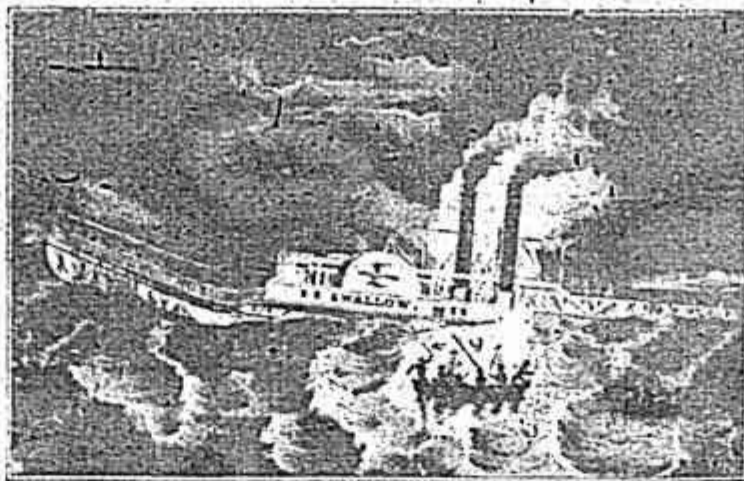


The Swallow House



Rare Currier & Ives print portrays tragedy of The Swallow which ran aground while racing from Albany to New York. Men from Athens in small boats saved many of the 300 passengers from drowning.

Valatie Residence Constructed from Salvage of Wrecked River Steamer

(This is the sixth in a series of articles on Columbia County homes of architectural or historical interest.)

FROM THE WATERS of the Hudson River, about 29 miles below Albany, juts a rocky island tinged by tragedy. Known to rivermen as "Noah's Brig," it received this strange sobriquet on an April night in 1846 when it became the scene of a major disaster. The victim was a fast, graceful passenger boat named "The Swallow," which plied between Albany and New York City. The competition for a paying load of passengers was keen 115 years ago, and a bitter rivalry broke out among the Swallow and several other boats. A price cutting war developed. Fares were slashed until it was possible for a passenger to be carried all the way from Albany to Manhattan for the grand sum of 25 cents.

THE BETTER BOATS tried to establish new speed records for this run of 142 miles. It was regarded as an added inducement to prospective travelers to step aboard the fastest carrier on the river. With boilers hissing and stacks belching smoke, the "Swallow" had lost a close race up-river one April night in 1845.

The winner — that time — was the "Swallow's" great rival, the steamer "Rochester." The next evening, as the boats cast off in Albany for the down-river run, the captain of the "Swallow" was determined to avenge his loss to the "Rochester." The race began at 6 p.m. The "Swallow" had a slight lead on the "Rochester," and close behind the "Rochester" was a third boat — the "Express." An old newspaper account reports that "all three were hooked up to maximum speed."

THE WEATHER was described as fair when the boats left Albany. However, it soon turned bad. Heavy clouds scudded across the sky. Fifteen miles below Albany, off New Baltimore, the boats ran into a rain storm that turned into a snow-

squall. To keep her lead, the "Swallow" was running at top speed — and so were the "Rochester" and the "Express," in expectation of taking that lead away from her. Some 300 passengers were aboard the "Swallow." Few showed concern, for the "Swallow" was regarded as one of the finest boats on the river, manned by a crew of able, carefully-selected officers. One of these men — the chief pilot — had been to dinner. As the boat became enveloped by the storm, he left his meal and climbed to the pilot house. Before his vision had become accustomed to the darkness, he ordered the boat to swerve 20 degrees portside. He apparently misjudged the vessel's exact whereabouts. It was a costly mistake. A few seconds later, the "Swallow" plowed into the rocky ledge of Noah's Brig. The crushing impact broke the boat into two parts.

THE STERN sank rapidly. The bow rose 20 feet in the air, cascading blazing coals from the ship's boiler into the hold. Fire broke out in all parts of the "Swallow."

Stunned by the crash, passengers scrambled across the deck and plunged over the sides. Some were caught by the river current and swept to their deaths. Accounts differ widely as to the exact death toll. They range from 15 to 75 lives.

At any rate, men from the nearby village of Athens hastened to the scene. Their heroic rescue work was credited with saving many of the 300 passengers from watery graves. The boats "Rochester" and "Express" hove to and their crews lent their efforts to saving human lives, but nothing could save the "Swallow." Dawn revealed a tragic dismal sight. Broken amidship, one part of the beautiful boat lay submerged, the remainder was scarred and blackened by flame. Around her swirled a litter of luggage,



Siding and an unusual circular stairway for the Walter Sterner residence on Albany St., Valatie, were taken from the steamship Swallow, wrecked off Athens on April 7, 1845.

clothing, boards and ship's equipment.

