

“Lots of Life” in the old Cudner-Hyatt House

Article written by Judy Handelman for the Scarsdale Historical Society’s 1997 Dinner-Dance Journal

In the fall of 1997, The Scarsdale Historical Society celebrated the tenth anniversary of the opening of the Cudner-Hyatt House, which the Society purchased in December, 1974. On September 10, 1987, after 13 long years of exterior stabilization and interior restoration, the house-museum was dedicated. Over the next decade, “this old house” has had thousands of visitors, seen many physical improvements and hosted an increasing number of exciting educational programs.

In the early years, an ambitious furnishings program included the acquisition of period pieces, including many donated by the Hyatt family and descendants of the Cudners. The now-familiar 19th-century wood-burning stove was donated in late 1987 by Margaret Pancoast and cast-iron kitchen sink was given by Dorothy Silverstone in 1989. Studies of appropriate wall- and floor-coverings by professional consultants began in 1988. In May, 1994, period wallpaper and carpeting were installed in dining room and parlor, and in 1995 ingrain carpeting on the front stairs to the second floor, funded by Annual Fund gifts from hundreds of friends and special grants from the James A. Macdonald Foundation. Research continued in support of the purchase and installation of appropriate lighting fixtures and decorative arts pieces.

In 1996, also using Annual Fund contributions, the Society was able to make repairs to gutters, downspouts and roofs on the Cudner-Hyatt House and the 1828 Quaker Meeting House. A new gutter and downspout were added over the rear entrance. Restoration carpenter Donald Fagan had the challenging task of fixing problems, such as replacing rotted shutters and basement bulkhead doors, while retaining the historic integrity of the two buildings. Following the repairs, the exteriors of both buildings were cleaned and received a coat of paint. Inside the house, plaster on second-floor walls was repaired, insulation was added, and the Museum Shop was completely refurbished, with new rugs, lighting, shelves and paint.

Even more exciting than the physical changes has been the sight and sound of hundreds of children enjoying the constantly expanding educational programs in the Cudner-Hyatt House: fourth graders learned about “19th Century Days” (the Fourth Grade Local History program) and children in grades 1 to 3 experienced what life was like “One Hundred Years Ago”, (described in Beverley Brigandi’s article). By September 1996, the Fourth Grade Local History Program,

begun as a pilot study with Fox Meadow School in the spring of 1989, had expanded to include not only all Scarsdale public and parochial elementary schools, but public schools in Mt. Vernon, Edgemont, Greenburgh, Larchmont and Pleasantville and several private schools as well. During the 1995-96 school year, 1,265 fourth graders, a 38 percent increase over the previous year, learned to quilt, play parlor games, and cook on the old 1881 stove.

During the summer, the house does not sit idle; in 1996, for the fourth consecutive year, all Scarsdale Day Campers in grades K to 3 came to our historic complex. They saw our Museum exhibition, "Here We Go 'Round the Mulberry Bush", then came to the Cudner-Hyatt House to perform some of the 19th-century chores it celebrated: washing clothes in a wash-tub, hanging them out to dry, scrubbing the floor, kneading dough and handling cast-iron utensils. Thanks to the support of the Scarsdale Recreation Department and a Westchester Arts Council Municipal Challenge Grant, 600 campers participate every summer.

Throughout the year, the house also played host to many of our Education Department's "Sampler" programs: after-school, weekend and vacation-time workshops, incorporating 19th-century chores, games, cooking (often using herbs from our period garden), baking, and varied seasonal creative crafts projects. And many, many families enjoy the beautiful year-end Candlelight Tours, when the house is decorated for the holidays as it might have been when the Hyatts lived there in the 19th century, and period refreshments, made by our volunteers, are served.

No, the two-and-a half century-old house, which was slated to be torn down after Caleb and Elvira Hyatt died in 1972, is neither lonely nor run-down! Its rebirth, courtesy of the Scarsdale Historical Society, has made it not only a National Historic Landmark, but a living, breathing, *exciting* center of preserving and teaching yesterday's history and heritage for the generations of today and tomorrow!

