

History of the Hoffman House

By Jill Fisher



Fig.1 – View of house from east. Photo by Neil Larson, 2014.

Editor's Note: When Donna Brown and Elliot Bristol acquired the house with 34 acres in 1980, they immediately began to make necessary improvements to the house and property. Inside, they renovated the second floor bath; outside they restored the front piazza, including replacing its roof. In 1990 they renovated the kitchen, shifting the entrance from the east wall to the south wall, replacing windows, and adding a bay window to the west wall to take advantage of the spectacular western views. They always wanted to do something to restore main-floor rooms and recover something of their 18th-century appearance. In 2001 they retained the services of Larson Fisher Associates to sort out the history of the building and help formulate a plan of action. This article comes out of the conditions assessment made at that time. Now more than a decade later, the owners have undertaken a major project to recreate historical interior spaces. Donna provided a running account of the work in e-mails many of us enjoyed, and she and Elliot have provided the illustrated report that follows Jill Fisher's historical background.

Background

The story of the Hoffman House begins with Martin Hermanzen Hoffman, who arrived in New Netherland from Revel, Sweden, in ca.1657. He first settled in Esopus (Kingston) but soon after moved to New Amsterdam (NYC) where, in 1661, his property was assessed among the highest level of taxpayers.¹ The Hoffmans were a wealthy family who built their fortune through strategic marriages with the most prominent families in the region – among them, the de Witts, Livingstons,

Van Renssaelars, Van Alstyne, and Ten Broecks. Their real estate, industrial and commercial interests extended to Ulster and Dutchess counties and New York City.

Martin Hoffman and his second wife, Emmerentje De Witt, had five children. Nicolaes, born in Kingston, was the second of two sons. He was a blacksmith and married Jannetje Crispell in 1704. She was the daughter of Antoine Crispell, a Huguenot, who settled in nearby Hurley and was one of the patentees of New Paltz in Ulster County. In 1707, Antoine Crispell conveyed property in Kingston to Jannetje and her husband – the site of the present Hoffman House Restaurant on the corner of North Front and Green streets.² (While one source states that Nicolaes was the builder of the stone house on this property, the deed history indicates that a stone house already existed on the property in 1707.³) Nicolaes Hoffman was a captain commanding a company of the Ulster County Militia at Kingston by 1717.⁴ In 1721 he acquired Peter Schuyler's half-share of a property known as "Maastebroek," in the northwestern corner of Dutchess County. Official records listed Nicolaes as a freeholder in Dutchess County in 1728 and 1740, and his will places him in Red Hook at the time of his death.

Nicolaes and Jannetje had nine children, only six of whom grew to adulthood – four sons and two daughters. Martinus was Nicolaes's eldest child and thus, according to tradition, named after his Swedish-immigrant grandfather. Like his father he joined the militia, ascending to the rank of Colonel. He married Tryntje Benson in 1733, and they promptly had



Fig. 2 – View of house from northwest. Photo by Neil Larson, 2001.

three children, Cornelia, Nicholas, and Robert, all born in Kingston. Five years later, at age 32, Martinus moved to Red Hook, settling on land his father had bought there and involving himself in a number of enterprises – including engaging in trade at “Hoffman’s Landing” on the Hudson River, overseeing a grist mill at “Hoffman’s Mills” at the mouth of the White Clay Kill, and farming. Martinus, (later referred to as Martin Sr.) and Tryntje had six more children, Anthony, Annatjen, Hermanus, Martin Jr., and Zachariah, all born in Red Hook.⁵

When Nicolaes died in 1750, his four sons inherited sufficient lands to provide each with a good start in life. Nicolaes also willed his eight African slaves to his heirs. Martinus received a male slave named Fortune and must have purchased more because by 1755 he owned ten slaves, the largest number held by anyone in the precinct.⁶ Nicolaes bequeathed one tract, the “Land of Martinus Shoe and Hans Jacob Dings,” to Martinus and his youngest brother Petrus to share equally. After parceling out his various land holdings among his sons, Nicolaes stated in his will that “all my Land on the East Side of the Hudsons River Shall Remain Common for my four Sons and their Respective assigns for cutting firewood...”⁷

