



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

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Our Most Famous Citizen

I have been asked who I thought our most famous citizen was. This is a difficult question. We had no presidents or governors – not even a movie or rock star. My vote would go to John Evert Van Alen, a merchant, surveyor, local judge and member of Congress.

Van Alen was born in Kinderhook in 1749. His ancestors were among the early Dutch settlers of this area and by the time of his birth were prosperous farmers. John began his adult life as a merchant in Schodack. The New York Historical Society has his account book and I hope to obtain a copy of these records to shed further light on his early life.

There are conflicting accounts of his activities during the Revolutionary War. One account says that he was placed under arrest for commenting that the war was having a “ruinous effect” on the population and he hoped that peace would soon be restored. For that he was thrown in jail and refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Continental Congress. Interesting story, but one that probably confuses our John E. Van Alen with another John Van Alen. Records at the State Archives indicate John E. Van Alen served in the Albany Militia during the War.

By the late 1780’s, Van Alen had moved to what is now North Greenbush and began his career as a surveyor for the Van Rensselaer land holdings. Most of the western part of our present county, including the original building lots of what was to become Troy were laid out by Van Alen.

In 1791, he was elected assistant justice of the newly organized county of Rensselaer. At the same time he was a justice of the peace for the town of Greenbush.

One year later, Van Alen was elected to Congress. Lest you think that election controversies are a modern occurrence, you should know that the defeated candidate Henry K. Van Rensselaer challenged the results. He charged that that more people voted in Stephentown than were registered; the ballot box in Hoosick was left unlocked; and that Van Alen had the ballot box for Greenbush in his possession even though he was not an election inspector. A Congressional Committee of Inquiry cleared him and Van Alen was seated and served three terms in Congress.

He left office in 1799. I don’t know if he was defeated or decided he’d had enough. He was a supporter of the Federalists and their time in power was coming to an end. Although he authored no significant laws, he must have been held in high esteem by President and Mrs. Washington, because Van Alen’s wife was presented with a sugar bowl inscribed from Mrs. Washington to Mrs. Van Alen. This souvenir remained in the Van Alen family for several generations.

After returning home, Van Alen served as a member of the State Assembly and as one of the incorporators of the Farmers’ Bank of Troy.

He died in 1806 childless, so after the death of his wife, the estate went to a nephew Evert Van Alen, who was also a surveyor of some note. The Van Alen home, built in 1793 still stands on Washington Avenue in Defreestville. There is a historical plaque in front of the property. If you drive by, take a moment and remember our most famous citizen.