



# Hudson-Mohawk Vernacular Architecture

April – June 2021

## Newsletter

Vol. 1, No.2

### Remembering Peter Sinclair

*The Hudson and Mohawk valleys have lost an icon of vernacular building history. In addition to his many contributions to the documentation of old houses and barns, Peter Sinclair was a founding member of both our formative organizations, the Dutch Barn Preservation Society and the Society for the Preservation of Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture. Peter also was the originator of this newsletter. His obituary follows. We dedicate this issue to his memory.*

**Peter Sinclair**, 90, of West Hurley, N.Y., died on Jan. 1, 2021. Seamon-Wilsey Funeral Home handled cremation arrangements. Peter is survived by his son Gerrit (Beth) Sinclair, Bloomington, Ill.; son-in-law, Thomas Gran, Saugerties, N.Y.; grandchildren, Bennett and Annie Sinclair and Elliana, Lukas, and Lena Gran; and dear friend, Roberta Jeracka, as well as many other friends, colleagues, and fellow local architectural history enthusiasts. Peter's daughter, Kristin Sinclair Gran, preceded him in death. Peter was born on Nov. 12, 1930 to Gerrit and Katharine (Springer) Sinclair in Milwaukee, Wis. After graduating from Riverside High School, he received a BFA in Art Education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Peter went on to teach college-level art in Saskatchewan, Canada, and continued his teaching career at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 1968, Peter moved his family to Manhattan, N.Y., where he founded and operated The Base Company, a small business dedicated to fabricating artifact display armatures for collectors and museums. The family later



relocated to West Hurley, N.Y., where Peter continued his business and became interested in the history of early-European colonization of the Hudson Valley. Peter founded the Society for the Preservation of Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture in the late 1980s. He was passionate about this topic and was lucky to be part of a wonderful community of like-minded people. Peter's family would like to thank Hudson Valley Hospice for the care they provided Peter and for the compassion they extended to everyone who loved him. In addition, the family is especially grateful to Peter's caretaker, Leebert Williams, for the years of companionship, friendship, and loyalty.

For contact information please visit [www.HMVArch.org](http://www.HMVArch.org)

## Two Calls to Peter Sinclair

by Greg Huber

My connection with Peter Sinclair started in early 1989 when we toured some barns in the Altamont area of Albany County, New York sponsored by the Dutch Barn Preservation Society. In my note-book, Peter's name and phone number occupied part of the first page in my association with the barn group.

This short story concerns two interesting phone calls, among others, that I have preserved in my Peter Sinclair collection of phone conversations. These were in the early days when Peter was first familiarizing himself with the Dutch-American culture in the eastern river valleys of New York State.

On May 30th 1992, I called Peter and a number of topics came up. He had received a letter from a man in Holland and my guess is that it was related to the use and

appearances of hay barracks. Peter took a special liking to hay barracks and he wrote about them several times in his publications. He had also received a call from Ev Rau to attend a get-together at the then half standing Logtown Road barn in Glen in Montgomery County. I believe this was the first time that Peter and I had ever met Jack Sobon where Jack, in later years, had taught both Peter and me many things about timber framing. We in turn helped Jack come to understand some of the earliest barn building traditions in Ulster County.

Likely, the most important item of our conversation that day concerned Peter obtaining one or two of the prominent braces that he saved from what we then called the 1732 "Katsbaan Church barn" – now non-extant – less than a quarter mile from the church. This barn was one of the very



P Sinclair at Barn Enthusiasts Celebration in the Year 1994

important 18 barns and barn remnants in Ulster County that all dated prior to the Revolutionary War era. The braces from this barn were oak and they had the very distinctive half-dovetail lapped tenons. When all of Peter's things at his old homestead are ultimately sorted out and distributed to their final resting places, we can only hope that that the brace(s) will find an appropriate place of honor in a museum setting.

