

# The Roost

VOLUME 19, ISSUE 1

IRVINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

WINTER 2018

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## Memories of Irvington

by Ibbets (Mary Elizabeth) Knapp

*Note: This piece was written in April of 1998 by Ibbets Knapp, a long-time resident of Irvington.*

My memories of Irvington begin in 1928 when my family moved here from Hastings to live on West Clinton Avenue, at the corner of Ardsley Terrace. It was the time of the old Ardsley Club by the station, before Hudson House, before the Half Moon Apartments, and before the other developments that were to come later. This was the time of large estates along Broadway, some of which reached to the river, many originally built as summer homes for wealthy New Yorkers who traveled here in the early days by horse and buggy. West Clinton is a street where the past still lingers.



Ibbets in front of the family home on West Clinton Avenue.

These memories are, in part, from my childhood, but there are also the tales I heard from my father and his friends when they spoke of “the good old days.” My father loved Clinton Avenue and, when we took walks, he would point out to me that the great old houses here were built within twenty years of each other—sometime between the mid and late 1800s—and that these houses must have known each other well as they gossiped across the street. He imagined that the Octagon House was the “boss.” The delicate Victorian across the street could have its feelings hurt, he pointed out, by the elegant, sophisticated colonial with its large columns and stately air, just below the Octagon. The serene-looking stucco house facing the river would be the “judge.”

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## Memories of Irvington, *continued*

Actually, my first view of Clinton Avenue was seeing the Wendel cows crossing Broadway just south of Clinton while all traffic was stopped. Twice a day the farmer would stand in the middle of Broadway holding up his hands to direct traffic while his cows crossed over to pasture on the Wendel property across the street, returning in the evening to be milked.

The Wendel sisters were maiden ladies who lived in an old house covered with vines and darkened with age, close to Clinton Avenue but hard to see. They loved their cats and dogs, rumor had it, to the extent that their favorite dogs ate at the table with them. In their wills, the Wendels left funds for a pet cemetery on Fifth Avenue.



Ella Wendel with her dog Toby.

Across Clinton Avenue from the Wendels, where Columbia now has a storage building, there are stone posts between a rusted iron gate. During the time I remember, there was a driveway leading to a handsome, colonnaded house at the top of the rise, facing the river. It was torn down, due to high property taxes, shortly after we moved to Clinton Avenue.

The land on both of these properties extended to the aqueduct. On the north side, beyond the aqueduct, I remember a large, buff-colored house with a large porte-cochere and driveway. It was also torn down,

but a charming, renovated carriage house remains. Bernard Karfoil, the artist, owned the property at one time.

The Octagon House, built in 1860 by the Armour family, rises with dignity across the street. To me, it will always be the home of the poet and writer Carl Carmer and his artist wife, Betty. They were welcoming neighbors, and we all felt at home lounging around on their porch on a summer evening. Betty loved children and especially Halloween, when she'd decorate the house with cobwebs and things that hooted and screeched. She'd appear in witch's garb.

Carl's birthday party, in mid-September, was unforgettable. The porch sparkled with Japanese lanterns that circled the house. We were invited to share the black-tie event. On warm evenings we could walk up Clinton Avenue to enjoy a birthday feast, followed by dancing through the hall and on the porch. The first celebration at the Octagon was recorded by *Life* magazine in a feature entitled "*Life* Goes to a Party," showing guests arriving in antique cars and dressed in elaborate Victorian costumes to emulate the period of the house.



The cover of *Life* magazine showing guests arriving for the Carmer party at the Octagon House.

## Memories of Irvington, *continued*

Across the street is the lovely Victorian I spoke of before, with its pair of weeping cherry trees on either side of the walk. Below is the grey stucco house, the "judge," with its sweeping porch on the riverside and handsome copper beech trees.

Just below the Octagon is the present Guthrie house, built in 1908 by William McAdoo (later Secretary of the Treasury under President Woodrow Wilson) as a present for his first wife. After her death, he married Wilson's daughter. This was a large house, beautifully proportioned, rising for three stories with four large columns across the front.



The McAdoo House as it appeared in 1913.

