

VOICES FROM THE FALLS

“Rush’s Hotel: the Pulse of Wappinger in the late 1890’s”, by Rena Corey . Published by the Southern Dutchess News on April 25,2012.

They were all there waiting. Silent, some for more than a hundred and fifty years, their lives shelved and bound in leather or marbled boards. In life they had been merchants, community leaders, and a few, the elite of New York City society. Almost all were connected to the religious centers of the village.

In 1776, that fateful year in our country’s history, Peter Mesier, a Tory, came from New York City to what was then, Fishkill. Attracted by the hydropower generated by the falls of Wappingers Creek, and wanting to escape revolutionary turmoil in the city, Mesier purchased land and a 1741 homestead built by Nicholas Brewer.

Mesier , among his other enterprises, was a tea merchant and installed a retail shop in the basement of the residence. As in Boston, high priced tea and American patriots did not mix and in 1777 the locals spent several May days thrashing the Mesiers and their slaves. Sources indicate that costly tea was a pretext used by agitated Whigs who simply wished to assault the Tory in their midst. Mesier testified before the first Commission for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies that he was pushed down, seized by the throat and threatened with a broad sword and that 20 people came to his house “ broke open the Cellar Door & ... drew his Liquors & Drank of them, broke open every Cask in the Cellar and the case of his Clock...”.

Eventually, things settled down and Mr. and Mrs. Mesier and their eight children became an integral part of the community. Mr. Mesier later increased his holdings to include the creek, its falls, and property along the Hudson. Amassing over 700 acres, the Mesier family operated a shipyard and a flour mill and owned almost all the geographic area that became the Village of Wappingers Falls.

Peter died in 1806 and in 1891 his grandson, Henry Mesier , sold the homestead and five acres of land to the Village of Wappingers Falls for \$2500.00 with the proviso that the property would always bear the family name.

During a tour of the landmark building, now home to the Wappingers Historical Society, I entered a room filled with a jumble of books, ledgers, maps and photographs. When our docent noted that this was an area awaiting hands on work, I heard myself volunteering . As a dealer in antiquarian books and documents, I had been seduced.



My work space in the Homestead resembled Jo March’s garret but was not as oppressive as the slave quarters just a few steps down.(According to the first United States census, 1790, the Mesiers

owned seven slaves who served eleven “free white” persons in the house.)

Although the only window in the room did not open, I was able to hear the chimes of nearby Zion Church tolling throughout my working days; the same bells that have sounded in the village for over 100 years. In time, I processed and researched hundreds of books, documents, scrapbooks, manuscript journals, diaries, and ephemeral items and in so many of them, the references and connections to Zion were prominent.

George Rush’s two hotel registers were among the exceptions.

In the years 1895-1909, the time period in which the ledgers were kept, the village of Wappingers Falls was an industrial and mercantile hub and the guest records of Rush’s Hotel reflect a vibrant municipal pulse.

Traveling salesmen used their sign in lines to pen the names of the products they peddled while troops of entertainers promoted their shows including admission prices and upcoming bookings. The Metropolitan Entertainers & Moving Picture Co. noted: “Business Packed to the Doors-We Have the Goods,” and New York impresario, Dave Zimmer, filled a half page with drawings in colored pencil announcing his one week stay at one of the two opera houses in town.

Alonzo Hatch of the D’Oyley Carte Opera Company visited on several occasions, as did Howard Argoe(he would become orchestra leader of the RKO Theatres) and the owner of Sig. Sautelle’s One Ring Circus, George C. Satterley.

Rush’s lodged bicycle racers including W. A. LaDue of Cold Spring, the New Paltz basketball team, and long distance walker, “Dakota Bob” who when registering in 1897 wrote:” On foot-San Francisco to New York 3385 miles in 6 mo 20 days.” He returned in 1900 noting ,” 31,000 miles in 4 1/2 years.” Next to his comment someone penned, ”Liar.”

A prime spot for festive banquets, Rush’s Hotel received the lion’s share of press attention although there were several other hostelryes on Main Street .

On November 14, 1891 *Sporting Life* headlined the dinner given for Dennis “Big Dan” Brouthers, the baseball great, often called the original Babe Ruth.



Bread Bountifully Broken in Behalf of Boston's Big Batter and Baseman-Citizens Wine and Dine Their Base-playing Townsman

The article noted that George Rush, having been given "carte blanche to prepare a feast" had more than delivered for the evening honoring "the Wappinger boy who had thrice stood at the head of heavy batters and had four times been a member of championship clubs." (Brouthers started his career with the semi-pro Wappingers Falls Actives and in 1945 was posthumously inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.) [See January 2011 HVM 'Where in the Hudson Valley...?']

Recognized not only for his food and lodging, Rush was lauded for his own persona. *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle* reported on October 26, 1893 that the "proprietor of Rush's hotel was twenty-second on the list of those chosen as the fifty most popular members" of the G.A.R. For the 4, 236 votes he garnered, Rush won a ten day trip to the World's Fair, boarding a special train at Newburgh for the festivities.

Rush's four children, Lillie, Alethia, Robert, and Charles, along with their friends, often signed the registry pages as pseudo travelers from foreign lands. Locals also felt free to pen thoughts and greetings, especially on holiday eves, reflecting an easy going management style on the part of the hotel's owner.

In 1892, a signal from the hotel's roof initiated the lighting of bonfires and explosions of colored lights as cannon boomed for the opening of the Harrison /Reid presidential campaign . Brennan's Band played patriotic tunes and one thousand Wapperians squeezed into the Opera House. The *Eagle* called "the whole affair an unqualified success."

