The Persistence of Dutch Culture: A First Person Account of Building a Farm in 1787

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The persistence of culture—what we have learned from parents and passed on to children in the way of knowledge, values, norms and other ideas about why and how we should act—varies with a society, its history, and environmental milieu. For example, there is an interesting contrast between the relative persistence of culture among immigrants who came to the United States during the last hundred years compared with those who arrived two centuries earlier. For the former outwardly observable markers of traditional culture such as language, costume, and housing are almost completely lost by the present generation for most ethnic groups. Traditional housing types may not even have been imported at all. But if we look at descendants of those Dutch immigrants who arrived by the 1650s we find they retain even into the nineteenth century their domestic language (although most by then knew English), Netherlands architecture, and even some attributes of Dutch costume if we are to believe William Strickland's 1794-95 description.

"...women in their external appearance are the perfect copies of their ancestors, or the modern inhabitants of the retired Provinces of Holland.... Exactly such figures may be seen in old Dutch paintings."1

From our twentieth century perspective we wonder at how long Dutch ways continued throughout a century of English rule. I think the real wonder, however, is our own country's ability to rapidly assimilate disparate peoples, a phenomenon which has not been characteristic of most societies now or in the past. The historical and anthropological literature is replete with societies living beside, even among, others with stark cultural differences persisting for long periods, even indefinitely. Judging by the relatively few apparent racial groupings compared to the thousands of distinct ethnic groups, genes have migrated much more rapidly than have customs, even though transferring genes takes a generation while learning another language or set of customs could take as short as two or three years. Clearly identity is a lot thicker than blood, and identity is what culture is about. Immigrants to the United States came to embrace a new and better way of life—most wanted to change—while immigrants to New Netherland came—as the name implies—to replicate Patria.

So if we now assume that Dutch persistence of culture is normal, then we should ask not why it persisted among the Dutch, but why immigrants to New York from other nations tended to adopt certain Dutch customs rather than visa versa. A case in point is in farm structures, specifically farm houses and barns. Besides the Dutch in the Hudson Valley, there were also identifiable groups of French (Huguenots), German (Palatines), as well as various immigrants from the British Isles. If we look at houses and barns built by, or at least for, the Huguenots at New Palz and the Germans at Germantown, West Camp, and in the Schoharie Valley we are hard put to single out any French or German architectural features with assurance. The houses are essentially New York Dutch in structure and fabric.

What about the British? Setting aside the fashionable upper class British in New York who took their cue from London, such as the Irishman William Johnson who built Georgian houses—even in the wilderness, one notes almost the total absence of English or New England style farm houses where people of British descent settled among the Dutch before the 1760s. As a case example of this phenomena we have the personal diary of a Scot, the young physician Alexander Coventry (1766–1831), who came to Columbia County in 1785 and proceeded to build farm structures which, from his descriptions, are similar to those built by his Dutch neighbors, which is to say, his house is typical of those built in the area during the 1780s showing the strong imprint of Dutch architectural influence in its structure overlayed with recent English influence as seen in Georgian and Federal decorative motifs. He built a barn which, although lacking descriptive details, was undoubtedly a Dutch type as were others in the area built well into the nineteenth

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Coventry’s diary is probably the longest one known from early New York. In its typed version it is 3000 double-spaced pages covering his entire adult life from his departure from Scotland in 1785, his settlement on a farm in Columbia County, to his removal to central New York in 1792 where he remained for most of the rest of his life. Because of the detail with which he described the process of constructing his house, we have a unique opportunity to hear first hand a builder’s thoughts and decisions. For this reason it is important to have Coventry speak as much as possible for himself and leave commentary to defining terms and suggesting reasons for his actions. What follows are verbatim abstracts from his diary pertaining to developing his farm with a few additional contextual quotes about his neighbors. Author’s comments are in italics. Coventry’s own spelling and punctuation is retained.

Coventry originally decided to come to New York just for the purpose of settling part of his father’s estate which was located north of the city of Hudson in present day Columbia County. George Coventry had been a British army officer in the last French and Indian War, stationed in New York where he acquired a farm in what was to become Columbia County. Alexander’s cousin William was occupying the farm, and Alexander came to claim his portion.


Albany, 16 Sept., 1785 When we rose this morning we had a view of Albany from the deck of our sloop . . . The Yankees or people of New England, here, are thought a polite cunning and knavish people who are very apt to cheat you . . . Was introduced to Mr. Sharp, who had known my father, having been a Sargent in the same regiment, with my father. Several of the people spoke of my father to me. It seems he was rather hard on the Dutchmen when he was here, but pretty kind to his own country people, the Scotch.

What he records of Albanian’s perception of New Englanders is almost identical to what Peter Kalm in 1749 said outsiders’ view of Albanians was. 3

20 Sept . . . Mr. Gordon who knew my father: Knew
30. Howard and Crossman a half day cutting timber for my house. Got 2 sills 6 by seven, 2 plates 5 by 6, 40 ft. long; the beams 2 and 14 in number. Wallace with Wm. C.[oventryl helped.

Pews or walls rest on sills and a plate sits on the wall posts. The 16 beams will support the first floor. The workman are mostly of English descent, a phenomenon which appears frequently in contracts dating to at least the 1640s for Dutch houses. Apparently the Dutch were less interested in being laboring craftsmen than in being farmers and traders—persons who made money by the wide use of resources.

