

# A History of the Gideon Frisbee House

By Tim Duerden

The centerpiece of the Delaware County Historical Association museum is the 1797 Gideon Frisbee House. The following is an overview of the house and certain of its inhabitants:

Gideon Frisbee (b. 1758 - d. 1828) settled in what was to become Delaware County around the year 1788. Typical of early pioneers to the region, he came to the Delaware River valley from Connecticut (Branford), via New Canaan, (Columbia County) NY. Gideon was the first son of Philip Frisbie, a fifth generation descendant of Congregationalist Puritans who settled in the New World during the early seventeenth century. Gideon, his parents and siblings, moved from Connecticut to New Canaan in the mid-1760's.

Philip Frisbie had been a Captain of Company 3, 17<sup>th</sup> Regiment of NY State Militia during the Revolutionary War, fought at Saratoga in 1777, was promoted to Major, and after the war served in the NYS Assembly. In 1787 he was appointed Lieutenant Colonel of a militia unit in Columbia County.

His son, Gideon, was also a Revolutionary War veteran, serving in the 17<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Albany County Militia and it is quite possible he could

have received land in territory that would become Delaware County as payment for his war service.

The region that became Delaware County was essentially a frontier region in the years during and after the war. Gideon Frisbee and other early settlers literally cut clearings in the forest in which they constructed log homes for themselves and families. Slowly they cleared more land upon which to establish farming operations (usually sheep farming in these early years).

The road outside Gideon's house was laid out in 1788 and by the early 1790's Gideon had firmly staked his claim on land where Elk Creek empties into the West Branch of the Delaware River. On land originally owned by wealthy Philadelphian, Henry Drinker he built a sawmill and a log house and operated a brick-building works. By 1795 the log house was in use as a tavern for wayfarers.



Frisbee House ca. 1880s

Gideon's farm also eventually consisted of land acquired from another prominent Philadelphia family, the Whartons, and at one time in the early nineteenth century his farm consisted of perhaps as much as 1,000 acres. It is unclear at this

time whether Gideon bought the land from the Whartons, or acquired it in some other fashion. Could it be that the Whartons, whose Quaker patriarch Thomas Wharton remained neutral during the Revolutionary War (and was thus exiled to North Carolina), were forced to cede some of their land away to others?

Gideon also at one time owned and rented a log house at the mouth of the Little Delaware, some 2.5 miles downstream of the Elk Creek site. Another of his occupations during his first years at his new home was buying logs from landowners further upstream, (or beyond the reach of the river valley) and floating the “rafts” down river for sale in Trenton and Philadelphia. Farming continued to occupy a large portion of his time, however, and it is recorded that his farm employed a good deal of “colored help” during the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Gideon and his family prospered enough in their new location to erect the present house sometime in the final decade of the eighteenth century - possibly as early as 1797. The May 1798 tax assessment list shows Gideon Frisbee owning a frame house measuring fifty by

twenty feet and in addition a barn. The house was built using chestnut and pine trees, with oak foundation beams. The plaster in the house had a pinkish hue from the sand used, dug from a deposit on the banks of Elk Creek.

The Frisbee House is rather prominent in style, mirroring Gideon’s position within the local community. The house was a large one for the region in 1800, and in its early years served as a site for several public functions. In addition

to housing a tavern and inn, the first county board of supervisors meeting was held here in March 1797, lending credence to the claim that the house is “The Birthplace of Delaware County.” Also, the first Court of Common Pleas convened in the house on October 3, 1797 and remained there until a courthouse could be constructed in Delhi in 1799. Gideon Frisbee was one of the associate justices of the Court of Common Pleas and a county treasurer for some years.

Gideon married twice and in total fathered twelve children, all of whom at one time lived in the Frisbee House.

In 1780, while still in New Canaan he wed Huldah Kidder (b. 1756 - d. 1804). Together they had six children: 1. Daniel (b. 1781 - d. 1860), 2. Freelove (b. 1782 - d. 1867), 3.

Gideon (b. 1783 - d. 1857), 4. Huldah (b. 1787 - d. 1845), 5. William (b. 1791 - d. 1862), the first of their children born in Delhi, and 6. Ruth (b. 1797 - d. 1876).

After the death of Huldah, Gideon married Freelove Fiske (b. 1780 - d. 1857) on September 8, 1805. She

was the daughter of a close neighbor and was many years Gideon’s junior. Gideon and Freelove also had six children:

1. Angeline (b. 1806 - d. 1845), 2. Anzolette (b. 1807 - d. 1861), 3. George (b. 1809 - d. 1809), 4. Milton (b. 1811 - d. 1888), 5. Porter (b. 1816 - d. 1889), and 6. Phillip (b. 1818 - d. c. 1900?)

After Gideon Frisbee’s death in 1828 the house passed to Freelove. She retained life-use of the



Frisbee House ca. 1930s

house and seventy-two acres until her death in 1857. When Gideon died he left his wife and children with several unpaid bills, including a \$1,000 mortgage made in 1819. In order to meet these obligations, produce, livestock and personal property had to be sold off; some of this property was bought by his son William and further acreage was willed and/or sold to Gideon's eleven other surviving offspring in the years to follow.

