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8. Narrative Statement of Significance*Overview*

The centerpiece of the Haxton-Griffin farm, a commodious two-story stone house with hipped roof erected c. 1815, is an architecturally significant example of masonry domestic architecture in the Athens area of Greene County. Built for prominent area merchant and sometime New York City auctioneer Benjamin Haxton, the dwelling was erected following his 1812 purchase of these lands from Joseph Groom. In form, plan and finish it embodied many of the prevailing architectural sentiments as expressed in the better class of dwellings of that period. The site chosen, a prominent bluff rising from the west side of the Hudson River, offered commanding views eastward towards the river corridor and westward towards the Catskill Mountains. Modifications were rendered during subsequent ownership periods, including those undertaken during the ownership of the Griffin family, at which time the surrounding property achieved its greatest extent. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century the former domicile was being operated as a boarding house by the Sprague family, known as “The Woodburne,” likely in response to declining fortunes in regional agriculture. Presently the house provides a composite image of the original and subsequent historic periods and is in the process of renovation activities that seek to reverse more modern and non-sensitive alterations and deterioration which have obscured its historic characteristics. Also included within the boundary are a c. 1930 tenant house, a c. 1900 light-frame barn, and a timber-frame barn dating to the mid-nineteenth century. The nomination includes 55 acres of land—farmed continuously for over two centuries—which remains in active agricultural use and shares significant associations with regional farm practices as they developed during the period of significance, c. 1812- c. 1934. The Haxton-Griffin farm is an architecturally and historically significant resource in the Athens area of Greene County which saliently illustrates important themes in regional architecture, agriculture, and social history; it is being nominated in association with Criteria A and C in the local context.

Local Historic Context

Dutch settlement of this region was initiated in the seventeenth century. The earliest settlement in what is now Greene County likely occurred along the Catskill Creek, a tributary of the Hudson River, in the 1640s.¹ Pieter Bronck, among the area’s first settlers, acquired a patent in 1662 and established a farm inland from the Hudson River in the present-day Coxsackie area, north of Athens. Bronck and other Dutch settlers improved their land holdings to sustain agricultural pursuits; by the mid-eighteenth century the area’s population included people of Dutch, Palatine German, Swedish, French Huguenot, and English extraction.² An early system of roads was developed as the population increased and settlement moved inland, though the Hudson remained the primary transportation artery. Greene County was originally part of Albany County. In 1772 the Colonial Legislature divided the counties into districts, with the current town and village of Athens located in the Coxsackie and Great Imbocht Districts; in 1800 Greene County was formed from these two areas.³ The Town of Athens was organized in 1815 from land which was formerly part of Coxsackie and Catskill.⁴

¹ Raymond Beecher, “Greene County,” *The Encyclopedia of New York State*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 665.

² Claire L. Ross and Edward R. Kozacek, *Greene County, New York: '76 Bicentennial Overview: Beginnings and Background* (Catskill, New York: Catskill Enterprise, 1976), 36.

³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴ *History of Greene County, New York with Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men*, (New York, J. B. Beers & Co, 1884), 32.

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The earliest settlers in the region purchased land directly from local Native Americans. Later, as European governments began acquiring land, land transactions were more commonly exercised through large patents. The major patents that encompassed the river flats of Greene County were the Bronck Patent (1662); the Loonenburg Patent (1667); the Coeymans Patent (1673); and the Catskill Patent (1680), which collectively opened a large area on the Hudson River's west bank to settlement. Following the French & Indian War some veterans received compensatory patents.⁵ The largest patent in the region, the 35,000-acre Catskill patent, paled in comparison to the Catskill Mountain region's largest land grant, the two million acre Hardenberg patent, which took in parts of what are presently Delaware, Greene, Ulster, and Sullivan counties.