Peter had also found another scythe from the Tuthilltown area near Gardiner in Ulster County to add to his collection. And he continued his work on the Vinicor one-aisle barn not far from the home of Alf Evers, the great author of the wonderful book *The Catskills*, in the Bearsville-Shady area of Woodstock. Peter and I both got to know Alf quite well through the years. Peter was then trying to draw the full complex of farm buildings at that homestead. Ken Snyder has a great Dutch-Anglo barn west of Saugerties where Peter said that he was drawing one of the manger troughs. Peter had read my article – "The Mammoth in Monmouth County" in the publication *Timber Framing*. This was a barn in New Jersey that truly had massive-sized timbers where the barn later tragically burned in late 1998.

The second call to Peter occurred on November 1st 1992. He told me that a print shop man in Ulster County told him about the dated 1758 anchor-beam that came from the smaller DeWitt-Suydam barn – Fitchen barn number 39 – located off Route 209 near Hurley. The barn was removed in the early 1980s or so. But a section of the beam was saved that included the carved date and a wonderful cypher – TADW that I later photographed. Peter added that he visited another Dutch barn off Route 209 that also had a cypher in it, but this story ended with no further conversation concerning it or any visitation to it. He also said he saw a masonic mark in the now-gone Deyo barn a little north of New Paltz.

Peter showed some marked interest in the converted Myers barn (one of the 18 barns mentioned above) northwest of Saugerties that had a square anchor-beam – a very rare dimension in these barns where they are always



P Sinclair at Dated 1766 Barn off Route 209 in Accord Area of Ulster County, NY



P Sinclair at Tool Demonstration about 1994 in either Upstate NY or Massachusetts

distinctly rectangular in cross-section. He also related a story that Joseph Brandt (of Rev War era fame) had an outpost in Pennsylvania near the Delaware River. He told me of a non-Dutch barn on Bone Hollow Road that had a "four corner notch" marten hole. Finally, I told him that a very rare area Dutch barn in Putnam County was located at a golf course.

These are just two short stories that filled parts of two days in the life of Peter Sinclair. I cherished these conversations that I had with Peter in those early days.

## Remembering Peter - Drawing on the Past

by Rob Sweeney

My memories of Peter go back about twenty years. I remember him as a sturdy folk character, - artsy/mountain man/historian. In my heart and mind he remains bigger than life. Peter had more interests and passions than any mortal could have time to explore. In many ways I still want to grow up to be just like him.

Peter was a generous human being always ready to share what he knew and humble enough to look for learning from all others. Open minded to different ideas and views, yet stubborn, dogged, and entrenched when he felt he was defending some sacred belief. Your interest earned you a place by his side; his gentle handing of newly developing knowledge kept you there. Peter had a hyper

sense of curiosity and a deep and broad range of interests. No matter who he met, he could find something of interest to explore or develop one on the spot. It was a natural gift that disarmed those who met him. I was pleased to see this magic at work many times.

I spent the afternoon with Peter on the day he had his stroke. We were at the annual meeting of the Ulster County Historical Society. We sat together. He told me he had gone to his doctor that week and that he was in great shape. We planned a day to wade into the swamp behind my house to cut phragmites (reeds) to use for a thatching project we were planning.



Peters Milk Maid

The next day I received a call saying, that Peter had suffered a very serious stroke. Weeks later he was transferred to the Thompson House Rehabilitation Center in Rhinebeck where I visited him again. He smiled, he struggled to speak, he said only a few words repeatedly, "One day" and "My mother". Frustrated he could not speak the words he wanted to say. I pointed to the view from his window to a stand of Phragmites, he smiled and replied, "One Day."

I left him that day, slowly walking down the long hall with tears streaming down my face, as they are just now as I write this.

