



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

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The Defreest Family

From a purely historical perspective, the Defreests are the “first family” of North Greenbush. Five of our Supervisors were Defreests. We had a County Sheriff and a County Corner; many Defreests were pillars of the Dutch Reformed Church and several were the largest landholders in our town. 169 Defreests are buried in the Bloomingrove Cemetery (no, I didn’t count the stones, but take my word for it).

Defreestville, one of the two hamlets in North Greenbush was named for the family. Originally this wasn’t the case. When first settled in the late 1700’s, the area around Washington Avenue was called Blooming Grove. However, a town in Orange County already had that name (and a Post Office!), so our hamlet’s name was changed to honor the Defreest Family.

There are several spellings of the name. In early days it was Deforeest. Old documents show “Defriest”, “de Forest” “DeFreest” or even just “Friest”. Any way you spell it-that’s our town’s family.

What you may not know is that the Deforest/Defreests played an important role in the early settlement of what was to become our country.

Jesse DeForest was a Walloon from Avesnes, Belgium (now France). He was a leader and spokesman for Walloons and Huguenots in Holland who successfully petitioned the Dutch West India Company to allow their group to set up a colony in the New World in order to escape religious persecution and practice their Reformed Religion. He was granted permission and in 1624, brought approximately 60 families to New Amsterdam, which is today’s New York City. This was the group that actually founded the city.

Jesse’s grandson Philip DeForest was born in New Amsterdam in 1652 and eventually settled in Beverwyck, which is today’s Albany. Philip was High Sheriff there and the family were members of the First Dutch Reformed Church in Albany. Within the next two generations, the DeForest’s name had changed to Defreest and they began to acquire large tracks of land in present day North Greenbush. The rest, as they say, is history.

There is a footnote to this story. At the tip of Manhattan in Battery Park, there is a monument, the Walloon Settlers Memorial, dedicated to the Walloons “under the inspiration of Jesse DeForest” who settled there and founded New York City. In Avesnes, France there is also a monument to Jesse Deforest. In Defreestville there is nothing. The memory is lost. Wouldn’t it be fitting to somehow commemorate the Defreests who have played such an important role in both American and North Greenbush history?

I plan to do stories on other North Greenbush families such as the Sharpes, Fondas, Hidleys and Van Denbergs. Anyone wishing to share information please contact me at 283-6384.