Palisades & Snedens Landing

Alice Munro Haagensen
PALISADES
AND
SNEDENS LANDING
PALISADES
AND
SNEDENS LANDING
FROM THE BEGINNING OF HISTORY
TO THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY
Alice Munro Haagensen

JACKET PAINTING BY W. LEE SAVAGE

~
edited and updated by
Alice Haagensen Gerard
2012
To my helpful husband,
Cushman Davis Haagensen
The Palisades. Lithograph by J. Hill from painting by W. G. Wall, 1820. The first break north of the city in this great wall of rock, where the cliffs fall from five hundred feet to two hundred feet, is the setting for the hamlet of Palisades, and its slope toward the river, which has for centuries been called Snedens Landing.

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WHEN I HELPED move the Palisades Library from the Big House to the Old School in 1944,* I was amazed to discover the historical material about this small hamlet which poured out of cupboards, came down off walls, and was moved from shelves. There was Nicholas Gesner’s Diary, 1829-1850, preserved in four dilapidated boxes; the original Verplanck Map of the Lockhart Patent and its surroundings in 1745, and a beautiful facsimile made by James S. Haring; a fine map of the village in 1822, and various other old maps and plot-plans; a number of original deeds for property here from 1741 on, and exact copies of deeds and title searches for much of the property in the village; a book listing the inscriptions on the tombstones in the old village cemetery in 1901; more than a hundred photographs of people who lived in Palisades in the nineteenth century; glass negatives for the fine pictures in The Story of the Ferry, and others, taken about a hundred years ago; post cards of buildings and scenes of that same period, made to sell in Mr. James Post’s store; and, perhaps most interesting, a number of manuscript volumes of Winthrop Sargent Gilman’s notes, comprising everything that an intelligent, curious, industrious observer could discover about the village a hundred and more years ago. He interviewed old inhabitants, wrote innumerable letters of inquiry, poked around and measured ruins, worked out genealogies, copied water marks from old documents, and photographed people, houses, scenes, and especially noble old trees.*

This is the stuff of history, but an intimate history, still alive, connected on one side with the past and on the other with our present, and with its roots in this one small hamlet. Over most of the forty-odd years since then, I have been examining the material, and reading and re-reading Mr. Gilman’s notes, every time discovering something I had missed before, talking to old people who were children in his time, following up things he said and checking them with authorities which weren’t known in his day. (George Budke’s voluminous collections of documents relating to Rockland County in general and the Blockhouse in Palisades in particular, for example, came out in the 1930’s, after Mr. Gilman’s death. See Appendix No.2.)

In a rather intensive study of the older houses in Palisades, I have come to think of the village as a palimpsest. (A parchment which has been written on twice, the original writing having disappeared.) We know of a good many houses which were here during the Colonial period and the Revolution, yet few remain. The old stone houses which survive were mostly built after the Revolution. Then in Gesner’s

*The Big House is the house — not so very big — now often called The Old Library, across Route 9W from the Antique Shop (Yonder Hill Dwellers). The library remained in the Old School for nine years, from 1944 to 1953, before moving to what seems to be its permanent home in the Jordan house.

*There is a list of manuscript books and other material collected by Mr. Gilman, and the forms in which they are available, in Appendix No. 1.
early days (his Diary covers 1829 to 1850) there was a whole community living around him, yet most of the houses in the neighborhood now existing were built in the late 1830’s to 1890’s.

So many interrelationships between the families in the village came to light that I have prepared a number of genealogies to help straighten them out; and now, when we read about a John Sneden, for example, we can turn to the family tree and point to the exact one.

Exact, however, is a word one can seldom use in writing history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, names were spelt in any way that pleased the writer, and the same Christian names would appear in generation after generation of the same family. Things were just as vague in other fields.

In the eighteenth century the English calendar was changed by eleven days, and the beginning of the year moved from March 25th to January first; land was bounded by a clump of bushes, a blaze on a tree, or two saplings; measurements such as a morgen or a league varied from country to country; and even today the length of a degree of latitude varies according to its distance from the equator. (In Appendix No.3 I have given a few illustrations of these tantalizing facts.)

Modern history must draw the line somewhere, and I have stopped this history at the turn of the century, when Mr. Gilman wound up his notes. Isabelle Savell has published a fine book about The Tonetti Years at Snedens Landing, and a further history of that period will have to await a writer with more perspective than myself. (I have, however, collected a good deal of material on this period, and on my own period from 1941-on, which will be available in the Palisades Library.)

This book is intended to be a sort of source book for the history of Palisades. The fact that I can quote references from books, manuscripts, or individuals for everything I say, and that I have had different parts checked by experts wherever possible, does not mean of course that it is all correct; but it is as close to the truth as I can make it.

[ Alice Haagensen left notes listing the many corrections she wanted to make in the book. I have made those changes, and replaced a few photographs with better versions. Because this book was written twenty-five years ago, many statements refer to the facts as they were in 1986, not 2012. I have left those as they were, except in a few places where the facts really needed to be updated: for example the case of Major André’s toe bone and the painting of the Palisades by Brown. My comments will be between brackets and in italic. Alice Haagensen Gerard]
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My list of acknowledgements will seem endless, for dozens of people have helped me over the years. In a desultory way I have talked to nearly all the old inhabitants of Palisades, and everything they have told me has been written down, even if I can’t bring it all into this account. I have often been advised to use a tape recorder, but I have been doing this for my own pleasure, and I like to see what I put down.

Mr. Gilman’s daughter, Anna Gilman Hill, told me so many wonderful stories that finally I persuaded her to write down her recollections of village life at the end of the nineteenth century, and the interesting result is available now in the Palisades Library.

Adeline Denike Van Blarcom also loved telling about old days in the village. Not only did she spend hours talking to me, but every so often she would write me a letter adding more stories or contradicting something someone else had said.

Mildred Post Rippey is a fount of Palisades history, original and articulate, but unfortunately her chief interest is in the present and future, and she spends her time taking such courses as public speaking, city planning, and creative writing. I treasure whatever she tells me.

A few years ago I met a daughter of Helen Park Stockman who had lived in Seven Oaks in her childhood. Through the daughter I was able to persuade Mrs. Stockman to write her recollections of Palisades. She also sent me some delightful photographs of Palisades in the old days.

Others who have helped me with information or photographs are Kathleen Martine and her sisters Emma and Marian Stewart, Miss Jennie Fox, Mrs. William (Emily Wahrenberger) Munson and her son, Dr. Albert Munson, Miss Mamie Sneden, John Sneden, Mrs. Grace Sneden, Mrs. Newton Sneden, Miss Helen Sneden, Alex Schultz, Adele and Harry Sisco, Constance Lieval Price, and Frances Sisco Pierson. Anne Tonetti Gugler has been generous in answering questions and in lending me Barry Faulkner’s charming unpublished account of the Tonettis.

Elizabeth Fox Finck, who grew up in Palisades and has been the chairman of the Palisades Historical Committee for the last twenty years or so, has been able to track down all sorts of material for me. So has Laura Ebmeyer, the postmistress, who of course knows everyone, and when I have no results from written enquiries from neighbors, a word from her will secure the information I need. She seems to attract old pictures, diaries, maps, etc. which are looking for a home. Helene Stansbury, as wife of the late Archer Stansbury, has many old family papers and photographs and is in touch with most of the old families in or outside of Palisades. She is also an authority on the Palisades Cemetery. (It was Mrs. Stansbury who was able to tell me where the fabulous collection of Sneden papers was, and which Mann now has the pistol found in the blockhouse so long ago, and many other things.)*

Mary Perrine has kindly given me information about her father, Van Dearing Perrine, and lent me a copy of his “Coasting Firewood” to photograph. Jack Allison, who lived on the Palisades as a boy, has written me about his recollections. Howard Walden, the author, read my manuscript and helped to tighten up the English.

The beautiful photograph of Snedens Landing from the

*The William Sloats, in Norwood, N.J. have the Sneden papers, and the Lindley Mann family, also in New Jersey, has the pistol.
river and the copies of old postcards by William Agnew which I have used are only a few samples of the hundreds of photographs of this village made by this prolific photographer. Over more than twenty years, besides making many general photographs of Palisades, he has photographed the crowd at the Memorial Day ceremony at the flagpole every year, and people leaving the Palisades Church on almost every pleasant Sunday — a possible wonderful resource for a twentieth century historian.

I have had various kinds of help in connection with the blockhouse on Woods Road, although the definitive job of excavating has yet to be done: Richard Koke of the New York Historical Society sent me copies of the findings of the 1925 N.-Y.H.S. Expedition to the blockhouse and showed me the utensils and uniform buttons which had been found. In 1972 Don Troiani of the Company of Military Historians did some excavating, but left to work on another project. Then in 1976 Kevin Durkin, a trained archaeologist, did some intensive work on the ruins with the help of Murray Fornaro, an interested amateur. He found and catalogued about a thousand objects, which turned out to be chiefly animal bones, but he got a job and eventually moved away to start a fundamentalist commune in Colorado.* In 1979 Marvin Rasnick and Lawrence Smalheiser went over the site with a metal detector, but, surprisingly, found nothing.

In 1959 Mary Malcolm Nafe, who was then in ninth grade, wrote a history of Palisades for a competition, which incidentally she won, and accompanied it with an album of photographs of Palisades houses and views, which are so good that I have borrowed several for this book.

Helen Norman, who lives in Niederhurst, Mr. Gilman’s old house, has suggested to me several interesting projects, such as the painting of “Snead’s Landing” and the similarity between Andrew Jackson Downing’s plans and Mr. Coles’ house.

From the beginning Mrs. Sheaf Satterthwaite, Jr., whose mother Mrs. Speer used to live in Palisades, and who lived here herself for a while, has helped me, copying Mrs. Hill’s reminiscences, bringing neighbors from New Jersey to talk to me, and calling my attention to various bits of information in books or the news.

Isabelle Savell, in her book, The Tonetti Years at Snedens Landing, has of course made enormous contributions to Snedens’ history, and I have borrowed from it in my account of the period, as well as using certain of her fine photographs. John Scott, of the Historical Society of Rockland County, has not only read my manuscript and helped to clarify the writing, but embellished it with interesting references and with some of its best photographs.

Robert D. Gerard, who is a busy geologist, took time to write a lucid description of the geological history of the Palisades, and Dr. John Nafe lent me Schuberth’s book, which provides the latest theories on the subject. Charlotte Schreiber of Lamont also advised me on the geology.

Although Marion Lowndes’ lively account of the “Next Fifty Years” of the Palisades Library, 1916-1966, deals with a later period, her description of Miss Quidor covers the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth.

Norman Baron, with his pupils from the Rockland Project School, interviewed old Charlie Lundstrom about his childhood in Skunk Hollow, and later showed me around the ruins and the spring there, and photographed the monument on the border for me. Philip Evola photographed tombstones in the Palisades Cemetery and in the Gesner-Concklin Burying Ground for me.

Lee Savage has helped me often in the field of art. He allowed me to use a copy of his beautiful painting of Palisades

*Kevin Durkin is a man of parts. Between his painstaking work on the blockhouse and his move to Colorado, he worked as a technician in the surgical pathology department at Columbia’s College of Physicians and Surgeons. While there he developed such a significant improvement in pathological procedures that the Annals of Surgery published an article describing it.
from the north, found material for me about John Quidor and Jasper Cropsey, and made a fine copy of Cropsey’s painting of the pool near the waterfall. Best of all, he painted another beautiful picture of Snedens Landing to use on the jacket and as a frontispiece for this book.

I have had a very active correspondence with three local historians. Claire Tholl, the architectural historian, has joined me in such expeditions as the discovery of the Station Rock, on the border between New York and New Jersey, (which we found only because she was able to persuade Tom Demarest, who had seen it ten years before, to locate it again for us), to inspect some of the old houses (her specialty), and to look at the Gesner burying ground. She is a skilled photographer and map-maker, and has plotted out graphically for me some boundaries about which I have had questions. If she happens to have doubts about anything, I have learned to pay attention.

Howard Durie, who is a retired title searcher and a family connection of the Snedens, has told me so much about the Sneden genealogy that I have a special notebook for his letters, and for mine telling him a few facts I have found out from Gesner’s diary, old wills, etc.

Another notebook is devoted to my correspondence about the Dobbs and related families with Margaret Travis Lane, a descendant of old Jan Dobbs, and to her interesting articles about the real Dobbs Ferry (in Westchester) in various historical magazines. Although she now lives in Troy, N.Y., she has an encyclopedic knowledge of Westchester history and genealogy.

Since 1982, when I first met Virginia McGuire of the Hastings Historical Society, I have had a delightful time exchanging information with this group of lively historians, including also Karolyn Wrightson, Mary Allison, and Mimi Copp, about such subjects as bone factories, picnic groves, Masefield’s stay in Yonkers and explorations on our side, and the Hastings Fête Venetian, which included boat trips to our waterfall.

Another person with whom I have had a fine time exchanging information is Joan Geismar, who wrote her doctoral dissertation for Columbia University on the remarkable settlement of Skunk Hollow, south of the New Jersey border.

Thomas Demarest, a member of an old Rockland County family, spends his days doing carpentry, landscaping, and yard work, but finds time somehow to do serious and fundamental research in local history. He introduced me to the earliest files in the county clerk’s office, and he is the authority for some of the most interesting facts in this history.

Wilfred Talman helped me start off my research with a list of historical references and some valuable background information. Other local historians who have helped me are Judge Stanley Bradley, who published a history of Alpine, N.J.; Reginald McMahon, who has written articles about Vriessendael and Jack Earnest, as well as several about old houses in Rockleigh, N.J.; Jack Focht, who has written about John Torrey; Carl Nordstrom, who has written historical works about the Rockland County region from a sociological point of view; Julian Salomon, who read and corrected what I wrote about the Indians; Dr. Jacqueline Holland, who read the part about Skunk Hollow; and Cathleen Heslin of Rockleigh, N.J., who lent me a copy of Dauphine Taylor’s genealogy of the “Snedens of the Field,” and helped me reprint the Verplanck map for general distribution.

My friend Mrs. Robert Reed, formerly of Dobbs Ferry (Susan Reed East, I call her to differentiate her from Susan Reed West, the folk singer), arranged for me to meet several Westchester historians, especially Wolfert Lockwood and Rebecca Rankin, both now gone, and Sister Mary Agnes Parrell, who has published a history of Dobbs Ferry.

Loring McMillen of the Richmond Restoration on Staten Island has made a survey of many of the old houses in Palisades and Snedens Landing, and, while he has overturned many of
our old ideas, he has given us a sounder foundation for our historical reconstructions.

Gordon Jacoby and his associates of Lamont’s Tree Ring Laboratory gave countless hours of their own time to help us date the foundations of the Big House. There had been suggestions that this was built in the late 1600’s, but their painstaking work over months brought only the dates 1735 and 1738 for the years the foundation beams were cut. This is an invaluable tool for historians; the chief drawback is the hours of time it demands of highly skilled scientists. We are very much indebted to Lamont’s “dendrochronologists” for their help in answering an important question.

Renald Von Muchow, the photographer at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, who usually makes meticulous photographs of pathological slides and anatomical drawings, has copied for me most of the photographs which have been lent me, with results which sometimes seem miraculous.

My husband Cushman Haagensen, who is a hard working surgeon and writer, has patiently acted as intermediary, carrying back and forth negatives, prints, or books, sometimes several times a week. Then he mounts each picture in the way that he developed for his own scientific papers. This is a small part of the help he has given me, which ranges from the building of shelves to hold all my notebooks, and a fine big table where I can spread out my work, to constant encouragement and friendly but critical reading of the finished product.

My sister Jeannette Munro, herself an historian and frequent contributor to the Princeton Recollector, has also read successive versions of my history and urged me to persevere, as has my grandson, Simon Gerard.

