

## **The Flight of the Rooster**

### **Firth Haring Fabend**

The Flight of the Rooster

1.

#### **This is the Church. This is the Steeple**

In 1788, the Tappan Reformed Church consistory acknowledged the need for a larger building to house its growing congregation. That year, the old building (Figure 1), which had served for almost a century, since the late 1690s, was radically reconstructed. Its two-foot thick sandstone walls were retained, but the building was lengthened from a square to a rectangle, and a gambrel or hipped roof was substituted for the original four-sided roof.<sup>1</sup> (See Figure 2.)

David Cole, a Reformed minister whose father, Isaac D. Cole, was the pastor of the Tappan Reformed Church from 1829 to 1864, described the new steeple of the 1788 church as "of open work, exposing to view the great wheel to which the bell was attached."<sup>2</sup> He did not mention it, but on the steeple was mounted an iron weathervane in the

shape of a rooster, forged no doubt in one of the smithies in the neighborhood.

Why a rooster? A rooster weathervane was common on European churches, both Catholic and Protestant, to remind the faithful of the cock that crowed each of the three times that Peter denied Christ on the eve of his Crucifixion. For more than half a century, Tappan's rooster weathercock wheeled freely in the wind over the little community, indicating the direction and velocity of every gale and zephyr--and flaunting his own familiar, impudent profile for miles around.

By 1835, it was evident that an even larger church structure was needed to accommodate the still-burgeoning congregation. Besides, the current building was "decayed beyond repair," in Cole's words. This time, the 1788 building and its original sandstone walls from the 1690s were completely demolished. It was not an easy task. "The hipped roof, though so hopelessly decayed," Cole wrote, "was a marvel of tenacity as to its old shingles, and the heavy wrought nails with which they were secured to the lathing. The shingles were not ripped up, according to our present way of removing a roof," he continued, "but the roof was cut into large sections and hurled in masses to the ground. The strong stone walls, not less than two feet in thickness, were pulled down with chains to which several yokes of oxen were attached."<sup>3</sup> In the commotion of the demolition, the church's steeple

toppled over, and the old rooster weathervane "flew off and was caught in a poplar tree," according to an account published in the *Nyack Evening Journal* forty-five years later in 1880.<sup>4</sup>

The new building on the site (Figure 3) was designed with a fashionable four-pointed crown steeple that offered no convenient roost for anything so plebeian as a weathervane. Nevertheless, one sentimental onlooker at the scene of the demolition believed he could offer the bird a home. John Perry, a parishioner, retrieved the rooster from its unaccustomed perch in the poplar tree and took it to Nyack, where he placed it on his premises.<sup>5</sup> Not long after this, the rooster came into the possession of Jacob Demarest, when he acquired Perry's premises in Nyack and built the St. Nicholas Hotel. And soon after this, Jacob Demarest sold the bird to one James S. Haring (1820-1878), a young man with a penchant for things historical.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, the rooster disappeared from sight and was believed--by anyone who ever gave the old weathercock a thought, and for many years some oldtimers in the Tappan Reformed Church did, judging by the interest in it in 1880--to have flown forever.

Recently, to great surprise, however, the rooster weathervane resurfaced. Since 1997, it has been in the possession of the Historical Society of Rockland County.

### **The Roost Covert**

Where was the bird roosting for those 162 years between 1835 and 1997, and how did it come to reappear at 20 Zukor Road in New City, the home of the Historical Society of Rockland County?

In September 1991, I received a phone call from a man who identified himself as James Smith Haring IV, a resident of Philadelphia. I knew of Mr. Haring by reputation as an eccentric collector of art and historical artifacts who had a strong affection for Rockland County's history and for his family's role in its original settlement in the 1680s and its affairs thereafter. He was calling to ask me how he could get a copy of my recently published book, *A Dutch Family in the Middle Colonies, 1660-1800* (Rutgers University Press, 1991), which documents the history of the Haring family over its first five generations, first in New Amsterdam and then in New York and New Jersey. Seizing the opportunity to meet him--and to see his collections--I offered to hand carry a copy of the book to him in Philadelphia. At first, he was adamantly opposed to this idea. He never, he said, allowed anyone into his house. Disappointed, I agreed to mail him a copy of the book. But an hour or so later, he telephoned again. He had had a change of heart and

invited me to visit him the next day. He made sure I knew that it was a very special and a very unusual occurrence for him to open his house to anyone.

