Big House on the Hill: Engaging with Heritage and Community through Archaeology at the Van Reyper-Bond House

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Introduction

The Van Reyper-Bond House property, located on the southern edge of the Montclair State University campus, was the focus of archaeological field work by students of Dr. Peter E. Siegel during the summers of 2008 and 2010. The 2-acre property was bequeathed to MSU in 1966 by George Bond. George had purchased the property from the last living member of the Van Reyper family, Elsie Van Reyper, in 1952. The Italianate Victorian mansion was built in 1872 by Elsie’s grandparents, Thomas C. Van Reyper and Caroline Speer. The house is listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places. In 2008, the University restored the exterior to its former splendor. Over the years, the house has been the center of considerable interest by local historians and community members. Here, we explore the archival, oral history, and archaeological significance of the property.

The house and its two acres were bequeathed to MSU in 1966 by George Bond. He had purchased them from the last living member of the Van Reyper family, Elsie Van Reyper, in 1952. The property was part of the area once called Speertown, for the abundance of Caroline Speer Van Reyper’s ancestors, whose homes dotted the mountainside. Speertown included all of Upper Montclair.

Thomas Van Reyper was a master carpenter and tools that he used to build the house have been saved by his descendants. Many are stamped with Thomas’s initials: TCVR.

New Amsterdam to Montclair: The Van Reyper and Speer Families

Caroline’s and Thomas’s ancestors relocated across the Hudson (“North”) River in the 1660s, in today’s Jersey City. From there, the families were among the first to go west across the Passaic River into present Passaic and Essex counties.

The map [right] shows the migrations of Caroline’s and Thomas’s ancestors. There are three lines because both of Caroline’s parents were Speers (Spiers), 4th cousins descended from two sons of Hendrick Jansen Spier: Johannes (prob. 1653-1724) and Hans (1663-1730), both of whom settled in the area now called Upper Montclair.

Caroline’s maternal line lived in present Passaic, then in the Clifton vicinity, and Caroline’s paternal line lived in present Belleville, following a farm on the mountain near MSU.

In 1713, Hans Spier and his wife Tryntje purchased a 150-acre tract of land on the east side of “First Mountain,” in today’s Upper Mountain Avenue. Caroline’s father, Thomas Van Reyper, inherited the farm. Frustrated farmer Thomas was able to focus on the design of the house when he married in the Reformed Church of New Amsterdam.

In or around 1824, Sally Speer’s brother, John, deeded a property of approximately eight acres to Sally and Peter. This became the Speer dairy farm, whose pasture and barns covered today’s entire Mt. Hebron Cemetery on the east side of Valley Road.

The Van Reyper-Speer Era

In or around 1824, Sally Speer’s brother, John, deeded a property of approximately eight acres to Sally and Peter. This became the Speer dairy farm, whose pasture and barns covered today’s entire Mt. Hebron Cemetery on the east side of Valley Road.

Whether Thomas and Caroline planned the house on the hill or the county required the Speer house to be demolished so that present Valley Road could be widened, upon Peter’s death they had the means to build the mansion and hire men to work the farm. Frustrated farmer Thomas was able to focus on the design of the house and his passion, carpentry.

Thomas and Caroline had two children, Peter and Margaret. Peter and his family continued to live in the house after his parents’ death. His son and daughter, Tom and Elsie, never married. Tom died at the house in 1948. Elsie sold the house in 1952 and died in 1961. The Van Reyper-Bond property was in the possession of the Van Reyper-Speer family from 1713 to 1952, and the Bond family from 1952 to 1966.

Peter Speer built his house on the west side of the wagon path that became Valley Road, below the site of the present Van Reyper-Bond House. Part of Peter’s house was built in 1831 and its cornerstone (right) survives.

Peter and Sally’s daughter Caroline married Thomas Van Reyper of “The Notch” in 1855 and they lived with her parents until Peter’s death in 1866. Thomas became a dairy farmer upon their marriage.