My other sister, Carol Sheldon, not only has made useful suggestions about my manuscripts, but has brought to my attention interesting and out-of-the-way bits of information, such as the origin of an “Agnew” and Captain Drinkwater’s trip to Piermont in 1901 with wood.

Outside of perhaps prejudiced relatives, the person who persuaded me to do more than file my material in the library cupboard was Mary Chamberlin of Heyhoe Woods. She and her husband, Jo Chamberlin, the writer, have been patient in reading the various versions and making suggestions for improvements, and Mary has gone beyond this in typing up clean copies and assuring me of the value of what I am doing, when, as often happens, I begin to doubt it.

Besides talking to individuals I have spent a good deal of time in libraries. Without the rich material of the Palisades Library, of course, this book could not have been written, and Beatrice Agnew, its librarian, is highly skilled in tracking down information. The others I have found most valuable are the New-York Historical Society Library, with Sue Gillies, the former reference librarian; the New York Public Library, especially the former American History Room, the Local History and Genealogy Room, and the Manuscript Room; and the New York Genealogical and Biographical Library. I have also found material in the libraries of Columbia University, the Holland Society, and West Point, as well as local libraries in New City (where Mrs. Yvonne Yare helped me), Nyack, Dobbs Ferry and Tarrytown.

The National Archives and Library of Congress in Washington, the New York State Library in Albany, the Library of the Museum of the American Indian, Bronx, N.Y., the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the Courthouse and County Clerk in New City have all supplied me with information and copies of source material, and of course the Budke Collection of documents about Rockland County in the MSS Room of the New York Public Library and the volumes which the Rockland County Librarians have reprinted from it are invaluable.

I have put most of the information I have received in loose-leaf notebooks or folders, which will eventually be given to the
Palisades Free Library.

The Historical Committee of the Palisades Library in its latest form has done much to ensure that this historical material in the library is made available on microfilm, and generally in other forms too. A card index is being prepared which will make access to the material much easier.

Finally, the preparation of this manuscript was made easier by Annie Gerard’s fine lettering on a couple of maps, by Charlotte Carlson’s careful copy of Mr. Gilman’s plan of the Gesner-Conklin burying ground, by the almost faultless typing of Jenifer Latham (Secretary and a half), and by the final painstaking arrangement and reproduction of text and illustrations by her friend, Henry Battestin, who did it out of kindness to her and to a writer whom he wanted to help.

After some vicissitudes, its publication was finally assured when W. Lee Savage offered to help, and found Ioannis (John) Daskalakis of “Pilgrimage” Publishing, who published it in the form I had hoped for, but never expected to achieve.
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1. INTRODUCTION


Snedens Landing and Palisades Today

THE present Snedens Landing, the vaguely defined* part of the hamlet of Palisades that faces the Hudson River on its west bank, twelve miles north of the George Washington Bridge, is a secluded and legendary place, the creation of Mary Lawrence Tonetti, who owned many of the houses in the first half of the twentieth century and rented them for pittances to creative friends. It was a rare writer, actor, artist, architect, or musician who had not lived here or visited here during that period, and all were friends and admirers of Mrs. Tonetti, who was herself a sculptor. Since her death in 1945, there are perhaps more doctors and television executives than artists in Snedens, but there are still celebrities here, and the Landing has changed less than one would expect.

In 1951, a world-renowned institution, Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory, was built on Torrey Cliff, the “mountain” to the south. The hill had been called after John Torrey, the famous botanist and professor at Columbia, who lived there from 1854 to 1865. Now Columbia is represented again by Lamont’s ships, which sail the oceans of the world, contributing significantly to the knowledge of the earth’s geology.

In the center of Palisades, west of Route 9W, there are still representatives of the old families, some of whose ancestors moved up from the Landing a century ago, and among the newcomers there and on the slope to the west are many who add variety and distinction to the life of the village.

Part of the attraction of Snedens was that Mrs. Tonetti had kept unspoiled the old stone or white frame houses, changing or adding to them only in a way that increased their charm. Since there are many old houses in the rest of Palisades as well, the old part of the village was in 1968 designated a Historic District by the Town of Orangetown.

In 1985 Scenic Hudson sponsored a study of Palisades, with a view to entering the older section, as well as many individual houses, in the National Register of Historic Places.

Highlights of Palisades History

There has always been a general idea that there was a long

*In the early days Snedens Landing was taken to mean the dock on the river where the ferry actually landed and the few houses around it; the Snedens Landing in Gesner’s Diary meant probably the 120 acres near the river and partway up the cliff which was owned largely by the Snedens from 1752 for about a hundred years; in Mrs. Tonetti’s time it came to mean chiefly the houses Mrs. Tonetti owned and rented out; nowadays, anyone who lives to the east of Route 9W, except perhaps those on Torrey Cliff, considers himself or herself to be in Snedens Landing; and some to the west of 9W have been known to refer to their houses, not quite seriously, as being in “Upper Snedens Landing.”
history behind the interesting present; but few have realized how important, varied, and well-documented that history is, covering not only Snedens Landing, but all of Palisades.

In the seventeenth century, before there was even one house here, the Governors of New York and New Jersey met at the foot of the hill by the river to try to agree upon the boundary between the provinces, and the house to the north of the Landing built soon afterwards became familiar by name to negotiators in New York, Perth Amboy, and London, as they carried on their labyrinthine disputes over the boundary which was obviously nearby.

As William Merritt’s Cheer Hall, this same house served as the seat of government for the province of New York for three weeks in 1702.

It was Merritt’s nephew across the river, Jan Dobbs, who was the first ferryman of the famous Dobbs Ferry, and the Snedens who moved across from Westchester soon took over the ferry, and gave rise to many legends.

During the Revolution George Washington and many of his officers passed through the settlement which they called Dobbs Ferry,* or stopped to visit the blockhouse which they had built on the cliff. (One authority, George Budke, wrote: “That this fortification is the most important relic of the Revolutionary War, not only in Rockland County, but anywhere in the vicinity of New York, is beyond question.”) From 1780 on there was always at least a captain’s company stationed in the blockhouse, which often played an important part in General Washington’s strategy. The letter Benedict Arnold wrote from there during the crucial period of his machinations gives a stunning picture of his duplicity. During the last year of the Revolution, all authorized communications between the patriots and the British passed through the “Dobbs Ferry” blockhouse. At the end of the war the new American nation was first saluted in the person of George Washington by a British warship lying off Snedens.

After the Revolution, ships built in Snedens sailed up and down the coast, and brownstones in New York were built with stones from the quarries south of the landing. In 1832 a thousand Methodists came to camp meeting on the west slope of the Palisades. At the same time nearly everyone in the village was told that he or she was descended from royalty and heir to a stupendous fortune as a descendant of Anneke Jans.

Toward the end of the last century prosperous New Yorkers began to build summer homes in Palisades. Andrew Carnegie came out to look at some property, but was put off by the saucy behavior of little Nannie Gilman. The Pre-Raphaelites found an outpost here, and New York City authorities had one of their first encounters with environmentalists when they tried to use the Piermont marshes as a landfill site.

The economic ups and downs and social changes of the nineteenth century all were reflected here in microcosm, and at every period there are available the accounts of individuals, illustrious or simple, who bring the events to life.

** Various Names of the Village

The village’s history is not well-known partly because of its small size and partly because it has been called by so many different names. First there was just one large house near the river, considered to be in Orange County or in Tappan. In 1714 an old will called the locality Rockland, and the name adhered, though loosely, for more than a century; throughout the eighteenth century it was sometimes called Corbett’s or Corbet’s Point, after a former owner of the first large house

*When Washington spoke or wrote of Dobbs Ferry, he sometimes — but seldom — referred to the landing in Westchester, and on a map of his camp in Westchester in 1781, only the settlement on the west side of the river was called “Dob’s Ferry.”
by the river, and a notice by the local patriotic committee in 1776 spoke of “Snyden’s or Dobbs’s Ferry, on the west side of Hudson’s River.” This reference led many, including the local historian, Winthrop Gilman, to assert that the village was customarily called “Dobbs Ferry on the west side of the Hudson,” but no other eighteenth century source has been found which uses that name. It was indeed called Dobbs Ferry during the Revolution, but with no qualification. Lossing, in his charming book *The Hudson*, says that Snedens Landing was once called Paramus, but this also cannot be verified.

In 1855, when the village finally obtained a post office of its own, after having been called Rockland for more than a hundred years, it took the name of Palisades. Ironically enough, the postal authorities had advised against keeping the name of Rockland, because there were so many others in the country, but nothing could be more confusing than the name which was selected, which is constantly mistaken for the nearby New Jersey towns of Palisade (without the s) and Palisades Park.

**“Hamlet”**

A “hamlet” to most people is a rather archaic term, meaning, as the Shorter Oxford Dictionary says, “A group of houses or small village in the country. *Esp.* a village without a church.” Now, in New York it is used to designate a neighborhood, small or not so small, which has no municipal government of its own. This probably dates back to 1870, when the State Legislature passed general laws for the incorporation of villages, and decreed that the term “village” was to refer only to an incorporated village. No law was passed concerning the use of the term “hamlet,” but it was obviously picked because the more usual term “village” had been preempted.

In 1972 there was an attempt to organize Palisades as an incorporated village, in order to preserve the character of this very special community, but it lost by a narrow margin to those who worried about the responsibility and expense of self-government. Now in 1985 the subject has come up again, and the proponents are better prepared and more ready to answer questions. If it loses this time, it will probably be the end of it.

Governmentally, therefore, for the time being, Palisades is a hamlet,* governed by the Town of Orangetown, in the County of Rockland. Its school district is called South Orangetown; its library system is Ramapo-Catskill; its church is part of the Hudson River presbytery; and yet Palisades is a definite entity, with a character of its own.

**The Postal District**

Its boundaries are best defined as those of the postal district. That is bounded on three sides by the Hudson River, the New Jersey-New York state line, and the Sparkill creek, where Oak Tree Road crosses it on the way to Tappan. On the north the line runs south of the American Legion Headquarters on the County Road, and south of the Country Club on Route 9W.

Laura Ebmeyer, the postmistress, reckons there are about 500 families in the postal district, not counting the 130 or more individuals in the Retirement Home.

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*New City, the county seat, and Pearl River are also called hamlets. Although this is understood to be the technical governmental term, in daily life it is never used. In this history, therefore, which is not particularly concerned with governmental relationships, and which will be read, one hopes, occasionally in other states, the constant use of the world “hamlet,” rather than the more customary generic term of village, would seem obtrusive. (In Ohio an incorporated village is a “hamlet.” In New Jersey it is a “borough.”)*
Geology of the Hudson

Since the history of the village has always been influenced by its magnificent situation, overlooking one of the most beautiful rivers of the world, it is interesting to understand something of the geology of the region, and the formation of the Palisades. This is particularly appropriate because much of our modern knowledge of the geology of the earth has been gathered over the past three decades by the ships and technicians of the Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory in Palisades. A geologist at Lamont, R. D. Gerard, provides the following description of the origin of the Palisades.

About two hundred million years ago, in the Triassic and Jurassic periods, (before North America and Europe split apart*) thick layers of nonmarine sediments were deposited in a series of basins along what is now eastern North America, from Nova Scotia to the Carolinas. These rocks are known as the Newark Group, and underlie much of Rockland and Bergen Counties. The rocks are brick red or purplish in color, and include sandstones, conglomerates, and shales.

Many of the early homes in the area were built of this red sandstone, as well as the “brownstones” in New York City. An outcropping of red sandstone and shale can be seen at the river just south of Snedens Landing,** and this quarry probably supplied material for most of the stone houses in the village. Other exposures are found in the numerous quarries along the river from Sparkill to Hook Mountain. [Green, in his History of Rockland County, speaks of thirty-one quarries in operation between Grand View and Upper Nyack in the first half of the nineteenth century.]

The Late Triassic period saw widespread activity and faulting, called, in an understatement, the Palisades Disturbance. In this area it was manifest by the invasive injection of molten rock, called diabase, or dolerite, between horizontal layers of the sandstone, forming what geologists call an intrusive sill. This sill, hundreds of feet thick, became tilted and exposed with time, and the overlaying softer beds of sandstone were worn away. The great towering cliffs of the Palisades were left, stretching for about twenty-five miles, from Weehawken to Hook Mountain, or Verdrietige Hook (troublesome bend) as the Dutch called it.

The columnar structure which characterizes the Palisades cliffs owes its origin to vertical cracks which developed as the sill slowly cooled deep within the surrounding strata. Such formations are rare, and are seen in only a few other parts of the world, such as the Giant’s Causeway in Ireland, and the cave of Staffa, off the coast of Scotland. In places the rock is marked by transverse cracks which make it resemble steps, so that one name for the Palisades rock, derived from the Swedish word for step (trappa), is trap-rock.

During the past million years four separate ice sheets spread across northern North America. During each invasion the southern limit of ice reached to a line just south of the New York-New Jersey border. Some geologists believe that at the end of one of these episodes a great mass of ice blocked the lower Hudson Valley, backing up the meltwaters, which poured through the

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* At this time there was a single continent, which geologists call Pangaea. In the course of a few million years, this split, first into a southern continent, called Gondwanaland and a northern, Laurasia. Later, at an infinitesimal rate, these were divided east and west into the continents as we know them today; and they are still moving. (A bumper sticker at Lamont reads “Reunite Gondwanaland.”)

**These are the “red rocks” where Albert Munson told the writer he used to swim with Mrs. Tonetti’s son Joe.
gap where Sparkill Creek now is, and ran down the Hackensack Valley until the ice melted, and the river could again follow its original bed.

Christopher Schuberth, of the American Museum of Natural History, gives another account of the extent of the Palisades and the early course of the Hudson, while admitting that “the evolution of the Hudson . . . to the present time is poorly known, and what is known is a matter of dispute.”

He maintains that the Palisades Ridge extends more than forty miles along the Hudson from Haverstraw into west-central Staten Island. Of the course of the river he says that one school considers that the first river veered westward through the Sparkill “wind gap,” then across the Watchung Mountains near Paterson, and only veered east again at the Millburn Gap. Then, this theory goes, the river was finally captured, ten or fifteen million years ago, by a smaller stream that had gradually worked its way northward to intersect the older river at Sparkill; and our Hudson found its present bed.

Be that as it may, the lower Hudson River is now a fjord, estuary, or branch of the sea, extending a hundred and fifty miles to Troy, just north of Albany, with a four and a half foot tide in its lower reaches. Ocean liners go up the river as far as Albany.

The village of Palisades is at the first real break in the cliffs north of Weehawken. Here the cliff drops from five hundred to two hundred feet, and falls to the river more gradually, with an irregular plateau halfway down, so that a road can wind down in easy curves. One result is that each house on the slope seems to have a different and more beautiful view of the river.

Verrazano

For millennia the Indians had the river, which they called the Muhheakantuck, to themselves*, but in 1524 Giovanni da Verrazano, an Italian exploring for François-Premier of France, said that he saw from what has been considered to be lower New York Bay “a very big river which was deep within the mouth.” He sent a small boat two leagues to the upper bay “a most beautiful lake, three leagues in circuit,” but, “all of a sudden a violent contrary wind blew in from the sea and forced us to return to our ship [the Dauphine], greatly regretting to leave this region.” He went no farther,** but from then on the river appeared on maps of the new land. It was given various names, of which the commonest were Mauritius, after Prince Maurice of Orange, and North River, to distinguish it from the Delaware, which was the South River. (North River is still used occasionally in New York City to refer to the Hudson, now as opposed to the East River.)

Hudson and the Half Moon

Other Europeans visited it, but none left a record until Henry Hudson’s trip in the Half Moon in September and October of 1609, undertaken for the Dutch in the hope of discovering a northwest passage to India. His ship’s officer, Robert Juet, kept a journal of this trip, and we have some extracts from Hudson’s own account — the first entry of the Hudson into formal history.

