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Tracing Your Roots in Greene County

By Sylvia Hasenkopf

A tale of two historic homes in Cornwallville

Yesterday, an article appeared in the Porcupine Soup reporting on a proposed residential development on Strong Road in Cornwallville. The developer's intent is to build 12 residential homes on a 95-acre parcel with a driveway from Strong Road providing access to all 12 homes.

Local residents have expressed their concern that an ambitious project such as this one would forever change the rural and bucolic setting of their neighborhood. They cite that Cornwallville, a hamlet established by Dan Cornwall, a Patriot who served during the American Revolution, would lose its historic charm and the agricultural foundation and values which have ruled the area since the first settlers from New England arrived towards the end of the Revolution.

Passions run deep in the town of Durham, NY, as do the family ties to the land. Many of the families who settled in Durham from 1784 until the early 19th century have descendants in the town, some of whom still live on their ancestor's original homestead lands, if not in the original homestead itself.

What drew those early settlers to the wilds of what was then then Albany County (Greene County was established in 1800 from land taken from Albany County and Ulster County)? Necessity and desperation.

Beer's History of Greene County, published in 1884, provides a glimpse into the motivation of those early pioneers.

"The government was heavily in debt, having borrowed \$8,000,000 of other nations, besides the many millions (\$170,000,000 according to Patton's history), which she owed to her faithful soldiery and marine."

"The whole energies of the loyal people had been given to the cause of liberty, so that trade and manufactures had been greatly neglected and in the language of "Willard's History, written in 1828, "many of the inhabitants were nearly destitute of clothing and the necessities of life."

"Add to this the burdensome taxes which the government was compelled to assess upon them, and we can see that the distress of the people was great."

"Therefore, urged by sheer necessity, many of the young men from the older sections of the country emigrated to newer regions, even into the wildernesses, like Durham."

They followed Indian trails and where there was none, they hacked their way through the dense brush. They arrived in the spring of 1784 and decided to build their new community on one of the small hills at the base of the Catskill Mountains. They called the hill Meeting House Hill, as most of these early settlers were of the Congregational faith, and named their new settlement New Durham.

Beer's History of Greene County continued with a description of the land.

"With the exception of a few settlements in the present town of Greenville, and along the valleys of the Manor Kill, the Batavia Kill, and the Katskill, it was a wilderness in which the wolf, panther, bear, deer, fox and wild-cat roamed in almost undisturbed security."

"It was heavily wooded with ash, basswood, beech, birch, buttonwood, chestnut, elm, hemlock, hickory, ironwood, maple, oak, pine, and whitewood timber."

There was no doubt that these early settlers endured tremendous hardship in order to establish their new homesteads. Their farms were large and their families equally so. Their hard work provided the produce that helped build the fortunes of many of the river town families.

Durham has remained virtually unchanged since the days of these early settlers. It is still largely rural, although agriculture no longer dominates the livelihoods of its residents. But, the roots of its citizens remain firmly tied to the land and their passion for their community runs deep.



Photo courtesy of Lisa Trafton

The Anson Strong Homestead, currently owned by Duane and Lisa Trafton.



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I thought it might be interesting to the readers of my column to learn about the history of two of the historic homes on Strong Road which will be impacted by the construction of the proposed development – the Anson Strong Homestead, and the M.H. Merchant Stone House.

It is simply serendipitous that I had already undertaken the research on the history of these two homes many, many years ago and am able to share it with you in this column.

The oldest of the two properties is the Anson Strong Homestead owned by Duane and Lisa Trafton. Anson Strong was the nephew of Selah Strong, one of those intrepid pioneer settlers who arrived in 1784 to clear the land and plant their first crop. As winter approached, many men went back to Connecticut, only to return in the spring with their wives and children.