The house has a varied history. A Mrs. Pateman lived there when we first moved to Irvington. When she died, a man who called himself a commander in the Navy and wore that uniform but also dressed in the habit of the church, took over the house and called it a naval academy. The few boys that we saw did not look very well cared for, and we understood the house was filthy inside. Some of the boys were taken to the Nevis property next door for discipline. Their cries alerted the neighbors but there seemed to be little they could do. It was like something out of Dickens. Fortunately, an ex-wife turned up, sued him, and we understood he went to jail.

We really marveled at the next owners, Mennonites we were told, and we watched them pitch tents on the lawn, living there while dismantling the house. First the roof came off, then the whole third floor

and the large columns that crossed the front of the house. Suddenly, it was an entirely different building. It is thanks to Ginny and Tom Guthrie, who bought the house in 1960, that it has achieved a style and beauty of its own.



The McAdoo House today.

From our house, which is near the bottom of the street, we could look down and across the Vietors' rolling fields and maple trees to the river. Their dark brick house was almost hidden. The Vietors were rarely there. The adjacent property of several acres, south of the Vietors, was owned by the Frasers. Ann was a close friend, so I remember well her stone house on the river, with its stretching porches. It has also been torn down.

The last property on the north side of West Clinton Avenue, on the river, belonged to Adam Luke. We were very aware of his land because our house faced his private three-hole golf course. In the distance, hidden in the trees, we could see his huge, grey stone mansion. Eventually, he, too, tore down his house, but before he could finish, the house caught fire and burned the rest of the way. Mr. Luke had many stories to tell about his reasons for demolishing his house, which I heard retold many times. He complained that it took 27 in help to care for the property and house—and there were always problems. It seems that his cook had a beau in the village who was jealous of the butler. Mr. Luke explained that he always made his own martinis in the butler's pantry. One night the kitchen door burst open and the cook's beau broke in, gun in hand, and

## Memories of Irvington, *continued*

started shooting at Mr. Luke, thinking he was the butler. Mr. Luke hid behind a table and wasn't hurt. But he did not care for the experience.

In 1940 he worried about food supplies and decided to purchase canned goods, which he kept in the cellar. However, whenever he asked for something special from the cellar, he would be told that it was not there. Someone was helping themselves to his cache. Now he replenished his supply of soups and tomatoes, but these he had carried to the attic. Here he felt they were secure. One night, sitting in his library, sipping his martini, he heard a noise and, looking up at the window, saw a large carton of Campbell's soup being slowly lowered to the ground. This was too much for him. He left his Irvington home as soon as he could.

I haven't mentioned Nevis but Coleman duPont was living there when we first moved to Irvington. After he died, his daughter Renee duPont Donaldson moved into Nevis with her husband, Jack Donaldson, and their two children. My father and Jack went to Maryland for fox hunting in the fall, and Dad kept his horse, Sam, at the Nevis stables. Jack Donaldson had jumps of all kinds placed around the property (some made of railroad ties). When Dad could, he'd get up early and take Sam out for a turn around the property, returning home to change before taking the train into the city.



Nevis as it appeared in 1938.

At 13, I also was jumping Sam, and could walk across the field to my piano lessons at Nevis. It is wonderful to have memories of that beautiful house being enjoyed as a home.

A few postscripts: Prohibition had taken over the country and bootleggers had moved onto one of the farms in East Irvington. When they learned that the police knew of their whereabouts and were on their way to oust them, they planned an escape. One Sunday morning, my father was awakened by the noise of screeching tires as a car turned into our back road. Dad, incensed, dashed out of bed and onto the open porch, his white nightshirt flapping wildly as he looked down at the men in the car below. He shook his fist at them, telling them it was an outrage to waken people so early on a Sunday. Quickly the car backed out of the road and roared down the hill, meeting Mr. Lee, the superintendent of the Vietor estate, driving his family to church. The bootleggers commandeered his car at gunpoint and flew back up Clinton Avenue. They apparently had hoped to find a street leading south to Manhattan, and instead had only discovered one dead end after another. At Broadway, they turned south, where the police soon caught up with them. We understood that the bootleggers had a running gun fight with the police and one of the bootleggers was killed.

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Isabel Benjamin, life-long Irvington resident known for her civic involvement.

