

THE VEDDER HOMESTEAD AND CEMETERY AT THE GREAT FLATS

by

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Two of the last of the little-known cultural remains of the ancient Dutch settlement of Schenectady dating to within a year or two of its founding in 1662 are now threatened with destruction.

These consist of the east wall of the Vedder homestead which was possibly built in 1664 by Marten Cornelise Van Esselstyne and the large, nearly forgotten burial plot of the Vedder family pioneers.

Both of these relics of early Schenectady were initially brought to public attention by Paul Schaefer, local builder and expert on historical restoration, when he was asked to help in restoring portions of the Campbell Mansion which was built 150 years ago in 1832. Schaefer, while examining the west wall of the mansion, noticed that the brickwork had an unusual pattern. The windows were of a different size and had a pattern unlike those in the rest of the mansion. He then observed that the better bricks in the wall formed the shape of a smaller building. A bricked-up window, the sockets of large timbers and the sooted bricks of a former chimney and other incongruities provided strong evidence that the westerly wall of the Campbell Mansion utilized the brick wall of an earlier structure. At the time, Schaefer proposed that this was the remains of the home of Harmen Albertse Vedder, built when he bought the Great Flats hindmost farm No. 8 from Dirk Hesselingsh in 1672. Since the mansion is scheduled to be demolished by a developer, I have recently made a more detailed study of these fascinating remains.

In that remarkable book, "The History of the Schenectady Patent," by Jonathan Pearson, Professor of Natural History of Union College, and others which was edited by Major J. W. MacMurray, a number of items can be pieced together to provide an exciting new view of the cultural relics which still exist at this location along Campbell Road.

These records show that a Martin Cornelise Van Esselstyne, who was one of the original freeholders who joined Arent Van Curler in settling Schenectady in 1662, was assigned farm No. 8 on the Great Flats. It is likely that he then built a house and barn on the rise of land adjacent to the Poenties Kill and above flood waters. Shortly afterwards, for some reason not yet known, he decided to move to Claverack on the east side of the Hudson River. In 1666 he sold "his hindmost farm No. 8 with the house, barn, three ricks, four horses, five cows, eight hogs, wagon, plough and harrow" to Claas Frederikse Van Patten and Cornelis Cornelise Viele. They, in turn, on August 25, 1670, exchanged this property with Jurriaen Teunis Tappen for a house and lot in Albany. Tappen then sold the farm, buildings and other items to Dirk Hesselinh. It was from Hesselinh that Harmen Cornelise Vedder bought Hindmost Farm No. 8, house, barn and "seed in the ground" on February 1, 1672.

Since Harmen Vedder had also been an adult freeholder with Van Curler at Schenectady, his assigned farm consisted of farm No. 6 which he rented for six years to Simon Groot. Thus, when he purchased farm No. 8, his earlier holdings became part of his Great Flats "hofstede."

The first historical reference to Harmen Vedder appears in 1657 when he purchased land along the Hudson north of Troy in what was then referred to as Steen Ruby (Stone Arabis). He appears in several roles. He and one Pieterse operated a "salt kettle" on Coney Island for Dirk de Wolfe in 1661.

His rights to this property were contested and he lost the suit and moved to Albany. Among other activities, he engaged in "free" trade with the indians. Since he apparently had a tendency to operate beyond the rules established by Albany, I wonder whether he might have encouraged Van Curler to settle Schenectady since they then might be able to establish an independent trading post at the junction of the Binnekill and the Mohawk River. This was an ideal site for a trading post, the land being above the reach of flood waters and with a good stream for water and a mill. It was also closer to the Mohawk Iroquois whose beaver pelts and other furs they wished to obtain by trade.

Harmen Albertse Vedder died about 1714, 42 years after settling on the edge of the Great Flats above the Poenties Kill. He had six children, five boys and a girl. The incomplete early records suggest that his first wife, whose family name may have been Provoost, had three children before she died: Albert, born 1671; Harmanus, born 1672; and Arent, born 1674. After the death of his first wife, Harmen married again about 1683. From this marriage came first a girl Angenietje, born 1684; Johannes, born 1685; and Corset, born 1686.

Nearly all of these children had large families, ranging in number from six to 10 and 12. That a number of these early pioneers are buried in the Vedder cemetery near the old homestead is quite likely, since as such early cemeteries go it is a very large one. I estimate it to be 20 by 40 feet, or possibly more.

Six gravestones were observed by Prof. Carl George and me in early January of 1982. All of these ancestors of the Vedder line are identified in the Vedder Genealogy 1657-1974 published by Edwin Vedder. This bound book lists 12 generations totaling more than 3000 individuals. I have been told that many more will be added in a revised edition.

A review of the activities of members of the Vedder family provides a fascinating picture of the founding and development of early settlements along the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers and later in other parts of the United States.

The fate of the standing east wall of the Vedder homestead and of the Vedder Cemetery is uncertain at the present time (March 20, 1982).

According to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement submitted to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation by the Wilmorite Corporation of Rochester, New York, the Campbell Mansion is scheduled for demolition. The developer was apparently not aware of the presence of the Vedder Cemetery or the possibility of an Iroquois burial site which may be nearby, since they have only recently taken note of these features. Since the Vedder Cemetery is located near the center of their proposed building complex and is at an elevation of 8 to 10 feet above the grade of their building complex, it is unclear as to what can be done to mitigate this problem.

There are a number of town and state rules and laws and also court decisions pertaining to burying grounds which must be considered before any construction or demolition can be done. The Wilmorite Corporation has agreed to abide with such regulations in a set of stipulations signed by the principals involved.

When Paul Schaefer discovered the ancient wall of the Vedder Homestead, he notified Mr. Larry Hart (now City Historian). Hart in 1962 had just joined the Schenectady Gazette as a reporter, and his article published June 14, 1962 is extremely interesting. Included in the article is a description of the dimensions of the Vedder Homestead which were apparently still visible in its foundation (50 feet by 25 feet), and the fact that holes for the 9 inch by 12 inch wooden beams could be discerned in the still-standing wall.

Another item in the article mentioned a nearby family burial ground and that eight years previously several Iroquois graves had been uncovered by a bulldozer cutting into a nearby hill. It has since been established that Mr. Alfred Hulstrunk, who in 1954 was employed by the Schenectady Museum, was notified of the discovery and spent the day exploring the find area. He found a second burial, the body in a flexed position (typical of indian burial practice). No relics were found other than the bones. This burial was carefully exposed and then prepared as an archeological exhibit at the Museum. Its present status is not known by me.

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