

# Raising the Roof: The Vander Ende-Onderdonk House



*The new roof, one year later.*

QUEENS, NEW YORK STATE: HISTORICAL HOUSE

CASE STUDY: FEBRUARY 2016

## An old house gets a new life.

Based in Queens, New York, the Greater Ridgewood Historical Society's mission is to save the "Onderdonk House" and exhibit the artifacts and history associated with this rare 18th Century Dutch American farm house. A dedicated team has uncovered fascinating objects and records of early American life. These are on public display in the many rooms of the Onderdonk House. Abandoned in 1970, in a middle class neighborhood, the house was in danger of being demolished. Local residents couldn't bear to let that happen to such an important part of their history. The unique Dutch-American 1.4 acre farm site, situated in Ridgewood (Queens), New York on the border of Queens and Brooklyn, deserved to be saved. Residents galvanized their efforts in 1975,



*Welcome sign outside Onderdonk House.*

forming the Greater Ridgewood Historical Society and focused on preserving one of the few remaining Dutch American Colonial stone houses with a gambrel roof in New York City. **Virginia (Ginny) Comber**, a **Director of the Greater Ridgewood Historical Society**, is a lifelong resident of the area. Together with **City Council Members Diana Reyna** (currently the Deputy Borough President of The Brooklyn Borough), **Elizabeth Crowley**, **Society President Linda Monte** and other members, **Comber** played a key role in the current roof restoration project and continues to work on the preservation of this historic structure. **Comber** shared a wealth of information about the Onderdonk house, its history, and connection to the neighborhood and how this project is a true team effort.



Virginia (Ginny) Comber, Diana Reyna (Deputy Brooklyn Borough President) & Linda Monte (President, Ridgewood Historical Society) at the Onderdonk House.



Half door to hedging and pathway.

## Early Residents

The first structure on the site was built by a mid-17th Century Dutch farmer named Hendrik Barentsz Smidt. His original wooden house was subsequently replaced with a fieldstone house in 1709, built by Paulus Vander Ende. The Vander Ende family would live in the home for many generations. The Vander Ende-Onderdonk House is the oldest Dutch-American stone farmhouse in New York City. In the early 1800's, the house was purchased by the Onderdonk Family.



Onderdonk House in 1903.

The home has ties to the American Revolution. Jannettje Van Ende, descendant of Paulus, was married to Moses Beadel, a future British prisoner, his captive status being earned at the Battle of Long Island. The gambrel roof has survived over three hundred years, despite fire, war, additions and numerous occupants.

The farm site is home to "Arbitration Rock", a boulder that sits in the middle of the grounds behind the house. It was the original rock used to set the boundary between Bushwick, Brooklyn and Newtown, in the Borough of Queens.



Plaque affixed to Arbitration Rock.



Arbitration Rock.

The farm site used to run all the way down to Myrtle Avenue; the farm was 100 acres when purchased.

### More Recent History

As the farming community along Flushing Avenue transitioned to commercial and industrial development, so, too, did the Onderdonk House. After the Onderdonks sold the house and property, the new owner operated a scrap glass business before "green" was in vogue.



*Reminders of past scrap glass business.*

Later it became the administration offices of a greenhouse company. And, in an intriguing twist, this colonial house actually once was a manufacturing site for spacecraft parts during the early days of the American space program.

### Fire and Restoration

A fire in the early 1970's caused intense damage to the house's timber framing and interior. In fact, the only 18th Century building materials that survived this devastating fire were the stone foundation, certain walls and parts of the framing.

The **Greater Ridgewood Historical Society** conducted significant fundraising efforts between 1975 and 1981. These tireless efforts resulted in the farm site and the Onderdonk House being officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. **New York City ("NYC")** provided landmark status in 1995. Both of these recognitions led to local, State and Federal funding opportunities. Restoration work was completed, exhibits constructed and tour guides trained; the Onderdonk House welcomed its first public visitors in 1982.

In 2012, **NYC** provided Capital Funding to restore the roof on the Onderdonk House. Current activities for continuing restoration and operational needs include modest admission fees, school tours and activity days, private research assistance and grounds usage fees for local events.



*The interior of the old roof.*



*The Onderdonk House in 1975, after the devastating fire.*

### An Impressive Design and Construction Team

The **New York City Department of Design and Construction** is managing construction of the cedar roof replacement. A schematic design report and construction documents have been prepared by **John G. Waite Associates PLLC**.

