

by

J. W. Aldrich, 1973

Sometime prior to 1688, an Albany merchant named Col. Peter Schuyler, whose sister Alida had first married Nicholas Van Rensselaer and then Robert Livingston (First Lord of the Manor), acquired from the Indians a sizeable parcel of land on the east bank of the Hudson River comprising most of what is today the Town of Red Hook. In 1688 Governor Thomas Dongan, acting on behalf of the British Crown, confirmed Schuyler's title to this land (on which, of course, he did not reside). In 1715 "Schuyler's Patent" was sold to three enterprising investors, one of whom was Judge Henry Beekman, the founder of Rhinebeck; subsequently the land was partitioned, and Beekman's son, Col. Henry Beekman, bought out most of the interests of his partners. When, in 1776, Col. Beekman bequeathed all of his extensive holdings to his only child, Margaret, the latter won the reputation of being one of the richest women in the American Colonies (she was by then a widow). Margaret Beekman's marriage to Judge Robert Livingston of Clermont had connected the Beekman properties in Dutchess County with the "Lower Manor" of the Livingstons in Columbia County. Ultimately, this Beekman land was subdivided and parcelled out to her ten children, most of whom chose to settle thereon. Where these noteworthy offspring established themselves is shown in this roster:

Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, of Clermont and Idele
Mrs. General Richard Montgomery, of Grasmere and Montgomery
Place (successively)
Secretary of State Edward Livingston, of Montgomery Place
(by inheritance)
Major John R. Livingston (the last surviving veteran of
the Revolution), of Massena
Mrs. General John Armstrong, of The Meadows, Mill Hill, and
La Bergerie (alias Rokeby) (successively) Neither The
Meadows nor Mill Hill are now extant.
Colonel Henry Beekman Livingston, of the "Kip-Beekman" House
Mrs. Peter R. Livingston, of Grasmere
Mrs. Reverend Freeborn Garretson, of Wildercliff
Mrs. Doctor Thomas Tillotson, of Linwood
Mrs. General (& Governor) Morgan Lewis, of Staatsburgh

This paper concerns the property of approximately 750 acres fronting on the Hudson River south of what today is called Barrytown (then Lower Red Hook Landing), and on which John and Alida Livingston Armstrong eventually settled.

John Armstrong was born in 1758 in Carlisle, Pa., the son of Major-General John Armstrong, a Scots-Irish emigrant who won a land grant from the Penns after achieving fame as the "Hero of Kittanning" during the French & Indian Wars.. The son attended Princeton College briefly until he left to join the Continental Army; he served as a Captain and later as a Major on the staffs of Generals Mercer and Gates, and was present at numerous battles. In 1783 he authored the so-called "Newburgh Addresses," which attempted to stir resentment among Army officers over their lack of pay. After the War he served briefly as Adjutant General of the Pennsylvania Militia, Secretary of State of that Commonwealth, and as a Member of the last Continental Congress. In 1789 he married Alida Livingston of Clermont, and busied himself in the management of the 27,000 acres which she brought to the marriage as a dowry. In 1790 he built a very grand house on 400 acres north of what is today Annandale-on-Hudson, and he named the place The Meadows. He shortly disposed of it and in 1796 erected another fine mansion one mile to the south which overlooked his mills on the Sawkill and which he named Mill Hill. This place, too, he sold, and from about 1801 until 1804 he rented what is now known as the Old Senate House in Kingston as a residence for his family, while he served two terms as U.S. Senator between 1800 and 1804, having been appointed by Governor Clinton through the potent influence of Armstrong's brother-in-law, Chancellor Livingston. In 1804 Armstrong was appointed by President Jefferson to succeed Livingston as U.S. Minister to the Court of Napoleon, in which post he remained until 1810. Armstrong then returned home with his wife and six children (among them Horatio Gates Armstrong and Kosciuszko Armstrong, named after his old friends of Revolutionary War days). The returning family brought with them magnificent furnishings for the new house that Armstrong envisioned building on his wife's property at the south-western corner of Schuyler's Patent overlooking the Hudson. The place was first named La Bergerie in honor of a parting gesture by the Emperor Napoleon, the gift of a herd of Merino sheep. As soon as the Armstrongs arrived home, barns were constructed (they are still standing) and work was begun on a massive 2½-story stuccoed fieldstone house of a symmetrical French design, boasting exterior walls nearly three feet thick. Warner Richards was the Scots master builder who supervised construction and who, as a fine artisan himself, created the superior moulding and wainscoting throughout; however, the identity of the architect, if any, is unknown, but possibly the Frenchman J.J. Ramée. Construction was interrupted by the War of 1812, during which Armstrong was first commissioned a Brigadier General and was placed in charge of the defenses of New York City, and then was appointed by President Madison as Secretary of War. He gave important field commands to obscure officers named Winfield Scott and Andrew Jackson, and according to Henry Adams, Armstrong does not deserve the blame that has been accorded him for the burning of Washington, D. C., by the British. After his resignation in 1814 he returned to Dutchess County, and abandoned hope that he would ever realize his ambition of attaining the Presidency (for which he was considered a strong contender) by uniting the North against his

