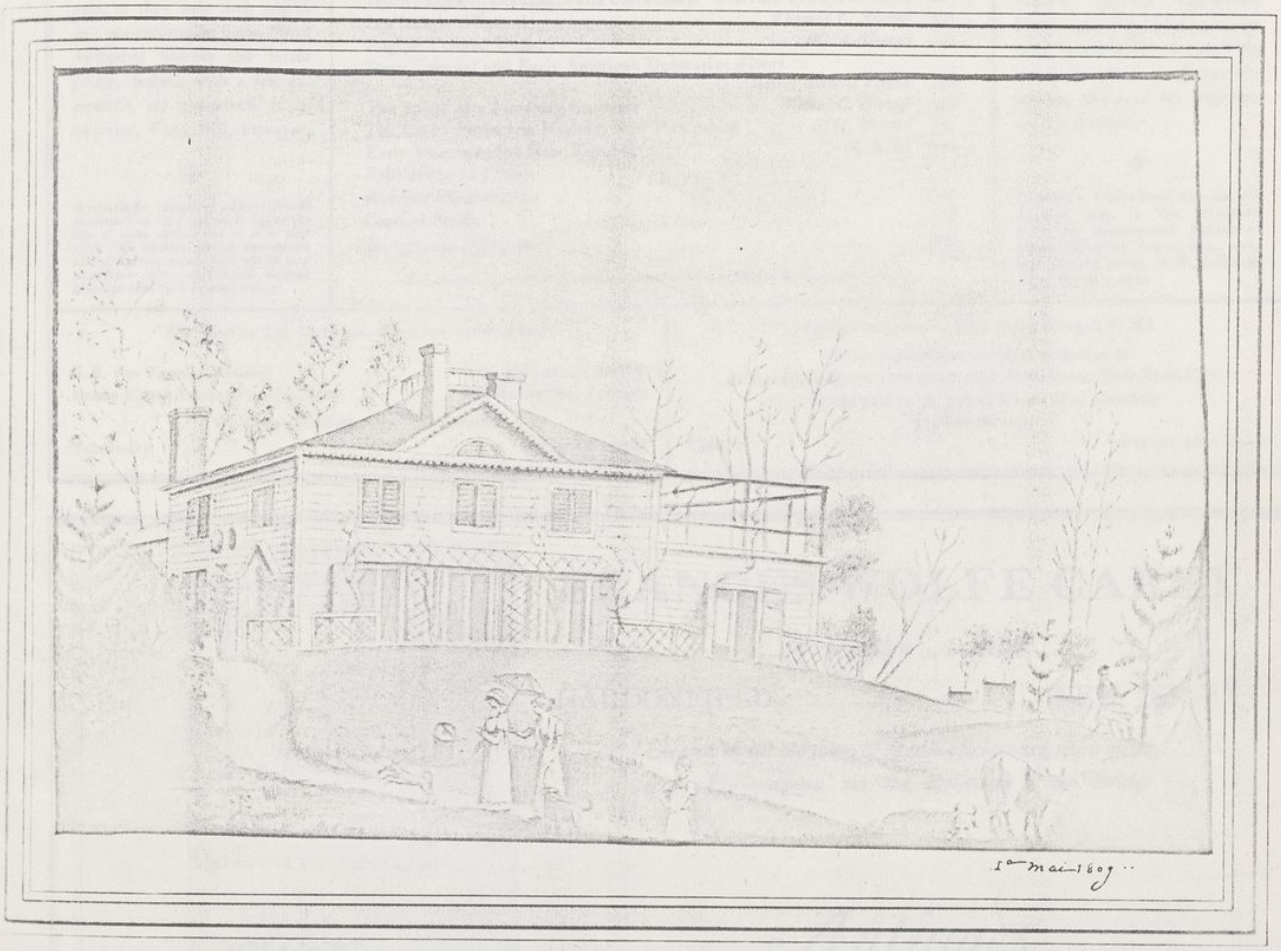
The Magazine

ANTIQUES



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Homer Eaton Keyes, *Editor*
Alice Van Leer Carrick, *Editorial Consultant*

