



The Old Dutch Church of Sleepy Hollow: Legends and Lore of the Oldest Church in New York

Janie Couch Allen, Elinor Griffith

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The Old Dutch Church of Sleepy Hollow is the oldest church in New York and one of the oldest in Colonial America. It was the only church in its region of the Lower Hudson River Valley for more than a century. It was, in fact, already old when the Revolutionary War began. General George Washington knew it well.

A National Historic Landmark, the church is most famous for its prominent place in American literature, as the setting for Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, written in 1819-20. A chapter on Irving and the *Legend* includes charming drawings showing Ichabod Crane and other characters from the story, drawn by Irving's favorite illustrator, Felix O.C. Darley. For nearly two centuries, Irving's story of the Headless Horseman, the frightening apparition said to be buried in the churchyard, has attracted thousands of visitors to the church. Names on sandstone markers in the burying ground are reminders of Katrina Van Tassel and others immortalized by the story.

The church was built in 1685 in what was then a vast wilderness some 20 miles north of Manhattan. The builder was Frederick Philipse, a Dutch merchant who was known as the richest man in New York. Philipse had bought up a vast estate along the Hudson River and constructed a gristmill on an inlet called the Pocantico River. He hoped that building the church nearby would help to entice pious Dutch and other immigrant farmers to settle on his land and plant wheat for his mill.

The farmers did come, and remained as tenants through several generations, until the Revolution, when the current Philipse landlord, who remained loyal to the Crown, was forced to flee with his family to England. The State of New York auctioned off his estate after the war. Much of it was sold to the families who had farmed it for generations, and who had, in large numbers, fought for the American cause. Their church and its three-acre burying ground were deeded to the congregation.

The church has changed little since it was built. The bell that was ordered from Holland and engraved with the year 1685 still hangs in the belfry, and a pennant weathervane bearing the Philipse trademark still graces the roof. Inside, a high pedestal pulpit dominates the small sanctuary. It is still a house of worship; the congregation that built two larger churches in the nineteenth century still returns to Old Dutch each summer for worship.

The three-acre burying ground has other attractions besides the Headless Horseman, such as 18th-century gravestones engraved with soul effigies, or winged faces, which symbolize the soul's flight to heaven. Some grace the graves of local heroes of the Revolution, 76 of whom are buried there.

The Old Dutch's long history encompasses many remarkable members and preachers too, including its first pastor, Guiliam Bertholf, known as the Itinerating Apostle of New Jersey and the sole Reformed Church minister in New Jersey for many years.

Entertaining anecdotes about pastors and members enliven the text. More than 200 color photographs, illustrations and historical maps add appeal to the book. The authors, both former editors of Reader's Digest, scoured church archives, including the First Record Book of 1715, and numerous sources listed in the bibliography, taking a fresh look at the many conflicting stories about the church. They sorted fact from

fiction in such columns as Myth or Fact, which appear throughout the book, along with amusing quotes by Irving.

What becomes clear is that the building's survival is a tribute to a caring community, which rescued it from decay, rot, insects, fire, schism and misguided efforts to modernize it.

Old Dutch is today a defining landmark in Westchester, with a wealth of legend and lore brought to life in this entertaining book.

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