

MAPLEWOOD HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

Designation Report for Historic Landmark

Landmark # D-005-06

Public Hearing: February 13, 2006

1. Historic name of property: **Vaux Hall**; Lewis Pierson House

2. Street Address: 693 Valley Street

3. Tax Map information: Block 18.3 Lot 120

4. Description at time of designation, including size and placement on lot, outbuildings, etc.:

Vaux Hall is a two-story Greek Revival style wood frame structure constructed in 1843. It is rectangular in plan with a full entablature and pediment supported by four fluted Doric columns. There are two fluted Doric pilasters at each corner of the main façade. The main façade has three bays with a central entrance. The foundation and front steps are ashlar sandstone and the columns rest on sandstone bases. The main entrance is restrained in style with a battered fluted architrave and heavy lintel. This same motif is repeated on the windows surrounds (without the fluting) and on the interior. The six-paneled front door is topped with a narrow transom. A fan shaped, louvered vent is located at the apex of the pediment. There are two additions at the rear—a two-story extension with a roofline that is slightly lower than the original (date unknown) and a one-story sun porch with single car garage below (1939). The building is surfaced with narrow wood clapboard siding. There are two doorways on the southwest elevation. One is a simple two-paneled door with narrow transom above. There is a large brick chimney stack (there were originally three). Windows on the main façade are wood six-over-one, double-hung. On the side elevations, the windows are six-over-one double-hung on the ground floor and six-over-six double-hung on the second floor. The windows on the side elevations have operable louvered shutters.

The primary façade faces southeast on Valley Street. Historic Pierson's Mill (1831) and its associated buildings are located to the west and southwest. An asphalt paved drive south of the house leads from Valley Street to the garage and a small parking area at the rear of the house. A hedge forms the boundary on the southwest side of the house. The Maplewood Country Club golf course—once part of the Pierson's land, is to the north and west. A split rail fence forms the border at the northeast side of the property. The setting of the golf course, with its rolling green hills and mature trees, is reminiscent of the earlier agrarian landscape when the house was built. Mature plantings and several notable trees, including a Copper Beech and several pines, surround the house.

5. Ownership history for property:

Vaux Hall was owned and occupied by the Pierson family from the time of its construction in 1843 until 2000.

2001 – 2004

2004 – present David Smith and Carl Gefken

History

The first European settlers in what is now Essex County came to Newark from the New Haven Connecticut Colony, led there by Robert Treat in the mid-seventeenth century. By 1678, the outer limits of the Newark Colony stretched to the top of the First Watchung Mountain. Early roads from Newark were surveyed, often along old Indian trails, two of which eventually became South Orange and Clinton Avenues. Settlers from the Newark Colony, in search of land to farm or to develop early industry, moved west along these roads. They established farms where they grew wheat, rye, Indian corn and fruit trees, raised cattle and set up grist and saw mills.

Over the course of the early eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, small settlement developed in the western and eastern parts of what is now Maplewood. These settlements took on local names—that in the west eventually took the name of Jefferson Village, the east, North Farms. A few local roads developed creating links between farms in the area, including Ridgewood, Elmwood, Parker, Tuscan and Valley. Another important artery, the Newark-Springfield Turnpike, was constructed in 1806. Because those who settled here were primarily of English descent, their farmhouses generally followed English traditions and were built close to these main arteries. Early families such as the Balls, the Crowells, the Baldwins, the Beachs, the Browns, the Smiths, the Heddens, and the Piersons bought large plots of land and eventually members of these extended families owned property throughout the area.

History of the Pierson family and Vaux Hall

[all genealogical information from the Stryker-Rodda genealogy of the Pierson family; see sources]

Vaux Hall was constructed by Lewis Pierson (1801-1889), the youngest son of Samuel (1765-1833) and Mary Jones Pierson (1766-1832). Samuel Pierson's father, Samuel Pierson Senior, was born in 1739, probably in Connecticut Farms (now Union). He married Phebe Brown around 1764. Several years earlier, Samuel Pierson Sr. began to acquire land around the Rahway River in what became Maplewood. His initial purchase was 31 acres of land (from Nathaniel Ball and his wife Esther) bounded on the southwest by more property of Nathaniel Ball on the northwest by the Rahway River, on the northeast by Thomas Ball's property, and on the southeast by land owned by Jonas Ball and John Earl. Samuel Sr. continued to acquire more land and in 1762 purchased an additional 31 acres on the East Branch of the Rahway River, bounded by Stephen Brown's land on the southwest, his own land on the southeast and northeast, and the river to the northwest. He constructed a small wood frame house near the present site of Vaux Hall.