The next morning I was on his doorstep. He opened the door, pulled me inside, and, much to my consternation, double bolted the door behind me. He saw my uneasiness and asked if I was nervous. I admitted that I was and asked him to leave the door unlocked, but he refused, saying that we were "safer" with the door locked, as the neighborhood was no longer what it had been.

Neither, clearly, was his once very elegant townhouse. I glanced around me. From where I stood in the front hall, every room that I could see was piled high with things: paintings, furniture, bibelots, books, artifacts of every description and clearly, even at a distance, of both good and of bad quality. A dog breeder, Jim had seven greyhounds in the house at the time, all of whom were yelping wildly from their quarters in the basement. Although I was exceedingly uneasy, I accompanied him upstairs anyway, to the one cleared space in the house, where in the center of a room on the second floor he lived. In this space, there were two chairs, a table, and a radio--which he never turned off, night or day, he told me--and there we sat.

3.

**Jim**

I presented my book to Jim, and he began to tell me about himself and his life: Born in 1919, he had graduated from Ridgewood High School and then from the University of Pennsylvania. During World War II, he was put in charge of developing the famed Canine Corps, and after the War, while working as a sales representative for Dow Chemical, he owned and managed Sundridge House in Harriman, N.Y., breeding and showing champion greyhounds and English setters under the Sundridge name.

Later, picking our way along narrow pathways through towering piles of furnishings and objects, he showed me around the house. Much of what I saw was of fine quality. But much was junk, especially in the hundreds of paintings of recent vintage that were stacked against every wall. In one room, however, I was astonished to notice paintings that seemed to be by John Singer Sargent. I asked him if they were copies. He said they were not. He explained to me that his grandfather, James Smith Haring, Jr. (1855-1925), had been one of the civil engineers hired by the tobacco mogul Pierre Lorillard IV to lay out Tuxedo Park in the 1880s, and many of the paintings and much of the beautiful, and ornate, furniture that Jim possessed had been acquired by his grandfather at estate sales at

this enclave of the rich and famous. (See Figure 4, a family tree.) Also, his maternal grandfather had belonged to the English baronetcy, and some of the objects and furniture in the house had come to Jim from that side of his family.

What caught my eye especially, however, were the humbler artifacts that had come down to Jim from his ancestors in eighteenth-century Bergen and Rockland counties: hand-painted miniatures of his great-great grandparents, daguerreotypes, albums, side chairs, a small desk, tables, a Bible--and more, all stacked haphazardly on top of one another in one corner of the upstairs hallway. Prominently displayed in the hall was a *rose famille* porcelain bowl in excellent condition and in an adjacent bedroom a charming set of framed watercolors of Piermont, dated 1906, by a skilled artist whose work was unfamiliar to me and whose name was tantalizingly just out of my eyeshot.

Naturally, I began to wonder what was to become of all these treasures, as Jim at the time was 72 years old and was suffering, he told me, from congestive heart disease. I asked him if he had made a will. He said he had not, but that he wanted to leave everything to Ridgewood High School and to the Historical Society of Rockland County. Gently, I tried to explain to him that a public high school was not a logical repository for antiques and priceless paintings, and that the mission of the

Historical Society of Rockland County was to preserve not elaborate furnishings and artifacts of English or Continental origin, but strictly items related to Rockland County's history.

At this point, a gleam came into Jim's eye, and he asked me if I wanted to see something very special that related very notably to Rockland County. Of course, I said Yes. After swearing me to secrecy, he leaped out of his chair and, in the same room where we sat, scrambled up the side of a stack of furnishings and objects to the very top of the pile, where from just under the ceiling he pulled out from beneath a welter of musty, dusty rags, rugs, and old newspapers an iron rooster.

I had heard of the long-missing rooster weathervane that had once topped the steeple of the 1788 Tappan Reformed Church. Local historian George Budke had written of it in his articles about the church on its 250th anniversary in 1944, and as noted above, even earlier the *Nyack Evening Journal* had described the rooster's disappearance in an 1880 article preserved in the archives of the Tappantown Historical Society.

Jim confirmed what I had instantly suspected: This was the very same rooster. It had been in his family for four generations, ever since his great-grandfather, whose namesake he was, bought it (for five dollars) in the late 1830s. I tried to persuade Jim to make a gift of the weathervane to the church, but he became very agitated at



the thought of parting with the object and reminded me of my promise not to reveal its whereabouts.

4.

