

Growing Places: The History Of The Garden Clubs Of Red Hook, New York

By Nancy Bendiner, April 2, 2022

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Flowers, trees, and plants can offer visual delight and remove us from our worries. No doubt the ladies who founded and continued the garden clubs of Red Hook felt this inspiration and aimed to make our world a better place. So doing, these women help us learn about their times.

A Seed is Planted

The Red Hook Hotel saw the launch on March 9, 1942, of the Red Hook Garden Club, with Mrs. Merrick C. Phillips as its first president. On that day, the Red Hook “Business Men’s Association” committee provided entertainment. Some of the surnames of the first members are recognized today in the Red Hook community: Kerley, Cookingham, Tremper, and Hart.

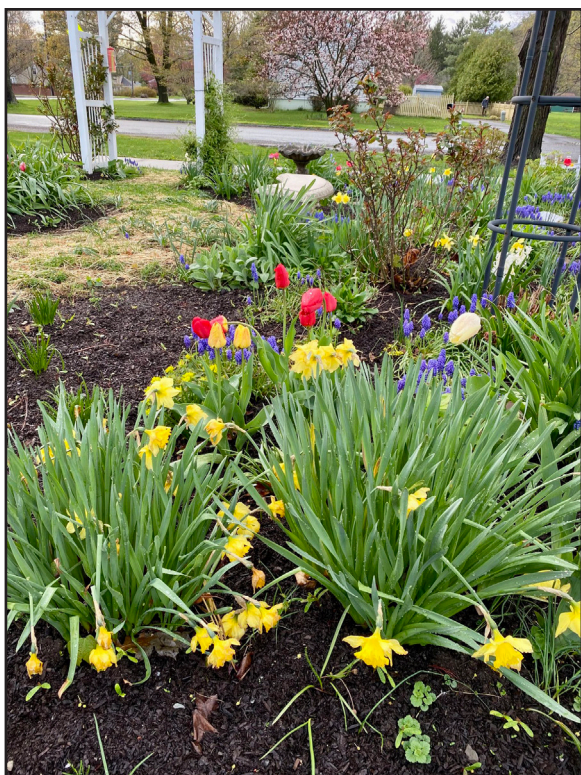
More than ten years later, on September 30, 1953, a second garden club in Red Hook was launched: the Dutch Village Garden Club. The founder, Mrs. Herman Mandell (formerly Viola Teator), greeted 17 attendees at her home for the first meeting. In honor of the Dutch heritage of Red Hook, a Dutch motif was chosen, with the tulip as club flower. Charter members’ surnames included, among others, Bathrick, Boice, Fraleigh, Hart, Donerly, Coon, and Cole.

At least in print, references by the garden clubs to a married lady usually used “Mrs.” followed by her husband’s first name and surname. This practice continued for quite some time. Single women were allowed a first name of their own. By the 1980s, in Old Dutch Village Garden Club yearbooks, the first name of married ladies was sometimes added in parentheses at the end.

So far, I have found no references to garden clubs in Red Hook preceding 1942. Though the Federated Garden Clubs of New York was founded in 1924, there is no apparent evidence that there were formal gar-



The Memorial Garden today



The Memorial Garden today

den clubs in Red Hook during the following 18 years, though I am open to the possibility. There were previously nurseries in Red Hook, including that of Alexander Gilson, a 19th Century African American master gardener. Gardening history in Red Hook before the creation of formal clubs is an area that merits further research. Certainly there could have been informal gatherings of gardeners.

In February, 1956, the Dutch Village Garden Club voted to change its name to the Old Dutch Village Garden Club, though the reason is not clearly known. This garden club today sometimes uses the abbreviation ODVGC. By the 1980s, this club's objectives were listed in its yearbooks: "the advancement of home gardening, the stimulation of civic pride, the preservation of natural resources, and the protection of wild life," all of which continue as goals today.

A Who's Who of Members

When the garden clubs were founded, there was some overlap of membership between them and at least one other local club, The Historical Club of Upper Red Hook (sometimes referred to as the Red Hook Historical Society). At first briefly named the Monday Club, this club was founded in 1901 at St. John's Reformed Church of Upper Red Hook- initially to study the history of the church. Mary Jane Elmendorf (Mrs. Peter Potts) was its first president. In 1959, the names of at least six ladies were listed in the Old Dutch Village Garden Club yearbook who were also listed in the 1960-1961 yearbook of the Historical Club of Upper Red Hook.

