AN HISTORIC HOUSE ON THE HUDSON: THE SILENT WITNESS OF THE GROWTH OF AMERICAN FREEDOM: BY NATALIE CURTIS

East of the Hudson River, about six miles above Newburgh, stands an historic house,—the oldest house in that part of the country,—whose history suggests the three great principles which are the foundation of American life: religious liberty, political independence and strength of individual endeavor. The house, which was built somewhere between seventeen hundred and fourteen and seventeen hundred and twenty, rests in a hollow, on a road leading downward to a rocky point of land jutting into the river. This point forms the northwestern head of Newburgh bay, and around it cling perhaps the oldest traditions of that region; for its story reaches back into the primitive life of aboriginal America.

Long before the white men, fleeing from religious persecution, sought homes in the New World,—long before the Dutch and English pushed to the shores of the Hudson River, the native Americans, the Algonquin tribes of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, met at certain seasons to worship in their own way along the river banks. The crooked roads past Newburgh and down to the water’s edge, over which throngs of the traffic of the white man today, are simply enlargements of Indian trails beaten by moccasined feet through what was then a primeval wilderness. From all directions the trails converged at the spot where the house now stands, and led downward to the point on the shore where the Indians held their ceremonies. Down from the North, up from the South, and across the mountains from the West came the tribes, sometimes from two hundred miles away, to gather on the rocky point. Here they danced in ceremonial rite, chanting their harsh, rhythmic liturgies and invoking the supernatural forces that to them were manifest in nature and in the animals. Thus the red men implored the greater powers to aid them in their struggle for existence, praying for help in war, in fishing expeditions and in the chase. Colonial chronicles tell that these rites were held before starting on the hunt, or on war ventures, in order that the Indians might learn whether they would be successful. Could the
Indian medicine-men, the tribal priests and prophets, have understood the sign that floated up the Hudson past their place of ceremony in the historic year of sixteen hundred and nine, what message of despair would they have proclaimed to their people? But the Indians little knew at that time that the coming of the white men meant their doom. Tradition says that Hudson’s ship lay by night at anchor off the rocky point, while the Indians performed their ceremony. What a sight met the eyes of the astonished sailors! Strange forms upon the shore, lit only by the flare of a great fire, danced and leaped around the blaze, while out over the waters floated a shrill, barbaric chant which must have seemed to the white men the very voice of the unknown wilderness. If the Indians further down the river, who by day had seen with awe the approach of the strange ship, had welcomed the white men, thinking them gods,—so now the sailors, struck with terror at the Indians upon the river bank, thought indeed that the aborigines were in league with the devil! In fact, a description of the Indian ceremony written in sixteen hundred and twenty-one, naively states that at a certain moment in the dance “the devil appears (they say) in the shape of a ravenous or a harmless animal—the first betokens something bad, the second something good.” It is uncertain just when the rocky point on which the Indians held their ceremonies received the suggestive name by which it still is known. The story goes that it was a Dutch skipper, somewhere between sixteen hundred and twenty-four and sixteen hundred and forty, who with the picturesque and superstitious fancy of that period, first called the spot, “De Duyfels Dans Kammer” (“The Devil’s Dance Chamber”), which title has been solemnly inscribed ever since on maps and legal records.

The Indians continued to hold their ceremonies at the Dans Kammer many years after Hudson’s advent, until early in the eighteenth century the simple worshipers retreated into the forests, driven back by the settlements of the whites.

IT WAS in the reign of “Good Queen Anne,” over a hundred years after Hudson’s discovery, that a large grant of five thousand nine hundred acres on the Hudson River known as the “Harrison Patent,” was issued and divided among five owners. The northern portion of this grant containing about one thousand acres of land, including the Dans Kammer, was obtained in seventeen hundred and fourteen by an obscure but interesting personage known to local history as “Gomez the Jew.” From his name Gomez must have been by ancestry a Spanish or Portuguese Jew, possibly one of those whose family had known little peace in Europe since the expulsion
of the Jews from Spain in fourteen hundred and ninety-two, but who, like religious refugees of Christian faith, had found temporary asylum in brave and tolerant little Holland. Or he may have been descended from the little band of Jews who fled from Portuguese Brazil and landed at the New Netherlands in sixteen hundred and fifty-four. However this may be, we hear of Gomez only as "a Jew and a merchant of New York." Here then, on the Hudson, in a hollow of the hills, close to the main Indian trail leading across the mountains to the Dans Kammer, Gomez built his house. Pioneer settlers in those days naturally selected such location for their dwellings as would provide them best protection against the elements and against hostile Indians. Gomez therefore built his home in a warm spot at the head of a valley facing the south, near a spring. As this spring was a favorite stopping place for the Indians, being on the main trail leading from the back country to the Dans Kammer, it can readily be seen that the house must have been built with the idea of fortification against possible Indian depredation. Indeed, Gomez was six miles from any other settlement and thus lived in comparative isolation. The house was therefore a stronghold,—a stone block house of the type often built at that period in outlying districts. It consisted of two front rooms and back of these two cellars wherein were stored provisions and possessions safely barricaded against the Indians. Over the whole sloped the slanting Dutch roof characteristic of New York dwellings at that time. It must have been Gomez, or his workmen, who first felled the primeval forest trees of this region to furnish timber for the roof.