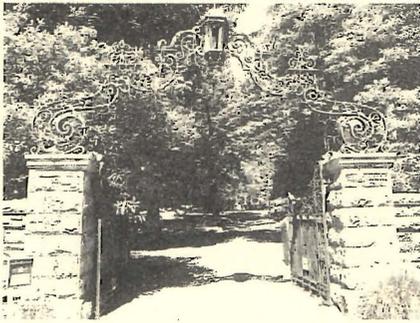
Even though Isabel Benjamin was known for her work with the Girl Scouts, I knew her as my Sunday School teacher at St. Barnabas. She was an exacting sort of person, but also a dear lady who used to invite us to tea at her house on Riverview Road. She

# Memories of Irvington, *continued*

would show us her treasures, and sometimes would give us one to keep. I still have an enamel stamp box from those days that I keep on my desk.

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The Mackey family lived on the northwest corner of Broadway and West Sunnyside Lane, in a house later bought by the Newberrys and then [Stan and Monica] Getz. I knew the Mackey son from the early years of dancing class. He had an older sister, Ellen, who was in love with a man the family did not approve of. She ran away to marry — Irving Berlin. During the Depression, when Mr. Mackey found himself in financial difficulties, it was Irving Berlin, the son-in-law he didn't speak to, who stepped in and saved him.



The gates to Shadowbrook at the northwest corner of Broadway and West Sunnyside Lane.

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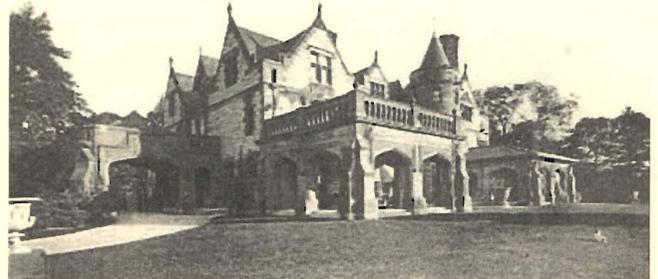
Miss Darling's dancing classes at the Racquet and Swimming Club (later the Ardsley Country Club) were held on Fridays. Miss Darling, in her white dress and shoes, snapping her castanets in time to the music, kept a firm hold on her classes. The girls loved the dancing. The boys went mostly because firm parents gave them no choice.

As we grew older, we were invited to formal dinner parties before the dancing, where the girls received corsages and the boys, boutonnieres. The tables were set with beautiful china and silver, and there were place cards to keep us in our seats. I remember Pinky Starring, Madelyn Noyes, Allie and Peter Mat-

thiessen, Sybil King, and Mollie Newberry, at whose home I had my first filet mignon.

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George Washington Hill, the head of American Tobacco, lived at Richmond Hill, where he built a huge house. He was one of the first to have an indoor pool and a large theater to show the latest movies to the many theatrical people he liked to entertain. The glamorous women of Hollywood visited him there. They were driven out by limousine, which we could recognize because there weren't many around then. My friends and I were movie crazy, and we would wait on Broadway to peer into every limo, to see if we could spot Merle Oberon, Jean Harlow, or Joan Crawford as they turned through those black iron gates at the corner of Broadway and Harriman Road.



Richmond Hill, home of George Washington Hill.

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In 1941, just married, we moved onto Bob Stearns' estate, where the high school is now. Our cottage was by his greenhouse and his cutting garden. It was called the Potting Cottage, referring to its past usage, an enchanting spot. We were one of several couples who lived in small houses on the property. Jesse Sweetster, the well-known golfer who won the British Amateur title in 1926 [the first American-born golfer to do so], lived with his wife, Nan, in the Pond House.

## Memories of Irvington, *continued*

Bob was the lord and master. For many years he lived in the great stone house built by his father and called Stern's Castle. Later when it burned down, he built a contemporary house on the same site. We were pretty much at Bob's beck and call. There were command invitations to dinner or bridge, where Bob reigned supreme. Should we be entertaining at the cottage and he passed by, he considered it perfectly natural to stop in and visit, and even stay to dinner.



Stern's Castle built by department store mogul, Isaac Stern.