In June 1946, a Rhinebeck Gazette article says that members of the "Historical Society of Upper Red Hook" and the Red Hook Garden Club heard Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt speak for two hours about the United Nations at a joint club meeting. In Roger Leonard's book, *Upper Red Hook: An American Crossroad*, Charlotte Bathrick recounted the plan for Mrs. Roosevelt to lecture in 1949 which "almost broke apart" the Historical Club. Due to her political affiliation, some of the ladies didn't want her to speak, and others did. She spoke.

Alice Colburn, lifelong Red Hook resident and past member of the Red Hook Garden Club, recently spoke with Linda Lawson, current Old Dutch Village Garden Club member, about the origins of the clubs. Ms. Colburn said that the Red Hook Garden Club included ladies mostly from the Village while the second club was possibly for the convenience of the ladies in Upper Red Hook. Sometimes the club was referred to in the press as the club of "Upper Red Hook." The Red Hook Garden Club eventually disbanded. Mrs. Colburn suggests reasons that the club ended: the women had difficulty holding meetings in the small spaces of their homes, the ladies were all getting older, and no one wanted to be president. She joined the newer garden club after the first one shut down. In 1987, there was an article in the local press that said the Red Hook Garden Club was helping with landscaping at the Town Hall of Red Hook, so it was still pre-

sumably in existence at that time, yet there are some reports that the club ended before then.

As far as I can determine, the families of the garden club members were all property owners. Where, by the way, were the men? A review of club yearbooks, press mentions, and memorabilia suggests that men weren't formal members of the garden clubs. Sometimes the clubs bestowed them with honorary membership. However, they were around in a helpful way. Recently, men are now taking the initiative to formally join.

Business groups of mainly or completely men worked with the garden clubs on many civic improvement ventures. Men served as speakers at meetings and assisted in garden projects with design, construction, and planting help. As remembered by Anita Sprague (Mrs. Judson Sprague) who is now 101 and joined the Old Dutch Village Garden Club in 1977, husbands often turned up at food events. In 2012, a number of men showed up for the renovation of the new Memorial Garden- including Chris Klose, who rototilled, as well as Bob Maleonskie, Bob Menti, Rich Lawson, Ken Anderson, Rick Rielly, and Dan Streib.

Joining the Club

Mrs. Sprague recently shared how she became a member. After submission of a letter about why she wanted to join the club and of three written recommendations, the entire club voted. Evelyn Anderson (Mrs. Kenneth Anderson), who joined in 1980, described her experience recently as well: after she was invited by a club officer, she was required to attend three meetings. At the third meeting, the club voted on her application, asking her to wait in a closet while they did so.

Though I have not heard of this requirement for the garden clubs in Red Hook, Wendy Wollerton reports that according to her grandmother Kathryn Tremper, aspiring members of the Millbrook Garden Club required that membership applicants pass a written test.

At the Red Hook Garden Club, only five members were "accepted" each year. Someone's resignation opened up a spot for a new member. The *Rhinebeck Gazette*, for example, mentioned that Mrs. Willard Klose and Mrs. Frank Moul, who headed a waiting list, were now "active members." If those resigning from the active list had been a member for three years, they could now join the "Associate" list of members who apparently were not so active as everyone else but still kept their names in the yearbook.

When I attended my first meeting of the Old Dutch Village Garden Club, it was at the suggestion of Pat Owens, a member since 2008, whose mother was my neighbor. I just showed up! I was a full-fledged member from day one!

