

Where In New York City Is Herman LeRoy?

by Lynne Belluscio

I spent last week in New York City searching for the LeRoy family. It was a challenge. But here and there along the cobblestone paved Stone Street and the buildings of South Seaport Museum and the Fraunces Tavern Museum, if I closed my ears to the noise and the traffic, I could almost imagine the LeRois walking in the area.

Jacob LeRoy who lived in LeRoy House from 1822 till 1838 was born in New York City in 1794. His father was Herman LeRoy and his grandfather was also named Jacob LeRoy. (Jacob also had an uncle Jacob to make the situation even more confusing.) As the Town of LeRoy in Upstate New York emerged from the wilderness in the late 1700s, the LeRoy family was living in New York City which was the economic center of the new nation. The LeRois were in the thick of the economic melee.

Jacob's grandfather had come to New York City in the 1750s before the Revolution. He was listed as owning a rope walk which made rope for ship rigging. He became a successful merchant operating under the name of Jacob LeRoy and Sons. After the war, his address is listed at 52 Queen Street and it is possible that like many other merchants at this time, he lived above his office and storehouse. Although the elder Jacob died in 1793, his business continued under the direction of his sons, Jacob and Robert.

In the meantime, in 1788, their brother Herman LeRoy went into business with his brother-in-law, William Bayard. Known as LeRoy and Bayard they dominated the merchant business for nearly 40 years. Their trading ships traveled to Europe, India, South America and China. They were very successful. Flush with money they began investing in



land – in Western New York and Pennsylvania.

In the meantime Alexander Hamilton, who served as a lawyer for LeRoy and Bayard established the Bank of New York in 1784. (I visited the Bank of New York at 1 Wall Street to see the historical exhibit with their historian, Chris McKay. She shared a lot of information about Herman and showed me the huge clock in the lobby that is the only piece of furniture that was in the original bank building.)

Herman LeRoy became a Director of the Bank of New York and in 1802 was elected the bank's President, a position that he held for two years. During the War of 1812, LeRoy and Bayard probably benefited from privateering, which allowed their ships to overcome foreign ships and sell their cargos and vessels for profit. In 1820, our Jacob became a director of the Bank of New York before heading up to Western New York in 1822 to make improvements on the Triangle Tract in the town named for his father. But the family fortunes remained in New York City.

I walked down to the South Seaport Museum near Pier 16. The museum has preserved several 19th Century merchant buildings. Although the buildings are filled with contemporary stores, they retain the image of the seaport in the 1800s when the

LeRois met the ships laden with goods from around the world. Some of the buildings face Water Street only a few blocks from where LeRoy and Bayard had their offices in 1788 and 1790.

In 1798 the company was located few blocks further, at 117 Pearl Street just down the street from the Fraunces Tavern where General Washington gave his farewell address to his officers in 1783. After the Revolution the tavern was rented to the new government to house the offices of the Departments of War, Treasury and Foreign Affairs. It is quite possible that Herman came to the Tavern to do business when he served as Consul General for the State of Holland in 1786.

The Tavern is now a museum and restaurant operated by the Sons of the Revolution. I stopped by hoping to see an exhibit about old New York but it had been taken down early. So from Pearl Street I walked up to Stone Street. The streets are narrow and Stone Street is still paved with old cobblestones.

Only a few blocks away is Broadway where Herman LeRoy built a large marble house and an identical one for his daughter on the lot behind at 7 Greenwich. The homes were turned into multiple family dwellings before the Civil War and then were razed when the Wall Street area no longer was a place for private

residences. Herman also bought a large country estate in Pelham where he and his family probably lived during the hot summers and when the yellow fever epidemics swept through New York City. The estate was sold in 1836.

I spent a day at the New York City Public Library where I read through some of the LeRoy papers in the archives. In a small firm hand,

Herman wrote to his son Edward who lived on a large farm in Avon. Herman was disappointed that Edward had decided not to come to New York for a visit. He noted that the grass on the bowling green was almost a foot tall.

The library has a copy of Herman's will written in 1840. He instructed his estate to be divided into nine equal portions. His land including his "estate" in Genesee County was to be sold. He provided trusts for his grandchildren for their education and upbringing. Herman died in 1841 at his daughter's home on Greenwich Street. He was buried in the family plot in the Bronx.

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