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Friends of Historic Kingston, 63 Main Street, PO Box 3763, Kingston, NY 12402. (845) 339-0720.

ONLINE: <http://ci.kingston.ny.us>

Sites described are open May thru October, and by appointment throughout the year. A walking tour can be enjoyed anytime.

Related Photos

- The Mansard roof on Jacob Tremper House was added in the 1860s, but the original structure dates to the early 18th century. P-R Photo/Richard Frost/on 1.00



- A monument at Old Dutch Church pays tribute to New York's first governor, George Clinton. P-R Photo/Richard Frost/on 1.00



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November 7, 2010

Kingston once served as state capital

RICHARD FROST, A Day Away Press-Republican

Election Day has passed, so I can skirt the political aspects of my story.

I'm one of those citizens who remains outraged by the New York Senate's refusal to even meet for a period of time last year. My wife, Marty, and I tried to put a different slant on things by visiting the Senate House Historic Site in Kingston.

Kingston's oldest residential area retains the street grid drawn by Peter Stuyvesant in the 1658. Because of fighting with the Esopus Indians, Stuyvesant ordered the community of 60 settlers to relocate homes and barns on a bluff overlooking their farmland. Board by board, brick by brick, these structures were moved.

A stockade of tree stumps, 14 feet high and with borders 1,200-by-1300 feet, was erected in a mere three weeks. Peace treaties were signed in 1664. Though no longer needed, the stockade stood intact into the 1700s. Segments were found during archaeological digs in 1971.

FIRST CAPITAL

Kingston's early economy thrived on trade up and down the Hudson River. When the British took control of New York City during the American Revolution, however, merchants were left without avenues of commerce. And government had to move.

Kingston was designated the capital of New York state. Leaders, most notably John Jay, penned the state constitution in the local courthouse. George Clinton, New York's first governor and the person after whom Clinton County was named, had his offices there. The state's assembly convened in a local tavern.

The Senate wanted a more private place to meet. Abraham Van Gaasbeek, prosperous until Hudson River trade dwindled, offered empty rooms he once used for storage. That legislative body came together for the first time in September 1777 — at which time his home was already more than a century old.

During these early sessions, the 24-member Senate responded to a gubernatorial address, authorized pay for legislators (do priorities ever change —) and contracted for food to feed soldiers at Saratoga and Fort Montgomery.

British forces were sighted sailing up the Hudson River in October. State government quickly evacuated to Hurley then Poughkeepsie, where it remained until the capital was permanently moved to Albany in 1795. The British burned much of Kingston, but a tenacious population began rebuilding almost immediately.

EYE SHARPENER

The Senate House survives as one of many impressive 17th- and 18th-century structures in Kingston's Stockade Area. Our guide Michael filled us in on its historical significance before touring us through the rooms.

Built of local limestone, the modest dwelling once housed as many as 10 people. Dutch doors, original Delft tiles and an illustrated Bible recall heritage of the area's earliest settlers. A treen, or massive wood bowl scraped

from a large burl, led Michael to tell us how awed European settlers were by the size of North American trees.

Most of the period furnishings derived from local contributions. One piece original to the home is a writing desk in the family parlor. Vases on the mantle were for show; they're only painted on the front side.

The Visitor Center features a small museum of local artifacts and early American furniture. Displays range from a 1650 matchlock rifle to the pilot wheel of a Hudson River steamboat. One oddity is called an "eye sharpener," a suction device purported to improve vision by changing the shape of the eye. I guess you could consider it the "LASIK" of its time.

There's an engaging exhibit on Kingston painter John Vanderlyn (1775-1852), the first artist in the colonies to formally study in Paris. Largely forgotten now, he was commissioned to paint "The Landing of Columbus" for the Capitol in Washington, D.C. His "View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles" hangs in New York City's Metropolitan Museum.

