



# THE DCGS NEWSLETTER

Dutchess County Genealogical Society  
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<http://www.dcgs-gen.org>

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## President's Message

*Valerie LaRobardier, President*

The DCGS extends gratitude to Frank Doherty for his generous donations to our library of the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register (NEH&G Register)* on microfilm, some surname research files, and the NY Historical Society Collections of abstracted wills from NY County Surrogate Court 1665-1800 including a volume of unrecorded wills prior to 1790 and two volumes of corrections. The microfilms are in our Family History Library. Watch the next issue for plans for the rest of the collection.

In June we begin to solicit volunteers to man the DCGS booth at the 168<sup>th</sup> Dutchess County Fair, August 20-25, 2013. Please help!

## Membership

*Roland E. Ormsby, Membership VP*  
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Member lists are not available on this web version of the Newsletter.

## Library Notes

*Mary Colbert, DCGS librarian*

### the James F. Brown Papers, 1827-1866

James F. Brown's Diary

[Note from the NY Historical Society: James F. Brown (1793-1868) was the ex-slave gardener of the Verplanck family at Mount Gulian, Fishkill, New York. Brown was a runaway slave from

Maryland, and the Verplancks purchased his time after he was found by his master. The collection consists of 8 diaries, 1829-1866, during which time Brown was gardener for the Verplanck family; 1 receipt book, 1832-1857, recording some personal and household expenses, although most entries are unspecified; and 1 memorandum book, 1827-1843. Entries in the diaries are brief, with little elaboration, and pertain to such matters as the weather, local deaths, his gardening activities, the passage of boats on the Hudson, etc. The diaries are not entirely chronological, as in several instances the entries for a year have been copied into a later volume.]

What does James Brown's diary offer for Dutchess County genealogists? The description in the catalog of the New York Historical Society library, where the diary is kept, suggests little:

Entries in the diaries are brief, with little elaboration, and pertain to such matters as the weather, local deaths, his gardening activities, the passage of boats on the Hudson, etc.

It's true Brown did not write about world events, and some would say his entries are dry and boring with endless reports on rain and snow and heat and cold. There's more to it than that, and for the genealogist with ancestors who lived in the Hudson Valley in the 19th century it can be a gold mine of information.

Brown was born a slave in Maryland around 1793. When he was 34 years old, he escaped to New York where he met Gulian Verplanck who had a large estate in Fishkill.

He knew everyone in the area around what was then called Fishkill Landing and today is Beacon and the Town of Fishkill. As the Head Gardener to Gulian Verplanck he also worked with major horticulturists in the area including Andrew Jackson Downing and Henry Winthrop Sargent.

Some useful information:

### Weather:

Brown's diary includes information about the weather, a seemingly mundane subject. For years

Brown recorded rain, storms and other weather conditions because this was important to him as a gardener. Today it's easy to find this information but if you want to know how the weather may have affected your 19th century ancestors it can be difficult. With Brown's diary, it can be a simple matter of checking the dates - he covered an almost 40 year period.

#### Farming:

If your ancestor was a farmer in the Hudson Valley then Brown's diary will provide a wealth of information - he recorded what he planted when and where he purchased the seeds or cuttings.

#### Births, Marriages, and Deaths:

Brown knew everyone in the community and recorded many births, marriages, and deaths. Since civil registration did not start until 1880, this can provide information not otherwise available.

August 15, 1852 - Christian Reynolds child very ill.

August 17, 1852 - C. A. Reynolds son Samuel died at 2.0 o'clock this morning.

August 18, 1852 - Funeral of C. A. Rs child

#### Day to day life:

Last, but not least, James Brown recorded day to day life in the Hudson Valley in the period between 1829 and 1868. He records what church he went to and the subject of the sermon, crossing the Hudson to meet with people in Newburgh, traveling to New York or Poughkeepsie and whether he took the "cars" or a boat.

I've always heard stories about people walking across the Hudson in the winter, but I didn't realize it was like a road and people used it as the only means to get from Fishkill to Newburgh in the winter months when the ferry was blocked by ice. Here's the entry for Saturday Feb 14, 1829: "There is very good walking on the crossing the Hudson River and has been for Three weeks." Two days later, on the 16th, he reports that, "The ice is now very thick and good crossing Horses and waggons cross"

People often traveled to NYC by steamboat, later when the trains were built they could choose what method they preferred. It took 8 hours to travel from NYC to Newburgh by steamboat. Brown made this entry on April 19, 1829: "This day the weather pleasant Left N. York at 10 oclock and arived at NewBurgh at 6 P.M." He had gone to visit his brother William who had been ill. On the trip down he took the steamboat Chief Justice Marshal.

The diary is available online. It is not indexed but it is organized by volume and year, not necessarily sequentially. If you want to know how and

when the farmer prepared for the planting season, just go to the month and year you want to check. Brown headed each page "Fishkill Landing" and the month and year. Next to each entry he wrote the day of the week and the day.

The diary can be found in the "Manuscripts relating to Slavery" collection at the New York Historical Society's digital collection:

<http://www.nyhistory.org/library/>.

The late Joan VanVoorhis, former Beacon Historian, extracted many entries from the diary, excluding most of the weather reports. An index to this list is in the works.

### **Newsletter Editor needed**

*J. Douglas Leith  
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After about 12 years as editor of this Newsletter, I need to leave in order to spend more time on my own family tree and on other matters long deferred. DCGS needs a successor to take over in the next several months, maybe for the Fall or Winter issue. The job is not hard, a few hours every quarter. I use MS Word and correspond entirely by email (I live in Newton, MA). I receive materials, edit them if and as seems necessary, and then format and fit them into the newsletter. Then I change the final draft to PDF to prevent formatting problems at the printer's and send it off for printing. If you might be interested, please contact me by email for questions and details!