I would like to finish with a paragraph I wrote some time ago that seems an appropriate closing to my memories of Irvington:

Wonderful stone houses originally graced the estate properties in Irvington. By the late 30s and early 40s, many of the houses were gone, torn down due to high property taxes and the stock market crash. Left were winding driveways to garages and superintendent cottages, and to circles in front of empty spaces where a few large stones were all that marked the existence of a one-time mansion. Though the houses were gone, the magnificent trees and plantings testified to the years of caring that had made this area so

special. As in defiance of the creeping neglect around the torn-down mansions, the magnificent copper beeches continued to grow and flourish, as did the oaks, magnolias, and dogwoods. Rhododendron and laurel bloomed along the driveways, and elaborate rose gardens, untended now but still beautiful, were tucked away behind thick hedges. Everything that could be removed was for sale, even the landscaping equipment. People treasured the trees and shrubs they bought, and remembered where they came from: the Lukes, the Mairs, the Blacks, they would explain.



Remnants of Irvington's past can be found in her stately trees, rutted paths, and old stone walls.

Today, we admire what is left of these great properties—the stone walls, the magnificent trees, the spirit of the past—and do our best to preserve and maintain what we have.

—Ibbets Knapp

*My mother always treasured Irvington and the Hudson River. I am certain she would have been honored to have her Memories of Irvington included in an issue of the Society newsletter.*

—Carolyn Cullins,  
Daughter of Ibbets Knapp

# Main Street School Students Visit the McVickar House



Fifth graders walking up Main Street to the McVickar House.



Docent Sara Kelsey helps students explore the history of the river.



Students search for answers to a scavenger hunt prepared by the teachers.



Students learning about ice harvesting on the river at the turn of the century.



Enjoying a PowerPoint presentation prepared by Society member Bob Connick.



Docent Bill Schwartz and students explore the village timeline.

# Captain William Dutcher

by Dr. Erik Weiselberg



William Dutcher (1741-1795), whose farm stood at the center of what would become the village of Irvington, was not only a founding father of the area but also a patriot who commanded a militia unit during the Revolutionary War. Local historian Marcius D. Raymond in 1894 described Dutcher as “one of the leading and representative men of this Manor at the time of the Revolution,” and “a man of ability, character, and substance,” whose patriotism “was of the kind which needed no incitement to action.”

The Dutcher, or Duytser, family came in the 1600s from Gelderland in the Netherlands, first settling in Flatbush and then Ulster County. In 1699 William Dutcher’s grandfather Barent Duytser moved from Esopus (Kingston) and settled just south of Wolfert Ecker’s farm. When Barent’s son Johannis married Meyno Buys in 1727, the large landholdings of the Buys (or *Boyce*) family became part of the Dutcher property.

In July of 1776, two British frigates arrived in the waters of the Tappan Zee. William Dutcher volunteered to form a company of 40 men, “to protect the inhabitants along the shore of the North River from the mischievous attempts of the Ministerial ships now lying in the river near Tarrytown.” On July 30, 1776, Dutcher informed the Provincial Congress that, “there is a number of men under my command that are well equipt as any Company in the County, and I think I can say with safety, the Best.” If the Provisional Congress would provide ammunition and

allowed the men to take care of their harvests, Dutcher assured them that, “you may depend upon it these men will be ready almost on the shortest notice.”

Dutcher became captain of the Upper Philipsburgh Associated Company of Militia, one of two unaffiliated companies that were formed alongside the three major militia companies of Westchester. Throughout the war, Dutcher’s company consisted of roughly 30 men, with a first lieutenant (Daniel Martling) and second lieutenant (George Munson), three sergeants, two drummers and a fifer.

By mid-August, supplies on the British ships were becoming dangerously low and, contrary to expectations, their captains found it impossible to obtain water or provisions, or to make contact with Loyalists, and were constantly harassed by the militia along the shore. On August 14 the British ships weighed anchor at Tarrytown. British Vice-Admiral Shuldhham called it a “fruitless expedition,” in which the ships had sat in the Hudson River “useless for six weeks.” British General William Howe said of the resistance, “I can do nothing with this Dutch population; I can neither buy them with money nor conquer them with force.”

During the summer of 1776, Dutcher’s Company constructed river obstructions between forts Washington and Lee. They also assisted with the construction of Fort Independence, overlooking the Spuyten Duyvil and the Harlem River, and were stationed in that area until the fall of 1776 when the British invaded Long Island and General Washington pulled his troops north towards White Plains. Fort Independence was abandoned, its barracks burnt, and the stores and cannon removed, and Dutcher’s Company joined Washington’s army at White Plains.