### **Curiouser and Curiouser**

At this point, the saga of the missing rooster becomes even stranger. I remained true to my promise to Jim not to reveal the weathervane's whereabouts, but my guilty knowledge of it, and my uncertainties as to its future, preyed on my mind.

In May 1993, I wrote to Jim to tell him that the Tappan Reformed Church was planning to celebrate its Tercentennial in 1994 and that, in honor of the occasion, the congregation had raised the enormous sum of \$56,000 to replace the now-dilapidated crown tower that since 1835 had been such a beloved landmark in the area. What an appropriate gesture, I suggested, if he were to present the rooster weathervane to the church at this time, as a memorial to his Haring ancestors, founding members of the church three hundred years before.

He did not answer this letter, and six months later I learned that James Smith Haring IV had died, on November 2, 1993. With his obituary to guide me, I tracked down a sister who lived in Ramsey, N.J., and asked her about the circumstances of his death. She told me that, four days

before dying, Jim had made a will, instructing that his house and possessions be sold--with the proceeds to be divided between Ridgewood High School and the Historical Society of Rockland County. She also told me that he had instructed his power of attorney, a Cynthia Williams, to go to his house in Philadelphia and remove from it two items: a *rose famille* porcelain bowl that had belonged to his mother, and the rooster weathervane.

Was I only wishfully thinking when it struck me that, on his deathbed, Jim had decided to return the rooster to the Tappan Reformed Church, as I had twice urged him to do? We will never know. Ms. Williams did not respond to my letter of inquiry to her, and in time it became known to me that (with or without Jim's treasures and precious antiques is not known) she had dropped, like the rooster 160 years before, out of sight.

5.

### **What To Do?**

After learning of the existence of Jim's will, I decided to telephone Scott Vanderhoff, then President of the Historical Society of Rockland County, to acquaint him with its existence, in case he should not have heard of it. He had not heard of it. I described in detail to him, both then and later in writing, the marvelous

treasures I had seen in the house in Philadelphia.

With little delay, the Society engaged the law firm of Doig, Cornell & Mandel in New City to look into the matter. Unfortunately, it was learned arduously--after much correspondence with the executors of the will and other parties--that Jim's house was ransacked soon after, or perhaps even before his death, of all that was valuable in it. All that was left was worthless.

Miraculously, the rooster turned up. One of the executors revealed that he had been holding it for "safekeeping." He conveyed it to the Historical Society, where it is today. Of all the possessions, of even the funds from the sale of the house, almost nothing was turned over to the Society except for the rooster, the *rose famille* porcelain bowl, a Civil War uniform belong to Colonel James Smith Haring, and seven disappointingly unimportant documents.

6.

### **Chanticleer Himself**

The rooster himself measures 16 and a half inches in height from his crest to his belly and 20 inches across, from the tips of his four flamboyant tail plumes to his cocky, swelling breast. The pole on which he stands adds another 9 and a half inches to his height, and he still

turns on his perch today as smoothly as the day he was fashioned.

He is in excellent condition, considering that he is 211 years old. Forged of iron, he was at one time, perhaps originally, gilded or painted gold. A layer of black paint was subsequently applied. Both coats are peeling, and the peeling, which mimics the mottled or speckled effect of a real bird, adds to his verisimilitude.

Will the Tappan Reformed Church weathercock ever return to his original roost in Tappan? The good news is *Yes, if . . . .* Pastor James Johnson has requested of the Historical Society that the bird be loaned to the Church for display, and the Board of Trustees of the Society has agreed to lend the old weathervane to the Tappan Reformed Church for exhibition, provided the Church can ensure its safety and security.

The downside is, this may not be so easy, given the weathervane's value as an outstanding example of eighteenth-century American folk art. So the rooster found still presents a problem. But what a wonderful problem for the Tappan Reformed Church, perhaps pooling resources and ideas with the Tappantown Historical Society and with the community at large, to solve together!

## Notes

1. David Cole, D.D., *History of the Reformed Church of Tappan, N.Y.* (New York, 1894), pp. 76-77. Cole believed the first church building dated from 1716, but local historian George Budke subsequently found information in the church records and elsewhere to suggest the earlier date. For this information, and Budke's reasoning, see "Introductory Sketch of the Tappan Church," Budke Collection #48, New City Free Library.

2. Cole, *History*, p. 77.

3. Cole, *History*, pp. 93 and 95.

4. Account in the *Nyack Evening Journal*, January 3, 1880, Tappantown Historical Society Archives.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.