

THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY REVIEW

A Journal of Regional Studies

MARIST



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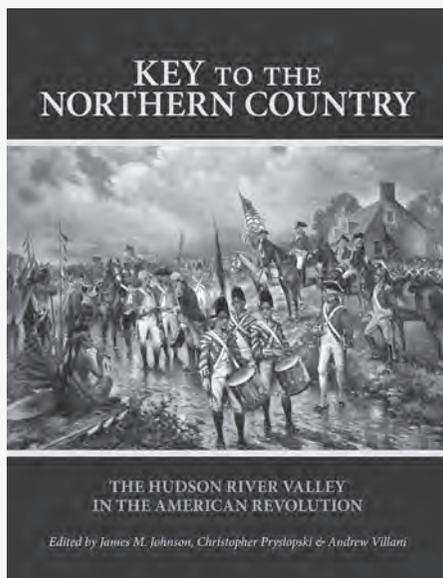
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KEY TO THE NORTHERN COUNTRY
The Hudson River Valley in the American Revolution

Edited by James M. Johnson, Christopher Pryslopski, & Andrew Villani

THIS NEW COLLECTION represents nearly forty years of interdisciplinary scholarship in twenty articles on our region's role in the American Revolution. This is a book for historians, educators, regionalists, and anyone with an interest in either the Hudson River Valley or the American Revolution.

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From the Editors

This eye-opening issue reminds us how much has changed in the last century: D. W. Griffith's propagandist *Birth of a Nation* was released to commercial success in 1915; that same year, women lost their second attempt to win the right to vote in New York, and while not without their benefits, industrialization and urbanization were upsetting traditional rural livelihood and communities. However, our region has long been home to social reformers and freedom seekers. Two women who divided their time between Dutchess County and New York City sought to affect positive change in both locations. Our cover article recounts the role Eleanor Roosevelt tried to play in improving the lives of young farmers via the establishment of Val-Kill Industries. The next may introduce readers to Margaret Chanler Aldrich and her commitment to achieving women's suffrage. Also inside you'll find intriguing stories that shed welcome light on Catskill's role in the Great Migration, the enduring legacy of Troy's Great Fire of 1862, and the remains of a Revolutionary-era warship, along with book reviews and even a poem.



The Hudson River Valley Institute

The Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College is the academic arm of the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area. Its mission is to study and to promote the Hudson River Valley and to provide educational resources for heritage tourists, scholars, elementary school educators, environmental organizations, the business community, and the general public. Its many projects include publication of *The Hudson River Valley Review* and the management of a dynamic digital library and leading regional portal site.

Call for Essays

The Hudson River Valley Review will consider essays on all aspects of the Hudson River Valley—its intellectual, political, economic, social, and cultural history, its prehistory, architecture, literature, art, and music—as well as essays on the ideas and ideologies of regionalism itself. All articles in *The Hudson River Valley Review* undergo peer analysis.

Submission of Essays and Other Materials

HRVR prefers that essays and other written materials be submitted as one double-spaced typescript, generally no more than thirty pages long with endnotes, along with a CD with a clear indication of the operating system, the name and version of the word-processing program, and the names of documents on the disk.

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Since HRVR is interdisciplinary in its approach to the region and to regionalism, it will honor the forms of citation appropriate to a particular discipline, provided these are applied consistently and supply full information. Endnotes rather than footnotes are preferred. In matters of style and form, HRVR follows *The Chicago Manual of Style*.



On the cover:
The Stone Cottage at Val-Kill,
photograph by Bill Urbin,
courtesy of The Roosevelt-Vanderbilt
National Historic Sites, National Park Service

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Regional History Forum

Each issue of The Hudson River Valley Review includes the Regional History Forum. This section highlights historic sites in the Valley, exploring their historical significance as well as information for visitors today. Although due attention is paid to sites of national visibility, HRVR also highlights sites of regional significance.



