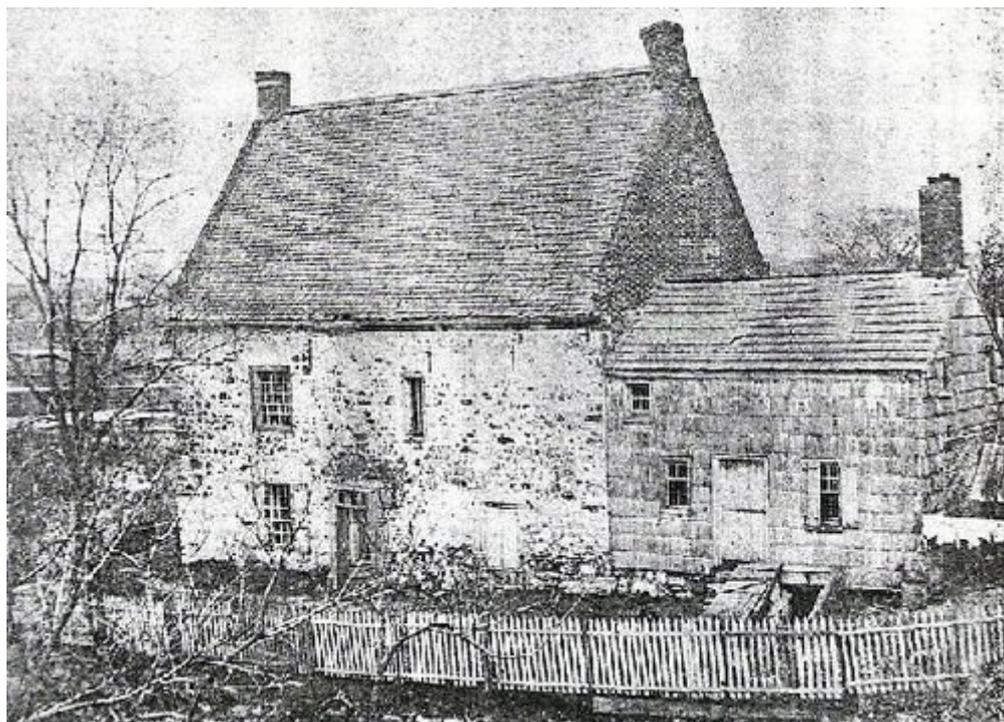


The Old Stone House

by W.M. Akers



On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed, and the Revolutionary War was about to begin. Seven weeks later, on August 22, 1776, the British Army invaded New York. The British chose to attack Brooklyn, a village across the East River from Manhattan. General George Washington's army was located in this village. The Patriot forces were ready to fight, but they were badly outnumbered. The British had about 20,000 soldiers. The Americans had fewer than 13,000.

The battle started on August 27, when British soldiers raided a watermelon patch, and were fired upon by American troops. The Americans retreated northward, fighting as they went. The British surrounded the Americans, who fled across the Gowanus Creek. To keep back the British, they left behind a group of soldiers from Maryland: just a few hundred Americans to hold off 2,000 Redcoats (British Army soldiers).

The British were fighting from in front of the Old Stone House—a farmhouse built in 1699. The Marylanders attacked the house six times. Nearly all of them were killed or captured. As he watched from a nearby hill, General Washington said, "Good God! What brave fellows I must this day lose." Because of the sacrifice of the Marylanders, the rest of the American army was able to escape. Had it not been for the fighting at the Old Stone House, the war could have been lost that morning.

The Revolution survived, and so did the Old Stone House. The family home of the Vechte family was sold to the Cortelyous in 1783. In the late 19th century, it served as the clubhouse for the baseball team that would later be named the Brooklyn Dodgers. In 1897, the house was destroyed and buried. Thirty years later, it was dug up and rebuilt by the New York City Parks Department.

"Eighty percent of the house," said Old Stone House Executive Director Kimberly Maier, "is original material."

On the outside, the house looks just as it did in 1699. On the inside, there is an exhibit about the Battle of Brooklyn and the men who died there. There are uniforms like the soldiers would have worn, maps of the battle, and a diorama of the fighting around the house. Six thousand children come every year to learn about the house. Maier and her staff teach them not just about the battle, but about what life was like in the 18th century.

"You couldn't just go to the grocery store," she said. "You just had one dress, because you had to weave it and cut the cloth and sew it together. The chores were so much more than just making your bed."

Maier said that school children are most surprised when they learn what playtime was like in the 18th century. To kids today, 18th century fun looks a lot like work.

"Kids would start out by helping in the garden, or helping to churn butter," Maier said.

Children would do basic weaving, or help in the kitchen. As they got better at these tasks, they would learn more advanced tasks. Eventually, they would be as good as a grown-up. When they played outside, they didn't have rubber balls. Instead, they used an inflated pig's bladder.

Outside the Old Stone House is a park. A few years ago, it was rebuilt. It has swings, fountains, and jungle gyms. Children play there every day-and they don't have to use a butter churn.