

THE MANORS AND
HISTORIC HOMES OF
THE HUDSON VALLEY

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**THE MANORS AND
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Etc.

WITH A PHOTOGRAPHIC AND A DRAWING ILLUSTRATION
BORROWED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



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CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	v
I. FROM BOSTON AND NEW LIFE IN NEW YORK	1
II. THE PATRIOTISM	11
III. THE MANOR	27
IV. THE PATRIOTISM AND MANOR OF BOSTONIANITY	34
V. THE PATRIOTISM OF COLON BIRTH	37
VI. FORDHAM MANOR—1871	38
VII. FOX HALL MANOR—1874	42
VIII. FORT TRAIL, GREENWICH MANOR (EASTERN MANOR OF BOSTONIAN- WYER)—1882	49
IX. THE LOWER MANOR, CLAYBACE (EASTERN MANOR OF BOSTONIAN- WYER)—1884	60
X. LIVINGSTON MANOR—1886	62
CLARENCE	
LEWIS HOUSE	
THE HILL	
XI. FELDEN MANOR—1887	68
XII. PHILIPPOURIE MANOR—1888	69
PHILIPS MANOR HALL, FORDHAM	
CLAYBACE HOUSE	
XIII. BOSTONIAN MANOR—1887	100
XIV. CHESTNUT MANOR—1887	101
XV. BOSTONIAN MANOR—1888	107
XVI. SPRINGFIELD HOUSE	108
XVII. THE GRANGE	109
XVIII. HYDEMAN HOUSE	110
XIX. MOUNT MORRIS	111
CLARENCE	112
XXI. THE CHESTNUT HOUSE, THE CHESTNUT PLACE	117
XXII. OAK HOUSE, GREENWICH	118
XXIII. THE CHESTNUT HOUSE, FRANKLIN	119
XXIV. BOSTON HOUSE	120
XXV. CONSTITUTION HOUSE OR MARSHALL'S HOUSE	121
XXVI. THE WICK HOUSE, FRANKLIN	122
XXVII. BARTY HOUSE (HALL BOSTONIAN, FRANKLIN)	123
XXVIII. MOUNT STILES, FRANKLIN (LIVINGSTON OR BOSTON)	124
XXIX. CLAYBACE HOUSE, FORDHAM	125
FRANKLIN	126
LEWIS HOUSE, CLARENCE	127
LIVINGSTON, BOSTONIAN	128
XXXI. THE TOWN HOUSE, GREENWICH	129

CONTENTS

LXXXV. THE PASTURES, ALBANY.....	100
LXXXVI. SINGAPORE IN HISTORY.....	107
LXXXVII. OLD BURGESS-STATION.....	108
LXXXVIII. NEW FALLS.....	107
LXXXIX. MAPLE GROVE, WASHINGTON.....	111
LXXXX. HILL HOUSE, WASHINGTON.....	112
1. WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS (BRUNSWICK HOUSE) NEWBURGH.....	117
2. KING HEADQUARTERS JOHN BILSON HOUSE NEW BRUNSWICK.....	121
3. HILL HOUSE, NEW BRUNSWICK.....	122
LXXXXI. CLAYTON HOUSE, NEW BRUNSWICK.....	124
LXXXXII. TRUMAN HOUSE, BAYVIEW (FORMERLY HOTT HOUSE).....	125
LXXXXIII. WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS AND ANNE'S PRISON, TAPPAN.....	126

ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
THE FACTORY, ALBANY. ENTRANCE, EAST FRONT.....	Frontispiece
SOUTH FRONT OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK, 1784.....	14
FRANCIS TAYLOR, BROND STREET.....	14
GOVERNMENT HOUSE (DUPRE).....	19
CITY HALL, WALL STREET, BEFORE THE RENOVATION.....	27
FEDERAL HALL, WALL STREET.....	27
FARMER IN CITY HOUSE, BEFORE 1800.....	28
TWO ENTRANCE OFFICES AND HALL, 1800-1800.....	31
BROND HOUSE (DUPRE) AT 101 STREET AND 101 AVENUE.....	31
EAST CORNER, WEST FRONT, GREENWICH (DUPRE).....	33
BROND HOUSE, LOWER TEN BROADWAY HOUSE, EASTWARD.....	35
SEEN OF WEST HOUSE, CLEARWATER.....	74
ONE HALL, NEAR LEADWATER.....	77
PHILIP HENCKS HALL, THIRTIETH:	
EAST FRONT.....	81
EAST AND SOUTH FRONTS.....	82
OLD ENTRANCE, NORTH FRONT.....	82
HENRY HOLLAN HOUSE, ALBANY FORT ROAD, BAKERTOWN.....	87
PHILIP HENCKS HALL, THIRTIETH (DUPRE), EAST FRONT.....	89
CARLE FRONTS, FIFTH MANOR HOUSE, PHILIPSBURG.....	93
WORKING MANOR HOUSE, WORKMAN.....	103
MOTAL CHURCH, OLDEN MANOR OF CORNELL.....	112
VAN CORTLANDT MANOR HOUSE, THIRTY-SEVENTH:	
NORTH FRONT.....	118
BELLWAY.....	118
PARADE.....	118
DINING ROOM.....	118
THE KITCHEN.....	118
LAWN WALK IN GARDEN.....	118
APPROXIMATE HOUSE, NEW YORK CITY.....	120
THE GRANGE, VIEW BY ALEXANDER HAMILTON, 1800.....	122
By courtesy of the New York Historical Society	
STURMAN HOUSE, BROADWAY AT 100 STREET.....	124
WORKING HOUSE, 100th STREET, BARLEW HOUSES.....	124
(Formerly known as the Field House)	
HOUSE ROOM.....	124
KITCHEN.....	124
SIDE ROOM OPENING INTO PARADE CONNECTION WITH GREAT PARADE.....	124