Anson Strong was born June 24, 1776 in Durham, CT, the son of Medad Strong and his wife Hannah Steward. He undoubtedly heard of the many opportunities a young man would have in the newly settled area of New Durham from his Uncle Selah. Many of the early settlers wrote glowing letters home, encouraging friends and family to join them. By 1796 Anson Strong made the fateful decision to join his Uncle Selah in New Durham.

The Strongs settled on what is now known as Strong Rd. in the Town of Durham.

Anson likely lived with his uncle in those early years, working on the farm in exchange for his room and board. He certainly doesn't appear on any of the early tax lists for the area, nor in the 1800 census.

We are fortunate that tax lists have survived for the years 1799 through to 1803, and they provide valuable insight into which settlers had arrived in Greene County and about what time.

Exactly when and where Anson met his future bride is unknown, however on February 6, 1803 Anson Strong married Sally Butler of Branford, CT. She was the daughter of John Butler and his wife Elizabeth Lindley. On December 27, 1803 their first child, Caroline (married Albert G. Owen of Rensselaerville, Albany Co, NY) was born in Durham, Greene County.

It wasn't until January 2, 1806 that Anson and Sally purchased two parcels of land on Strong Rd. from Ezra Jones and his wife Martha for \$1250. The first lot of land contained 66 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres of land and became the nucleus of the Anson Strong Homestead. The second lot was only 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ acres of land, situated near Zoeth Smith's parcel down the road from the first lot.

I wondered whether there was a house already standing on the larger lot. I turned to the early tax assessments. Was Ezra Jones listed? He certainly was. Ezra was taxed 74 cents on real estate valued at \$744 and a personal estate valued at \$54 in 1799. But was there a house on this land?

The 1800 tax assessment gives us our first clue. Ezra is taxed for a house and land. His real estate is valued at \$620 and his personal estate at \$55. It seems very probable that there was a house on the land in 1799.

Most people today would think that Ezra owned his land, as he was being taxed on it. Not so. Large parts of Greene County were

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awarded to individuals in land grants that date back to early colonial times. Most were absentee landowners.

A look at the early Greene County deeds turned up the actual sale of the property to Ezra Jones. On February 20, 1801 Charles Hurst of Philadelphia sold 455 acres of land in the Town of Durham to a consortium of buyers, that included Joseph Hart, Ezra Jones, Thomas Smith, Stephen Stocking, Jabez Hubbard, Philip Goff, Seldon Champion, Nathan Champion, Stephen Bennison and Zoeth Smith.

This group of buyers paid \$1675 for the land. The parcel was situated in Lot 35 in the first division of the second tract of land that had been granted to Martin Gerritse Van Bergen in the 18th century.

This means that Ezra was a leaseholder in 1799 and 1800 when he was taxed for his property and it was only in 1801 that he took full claim to his parcel.

On December 1, 1801, Ezra took out a mortgage for a tract of land of 66 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres in the Town of Freehold (later to become Durham). His mortgage was for \$219.85 and it was William Cockburn, a surveyor and land agent for absentee landlords in Ulster, Greene and Schoharie counties, who lent him the money.

Ezra had a very short timeframe in which to pay the full mortgage. His first payment for exactly half the amount, \$109.92 plus the usual interest, was due one year later on December 1, 1802 and the remaining half, plus interest, a year after that.

This investigation showed me that Anson Strong bought a working farm and he was able to move into an existing homestead in 1806.

Anson was a well-respected member of the community. He was a farmer from spring to fall and taught school in the winter months for seventeen years. He was a town clerk in Durham, a Justice of the Peace, a Trustee and a Clerk in Durham School District No. 2 and a staunch Methodist.

He also was a soldier of the war of 1812, serving as a Private in the 68th Regiment (Stoddard's Regiment) New York Militia and also in the 61st Regiment (Carver's Regiment) New York State Militia.

Anson and Sally had five more children: Sarah "Sally", born December 12, 1806 (never married), Emily, born July 8, 1808 (never married), Ellsworth, born December 12, 1811 (married Phoebe Smith), John Butler, born May 30, 1814 (married Rhoda Smith) and Mary "Polly", born August 13, 1819 (never married).

