

The Society for the Preservation of
HUDSON VALLEY VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 2007

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From the Editor:

Warm greetings for a happy and prosperous New Year. I would like to thank all the members for their support of the holiday house study and luncheon, we turned out a really good crowd, with quite a few folks joining in for the first time. I think those new comers really got to see just how enjoyable HVVA participation truly is. Many thanks to The Senate House Staff for their willingness to allow us to examine their venerable building from cellar to garret. We were also honored to be welcomed into the Tobias Van Buren the younger's House, by HVVA members, Gerard and Doris Soldner, we thank them deeply and look forward to learning more about their home in the coming months.

January holds our annual meeting which will be on January 20th, 10:00 am at the Bevier House in Marbletown. This is a time of growth and change for HVVA, so we hope you will consider joining us on that day. Over the last few years we have built up a lot of momentum and now need to keep that spirit going in order to fulfill our mandate to preserve and record in the coming year. We have a pretty full agenda, but if you have an issue that should be addressed please notify our President Jim Decker so he can add it to the list of items to be discussed. We are hoping to form a few committees to work on projects, so be careful you may end up on one even if you are not present!

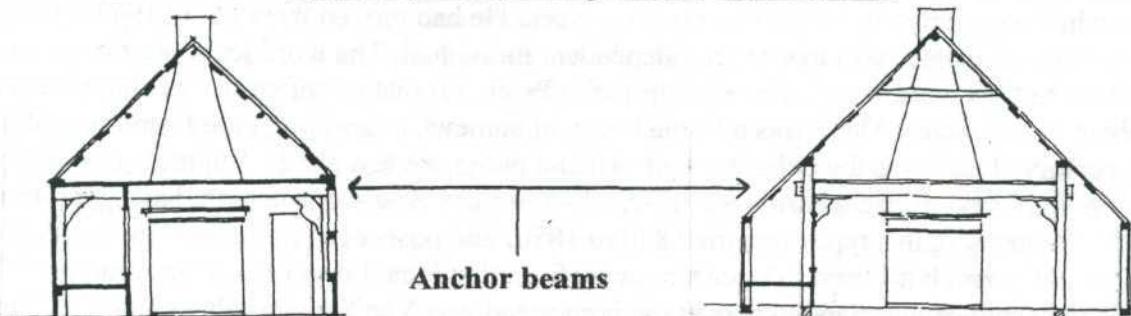
Also keep the items coming in for the newsletter, the dissemination of knowledge is what this newsletter is all about. Thanks go to John Stevens and Greg Hubber for their contributions to the January issue.

With wishes of a warm hearth and a peaceful home in 2007, Rob Sweeney

Speaking Vernacularly: This space will be dedicated to definitions. While studying vernacular houses here in the Hudson Valley we often use terms which are specific to our location and in particular to our study of New World Dutch Culture.

Anchor beam (ankerbalk, in Dutch) is a form of drop tie beam with the tenons extending beyond the outside faces of the posts (or columns, in the case of an aisled building). In addition to the regular pins securing the joints, there are also (usually) two flat wedges driven through holes in the extended tenons that bear against the outside faces of the posts or columns. If the tenons only go through the thickness of the post or column, then the beam is designated a (Dutch) tussentebalk. We tend to call all drop tie beams 'anchor beams', which is not strictly correct!

Illustrations taken from, Architecture and living in Broek in Waterland.



Early Days with Peter Sinclair

By Greg Huber

It was thrilling for me to visit the Old Stone Fort in Schoharie in Schoharie County, New York in early October 1988 and learn that an upstate New York based organization was formed that was dedicated to the preservation of Dutch-American barns. They called themselves – The Dutch Barn Preservation Society (DBPS). I thought – “other people share the same interest as I do. It is about time.” I could not wait to join and learn of their specific interests and the kinds of activities they were pursuing. I then learned the name of Shirley Dunn who headed the group at that time. My dad was very sick at that point and as things turned out I did not send in my ten dollars for dues until about the middle of January 1989. In about a week I received a packet of information including the first issue of the Newsletter (inaugural issue) and I found out that the group was having a barn tour of barns in the general Guilderland area of Albany County on Saturday February 10th. Goodness. I believe I called Shirley and asked her a few questions of the group.

