

# The Peter DeBaun House (ca. 1770)

## 324 Main Street, Emerson, New Jersey

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### Introduction

The “Peter DeBaun House” is a fine example of pre-revolutionary agricultural Dutch architecture in Emerson, New Jersey. But it is more than that. It is an untold story. A story tens of thousands of Americans can trace their lineages to and millions more can be enriched by. Whether black, white, English, Dutch, Italian or African -- all the inhabitants of the house were American. Through luck and good stewardship over the centuries the historic “Peter DeBaun House” has survived to the present day, but just barely. Generations yet to come would be impoverished were this tangible link to the beginnings of our country to be forever lost.

### A Brief History of the Occupants

The “Peter DeBaun House” was built about 1770 by Petrus “Peter” DeBaun (1719-1797). Peter was the son of Carrel “Charles” DeBaun and Janneke “Jane” Haring and the grandson of Joost DeBaun, an immigrant “Dutch” Huguenot and one of the earliest settlers of the Kinderkamack settlement (Today’s Emerson).

Before the American Revolution the house most likely consisted of just the center section of two stories, with the characteristic Dutch roofline, four windows across the front with entrance at center [see Fig. 1].

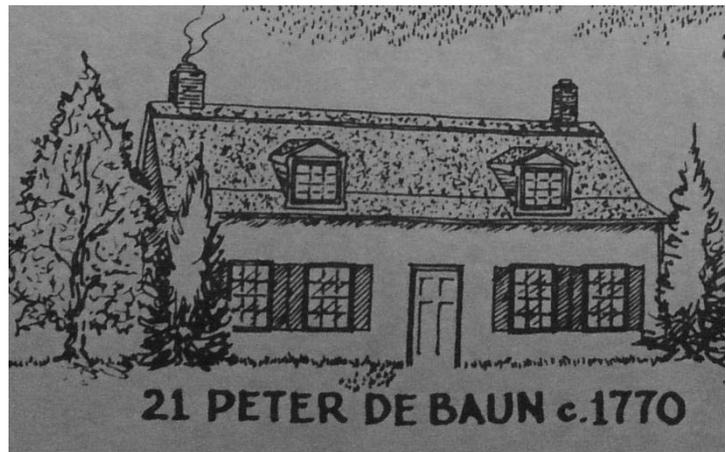


Figure 1-“Peter DeBaun House” as it appeared during the American Revolution. *Illustration from US Bicentennial Map of the Pascack Valley, designed J.S. Nants.*

In 1770, the Peter DeBaun family consisted of Peter, wife Maritie Jacobse “Maria” Banta (1722-1801), Charles (b.1753), Jacob (b. 1756), Maria (b.1758), Petrus “Peter” (b. 1767) and probably Cornelia (b.1749). (Oldest daughter Jannetke DeBaun (b.1745) had married Jacob T. Eckerson in 1764.)

During the Revolutionary War, the house undoubtedly witnessed troop movements, being cited in the midst of frequent skirmishes and battles. Bergen County was the scene of constant conflict between the British Army based in New York City and Washington's troops headquartered West of Emerson. In the first decades of the new American Republic, the house changed hands to the younger Peter "Petrus" DeBaun (1767-1839). About this time the two side wings of one and one-half stories were most likely added to the structure. [See Fig. 2]

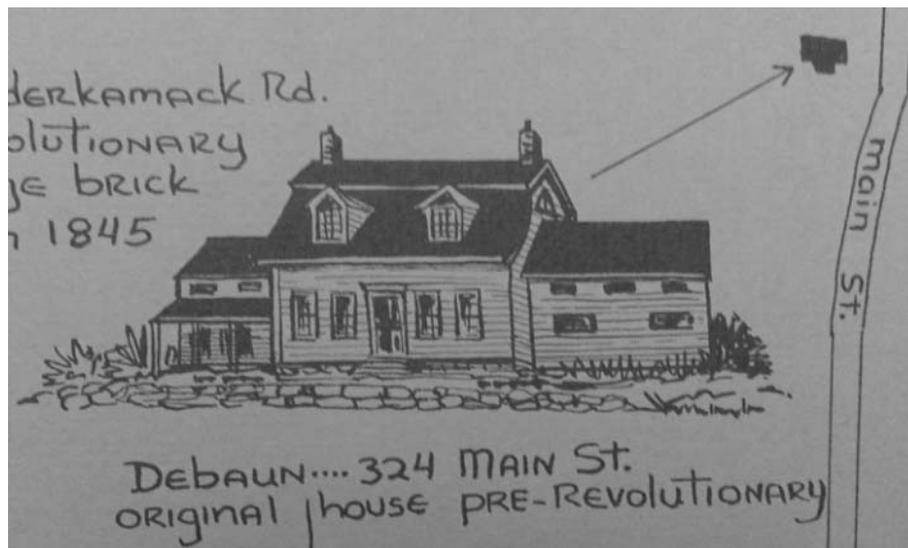


Figure 2 - "Peter DeBaun House" as it appeared in early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Illustration from 1964 *New Jersey Tercentary poster of Emerson, NJ Old Homes*, designed by Meadi Christensen.