31. Was at Matthew van Alstyn’s mill again to-day, and gave some medicine to an Indian whom came in to see me.

Substantial water falls on Stockport, Kinderhook and Claverack Creeks were an early inducement for settlers to come to this region. A second inducement was the availability of land for freehold purchase outside of the surrounding Van Rensselaer and Livingston Manors.

2 Sept. Crossman and Howard hewing the long timber for my house, and Alex making water furrows.

In this context “water furrows” may refer to hollowed wood gutters, not irrigation. Alex is his cousin Alexander Coventry.

4. Talked this morning with Sylvester about timber. He said I might have beams. He asked for 2 dollars which I promised him.

5. Howard and Crossman, and Alex’r at the timber, sent for a gallon of rum at Killyen van Rensselaer’s, which I got.

Supplying rum is often specified in building contracts as a contractor’s obligation. This Kiliaen was probably the son (1749–1814) of Capt. Hendrick van Rensselaer and his wife Elizabeth van Brugh of Claverack.

6. Men getting out house timber, and begin to-day to draw. Shot three pigeons.

To draw: haul timber to his house site, probably using the Dutch wagon which can be elongated for carrying long pieces. Peter Kalm and Anne Grant remark on the plentitude of passenger pigeons during migration times and the Dutch use of the fowling pieces to shoot them.

7. Men at timber.

18. Went this morning to get timber with the following people. Caleb and John Lobdell, Titus Finch, Thos. Whitlock, Thomas Crossman, Matthew Ghoes, Andrew Martin, William Wallace, and Mr. Howard. We wrought about two hours, when the rain stopt us. Went out again in P.M., and with the aforesaid men, except the two Lobdell’s and Mr. Finch. It rained some, however we have got all the beams cut, 8 of which are hewn, and 16 of the rafters cut down.

Wrought: to work. Coventry is using his diary as an account book, recording work hours and cost of materials. Hewn: to square a log into a beam using an ax and adze. Sixteen rafters match the six floor beams (plus two end wall sills which act as floor beams) plus eight ceiling beams already mentioned. These will be followed by sixteen wall posts and six collar beams to complete the basic structure, all joined in parallel “bents” in the Dutch manner.

19. Finch, the carpenter, and John and Caleb Lobdell, came here this P.M., and we went to a proposed place which they approved for a house. We tried for a cellar, but found the slate rock all over, not above 9 inches from the ground. Staked out the ground, and cleared away a number of bushes, trees &c., They drank two bottles of rum, and wrought pretty hard; proposed to begin the frame to-morrow.

Finch is evidently not just a carpenter but also a housewright, taking responsibility for planning and directing the construction. To begin the frame means to begin to lay out the hewn beams on the ground and mark and cut them for mortise and tenon joints. Each bent can then be reassembled and raised into place during the “raising”.

20. Howard, Wallace, and Maize gone over the creek to hew timber. Finch and Lobdell in a notion of going home but agreed to give them cloth for their work, on which they began to frame my house. Sent them their dinner, W.C. having killed a sheep to-day. Howard finished the beams, having hewn 120 feet. They praised little Maize.

The carpenter and assistant seem to be testing Alexander by threatening to leave him in the lurch without some extra inducements. Apparently there is no written contract to enforce an agreement. Beams are twenty feet long, so six beams were completed this day.

21. Howard, W. Coventry, Wallace and Maize, with Matthias Ghoes at the timber hewing. Alex. drawing the beams, and I drawing the rafters together. They hewed about 340 feet to-day, 2 hewing. Little Maize the most indefatigable alive. Could have kept 2 hewing himself. When he might have rested, he hewed with his narrow axe. Got the beams across the Creek. The 2 carpenters at the frame. They work extraordinarily well. Send for another gallon of rum at Rensselaer’s.

22. Same hands as yesterday at work over the creek. Thomas Whitlock helping to frame. Finished all the rafters, and collar beams, and got them over the creek; also another plate, the one we had not being sufficient. Have got 13 trees for beams, having two out of one tree; 14 for rafters, and 6 for collar beams, in all 14 good, and 20 small trees.
23. Men at work at the frame, and Wallace at the cellar. They throw the earth off the rocks.

24. Went to Fosberry's to dress the foot. Here saw some locust trees, and they have promised to give me some seed and some sprouts.

25. The men all at work framing, and getting stone, of which they brought 5 loads. Alex. bro't up the remainder of the rafters. Borrowed from Killian van Rensselaer's, a crow bar and pick ax from Roside.

26. The men at work on the frame, and others getting stone. They rode 7 loads with wagon and cart. Had Howe's two steers.

27. At the cellar Wallace, Maize and Ghoes at framing: the carpenters, Whitlock and Wm. C. in P.M. I intend raising to-morrow. I had a dispute with Alexander in which he spoke very saucily to me. I believe he shall do no more work for me.

28. At work to-day at the frame, Finch, 2 Lobdell's, and little John O'Lobdell, Ghoes and Maize. Building the wall at the cellar there were Caleb and Daniel Lobdell, Howard, Whitlock, and the negro Harry, and they got 4 corners up by noon. After dinner they began to raise. There were about 20 hands, viz, Finch, 3 Lobdell's, Whitlock, Williams, Cardegan, Wallace, Baker, Samuel, Benjamin, Thomas and Lawrence van Alstyn, their negro Jack, the 2 Williams, Martin, Isaac Decker, Thos. Ghoes, Timoth. Allen, and Maize. They wrought very briskly, and got it finished a little after sundown. A number of women, old and young were present. They all went a frolicking to David Williams, and being all hearty, having finished 2 1/2 gallons of rum, their mirth ended in a quarrel between A. M. [Andrew Martin] and G. who fought.

