

Lafayette and Massena

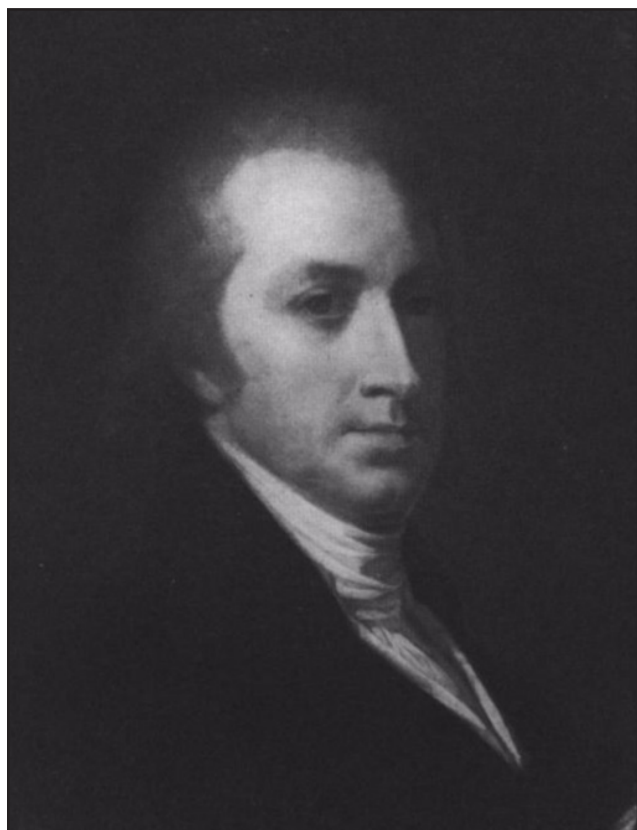
By Wint Aldrich, HRH member and former Town of Red Hook historian, December 17, 2024

During Historic Red Hook's 2024 Annual Meeting, Aldrich gave a talk about the Marquis de Lafayette and the historic Massena Estate, transcribed below.

Good to be back again in this great room! Thank you for the introduction, and thank you, too, to Elisabeth for organizing the images and their projection, and to our friend and county colleague Bill Jeffway, who has led the effort to document Lafayette's visit to our neighborhood and celebrate its bicentennial, to include reminding us of the naming of Lafayetteville, LaGrange and individuals who were named in his honor. I myself descend from a Vermont farm boy born just after the Revolution and named Marquis de Lafayette Hooker—known to friends and family as Marcus.

John R. Livingston was one of the nine siblings of Chancellor Robert Livingston, of Mrs. General Montgomery, of Mrs. General Armstrong, of Mrs. General Lewis and of Edward Livingston. All figured in Lafayette's visit. During the Revolution, John served as a major in the Livingston Manor militia regiment but was more important as a purchasing agent for the Congress and as a manufacturer of cannon and gunpowder for the Continental army.

Here are portraits of him and his second wife Eliza painted by Vanderlyn in 1802, now in the Senate House Museum (note that Eliza requested a double image, by use of a mirror).



John R. Livingston



Eliza McEvers Livingston



*John R.
Livingston
by Sharples
made in
1797.*

Following the Revolution, Livingston became an active purchaser from the State of New York of properties in Manhattan formerly owned by loyalists who had fled; but unlike many others who speculated in these assets and flipped them, John held onto his properties for the rest of his very long life, receiving ground rents and growth in value on some, letting others build up with dwellings and businesses on the parcels. As a result, he became the richest of the Livingstons in his generation. Here is an engraved view from “Mount Pitt”, his hill-top mansion in the City.



Fig. 12. Saint-Mémin, *View of the City and Harbour of New York* (13)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Saint-Mémin – View of City and Harbor

The property known as Massena, which encompassed both the north and south sides of Barrytown –that is, both the Unification Seminary and the Jenrette/Lerrick properties—was purchased by Major Livingston from a cousin in the mid-1790's, after which he commenced building his great house. He named the place Massena in honor of one of Napoleon's marshals – the victor of a 1797 battle in Italy (why he did this is unknown). Said to resemble the palace of Beaumarchais in Paris, the house presented as one of its remarkable features a domed polygonal tower said to have been constructed in part of glass and cast or wrought iron, the work of Marc Brunel, a civil engineer who had briefly sought refuge in Manhattan from the French Revolution's Terror and was celebrated for designing with iron a fireproof theater in New York City.

Here are drawings of a much later date showing the gatehouse (which survives) and two views of the main house, one showing the tower.



About 1820, John gave the south portion of this property to his daughter Margaret Brown and built on it Edgewater, shown here:



Edgewater – west side

In 1812, Livingston's friend Washington Irving came for a visit and was inspired by the commanding view of the Catskills from Massena to write one of the most celebrated opening paragraphs in an American short story "Rip Van Winkle".