Builder of the stone house

A lack of records from this time period makes it impossible to be certain of who actually built the Hoffman House in Tivoli, but the form and design of the structure suggests it dates to the middle of the 18th century (Figs. 1 & 2). The original house was typical of vernacular German house architecture in

Rhinebeck (Figs. 3-5). Constructed of locally quarried bluestone, 41’ 4” wide by 26’ 6” deep in dimension, it had two rooms on the main floor plus a basement kitchen and storage area. A gable roof rested on short knee walls that created a half-story under the rafters. A central partition wall separated two main floor rooms. The ground around the house sloped away so that the cellar at the south side of the building was at ground level providing the kitchen with direct access to the outside. The principal façade on the east side of the house was pierced by two front doors and two windows on the main floor level, a pair for each room, as well as a kitchen door on the basement level (Fig. 6). On the west side there was a single door on the main level, which accessed the southern of the two main floor rooms, flanked by windows, as well as a basement window beneath the southernmost one on the main floor (Fig. 2). The end walls of the house had no openings, but instead each had a jambless fireplace providing a source of heat. The brick chimney for the kitchen fireplace bisected the south stone end wall behind the interior chimney (Fig. 7).

A singular characteristic of the house is its extraordinary siting on a ridge with one of the most expansive vistas of the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains of any property in the region. Whether or not the 274-acre tract of land on which the house was originally situated was one of the parcels Nicolaes Hoffman owned and bequeathed to his sons, it would have been highly prestigious and valuable real estate. This fact would not have been lost on the Hoffmans, and the property would have been particularly desirable since it also overlooked



Fig. 3 – Ackert or Cruisius House, Rhinebeck, ca. 1750.

Fig. 4 – Freidenberg House, Rhinebeck, ca. 1730.

Fig. 5 – Traver House, Rhinebeck, ca. 1730.

their vast holdings around the landing. A portion of the property is in the low lying “flats” area that follows the eastern bank of the Hudson River, but it extends eastwards and upwards onto a series of knolls atop a ridgeline that were heavily wooded when the settlers first arrived. Today the house is on a lot a fraction of the original size of the farm, but it retains the siting that distinguishes it from other farmhouses and even elite country seats in the area.

There will probably always be ambiguity as to the identity of the builder and first occupant of the stone house as the public records are inconclusive. However, the Hoffman association is established by the fact that Jannetje Hoffman Grier, the only