An eventful day, beginning with a house raising bee. Evidently the foundation wall of stone is only built up at the corners to proper level then the four sills are laid from corner to corner after which the floor beams are set into the sills (see Figure 8a following). Then each bent, composed of two wall posts joined by a ceiling beam (or six feet apart (Figure 8b). Next the two long forty foot plates are inserted over the tops of the wall posts on each side of the house. Last the paired rafters with their attached collar beam are lifted into place over each bent and secured to the plate by large h-on

29. The carpenters came this morning for their pay. They charged 6/6 per day, which for 8 day's work, amounted to £ 5, s. 4. Wm Coventry gave them goods for it, and placed it to my account. Also gave Caleb Lobdell a pair of stockings at 10 sh. and a piece of cloth at 4/, and also another piece, for which he is to give a day's work, atstoning my cellar... To Butler for sleigh runners 10,

4000 shingles at 18/ per m. £ 12 s. 6 d.

If shingles are 27 inches long and about 7 inches wide with 9 inch exposures, then 315 were used per square (100 square feet) on a house requiring 11.2 square or a total of 3528 shingles plus additional for breakage.

October 2. Bespoke Vandercarr's wagon, also Mr. Salishury's to go to Kinderhook for boards. Mean to set out to-morrow, with 3 or 4 wagons and a cart.

3. Can't go for boards on account of the roads being slippery. The hogs amongst the wheat, a great part of which they rooted out.

Wheat was the principal market crop in the Hudson Valley until dairy farming became more important in the nineteenth century. Dutch barns are especially suited to wheat farming, many later being raised to accommodate a herd of cows underneath.

13. Set out with 2 wagons, viz. Sylvester's and W.C.'s, with Hoe's cart, for Kinderhook after the boards, bought there when coming from Albany. The 2 wagons took 1000 feet, contained in 70 boards, and Howe's cart took 185 feet contained in 57 boards. Paid for 25 ft. in 2 boards, 1/ for an ox whip, 1 s. 9 d. for 35 lbs. of board nails £ 1 s. 15.

It will require about 1600 square feet of siding and another 1600 of flooring for Coventry to complete his house in addition to 1120 square feet of roofing boards. It is not clear which use the 70 boards are for. The 57 boards must be short boards averaging 31/4 feet long, about right for stair treads of which he will need only 30, half the amount brought.

November 8. Began to sow my nursery; made drills, leaving a passage between every four rows. Sowed two rows to-day. Had Howe's team carting stone, and carted 9 loads of small stones.

Drills: perhaps a series of holes to accept cuttings, such as for fruit trees. The small stone may be for fitting among the larger in the cellar wall, or if cobble stones for an entry way or walk.

10. Drawing stones. Finished my nursery, having four quadrangular rows, 9 paces long. Made a bush fence around them.

Kitchen garden plans appear in the Castello Plan of New Amsterdam (1650s) with just such quadrangular beds as Coventry describes for his nursery. A bush fence presumably is intertwined branches and cut bushes thick enough to ordinarily deter animals. The eighteenth-century Dutch of New York also made a fence of four wide horizontal boards attached to posts.

13. Went to raise my potatoes, and found the hogs had saved me the trouble, having rooted them up completely. Out of 20 bushels got 2. Sent to Hudson by Mr. Stiles for nails, and he got 12 lbs. at 1/4 pr. lb. The hogs have broken through my bush fence, and destroyed my nursery.
The problem of controlling domestic animals is evident in an era when animals were left to forage where they pleased on and off the farm but were fenced out of gardens and fields.

14. This morning, Ezekiel began to work at my house; made a scaffold, and nailed some roof boards on. The masons began the cellar wall, and laid up 2½ feet on the four sides, working well.

Ezekiel Butler is Coventry’s future brother-in-law. He resided in the house just south of the new one. Note masons had already laid up the corners of the cellar wall which support the frame, now they fill in under the sills.

15. The masons went home to Hudson in the morning. Both the Butler’s at work planing clap-boards, not being able to shingle on account of the wind blowing so hard. I got Grott to work for Howe, who joined shingles for me.

Evidently the 70 boards were for clapboards. At this period the usual clapboard was about 8 inches wide, one inch thick with a 3/8 inch bead on its lower edge, following the Dutch tradition.

16. Carpenters and masons both at work. Carpenters planing boards for the north end, and the masons finished south end of cellar.


18. Ezekiel Butler at work; erected a stage, and began to shingle the back-side of the house.

20. Butlers at work. Ezekiel began to board up the north end.

23. Both Butler’s working at the house.

24. One of the Mason’s came up and began to work. The other came at noon. Got 1800 brick rode to my house in 2 cart loads by Samuel Howe Jr.

1800 bricks would be enough to do more than half a fireplace system: arch support, hearth, fireplace, and chimney.

25. The Butler’s finished the two gable ends of the house. There are two windows and a chimney in each gable end of the house. There is a dance at David Williams, he having a shooting match to-day. They set up a turkey about 100 yards distant, and shoot at it with single bullets, paying 3d a shoot. If blood is drawn, the turkey becomes the property of the shooter or person shooting. A rifle shot costs more.

It was usual to have but two windows in the gable end, both on either side of the chimney at the second floor level. On the first floor gable wall it was customary up to this period to have a paneled wall with cupboards on either side of the fireplace. No mention of such paneling is made by Coventry. Also no mention is made about planing the ceiling beams, indicating they may have been left rough but covered with lathe and plaster. However, given the simple quality of this house, the lack of mention of ceiling lathe and plaster, it is more likely the beams were planed and left exposed.