We spent several hours walking in the Stockade Area, with its two dozen-plus pre-Revolutionary homes and commercial structures. Though ornate details such as Mansard roofs and Gothic Revival gingerbread have been added, it's the solid stonework that most impressed us.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Stabilized ruins in Frog Alley show rooms tended to be small, but a few mansions offer contrast. The Jacob Tremper House includes 35 rooms. Judge Lucas Elmendorf House, dating to 1790, has 21 rooms, plus three cellars that may have been quarters for slaves who did the construction. A beehive oven survives on the original 1690s section of Henry Sleight House.

Jacobus Elmendorf House served as the community's first Methodist Church. Dutch proprietors allowed freedom of religion, as long as services were held in private. Thus, a new resident of a different faith would build an extra room for such use.

Kingston Academy, an especially formidable structure, dates to 1774. It became New York's first two-year college. The junction of John and Crown streets claims to be the "only intersection in the U.S. where 18th-century stone houses stand on all four corners."

Old Dutch Church, handsomely reconstructed of stone in 1852 and featuring a tall clock tower, dominates one block. A plaque denotes George Washington's visit in 1782. Among tombstones in the adjacent cemetery is a prominent monument to George Clinton. Seventy Revolutionary soldiers are also buried here.

FEDERAL-STYLE HOME

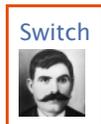
Friends of Historic Kingston operates Fred J. Johnston Home as a museum. In 1937, Johnston (1911-1993) averted its demolition in favor of a gas station then lived there for nearly six decades. Inspired to study art and antiques by a high-school teacher, he became a regionally noted dealer in early decorative arts.

Volunteer guide Mary Ann brought us first to the parlor. This served as the showroom. Here Johnston would show customers a variety of pieces while taking stock and gauging their true interest. Those who passed muster were then brought through the rest of the home. The family understood every single item in the home was always for sale. That comfortable four-poster bed, the pretty vase on the mantle, the distinctive china pattern used for family meals — all might be gone the next day!

Upon Johnston's death, the Federal-style home and its contents were bequeathed as a museum. The collection is impressive for both its breadth and depth. Red earthenware pottery, copper ware, a lute-like door chime, and locally made coverlets complement the extensive sampling of furniture.

Kingston offers more, including an historic port area, trolley, volunteer firemen's museums and a maritime collection. These will be on our agenda next time.

E-mail Richard Frost at: rbforiole@aol.com



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Day Away



- [Railroad adventure takes author to gold country](#)

It's possible to leave downtown Plattsburgh by train and be in California just three days and three nights later, Richard Frost writes.

March 4, 2012 6 Photos



- [Westward ho!](#)

Columnist Richard Frost continues his three-part series on his train trip across the country.

January 1, 2012 5 Photos



- [Westward ho](#)

Columnist Richard Frost chronicles his cross-country rail trip.

November 27, 2011 4 Photos



- [Don't have to travel far to follow Stevenson's footsteps](#)

Visit to Robert Louis Stevenson Memorial Cottage and Museum an inspiring experience, Richard Frost writes.

September 11, 2011 3 Photos



- [Humble start noted in visit to former president's homestead](#)

Americans like to idealize their heroes, but Calvin Coolidge's tale seems to require little adornment, Richard Frost writes.

July 3, 2011 5 Photos



- [Journey to immigration destination](#)

Richard Frost writes about tour through the process that an immigrant would have faced when docking at Ellis Island.

March 6, 2011 3 Photos



- [Finding history close to home](#)

At the Clinton County Historical Association in Plattsburgh, travel writer Richard Frost was pleased to find an excellent exhibit of Redford glass.

February 6, 2011 2 Photos



- [Key West delights the eye, the palette](#)

If you have a chance to sample just one aspect of Key West, writes columnist Richard Frost, make it the evening sunset ritual on the pier adjacent to Mallory Square.

January 23, 2011 3 Photos



- [Castle Hill gives taste of luxury in Vermont](#)

Allan M. Fletcher built the Cavendish inn as a retirement home in 1905.

January 2, 2011 2 Photos

- [Glens Falls museum boasts extensive works](#)

Includes works by Renoir, Picasso and da Vinci, writes columnist Richard Frost.

December 5, 2010

- [More Day Away Headlines](#)

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