The Loonenburg Patent included most of the area that today forms the Athens area. The land was originally purchased from Native Americans by three Dutchmen—Johannis Clute, Jan Hendrick Bruyn and Jurean Theuinessen—in April 1665. In May 1667 New York Governor Nicholls confirmed this patent. By 1684 Jan Van Loon owned over one-third of this patent and settled there with his family, accounting for its name. In 1688, after the English took control of New York, all patents were re-issued by the new government. The Loonenburg Patent was applied for by Jan Van Loon and two others, representing themselves and the remaining landowners. The Loonenburg Patent remained intact until the 1750s, when a large tract was sold to Martin Garretse Van Bergen and platted into lots for sale, a map rendered by surveyor Charles Clinton. The nominated property formed parts of lots 71 and 72 of this patent and was owned by the Groom family prior to 1812.

Ownership Chronology

Benjamin Haxton, a successful local merchant and one-time New York City auctioneer, acquired this property in 1812 from the Groom family, who had been actively trying to sell it. In June of that year Joseph Groom ran the following advertisement in the *Northern Whig*, a Hudson newspaper:

An Excellent Farm
TO BE SOLD.

For sale, a FARM, of about 210 acres of Land, within about one mile of the village of Athens, 160 acres of which are the very richest of intervale, the residue is composed of upland suitable for the use of plaister. On which there is an Orchard of better than 200 apple trees, composed of Spitzenbergs, Suwarrow apples, &c. &c. besides a choice variety of other fruit trees. . . There is on the first mentioned tract, an old Dutch house, a barn and barracks. The terms of payment will be made accommodating to the purchaser. For further particulars apply to the subscriber on the premises.

JOSEPH GROOM.

⁵ Beecher, 665.

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Athens, June 21, 1812 ⁶

Benjamin Haxton purchased the Groom land later that year. The deed recorded the sale by Joseph Groom and his second wife, Hannah, of slightly more than 210 acres for \$8,000. The Groom family burial plot was exempted from this sale, in addition to another small plot, with the care of the cemetery transferred to the Dutch Reformed Church. The Grooms also sold Haxton an additional 23 acres for \$500 in order that he could “make a road from the Turnpike road to and from the aforesaid land through and part of the residue of the lands ...and to use occupy possess and enjoy said road without hindrance or molestation...”⁷ Given the advertisement mentioned only “an old Dutch house,” it is evident that the present stone house post-dates this transaction and was built for Haxton.

Benjamin Haxton (c. 1763-1836), or Haxtun, was descended from a Scottish family which settled in Massachusetts in 1689 and subsequently diffused into parts of Rhode Island and Connecticut. By the end of the eighteenth century members of the Haxton family had settled in New York and western Massachusetts. Benjamin Haxton was born in Mount Washington, Massachusetts, a son of Andrew Haxton (c.1730-1801) and Abigail Wooden Haxton (c. 1735-1789). Census data indicates that by 1800 Haxton was residing in Hudson, New York. He may have been there as early as 1793, as one Benjamin Haxton was credited with forming “Haxton’s Artillery” company by that date.⁸ Haxton operated a Catskill slaughterhouse and served as an assistant inspector of beef and pork in Hudson in 1803.⁹ He was additionally involved in a mercantile business in Catskill with John H. Strong, under the name Haxtun & Strong, which offered various products, including dry goods and spirits; this business was dissolved in February 1809.¹⁰ By early 1812 Haxton had relocated to New York City where he went into partnership with David Adee in an auction and commission business, Adee & Haxtun, located on Pearl Street, which continued until being dissolved by mutual consent in March 1813.¹¹ Prior to this association Adee had been involved in the mercantile and auction business, engaged in the sale of nails and hardware, and later real estate and imported dry goods; he was additionally associated in some way with cabinetmaker Duncan Phyfe.¹² Adee & Haxtun auctioned a number of properties during their brief association, among them a stone house with brick front in Tappan, farms with various appurtenances in New Rochelle and Scarsdale, and a brick house and store in Athens. They likewise auctioned food products such as beef, and also Merino sheep.¹³ In 1819 Haxton was a director of the Catskill Bank.¹⁴ The image one gathers of Benjamin Haxton is a man of substantial means and influence in his community.

