

Messmore-Kendall House, - Dobb's Ferry,  
Westchester County,  
New York.

HABS No. 4-105 HABS  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4  
Southern New York State

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,  
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

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THE MESSMORE KENDALL RESIDENCE  
On Broadway, in Dobbs Ferry, Westchester Co., New York

Location and Present Ownership

This house, owned and occupied by Mr. Messmore Kendall, stands on the east side of Broadway, the main north-and-south avenue of travel, formerly called the Albany Post Road, at Dobbs Ferry, New York, overlooking the Hudson River near the southern end of the wide stretch of water called Tappan Zee. It is about seven miles north of the New York City line.

Date and First Owners

The land on which the village stands was part of the Manor of Philipsburgh, granted in 1693 by royal patent signed by Governor Andros to Frederick Philipse. The Indians (Mohegans) had already released their titles by sales to him at various times more than ten years before. He died in 1702 and was succeeded as Lord of the Manor by his grandson, Frederick, the child of his eldest son, Philip, who died in 1700. Young Frederick was only seven years old when his grandfather died. Born in 1695, he entered into his inheritance in 1716. He died in 1751 at the age of 56, and was succeeded by his son, Col. Frederick Philipse, the third and last Lord of the Manor of Philipsburgh. It appears likely that the old farmhouse which comprises the earliest unit of the present residence at Dobbs Ferry was built in that outlying section of the great landed estate between 1690 and 1700, by the first Frederick Philipse. Having served the West India Co. as architect-builder in Stuyvesant's time and later, it is likely that he personally designed the house.

*Philipse, the great-grandson, had his lands and houses, including the Manor House in Yonkers, ~~were~~ forfeited by his attainder under the Confiscation Act of 1779. They were sold*

for small sums to his former tenants under a preemption clause in the general act passed by the New York Legislature May 12, 1781, relating to the sale of confiscated estates; and Philip Livingston with two others acquired the Dobbs Ferry land, by indenture from the Commissioners of Forfeiture, Oct. 10, 1785. Livingston took title to the whole of it on April 1, 1796; and in 1806 made a large and stately two-storied addition to the three-storied old farmhouse. House and lands were transferred to his son, Peter Van Brugh Livingston, by a partition deed on April 30, 1824, and in 1830 he began to sell off small parcels of the estate. He sold the house and its ample grounds to Stephen Archer, whose daughter married Dr. Joseph Hasbrouck. Title passed to him upon her death, and Mr. Kendall acquired it from Hasbrouck's widow and others in 1916 when advertised for sale.

The foregoing facts are derived from authorities cited by Shonnard & Spooner, by Bolton, and Scharf in their histories of Westchester County; from Eberlein's

The Manors & Historic Homes of the Hudson Valley  
(1924), pp. 83-85;

Paul Hollistor's Famous Country Houses; and an anonymous pamphlet relating to the town's real estate, entitled

Dobbs Ferry in History (in the N. Y. Public Library).

The Earliest Wing a Typical Colonial Farmhouse

The oldest unit, the original or central portion of the present composite structure, built by the distinguished burgher Philipse, has passed practically unaltered into the possession of the Livingstons and later owners to our own time. It is a good example of what the seventeenth century farmhouse was, with long sweeping roof and dormer windows. Alice Morse Earle, in Colonial Days in Old New York (1896),

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describes this type of house with particular care. Mr. Walter D. Chambers, architect, who undertook the restoration of this residence for its present owner in 1916, and published an account of it in

The Quarterly Bulletin of the Westchester  
County Hist. Soc., VII; 49-58 (April, 1931),

mentions the almost characteristic appearance of the Dutch-English Colonial houses in the Hudson River valley: "Low ceilings, a huge kitchen-living-room fireplace, with a bake-oven included as part of the masonry chimney pier, a long sweeping roof with dormers covering the two-storied verandah, the house placed with its long front facing south,--these features are to be found in many of the more important farmhouses of that time," not only in that locality but also in the settlements on Long Island, in the Mohawk Valley, and elsewhere.

Restoring the Older Wings

"When the present owner bought the place," writes Mr. Chambers, "the house was in a deplorable state of neglect and decay--almost ready to collapse. Many framing timbers necessary to its support were so rotten that they were structurally worthless and had to be replaced. Some of the two-story columns on the south side of the Dutch wing, whose business it was to support the roof, were actually hanging suspended from the roof, having rotted through at their bases, so that they swayed in the wind, hung by their tops to the roof beams." Mr. Kendall ~~described~~<sup>desired</sup> that the place be restored inside and out to a habitable state, and yet that the architectural character of the Dutch-English wing and also that of the early Federal wing should be retained.

As described by Mr. Chambers, the materials used for constructing "the Dutchman's wing" were such as could be found at hand. "Stone, brick, wood and plaster were employed logically and thriftily, and in

certain places one finds that naive partition wall built of oak uprights connected by horizontal oaken billets, filled in with clay or mud."

The restoration of the old dining room in that wing was done with an axe. "The fine adzed oak beams of the ceiling had been concealed by a flimsy lath and plaster covering, and the great fireplace, seven feet high by eight feet wide, with the old crane in one corner and the bake-oven in the other, had been hidden by a cheap late-Victorian 'Eastlake' mantel, surrounding a dinky fireplace about two feet square."

