

Peekskill: A Brief History



At the time of the American Revolution, George Washington established this area as the headquarters for the Continental Army in 1776. Its various mills built along the community's creeks and streams made the area an important manufacturing center and provided the army with supplies. In addition to Washington, Peekskill played host to Abraham Lincoln. On his way to his inauguration, Lincoln's train stopped here and he spoke to a huge crowd.

Peekskill holds a prominent place in the history of civil rights. It is the most significant place in the Hudson River Valley for understanding the history of American slavery and the Underground Railroad, the network of secret sites that helped fugitive slaves travel to freedom. Historical Underground Railroad sites include the home of William Sands known as the "Safe House," the home of the famous abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, and the A.M.E. Zion Church whose members included Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass.

In modern civil rights history, Peekskill would become known infamously as the place of the "Peekskill Riots." In 1949,

local violent protests broke out against the concerts announced by prominent activist Paul Robeson to benefit the Civil Rights Congress. The riot actually took place in Cortlandt Manor.

More recently, Peekskill would become the first city in New York State to elect an African American mayor, Richard E. Jackson in 1984. Two more African Americans would become mayor, Andre K. Rainey and Vivian C. McKenzie.

Peekskill has always been known as an industrial center—a city that makes things. The mills of Peek's Creek provided essential gunpowder, leather, planks, and flour for the fight for American independence. The area is also known for its prominence as a maker of brick pavers, iron plows, hats, and stoves—many of which were transported West to fuel the settling of America. Peekskill is also known for the invention of Crayola Crayons at the Peekskill Chemical Works and the Fleishman Factory made yeast used across the country.

Throughout most of the 20th Century, Peekskill served as the primary shopping and entertainment center of

Northern Westchester and Southern Putnam Counties.

In the 1990s Peekskill created the Peekskill Artist District to attract artists to live, work and create affordably in Peekskill. The artist community today has about 100 artists who live or create here. And a new wave of artists—those in the media arts are abound. Photographers, videographers, sound engineers, lighting designers, graphic designers, and game designers now call Peekskill home.

Peekskill's prominent people include New York State Governor George Pataki and NBA Basketball Star Elton Brand—both of whom graduated from Peekskill High School. L. Frank Baum, of Wizard of Oz fame, attended the Peekskill Military Academy.

Thanks to a \$10 million state grant, revitalization is in full force now with the focus shifting to arts technology, culinary excellence, galleries, boutique shopping, and Hudson River waterfront. Peekskill is fortunate to have reclaimed and retained much of the architecture and open space that defined its elegant past. Come be part of our future as you look at our past! ●

In September 1609, Henry Hudson anchored his ship, the "Halve Maen" (Dutch for Half Moon), along a bay on the Hudson River outside of what would become the City of Peekskill. His first mate, Robert Juet, described in the ship log the location as a "very pleasant place to build a town." It was to become among the first Dutch trading posts.

Jan Peek was Peekskill's earliest European resident, recognized as making first contact with the Lenape Native American people that populated the lower Hudson Valley at that time. The name "Peekskill" derives from a combination of the Jan Peek's last name and the Dutch word for stream "kill."

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Hudson Valley Gateway Chamber Of Commerce
1915
One South Division Street

