

47-49 Beekman Avenue and the Early History of Sleepy Hollow

Introduction



As a pair, two adjoining structures at 47 and 49 Beekman Avenue housed organizations and institutions that represented the financial and social core of the blue collar, hardscrabble, immigrant community that was Sleepy Hollow in the twentieth century. The Oddfellows Building at 47 Beekman Avenue with its enigmatic inscription “IOOF” (Independent Order of Oddfellows) was a gathering place first for the Oddfellows, a mysterious fraternal order, and then for the Cuban and Portuguese social clubs of North Tarrytown.

These groups used the building as a place to network, socialize, and give back to the community through philanthropic work. As the only bank in Sleepy Hollow for nearly a century, the North Tarrytown Bank building at 49 Beekman Avenue was the financial hub of the community,

helping countless enterprising immigrant families to achieve the American Dream through home loans and other financial services.

47 Beekman Avenue (Oddfellows Building)



Built in 1926, the handsome Oddfellows Building initially housed a local chapter of an enigmatic organization called the Independent Order of Oddfellows, originally founded in England in the 1700's. The group's acronym "IOOF" (Independent Order of Oddfellows) and its symbol, three chain links—representing the concepts of Friendship, Love and Truth—feature prominently on the facade of the building. The Oddfellows were established in both Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow by the late 1800's, eventually settling in at the Beekman building in 1926. Although the group once had lodges throughout Westchester and the northeastern U.S., they survive today primarily in other parts of the country.

Part fraternal order, part ad hoc labor union, the Order's mission in the U.S. was to advocate for the interests of its typically working class members, often providing medical and financial assistance, as well as performing outreach projects for the community such as building homes for

orphans and the elderly. Illustrious past members include Winston Churchill and King William IV in England, and Ulysses S. Grant, Wyatt Earp and Charlie Chaplin in the U.S.

Officially a fraternal order along the lines of the Freemasons, membership involved a number of secret passwords and practices. Their elaborate protocols, the symbolism used, and the often bizarre-looking regalia worn by its leaders closely resemble those of the Freemasons, with whom they seem to have been affiliated from the beginning. The name of the group probably derives from the fact that its original members worked at a variety of smaller, “odd” trades that weren’t widespread enough in 18th century England enough to merit a guild of their own.



Figure 1. Members of the North Tarrytown Chapter of Oddfellows, circa 1908. Courtesy of the Tarrytown-Sleepy Hollow Historical Society.



Figure 2. Illustration of Ulysses S. Grant's being inducted into the Oddfellows.

After the Oddfellows left the building, it was used by the Portuguese and Cuban and Portuguese social clubs (one longtime owner recalls an elaborate, beautifully rendered map of Cuba carved into the floor tiles of a space on the third floor). Other tenants included the neighboring bank, which purchased the building in 1961, and a beloved local shoe repair shop (Beekman Shoe Repair) on the first floor.

49 Beekman Avenue (The North Tarrytown Bank Building)



This humble yet elegant commercial structure was originally designed to house a small community bank and its upstairs offices. The North Tarrytown Bank was one of innumerable small community banks that were started in the U.S. by ambitious community members as a place to grow wealth and facilitate local development of homes and businesses, in an age before national and international banking conglomerates. As the only bank in Sleepy Hollow (or North Tarrytown as it was then known) for nearly all of the twentieth century, this humble institution represented the financial heart of a largely immigrant community that was growing exponentially in the early twentieth century as a result of the establishment of the GM plant and other industrial entities on the river. Always serving an immigrant clientele, the bank and the loans they provided represented a gateway to home ownership and the realization of the American Dream for countless Italian, Irish, Polish, and Latino families. In an age before credit scores, loans were often signed on the basis of nothing more than a client's personal reputation and standing in the community.



Figure 3. Original safe used in North Tarrytown bank

Architecture: Architecturally speaking, the two structures represent fine examples of turn-of-the-century commercial building practices in the New York City area. Among other things, the architects had to accommodate a sloping topography and an irregular pre-existing street grid hostile to right angles and straight lines. The result is a delightfully complex geometry, embedded in the hillside and solidly set in steel. Distinctive decorative features include beveled corners, and a brickwork display that includes a bichrome color scheme, projecting cornices, and alternating vertical and horizontal courses.

