



Season 6, Episode 7: Front Street Blockhouse

Elyse Luray: Our final story investigates a seemingly ordinary house with a potentially extraordinary past.

February 8th, 1690: a winter storm buries the frontier village of Schenectady, New York, under six feet of snow. The community of Dutch settlers huddles together...but the bitter cold will prove the least of their worries. That night, they are attacked by a force of French soldiers and Mohawk Indians. By dawn, some sixty settlers have been killed, and Schenectady lies in ashes. 300 years later, Dan Partington and Sharon Cole of Schenectady, New York, believe their home may have a connection to these terrifying events.

Sharon: I was drawn to the house from the first moment I saw it. It pulled me right in.

Dan: It took me a little while to get used to it. It seemed to be a little ominous to me.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray, and I've come to see Dan and Sharon's Front Street home for myself.

Elyse: Wow what a beautiful house you have.

Sharon: Thank you very much.

Elyse: So tell me why am I here?

Sharon: We think our house might have been built as a blockhouse.

Elyse: And what's a blockhouse?

Dan: A blockhouse is a fort that protects the inhabitants of the area.

Elyse: And why would a fort be here?

Sharon: Well, this is the Schenectady Stockade, a very historical area, and it was the site of the French-Indian War in the 1700s.

Elyse: Sharon explains that the town's historic district was once guarded by a fortified perimeter. Three hundred years ago, this perimeter, or stockade, had lookout posts, also known as blockhouses, at each corner.

Sharon: Apparently the blockhouses were made of stone. There are no other stonewall houses here.



Elyse: Sharon and Dan have done research online, and although their house looks very different now, the basic shape of surviving blockhouses from the pre-Revolutionary-era – such as this one in Johnstown, New York – are somewhat similar.

Elyse: What exactly do you want me to find out?

Sharon: We'd like you to find out if it was built as a blockhouse.

Dan: And what year it was built.

Elyse: Dan will you come outside with me and show me the house?

Dan: Of course.

Elyse: The façade doesn't reveal much. It looks similar to the other homes on Front Street...except, Dan says, for this exposed stone along a narrow passageway. The home's been renovated over the years, and the rest of the exterior is covered in stucco. We take measurements of what looks to be the original foundation.

Elyse: How much is it?

Dan: About 24 feet.

Elyse: Ok 24 feet 5 inches. That makes the house 24 feet by approximately 24 feet. More stone is visible in the cellar, where I get a better feel for the original shape and construction of the house. All four walls of the cellar are made of stone...and continue all the way up to the attic, two stories above. Wow! Up here, I also find several wooden beams that look very old. It's almost like there's a hidden part of the house up here. It's really incredible. Dating houses isn't my specialty, so I'm not sure if this wood was part of the original construction. If the house was indeed built during the French and Indian War, these beams could be 300 years old – and make the house a rare surviving structure from our pre-Revolutionary past. I want to get the timbers from the attic dated. But first, I'll need to learn more about why Schenectady needed the protection of a fortified stockade.

Mary Beth: Hi, Elyse, nice to meet you. I'm Mary Beth.

Elyse: Historian Mary Beth Norton has studied the early history of New York State, where an early source conflict was the great wealth that came from trapping and trading furs.



Mary Beth: The French, the Dutch, the English were all fighting over who were to be the people who had the right to trade with the Indians to get the furs that everybody in Europe wanted.

Elyse: Mary Beth says upstate New York was mostly wilderness then, and on the frontier of the British Empire in North America. But it was also a frontline of the struggle to control the fur trade. Whoever controlled the town would gain an upper hand.

Mary Beth: Schenectady was founded in 1661 and it was picked as a site for settlement because it's on the Mohawk River and furs which were the most desirable commodity could be moved most easily by water.

Elyse: I tell Mary Beth about my investigation. She says the first blockhouses and stockade were made of wood, not stone. But on the night of February 8th that stockade would fail a critical test, as the town came became a battleground for two European superpowers.

