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Guest view: Massive journal needs to be made easily accessible

By **EUGENE NASSAR**

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One of my current research obsessions is the legacy of the Hooker family of designers and builders in the Central New York area, and, specifically, whether a part of that legacy is the venerable house of Dr. Alexander Coventry at the corner of Coventry Avenue and Cosby Manor road in Deerfield.

Coventry, born and educated in Scotland, kept a journal for most of his adult life, spanning the years 1785-1831, and the published transcript of the journal ("Memoirs of an Emigrant," New York State Library, 1978) runs some 2,800 typed pages!

In this fascinating journal, we learn that the Coventry mansion dates from 1798, not the 1804 date surmised in Bagg's *Pioneers of Utica*:

-- ...began to shingle over the house which begins to leak. This roof was put on in 1798— 27 years ago — and has not been bad till lately. (p. 2,114)

-- ...returned to this place in Sept. and in the Spring of 1798 settled with Mr. Post and purchased where I live now. (p. 2,208)

ã I bought 50 acres of land...from Arnold Wells, built a house and removed into it in 1798. (p. 2,781)

At this time (1798), the Rev. Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College, on a trip to "Old Fort Schuyler," estimated the number of houses in the village at 50, most of them certainly modest log and wood structures. We are told further by Bagg that there were but "200 souls" in Utica in 1801.

The York House built by the Hookers in 1797 was the great edifice in Utica, and, as Bagg notes, "The [Hookers] were the only persons resident who were competent to project and carry on so important a structure as the Hotel." The same can be said of the house of Alexander Coventry. Thereafter, as the *Utica Observer* of Sept. 8, 1881 notes, "Samuel Hooker and his son John were celebrated in their day and generation as the leading builders of the village."

The Coventry house, in its size and elegance, inside and out, is of the stature of the Miller-Conkling, the Stocking, and the Weaver house of the period designed and built by the Hookers, and the journal, with its frequent references to both Samuel and John Hooker (who, as carpenters, were not of Utica's elite), makes it plain that they were in fact good friends, Coventry often having breakfast or dinner with the families, they making social calls at Coventry's home, Coventry selling them fruits and vegetables from his farm, and tending to their medical needs, in good times ("spent the evening with Sam Hooker at the York House...oysters supplied by Sam Hooker," p. 1376), and bad times ("visited John Hooker, who is in a debilitated state," p. 2540).

Indeed, Alexander Coventry knew everyone who was anyone in the Utica and Central New York area in the 35 or so years he was resident here, including the very top echelon of Utica's high society, all of his fellow wealthy parishioners of Trinity Episcopal Church, along with many others of both the rich and the poor, as he interacted amiably with the Dutch, Palatine German, Yankee, Welsh, and Irish that made up the ethnic mix of Utica of the time.

The massive Coventry journal is an important historical resource and needs to be scanned into a program that allows searches for names and places. As with Bagg's *Pioneers*, Coventry never mentions the designers of any of the homes he visits, (designers who would have provided basic architectural plans with variations to suit their wealthy clients), though he praises highly the Hamilton College Chapel and the Miller-Conkling House, both designed by the renown architect Philip Hooker of Albany, son to Sam and brother to John (page 2,715).

The Coventry house is now owned and occupied by Mr. Ted Hughes and his daughter and her husband. They are confident that most of the house is largely unchanged from Coventry's time, and the house is, inside and out, most impressive.

Comparative studies of the Coventry home, the Weaver homes built before the 1830's, and the Pratt-Smith home on Cosby Manor Road with the Miller-Conkling, the Mappa Hall in Barneveld, and Lorenzo in Cazenovia, and the photographic evidence of other Federal Period homes and buildings of the area, their exteriors and interiors, that are now demolished, should be an occupation for someone younger than me.

Eugene Nassar is a retired English professor emeritus at Utica College, where he founded the Ethnic Heritage Studies Center in 1981. He lives in Utica.

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