Keeping Track

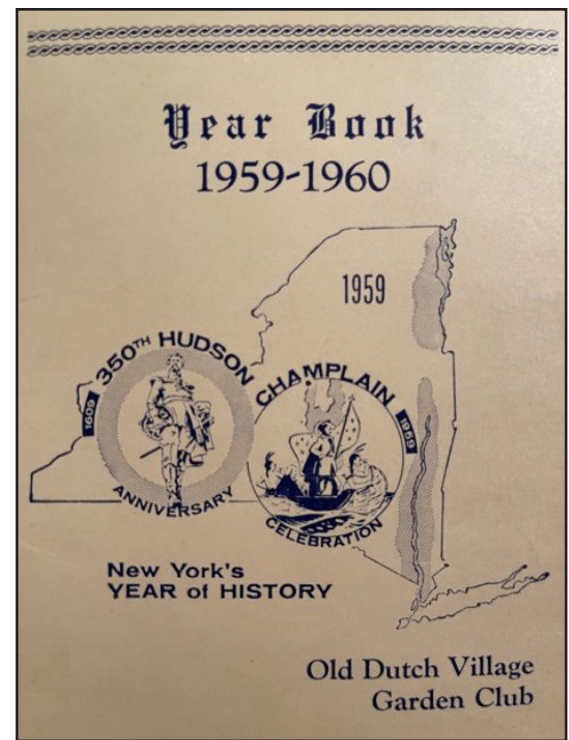
Up until today, the Old Dutch Village Garden Club yearbooks (distributed yearly to members) contain lists of the 26 Charter Members, 4 Honorary Memberships (as of 2021), and 12 names for a "Book of Recognition." Previous members are thus remembered. There is in fact a small plaque at the Memorial Garden: "In Honor of the 100th Birthday of Charlotte Bathrick- February 6, 2016."

Lists of members in these yearbooks suggest that garden club membership continued within some families for generations or within the same generation. The 1959-1960 yearbook lists three Bathricks-

Mrs. Arthur, Mrs. Arvine and Mrs Erwin Bathrick- and two Fraleighs- Miss Lena and Mrs. Irving Fraleigh.

Current garden club members with earlier family membership in Red Hook garden clubs include (but are not limited to): Wendy Wollerton, the granddaughter of Kathryn Tremper; Linda Lawson, a niece of Margie Griffin; and Cathy Michael, daughter-in-law of Mrs. Edith Redder Michael (Mrs. George Michael Sr.) who was also a member of the Historical Club of Upper Red Hook.

From the start, the executive structure for both clubs followed a similar pattern which essentially remains today -president (though more recently there were two co-presidents), vice president (sometimes two of them), treasurer, corresponding secretary, and recording secretary. Each club had committees: only seven in 1953, but 18 in 1960! Currently, the Old Dutch Village Garden Club has six. Some of the past committees that no longer exist include Hospitality, Advising, Membership, Flower Show, Parliamentarian, Bird, Junior Gardeners and Therapy.



Old Dutch Village Garden Club yearbook, 1959-1960

Meeting for Meetings

“Indirect therapy” referred, I believe, to projects to help “shut-in’s”- those who were bed bound or homebound. For example, Meals on Wheels, nursing homes, and Northern Dutchess Hospital sometimes received trays decorated with tray favors made by the Red Hook Garden Club.

Both Alice Colburn and Margie Griffin suggest that the meetings were very formal. Photographs in fact often show members in dressed-up attire, and great attention was often given to place settings at meals. Through at least the 1970’s, meetings were started with the Lord’s Prayer. They currently start with the Pledge of Allegiance.

For many years, meetings were usually held at members’ homes. More unusual meetings were also held: in 1969, members were urged to “bring your swimsuits” to the meeting at Mrs. Chapman’s house, where there was also a “horticulture” exchange. One member of the Red Hook Garden Club with whom I spoke, who asks to remain anonymous, joined when she was a young mother with small children at home. She wanted to learn how to garden but she feels the club centered on social events. “They went to everybody’s house, and I felt they wanted a house tour,” so she eventually resigned. Margie Griffin remembers that her mother Evelyn Hefferman needed to borrow a tea set for a meeting because she didn’t have one. Meetings were often longer than they are today, and sometimes involved an entire day: a workshop or flower project in the morning, followed by lunch (sometimes a bag lunch), then a business meeting.

Abloom with Learning Opportunities

Many of the lecture topics at meetings would be familiar to present-day members such as flower

arrangements and how to grow roses. Local residents sometimes gave talks relevant to Red Hook interests. Albert Cole, who “operated a 140-acre fruit farm in Upper Red Hook,” spoke in 1960 to the Red Hook Garden Club on “A Local Specialty, Apples.” There were a few presentations though on “table settings” through the 1990s which were not common in later years. There is an extensive account of lecture topics in press articles of the times, especially the 1960s.

