COVER Tulips dominate a formal garden on Oscar de la Renta's Connecticut estate. Photograph by Richard Felber. Page 94.

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Local landmarks embody centuries of patrician life.
Tales of the Hudson River Valley

Local landmarks embody centuries of life in a patrician preserve

By John Ashbery
Photographs by William Waldron
Produced by Babs Simpson

Margaret Livingston Chamier, later Mrs. Richard Aldrich, poses in 1906 in the library at Rokeby, the family home she owned from 1899 until her death in 1963. Opposite: The "plaza" at Oak Hill, another Livingston domain, overlooks the Hudson.
Rokeby's almost exuberant shabbiness speaks of the Aldriches' determination to keep the place afloat come hell or high water.
RUSCONI HOUSE

designated the Hudson River Historic District by the National Park Service, is a surviving remnant of several patents dating from the late seventeenth century, when the English were seeking to develop the province of New York, as the Dutch had before them, through land grants to favored colonists who would in turn establish settlements in the wilderness in an aristocratic pattern descended from the feudal system. Two of the largest grants were Robert Livingston’s Clermont and the Beekman family’s Rhinebeck, a few miles to the south.

A ninth-generation Livingston, Henry, lives today in Oak Hill, a handsome if somewhat severe foursquare federal house built in the 1790s by his ancestor John and now topped with the mansard roof that so many Hudson Valley houses acquired during the nineteenth century. An affable man whose close links to the region are apparent even before he speaks of it, he is married to the former Maria Burroughs, a great-granddaughter of the Hudson River painter Frederic Edwin Church, whose quasi-oriental palace, Olana, looms on a hilltop nearby. Henry Livingston believes that his ancestor chose Oak Hill’s site not just for practical reasons—the narrowness of the Hudson at this point would later facilitate a commercial link with the old Susquehanna turnpike to the west—but also for its beautiful view. “He had an eye for luminism,” Livingston says, pointing to the seven-foot-tall windows facing the river which are unusually large for the period and “very cold.” Nevertheless this is a warm house, burnished by being cared for by generation after generation.

A kitchen wing added in Victorian times seems to have become the hub of family activity; from it a broad corridor with parlors and a dining room on either side sweeps the length of the house to the “piazza”—another nineteenth-century addition, angled so as not to interrupt the river view from inside, where life goes on all year and the late-afternoon light pouring eastward over the Catskills is a joy in any season.

The same porch positioning exists at Rokeby, owned by Winthrop “Winty” Aldrich (an assistant to the state commissioner on environmental conservation and perhaps the most prominent of the Hudson Valley activists) and his brother and sister. Built for General John Armstrong, an Aldrich forebear, possibly
Rockefeller's gather in the 1930s at their ancestral house in Germantown, above, part of which was once a tavern. Left: In a downstairs hallway the present owners, Mary Black and Mike Gladstone, have concealed a lavatory behind the doors of a Dutch kas. Below left: A Dutch door connects halves of the house built at different times. Black's half is on the near side of the door, Gladstone's beyond. to the designs of the French architect Joseph Jacques Ramée, the house was occupied by the family in 1815 while it was still uncompleted, after their temporary home burned down. Today it still looks as if they hadn't finished moving in; its almost exuberant shabbiness contrasts with Oak Hill's solid comfort and speaks of the Aldriches' determination to keep the place afoul come hell or high water. Rockefeller became the property of Winthrop's grandmother, Margaret Livingston Chanler, in 1899, after she succeeded in buying out her many siblings' interests; several years later she married the musicologist and New York Times music critic Richard Aldrich. Remodeled and enlarged in the mid-nineteenth century and with further interior alterations done in 1895 by Stanford White, a family friend, the house is both ungainly and totally charming, the ideal house to have been a child in. A center hall furnished with gigantic Renaissance revival cabinets leads to a perplexing warren of little staircases and service rooms whose pattern no one has ever been able to figure out; at the corners of a landing White introduced "hidden" servants' passages to confuse things even further. A reception room to the left of the red drawing room furnished with green upholstery and tapestries intended to continue the motif of nature outside are both told toward the river, as is the octagonal library, the first floor of a five-story tower. Reception room still has its red rosewood French papered wall hung with an orangery and muslin framework to protect it from "rising damp"—so one the title of a British TV series recently, but a fact of life in the valley. Everything—gilt leather ingles, a fading Aubusson carpet, lots from wherever and whenever (including a piece of imperial Chinese embroidery salvaged by indomitable Margaret, who was in China during the Boxer Rebellion) where it was being used as a lhabitat—looks old, tired, distinguished, rich, and right. Miss Havisham would have felt at home here, obviously, so do the spirited and ve Aldriches.