By 1785 only the more progressive houses had fireplaces, i.e. living quarters, on the second floor. Unlike most New England houses, Hudson Valley houses had chimneys in each gable end.

27. Ezekiel began to board up the west side of my house, having finished the two ends last week, it taking him six days to board up and finish the windows.

28. The wind has continued all day, and the weather is so extremely cold, that one does not dare leave the fireside. Butlers not at work.

29. The river frozen over so thick and firmly that persons can walk on the ice. Butlers at work to-day.

30. Went to Hudson and engaged some boards of Capt. Worth. Men at work; closed up the back side, and put some roof boards on the front side.

December 1. Went to Hudson with Samuel Howe, who carried down a load of wood. Bought 4400 ft. of clap-boards, of Capt. Worth, for which I paid 27s and 100 feet of the same kind of boards, of Capt. Thurston, for which I paid 7s Dought of Thomas Jenkins 6 lbs. of 12 penny nails at 14d per lb.

Evidently this lumber was shipped to Hudson from the hinterland and consigned to the sloop captains who carried it. 4400 feet of clapboard in addition to the 1600 feet acquired before is far more than the 1600 required for this house but 5400 feet would cover the house and a large Dutch barn.

2. Ezekiel Butler at work; erected a stage, and began to shingle the back-side of the house.

7. The two masons from Hudson, viz. Jones and Suthard, came to-day for their pay, which I gave them; it amounting to £5 8s. and it can scarcely be seen where they have done anything.

A Seth Jones and David Sullard were masons in Hudson known to be working in the late 1780s and early 1790s. They were responsible for the construction of the William Ludlow house in Claverack in 1787, a substantial Georgian brick house.

9. Having got two sleigh-loads of hay from the Clayberg into the barn . . .

Presumably the existing barn built by his father.

12. Elias Butler at work yesterday and to-day. He has planed 540 feet of clapboards.

This in addition to the previous 1000 feet would be almost enough to cover the house.

13. Mr. Elias Butler at work to-day; cased the door and nailed on some clapboards.

16. Went on skates up to Kinderhook Landing to look for planks, but found none.

Flanks: floor boards.
February 2, 1787. About 11 A.M. set out with 2 sleighs, W.C. and Wallace driving, to get two loads of boards at the saw-mill across the river. Rode through the Coxsackie settlement . . . The tract consists of several intervale farms, as level as a bowling green, and mostly black mould. These plains are surrounded, and in some places intersected, by rocky ridges on which timber grows . . . The enclosures are middling small, but fences poor; the soil is excellent for grass, corn, or wheat. The houses are substantially built of lime-stone, and are generally 1 1/2 stories high; the barns are capacious. There is an appearance of substantial wealth about the buildings and farms, and the Coxsackie farmers are supposed to be the most opulent in the state. Their fertile soil, and its convenience to market, being much in their favor. This tract is almost exclusively inhabited by the low Dutch, viz; Bronks, Vandenberghs, Stoutenbergs &c, &c., and each farmer has a number of negro slaves. We arrived at Talmadge’s Saw-mill about 3 P.M., and by the time we had loaded with boards, it was near sun set. We got 1000 feet, middling quality, at 4 dollars, (the best boards having been carried to the river). Also 100 feet of clapboards at 4/. Engaged 1000 feet of 5-4 [meaning 5/4 inches?] at $ 5.62 per m.

His admiring descriptions of the Dutch farms at Coxsackie here, and below, give a clue as to why British immigrants such as himself would emulate Dutch building practice, sure signs of practicality and prosperity.

10 . . . we went to Col. van Bergen’s. He lives in an elegant stone house, not far from the church. The Col. and his lady were not at home, but Miss Catherine van Bergen, a pale young lady about 17 years, genteel, straight figure, with regular features, and delicate countenance, entertained us. We drank tea, had a dance, and supped. This house is the one which appears in the well known painting of the Van Bergen farm, ca. 1734, attributed to John Heaton.4

11 . . . Mr. Houghtaling, a Dutch farmer, who is very rich; owns a large tract of land, has a large substantial stone house, richly furnished.

14. There are few portions of my life that I survey with more pleasure than the few days spent among the respectable Dutch families, farmers, on the Coxsackie neighborhood . . . Their hospitality was sincere, unostentatious, and they seemed to participate in the enjoyment of their guests. Neither was it burdensome for them to entertain. Their farms produced all the means. I have never met with any portion of the human family who lived so independently as those where we visited. In the first place their farms were large, of the richest soil, and within two miles of the Hudson river. Within 24 hours sail of New York. Their houses were of the most substantial kind I have seen in America; good stone and lime; sufficiently so without being too capacious, and were finished in a style superior to anything I have seen among agriculturists. Each individual family had more or less black slaves who did all the work on the farm, and in the house; this saved the masters and mistresses from the insolence of what is called hired help, who must be humored like spoiled children, or they will leave you at their own will. Although the blacks were slaves, yet I feel warranted in asserting that the laboring class in no country lived more easily, were better clothed and fed, or had more of like, than these slaves.

Sailing to New York could take several days if the winds were not favorable. His description of slave conditions is echoed in the writings of Peter Kalm and Anne Grant.5

20. Sent two loads of hay to Hudson, Wm. C. having agreed with Thomas Jenkins for a box of glass at 5 pounds.

21. Sent three sleigh loads of hay to Hudson, which made out the two tons for Jenkins, and had the glass brought up.

26. The Yankee settlers very busy getting out boards and shingles.
27. White got 400 brick of Winslow on W.C.’s order, and brought them to the foot of the hill.

