

History of the Jamesport Manor Richard Wines - 2007

Like the Star Confectionary in downtown Riverhead, the steeply sloped “mansard” roof with its multicolored slates marked the Manor as a Second Empire style structure – a Riverhead imitation of the fashionable buildings erected by Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann along the boulevards of Paris during the reign of Napoleon III from 1852-1870. The style’s popularity in the United States continued a little later, through the 1880’s and beyond. The mansard roof itself dates back another two centuries to the architect Francois Mansard, who used it in his designs for Louis XIV’s palace at Versailles.

When it burned, we thought that the Manor had been built by John Franklin Dimon (1820-1912) sometime in the 1850’s. We thought that Dimon had been a sea captain who made his fortune in South America. We thought that Rosalie, the wife he brought back from Peru, was of Spanish nobility and very religious. We thought that the lovely “prayer seats” – originally in a bay window of the main parlor and now just inside the front hall -- were built for their daily morning and evening prayers.

However, recent research reveals that Dimon was a merchant -- not a “captain” – although he did spend considerable time in Peru and elsewhere in South America. The 1880 census calls him a “retired capitalist.” Later census enumerations call him either a “gentleman” or a “farmer.” Probably he was a little of both.

His wife Rosalie was born in Peru, but she was the daughter of a British merchant living in that country. Moreover, the couple was still living in Peru in the 1850’s when the couple’s three daughters were born, and could not have built the Manor during that decade. They probably did not settle in Jamesport until the 1860’s, and stylistic evidence indicates that the elaborate second-empire structure, now so

The Dimons of the Manor

1st generation

Jonathan Dimon (1727-1787) probably built Manor about 1750

2nd generation

Jonathan Dimon (1756-1831), son of Jonathan, minuteman, lived in the Manor

3rd generation

John Dimon (1795-1879), born in the Manor, shipbuilder, lived in New York City

Daniel S. Dimon (1802-1885), farmer, younger brother of John, lived in Manor

Jonathan Dimon (1791-1862), farmer, older brother of John, ended up in the town poor house across Manor Lane

4th generation

John F. Dimon (1820-1912), oldest son of John Dimon the shipbuilder, married Rosalie Robinson of Lima, Peru, retired to the Manor in 1860’s and rebuilt it in the Second Empire Style

5th generation

Mary Dimon (1851-1931), oldest daughter of John F. and Rosalie, never married

Laura Dimon Sneden (1856-1921) daughter of John F. and Rosalie, briefly married to Dr. Warren Sneden of Brooklyn

Margaret Olivia Dimon (1858-1868), daughter of John F. and Rosalie, died in an accident at age ten

6th generation

Rosalie Sneden (1889-1917), daughter of Laura Dimon Sneden, never married, died at age 29, leaving her mother heartbroken

lovingly recreated, was probably not built until the late 1870's or early 1880's.

As for the prayer seats, we don't really know. The Dimon family was not particularly religious, and if Rosalie ever was an openly practicing Catholic, she gave that up when she married. She may have been privately devout and she certainly spent her last forty years at the Manor in great sadness and seclusion.

And even older Manor

The biggest surprise of all was discovered just before the Manor burned. Restoration work uncovered the hand-hewn post-and-beam skeleton of an earlier house inside the 1880's Manor – now reproduced in the bar area of the new Manor. The Dimon family acquired their first property in what is now Riverhead Town in 1706, a parcel that ran from the Sound to the Bay a little east of Herrick's Lane. The Hallockville Museum Farm (see Hallockville.com) is located on the northern part of that parcel.

The Dimon family started acquiring property on Manor Lane in the 1750's. John F. Dimon's great-grandfather, Jonathan Dimon (1727-1787), probably built the original house at that time. His son, John F.'s grandfather, also named Jonathan (1756-1831), lived there when he served in the Third Regiment of Minutemen at the beginning of the Revolution. It is also almost certainly the house where John Franklin's father John was born in 1795.