### The Reroofing Project

In 2012, a probe analysis was conducted on the roof, exterior wall and ceiling. The purpose was to determine the condition of the structure. Results showed a roof in need of replacement due to age and associated water damage, squirrel nesting as well as malfunctioning gutters. The framing was in fairly good condition. Exterior trim boards showed evidence



*Photo taken in 1981.*

of advanced deterioration. The photos of the existing roof ridge showed a severe need for ridge cap replacement, largely due to end of life roofing product, face nailing and loose fasteners. The probe report also showed that some areas of historic mortar are now reduced to loose sand; deteriorated mortar joints need to be repaired.

Great care is being taken to ensure the successful bidder is fully qualified to tackle this historical project. Due to the public funds involved and overlapping jurisdictional authorities, there are multiple rule books to follow. As the site has been granted landmarked status, the project must use as close to original materials as possible.

A stringent in-house quality control team was developed for this special project. As the project's specifications called for **Cedar Shake and Shingle Bureau ("CSSB")** member **Certi-label™** brand



*Enjoying the outdoor grounds.*

product, a call was placed to **Tony Bonura, CSSB District Manager, Northeast**. The quality control committee learned that there were many factors to consider in a roof replacement project. These factors include condition of current roof, quality of replacement roofing materials and installation, accuracy of historical product type as well as product mill and treatment labels. The **Certi-label™** product selected was Number 1 Grade Western Red Cedar



*Main roof attic, looking west, with open envelope and water infiltration stains on chimneys.*

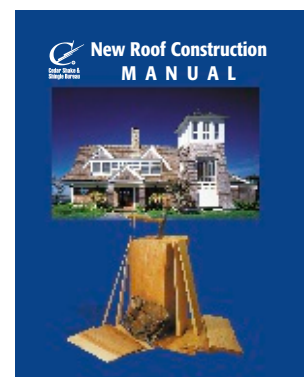
24" Royal Shingles, also specified for the sidewalls on both sides/ends of the house, were manufactured by **S&K Cedar Products Ltd.** and distributed by **Riverhead Building Supply Corp.** Installation was completed by **Eli Construction Services Inc.**

A quality roof is only as good as the quality of its installation, and the workmanship aspect was a large topic of discussion within the committee. The scope of work included the roof and trim board's removal and replacement to ensure a weather resistant structure. Some earlier temporary replacement cedar products were used on walls and needed to be switched out with more accurate types. Overhanging trees also needed to be trimmed back to allow for a less shaded environment.

### **Today's Tours**

**Richard Asbell**, the Society's curator and archivist, takes great pride in maintaining the Onderdonk House and its exhibits. The exhibit space, with fine glass-fronted display cabinets, contain important archaeological treasures unearthed from the archaeological digs onsite in 1970. Visitors can view the Victorian room, set to look like a parlor from the late 19th Century.

The furniture and accessories are original to the period and items have been donated by kind curators and friends of the **Greater Ridgewood Historical Society**. Temporary exhibits change throughout the year, and have included a display of 19th Century lighting innovation called "Candles to Kerosene" as well as "Just After the Battle", an



**American Civil War** exhibit including period photos, currency and other memorabilia. Artifacts on permanent display include a butter mold, a child's wooden shoes, gallon bottle of Peppermint Spirits, salt-glazed stoneware bowls and bisque porcelain dolls. An interesting collection of bottles, in a glassed-in archway, are identified as soda bottle, Squibb medicine bottle (**Bristol-Myers Squibb** was founded in 1887), rum, dazzle bleach, soda, medicine with measuring cup... many of which were found on the grounds and instantly show the house's connection to a fascinating past.



*The Onderdonk House's Victorian Room.*

### Research Opportunities

A significant collection of history and genealogy resources offer a vast collection to researchers. If you have Dutch farming roots in the Queens/Brooklyn area, then chances are the Onderdonk records may prove fruitful to your ancestral search. The **Daughters of the American Revolution**, an organization dedicated to preserving American history and family history research, have partnered with the Society to give genealogy workshops at the Onderdonk house. **Historian George Miller** frequently helps answer genealogy questions and also assists architects interested in the history of the area.

Those interested in the house's own history will be intrigued to learn that due to a **Civil War-era** fire, the walls and stairs had to be replaced. The Onderdonk family then made their own mortar out of crushed shells (from nearby Newtown Creek's clams), sand, water and cattle/hog hair. A cut away of this creative construction can be seen in the first bank of stairs leading up to the second floor.