Anson died in January 1848 and was laid to rest in Cornwallville Cemetery, amongst many of his neighbors and old friends.

It was Anson's eldest son, Ellsworth, who took over the farm, buying out his brother's, John Butler's, share in December 1848 for \$300.

Ellsworth had married Phebe Smith, the daughter of Zoeth Smith and his wife Olive Merwin on November 25, 1835 and had a household full of little feet by the time of his father's death.

The 1850 census shows that Ellsworth and his family and his mother-in-law were living down the road from his mother, Sally, who was still in her home with her daughters Sally, Emily and Polly, as well as her daughter Caroline Owens and grandchild Emily H. Owens, aged 6.

Future censuses would show that Caroline was a weaver and held real estate and a personal estate of her own.

Sally, Anson's widow, appears to have stayed in her home until her death on July 23, 1873.

Ellsworth was farming his father's land from Anson's death in 1848 until his own on May 18, 1884. Each of the agricultural censuses attached to the 1850, 1855, 1860, 1865, 1870 and 1880 censuses show a modestly sized farm.

Ellsworth had planted wheat, Indian corn, oats, buckwheat and Irish potatoes, however the size of the crops he harvested seem more suited for his own home use than for sale elsewhere.


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By 1865, however, Ellsworth has an extensive apple orchard with 80 trees from which he harvested 300 bushels of fruit. He has also invested heavily in sheep accumulating 90 pounds of wool in that year from his flock. Given the fact that his sister Caroline is a weaver, that seems to make sense.

Ellsworth and Phebe had a large family – nine children. William, born September 23, 1836 and died at a young age, Wilbur Fisk, born December 6, 1838 (soldier in the 5th NY Heavy Artillery during the Civil War, fought in the Shenandoah Valley campaign and died in the hospital at Martinsburgh, VA in 1864 at the age of 25), Frederic Collins, born April 25, 1841 (married Eliza Snyder and died at the age of 38), Mary Jerome, born October 1, 1843 (married Horace Strong), William Hoyt, born March 31, 1846 (married Hattie E. Smith), Ellsworth Anson, born September 14, 1848 (never married), Martha, born May 22, 1851 (never married), Elizabeth, born August 24, 1854 (never married) and Olive, born January 16, 1857 (never married).

As was quite common in the 1880's, Ellsworth began to advertise in the New York City newspapers seeking summer boarders. He offered good board, a fine locality and moderate terms.

Ellsworth died May 18, 1884 and his son Ellsworth Anson took over the family farm, buying out the shares of his brothers over the next number of years.

Ellsworth and his unmarried sisters, Martha, Elizabeth and Olive, lived on the Anson Strong Homestead until each of them, one by one, joined their parents and grandparents in the Cornwallville Cemetery. Olive was the last Strong to live in the old homestead.

Before she died in 1933, Olive sold the Anson Strong Homestead for \$1 to her nephew, Burdette Strong of Newburgh. The farmhouse was rented out for many years until Burdette sold it to John A. and Florence Miller in 1943.

Today the Trafton family owns the old farmhouse and values its history. They have taken delight in and cared for the aging structure that is now over 200 years old.

Stephen Ellwood fell in with love the M.H. Merchant House from the moment he first saw it. He knew that he meant to be the person to bring the aging building back to life.

Situated just down the road from the Anson Strong Homestead, the Melvin H. Merchant House couldn't be more different than the old farmhouse. It's two-story structure was completely built of stone.

The Melvin H. Merchant stone house stands in what was the Maitland Patent, which was awarded to Lieut. Col. Richard Maitland on January 19, 1767, in recognition of his service to the British Crown in the French and Indian War.

Deacon Joseph Hart arrived in what was then the Town of Freehold around the year 1792 and began to buy parcels of land in the Cornwallville area. He acquired the Merchant parcel during this period. By 1806, Hart left the area and 94 acres of Hart's land was purchased by Elias Snyder.