About 1810, as a 15-year-old boy, John left Jamesport, then still called "Lower Aquebogue," and went to the big city, New York, where he served as an apprentice in the famous East River shipyard of Henry Eckford. There may have been a ship building heritage in the family, as one of his brothers, Daniel S. Dimon, also started out as a ship's carpenter and their father was a ship owner in addition to being a farmer.

John missed the local battles during the War of 1812, but his younger brother Daniel S. Dimon encountered a cannonball rolling across the fields as he ran north towards Long Island Sound to watch a battle between two British frigates and the local militia in 1814. The cannonball is now in the collection of the Suffolk County Historical Society, a donation of his son, John M. Dimon. The Hallockville Museum, located near the site of the battle, also has two cannonballs from the engagement.

In 1815, at the end of the War of 1812, when John was about to turn 21 (the end of his apprenticeship), he formed a partnership with two fellow apprentices, Isaac Webb and Stephen Smith. The three young men founded their own shipbuilding firm, which eventually became Smith & Dimon. The firm had a shipyard at the foot of Third and Fourth Streets in Manhattan and became famous as a pioneer builder of fast clipper ships.

Three years after going into business, in 1818, John Dimon married Susan Smith of Stamford, Connecticut. She was the sister of his business partner, Stephen Smith. The young couple set up housekeeping on Stanton Street in Manhattan. Their first son, John

Franklin Dimon, who would later rebuild the Manor as his retirement home, was born there in 1820, followed two years later by a brother, Charles L. Dimon. After the couple moved a couple blocks south to Delancy Street, now the main approach to the Williamsburg Bridge, they had a daughter. They soon moved to Rivington Street, where they had six more children. All of their addresses were within a short walking distance of the Smith and Dimon shipyard.

John Dimon and Stephen Smith were much more than business partners. They were of course also brothers-in-law. But their closeness may be best indicated by the names they gave their children. Stephen and Mary Ann Smith named their 11th child (out of 13) John Dimon Smith. In turn, the Dimons named their 7th child (out of 9) Stephen.

Smith and Dimon built two of the earliest and most famous clipper ships, the *Rainbow* and the *Sea Witch*. The *Rainbow*, commissioned in 1843 by Howland and Aspinwall, a leading New York merchant firm, was launched in 1845. The first of the true clipper ships, its long narrow hull, sharply pointed bow and huge rig was so radical in design that the ship was dubbed “Aspinwall’s folly.” New York wags said the ship was likely to be sunk by the first large wave she encountered. Indeed, second thoughts about the design led to delays in the launching, and a rival clipper, the *Houqua*, beat the *Rainbow* into the water by two months. However, once launched, the *Rainbow* quickly proved the merits of her design by sailing some remarkably quick runs between New York and China -- in as few as 84 days -- before being lost at sea in 1848 without a trace.



“*The Sea Witch, Smith and Dimon’s most famous clipper ship.*”

Smith and Dimon quickly built the even faster *Sea Witch*, a ship launched in 1846 that went on to set an all-time clipper ship record. John’s younger brother Charles was on board as the owner’s agent for her maiden voyage to China. On her third voyage, the *Sea Witch* made the passage from China to New York in 74 days – a record never surpassed by a merchant sailing vessel. These records weren’t just bragging rights.

The returns from selling the season’s first tea after a single speedy voyage were more than enough to pay for the ship and give its owners a handsome profit. After the gold

rush in 1849 the *Sea Witch* was transferred to the around-the-Cape run from New York to San Francisco, where brother Charles was now serving as agent Howland and Aspinwall. The *Sea Witch* proceeded to set an all time record of 100 days on that route. The ship eventually returned to the China trade and was lost in 1855 when she struck a reef off the coast of Cuba.