"Whoever has made a voyage up the Hudson must remember the Kaatskill mountains. They are a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family, and are seen away to the west of the river, swelling up to a noble height, and lording it over the surrounding country. Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains, and they are regarded by all the good wives, far and near, as perfect barometers. When the weather is fair and settled, they are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky; but sometimes, when the rest of the landscape is cloudless, they will gather a hood of gray vapors about their summits, which, in the last rays of the setting sun, will glow and light up like a crown of glory."

And then in 1824, Lafayette dropped in for a brief visit. Here is the great man painted that year in Manhattan by Samuel F. B. Morse – a huge portrait that has dominated City Hall ever since.

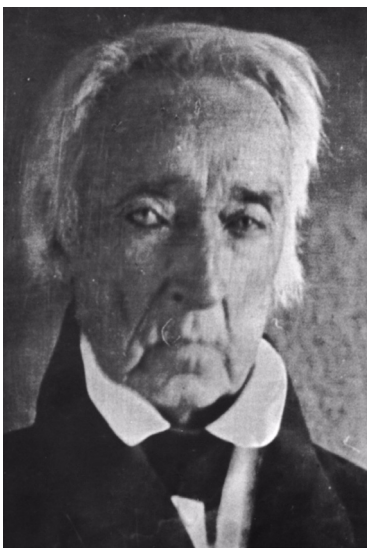
On September 16, Lafayette had visited General Lewis at Staatsburgh and then had attended an evening ball and dinner put on by the Livingstons at Clermont, where the guest of honor spent the night. Following a visit to Albany and Troy, on the morning of September 19, the steamboat Chancellor Kent brought him to the Massena dock at Lower Red Hook Landing (the name Barrytown came a few years later), and Lafayette was driven up the hill to see Major Livingston and thence accompany him to Montgomery Place to see the widow Montgomery. Lafayette had known Major Livingston and his beautiful fiancée Margaret Sheaffe when they were all in Boston early in the war and after the British evacuation of that city. The young Frenchman is said to have remarked to Livingston, “Were I not a married man I would try to cut you out.” John and Margaret did marry, and after Lafayette’s return to France, he sent Margaret a satin cloak lined with ermine and a silk undergarment.



Marquis de Lafayette

However, by 1824 both of Major Livingston’s wives had died. At Montgomery Place, others also gathered – among them Edward Livingston and Generals Armstrong and Lewis – and strolls were taken to admire the Cascades and the Sawkill. And then it was back on board the steamboat and the journey southward. The hero’s visit to Red Hook was over.

But there is more to the story of Massena. In 1844, Mathew Brady, on his way up the river to Kinderhook to photograph Martin Van Buren, stepped off a steamboat at Barrytown and walked up the hill to obtain



John R. Livingston

permission to make a daguerreotype of the last surviving veteran of the Revolution. Here it is: Major Livingston at age 89, one eye gone with cataract, the other staring right through the camera’s lens and a million miles beyond.

Following Livingston’s death at 96 in 1851 (the year the Hudson River Railroad began service at Barrytown), Massena was sold to a Mr. Dwight and remodeled a bit by an English-born architect Gervase Wheeler; and then about 1860 it was sold to John Lloyd Aspinwall, who had just retired from the hugely successful trans-oceanic maritime shipping business Howland & Aspinwall, when his brother had extended to building a railroad across the isthmus of Panama with connecting maritime service on each ocean, thus greatly facilitating access to the California gold fields. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Aspinwall, and images of the enlargements they brought to the house at Massena.



