

The Many Names of Harmen Janse Knickerbocker

Part 3:

Van Berghen Knickerbocker: A hoax?

Bryan Knickerbocker, January, 2018

This report is part of a series on the many names of Harmen Janse Knickerbocker.

Parts 1 and 2 focused on the many ways that Harmen Janse was described in historic records. This included Van Dutchess County, Van Turkeyen, Van Wye, and Van Bommel.

Now we come to Part 3. The name that we will cover here is Van Berghen. Supposedly, Harmen Janse Knickerbocker was the son of Johannes Van Berghen Knickerbocker.

However, it is clear that “John Van Berghen Knickerbocker” was a myth. No such person ever existed, and our ancestor, Harmen Janse, was never called by any name even vaguely resembling Van Bergen.

The Van Berghen myth was created around 1880. Unfortunately, the myth has been circulating since ever since. This is annoying. The myth gets in the way of people trying to do serious research.

The problems go back to Joseph Foster Knickerbocker, who owned the Knickerbocker Mansion in Schaghticoke for thirteen years.

This report is more than a discussion of the Van Berghen myth. This report is also a general discussion about the years around 1880, which were the dark ages of Knickerbocker genealogy.

Today, many of us are frustrated by the false information that propagates via the Internet and via popular genealogy sites like Ancestry.

However, as we will show here, fake genealogy is not a new phenomenon.

Knickerbocker genealogists are still trying to recover from mis-information that has been circulating for more than 130 years.

NOTE: References are shown on the last page of this report.

Background: The Schaghticoke Knickerbockers.

This report will mention the name of Joseph Foster Knickerbocker several times.

Joseph's lineage is illustrated in this partial family tree.

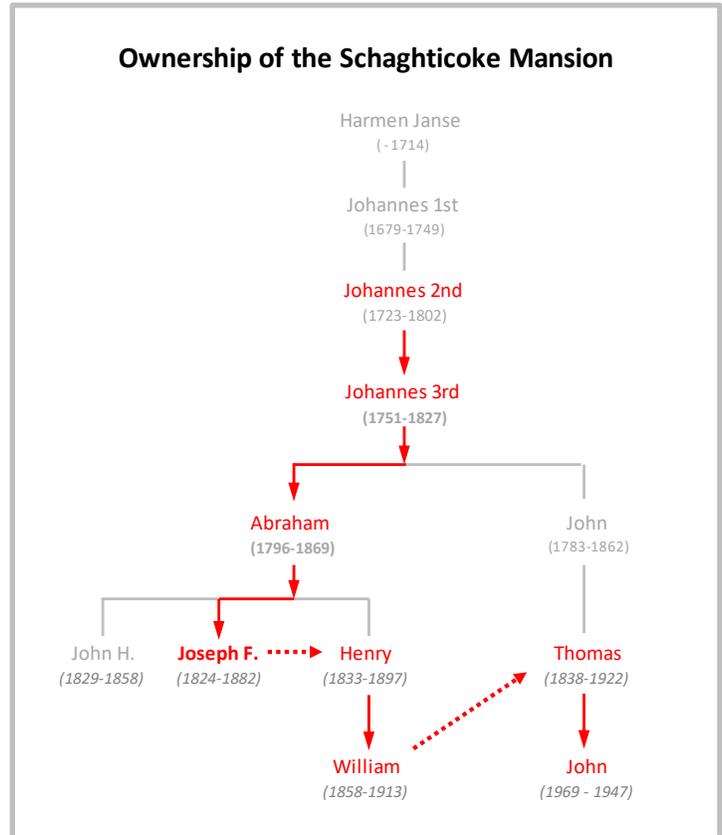
The red arrows in this chart illustrate the chain of ownership of the Knickerbocker Mansion in Schaghticoke.

The mansion was built by Johannes the 2nd. Ownership passed to his son, Johannes the 3rd, then to Abraham, and then to Joseph Foster Knickerbocker.