The 1820 Federal census portrays the Haxton household, which at that time included one male 16-18, 2 males under 26, one male 45 years and upwards, one female under 16, and one female 26-45 years of age. There was additionally a free colored male between 26 and 45 in the household. By the 1830 census Haxton had sold the Athens property and was living in Catskill. While still residing at the nominated property Haxton had a tenant

⁶ Advertisement, *Northern Whig* (Hudson), 6 July 1812.

⁷ Book D, 311, 313, Greene County Records (GCR hereafter).

⁸ A.R. Bradbury, *History of Hudson, New York* (Hudson: Record & Publishing Co, 1908), 101.

⁹ Notices, *Albany Centinel*, 14 January 1803; *American Eagle* (Catskill), 19 July 1809.

¹⁰ Notice, *American Eagle*, 14 February 1809; *Catskill Recorder*, 16 September 1805.

¹¹ Advertisement, *The Columbian* (New York), 13 March 1812; Notice, *New York Gazette & General Advertiser*, 8 March 1813.

¹² Advertisement, *Daily Advertiser*, 16 July 1793; a notice in the *American Citizen*, 31 May 1805 indicates Adee had lost a note “drawn in favor of D. Phyfe at 90 days from 18 March, for \$177 and 18 cents.” A series of advertisements in the New York City papers in the 1800s and 1810s depict Adee’s auction business, which was primarily concerned with dry goods.

¹³ Advertisements, *Commercial Advertiser*, 16 November 1812; *The Columbian* 24 June 1812; *The Commercial Advertiser* 9 January 1813.

¹⁴ Andrew Beers, *Farmer’s Diary; or Catskill Almanach, for the year of our Lord 1819* (Catskill: Nathan Elliot).

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farmer named William Chard, who attempted to purchase land but defaulted. The deeds relating to this transaction instructed Chard to continue farming the land. Haxton married three times. His first wife was Sally Benjamin; he married his second wife, Hudson-native Sally Morton, around 1796. The latter marriage produced two sons, Andrew and Caleb. The Haxton family was dealt a terrible blow when, in December 1813, Caleb, then 16, and his grandfather Reuben Morton, 73, died after falling through the ice and drowning while attempting to cross the frozen Hudson River.¹⁵ Sally Morton Haxton died in 1827. Haxton's third wife was Martha Weeks, and the couple had four daughters. Benjamin Haxton died in Catskill in December 1836.

In 1826 Benjamin Haxton sold the house to Reverend Joseph Prentiss, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Athens. The property associated with the house was reduced to 100 acres and sold for \$4,000. Joseph Prentiss was rector of Trinity Church for over 20 years and in 1814 delivered the sermon at the New York Protestant Episcopal Convention divine service. Prentiss retired in 1835 and sold the property at that time; he died in January 1836 from injuries received in a stagecoach accident. Prentiss was so highly regarded that the altar, desk and pulpit of his church were draped in black cloth for 30 days. James D. Pickney, in his book *Sketches of Catskill*, referred to Joseph Prentiss as the "most eloquent divine who ever occupied the desk of that church." Joseph Prentiss was married to Sarah Morgan and the couple had four children, their baptisms recorded in the records of Trinity Church.

In 1836 George Griffin (1811-1881) purchased the 100 acre property for \$5,700. This deed mentions the stone house and a stone barn.¹⁶ During the time the family lived in the house Griffin made four other land purchases, increasing the size of the property to 326 acres and thus expanding on the 100 acres bought by Prentiss from Haxton. These include an 1836 purchase of 140 acres from Richard Rushmore and an 1840 purchase from Peter Hubbell, a son-in-law of Joseph Prentiss. Hubbell's sale of 10.5 acres was made on behalf of a minor. The last purchase, for two parcels of 12.25 and 64.5 acres, was made from William Brandow. George Griffin married twice. His first wife, Mary Augusta, was raised in Catskill and died the day after their son died, in August 1848. They had two other children, one of which, Frederick, was referred to in George's will. Griffin remarried in 1851. In the 1860 census Griffin and his second wife, Elizabeth Francis Benson, had five children ranging in age from one to seven years of age.

