story—that while they were made by hand, carried on the arm, that which they contained was near the heart.

## Voorlezer

(Continued from page 3, column 1)

Examination of the foundation and the timber used in the construction of the building discloses no sign of a former building ever having occupied the site. This is almost always a reliable proof in itself, as our frugal forefathers in rebuilding used the old materials. These are easily identified through old nail, tool, or other marks.

These factors: strengthening of the meeting room floor beams, floor plans, three details of construction not used after 1700, all details in use before 1700, and no signs of a former structure occupying the site, invariably bring one to the conclusion that 63 Arthur Kill Road is the Voorlezer's House of 1700.

(Continued on page 8, column 2)



## The Staten Island Historian

Published quarterly by the

STATEN ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY,  
INCORPORATED

Volume I January, 1938 Number 1

### Officers—1937 - 1938

Wm. T. Davis.....President  
Rev. Lefferd M. A. Haughwout.....Vice-Pres.  
Harry Kuhn.....Treasurer  
Dr. Frank A. Strauss.....Secretary  
Loring McMillen.....Director of Museum  
Burton A. Kollmer.....Curator  
Charles C. Stoddard.....Librarian  
Raymond Safford.....Museum Assistant  
Charles F. Vreeland.....Museum Assistant  
Ross Barreau.....Museum Assistant  
Nicholas F. Galante.....Museum Assistant  
Roswell S. Coles, Editor

Subscription \$1.00 per year.

Membership, including subscription, \$3.00.  
Single Copies, 25 cents.

Address all communications to:

The Staten Island Historical Society, Inc.  
The Historical Museum, Court & Center Sts.  
Richmond, Staten Island, New York.

Copyright 1938.

Printed by D. D. Magruder, Inc.

### EDITORIAL

*The Staten Island Historian* has developed logically from the expansion of activities undertaken recently by the Staten Island Historical Society. With the growth of the Museum, the increasing interest in collection and display, and the accumulation of the fruits of painstaking research a need for some sort of permanent record has become evident. In addition there is a keen desire to make the Museum a more vital factor in Staten Island life and to create a wider interest in the work of the Historical Society. *The Historian*, therefore, will attempt to satisfy the need for a scholarly historical publication which is at the same time of a literary and educational value.

The work of the Society is, however, of more than local significance. Staten Island has much in common with the rest of the eastern seaboard, but socially, geographically, and historically it presents local variations of importance to all students of history. Members of the Society engaging in research are aware of the broader significance of their findings and, consequently, *The Historian* will appeal to students, historical societies, libraries, and educational institutions wherever they may be located.

## ACCESSIONS

By LORING McMILLEN

When in 1933 the Museum staff, then made up of a custodian and two assistants, was promised an eight-room building of approximately 10,000 sq. ft. of floor space and was told that upon completion of reconstruction work, the building was theirs for an Historic Museum, the situation was not a little amusing. For we had nothing then but a few good articles in the Stillwell-Perine House, home of the Society, and the good-will of the Society.

In reality, we had more: a good idea of the types of articles we wanted for Museum exhibits and an automobile to bring those articles to the Museum if they should be forthcoming.

For the sake of expediency we early adopted two rules, which have since become the governing policy of the Museum, namely, to collect only Staten Island objects, and to collect from all fields of life the home, the farm, or the workshop.

Our plan, which we still follow, was to start early Saturday mornings (our only day as we were privately employed on week days). Upon seeing some likely-looking house or a house which we knew through a "tip" to be of interest, we approached and knocked at the door. When the door opened we explained our mission to the lady or gentleman who appeared. Often we were told that they had no objects of historical value, but as often, we were invited in and shown the treasures there. As time went on and we made more and more visits many of the treasures from barn, attic, or cellar were entrusted to our care to become the property of the Historical Society.

