

HOMES OF HISTORIC DISTINCTION

# Van Cortlandt tenant farmhouse

Most residents of Yorktown consider themselves lucky to trace the ownership of their property back 50 or 60 years. Very few, however, are fortunate enough to possess a copy of a deed tracing their home as far back as the original Van Cortlandt land grant and a date of 1769.

After some sleuthing, Croton Heights resident Jean-Francois de Lapérouse, whose house has recently been declared a Home of Historic Distinction by the Yorktown Landmarks Preservation Commission, discovered this and more.

His property was originally owned by Cortlandt Skinner, a grandson of Stephanus Van Cortlandt, who in 1697 was granted 6,000 acres of land in Westchester County. Skinner inherited his mother's share of the acreage, and, in 1769, sold the house and 200 acres to Zadock Birdsall.

Before the sale, the land had been rented out to a tenant farmer who built the original house on the site. Although every 21st century comfort has been added, features of that small pre-revolutionary home remain today such as the large hearth and beehive oven in a lower-level room.

During the Federal period, the structure was expanded into a center hall colonial with chimneys on both ends. An entry door on the south side of the house was replaced years ago by a window in the first floor hallway but the original sidelights still remain.

Later in the 19th century, a

lean-to addition, which now contains the kitchen and a bathroom, was added. In 2011, de Lapérouse continued that addition across the rest of the house to provide an entry foyer and den.

De Lapérouse was fortunate in that several of the building's previous owners were astute record-keepers. The Waite sisters—Minnie Etta and Louise—who purchased the house in 1925 and occupied it until the late 1950s learned much about the property's history. Over the years, the house had been referred to as the Gallagher Farm, the Birdsall House, the "Tumble Down House" (no doubt a reference to its condition at the time) and later, in keeping with the 20th century trend of naming country properties, christened "Fanadikwah Lodge" by the Waite sisters.

Today, the home still looks as though it had been taken from the pages of an American history book. The de Lapérouse family has carefully maintained and polished it, restoring some out-buildings and adding two fanciful playhouses for their daughters on the park-like grounds.

The Yorktown Landmarks Preservation Commission is always seeking applicants for the Homes of Historic Distinction Program. To qualify, homes must have historical significance based on age, architectural style, past ownership or association with a person or event important to Yorktown's history. Through the program, plaques designating the basic facts about each



PHOTO COURTESY OF NANCY MILANESE

The Van Cortlandt tenant farmhouse

house's history are fabricated and installed on or near the home. The commission will work with each homeowner on appropriate wording for the plaque and will assist in research. The cost for the application and the plaque is \$100. Applications are available online at [yorktownny.org/planning](http://yorktownny.org/planning) or by emailing [nmilanese@yorktownny.org](mailto:nmilanese@yorktownny.org).

*This article was submitted by the Yorktown Landmarks Preservation Commission as part of a series highlighting Yorktown Homes of Historic Distinction.*



# Yorktown vet takes in patient after owner's death

BY BRIAN MARSCHHAUSER  
EDITOR

Tens of thousands of patients have come through the doors of Yorktown Animal Hospital since opening on Veterans Road in 2002, but it was one dog in particular that caught the attention of Dr. Phillip Raclyn, the hospital's owner.

Gracie, a 7-year-old mutt, has been Raclyn's patient since 2009. The two developed such a special bond that Raclyn told the dog's owner, Polly Berends, that if a time ever came when she was unable to care for Gracie, he would give her a home. Berends, 75 at the time, agreed.

Raclyn, remembering his own mother's difficulty in caring for her dog, said he feared for

Berends' safety. Twice, he said, his mother's arm was broken when the leash became tangled around her legs, causing her to fall down.

"It was an 85-pound dog being walked by a 75-year-old lady," Raclyn said of Berends. "As sweet as [Gracie] is, you couldn't really tell who was walking who."

Over the next two years, Berends constantly reminded Raclyn of their handshake agreement—"Look, there's your next family," Berends would tell Gracie during visits to Yorktown Animal Hospital.

"She started asking me that if anything happens to her, if I would take her," Raclyn said. "I promised her that I would. I've already got five dogs, I have a big yard and Gracie's a great dog. I just didn't expect it to happen so



Gracie gives some love to Dr. Phillip Raclyn



PHOTO: BRIAN MARSCHHAUSER  
Dr. Phillip Raclyn and Gracie

soon."

Berends, 77, died Thursday, Feb. 9, at her Putnam Valley home. When Raclyn returned from

a conference in Florida a few days later, his staff informed him about what happened. Soon after, Berends' adult sons brought Gra-

cie to the hospital.

"As soon as I heard Mrs. Berends died, I knew what my responsibility was, but I also knew that I wanted to," Raclyn said. "I really do love Gracie. I was happy to give her a home."

Raclyn, who lives in Briarcliff, officially took Gracie in Monday, Feb. 13.

"She's getting along with everybody and all the dogs are getting along with her,"

Over the course of his career, Raclyn said he had made the offer to several other clients, with one couple even putting in their will that Raclyn would take ownership of their two cats. In that scenario, the two cats died before the owners.

"This is the first time it's actually happened," Raclyn said.