

Brief History of the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum

The present Dyckman farmhouse is the only remaining structure built by the Dyckman family in northern Manhattan. Jan Dyckman arrived in New Amsterdam in the 1660's via Bentheim in Westphalia. Not much is known about Jan until the 1670's when he started appearing in Harlem records. In partnership with Jan Nagel he began acquiring land at the very top of the island. The Dyckman Homestead, which included at least two houses by the time of the Revolutionary War, was located at the East River, slightly north of present-day 207th Street. The houses were adjacent to the Nagle property and the Dyckman and Nagle families, who intermarried, and shared a cemetery on the land.

By the time of the Revolutionary War, William Dyckman (1725-1787), Jan's grandson, was living on the homestead and inherited a portion of the family land. While three of his son's fought on the colonist's side during the War, he and his wife Mary Tourneur Dyckman (1782-1802) and the youngest of their children fled upstate during the war. No evidence has emerged to prove exactly where they stayed, but there were many Dyckman relatives throughout upstate New York.

When William and his family returned following the evacuation of British troops from New York in November 1783, it was to utter devastation. Seven years of war took an enormous toll on New York. In Northern Manhattan, which was not as densely populated as the lower city, there was still a significant amount of destruction, both to homes and farmland. William Dyckman returned to find the houses on the homestead gone, one apparently by fire, and his farms and orchards destroyed.

It appears that William joined in these recovery efforts and began rebuilding on a site south and west of the earlier Dyckman family homes, on the newly re-routed Kingsbridge road [modern Broadway]. The original pathway of the roadway led towards the old homestead, but during the war it had been rerouted to run further inland. The re-routing of the roadway may have influenced William's decision to build in a new location. Oral family tradition, as reported by his grandson, Isaac Dyckman, suggests that William initially opened his new house to travelers. Although for how long he may have run an informal inn is unclear. The house, as originally constructed, consisted of the main rectangular block of the house, with an east overhang protecting the stairs leading to the front door. It is presumed that the farmhouse and the farm were rebuilt with the labor of family, friends and slaves.

William died in 1787 and the property with its "commodious dwelling house," and 250-acre farm was offered for sale in the *New York Packet* in August of 1788. While ultimately William's son Jacobus took over the farmhouse, the ad is an excellent document of how much work the family and slaves had done in rebuilding the farm in less than five years. The ad describes the property as convenient for fishing and containing both salt and fresh meadowland, a barn and other outhouses in good repair and as well as a young orchard.

Jacobus inherited a modest farmhouse that he would alter significantly over the next several decades. The makeup of the household also changed drastically over the years as family members died or children moved. Jacobus and his wife Hannah had 11 children, most of whom were born before they moved into the house. Their household would also have included slaves, free black workers and extended family.

Upon his death in 1832, Jacobus left the bulk of his property to his two bachelor sons, Isaac (1794-1868) and Michael (1797-1854). At some point in the early 1850's the brothers and those in their household, moved to another house on their property. By the 1850 census that household included extended family, female Irish servants and male farmhands. Included in the household was their nephew James Frederick Smith (1813-1899) who first moved in with his uncles around 1820.

It is believed that the Dyckman family rented out the farmhouse from the 1850's until it was finally sold in 1871.

Following the death of Isaac in 1868, and in accordance with his will, James Frederick Smith changed his name to Isaac Michael Dyckman and inherited a substantial amount of the Dyckman Property. However, Isaac also dictated that his executors sell a significant amount of land with the proceeds going to other nephews and nieces. In 1871, farmhouse and some surrounding land was sold.

Between 1871 and 1915 the farmhouse changed hands several times and seems to have remained rental housing.

With the arrival of the first subway line in 1906 and the second destined for 1933, there was much discussion in the local press about the building boom expected and the impact on the neighborhood. Questions were also raised about the state of the "relics" of the neighborhood such as the Dyckman Farmhouse. It was certainly not the only old house in the area but it was one which was quite prominently placed on Broadway and concerns over its future were voiced.

In 1915, Mary Alice Dyckman Dean (1869-1950) and Fannie Frederika Dyckman Welch (1871-1951), daughters of Isaac Michael Dyckman (James Frederick Smith) purchased the farmhouse with the plan of turning it into a museum. With their husbands, Bashford Dean, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Alexander McMillan Welch, a talented architect, they restored the building, furnished it and landscaped the grounds. Welch appears to have directed the physical restoration of the building while Dean served as honorary curator of the new museum, setting up the initial period room displays and the exhibition rooms.

Mary Alice Dean and Fannie Welch presented the fully restored Dyckman House to the City of New York on July 3, 1916 "in memory of Isaac Michael Dyckman and Fannie Blackwell Brown Dyckman, parents of the donors, upon condition that the said land and dwelling are to be used in perpetuity as a public park and as a public museum, called The Dyckman House Park." The house has served the City of New York as a public museum since that time.