bitter rivals, Monroe and the Virginia Dynasty. When in 1815 the Palatine cottage in which the family was temporarily living burned to the ground, destroying Armstrong-Napoleonic correspondence, the family moved into the still-unfinished main house "to the music of hammers and saws". The house was soon finished and the family could enjoy their commanding prospect of the Hudson and the Catskills. Armstrong took a lively interest in the agricultural development of the property, and published several treatises on agricultural topics. For the rest of his long life he busied himself with a voluminous correspondence (especially with his good friend Ambrose Spencer, Mayor of Albany and Chief Justice of N. Y. State). He also carried on volatile pamphleteering on political subjects, wrote a two-volume history of the War of 1812, wrote biographies of Generals Wayne and Montgomery for Jared Sparks, and continued to build up his library and to read widely. There are in existence portraits of Armstrong done from life by the following artists: Rembrandt Peale, J.J. David, John Trumbull, J.W. Jarvis, and two by John Vanderlyn.

In 1818, General Armstrong's only daughter, Margaret, married William B. Astor of New York City; he was the son and principal heir of "the Original" John Jacob Astor. After Alida Armstrong's death in 1822, Armstrong relied increasingly on his daughter; the Astors thus became more and more accustomed to managing the place and spending their summers with the old General. On her honeymoon Margaret had read Sir Walter Scott's epic poem "Rokeby", and because the scenery described therein reminded her of the deep, wooded gorge at La Bergerie through which the Mudderkill flows on its way to the Hudson, she prevailed upon her father to rename the place after Scott's poem. In 1836, William B. Astor persuaded his aging father-in-law to sell him the property for \$50,000. Astor was by then a millionaire in his own right, even though his father was not to die until 1848; nevertheless, it has long been believed by the family that the purchase price had been given to W. B. Astor by his father in 1818 for this specific purpose, as a wedding present. Until General Armstrong's death in 1843 at the age of 85, he continued to be welcomed as an annual summer guest at Rokeby; during the winters, when the Astors resided in New York City, he lived with a younger son in nearby Red Hook. Armstrong's great library and his archives are preserved in the house to this day; however, aside from a very few pieces of furniture, portraits of General and Mrs. Armstrong, and the unique French wallpaper that is well preserved in one room, the original Empire furnishings brought from Paris in 1810 were all removed by Armstrong's oldest son at the time of the sale in 1836. The Astors refurnished Rokeby in a Rhenish Victorian style, and continued accumulating books (there are today more than 10,000 volumes in the house). In the 1840s the Astors had the Danish landscape architect Ludwig Ehlers lay out a formal entrance and a mile-long driveway, and make changes to the grounds near the house--especially flowergardens with specimen trees, masonry bridges with iron railings, a formal carriage drive--and a gatehouse was built; and the old track from