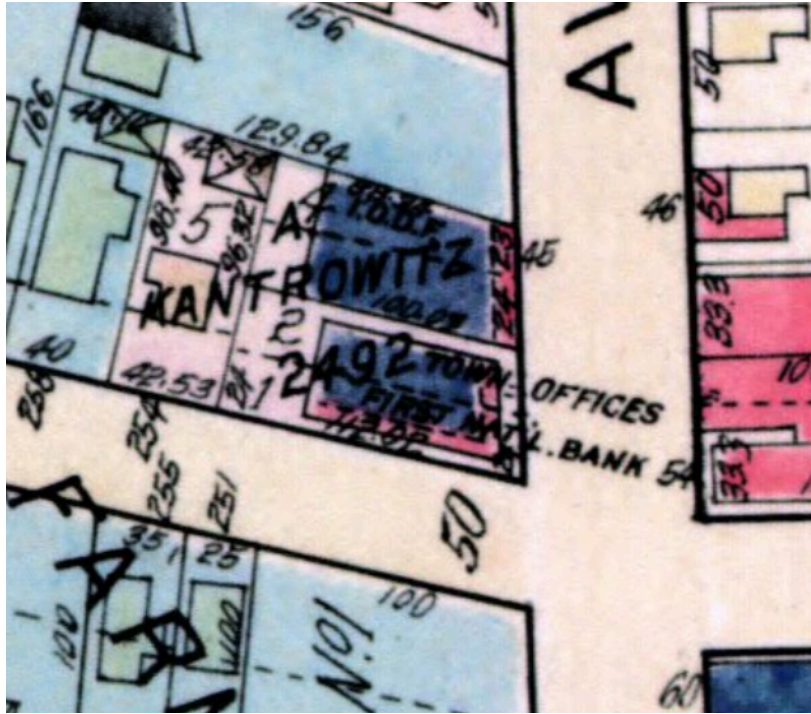


Figure 4. Detail of 1938 Atlas of Westchester County showing the buildings at 47-49 Beekman Avenue.

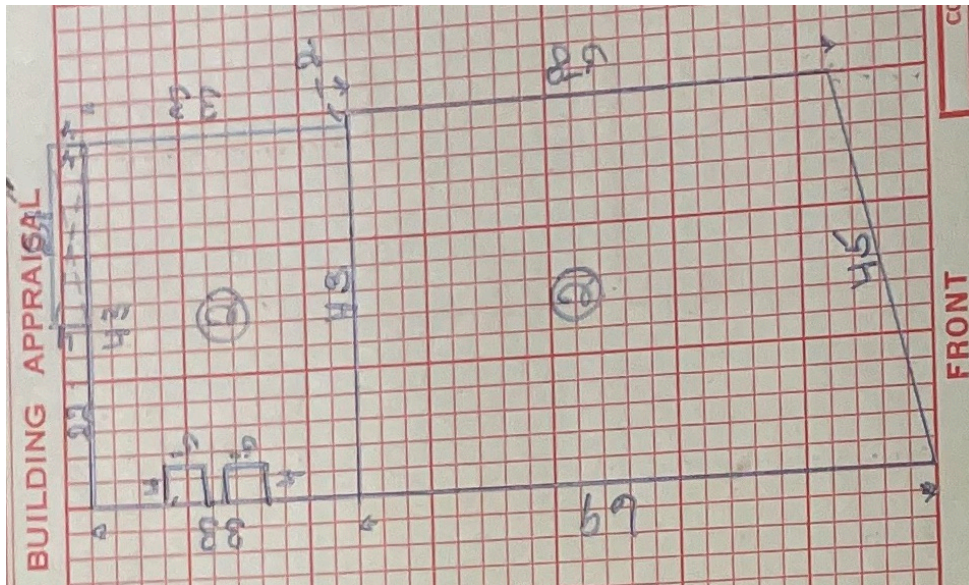


Figure 5. Detail of 1933 property card for 47 Beekman Avenue