

Inviting the Neighbors In: The Rebirth of the Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum

► *Wyckoff House & Association, Brooklyn, New York*

The Wyckoff house is the oldest building in New York City. It was built c. 1652 by Pieter Claesen Wyckoff who came to what was then the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam in 1637.



The Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum is an example of an historic site reaching out to its neighbors and forging new connections between the site, its historical significance, and the community. The museum built these connections by inviting the neighbors into the site through the establishment of an advisory board and the creation of a community demonstration garden linking the site's Dutch agrarian past to its multicultural urban present.

Adoption of this new commitment to inclusion and relevance has made the Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum a vibrant part of community life. The effort expended in cultivating relationships, creating partnerships, and seeking out the

opinions and concerns of the local community has rejuvenated the site, captured the interest of the neighborhood, and improved the site's financial position making possible a new capital campaign.

The Challenge: Finding a New Institutional Direction

The Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum opened in 1982¹ after a long campaign on the part of the Wyckoff family to re-acquire and restore the farmhouse. During the first 18 years of the museum's operation its primary focus was the Wyckoff family history and domestic economy (textiles and food preparation). However, by the late 1990s few visitors came to the house which was experiencing serious financial difficulties. In addition, the ethnic composition of the surrounding community had dramatically changed from Eastern European Jewish and Irish American to predominantly African American and Caribbean American, and the site increasingly became a cultural as well as physical fragment of the past. In 2000, at the instigation of the Historic House Trust of New York City², a core group of association board members began the process to find a new institutional direction for the museum. The challenge was to continue the association's mission to preserve family history while developing programming that would connect to the site's broader historical significance and make it more relevant to the surrounding 21st century urban neighborhood.

Inviting the Neighbors In: The Museum Advisory Board

In 2001 a new executive director worked with board members and the Historic House Trust to devise ways to meet this institutional challenge. They conceived of a community advisory body that would build connections with the surrounding community by inviting the neighbors in to be part of the operations of the museum. Descendants and board members E. Lisk Wyckoff, Jr., William S. Wyckoff, and Thomas A. Wycuff took the concept to then Democratic District Leader Lewis Fidler (now a member of the City Council). The newly hired executive director followed up on this connection with Fidler, who helped him to understand the demographics of the neighborhood, offered suggestions of individuals to be contacted, and made critical introductions.

Since its establishment, the Museum Advisory Board has become the primary channel through which the site has sought community input and guidance. It serves as a resource for staff, offers suggestions for and feedback on public events, maintains an ad hoc committee on interpretation, assists with fund raising, and facilitates local hiring. The group is composed of leaders and activists in the local community; organizations partnering with the museum; local business leaders; and staff from the city's Historic House Trust.

The advisory board also serves as an avenue for increasing neighborhood representation on the association's board of directors. To date, two members from the advisory board have been elected to the board of directors.



Linking Past to Present: The Community Demonstration Garden

The museum is currently developing a community demonstration garden in collaboration with Just Food, a non-profit organization that supports and connects urban agriculture projects throughout New York City. The garden is intended to be a center for historical and horticultural education with an emphasis on sustainable organic production. The garden produces fresh, organic vegetables sold weekly at a stand on site. In addition the garden hosts a series of special garden training events throughout the growing season, including workshops on soil building, crop rotation, integrated pest management, season extension, and seed starting.

The project had its genesis in a small kitchen garden intended to show Dutch colonial foodways. After getting the kitchen garden underway, the museum's gardener and members of the advisory board began discussions on expanded uses of the grounds. The community garden project fit well with the museum's overall plan to bring back the site's former agricultural landscape.

The museum intends the garden to be a dynamic community center for sustainable living rather than an historical recreation. It hopes to bring the site's agrarian history to life while actively engaging the local community in the Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum's educational programs. Another goal is to foster sustainable local food production. The board and staff hope it will provide for the real needs of the neighboring community as well as serve as a model for successful urban agriculture demonstrating the latest in sustainable organic gardening techniques. Some of the techniques to be employed will be no-till agriculture, crop rotation, natural pest management, cover cropping, sheet mulching, companion planting, composting, and heirloom variety production.

The first planting was in spring 2004. The growing season was successful despite a wet summer with more than usual difficulties with fungi, and the farmers market performed at the level expected. The workshops were better attended than expected. The museum hopes the garden will be in full production during the 2005 season.

This new identity for the Farmhouse Museum is still growing and evolving. Staff, trustees, and advisory board members continue to experiment with new ideas and learn from their experiences. What is clear is that the museum is alive and relevant, no longer a static relic from the past.

¹ The Wyckoff family continued to live in the house and farm the land until 1901 when it was sold to developers who subdivided the land for residential and industrial development. The Wyckoff House & Association, established in 1937 by the descendants of Pieter Claesen Wyckoff, acquired the house in 1961. The association donated the house to the City of New York Parks & Recreation Department in 1969, which in turn granted the Association a perpetual operating license.

² The Historic House Trust is a nonprofit organization established in 1989 to preserve the historic houses located in New York City parks. The mission of the trust is to work in partnership with parks and the non-profit boards of the individual houses to restore these sites in a way that contributes to the life of the city and to educate visitors and residents about New York City history.

Contact Information

The Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum, www.wyckoffassociation.org

Sean Sawyer, *Executive Director*, Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum,
seansawyer@wyckoffassociation.org

Civic Engagement Team

Shaun Eyring, *Manager*, Resource Planning and Compliance, NER, shaun_eyring@nps.gov

Eileen Woodford, *Civic Engagement Coordinator*, NER, eileen_woodford@nps.gov

Civic Engagement Principles & Practices

The new institutional direction of the Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum illustrates the power of forging new connections between an historic site, its historical significance, and the community to establish the site as a vibrant part of community life. Elements contributing to the site's success include:

- Reimagining the site's role in the community.
- Developing programs that connect the site's past to the community's present interests and needs.
- Bringing communities of place and interest into the operations of the site. The Museum Advisory Board actively participates in conceiving and developing programs, fundraising, and reaching out to the surrounding community.
- Using staff and board members to establish programs and make connections.

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