Smith and Dimon also built steamships. In 1847, one of the yard's steamships, the *Oregon*, was involved in a famous race with the *Vanderbilt*, owned by "Commodore" Cornelius Vanderbilt. The seventy-mile course ran from the Battery in Manhattan up the Hudson River to Ossining and back. The prize was \$1,000, a very substantial sum in those days. Both owners were so eager to win the race that no tactics were barred. The *Vanderbilt* actually rammed the *Oregon* as the latter passed it, inflicting considerable damage to the *Oregon's* paddle wheel housing. But the *Oregon* gradually pulled ahead, only to run out of coal near Yonkers on the return trip. Undeterred, the captain ordered the crew to burn the ship's berths, chairs, benches, stateroom furniture and even the wainscoting. Belching black smoke from the wood in its boilers and cheered by a large crowd, the *Oregon* won the race by twelve-hundred feet to claim the prize. One observer wondered if the prize money was sufficient to replace the fancy joinery consumed by the boiler!

Boyhood in New York City

John F. Dimon must have had an interesting boyhood, growing up in lower Manhattan as the oldest son of one of the city's leading shipbuilders. He and his brother Charles both attended the grammar school of Columbia College. Years later, Charles recalled getting a small horse as a gift from Commodore Vanderbilt, who was both a good customer of their father's steamers and a good friend of the family.

John F., as was common in the period, went straight from grammar school to business. He became a clerk in the "counting house" of Howland & Aspinwall, probably through his father's connections. This firm, of course, was not only one of the leading merchant firms in the city with global trading interests, but also an important customer for Smith and Dimon's ships.

In 1836 or 1837, John F. and his brother Charles sailed around Cape Horn on Howland & Aspinwall's ship *Natchez*. They spent a pleasant month at Valparaiso, Chile, before proceeding further north to Coquimbo, Hucaco and Copiapo in Chile's cooper mining region where they took on a cargo of pig copper – Chile's leading export in the mid-19th century and still an important industry there. The Dimon brothers returned to Valparaiso and then home around the Horn.

Although they lived in New York City, and circulated in the upper reaches of New York society, the family retained its connections to Jamesport. John F.'s grandfather, Jonathan, was living in the old Manor and farming the family farm. John F. apparently spent time there with his grandfather as a 10-year-old boy. Then, after his father built his

own “summer seat” in Jamesport, and John F. clearly grew to love the village on during the family’s summer visits there.



“Smith and Dimon shipyard, New York City.”

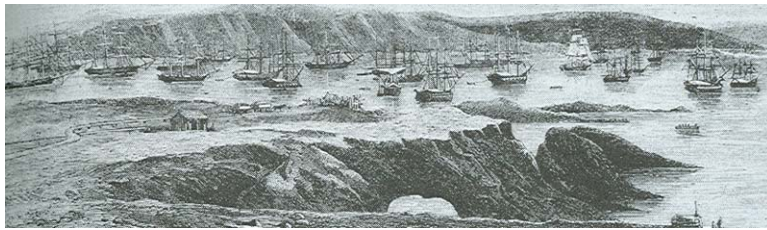
Meanwhile, one of John-the-shipbuilder’s brothers, Daniel (John F.’s uncle), took over the old Manor house and farm after the death their father in 1831. Another brother, confusingly also named Jonathan, had a penchant for demon rum and ended up at the town’s poor house, which ironically was located

just on the other side of Manor Lane. The 1860 census lists this brother as a resident of the poor house, but lists his occupation – rather grandly – as a “planter.”

John F. Dimon

While his uncle Daniel lived in the old Manor, John F. Dimon continued to travel the world. He apparently made his fortune in Peru, where he was likely engaged in the guano trade that was at its peak in the 1850’s. This trade centered on the Chincha Islands off the coast of Peru, where the huge numbers of sea birds and extremely dry climate had resulted in immense deposits of natural bird guano. This material became the first commercial fertilizer in the United States, and helped spark a major revolution in agricultural practices. So intense was the interest in Peruvian guano that dozens of ships often converged on the islands at a time. By the 1870’s, ten million tons of guano had been carried away and the islands were exhausted.

It was in Peru that John F. met and married Rosalie. All of their daughters were born there. According to his obituary, he “sailed all over the world.” Many years later, an elderly Chinese cook living in Riverhead recalled having arrived in this country on the same ship with Dimon in 1861. It is likely, however, that the Chinese cook came back from Peru with Dimon, as there was a large population of Chinese laborers there working the guano fields in the 1850’s.