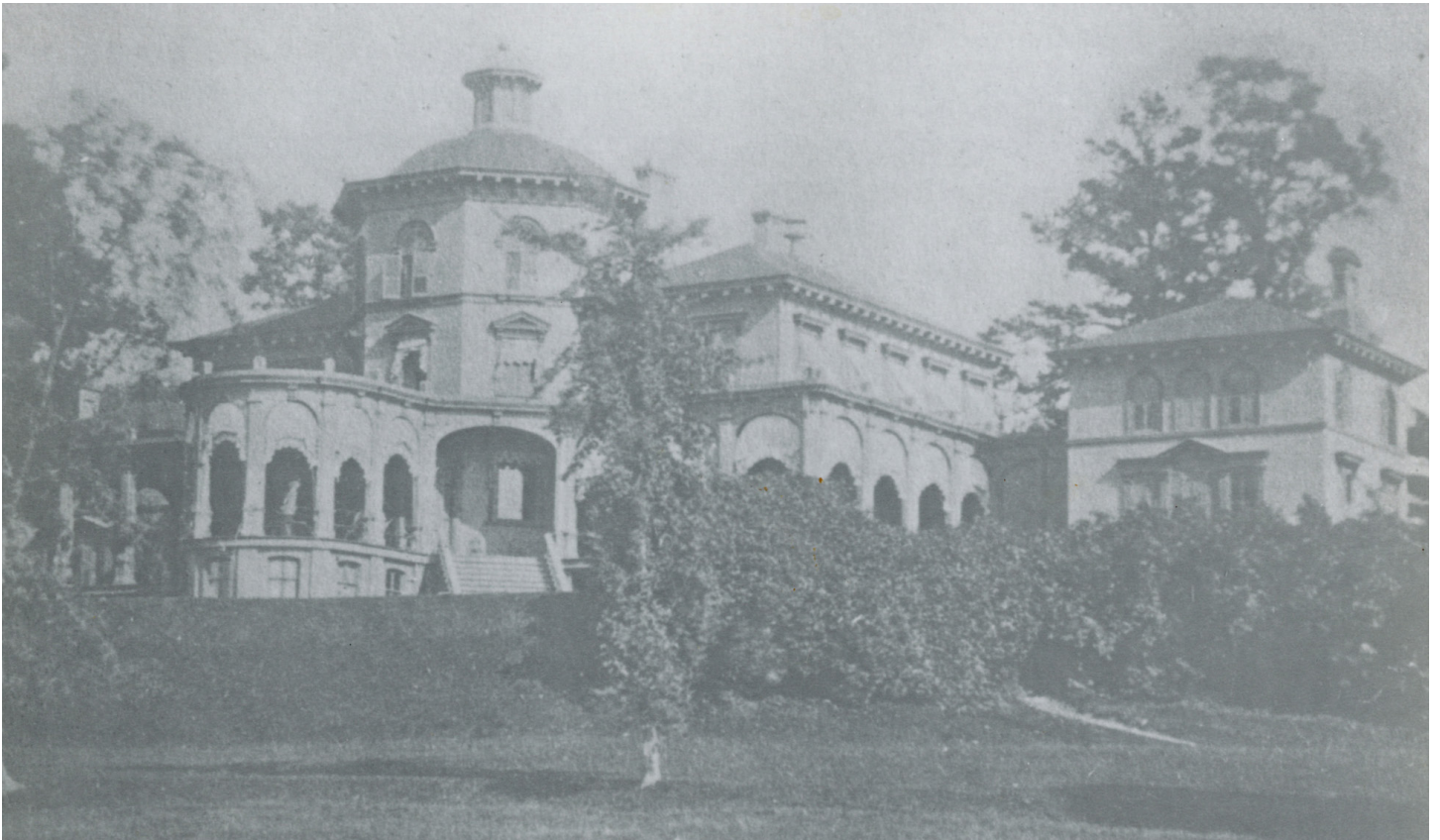
Jane and John L. Aspinwall



Massena after Aspinwall enlargements



Massena after Aspinwall enlargements



Massena after Aspinwall enlargements

The glass tower room was a “fernery”, used only for the growing and displaying of various species of ferns. In 1885, the house burned to the ground and was replaced by this very different structure, which still stands.



Massena redesigned and rebuilt

Here also are late 19th century interior images.



Interior of Massena

The new structure was designed by the brothers Potter, whose firm was also retained by Mrs. Aspinwall to design the Church of St. John the Evangelist in Barrytown as a memorial to her husband; a house for her daughter Helen Shober, known as "The Oaks" and recently owned by Dr. Verrilli [and now by Nina Clemente]; All Saint's Chapel in Upper Red Hook, a project for her Episcopal seminarian son-in-law [Francis] Shober; and "Pinehurst", a Queen Anne style house for her son John, overlooking Tivoli South Bay. Pinehurst was destroyed by fire about 30 years ago.

During the summer of 1869, the Aspinwalls went to Europe, and Massena was rented out to their friends the Theodore Roosevelts, who were eager to escape Manhattan's heat. It was then that ten-year old Teddy began a diary, now enshrined at Harvard, recording his joy at being on his own in the out-of-doors: bird watching, investigating creatures in the woods, streams and wetlands, and exploring Cruger's Island and the Tivoli bays. It was here in Red Hook that saw the origins of our greatest conservationist President. But the heat and humidity of our August climate proved too much for his parents, and subsequently they escaped to Oyster Bay on Long Island's north shore. Had it not been so, Dutchess County might have been able to claim two Presidents named Roosevelt.



Theodore Roosevelt at age ten

We will leave to another day an account of the later history of Massena. Suffice it to say here how wonderful it is that due to cooperation between the Town of Red Hook, Bard College and Scenic Hudson, that property's open space will be preserved (here we are iceboating on the South Bay several years ago) and that the town will own 50 acres as well as Major Livingston's old gate house.

However, I will share with you one final Lafayette connection. About 30 years ago, we learned that the State highway folks intended to improve the River Road/Barrytown Road intersection, an operation that would entail removing a large, healthy horse chestnut tree growing immediately to the west and hard by the house at the corner. A community meeting was summoned to the intersection, with the State DOT in attendance.



Iceboating on South Tivoli Bay

As Town Historian, I held forth on the sanctity of what I called the Lafayette Horse Chestnut, which I confidently asserted had been standing tall and offering shade when the great man passed beneath it on September 19, 1824, on his way from Massena to Montgomery Place—a tree which as a seedling had likely been brought from Paris by one or another of the traveling Livingstons.. There wasn't a dry eye in the gathering, and the tree was spared by the State. The reach of Lafayette's influence was a long one. But alas, in the years since, the tree died and is now gone. Thank you.