Between October 28 and November 11, 1776, Dutcher’s Company served at the Battle of White Plains, stationed just west of Horton’s Mill Pond (now Silver Lake). Although far from the main action involving the Continental Line at Chatterton

## Captain William Dutcher, *continued*

Hill, they may have contributed to General Washington's deceptions that made the American forces seem larger and their positions more fortified than they actually were, causing British General William Howe to cancel his attack.

After the Battle of White Plains, William Dutcher moved his family to take refuge with relatives in Salem, New York. The British encamped on neighbor Jonathan Odell's farm and took his hogs and destroyed his orchards. At the Dutcher home, British raiders rounded up the slaves who had been left in charge, and dumped them out of a boat into the Hudson River (presumably they could not swim), although they were able to walk back to shore.

In January of 1777, Dutcher's Company participated with General William Heath on a siege of Fort Independence, which had since been rebuilt by the British and occupied by Hessian soldiers. Cold and stormy weather, a lack of artillery, insufficiently trained militiamen, and poor planning saw the company retreat without taking the fort; but the battle may have served to teach General Washington how to maneuver the British to his advantage.

After the British defeat at Saratoga in October of 1777, the regular armies had essentially abandoned Westchester, leaving it a "Neutral Ground" subject to raids and skirmishes by both sides. During the winter of 1777-1778, William Dutcher was home on leave when the British raided his homestead looking for him. Thanks to his wife, Catherine, who distracted the raiding party, Dutcher made a narrow escape on horseback.

On June 16, 1778, Daniel Martling replaced William Dutcher as captain. Some sources claim that Dutcher may have been enlisted in the Secret Service as part of Washington's delicate intelligence game that contributed to victory in the War for Independence. Little record exists of Dutcher's subsequent war service, except that in 1782 he sought a commission to

cruise a whaleboat on the Hudson River, but it's unclear what became of the offer.

Several other local Dutchers served in the war, including William's cousins Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, or Abram, served in the First Westchester Militia, but also may have lived and served in Dutchess County, as well as in Col. John Lamb's Regiment of Artillery as a matross, or gunner's mate. Isaac was baptized at the Old Dutch Church but lived in Tappan, serving in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of Orange County Militia under Colonel Ann Hawkes Hay. John Dutcher, William's nephew, was related to Wolfert Ecker and served in the First Westchester County Militia, among other militia units and the Continental Line.

After the war, William Dutcher's children married local residents: daughter Jemima married Abram Acker 3<sup>rd</sup> and they lived on the old Acker farm just north of the Dutchers; daughter Maria married Benson Ferris, son of Oliver Ferris, a revolutionary war veteran from Connecticut who purchased the Wolfert Ecker/Jacob Van Tassel property (later sold to Washington Irving and renamed *Sunnyside*).

William Dutcher's large farm formed the center of present Irvington. In 1817 the southern half was sold to Justus Dearman, who in turn sold it in 1848 to developers who laid out plots for the village of Dearman, renamed *Irvington* in 1854. William Dutcher's farmhouse was later owned by Charles Lewis Tiffany, but it was demolished sometime between 1902 and 1924.

Today, Dutcher Street remains the most visible mark of his life in our village, but soon Dutcher's name will appear on the new Revolutionary War Memorial at the aqueduct crossing in downtown Irvington, on land that was once his home.

—Dr. Erik Weiselberg

# Adventures in the Neutral Ground: Irvington and Philipse Manor in the Revolutionary War

by Ginny Read



On Sunday, January 21<sup>st</sup>, to a standing-room-only audience at the Irvington Public Library, Dr. Erik Weiselberg presented an Irvington Historical Society-sponsored lecture on the Revolutionary War in the “Neutral Ground” of our village and the surrounding area.

Some background: In May of 2017, Deputy Mayor Connie Kehoe approached Dr. Weiselberg about researching the names of residents who had lived within the borders of what is now the Irvington School District, and who enlisted to fight the British in the war for American independence. The aim was to list these patriots on a memorial plaque at the newly restored War Memorial Plaza, sited where the Old Croton Aqueduct crosses Main Street.