Space will permit neither a detailed list nor description of the many objects given to the Society. However, a list of donors is arranged below and to these friends the Society wishes to express its sincere thanks for their gifts to the Museum and for the help so unselfishly given in many ways. Without this support the Museum could not succeed and with it the Museum becomes an educational institution, a me-

morial to these friends and to the old Staten Island families whom they represent. The following list, arranged more or less chronologically, includes donors for the period from the beginning of the Museum in 1933 to November 30, 1937:

Miss Eliza Lake, Mrs. Harvey L. Allen, Mrs. W. Meschenmoser, C. H. Nielson, Mr. and Mrs. Alex Daly, W. R. Britton, Wm. T. Davis, A. W. Callisen, Mrs. Stephen Cutting, Mrs. W. L. Conner, Mrs. J. A. Sharrott, Miss Catherine W. Bodine, Mrs. Viola Fuller, Mrs. Josephine B. Post, Mrs. F. M. Beasley, Mrs. Joseph Miller, C. C. Jones, Mr. and Mrs. Fred. Decker, C. H. Brown, Mrs. G. W. Sleight, Misses E. and D. Seaver, Mr. and Mrs. William Morgan, John Fred. Smith, Mrs. Wm. Flake, Miss Ida Dudley Dale, Mrs. Ida C. Standerwick, Mr. and Mrs. U. G. Sprague, Geo. W. Cole, Mrs. Eliz. Barton, Mrs. E. Lewis, P. G. Ullman, Jr., Mrs. Ella B. Burkman, Mrs. Andrew M. Eagan, Mrs. P. Davey, Miss Gertrude Clark, Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Thompson, Miss Katherine Seaman, Richard Decker, Robert Decker, Mrs. Evelyn Pero, Mrs. Juliet Trench, Graham Marr, Edward M. Stothers, Misses Mary K. and Julie M. Seaver, Mrs. Chas. G. Hine, Wm. M. Winant, Mr. and Mrs. Thos. B. Simonson, Mrs. Ella Barnes De Puy, Mr. and Mrs. Harold De Puy, Miss Marie Schwerd, Miss Laura Yetman, Cornelius G. Kolff, Stephen L. Mershon, Mrs. W. M. Zeluff, Mrs. H. C. Chance, Mrs. Emily S. C. Keyes, Abram De Puy, Miss Emma Butts, Walter Bush, Stephen Merrell, Horatio J. Sharrett, Edwin Barnes, John Scotto, Mrs. David H. Cortelyou, Frank Van Pelt, Miss Annie Cole, Mrs. Sam. E. Barton, Mrs. A. G. Lake, Mrs. Annie Seguire Crocheron, Mrs. A. E. Simonson, Miss Helen J. Kelsey, Willard D. Decker, Mrs. Mary J. King, Miss Alice Egbert, Misses Marie and Anna Walz, Mrs. Irving McKesson, Mrs. Wm. Bailey, Elliott Burgher, Mrs. Godfrey W. Routenberg, Mr. and Mrs. F. Brower, Mrs. Colice Caruso, Miss Anna McClure Sholl, Mrs. Ernest Beaumont, Mrs. Neefus Journeay, Wm. D. Perrine, Mrs. Emil Sevenhaar, Mrs. Mary S. King, Mrs. Lucy Mersereau, Miss Edith Berry, Dr. H. G. Steinmeyer, J. M. Lake, Mr. and Mrs. A. B. DePuy, Miss Jane E. De Puy, Miss Adele de Vigne, Mrs. E. W. Staight, Mrs. Jennie M. Parker, Mrs. S. C. Benjamin, Frank S. Merrell, Mrs. Bessie P. Addicks, Miss Louise M. Androvetto, Wm. Anderson, Misses Josephine and Mary Henning, Mrs. J. G. Olmstead, Isaac U. Van Duzer, Sidney Weir, Mrs. Melvin Decker, Mrs. Ida Grant, W. H. Duncan, Mrs. Elvira Van Pelt, Mrs. E. L. Benjamin, Mrs. Eliz. C. Evans, J. N. Jacobsen, Carleton Siemer, Miss Frieda Schreubner.

## OUR SPORTING ANCESTORS

By CHARLES C. STODDARD

Many readers who will recall the exciting horseraces that were a feature of the various County Fairs held at Dongan Hills and elsewhere on the Island may be surprised to know that the "sport of kings" held a place here almost two centuries ago.

In the *New York Mercury* of Monday, September 26, 1763, appeared the following notice: "The Elizabeth Town Free-Mason's Plate of Twenty Pounds Value, To be run for, in the Field of John Vander Belt, on the South Side of Staten Island, the 4th Day of October next, (being the first day of the Elizabeth Town Fair) by any Horse, Mare, or Gelding (Whole blooded only excepted) to carry nine Stone, the best of three Heats, three Miles each Heat, three Rounds for each: The owner of each Horse, Mare, or Gelding must enter them the day before, and pay to Mr. Thomas Duncan, or Jacob Vander Belt, the sum of Twenty shillings for each; the Entrance Money to be Run for the next day, by all but the winning Horse of the preceding Day, and those distanced. Those that neglect to enter till the Day of Running, must pay double entrance at the Stake: Not less than three will be permitted to start for the above Plate, all Disputes that may arise shall be determined by three Masons, who are appointed for that purpose."