As far as we can tell, Joseph was the only mansion owner who pretended to care about genealogy. Joseph owned the mansion from 1869 until his death in 1882. As discussed below, these were the years when Knickerbocker genealogy was driven completely off the rails due a raft of false information.

Later, after Joseph died, mansion ownership passed to Henry, then to William, then to Thomas, and, finally, to John.

John Knickerbocker eventually sold the mansion.



Ownership of the mansion was not a guarantee of health and a large family. In fact, the opposite was true. There are no surviving descendants of Joseph, Henry, William, or John. (Joseph never married. Henry had two children, but never had grandchildren. William and John had spouses, but never had any children.)

As described elsewhere, the Schaghticoke Knickerbockers experienced more than their fair share of bad luck and poor health. There were never very many descendants of Johannes Knickerbocker. (Most Knickerbockers who are alive today are descended from Lawrence Knickerbocker, not from Johannes Knickerbocker. Lawrence lived most of his life in Dutchess County, and left many descendants.)

Part of Joseph Foster Knickerbocker's problem may have been that he was cut off from the story of the Knickerbockers in Dutchess County and beyond. The clearest indication is that Joseph apparently never knew about the Knickerbocker burial ground in Dutchess County. We will discuss a bit more about the burial ground in the next section.

The Fake Knickerbocker Bible

The first genealogy problem related to Joseph Foster Knickerbocker involved a “Knickerbocker bible”. Somebody apparently bought an antique bible with a blank overleaf section. The overleaf was carefully filled in, with names and dates written in Dutch. Unfortunately, the dates were completely wrong.

The bible is the clearest example of the genealogical fraud that occurred during the years when Joseph Foster Knickerbocker owned the mansion.

The background on Knickerbocker bibles can be found in Kathlyne Knickerbocker-Viele’s 1916 book on the history of the Knickerbocker and Viele families.

Ms. Viele started out her bible section by discussing two legitimate family bibles from the Schaghticoke Knickerbockers. The first two bibles were completely focused on the Schaghticoke families. The owners of these real bibles never mentioned Harmen Janse Knickerbocker or his family. Every name and date in the first two bibles seems legitimate.

Ms. Viele then discussed what she called the “Third Knickerbocker Bible.”

The third bible included a few entries dealing with the Schaghticoke families. The Schaghticoke information matched the first two bibles, and was obviously just copied from those real bibles. We will not discuss the Schaghticoke entries here.

The crucial entries in the third bible are the ones that (a) deal with the broader Knickerbocker family, outside of Schaghticoke, and (b) can be fact-checked using historic records. Ms. Viele did a significant amount of fact-checking, and pointed out several errors in the third bible. More historic records have surfaced during the 100 years since Ms. Viele’s book, so we can expand upon the fact checking.

Shown below are the nine birth and death entries which we can compare to actual data in church records, court records, cemeteries, etc.

Births and Deaths from the “Third Bible”

<u>Births & deaths according to the “third bible”</u>				<u>Reality, as proven by the actual records</u>	
<u>Event</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Right or Wrong?</u>	<u>Actual</u>	<u>Reference</u>
Birth	Lawrence	May 3, 1681	Wrong	1685	Lawrence’s baptism & tombstone
Birth	Cornelius	June 7, 1684	Wrong	1692	Cornelius’ baptism record
Birth	Evert	Jan 12, 1688	Wrong	1699	Evert’s baptism record
Birth	Peter	January 9, 1689	Wrong	1702	Peter’s baptism & his court testimony
Death	Harmen	April 4, 1720	Wrong	1714	Court testimony & tax lists
Death	Lysbet	April 15, 1723	Wrong	> 1730	Tax record. (See Kathlyne Viele book)
Death	Lawrence	October 5, 1750	Wrong	1766	Lawrence’s tombstone
Death	Evert	January 6, 1735	Wrong	> 1755	Militia lists showing Evert as member
Death	Peter	September 5, 1740	Wrong	> 1784	Peter testified in court in 1784

The bible gets a red flag on every one of the nine dates. Whoever created this bible was completely out of touch with reality. Their batting average was exactly zero.