All images courtesy of Boscobel House and Gardens,
Garrison, New York

Rescuing Boscobel

Emily Hope Lombardo, Marist '15

Many visitors who drive through the gates of Boscobel for the first time may not be aware of the 210 years of storied history behind this exceptional restoration. The house, built during the first years of the nineteenth century by an American Loyalist, was originally located in Montrose, about fifteen miles south of its present location. For more than eighty years, the mansion housed four generations of a prominent New



May 25, 1925 view of Boscobel probably was taken at the opening of Cruger's Park in 1925

York family before it was left abandoned and empty for an additional sixty years. It may come as a shock to learn that Boscobel was saved from the wrecking ball at the eleventh hour, then disassembled piece by piece and driven up to Garrison on flatbed trucks. Even more stunning, the mansion remained scattered in the barns and sheds of local residents for years before it was reconstructed on the banks of the Hudson River across from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

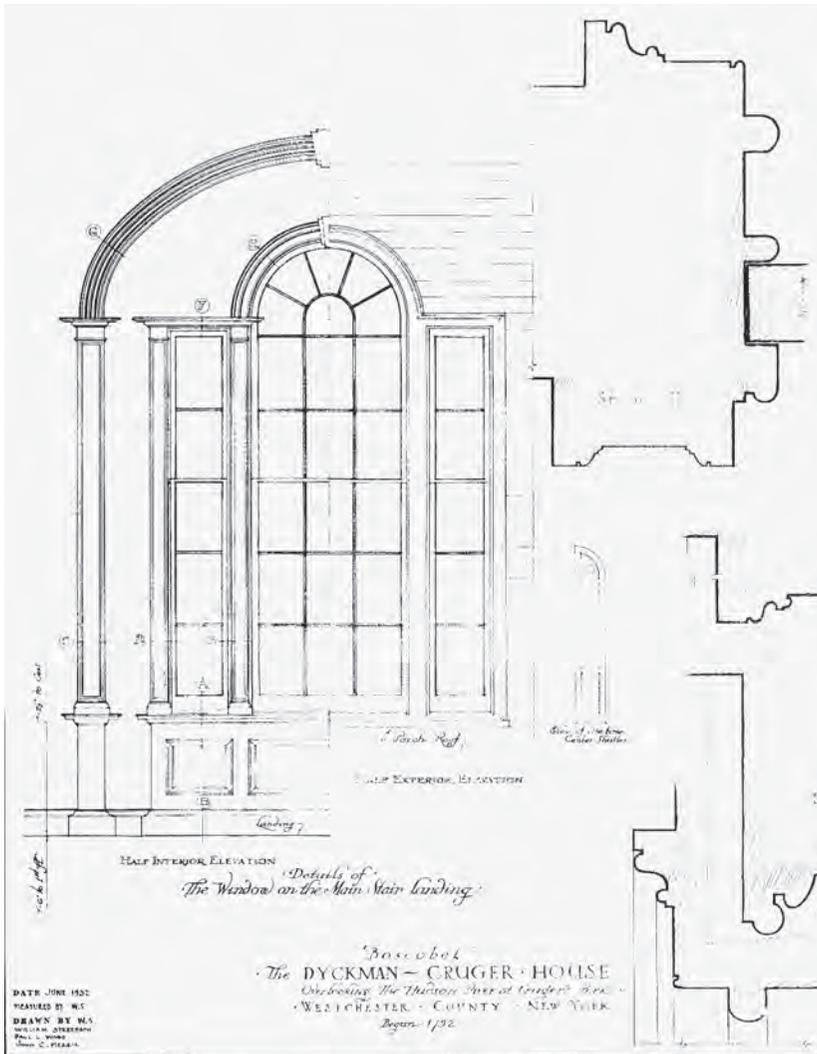
To fully appreciate the preservation and restoration of this cultural landmark, one must begin with the initial conception of the estate. States Morris Dyckman dreamed of a life as a gentleman farmer, a goal that became a reality after the American Revolution. Born in 1755, the descendant of a Dutch-German family who arrived in New York in 1662, States Dyckman split from his family during the Revolution and became a Loyalist. Working as a clerk for the British Quartermasters, with access to their financial records, Dyckman was ideally situated to aid his employers when they were charged with profiteering during the war.¹ In 1779, he accompanied his superiors to England, and for the next decade rebutted government allegations against them. (As keeper of the department's ledgers, Dyckman well knew how the quartermasters had fattened their purses.)² As a result of his informed testimony, the officers were eventually cleared of any wrongdoing, and Dyckman was rewarded by them with a generous annuity. He



**Boscobel house as it looked in 1942 while owned by the
Westchester County Parks Commission**

returned to America in 1789, after a general amnesty of Loyalists had been declared. Five years later, he married Elizabeth Corne, a member of a distinguished New York family, who was twenty-one years his junior. In 1800 Dyckman left behind his wife and three-year-old son Peter Corne Dyckman to return to England alone on what was intended to be a six-month visit to settle problems with the payment of his annuity. The trip proved to be a success, but wound up lasting three years.