The Griffin family actively farmed these lands during their tenure. The 1855 agricultural census indicates the acreage was at that time divided into 120 acres of pasture and 150 acres of meadow. Orchard acreage was not given, but 250 bushels of apples were harvested. The Griffins had six milch cows they maintained for their own use and produced 500 pounds of butter. They also had swine, cattle and oxen but kept no sheep or poultry. The farm was at that time valued at \$12,000. In the 1860 Federal census George Griffin reported his real estate as valued at \$20,000, and by 1870 it had increased to \$50,000. His personal wealth in 1870 amounted to \$50,000. These financial figures are indicative of the prosperity of regional agriculture in this era, when characteristic Greene County farm products such as apples, butter, and hay were profitable and readily marketable. George Griffin was a trustee of the Catskill Savings Bank when it opened in 1868 and was elected vice president of the Greene County Agricultural Society in 1841. He later served as a justice of the peace.

Following Griffin's death in 1881 his widow, Elizabeth, sold 326 acres to Samuel W. Sprague for \$20,650. Sprague was a farmer and the deed stipulated his possession of the property by April 1882 and allowed him to enter

¹⁵ "Most distressing accident," *Northern Whig*, 14 January 1814.

¹⁶ Book U, Page 350, GCR.

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and plow the land before that date, provided the current tenant approved.¹⁷ Tax records show that by 1890 the Sprague's had sold part of the 326 acres, thereby reducing the parcel to 200 acres valued at \$8,800. In 1896 the property was solely in Louisa Sprague's name, though her husband was still living. The couple had no children, but the 1900 census indicated two servants. The Spragues sold more land in 1899 so that by 1900 the property included only 60 acres valued at \$5,000. This would seem indicative of the decline in farming in Greene County at the end of the nineteenth century. Samuel Sprague died in 1917 and Louisa in 1919. Athens tax assessments show that the property continued to be taxed as a farm after the 1921 sale by the executor of Louisa Sprague's estate to Henry Wagner and his wife. It is during the Sprague ownership period that the house was first used as a boarding house, known as "The Woodburne," presumably to offset the declining fortunes of regional agriculture. The property was taxed only as a farm, as the boarding house was a seasonal business.

Henry G. Wagner and his wife were born in Germany and came to the United States in the 1920s. The Wagners farmed the land but also continued the summer boarding house business established by the Spragues. Produce from the farm operation was used in part to feed visitors. The Catskills were well known during the early part of the twentieth century as a summer vacation area, especially to occupants of the New York City metropolis who traveled there via train and the Hudson River. A brochure from the Wagner period of ownership noted that "The Woodbourne" was a "commodious stone country house, substantially built, with large rooms and broad halls extending through the house." The business boasted an "entirely satisfactory Table, supplied with Fruits and Berries of all kinds, Vegetables, Milk, Chickens, Eggs, etc., fresh from our own farm." A description of amenities noted hot and cold water in most rooms; recreational facilities including badminton, shuffleboard and croquet; sanitary plumbing; wood fires; a 100-foot piazza with river views; and pick-up service if prearranged. Rates began at \$27 per room. The advertisement also noted that "The Woodbourne" catered to Gentiles, and not Jews, and further indicated it was "convenient to Protestant and Catholic churches and other amusements."¹⁸

In 1950 Henry G. Wagner transferred the property to his son, Henry J. Wagner, who was born in the stone house. In the 1930s portions of the land were included in easements to New York Telephone Company and Central Hudson. In 1970 the Wagners sold the main house and six acres to Henry and Irma Nichols, though they retained ownership of the majority of the land. It has now passed into the hands of Henry G. Wagner's grandson and wife, who live in the c. 1930 house and continue to work the land as dairy farmers. In 1980 the six-acre property changed hands again and there were numerous transactions between the same parties over the next 20 years. During this period the stone house fell into severe disrepair. It was acquired by the present owners in 2005.