“Guano ships at the Chincha Islands, 1868”

According to Dan Fisher, a descendant of John F.’s uncle, Daniel S. Dimon, the latter was still living in the old family house through the 1850’s. Sometime in the following decade, Daniel moved to a new farm in Aquebogue and sold the old Manor to John F., his nephew. Although the Dimon family does not show up in the manuscript federal census until 1880, Rosalie’s obituary in 1908 stated she had resided in Jamesport “over forty years” – indicating an arrival time in the 1860’s.

A 10-year old daughter, Margaret Olivia, died in 1868 and is buried in the Jamesport cemetery between the graves of her parents. Margaret Olivia apparently died after she fell from a tree. The tragic accident plunged her mother into a deep despair from which she never recovered. The column marking her grave was topped by a little bird bath, which no longer survives.

John F. Dimon might have remodeled the old house when he acquired it in the 1860’s. It is more likely, however, that the couple lived there a decade or two before undertaking the remodeling. Indeed, they may not have begun the renovations until he inherited a seventh of his father’s fortune about 1879.

Whenever it happened, Dimon gutted an old family house, leaving nothing but the outside walls standing, and built his stylish Second Empire mansion around the frame. In the process he added considerably more space on the back, nearly doubling the size of the structure.

Seclusion, love and scandal

The Dimons lived a quiet life in Jamesport from the time of John F.’s retirement in the 1860’s until his death in 1912 at age 92. Already saddened by the early death of daughter Margaret Olivia, the family suffered through two scandals, both involving their high-spirited second daughter Laura. The first was announced with breathless headlines in the

Brooklyn Daily Eagle typical of the “yellow journalism” of the day: “THEY ELOPED and Outwitted and Unwilling Father.”

The article chronicled Laura’s elopement in 1886 with Dr. Warren Sneden, the Brooklyn-born son of the president of a major New York City bank. It spoke of the “romantic circumstances” of their secret marriage at the Griffing Hotel in Riverhead and the various ruses “the stunningly handsome” lovers used to elude detection by her father, who adamantly refused to let “any young man” as much as visit his daughters.

Included in the article were such juicy details as the meal the groom ate at the Griffing Hotel while waiting to abduct the bride: wild duck, mince pie and milk. The reporter may not have been terribly accurate, however, as he called the village “Jamestown,” and ascribes the elopement to “Mary,” Laura’s older sister. The reporter also exaggerates the tenderness of her age, saying she was barely twenty when she was actually closer to thirty. Interestingly, the *New York Times* also covered the story – and made all the same mistakes. Either the *Times* reporter simply rewrote the story from the *Eagle*, or they both cribbed from the same error-prone source.

The second scandal, also reported in delicious detail by the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, occurred just seven years later in 1893. Apparently the marriage was not a happy one. In subsequent litigation over custody of their young daughter, Dr. Sneden alleged that his wife had abandoned him several times without cause and refused to let him even see his daughter, Rosalie. He further alleged that his wife’s behavior was “due solely to the interference of the members of her family.”

Laura in turn accused him of “cruel and inhumane treatment” including threats to kill her by using his medical knowledge to “give her medicine that would put her to sleep forever.” Allegedly, he said he “longed to bury her and threatened to put her in an asylum.” Laura also alleged that her husband threatened to kill himself. She testified that, he once disappeared into an upstairs room and she heard two loud shots – which, as the *Eagle* put it, she afterwards learned “was not pointed in the doctor’s direction by a long way.”

The judge must have believed Mary’s side of the story, as he awarded her custody of “baby Rosalie” – actually a 6-year-old child at that point. The *Brooklyn Eagle* story ends with a note that the couple had reconciled. However, this appears not to have been the case. The 1900 and 1910 census manuscript records that Laura and her daughter Rosalie, as well as her still-unmarried sister Mary, were all living with her parents at the Manor.

In an interesting footnote, Dimon family historian Dan Fischer discovered that Warren Sneden married again, and that the second wife “died in a new York hotel under suspicious circumstances involving medication.” Perhaps there was some truth to Laura’s allegations.