ILLUSTRATIONS

TRINITY HOUSE, NEW PALM BEACH FRONT	120
NAPLES GROVE, WASHINGTON	121
MILL HOUSE, MARYLAND—	
WEST FRONT	122
DETAIL OF NORTH END	123
BARBROCK HOUSE, WASHINGTON'S HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK—	
WEST FRONT	124
SOUTH SIDE	125
EAST FRONT	126
NORTH END	127
JOHN ALLAN HOUSE, WASHINGTON'S HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK—	
WEST FRONT	128
NORTH OR REAR VIEW	129
FRONTAGE IN PARADE	130
'TRINITY HOUSE' HOUSE OF FORT'S BATT' HOUSE, NEAR BAYVIEW*	131
By design of the New York Historical Society.	
DE WINT HOUSE, WASHINGTON'S HEADQUARTERS, TAPPAN	132
HOUSE WHERE WAG. ARNDT WAS CAPTURED, TAPPAN	133

FOREWORD

"WOOD-gathering" is a common failing amongst most people with reference to historical matters. Even comparatively recent history grows vague and hazy to them in its outlines amazingly soon, and they are apt to lose the thread of connexion between places and events. The sequence of events, too, becomes confused. Hence many a person falls unwittingly into the most absurd anachronisms. Those blessed with an active invention, and a decent degree of interest or pride in the past, oftentimes positively *know* a vast deal "about things that are not so."

Houses and public edifices supply one of the best correctives for this nebulous mental condition. They are visible symbols and reminders of past life. They are specific tangible evidences. They are pegs on which to hang the links of memory, links that bind together the series of events and connect episodes with definite spots. They are finger-posts to guide us, markers to fix with clear-cut definition the sites of former happenings in which we have an interest. Above all, they afford a concrete setting for bygone men and deeds, and help us to visualise momentous actions and diverting incidents alike, with all the attendant circumstances.

Through force of association they make history a real and living thing to us. And whether we keenly pursue history or merely play about its fringes, whether we seek only to gratify a whim for romance or strive to learn somewhat from the experience of the past that may be of profit to us in the present, most chiefly do we need the sense of reality if our enquiries are to satisfy us and produce any lasting result.

If you are taken into a timber-celled room in a low-ceaved house on the banks of the Hudson, and told that in that room, on such and such a day, the Society of the Clericists had its birth, you will ever after remember the place and the incident. One helps the other by association, and the occasion with its setting will be indelibly graven in the memory. If you go into the garden of another venerable house, farther up the river,

FOREWORD

and learn that "Yankee Doodle" was written by a young officer attached to General Abercrombie's staff, as he sits by the well, you will promptly acquire another mnemonic peg on which to hang a deal of romance and history. Again, if you enter a small study in a certain serene mansion in Cambridge, and discover that when a young subaltern popped in, without first knocking, to find General Washington down on his knees in fervent prayer, and that the great man, enraged at the intrusion, flung his scabbard at the youngster's head, swore roundly at him as he beat an hasty retreat, and then went on with his prayers, the whole occurrence will be so vivid that you will not soon forget the least detail. And, mark you, in each instance the house has been the mordant to make the story bite into the memory.