The boat that Hudson sent out to reconnoiter reported

*Washington Irving said that the Indians called it the “Shatemuc,” but Julian Salomon, who is an authority on the subject of Indians in this region, has not been able to document this.

**Verrazano came to a strange end: Morison says “Verrazano was on his way to cut logwood in Brazil when the Caribs killed him and ate him in the West Indies.”
The Ghost of the Half Moon on the River.

Mrs. Howard Robbins made an accurate etching of Hudson’s ship on a window of her Palisades house, so that when seen from a certain position it would seem to be sailing once more on the river.

A nineteenth century conception of the reception of Hendrick Hudson by Indians, engraved from a painting by Robert W. Wier (Sic.), 1896
that “The Lands . . . were as pleasant with Grasse and Flowers, and goodly Trees, as ever they had scene, and very sweet smells came from them.” The sweet smells seem to have struck most explorers, as Robert Boyle details in his fine book The Hudson River.

The Half Moon passed the Palisades going up the river on September 14th, a beautiful fall day with a fair wind. Juet was too concerned with the navigation and the “savages” to comment on the spectacular scenery. A few Indians attacked them on their way up the river, but most were “loving” and brought them goods for barter: tobacco, beaver and other skins, oysters, wheat, corn, grapes, currants, “pomptions” (pumpkins), beans, and “stropes of beads.”

Many of the Indians were gorgeously dressed in “Mantles of Feathers, and some in Skinnes of divers sorts of good Furres.” Juet adds, “They had red Copper Tobacco pipes and other things of Copper they did weare about their necks.” Nonetheless, the trader found: “They desire Cloathes and are very civil.”

After two weeks the Half Moon ran into shoal water just south of the present location of Albany. Deciding that this was not the northwest passage, Hudson turned back and passed the Palisades, again without landing, on October 2nd.* (Three hundred years later, during the Hudson-Fulton Celebration in 1909, little Mildred Post, later Mrs. Rippey, sat with her family and friends on the front lawn of the Austin Abbott house, now only a cellar-hole in Tallman Park, watching replicas of the Half Moon and Clermont go past up the river, and later she wrote a poem about it, which you can find in Appendix Number 6).

*Hudson also had a tragic end: two years after he sailed up the Hudson, a mutiny by a starving and diseased crew, led by Juet, set him adrift to perish in the inhospitable waters of Hudson’s Bay.

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Reaches of the Hudson

Sailors divide the river into Reaches — straight stretches from one bend to another, which a sailboat, if it has a favorable wind, can sail in one tack, or reach. Johannes DeLaet, who in 1625 wrote a description of the Hudson derived from Hudson’s and other travelers’ accounts, listed nearly all the reaches by names, and they have not changed very much to this day. He began with the Tappan Reach, but later mariners named the one just south of it, which runs past the Palisades, the Great Chip Rock Reach.

The Tappan Indians

An old map, made by Lucini, twenty-odd years after Hudson’s trip, calls the river the “Martins or Hudson,” and shows the “Tappaen” Indians to the west of the Palisades. These were a band of the Delaware, or Lenni Lenape, a tribe of the Algonquian Indians. The Algonquians occupied the coast from the Gulf of Saint Lawrence to North Carolina, and also the shores of the Hudson as far as the trading post at Fort Orange (now Albany). North of the Tappans were the Haverstraw bands, who, like all the other Rockland County Indians, were a part of the Munsees. Along the upper Hudson and around Fort Orange were the Mahicans, or Mohicans, a separate but related tribe.

The Tappan Indians made their living chiefly by agriculture and fishing, although in winter they did a certain amount of hunting and trapping. Each band was self-sufficient until the colonists taught them to want the products of civilization, including guns and liquor, and to obtain them by trapping, especially beavers, which were needed in Europe for men’s top hats.
This axe-head was once one of the treasures of the Palisades Library, but now it cannot be found.


Cornelia Bedell writes on page 297: “The ‘rack’ or sailing course, opposite Nyack, which is now best known as the Tappan Zee, was sometimes called ‘The Sleeper’s Haven’ because crews of becalmed sloops could sleep away the hours in the shadow of ‘Verdrietige Hoek’ or ‘Tedious Point.’”

The Fourteen Reaches of the Hudson

1. Hunter’s Reach
2. Jan Playsier’s Reach
3. Baker’s Reach
4. Clover Reach
5. Vaste Reach
6. Long Reach
7. Fisher’s Reach
8. Martyr’s Reach
9. Hoge’s Reach
10. Crescent Reach
11. Seylmaeker’s Reach
12. Haverstraw Reach
13. Tappan Zee Reach
14. Chip Rock Reach

Reaches from page 10 of *The Hudson River Guidebook*, by Arthur Adams.
Part of Lucini's Map, about 1631, shows Tappaen Indians to west of Hudson. Notice near Block Island it says “L’Aria è buona” (The air is good). And near Cape Mai, at the R. Carlo (Delaware or South River) it says “Qui comincia la nuova Belgia” (Here begins New Netherland).
North and west of the Delaware were the more warlike Six Nations, or Iroquois, who called themselves allegorically the Six Fires of the Long House.

It was the Tappans who sold the land to sixteen Dutch settlers in 1681, receiving in exchange a great store of sewant (wampum), blankets, tools, guns, knives, clothes, rum and beer. The Indians stayed on, amicably, for a while, probably in the unsettled land to the west of the Hackensack River. In 1690 their Sachem sent twelve braves to help in the French and Indian Wars, and said he had in all sixty young men available. The Kakiat Patent to the west of the Hackensack River was settled, however, in the early eighteenth century, and the Indians moved out. As Daniel Denton, a Long Islander writing of the Indians there in 1670, piously described the process: “where the English come to settle, a Divine Hand makes way for them, by removing or cutting off the Indians, either by Wars with one another, or by some raging mortal disease.”

In the matter of the Indians in and around Tappan, Thomas Demarest, in Bergen County History, makes a convincing case for the intermarriage of many of them with whites and blacks, and their retreat to the Ramapo Mountains. He tells of Johannes DeVries Jr.,* who, to validate his vote in a contested election, had to prove his ownership of a piece of land near the Pascack Brook. His deed was dated 1735, and he deposed that there were “50 or 60 apple trees and peach trees on it planted by him and Indians.” Demarest goes on: “Did they associate? In 1760 a Muster Roll was taken of men raised in the County of Orange for Captain Howell’s Company of Militia. One of the men on the Muster Roll is John Defries, born at Tappan and twenty-five years old. His description: ‘Indian.’” Demarest later points out that among the families still in the Ramapos are the DeFreese.

The Indians in Rockland County have left few traces, according to Julian Salomon. Among them are many Indian place names, shell heaps near the river, rock shelters in the mountains and along streams, and “Spook Rock,” a shrine or “sacred abode of the spirit.” Hidden in the earth are thousands of arrowheads and other artifacts which may be found wherever the ground is suitable for planting.

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*Johannes DeVries Senior, a free Negro, was the son of a Dutch army captain and a “woman of color” named Swartinne (Black Annie). He was one of the Tappan patentees.
In the seventeenth century, until 1664 under the Dutch West India Company, and afterwards under the English governors of New York and New Jersey, the land around New York and up the Hudson was handed out to large proprietors, who usually sold and resold the patent until eventually the land ended up in the hands of permanent settlers.

Vriessendael

The first settlement hereabouts was “Vriessendael,” which David Pieterzoun DeVries established in 1640 in “a beautiful and pleasant place,” a meadow on the shore of the Hudson under a mountain. For years this site was believed to be in the area of Tappan, including Piermont and the marshes between Piermont and Snedens Landing. A number of historians have questioned this, however. In 1969 Reginald McMahon argued convincingly that it must have been at Edgewater, where Revolutionary War maps show that there was once an extensive marsh and a couple of rivers. He quotes Thomas Demarest as proving that the Dutch mijl or league, as it was translated, was equal to four or four and a half English miles. If one reads the translation of DeVries’ account with this in mind, it seems quite clear that his main plantation was near Edgewater, although he also owned the Tappan marshes.

“On February 10th, 1640,” DeVries wrote, “I began to make a plantation a league and a half or two leagues above the fort [that is, about eight miles above the tip of Manhattan] as there was there a fine location and full thirty-one morgens* of maize land where there were no trees to remove... I went there to live, half on account of the pleasure of it, as it was all situated along the river...

“The 15th of April I went with my sloop to Fort Orange (Albany) where I wanted to examine the land which is on the river. We arrived at Tappan in the evening, where a large flat of about two or three hundred morgens of clay soil lies under the mountains, three or four feet above the water. A creek which comes from the highland runs through it, on which fine water mills could be erected. I bought this flat from the Indians as it was only three leagues above my plantation and five leagues from the fort.”

DeVries made friends with the Indians, and his plantation flourished until Governor Kieft’s massacre of Indians.

II. COLONIAL TIMES


*See Appendix No.3 for a discussion of “Morgens.”
The colony founded by DeVries was often thought to have been on the site of Piermont and Sparkill, but Reginald McMahon, who composed this marker, maintains, convincingly, that it was near the site of Edgewater, although DeVries did own some land in “Tappan.”

encamped near Jersey City precipitated a war in 1643. Before friendly Indians could intervene, the farm buildings and plantation of Vriessendael were laid waste. Discouraged, DeVries returned to Holland, and no trace remains of his pleasant settlement.

Valott

A quarter of a century later, in 1669, Claude Valott and three associates were granted a large tract of land on the west side of the Hudson, called Tappan, running four miles along the river and three miles back, for a payment of twenty-four shillings a year, with the proviso that the grantees must settle the same within seven years. Apparently they couldn’t, for the document was marked in the margin, “This patent is void and trown up.”

Tappan

Finally, in 1681, a group of sixteen Dutch farmers, some of them free blacks, obtained from the Tappan Indians “a Cartaine tract of Landt named ould tappan” in “ye province of East New Jersey knowne by ye name of tappan.” This was sold first by the Indians to Lady Elizabeth Carteret, the wife of the governor of New Jersey (and an ancestor of the “Cliffside” Lawrences of Palisades), and transferred by her to the farmers.

Since this tract was in a disputed boundary area between New York and New Jersey, they obtained from Governor Dongan of New York in 1686 another patent for the same land, a tract about eight miles long and two to five miles wide in the county of Orange, New York, the “towne of Orange,” for the yearly payment of sixteen bushels of good winter wheat. They settled the tract immediately and built a prosperous community.
which they called Tappan or Orangetown. (Sergeant Joseph Plumb Martin said in 1780 it was pronounced Tap-pawn.)

Green, in his *History of Rockland County*, published in 1886, has an interesting account of the glorious visions in the minds of the settlers.

Orangetown was one of the very few patents, within the limits of our present County, which was bought with the idea of a permanent settlement, and most, if not all of the purchasers, moved onto their new possessions and began the founding of homes. Never, perhaps, did enterprise start with more enthusiasm and terminate with less result. It was the plan of those, who obtained that grant, to build a city which should eclipse all rivals in the Colony save its neighbor, New York. Nor, if we take the same view as did those settlers, will this project seem absurd. The wonderful agricultural resources of the Hudson Valley and the rapidity with which they were to be developed, were not forseen at that time; what was realized was, the enormous profit to be obtained from trade with the Indians in furs, and surely no better location could be chosen for that purpose than Tappan.

From it to the north, west and south, stretched a country still filled with game. It was convenient to the local Indians, and what would be more natural than that its fame as a trading post should spread to the more remote tribes in the western mountains, and draw to it their dusky hunters laden with the spoils of the chase. As an outlet, it had the slote or creek, now known as Sparkill, which, after many a sinuous turn through the scene of DeVries’ failure, at length emptied into the broad Hudson, at the mouth of which lay New York; and the flat-bottomed, broad bowered vessels of that day could navigate that creek well into the Orangetown grant.

Following out their idea, the settlers had a part of their patent mapped out and divided into small lots. Each holder of property in the patent was expected to buy and improve one or more of these, and the project started with great promise. Further than a start it never advanced, and to this day there is not, on all the original Orangetown grant, a place of sufficient size to amount to more than a country hamlet.

**Orangetown Resolutions**

The fact, however, that the land was settled directly by a group of independent farmers (many of whose descendants are still in Rockland County), and did not pass through the hands of a rich proprietor or patroon, seems to have given a special character to the community. Certainly, even before the Revolution, on July 4th, 1774, the freeholders and inhabitants took the initiative in passing the Orangetown Resolutions, which protested the British Government’s taxes and suggested the non-importation agreement, adopted three and a half months later by the Continental Congress. During the Revolution Sir Henry Clinton recognized the character of these farmers, when he declared that he could “neither buy nor conquer these Dutchmen.”

It must be admitted that many of the Dutchmen were equally obstinate in their loyalty to the British, so that there was actually a state of civil war in the valley during the Revolution.

**Tappan Church**

Another field in which the settlers showed their stubbornness and their independence was in religion. The Tappan Dutch Reformed Church, organized in 1694, was the first church in Rockland County, and the only one for over fifty years. There are records of baptisms and marriages from the beginning,
even before 1716 when the first church was built, the one in which André’s trial was to be held. The church maintained its connection with Amsterdam, in Holland, until 1749, when the majority of members voted to look to New York rather than to Amsterdam for direction. The New York oriented members called themselves the Coetus. The others, the Conferentie, split off and tried to organize a separate purely Dutch church, but the times were against them, and they faded out.

So strong was the Dutch influence in the whole fertile Hackensack Valley that Zabriskies, Campbells, and Demarests who settled there later all considered themselves Jersey Dutchmen. The Dutch language, in Tappan as in other towns, was spoken along with English until well into the nineteenth century.

**Orange and Rockland Counties**

Orange County, including what is now called Rockland County, was organized in 1683, and Tappan, or Orangetown as it was also called, was the first county seat. Soon, as the northern part of the county beyond the Ramapo Mountains became more thickly settled, it became necessary to have a duplicate courthouse and “gaol” in Goshen. This was fortunate during the Revolution, because it happened that the courthouse in Orangetown had burned in 1773, so the county government was transferred to Goshen for the duration of the war. In 1790 the supervisors started meeting in New City, which was more central.

By 1798 the northern settlers were much more numerous than the southern, and it was decided to divide the area. The part south of the mountains was called Rockland County, while the remainder retained the name of Orange.

**Lockhart Patent**

In the meantime, to return to the area near the river, the southern half of what had been Valott’s patent, two miles along the river and three miles deep, was bought from him by Dr. George Lockhart, a New York physician and land speculator of Scottish descent.* On February 7, 1685, New Jersey confirmed the purchase with the proviso that he “lay thirty tons of stone at Amboy in order to build a prison house,” and pay six pounds, five shillings quitrent every year. Less than two weeks later he sold half the extensive marsh land to “ffrederick fflypson” (Frederick Phillipse) for five shillings. There must have been

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*See Appendix No. 7 for details of the Lockhart Patent. This obviously conflicted with the Tappan Patent, but apparently the differences were resolved peaceably.
Copy of the Original Verplanck Map — 1745
— Discovered in 1899 by Mr. Gilman, and presented to the Historical Society of Rockland County in 1958. (For copy of reproduction and detailed description see Appendix Number 8.)
some other considerations, for Lockhart seems to have been a shrewd businessman. A couple of years later, on June 27 1687, he obtained a patent from Governor Dongan of New York for more or less the same property, which had now been surveyed by Leonard Beckwith.

This tract of land, 3,410 acres, covered with thick forest, and chiefly accessible by river, was kept in one piece until the middle of the eighteenth century. Its successive owners were prominent New York citizens of British extraction, all of whom came and went by river.

William Merritt and His Cheerhall

There is no record of Lockhart ever having lived on his land. On October 20th, 1687, less than two months after his patent was finally confirmed by New York, “George Lockhart of the City of New York” mortgaged or sold the whole tract to William Merritt for 353 pounds, 17 shillings. It was probably Merritt who built the house north of the landing, which he called “Cheerhall.”