the River up which the materials to build the house had been hauled, was refined into a carefully graded sylvan path known as the "Poets' Walk" in honor of the Astors' friends Washington Irving and Fitz-Greene Halleck, who are said to have strolled there. In the 1850s a greenhouse was built, and stables (since destroyed by fire). The house itself was greatly enlarged about 1858 (exact date and architect's identity unknown): a more ornate Corinthian piazza to the south; a polygonal tower of five stories to the west (the bottom three floors contain libraries, and the ground floor octagonal library is thought to be one of the finest Gothic-Revival rooms in existence--perhaps the work of Alexander Jackson Davis); to the north, a kitchen/laundry wing, with servants' rooms above; and finally a full third story superimposed beneath a Mansard roof and massive cornice gutter. In all the house was enlarged from one of 20 rooms to one of 48, making it the largest house in the region at that time. Here Mr. and Mrs. Astor passed their placid summers and raised their six children. Their eldest child, Emily, married Samuel Ward (later famous as the first great lobbyist in Washington and the brother of Julia Ward Howe) and died shortly after producing a daughter named Margaret. The Astors adopted this favorite little granddaughter, and ultimately bequeathed Rokeby to her. However, Rokeby's acreage had by then been diminished to approximately 450 because of Astor's gift of the southern portion to his youngest daughter, Laura, upon her marriage to Franklin H. Delano; on this property the Delanos built a large Tuscan-style mansion, "Steen Valetje", which still stands. The Astors' third daughter and three sons were otherwise provided for; one son, John Jacob Astor, had only one child--William Waldorf Astor, later the First Viscount Astor; another son, William B. Astor, Jr., was the husband of the Mrs. Astor, the leader of New York's "400, and he established "Ferncliff", the vast estate north of Rhinecliff which was last owned by his grandson, Vincent Astor. Mrs. William B. Astor of Rokeby died in 1872, and her husband in 1875. During the years following the death of his father in 1848, William B. Astor was commonly identified as "the Landlord of New York" and was reputed to be the richest man in America, having increased the value of his father's \$20 million estate to more than \$100 million.

Margaret Astor Ward married John Winthrop Chanler in 1862; he was a Tammany Sachem of South Carolina and New England parentage who went on to serve as a New York City Congressman during the Reconstruction period. Within two years of William B. Astor's death, however, both the Chanlers had died and Rokeby descended to their ten surviving children. These rambunctious orphans lived at Rokeby (which they owned in common) during their minority. By 1899 one of them, Margaret Livingston Chanler, had bought out the interests of her brothers and sisters and had established a professional dairy farm on the property. Margaret Chanler served as a volunteer nurse and organizer of field hospitals during the Spanish-American War, and was later instrumental in the creation of the Women's Nursing Corps of the U.S. Army; this work took her to Puerto Rico during the War with Spain, to the Philippines during the Insurrection, to Japan and to Peking in the wake of the Boxer Rebellion. The Press styled her "the Angel of Puerto Rico",

and in belated recognition of her war work she received in 1939 a special Congressional gold medal, presented personally by President Roosevelt. Influenced by her great-aunt, Julia Ward Howe, she was a founder and first president of the Women's Municipal League, a predecessor of the League of Women Voters. In 1906 she married Richard Aldrich, who was music critic on the New York Times until his death in 1937. They had two children, one of whom--Richard Chanler Aldrich--died in 1961. Throughout her long life Rokeby was Mrs. Aldrich's country place and legal residence. Among the so-called "Amazing Chanlers"--the brothers and sisters who grew up with Margaret at Rokeby--were the following: Robert Winthrop Chanler ("Sheriff Bob"), who was celebrated as a muralist, bohemian, and as Sheriff of Dutchess County in 1906, and whose house, designed in the French provincial style by Whitney Warren, still stands in Red Hook; Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler, who married the political reformer and literary essayist John Jay Chapman (their estate, Sylvania, adjoins Rokeby to the north, and the house, which still stands, was designed by Charles Platt); William Astor Chanler, Congressman, soldier of fortune, and leader of the first big expedition into uncharted North Kenya; and Lewis Stuyvesant Chanler, criminal lawyer, reformer and politician. Lewis campaigned for Home Rule in Ireland; became one of the first "people's attorneys" who successfully represented indigent defendants in murder cases without fee; started Franklin D. Roosevelt on his political career; and, using Rokeby as his political base, made a successful bid for Lieutenant Governor of New York in 1906, and campaigned for Governor on the Democratic ticket in 1908, in which contest he was narrowly defeated by Charles Evans Hughes.