Benefactors to the community

The Dimons were generous benefactors to the community. After the old one-room schoolhouse that stood next to the historic meeting house in Jamesport was destroyed by a suspicious fire in 1877, John F. Dimon conveyed an offer to the community from his father, “to erect a new school house at his own expense.” The citizens of Jamesport quickly accepted the “generous offer” and erected an unusual cross-shaped building with an open floor plan on the site of the old structure.



“The Dimon School, Jamesport, built 1877”

Generally called “Mr. Dimon’s School,” it was moved to the south side of the street in 1891 to make way for a new parsonage. Parts of “Mr. Dimon’s school” were incorporated into a house still standing on Washington Avenue when the new Jamesport School, now the Community Center, was built in 1923.

John F. continued to take an active interest in the school. Years later, Cuyler B. Tuthill, who attended the school in the mid-1880’s, recalled “I can now, in imagination, see Mr. Dimon, whom we all loved, looking over the general premises to know first hand of its upkeep. He always, in winter, ‘sported’ a certain type of hat, [wore] a cape trimmed overcoat and carried a cane. He was kind and always remembered us at Christmas and at other times with candy and a kind word.”

In their later years, the Dimons, burdened by tragedy and scandal, lived a “secluded life,” as it was described in Rosalie’s 1908 obituary. More than half a century later, a Jamesport resident still recalled the Dimons riding by in their carriage with the blinds drawn, on the way to the station to take the train to Brooklyn.

John F. Dimon died in 1912, four years after his wife. Three years later, his fancy barn burned down in a mysterious fire – despite the efforts of the Riverhead Fire Department

which towed one of their hand-pumpers there behind an automobile. The two daughters continue to live in the old place.

Still another tragedy struck in 1917, when Laura Dimon Sneden's only daughter, Rosalie, "the center of her affections and the hope of her declining years" died in 1917 at the young age of 29. The mother, "dazed by an immeasurable and uncomprehended grief," made almost daily pilgrimages to the daughter's grave until she followed the daughter there four years later, at age 66. Both are buried in the Sound Avenue Cemetery. From Laura's obituary:

"Born in Lima, Peru, she was brought to this country in early childhood, and reared in strict seclusion in the old mansion on Manor Lane. . . . Of remarkable beauty in youth, time and sorrow but softened that beauty as it faded, and the little black-robed figure with the white pathetic face, never failed to appeal to the sympathies even of those who did not understand."



"Gravestone of Rosalie Sneden in Sound Avenue Cemetery"

Mary Dimon, John F. and Rosalie's oldest daughter, lived another ten years. When she died in 1931, she was the last of that line of the family. At the time of her death, she had already left the Manor and was living alone on Tuthill's Path. Like her sister and niece, she is buried in the Sound Avenue Cemetery.

The old Manor became a restaurant in 1947 – named the "Twin Oaks" because of two large oak trees that stood just outside the front door. It had lost its central cupola in a hurricane and along the way acquired a sheathing of asbestos shingles that hid most of its architectural detail. Over the years, the restaurant passed through a series of owners and names. Several generations of North Forkers still fondly remember eating in its paneled dining rooms. Now, thanks to the efforts of the Kars and the McVeighs, North Forkers will again have the opportunity to dine at the lovingly rebuilt Manor.

Sources:

Dan Fisher, a descendant of John F. Dimon's uncle, Daniel S. Dimon, has done extensive research on the family and provided much of the genealogical information contained in this article.

Kate Dimon, whose husband is descended from John F. Dimon's brother, Charles L. Dimon, has also done considerable research on the family.

David Lear Buckman, *Old Steamboat Days on The Hudson River*, 1907

Brooklyn Daily Eagle: Nov. 30, 1886, p. 4; December 1, 1886, p. 4; January 26, 1893, p. 12; June 27, 1893, p. 16;

"The Era of the Clipper Ships," <http://www.eraoftheclipperships.com/>

Riverhead Bicentennial Album, 1976

Virginia Wines, Scrapbooks, collection of the Hallockville Museum Farm

Richard Wines, *Fertilizer in America*, 1985