somewhat more formal, though dully austere, is the brick gentilhomme known as Forth House—livingston, a few miles east of the town named by the architect Harry Dyke and his brother Frank, a horticulturist. Harry, who has a stcice in New York City, has also milled restoration work on historic uses in the valley region, including an Davidson's Midwood, the rockefeller Tavern, and others belonging to art dealer Pierre Levai and novelist Harold Brodkey. Forth House (whose name may be an abbreviation of Forsyth, that of an early owner, or allude to the River Forth—Scottish place names abound in the region), purchased by the van Dyke brothers and their late mother in the 1950s, has rightly been called one of the most outstanding Greek revival residences in the county. The facade, with its discreet white portico (the rear one runs the length of the house as a piazza), is sober but welcoming; the interior decoration is notable for its rows of lead medallions, copied from an ornament at the Erechtheum in Athens, that march around door and window frames and seem to be bolting the house together. The van Dykes have added a spectacular conservatory, which protects tender plants in winter and serves as a dining and party room in summer, adjoining it is a room

Livingston portraits survey the dining room at Oak Hill, above, now home to a ninth-generation heir. Below left: The American Empire sofa and matching chairs were made for Oak Hill. Below: The house dates to the 1790s.
The valley is a place of legends, of which Rip Van Winkle's is only the best known chiefly devoted to housing issues of Country Life, which, as Harry observes, accumulate at an alarming rate.

One unusual feature is the triple-hung windows at the back, typical of southern houses of the time. They allow access to the piazza and a recently created terrace and let in breezes in summer. Outside, a series of enclosed formal gardens and "wild" English-style ones, as well as a grove of towering trees that screen it from a nearby highway, extend the serene classicism of the house.

Several miles to the southwest in the town of Germantown (once called East Camp by the Palatine refugees who settled it in the eighteenth century) is the house known during most of the nineteenth century as the Rockefeller Tavern, now the home of art historian Mary Black and publisher Mike Gladstone. It is a remarkably clear wedding of the vernacular Dutch and English styles common throughout the Hudson Valley. The Dutch half, which originally served as a house and tavern where John D. Rockefeller's great-grandparents were married in 1772, was basically a plain one-room stone structure with a half-story loft above; it dates from about 1755. The more spacious and higher-ceilinged English half was added about 1800.

The tavern was ideal for the two houses under one roof that Black and Gladstone had envisioned, which are further united by long first- and second-story porches. A connecting Dutch door, originally an exterior door of the tavern, now serves as a perfect device for defining separate but contiguous units. Beyond adding a few windows and a downstairs lavatory cleverly hidden in a replica of a large Dutch kas, or wardrobe (of which Oak Hill has a particularly fine example), the owners have left the place much as it was. Both halves are furnished with a combination of nineteenth-century antiques and comfortable contemporary furniture and folk art from Black's collections, the most notable pieces being her family portraits by Erastus Salisbury Field and Gladstone's pair of Wardian cases, patented terrariums more often seen in Victorian engravings than in person.

Hudson, New York, is the train hub of the upper valley, and the first house one encounters on walking up from the station is Jeremiah Rusconi's faded redbrick Greek revival one. It stands as a kind of symbolic signpost to the small river city, whose fortunes have fluctuated with the times and are still doing so. Rusconi, whose business is architectural restoration (he was also the art director of the Merchant Ivory film The Europeans), bought the place (Continued on page 172).

Lead medallions based on paterae at the Erechtheum in Athens ornament Greek revival woodwork at Forth House, right. The dining table is set for one of the teas at which Harry and Frank van Dyke entertain neighbors. Above, Harry van Dyke, an architect, and his brother, a horticulturist, enlarged the 1833 house with a neoclassical conservatory, at left.