



Egbert Benson HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RED HOOK

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

FALL 2001

FROM THE INTERNET TO THE DISTANT PAST

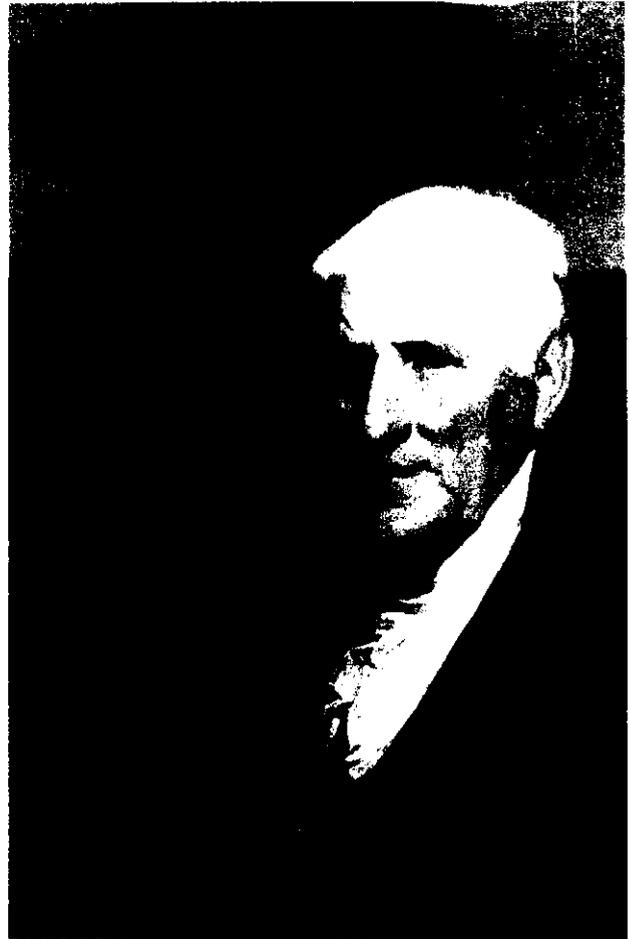
Where is the Cholwell farm?

This was my first question after receiving an e-mail with the subject heading: "Cholwell Farm" sent to my web site, www.jane-knobloch.com from Virginia Close Bacon, a Realtor in California. After reading further, I learned that this was not a farm currently on the market for sale, but instead was a Red Hook farm most likely purchased by one Jacob Cholwell on 1 February 1817.

Ms. Bacon was inquiring not as a Realtor, but as a descendent of the Cholwell family, whose research led her to Red Hook and my website. Cholwell descendants in California and Connecticut have been researching their roots. With information found in the archives of the Egbert Benson Historical Society and answers to questions posed to current Red Hook residents, we were able to tell them something about their family patriarch, Jacob Cholwell, and his farm in Red Hook.

A description of the farm in family records states that "the farm was about 200 acres and was beautifully situated with a fine view eastward towards the Old Post Road. There was also about 20 acres of woodland which the farm abutted." Other records reveal that Cholwell family members continued to visit the farm until 1893.

After looking at the 1867 map in my office, it was easy to pinpoint the farm's location. As shown on the map, G. Cholwell (Gustavus, son of Jacob Cholwell
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This copy of a picture of the 74-year old Egbert Benson, painted by Gilbert Stuart seven years before the great patriot died, was given to the Historical Society of Red Hook by John Gordon III, who lectured at the October public meeting.

EGBERT BENSON, MAN OF LAW

Egbert Benson, after whom our historical society is named, became a little more familiar to us last month, as we welcomed John D. Gordon III to our public meeting at the Elmendorph Inn.

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Cholwell...

and his 3rd wife, Mary Lyle) was living in the house at the time. The house is now owned by John and Bernadette Reilly and is located at 179 Benner Road. It was formerly the farm of the late Charles and Mary Hoffman.

A phone call to Roger Hoffman revealed that Gustavus (or his heirs) sold to someone named Trenholm, who sold to Robert Chanler, who sold to Roger's parents. A news item in the April 24, 1903 issue of the *Red Hook Journal*, as found by Maynard Ham, reports "The Cholwell farm was purchased by Robert Chanler, 219 acres, for \$6500." [Editors note: As the Chanler farm, the property was the site of Chanler Park, along Route 9, which in the early 1900s hosted public baseball games, horse races, community celebrations and firemen's parades.]