In the early 1980's, students from **Columbia University** catalogued the vast array of artifacts gleaned from various discoveries and archaeological digs over the years. They arranged acid-free, archival-safe storage boxes and did a fine job sorting through a mass of materials.

### Children's Activities

The Onderdonk House has developed a wonderful



*Archway of bottles between two rooms.*



*A serving platter unearthed on the grounds.*



*The library.*

array of children's programs. The Society's School Program offers tours of the old farming site plus education on what crops were grown in colonial days. This is supplemented by a slide show, crafts and lunch in the picnic grove.

### Interested in Visiting?

The Onderdonk House is currently open from 1-5pm on Saturdays, during the Spring and Summer, and 12- 4 pm on Saturdays during the Fall and Winter. Facility rental, including an



*Stair cutaway.*

upstairs bride's area, plus a tented area for receptions, is available from April through October. The site has hosted ten weddings to date. Visit [www.underdonkhhouse.org](http://www.underdonkhhouse.org) for the most current hours and exhibit information. Note that the Onderdonk House is a **Blue Star Museum**, meaning that Military Service Personnel and their families with proper identification receive free admission.

### Dedication Ceremony

Northeast District Manager **Tony Bonura** attended the "by invitation only" dedication event for the official opening of the Onderdonk House restoration project. He was hosted by **Society President Linda Monte**, **Steven Monte Vice President**, **Ginny Comber, Corporate Secretary & Board Member Greater Ridgewood Historical Society** and **Peter Comber, Treasurer, CFO & Board Member Greater**



*New roof one year later.*



*A skyline view of the Big Apple.*

### Ridgewood Historical Society and Diana Reyna, Deputy Borough President, Borough of Brooklyn.

Reyna made a presentation and made mention how the CSSB was one of the entities that was dedicated to the success of the restoration and "...Tony actually came to the site and inspected the shingles to ensure that the shingles were on grade".

**Bonura** discussed appropriate roof care and maintenance with **Jeremy P. Woodoff, Deputy Reviewer/Historic Preservation Structures – New York City Department of Design + Construction (NYC-DDC)**. Also in attendance was **Grace Meng, Congressional Representative, New York 6th District** and **Melinda Katz, President, Borough of Queens**. During the dedication ceremony, the CSSB was recognized for its technical assistance, time and for being part of the historical project.

Of the 100 guests present, **Bonura** was one of ten other guests from the audience of about 100 who was summoned to the podium to participate in the dedication of the new roof. Each person was provided with a ceremonial hammer to use on the original mock-up of the installation and simulated "hammering" of the nails to attach the new shingles.

Special Note: This Case Study and the CSSB's involvement with all of the entities dedicated to the

restoration of the Onderdonk House, is very special to **Tony Bonura** as the Onderdonk House is situated in the neighborhood in which he spent the first twenty-five years of his life. The home in which **Bonura's** parents, sister and he lived in is located at 1855 Putnam Avenue; the house is located about sixty feet from the intersection of Putnam Avenue and Onderdonk Avenue. While on site meeting with the representatives from the **New York City Department of Design and Construction and the Greater Ridgewood Historical Society**, **Bonura** observed a map of the Onderdonk Farm. The map revealed that the house he grew up in was located on the land that was once part of the property and actually quite close to both schools he attended as a child and young adult.

As a teenager, **Bonura** and friends enjoyed the Onderdonk Avenue 'speedway', a long, sloping hill that began just past St. Aloysius Church, near Dekalb Avenue. When the teens reached the bottom of the hill, the Onderdonk House was just to their left... needless to say, they didn't have much fun going back up the hill for dinner!

*Copy and Photos courtesy Lynne Christensen and Tony Bonura*



*Dedication with Tony Bonura and dignitaries*



**Written by:**

Lynne Christensen is the CSSB's Director of Operations. She has worked for the CSSB since 1998 and is involved in a variety of departments with a focus on marketing. Christensen holds a Master of Business

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**All Photos by (except where otherwise marked):**

Tony Bonura is the CSSB's District Manager, Northeast. He has over 40 years sales and marketing experience in the forest products industry and shares his immense knowledge with a wide range of marketplace participants. Bonura is the Past Chairman of the Joint Forest Products/Coatings Committee, headquartered at the Forest Product Laboratory in Madison, WI. He resides in New York State.



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