I got up very early on that Saturday morning at a friend’s house in Mahwah, New Jersey and at about 6:15 AM headed the radiator of my car north to the hinterlands of New York State with destination not far from the state capital – Albany. I thought to myself – “whom would I meet. Who was actually interested in looking at these barns with hopefully discerning and wondering eyes?” I basically waited for this to happen for more than a dozen years. I would soon find out who these people were.

There were perhaps twenty people or so whom I met in the adjacent parking lot to the historic Frederick house on Route 146 in Guilderland Center. But I do know one very definite thing – it was darned cold. As in C-O-L-D. I very distinctly remember the hulking presence of Vincent Schaefer. There was a large man. I was soon to find how large he really was - in more ways than one. He was a prominent meteorologist and somewhat a friend of my silent mentor – Eric Sloane. I also recall Shirley Dunn and Chris Albright and I believe Mark Hesler being there. All of these people proved to be major figures in the Barn Society. But the person whom I most remember – by far – was Peter Sinclair. Here was a man approaching sixty years of age. Bald or mostly so I saw but still possessive of some very definite youth. There was also a certain quietude about him and yet a very definite enthusiasm shone through his reserved demeanor. This part of him was plainly obvious. It is quite curious that in view of the fact that Peter became far and away my closest friend in the society that his name was the very first one that I recorded in my (ever present) notebook. His name appeared on the second page of my notes along with his phone number. His name came right after the entry of the SHBO (a Netherlands historic organization) that was mentioned at the trustee meeting. The only very distinct memory that I have of Peter during the barn tour were comments that he made at the so-called Altamont Orchards barn. He was pointing out certain traits of the H-frames. I was seeing things that were new to me that I had not seen in other Dutch barns that I had visited in the more southern reaches of New York. Somehow I sensed that a friendship would ensue with this man who was close to twenty years my senior.

It was likely after the second DBPS trustee meeting that I attended in March 1989 that I went to see Peter at his homestead place in West Hurley in Ulster County New York. He had moved there about 1973. One got the instant impression that the place was that of an independent individual. The word iconoclast came to my mind. Later on I learned that this word very definitely applied to Peter. All manner of stuff was about the place that consisted of about twenty acres. There was a frame house of somewhat rambling type from the middle third of the nineteenth century. There was the obligatory garden and perhaps a few sheds. But most important of all – the biased person that I am – it had a barn – not of Dutch-American type – one can not have everything – that was of side wall entrance English type – maybe 1840 to 1850. The posts even had raising holes. Peter thought it was a Dutch derivative barn but I tried to steer him away from that idea. I don’t know how successful I was. At least one of the nineteenth century landowners at the homestead was Van Steenburgh – a good and healthy and unmistakable Dutch name. The barn had wood working tools in it that Peter used on various projects. The roof at that point needed attention.

The interior of the house on the property was not fashionably decorated – that was not Peter's style – not by a very long shot. But important artifacts from many sources adorned the walls and corners and what-not (and a few cob-webs). And he had hundreds of books on Indian lore and country life. In very short order I realized that Peter was in love with Indian life. And he could talk about them – ad infinitum. In the first year or two that I knew him he sadly had to part with one of his treasured native masks – I guess from Africa – for many dollars as he was short of funds. I also learned that his Dad Gerrit Sinclair which is also the name of Peter's son was a quite major artist in the mid-west. Gerrit depicted many genre scenes of the mid west and so the environment that I was introduced to at the Sinclair homestead was really a natural sequel to his father's orientation. If memory serves Gerrit also painted a number of barn scenes. Bless his soul.

I believe I stayed overnight at Peter's place that night and then left in the morning. In a few days I received some information in the mail from him and a note appeared that said – "You are welcome here anytime." I knew that I found a friend. In the ensuing months Peter and I attended many trustee meetings of the DBPS. He had become a trustee in the fall of 1988 and I later became a trustee in the fall of 1989. After the meetings I would often stay at his place. However, on one occasion we followed each other home and we got lost and nearly ended up in Massachusetts due to a very wrong turn and I ended up not getting back to New Jersey until nearly 2 AM. Peter was never great on directions – something that he freely admitted.