Samuel Pierson Sr. died in 1765 at only 27 years of age. Phebe was pregnant at the time, so their son Samuel Pierson Jr. was born after the death of his father. Phebe re-married a widower named John Tuttle, a miller from Hanover, who had four children of his own. The family continued to live in the small frame house. On the eve of the Revolutionary War, in 1775, Phebe was widowed yet again and Samuel Jr. was the sole heir of the property under the terms of his father's will.

Samuel Pierson Jr. married Mary Jones in 1788. He continued to farm the land and may have operated a general store. The couple had six children, of which four survived. Mary died in September 1832 and Samuel Jr. in April 1833. The property and real estate were divided equally between sons Samuel (the third) and Lewis.

Lewis was born in 1801 and was educated in the public school of Jefferson Village, now Maplewood. He continued to work on the farm and in his father's general store. He also traveled quite widely in the region and a visit to Rensselaersville, New York in 1824, may have induced him to construct a mill on the Pierson property. He recorded the trip in his journal and noted a number of mills he saw there. Lewis wrote in his journal on September 10, 1831, "I went to Rahway, started the water wheel of my mill for the first time ever a wheel went by water on this hill." Lewis dammed the East Branch of the Rahway and created a pond. The three-story timber frame mill (still standing) with its water powered wheel, rotated large granite millstones. Local farmers brought wheat, barley, corn and oats to be ground into feed for their stock and flour for their own consumption.

Just days after the death of his mother Phebe, Lewis married Abby Susannah Beach on September 30, 1832. Abby continued a tradition of keeping a diary. (Excerpts of her diaries are housed in the Maplewood Memorial Library). She recorded in May 1843: "...have moved in the barn today while we have a house built." She recorded that the house "was raised" on May 30 and in September "...we have taken tea in our new house this eve for the first time; not half our things taken in." No documentation has yet been found as to who the builder was. Five children were born to Lewis and Abby Pierson--three died young. The youngest child, and first to be born in the "new house" (Vaux Hall) was Hubert Lewis, born in 1847

Hubert Lewis attended public school in Jefferson Village and later at the Newark Academy. He also went to New York University. To aid in the family's milling business, Hubert went to Chicago to learn more about the grain business, where he also became acquainted with the Chicago Board of Trade. When he returned, he established himself in the wholesale grain business in New York City. He returned home to Maplewood after a decade to assume management of his father's milling and mercantile business. In 1871 he married Emma C. Kays of Sussex County. They established their own home on Ridgewood Road, where Emma remained until her death. (the house is no longer standing).

Hubert Lewis made many improvements to the mill. He constructed a large stable at the rear of the property, where horses belonging to wealthy families in the area were boarded. Their carriages were stored on the upper level. He also established a retail hay, grain and feed business. In 1884, while setting dynamite charges to blast stumps in the river, Hubert was blinded in an accident. Following the death of his parents (Abby died in 1887 and Lewis in 1889), Hubert Lewis inherited the property and business and turned it into a stock farm. Despite his blindness, he continued membership in the Chicago Board of Trade and was Vice president of the New York Northern Grain Company. He also became a member of the Board of Directors of the Second National Bank of Orange.

Hubert Lewis and Emma Pierson had two children: Lewis Henry and Emma Maud. Lewis Henry was born in 1872. Lewis took over full responsibility of running the mill business at age 17. The Pierson land holdings by this time were quite extensive. As the surrounding area changed from agricultural to residential, Lewis sold land and changed the focus of the mill business. Emma Maud left home in 1899 to attend Vassar College, and died of peritonitis just several months later. While visiting her grave at Fairmount Cemetery on Memorial Day 1908, Hubert had a heart attack and died at 61. Emma died in 1939 at 86. In 1909 Lewis Henry installed electric power in the mill. As the pond was no longer needed to power the mill, large pieces of the property were leased to the Maplewood Country Club. Little by little, parcels of land were sold off until all that remained were the acreage where the mill and house stood. Lewis consolidated the Pierson's resources and changed the mill business to a retail business in feed and fertilizer. Lewis married Eva Margaret Brown in 1894. They had five children, three who survived to adulthood (?)—Hubert Lewis (the 2nd), Mildred and Carleton Wellington.

