

HISTORIC RED HOOK

Robert Massonneau, Five Times Over

St. Paul's Lutheran Cemetery, Red Hook

Scroll monument with footstones for each, centerish, south of center path near line of cedars

The Massonneau family was an important one in Red Hook, especially in the 1800s. The family marker—a large stone with a scroll and the name Massonneau written in flowing script—is surrounded by footstones of Massonneaus, family through birth or marriage. Five of them are for five different men named Robert Massonneau. Not all of the Roberts are direct descendants, but they are all related.

The Massonneau family came to Red Hook with the arrival of Claudius Germain Massonneau, a native of France, and his wife Catherine G. Livingston. The Massonneaus were initially merchants in the village, and they eventually owned the Red Hook Tobacco Factory. “The tobacco industry in Red Hook was established by the Massonneau family, French immigrants who in 1812 built a store at the four corners on a piece of property bought from John Armstrong. Claudius Massonneau built the tobacco factory just south of the store around 1830, though an early account of the family business indicates chewing tobacco and cigars were manufactured by the Massonneaus even earlier. At the factory, Robert Livingston Massonneau started the practice of reading aloud to workers who would sit and tediously roll tobacco into cigars. Many were women, with the heavier jobs of cutting, packing and drying going to men. In the early years, tobacco was brought up to Barrytown by sloop in summer and by horse and sleigh along the roads in winter,” according to *A Brief History of Red Hook* by Clare O’Neill Carr (published in 2001 and available for sale from Historic Red Hook).

The factory was an important one for the livelihoods of many in Red Hook, even into the 1930s. Edmund Bassett’s “Reminiscences of Red Hook,” published in the *Red Hook Advertiser* in 1926-27 and reprinted as a booklet in 1976, mentions various Massonneaus themselves as well as many people directly employed by their businesses or who offered goods or services to the Massonneaus. By then, a number of Massonneaus had left the village, but when they passed away, they were interred at St. Paul’s. Bassett recalled the

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tobacco factory was “Red Hook’s oldest business” and that tobacco sold by the barrel “first adopted the Red Hook as their trade mark.”

As to the five men named Robert Massonneau buried at St. Paul’s, the oldest Robert Claudius Massonneau (1797-1877) married Elizabeth Waldorf (1808-1874), the daughter of Christopher Waldorf and Regina Benner. Robert Claudius was the son of Claudius and Catherine.

The next Robert Massonneau was Robert Livingston Massonneau (1825-1898) who married Emma Clark Stroble (1839-1906). She was the daughter of Rev. William D. Stroble, a minister of St. Paul’s, and Abby Anna Engs. These Massonneaus lived at the corner of Broadway (Rte. 9) and Fraleigh Street, according to an 1867 map of the village. This Robert was important to his community, having served over 20 years as president of the First National Bank at Red Hook, as well as being the Robert noted as reading aloud to the tobacco factory workers. It was as the bank president, however, that Robert made an impression on Edmund Bassett, who described the bank at the corner of Broadway and Prince Street and its president this way: “We now come to the Red Hook Bank. Robert L. Massonneau was president, Mr. Crouse cashier and Clarence Shook clerk in the old days. I went to the bank as a boy but I was afraid of Mr. Crouse and Mr. Shook; they seemed so stern, but everybody loved Mr. Massonneau. I remember a Mr. Ham lived in the bank building and later Gill Cole and family lived there for many years.” Bassett goes on to describe the home of the banker himself, writing, “The next house was the home of Robert Massonneau, later home of his son, William. His other son and namesake, Robert L., is connected with the Department of Education of the City of New York and has a beautiful home on East 18th Street, New York City.”

Indeed, Robert Livingston Massonneau (1860-1951) made his mark in the New York City schools. Married to Anna Caroline Coe (1858-1934) who was born in Hudson and whose parents were Jonathan Coe and Susan L. Witman Coe, Robert worked as a teacher, eventually rising to the position of assistant principal of the Manual Training High School in Brooklyn during his 40 years as an educator. Robert’s longevity led his obituary in the Dec. 28, 1951, *Poughkeepsie Journal* to state, “Mr. Massonneau was believed to be the oldest graduate of Hamilton College, where he received a degree in 1881. He was the oldest

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member of Chi Psi Fraternity and also a member of Phi Beta Kappa.” In August 30, 1913, an article published in *The Chat* of Brooklyn, NY, Robert explained his theory of educating students in an article about vacation school, akin to summer school. The article points out that most principals who had to host the vacation school in their buildings were not keen about that, but Robert’s principal at P.S. 145, then at Central Avenue and Noll Street in Brooklyn and “in the heart of the big brewery district,” welcomed it. Robert, a ten-year veteran of running vacation schools, emphasized a focus on practical skills and pointed out the added benefit of giving children a safer place to be than the streets. He successfully took up the challenge, ensuring beyond schooling that the students wore shoes to class and having a nurse look after the children’s health. He noted to the naysayers, “But what we are teaching in vacation schools can all be used in the homes...The moral effect is splendid. A public school stands for certain ideals, law, order, industry, instruction. It carries its own atmosphere and produces an effect on the mind, so that a lot of boys in school are very different from the same boys playing wildly in the streets.” The vacation school was co-ed. Boys were taught skills they might use in industry and girls skills for homemaking. The younger Robert reading to workers in Red Hook evolved into the Robert watching out for workers’ children in Brooklyn.

There are two more Robert Massonneaus: Robert Franklin Massonneau (1890-1986) and Robert Livingston Massonneau (1924-2001), the son of World War I veteran Reginald and his wife Eleanor Seaver Massonneau. Their stories are more recent and will be held in abeyance until someone researches these Roberts and the rest of the Massonneaus and tells their stories.

Here’s a start: the Red Hook Fire Department held an inspection of its abilities, seemingly poorly attended with only ten men of the D. W. Wilber Hose Co. coming out for practice, on a Friday in October 1899, according to the *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News*. However, the fire company did well despite the manpower shortage, reporting, “A trial of our water force was made, however, and was very satisfactory, as water was thrown over the tower of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, and at least fifteen feet above the signal weather pole, making over 100 feet, which will easily cover any building in town, as with an active and efficient fire department our citizens feel quite a comfortable sense of security from fire.” That

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equipment came in handy, because the very next night, the news from Red Hook was reported, "Our fire department was called out on Saturday night at about 12 am. to fight a lively fire in a barn belonging to E. F. Massonneau. The barn was entirely consumed, but by the efforts of our efficient firemen and the great force and supply of water the fire was confined to the barn, thus saving the tobacco factory, the Massonneau building and other adjacent property." It is assumed that the E. F. Massonneau listed as the owner is Edward Francis Massonneau (1836-1905), also buried in St. Paul's Lutheran Cemetery, next to the very church over whose tower the fire department had practiced shooting water.