While at Peter's place we would discuss barns for hours on end and what we could do to document them but mostly in his area of Ulster County. I soon learned that he had a quite interesting system of categorizing barns in certain ways relating to their locations. It must not have been until sometime in 1990 that I learned of the full extent of the barns that Peter knew most of which were in his county. They amounted to a few dozen barns a number of which I was not aware of. I copied many of the notes that Peter had taken over the course of perhaps two years and except for the Napanoch barn (off Route 209 near the prison), the Rest Plaus barn (in Marbletown off Route 209) and the excellent "Dutch/Anglo" barn with the ninety degree re-oriented roof in the Katsbann area northwest of Saugerties I was ultimately able to see all the barns on Peter's list. I deeply regretted not seeing the last barn as it had in its core pre-Revolutionary War era framing.

It appears that the first Dutch barn that Peter had ever been in was the superb Nieuwkirk-Kaufman barn on Hurley Mountain Road west of Kingston. He related that he wanted to learn some of the characteristics of Dutch barns before he attended his first DBPS trustee meeting that likely occurred in April 1988. Little did he know at the time that his first barn visit proved to involve a barn that remains one of the most interesting Dutch style barns in either New York or New Jersey! The mention of this barn brings up an interesting story. Peter and I were working on a new documentation form in the late summer of 1991 and we of course had to choose our first barn to document. We decided on the Kaufman barn. One of us had called John Kaufman the owner of the barn to tell him that we wanted to take a number of measurements. John had lived at the homestead since about 1953 or so. He indicated that he would not be there but that he would leave some electric leads for us to use. We both knew John quite well at that time so he knew that all would be okay. Peter and I got into the barn with our new forms and Peter became busy with connecting the electric lines. I put the lights in front of the first inner anchorbeam and then sat in front of the first inner H-frame on a pile of hay while Peter was finishing with the connections. Peter flipped the switch and the light shone brightly on the bent and there before me in the middle of the anchorbeam was a carved date of 1766 and the letters AHM. I let out a scream. Peter rushed over and saw the date for himself. It turns out, amazingly, that no mortal man in at least the last half of the twentieth century had ever seen the date. This was Fitchen barn number 42. At first we believed that the letters were initials of the farmer or perhaps builder (unlikely). We only later found out that the letters meant – Anno Heerem Machem – in the year of our Lord made. John had never known that the date and letters were on the anchorbeam as the light source at the roof peak did not shine on that face (lay-out face) of the H-frame. John's son later that day told John of the date and letters. Peter had always thought that this was one of his greatest discoveries in a Dutch barn. It certainly was for me. This is the barn that Jack Sobon has called the most European like barn in North America that he had ever seen. We finished our form and went rather gleefully home that day.

One barn that I knew about in the 1970s that was apparently in the Lamontville area of Marbletown but that I was never able to find was very likely the greatest barn that Peter ever showed me. This was the superb Bogart barn off Route 209. I just marveled at this barn. It was so original and abused the privilege of retaining interesting features – to say the least. This was a U-barn a term that originated with Peter. In this case the Bogart barn was what I later called a true U-barn as dirt surrounded the threshing floor at three sides forming the letter – U. A number of variations on the basic format exist. What particularly interested us both were the miraculously intact virtually 100% original threshing floor doors with the first rate folk-like carvings on one of the door halves. These Peter traced. Another virtually unique feature in the barn is the fully carved name of Jacob Osterhoudt on one of the purlin plates. This Peter traced too. Later we documented the barn in part with the help of Mike Bathrick in late 1990.