28. Used both Ox and horse team to bring the brick, of which got 1700, and Cornelius Becker brought up 1000 for which to allow, but the brick were very poor.

March 1. The sashes of the house are finished.

2. Went to Winslow who agreed to let me have 1200 of his best brick. A. Martin drove the sleigh and brought up 400.

3. A. Martin brought up 700 brick. Got 3 lbs. of putty at 1/6 pr. lb. also 1 lb. sugar at 1/. Found 300 panes of glass in the box—264 wanted for the house.

Tkis totaled 6400 bricks (discounting the loo0 poor ones) to date, 264 panes of glass, each probably 7x9 inches, provide a clue to the glass in the box—264 wanted for the house.

At t/s pr. lb. also 1 lb. sugar at l/. Found 300 panes of glass, each probably 7x9 inches, provide a clue to the size and number of windows, as conjecturally reconstructed in Figures 8 a & b following.

5. Got Mrs. Elias oxen about 11 A.M., and with double team, got 2/3 of the brick up to the house, using 2 yoke to the load to get up hill at the river, taking 800 at one load, and 600 on another. Wrought hard myself.

This totaled 6400 bricks (discounting the 1000 poor ones) to date, probably enough to do two large fireplaces and chimneys.

28. Jones the mason came this morning, and offered to work for me, and take payment in grain after harvest. He began the front of cellar, but the rain coming up, went to foundation of the chimney in the cellar.

29. Went over the creek to Fosborg’s; planted the two locust trees I got there before the door, and staked them around to keep the cattle off. Got the promise of 4 more locust trees. Planted the rest of the cherry trees.

Black locust trees were the preferred planting around Dutch houses throughout the colonial period. The reason derives from one or more of the following attributes: Their cascade of flowers are fragrant and attract bees who produce honey, the common sweetener of the period. Locusts grow rapidly offering quick shade and perhaps lightning protection although their absence from around barns belies this function. Locust wood is excellent firewood and highly resistant to rot as fence posts.

31. W.C. told me Dr. Tully wants to know if I meant to sell my farm, and the lowest terms, as he knows a merchant with the ready money. Will sell for 1000 pounds sterling, not less.

April 1. About 9 A.M. set out for Dr. Tully’s; he is a German . . . He lives in a rather poor house, part log and part frame, and consists of two or three apartments. Eat a dinner of sour-kraut and pork with him. He showed me his garden, in which he has a choice collection of fruit, especially pears and plums, among which are the magnus bonum. His son accompanied me to Mr. Mesick’s, who lives in an ordinary looking house, but well furnished, bearing all the marks of opulence, having a large board of pewter, a good bed, &c. . . got from the Dr. a variety of pear grafts, a single pear of which variety when full grown, will weigh one pound.

3. William van Valkenberg brought me 6 locust trees, three of which I will set out before the door, and the other three gave to William Coventry. Got 16 plum trees of Van Alstyne, which I set out along the run west of the house. Got some pear and apple grafts at the widow More’s old house.

4. Got Mantel-piece from Maye’s and 2 Crane eyes. Alderman Lawrence, and one Mr. Friesbrook, road commissioners appointed by the council in Hudson, came up this P.M. to lay out the road, which they did from Abram Maize’s to my house; making a crook at David Williams, from hence to the end of Butler’s line straight, then almost straight to my house, where they kept the old path pretty much, which is four rods east of my house; the width was 2 rods or 33 feet [see Fig. 5]. Previous to this, the road was along the river beach, and then up the hill or bank to each house.

As he acquired but one mantle-piece it was for the living room while the two crane eyes were undoubtedly for the kitchen fireplace to hold an Iron crane. Sometimes kitchen fireplaces were without mantles. The present route 9 follows this new road exactly in this vicinity.

5. Got brick up from the river, having Mrs. Elias oxen with mine, and got through about 3 P.M. Took the brick to Mount Pleasant. The men have not done much to-day, but have got the brick laid above the chamber fire-place.

Mount Pleasant is the name he now gives his new-built property which heretofore was part of the farm known as the Clay Barrack or Claybery, no doubt for the hill to the west of his house. Masons have apparently finished the living room (chamber) fireplace.

6. Masons wrought well to-day, having built the south chimney 5 rows above the ridge, and intend finishing the chimneys to-morrow. (There were 3 chimneys in the house—one North end—1 South end, and kitchen chimney on west.)

The parenthetical remark about three chimneys was added by Coventry when he amended his diary in 1830. His contemporary diary accounts, however, clearly indicate a house without a rear section which may have been added shortly thereafter.

7. Masons finished both front chimneys to-day, pencilled them so as to look pretty well. The bricks were just done, when the chimneys were finished. They have taken 4 days work to the chimneys, besides Janes and Lobdell 2/3 of a day at foundation. Jones 6 days, Southard 4, White attended 4, and I one day.
Pencilling refers to the seventeenth and eighteenth century tradition of painting the mortar joint with white paint to give a pleasingly uniform appearance. This is still to be seen on brick walls of Dutch, Georgian and Federal houses built in the Hudson Valley.

18. White refuses to continue on the farm. I thought everything was understood, but there is no holding the Yankees, they will creep out of a gimlet hole; and always advisers to put mischief in the minds of would be honest men.

White may be a hired hand; note above Coventry's disparaging comparison of hired hands to slaves.