Unfortunately the subsequent issues of this newspaper do not furnish us with the outcome of this particular race, but it is evident from inference that, even at this early date, the "field of John Vander Belt, on the South Side of Staten Island" was a known rendezvous for meetings of this sort. While this may be one of the earliest published references to the organized sport on the Island, there is a certainty that horse racing had persisted for many years previous, since there are many references to the fine types of horses met with in this locality. Where one finds fine animals, one will always find a spirit of rivalry. We know that for many years subsequently this particular neighborhood was noted as a center for the sport.

If we do not have an account of this race, we do have an almost contemporaneous one that might well be the envy of a modern sporting reporter. This is furnished us in the "Diary" of Philipp Waldeck, recently translated for the Staten Island Historical Society. Waldeck,

chaplain to one of General Howe's German regiments, stationed on the Island during the War of Independence, was a close observer, interested in the social as well as the military aspects of his visit, and always saw deeper than the mere scene, as his account will show.

"In this month (May 1776) the customary horseraces (are held), by which one can learn to know the true nature of the American, who in the matter of betting even surpasses the born Englishman.

"In general the American accustoms himself from youth to strenuous bodily exercises, and when he cannot supply himself with an other kind, he hits ball. One should not therefore be at all surprised when one sees an old man play ball with young fellows. The Sunday diversions of the young consist principally in riding, and this is equally the pleasure of the women as of the young men. We attended in company a horse race, held on a Sunday afternoon, which would be the most festive. One saw here half the Island together, and there was not a fairly good horse that was not on this occasion put through its paces. Even the fair sex of the negroes had gotten permission from their mistresses, and appeared in such finery that one prepared himself to pay a compliment when seen from behind. It is a particularly droll sight to see a pitch black individual in white summer clothing, a white silk sunhat, and black silk gloves of the same color as the hand. These were escorted by their sweethearts (the negro girls have also their schwit-hards), who paraded in the discarded clothing of their masters. They had a dance worth seeing for the music alone. A darky played a self-made fiddle, which judging by the tone could have only one string. This is, however, not only the music of the slaves during their festivities, but also the gentlemen on the island amuse themselves by this music. No people love music more than the Americans, but none love it with less taste than just they.

"Now the two horses which were going to run and were covered with all sorts of ornaments were paced up and down to incite the spectators to betting. Hardly was that done than one saw them stake by twenties, the one on this, the other on that horse, and to press each others hands in confirmation of their wager. There, others were standing who had not yet decided on which horse they wanted to bet, here, others were relating the entire pedigree of these horses, and investigating whether they were descended from genuine English stock. One

praised the virtues of this horse, which the other therefore alone did not consider, because you praised the first, and this was already enough to bring about a wager. Two others heard the wager of these two, and bet who of the two would win. It was impossible to find out what the various inducements for betting were.

"Now, they were off. Everybody was all attention. The riders were hardly in the middle of the course when one horse was one step behind. Now there were all kind of countenances, both could not win. And the horse that was outrun, even if handsomer than the other, was now not worth a pound. Whereupon everybody raced each other and the wagers diminished gradually, so that two and two rode for a bottle of punch where the first two had raced for \$50."

While on the Island, General Howe made his headquarters at the "Rose and Crown," which stood nearly opposite the head of New Dorp Lane, and his subordinate officers were quartered in neighboring houses, notably the Fountain House and the "Black Horse" tavern. The latter, even in Colonial days, according to Bayles was considered "rather inferior in tone, being frequented by those who ran horses on the road there."

It was while the troops were encamped at New Dorp that the "Black Horse" Tavern was given its name. The story is that one of the members of General Howe's staff was the owner of a handsome black charger which had won scores of races on New Dorp Lane. On the occasion of a general review of the army at New Dorp, this officer mounted his horse preparatory to escorting Sir William. The horse took fright and ran away. Dashing against a large rock that stood near the hotel, both the horse and rider were instantly killed. Fellow officers decided thereupon to change the name of the house to the "Black Horse" Tavern; and a sign, bearing the picture of a black horse, was painted by a British soldier and hung in front of the building.