Architectural Summary & Analysis

Multiple historic periods and architectural tastes shaped the main house as presently constituted. These include the original mid-1810s building campaign, followed by c. 1830, c. 1860 and c. 1885 renovations; the last historic-period change occurred c. 1930 and forms the terminal point for the house's historic development. The first era represents the tenancy of Benjamin Haxton, for whom the dwelling was erected. The house, as built at that date, formed a regional representation of the prevailing Federal style, erected with load-bearing mortared rubble stone walls and a characteristic plan for a house of this class and scale. It was presumably during the tenure of Joseph Prentiss— 1826-36— that the gold-veined black marble mantels were introduced on the first floor, as they compare

¹⁷ Book 97 Page 385, GCR.

¹⁸ "The Woodburne" promotional material; undated.

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favorably with examples dating to c. 1826-1832.¹⁹ They are representative of early Greek Revival design impulses. The full-width rear verandah on the east elevation, which physical evidence suggests may not have been an original feature, is nevertheless an early one. If not original, it presumably dates to the Prentiss ownership period, and from an aesthetic standpoint is expressive of the overarching Neoclassical tastes of the first half of the nineteenth century. The Roman Doric columns, shallow entablature and moulding profiles suggest a date prior to c. 1830; its aesthetics are not Greek Revival but instead of Federal derivation. The main house's moulded cornice with built-in gutters and deep frieze do, however, recall Greek Revival-style precedents and would appear to date after c. 1830. A paneled parapet, similar to that which adorned the main roofline, once screened the verandah's half-hipped roof from view. This parapet was not an original feature, but instead introduced subsequently, much like that added to the c. 1798 Ten Broeck house in Albany in the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps at the time of that house's Greek Revival-style modifications. The porch was badly denatured and requires a comprehensive restoration, though examples of the original balusters and Doric columns remain; the parapets were removed from the verandah and roof by the Wagner family between 1920 and 1930. At times during the building's nineteenth-century history the lower area of the porch corresponding with the basement fenestration was partially screened and, at times in the twentieth, fully framed out.

Other changes undertaken during the Griffin ownership period—1836-1881—were interior modifications, such as the updating of the staircase in the main hall with a curving Italianate-style open stringer stair with prominent newel post, balustered handrail and paneled wall treatment. This architectural fashion gained a foothold in the 1850s and flourished during the 1860s. It is probable that during this period the entrance vestibule was added; at one point it was fronted by a porch of typical Late Victorian characteristics and included an enclosed second-story, both since removed. The last substantial change to the building, arguably the most significant since the original building campaign, was the raising of the original hipped roof to form a monitor-like cupola feature. This was accomplished by cutting the rafters and raising the central section of the original roof. While this change may have occurred during the Griffin period, it seems more likely that it was executed following the Sprague's 1881 acquisition and implemented in relation to the boarding house business, which drove the need for additional space. This new roof feature was finished with a moulded cornice and eaves brackets with drop pendants. During this use, alterations were made to the existing plan in order to create the necessary interior configuration for a hotel use. Around 1930 a small frame office was added on the north side of the building, adjacent to the verandah on that side, by the Wagner family.

While the Hudson Valley sustained a tradition of stone domestic architecture fostered by its earliest Dutch, Palatine German and French Huguenot settlers, the house built for Benjamin Haxton around 1815 shares little relationship with this vernacular tradition, save for its load-bearing rubble walls. It instead embodied design trends which first gained a foothold in the upper Hudson Valley in the post-Revolutionary War period, as new influences and architectural mandates were reshaping the cultural landscape of the region. By the time the house was erected, the influence of Roman Neoclassicism, known popularly as the Federal style, had been advanced in the Albany region by architect Philip Hooker and disseminated at the folk level to craftsmen through the builder's guides of William Pain and Asher Benjamin. Haxton, as a prominent merchant and onetime auctioneer of real estate with sometime partner David Adee, was undoubtedly well aware of the prevailing architectural sentiments of his day, and familiar

¹⁹ Mantels of similar form fashioned from gold-veined black or "Egyptian" marble are present in the c. 1826 Hart-Cluett house, Troy; the c. 1830 David Crawford house in Newburgh; and the c. 1832 Seabury Tredwell house, Manhattan.