20. Elias Butler got ½ gallon of Linseed oil, 5/ yesterday, and 10 lbs. of Spanish white at 6 - 5. Ezekiel Butler finished the window sashes the 18th.

Ten pounds of white powdered pigment when mixed in several gallons of linseed oil is probably sufficient to paint the outside of the house. However it is not clear that this white was for the outside clapboards.

24. Yesterday dug out some of the large stones in front of the house, and to-day dug up some of the garden on Mount Pleasant.

26. Went with W.C. to a frolick at Caleb Lobdell's, where there was a spinning bee, where there was a fine collection of girls . . . I danced only once twice. They ended with the cushion dance, balance at the bolster.

Some of the pleasures of frolicking are yet to be unraveled.

29. Pretty warm, sometimes cloudy, but serene most of the day in Clayberg. Reading "The Guardian", and thinking of Eliza, whose name I had just engraved on a smooth-barked poplar, and had just finished, when I heard Wm. Coventry's boy, David calling me. He said I must go to Hudson; that my wife had come. Transporting tidings to a love-sick swain. How my heart fluttered.

Elizabeth Butler of Branford, Connecticut, returns from a visit to her parent's home. She and Alexander were married at Branford on March 11, 1787.

May 1. Men at work at my house, ploughing the plank for chamber floors.

The chamber or first floor.

5. Butler mending fences around the house; seems discouraged at the poverty of the fences.

7. Both the Butler's at work, ploughing the plank for chamber floors.

8. Rode to Kinderhook and agreed with Mr. Meehan, merchant, for 20 pitch pine plank to be delivered by, and paid for to Mr. Pruyn, tavern keeper at Kinderhook Landing . . .
20. There is the raising of a barn, and a spinning bee at Mr. Salisbury's to-day, and the girls with a number of the people from this neighborhood have gone. Mr. Butler, Rebecca and my wife and I had an invitation, but did not go. Rebecca is Elizabeth's sister who is apparently living with them.

October 4. Set off for Albany, intending to go to Ballstown on purpose to view the country and see what encouragement there is for a young surveyor and physician.

12. Patrick McArty finished digging out the cellar to day, at which he has been 15 days at 3/- per day, which added to Ghoes and other's work amount to £2 17s. this time digging cellar.

The long delay in finishing the cellar and the many days it takes to dig it out relates to the fact that rock was found below the surface.

19. Returning, found some white pine trees. I dug up 4, drew them to the house and planted two at each end of the house; and then began the stable, and by help of the neighbors, got it up 7 logs high.

Log structures are mentioned elsewhere in the diary, including dwelling houses.

20. Billy filled the places between the logs of the horse stable, around which we dug a trench, and dug also a dung hole, and got the hovel cleaned out.

21. Men laid foundation for, and laid the hearth in the bedroom.

It is not clear whether this is a first or second floor room. It was just at this period that local houses were being built with second floor rooms instead of just an open garret.

November 28. We came to Capt. Barker, who was busy splitting some ash wood, to make a clay chimney, to a squared log house, which he built up in a square, the sticks lapping at the ends; then these are covered on the inside with a thick coat of plaster of clay. This the universal method of making chimneys for log houses; but after a while the clay dries, and cracks, and if not mended, the chimney is apt to catch fire.

In the 1640s Father Joques comments on the hazards of similarly constructed chimneys in Beverwijck (later Albany).

December 1. In the afternoon, employed in laying floor, and recovering the stable, which Billy had done before, but in a wrong manner, and has spoiled four of the best slaps.

Slaps? Perhaps slabs, rough cut planks used then and into the next century for roofing rude structures, the slabs being laid from ridge to eaves across the roof, the cracks between covered by a second layer of slabs.

February 12, 1788. Got about 2 lbs. nails, of those that came out of the roof of the old barn, of which W.C. has pulled a part down. It was originally 100 feet by 50 feet, and was built by my father at his expense during the French and Indian War.

Large Dutch barns measure 50 feet square; to have a double sized barn must have been unusual. Anne Grant described an even longer barn at the Schuyler Flatts north of Albany.

14. Have used, since housekeeping, which began in June, 1787 the 10 present month, 15 bu. wheat, besides some Indian corn.

15. Employed getting the rest of wheat from Clayberg to Van Alstine's barn. Threshed out the loose part with blocks. A block is a conical shaped stick of wood. The small end plays around the post in the middle of the barn floor, and 2 horses fixed to the large end, draw in a circular course over the wheat.

Such a threshing block was used in the Netherlands up to at least the beginning of this century.

April 26, 1788. Employed making bars at each end of the house, and before the door, picking up stones &c most of the day, cut and piled some brush on the 1 acre lot. Squared accounts with Matthias Ghoes, .

Bars? The meaning is not clear. Cellar windows usually had squared wooden bars but these do not relate to a door.

May 21. Went over the creek to see Van Vechten, who was at Hans Staats' helping Elias Butler to make some cabinet work.

Cabinet work could refer to a paneled wall and cupboards for a fireplace wall. Ezekiel Butler's next oldest brother was Elias.

June 17. He [Oreston] laid out 8s for himself, without as much as asking my liberty. There is none in America to be trusted—no, not one. Employed along with Jonathan getting the Barrack timber to the spot, which we affected excepting 2 pieces.

