

The Dutch Roots of Ithaca's Dey Street

By Patricia Longoria

On the northwestern edge of Ithaca's Fall Creek neighborhood, a turn from busy state Route 13 leads to tree-lined Dey Street.

Only three blocks long, the street has a relaxed, neighborhood vibe. Its tidy late-Victorian homes sit close to the street on narrow lots.

At one end, where Dey Street and Auburn Street meet at an acute angle, a V-shaped pocket park offers a shaded reminder to slow down and enjoy the day.

A three-story brick building, once home to the Ithaca Calendar Clock Co., dominates the block across from the park. The former factory currently houses a music store.

Dey Street was named for the Dutch Dey family, who arrived in colonial New Amsterdam in the 17th century. (Lower Manhattan's Dey Street is named for the same Dutch clan.) Tracing its naming gives us a glimpse into the first few decades of Ithaca history.

Jane Dey Varick Hardenberg DeWitt (1760-1808) made the first Dey family connection to Ithaca. The widow's mother was a Dey whose New Jersey relatives fought in the Revolutionary War and raised funds to support independence. Jane married New York Surveyor General Simeon DeWitt (1756-1834), himself a widower, in 1799.

The couple lived in Albany, but by the time of their marriage, DeWitt owned more than 1,000 acres in Ulysses (Military Tract township Number 22). This acreage would form part of the City of Ithaca at the head of Cayuga Lake.

At the end of 1834, Simeon DeWitt died. Richard Varick DeWitt (1800-1868) — Simeon and Jane's oldest son — managed the sale of his father's Ithaca property.

Richard, along with two other commissioners, divided the DeWitt property into lots. They laid out and named streets in what would later become Ithaca's Northside and Fall Creek neighborhoods. First through Seventh streets ran parallel to Cascadilla Creek. There were the Founding Father streets of Franklin, Adams, Hancock and Madison. The New York state governor streets of Yates, Tompkins and Lewis were sandwiched between streets named for first Supreme Court Chief Justice John Jay and fourth Chief Justice John Marshall. The resulting 1836 map was the first to show Dey Street named and laid out.

These streets were just names on a map for decades. Most of them were still rough dirt tracks into the 1880s and later. Still, the names of these state and national political figures imbued the raw, young village's planned streets with a sense of patriotism and history.

On an earlier map made in 1831, Simeon DeWitt had acknowledged his wife's father's family by naming Varick Street (now Park Place) along a public park. Richard's uncle and namesake, Richard Varick (1753-1831), was mayor of New York City in the first decade after American independence.

Similarly, Richard chose to recognize his mother's Dey ancestors with the naming of Dey Street. The Dey name evoked Revolutionary War heroes and leaders of the early republic. It also revealed the extended family ties that greased the wheels of commerce and shaped the course of politics in early New York state.

Patricia Longoria is coordinator of "Names on the Land — Tompkins County," a Legacy Project of the Tompkins County Bicentennial Commission. For more information about the Names project, see tnames.wordpress.com and facebook.com/tompkinscountynames.