Until recently this was assumed to be the stone house, sometimes called the William Sneden house, now existing in roughly the same position. There have always been doubts however and finally, in 1983, Loring McMillen, the expert on historic buildings, declared that the stone house was not built until about 1820, and that none of the houses he examined around the landing could be said to be pre-Revolutionary.

The assumption must be that the considerable number of pre-Revolutionary buildings at the landing were either burned or torn down, and that those existing now were built in the active and prosperous period after the Revolution.

The original “Cheer Hall,” however, must have been a substantial house. William Merritt, a former mariner, was mayor of New York City in 1695-1697,* and was probably in the process of building his country house at that time. His widowed sister, Sara Crab, with three young children, and Edward Meek, her son by a former husband, were listed in the 1702 census among the few inhabitants of Orange County. Merritt’s son John was not listed in that census, but according to other records he was appointed Judge of the Court of Sessions and Pleas for Orange County in 1702, along with his father. (In Appendix No.4 the complex network of their relationships on both sides of the river is described.)

Lord Cornbury

Lord Cornbury, the Governor of New York, stayed in Cheer Hall** in September 1702 to avoid an epidemic of yellow fever in New York City. He had been in Albany in July and August of 1702 when he got news of the “terrible sickness in New York City, which had killed upward of 500 persons.” He came down the river to what was probably the nearest place to New York where he could feel safe, and stayed off and on for three weeks. On September 8th the members of his Council joined him there for a meeting. The Council was given the news that England was at war with Spain and France, and voted on various orders, warrants, petitions and licenses.

*While Merritt was mayor, he was responsible for ordinances arranging to light the streets of New York by means of candles in every window facing the street, and a lantern on a pole at every seventh house.

**In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries spelling was a matter of personal preference, and the same name can be spelled differently in the course of a few lines.
On September 12th and 17th he met the Council in Kingsbridge, across the river and nearer New York City, but on September 24th, 27th, and 29th he was again writing from Orange County, presumably in Merritt’s house.

Lord Cornbury could not have been a welcome guest. William Smith in his History of New York described him as dishonest, a bigot, and a transvestite, universally detested. His explanation for putting on women’s clothes was that he wanted to show how much he looked like his cousin Queen Anne, and he had a portrait painted to prove it. At one dinner party he made a speech about his wife’s ears, and invited all the guests to feel them for themselves. He had come to this country to escape crippling debts in England, and at the end of his governorship he was thrown in jail in New York and released only when he became Earl of Clarendon on the death of his father.*

Captain John Corbett

In 1705 “William Merritt Esqr of Cheerhall in Orange County, Marjory his wife, Jannet, the widow and relict of George Lockhart Late of the City of New York Chyrurgeon Deeced, and John Merritt gent, and Jannet his wife”** all jointly sold their patent to “Captain John Corbett of the City of New York Merchant,” after having mortgaged it to him in 1703. The deed said: “William Merritt hath made considerable improvements.” He must have. By now the price was 1800 pounds. The deed included, besides the “3,410 acres, more or lesse,” excepting half the salt meadow, “three negroe men, slaves named Stephen, Dirck, and Toby, three yoak of oxen, Eleven cows, seven yearlings, four two year olds, two three

* A genealogist who is researching the Merritt family, and who knows Lord Cornbury’s reputation, was surprised to see that the name Cornbury appeared in conjunction with the Merritts sometime in the eighteenth century, and was repeated at least ten times.

**William Merritt’s son John was married to Lockhart’s daughter.
The Big House or Old Library after the changes in the nineteenth century.

Probable early appearance of the Big House.
Drawn by Claire Tholl, the architectural historian.
year olds, seventeen sheep, Eleven lambs, five horses, and one sett of Smiths Tooles.”*

Captain Corbett had been master of the ship Beaver, sailing to and from Europe, and later an alderman in New York City. His first wife had died, and now he had remarried and was moving to the country. He lived in the house only a dozen years, but he and his wife, who survived him for some time, left a strong imprint on the vicinity, for it was called Corbett’s Point for years afterwards.

There is a tradition in the village that Corbett lived in the Big House at the top of the hill and shot deer from his front porch. Tree-ring analysis of the foundation beams, however, shows that the present Big House was built after 1735, certainly by Corbett’s son-in-law, Henry Ludlow, so if there was any house on the site before 1717, when Corbett died, it has been almost completely rebuilt. There are indeed signs of an extensive fire within the walls, which may be an indication of an earlier origin.

On Captain Corbett’s death in 1717, the patent, which he referred to in his will as “a plantation called Rockland in Orange County,” passed to his wife and then to his daughter Mary, who was probably about thirteen years old when he died. His wife continued to live in the house by the river for some years, entertaining such guests as James Alexander and his fellow-surveyors. Mary grew up to marry Henry Ludlow, of a well-known New York family, in 1725, and had thirteen children. The young couple probably lived in New York for the first eight years or so of their marriage, but they were in Orange County in 1733, when they were received into the Dutch Reformed Church in Tappan. Six of their children were baptized in that church between 1734 and 1744.

Although the Big House was altered to suit Victorian taste in the nineteenth century, Mr. McMillen has said that its noble proportions, rare paneling, and fine detail must have made it one of the most distinguished houses of its time and place.

Breaking up of Patent

The Ludlows broke up the patent in the middle of the eighteenth century and moved back to New York City. Jonathan Lawrence of Westchester bought the Big House and 504 acres at the top of the hill in 1749. Three years later, in 1752, Robert Sneden, of Dutch descent, also from Westchester, bought Cheer Hall and the 120 acres around the landing and part way up the hill** which remained in the family’s hands for another century. Most of the rest of the patent ended up in the hands of other Hollanders, such as Posts (Poosts), Willseys, and Blauvelts, and of Germans, such as Manns, Gesners, and Hagens. Up to then those listed on deeds were described as gentlemen or merchants; now artisans of various sorts appeared — wheelwrights, blacksmiths, coach-makers, ship carpenters, curriers, and an occasional yeoman, farmer, or planter.

The Manns

The Manns were among this latter group. In 1767 George Mann of Wuertenberg, Germany, bought 98 acres of land at the top of the hill from one of the Lawrences; later he and his sons

*In 1706, when he was at least in his mid-sixties, and just two years before his death, William Merritt returned to the sea and was commissioned pilot of H.H. Ship Lowestaffe.

**The 120 acres extended surprisingly far up the hill on the south side of the road, running to Ludlow Lane, and taking in much of Torrey Cliff, now Lamont, and most of Mr. Gilman’s property.
bought many more large parcels of land on the western slope. They built at least four houses, of which only one remains — the old stone house between the church and Route 9W — which, according to Winthrop Gilman, was built in 1784. Another Mann house, built in about 1850 at the corner of Washington Spring Road and Lawrence Lane, survives in two parts. In the twentieth century, Miss Margaret Lawrence bought it and proposed to tear it down to save taxes, but her sister, Mary Tonetti, wanted it, and was told she could have it if she could get it off the property. She got it as far as Washington Spring
Road but winter set in, and she was forced to leave it there blocking the road until the following spring. Then it was sawed in two, and half added to the “Log Cabin,” part of which had been bought at Wanamakers, and the other half to the Adriance house nearby, the two parts of which are now called “Chateau Hash” and “Hachette.”

The last Mann moved to New Jersey in the 1930’s but they left many relatives in the village.*

Houses on the Western Slope and Rockland Road

While settlers were gradually building houses on the eastern hillside between the Lawrences at the top and the Snedens at the bottom, other settlers were buying the good farming land on the western slope, where the “Road to Snedens Landing” had been laid out in 1745 over an earlier track. Jacob Concklin bought land in 1748 on what turned out to be the Jersey side of the then unsettled border. His first small house was replaced in about 1796 by the present handsome stone structure, built by his son, the second Jacob Concklin, who married Elizabeth Gesner, the older sister of Nicholas, the diarist. It was their daughter Elizabeth who married the Samuel Sneden who appeared out of nowhere, to live in the old Concklin house and found the “Snedens of the Field.”

John Gesner’s house, now gone, was built, still in New Jersey, in about 1749, either by himself or by his father of the same name, who had bought land in Tappan in 1725. Here John brought up his large family and from here he sent five sons to Nova Scotia during the Revolution. In 1796, when his wife had died, and Nicholas, his only surviving son, had built his house nearby in New York, John Gesner sold his house and burying ground to the energetic Jacob Concklin Jr., for his son Jacob Concklin the third. The younger Jacob Concklin married Mary Quidor, and had eight children before he died in 1811. His widow, who continued to live for twenty-odd years in what Nicholas Gesner called the “o.ho” (old house), became the object of the diarist’s obsessive attention. He went to her house several times a day, and in his diary he chronicled every one of her absences from home,** and complained of her frequent visits to her married daughters living nearby. Altogether he caused so much talk among relatives and neighbors, and made her life so miserable, “jawing, jawing, jawing,” as she put it, that in early 1832 she moved in with her daughter Phoebe Van Wickel. The old house remained empty, and by Mr. Gilman’s time all that remained of it was a depression in the ground.

Erskine’s Revolutionary War map, Number 110, shows Jacob Concklin’s and “Jno Guessner’s” houses in New Jersey. In New York, besides “Sneder” a little above the landing and Capt. Lawrence at the top of the hill, only Post and “Woolsey” (Willssey) are shown on the Closter Road. The Post’s house is long gone, and there is only a faint chance that the present Willssey house is the original one. Village tradition says that the Willssey house nearer the boundary, which was torn down for the Palisades Interstate Parkway, was the one where all the Willsseys were born, and that the existing one was built by Captain John Willssey, who certainly lived there in the nineteenth century.

*When he sold his farm on the western slope to Mr. Perry, David Mann is said to have announced that he would never again do a day’s work for anyone; and neither he nor his son ever did.

**From indications in the diary it can be conjectured that, Nicholas’s wife Gracy being a poor cook, Nicholas had lent money to Mary, (or “Pol. Conck”) with the proviso that she cook for him. This would explain his complaints when she was away from home, and his meticulous listing of every meal she gave him.
Detail of the Erskine-Dewitt Map, No. 110, made during the Revolution by Washington’s geographer, Robert Erskine, showing the important houses in “Dobbs Ferry.” It seems to show no important houses by the river, but “MO Sneder’s” part way up the hill. This may mean that Cheer Hall was burned or destroyed between 1769, when the boundary settlement mentioned it, and 1780, when Erskine died. Bailey was probably referring to this map when she said that John Sneder’s house (the Watson house or Dingdong) showed on Erskine’s map. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.
Another of Erskine’s Revolutionary War maps, Number 113, shows several houses on Rockland Road, the precursor of Route 9W. Of the three older houses now existing on the west side of 9W, (Tallman Park runs along most of the east side), the northernmost, the Tallman house, was entirely rebuilt at the end of the nineteenth century, but the foundation seems to date from about 1805. Next is the Van Dien house, which shows many signs of eighteenth century construction, and, indeed, has a large stone near the steps with the date 1760, although it has been changed and added to several times. The third, the Haring house, is said to have been built in 1830 and 1865 on the site of a pre-Revolutionary log house, and there are eighteenth century vestiges still to be seen. (There is also an agreeable ghost.)

**Early Commuters**

One curious feature of village life was the close connection with New York City. From early days members of local families were as often as not listed on deeds as “of New York City.” It looked as if their roots were here, but in order to make a living they had to find work in the city, and there was frequent coming and going. This continued on throughout the nineteenth century as is shown by Nicholas Gesner’s diary, and by Mrs. Van Blarcom’s account, for instance, of the Adriances, or Auryansons, who lived in the house near the bottom of the hill called Chateau Hash. (Mrs. Van Blarcom called it Green Gate house.) According to her they were always moving to New York City, (Bank Street) and back. And Mr. Adriance, who was a carpenter, built the house west of the parsonage for his son John, and they went back and forth too.
THE reason why the Tappan settlers and Lockhart had to secure patents from both New Jersey and New York was that the boundary between these provinces was under litigation for nearly a hundred years, from about 1684 to 1773. The account of the negotiations leads one to the inescapable conclusion that the delay was due to sharp dealing on the part of the Province of New York.

The original description of the boundaries of New Jersey when Charles the Second’s brother, the Duke of York, afterward James the Second, granted it to Berkley and Cartaret in 1664 was in part: “All that tract of land . . . being to the westward of Long Island and Manhattans Island and bounded on the East by the main Sea and part by Hudson’s River . . . and extendeth . . . to the Northward as far as the Northernmost branch of the said Bay or River of Delaware which is one and forty degrees and forty minutes of Latitude and crossing in a straight line to Hudson’s River in one and forty degrees of latitude.”

It should not have been so difficult to find out where the 41st degree of North Latitude reached the Hudson River, but every time the question came close to being settled the New York authorities would make some objection, and the matter would go back to Perth Amboy, New York City, or London for more protracted negotiations. New York claimed land south of the line and was not willing to give it up without a fight, and since New York was a Crown Colony and New Jersey still a Proprietary Colony with regard to land tenure,* New York’s claim had royal support.

As the Merritt-Corbett-Sneden house was the only one of consequence anywhere near the boundary line, wherever it might be, it became the meeting place for governors, surveyors, and other negotiators who met over the next century to discuss the matter.

Sometime in the early or mid 1680’s the Governors of New York and New Jersey met by the river with their advisors to discuss the boundary. Lewis Morris, a boy of twelve or thirteen who came along, probably with his father, remembered it well. Sixty years later, in 1745, when he was Governor of New Jersey and Lord of the Manor of Morrisania, he described the meeting.

Governors Dongan of New York and Lawrie of New Jersey and others met “at a place nigh which stood afterwards the house of Col. William Merret on the west side of Hudson’s River, where an observation was made of the latitude, and marked with a pen-knife on a beech tree standing by a small run or spring of water that runs down on the north side of the place . . . I was told that they then did agree that the mouth of Tappan creek should be the point of partition on Hudson’s River between the province of New York and that of New Jersey.”

This would seem to be confirmed by the wording of the Lockhart Patent of 1685 from New Jersey: “Beginning at Tappan Creke upon sd Hudson’s river aforesaid at the line of division agreed upon by the governor of the sd province of East New Jersey & the Governor of New York.”

The New York surveyors, however, without actually having surveyed the line, maintained that it ran a mile and a fraction north of Yonkers — a difference of about five miles!

*This meant that in New Jersey the quit rents and other perquisites went to the proprietors and in New York they went to the Crown.
Winthrop Gilman’s copy of Alexander’s map, showing the 1686 dividing line between New York and New Jersey, which was never surveyed, and the more nearly correct 1719 line. Note “Corbels old House,” where Corbett’s widow was then living, the Letter L Tree near it, and the “Creeple Bush” to the west of it. (From the Dutch Kreupelbosch — thicket or swamp).
In 1719 James Alexander for New Jersey and Allain Jarrett for New York surveyed the whole boundary, starting at the western end. They agreed, reluctantly, until they got to the Hudson. There Alexander quite correctly, as the final settlement proved, declared the boundary to be about a mile south of the house where they were then staying as guests of Corbett’s widow, called on one of their maps “Corbets Old House.” Jarrett, however, after spending a few days with his principals in New York City, came back and complained that there was something seriously wrong with the surveyors’ quadrant, so all their reckonings were wrong. They must send to England for a much larger instrument.

Years passed. There were other abortive attempts to a settlement, always hampered by the New York authorities or the Crown, and it was not until 1769 that the provinces agreed that the 41st degree of latitude reached the river at a line 79 chains and 20 links (a little less than a mile) south of “Sneydon’s house formerly Corbet’s.”* The treaty was signed in 1773.