Through the Years

Yearly themes were often chosen which directed a club’s agenda. In 1959-1960, the theme at the Old Dutch Village Garden Club was “Our Hudson River Heritage.” Among the lecture topics were local soil problems, conservation of our natural resources and of wild plant life. In 1980, the theme was “Peace, Faith and Hope Through Nature.” In 1989, a speaker on the environment focused on “Mid Hudson at Risk,” though there was no theme listed for that year.

There were also workshop and trip events. Yearbooks of the Old Dutch Village Garden Club indicate that some years there were more events than lectures. In 1993-1994, for example, all the meetings but one involved member participation, such as a visit to the Vanderbilt Estate, work at the Dutchess County Fair, a flower show at the church, a workshop to prepare for the Holiday Greens Show (to be held at the Elmen-dorph Inn), and the preparation of May baskets. The rest of the calendar included the annual Anniversary Luncheon with hat show, the Christmas luncheon, and the annual plant sale.

When the need arose for a venue larger than a home, common locations included Grange Hall, local schools, the Red Hook Public Library, St. John’s Dutch Reformed Church (where regular meetings were also held), and the Elmdorph Inn- which hosted a number of teas, meetings, shows, and meals. A picnic and auction became an annual event, which for about 20 years have mainly been located at Clermont State Park.

Evelyn Anderson Remembers

Evelyn Anderson recalls that when she joined, about a third of the members in the Old Dutch Village Garden Club were the wives of farmers, and they already had some gardening experience. It sounds as though some in the club were critical of those who lacked this experience. She adds” “this was a small town, back in the ’70s and ’80s.”

In 1990 Mrs. Anderson was elected president of the club, along with Mrs. Arvine Bathrick as treasurer. The club, Anderson says, offered opportunities to learn through outside experts who came to lecture and flower arrangement demonstrations which would receive critiques from senior members. People also brought in things from their own gardens. “Someone would demonstrate, and then you would make it.”

According to Mrs. Anderson, some ladies such as Ruth Landauer were members of both garden clubs in Red Hook. She particularly remembers a Ruth Landauer piece of advice: “When in doubt, leave it out.”

There were many ways to be involved beyond meetings. One of these was flower show participation.



1995 Anniversary Luncheon

There were flower shows given by a garden club in Red Hook, other garden clubs, and by the Federated Garden Clubs of New York State, among others. There is vast documentation in newspaper articles of every ribbon and prize won by each garden club, and of every event.

A garden club member who has been involved in flower shows elsewhere in the Hudson Valley says that for the amount of work involved, in her experience the attendance at such shows does not merit all the work involved in preparing them. She feels, however, that there is still good interest in garden exhibits at the County Fair.



1999 Community Tea Party at the Elmendorph Inn

The example of the 1954 Red Hook Garden Club Fall Flower Show demonstrates the level of work which went into such shows, as well as their intricacy. This show included 16 categories under “Arrangement” classes as well as a junior section, a table setting section, and a horticulture section with 32 categories focused on various flowers, such as the category: dahlia, miniature, 3 blooms. A table setting winner was “Sunday Brunch Al Fresco.” Sometimes, there were entries that would seem archaic today, such as at the same club’s flower show in 1947 with the entry “composition in an ink well or ink bottle.”

Awards from shows organized by the Federated Garden Clubs of New York were highly valued and both garden clubs in Red Hook joined this organization, which has a national tier. The Federation “elected” clubs to membership and organized the New York clubs by districts made up of counties. In the 1950’s, there were 50 garden clubs in the state’s third district made up of eight counties including Dutchess. In 1990, the Old Dutch Village Garden Club broke away. The Publicity Chairwoman, Mrs. Alexander, said that the national organization was “too structured and too competitive for the wants and needs of a local club.”

In the 1950s, in fact, affiliations of the Old Dutch Village Garden Club included as well the National Council of State Garden Clubs, the Third District Federated Garden Clubs of New York State, and The Hudson River Conservation Study. In later years, the Central Atlantic Region of Garden Clubs was added. The club has chosen to no longer hold these affiliations.