Whether or not the Jewish merchant piled up the stone walls with his own hands, or whether he employed Dutch or English builders to help him, is not known; but the house was skilfully and well built. The common field stone was the only material used in the entire structure except the wood for the roof. There was no lime, yet the stones were so well fitted, and so cunningly locked together that the observer would fancy them laid in mortar. The unavoidable cracks between the stones were simply chinked with clay—found near at hand—to keep out rats and weather. The great walls, over two feet in thickness, have stood for nearly two hundred years, just as they were when the stones were first laid.

It is probable that like many another early New Yorker, Gomez sought the wilderness for trade with the Indians. Indeed, the location of his house at the convergence of the Indian trails, near the Indian spring and camping ground, would indicate that he purposely established himself where he could come into ready touch with the red men for purposes of barter. We may imagine the Indians on
their way to the Dans Kammer stopping at the block house to leave
their furs in exchange for the hatchets, knives and trinkets that they
coveted. The strong cellars in the back of the house were probably
built to hold the peltries acquired by the merchant, as well as the
articles of exchange for the Indians. Trade with the natives was
indeed one of the commonest forms of livelihood among the Dutch
and English of New York, and it is not unlikely that Gomez was a
rich merchant with paid assistants, and that his trading was an enter-
prise of some importance. It is curious that he should bear the same
name as Estevan Gomez who in fifteen hundred and twenty-five
sailed from Labrador to Florida and was one of the earliest navig-
gators to notice the mouth of the Hudson River.

SO STOOD as a frontier settlement this house of an early Jewish
pioneer whose presence, even as a merchant-trader, suggests
reflection on the spirit of religious freedom which was avowedly the
first principle of the settlers in the New World. At that time bigotry
and persecution raged in Europe among those who were all Christian
and racially related, but differing Christian sects had endured per-
secution at each other's hands only since the Reformation; the Jews
had endured it at the hands of all almost since the advent of Christian-
ity itself. It was therefore a significant test of American ideals of
religious liberty, that the Jew as a Jew, so early found a home among
the Colonists. Perhaps nothing proves more convincingly the sin-
cerity of the followers of Roger Williams than the reception of the
Jews by Rhode Island. When some of the oppressed and harried
Hebrew race asked if they could find a home near this settlement,
they received in answer this statement, "We declare they may expect
as good protection here as any stranger, not being of our nation,
ought to have." For did not the very Charter drawn up by the
Rhode Island assembly of the people contain the words,—"No
person shall at any time hereafter be in anyways called in question
for any difference of opinion in matters of religion . . . ."

In August, sixteen hundred and ninety-four, a band of Jews
landed at Newport, and there, true to their faith, they subsequently
built a Jewish house of God on American soil. Longfellow has
sung the pathos of this persecuted race in his poem on the old
Colonial Jewish burial ground at Newport. But it was not in Rhode
Island that the Jews were first received; New Amsterdam had already
opened its harbor to the Jewish refugees from Brazil. Though
Peter Stuyvesant, then Governor of the colony, had ordered this little
band of Jews to leave the country, he received instructions from
Holland that this course would be "unreasonable and unfair," and
Scene in the House of Gomez the Jew:
Indians bartering furs with the trader.
that he was to allow the Jews to remain and to accord them such civil
and political rights as were granted them in Amsterdam. The Jews
found happiest homes, however, in the colony of Roger Williams,
who was beloved for his justice and broad-mindedness not only
by his own followers but by the Indians as well,—he who feared that
England and the other nations would one day have to regret their
treatment of the Jews, and who declared, “I desire not the liberty
to myself which I would not freely and impartially weigh out to all
the consciences of the world besides.”

To appreciate what this spirit of religious tolerance—or perhaps
more truly, the effort toward it—meant in those times, we must
remember how Europe had been torn by jealous and bloody wars in
which religious bigotry had played hideous and cruel part. The
block house on the Hudson, like many another old American dwelling,
was therefore, in a measure, a silent witness to a new spirit of freedom,
—to a spirit of growth in racial as well as in religious tolerance. Who
can foretell, in our nation of many races, what the complete develop-
ment of this spirit of tolerance may mean in the ideals and in the
“new religion” of the country. Certainly, in regard to the Jews,
the opening to this keenly intellectual race, of professions and activities
which had been denied them during centuries of European oppres-
sion, should have a quickening effect upon our institutions, stimu-
lating progress in the arts and sciences, and grafting upon a cosmo-
politan and youthful country the seasoned cultural influence of an
ancient civilization. Indeed, Harper’s Encyclopedia of United
States History, in writing of the Jews in America, says that already
“their homes, asylums, hospitals and educational establishments
are among the best endowed and most progressive institutions in the
country, and the benevolent acts of prosperous Hebrew men toward
objects and institutions other than those of their own people have
received a high and deserved recognition.”