When he returned, Dyckman was a wealthy man worth the equivalent of seven million of today's dollars. He began building his house in Montrose in 1804.³ He decided to name it Boscobel, a tribute to his dedication to the British crown. Boscobel was the name of a hunting lodge in England where the Royal Oak was located.⁴ To commemorate his visit to this landmark, Dyckman returned to America with a snuff box bearing a piece of the tree in its lid. In 1806, two years after construction of the house began, Dyckman died following a period of declining health. His wife oversaw completion of the house under the supervision of master builder William Vermilyea. At the same time, she raised Peter, ran the 250-acre farm surrounding Boscobel, and managed the family bank account. Peter inherited the house when his mother (who never remarried) died in 1823, but he died one year later, leaving Boscobel to his wife Susan and subsequently their daughter Eliza Letitia Corne Dyckman Cruger.⁵ Eliza



The 1932 measured drawings record both the interior and exterior features of Boscobel house

maintained possession of the house until 1888, when the family abandoned the property, taking their belongings and leaving the house empty.

Thirty-five years later, in 1923, Boscobel laid dormant and deteriorating when Westchester County Parks purchased the 250-acre riverfront property and opened it to the public. The house was only periodically visited by the occasional Boy Scout troop or caretakers checking in. In 1932, a team of architects from the Westchester County Emergency Works Bureau was so enthralled by the “superb workmanship and materials” of Boscobel that they documented the detailed interior and exterior features of

the building as well as the surrounding landscape.⁶ Their drawings would become the basis for the authentic restoration of key elements during Boscobel's reconstruction in the 1950s. But the mansion's fate looked bleak in 1941, when County Parks Chairman Evan Ward threatened to demolish Boscobel unless someone came forth and provided the necessary funds to repair and maintain it.⁷

In 1942, local architect Harvey Stevenson attempted to save the house by creating an organization he called Boscobel Inc. The organization negotiated to lease the house and five acres of land around it for five years, paying an annual rent of one dollar. The group hoped to raise funds to finance necessary repairs and eventually the house's complete restoration. With the country in the midst of World War Two, Boscobel Inc. eventually decided to postpone its fundraising campaign, having completed just a few repairs. In 1945, the property was acquired by the Veterans Administration to construct the new Franklin Delano Roosevelt Veterans Administration Hospital. Boscobel Inc. disbanded two years later. While Harvey Stevenson recognized there was no chance of saving the house on its original site, he could at least save some of the woodwork and incorporate it into a residence he was designing for Mrs. Henry P. Davidson in Locust Valley, New York. In 1955, the government declared Boscobel "excess to the needs of the Veterans Administration" and auctioned off the building to a demolition company for thirty-five dollars.⁸ Ironically, this seemingly grim fate turned out to be Boscobel's saving grace.

Benjamin West Frazier, a resident of Garrison, was then president of the Putnam County Historical Society. He was a modest man with an obsession for old houses and had already saved quite a few. His success at preservation was the result of many family car rides; Frazier often stopped during his travels to inspect old houses and barns and



A view of Boscobel house before it was dismantled



Front façade Boscobel house, Cortlandt, New York

groan about the fact that they were falling down.⁹ Hearing about the sale of Boscobel to a wrecker, he promised himself he would not let it be demolished. The wrecking ball was set to swing on Monday morning, May 16, 1955. On the Saturday before, Frazier called a judge to seek an injunction; the judge said he could not help because the wrecker had done nothing illegal. However, Frazier discovered some information off the record that changed the fate of the house. The wrecker had a police record and would not want any new trouble with the law.

Frazier's plan was to surround the house with "plug uglies," a group of intimidating men with bats and clubs, in a last-ditch effort to save it.¹⁰ With the help of a friend, John McNally, he hired just such a crew to meet at Boscobel house that Monday morning. As predicted, the wrecker would not risk a confrontation with the men, and Frazier was able to negotiate the purchase. In the end, the wrecker agreed to sell the structure to the newly incorporated Boscobel Restoration Inc. for \$10,000. Preservationists along with community members managed to raise the necessary funds to complete the transaction.