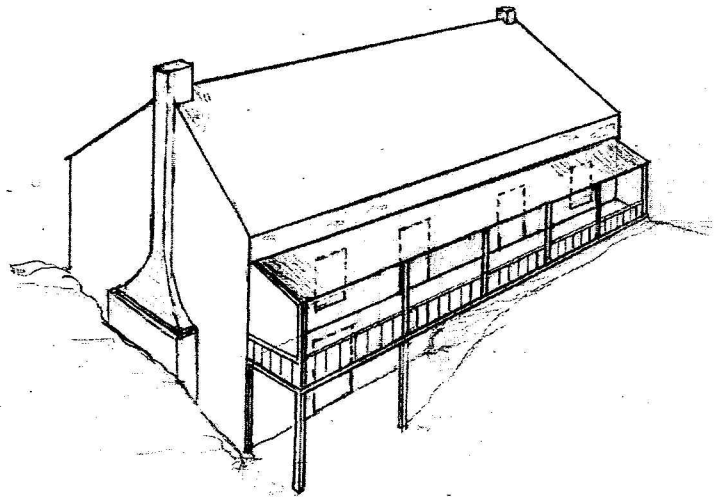
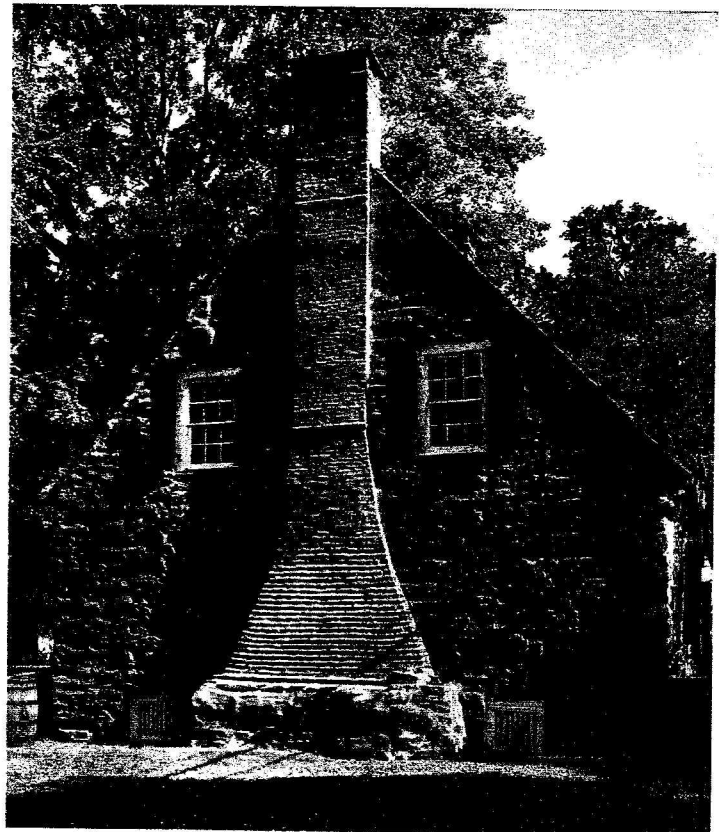


Fig. 6 – Schematic depiction of original Hoffman House, ca. 1750. Drawing by Jill Fisher, 2001.

child of Petrus Hoffman and daughter-in-law of his brother, Martinus by her marriage to his son Zachariah, was owner of the property in 1800. As such, some reasonable assumptions can be made. For instance, Nicolaes’s son Anthony probably did not occupy the house since he resided in Kingston and was a trustee of that city on and off from 1742 through 1780. Secondly, Nicolaes willed his son Zecharias land near the Hudson River near Hoffman Landing. By about 1760,

Fig. 7 – View of kitchen chimney, Abraham Hasbrouck House, New Paltz, ca. 1725. Photo by Neil Larson.



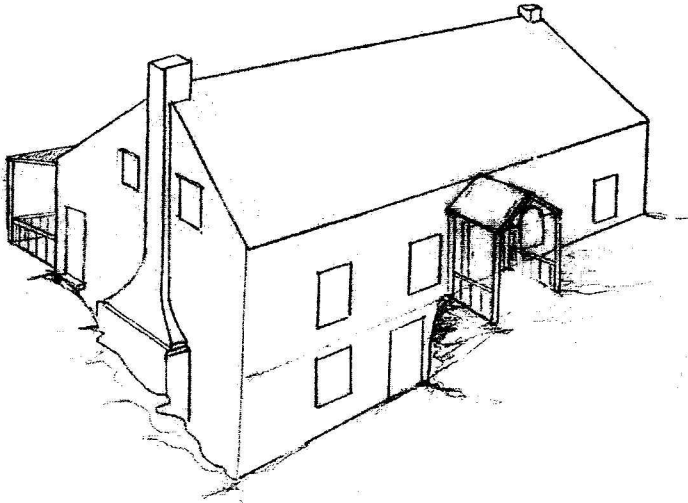


Fig. 8 – Schematic depiction of Hoffman House following alterations, ca. 1790. Drawing by Jill Fisher, 2001.

Zecharias built a large two-story stone house near the mills, referred to as "Hoffman's Castle." This leaves Martinus and Petrus as the two most likely sons to have had an interest in the farm, particularly since in his will Nicolaes gave several tracts of land to them in common.

