

SAVING OUR BARNS

by Terry Schaff

In 1986, my husband Doug Schaff and I became owners of the remaining 18 acres of Frank and Miriam Geiger's apple farm on Starbarrack Road in Red Hook New York. Every time we passed the Geiger's farm, on our way to our summer cottage on Spring Lake we were taken with the beauty of their barns. When a For Sale sign appeared on their property I arranged a visit, and immediately fell in love with the property.

A few weeks later Doug went to see Frank Geiger to get a first-hand tour of the farm. Frank Geiger shared with him the fact that he was dying of cancer and that it was his wish to keep living on the farm until his wife could be comfortably resettled near her family in New Jersey and so that he could finish harvesting his last crop of apples.

Ownership of the farm was passed on to us that August with the understanding that the Geigers would continue to live there as long as they wanted. During that time, which turned out to only be a few months, Frank Geiger convinced Doug that it would be foolhardy to try and make a go of part-time apple farming (Advice that Doug has appreciated ever since).

For a few years we succeeded in finding local farmers to care for our apple orchards and to store their apples in the basement coolers of our largest barn. But it became more and more difficult to find farmers interested in either enterprise. At one point we pulled out an aging orchard when a neighboring farmer expressed interest in planting corn in the field, but that didn't come to pass. By 1990, more than 250 years of continual farming had come to an end on one of Red Hook's oldest farms. And we had become the custodians of beautiful old artifacts; buildings that told the history of one of Red Hook's oldest working farms, but which would increasingly become a burden to sustain.

In November I came to the Egbert Benson Historical Society of Red Hook to learn more about the lineage of our farm with the hope that our farm might have enough historical relevance to merit consideration by the National Register of Historic Places. My close friend Ellen Phelan, a board member of the Friends of The Elmendorph Society, helped me to get this process started. She introduced me to the dedicated volunteers of the Egbert Benson Historical Society who became active participants in my search. To our surprise we discovered that the historical society had as much or more information on our farm as any in the Town of Red Hook.



*The old Dutch-style barn on the Schaff property.
Photo courtesy of Terry & Doug Schaff*

Original leases on parchment dating back to 1754 and 1756, discovered by EBHS Archivist Barbara Thompson told much of the early history of the property. Photographs taken by the amateur photographer, naturalist and farmer, William Seward Teator, whose family owned the farm for close to 200 years, documented the farm and its inhabitants in the early 1900s.

We traced the history of the farm, with the help of the Historical Society, back to 1688 when Pieter Schuyler, (a Dutchman) received a patent from King James II for land that included our property. Sometime thereafter he sold property including our parcel to a fellow Dutchman, Captain Barent Van Benthuyzen. In 1722 this parcel was leased to Andries Drom, a Palatine (German Palatines tried to escape war, famine, and religious persecution by coming to America). It doesn't appear that either Van Benthuyzen or Schuyler ever occupied or used this land, making the Drom family the first non-indigenous people to live here and to cultivate a farm.

In 1754, the land passed into the hands of Peter Kool, who only held onto it for a couple of years. In 1756, the Teater family, who were also Palatines, took possession of the land, successfully raising apples and potatoes for close to 200 years. William Seward Teator (The Teater family name has undergone many spellings.) called the farm "Meadow Brook Farm". And his orchards were known as Blue Ribbon



Nina Teator and her children Marion and Roscoe standing in front of the stone summer kitchen at "Meadow Brook Farm".

Photo courtesy Terry & Doug Schaff

Orchards in recognition of the prize-winning apples that were grown there and sent around the world. I recently learned that our road was known as Teator Road until the mid 1960s when it was renamed Starbarrack Road.

In 1941 the property was sold to Albert B. Cole who continued to raise apples. Twenty-five years later, Bruce and Frank Geiger purchased it, (naming it Geiger Meadows) continuing a tradition of apple farming. And 20 years later, in 1986, my husband and I became the sixth owners to reside at what is now known as Starbarrack Meadows.

Recently Jim Krick, an internationally-recognized timber man, and Peter Sinclair, editor of the Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture Newsletter, were kind enough to visit our farm to help us to identify and date the barns on the property. It turns out that the oldest barn on the farm was originally of a Dutch design, one of ten Dutch barns

registered by Mr. Sinclair in Red Hook. Markings, used in pre-revolutionary times, show where structural beams were married. This barn had bays for housing horses and cows, and a center section for storing a hay wagon. At some point the barn was enlarged, the roof was raised and it was moved over a full basement to handle the later orchard. The second oldest barn on the property is an English side-entrance barn with a two-story carriage house.

Our research continues side-by-side with a search for ways to keep up these magnificent barns. Next on the list is learning more about the 18th century stone summer kitchen that houses a bee hive oven.

Recently we have been receiving requests from people asking if they could get married on our land or in one of our barns. The apple orchard that we had pulled up in hopes of corn being planted there has become a lovely rolling meadow. While we never thought of weddings as providing means towards repairing and sustaining these structures, the fact is that we do not have enough acreage to sustain the barns through farming. When you think about it, these days with the change in land usage, we need to be creative in finding a new purpose for the barns so that they can be maintained. We do not yet have the answer. But if having weddings or family gatherings in these lovely spaces could help, then we are open minded. What a wonderful way to provide a source of revenue to sustain these noble structures.

Ed. Note: Finding viable ways to preserve historically important farm buildings after their agricultural use has ended is a challenge closely tied to the preservation of the rural landscape of Red Hook. Anyone who has ever paid to have a house painted can appreciate the expense involved in painting an enormous barn, or repairing its aging roof. And yet barns, silos, sheds and other agricultural buildings are all important symbols of the once most important economic activity of the community.

NOMINATIONS REQUESTED FOR HERITAGE AWARDS

Now is the time to honor those individuals or projects that you have observed and admired in our community. Each year the Historical Society solicits nominations of significant contributions to the historic heritage of the Town of Red Hook. Nominations may be made in one or more of the following categories:

- **Written or Recorded:** typed or published texts; taped photographic or audiovisual material; documents or research work.
- **Architectural:** historic restorations, preservation or design applications, which reflect or enhance the vintage rural character of the Town.
- **Artistic:** artwork, artifacts or replicas, in any media or material, which depict, typify or enlarge comprehension of the past.
- **Environmental:** site works that conserve, restore or beautify settings reminiscent of the areas past.

Nominations may be made in each of these two categories:

- **Senior:** an individual or group over the age of 21;
- **Junior:** an individual or group under the age of 21.

Nominations must be received by June 10th. Mail to the Egbert Benson Historical Society of Red Hook, Box 397, Red Hook, NY 12571-0397. Please include the following:

- Award category;
- Identification of the nominee by name, title or location;
- Your name, address and telephone number in case we need more information.

An objective Heritage Awards Committee will evaluate nominations received by the due date. Winners will be notified and a formal presentation made at the Annual Dinner Meeting on June 17th. Awards include a complimentary membership, award certificate and complimentary dinner. For more information, call 758-2923.