This next phase of Boscobel's history was even more challenging, since it was necessary to remove the house from the Montrose property. Frazier knew, as many others began to realize, that Boscobel was "One of the great architectural treasures of the country," and he was determined to do whatever was necessary to save it.¹¹ John McNally led a group of Garrison residents who helped to disassemble and move the house. Frazier



The flatbed truck, heavily laden with the missing pieces of Boscobel, completes the journey from Locust Valley, Long Island, to Garrison. The Hudson Highlands are visible in the background

made arrangements with several generous members of the Garrison community to store pieces of it in their barns, sheds, and homes for what was an undetermined amount of time—since no property had been purchased to relocate the house.

Constance Dennis Stearns and her husband Charles were proprietors of Garrison's Bird & Bottle Inn, an eighteenth-century tavern that had previously undergone a historic restoration. Constance Stearns and Frazier took responsibility for most of the daily activities of Boscobel's preservation, which included organizing the storage operation. Each piece of the house was labeled as it was taken from Montrose and recorded to track its location.

The property where Boscobel currently sits was previously owned by a family named deRham, who sold it in 1957 to a developer with plans to build a housing subdivision. The developer got so far as marking individual parcels where the houses would be constructed before discovering that the cost of drilling a well to the required depth would be too great to make the project profitable.¹² The property went back on the market, ushering in the involvement of Lila Acheson Wallace, co-founder of *Reader's Digest* with her husband DeWitt. Hearing about the work that had already gone into saving and preserving Boscobel, she purchased the sixteen-acre parcel for \$144,273.60.¹³

The project broke ground in 1958 with local contractors Fair-Chester Builders, Inc., and The Builders Millwork Co., Inc., hired to erect the house's frame.¹⁴ Wallace was promised that construction would continue through the winter, ensuring the building's swift completion, so she simultaneously purchased furnishings for the mansion. Meanwhile, Mrs. Davidson agreed to return original architectural elements as long as reproductions were made for the house she was planning to build.¹⁵ Work on Boscobel's interior did not begin until 1959, when Lila Wallace hired William C. Kennedy, an interior designer and consultant for the Reader's Digest Association, to oversee the restoration with assistance from Ben F. Garber.¹⁶ The interior was decorated in the English style, based on the assumption the Dyckman family would have owned English furniture. Wallace's attention to design and style, as well as her funding of the project, had a profound influence on Boscobel's restoration. It was her "attraction to fine things, her association with art collectors and dealers, and an innate domestic sense that attracted her to the challenge of Boscobel's restoration."¹⁷ After approximately two years of rapid reconstruction and development, the project was completed in 1960.

Benjamin Frazier's wife Helen would later say:

After Mrs. Wallace began to provide the money for the restoration, Ben was absolutely flabbergasted watching the work as it progressed. Ben had gone to St. Paul's and Harvard, he was amazed to see the example of what real money can do. The beautiful maple trees in front of the house came fully grown on trucks. The entire apple orchard came in fully grown on trucks. He stood here in absolute awe looking at these things arriving.¹⁸

Wallace did not concern herself with cost at any point of the project, including the property's landscaping. While not an accurate representation of the grounds of the

May 26, 1960 from a story in the *North Westchester Times* which gave public recognition to the support Lila Acheson Wallace proved for the restoration effort.



Five members of the Boscobel Restoration Inc. are shown as they gathered before a parlor fireplace as Boscobel house was being reconstructed at Garrison. From left are Henry Wilcox, secretary-treasurer and director; Mrs. Charles Stearns, vice president and director; Benjamin Frazier, chairman of building committee; Lila Acheson Wallace, vice president and director; and Lt. Col. M. Campbell Lorini, director, who is in charge of the restoration

original nineteenth-century estate in Montrose, the Garrison property continues to epitomize landscapes of the 1950s according to Wallace's interpretation.