Further correspondence from Cholwell descendants informs us that Jacob Cholwell was born in 1765 in New Jersey and died 12 July 1835 in Red Hook. In 1803/04 he went to New York City where he became a wealthy man through a contract he had with the City of New York from 1805-1809, to light the city street lamps with sperm oil. This contract reportedly earned him more than \$84,000.

It is likely that Jacob moved his family to Red Hook between 1817 and 1819. Research is ongoing to determine exactly when they arrived in Dutchess County. In a letter to his brother, Lyle Bacon, dated 24 September, 1933, Knox Bacon, a relative of the Cholwells, wrote, "In 1819 the family moved from Bound Brook (New Jersey) to Red Hook. I do not know how near water Bound Brook may be, but the move was made by sloop to Barrytown landing or to Rhinebeck landing, these places being near one another. The family, household goods, stock and colored help was loaded on the sloop and sailed up the Hudson River to the landing about 100 miles north. The colored help, 2 or 3, had previous been slaves who were then freed and continued to live with their former masters."

Early 19th century maps show that there were once two homes on the farm. From Susan Hoffman Ellis we learn that there was another house located at the

northwest intersection of Rokeby and Benner roads, right where the maps indicate. She remembered that as a child she was aware of a well at this site, but no signs of a former dwelling.

An unexpected meeting in front of the Post Office yielded more information. A local attorney lives in a home situated on what was once part of the Cholwell farm. When asked if he had ever heard the name "Cholwell" he responded: "right over my back line is their small family grave yard." On a damp and dreary Sunday afternoon, four of us set out in Maynard Ham's pickup truck to locate the burial site fairly near the old winding farm road. Two Cholwell headstones (broken and lying flat on the ground) were found, as was the piece of another stone with the inscription too worn to be discerned. There is also an unmarked, sunken grave. The site, now wooded and neglected, is a reminder that Cholwells once lived and died in the farmhouse just uphill from the cemetery. There are more Cholwell family members buried in St. Paul's Cemetery and at St. Peters [Old Stone Church] Cemetery a few miles south.

Now, as the last remaining portion of the Cholwell farm is about to be subdivided into building lots, Jacob's farm is gone. Businesses line his frontage on the Post Road (now Route 9) and the rest of his land is in residential use. A young family again occupies the farmhouse on Benner Road. Christmas trees have been planted on the 3-3/4 acre parcel, which contains the old Cholwell homestead, thereby continuing a tiny portion of the property in its original agricultural use.

The Reillys are interested in history and are looking for clues into the home's past. Their enthusiasm and excitement are evident as new discoveries arise. A three-chamber chimney has been found, and by taking down some sheetrock, a double fireplace with hooks for hanging cooking pots has been discovered. Recently, the original 15-foot deep, hand-dug well of laid-up stone was unexpectedly uncovered. Future plans include converting the currently two-family house back to its original single-family use, and returning the back door access to its original front door status. The Reilly family is now taking its place in the history of Red Hook. I believe that Jacob
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Cholwell...

Cholwell and his son, Gustavus, would be pleased to know that their farmhouse endures under the care of a new generation.



The Cholwell homestead, above, located on Benner Road southwest of the Red Hook Village, was built in the 19th century. It was later owned by Robert Chanler, then by the Charles Hoffman family in the 20th century.

This journey into the past and the discovery of information on one of Red Hook's early families has been a fascinating experience for me. I have long been interested in local history and when inside old homes, have often said to myself, "if only these walls could talk!"

However, without my website, which was designed by graphic artist and Upper Red Hook resident Richard Wambach, the California researcher might not have been inspired to make her initial inquiry, and the Cholwell family would have quietly remained solely as data on an old census page.

Jane Knobloch

Egbert Benson... con't from pg.1

The New York attorney, a trustee of the Supreme Court Historical Society, is an authority on Egbert Benson. He was welcomed by the eager crowd at the Inn, and, standing beneath the portrait of Benson in the south room, soon warmed to his subject on

Egbert Benson, Man of Law.

A biography of Egbert Benson, Gordon said, would be a chronicle of the early history of our country and state. During the course of his 25-year service to his fledgling country, Benson filled as many as three public offices at one time. He had served in every branch of the federal government, with the exception of the executive branch. His contribution, said Gordon, cannot be underestimated, though his fame has never been widespread.

He quoted Benson's student and colleague, the famous James Kent, who more than any other figure, admired and chronicled the career of the Patriot lawyer, who wrote of his mentor:

"This great and good man lived to survive all his contemporaries, and seems to have died almost unknown and forgotten by the profession which he once so greatly adorned."

