



FAMILY HISTORY SHOWS BRONX AS RURAL PARADISE

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DAVID LEGGETT, who makes his living writing regulations for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, journeyed from Virginia to Hunts Point the other day to check out his old neighborhood.

Now, Leggett never lived in Hunts Point, but a long time ago, his family owned some land in that section of The Bronx.

Actually, all of it - a 10,000-acre estate that covered most of current-day Hunts Point, from Boston Road down to the East River.

Today, that estate exists only in Leggett's imagination, fueled by family photos and an extraordinary series of letters his great-grandfather wrote shortly before his death a century ago. The letters offer a rare glimpse of life in Hunts Point - from the days when Indians used to stop by demanding food ("They would stand about as still and straight as young pine trees and wait until food was brought to them") all the way to the Civil War 200 years later.

"So extensive were [the grounds]," Thomas Bogart Leggett wrote in May 1892, looking back on his childhood on the estate 60 years earlier, "one might roam all day through the woods and fields without going off the property. The nearest village was three miles away."

Where tenements, bodegas and the El Coche go-go bar now stand were Leggett barns, stables, pastures, farm animals and orchards growing "every kind of fruit that would grow in that latitude."

The family made its fortune not only by working a farm but by selling building supplies as the Big Apple blossomed.

The centerpiece of the estate was, of course, the manor house, Rose Bank. To read Thomas Leggett's description or to look at 140-year-old photos of the columned, Monticello-like mansion is to enter a world that's hard to envision when you're standing on the corner of Hunts Point and Viele avenues.

"The house stood in the center of a fine lawn of some 60 acres which extended down to and along the [East] river for quite a distance," Leggett wrote. "The view from the house towards the river was just charming. There was no hour of the day but that sailing vessels of all descriptions were to be seen on this beautiful river."

Yet today, except for a street named Leggett Avenue, all that's left of this remarkable estate is a small family cemetery a few blocks from the Hunts Point Market. There, the first three generations of Leggetts are buried - and it was the first place David Leggett wanted to see during his visit last month.

"You couldn't really read many of the headstones, thanks to all the acid rain and vandalism over the years," Leggett said. "But it was very emotional to know that this is the only part that's left."

This part of the tour even made an impact on Leggett's guide, Paul Lipson, who runs The Point, a community center on Garrison Avenue - roughly where some of Rose Bank's cows once grazed.

"It certainly was emotional to be in that cemetery," said Lipson, whose own family abandoned the hardscrabble neighborhood in the postwar flight to the suburbs. "How many families in this country can walk down a block in New York City and say, 'This is where my ancestors are buried?'"

More important, Leggett's visit to his family's old stomping ground presented Lipson with a rare chance to broaden his appreciation for Hunts Point's history.

"Typically, when people in Hunts Point think about their roots, they'd think of Eastern Europe, Africa or Puerto Rico, but here's a guy from Virginia whose roots were here," Lipson said. "It just turns history on its head."

David Leggett was somewhat disappointed that his three-hour tour of the area did not yield any clues to the one remaining mystery of Rose Bank: How did the Leggett family lose its patrimony - an estate that survived the Revolutionary War and sprawled across much of today's South Bronx for 200 years, only to be dismantled under mysterious circumstances?

His great-grandfather - writing his recollections from an apartment building in Harlem years after the estate was lost - says only that "financial difficulties" forced its sale. The family may have been made an offer it couldn't refuse.

"There was obviously some setback," David Leggett said. "I'd like to think that [after the city annexed The Bronx in 1874], they got a good offer and sold out to irresistible economic forces, but I'm not sure."

Either way, Leggett says there's a lesson to be learned from the story of his family's rise, decline and fall to the kind of obscurity that leaves even great families with little more than a street named after them.

"When you think that my family owned all this land and had a huge estate, it shows that the difficulty isn't so much putting it together," he said. "The difficulty is *keeping* it together."

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