

Jan van Hoesen House, Claverack, NY

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For nearly three hundred years, the home of Jan van Hoesen has stood overlooking the Claverack Creek, about two miles from the Hudson River's eastern shore. Today the house is empty. Though historians recognize this as being one of the oldest and most important examples of residential architecture in the Hudson Valley, decades of neglect have left the house a desolate ruin. Once it was common to find the Hudson's old Dutch houses in varying states of disrepair. In recent years many homes from this period have been carefully restored or even made into museums, but this old mansion remains a landmark forgotten by most.



The original main facade of the Jan van Hoesen house has been altered, but its symmetrical arrangement can still be discerned

Though small by today's standards, the Van Hoesen house was one of the grandest on the Hudson when built, around the year 1720. It stands on a tract of land purchased by Jan Franse van Hoesen, the grandfather of its builder, who came to New Netherland via Amsterdam from Husum, near Hamburg on Germany's North Sea coast. A seafarer by trade, Van Hoesen arrived at New Amsterdam in 1639 and eventually made his way up the river to Beverwyck (now Albany), where he settled with his family. In 1662 he negotiated the purchase of a large tract of land south of Beverwyck from the native Mahicans, at the site of the future city of Hudson.

Van Hoesen's land lay some thirty miles downstream of Beverwyck, near Claverack (literally "Clover Reach"), at the southern end of the vast patroonship of the Van Rensselaer family. The property included a large, flat point of land that jutted out into the Hudson, where a village called

Claverack Landing emerged by the eighteenth century. In a drawn-out legal battle that went on for generations, the powerful Van Rensselaers challenged Van Hoesen's title to this land, claiming to have purchased it for themselves in the 1640s.

But Van Hoesen fought back, and he passed the land to his heirs upon his death in 1665. With the creation of Livingston Manor to the south in 1686, the Van Hoesen property became one of very few freeholds for miles along the Hudson's eastern shore. The feud persisted for more than a century, until 1784, when most of the contested land was sold to a group of Quaker whaling families from Nantucket. In the wake of the Revolutionary War, these families had come up the Hudson in search of a more sheltered place to make their homes. They found that place at Claverack Landing, which they renamed Hudson and which in 1785 became the third city incorporated in the state of New York.

Just east of the newly established city stood a graceful brick mansion that could already have been called "old" by the time the Quakers arrived from New England. This was the house built for Jan van Hoesen (1687-1745), a grandson of Jan Franse van Hoesen, who had inherited a portion of his family's land in the early part of the eighteenth century. Though there is speculation that the inheritance may have occurred around the time of this grandson's marriage in 1711, historians believe the house to have been built sometime between 1715 and 1725, based on the probable time of Jan van Hoesen's inheritance and on known construction dates of similar houses built in what was then still part of Albany County.

Van Hoesen built his home in a style developed in the medieval period and used commonly throughout northern Europe for centuries afterward. While early American builders typically borrowed from European precedents, few did so as literally as the builders of Dutch-era mansions in old Albany County, such as that of Jan van Hoesen.



West Elevation
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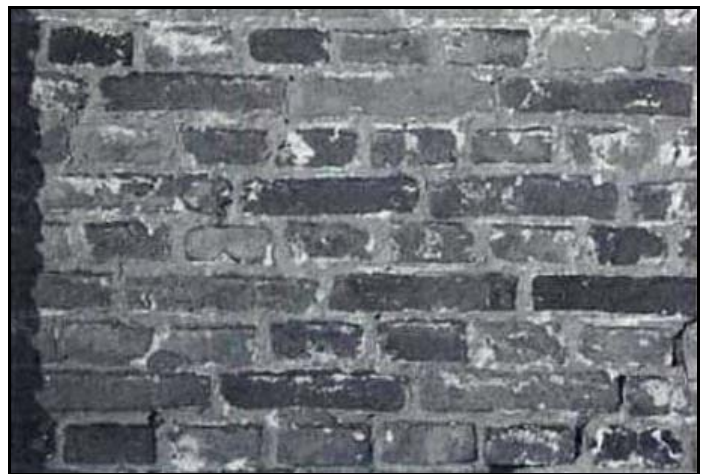
Unlike more modest homes in New Netherland, which were usually built of stone, or wood, these larger homes were constructed with brick facades built around a timber frame set atop a fieldstone foundation. It has been speculated that this unique structural system was held over from a Dutch technique designed to reduce the weight of load-bearing walls in an attempt to prevent settling, which was a common problem on the soft soil of the Netherlands.