Benson was a Patriot who was in charge of the local war effort in Dutchess County and the state's first Attorney General. As Red Hook's first state Assemblyman, then U.S. Representative from Dutchess and Westchester counties to the First and Second American Congress, he was responsible for development of much of early New York State law. He helped steer the adoption by New York State of our first United States Constitution and championed the all-important first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights.

Benson was just 25 years old, the son of an old New York Dutch family, when he came to set up a law practice in Red Hook in 1772, fresh from an apprenticeship in his native New York City. His relative, Tryntje Benson, had married into the Hoffman family in Tivoli. He had most likely visited her as a boy and young man, and become familiar with Red Hook. It is from the Hoffman home in Tivoli that he wrote to clients and conducted his practice, when he moved here just before the war.

It appeared he never really had time to settle down and establish himself in Red Hook, a situation that

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Egbert Benson...

concerned him, but not enough to prevent him from jumping wholeheartedly into the war effort when he was needed. There always seemed to be a shortage of money. He moved from New York to Red Hook because he thought New York too crowded with lawyers. But at one point before the war he was faced with the arrival of a wealthy and influential local son of a famous family – his classmate from King’s College, Robert Livingston - returning to practice law a few miles away near his parents’ large estate in Clermont. The situation greatly threatened Benson’s own hopes of establishing a successful practice. However, he was philosophical. He wrote from Red Hook to a friend in March of 1773:

“...was it not for one thing I should expect an Increase of Practice, but I have lately received a very disagreeable Piece of Intelligence, namely that Rob’t Livingston is coming to reside amongst Us. He is the most formidable Rival I could have and I dread both his Abilities and Connections. He has talked of this Matter for some time and proposed to take a part of his Father’s Farm lying within the Manor but the Judge has been treating about the Purchase of a Place for him in this County about a Mile from the Line. A word to the wise is sufficient. The situation in the Manor is the more eligible, but then it is not Dutchess County, and there is an Act against Non-resident Representatives. As this Matter evidently originates in Politics, I have in my Wrath wished all Politics to their father, the Devil -

I have never been properly fixed since I came into Practice. The Business I had in New York was so trifling, and the Numbers that daily entered into the Profession cutting off all hopes that it would receive the least Addition, made Me determine long-since to leave the City and the only Reason why I remained there so long as I did was because I saw no Opening elsewhere.

Here at least I thought myself happily settled and my Prospects were as favorable as I could reasonably desire, but this sad Circumstance interposing has been the Cause of some Uneasiness to Me – however I am determined since I am here that here I will remain while I can keep Soul and Body together always observing this Maxim to cut my Coat according to my Cloth.”

Benson spent the war years in Red Hook, extensively involved in the Revolutionary effort, helping to organize the first American resistance to the British. He served on the Committee for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies in the State of New York, and later, the Committee of Safety, working closely with his good friend John Jay. By the time he was 30 years

old, in 1777, he was appointed New York State’s first Attorney General. He represented Dutchess County in the first state Assembly, and in the first Confederation Congress. In his law practice he was involved in a great deal of real estate law, settling disputes over the borders of old patents, including Clermont, the Livingston estate, in which he represented tenants who claimed ownership of land in Hillsdale. Eventually he was involved with litigation establishing the border between Vermont and New York.

In the 1780s, Benson became more involved on the federal level. He represented New York with his friend Alexander Hamilton at the famous Annapolis Convention, which recommended the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. When it was drafted, Benson fought hard for its adoption by his home state, which was not an easy task. In 1794, he was appointed to the newly established position as the fifth Justice of the Supreme Court of the State of New York. He held the job for seven years. He was always referred to as Judge Benson after that.

His work on the Supreme Court, which from references made at the time by other jurists, was detailed and thorough, was not always published, Gordon said. Therefore much of his work is not attributable. His published decisions include rights in real property and foreign trade.

“Though a strict lawyer,” wrote his biographer James Kent, “he did not cease to penetrate the depths of the science, and rest himself upon fundamental principles. He was more distinguished than any man among us, Hamilton alone excepted, for going, in all researches, to the reasons and grounds of the law, and placing his opinion on what he deemed to be solid and elementary principles.”

One little known aspect of his work as a judge was in negotiations with the Indians. In 1796 he negotiated a treaty with the Seven Nations of Canada that relinquished their rights to any real property in the State except for a limited reservation of land. In 1797 in return for \$1,000 and \$100 travel expenses, the Mohawk similarly relinquished all of their rights to
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From the President's Desk....

NOV. 16, 2001

As the last incredibly golden leaves of this beautiful autumn finally blow free of the trees outside the windows of the Elmendorph Inn, I am, literally, reflecting on the coming year from the President's desk. Recently evacuated by long-time president, Barbara Bielenberg, I am just this summer beginning to get the feel of the seat. And as winter and the new year loom, I feel energized by the work of the society as it approaches its 25th anniversary.