The Valley of the Hudson has that about it which makes one feel instinctively that it must have a story worth the telling, even though they may be wholly unaware of what has taken place since the first white men sailed up the river more than three hundred years ago. And it has an history well worth while. That history is inseparably bound up with the old houses that stand upon both banks of the river, and without them it would lose its dramatic force and become a dull, dead abstraction. They afford just so many points of vital contact with the past and help us to grasp the life of bygone days, the social, economic and political background from which the present has emerged. They aid us mightily, whether we make the river's chronicle a source of curious and romantic gratification, or whether we take a more serious view and regard it as a rich treasure house whence we may derive a clearer understanding of modern values. And surely the complex life of one of the greatest States of the country is worth making some effort to understand.

Even the names we encounter are fraught with meaning and have no end of history interwoven with them. To take only a single instance, how many realize why the name of Dutchess County is spelled with a "t"? The story is this. In 1683, the Assembly of the Province of New York set off and

FOREWORD

named the counties. Spelling was a variable quantity in those days and a "t" more or less made little matter, but the "l" has been kept, all the same, as a kind of heirloom. Dutchess County was really "The Dutchess's County," and was so named for Maria Beatrice d'Este, daughter of the Duke of Modena and second wife of James, Duke of York and Albany, and Lord of the Province of New York. If anyone wishes to crowd more history into the name they have only to glance through the annals of the Court of Louis XIV, to detect the scheming of "le Grand Monarque" to get James married to an Italian princess.

The houses and estates of the Hudson Valley reflect a system, social and economic, which, however much one may approve or disapprove it on general principles and judged by Modern standards, profoundly affected the subsequent development of the State. Whatever flaws the doctrinaire democrat may pick in it, it unquestionably made for strength and stability in the early days of colonization.

The systems of Patroonships and Manors, with their methods of land tenure and judicial administration, will be discussed in their appropriate place. We may, however, glance here at a picture of the social life of the region when the old régime had reached the flower of its growth, just before the War for Independence. In speaking of the upper part of the east bank, the writer says:

"Almost every slightly eminence was capped with a fine residence of one of the grandchildren of the first Lord and Lady of Livingston Manor. At all these mansions, cordial hospitality, abundant cheer, and what was then esteemed splendor, were to be found; and from the extreme limits of Van Rensselaer's Manor on the North to the Van Cortlandts' on the South, the eastern bank of the Hudson river from Albany to New York, and for a distance of from fifteen to thirty miles back from the river, was dotted by handsome residences of an care-free, fine-looking and happy a class as probably the society of any country has ever known. They had intermarried so freely that they seemed one great country, all having a serene confidence in the invulnerability of their social position, which left them free to be jovial, hospitable, good-

FOREWORD

honoured, and withal public-spirited to an unusual degree. The men had their business offices and their business hours to confer with their stewards and tenants. . . . Into their capable and willing hands official positions naturally fell and were faithfully filled, but all these things were done in an atmosphere of large leisureliness, consequent upon the slow means of communication between distant parts."

And so life passed in an ample, dignified, idyllic way amidst surroundings that could scarcely be surpassed, the world over, in the mingled sweetness and majesty of their natural beauty.

A manner of life and a social order so firmly rooted could hardly be swept suddenly aside in its entirety by the political upheaval of the Revolution, and a good deal of the former method of existence lingered on into the early years of the nineteenth century. In 1819 it was said of Judge John Kane that he "could go from Albany to New York on horseback, or in winter by sleigh, and not spend a night nor take a meal outside of an house of a near relative." The hospitality was as spontaneous as it was universal.

No story of the Mannes and historic homes of the Hudson Valley would be fully intelligible without some reference to the life that went on in the two urban centres, New York and Albany, with which most of the river gentry had close ties, whither they often went, and in all the affairs of which—social, commercial and political—they were accustomed to play an active rôle. Not a few of the grandees, who dwelt upon the banks of the upper Hudson, had their town houses as well as the broad estates upon which they passed a great portion of their time. For the sake of completeness, therefore, as well as for its own intrinsic interest, some account of town life and town houses is included in this volume.

Most of the houses built along the east and west banks of the river by the early lords of the soil, their tenants, and the small freemen with holdings of modest size were substantial but unpretentious. Nevertheless, they possessed charm of a very pronounced type and they were rich in the homelike domestic quality that is too often lost when a more formal

FOREWORD

and academic mode of expression is consciously adopted. Although they were unassuming in their appearance outside, within they were furnished with everything that could contribute to either comfort or elegance.

As might be expected, these dwellings derived their inspiration from the lesser domestic architecture of the Netherlands. Many of them are almost exact replicas of their prototypes; others bear witness to the process of adaptation that went on, as local exigencies arose, until ultimately a characteristic Hudson River type was evolved. These houses were dear to the descendants of the original builders. They cherished them and added to them, when additions became necessary, rather than abandon them for dwellings of a more sumptuous and fashionable character. It was not until the eighteenth century was well advanced that Classic forms began to make their appearance to any appreciable extent in the architecture of either shore.