Marking the boundary was a great rock near the water in the middle of which was chiseled a line and the words Latitude 41° North. On the south side were marked the words New Jersey, and on the north, New York. About ten years ago Thomas Demarest of New Jersey and a friend rediscovered this rock with its faint inscription, and recently, he and Clair Tholl, the editor of Bergen County History, located it again, so that a photograph could be made. Considering the many graffiti on nearby rocks, it seems wise to keep its whereabouts a little vague.

*This figure is perhaps no more exact than the 41° turned out to be. In Budke’s papers, Vol. 29, page 45, there are affidavits by Johannes Isaac Blavelt (sic), and Abram Kool that in 1769 they saw James Clinton run an east-west line from a point on the Hudson “a mile, nine chains, and some links to the southward of Corbet’s old house.”

The Station Rock, on the New Jersey-New York boundary. Actually, it is at 40° 59’ 51.20”. Taken by John Scott; 1982.
This was not the end of the matter, however. In 1874 a more accurate survey by G. H. Cook, the New Jersey State Geologist, showed that the “Station Rock,” which marked the border was actually at 40° 59' 51.20" or about 900 feet farther south than the 41st parallel. When New Jersey suggested readjusting the boundary to allow for this and other mistakes, all of which were in New York’s favor, New York refused. The boundary still begins at the Station Rock, now on Palisades Interstate Park property, thereby giving New York about ten square miles of extra land.

There has been even more trouble about the other boundaries. The northwest corner was supposed to be at the northernmost branch of the Delaware River at 41° 40' latitude. After a good deal of quibbling about which was the northern branch, the line ended up farther south at 41° 21' 57", thus giving New York between 150,000 and 200,000 extra acres.

The part of the boundary which in the grant was supposed to be to the west of Long Island and Manhattan was somehow moved over to take in Staten Island for New York, and that part declared to be the Hudson River was interpreted by New York as being at high water mark on the Jersey shore. This meant that New York claimed control over the Jersey shore, and brought suits to stop Jerseyites from building wharves along their own shore. In 1826 Mayor Philip Hone of New York actually had a Captain Cochran arrested for landing passengers in Perth Amboy! This was only remedied by a suit in the Supreme Court of the United States in 1833 with the result that the boundary was finally conceded to be the middle of the Hudson River.

One would think that, since the east and west line at Palisades slants rather sharply northward, this would have brought the line at the shore even more to the north of the Station Rock, but as described above, it was at the rock in 1874, and remains there in spite of New Jersey’s protests.

The rough mountainous land next to the Hudson on both sides of the line was not colonized like the rest of the region, partly because of its inhospitable nature and partly because of the doubt as to which state had jurisdiction. Some of it was included in the Lockhart Patent of 1685. South of that were the King’s Woods, one of the forests used to supply the great trees needed for the masts and other parts of British ships. Not until after the Revolution was it settled by squatters, freed slaves and Indians.
IV. THE SNEDENS OF THE LANDING AND THEIR FERRY

Dobbs Ferry, Robert and Mollie Sneden,
“Mrs. Sneethin’s” Bill, Ferry Boats, Legends
about Mollie Sneden, The Mystery of George
Calhoun, John Sneden, “The Patriot.”

Dobbs Ferry

There are no known records of the famous Dobbs Ferry for the first fifty-odd years of its existence, but tradition says that it started across the river in 1698 or 1700, when Jan Dobbs, son of an English mariner, is known to have leased 282 acres on the east shore of the Hudson from Frederick Phillipse, and built a house on Willow Point, near the site of the present Dobbs Ferry Railroad Station. Most travel was by boat in those days, and Jan Dobbs had good reason to cross the river often. His uncle, William Merritt, had bought the land on the west shore before that date and was engaged in clearing land, and building houses and outbuildings. His aunt, Sarah Crab, and four cousins were also living there by 1702. No doubt there were family visits and perhaps Merritt had work for Dobbs and his neighbors.

In 1729 Jan Dobbs’ son, William, married, and he is said by east bank historians to have been from that time the first real ferryman.

Robert and Mollie Sneden

The fact that the Verplanck map of 1745 shows ‘Sneedings House the ferry” on the west side has been considered to show that Robert Sneden and Mollie, his wife, had bought the Corbett house and were running the ferry at that time, but Robert Sneden is known to have bought the house and 120 acres at the bottom of the hill in 1752. Margaret Lane, the Dobbs family historian, suggests that perhaps the map just designated the location of a rented house at the west end of the ferry, where passengers debarked and waited to embark. Mollie Sneden was probably William Dobbs’ half-sister, so it could have been a family affair.

Robert Sneden did have a bill for cable in 1750, but that could have been used merely in some connection with the ferry landing. By 1756 he must have died, because in that year, “Mary Sneden, Wido” received a license to operate a tavern, probably next to the ferry. Howard Durie, in his article on the Snedens in Relics, describes a later license, on January 2, 1763, giving her the right “to keep a Public House for entertaining of travelers and to sell by way of retail all sorts of strong Liquors in the house wherein the said Mary Sneden now dwells and out doors from the date hereof until the first day of January next.”

Family tradition says that William Dobbs, with the help of his son Abraham, ran the ferry until 1758, and there is a record of his securing a license for a tavern on Broadway in 1760.

Mrs. Sneethin’s Bill

From 1758 on there was little doubt that Mollie was running
the ferry. Her descendants have a large bill to “Mrs. Sneethin” for five pounds, two shillings, ten pence, from a New York businessman, Thomas Lawrence, a son of a neighbor, Jonathan Lawrence, the “Elder Senior.” This bill included, among other items bought in 1758 and 1759, “Ringboals for the ferry boat,” “band for the rudder of the big boat,” and “mending hawser.” Mollie never did pay this; consequently her credit was probably shaky. At least, in 1765, when “Widow Mary Sneden” bought cable, rope, and marline from Samuel Loudon, on the bill was the notation: “To pay at 2 months.” Finally, in 1766, Thomas Lawrence’s sister, Ellison, who had married Mollie’s son John in 1762, paid the earlier bill, now seven years overdue. One can only imagine the family discussions that had gone on.

From this time on the ferry was run by the Sneden family for nearly a century and a half from 1758 to 1903, and continued under various arrangements until 1946. The name Dobbs clung to the ferry and to the settlements at both ends, however, until after the Revolution.

Ferry Boats

The first boat used as a ferry was a periauger. This word came from the Spanish piragua, meaning dugout, and was also spelled perriauger, pelliauger, pettiauger, and even pettinger. Eventually there were two boats, one large enough to carry horses and wagons. When there were passengers at Dobbs Ferry waiting to go across, the ferryman at Snedens would be notified by the display of black shutters, one for passengers alone, two for horses and wagons.

In Gilman’s Story of the Ferry, written in 1903, Miss Ella Coates, granddaughter of Captain Larry Sneden, describes bills for two of the larger boats used by the Snedens in the early nineteenth century. The first, the Tappan Packet, 55 feet long, 15 feet, 11 inches wide, and weighing 35 tons, had been built at Tappan (Slote) in 1792, and had already seen fifteen years of service when it was bought by John Sneden Sr. for $80 in 1807. (Tappan then included Piermont and the shipyard at Bogertown on the Sparkill Creek.) This may have still given some years of service, because the next bill was for a new pettiauger, the Friendship, slightly smaller, built at Tappan (Slote) in 1821 and bought the same year by John Sneden Jr. for $1250.
“After 1860,” Miss Coates says, “the perriaugers were replaced by 28 foot cat-boats, and these in 1875 by the 18 foot boats in which many so pleasantly voyage by sail or by oars to Dobbs Ferry still.”

Legends about Mollie Sneden

The most famous story about Mollie Sneden tells of the Tory spy who came to her during the Revolution for shelter. (All the Snedens but her son John were Loyalists.) She put the man in a large chest, and set out on it several pans of milk. When the Americans came to hunt for him, she said they could look everywhere, but they mustn’t disturb the cream which was rising, and the spy was saved.

Another story is of the hundred pigeons Mollie is said to have brought down with one shot. Allowing for the fact that the Encyclopedia Britannica says that one flock of passenger pigeons in those days had been estimated to consist of more than 2,230 million birds, this is not inconceivable.

The particular story which one would like to believe — but hesitates — is that Mollie Sneden might have been a spy for the Americans. Freeman’s Life of Washington gives the text of Nathaniel Sackett’s letter to Washington from which this inference was drawn. It was dated April 7, 1777.

Week before Last I sent in a woman - the wife of a man gone over to the enemy. Our people has taken her Grain for our use. She made a very heavy complaint. I advised her to go to New York and complain to Lord Howe. She was pleased with the advice and set off to his Lordship and to request the time that she might expect relief. She left the city last Friday week, and says that she despairs of any relief soon; that there is a large number of flat bottomed boats in the harbour of New York which are intended for an Expedition against Philadelphia and that the British army is going to subdue that city; and that the poor Tory sufferers will not be relieved until that Expedition is over. She says that provisions of every kind in New York is very dear; that when a cow calves, they let the calf suck until it is fit to kill, and then kill both cow and calf together and eat them; that the beef of such cows sells from 18 to 2/pound; that flower is 28 / per hundred wt and everything in proportion and she fears very much that the Kings army will not be able to subdue the Rebels in less than two or three years.

This was obviously written with tongue in cheek; but whether it was or not, it doesn’t quite fit Mollie, since her

Knot Bowl. Made from the burl of a tree, said to have been given to one of the Snedens by an Indian, to reward him for ferrying him across the river. In the Bergen County Historical Museum. (Mary B. Davis, Librarian for the Museum of the American Indian, writes: “The burl was chopped from the tree and hollowed out by charring and scraping. After white contact was made, metal gouges were used, and the bottoms flattened so they could sit on tables. They were made well into the 19th century.”)
husband had been dead for about twenty years, and it was her sons who had gone over to the British.

The Mystery of George Calhoun

A mysterious character, George Calhoun, first pointed out by Mr. Durie in his article in Relics, made a couple of appearances in the family chronicle and then disappeared. On May 24th, 1765 “Mary Sneden and George Calhoun” got a marriage license. This might have been Mollie Sneden, who was a widow of fifty-six at the time, or her daughter, Mary. It is hard to believe that the marriage went through. There was never any mention of Mollie having remarried, and her daughter Mary married Samuel Lawrence about two weeks later. But George Calhoun, on September 30th, 1765, bought from Samuel and Mary Lawrence for fifty pounds their twelve-acre share of the Sneden property. This is as much as is known now, but future research may discover the story behind these facts.*

With all the traditions about Mollie Sneden, one cannot doubt that she was a strong character, and one final proof of this is the fact that in 1788, when she was seventy-nine years old, two of her sons in Nova Scotia, Samuel and William, gave their “trusty and loving friend and mother, Mary Sneden” a power of attorney to sell their shares of the family property in “Dobbs Ferry” to their brother John.

John Sneden “The Patriot”

John Sneden was the patriotic son who stayed behind when his brothers left to go to the British. The fact that he had married Ellison, the daughter of the patriot Jonathan Lawrence, “The Elder Senior,” in 1762 possibly brought him over to the American side.** He is said to have piloted American ships-of-war on the Hudson, while his brother Robert did the same for the British.

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* Mr. Durie found a list of Robert Snedens’s property, mentioning Mary Calhoun, not Mary Sneden. (See notebook. vendue, 1767.)

**There has also been a suggestion that the family delegated him to remain in Snedens to look after the family property. He certainly did that. After the war, he seems to have reimbursed his brothers and sisters, and the 120 acres were divided among his children,
RELATIONSHIPS IN CONNECTION WITH DOBBS FERRY

On East Bank

Mary Merritt Dobbs  
1632-1737

Jan Dobbs  
b. c. 1675

William Dobbs  
b. 1706  
ferryman

On West Bank

William Merritt  
d. 1708, over 66  
Children: Edward Meeks  
by former husband,  
and 3 small Crab  
children

Sara Merritt Crab  
c. 1634-1737

Jonathan Lawrence  
the "Elder Senior"  
1695-1777

Ellison Thomas  
Sent bill  
to Mollie  
for supplies

William Sneden  
1807-1871  
Ran ferry c. 1830-1869

Capt. Larry Sneden  
1800-1871

John Newton S.  
Ran ferry in  
1870

Horton S.  
Ran ferry  
1875-1886

Mary Neal S.  
1826-1909  
m. Capt. William  
Coates, ferryman  
1871-1874 & 1886-1903

Sources of Information:
Margaret Travis Lane about Dobbs Family
Story of the Ferry, pages 3 & 4
Palisades cemetery records
“A VIEW IN HUDSON’S RIVER OF THE ENTRANCE OF WHAT IS CALLED THE TOPAN SEA.” “Sketch’d on the Spot by his Excellency Governor Pownal. Painted by Paul Sandby, Engraved by Peter Benazech.” Thomas Pownall, 1722-1805, came to New York as secretary to Sir Danvers Osborn, the Governor, and was later appointed governor of Massachusetts, then governor of South Carolina before returning to England in 1760. (Perhaps he was lucky not to have been governor in New York. It is a curious fact that between the reigns of William and Mary in 1689 and the accession of George the Third in 1760, of the fourteen governors of New York, one Leisler, was executed, one, Osborn, committed suicide, one, Lord Cornbury, was thrown in jail, and six others died soon after taking office. Information from Cole’s *History of Rockland County*, pages 6 to 10.)
Martha Washington

EALY in the Revolution, the ferry carried spectacular passengers — Martha Washington and her entourage. In December 1875 she was traveling from Mount Vernon to join her husband in Cambridge, and since General Washington told her to stay north of New York City, on account of the Toryism there, they crossed the river at Dobbs Ferry. Her son Jack Custis and his wife, Captain George Lewis, Mrs. Horatio Gates, and a maid, came with her; and they traveled in a chariot drawn by four horses, with a black coachman, and a postillion in scarlet and white livery. A detachment of horsemen under Lieut. Col. George Baylor had been ordered to accompany Mrs. Washington from Philadelphia to headquarters. As Mrs. Washington wrote to a friend “I left it [Philadelphia] in as great pomp as if I had been a very great somebody.”

All roads were bad at that time, of course, but the primitive road straight down the cliff at Snedens must have been one of the worst parts of the trip. The story is often told that Martha stopped for tea in Mollie Sneden’s tavern near the landing, and that Mollie ferried her across, but these, although quite possible, are only what Mr. Gilman was to later call “floating legends.”

Dennis Sneden’s Bill

A few months later, Mollie’s son Dennis was certainly running the ferry. His brother John’s descendants have a copy
of a bill of his, with no date, for ferrying members of the Militia and the Continental Army and their horses and wagons across the river, perhaps on different occasions. (See Appendix No. 10.) One can't be sure it was paid, for on July 29, 1776, the Orange County Committee forbade all the Snedens but John to “keep ferry,” and around that time Dennis took off for the British fleet in his small open perriauger, with four Gesner sons. Nicholas Gesner, the diarist, was a boy of eleven at the time, and stayed with his father. Later, in his entry for July 19, 1834, he described the difficulties faced by the would-be neutrals:

It may not be improper to note here that our Father and Mother, John Gesner and Famitcha Brower, wished to remain neutral in the War of the Revolution. He refused to sign the Association Articles, dreading the Consequences; was called a tory, but truly he was a peaceable man in every respect. Threatenments were made, and his sons grown up were all menaced to be taken to New England, and confined in dungeons (or mines). Violence was used in many places and with many. Father Gesner, now about 52 or 53 years old, admonished his sons Jacob, Isaac, Henry, and Abraham to take opportunity to go to New York, now in possession of the British. With some others, after their father had admonished them to be good boys, they went off in an open small pettiauger belonging to Denis Sneathen.

**Gesners and Snedens Leave**

Most of the loyalist Snedens and Gesners went to Nova Scotia after the war, but Mollie and her son Dennis, who never married, stayed, sometimes in New York City, and sometimes in Snedens, and both are buried in the local cemetery. After the war they probably lived in the small white house southwest of the William Sneden house.

