

Washington Irving Didn't Sleep Here, But...

There is an “oral tradition” story that because the famous writer Washington Irving visited the Allyn Boardman house in south Seneca County, there is an illustration in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” showing Ichabod Crane telling a story to family members in a kitchen—the kitchen of this Allyn Boardman house. Washington Irving is famous for two short stories—“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle.” He was probably the first American writer to make a living as a writer. The oral tradition story comes from the 1890s when Emily Boardman, one of Allyn and Phoebe Boardman’s daughters, told the details of the story as she remembered them, at the time she was about five years old. Gerald Collins, who with his wife Eileen are the current owners of this Allyn Boardman house which they operate as the Copper Beacons Bed and Breakfast, contacted me to write this article.

Could it be that the illustration in Washington Irving’s famous short story was really based on the kitchen of the Allyn Boardman house? That is a question that intrigued me as Seneca County Historian. My easy response to that question could have been “no,” simply



because the original printed version of the story, contained in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* in spring 1819, didn't contain this illustration. (Geoffrey Crayon was a pen name used by Washington Irving.)

Gerald Collins’ research, however, provides “circumstantial” information that lends much credence to the story. Just because Washington Irving’s *Sketchbook* was published in 1819 while Irving was in England, does not mean that he didn't ever visit the Allyn Boardman house. There is evidence that during the War of

1812, Washington Irving served on the staff of Daniel Tompkins, the governor of New York and the commander of the New York State Militia. In that capacity, Washington Irving went to Sacketts Harbor on Lake Ontario in late September/early October 1814, to deliver some orders. He is given as much as three weeks to do this and return to Albany. Completing his official task in just a few days, Irving might well have taken an alternate route back to Albany, a route taking him through southern Seneca County. Very likely, he wouldn't “document” these kinds of activities while he was on official duty, so it would not be surprising not to find clear evidence of his day-by-day itinerary. Given that Allyn Boardman was a prosperous entrepreneur who had built a nice five-bay Federal-style house, it is very possible that Irving might have made a stop there. Possibly the kitchen of that house would have had some special qualities that would have been ingrained in Irving’s memories.

Add to all this the fact that the Literary Guild commissioned a complete revision of Washington Irving’s works in the 1840s. It is this revised edition of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” short story that contains an illustration of Ichabod Crane sitting at the kitchen table with

others gathered around him. This illustration was done by Felix O.C. Farley, who worked very closely with Washington Irving. Irving could very well have recalled some special kitchen in his memory that he would have described for the artist to then create an illustration. The illustration does show an infant in a cradle near the kitchen table. This could be the young Emily who over 80 years later would tell about Washington Irving's visit and get some of the family's "oral tradition" story a little mixed up in terms of how old she was at the time of his visit. The sketch shows a baby in a cradle. Because Emily Boardman was born in June 1814, she would have been about four months old in late September/early October 1814—the time period that Washington Irving might well have visited on his way back to Albany from delivering the orders to Sacketts Harbor.

Were there enough "unique" features of that Boardman kitchen to have made enough of an impression on Irving that he would have suggested that Farley use that kitchen as the setting for the illustration to go with the revised printing of the story? When I visited the house in early fall 2009, I took several pictures of the kitchen. Despite some alterations, the kitchen retains much evidence of what it would have looked like in its early years—exposed ceiling beams, plank flooring, etc. The kitchen had a "charm" that made a distinct impression upon me. It could



have had somewhat the same effect upon Irving over 150 years ago, who, if he visited, probably came on horseback, arriving at this house after hours of travel, perhaps in inclement fall weather, and found the hospitality of a fellow European-ancestry family a welcome relief!

What we have is valid reason to consider that it is very possible that Washington Irving did visit this Allyn Boardman house. I hope that others will contact with information and their thoughts on this oral tradition.