“Gomez the Jew” must have held his lonely citadel for some
thirty years or so. His block house subsequently changed owners,
—and in seventeen hundred and seventy-two, four years before the
Revolutionary War, it was bought by a patriotic Dutch-American
named Wolfert Acker, during whose possession the house entered
upon its second period of typical American life.

This Wolfert Acker was a great-grandson of Jan Acker, one of
the early Dutch settlers in New Netherland, and a grandson of
the older Wolfert whom Washington Irving has immortalized with
such quaint humor in his sketch called “Wolfert’s Roost.” This
younger Wolfert is in no way to be confused with the elder, nor is
the block house of “Gomez the Jew,” on the west bank of the Hud-
son to be identified with the "Roost," or "Sunnyside," on the east bank, described by Irving. Wolfert the younger was a Revolutionary patriot who attained much local prominence during the war. He seems to have been a man of decision and energy, and to have been filled with a fine spirit of American patriotism. At a time when New York was wavering between loyalty to the crown and the determined stand for independence, Wolfert came forward in his local precinct as a stanch and daring adherent to the cause of liberty. Newburgh was then the principal town on this part of the Hudson, and we repeatedly find the name of Wolfert Acker upon the town chronicles.

The story of the settlement of Newburgh is not without picturesque interest. It was in seventeen hundred and nine, a hundred years after the discovery of the Hudson River, that a group of Protestant German peasants, known as the Palatines, were driven by the Catholic French from the Rhine during the war of the Spanish succession between Louis XIV and the Grand Alliance of European powers. The villages in the Palatinate were burned and the peasants reduced to starvation till at the instigation of Protestant Queen Anne and her statesmen, the German refugees sought English protection and were sent to America. Most of the Palatines settled in Pennsylvania—(having perhaps already come under the influence of William Penn during his travels in Germany) and there they left their impress in the quaint dialect known as "Pennsylvania Dutch." But a few came to New York, for, homesick for their Rhenish country, they had petitioned the "Goode Queene" for lands in the new world as like as possible to their beloved banks of the Rhine, and a grant on the beautiful Hudson River had therefore been issued to them. Some ten or twelve rude log cabins of these Palatine settlers formed the beginning of what is now the town of Newburgh. The German colony was short lived, however, for in seventeen hundred and forty-three the increasing stream of English settlers bought out all the Palatine farmers, who sought homes elsewhere,—all except one family, the descendants of Michael Weigand, who are still to be found in Orange County.

It was at the hostelry of Martin Weigand, mentioned by historians as "the Weigand Tavern at Newburgh," that the daring General "mad Anthony Wayne" made his headquarters, while Washington stayed at the historic "Washington Headquarters" still standing in the town. In seventeen hundred and seventy-five, before the outbreak of the war, a meeting was held by the patriots at the Weigand Tavern, when Wolfert Acker and others were appointed "A Com-
mittee of Safety and Observation.” The Tories in the northern part of the precinct were aggressive and prominent, and had incited the neighboring Indians to depredations upon the Whigs. It was as necessary to protect the settlers at home as to send troops to the front. A little later in the same year, we find Wolfert among the delegates selected to attend the Provincial Convention in New York. Still later we see him chairman of another important meeting at the Weigand Tavern, when the Committee “formulated and placed a copy of the pledge of the patriots there for signature.” We are told that Wolfert was in fact a “zealous Whig,” and that he was noted for “hunting Tories.” We are also told that a regiment located at Newburgh in seventeen hundred and seventy-three had Wolfert Acker as second lieutenant. He contributed freely of his means to the Revolutionary struggle, and, indeed, he seems to have left nothing undone that was in his power to do in furthering the cause of American independence.

The block house near the Dans Kammer now became the meeting place for the Whigs in all that part of the country, and indeed the favorite resort of the local patriots. The house, as occupied by Wolfert Acker, stood for the great principle of political independence. On the Sabbath day the neighboring Whig farmers gathered at Wolfert’s house to confer together and to learn the latest war news. Wolfert opened these meetings by reading a chapter from his old Dutch Bible; after this he recounted to his audience whatever news he had received, then the current Whig newspaper was read, and a general discussion followed. The meetings broke up early that the farmers might reach their homes before dark. We may imagine that the Whigs dreaded to leave their farms unprotected after sundown; and though the old Indian trails had long since become high roads along which the people had built their homes, perhaps the revolutionists never felt wholly safe from Tories and hostile Indians after nightfall.