Mary Beth: In February of 1690 a group of French and Indians came down from Montréal in an overland expedition in the middle of the winter.

Elyse: Mary Beth says a harsh winter storm gave the town a false sense of security. As the villagers slept, the attackers slipped past the stockade through an open gate, and laid siege to the settlement. Some of the townspeople who initially escaped the carnage froze to death in the surrounding woods. The wooden blockhouses and stockade were burned. What was the reaction to it, did they rebuild the towns, did they leave?

Mary Beth: The town was ultimately rebuilt because it was too valuable for the fur trade to be abandoned even after that attack.

Elyse: But this time, Mary Beth explains, the blockhouses were made of stone instead of wood, and raised two stories high to allow guards to fire down on attackers. Was Dan and Sharon's home part of this rebuilt stockade? Mary Beth can't say. But she does doubt that their home was originally built as a residence.

Mary Beth: That's unlikely to have been a regular house.

Elyse: Why is that?

Mary Beth: Because at the time people both Dutch and English people tended to build houses that were rectangular in shape, they would be like 20 by 40 feet.



Elyse: I'm heading back to the house on Front Street – this time with dendrochronologist Carol Griggs of Cornell University. She's agreed to help date the wood in the attic.

Carol: We look for samples that have a lot of rings in them, and you can usually see on the outside at least an outline of the ring structure.

Elyse: She determines age by drilling cores from the beams and analyzing the tree rings.

Carol: We look for the larger beams, we look for anything that still has bark on it, and there are a few here, and then we go from there, and then we start drilling.

Elyse: It doesn't hurt the foundation of the house?

Carol: No, it's too small and it just takes out one small part of the outside of the structure.

Elyse: After drilling a dozen cores in the attic and cellar, Carol heads back to the lab. While I wait for her results, I want to find out more about how the colony rebuilt itself after the massacre, and whether any other structure once stood on the site of 9 Front Street. The Efner Center in Schenectady houses some of the town's oldest documents. I locate a text called *A History of the Schenectady Patent in the Dutch and English Times*. It's a collection of correspondence spanning Schenectady's life, from the 1600's to the 1800's. The 1690 massacre left the survivors in a state of terror, and desperate for new fortifications. In 1696, six years after the attack, letters from Schenectady's townspeople make clear that the town lived in fear of additional attacks. As the new century began, British Governor Cornbury in New York sought to ease those fears by allocating funds to build stronger fortifications. Here's a reference about the need to fortify the town after the massacre, and it says they're bringing stone up the river. This is interesting. It says here that the blockhouses were 24 feet square. I don't find anything on where the new stone fortifications were constructed – but I do unearth a possible clue. Listen to this. The writer is led to believe from references in the records that the first blockhouse was in the north angle of the stockade at or near the junction of Front and Washington Street. This was destroyed in 1690 by the French. Front and Washington is very close to Dan and Sharon's house. If the new stone fortifications were built near this original site, then it's possible 9 Front Street was built as a blockhouse. It's time to check back with Carol whose lab has now dated the beams from the house. OK. So these are the wood samples? Carol has prepared the core samples by gluing them back together and sanding the edges to expose the tree rings. She uses a high-powered microscope to measure the distance between each ring – represented in this graph. The compiled measurements create a unique and remarkably precise timeline of that wood's lifespan.



Carol: We're going to match their patterns with the master chronology that we have from New York State 500 years long.

Elyse: So it's like a fingerprint?

Carol: It's very much a fingerprint of how the trees grew over time.

Elyse: Her results are dramatic...the wood is almost 300 years old.

Carol: We found in the hemlocks there were three samples. They date back to 1727.

Elyse: Those are some of the oldest samples she's taken from Schenectady. But I'm not quite sure how to interpret this; 1727 is more than two decades after we know Governor Cornbury requested stone be brought upriver to rebuild the town. Schenectady County and City historian Don Rittner believes he may be able to account for this. He says rebuilding the town took decades.