Hay barracks (see Figure 10) were characteristic Dutch farm structures which functioned something like modern silos and are still in common use in the Netherlands. Usually four, five or six tall poles, up to a dozen in diameter and 60 or more feet high were placed vertically in the ground, each drilled with holes which held iron rods which supported and adjustable roof. A Jack raised and lowered the roof to cover the hay stacked under it. The last hay barracks in New York State collapsed recently; it was in Livingston township, Columbia County. Others may still survive in New Jersey.

28. Went to the mill between sermons and saw them set the mill going. When they stop it, they tighten a very large hoop or bar of iron, which goes around the wheel &c.
July 2. Went over to Major Hallenbeck's, and by his permission, cut down 28 pine trees for spars to the barrack.

So many trees to make the roof rafters of a barrack suggest it was unusually large.

26. Coming home called at Rensselaer's, who had a bee to repair the mill dam.

30. Cut some hoops for the top of the barrack; also got some withs.

Hoops: possibly applied to the spars to position them to form a conical shaped roof and also to attach shingles or thatch.

October 12. At Kinderhook 55 lb. of nails at l/equals &2 15s. Ox whip, 19. Mason 31/2 days of work at $1 per day. Butler for sleigh runners 10/4000 shingles at 18/pr. thousand.

4000 shingles is the same number as required to cover the house, again suggesting a large hay barrack of 1200 square feet roof area, or about 40 feet in diameter.

March 12, 1789. heifer ... value 3 pounds N.Y. currency, payable in 27 inch shingles at £1 4s 0d per thousand.

Shingles in the colonial period were sometimes as long as three feet. Longer shingles far outlast thinner and shorter shingles.

14. Wm. Galburn at work, helping to ride the timber of my horse stable to Whitlock's. We got 7 or 8 loads.

18. Went to the Claybergh bridge, and got it moved into its place, with the assistance of a number of people.

23. Helped Finch to cover Claybergh Bridge, which we got about half done.

A bridge that has to be moved in place, coupled with the spring high water suggest a flood had dislodged it from its foundation.

27. Finished covering Clayberg.

Replacing lost planking or is this a covered bridge?

May 27. Cuff drew some sticks belonging to the barn that still remained in the woods. Ezekiel intends to raise the barn in the P.M. Sent to Thurston's for 11/2 gallons rum which they got. They got all the barn raised except one plate and the rafters.

Although there is no prior mention it is evident from later comments that this was a barn Alexander was having built on his property. The brief mention of its erection does not identify its structural type. However, as Dutch barns continued to be built in this region into the next century it is most likely to have been this type (see Figure 9 following).

June 21. Mr. Delameter has got his house as high as the second floor; it is 40 by 24 brick. He is now burning a lime kiln. Has dug a hole in the side of the hill and arched it over with limestone; on the outside are some logs and between them and the stone it is covered with clay.

A substantial brick structure required a quantity of lime to mix with sand for mortar. Apparently it was more economical to build a temporary kiln to produce hydrated lime from limestone than to bring it up from the coast where it was made from sea shells.

October 19, 1799. Dug a small well, there being a spring, and stoned it up after which Cuff asked to go to Claverack to a horse race.

28. Went to Hudson and agreed with Capt. Thurston for 2000 feet of boards to be paid for in hay.

Curiously there has been a four months delay between erection of the barn and beginning to cover it.

November 4. Carried 34 cwt. of Hay to Capt. Thurston and got 739 feet of boards of him.

November 13. Cuffs load of hay weighted 12 cwt. Took my load to Thurston, and got 315 feet of boards in one wagon and 60 refuse boards.

16. Sent Amasis Hubbel to Thurston for 20 lbs. of tens, nail and 20 lbs. eights which he got pr. order.

A total of over 3000 board feet would enclose a Dutch barn about 45 feet square.

20. Jointed shingles for the carpenter. Had Cuff also joining. (November 24--Cuff and I joined shingles for the barn. Ezekiel has finished the roof to two or three courses.)

Joining shingles may refer to shaping the edges so they fit closely together.

26. This day appointed a fast or feast day by the President. It is a Thanksgiving Day.

December 10. Employed today breaking out Lime-
stone, and Cuff and Peter took our tools in a wagon. Got there about an hour before sunrise. Got the Stone on the N. Side of the hill, endeavoring to get what lay under ground.

December 11... got some very large stone found them softer and easier dug, the deeper we went got neigh twenty loads: although the rock seemed sound at top, yet we found it full of veins, and lay in layers about 18 inches thick.

The reason for selecting limestone carefully would suggest burning it to make lime for mortar.

18. Covered the sheep's hovel with rails: also covered a hole with earth this hole for the hogs to sleep in.
May 28, 1790. Williamson assisting me in digging the well. The stratum of sand which we reached yesterday, seemed about 10 inches thick, and the water oozed out, in different places all around the well often getting through the sand we came to a body of yellow clay about 2 or 3 feet thick. This was free of stones, nor seemed so hard as the black sand, when most through the clay it began to be stony in one side and we came to another layer of sand but not so pure as the first, some stones and the water came out of a small spring, on digging about 8 inches deeper we came to a sandy bottom mixed with round stone all over the well, and this seemed springy. The sand was hard before being broken up but when loosened it was quite soft, and mixed freely with the water. On digging this down, the water came in fast, and about 2 feet down a vein of quite black sand appeared on the East side, and a considerable stream oozed out, dug about 6 inches deeper when a blue clay appeared and the water came so as to require constant throwing out. We quit about 2 hours before sun set.