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C. B. Van Tassel, *President* — C. F. Baecker, *Treasurer*
Homer Eaton Keyes, *Vice-President* — O. N. Gorton, *Secretary*
William H. Osgood, *Business Manager*

Telephone — Bogardus 4–6789

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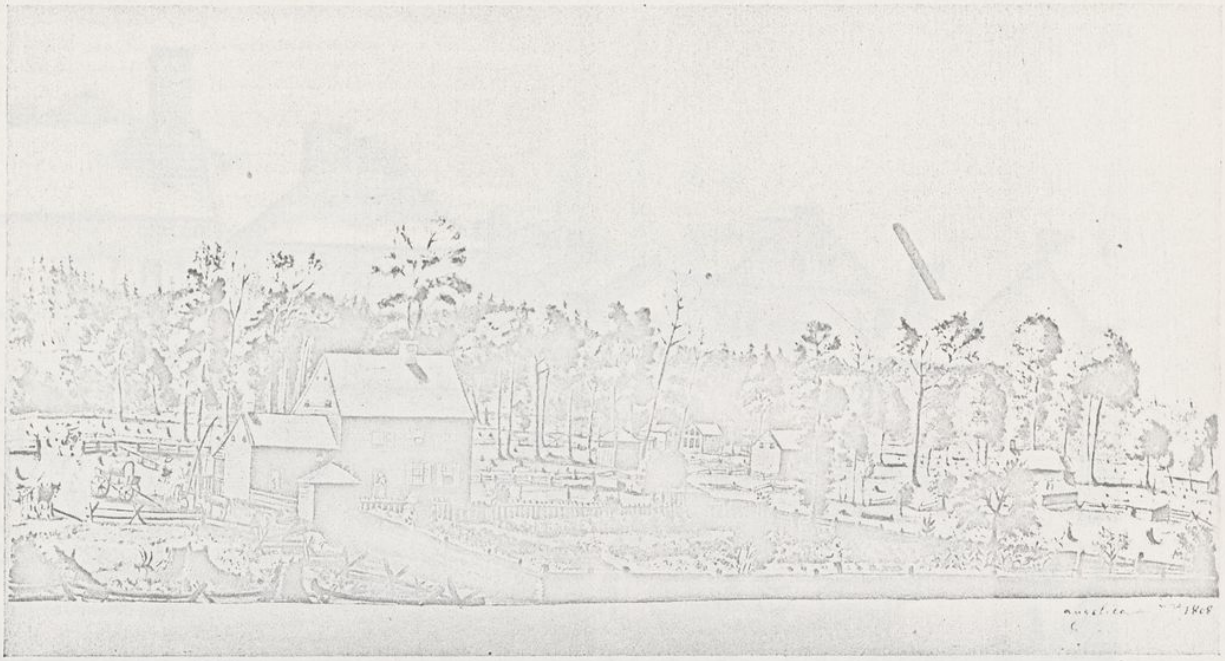


ANGELICA, NEW YORK (*1808*)
From a water-color drawing by the Baroness Hyde de Neuville.
This and other illustrations, including the Cover, from the collection of Kennedy & Company

Early Visions of the New Republic

A GALLERY NOTE BY H. E. K.

ON SATURDAY, June 20, 1807, two distinguished French refugees landed in New York from the ship *Golden Age*, fifty days from Barcelona. They were Hyde de Neuville, exiled supporter of the ill-fated Bourbon monarchy, and his devoted wife, the former Mlle. Rouillé de Marigny. At the time of their arrival in this strange new world, the pair had already been thirteen years married. Together they had lived through the tumultuous years following the French Revolution. Likewise they had survived Monsieur's refusal to take the oath of fidelity to the Emperor Napoleon, though that stiff-necked behavior had necessitated the seeking of an asylum across the sea.

