

Catharyna Brett
Dutchess County's First Real Estate Dealer

By Barbara Wilman



Madam Brett Homestead

Madam Brett, as she was called by succeeding generations, first arrived at what was later to be called Dutchess County in the fall of 1708. Born in 1684 to well to do Walloon family in New York City, she found herself without a fiduciary inheritance and land poor upon the death of her mother, Helena Rombout in 1707. She had married Roger Brett in 1703, who had arrived in the new world with Lord Cornbury governor of New York. Brett was a well respected captain in the Royal Navy.

It was not long before Captain Brett met his future wife, as the Rombout family was active in the social life of the royal circle. After their marriage the Bretts moved into the family Rombout home on Broadway. As the family had great wealth, there was no reason for Roger Brett to be gainfully employed apart from attending to business needs of the family.

A drastic change in life style came about for the Bretts in 1707, as Catharyna, on the death of her mother, had received only nine pence, and the house on Broadway, which she could no longer afford, and 28,000 acres of wilderness in the Hudson Valley which was a third of the Rombout Patent which had been negotiated by her father, Francis Rombout with the Wappingers Indians in 1683.

Knowing that their future and livelihood lay in the Hudson Valley, Roger Brett, mortgaged the Broadway House, and headed to the wilderness to build a home and grist mill for his family near the junction of the Fishkill Creek and the Hudson River. Catharyna in her third pregnancy arrived with her two young sons, Thomas and Francis, in the fall of 1708.

Although there was the King's Highway, a very narrow dirt road running from New York City to Albany(the current Route Nine) the major means of travel was by sloop on the Hudson River.

The Bretts began developing their inheritance by leasing lands to tenants for farming, selling tracts of land would come later. The settlers relied on water commerce (sloops) to take their produce to the city and return with supplies. Returning on his sloop from New York in June of 1718, Roger Brett encountered a fierce squall near the Fishkill Landing.

The sail quickly filled with wind and the boom snapped across the deck striking Brett on the head sweeping him into the water to drown.

With the death of her husband, Madam Brett now became the partner of George Clarke, secretary of the province, who had been the partner of Roger Brett. He held the mortgage to the southern most portion of the Rombout Patent, as the Bretts needed capitol to

establish themselves in Dutchess. As her partner, he guided her to several important land sales and clients. The most outstanding ones being, Dirck Brinkerhoff, Cornelius Van Wyck and Theodorus Van Wyck. Theodorus and Cornelius were known to be surveyors for Madam Brett. With these sales, Catharyna was able to pay off the mortgage and became the sole proprietor of her land.

Madam Brett never remarried, but had the support of her sons and the other colonists. She had had to provide food, clothing and shelter for family, as well as servants. One of her greatest responsibilities was maintaining and running the grist mill at the mouth of the Fishkill Creek.

The Wiccopee Indians were played an important role in Catharyna's life. They often camped on her land in front of her house and her children played with Sachem Ninham's children. The Bretts became familiar visitors to the Indian village. This friendship was to prove beneficial, when a land dispute arose between Madam Brett and the English and Scots settlers in Poughkeepsie

When the dispute could not be settled, Lewis, an Englishman, sent some Indians to attack the Bretts. Daniel Ninham, son of Sachem Ninham, warned Madam Brett and she was able to escape. An official survey resolved the dispute in favor of Madam Brett and the Wiccopee Indians were given a gift of money as a goodwill gesture by the Van Cortlandts, Verplancks and Madam Brett, holders of the Rombout Patent.

As with many of the colonists, religion played an important roll in the lives of the Bretts, especially Catharyna. They donated land for a church in Fishkill, as it was the center of the farms along the Fishkill Creek. The church building was begun in 1716, two years before Roger's death. In all it took seven years to complete the building. "Madam Brett's Road" (now, route 52) ran from Beacon, known as Fishkill Landing, to Fishkill.

During her lif, from 1687 to 1763 Catharyna accomplished many things, but is known for establishing commerce and the selling of lands to create farms in Southern Dutchess. She is buried under the pulpit of the First Reformed Church of Fishkill which she helped to found.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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