The Patten House, a noted resort of sportsmen, close to the site of the "Rose and Crown," was built in 1835 on the recommendation of a group of men that included Commodore Vanderbilt, Dr. Ephraim Clark, Daniel L. Clawson, Richard Conner, and others interested in horseracing at New Dorp. On the opposite side of Richmond Road, for many years afterward, was the racing park of the Seaview Park Association, with a half-mile race track. New Dorp Lane continued also to be used as a race course. On the William H. Vanderbilt property near the beach, now the Aviation Field, was the "Club House Trotting Course." The names and reminiscences connected with these places form in themselves and interesting chapter in the history of the Island.



## Richmond About a Hundred Years Ago

By WM. T. DAVIS

The folder on the Historic Village of Richmond and Vicinity, recently issued by the Staten Island Historical Society, states that the Old County Clerk and Surrogate's office building, where the Museum is now located, was built in 1848. In 1813 Horatio Gates Spafford, in "The Gazetteer of the State of New York," had described the county seat as a poor, mean village, but by 1848 Richmond had become an important place, both socially and politically, as far as our Island was concerned.

A hundred years ago *The Richmond County Mirror*, on August 20, 1837, had this to say of Richmond Village: "A new street has lately been opened in this village, on which seven pretty little houses have been erected. These, in addition to the new court house, give quite a business appearance to the place. 'Who'd have thought it?' Till lately Richmond has been a bye-word for inanity."

This "business appearance" was largely due to the activities of Henry I. Seaman, who brought about the erection of the fourth Court House, and the building of the pretty little houses on Center Street. At one time "Seaman Town" was a nickname for Richmond Village.

About a year later, namely on May 26, 1838, the *Mirror* again praises Richmond Village as follows:

"To one who now visits our Island after an absence of two years, the little village of Richmond presents a noble instance of the unborrowed and intrinsic worth of a place where the uncertain heat of speculation has thrown off none of those transient meteors which blaze, burst and fade at the same moment, leaving no visible traces of their source or goal. Our readers will remember that on the approach to Richmond from Tompkinsville, a stunted wood intercepted a view of the place from a position east of the Episcopal parsonage. This wood has been entirely cleared, and now the approach to Richmond is gladdened by a full view of all the new public and private buildings—the mills and the old fort beyond the village—and the picturesque meanderings of the stream which puts up to the village from the sea. The advantages of Richmond as a manufacturing place never struck us until very lately. There is quite a body of water collected in natural reservoirs upon the high ground, which could by a very little ingenuity be made to yield a great and never failing power. The arm of the sea which flows quite up to the village, rises and falls several feet at every tide, and as it is already made to drive three or four undershot wheels, there is no reason why it cannot drive more. This system is about

five miles long, and is naturally navigable to within half a mile of the village. With all these natural advantages, and the entering-wedge of improvement having already been driven, Richmond must soon display other claims than those which her central position and ancient usage give her, to the immunities and title of 'the county town'."

"The great body of water collected in natural reservoirs upon the high ground" to the north-west of Richmond, had apparently been made use of, at least to some extent, before 1838. The Bedells, whose family burying ground was on the top of Burial Hill, and who owned nearby property, appear to have operated a mill. In the *Richmond Republican*, May 17, 1828, Benj. C. Yarrington under the heading of "Carding Wool," informs "his friends and the public that he has taken Judge Bedell's Mill at Richmond," and engages to manufacture as good wheat or rye flour as can be made on the island. He has also got a complete carding machine with new bolts, etc. and will card wool in the best manner, and the shortest notice." (See *Staten Island and Its People* p. 613)

Dripps map of 1850 shows that at that date, the fresh water mill on the edge of the bluff close to the old Mill Road, was operated by P. Ketchum, and that R. Crocheron operated the Tide Mill below. The fresh water mill received its supply by way of a ditch leading from the mill pond to the bluff, otherwise the water would have reached the Kill by way of what is now known as Ketchum's brook.

A hundred years ago a considerable amount of grain was grown on our Island to be ground in the mills near Richmond or elsewhere. The following is from the *Mirror* of March 30, 1839: "By the late official report of the Measurer General of grain in the city of New York we see that the export of wheat from this island was 1,419 bushels to 2,253 from Long Island, neither island exporting any other grain. If Staten Island can export more than half as much as her colossal neighbor, in these times, when so large a portion of her land is held in the glorious nonentity of town lots, what may we not expect of her?"