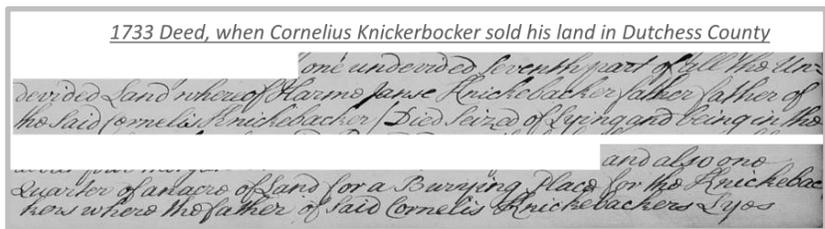
These red flags were not assigned arbitrarily. We can prove that the bible was wrong.



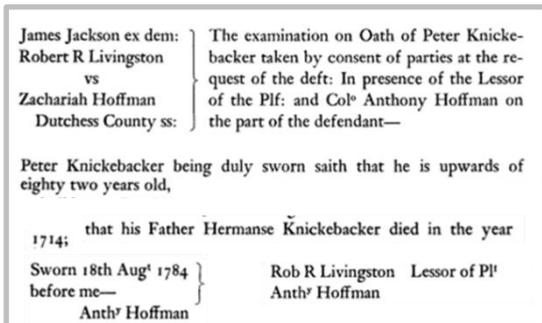
Glaring examples of red flags involve the birth and death dates for Lawrence Knickerbocker, the son of Harmen Janse. Lawrence was buried in Tivoli, New York, in the small family burial ground. His tombstone was still there as late as 1882, when it was documented in a local history. (The tombstone was later moved.) The tombstone says “Here lies the body of Mr. Lowrance Knickerbacker, who di’d ye 20th of Decem and was buyed ye 22, in the 82nd year of his age in ye year 1766.”

A local historian had no trouble finding the tombstone, which suggests that the creator of the fake family bible never bothered to look for it. In fact, it is clear that the Schaghticoke family had long since forgotten where Harmen Janse was buried.

(As shown in this deed, there is no doubt that Harmen Janse died and was buried in Dutchess County. In 1733, Cornelius established a small family burial ground to preserve the spot where Harmen Janse was buried.)



Now, consider the facts around Peter Knickerbocker, the youngest son of Harmen Janse.



In 1784, Peter gave a deposition in court. Peter testified that he was 82, and that his father died in 1714.

This record provides three important dates. Peter was born in 1702 and was still alive in 1784. Also, Harmen Janse died in 1714.

The “third bible” was wrong on all three dates.

Incorrect dates are the clearest proof of fraud, but there are additional indications of problems.

Ms. Viele thought that the entries in the bible might have originated with John Hale Knickerbocker, the younger brother of Joseph Foster Knickerbocker. John apparently prided himself on his knowledge of Dutch. A subtle observation about the entries in the bible is that they used an archaic form of Dutch.

Examples of Month Names: Real Bible vs Fake Bible

Actual Bible of Johannes Knickerbocker	“Third Knickerbocker Bible”
Januawary = January	Louwmaand = January
Februwary = February	Grasmaand = April
Augustus = August	Zommermaand = June
	Wintermaand = December

The actual bible of Johannes Knickerbocker used simple names for the months, spelled phonetically. The “third bible” used archaic names, spelled perfectly, as if they were copied from a dictionary. This supports Ms. Viele’s hypothesis about the creation of the bible.

Aside from Ms. Viele, there was one other author who offered comments about the bible. This was A.J. Weise, in his book *The History of the Seventeen Towns of Rensselaer County*. Mr. Weise visited Schaghticoke around 1880, and got a first-hand look at the bible.

