



Egbert Benson HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RED HOOK

P.O. Box 397 Red Hook, N.Y. 12571-0397

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Discovering Saint Margaret's Girls

EBHS and Hannaford Archeologists dig into the past



Working in cooperation with a New Jersey archeological firm that has been digging at the Hannaford Supermarkets site on North Broadway, more than artifacts have been unearthed about one of Red Hook's most significant historic sites.

The elegant Italianate-style St. Margaret's Orphanage stands abandoned in front of the hill where Hannaford will build their new store, possibly next year. For over 80 years, between 1852 and 1937, it was home to about 130 young girls, some orphaned, most surrendered by parents who could no longer afford to keep them.

The Society has been researching the history of the home through interviews and examination of original records, in hopes that the building and its history will be preserved and that St. Margaret's may eventually serve as a community-based center for not-for-profit educational and historic preservation organizations. In this way it will be accessible to local citizens.

The archeologists, hired by Hannaford Stores and headed by William Sandy, are digging for artifacts that will tell us something of the life that went on there for so many years. The digging is in conjunction with Hannaford's plans for the store and is required by

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state law. Besides the research, Hannaford has agreed to repair the roof, clean up around the house, and ready the building for National Historic Register designation. Beyond that the future of the building is not secured.

Between us, we are developing a picture of the home, which was the first of its kind – a privately funded school and home for abandoned girls - to be built in Dutchess County. In 1851, Margaret Armstrong Astor persuaded her husband, William Astor (son of John Jacob Astor who was reputed to be the wealthiest man in the country), to build the house for orphans. In a story that was apparently often repeated in the family, Mrs. Astor, a gardener and a very religious woman, was considering her plans for an orphanage when her husband said to her, "Should I give you money to establish an orphanage, Peachy, or to build a greenhouse for flowers?" Though tempted, Margaret opted for a project of good works, but in the end, she got both (*The Astors: an American Legend*)

The new house was located just a mile or two from their river estate, Rokeby. According to historic architect Alan Neumann of Hudson River Heritage, the building is almost an exact copy of an A.J. Davis design in a popular book by his famous partner American landscape architect A.J. Downing. The two did a lot of work on the large estates in Red Hook at that time. It is very likely that Margaret Astor saw the Davis' sketch and asked the architect to duplicate it, Neumann said.

The idea of St. Margaret's was to provide a good home and religious education for poor girls who were orphans or whose mother or father (usually the second parent was dead) could not afford to keep them. At the same time, the girls, who at that time had few prospects in life were trained in the domestic arts - cooking, sewing, gardening, canning, child care, nursing and housekeeping – in order to ready them for employment as domestic servants. Many actually ended up working in the homes of local families. Episcopal Deaconesses ran the home for many years. Deaconesses were women who devoted their life to the work of the Episcopal Church. The Astors were patrons and members of Christ Episcopal Church in Red Hook, and for years St. Margaret's was

connected to Christ Church. In a wonderful find, the Rev. Fred Cartier of Christ Church lent us one of the original registries for St. Margaret's, with listings and personal notations on girls admitted between the mid-1880s and 1937. Most were confirmed at Christ Church, and often married there after leaving the home.

In the early years, St. Margaret's was considered a school and the girls called scholars. "Teachers" were hired at the home to instruct the girls in various skills. Later the girls were called residents, and even "inmates." In those years, a cook and a few other employees helped the Deaconess train the girls in their work before and after school. One of the last living residents of the home, Edna Hunt Eramo, (see her story on pg. 6) remembers lists of chores posted each day.

The girls ranged from about five years old to 18, at which age they were expected to leave the home to work for a living. They slept upstairs, three or four in each large room, averaging between 12 and 16 residents. The Deaconess lived there as well, while several employees – some men to care for the cows, chickens, pigs and other animals, as well as the grounds and at least one cook for meals – lived away. There was a large barn in the back with four or five cows, a large vegetable garden and flower gardens. Edna remembered learning to can, weeding the garden and cooking.

Every day, after morning prayers and breakfast, the school age girls walked together to the Red Hook Public School District #4 in the village about half a mile away (it is where the Old Soap Factory Paint and Hardware Store is now). When they came home they had their chores to do. In the evening after supper, they did their homework, and ended the day in the large parlor downstairs, where the Deaconess conducted Bible readings and prayers. Sometimes on weekends, there were visitors. They had occasional picnics and outings, in a horse and wagon, recalled Eramo who lived at St. Margaret's between 1919 and 1929. On Sundays, they all walked to church at Christ Church in the village.

Bill Sandy's team found, among other artifacts, many pieces of the kind of glass used in canning jars, supporting Edna's memories of jars and jars of canned food, prepared each fall and stored in

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cabinets in the large basement of the house.

A highlight in Edna's memory was a wonderful annual Christmas party given by the home's patroness, Margaret Chanler Aldrich, descendant of founder Margaret Astor and a frequent visitor to St. Margaret's. There was a huge Christmas tree for the girls, Edna recalled.

Prominent among the artifacts unearthed by the archeologists were fragments of porcelain dolls that one could imagine were among the Christmas gifts that Edna recalled each girl received personally from Mrs. Aldrich.

Frank Coons...

and a daughter who lived in Falls Church, Virginia at the time of his death. We understand that Frank Coon's widow moved to Virginia after his death, which is probably how this important Red Hook album found its way south.