The Committee did not issue the prohibition against the Snedens without cause. A year before, on July 17, 1775, five of the Sneden sons, but not John, had been listed as having refused to sign a patriotic pact called the Association. Now the Committee had discovered that Robert was serving as a pilot of British ships on the river. They declared, moreover, that the four other non-signing brothers were “greatly suspected of carrying on a treasonable correspondence with ... ships-of-war belonging to the king of Great Britain, lying in the aforesaid river.”

**British Ships on the River**

The ships-of-war mentioned in these communications were the *Phoenix* and the *Rose*, which with three tenders sailed up the river on July 12, 1776, almost certainly piloted by Robert Sneden. They went as far as Haverstraw Bay, but much of the time they were in the Tappan Zee off Tarrytown in full view of Snedens. The Shore Guard and Militia in Orange County watched them so carefully that they did most of their foraging in Westchester, where they had more sympathizers.

**The American Fire Ships**

The patriots did their best to get rid of them. On August 3rd six small “row gallies” exchanged cannonades with the great ships for two hours, giving about as much damage as they received. The Americans then dropped down river to Dobbs Ferry to recover. On August 16th, the patriots had more success. Two specially built fire ships laden with combustibles approached the men-of-war in the evening. The one that attacked the *Phoenix* was thrown off, but the other grappled
“Forcing the Hudson River Passage,” October 9, 1776, by Dominique Serres. The Phoenix and the Roebuck, on their way up the Hudson to Dobbs Ferry to do more damage. The Historical Society of Rockland County.

“The enemy” in this case were the Americans, who attacked the British warships with fireships on August 16, 1776, and did enough damage to drive them away. Phelps Stokes Collection, New York Public Library.
with a tender and took off cannon, guns, cutlasses, etc. before setting it afire and escaping with the booty. The British war ships took alarm and sailed down the river to Staten Island in time to join the attack on Long Island on August 22nd.

The End of the Turtle

Later, on October 9th, 1776, the Americans were mortified to hear that two large British ships-of-war, the Roebuck and the Phoenix, and a smaller frigate had sailed past the batteries of Fort Lee and Fort Washington and the chevaux de frise (sunken ships and other man-made obstacles in the river, joined with a chain) with no apparent damage, and had got as far as Dobbs Ferry. They sank a schooner loaded with rum, sugar, wine, etc., drove a couple of American galleys ashore at Dobbs Ferry (probably in Westchester) and, worst of all, they sank a sloop which had on board David Bushnell’s submarine, called The Turtle. This was a round machine designed to maneuver under water, and attach a magazine of powder to the underside of the enemy ship. This could then be exploded by a clockwork mechanism. It had failed once when it had been aimed at Admiral Howe’s flagship. Now it was finally destroyed.

Although the British ships made many forays up the Hudson, their usual anchorage was farther south. William Smith* wrote in his Historical Memoirs for August, 1778: “Dobbs Ferry ... is now passed by the Continental troops, in sight of the ships laying near Spuyten-Devil.” Again in September of that year he wrote: “No ships in the River above Kings Bridge . . . Great Stores at Tarrytown, brought from the West Country across Dobbs Ferry and Kings Ferry in sight of the Ships.”

*See Appendix No. 13 about William Smith.
Site of the redoubt, above the William Sneden and Mollie Sneden houses, showing the remarkable lack of trees in Palisades around the turn of the century.

A closer view of the redoubt, with a cow and Mr. Gilman.
The Redoubts

In November, 1776, five hundred patriots were stationed at Snedens Landing with four cannons and a howitzer, probably on the redoubt halfway up the hill,* so that when the British wanted to cross the river to attack Fort Lee, they were forced to land farther south, near Closter, even though the climb up the cliff was much more difficult.

The Baylor Massacre

Two years later, on September 27, 1778, according to Leiby (p.172), a party of the enemy crossed the Hudson, landed at the Slote and were on their march towards Clarkstown en route to Old Tappan and the infamous “Baylor Massacre.” The British surprised Colonel Baylor and his company of dragoons, captured Baylor, and killed or wounded severely nearly a third of his soldiers, giving little quarter.

The Lawrence Family

The prominent patriotic family in the village of Dobbs Ferry (now Palisades) during the Revolution was that of Jonathan Lawrence, called on his tombstone the “Elder Senior.” Although his father was also Jonathan Lawrence, it is convenient to call this one Jonathan the First, since he was the first of the four Jonathan Lawrences connected with this village between 1749 and 1883. In 1749 this Jonathan had bought the Big House and five hundred and four acres of land at the top of the hill from the Ludlows, who had moved back to New York City. His son Jonathan, the Second, became a merchant chiefly in New York City, and later, during the Revolution, a sort of bureaucrat who served on commission after commission: to forward troops to Pennsylvania, to procure specie to pay bills, to find salt, and to build barracks at New Windsor, on the Hudson. While he was at Fort Constitution, opposite West Point, on this last assignment, his wife got into trouble selling tea at an inflated price.** Their son Jonathan, the Third, who was sixteen at this time, had apparently created problems for them — General Clinton had characterized him as a “wild young lord” but said he had become more responsible recently — and at this point, undoubtedly mortified by his mother’s conduct, he left his parents to stay with his grandfather in Rockland, and spent most of the rest of his short life there. He began immediately to help guard the ferry, and the next year when his grandfather died, he joined the army. He always signed himself Jonathan Lawrence Jr. It may have been with reference to him that his grandfather was called the Elder Senior.

Jonathan Lawrence Jr.

The young Jonathan Lawrence the Third had an active and distinguished career, receiving many complimentary

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*The Field Exploration Committee from the New-York Historical Society found in 1924 on the lower plateau “the remains of an extensive earth works (sic) overlooking the landing. Here well marked, there obliterated, this embankment extends from before the old fort to a point at least 800 feet south.” (Mrs. Gugler says that remains of the works have been found near the “Red Barn,” but by the 1980’s almost nothing can be seen.)

**The Committee’s complaint about Mrs. Lawrence is given in Appendix No. 12, as is General Clinton’s description of young Jonathan Lawrence.
comments from Washington and other officers. He was at Valley Forge as a second lieutenant for a short time in the spring of 1778, and probably fought in the battle of Monmouth. As early as the fall of 1778 he was sending intelligence to Washington through his colonel, William Malcom. In 1779 he was made captain, and for the next three years he took an active part in fighting and in gathering intelligence, mostly around Dobbs Ferry. In 1780 he captured the famous spy, James Moody, and delivered him safely to West Point. (Pennypacker in his book Washington's Spies, suggests, however, that the capture was not due to Lawrence's initiative, but was contrived by Moody so that he could be taken to West Point and communicate with Benedict Arnold about his betrayal.)

**Different Names for the Settlement**

All through the Revolution, Washington and his officers called the present hamlet of Palisades, Dobbs Ferry, while spies called it Snedens or Sneethins Landing, or some variation of the name, probably because if they were not themselves Snedens, they knew about the Tory Snedens who had lived at the bottom of the hill.

**The Blockhouse**

At a low point in the war, in August, 1780, Washington ordered the construction of a blockhouse at the western end of Dobbs Ferry, explaining to Rochambeau “We intend to establish a communication that will save us a considerable land transportation in case New York is our eventual object.” This was to be used as a guard for the ferry route, a center for the collection of intelligence, and a means of communication*. Washington himself established headquarters in Tappan that year from August 8th to August 23rd, and again late in September for the André trial.

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*No mention of this blockhouse is found in standard histories of the Revolution; but George Budke, in Rockland County During the Revolution, redresses the balance. On page 149 he writes: “That this fortification is the most important relic of the Revolutionary War not only in Rockland County, but anywhere in the vicinity of New York is beyond question.” In Appendix No. 14 there is a more detailed account of the blockhouse.
The blockhouse, according to spies’ reports, consisted of an outer circular breastwork eight feet high, taking in not only the brow of the cliff but also a part of the upper slope, and an inner square breastwork of the same height on the top of the cliff to the east of the present Woods Road. These walls have been described by James S. Haring, a local historian who lived in Palisades more than a hundred years ago, as of timber faced with stone. The square inner structure had a timber roof over a lower story, and an upper story with no roof but a four-foot parapet. Surrounding the whole complex was an “abatis,” composed of tops of trees with the ends of branches all sharpened, pointing outward, close together, and with the butts fastened securely in the ground near the wall.

The blockhouse when completed was usually garrisoned by a company of about twenty-five men; but on occasion, when it was being constructed, or when regiments were crossing the river, the tiny settlement swarmed with hundreds of soldiers.

Soldiers’ Living Conditions — and Officers’

The conditions under which most of the soldiers lived while they were working on the blockhouse were described vividly by Sergeant Joseph Plumb Martin, who was stationed there as a member of the Corps of Sappers and Miners:

That fiend, scarcity, followed us here, and when we chanced to get any meat, we had no salt. For a long time we had to go three-fourths of a mile to the river to get water, which was trifling, however, compared with the trouble of having nothing to cook, which was often the case with us. There was indeed a plenty of fruit to be had ... but there were mosquitoes enough to take a pound of blood from us, while we could make an ounce.

(It was probably at this time that “Washington’s Spring,” partway up the hill, was discovered.) As an officer, Dr. James Thacher, who was stationed at Tappan at the same time, had few such privations. One night he dined with Baron Steuben and remarked complacently in his diary, “The Baron keeps a splendid table.” Thacher was one of the many visitors from the camp who came over to watch the building of the blockhouse; and later, in 1782, he was to be stationed there, either in the blockhouse or nearby. One may be sure, however, that he didn’t care much for the scenery. He came from Barnstable on Cape Cod, with its sand dunes and marshes, and when he was staying up the river, across from West Point, he deplored the view, “with its hideous mountains and dreary forests.”
**Benedict Arnold in Snedens**

Even before the blockhouse was completed, on September 11th, 1780, Benedict Arnold spent a day there to escape the patrol boats which had prevented his first meeting with Major John André to arrange the betrayal of West Point. The letter he wrote to Washington from the blockhouse is almost amusing in its duplicity. He said:

> Yesterday I had the honor to receive your Excellency’s letter of the 7th, and am very happy to hear such favorable accounts from the southward. I hope our affairs in that quarter will soon wear a more pleasing aspect than ever.

Of course, if his plans had gone through, the aspect would have been pleasing only for Arnold and the British. He added:

> The inhabitants of Westchester complain, that the country is not sufficiently guarded against the enemy. I have, therefore, sent Colonel Hay fifty men from West Point, as more eligible than taking them from the lines.

This was undoubtedly the same Colonel Udny Hay to whom he had already sent two hundred men as guards and two hundred as woodcutters. Colonel Lamb had protested that with so many men gone they would not be able to finish the works at West Point, nor to defend what was there; now Arnold was sending more. He went on:

> Benedict Arnold, who spent a day at the Dobbs Ferry blockhouse, in September, 1780, and the pass which he gave to André.
I came here this morning in order to establish signals, to be observed in case the enemy came up the river; to give some directions respecting the guardboats; and to have a beacon fixed upon the mountain, about five miles south of King’s Ferry, which will be necessary to alarm the country. The one fixed there formerly has been destroyed.

This suggests that he was making sure that the communications with the blockhouse would be confused, that the guardboats would in some way be immobilized, and that if it was not indeed he himself who destroyed the beacon, at least he would see that it was not fixed. When he said:

There are some cannon at West Point which are of little service, except for signal-guns. I propose sending two of them to Colonel Gouvion [at the blockhouse] for that purpose, if agreeable to your Excellency.

it is obvious that it was another plan for diminishing West Point’s defenses.

Sergeant Martin afterwards told of seeing Arnold walking in the woods that day, and said he thought he was “upon some devilry.”

A letter which Washington received from General Nathanael Greene a few days later, on September 23rd, also means more to present-day readers than it did to Washington. Greene was giving news of the Army at Tappan, and mentioned that:

The Block House goes on very well and will be complete in four or five days, and I think it will be a very strong place. The Minister [of France, Luzerne] was down to view it yesterday.

At the end of the letter he added casually:

There has been some firing on the East side of the North River at the shipping which lay near Tallards Point but I have no account of what effect it had more than to make the shipping move a little further from the shore.

This, of course, referred to Colonel Livingston’s firing at the Vulture off Tellers Point the day before, and Greene with the rest of the world was soon to learn that its effect was to force André to return to New York by land and be captured.

Two days later those at the blockhouse saw the British Sloop-of-War, Vulture, going down the river with Arnold on board, fleeing to the British in New York. They fired some shots which might have changed history if their aim had been better.

Major André, in a sketch he made of himself, the night before he was hanged. When he was imprisoned In Tappan, most of the communications regarding him came through Snedens Landing.
The Capture of André

An interesting, perhaps apocryphal, story about André’s capture across the river in Tarrytown is told by Elias Boudinot in his journal. André, he says, “came to the cross Roads, one leading to New York, the other to Tarry Town on the North River. It so providentially happened that the Horse on which he rode had been bred in Tarry Town. André lost in thought did not attend to either his Horse or to the Road, and the Horse naturally took the Road he had been used to, and André soon found himself challenged by a sentinel.”

When André had been captured near Tarrytown and taken to Tappan by way of West Point to be tried and hanged, it was to the western Dobbs Ferry that the British sent messenger after messenger in an effort to save André’s life.

British at Snedens Trying to Help Andre

The forlorn hope of the British and their final desperation can be read in the eyewitness accounts of the missions that came through Dobbs Ferry in the next few days.

One soldier, Sergeant Edmund Gale, described in his diary of September 27th coming over from Tappan with Sgts. Frost and Poland to see how the building of the blockhouse was getting on. While they were there they saw a British naval officer arrive with a flag of truce from the Vulture, probably carrying Beverly Robinson’s letter in defense of André. American officers took the emissary to “a house near the ferry,” which might have been Mollie Sneden’s tavern.

The happenings of the next two or three days were described in the diary of Colonel Israel Angell, who came over from Tappan to be officer of the day at the ferry. On September 29th Sir “Hary” Clinton set a flag of truce with a message that André had gone to see Arnold under the protection of a flag and ought not to be detained. That maneuver failing, the next day, the diary continued, “a flagg came from the Enemy to dobbs Ferry and brought a number of things from the Enemy to Major Andrews [André] his servant came in the flagg.”

The last fruitless interview, between the British General Robertson and the American General Nathanael Greene at Dobbs Ferry on October 1st, was described by Chief Justice William Smith, who waited with the other emissaries on the Greyhound off “Corbett’s Point.” General Robertson brought
a letter from Arnold which stated that André had come under the
cover of Arnold’s flag, and should not be considered a spy, but
Greene “produced a letter from André to Washington in which
he faults his own Disguizes in the Transaction with Arnold,
and confesses he had no Flagg ... Greene said Arnold was a
Rascal and André a Man of Honor whom he believed, and they
would consent to no Conferences or Additional Evidence.” The
Greyhound lay there off Snedens Landing till noon the next
day, when André was executed.

Believable Traditions: Zig-zag Road,
Washington’s Spring and Washington’s Table

There is a local tradition that the road to the ferry, which
used to come straight up the Palisades, was changed during the
Revolution to its present zig-zags in order to make it easier for
wagons carrying guns and other heavy traffic. Another tradition
is that Washington’s Spring, half way up the hill, was used by
the troops — perhaps even by Washington. A third of these
completely believable traditions is that Washington, Lafayette,
and Steuben dined at the Big House during the Revolution
as guests of the Lawrences. Certainly Washington visited the
blockhouse at least once, probably while it was being built in
August 1780, as did the French Minister, Dr. James Thacher,
and others from the army, and since Lafayette and Steuben
were in Orangetown at that time, it seems reasonable to suggest
that Washington might have brought them with him to see the
works, and afterwards to dine with his friends the Lawrences.
Jonathan Lawrence the Elder Senior had died in 1777, but in
his will he mentioned that three sons were living with him, and
probably Jonathan Lawrence Jr. also made the Big House his
home. A beautiful old table which had been in the possession
of the Lawrence descendants until 1899 has always been called
the Washington Table. It is now the property of the Palisades
Library.