Peter and his wife Magdalena "Lena" Van Voorhees (1775-1849) lived in the home during this period with son Hendrick "Henry" (b.1795), daughter Eefje "Effie" (b.1797), son Peter "Petrus" (b.1799) and daughter Wybrecht "Wibey" (b.1802).

Historical records prove that persons of color also lived in the DeBaun household. The 1830 US Federal Census records Peter and Lena living on the property with an enslaved woman of color of 36 – 54 years of age and a free man of color between 10 and 24 years of age. The enslaved woman was likely first the property of Isaac DeBaun (1722-1815), the uncle of Peter "Petrus" DeBaun (1767-1839). The younger free man of color was almost certainly the son of the enslaved woman.

Peter died in 1839 and in late 1840 or early 1841 his son Hendrick "Henry" DeBaun (1795-1868) moved back to the property from New York City, where he had worked as a carpenter in the Greenwich Village area since just after his 1818 marriage to Femmetje "Effe" Cole (1799-1864). By 1843 the household would have consisted of the following persons: "Henry", "Effe", son Abraham (b.1825), son Jacob Henry (b. 1831), daughter Hannah (b.1833), and son Henry C. (b.1842).

It is thought that the ornate wooden fireplace surround in the great room of the house dates from about this period. In the 1850 census values real estate at \$3000.00. Hendrick "Henry" is farming. He and Effe are living there with daughter Hannah and son Henry C. Around this time a porch was added across the front of the two-story center section of the house. A well was in the front of the home and large detached barns were in the back. [See Fig. 3 and 4]



Figure 3 - "Peter DeBaun House" from the street as it appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Note the well sided with lattice.

*Photographs from the private collection of Edna Baker (nee DeBaun), passed down to David Louis Baker, Jr., 5<sup>th</sup> great-grandson of Peter DeBaun, original owner of the house.*



Figure 4 - "Peter DeBaun House" as it appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Note the barns behind the home. What is today Main Street runs between the wood rail fence in the mid-ground and the picket fence in the mid-background.

In the 1860 US Federal Census, son Jacob Henry DeBaun (1831-abt. 1889) having moved from New York, is farming the property, now valued at \$6000.00. Living with him is wife Maria Lavinia Bush (1836-1910). They had married in Hackensack in 1856. Also at the DeBaun Homestead are young daughter Evanna (b. 1858) and a 21 y.o. New Jersey-born black laborer named George Thompson. Son David Henry DeBaun (1860-1923) was born at the home soon thereafter. [See notation at top of Fig. 3]



Figure 5 - The 1861 map above shows the location of the “Peter DeBaun House” as “Henry DeBaun” and also shows the oldest part of Westwood Cemetery where Abraham and other DeBauns are buried to this day. (Note: Old Hook Road runs left-right towards top of map. The swampy area at bottom right is today’s Oradell Reservoir.) 1861 Map of the Counties of Bergen and Passaic NJ, G.H. Corey Publisher.

When the Civil War came, the two DeBaun sons both served the union, one giving his life in the effort. Jacob Henry DeBaun enlisted as a corporal in Company F, 8th Infantry Regiment New Jersey on 10 Oct 1861. He received a disability discharge from Company F, 8th Infantry Regiment New Jersey on 1 Jan 1862 at Lower Potomac, MD.

Abraham DeBaun (1825-1863), who had lived in the house in his teens, served his country by enlisting as a private in Company I, of the 22nd New Jersey Infantry Regiment on September 1, 1862. He died of disease on 22 Feb 1863 at Belle Plain, VA, leaving a widow and four children. Abraham is buried near many of his family members at Westwood Cemetery in the DeBaun family plot. [See Fig. 5 and 6] Abraham’s mother Effe DeBaun died at the “Peter DeBaun House” in 1864. Henry died there four years after in 1868.



Figure 6 - “IN HONOR OF ABRAHAM DEBAUN WHO DIED IN THE SERVICE OF HIS COUNTRY, BELL PLAIN, VA February 22, 1863 Aged 37 years, 6 months & 2 days” (DeBaun Family Plot, Westwood Cemetery)