Don: Between 1690, the massacre, and in about 1740's, the whole, what we call today the city or the village of Schenectady, was being rebuilt.

Elyse: According to Don, our wood could easily have been part of the new stone blockhouses.

Don: The 1727 date would fall well within that time frame when they were rebuilding the fortifications.

Elyse: The very existence of stone in Dan and Sharon's house may be the most important clue that the home once protected Schenectady.

Don: There's no stone in Schenectady. They would have been using limestone, or blue stone, and we don't have that in Schenectady County. We know as early as 1701 from the colonial records that there was a demand that every sloop that came up the Hudson bring stone with it. It wouldn't have been easy to bring it up and it wasn't cheap, so it probably was only used for military fortifications. So it makes a lot of sense, you know, at least circumstantially that the building that you have might be a blockhouse.

Elyse: Don offers to help me search in some of the early town maps for a record of the Front Street home.

Don: This is oldest Schenectady map known to exist. This was done in 1698 by Wolfgang Romer. It shows a little fort called the King's Fort.



Elyse: Eight years after the slaughter and fire, Schenectady was rising from the ashes.

Don: This is where the survivors of the massacre lived and then went out and started to rebuild their village. So, what you'll see here is a number of houses already rebuilt. That is a propose fort and in fact that is an area where your building exist although it just shows an area that has been sort of burned over.

Elyse: But there's a potential problem...there is nothing there? There was still no blockhouse at 9 Front Street eight years after the massacre. And a map from about 60 years later shows no blockhouse at that location either. It looks like Dan and Sharon may be wrong about their home.

Don: Here is Washington. There is Front Street.

Elyse: Right. The map is a riddle – there's no blockhouse on Front Street, but there is a structure several hundred feet from where Dan and Sharon's house now stands.

Don: There is blockhouse sort of directly below where your building is. Which is closer to the river. About 600 feet from your building.

Elyse: According to this map, it doesn't appear that Dan and Sharon's home was ever part of any kind of defensive structure. So, maybe our house isn't a blockhouse? Don doesn't know what to make of this.

Don: Your building is sort of the right size and shape and right location. Maybe what we should do is look at some of the colonial documents.

Elyse: It takes a while, but Don and I eventually uncover a document that unknots our mystery. It's a letter from Governor Cornbury... with a plan to prevent a repeat of the 1690 French attack. Ah, this is interesting! It's time to tell Dan and Sharon what I've learned about their home. The first thing you asked me was about the date and you know that we had the wood tested. If we had to date your house, we'd date it around 1727.

Sharon: Wow.

Dan: That was a long time ago.

Sharon: That's fantastic.

Elyse: The other question you asked me was do you have a blockhouse?



Elyse: I tell Sharon and Dan that the wood dating, the stone, and the dimensions of the house were all signs that their home had been an early fortification. But without the letter from the British Governor of New York, I would never have solved our riddle. Why did maps of the period show the blockhouse to be in a different location –six hundred feet from their home? It says that Governor Cornbury ordered the stockade along Washington to be moved closer to the river. So that explains it, the blockhouse on the 1756 map, was a new blockhouse. Dan and Sharon’s home on Front Street was most likely built in the early 1700’s following the massacre. But when the town grew and the stockade was expanded and moved closer to the river, that blockhouse was abandoned for other uses. So I’m happy to tell you that in my opinion, you really do have a blockhouse.

Sharon: I’m thrilled it’s a blockhouse. I am in shock. You know what makes it extra special at this point now is that, when you think about it, without 9 Front Street, the other houses probably wouldn’t even be here.

Elyse: By the time the American Revolution began, Schenectady was already more than 110 years old. Its stockade fortified with blockhouses provided safe haven for residents of the Mohawk Valley, for wounded soldiers seeking treatment, and for Schenectady’s local militia – the 2nd Albany County militia regiment – which took part in the pivotal battle of Saratoga.