

Joining home and history

By Mary Amoroso
Staff Writer

The stone house sits squarely in a clearing next to Teaneck Road in Teaneck, and if you squint and screen out the traffic noise, you can visualize what Hendrick Brinkerhoff must have seen when he built the house in the 1780's: wooded uplands sloping to the salt marsh below.

Now the Glenpointe hotel-office-condo complex stands in the marsh, like some futuristic mirage, but the Brinkerhoff-Demarest House has first claim on this land, before the malls and the tract-housing, the hotels and the office buildings.

The Brinkerhoff-Demarest House, which over 200 years stayed in the hands of two families, has been respectfully restored in the past two years by a young couple, Patrice and Tom McMahon.

The McMahons, who spent roughly \$225,000 to restore the house, also have assembled an estimable collection of early Bergen County furniture: a linen press, china closet, and tall clock case that are the work of A. G. Banta; a set of Cooper-and-Demarest chairs; a game table; a jelly cupboard, and children's chairs.

They restored a kas — a tall, ball-footed cupboard used by the Bergen Dutch to store their fine textiles and precious metal objects. The kas came with the house and is probably almost as old as the house.

The McMahons are selling the house. Bitten by the restoration bug, they are preparing to restore another old house in Bergen County.

They are, in many ways, a thoroughly modern couple: a VCR by the hearth and an Audi in the driveway. Tom, 32, is a commodities trader, and Patrice, 28, worked for a telecommunications firm before she left her job to supervise the restoration.

In fact, in late 1984 when Tom saw a newspaper ad for the house, they were a week away from moving into a Hoboken brownstone they had purchased. They saw the house the next day and completed negotiations for it by that weekend. It was owned by Mrs. F. C. Schab, who had purchased the house from her maiden aunt, Saretta and Mary Demarest, in 1932. Saretta Demarest was an amateur architectural historian who had helped to date and save the Steuben House in River Edge.

Said Kevin Wright, curator of the Steuben House: "Nowhere else in the world can you find exactly this kind of architecture: the Bergen County Dutch sandstone."

There are some 230 examples of the Dutch stone house in Bergen County, Wright said. The Brinkerhoff-Demarest House is special because its history is well-documented and its structure and topographical setting remain virtually intact.

Wright said the Brinkerhoff-Demarest House is a transitional example of the Dutch sandstone, with a Georgian sense of symmetry: a central hallway with two rooms in the front and two rooms in the rear. The David Demarest House — originally located in New Milford, now near the Steuben House — is an early, more primitive example of the Dutch sandstone, from the first quarter of the 18th Century.

Tom McMahon is a history buff, and already had a collection of



Staff photos by Linda Caselli

Patrice and Tom McMahon have spent two years restoring the 200-year-old Brinkerhoff-Demarest House in Teaneck. They brought back beams and other period touches to the home, which is pictured at top as it looked about 1900.



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REAL ESTATE

Couple restores a house with 200 years of history

Brinkerhoff-Demarest House more than a museum

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Victorians and golden oak antiques when he met Patrice four years ago. Together they would go look for antiques and take tours of old houses in Rockland County. But they were looking for an easier commute to Manhattan.

When they walked out of the Brinkerhoff-Demarest House after they first saw it, Patrice says, "We wiped the cobwebs off our faces and made a bid on the house." They purchased it in November 1984 for \$120,000. They hope to sell it for \$549,000.

The house stands on land originally given by Indians to Sara Kirsted, a New York widow, in gratitude for her serving as translator to Oratam, the chief of a great Indian village at the head of the Teaneck creek.

The construction date of the house was thought to be 1735, but research Wright has done indicates the land wasn't purchased by the Brinkerhoff family until 1764. By 1784, Hendrick Brinkerhoff had bought out his brothers' share of the land, and probably started construction.

Hendrick was 29 years old that year; his first wife had died in childbirth the year before. Orphaned at the age of 5 and raised by his brothers, Hendrick had inherited a fair amount of land from his father and grandfather. By selling that outlying land in the Tenaia hills and the meadowlands, he was able to buy 58 acres and build a comfortable house, Wright says.

All original

Two hundred years later, another young man came to admire Hendrick's house.

"Every door in this house was original," said Tom. "All the brasses and the hardware were original."

Chimed in Patrice: "The general floor plan is the same as the day they built it."

Downstairs in the front, on the south side, are the formal parlor on the left and the man's parlor — or informal parlor — on the right. Both parlors have built-in cupboards adjoining the fireplaces and bull's-eye glass in the hallway doors.

The "grandparents' room" — the only room with a door that locks only from the inside, for privacy — is behind the man's parlor. Behind the formal parlor is a room used for dining. This room has a coffin door.

"The Dutch had a door to bring coffins in and out for wakes," said Tom. "They didn't waste space: They built these skinny little doors."

Around 1805, the house underwent a major modernization. The kitchen wing was added (cooking had probably been done in an outbuilding before that), the second floor was turned into living space, and the original beamed ceilings on the first floor were plastered over.

"At that time, beams were unfashionable," said Patrice. "They were signs of poverty."

"To us, this is not a museum. This is our home, and we are comfortable here."

— Patrice McMahon

Today, the beams are visible once more, in all their hand-hewn strength. The random-width pine floors, once painted, are stripped and lustrous. The Dutch doors on the north and south sides of the house were intact; Tom and Patrice had the Dutch stoops outside those doors rebuilt. The three fireplaces have been restored, as have the walls.

Beams visible once more

"Some people would have Sheet-rocked, but we found a workman who knew how to replaster," said Tom.

"It was like opening Pandora's box," said Patrice. "We had to take the plaster walls down to the mud and the straw and rebuild them."

Ceilings were so low in the kitchen that the McMahons had the floor dug out to give more head room. The kitchen fireplace with its Dutch oven was lost 35 years ago when the county widened Teaneck Road. ("It was a spite move on the county's part," said Tom, "because Saretta Demarest was such an outspoken preservationist.") The McMahons have re-created a cooking hearth in the north end of the kitchen using old brick.

The Brinkerhoffs lived in the house until 1829, and apparently grew melons on their farm. Much of Bergen County was in the truck farm business in the 1700's and early 1800's, shipping fruit and vegetables to New York City. Muskmelons were a big product, said Steuben curator Wright, as was a watermelon known as the Hackensack watermelon.

Bergen County's slaves

The Brinkerhoffs' house and farm were ideally located near Teaneck Road and Fort Lee Road and the Overpeck Creek. The Brinkerhoffs' farmhands were most probably slaves: Wright says that in the period from 1650 to 1750, Africans were the second largest group in the population of Bergen County, and in the 1790 census, only 7 percent of the Africans were free.

In 1829, Jasper or Casparus Demarest (who lived in the Jacobus Demarest House on River Road in New Milford) bought the Brinkerhoff house for his son, George C. "Joost" Demarest, on his marriage to Sarah Brinkerhoff. The dormers were added around 1900. Plumbing and electricity were installed in 1913.

The McMahons obviously thrive on restoration projects — the research, the search for skilled craftsmen, the dust, and the debris — and they are preparing to do it again in another house. Potential buyers came through the Brinkerhoff-Demarest House the other day and asked the McMahons, "How can you live in a museum?"

Patrice said she looked at them and shook her head. "To us, this is not a museum," she replied. "This is our home, and we are comfortable here."

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