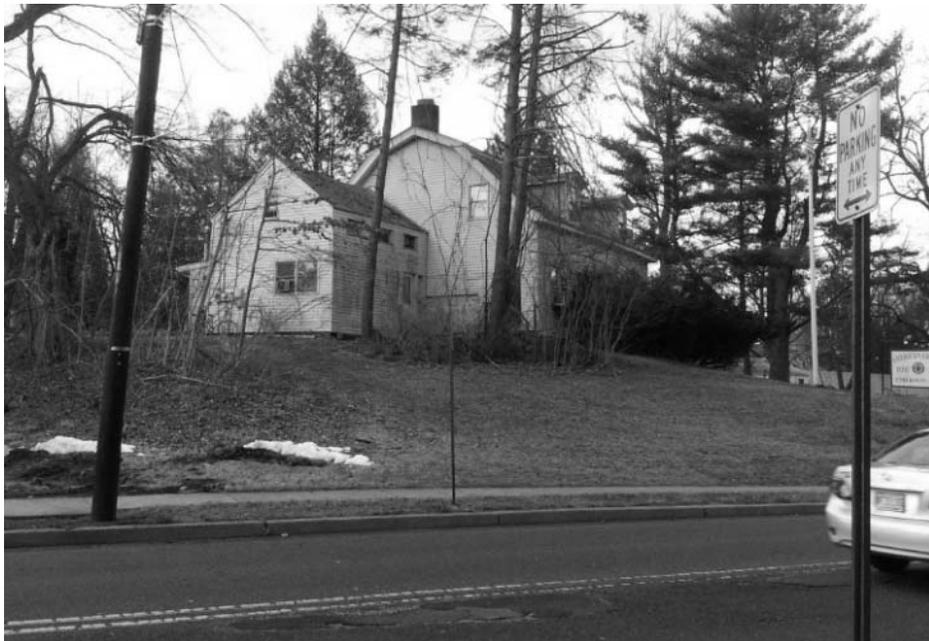
In 1868, after 98 years of continuous DeBaun residence, the “Peter DeBaun House” left the DeBaun family. Big changes were occurring in the area with the coming of the railroad and the county’s population was increasing markedly both in size and diversity. Over the next hundred years, ownership changed many times. The proud home stood bravely against the ravages of time, even as its’ mid-19<sup>th</sup> century porch fell away, its barns disappeared, and its farmland was sold away.

In the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, American Legion Post 269 of Emerson, New Jersey saved the old building by putting its first floor to a new use as a meeting hall. (The second floor was retained as a residential apartment). A pool was added in the back for the membership’s outdoor recreation and the first floor was modified to promote the enjoyment of the space by the members. As club membership declined the pool was filled in and meetings became less well attended. In 2012, a majority of the remaining members voted to sell the Legion Hall and use the proceeds to set up a fund for veterans in need and to provide scholarships to the local community.

### The Future of the Peter DeBaun House - Options to Avoid the Wrecking Ball

This historic building is now on the market, an approx 3100 SF pre-colonial home on 1.62 acres. It has no legal protection despite its remarkable story and is in imminent danger of demolition.

Certainly the building needs much work to become the asset it could be, but a surprising amount of cosmetic progress could be made in very short order to show off the home’s true character, which is now largely hidden from the street and hampers its historic marketability.



The overgrown landscaping almost completely obscures the front elevation and could be removed in an hour or two. The original foundation, original interior beams, original exterior siding, and original windows are all intact, just covered over by aluminum exterior siding, stained planks, and dropped ceilings. These modern coverings have usefully

served to protect the original historic elements and could be removed by even unskilled volunteers in a day or two. The historic door frame almost certainly remains behind the aluminum siding on the front elevation. The historic door likely does too. Even the original colonial 10-12” wide plank floors could be uncovered with somewhat more effort. (They remain under the early 20<sup>th</sup> century pine.)

The “Peter DeBaun House” has not been marketed to historic home enthusiasts despite its Metro NYC location, which is a pleasant one mile walk from the Emerson Pascack Valley commuter train station or a 45 minute drive to Manhattan. In addition to the home’s historic attributes, nature lovers would also be attracted to the location. The home’s front viewshed is all forested. The Emerson Woods Preserve, 17 acres of borough-protected woodland connecting to hundreds of more acres of preserved land abutting Oradell Reservoir. The trailhead is directly across a not-very-busy Main Street from the “Peter DeBaun House”.



Some sources have revealed that there is also interest by the Borough of Emerson in purchasing the land for government purposes. However, there has been no interest shown by the Borough’s Mayor, Council or Administrator in preserving or adapting the historic building to a new use should the borough purchase the property from the American Legion, despite the fact that such an adaptation would be facilitated by the open floor plan of the American Legion Hall space and the possibility of handicapped accessibility and parking behind the historic home. One such option would be to maintain the

home as town offices, programming space, or a small museum while utilizing the remainder of the property to build to specific needs. Another option would be to use the building as a community meeting space or hall. Moving to the building to another nearby location is also a possibility.

Due to the size of the lot in a tight borough, there has been some interest from developers who would put a small subdivision of homes on the property and demolish the “Peter DeBaun House.” Due to the home’s forward location on the property, however, the potential exists to put in a smaller subdivision in the rear of the property while maintaining the historic home intact with ample parking and yard space to maintain its attractiveness for private purchase or community uses.