Busy Bees Sharing Beauty

It is fairly clear that a garden club member would be kept very busy especially if she were a member of more than one club! In many yearbooks of the Old Dutch Village Garden Club through the 1990s, there was a statement that said “each member will take an active part in a club project” and the projects for that

year were then listed.

Garden Clubs collaborated, sometimes by attending each other's meetings (by invitation), sometimes by involvement in the same activities. In 1955, 32 members of the Old Dutch Village Garden Club, Red Hook Garden Club, and Rhinebeck Garden Club took a trip to the Women's International Exposition at the Armory in New York City. In 1959, both garden clubs in Red Hook created a Tour of Historic Homes on the Hudson which included Rokeby, Montgomery Place, Callendar House, and Ward Manor.

Starting in the 1940s, the garden clubs and other Red Hook groups came together to help the community. Over the years, the Red Hook Garden Club was invited to arrange table decorations for commencement events at Bard College and for graduations at Red Hook Central Schools. At a school cafeteria in 1959, the club donated 90 ornamental shrubs to the first 90 people who showed up. That same year, the club hosted a Homeowners Spring Forum and a service to counsel homeowners about "lawn care, landscaping, home grounds improvement and foundation planting." The garden clubs planted trees throughout the community including at the schools.

The Old Dutch Village Garden Club continues to support the beautification of Red Hook, most recently with the Garden of the Month initiative chaired by Carol Annas. One business and one residential Red Hook garden are honored yearly for excellence. In addition, in 2021, club members created the Four Corners decorations for Hardscrabble Day- an event at which they have also occasionally set up a table. The club is now working with the high school on a landscape project.

Red Hook garden clubs also reached out to schools and children in other ways. In 1960, for example, the Old Dutch Village Garden Club brought together a group of children under age 11 to teach them the basic rules of flower arranging. This group contributed arrangements for a meeting and for a flower show. There was also the popular May Basket contest for first, second and third graders. In 1974, there were 349 baskets created by the children.

Garden club donations went to many causes over the years. Some organizations that received them include The World Gardening Program of the National Council of State Garden Clubs (which assisted children in many ways), the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island Commission, the American Land Trust, and the Friends of Clermont and, in 2009, the Red Hook Parent Teacher Student Association for the Post Prom Party.



Past awards and memorabilia

Raising Money

Many of the collaborations and also club projects have been fund raisers. An annual plant sale, started by the Red Hook Garden Club in the 1940's, has been continued as a May tradition by the Old Dutch Vil-

lage Garden Club. The first sales were held at the Red Hook Hotel, on the porch, sometimes coupled with a bake sale. In 1945, the sale earned \$34.00. At times, there was a “white elephant” table. In recent years, the May plant sale has been held at the Memorial Garden.

One example of a fund raising event was the benefit held at “Sylvania,” the Barrytown estate of Mr. and Mrs. Chanler Chapman, on June 30, 1963. This was a tea sponsored by The Red Hook Garden Club, of which Mrs. Chapman was a member, and the Old Dutch Village Garden Club. Proceeds went toward planting at the Northern Dutchess Hospital.

In the 1970s, there were luncheon/fashion shows, part of a drive to raise funds for the Civic Improvement and Scholarship programs of the Red Hook Garden Club. This program often received contributions from local businesses. Garden club members served as fashion models with their outfits donated by local stores.

Both garden clubs contributed funds to a scholarship for a graduating high school senior interested in conservation or environmental science, and the Old Dutch Garden Club continues this tradition.

Mona Matthies, a member of Old Dutch Village Garden Club since 2008, and Connie Barresi, a member since 2002, met with me recently. Mona had collaborated with Anita Sprague to make a list of how the club kept busy in 1980s and 1990s, the first years after Anita became a member. The group assisted in the landscape of local schools, entered arrangements at the Dutchess County Fair, sold calendars, planted at the Red Hook Post Office, made and sold Christmas wreaths, maintained a shelf at the Red Hook Library, held an annual club flower show, made gifts and favors for nursing homes, and held the annual plant sale. By 2002, Mona and Connie said that only school landscaping and the plant sale from this list remained as club projects. Today, however, flower arrangements are prepared to give to nursing homes.