Mr. Weise's description of the bible is shown here.

The publisher's statement (indicated by the lower bracket) says "The new testament of all the books of the new covenant of our lord Jesus Christ by the order of the States General of the United Netherlands, according to the decree of the Synod National, held at Dordrecht, in the years 1618-1618, etc. At Dordrecht by Hendrick and Jacob Kuer at Amsterdam by Marcos Doomeck company, AD 1682."

AN OLD DUTCH BIBLE.

The old Dutch Bible used by the ministers of the first Reformed Protestant Dutch church of Schaghticoke, is here also preserved in its original heavy board binding and brass clasps. The title page of the old testament is torn out, but the other leaves and the engraving are retained. The new testament title page reads :

Het Nieuwe Testament ofte alle Boecken des Nieuwen Verbonds onses Heeren Jesu Christi Door Last van de Hoog: Mog: Heeren Staaten Generael Der Veereenighde Nederlanden, ende volgens 't Besluit vaude Synode Nationael, gehonden tot' Dordrecht, in de Jaren 1618 ende 1619, etc. * * * Te Dordrecht by Hendrick-en-Jacob-Keur en t' Amsterdam by Marcus Doornack, in compagnie Ao. 1682.



Thanks to the Internet, we can confirm that the format of the third bible is exactly what would be expected in an ancient Dutch bible. For example, the snapshot to the left is from a bible from the same printer. Such antique bibles can still be bought on the open market. (The one shown here is for sale for \$1,300.)

The publisher and date quoted by Mr. Weise exactly match Ms. Viele's description of "Third Bible."

Mr. Weise says that the bible had belonged to the ministers at the church. This seems inconsistent with the bible having been an old family heirloom, but that might just have been a misunderstanding by Mr. Weise.

Mr. Weise never mentioned that the bible contained any Knickerbocker family information on births and deaths.

Notice the offhand comment, near the upper red bracket, that the title page of the Old Testament was torn out of the bible. Why was a page missing from an otherwise well-preserved bible? It might have been torn out accidentally. Or, it might have been torn out intentionally, to hide some incriminating (non-Knickerbocker) writing, such as the name of the original owner of the bible.

To summarize our analysis of the family bible, in five words: This bible was a fraud.

"Fraud" is a strong word, but, as we've shown, we can back it up.

The Fake Story of John Van Berghen Knickerbocker

The claims related to “Van Berghen” originated with the same people who created the fake bible. Unfortunately, the Van Berghen myth has been published repeatedly.

In 1876, an article called *The Knickerbockers of New York Two Centuries Ago* was published in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine. It was written by General Egbert Viele. Mr. Viele was not a genealogist or a historian, but apparently believed that his military fame entitled him to write the history of the Knickerbockers.



In reality, all of his information came from Joseph Foster Knickerbocker at the mansion in Schaghticoke.

The Harper’s article claimed that Harmen Janse was the son of John Knickerbocker Van Bergen. This claim has never been supported by a single piece of data, either then, or now.



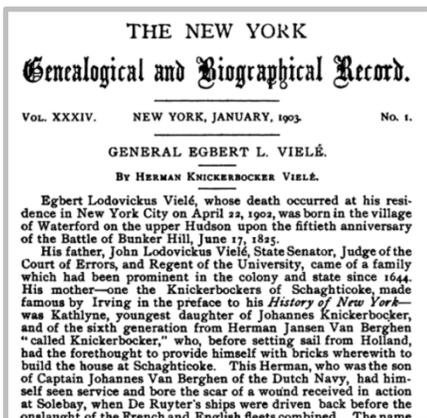
Four years later, 1880, a local historian named A.J. Weise published a book, *The History of the Seventeen Towns of Rensselaer County*. Mr. Weise also apparently got all of his information from Joseph Foster Knickerbocker.

Also in 1880, the book by Mr. Weise was published in serial form in the Troy Daily News. This also spread the myth.