By the time Nicolaes died, his son Martinus had emerged as a prominent citizen in Red Hook. He served as a Justice of the Peace for the town and was appointed one of His Majesty's Judges in the Dutchess County Court of Common Pleas. He is on record as having bought and sold many parcels in the Red Hook area, but he was living in New York City at the time of his death in 1772. Conversely, Petrus, being

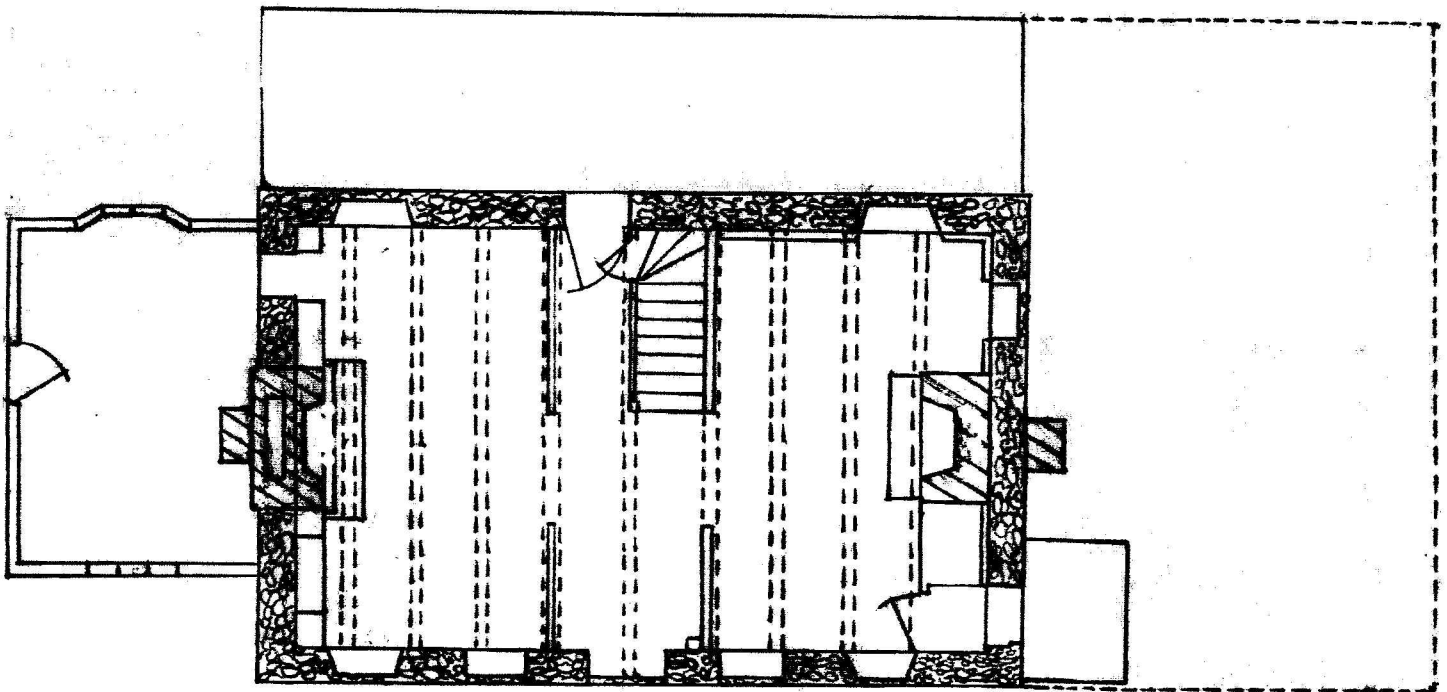
the youngest of Nicolaes's children, was 23 and unmarried at the time of his father's death. His inheritance of land and a yearly income would have made marriage feasible for him. The Hoffman genealogy states that his daughter, Jannetje, with Catharina Van Alstyne was baptized January 23, 1753, suggesting they were married by early 1752. Such an event could well have prompted the construction of the stone house at this point in time. Tragically, Petrus died at age 27 in 1754, only a year or so after the birth of his daughter, leaving his widow in charge of the farm.