The house was dedicated on May 21, 1961, with all those involved in the restoration attending a public ceremony to celebrate Boscobel's opening. The event also drew many of New York's elite, including publisher Bennett Cerf, U.S. Senator Jacob K. Javits, and David Rockefeller. New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller delivered the dedication speech, saying: "The rebuilding of Boscobel restores to our Hudson River Valley one of the most beautiful homes ever built in America. Now this magnificent mansion may be enjoyed by all our citizens. Set high above spectacular vistas of the Hudson River, Boscobel offers us and future generations a link with the gracious and historically significant past of our great state."¹⁹ Coinciding with the opening, Lila Wallace also announced a pledge of \$500,000 as an endowment for Boscobel Restoration on behalf of the Reader's Digest Foundation. She noted that "The rightful heirs of Boscobel



Boscobel Restoration, Inc., Garrison, New York opens to the public in 1961

are the American people who treasure all that is good and enduring in their history, architecture and art.”²⁰ Wallace’s pledge served to increase the project’s visibility in newspapers in New York City as well as throughout the Hudson River Valley.²¹

Since opening, Boscobel has become a focal point in the valley and attracted many important individuals, including then-First Lady “Lady Bird” Johnson. Her visit was part of an officially sponsored tour of the region in 1968 to address regional concerns about industrial and commercial development and pollution.²²

The 1970s marked a period of improved historical accuracy for Boscobel. The site received an archival collection that detailed the life of the Dyckman family and how they had furnished their home. Records from Dyckman’s time working with the British Quartermasters, letters between the family and colleagues, and numerous receipts and inventories helped to create a better understanding of how the house looked originally. Information derived from these documents contradicted the interpretation done by Kennedy and Garber in the 1960s and resulted in significant changes to both the interior and exterior of the house.

Boscobel was closed throughout 1976 for a reinterpretation, once again funded by Lila Wallace. She hired Berry B. Tracey, curator of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to purchase the finest early-nineteenth-century American furniture he could find. Tracey carefully researched the Hudson River Valley during the Federal Period as well as Dyckman family inventories to redecorate the house with historical accuracy. He outfitted it with furniture from leading New York cabinetmakers such as Duncan Phyfe. Period wallpaper was hung in the front entrance hall and two upstairs bedrooms. Tracey’s goal was to make Boscobel’s rooms “appear as they would have been when sparkling and new, not muted, and faded as historic house interiors

often were.”²³ Even Boscobel’s exterior also underwent a change—repainted from blue to its original yellow ochre.

Frazier would later write that “The actual rescue of Boscobel was dramatic and hectic beyond the wildest imagination of anyone of us connected with the project. Now



Painting trim elements with handmade pigmented linseed oil paint is conservation technician, Nicole Sequin during 2014 historical upgrade of the entrance hall



Boscobel’s historically upgraded entrance hall in 2014



Boscobel's guided house tour begins outside with a discussion of classical architectural features

that this phase has happily passed, we wonder how we ever did it and certainly would never do it again, not if all the treasures of the western world were at stake.²⁴ The process of saving the house was so complex that it is only appropriate that as Boscobel lives on, it continues to inspire further preservation and improvement. In the winter of 2013-2014, its front entrance hall received a historical upgrade, including new wallpaper in a period pattern that was reproduced with block printing and hung in strips. A floor cloth painted to resemble marble tiles was installed and the trim was repainted with the original color (identified after a paint analysis of an original door frame).

No doubt the rescuers of Boscobel would be pleased to witness a typical day in and around the mansion now. They might see a group of excited second-graders stepping off a school bus on what could be their very first field trip, or perhaps a Boy Scout troop heading out for a hike on the property's woodland trail. They might walk past chairs set up for a wedding with panoramic views of the Hudson River as its backdrop. They could stroll through the meticulously tended flower gardens or explore an exhibit in the historical art gallery.

One thing that has not changed is the traditional guided mansion tours that excite the interest of art, history, and architecture lovers alike. Without those who saw the value in saving, restoring, and preserving this house, Boscobel would not be the wonderful site of education, entertainment, and culture that it is today.

The author would like to thank Julia Frazier, Judith Pavelock, and the staff of Boscobel for their assistance in preparing this article.



View of the Hudson River from the front lawn of Boscobel looking south

Endnotes

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2. Kelly, Richard, and Reed Sparling. "History." *Boscobel Restoration Inc.* (Boscobel Restoration, 2005). 11.
3. States Dyckman letter written to bank in England in 1804
4. Boscobel was the name of the hunting lodge in Shropshire, England, where Charles II went into hiding after being defeated by Oliver Cromwell at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. The story of the day Charles II spent hiding in a tree in the forest spread, and the Royal Oak became a popular symbol of the British monarchy, House of Windsor.
5. She was named in honor of Peter's mother (Eliza being short for Elizabeth) and his younger sister, who died in infancy.
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22. Mike Risinit "Lady Bird Memory" *LoHud News*, July 13, 2007
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