With what joy must the Newburgh patriots have welcomed the victorious close of the war! Surely they must have felt that some thanks were due to the local efforts of Wolfert Acker. For we are told that by the little Sabbath meetings in his stone house Wolfert “continually strengthened the hearts and hands of the friends of Liberty during the whole War.”

After the seven years’ struggle was over and commerce and industry were again striving to emerge from the ruin that had blighted New York, we find Wolfert Acker vigorously engaged in new pursuits. With the creative enterprise and self-reliant initiative that were and are typical of American character, we see Wolfert estab-
lishing a landing on the Hudson (now known as Cedarcliff); throwing a ferry across the river; sending a packet line of sloops to New York City; operating grist and saw mills on the stream flowing past his house, known on old maps as "Jew's Creek" in honor of Gomez; and busily occupying himself on his own premises with the manufacture of brick,—a trade in which the Dutch excelled. The brickyard was but a simple affair. Acker had found clay in the hill above his house, and utilizing the natural opportunity thus offered he had his negro slaves cast bricks in home-made molds. The block house now enters upon the third era of its life. It bears witness to the pluck and industry with which the New Yorkers rebounded from the devastation of the War. It becomes transformed from a mere pioneer stronghold into an American home. Acker knocks off the old sloping Dutch roof and builds a second-story from his own bricks. So stands the house today,—an old American mansion on the Hudson River, having outlived those who made its history, but still filled with the honor of by-gone days.

We part reluctantly from the forceful character of Wolfert Acker the younger, and from this interesting period in New York history. In eighteen hundred and twenty-four the house and property passed from the old Dutch family into other hands.

Fortunately for the house and its history, the present owner is himself a native of Newburgh who values the old traditions of the Hudson River. When the house came into his possession, he found it quite a modernized dwelling. With care, prompted by taste and intelligence, he undid the work of the last fifty years and restored the house to its old Colonial dignity. The task was only accomplished by patient study and effort. Bit by bit, beneath the modern innovations, the true character of the old dwelling was discovered and again brought forth. Let us look at the house today. There it stands, half stone, half brick, nestled deep among the hills, sheltered from the winds in winter, shaded by the trees in summer. Before it rushes the mill-stream with its ceaseless song. A little path leads to the door, whose framework is still the wood of those first trees felled by "Gomez the Jew." Opposite the door in the center of the house is a steep pine staircase built by Wolfert Acker. To the left of the staircase on the ground floor, is the larger of the two rooms built by Gomez. Here is the huge stone fireplace, whose opening is at least eight feet wide and between five and six feet deep, before which we may imagine that the Indians warmed themselves when they came in winter to barter furs. What a picture it makes for the fancy—the pioneer Jew and the Indians in the broad,
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low-ceiled room, lit by the roaring fire of mammoth logs. In the smaller room to the right is another equally large fireplace, in the center of which hangs an iron chain with a hook at the end on which a pot or kettle was hung in the old days. Back of these two rooms, bedded in the hillside and thus quite inaccessible from without, are the two cellars. Upstairs there are several rooms, built, of course, by Acker, and above this second story of brick is a garret in which may now be seen a number of spinning wheels collected by the present owner of the house.

The great stone fireplaces of the Jew had been bricked in by Acker, and Colonial mantelpieces placed above them. Later comers had made the fireplaces still smaller, according to modern fashion, so that no traces of the original hearths were to be seen. The present owner noticed that the chimneys in the garret were enormously wide, and he wondered why they were so much larger than the fireplaces below. Convinced that the original fireplaces were very large and were still beneath the modern ones, he began to dig and found, as has been said, that two successively smaller fireplaces had been built into the first cavernous ones. So he restored the rude picturesque hearths to their original aspect. This is only one detail of his work upon the house.

It is gratifying to find an American of today unpossessed by the fever of tearing down the old while striving for the new,—one who as a private individual is willing to give time and study to the preservation of an old American landmark. Surely this is a pastime,—if we may call it by so slight a word—of benefit to a local community, as well as of credit to the individual. Our past is not far behind us; it is true; but our history, though only a few generations long, is worth remembering.

They say that some of Wolfert Acker's many descendants pushed westward. Let us hope that they inherited the vigor and initiative of their progenitor. The desire for liberty of thought and of individual enterprise is as characteristic of our struggling Western towns today as ever it was of the first settlements. Indeed, could the old house on the Hudson but speak, it might justly echo for the present generation of Americans the Colonial maxim declaring freedom of conscience 'to every man, whether Jew, or Turk, or papist, or whomsoever steers no otherwise than his conscience dares.'