His research—culled from maps, genealogical works, pension records and muster rolls, and nineteenth-century local histories—uncovered not only the names of enlisted soldiers but also stories of those “civilian” men, women, and children, some enslaved, who served the patriot cause when war came to our village. As the memorial will list only soldiers, the library lecture gave Dr. Weiselberg the opportunity to share with an enthusiastic public some of these other stories; among them, the courage of William Dutcher’s wife, who stalled British raiders so her husband could make his getaway, and Jonathan Odell’s slave, Caesar, who was “half-hanged” three times for refusing to divulge the location of hidden provisions.

With his *Adventures in the Neutral Ground* lecture, Dr. Weiselberg also explored Loyalist and Patriot strategies (successful and not) to control the Hudson River corridor, which was vital to both sides for moving troops and provisions. “Irvington,” situated on its shores, lay in the thick of this struggle and involved its citizenry as well as local militias.

Dr. Weiselberg’s research is ongoing. He plans on writing individual biographies of the lives of some of the soldiers whose names will be listed on the monument (one of these, a profile of William Dutcher, appears in this issue) and presenting additional lectures on the Revolutionary War.

—Ginny Read

## CALLING ALL IRVINGTON PATRIOTS!!!

Soldiers from the following families have been identified as having lived in what is today Irvington (current school district boundaries) and having enlisted and served in the Revolutionary War. Their names will appear on a monument to be placed at the newly renovated War Memorial Plaza:

ACKER • BONT • BUCKHOUT • DUTCHER • FERRIS  
JEWEL • ODELL • REQUA • VAN TASSEL

If you know of (or think it’s worth researching) anyone else, please contact:

Connie Kehoe at [ckehoe@irvingtonny.gov](mailto:ckehoe@irvingtonny.gov) or Pat Ryan at [jppjryan@aol.com](mailto:jppjryan@aol.com)

# Standing in their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution

by Patricia Ryan



Dr. Judith Van Buskirk spoke at the Irvington Public Library on Sunday, February 11th.

On Sunday, February 11, the Irvington Historical Society presented Dr. Judith Van Buskirk speaking about her 2017 book, *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* at the Irvington Public Library. Dr. Van Buskirk tells the story of thousands of black men who took up arms against the British and fought for the cause of American independence.

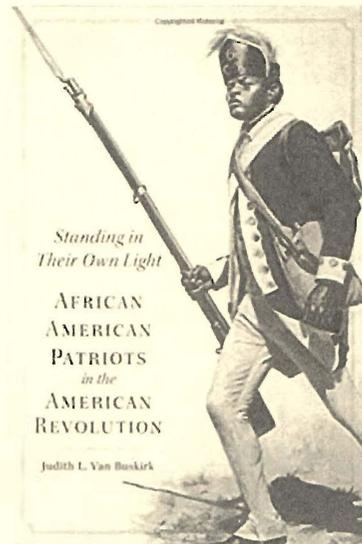
Dr. Van Buskirk, Professor of History at the State University of New York, Cortland, drew upon pension files and military records to reconstruct the lives of more than five hundred African Americans who served in the Continental Army. Their stories enrich and complicate the story of the American Revolution.

Washington's army was an integrated one and Van Buskirk gave us an overview of the numbers of African Americans, the reasons they served—including a down payment on a better life, bounty money, the

promise of freedom if they served for their master—and the history of Revolutionary War pensions and pension records.

She also explored the Continental Army policy regarding African American soldiers and their experiences as Continental soldiers, presenting two very different examples: Rhode Island successfully established an all-black regiment with white officers but in South Carolina, the interests of slaveholders proved too hard to counter.

African Americans, Dr. Van Buskirk points out, had to fight to get into the army, fight the British during the war and fight after the war for a place in society. Yet she believes that this was still a transformative experience for those who served. While not denying that the revolution's promise of liberty and equality went unfulfilled for the vast majority of African Americans, black patriots' wartime experiences became "a weapon in their fight for basic rights."



Dr. Van Buskirk's book, published in March 2017.

—Patricia Ryan

# The Roost

Irvington Historical Society  
P.O. Box 23  
Irvington-on-Hudson, NY 10533  
Phone: (914) 591-1020  
[www.irvingtonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.irvingtonhistoricalsociety.org)

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**Save the Date:**  
**Sunday, March 18, 2018**  
**2 p.m.**

**Barnet Schechter**  
**“The Gettysburg Campaign and the New York  
City Draft Riots: Conspiracy or Coincidence?”**

**Irvington Public Library**