



The road to the sleepy village of Athens abounds with deep forests and pastoral landscapes buttressed by mountains. This cradle of land between the Catskill Mountains surrounding the nearby Hudson River winds privately beyond the willow and hemlock trees. The scene is breathtaking, and the river, concealed from the road, surprisingly, is scantily missed. These rolling hills drenched in dots of yellow sunshine are every New Yorker's ideal country getaway from the rush and push of the City.

Howard Hall Farm is perched on one of these rolling hills, softly hidden behind embankments of trees. This is a different world, indeed, where hens lay pastel blue eggs and sheep cut the lawn. A Great Pyrenees named Lambchop keeps the coyotes at bay while a team of carpenters, interns, conservationists, and restorers piece together the history of a 220-year-old Federal Style house.

When Reggie Young and Nora Johnson first gazed toward the Howard Hall home, the weed tree overgrowth consumed the three-story manor; certainly, the most casual passerby could miss it completely. After all, one hardly notices the radio towers or the foreboding, looming PG&E Plant. The Energy Group and thousands of citizens mistook the ruins for a loss, failing to comprehend the age and historical importance of the 18th century estate. Despite the years of neglect witnessed by Reggie and Nora that fateful day in 2005, the ghosts of the Federal staircases and Dutch hallways seem to whisper, "you're going to buy this house Reggie." And with the promise of ten years hard work, Reggie and Nora formed a partnership and purchased immediately. According to Reggie, on that day "in 2005, Nora and I became part of the history of this house."

The home is unassuming from the front. The modest entrance leads into the wide Dutch hallway, used in the period to conduct business meetings. In 2005, the ramshackle walls and modernized windowpanes were an odd juxtaposition. The home's piece de resistance, the upstairs New England style piazza facing beautiful sunny meadows, dense trees, and big skies was dilapidated. The floors and fireplaces were crumbling, the tin roof was a corroded, rusty wreck, and the masonry was disintegrating. Much of the period architecture and fixtures were hidden behind decades of botched remodeling and decayed walls. To make matters worse, an early 20th century owner had built an outer door through the southern load-bearing wall. It has since cracked the home's foundation. The masonry had barely survived its hundred year gravitational struggle to stand. As Young also noted, the transfer of the home into the Woodburne Boarding House in the late 19th century had left the home even farther removed from its original splendor.

Despite the overwhelming task at hand, Reggie and Nora began their complicated process of restoration and conservation in March of 2006. This first, slow, daunting phase brought stability to the foundation, floors, and fireplaces. As carpenters peeled away the layers, surprises abounded. Reggie and Nora were amazed to find the original fireplace mantel behind layers of concrete and a Victorian mantel. While working on the roof, Reggie and gang uncovered their favorite discovery. He says, "The soffits that we just discovered were made from a huge slag of a tree, with a crown molding carved into the front, which became what one sees, and the top hollowed out which became the gutter. We all went crazy over that wonderful find."

In the fall, once the structure was safe, Young moved in to the bare bones building and proceeded to create a semblance of a home. This is when the farm animals arrived, just as soon as the gargantuan weed trees were bulldozed to re-open the view toward the river. As Reggie relocated into his newly christened "home depot" upstairs apartment, he opened shop. According to Reggie, "[they] had grown up in stone house renovations in eastern Pennsylvania, and well remember our pre-teenage years of climbing the ladder to go to bed as the stair restoration was happening. So we knew what the deal was." Between the daily rituals of gathering eggs from the Araucana hens and feeding the chickens, dogs, and other assortment of animals, Young began to think seriously about the bigger picture. The task of finding carpenters, plasterers, and other skilled laborers experienced with historic homes had been daunting. This was a private venture, after all, and much of the assistance available to non-profit historic sites was unavailable to him. As the icy winter winds gushed over the mountains that winter, Reggie knew he had to develop a business plan. How was he going to restore this home with historical accuracy and on a limited budget?

As the brutal winter winds swashed throughout the house, and amid the noise of machinery, hammering, and sawing, Reggie recalled an old adage, "Let chaos and squalor reign for with order there is tyranny." Despite the merciless winter chill, he decided to avoid the pitfalls of the quick fix solution most often used for restoring private homes. He resolved himself to patience. In the midst of chaos, he would find a solution to utilize adequately trained craftsmen and carpenters while maintaining a home in a skeleton of a house.

In an usual twist for a business model, Reggie and Nora designed a private, for-profit company based on non-profit, 501c3 organizations. They would be methodical and cautious. He began documenting every detail on each project. Nora meticulously researched the home's history, and they compiled a list of expert contacts. Photographs were taken everyday of the progress of work, and for special projects, video cameras rolled, documenting subjects ranging from the basement fireplace to sheep sheering. A regularly posted weblog, howardhallfarm.com, provides a detailed diary for the entire restoration effort, including announcements, videos, photographs, history, and research. On the flip side, his business model allows him to avoid the red tape and the strict policy of non-profit organizations.

Certainly, Reggie and Nora will remember 2007 as the year they hit their stride. Recently, they implemented the use of Green technology in the restoration process. While not always historically accurate, implementing the use of environment-friendly materials and recycled products outweighs the need to adhere to uncompromising, traditional restoration and conservation techniques. In terms of preservation, however, using eco-friendly, stable materials will assist in the long-term preservation of the house.

Also this year, an impressive string of workshops and lectures has been presented, educating the staff, crew, and the community. Reggie insists, "This house was the platform for a school of restoration that I had fantasized about." Howard Hall Farm's educational programs are generally timed for the beginning of a new project. The Lime Plaster workshop coincided with the restoration of the walls. The Historic Paints and Finishes workshop precedes the restoration of the home's finishes. And that old, rusty tin roof...naturally, it will coincide with the upcoming workshop and lecture by Dennis Heaphy, the Terne tin expert involved in the recent restoration of the Statue of Liberty. If that seems impressive, look at the list of previous workshops this year. Rory Brennan of *Preservation Plastering* and *This Old House* offered on-site consulting and training. Michael Black of Liberty Paints headed a recent series, as well as Margaret Saliske, fresh from clocking in 400 hours conserving the Court Hall stencils at Olana, the famous home of Hudson River painter Frederick Church.

Ask Reggie how long it will take to complete the restoration and conservation of Howard Hall Farm and he will answer, "oh, the rest of my life." And he almost means it. This is not just a project, but also a lifestyle. "We sometimes struggle with the amount of work, living among the dirt and workers, chaos and squalor," Young exclaims, "but imagine someday we will too be past this phase with a beautiful restoration to show for it, and another slice of important Hudson river history preserved for posterity."

Already he is exploring potential television shows, podcasts, and online broadcasts. He contemplates the expansion of the educational programs and continues outreach to the community. He intends to broaden the Internship Program, and he and Nora relentlessly research and gather historical materials for the Howard Hall Farm archives. Speaking of the process, Reggie emotes a still calm as he expresses his vision for this home, and it is easy to understand his perception that this is a life long project. Sitting on the veranda with the indefatigable Reggie and hearing him calmly speak of his love of this project,

