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Living History: Claverack's Reformed Dutch Church

By Andrew Amelinckx
Hudson-Catskill Newspapers

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CLAVERRACK — The Reformed Dutch Church of Claverack sanctuary, located on Route 9H, was built before America gained its independence, but the history of the church's congregation goes back even further to a time just after England gained possession of what is now New York State. The church's historian, Mary Hallenbeck, gave a 300-year overview of the history of this historic church Sunday.



Mary Hallenbeck describes the church, a painting of which stands behind her. According to John Keeler, who brought the painting for the evening's talk, it was painted by John Honsinger of Hillsdale in 1960. Honsinger admired the church's beauty but did not want to paint it from the front where all of the cemetery stones would make it less attractive. (David Lee/Hudson-Catskill Newspapers)

Hallenbeck, who resides in Greenport, isn't just the historian — she's been part of the church since her family moved to Claverack in the 1930s.

The lecture, given at the A.B. Shaw Fire Company station in Claverack, was part of a series of lectures titled "Local History, Local Historians," presented by the Claverack Free Library.

According to Hallenbeck, the Reformed Dutch Church of Claverack had its beginnings in 1716.

"They began to hold services in private homes," she said, adding that the minister Petrus Van Driessen, would come down from Albany "a couple of times a month" to preach.

The first church building was built in 1727 near the current location of the first county courthouse on Route 23B. People on the building committee were required to either help in the construction of the church or give money for its erection.

Women and children sat in the center of the 24 pews, while men sat on the periphery with loaded guns to ward off attacks by Indians, she said.

That same year the congregation elected Johannes Van Driessen to be minister. But, said Hallenbeck, he didn't last long due to his emigrating to this country without having been ordained by the mother church in Holland.

"That was a no-no," she said.

So for the next 28 years the church had no permanent minister.

"Itinerant ministers would come around," she said.

The church building that still stands today was built in 1767 during the tenure of Rev. Johannes Casparus Freyenmoet, a Swiss pastor.

"They sent him back to Holland for further education" before returning to serve the church,

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said Hallenbeck.

The next minister, John Gebhard, stayed for 50 years and played an important part in the community.

"Gebhard came from Kingston," said Hallenbeck. "He was a German."

He founded the Washington Seminary, an institution that would eventually become the Claverack Academy and Hudson River Institute.

Just outside the church lies the cemetery, wherein a number of famous people lie, including Gen. Samuel Webb, who was a general in the American Revolution and held the Bible used in the swearing in ceremony of the country's first president, George Washington.

Other notables include Colin Livingstone, the first president of the Boy Scouts of America and Harriet Livingston Fulton-Dale, the wife of Robert Fulton, the inventor of the first commercially successful steamship.

Hallenbeck also recalled her own memories of the church when she was growing up, from the long services to the church bazaars, but especially recalled the years encompassing World War II.

"I remember that Sunday like it was yesterday," she said of Dec. 7, 1941 the day America joined the war. "We still had to go to Sunday school."

Hallenbeck, a nurse by profession, wrote to two nurses serving overseas during World War II. She also helped make pulled taffy that they would mail to G.I.s at Christmas time.

Pulling the taffy was hard work, she said, and she and the other kids at the church would have blistered and sore hands afterwards.

Hallenbeck, who holds a master's degree in educational Psychology from the College of St. Rose, has always loved history. She has been the church's historian since 1998.

She said that she is often asked to look up information on people's ancestors and that many of the requests come from as far away as Canada and California.

"This little church in Claverack has people from all practically all over the world. It's amazing."

To reach reporter Andrew Amelinckx call 518-828-1616, ext. 2267 or e-mail aamelinckx@registerstar.com. To comment directly on this story, go to www.registerstar.com.

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