

BY GUY ARSENEAU

DUTCH TREAT

AROUND
TOWN

Like so many aspects of city living, the Vander-Ende Onderdonk House is at once an unexpected yet hidden treasure of the urban experience. Located in the Ridgewood section of Queens, at 1820 Flushing Avenue, this enduring edifice and its colonial era residents witnessed the birth of New York along with the convulsive and often violent growth of a nation. Currently surrounded by industrial warehouses and sitting just off the corner from a collection of automotive shops, the two-story building was originally constructed in 1709 as a farmhouse by Paulus Vander Ende, a Dutch immigrant and farmer who sought

a better life for himself and his family in New Amsterdam. This Dutch Colonial style home, the oldest of its kind in New York City, was part of a land grant overseen by New York City's earliest politician and power broker, Peter Stuyvesant.

Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1977, Onderdonk House provides today's estimated 12,000 annual visitors with an opportunity to step back in time and see the textured patterns of daily life in an era before cell phones, ipads and the internet dominated daily life. With an all-volunteer staff of 25 dedicated individuals, Onderdonk House operates under the leadership of Artistic Director Richard Asbell. A former singer for the Metropolitan Opera House, he oversees day-to-day operations, functions as a guide, carpenter, historian and lecturer for this Queens treasure. "Back in the sixties," he notes, "There were three buildings similar to Onderdonk House here in the neighborhood; today they're all gone, they've been replaced by factories and industrial warehouses. So believe me, it's a miracle we have something this old for this long that can still give us a sense of our history."

Like any structure, contemporary or historical, Onderdonk House requires constant maintenance and repair in the form of painting, cleaning and ground upkeep. Working five days a week on average, Asbell's dedicated volunteer team dusts furniture, moves exhibit items and weeds the large backyard, which includes a family cemetery dating back to the seventeenth century. A magnet for would be archeologists and anthropologists, Onderdonk House attracts graduate students in these fields from Columbia University, Hunter College, New York University and Queens College. "The graduate students from these colleges and universities oversee and supervise high school students who want to indulge their passion for archeology," states Asbell. "As visitors can see in our display cases, students have come up with an extensive collection of pottery, household items and utensils such as pots, pans, forks and knives." Catalogued and registered, the items are glued and repaired to whatever extent

possible and then placed on display for visitors," Asbell says.

While traditional red velvet ropes cordon off rooms, Onderdonk House invites guests, especially children, to become active participants in discovering a time in American history when air conditioning meant opening a window and central heating consisted of sitting in front of a roaring fire. "So much of New York City history is rooted in the experience of seventeenth century Dutch settlers," Asbell observes, "Because of this, we want to offer youngsters an opportunity to see what life was like for the kids who lived in that period." As part of an annual tradition, in the early part of December Onderdonk House hosts St. Nicholas Day. Attracting up to 100 neighborhood youngsters on average, boys and girls visit with St. Nicholas, the forerunner of the modern day Santa Claus, and enjoy musical presentations, lunch, storytelling and crafts that help bring alive the Christmas experience. A December evening candle light vigil also allows children and adults alike an opportunity to step back from the media driven buying frenzy and understand Christmas in a more profound and relevant way. Throughout the year, Onderdonk House invites children in grade school to visit the residence as part of class projects that animate history for them. Craft tables on site provide a work setting that allows young people to become participants rather than just observers in the nation's history.

Describing his efforts as "A continual work in progress," Richard Asbell works tirelessly to discover new elements of Onderdonk House and preserve old ones. "Right now," he says, "I'm working in the basement in order to save an old fireplace that was bricked over. I'm taking out a lot of 'new' brickwork from the nineteenth century and restoring it to the way it looked when the Vander Ende family lived here several centuries ago. I hope to have it open for public display by the spring of 2012." Along with his restoration work, Asbell looks for colonial period furniture that will help sustain the atmosphere of this rural time capsule.

Onderdonk House, like any cultural icon, requires active support from the community that it serves. This support has been forthcoming from various sources and individuals; among these are Queens Borough President Helen Marshall and New York City mayor Mike Bloomberg, both of whom lent their presence during a 2009 fundraiser to repair the roof of Onderdonk House. Public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, coupled with support from the Greater Ridgewood Historical Society and City Council members Diana Reyna and Elizabeth Crowley, continue to sustain this living testament to the history of Dutch culture in New York. Additionally, support from the local Kiwanis Club, Chamber of Commerce and concerned individuals insure that Onderdonk House will continue to tell a story of an era when New York City was a small village at the southern tip of Manhattan.

Further information on Onderdonk House concerning hours of operation and group tours is available at their website, www.underdonkhouse.org. Telephone inquiries can be made by calling (718) 456-1776.

ASTORIA CELEBRITY & ENTERTAINMENT