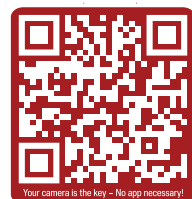
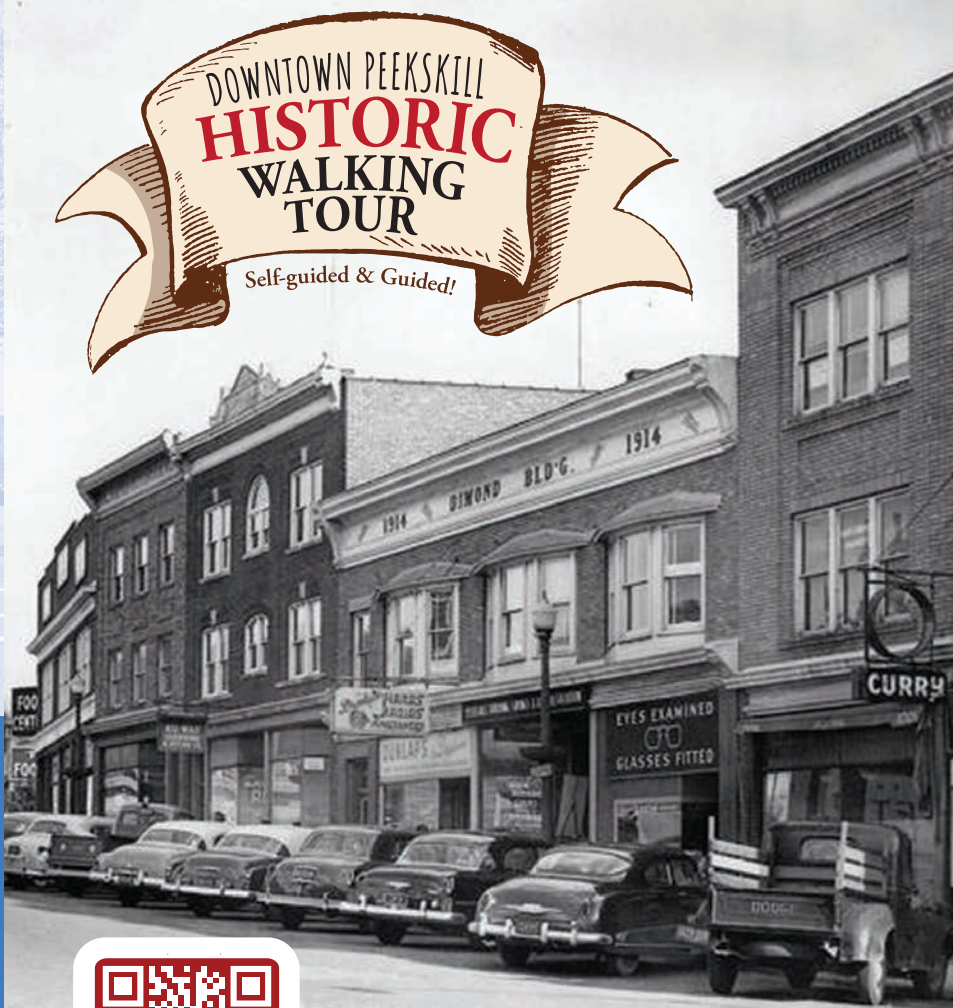
Located in the heart of historic Downtown Peekskill, the Chamber office also serves as a Tourism Information Center. The chamber building has its own rich history, having been built around 1900, and home to a shoe store, men's clothing store, architectural firm, and now the chamber. ★

Presented by the Peekskill Business Improvement District, PO Box 206, Peekskill, NY