Like his grandfather, Jan van Hoesen is thought to have been a mariner, which would have afforded his family resources necessary to build so impressive a house. He situated his home where the road from the landing to the village of Claverack forded the Claverack Creek. The house occupies a rectangular footprint forty-eight feet long by twenty-four feet wide, and was oriented to face the road and the creek below. Over a stone foundation the wood frame was erected first. A skilled builder then laid brick exterior walls in the Dutch Cross bond, a hallmark of Dutch masonry on both sides of the Atlantic, in which courses of headers alternate over courses of stretchers. Two doorways and three windows were arranged symmetrically in the main façade, topped by flat arches in which alternating red and black brick provide subtle architectural detail. Iron fleur-de-lis anchors tie the brick facade to the wood frame beneath. A steep-pitched roof tops the whole, with gable ends forming shallow parapets at either end. Chimneys built into each of the gable ends vented fireplaces used for cooking and heating. Set into the north gable, blackened bricks called klinkers mark the initials of Jan van Hoesen and his wife Tanneke.

In each gable end, brick laid in stepped triangular patterns set at right angles to the slanting roofline form what is perhaps the building's most distinctive architectural detail. The Dutch called this technique *vlechtagen*, and employed it to help create a smooth, weatherproof edge along the roofline of the gable parapet walls. In English it is known as braiding or tumbling (it is often incorrectly identified as another technique called *muiszetanden* or "mouse tothing"). A common feature in northern Europe and in England, it was a definitive detail of the finest homes of old Albany County, and surviving examples today are exceedingly rare.

Detail of west elevation, showing Dutch Cross bond.

Detail view of tumbled brickwork and handmade iron fleur-de-lis anchor, both typical details of Dutch mansions on the Hudson River in the first part of the eighteenth century.



Three rooms occupied the main floor, which probably made up the extent of the family's living space when the house was built, as Dutch houses typically used basement and garret space for storage. Elegant turned balusters and paneling—an interior detail common only in the finest homes of the period—adorn a central staircase leading to the garret. Almost certainly the builder fitted the house with hinged casement windows and with jambless, open fireplaces, though these have not survived (by the nineteenth century both fireplaces were typically replaced by English sash windows and enclosed fireplaces).

While the house itself stands as a fine specimen of the region's early architectural heritage, it is also a reminder of an important, often forgotten theme in the social history of New Netherland. Jan Franse van Hoesen had his origins not in Holland but on Germany's Jutland Peninsula, in an area that was then part of Denmark. Although Dutch character prevailed in the colony, from the very beginning New Netherland was among the most cosmopolitan places in the New World, with early settlers including considerable populations of Dutch, Danes, Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, and French, among others.

Like the Van Hoesens, many of these families came to New Netherland by way of Amsterdam, where assimilation into Dutch society began even before they left Europe. They adopted the Dutch language and took Dutch spellings for their names (as in "Hoesen," derived from Jan Franse's native Husum). Once in the New World, they often employed Dutch builders to give their houses characteristics like those of the Dutch establishment that administered the communities in which they lived. Long after the English assumed control of the colony in 1664, these families continued to identify with their adopted Dutch culture. Built some six decades after the British takeover, the home of Jan van Hoesen is indicative of this persistent cultural identity.