I visited Peter the following Sunday, I brought him an oversized book of Jan Vermeer paintings. I thought he would enjoy these paintings, a place to journey to in his mind while his body was trapped in that foreign, sterile clinical environment. By chance that week, another friend, Bob Hedges, had brought Peter pens and paper to try to help

him communicate. And so it began, Peter started to draw himself back to life. The friend I thought was gone, was reappearing, changed, yes, but alive, with will and desire. He copied those Vermeer paintings into a large stretch pad. Drawing on the past Peter found life. He continued to recover and learned to accept the limitations of his transfigured body with a grace that still amazes me.

Peter would go on drawing every day for over a decade. Drawing on the past, drawing on his love of old buildings, drawing on the faces of loved ones and strangers, drawing strength to live from some previously undiscovered place within himself. My God, this friend has taught me well. He has drawn me from a place of tears to a place of joy every time I draw on the memory of his strength! I am grateful for all the benefits his lifelong labors brought forth into the world and that so many of us have and will continue to be blessed by the gift we call Pete.

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## From Leslie LeFevre Stratton

Retired Curator, Historic Huguenot Street  
Board Member, Ulster County Historical Society

Peter was an inspiring teacher and one of my first real "mentors" when I worked at Historic Huguenot Street. He was also a wonderful artist! My favorite memory of Peter involves our first meeting when he accidentally spilled orange soda on the carpet in my office. After a quick mop-up, we got down to the business of local history. He asked me if I had ever heard of a "barrack" and I said, "Yeah, that's where soldiers sleep." Well, no. He was referring to a hay barrack. That was the beginning of some wonderful conversations. Over the years he helped us to identify and describe early tools, architectural elements and other early artifacts in the collections. I was so thankful to call upon his expertise in these areas. Always cheerful, enthusiastic and obliging - that was how I remember Peter whenever I had a question for him. I will miss him very much.



Hay Barrack

# WOODSTOCK TIMES

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WOODSTOCK TIMES

## Drawing himself back

### Exhibit of Peter Sinclair's drawings at Friends of Historic Kingston

From now through Dec. 19, Friends of Historic Kingston is showing the ink drawings of historic preservationist Peter Sinclair, a resident of West Hurley who founded and was the former president of the Society for the Preservation of Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture (HVVA) in the late 1990s. Given Sinclair's seminal role as a preservationist, it's no surprise that his subject matter is the region's historic stone houses, Dutch barns, costumed colonial re-enactors, house interiors, and gatherings of musicians and Sinclair's preservationist friends (usually in rooms whose heavy ceiling beams reveal their historic provenance). What is perhaps unexpected is how the objects of his fascination have been transformed by the spontaneity and inventiveness of the artist's pen into lively forms full of whimsy and personality.

The assured grace of his line, the rhythm of his squiggles and hooks, and the partially shaded shapes, edged with white space, have the spare, syncopated melodiousness of a Thelonious Monk composition. His congregating figures have a bird-like character and variety, recalling the lyric masterfulness of a Saul Steinberg or Edward Gorey. In Sinclair's jazzy compositions, which jump, extend and retract across the page, the material and social culture of the regional historian's world is a swinging place; every stone, beam, and jug is sentient and alive. The dormers on his roofs swoop like chutes, the vibrating pattern of window panes set within the scribbled description of a stone wall is as rich and subtle as the intricate design in a carpet, and the slouching postures and exclaiming faces of his figures sing with insouciance. Some pieces veer toward the abstract: the vertical supports and planed roof in a barn are a scintillation of strokes, filling the page from top to bottom. Other pieces have a monumental simplicity: the depiction of a man with a shaded face sitting at a table set with dishes has the cryptic force of a Bonnard.

Such mastery provides no clue to the extraordinary circumstance of the works' making: Sinclair suffered a stroke in October 2006 and picked up his pen for the first time while undergoing rehabilitation at the Thompson House Rehab Center in Rhinebeck. Wheelchair bound, he was supplied with paper and pen by Bob Hedges, a fellow member of HVVA. His initial attempts were "real basic," according to Roberta Jeracka, an HVVA member and Sinclair's companion. It was only after he returned home months later that the drawings began to blossom and pour out of him. Jeracka sent him a postcard from Vermont and something clicked; since then, she and his other HVVA friends keep him well-supplied



Peter Sinclair



with photographs and postcards (the show includes a drawing inspired by Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* and also has pieces depicting hay barracks, which are based on photographs from the Netherlands).