There have been numerous changes at Rokeby since the Astor period. One of the estate's most notable ornaments is the mile-long dressed stone dry wall which marks Rokeby's boundary along the public road. It was erected as a labor of gratitude by a family retainer, a retired master stone mason named Josiah House, who worked on it for eight years with only the help of a farm boy. House was born in 1800; he finished the wall in 1888. It stands as an unsurpassed monument to native Dutchess County craftsmanship in the 19th Century. In 1895 Margaret Chanler asked her friend Stanford White to prescribe certain structural and decorative alterations inside the main house; these changes involved principally an enlarged drawingroom and an altered front staircase. In 1911 she commissioned Olmsted Brothers to improve the landscaping of the lawns and gardens west of the house. She also had additional farm buildings (to include a McKim, Mead & White stable) and a private riverside dock built. At about that time Chester H. Aldrich, who was her brother-in-law and a partner in the firm of Delano & Aldrich, Architects, persuaded her to have the stucco exterior of the house resurfaced with pure white beach sand or marble dust, and to have the shutters painted a very dark green, the wood trim below the level of the cornice gutter painted white, and the trim above it light gray. This exterior color scheme is unchanged to this day. (In the late 19th century the stucco had been painted an off-white and scored; the trim was painted tan.) In 1913 a new greenhouse was erected, designed by Delano & Aldrich, and the Astor greenhouse was converted to a garage and chauffeur's apartment. Rokeby presently contains

numerous examples of Robert Chanler's works, most notably the wall murals on the piazza and in the "Crow Room", and the panel "the Dance of Death." Among other furnishings which are of general interest are several which have been recently loaned to the Metropolitan Museum at the request of the Curator of the American Wing: an 18th Century Chippendale chair bearing the "Livingston cypher" which came originally from Clermont; an important American painting of the 19th Century, Voyageurs, by Charles Deas; and several pieces of documented American 19th Century furniture by Alexander Roux. (*Returned to Rokeby.*)

The present four Partners in Rokeby Preserve, a family-owned partnership created in 1977 to manage and hold the property, are the three grandchildren and the daughter-in-law of the late Margaret Chanler Aldrich, who died in 1963 at the age of 92. Thus the house was descended within one family in direct line since its construction in 1811-15, and likewise the land since its purchase by the elder Beekman in 1715. Moreover, Colonel Schuyler, the original patentee (1688), was a collateral ancestor of the family. The Rokeby Dairy Farm has given way to non-specialized crop farming. One closing note of a sporting character: for many years the proprietors of Rokeby have been the last remaining family along the River who still sail their own fleet of 19th Century iceboats on the Hudson's frozen surface each winter, conditions permitting. The property is fortunate to include 25 acres beyond the railroad right-of-way, consisting in part of a scenic headland called Astor Point and a river pier, and vehicular access to these resources by means of an overhead bridge. In 1978 The Nature Conservancy published documentation of the ecological significance of Rokeby's Mudderkill Tideswamp, which provides habitat for rare and threatened species.

Present acreage approximately 450

Principal past owners, showing their years of birth and death:

General John Armstrong, 1758-1843

William Backhouse Astor, 1793-1875

Margaret Livingston Chanler Aldrich, 1870-1963

Present owning partners:

Richard Aldrich

John Winthrop Aldrich

Rosalind Fish Aldrich Michahelles (Mrs. Michele Michahelles)

Susan Kean Cutler Aldrich (Mrs. Richard Chanler Aldrich)

Addenda: In 1973 the mansion at Rokeby was fully documented by the Historic American Buildings Survey (U.S. Department of the Interior)

In 1975 the entire property was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1979 it became part of the National Register "Sixteen-mile" District

In 1977 a State Agricultural District came into existence which included this property

In 1980 the Mid-Hudson Historic Shorelands Scenic Area (which included this property) was designated by the State

The Coastal Management Zone, as presently proposed pursuant to Federal Law, includes this property within its boundaries