Although the family house bears a heavy Dutch influence, Jan van Hoesen and his wife remained active in the Lutheran Church—which meant a journey across the river to Lunenburg (today Athens) to participate in church services. The Lutheran community was something of an isolated group in New Netherland, and local histories written in the nineteenth century tended to rely on records of the Dutch Reformed Church, thereby neglecting to document non-Dutch families such as the Van Hoesens. Some have attributed this early oversight to the Van Hoesen house's eventual obscurity. After the death of Jan van Hoesen in 1745, his descendants handed the house down through several generations before it eventually passed out of family ownership. The realignment of the roadway led subsequent owners to build a new main entrance and porch onto what had been the building's rear façade, while further alterations obscured the handsome fenestration and masonry details of the home's intended front elevation.

Insensitive alterations were the least east of the problems that faced the Hudson Valley's early Dutch houses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite a growing appreciation for the region's early colonial history, many of that era's houses disappeared during this period, while others fell into ruin. As their owners built newer, modern homes on adjacent lots, many of the old houses were converted into barns, used for storage, leased to poor immigrant families, or simply demolished. None of these uses required particularly attentive maintenance, and it became common to find the old homes in various stages of decay. An Albany reporter writing in 1906 found that one such house, the c.1716 home of Ariaantje Coeymans in Albany County, "despite its former glory," had "deteriorated into a second rate Italian boarding house," but still retained "some of its pristine beauty."

By the end of the nineteenth century an increased interest in New York's Dutch roots led to a greater appreciation for the architecture of New Netherland. Evidence of this resurgence manifested itself in the advent of organizations such as the Holland Society, formed in 1885, and the Society of Daughters of Holland Dames, founded ten years later. At the same time there appeared a revival of Dutch Colonial architecture, a movement that had an especially strong hold on Franklin Roosevelt, who was himself of Dutch ancestry, and who as president saw to it that the style was faithfully adhered to by WPA architects working in the Hudson Valley.

Historians meanwhile set out to document surviving Dutch houses before they disappeared. Books appeared on the subject by the 1920s, of which Helen Wilkinson Reynolds's *Dutch Houses in the Hudson Valley before 1776* is probably best known. In surveying what remained of the region's Dutch Colonial architecture, Reynolds found the Abraham de Peyster house at Beacon "rented to Italian and Slavic tenants," the Bethlehem home of Hendrick van Wie in "a state of decay" where "occupation in recent years by tenants of the laboring class has altered the house in many details," and the Coenradt Bevier home in Ulster County "a pitiful wreck, abandoned by the fast vanishing native population in the period of the incoming alien and the cheap, frame-dwelling, equipped with modern conveniences."

Remarkably, Reynolds and other historians neglected even to mention the Van Hoesen house in their surveys. Its provenance was confused in local histories, which attributed its construction to other Van Hoesen descendants. Writing of the house in 1961, a local newspaper reporter found living there a "Mrs. Minnie McKittrick, an alert little lady of 82 years, who has resided in the handsome old home since 1923." After her death, the house was left empty. On the fields behind the house, which Mrs. McKittrick had leased for many years to neighboring farmers, a later owner developed a trailer park called "Dutch Village" in an apparent, somewhat ironic tribute to the decaying landmark next door.

By the 1960s, a greater appreciation for such early homes prompted the restoration of many, including the old Ariaantje Coeymans house in Albany County. In nearby Kinderhook another Dutch mansion, the Luykas van Alen house, had also suffered prolonged neglect. Architecturally the Van Alen and Van Hoesen homes were extremely similar. Yet while the Van Hoesen house slipped further into disrepair, the Van Alen house was acquired by the Columbia County Historical Society, restored to its original appearance, opened to the public as a museum, and declared a National Historic Landmark in 1968. Today the Van Alen house is celebrated as one of the best-preserved examples of its kind. The Van Hoesen house meanwhile remains in the shadows. The presence of adjacent mobile homes has deterred vandalism, and the house is kept securely boarded up. Local historians succeeded in placing it on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. But twenty-five years later the home of Jan Van Hoesen remains empty, still awaiting the recognition that has come to the rescue of its more fortunate contemporaries.