Flower Gardens for Red Hook’s Citizens

A special interest of the Old Dutch Village Garden club has been the landscaping and garden maintenance at the intersection of Route 9 and Spring Lake Road in Upper Red Hook, where the club has also placed a sign.

The story of the Memorial Garden is also part of the history of the Veteran’s Memorial and park on the strip of land between Old Post Road and Broadway. According to an article in the Gazette Advertiser, the park property was deeded in 1942 to Red Hook Village by the late Oakleigh Cookingham, his wife Clara, and son Oakleigh Jr. The project at the time was a cooperation between the Village board, Mayor Rider, and the Red Hook Garden Club. Starting in 1944, the club landscaped, planted and maintained the park. Today there is a plaque identifying the park: “Village of Red Hook Municipal Park, the Gift of O.T. Cookingham and Family, April 10, 1942.” There was also a period later where the club helped care for the Richard M. Abrahams Memorial Park on Park Avenue in the village of Red Hook.

Roger Hoffman, long-time Red Hook resident, recently explained that the road along the land that became the park area changed in the 1920s. Old Post Road was no longer the main thoroughfare at that location and Route 9 was constructed there to make a straighter road. The land became an island surrounded by road. He remembers there were plantings surrounding the original wooden veterans’ monument in the park area. In the 1960s, Harold Fell spearheaded an effort to redesign it and the Memorial. Old Dutch Village Garden Club later gave him an honorary membership.

A garden just north of the Veterans Memorial was started about 1999 by Arlene Sweeney. That is the first year I was able to find mention of that garden, which someone had written by hand in the yearbook as a new “continuing project.” According to Carol Annas, the original garden area there consisted mainly of hostas. Linda Lawson adds that this planted area had deteriorated by 2012, when she headed a committee of Old Dutch Garden Club volunteers to dig up and redesign a new garden, named the Memorial Garden. Throughout the year, the members of Old Dutch Village Garden Club continue to maintain the garden and attend to its seasonal needs. Red Hook residents are encouraged to sit on the benches and enjoy the interesting and peaceful space.

Members of the Red Hook garden clubs of the past lived in a world that, in many ways, exists no more. Life became more streamlined; many women returned to work without the time to engage in tea parties with hand-painted place cards, monthly evening dinners and day-long garden club agendas. More volunteer and work opportunities opened.



Starting the Memorial Garden in 2012

Present and Future

Communications have in recent years been transformed. Local newspapers on which the garden clubs depended are today but one way the community can learn about events and trends. The Old Dutch Village Garden Club has in recent times used Facebook and online newspapers such as Red Hook’s *Daily Catch* to report club doings.

Will the current easing of pandemic concerns inspire interest in attending garden-related events? Will the ability of some to work more from home inspire more attention to the beauty of one’s yard? What

place can garden clubs take as, again, time moves forward? How can garden clubs help to create a more environmentally sustainable world?

In the Spring of 1998, Doreen Alexander's article "Spring Promise" ended with these thoughts: "There is pleasure, satisfaction, and good health to be gained by growing plants, or even just looking at them, so visit, be inspired and maybe start a garden– or join a garden club and be with others who share your interests!! We would love to have your company!"

Nancy Bendiner is a member of Historic Red Hook's Collections Committee. For the Old Dutch Village Garden Club she is a past Co-President, past Vice President, and current Recording Secretary.

Thank you to the following: Two people who want to remain anonymous, plus Anita Sprague, Evelyn Anderson, Linda Lawson, Carlene Baright, Mona Matthies, Alice Colburn, Margie Griffin, Connie Barresi, Carol Annas, Kayla Bell, Wendy Wollerton, Cathy Michael, Roger Hoffman, Pat Owens, Claudine Klose, and the archives of Historic Red Hook and of the Old Dutch Village Garden Club

Further information about the garden clubs of Red Hook (including prizes won and meeting and event details) can be found on the site fultonhistory.com, at the Historic Red Hook digital newspaper archives accessible through news.hrvh.org, and through newspapers.com.

Additional Sources: the *Red Hook Advertiser*, the *Rhinebeck Gazette* and the *Red Hook Times* (section of the *Rhinebeck Gazette*), the *Gazette Advertiser*, *Poughkeepsie Journal*, and *Upper Red Hook-An American Crossroad* by Roger M. Leonard



Memorial Garden today