

Immigrants to Schaghticoke: The Knickerbockers: Part One

In earlier columns, I have discussed the Native Americans of Schaghticoke. The first whites or Europeans to live in the town were of Dutch descent. Of course Albany began its history as a trading post for the Dutch in 1624. I wrote earlier about the city of Albany purchasing land at Schaghticoke in the early 18th century, the Albany Corporation Lands. The city granted leased farms of fifty acres each to a few men from Albany in 1708. Those first Dutch settlers arrived the next year. Descendants of several of those first families stayed in town for at least the next 100 years. They brought Dutch customs and culture with them, from the language, to the religion, Dutch Reformed. The services at the church were conducted in Dutch until about 1800.

Johannes Knickerbocker was one of the first settlers, and became the most outstanding Dutch immigrant to Schaghticoke. He was the son of Harman Jansen Knickerbocker, who immigrated from Holland to New Amsterdam (New York) about 1674. At the time, last names were not in general use, but when needed, often reflected the place one lived or came from. In the records, Harme Janse (spelling was also very flexible) was sometimes called Herman Jansen Van Wyekycbacke or Van Bommell- both locations in the Netherlands. Last names were also taken from occupations, and around 1695, Harme Janse began to refer to himself as Knickerbacker. It means “marble baker”. Playing marbles was a popular Dutch game, and probably either Harme Janse or his father made marbles. Harman or Herman married Elizabeth Van de Bogart in 1678. Their son Johannes was born in 1679, and they had moved upriver to the Albany by 1680. Harman bought a farm at Half Moon for thirty beavers in 1682. He added to his property there in 1697, but sold it and moved to Dutchess County in 1704.

Meanwhile, son Johannes or John grew up and married Anna Quackenbush in 1701. As stated above, he was one of the original eight lessees of Albany City land at Schaghticoke. Even before moving to Schaghticoke, the enterprising Johannes and Dirck VanVeghten petitioned the city of Albany for milling rights, probably on the Tomhannock Creek near their farms, “to erect a saw mill . . .together with a privilege to cut saw logs within the city bounds (the Albany Corporation Lands).” Johannes added to his leased acreage over the years. In the 1720 census of the city of Albany, Johannes was one of twelve freeholders at Schaghticoke. That means he had property worth at least forty pounds. Johannes and Ann had three sons, Harmon, Wouter, and John. The youngest, John (1723-1803) inherited the land on which the surviving mansion stands when his father died in 1749.

In the next column, I will continue the story, describing the prosperous and civic-minded lives of John Knickerbocker and his son, another John. The bibliography will be at the end of that column.

Immigrants to Schaghticoke: the Knickerbocker Family, part 2

In the last column, I described the arrival of the now famous Knickerbockers in Schaghticoke. Johannes Knickerbocker moved to the Albany Corporation Lands on the Hoosic River as one of the original Dutch lessees in 1709. His father, Harman, a Dutchman from Albany, was the first of the family to use Knickerbocker as a surname. Johannes thrived, passing a considerable estate on to **his** son John, born in 1723.

John, son of Johannes, became the leader of the new community of Schaghticoke. In 1750 he married Rebecca Fonda at the Dutch Reformed Church in Albany. They had two children who survived, John, born in 1751, and Anna, born in 1753. John Sr. continued his father's habit of acquiring land, leasing several more farms within the Albany Corporation Lands. John became very involved in civic and military affairs. He was a soldier in the French and Indian War, part of the British expedition against the French Fort Carrillon in 1758. In 1773 he was appointed a Justice of the Peace in Albany County, and as the Revolution began, headed the local Committee of Safety. He became the first Colonel of the local militia unit, the 14th Albany. It is possible that some of his land was used to bivouac American troops preceding the battle of Saratoga. John resigned his commission after being wounded at the battle of Saratoga in 1777. He ended his long civic career as the first assemblyman to represent the new Rensselaer County in the NYS Legislature in 1792. John died at the age of 79 in 1802.

John Junior continued in his father's footsteps. At the age of eighteen, in 1769, he petitioned the city of Albany, asking that he be granted all the remaining unleased Albany land between his father's land and the Hudson River. This was allowed, in exchange for a yearly feast at his home for the Albany Common Council. By 1788, he owned much more land than his father. It is probable that about that time, he constructed the current Knickerbocker Mansion. The father and son were certainly among the wealthiest men in Schaghticoke. There were six Knickerbocker farms on the c. 1790 map of the Albany Corporation Lands. The 1790 census lists father and son each owning nine slaves, the most of anyone in town. Slaveholding was common in the Dutch culture. In 1800, John Junior had \$5750 worth of real estate, and a personal estate of \$1406. John Junior went beyond farming to invest in the second bridge over the Hoosic River in 1799, which facilitated both agriculture and the developing industry in the gorge of the Hoosic.

John Junior also followed his father in taking on civic responsibilities. After serving as a private in the 14th Albany Militia in the Revolution, he continued on in the militia. In 1791 he was a Major in Brigadier General Henry VanRensselaer's Brigade, rising to the rank of Colonel by the War of 1812. John served the town of Schaghticoke as both Poor Master and a Commissioner of Highways. He was appointed an assistant Justice of the Peace when Rensselaer County was formed in 1791, and served after his father in the State Assembly, from 1796-1802. John Junior died in 1827, leaving 1,166 acres of land in his will. The Knickerbockers had come a long way since Harmen Jansen's arrival in the New World about 100 years earlier. In future columns, I will write about one of John Junior's sons, Herman.

The Knickerbocker Historical Society has done remarkable work in restoration of the Knickerbocker Mansion, which was a derelict building in the 1980's. It is "the most significant historic building in upper Rensselaer County." If you have not visited it lately, I strongly recommend that you do. The Mansion is open for tours every Sunday from 11 am to 3 pm from May to October. The Society also holds a number of special events during the year, and is available for weddings and special events. Their website is www.knickmansion.com. Email them at knickinfo@aol.com, or phone at 664-1700. The Society also knows far more about Knickerbocker history and genealogy than I!

Bibliography: Pierpont Nelson Architects, Historic Structure Report: Knickerbocker Mansion, 1990.
1790 census
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