Mr. Weise’s work repeated the Van Berghen myth.

The publications shown above all came out within four years. This was a horrible sequence of events, and a major blow to anyone interested in finding the truth about the Knickerbockers.

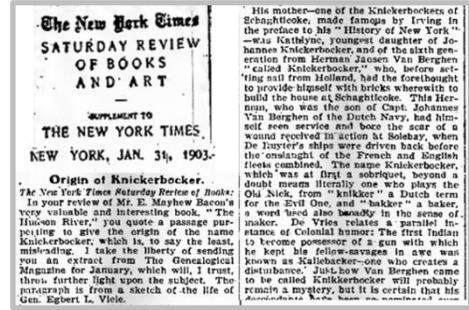


The Van Berghen mythology probably had its high point in 1903.

In January, 1903 the NYGBR appeared to endorse the Van Berghen myth. They published an article by Herman Knickerbocker Viele, a son of Egbert Viele. The article mentioned Harmen Janse Van Berghen Knickerbocker.

The New York Genealogical and Biographical Society is supposed to be a bastion of serious genealogy. In this case, they failed to meet their normal high standards.

Herman Viele Knickerbocker repeated his claims about the Van Berghens in a 1903 letter to the editor of the New York Times. As proof, he offered up the article from the NYGB&R, which he had written.



The Van Berghen myth has also appeared in the newsletter of the Holland Society, in 1972. The author of this work was Chase Viele. Chase Viele was aware of Kathlyne Viele's book, and mentioned it several times. However, Chase Viele repeated the claim about Johannes van Berghen.

The myth appeared in the New York Times as recently as 1988, in the obituary of Admiral William L. Knickerbocker. (Lineage: Harmen Janse / Lawrence / Peter / Hugh / John / Myron / Dwight / William.) This obituary added the most ridiculous claim yet: that a man named James Knickerbocker was the founder of the family in New York.



As we have shown, the Van Berghen myth has appeared in a local history, *and* in Harper's magazine, *and* in the New York Times (twice), *and* in the NYGBR, *and* in the journal of the Holland Society. Unfortunately, this means that the fake story about the Van Berghen Knickerbockers will live forever. In today's world, most amateur genealogists would consider the above references to be "proof."

Shown below is a list of every single historic record that has ever been found for the Van Berghen Knickerbockers:

<u>Types of Historic Records</u>	<u>Number of records that mention any variation of Van Berghen Knickerbocker</u>
Baptism Records	Zero
Marriage Records	Zero
Death Records	Zero
Other Church Records	Zero
Court Records	Zero
New Netherlands Records	Zero
Rensselaerswyck Records	Zero
Deeds & Land Records	Zero
Total Number of Records for the Van Berghen Knickerbockers	Zero

The Van Berghen story was a hoax.

The real story of the Knickerbockers finally received attention in 1908/1909, when William Van Alstyne published his *History of the Knickerbocker Family* in the NYGB&R.

Mr. Van Alstyne chose to completely ignore the myths created by Joseph Foster Knickerbocker.

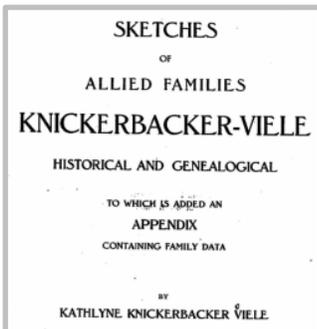
THE KNICKERBOCKER FAMILY.

By WILLIAM B. VAN ALSTYNE, M.D.