#### Providing a focus

Sinclair, who can only speak a few words but is now walking, draws every day after doing his exercises. "He's very particular," said Jeracka, who lives in Albany and works as an architectural historian assistant at Hartgen Archeological Associates Inc. "Many things have been ripped up. This focus gives him something to look forward to."

The drawings and the support he receives from HVVA members are a major force in his healing and recovery.

"It's part of his therapy that still works," said Rob Sweeney, the Town of Ulster historian and HVVA's treasurer and newsletter editor. "Other people have given up, but we're like, 'not necessarily.' He's able to connect with pen on paper and communicate his thought. In a sense, this is about the world of art therapy. There was no stimulus in the nursing home, and it was killing him. He gave so much, and now vernacular architecture is saving him."

Sinclair's pieces also herald his re-emergence as an artist after many years. Born in Milwaukee in 1930, Sinclair, whose father was noteworthy regional artist Gerrit Sinclair, studied art while in college and taught art for seven years at the University of Wisconsin. Shortly after his arrival in New York City in 1967, he gave it up and opened up a business making bases for sculptures. He settled in Ulster County in the early 1970s after buying a farm in the area and moving his workshop into his home (it's currently being run by a coworker). After meeting historian Alf Evers and reading the books of Henry Glassie, an expert on vernacular architecture and folk culture, Sinclair joined the Dutch Barn Preservation Society, ultimately forming a Hudson Valley

chapter with architectural historian John Stevens, which became HVVA. The two men worked together to begin cataloguing the Dutch buildings in the area, with Sinclair locating and identifying the buildings and Stevens documenting them. Today, the organization has more than 400 members. Sinclair also is a timber framer — he and Jeracka recently attended a timber framers' conference in Saratoga Springs — and he donated a portion of his collection of historic tools to the Ulster County Historical Society, which exhibits the artifacts in a room at its headquarters in the Bevier House.

Thanks to help from HVVA members, Sinclair remains active in the preservationist movement. "He comes out with us on our field trips. We keep that part of his life going," said Sweeney. "We all realize the importance of what this man has done to preserve. There was no interest in Hudson Valley vernacular architecture before him. This is somebody who cares so much that even if he couldn't move, he'd find some way to communicate and share his enthusiasm."

It was Sweeney who came up with the idea for the exhibition at Friends of Historic Kingston, which consists of more than 100 works. He and fellow HVVA members Eddie Cattuzzo and Jim Decker organized, framed, and hung the works, which are priced at \$125 for a framed piece and \$75 unframed. All proceeds will benefit FOHK and HVVA.