The desire to hold to the old houses, and yet appear fashionable, was responsible for much ruthless and absolutely indefensible dilapidation during the Victorian era. Old glazing in the windows gave place to big, vulgar, characteristic panes. Silly gables burst forth above, where gables did not belong and could do no real good. Sillier barge-boards, fretted with jig-saw convolutions and begotten of a besotted imagination, added their tawdry horrors to abominations that were already had enough before. Even some of the later Georgian houses lost their purity of line and were transmogrified into marvels of atrocious ugliness. Nevertheless, not a few of the ancient structures escaped the hand of the nineteenth century spoiler and have remained intact for the delight of a generation at least more appreciative of antiquity if not more intelligent. These are they that have been chosen for illustration.

On looking at a map it will be seen that numerous streams on both sides debouch into the Hudson between New York and Albany. Some of them are navigable a short distance above their mouths for small craft of light draught; others are little more than brooks. The river was the natural, and for

a long time the only, artery of traffic and communication. When the early colonists wished to penetrate into the heart of the country, they turned aside into these lesser waterways and followed them as far as they could go by sloop or canoe and, after that, took to their feet along the banks. It is, therefore, at the mouths and along the courses of these streams that we must look for the first settlements.

Furthermore, these tributaries of the Hudson offered another inducement to which the pioneers were not blind—they supplied abundant water power for mills, and mills were important nuclei of colonization. The mill was a centre of distribution to which all were obliged to go to get the wherewithal for their daily bread. Oftentimes, until a church was established in the neighbourhood, they had no place else to go when they stirred from home, and after a church was established it was a common saying that thenceforth the people had two places to go—"to mill and to meeting."¹⁰ Not seldom did the miller do a thriving business as far trader and general store-keeper, so that the mill was the centre of local commerce.

Although roads of a very indifferent character had here and there been opened between neighbouring settlements—usually by means of widening Indian trails—it was not until the early years of the eighteenth century that any systematic attempt at road making for the benefit of the whole Province was essayed. Then, in 1763, the Provincial Assembly passed a "Publick Highways" act:

"Publick and Common General Highway to extend from King's Bridge in the County of Westchester, through the same County of Westchester, Dutchess County, and the County of Albany, of the breadth of four rods, English measurement, at the least, to be, continue and remain forever the Publick Common General Road and Highway from King's Bridge to the ferry at Crouther over against the City of Albany."¹¹

Even long after the whole length of the road had been pushed through and all the links completed, the river remained the chief highway; "traders followed it and settlers kept near its waters. The river bank was the most desirable land." The sloop or sail boat was the principal means of transit and the

Hudson's bosom was dotted with sails. The "aquatic Dutch" appreciated its value and profited by it. As time passed regular boat communication between New York and Albany, and between intermediate points, was established at regular intervals. An advertisement in the *New York Gazette*, in April, 1734, announces:

"These are to give notice that Evert Bagardus now plys in a boat on the Hudson River, between New York and Koenigs [Kingston]. If any Gentlemen or merchants have any goods to send to Ryn-Broek or Koenigs, he will carry such goods as cheap as is usually paid for carrying to Koenigs. He will be at New York once a week, if wind and weather permits, and comes to Coert's Ship."

Not only was the Hudson the great highway of the Province in the days of its beginnings; it was later the chief line of strategy during the War for Independence. This phase of its history we must not overlook. It was the British aim to control the river throughout its whole length and thus completely cut off New England from the Middle Colonies and the South. It was Washington's aim to control it and thus keep open an interior means of communication, whatever might befall along the seaboard. For this reason the Hudson's shores are most intimately associated with the struggle between the Colonies and the Mother Country. Hence do they derive no little share of interest, for many of the most momentous as well as most dramatic events in the history of the war occurred in or near the houses described in this volume.

In the performance of any task, however congenial it may be, it becomes necessary to set limits. The limits within which lie the houses treated in this book are the shores of the Hudson from New York to Albany. On the West Shore are not included those houses within the boundaries of New Jersey, for New Jersey's historic houses form a subject by themselves. Neither are the houses in Long Island and Staten Island included, for there are so many of them to which great historic interest attaches that it would be impossible to put them into one volume with the Hudson Valley houses and do justice to them. It seems better, therefore, to reserve them for separate

FOREWORD

discussion. Hence the scope of this volume is confined to the east side of the Hudson, from New York to Greenbush, now called Rensselaer, and the west side, from Albany to the New Jersey border.

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