Jannetje Hoffman married her cousin Zachariah Hoffman in 1772. With this marriage, the hereditary interests of both Martinus and Petrus were united with the farm at the center of the Hoffmans' Red Hook holdings. Though he was just beginning his family, Zachariah was one of the "signers" that pledged his opposition to British rule in 1775, following both his father's and his uncle Zecharias's lead.⁸ This involvement in the Revolutionary War may explain the age gap between the birth of his first daughter, Chatiane (Caty), probably born within a year or so of his marriage (ca. 1773), and his second child Maria born in 1780. In 1784, Zachariah and Jannetje's third daughter, Cornelia, was born, and two years later Zachariah died, leaving 33-year-old Jannetje with title to the farm. Not too many years after Zachariah's death, she remarried.⁹

Updating the stone house

The stone house was substantially renovated and stylistically updated sometime during the last two decades of the 1700s, either before Zachariah Hoffman died in 1786 or after his widow remarried in ca. 1789. Jannetje Hoffman's second husband, John Grier was ten years her senior, but had no children, and had not been married previously. He was

Fig. 9 – First floor plan following alterations, ca. 1790. North to right. Drawing by Jill Fisher, 2001.



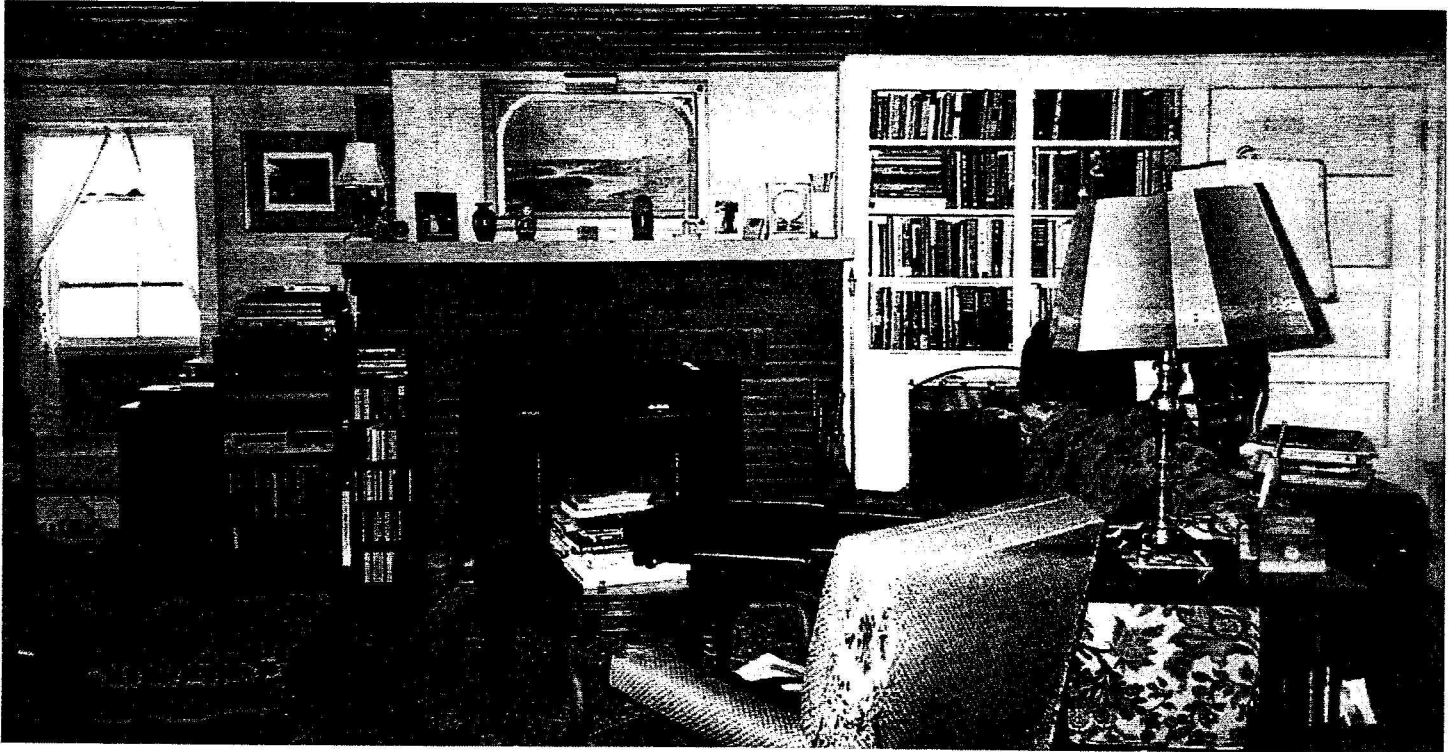


Fig. 10 – Detail of fireplace in south room, ca. 1790. Photo by Neil Larson, 2001.

a merchant involved in trade at Hoffman's Landing.¹⁰ He and Jannetje had three children, the eldest of whom was Jane, born ca. 1790. Two other children, John and George, were born before John Grier died in 1797 at age 54. (Renovations would have been made prior to this date.) He willed his wife, their children and his stepchildren undivided shares in his estate – which would not have included the Hoffman farm, since this would have remained in the possession of Zachariah Hoffman's heirs.¹¹ Jannetje (also known as Jane) is listed in the 1800 Federal Census as a head of household residing in "Rhynebeck" with several people in the household, including two slaves. When she died in 1809, her interest in the farm was shared equally by the five children. These interests do not begin to be sold off until 1820, suggesting that either one of the children continued to live on the farm or that it was rented out to a tenant farmer.