The Knickerbocker family of New York, rendered famous by the genius of Washington Irving, has never to our knowledge been printed in genealogical form. This we now endeavor to do for the first four or five generations. Pains have been taken to secure accuracy and authorities are given for most statements. Traditions are current in the family concerning its origin and history in Holland, but these the writer, not finding leisure to verify them, has omitted. He has encountered many early spellings of the name of the family, such as Knikkerbakker, Knikkelbakker, and Knikkenbakker, but has adhered to the present spellings, Knickerbacker and Knickerbocker. Authorities differ as to the origin of the name Knickerbocker. William Arthur (*Derivation of Family Names*, p. 177) derives it from knacker, a cracker, and baker, a baker; while Edward M. Smith (*History of Rhinebeck, N. Y.*, p. 174) derives it from knikker, a marble, and bakker, a baker. Consensus of opinion favors the latter explanation.

Harmen Jansen Knickerbocker, the ancestor of the family, came to this country from Holland prior to 1683 and settled at Albany, N. Y. Occasionally he added the termination Van Wie to his name indicating that he came from Wie, the present Wybe, a few miles south of Zwolle, in the Province of Overijssel, Holland.

In 1683, Harman Jansz Knickerbocker and Lysbet Harmensz were members of the Dutch Reformed Church at Albany (*Year Book, 1904, of the Holland Society of New York*, p. 5).
On 6 May, 1684, Harmen Jansen Knickerbocker deeded land



Then, in 1916, Kathlyne Knickerbacker-Viele published her book on the Knickerbocker and Viele families. Kathlyne Viele was the daughter of Egbert Viele, and the sister of Herman Knickerbocker Viele.

Kathlyne Viele did some actual research. It apparently didn't take long before she realized that her father's work was all wrong.

In the end, Ms. Viele did an admirable thing: She debunked the myths that her father had helped to propagate.

In 1908-9 there appeared in the New York Genealogical and Biographical Record a Genealogy of the Knickerbocker Family by Dr. William B. Van Alstyne. This is an accurate work, but of limited extent. It did not at first sight appear to be correct as it differed considerably in the records of the first generations from those written out and left by the family historian, Joseph F. Knickerbocker of Schaghticoke. These records written in Mr. Knickerbocker's own hand are in my possession. In response to a letter asking Dr. Van Alstyne if he had seen these family records and also the charts of General E. L. Viele (1875) and of Mr. Edmund Knickerbocker (1890) he replied that he had and that "they tormented me till I put them out of the way and depended on church entries and other sources of information."

In his genealogical work he was assisted by his brother, John Hale Knickerbocker, who died in 1858. This is the account of the family origin left by Joseph Foster Knickerbocker:

"John Van Berghen (Knickerbocker) was the third son of Godfrey Van Berghen, Count Van Grimberger, and Honorine Van Horne, his wife. He was a captain in the navy of the Netherlands and went in that service to Brazil. He was afterwards at home under Count William Frederic of Nassau. After the death of William, Prince of Orange, he went to North America, A. D. 1652, and died in New York June 18, 1656. His wife was Julianna Van Marnix, daughter of Rutgar Van Marnix, Lord of Botselaer. She died in 1668. They had two sons, Gerrit, who died in Antwerp, and Hermen, called Jason. Hermen Jason, second Knickerbocker and second son of John Van Berghen Knickerbocker, was born at Friesland (Friesland?) March 18, 1648, and accompanied his parents to America when very young. He was placed in the navy and severely wounded at the Battle of Solebay, A. D. 1672. After this he returned to America and married, January 3, 1678, Elizabeth, daughter of Myndert Hermens Van der Bogert, a surgeon in the Colony. He owned land at Albany, in Dutchess County and at Half Moon, Saratoga County. He moved to Schaghticoke in 1690. He died April 2, 1721. His wife was born June, 1651; she died April 15, 1723."

Shown here is a short section of Ms. Viele's book. She listed the fake information that had originated with Joseph Foster Knickerbocker.

Ms. Viele showed this information so that she could refute the myths.

Notice that, among other things, the myth is wrong about the movements of Harmen Janse.

Here is Ms. Viele's discussion of the myth:

We are told that John Hale Knickerbacker went to Holland and sought there for the origin of his family and it appears probable that some unskillful, if not unscrupulous, genealogist found in a book of heraldry the Van Berghen lineage and Coat of Arms and fitted it in to the family tradition which John Hale Knickerbacker furnished him with.