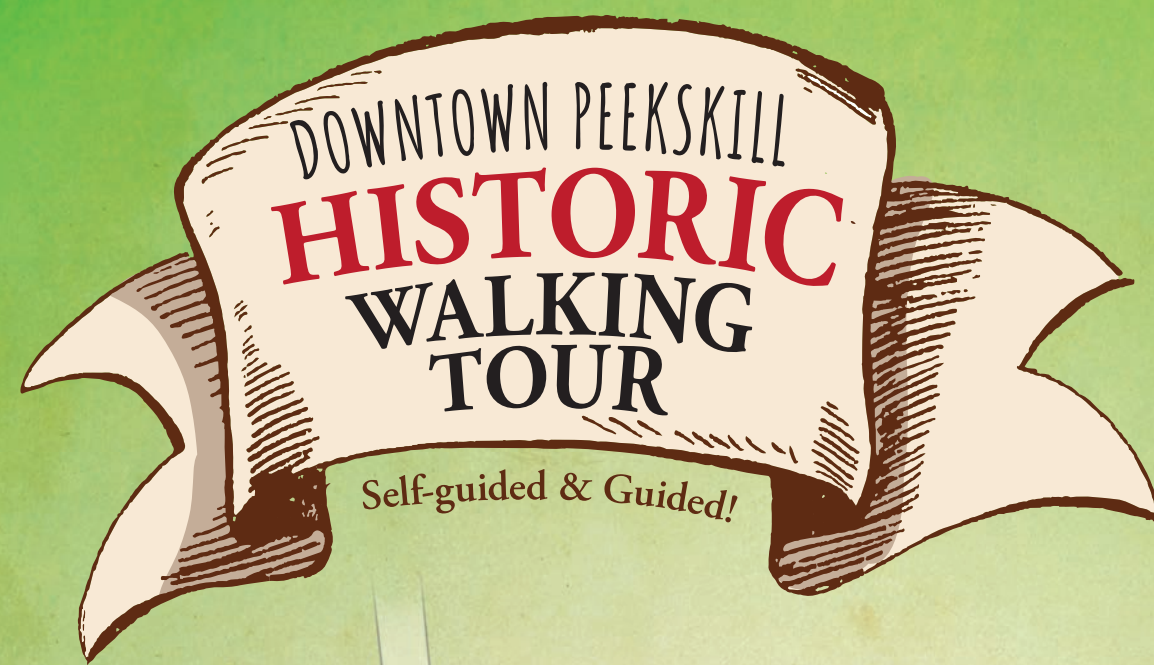
Special thanks to Peekskill BID Executive Director Bill Powers, BID Board Member David Kaminsky and everyone who had input into this publication. Modern photos by Bill Powers, (c) 2023 Peekskill BID. Illustrations by Madeline McKinley.

About the BID: Founded in 1996 as a non-profit corporation, the Peekskill BID encompasses downtown's Central Commercial District — a 25 block area home to restaurants, coffee shops, specialty retailers, artists galleries, live/work studios, and professional services. The Peekskill Business Improvement District ("BID") works to promote the growth and development of downtown Peekskill as an attractive place to live and do business through business recruitment and retention, capital improvements, marketing and promotions, beautification and clean efforts, event creation and support, and advocacy for small businesses.

For more information visit: www.discoverpeekskill.com



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MAP KEY

- North Tour
- South Tour
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North Tour



Brown Plaza/Gazebo
1913 • Northeast Corner of North Division & Park Street

The downtown gazebo stands on a small triangle of land where a bronze plaque identifies it as Brown Plaza, dedicated in 1913 to the Brown family's three sisters: Misses Phoebe, Esther, and Elizabeth. Their grandfather, Nathaniel Brown, was a Peekskill merchant and Quaker, industrialist, and landowner in the late 1700s. As you stand on this site, looking south-southeast, note the buildings across Park Street with names and dates on the cornices: "The Eleanor," "Dimond Building 1914," and "Ballard Building 1915."



Former Kentora Hotel
1885 • Northeast Corner of North Division & Park Streets

The distinctive and purely decorative onion dome or turret attached to this cornerstone building since 1905 is an exclamation point designating the downtown center. Originally the Empire House Hotel in 1885 (with William Brennan as proprietor) this brick corner building was identified as the Kentora Hotel in 1907. "Kentora" was coined from the owners' names, Clune and Torpy. Guest rooms were upstairs, and a saloon was downstairs. It was home to the Clinton Drug Store from about 1910 to the 1960s and the popular Sub Galley operated by Anita Creem in the 1980's and '90s.



Harriet & Hawley Green's Barber Shop
1800s • Rear of 8 North Division Street

Hawley Green's (1810-1880) barbershop business was located among the retail stores on the west side of North Division. Hawley and his wife, Harriet, (1810-1886) actively assisted those escaping slavery from the Southern states before and during the Civil War. As such, they were active members in the famous Underground Railroad. Their son, William G. Green, was a Union soldier. This family now rests at Hillside Cemetery in Van Cortlandville. The family home still exists today at 1112 Main Street.