Livingston's frank departure from the Dutch type in planning his new wing "is forgivable," Mr. Chambers observes, "for he wanted higher ceilings and rooms more spacious than could be made to conform to such a type." The Charleston houses of the eighteenth century, "with their two-storied galleries facing west, their high ceilings, and generous well-proportioned rooms," perhaps are what he had in mind. In building this new addition, the architect of 1806 (probably Livingston himself) was confronted with the problem of making a single main staircase which would serve both wings, and Mr. Chambers found that Livingston had solved it incorrectly; for, "if one wanted to mount from the ground floor to the bed rooms in the Dutch wing, one had to travel several feet higher to the bed room floor over the new wing, and then come down again." In the restoration Mr. Chambers reversed the staircase and now the stairs "invite you up instead of presenting their inhospitable posterior."

Livingston's operations on the house were not entirely confined to the addition of a wing totally out of harmony with the old one. He consolidated all the dormer windows in the roof of the old farmhouse

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into one continuous front which gave the appearance of a third story, and ruined the grace of the old roof line. The original design has been restored.

The present owner thus succeeded in rejuvenating the "tumble-down antique" into a comfortable modern dwelling with all the necessary present-day equipment of plumbing, heating and lighting, while preserving the structure's historic and artistic value. The kitchen wing, together with a modern garage with children's playroom in its second story, connecting with the house by an enclosed bridge or runway, is entirely modern. The entire roof is covered with asbestos shingles over old wooden ones.

The architects of the present survey observe that the front or newer (western) part of the residence dates from a period of more refined development in social life and taste. Its delicacy and sophistication are far in advance of the homespun simplicity of the earlier part. This is shown by the slender fluted columns, by window casings moulded instead of plain, and by cornices enriched with modillions and a band of lace-like carvings. The west front is covered with narrow clapboards, and the scale of this entire façade is remarkably fine. The original ceilings here were plastered and enriched with plaster ornaments. Contrasting with the great primitive fireplace in the original old part of the house are the more refined fireplaces in the drawing room and dining room of this new part, their eighteenth century black-and-gold marble mantels having been procured from a house of the same period on Bowling Green, New York City, and installed as the new west wing was building.

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Its Place in History

Dobbs Ferry was on the so-called Neutral Ground during the Revolution, and strong redoubts were erected near the old Philipse farmhouse to dominate from this commanding site the ferry and the shipping on the river.

Lossing, Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution, 1859, I; 763.

Exciting events or alarms occasionally occurred almost within sight and hearing of the occupants of the house. The region was the hang-out of marauders from both armies, and the first pension granted in the United Colonies was given to a boy named Vincent, the survivor of three young men residing in the village who were terribly mutilated by Tory "Cowboys".

Scharf, Hist of Westchester Co., 1886, II: 184.

Lossing was unfortunately in error, however, both in his

Pictorial Field-Book and in The Hudson (1866), p. 358,

when he stated that Washington had his headquarters at this house toward the close of the Revolution; and that, in November, 1783, Washington, Governor Clinton, and the British commander Sir Guy Carleton met there "to confer on the subjects of prisoners, the loyalists, and the evacuation of the city of New York by the British forces." Scharf (cited above, Vol. II, p. 186) also says that Washington and Carleton met there, on May 3, 1783, "to settle terms for the disbandment of the two armies." He goes so far as to declare that "The spot should ever be held in honored remembrance as the birthplace of the United States." Relying probably on these distinguished authorities, the Sons of the Revolution erected in 1894 a small monument by the roadside in front

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of the house to commemorate that event.

Evidence began to appear that Lossing must have placed confidence in neighborhood hearsay rather than in documentary proof. A descendant of Van Brugh Livingston who had known that former proprietor personally wrote that she had never heard him say that the house had been Washington's headquarters.

Mag. of Am. Hist., VII: 145, 373.

Shonnard & Spooner, in their

Hist. of Westchester County (1900),  
pp. 522-523,

presented more tangible and convincing testimony: "Since the erection of the Dobbs Ferry monument it has been established by indisputable evidence that the memorable meeting of Washington and Carleton did not occur in the Livingston house or at Dobbs Ferry, but at Tappan (Orangetown) on the opposite side of the river." They cited an article on this point by Mr. Daniel Van Tassel, of Tarrytown, published in the Tarrytown

Arms for March 23, 1895,

in which he related the finding, in the collection at the Van Cortlandt Manor House, of a long letter written by Col. Richard Varick, dated May 18, 1783, describing the meeting of Washington and Carleton in Tappan which he himself attended as aide to Governor Clinton. The Varick letter had already been published ten years earlier in the

Mag. of Am. Hist., XIV: 513 (Nov., 1885).

This subject is more fully developed, with additional and conclusive documentary proof, by Mr. William S. Hadaway, in an article entitled

"Dobbs Ferry in the Revolution," published in  
The Quarterly Bulletin of the Westchester Co.  
Hist. Soc., Vol. VIII, pp. 114-121 (July, 1932).

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The 1894 monument also incorrectly alleges that Washington and Rochambeau met at this house to plan the Yorktown Campaign in 1781.

As explained authoritatively in other articles in the

Bulletin for July, 1932,

above cited, these commanders of the allied armies occupied the Appelby and Odell houses respectively on country roads back in the hills, and conveniently held their conferences there surrounded by their troops.

Written, March 28, 1934, by

*Thomas W. Hotchkiss*

Thomas W. Hotchkiss  
118 Pine St., Peekskill, N. Y.

Approved:

*Am. Dreyer Miller*

*Reviewed 1936, H.C.F.*

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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An addendum to  
Messmore Kendall House  
Dobbs Ferry, New York  
in HABS Catalog (1941)

Location: East side of Broadway at Dobbs Ferry, Westchester  
County, New York

Present Owner  
and Occupant: Ferdinand Gottlieb

Architectural  
Changes: House demolished November 1974

Information provided by: John Zukowsky  
Architectural Historian  
Hudson River Museum  
Yonkers, New York 10701  
March 1975