The Shot from the Asia

Another unverified but possible story recounted by Mr.
Gilman was of the shot from the British frigate Asia* which

*It is interesting that Carl Carmer, in *The Hudson*, says the Asia joined the
Phoenix and the Rose up the river in 1776, and that they bombarded the shore.
He doesn’t say where he got this information.
Camp of Washington’s and Rochambeau’s armies in Westchester in 1781. Notice “Dob’s Ferry” across the North River, with redoubts part way up the hill and the blockhouse at the top. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.
Detail of the French map of the camp of Washington’s and Rochambeau’s armies in Westchester in 1781. This shows “Dob’s Ferry” only on the west side of the river, with redoubts part way up the hill and the blockhouse at the top. The structure to the left of the road may be the Mollie Sneden house shown on the Erskine map. (page 22)
which cut off the top of a cedar tree at the top of the hill — or were there two cedars? Old Mr. Herbert Lawrence told Mr. Gilman that the tree was at the south edge of the “timothy meadow” (between the present Route 9W and the Post Office), and he often used to sit on the spot, while old Mr. J. T. Stansbury said it was a tree southeast of the Presbyterian Church, and showed Mr. Gilman a piece of the root. A third more tangible indication of a bombardment was the cannon ball which John Hagen found in 1897, “where Mr. Lawrence had been ploughing, N.W. of the parsonage.”

A rumor which Mr. Gilman did not mention, but which has cropped up in various historical accounts, is that the Big House served during the Revolution as headquarters for General Washington or General Nathanael Greene. In Appendix No. 15 these accounts are detailed and evaluated.

**Captain Pray and The Water Guard**

In the spring of 1781 John Pray of the newly-formed Water Guard* based in Nyack, was given command of the garrison of the blockhouse, and visited it every day. He kept a vigilant watch on the river and collected information for General Washington, who was seldom far from the Hudson.

**The French-American Encampment**

In July and August of 1781 General Washington and his ally, General Rochambeau, camped together across the river in the embattled “neutral ground,” and made plans for the attack on the British at Yorktown which was to bring the end of the war in sight. The fine map of the encampment shows “Dob’s” or “Dop’s” Ferry only on the west side.

**The March to Yorktown**

When the armies were ready to cross the river, on August 19th, en route for Yorktown, General Hazen’s regiment was said to have gone by Dobbs Ferry to join the “two or three Hundred Jersey militia posted at Corbet’s Point, the Western Shore of

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*This military Water Guard is sometimes confused with the Shore Guard, which was organized early in the Revolution by local inhabitants to watch out for marauding parties from British ships and to protect their neighbors from them. The Shore Guard sometimes communicated by beacons, or signal flares.

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Table knife, spoon, and fork improvised by Revolutionary War soldiers, found in the ruins of the blockhouse by the Field Expedition Committee of the New-York Historical Society in December, 1924. Many other artifacts were found at the time, including buttons from Revolutionary War uniforms. These can all be seen at the New-York Historical Society in New York City. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.
the Ferry at Dobb’s, 20 miles up the Hudson,” mentioned by William Smith. From there they marched together to Chatham, N.J., where large bake ovens were constructed to convince the enemy that the aim was an attack on Staten Island. The rest of the two armies made the long march* north to the much more capacious Kings Ferry, and then south again on the west side of the river.

**Dobbs Ferry as Center of Communications**

The winter of 1781-82 was comparatively quiet at the blockhouse, but on May 10, 1782, Washington issued an order giving the post at Dobbs Ferry a new and important role. “I have given the most peremptory orders,” he wrote, “that no Flags from the enemy shall be received at any other place or post but Dobbs Ferry on any business or pretext whatever, and that no flag from us to them shall (for any reason however pressing) be permitted to pass to the Enemies Lines except from the same place.”

Although the actual fighting had ended with the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in October, 1781, and peace negotiations were going on in Europe, Washington did not dare to relax. He could not believe that the British had sent one of their greatest generals, Sir Guy Carleton, to New York merely to wind up British affairs in this country.

The blockhouse became an important listening post. Members of families separated by the war were allowed to meet there, prisoners of war were exchanged, messages were sent and received, and the officers in charge were able to gather important information for Washington from these encounters.

* Clermont-Crèvecoeur in his journal gave a horrifying description of the French army’s difficulties during the six days that it took to march the forty miles to King’s Ferry. (See Appendix No. 9.)

**Activities at the Blockhouse**

In the summer of 1782, Dr. Thacher describes some of the activity;

The tour of duty at Dobbs’ ferry having fallen to our regiment, we marched from Nelson’s Point [opposite West Point] on the 24th [of July], crossed the river at King’s Ferry, and on the 25th encamped near the block-house at this place. This afternoon a flag of truce arrived here from New York with despatches for General Washington, which were immediately forwarded to him.
August 5th. Flags are passing and repassing from this post to New York and back every day, and several gentlemen have been permitted to come out of that city. By the intelligence which they bring, corroborating those which we receive from other sources, commissioners are sent from the court of London to Paris, where they are to meet French and American commissioners for the important purpose of negotiating a general peace . . . A very considerable number of deserters have come out from New York within these few days past.

Since this duty, combined with the command of the Water Guard, was too much even for the energetic Captain Pray, Washington had arranged in June 1782 for Colonel John Greaton, with part of his regiment, to relieve the garrison of the blockhouse and encamp the rest of the detachment under its cover. He added: “Captain Pray, who has long commanded at that post, and who has acquitted himself in that service with great reputation, is still to retain the command of the Water Guard.” Colonel Greaton was apparently of two minds about his command. He wrote General Heath on June 21, 1782: “I think that two field officers is little enough at this post, one to attend to the discipline of the troops, the other to flags. The duty here is considerable hard. I have but about one hundred men present fit for duty — a grand command indeed! If I had my proper command this place would be very agreeable.” Later, in October, 1782, Washington wrote to Colonel Webb: “Although there will not be a field officers Command at Dobbs Ferry, yet the importance of the Post renders it essential that the Major whose Batallion is on duty, should be there to superintend the general business of the post.”

William Stephens Smith

The Commissary of Prisoners, Colonel William Stephens Smith, who later married the daughter of John Adams, was stationed at the blockhouse from October 1782 on. He was an ambitious young man, who had asked for service in the Caribbean, where there was still fighting. He felt he was in a backwater in Dobbs Ferry, and wrote to Washington,
complaining of the “general imbecility of the post.” Soon after Colonel Smith arrived, the high-spirited Captain Pray, who had been answerable to no immediate superior for so long, was complaining to Washington that although he had every man in the detachment cutting wood and building huts, besides their duty on the river, and although there was a public express horse at the post at Dobbs Ferry, “nothwithstanding the Commanding Officer orders me to send a boat and crew with those [private] letters to Head Quarters, which I cannot possibly do on account of the Wind and not being abbl to take the men from other duty. I am oblige to Send the bearer off on Foot.” As he so often had to do in that army of individuals, Washington wrote back through an aide, reminding Captain Pray of military discipline and telling him he must do what Colonel Smith said.

**Captain Pray’s Blunder**

Captain Pray’s enthusiasm sometimes got him into trouble. Budke describes one such exploit. “On April 1st [1782] a party of Captain Pray’s men of the Water Guard, stationed at South Nyack, who were on shore on the east side of the Hudson fell in with a party of the local militia, and in the dark, they attacked each other, four of the latter were wounded, and the entire party taken prisoners before the mistake was discovered.” Captain Lawrence, Captain Pray, and Colonel Smith were all actively engaged in securing intelligence for Washington, and there are many references to all three officers in his correspondence. Washington also wrote often about the importance of the blockhouse and its place in his strategy.

The Abigail Adams Smith House, 421 East 61st, N.Y.C., now the headquarters of the Colonial Dames of America. In 1795 William Stephens Smith and his wife Abigail Adams bought this property and planned to build an imposing house, to be called Mount Vernon. Within a year, however, financial reverses forced him to sell it, and the property became known as “Smith’s Folly.” In 1924 it was bought by the Colonial Dames, and it contains many mementoes of the Smiths.

The photo is titled: Mount Vernon Hotel Museum & Garden. A copy of this photograph may be found in the collection of The Colonial Dames of America.
Jonathan Lawrence Jr. Resigns

In 1782, when the main fighting ceased, the years of privation caught up with Captain Jonathan Lawrence Jr., and he was forced to resign because of ill health. He had a difficult time, as did the other Lawrences, and the Big House finally went out of the family for a couple of years. In 1794, however, after receiving a land grant from the government and selling it, he was able to buy the house back and lived there until his death in 1802.

Nineteenth Century Lawrences

His son Herbert inherited it, and lived to know the Palisades historian, Winthrop Gilman, in the mid-nineteenth century. Strangely enough, he doesn’t seem to have said much about his distinguished father. It was Herbert Lawrence who in 1861 gave the land for the flag pole in Palisades. Another son, Jonathan, the Fourth, married the daughter of Nicholas Gesner, who often mentioned him in his nineteenth century diary. A third son, George, was Palisades’ first postmaster.

Lawrence Burying Ground

Most of the Lawrences are buried in the Palisades Cemetery, which was at first the Lawrence Burying Ground. This dates back to the time of Jonathan Lawrence, the “Elder Senior,” whose wife, Mary Lawrence, was the first to be buried there, in 1774. (See Appendix No. 5.)

First Salute to the Flag

At the end of the Revolution a historic event occurred at Dobbs Ferry (now Snedens). When General Washington first met Sir Guy Carleton in Tappan in May 1783* to work out the details of the evacuation of New York City, the British frigate Perseverance anchored off the western end of Dobbs Ferry. After the negotiations were finished, Washington was invited to dinner aboard the Perseverance. As he boarded the ship, and again as he left, the new nation was first saluted, in his person, with volleys of seventeen guns.

*In a report which he sent home to Hesse-Castel, Major Baurmeister of the Hessian army said that on May 5th, the night before the conference, General Washington was “at Lawrence’s house, across from Dobbs Ferry.” (The editor of Baurmeister’s memoirs notes “not identified.”) Baurmeister often made misstatements, and nothing has yet been found to confirm or contradict this.
VI. FIRST HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Sneden Family

AFTER the Revolution Mollie Sneden and her unmarried son Dennis stayed on in New York, at least until after 1788, and Dennis carried on a coastal trade. Later they moved back to Snedens. They were said to have lived in the “Mollie Sneden House,” just north of the road near the Landing, and since Elison Westervelt, Mollie’s great-granddaughter, who made this assertion to Miss Coates, was twelve when Mollie died in 1810 at the age of a hundred and one, one would like to believe her. Loring McMillen, the architectural historian, reports, however, that the house shows no sign of an eighteenth century origin. It is known to have been moved back from the road by “Dan Ed” Conklin, the boat-builder, in the 1880’s, and it may have been substantially rebuilt at that time.

The stone house south of the Landing road, later to be called the Captain Larry Sneden House, must have been built by John Sneden Senior, “The Patriot,” soon after the end of the Revolution. Loring McMillen says that it was built around 1800. It is possible that the original Cheer Hall or “ferry house,” was gone by that time. No record has been found of it after 1769, when a boundary settlement referred to “Sneydon’s House, formerly Corbet’s.” The southern stone house may have been built to fill a need for a house near the ferry where passengers could wait for wind and tide. John Sneden owned it until 1818, when he sold it to his son Robert.

Dennis, who died in 1824, aged eighty-nine, may have helped his brother John run the ferry when he first returned. (Mollie, in her late seventies and eighties, would hardly have been working on it, and there is no indication that Robert
Mollie Sneden had lived in Cheer Hall earlier as the wife and widow of Robert Sneden, but this house is considered more particularly hers, although it seems to have been completely rebuilt since the time when she and her son Dennis lived there.

Captain Larry Sneden’s house. Built probably after the Revolution. The Ferry House is in the lower right corner.
The central part of John D. Haring’s map of 1822, showing two Sneden’s houses by the river, the Mann house and the Big House at the top of the hill, and one other, not identified, part way up the hill. (There must have been others, not shown.) “A Q R” stands for acres, quarter acres, and rods. Where some of the legends are upside down, Annie Gerard has written them right side up as well. The map hangs on the wall of the Palisades Library.
The William Sneden or Stone House, to the north of the road at the Landing. It was once thought to be Cheer Hall; now it is considered to have been built around 1820 by John Sneden Junior. This photograph was made in 1893, before the steps were added — twice — and removed twice.

The back view of the William Sneden house, before 1915.
No records of the ferry have been found, however, until 1807, when John Sneden bought a second-hand pettiauger for it, and 1822, when John Sneden Jr. ("Boss Sneden") bought a new one. Since Boss Sneden lived on Sparkill Creek, in what is now Piermont, and had a shipyard there, he must have had a helper in Snedens. This perhaps explains his need to buy land in Snedens from his father in 1818, to build the stone house north of the road for a ferry-house, and to arrange for one of his sons to live there.*

The 1822 map of Snedens in the Library shows Robert Sneden to the south of the Landing road, and John Sneden to the north, which fits in with Mr. McMillen’s statement that the northern stone house was built around 1820. He found no pre-Revolutionary houses at all at the Landing, although it is known that there were a number of houses there in Colonial times.

Family tradition says that “Boss” Sneden’s son Lawrence, “Captain Larry,” was living in the northern stone house in 1826; and he probably started his long career as ferryman then, if not before. In 1834, after his father’s death, he bought the southern stone house and lived there, running the ferry, almost till his death in 1871.

His brother William moved into the northern stone house,

*In Appendix No. 17 a detailed account of land transactions, wills, etc., supplies the background for these suppositions.
and lived there until his death, also in 1871.* William’s children all died relatively early of consumption, and neither he nor Captain Larry had any Sneden descendants, so the Snedens “of the Landing” gradually died out. Captain Larry’s daughter, Mary Neal, however, married Captain William Coates, who took over the ferry and ran it off and on, alternating with one or another of William Sneden’s sons, until 1903. It was their daughter, Ella Sneden Coates, who saved many Sneden papers and, in The Story of the Ferry, gave her recollections of what she had heard from her father.

Newcomers

In the meantime, much of the land at the bottom of the hill was sold to a vigorous lot of newcomers — Dobbses, Willseys, Manns, Van Ordens, Stansburys, and Vorises; Palisades, then Rockland, became a very busy village.

Bone Factory

To the south, near the waterfall which fell from the top of the cliff almost to the river, there was a “bone factory.”** On old maps this was called Carbonville or Carrinville. Several other bone factories are marked on mid-century New Jersey maps on the shore below the Palisades. No contemporary written description of these has been found, but Stanley Bradley of Alpine was told that the many horses and mules that dropped dead in the streets of New York City every day were loaded into scows and brought to the factories — all necessarily isolated because of the stench — where the meat was removed and the carcasses boiled and ground up for bone meal. The painting, “Snedens Landing, 1858” by R. K. Sneden* shows the bone factory at the waterfall — a long low building with a tall chimney.

Shad

After the middle of the century, the bone factory workers gave way to shad fishermen, who kept their boats and nets around Captain Jack Coates’ “Little House” at the cascade. Mr. Gilman described the “busy scene”; “Jack Coates’ premises were then surrounded by farmer-fishermen who came from Closter and the vicinity by the now almost impassable ravine road, to procure a quantity of shad for salting down ... The ravine road ended, as now, at the top of the Cascade, & the rest of the journey used to be performed on foot.”

Quarry

Between the cascade and the road at the Landing was the sandstone quarry, divided into fifty-foot strips among the eight Sneden heirs. According to Ella Coates there were twenty-five men working in the quarries at this time.

The Landing’s Commercial Heyday

At the landing there were several small stores and at

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* Cameron Blaikie Jr. points out that, according to the Northern Railroad of New Jersey records, William Sneden was engaged in 1857 to survey the course of the railroad from Jersey City to Piermont.