Former Bank Building
1883 • North Division Street, north of Westchester Community College, rear of 16 Bank Street

The commercial heart of the old Peekskill village was the "Westchester Bank," organized in 1833 as the first such financial institution in Westchester County, with Pierre Van Cortlandt as its first president. It became the Westchester County National Bank in 1865, authorized to issue its own paper money as currency. Cornelius Pugsley, its president during the 1930s, saved the bank from monetary collapse by turning in his family stock. The branch became the National Bank of Westchester until the mid-1980s. Today, it is home to a private business.



"Mandeville's Corner"
1865 • Northeast Corner of Main & North Division Streets

A general store was once owned and operated on this corner site by Cornelius Mandeville during Revolutionary War days. A relative, Henry Mandeville, operated a hotel and tavern a few doors down on Main Street that was frequented by Continental Army officers when Peekskill was the Hudson Valley command headquarters in 1776 and 1777. The Mandevilles were a patriotic family, with 16 members serving with Continental forces during the War for Independence.



St. Peter's Church
1891 • 137 North Division Street

Episcopalians of Peekskill and Cortlandt once worshiped in the old wooden church built in 1767 a few miles away in Van Cortlandtville. A second wood frame church was built on Howard Street in 1838. The Church was designed by noted architect Richard M. Upjohn Jr. (1828-1903), completed in 1891 and is a fine example of the Gothic Revival Style. The tower, completed in 1905, houses a bell weighing 1,085 pounds. The Episcopal Sisters of Saint Mary arrived in Peekskill in 1873 to create and manage the St. Mary's School for Girls and Convent, which was featured on the popular TV series Facts of Life. The Church was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2003.



Civil War Monument
1916 • North Division Street & Highland Avenue

The American Civil War resulted in 620,000 military fatalities. Peekskill and Cortlandt veterans who survived the conflict rallied to buy this parcel of land. In 1916, they built the foundation and paid for the stone monument dedicated to their comrades in arms. This is a fine piece of public sculpture with three-dimensional statues and memorable battle names. What is now Monument Park also contains memorials for World War I, World War II, Korean and Vietnam War veterans and hosts the city's annual Veterans Day Remembrance and Celebration.



Birdsall House Plaque
1770s • Opposite 968 Main Street

This is the approximate location of the original "Birdsall House" where American officers gathered in November 1776 after the battle at White Plains. The inset bronze tablet is inscribed: "Near this spot during the Revolutionary War stood the Birdsall House, a popular hostelry patronized by General George Washington on his frequent visits to Peekskill and vicinity as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army." The Birdsall House was used as military headquarters for three Continental Army commanding generals in the Hudson Valley from November 1776 to April 1778. General Benedict Arnold personally received the West Point regional command from

General Washington near this site in 1780. The original house was disassembled in 1859, and its structural beams were used to frame a house that now stands at 317 North Broad Street.



Kurzahls Building
1838 • 900 Main Street

Built by William Nelson (Peekskill lawyer, Congressman, and friend to Abraham Lincoln), its first use was as a grocery store in 1838. The Peekskill telegraph office was located here in the 1860s. A small stage, built on the 3rd floor in 1870, was identified as "Dramatic Hall." The street level retail store, known as Durrin Brothers, provided hardware supplies starting about 1880. This business became Kurzhals Brothers Hardware in 1920. There is event space on the upper floor, replete with small stage and spectacular and sweeping ironwork railings.



Peekskill City Hall
1936 • 840 Main Street

Peekskill's government offices were located at this site after the Nelson family donated their residential house to the Village in 1898. William Nelson had served in the U.S. Congress (1848 to 1851) where he became friends with Abraham Lincoln and Daniel Webster. The current brick Municipal Building was designed by a Peekskill mayor and architect Ralph Hopkins and dedicated in 1936. Peekskill became an incorporated City in 1940. The Council Chamber, Mayor, City Manager offices and most city departments are located inside this municipal building.