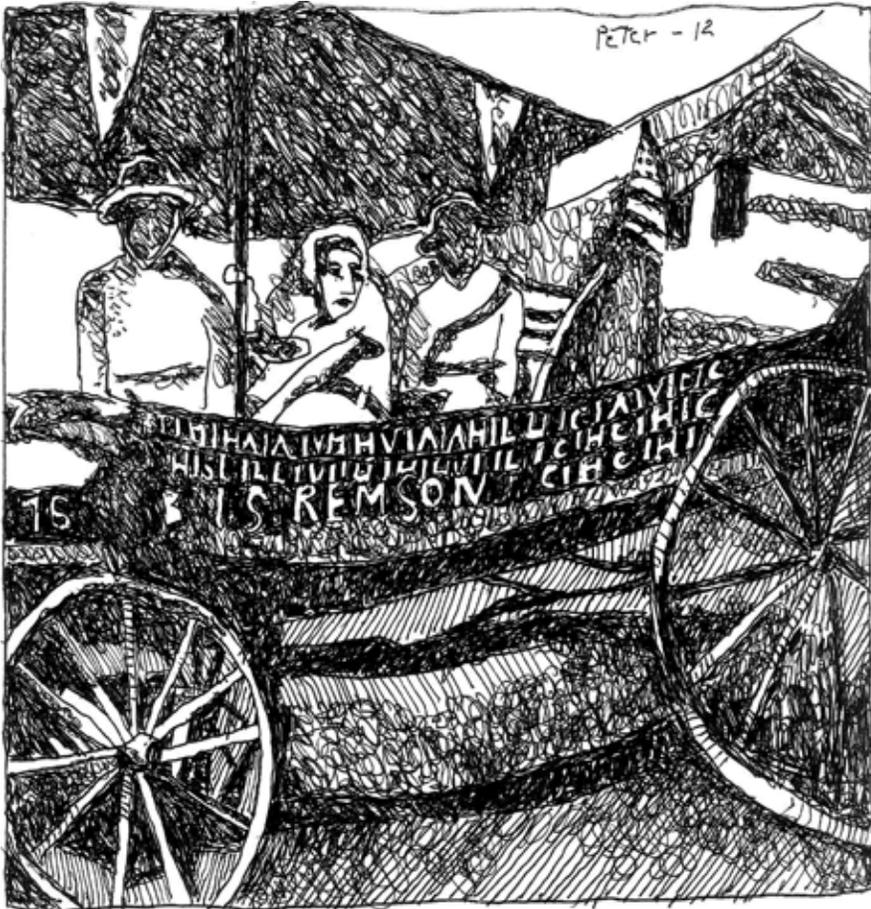
The exhibition is open Saturdays through Dec. 19 from 1 to 4 p.m. and by appointment. There will be an artist's reception on Dec. 5 from 7 to 9 p.m. For more information, call (845) 339-0720 or visit [www.hvva.org](http://www.hvva.org).

"He has received services. It's all part of giving back to the preservation movement that he started," said Jeracka. "Peter is literally drawing his way back into the world he loves." ♦♦

Lynn Woods



The Society for the Preservation of  
Hudson Valley  
Vernacular Architecture



Spirit of 1776 Wagon used by suffragette Edna Buckman Kearns. The wagon is on display in the New York State Museum. Peter Sinclair played a key role in storing the wagon until it found its way to the state museum. He gave this drawing to Marguerite Kearns. Image accessed from <https://www.suffragewagon.org/>

## Obituary of Judith Rees McMillen



*We also regret the loss of another lifetime member of HVVA. Judy, with her husband Bill, was an active attendee of study tours and events. She was one of our most faithful members. We shall miss her.*

**Judith Rees McMillen**, age 78, passed away peacefully in

Albany on Saturday, March 27, 2021, after a brief illness. She was born in Canton, Ohio and grew up in LaPlata Maryland, attending nursing school at the University of Maryland in Baltimore. She found her life's work in history when she met her second husband William and worked in the education department and later became the director of education at Historic Richmondtown on Staten Island where William was the supervisor of restoration. After

they both retired they moved in 2003 to Glenmont where they pursued their love of traveling throughout Europe and the United States visiting the places that they always dreamed of seeing. She stayed active in history becoming the first female president of the Early American Industries Association as well as served as a board member of the Historic Eastfield Foundation. She loved her husband, her family and the many friends that she made through the many historic groups that she was a part of including the Brigade of the American Revolution. She is survived by her husband; brother, Bill and sister-in-law Ann; son Chris and daughter-in-law Liz; stepdaughter Sally; stepson John and daughter-in-law Germaine; and Judith McMillen grandchildren, Richard, Liam, Vincent, Emma, Kathryn and Micah. A private memorial service will be held at a later date. In lieu of flowers, donations in her memory may be made to the Early American Industries Association.

## Membership info

If you have been receiving this newsletter, but your membership is not current and you wish to continue to receive the HMVA newsletter and participate in the many house-study tours offered each year, **please send in your dues.**

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