On July 13, 1839, the same paper reported: "Our farmers look as cheerful as their fields, and everything is smiling in profusion. Our export of wheat will probably exceed that of last year."

The Staten Island Historical Society has preserved a number of old mill stones, among them several once in use in Ketchum's Mill. The old mill pond site with its fine growth of timber, the ditch leading from the pond to the mill foundation, close to which there is a natural spring out of which we occasionally drink, are all in Latourette Park, and the City of New York could not do better than preserve these interesting and historical land marks.

## HOUSEHOLD HINTS

By JANE DE PUY

These are extracts from "The Frugal Housewife" dedicated to "Those Who Are Not Ashamed of Economy," published in Boston in 1831.

"Provided brothers and sisters go together, and are not allowed to go with bad children, it is a great deal better for the boys and girls on a farm to be picking blackberries at six cents a quart, than to be wearing out their clothes in useless play. They enjoy themselves just as well; and they are earning something to buy clothes, at the same time they are tearing them."

"New England rum, constantly used to wash the hair, keeps it very clean, and free from disease, and promotes its growth a great deal more than Macassar oil. Brandy is very strengthening to the roots of the hair; but it has a hot, drying tendency, which N.E. rum has not."

"Boil castor-oil with an equal quantity of milk, sweeten it with a little sugar, stir it well, and, when cold, give it to children for drink. They will never suspect it is medicine; and will even love the taste of it."

This edition of the *Frugal Housewife* has an addition called "Hints to Persons of Moderate Fortune."

"There is one kind of extravagance rapidly increasing in this country, which, in its effects on our purses and our habits, is one of the worst kinds of extravagance; I mean the rage for travelling, and for public amusements. The good old home habits of our ancestors are breaking up—it will be well if our virtue and our freedom do not follow them!"

Change the wording slightly and one would think the following had been printed in 1937 instead of 1831.

"Perhaps there never was a time when the depressing effects of stagnation in business were so universally felt, all the world over, as they are now. . . . The effects of this depression must of course be felt by all grades of society. Yet who that passes through Cornhill at one o'clock, and sees the bright array of wives and daughters, as various in their decorations as the insects, the birds and the shells, would believe that the community was staggering under a weight which almost paralyzes its movements. 'Everything is so cheap,' says the ladies, 'that it is inexcusable not to dress well.' But do they reflect *why* things are so cheap? Do they know how much wealth has been sacrificed, how many families ruined, to produce this boasted result? Do they not know enough of the machinery of society, to suppose that the stunning effect of crash after crash, may eventually be felt by those on whom they depend for support?"

## WHY GENEALOGY IS IMPORTANT

By LEFFERD M. A. HAUGHWOUT

When the interest of the historian was limited to political events and public personages, genealogy was regarded as a pursuit of no great seriousness. But the historical field has broadened. History today concerns itself with everything that has to do with the social and cultural interests of the community. It deals not only with rulers, wars, and political affairs, but with the people themselves. This gives to genealogy a new significance, for genealogy rightly understood is a study of the family; and of all social classifications, the family is by all odds the most important. The history of architecture and of the cultural arts has long been recognized as a worthwhile interest. Specialists devote themselves to the study of old furniture, silver, glass, pewter, and what not, and great museums are maintained at public expense to shelter such collections. But what of the people by whose art and industry these things were made, and who used them in their homes? They, surely are of even greater interest, and of vastly greater importance. To study them is the function of genealogy: their origin, the sources from which they spring, their migration to the new world, the environment which shaped them, and their gradual dispersal to widely separated parts of the United States. To those who regard it in this light, genealogy is not only a useful but a fascinating subject.

The Staten Island Historical Society is whole-heartedly committed to this newer concept of historical science. It hopes, therefore, to develop a genealogical "section" which shall devote itself to a serious study of Staten Island's families. It seeks, above all, to raise genealogical interest from a mere matter of tracing particular ancestral lines in the interest of a society membership, to a broad study of the whole family group, regarded as a component part of the social community.

For the furtherance of this purpose, the ever growing "Staten Island Index" has to offer a wealth of genealogical and historical data such as will hardly be found in other parts of the country. For those who are not already familiar with this great accumulation of historical matter it should be explained that the "Index" is a comprehensive card-index of Staten Island's public records—deeds, mortgages, wills, and court records, from 1680 to 1875, of Church records—births, baptisms, marriages, deaths and Church membership, of Staten Island Family Bibles and other family records, of old New York and Staten Island newspapers and other published works, state or private, which in any way have to do with Staten Island or its people. The libraries and public archives of greater New York have been searched in the accumulation

of this matter. The Index is not merely an index of unrelated names, but of complete and related information. In the case of a deed or will, for example, there is first made a master-card under the proper heading, upon which all names and date are noted. Each individual name on the master-card is indexed in turn, with a reference to the master-card and the source from which the record is taken.