Among those who jumped overboard that night was a Judge Baker. As he plunged over the rail, he gripped in his hand a leather suitcase, and years later the visual reminder of the tragedy was displayed in the museum of Hendrik Hudson Chapter, DAR, on Warren St., Hudson.

COLUMBIA COUNTY has another relic of the "Swallow" in the village of Valatie and the present residence of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Sterner on Albany Avenue. It is, in fact, the house itself.

This comfortable, fairly large neat and substantial looking structure was constructed of lumber salvaged from the wreck of the "Swallow." Ira Buckman, a Valatian,

claimed salvage rights on what was left of the wreck during the summer of 1846. He tore the skeleton apart as she lay beached on Noah's Brig and carted usable boards some 17 miles overland to erect what is now widely known as "The Swallow House."

The outstanding reminder of the once proud river steamer in the Sterner home is its stairway, vintage of 1845, and built like a corkscrew. It begins in the basement and spirals upward for two stories, with the stair-steps supported by a center pole.

Two young ladies, the Sterners' daughters, Carol and Marie, move blithely up stairs and down... over the same treads and risers where, 115 years ago, passengers of the crowded "Swallow" began a rendezvous with death.

New York Service For Hugh Johnston

Hugh McBirney Johnston, 49, president of Tilton-Johnston film producers, died Monday at his home, 26 West 9th St., New York City from cancer. He also maintained a farm at Ghent and had resided for 15 years.

Born in Chicago in 1911, he was a graduate of St. Mark's School, Southboro, Mass., in 1930 and Harvard College, 1934, where he was a member of the Fly Club and Hasty Pudding Club. He was engaged in the advertising business upon graduation from college. He was a former Master of the Mill Creek Hunt, Wadsworth, Ill. During World War II he served with the United States Navy as a Lieutenant Commander.

In 1942 he married the former Ellen Wacker of Lake Forest, Ill. Following the war, Mr. and Mrs. Johnston moved to Ghent, where they spent the summer months and weekends in the winter.

For several years, Mr. Johnston maintained offices of Stillhunter, Inc., in Chatham, engaged in the manufacture and distribution of Stillhunter riding and shooting gloves which he designed. Mr. Johnston was a member of the hunt staffs of the Carroll Hounds and later the Old Chatham Hunt. An accomplished horseman, Mr. Johnston appeared frequently in local horse shows and owned and trained several hunters at his Ghent farm. At one time he was active in Boy Scout activities in Ghent. He was engaged in the production of industrial films in New York City and later headed Tilton-Johnston, Inc., in the development of entertainment films.

He is survived by his wife, Ellen Wacker Johnston; a daughter, Mrs. Deborah Johnston Lionberger of St. Louis, Mo. a son, Hugh McBirney Johnston III of Gladwyne, Pa., a stepson, Thomas C. Sheffield, Jr. of Lake Forest, Ill.; two sisters, Mrs. Conway Almstead, Mrs. Otis L. Hubbard; a brother, Hubbard, all of Lake Forest, and a granddaughter, Deborah Lionberger of St. Louis.

Memorial services were held at the Church of the Holy Trinity in New York City.

Hudson Drivers Lose Licenses

Three Hudson drivers' licenses revoked or suspended by the Motor Vehicle Bureau for causes during the first three months of the year.

Peter Stragasky, Hudson, had his license revoked for conviction of driving while intoxicated, the Bureau reported. Conviction of driving without insurance resulted in revocation for William I. 302 State St., Hudson, said.

According to the Bureau, Junior operator license of Winch, Hudson, R.D., was suspended for six months for Bureau stated.

Chatham Biologists Visited State

The Chatham High School Biology Club was given a tour of the State Museum Saturday, by Dr. E. M. of Old Chatham, curator. The members viewed the preparation in building groups and handled the study collections.

In the afternoon, they visited the NYS Conservation Research Laboratory where Joseph Dell, a staff, explained the projects currently being conducted.

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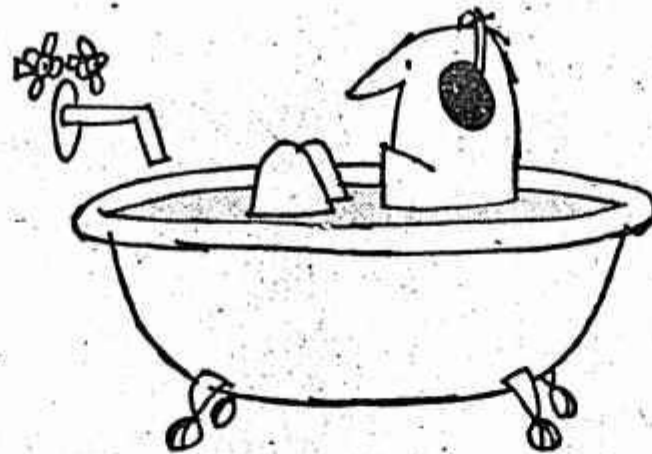
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