17. Got Patrick McArdy to stone up the well which he almost finished. The stone being drawn as fast as he used it.

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This concludes Coventry's diary entries for construction on his farm. Later entries mention his buying and selling boards, but not for his own use. Before he has completed his farm buildings he already is mentioning looking for another place to live where his medical skills will be in greater demand. There are already other doctors in the Hudson area and Coventry apparently has made up his mind to go to an area where there are no doctors, hence his move to the newly opened lands in the middle part of the state.

Notes

6Ibid., 116.
7Uit Het Oude Friese Akkerbouwbedrijf (Leeuwarden: 1981), 12. [Ids Wiersma's (1778–1965) sketches of farming practices in Friesland.]
Illustrations

Figure 5. The 1799 Penfield Map, detail of Coventry's farm. Collections of Columbia County Historical Society.

This large manuscript map, drawn at the time of purchase of the Van Rensselaer holdings in Columbia County by Daniel Penfield, depicts all the land holdings and buildings of the central third of Columbia County. Alexander Coventry had by then sold his farm and the listed owner was Macy who lived just north of Ezekiel Butler. The similarity of farm houses drawn on this map is such that one is not assured that any one house is accurately represented. Most are one and a half story with gable end chimneys and are colored red, an accurate if simple depiction of a common house type in the eighteenth century for this region.

Figure 6. A clapboard house of about the 1780s. Author’s photo, 1987.

This house near Stuyvesant (formerly Kinderhook Landing) on the Hudson River in Columbia County, resembles in basic structure the Alexander Coventry house. The structure relates closely to how Dutch clapboard houses were built throughout the eighteenth century with an overlay of features characteristic of houses of the late eighteenth century. Thus a one and a half story two room Dutch-type house now has a central hall, each window, lighter framing timbers, English type jamb fireplaces, and English derived door and window moldings. This type of Hudson Valley farm house was produced with variation into at least the 1820s before succumbing to a series of revival styles (Greek, Gothic, Second Empire, etc).

Figure 7. M.D. Defreest 1806 A Plott of the house & Barn. Courtesy of Eastfield Village, East Nassau, NY.

This rare surviving builder’s drawing of a proposed house, barn, outhouse ("Necessarium") and well is similar to what Coventry had built two decades before. The inscriptions are as follows: "A Plott of the House & Barn Done for Mr. M. D. Defreest 1806. A Good Barn, very well finished 33 by 27½ Necessarium, Painted. A very good Well, of good Durable water. The Cellar is 7 F.[feet] from floor to floor, with a good well plastered & conveniently Lighted. The walls of the upperrooms are fluted in with brick and plasterd. The Joiner-work is done well & painted. The rooms are 8 feet from floor to floor. The upright part of the Chamber [second floor] is 3½ feet, the wall filled in with brick & the Gable ends as high as the crossbeams. The roof & body of the House is well covered with a good coat of Spanish brown." The only room on the main floor shows a "cupboard" [with shelves] and a "Clothes press" [without shelves, for hanging clothes]; the right room "Two convenient cupboards and a good breast-work." The illustration shows only one but the description indicates a paneled wall with cupboards, usually these are on either side of the fireplace.

Figures 8a & 8b. Reconstruction of Alexander Coventry’s house. Author’s drawings.

This reconstruction of Coventry’s house is based primarily upon his own diary account which stipulated the house’s overall size, number of structural members (sills, beams, rafters, collar beams) covering, room size, and number of panes of glass used. The number of beams (eight) and their spacing stipulate the position of the twelve foot wide center hall (off center) and thus the position of the door and windows. The roof angle is approximately that most common to houses built at this time. The stoop, gutters, cellar entrance, and foundation height are conventional features of houses of this place and period. No assumption has been made about interior features except for a stairway. It is likely that the larger room was the main living room and had a paneled wall with cupboards on either side. The other room was the kitchen and may or may not have had paneling.

Figure 9. Structural plan of a Dutch barn. Author’s drawing.

The structure of New World Dutch barn derives from Netherlands prototypes which antedate New Netherland by several centuries. Their main features are gable end wagon doors opening on a wide central aisle with smaller gable end doors entering onto side aisles. Side walls tend to be low compared to the height of the gable. The central aisle received wagons laden with wheat or hay and served as a threshing floor. The side aisles were for domestic animals of which a farm kept sufficient for its own needs. Three aisle Dutch barns are thus multi-purpose, but the primary commercial crop was wheat. Surviving Dutch barns are three to six bays (most are four) bays. Most are square in plan, from 35 to 50 feet on a side. Dutch barns ceased to be constructed during the first half of the nineteenth century as newly pre-dominant dairy farming required different structural arrangements.

Figure 10. Livingston hay barracks. Photo courtesy of Don McTeman, 1978.

This hay barracks survived with its original four poles upright into the 1980s. It is believed to be the last such structure in New York State although less than a dozen survive in New Jersey. The latter were built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggesting that this one was too. As such they represent the longest persisting Dutch farm practice in the New World. Their storage function has been assumed by the silo which resembles it in general shape. This hay barn was composed of four posts and a roof twenty feet square.
Fig. 5. 1799 Penfield Map with detail of Coventry’s farm.
Collections of Columbia County Historical Society.

Fig. 6 A clapboard house of ca. 1780s. Author’s photo, 1987.
Fig. 7. M.D. Defreest, A Plot of the house & Barn, 1806.
Courtesy of Eastfield Village, East Nassau, NY.
Figs. 8a & b. Reconstruction of Alexander Coventry’s house. 
Author’s drawings.
Fig. 9. Structural plan of a Dutch barn. Author's drawing.

Fig. 10. Livingston hay barrack.