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with the best class of architecture in New York City and other locales. As a man of relative wealth and stature, he embarked upon a building campaign to build an appropriate country seat suitable to a man of his social and economic standing. The building was nevertheless in some regards cast in provincial terms, by virtue of its rubble stone envelope. His reasoning for building in stone may have taken in to consideration the distance of the house from the river, the availability of stone nearby, and the expense of either transporting brick to the site or having suitable quantities made there.

The house as built in the 1810s was representative of established design concepts. It was erected on a rectangular plan with a center hall layout, one and one half rooms deep, in concert with five-bay east and west elevations. The banked construction allowed for the placement of service areas in the basement with suitable lighting and ventilation; here a large kitchen with cooking hearth and bake oven were situated, on the southeast side of the plan. Such an arrangement was common in the region for elite housing since at least the time of the Revolution. The hip-roofed form in combination with five-bay façade and rectangular plan was well-established by this date. Asher Benjamin offered examples of this type in his *Country Builder's Assistant* of 1797, which undoubtedly assisted in its popularity. A contemporary example was the William J. Morris house, built c. 1816, in Morrisania, New York, which was also built with walls of rough hewn stone.²⁰ In New Baltimore, the c. 1786 Van Bergen house was expanded c. 1820, at which time it assumed similar characteristics with a five-bay façade and hipped roof. The General Haight house in Athens, a brick house built c. 1814, was of a similar type, featuring a low hipped roof; however, the façade was of a four-bay type with offset entrance.

While minor nineteenth-century upgrades were made to reflect prevailing architectural fashions, notably the introduction of Greek Revival-style mantels and the Italianate-style staircase, Late Victorian-era changes appear to have been minor. This was perhaps in part due to the transition from a single-family occupancy to a boarding house operation, and included a front porch, since removed, with characteristic turned supports and spindle friezes. The new hotel use required the further partitioning of space within the existing stone house envelope, in addition to the formation of new interior space, accounting for the raising of the roof, the addition of a frame kitchen wing on the south elevation, and the addition of enclosed space above the entrance vestibule. The latter two features have since been removed. The last historic addition to the stone house was the office on the north elevation, added c. 1930.

The more modern features of the farm are the c. 1930 Sears kit house and a 1900 light-frame dairy barn, the former being representative of the Wagner ownership period. During the first half of the twentieth century Sears, Roebuck & Company sold upwards of 75,000 houses via its mail-order Modern Homes program, and over that period offered 447 different housing styles. The company was not an innovative domestic designer but instead took its cues from popular and established designs, modified to suit the needs and tastes of the purchaser. Individuals could design their own houses and submit blueprints to Sears, which would then ship the pre-manufactured and fitted materials to the building site. Modern Homes offered advantages over other construction methods, as the ability to mass-produce the materials lessened manufacturing costs, which in turn lowered purchase costs for customers. Precut and fitted materials also lessened construction time and labor costs. While Sears was the most successful merchant of mail-order houses, it was Montgomery Ward that innovated the practice. Originally constructed to accommodate overflow borders, the Wagner house was built with only

²⁰ The Morris house is illustrated on plate 149 of J.M. Howells' *Lost Examples of Colonial Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1963).

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bedrooms and bathrooms. In the 1960s it became a rental property, at which time the kitchen was added. In the 1970s the grandson of the Henry Wagner took up residence; he became the owner of the property in 1986.

The earlier barn, notwithstanding additions, is of a braced timber-frame type and likely dates to the third quarter of the nineteenth century. In addition to its value in depicting the agricultural history of the property at that juncture, it is representative of the building technology of that era, being comprised of a sawn frame joined in traditional fashion with square rule techniques. It is of banked construction, the mow entered via a ramp from the road.