There is nothing in the name of our ancestor that would indicate any Van Berghen connection. We must keep to the names given him on the records if we would hope to reach the truth concerning him.

[The Van Berghen pedigree contains] unproved statements such as seem most unlikely to be true, till one is fairly puzzled to see how such a connection could be accepted by intelligent people. Yet members of the Knickerbacker family have copied out and treasured this pedigree - on the face of it so clearly improbable - as gospel truth ...

It has been more than 100 years since Ms. Viele wrote about the "treasured pedigree" being adopted as "gospel truth." Unfortunately, she was exactly right.

Ms. Viele said that she was puzzled how the Van Berghen story could be accepted by intelligent people. The problem is even worse now, because the myth has propagated so widely. Amateur genealogists don't realize that so many "reputable" sources could be wrong.

The Fake Coat of Arms

The third item that we will mention is a Knickerbacker Coat of Arms that was displayed on a wall at the mansion in Schaghticoke.

Like the bible and the Van Berghen story, the coat of arms appears to have been a fraud.

The coat of arms may have been a legitimate antique from an historic Dutch family. However, it probably had nothing to do with the Knickerbockers.

For example, Kathlyne Viele and others reported that the word "Knickerbacker" had been painted onto an older coat of arms.



Over the years, a few people had tried to claim that it was really a Van Wye coat of arms, or a Van Berghen coat of arms, or whatever. Such analysis is useless. The coat of arms was probably brought from a random antique dealer in the Netherlands, and had probably belonged to someone who either died or went broke. There is no reason to think that the coat of arms had any connection with Harmen Janse Knickerbocker or his real roots.

The issue with the coat of arms is a minor one. We are fortunate that the coat of arms is largely forgotten.

Summary

This report has discussed the mythology that was invented by Joseph Foster Knickerbocker, probably with the help of his brother John Hale Knickerbocker. We have also discussed the unfortunate route by which this mythology was propagated.

As we have discussed, there has never been any basis for Joseph Foster Knickerbocker's claims.

The "third family bible" was a hoax. The coat of arms was almost certainly also a hoax. And, our ancestors never called themselves Van Berghen.

Sources of Information

- Page 2: *Sequence of ownership of the mansion was pieced together from newspaper stories on FH*
The full family tree can be found on Ancestry (userid bmknickerbocker)
- Page 3: *Third bible entries from KKV*
- Page 4: *Photo of Lawrence Knickerbocker's tombstone was taken by Findagrave member S. Zeller*
Cornelius' deed from New York land records on FS (Ulster, book EE, p 424)
Peter's testimony from LPAH
Bible excerpts from KKV
- Page 5: *Description from old Dutch Bible from AJW*
Image of a similar bible, currently for sale, was found using Google
- Page 6: *Egbert Viele excerpt from Harpers*
A.J. Weise book excerpt from AJW
Troy Daily News excerpt from FH
Viele profile from NYGBR, January, 1903.
- Page 7: *Herman Viele letter to NY Times from FH*
Chase Viele / Holland Society excerpt from Howard Knickerbocker
William Knickerbocker obituary from Ancestry
- Page 8: *Van Alstyne excerpt from NYGBR, January, 1908*
Kathlyne Viele excerpt from KKV
- Page 9: *Coat of Arms from Harpers*

- AJW** = *History of the Seventeen Towns of Rensselaer County by A. J. Weise (1880)*
- FH** = *fultonhistory.com*
- FS** = *familysearch.org*
- Harpers** = *Harper's New Monthly Magazine from December, 1876*
- KKV** = *Sketches of Allied Families: Knickerbocker–Viele by Kathlyne Knickerbocker Viele (1916)*
- LPAH** = *Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton, Volume 3 edited by Julius Goebel (1980)*
- NYGBR** = *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*