** See Appendix No. 19 on Bone Factories.

* See Appendix No. 40 on The Artist Sneden.
least one inn. Ella Sneden Coates tells about Snedens Landing during its heyday.

Wagons of farm and garden produce came from Closter, Tappan, Duncantown, Pasack, Kakiat, Kaskat and Kinnikamack, and the surrounding country. A warehouse some 25 feet square stood by the river at the end of the public road. About the year 1850 Capt. Lawrence J. Sneden built a pier extending 500 feet into the river, wide enough for three wagons to pass abreast, with a T at the end towards the river, to turn upon, to accommodate his perriaugers, and other craft. The wagons often stood in a line from the top of the hill (by the first Library — Watson house) to the end of the pier waiting their turn to unload.

[The Watson house (now the Ding Dong) is at the second bend of the road, about a third of the way to the real top of the hill. The goods shipped included lumber, meat, dairy products, and garden produce, especially strawberries.]

**Shipping and Ship-building**

The usual means of reaching the city before the year 1859 was by steamer or sloop. The fare was 25 cents,* including lodging overnight when necessary. As the berths only numbered a half a dozen, and the passengers were often a score, travel by this means was not luxurious. Capts. Peter Van Orden, John Wilsey, Sr. and Jr., John Vooris and Henry Dobbs, resident here, owned & commanded vessels engaged in river traffic or voyaging to Virginia for pine wood and oysters. Shipbuilding was then an important industry at Sneden’s Landing. Timber

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*In studying old copies of the Rockland County Journal, however, Tom Demarest found an advertisement in November 25, 1854, for the steamer *Washington Irving* which charged only 12 1/2 cents for the daily trip from Nyack to New York. If one got on at Snedens, where it stopped to meet the stage from Tappan 25 minutes later, the fare must have been less.

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Miss Ella Coates, 1861-1949, Daughter of Captain William Coates and grand-daughter of Captain Larry Sneden. She owned many Sneden papers, and in the first article in *The Story of the Ferry* she left a vivid picture of Snedens Landing in the early nineteenth century.
was cut on the hills, brought down to the landing, sawed by hand in saw pits and made into the fine sloops which were launched at high tide from the ways in the shipyards in front of the William Sneden house and south of the Ferry House. Among the vessels launched here were the **Accommodation**, a sloop of 60 tons; the **Benjamin Franklin**, still in service from Yonkers; the **Chief**, a schooner of 160 tons & very fast, and the **Brave**, of like size in 1844, the last vessel built here.

Miss Coates seems to have forgotten another vessel built in Snedens in 1868. Daniel de Noyelles, in *Within These Gates*, calls attention to the *Rockland County Messenger* of July, 1868 which tells of the launching: “On Wednesday of last week, July 9, 1868, the usual quiet village of Sneden’s Landing was set in a blaze of excitement, by the announcement made a few days previous, of the launch of a new vessel from the yard of its owner, Capt. William Sneden.” Capt. Sneden, who then lived in the old house to the north of the Landing, sprinkled the boat with Hudson River water and declared the name to be the **Union Volunteer**, who saved this great Republic from monarchy.” (Thereby seeming to cover both wars.)

When the steamboats began to replace sailing vessels, two of the best-known were built by men from “Rockland.” The **Orange**, the first steamboat to run from Nyack, was built in Nyack by Nicholas Gesner’s nephew, Henry Gesner, in 1827. Green’s *History of Rockland County* gives a detailed history of this pioneering steamboat, which was sometimes called “The Pot-Cheese” because of its shape (75 feet overall, with a 22 foot beam), and sometimes, sarcastically, “The Flying Dutchman,” or “The Gazelle.” The fuel used on the **Orange** was wood, and huge piles of cord wood stood along the roadside, from the foot of Main Street to Piermont Avenue. The **Orange** ran between Nyack and New York, stopping at Tappan Slote (Piermont). Cole in his *History of Rockland County* told why the next steamboat was built by Dutchmen at Tappan Slote. They were so angered by the failure of the **Orange** to stop at their landing one day that they built the **Rockland**, 25 feet longer and considerably faster. The **Orange** soon added a false bow and altered her paddle wheels, which put her ahead again.

In 1834 a group of Rockland County men formed a stock company and had the **Warren** built by Sneden’s and Lawrence’s boat-yard in New York. Nicholas Gesner often mentioned that his son-in-law, Jonathan Lawrence, Herbert Lawrence’s younger brother, was in New York working on the **Warren** or fetching lumber for it. This was a larger boat, which made seven stops between Haverstraw and New York.

**Sneden’s & Lawrence’s Shipyard in New York**

In Appendix No. 21 there are many clues from Gesner’s diary and elsewhere, which, put together like a jigsaw puzzle, show that Sneden’s and Lawrence’s — or Lawrence’s and Sneden’s — shipyard was owned in the 1830’s and 1840’s by Benjamin Sneden, brother of Samuel (of the Snedens in the Field, described below) and Herbert Lawrence, son of Jonathan Lawrence Jr.; that it was situated in Williamsburgh, Brooklyn, with a sail-loft on Water Street, New York City; and that it employed a number of the neighbors from “Rockland.” After Benjamin Sneden’s death in 1842 it seems that his son Samuel took his place.

**Strawberries**

When steamboats began to make regular trips on the river, farmers began to grow strawberries in quantity for the New York market. They shipped them in small splint baskets with handles which held about a pint, and sold for five cents each. The grower received about half the price, paying the freight out of his share.
By 1854 the Nyack Steamship Line put on a special Strawberry Boat for the three weeks of the season, and five years later the Northern Railroad of New Jersey had a special Strawberry Train. In 1860 it was reckoned that in the short growing season more than a million baskets were sent from Rockland County by train to New York, in addition to those that went by teams or boat. In Retrospect, Mr. Gilman described how strawberries and other produce were loaded: “Farmers and others embarked upon a barge with their produce, and by the time the steamboat reached a point opposite the ‘Little House’ (as our Capt. Wm. Coates’ grandfather’s house at the foot of the Cascade was then called) were safely transferred to the steamer’s deck, when the barge was towed back to the landing.”

Samuel Sneden

In 1784 Samuel Sneden wrote from Shelburne, Nova Scotia, to his mother, “Mary Sneden, living at the upper shipyard, New York,” telling of the birth of a daughter, Mary, named after his wife and his mother, and mentioning “Little Sam Sneden, Shoemaker.” It seems likely that this grandson of Mollie Sneden might have later returned from Nova Scotia, and been the Samuel Sneden who appeared, no one knows from where, to marry Elizabeth Concklin of Closter Road, and found the other branch of the Snedens, always called “Snedens in the Field.” The reasons why this seems probable are given in Appendix No. 20.

Gesner’s Diary

Nicholas Gesner left in his diary a graphic picture of village life between 1829 and 1850. He lived in an old house still standing on Closter Road near the Jersey border. The huge white oak tree in front of the house is supposed to have been planted by his wife, Gracy. If, as Mrs. W. C. Denike told Mr. Gilman, she planted it in 1772, it was 21 years before the house was built, and she must have been eight years old at the time. (Tree ring specialists, however, confirm the approximate age.) Gesner described the weather — even more extreme than
nowadays*— his life as a farmer, surveyor, and school teacher,** his neighbors, his obsessive interest in his niece by marriage, Mary Quidor Concklin, what he ate, and the bitter quarrels connected with the school and the two sects of the

*Gesner wrote, for example on January 11, 1835: “Walking across the river on ice for the past three days.” On August 4, 1835 and August 22, 1836 there were frosts. On June 12, 1842: “The heaviest white frost I have seen in years. Ground in some places frozen.” Talmang, pages 111 to 116, gives many other examples of extreme weather in those days.

**The school in which he taught was on the Closter Road behind the Willsey tenant house. Mrs. Richard Van Dien told Mr. Gilman she remembered jumping the brook to the north of it on her way to his school. (P.N. 179).

Nicholas Gesner, 1765-1858, whose diary, detailed, gossipy, irascible, brings to life the Palisades (then Rockland) of 1829-1850.

Nicholas Gesner’s house, built in 1793, and the tree supposedly planted by his wife, Gracy, in 1772.

Methodist Church. He wrote also of many interesting happenings in the world around him, such as flights of wild pigeons, Halley’s comet, flour riots and cholera in New York City, the new church in Tappan, the railroad in Piermont, and Croton Aqueduct.

He kept the diary during most of his life, but unfortunately much of it was burned as waste paper before Mrs. Abraham Post, a Gesner descendant, rescued what was left, and later gave it to Mr. Gilman. The surviving parts of the diary as well as a facsimile are in the Palisades Library, and have been used by researchers of nineteenth century history such as Carl Nordstrom and
Reginald MacMahon, but they have never been completely transcribed.

The more one reads the diary, the more one realizes that the surface has hardly been scratched. There are startling statements, such as his description of his poor wife Gracy’s physical condition and its treatment on June 21, 1836: “Gracy much troubled with the animal in her stomach and throat, is quite sick, it seems that all that can be done cannot destroy it — one year and more is elapsed with this plague in her stomach, frequently and quickly fly’s up in throat, almost chokes her, harsh medicine sends it down a moment, but starts up again as though it would fly from the severity of the stuff taken — large portions of the spirits of turpentine has been taken: doctor’s medicine and every harsh attempt to destroy it has hitherto failed.”

A Pitching Place. Van Dearing Perrine’s “Coasting Firewood.” Painted about 1905, when he was living in a cliffside house on the Palisades, above Fort Lee.

(Dr. Alice Baker surmises that this may have been a hiatus hernia.)

And Gesner’s casual remark that he had seen Mrs. Waldron (probably Ann Sneden Waldron), who complained of being exhausted, reminds one of the housewife’s lot at that time. How could she not be exhausted, with the contemporary conditions of housekeeping — the only light from lamps and candles which often set fires, the only water carried from wells, the only

A typical page from Gesner’s Diary
Dumkin’s Blacksmith Shop in a later form, as the Blacksmith Tea Shop in the 1920’s, run by Ella Speer.
cooking and heating from stoves and fireplaces, the mother nearly always pregnant or nursing babies that all too often died in infancy! The mere thought of what she must have gone through in winter, trying to dry diapers from one or two babies, along with the usual family washing, is appalling.

**Destruction of Forests**

One understands the photographic views of Palisades in the late nineteenth century showing great open vistas and almost no trees, when one reads Nicholas Gesner’s frequent references to shipping wood to New York, and John Scott’s description in his article on the Erie Railroad in Piermont, published in *South of the Mountains*, of “leveling the forests for many miles around for the thousands of cords of wood needed to stoke fire boxes of the many engines and steamboats.” “High Gutter Point” near the state border was one of the pitching points where logs were thrown over to the ships waiting in deep water below. This is probably the same high lookout that children today call Eagle Rock.

**Trips to New York**

Among the other things Gesner sent to New York for sale in care of his son Jacob or Zebulon Woolsey, were apples, raspberries, currants, and potatoes. Once his wife Gracy sent chickens, flowers, and “an old ewe, but thin.” Of another trip, in September, 1833, he wrote: “Gracy went to New York took Barrels and 4 or 5 baskets of very handsome and very large summer pippins, a basket with chickens and 2 small Hindquarters of lamb.” The next day he wrote: “Gracy and Jim Miller back from New York. James Post fetched. Made 41 [shillings] and expenses and laid out 23.8, leaves 17.4 of which Sally to get a ham for us, &c.”

For a time the frequent trips to New York City mentioned by Gesner were made either by sailing vessel or by steamboat. He described one trying trip on May 11, 1831, which started in one and ended in the other:

I went New York from home about 9 or 10 o’clock... Went with John Willse and George Quidor from Snedens. [In the margin he added ‘Gracy went too’] A violent South wind. First single reef, then double reef, just below (?) the leech Rope of Mainsail broke and tore the Sail. Amazing. There was a terrible swell. We got in near West Shore where it was more Calm. The Rockland Steam boat came near along. They Attended to our Signal, took from the Schooner about 15 passengers and got in about 4 oclock P.M. John and George Got in the same night late.

**Small Stores**

Gesner grew much of his own food, but supplemented this with purchases from neighbors who kept stores in their own houses. One reads of John Van Kleeck keeping store in the basement of the Big House, of Henry Coles’ store near the old Doughty house opposite the Watson house, another in the Coates’ barn at the Landing kept by William Van Sciver, and Jesse Trenchard’s and George Lawrence’s stores next to each other, opposite the present library.

In an old house on the site of the present library, Herbert Gesner had a cobbler shop, but he may have priced himself out of business. His father wrote on April 18, 1842: “At Herbert’s I half sole and a piece for a welt, 1 sh. (It’s too much) unpd.” Next day Nicholas wrote: “I mended my shoe.” Later there was a bakery there, and Emma Quidor, who was born in 1865, told Constance Price that on cold days her mother would give her
The Palisades Methodist Church, built in 1859, with its cupola. Now it has lost its cupola and is the antique shop, Yonder Hill.
a penny, and after school she would run over to the bakery, almost next door, to buy a hot roll to warm her hands on the long walk down the hill to her home.

**Blacksmith Shops**

Other neighbors kept blacksmith shops. Jesse Trenchard had one west of the “country store,” and across the road — perhaps not at the same time — were Mr. Denike’s and Mr. Wahrenberger’s. When the latter burned down, Mr. Wahrenberger rebuilt it to the east, where it later became August Dumkin’s. Mildred Post Rippey remembered visiting August Dumkin’s Blacksmith Shop in the first years of this century, when her invalid sister’s wheelchair needed repairs. She wrote: “I was fascinated with all that was going on in the shop. I could hardly bear to leave — the smell of burning hooves, the clang of the forge, and the shower of sparks flying upward enchanted the little girl that was ‘me.’”

**Frequent Fires**

There were frequent fires, which were generally uncontrollable. The first fire company in the county was organized in Nyack in 1834, but of course it was so far away that it could have been of little help. Even when the Piermont fire company was organized in 1852, it must often have come too late. The only recourse in the village of Rockland was to organize bucket brigades from the nearest well, which were not very efficacious.* This is one reason why it is so hard to give a definite date for any of the old houses. Nearly all have been partially or wholly burned at one time or another. Even without a fire, of course, many of the houses were remodeled and changed over the years.

**Methodism**

With the coming of Methodism to this area in the early nineteenth century a new religious revival struck the village of Rockland.** Until then, going to church had meant riding or walking down the “cow path” to Tappan, seeing the neighbors, and listening to the Dominie in the decrepit Dutch Reformed Church (which was replaced by the present handsome structure in 1835). The Methodists, on the other hand, emphasized the individual’s responsibility for his own salvation and for that of others. Anyone could preach, and Gesner speaks particularly of two women preachers: “Mrs. Thompson’s remarkable preaching. Elegant, acute,” and “Miss (Mistress) Van Saun a great preacher.”

There was apparently plenty of excitement at the services. Gesner wrote on September 27, 1833 of a Reform preacher: “He is a great singer. He is considerable noisy in his devotion.” He spoke more strongly on November 5, 1834 of the other church: “Methodist Episcopal meeting I have been informed was attended with Great shoutings. A. V. Sturr, their local preacher and present School master in District No.1. He is among the people pulling and haling (sic) a few young people into the alter. Jesse Trenchard’s wife fell. The whooping and screaming in the Meeting House was never equaled in this place.”

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*Emily Wahrenberger Munson described the fire in her father’s blacksmith shop, when the stove was filled too full with coal and became overheated. Her mother rang the dinner bell all the way to the Jersey border to get volunteers to help. The blacksmith shop burned, but they saved the house next door.

**This was part of a country-wide religious revival in the early nineteenth century called “The Great Awakening,” which affected members of other sects as well as Methodists. The Camp Meetings were usually non-denominational.