

To know and appreciate the story of the John C. Hart Memorial Library ... we need to travel back 200 years – to 1822. That’s when John C. Hart himself was born ... right here in Shrub Oak.

John attended the District School in Shrub Oak.

As a youngster, he loved to visit his older sister in her very fine home in Shrub Oak. His sister had married John Hyatt, and they were living in the Hyatt Homestead – yes, the same East Main Street structure where the library is located today.

Nobody realized then what the homestead would go on to become.

When John was just 17 years old, he left Shrub Oak to pursue his fortunes in New York City. He went to work at a pharmacy – Wheeler & Hart – that was owned by his cousin.

Well, it didn’t take him long ... just four years ... before John bought the store outright.

The year was 1839.

John thought that was also a good year to get married.

John C. Hart – at age 21 – married a cousin, Mary Ann Allen.

Mary Ann was a widow, and she was wealthy.

She was also the daughter of Stephen Allen – a former Mayor of New York City.

John and his family had their primary home in New York City, on 14th Street. He had to spend most of his time in the City – because that’s where his pharmacy business was based

But, he loved to return to his boyhood town of Shrub Oak.

He wanted to have a place in Shrub Oak – a place to “get away to” during the summer in the countryside ... a place where he could “stay in touch with his roots”

In 1854, when John was 32, he took some of the profits from his pharmacy business and convinced his sister and John Hyatt to sell their home to him.

They went on to build another home nearby – the house now known as the Gateway Apartments.

John C. Hart and his wife Mary Ann Allen would have four children.

As the Civil War flared in the 1860s, he moved his family from 14th Street in Manhattan to East Main Street in Shrub Oak for a period of three years, before returning to the city for year-round habitation. However, they held onto the property in Shrub Oak.

One of John and Mary Ann’s daughters – Catherine Dresser – inherited the property after her parents passed away. And, upon her own death, in 1916, she bequeathed the 45 acres of land and the family homestead to the Town of Yorktown.

The town took steps to secure the property as Yorktown's first library. A Board of Trustees was appointed and, September 3, 1920 the John C. Hart Memorial Library proudly received its initial charter from the State of New York.

The structure itself underwent frequent remodeling over the years. Unfortunately, no records were left behind to tell us what was done or precisely when.

It is known that during the renovation work between 1988 and 1989, all the 19th Century addition was removed – and the oldest part of the building was gutted.

That left only the facade to project the image of the old house to passersby.

Nothing else remains except the memories recorded in letters, faded scrapbooks, an old picture of John Hart now hanging on the first floor of the current library ... and a diary!

It turns out that during those Civil War years, when the family was living full time in Shrub Oak, John C. Hart kept what was known as a "gentleman's farmer's almanac"

In it, he recorded (1) the weather, (2) dates and times of plantings, and (3) the success and failure of crops

The diary tells little of Hart's other life apart from farming – with an occasional stanza or two of poetry.

Here's an excerpt from December 2, 1866:

A most beautiful day bright clear and mild like spring -- the face of nature is very clean! All the leaves have gone long ago & the grass on the hill side and plain is quite brown but there are patches of Virginian Juniper in the rocky slopes & soft green Rye fields here and there in the landscape & flashing of the well-filled brook, winding in the valleys

I sat on a mossy stone wall by the orchard today and cracked nuts which were left by the squirrels & mused & gazed afar along the quiet scene

I was all alone – as I would wish to be ... unless with friends

Throughout the diary, he states his love of being at the Shrub Oak property ... and loathing to go back to the city to work

After his death, daughter Catherine added to the diary ... describing her father as "*slight, delicate and never having weighed more than 100 pounds.*"

She also says: "*I suppose nothing that ever happened to my father during all his life was a more wonderful thing than the owning of the Shrub Oak home*"

John Coleridge Hart and his wife are buried in the Methodist Church yard in Shrub Oak

He died much too young – at age 49 – on May 3, 1872