But all was not feasting and fireworks. The little Village of Wappingers Falls and its most prominent hostelry were no strangers to crime, cons, and even death.

Numbers of inquests were held at the hotel, many of them attracting press attention from a variety of sources .

One of those reported by *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle* on February 17, 1891 was the notorious Carrie Gerard affair :

The inquest in the Carrie Gerard case convened at Rush's Hotel to-day ,and attracted more than passing notice , as a large crowd was present to listen to the testimony.

Days later, the *New York World* headlined the case:

**BUTCHERY OF A GIRL CHARGED TO A DOCTOR.
Louis A. Harris, a Young Physician of Newburg Arrested
and Locked Up.**

**ACCESSORIES TO THE CRIME.
Poor Carrie Gerard's Father and Mother Accused of
Having Guilty Knowledge of the Act That Caused Their
Daughter's Death.**

The doctor and the parents were both found culpable . Harris was indicted on a charge of manslaughter in the first degree and Mr. and Mrs. Gerard held as accessories .The newspaper further reported that "Carrie Gerard's mangled remains " were in a vault in the Wappingers Falls Cemetery.

In 1894 three successive events at Rush's Hotel again made news.

An inquest in April investigated the death of John Delaney in the Bunker Hill Quarry. The bank upon which Delaney stood, caved in but the jury exonerated the Dutchess Print Works, owner of the quarry, in as much as Delaney, foreman of the work gang, had himself ordered the bank dug away and should have known of the danger of a cave in. A severe example of digging one's own grave.

On September 28, the *Cold Spring Recorder* reported that George Rush and a detective were in that village, hunting a Mr. Culver who had given Rush an envelope purporting to contain \$ 2500.00, requesting it be put in the hotel safe. For over a week, Culver led a high life while making it known that he was a prominent buyer of produce. He approached a Mr. Philips for 2000 barrels of apples. Philips, not having enough wooden barrels, ordered 2000 from the cooper, Mr. Moore. George Rush eventually became suspicious, opened the envelope and found it stuffed with worthless paper. Rush was out \$83.00 in checks cashed for Culver, as well as 10 days lodging; the farmer still had all his apples for sale and the cooper was seeking customers for 2000 unclaimed barrels. Culver was last seen boarding a north bound train.

Three months later, it was George Rush who was under arrest.

The *New York Times* reported that William O'Hearn, an employee of the hotel, was asleep in the bar-room on Thanksgiving Day, "when according to the story he tells, ex-coroner Philip Rion and the hotel proprietor, George Rush, applied a hot copper penny to his leg, burning him so that he shrieked with pain."

O'Hearn suffered blood poisoning and died on December 12th. Both men were arrested and released on their own recognizance and a date was set for an autopsy which both Rion and Rush welcomed. Witnesses claimed that the deceased had suffered a long term leg sore. On December 13 the *Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle* wrote that "Mr. Rush ... a very quiet individual concerned only with his business would be extremely unlikely to allow...let alone assist in the carrying out of any such barbaric scheme." As for Coroner Rion, he had "been a very busy man for many weeks owing to the number of deaths that have occurred and it is equally improbable that he would find time to involve himself in any such inhuman prank." By the next day, the verdict was in and reported in the *Eagle*: O'Hearn had died from pneumonia and not from "any injuries inflicted by any person or persons." The tale of the copper penny was never mentioned again.



"GENERAL" ROSALIE JONES ADDRESSING SUPPORTERS IN 1914

Excitement at Rush's did not end in the 19th century. In 1912, Rosalie Jones and her army were headed for Albany .

While her mother was a member of the New York State Anti-Suffrage Association, Rosalie led troops marching for the right of women to vote. In December, both "General" Rosalie Jones and an emissary sent by Mrs. O. L. Jones, converged upon the village.

The group had begun walking on December 16th from the 242nd Street subway station in the Bronx. After an *al fresco* meeting in Yonkers, several hundred women returned to New York City while Rosalie and four or five hardy souls pressed on . After days of enduring mud, rain, and snow, the group reached the Hamlet of Hughsonville. *The New York Times* reported that " the whole population turned out including the village clerk, the Police Department and the village cut-ups." A resident, Mrs. Hester Lawson was quoted : " A woman should be home with the children. If she hasn't any let her borrow some. Goodness knows there are enough to go around."

Rosalie's mother, learning that her daughter was experiencing foot problems, dispatched a male nurse to bring her home. The General, now approaching Wappingers Falls, told him she was not returning. The nurse continued to follow the women into the village and to Rush's Hotel, where Rosalie and her companions gave out a war cry. After dinner at Rush's the *Times* reported, " Gen. Jones wrote a war dispatch to her mother" advising her that it was on to the State Capital and the Governor. And, as she had promised, after a distance of 170 grueling miles, General Jones and four other suffragettes entered Albany on December 28th.

An unimposing three story brick building, Rush's Hotel belied its style and size becoming a focal point for politicians, businessmen, entertainers, legal bodies, government officials, fraternal organizations,

sports figures and visitors from all over the country and many from around the world. The newspapers that chronicled its activities brought both notoriety and fame to the hotel and the village in which it stood.

By 1919, the Rush building had become the Village Club House, thus retaining its position as the social center of Wappingers Falls.

George Rush died in 1926, aged 81, and was buried in the Rural Cemetery . An impressive tombstone notes his Civil War regiment, the Harris Light Cavalry.

The hotel building still stands at 2652 East Main Street, its story preserved within the old ledgers and the ledgers preserved by a village with a thirst for history.