In 1842 Milton, the second son of Gideon and Freelove, purchased complete interest in the "dower" from Freelove Frisbee. Milton and his wife (he had married Angeline Parke in 1836) moved into the house sometime during that year with their two children, Edward and Charles. A third child was adopted by the couple in 1853, a daughter Julia.

Milton, however, was forced into bankruptcy and sometime between 1849 and 1859 complete interest of the dower passed to the Delaware National Bank. However, Milton, his mother and family (and possibly his mother's father, Joseph Fiske – b. 1754, d. 1843) continued to live in the house and farm the land until November 1857. (Milton died in Delhi in 1888, his wife following him to the grave three years later.)



James, Nancy and Jennie Frisbee.

There followed a period in which the house passed out of the hands of the Frisbee family – the only time it would do so until becoming part of the Delaware County Historical Association in the early 1960's.

William Youmans bought the property from the bank in 1859 and the next year sold it and 55 acres for \$1800 to Elizabeth Root, widow of another of Delhi's founders, Erastus Root (d. 1846). Stated in this deed was the stipulation, "said premises include none of the mill privileges." Elizabeth and her son William rented out the farm and lived in the eastern half of the house, renting out the other half to the farm tenants, until her death in 1871 after which the estate passed back into the Frisbee family.

James Henry Frisbee (b. 1846), a great-grandson of Judge Gideon, grandson of Daniel, and son of Gideon Frisbee and Ann Parke, acquired the property from Elizabeth Root's estate in 1875 (the house and approximately 70 acres) and he continued to live in the house until his death in 1933.

On February 21, 1878 he married Nancy (Nannie) MacMullen (b.1853, d. 1924) at the home of her parents at Watauga Falls. Their daughter, Jennie, was born (adopted?) on June 25, 1883.

Surviving documents, newspaper accounts and reminiscences of older local residents recorded during the 1970's and 1980's give us a tantalizing glimpse into the lives of the inhabitants of the Frisbee House during the first half of the twentieth century. On June 10, 1903, for example, an article from the *Delaware Gazette* informs us that: the exterior of the house is currently being painted by an Englishman named Harrison (a survivor of the "Charge of the Light Brigade" during the Crimean War in the 1850's). It is entirely possible that this was the first exterior paint job on the house.

In 1915, during an assessment adjustment, James is recorded as owning 60 acres, of which 10 were considered, "swamp waste land." He kept 10 cows and yielded 20 tons of hay. The house that year is recorded as being, "old, but well kept. Electric lights – only improvements." Dating from approximately this time



was the installation of a Delco Power plant in the basement. The assessment also notes the presence of a tall windmill in the rear of the house for pumping water and states simply that there was, "water in house." The value of the house was set at \$3,000.

For many years during the teens and 1920's Nancy's older sister, Sarah (Sadie) MacMullen (b. ? d. 1927) lived with them in the Frisbee House. She was a retired schoolteacher at Fitch's Bridge School. In addition, James and Nannie took in summer boarders. The Frisbees continued to occupy the eastern side of the house, using the present kitchen as theirs; their living room was downstairs in the east room (presently the parlor), with shell curtains covering the alcoves and interesting curios all around.

During this time James Frisbee kept a few cows, usually 8 – 16 in number, and from them his wife Nannie made butter for sale. The farm also produced hay and eggs for market. Looking back on their visits to the house as small children, several people interviewed in the 1970's and 1980's recall a plum orchard (near the present tollgate), an apple orchard near the family cemetery behind the barn, and beehives between the plum orchard and house. One of the rooms upstairs in the rear of the house was the honey room. During the 1920's they had a lovely delphinium garden on the eastern side of the house and next to this garden ran the driveway.

There is no record of James and family ever having made maple syrup, but a still in the basement gave rise to rumors that they made moonshine and sold it. In addition, there was once an icehouse on the farm and the Frisbees cut their own ice from the mill at Falls Mills.

James and Nannie's daughter, Jennie Frisbee, was a large, energetic woman with fiery red hair. She married twice: in 1926 to Clarence P. Saultz (b. 1884, d. 1935), and in 1937 to

Charles Evins (b. 1877, d. 1950). Her first wedding took place in the house in front of the fireplace and alcoves (presently the parlor) and a reception was held afterwards. No children were born from either union.

Her first husband, Clarence, was a native of Springfield, Illinois. He moved to the area some years before their marriage and operated a gravel pit on the Frisbee's property. He supposedly did quite well while Delhi's Main Street was being paved in 1920-21, but later turned to drink. He was jailed several times due to his alcoholism and reportedly did much damage around the house. Sadly, Clarence committed suicide while incarcerated in 1935.

In 1939 Jennie and her second husband, Charles, rented half of the house to the VanWie family. They lived there during the summer months with their six children. The rent was about \$12 per month. Jennie and Charles spent most of their winters in Florida with relatives of his and rented out the land for many years to Floyd Rockefeller starting in the 1940's.

After Charles' death in 1950 Jennie remained in the house during the summer months until 1961 and finally died in 1963 in Roxbury, NY. She was still using the small outhouse on the western side of the house and there was reportedly no working indoor plumbing. Those who remember her recall that she was by now very infirm. On August 27, 1960 the Frisbee House and farm (60 acres) were purchased by the Delaware County Historical Association.

In 1978 N.Y. State reworked St. Rt. 10, creating the bank that now runs along the front side of the house.