The predominant architectural taste of the late 18th century was one of finished surfaces and formal symmetry that mirrored a more sophisticated and comfortable way of life. Direct entrance into a family's living quarters became unacceptable. A single central entrance was introduced on the east facade of the house, and the two exterior doors that had previously provided access to each main floor room were converted to windows (Fig. 8). A center passage was created on the interior by the removal of the partition wall between the two main floor rooms and construction of two new walls (Fig. 9). The west-facing door had to be shifted slightly northward to accommodate the new south wall of the passage, which left a telltale seam in the exterior stone wall.

Plastering the entire house hid the evidence of these alterations and gave it a more modern and formal

appearance. A piazza, or full-width porch, on the west side of the house was added, allowing for more genteel enjoyment of the property and its spectacular views. Still, the cellar kitchen was needed, so to compensate for the existing window on the west wall being filled in to allow the ground to be regraded for the piazza, a new window was created on the east facade. The exterior cellar door was relocated toward the center of the east wall, and the old doorway was converted to a window to provide necessary light to the kitchen hearth. Although no evidence remains of it, there was likely some sort of front porch that provided a formal appearance to the new centered front door (Fig. 8).

The improvements at this time were not limited to the addition and subtraction of doors and windows in exterior walls, but involved removing the two jambless fireplaces on the main floor and replacing them with English fireplaces (Fig. 10). This required the demolition of two large brick chimneys above the ceiling level and building new ones plus a new brick arch support in the basement under the fireplace on the north end of the house. The kitchen fireplace was retained (together with the cantilevered arch supporting the hearth above) along with its chimney, which passed through the south stone wall. Mantles and built-in cupboards, on either side of the north fireplace, and the introduction of stylish moldings around the windows and doors would have transformed the rooms into fashionable living quarters.

The staircase in the center passage that provided access to both the basement and the half-story garret would also have been installed at this time. This change would also have increased the formality of the plan with an ornamental object in full view from the front entrance. The renovation included

plastering the ceiling in the south room, with the beaded beams being chiseled to create a level surface. Paneled jambs in the original window spaces indicate that this was the best room in the original plan, and the plastering was done to bring this high-status space up to prevailing design standards. Beams remained exposed in the center and north rooms.