This Index has been in course of development for the past two years, with a staff of research workers, filing clerks and typists furnished by the Works Progress Administration. Thanks to the intelligent cooperation of the W.P.A. organization, a high degree of efficiency has characterized the research staff from its beginning. More than 100,000 cards are now in the files, and others are added day by day. Although far from complete, and not officially available to the public, it may be consulted in a limited way, under the supervision of the worker in charge.

### Voorlezer

(Continued from page 4, column 3)

Unfortunately, no record has come to light as to when the house was built. Its earliest mention is in 1696, and it is probable that it was built shortly before that time, as that was the period of general settlement throughout the Island. It seems evident that the house is the first building erected for a church on the Island, since the first French Church was built in 1698, the English, St. Andrew's, in 1709-1712, and the Dutch Reformed at Port Richmond, about 1716. The erection of an earlier church at Stony Brook, now Oakwood, has been disproved by the very absence of any supporting evidence. A Presbyterian Church was built there, however, in 1724. The earliest record concerning a building constructed for school purposes, other than the Voorlezer's House, appears in the County Clerk's records just preceding the Revolution, thus establishing the House as the first school.

It would be an interesting point if one knew who the Voorlezer or Voorlezers were who lived in the old House and eked out a simple living in service to the pioneer 17th century community about them. They cannot be positively identified. The Ecclesiastical Records state that William Bertholf, Voorlezer of Bergen, officiated but whether he lived here, one cannot say. There is a supposition also that Thomas Coone was the Voorlezer. This is based on the fact that he was county clerk prior to 1700, owned the one acre lot opposite the House and sold his holding in Richmond when the House ceased to be used for religious purposes.

On March 17, 1700, the Voorlezer's House was sold by the Dutch Congregation to Louis Du Bois for his own private use, thus bringing to an end its use as a church. It is probable, however, that it continued to be used as a school for some

time, as there does not appear to have been any other in the neighborhood. This seems more probable as Louis Du Bois is known to have lived on the opposite side of the Arthur Kill Road. Eventually, however, possibly by an unrecorded sale, and by the terms of the original 50 year lease of the property on which it stands, the House became the property of the Rezeau family, owners by purchase of the original 79 acres and as such, holders of the lease.

The House remained in the possession of the Rezeau family for more than 150 years, and was until recent times known as the Rezeau House and said to be of great age. A former resident of Richmond, Miss Kitty Edwards, tells the story as told her many years ago of the coming to Richmond of the British soldiers and of their taking possession of the houses of the little village, among them the Voorlezer's House. A widow Rezeau then lived there with her granddaughter. The soldiers moved into the House and the widow was compelled to cook for them in the huge cellar fireplace and the girl served them in the rooms above.

Until recent years the building was well kept and fortunately suffered very little from changes within. About 1890, the adjoining building was constructed, but this did not affect the old House which was now being used as a store and residence. The last few years, however, have seen the historic house come precariously close to a final stage. In 1936, the Richmond County Federal Savings and Loan Association took the property over on foreclosure, and, as the building by this time was in disrepair, they made plans to tear it down.

It was by a happy coincidence at this time that the identity of the House was ascertained, and the Historical Society determined to save it. The Loan Association gave its full support, withholding action. The matter was brought to the attention of Borough President Palma, with the purpose of having the city purchase the building. Mr. Palma took up the matter with the City Comptroller. Unfortunately, the Comptroller for reasons invalid as regards this historic structure, rejected the proposal. It now rests in committee and it is hoped that the new Comptroller will act favorably when the proposal is again submitted.

It would be hard to realize how any community, even New York, famous for the destruction of its landmarks, could allow such a monument to be destroyed. For here, still standing in a fair state of preservation, is the oldest, the mother church of the Dutch, the French and the English churches on the Island. Here is, also, the first school building on Staten Island, and of national importance, what is probably the oldest primary school building in the country. Few communities can point to a similar historic structure, for the Voorlezer's House is truly a unique building, and as such should be preserved.