

The Importance of Cornelia Beekman

Cornelia Beekman, born in 1752, was an instrumental woman to the American cause during the American Revolutionary War. Until her death in 1842 Cornelia also greatly impacted Sleepy Hollow. Her positive impact on Sleepy Hollow's streets and division of land, combined with her patriotic accomplishments during the Revolutionary War make Cornelia Beekman deserving of a place in the Tarrytown-Sleepy Hollow Hall of Fame.

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Cornelia Beekman

Throughout the history of Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown, New York, there are many people who have contributed greatly to the two villages. There are many politicians, philanthropists, writers, and soldiers who have all left their mark on Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown in various ways. However, not all of these people central to the development of Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown have received the recognition that they deserve. One of these people is Cornelia Beekman (1752-1842). Cornelia was an American patriot who lived in Peekskill during the American Revolution. During this time her family was extremely prestigious and later owned most of modern-day Sleepy Hollow. Cornelia was responsible for the division of Sleepy Hollow into lots and streets. Although it was not just her political accomplishments which should be remembered, but also the vibrant loyalty and high morals of Cornelia's character which make her so deserving of the honor of the Hall of Fame.

Cornelia Beekman was part of a very well-known and popular family. Living with her parents, Pierre Van Cortlandt and Joanna Livingston, at the family house on the Croton River, Cornelia had a peaceful childhood. At the age of seventeen she married Gerald G. Beekman and moved into New York City. Cornelia and Gerald lived in New York City until the urban excitement caused by the outbreak of the American Revolution encouraged them to move back to Cornelia's family house in Croton. This is where the Beekmans stayed until the Beekman Manor, built for Cornelia and Gerald, was completed in Peekskill. Cornelia was not the only Patriot rebel in the family; she learned most of her beliefs from her father, Pierre Van Cortlandt. Beginning with these lessons, Cornelia's aspirations for freedom and her deep sense of loyalty to the Patriots continued throughout her brief amount of time in the city, becoming the main aspect of her life after her husband's death. Gerald Beekman died in 1822, leaving Cornelia widowed.

During this period in time (1776-1783) the conflict between the American and the British forces was intensified locally, including in Peekskill and similar areas of Westchester. This is where Cornelia spent the war, (in her manor house in Peekskill) as a target of insult and aggression from the British soldiers. However, Cornelia maintained her dignity and her devotion to the American cause throughout, resulting in one instance

in particular which shows the extent to which Cornelia's actions influenced "the fate of the nation." This instance involved Major Andre. Smith, a man working with the infamous Major Andre, tried to retrieve an American uniform from the Beekman house to give to Major Andre. However, Cornelia determinedly refused to give Smith the uniform, claiming that she had suspicions about Smith's possible connections to the Whig Party. Cornelia was not aware of the importance of her actions at the time, but if Major Andre had received this uniform, he potentially would have been able to escape to outside the American lines. If this had happened, the outcome of the war may have been drastically different. This event represents the importance of the regular, every-day people in history. Also, this shows that Cornelia Beekman deserves recognition not only for her local contributions to Sleepy Hollow/Tarrytown, but also for her accomplishments on a larger scale.

The contributions of Cornelia Beekman in Sleepy Hollow are still visible today. Cornelia's impact began in 1822 when her husband Gerald died, and Cornelia's funds ran dangerously low. As a solution to her money troubles, Cornelia advertised part of her acreage for sale. At this point in time, Cornelia owned the majority of modern-day Sleepy Hollow. The lots which Cornelia put on sale sold quickly, and thirteen years later, Cornelia created Beekmantown. The center of Sleepy Hollow was divided into streets and lots, with Beekman Avenue, Depeyster Street and Cortlandt Street as the main streets. Beekman Avenue, which still exists today, became the main street of Sleepy Hollow. Cornelia had built these streets and lots in hopes that they would be "for the public use forever." Beekman Avenue was unique because it was 66 feet wide, wide enough for three sets of wagon tracks next to each other. From these streets, the land was divided up into 50 by 125 feet lots, on sale for a hundred dollars each. The selling of these lots brought an increase of people into Sleepy Hollow, causing a sudden upspringing of houses and industry. Tarrytown was slightly more developed than Sleepy Hollow at this time, which was partly due to the fact that the Beekman family owned the Upper Mills in Sleepy Hollow. When Tarrytown emerged as a retail and commercial center, Sleepy Hollow was overshadowed. However, the influx of immigrants to Beekmantown allowed Sleepy Hollow to enter the industrial age, with the village's first aqueduct and railroad.

Although Cornelia Beekman's name is not widely known in connection to the American Revolution, her highly moral character helped her to influence the possible outcome of the war. The fact that she was a woman, and still so respected by many, shows how many boundaries she overcame. For this alone, Cornelia deserves recognition, however this is not all that she accomplished. Not only did Cornelia make contributions to the American war effort, but she also had permanent, positive impacts on Sleepy Hollow. Although referred to as Beekmantown during this time, Sleepy Hollow flourished under Cornelia's ownership. The main street of Sleepy Hollow continues to be named after Cornelia today, but Cornelia deserves more recognition than simply a street sign. Cornelia Beekman deserves to be in the Tarrytown-Sleepy Hollow Hall of Fame because of her various irreplaceable contributions to society of the time and to the villages of Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown.

Works Cited

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