Snyder did not build on this parcel either and eventually sold the 94 acres to John Jerome on April 24, 1816. John and his wife Margaret Sickles built their homestead and raised their twelve children on this thriving farm. Their children and grandchildren married

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into many of the prominent families of the area: the Smith, Gould, Waggoner, Finch and Borthwick families.

The farm remained in the Jerome family until it was sold on April 2, 1869 to Horatio H. Hough for \$3,760. Horatio and his wife Sarah continued the tradition of farming, but also began taking on guests and Horatio became known locally as a boarding house keeper.

Clues on the construction of the house were sparse, however census records indicated that the house was made of wood at that time. So, the question raised was, "When was the stone house built?"

The *Catskill Recorder* provided the next clue. In the gossip column of January 20, 1893, it noted that the house of Mrs. H.H. Hough burned down on January 17th of that year.

When I shared this new piece of information with the owner, his eyes lit up. East of the present stone house, he had found a large area that had a three to four-inch layer of burned material. It had always puzzled him, but now we knew what had happened. The old Jerome homestead had burned to the ground!

On October 10, 1899 the heirs of Mrs. Sarah Hough sold the old homestead land to Myrta E. Merchant, wife of Melvin H. Merchant. The *Catskill Recorder* wrote that in April 1900 the Merchants moved into M. Minor's house, down the road, and the May 25th issue of that paper stated that, "M.H. Merchant is working on his new home."

The mystery of who built the house and when had been solved. The next question was, "Who was Melvin H. Merchant?"

Melvin first appears in the 1880 census, aged 15, working as a farm hand for Nathan Shaw in Greenville. The census indicated that he was born in Illinois. By 1888, Melvin was living in Syracuse and was actively promoting and selling his new invention – Merchant's Bluing – a whitening agent for laundry. Ads in the local Syracuse papers in 1888 show that he had a number of merchants who were selling the product for 10 cents, which made 1 quart of bluing.



Photo courtesy of Stephen Ellwood
Situated just down the road from the Anson Strong Homestead, the Melvin H. Merchant House (above) couldn't be more different than the old farmhouse. It's two-story structure was completely built of stone.



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It was in Onondaga County, NY that Melvin met and married Myrta. Her family was from Weedsport, NY. Melvin and Myrta had only one child, Eunice, who was born in June 1891. The family moved to Cornwallville and eventually into the new stone house by 1900. The family moved back to Syracuse in 1903, but returned about 1910 to the stone house.

Melvin's entrepreneurial spirit stood with him his whole life. He was continually inventing new products and managing various business enterprises. In 1918 he launched a new enterprise after he invented and began the manufacture of a tire-chain tightener. He patented the product on January 24, 1922.

Unfortunately, this business became insolvent in the early 1920's. By 1931, Melvin had established yet another business – supplying and installing springs, leafs, bushings, and the like for cars and trucks.

The story of the stone house does not end with the Merchants. In 1923 Myrta sold the house to Mary Eliza Wing and it remained in the Wing family until 1971.

The M.H. Merchant Stone House stands apart from the traditional stone houses of the Dutch that can be found throughout the valley towns in Greene County, except perhaps for Cairo, where there are none to be found. It's large, evenly-cut blocks of stone are quite different in color, texture and style from the traditional stone houses. This is what makes this structure so special and unique.

Nowhere in Greene County, or in bordering counties have I come across a stone house constructed quite like the M.H. Merchant Stone House. With the efforts of its current owner, Stephen Ellwood, it has been brought back to its former glory.

Completing house histories is one of my specialties. The research needed to tell the story of the house and the people that lived in it may well be challenging, but once completed, is very rewarding. Six properties that I have worked on in Dutchess, Greene and Ulster counties are now on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Want to connect with Sylvia about local history? Contact her at Sylvia@northriverresearch.com

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