Barbara has left the Society in very good shape. With our Archives Room and offices on the second floor of the Elmendorph, we have a good home. Our collections are growing under the management of Barbara Thompson, our archivist, and more and more students, scholars, history buffs, writers, geneologists and researchers are using our archives each month. Our monthly programs, held in the lovely south room of the Elmendorph on the fourth Tuesday evening of each month, continue to draw interested people, fulfilling the society's mandate to promote local history. The arrival this spring of our town's first published history, "A Brief History of the Town of Red Hook," published through the generosity of Red Hook resident Robert Wise, has given us an even stronger sense of purpose.

During our usual dormant period of July and August, we were busy distributing the new book, which has sold, along with its sister book, "A Brief History of Rhinebeck," by Nancy V. Kelly, over 4200 copies and is now in its second edition. For the first time in its history, the Society is saving a little money, and we are thrilled at the prospect. We plan to put that money right back into the community with a new, free Guide to the Villages of Red Hook and Tivoli. Building on a \$5,000 grant from Furthermore, a local, philanthropic trust, it will be published in the spring,

In the meantime, our work continues each week here at the Society Archives offices. Each Tuesday you can pretty much guarantee that you will find us here. We urge anyone in the community who is interested in helping out to let us know. Among the completed and ongoing projects: compiling obituaries; transcribing original letters into legible notebooks; copying items of historic and human interest from 19th and 20th century newspapers (as board member Maynard Ham has been doing this with his newspaper project for over a year); and identifying houses and farms in old real estate records from the early part of the 20th century.

Finally, it is the citizens of a town that are its most valuable resource, in the stories stored away in memory, in the traces of history contained in attics and hall closets and in their natural curiosity, as witnessed in the contribution in this issue of Jane Knobloch and Maynard Ham's adventures in uncovering a family's story. It is this rich resource we wish to tap.

Clare O'Neill Carr

**FALL/WINTER 2001
PROGRAM SCHEDULE**

Sept. 25th **Delaware & Hudson Canal**, a slide talk by Jennifer Dodd.

Oct. 23rd **Egbert Benson, Man of Law**, a lecture by John D. Gordon III, expert on Egbert Benson.

Nov. 27th **The Forgotten Holidays**, a slide talk by Peter Rose, food columnist and author on Dutch customs and cooking.

*Sponsored by the NY Council for the Humanities

Dec. 18th **A Christmas Carol** by Charles Dickens, a performance by Roger Leonard.

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Egbert Benson... con't from pg.4

any land within the State.

In 1801, Benson resigned from the Supreme Court to accept a commission from President John Adams as Chief Judge of the United States Circuit Court of the Second Circuit, covering New York, Vermont and Connecticut. These judges have gone down in history as the "Midnight Judges," because the courts only lasted a year and a half before being disassembled by the next President, Thomas Jefferson. But in the Fall of 1801, Benson was sitting in Albany at his second of only two sessions as a federal judge.

In 1802, when he was just 57 years old, his intense career came to an end.

"Fortunately, then as now, former judges retain something of their official prestige, which adds value to their skills if they return to the bar. Which Egbert Benson did," said Gordon. Much of his later litigation continued to involve commerce, foreign trade and disputed tracts of large land parcels.

Always interested in history, Benson helped found the New-York Historical Society in 1804, then served as its first president from 1805 to 1815. In 1813, he returned briefly to Congress, then retired soon after to Jamaica, Queens.

Following a life-long habit, he continued to travel for many years, especially to visit old friends and colleagues, and he continued his interest in life around him. James Kent leaves us with a wonderful sketch of this old, very lively and very opinionated Patriot, who was proud of his Dutch ancestry, suspicious, in the tradition of that early American time, of anything smacking of Roman Catholicism or the papacy, and a champion of the Federalist cause:

"He was to the last a very handsome old man – his mind was vigorous & active til the day of his death; while his untiring vivacity, his fund of anecdotes, his power of narration, his love of argument, his humor, and his various points of eccentricity and quaintness gave him an individuality & interest which it was amusing to observe and it is pleasing to recall. He remained through life an invincible bachelor, but there was nothing morose, nor ascetic about him. No one was more fond of society; no one enjoyed more, but always in an innocent & decorous degree, the pleasures

of the table. It was a jubilee to the children & a pleasure to the Parents, when, of a summer afternoon, the Judge was seen to drive up to the door of a friend – like Mr. Van Schaack at Kinderhook – or the Patroon, or the Chancellor at Albany, announcing his intention of passing a few days, and carefully dislodging from his carriage a fine fish, or a pair of canvas-back ducks, or some other epicurean rarity, which he delivered over to the cook, with some skillful suggestions as to the dressing. Then would follow a season of liveliness & gaiety – of thronging visitors – disputations – dinners – conversations -, in which the old gentleman would display all his peculiarities – all his pertinacity & disputatiousness – keep the table in a roar, while he never for a moment forgot that he was a Federalist and a gentleman. – Wo to the man, who crossed his path and interfered with his hobbies! – William Cobbett was not a more determined enemy of the potatoe; and luckless was the agriculturalist who ventured to assert there was any nutriment in this much discussed esculent. More zealous still he was for the Dutch Reformed Church and the Heidelburgh catechism; & he anticipated the times of Oxford tracts & Puseyite theology in his denunciation of the papistical tendencies of the Episcopal church. But his plenitude of zeal and constancy was reserved for his Dutch brethren in America, on whose behalf he was ready to do battle at all times."

John Gordon has added to our knowledge of Benson, and also to our collection, leaving us with a fine print of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Egbert Benson when he was 74 years old, about the age he was when Kent recalled him in his biography. Benson lived to an old age, 87 years old, and died in Jamaica in 1833. We have yet to discover where he was buried. C.O.C



SOMEWHERE IN RED HOOK? Can anyone tell us where this old Dutch stone house is located? The picture was found by the late Dr.Fred Zipser in his attic at the former Massonneau house on S. Broadway and Fraleigh St., where he and his family lived for 50 years. Let us know!

A Few Things You Could Do To Help

The E.B. Historical Society is fortunate to have a number of active volunteers who work hard to organize and make accessible information about our town and villages. The trustees of the Society have recently honored the indefatigable Bobbie Thompson by naming her our official Archivist, but there are a number of others who show up at the Society's office upstairs at the Elmendorph every Tuesday to help however they can and, not unimportantly, have quite a good time doing so.

But, of course, there is always a need for more help. Would you consider becoming a volunteer? These are a few ways you could help:

1. Clip obituaries for our records. Clip from one or more local newspapers. Note the name of the paper and date of publication on each clipping. Arrange clippings in alphabetical order. Deliver to the Elmendorph on Tuesday, or call to have them picked up. If you can, come in to the Society office, make two photo copies of the obits, and file them in their appropriate places (Someone will show you). If the obits are collected and filed regularly, it shouldn't take more than a few hours each month.
2. Clip various newspaper articles of importance to town history. Clip from the papers, note the name and date of the publication and write it on the clipping, as with obits. Bring to the Society, where you can make the necessary copies. Working with the archivist, you can file them in the right category for future use.
3. Identify old houses and farms. The Society has a large number of real estate farm listings from the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the old places can only be identified by following the description and directions and driving to them. Thus identified, the old records become a good source for researching house histories and family geneology.

Katherine Dewsnap



Remember? Westmore Cottage was a boarding house, later Melley's Tavern, at the site of NAPA Auto Parts on Broadway, Red Hook Village. The Tobacco Factory is on the left. Postcard gift of Frank Knobloch.

Rosemary Coons Archive Room 11/01

This summer and fall have seen busy Tuesdays at the Archival Room. The Historical Society's collection has been growing at a wonderful pace. The requests for information on all kinds of subjects has been challenging, to say the least.

Some of the requests we have been able to help with include a history project for the 11th Grade at Red Hook High School concerning World War I, industrial and communication advances; the effects of the Depression, FDR and World War II; several requests for the use of Frank Teal's records from both Dutchess and Columbia county surveyors; and historical background on Cokertown and Spring Lake.

The map and photograph collections have been invaluable tools for researchers. The Tivoli Bays Visitor Center used the maps for land use changes; a resident searching the history of his house was able to find it on one of the Beers maps; a high school student used photographs of some of the buildings for an art project.

In the meantime we are cataloguing our photograph collection into categories for easier research and accessing new materials. The computerized synopsis of Frank Teal's records has been completed for Red Hook and Milan. Rhinebeck, Hyde Park, Clinton and part of Columbia County remain to be done. Life on Tuesdays at the Archival Room is never dull.

Barbara Thompson

The Egbert Benson Historical Society of Red Hook
P.O. Box 397 Red Hook New York 12571

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BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP: + Advance notice of monthly programs + Three newsletters yearly +The knowledge that you support the collection, preservation and dissemination of the history of the Town of Red Hook

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