Former First Hebrew Synagogue
1897 • 813 Main Street

Peekskill's First Hebrew Congregation was organized in 1896 and this Synagogue structure was built in 1897 in a traditional style with Gothic window arches. A new multi-purpose facility and synagogue was opened on East Main Street in 1957, and this facility was closed. Jewish merchants operated many of the retail and manufacturing businesses throughout Peekskill. The building now houses the Islamic Center of Peekskill Masjid Al-Tawheed.



Evening Star Building
1930 • 824 Main Street

The Peekskill Evening Star Building was built in 1930 as the new headquarters for The Evening Star, a newspaper published and printed locally for almost fifty years. The architects Stern & Peyser designed the masonry building in the Art Deco Style. It has a two-story front section with limestone veneer. On the Main Street side there is a three-bay façade with central pavilion with a monumental arched glazed entrance and a tall parapet with a carved sign. After The Evening Star newspaper ceased publication, the building was sold. In 2015, the building was purchased by Vivid RGB Lighting LLC. The Peekskill Evening Star Building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005. Source: CLIO.

South Tour



Town Wall Mural
1996 • Bank Street Parking lot between Brown & Park Streets

"Crossroads: The Meeting and Marketplace Mural" was completed in 1996 by Mariah Fee and Francesca Samsel with the assistance of volunteers. Represented on this 1,000 square foot outdoor painting is 62 identifiable people, places and items that formed Peekskill's historic past, touching the lives of each generation since the 1800s. A booklet, issued by the Peekskill Chapter of American University Women describes each image, and is available at the Field Library.



Elk's Lodge
1903 • 1038 Brown Street

The Peekskill Lodge #744 of the international Elks Club completed this Classical Revival Structure topped by a bronze elk in 1903 (look up!). The ceremonial Lodge Room located on the top floor reveals an early 1900s grandeur with its deep wainscoting and wood beam ceiling arches that support and display a grand open room. The Peekskill Elks organization has provided continuity and service to community life since 1901.



Former Masonic Lodge
1926 • 1016 Brown Street

Freemasons were active in Peekskill from 1793; early members John Paulding and Pierre Van Cortlandt were Revolutionary War patriots. Fashioned as a meeting lodge for the Fraternal Order of Masons in 1926, this historic structure was designed by Peekskill architect and former mayor Ralph Hopkins, who also drew the plans for Peekskill City Hall. Note the detailed cornice, the medieval figures with shields, and the intricate details around the doorway arch that create a fort-like impression. Gutted by a 2001 fire, it was known as the "Paramount East" and has since been renovated for offices, live-work art studios and various professional services.



Paramount Theater
1930 • 1008 Brown Street

Following the era of silent movies, the Paramount Company built this movie palace in 1930 to provide the newest film sound technology (or "talkies") in the best auditorium they could create. The first motion picture to play here was "The Big Pond," starring Maurice Chevalier and Claudette Colbert. Since 1982, operators have been providing a diverse range of programming and musical performances in this City-owned entertainment venue. The exterior has a curious mix of Tudor design elements and a bold well-lit theater marquee. The authentically renovated interior offers excellent acoustics and a reminder of classic vintage opera houses. The theater now hosts a variety of shows and events, including The Miss New York Competition, which crowns the contestant that goes to Miss America.



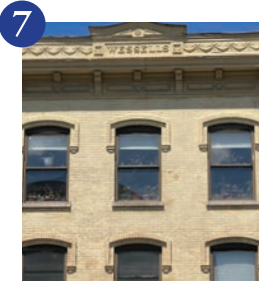
Hermax Building
1930 • 27 South Division Street

This commercial corner structure wraps around the block from Brown Street to S. Division Street. The second floor that was once occupied by Peekskill doctors and lawyers now hosts artists' studios. The street level storefront was a Woolworth's retail store and the independent Tuller's Department Store in the 1950s and 1960s.



The 48-Mile Stone
1760s • 942 South Street

This approximately 250 year old mile marker is located against the building at 942 South Street. These mile markers were placed in the 1760s for calculating mail delivery rates along the New York City to Albany Post Road, as conceived by postmaster Benjamin Franklin. Peekskill has a "47" milestone on Lower South Street, and a "49" milestone at 1000 North Division Street.