Although I knew a number of Dutch related barns in Ulster County before joining the Barn Society it was only by way of association with Peter that I learned how truly great the barns of Ulster really were. It took me about four years to fully appreciate this. Currently, Ulster easily has the greatest number of Dutch barns and remnant ones in the entire Dutch barn kingdom at 113. It also likely has the greatest diversity of barn subtypes. There are other Ulster County barns that were among Peter's favorites. These included the circa 1770 Scolnick barn off Route 212 near Woodstock, the Shultis circa 1810 barn near Woodstock, the circa 1760 Oliver barn (with addition) on Route 209 in Marbletown, the circa 1825 Henry Snyder variant U-barn south of Saugerties, the circa 1820 one aisle Vinicor barn near Woodstock and the circa 1820 John Snyder "Dutch/Anglo" barn off Route 212 near Veteran. It was particularly the last barn and the homestead itself that Peter probably found the most intriguing. This was a side entrance true open bay barn. Inner almost all original threshing floor doors appear at the first inner H-frame. Anchorbeams from an earlier barn were recycled into the H-frames. The one side bay contained remnants of a very old hanging type horse partition wall. Curious pigeon nesting boxes adorn the front façade wall. I would venture to guess if Peter had to choose among a favorite barn of his that he has seen it just might be the Snyder barn. He has gotten to know the owner Kenneth Snyder very well in the last nearly twenty years.

One other barn that held high prominence in Peter's list was the circa 1810 Joy barn not far from Saugerties that was re-located to south of New Paltz in late 1991. The fact was that Peter passionately wanted to save this barn as the land and the barn was being threatened by "official intrusions" – shall we say. He met many government people to tell them of the importance of the barn. I believe that he even wanted to hire a lawyer at his own expense. Peter also formed The Joy Farm Preservation Society and published several issues of a newsletter. All this was to no avail. I am sure that he learned much from the experience none the least of which were the obstacles in trying to convince people "in power" of the importance of saving local cultural heritage. His efforts in trying to save the Joy barn probably made the greatest impression on me in knowing his true level of dedication.

The next installment will cover the years 1992 to about 1995 or so. It includes some very interesting barn visitations and the forming of the Barn Enthusiasts Group among other things. Some important people came into Peter's life during this time.



A shot from the holiday house study showing the hearth on the first floor, north gable end wall of the Tobias Van Buren House in Kingston. The house was reported to have been burned during the British raid on the morning of October 16, 1777. So it would seem reasonable to assume the mantle and other interior wood finish would post date the burning. RDS

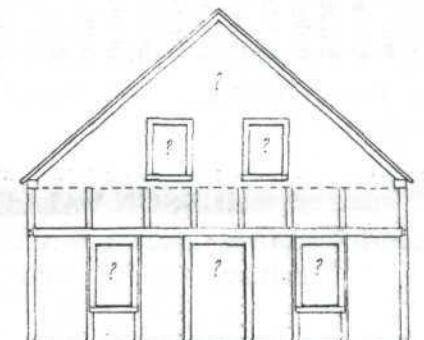
Notes about a house in Westbrookville: Near it there is a State historical marker that says: WESTBROOK FORT AND HOUSE BUILT ABOUT 1750-60 BY TJERCK VAN KEUREN WESTBROOK. VILLAGE OF WESTBROOKVILLE NAMED IN HIS HONOR. (1936). We first saw the house (which is in Sullivan County) in November 1967, about a month after we had emigrated to the United States. Spoke to the owner. It looked pretty much the same then as it still does. It seemed to me then, and reaffirmed with my visit in August, that it never was clad with siding, but had probably been whitewashed to protect the mortar. The only other building that I know to have been treated similarly is the Coeymans Secondary House which has a brick end (maybe both ends had been brick, but it was shortened at some point. The south side wall, which is inside the connector that joins it to the main house, has survived in original condition with its infill of clay and straw around sticks, and a skim coat of plaster/whitewash covering the posts of its H-bents. I do not know of any other examples like this, although it is possible that the John Bowne house in Flushing, in which is used an identical infill technique, may not originally have had cladding? This house may date to the early 1660's- Wally Wheeler is involved in getting dendro-dating done on the earliest part of it.

-John Stevens

House at Westbrookville, Sullivan Co., N.Y.



East ±



North ±

5 10 15 20 25 ft.

Drawing courtesy of John Stevens.