We are deeply grateful to Judy Nelson for contacting Margaret Doty and especially to Margaret for purchasing the album for the Historical Society.

B. Bielenberg



In 1949 Coons remodeled the Sittenham home on North Broadway for the Red Hook Fire Company, enlarging the front to create three bays for the fire trucks. EBHS photo. Frank Coons Collection.

New Photographic Collections for the EBHS Archives

If land records, census and church records, maps, letters, news stories etc. are the bones of the Historical Society's collections, photographs are the elements that fill in the stories and make the life and times of the area come alive.

Photographs have been acquired since the inception of the Egbert Benson Historical Society and have presented as much of a challenge as the Teal files in deciding how to arrange them for easier research. Some have been outright gifts and some have been loaned briefly to be copied or scanned. William Teator and Harriet Martin Day took many of these photographs in the late 1890's and early 1900's. These, on glass plate negatives, were reprinted by John Losee and given to the Society. Others were included as a part of a larger collection. So scattered were they all, that searching for the right ones for any particular researcher began to present problems of time, even though they were entered into computer fields.

Something a little different had to be done. With the exception of the singularly photographic collection of the album of Frank W. Coons and the work of Dutchess County Landmarks, which will remain intact, the photographs and postcards, originals and copies, are being labeled, placed in archival sleeves and stored in archival albums. Six hundred and fifty-one photographs have been sleeved at this date. We have devised (so far) 13 categories: Agriculture, Red Hook Hotel, Red Hook Village & Business, Annandale, Barrytown, Tivoli, Upper Red Hook, Houses, Churches, Schools for Elizaville and Milan, Organizations and People. Each have been entered onto a spread sheet with the title, origin, photo or post card, date if known, size and copy, original or glass plate negative.

There is a certain pleasure to this chore when I look at families in their best bib and tucker, sitting on straight chairs outside their homes, or a couple in a horse drawn buggy coming up a lane. To see the streets of the village as they once were, tree shaded wide roads with picket fences along the walks and always the school children, boys in knickers and
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brogans, girls with wide ribbon, small faces standing outside their school. If you have a little time on Tuesdays, come visit us and take a journey, through pictures, back through the 20th century.

Bobbie Thompson, Archivist



Will Teator photo of a winter scene at Upper Red Hook taken from a glass plate negative.c. 1890. EBHS

Legion Auxiliary Papers at EBHS

A box of items presented to the Historical Society by Mary Briggs (Mrs. Fred Briggs) contains the entire history of the Red Hook American Legion Auxiliary Unit No. 1304, which was formed in 1947 to support the activities of the post World War II American Legion. At a time when Americans are once again being asked to serve their country with volunteer activities it is inspiring to see how much the group of 22 charter members took on.

Dues were set at \$2 per person and the treasury was augmented by card parties and food sales. The women catered dinners for the Legion post and served refreshments at Legion bingo games.

With the money raised, the Auxiliary bought gifts and magazine subscriptions for the veterans at the Castle Point VA Hospital in Beacon and toys and gifts for the Community Action Agency to distribute to the needy. Money was raised for child welfare, the American Legion Mountain Camps, Empire Girls State, the education of war orphans, and cancer.

The activities are documented by Minute Books and six full scrapbooks of clippings, programs and correspondence. Over the years the membership declined until there were only nine paid members left in 1995. The Auxiliary was disbanded in 1996.

Among the Auxiliary artifacts included in the gift is the brass bell and wooden gavel that called meetings to order, and Mary Briggs' American Legion Auxiliary cap worn so proudly in many Memorial Day parades.

B.Bielenberg

Edna Hunt Remembers St. Margaret's

EBHS trustee Maynard Ham and I traveled recently to Hamden, Conn. to speak to Edna Hunt Eramo, who came to live at St. Margaret's Orphanage in 1919 at the age of eight, with her six-year old sister. Their recently widowed mother could not manage her five children, so the girls were sent to Red Hook.

We were greeted by a frail but lively, elderly lady. She soon settled down to look at pictures and to recall her memories.

"They were good to us," said Edna, recalling the Deaconess Stephenson, who cared for her for ten years, until she left for work in 1928.

"But it was hard to be without mother," she said several times, close to tears. "I used to sit up here in this window and look out and think, 'why do we have to be here,'" she said, pointing to a picture of the house, with its large windows on the second floor. Her mother visited often, she said, but she never got over her leaving. "Many is the time I sat there watching mother drive away."

She remembered walking to school and to Christ Church each Sunday, checking her chores posted each day, and sitting still for Bible readings and prayers morning and evening led by the Deaconess in the parlor. She recalled learning to cook and sew and can vegetables, and weeding the large house garden. They also had some fun, she said: picnic outings in a horse and carriage or the occasional car, movies at the Lyceum when she got older.

But Christmas was her fondest memory. Edna recalled the parties of Mrs. Richard Aldrich, the patroness of the school. "She was great to us kids," said Edna. "We got our Christmas like nobody had Christmas - She put a big Christmas tree in her home, and she gave us all a present. This was all her doings!"

Edna said although they never stopped missing their family, "We were lucky we had the home to go to. Mother couldn't keep us... she did what she could to help us... It was a sad situation my childhood."

C. Carr