Hubert Lewis (the 2nd) was born in 1898. He started work with his father at the mill after he finished high school. He married Mildred Greville Gothberg (1900-1983) in 1922. Hubert continued to change the scope of the business and enlarged it to include lawn seed and fertilizer, reflecting the growth in Maplewood. They had three children: Hubert Lewis (the third) (b. 1923); Donald E. (b. 1926); and Adele M. (born 1932). Hubert (the 2nd) formed a partnership in the 1950s with his two sons. He died in 1958 at only 59 and Hubert Lewis (the third) and Donald were left with the business. Donald retired from the business in the 1970s and Hubert Lewis (the third) became the sole owner.

Hubert Lewis (the third) was born in 1923. He worked part time at the mill, but was encouraged to go to college by his mother. He decided to go to Rutgers, but went into the service during World War II. Following the war he resumed his studies, but after a devastating fire at the mill in 1946, returned to help his father rebuild. Hubert Lewis married Sara Deems. They had three children, including sons Lewis Gregory and Mark Hubert. Greg and Mark joined their father in the business in the 1970s and worked at the mill until it was sold in 2001. Greg and Patricia Pierson were the sixth, and last, generation of Piersons to live in Vaux Hall.

6. Statement of significance, incorporating criteria for designation:

According to the criteria set forth in Section 7 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance of the Township of Maplewood (#2166-01), Vaux Hall is eligible as a Maplewood Historic Landmark under criteria (1), (2), (4), and (7).

(1.) Of particular historic significance to the Township of Maplewood by reflecting or exemplifying the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community:

Vaux Hall is of particular historic significance to the Township of Maplewood as a visible reminder of the early agrarian era in Maplewood. The use of the temple-front design is a clear illustration of the level of prominence attained by the Pierson family as major landowners in the area and operators of a gristmill at the site since 1831. It is thought to be the only temple-front “high style” Greek Revival House remaining in Essex County. According to the family, “Vaux

Hall” was named for the “pleasure garden” Vaux Hall in London, however the use of Vaux Hall for an area near the Pierson home dates back to the eighteenth century.

(2) Associated with an historic personage(s) important in national, state or local history;

Lewis Pierson, a member of an early Maplewood family, constructed Vaux Hall in 1843. The first member of the family to settle in the area was Samuel Pierson, grandfather of Lewis, who was born at Connecticut Farms, New Jersey around 1739. He settled in what is now Maplewood in 1760s. He owned land between what is now Springfield Avenue and Ridgewood Road and constructed a small house and store on a site believed to be directly in front of the present Vaux Hall. Lewis Pierson was born in 1801. He expanded the family enterprise to include milling and in 1831 constructed a gristmill on the East Branch of the Rahway River—the present mill. In 1843, he constructed Vaux Hall, a self-conscious design that reflects the status of the Pierson family, and how they saw themselves. The earlier Pierson homestead was either torn down or moved at the time of the construction of Vaux Hall.

(4) An embodiment of the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of architecture or engineering:

Vaux Hall is an excellent and intact example of the Greek Revival style as promoted by pattern book designers such as Asher Benjamin and Minard Lafever. The style evolved out of a desire for a “national” style of architecture, reflecting the democratic ideals of the young nation, and from a heightened interest in classical antiquities. Houses in the Greek Revival style can be found across the country, even as far as the western territories where the style arrived with the settlers about ten years after it achieved its great popularity in the east. Vaux Hall is particularly significant as a rare example of a full-blown temple front Greek Revival house remaining in Essex County.

(7) Able or likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Archaeological deposits associated with the earlier Samuel Pierson house, as well as Vaux Hall, are likely to yield important historical information on early settlement, the agrarian era, and milling in Essex County. Because the house remained in the same family for such a long period, the site is likely to yield important information about life and the economy in this region, from the early settlement period through the 20th century.

Sources

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Pierson Family File, Durand-Hedden House and Garden, Maplewood, New Jersey.

Reiff, Daniel D. *Houses from Books, Treatises, Pattern Books, and Catalogs in American Architecture 1738-1950: A History and Guide*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.

Stryker-Fodda, Harriet M. *One Line of Descent from Henry Pierson of Long Island, New York 1620-1987 and some related families*. South Orange-Maplewood, New Jersey, 1987.

Zakalak, Ulana D. letter to the State Historic Preservation Office dated February 7, 2000.

Prepared by: Patty Chrisman and Angela Cockman

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