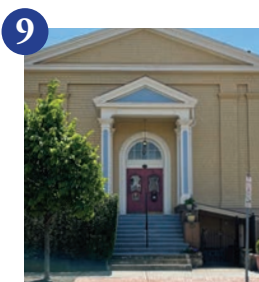
Wessells Building
1890s • 934 South Street

Paul Wessells was a Peekskill Civil War veteran who served with the 6th Heavy Artillery regiment. In this building he operated the "Excelsior Bakery and Ice Cream Saloon," that offered breads, pies, cakes, and candies through the late 1800s. Mr. Wessells bottled soda water in his own inscribed bottle.



Peter Cooper Plaque
1780s • 920 South Street

Peter Cooper (1781-1883) lived on this site for part of his childhood. The memorial plaque that is set into the wall of the bank building marks the site of his father's home. Peter personally fashioned the "Tom Thumb" as the first locomotive to be used successfully as an American railroad (1830). He later sponsored the trans-Atlantic telegraph, the undersea wire cable connection between the U.S. and Europe. He built Cooper Union to provide free education for the working classes and led in securing the public school system in New York City.



Former Field Library
1845 • 901 South Street

This modified Greek revival building was originally the Second Presbyterian Church. The local Field Library occupied this structure from 1921 to 1978. It was a theater for a short time. The building is now privately owned and houses artist studio spaces.



Peekskill Museum "Herrick House"
1877 • 124 Union Avenue

The Herrick House has been Peekskill's historical museum for local artifacts since 1946. This Queen Anne style Victorian house of 1877 was designed by noted architect William Rutherford Mead,

friend and former classmate of the resident, Dwight Herrick. Mead went on to form the prestigious American architectural firm McKim, Mead and White. The interior has two staircases, and each room has a uniquely designed fireplace. An authentic Revolutionary War cannon is mounted on the front lawn. An inscription on its base describes the attack of September 21, 1780, on the British ship "Vulture" that involved the Benedict Arnold treachery and John Jacob Peterson, a soldier of African descent. The museum is staffed by dedicated local guides.



Church Of The Assumption "Guardian Building"
1904 • First Street & Monsignor Ansbro Way

This impressive structure was originally built as a multipurpose facility: Catholic Church, theater, school, and recreation hall. The theater had a fully equipped stage and seating for 1,100. The "Guardian Angel" statue is a most distinctive feature in the large portico over the front doors of the Church of the Assumption. It remains a very important part of the spiritual life of Peekskill.



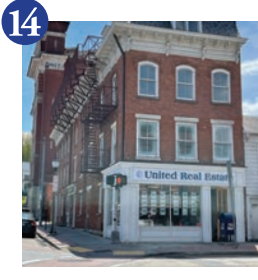
Former Blacksmith Shop
ca. 1850 • 201 South Division Street

The building that now houses the popular BeanRunner Café was built around 1850. It was originally a blacksmith shop and a working blacksmith worked there through the 1950s. The attached building, with green clapboard, was a wagon repair shop. In the 1950s the two buildings were combined by Gordineer Hardware and made into one storefront. Gordineer Hardware sold the building to a hairnet manufacturer, which employed many Peekskill women until 1999.



Flat Iron Building
1910 • 101-107 South Division St.

This building was known until recently as the James Dempsey Building. The triangular building, in a simple Renaissance Revival style, conforms to its triangular block that is shaped as a "flat iron." A Ford car dealership was located here in 1915, followed by the Wishing Well Bookstore. The upper floors are currently occupied as artist studios and the ground floor is occupied by the popular Peekskill Coffee House.



Riley Building
1874 • 104 South Division Street

This 1874 corner building illustrates the late 19th century commercial development of the village. The Post Office was located on the first floor until 1915. Some of the other enterprises located here over the years included two Peekskill newspapers: The Daily Union and the Peekskill Blade. It was also home to the State Line Telephone Company. The Riley insurance and real estate business owned and occupied this site for many years.