Changing ownership

In 1813 Rufus Reed married Jane Grier, thereby involving him in her share of the Hoffman property. He was born in Sharon, Connecticut, and after living for some time in Charleston, South Carolina, moved to Hudson, New York, the year that Jannetje Hoffman Grier died. He was involved in mercantile pursuits that proved to be quite profitable. He also became active in politics, being elected Mayor of Hudson and a member of the New York State Assembly. He had numerous civic, business and banking interests.¹³ Reed was able to help his wife consolidate her siblings' shares in the 265-acre Hoffman farm. In 1831 the farm was sold to others.

The current appearance of the house represents a more recent renovation occurring soon after Emma Moore Denegar inherited the property in 1915 and took up residence with her husband. Following models of contemporary suburban homes, they added a gambrel roof to create a full second story over the stone house and indoor plumbing was installed. New exterior chimneys were built to clear the new roof, with the old stone gables concealed under wood shingle siding (Fig. 11). The spacious layout of the four second-floor bedrooms and bath was created at this time. Shed dormers allowed for windows on the east and west walls in addition to those that had been included on the north and south end walls flanking the chimneys. Moldings and finishes throughout the second floor are consistent with the Craftsman style that flourished throughout the 1910s and 1920s.

On the first floor, the north room fireplace was completely rebuilt in coarse brick, connecting through the stone wall to the new chimney outside the house. The door west of the fireplace that once connected to the frame wing was converted to a window. The doorway east of the fireplace was retained; a built-in bookcase was created along with a small vestibule between the exterior and interior walls. In the south room, the old fireplace was reconditioned and connected to the new exterior chimney as well. A cupboard was built east



Fig. 11 – View of north end of house. Photo by Neil Larson, 2001.

of the fireplace and a new door installed in the plank wall on the west side. A door that previously led to the outside was closed off and a small closet with shelves created. Other improvements made by the Denegars included removing the plaster ceiling in the south room and boxing in the damaged beams. Panels were added between the beams in all three first floor spaces and oak flooring was laid over the earlier wide boards.

The history of Red Hook in a stone nutshell

Outwardly the Hoffman-Denegar House is a modest 20th century, Craftsman-style suburban dwelling, but in truth it is a rare, remarkably intact architectural relic from a bygone era. Architecturally, the stone house represents the design of the earliest German vernacular buildings and the more elite formal style of the late 18th century. Its connection with the Hoffman family, the members of which were major players in shaping the development and economy of the region, lends the property historical significance. The building provides a long view of regional history, not only of Tivoli and Red Hook, but also of the earliest settlements in this stretch of the Hudson Valley. Twentieth century modifications reflect technological advances and modern tastes right up through the Brown-Bristol's improvements. Each and every occupant has left their mark on the stone house as well as the land, and making the house an important historic resource in the community.

¹ William Wickham Hoffman, *Eleven Generations of Hoffmans in New York, Descendants of Martin Hoffman, 1657 – 1957* (NY: American Historical Co., Inc., 1957), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, Also Ulster County Deed Book BB Page 83.

⁴ Philip H. Smith, *General History of Dutchess County from 1609 to 1876, Inclusive* (Pawling, NY: the author, 1877), 477-480.

⁵ *Genealogy of the Hoffman Family, Descendants of Martin Hoffman with Biographical Notes*, (1899), 4.

⁶ *First Federal Census 1780; Heads of Families – New York, Dutchess County*, 91.

⁷ Dutchess County Deeds (located at Kingston), Book BB Page 348. *Genealogy of the Hoffman Family*, 111.

⁸ Smith, *General History of Dutchess County*, 480.

⁹ *Genealogy of the Hoffman Family*, 158.

¹⁰ Dutchess County Wills, Book B page 56.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *Reed-Read Lineage – Captain John Reed of Providence, R.I. and Norwalk, Conn. and His Descendants Through His Sons John and Thomas 1660 – 1909* (1909), 34.

¹³ Franklin Ellis, *History of Columbia County, New York*, (1878), multiple references—see index.