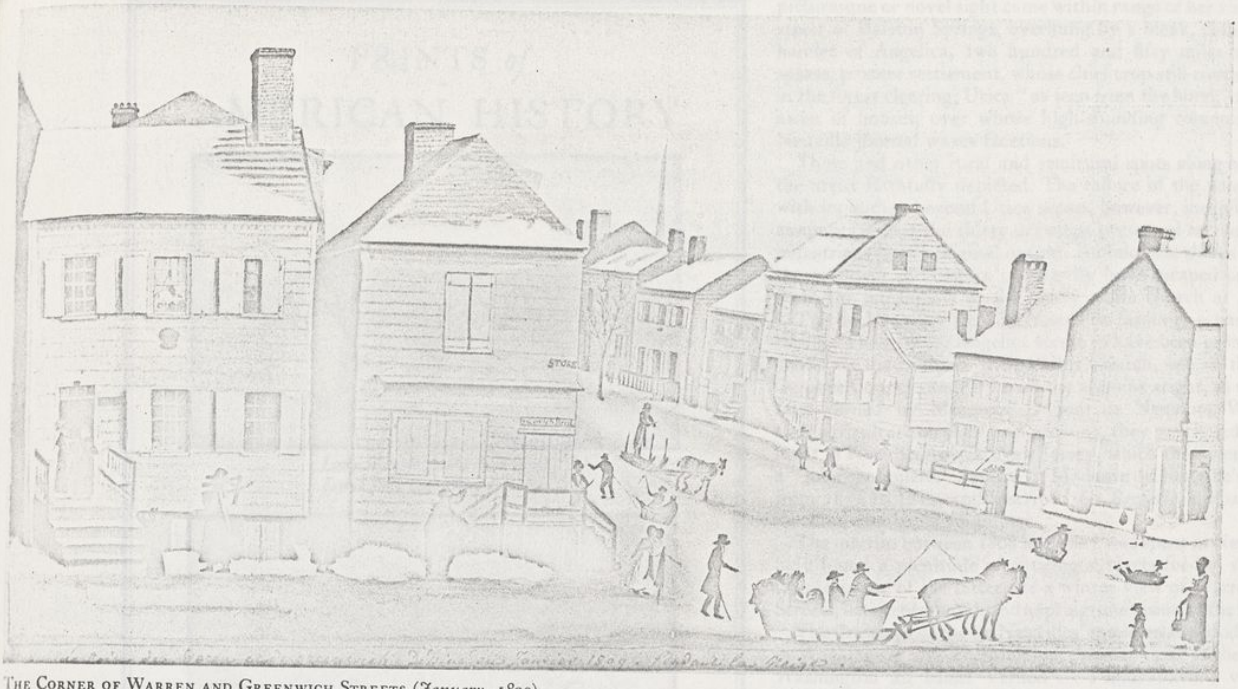
Their sojourn in the United States continued, without interruption, until 1814, when, learning of Napoleon's imminent return from Elba, de Neuville hurried home to warn Europe of the impending crisis. By the time of his arrival, the news was already a matter of common knowledge; but the messenger's faithfulness was, nevertheless, rewarded — after a fashion. Louis XVIII, realizing the value of the former exile's familiarity with life and manners in the new American republic, promptly shipped him back, this time as minister from France with the title of Baron.

Madame de Neuville, who seems to have clung closely to her husband's side, accompanied him on his mission. This second sojourn in the United States lasted five years, though it was broken by one visit to France. In 1821, having completed his mission in the United States, de Neuville was transferred to a ministerial berth in Portugal. His subsequent career has no bearing on the purpose of these notes. Suffice it to say that the old diplomat endured to the ripe age of eighty-one, and died in Paris, May 28, 1857. His wife had preceded him into the better land by some seven years, probably in her usual rôle of intercessor in his behalf.

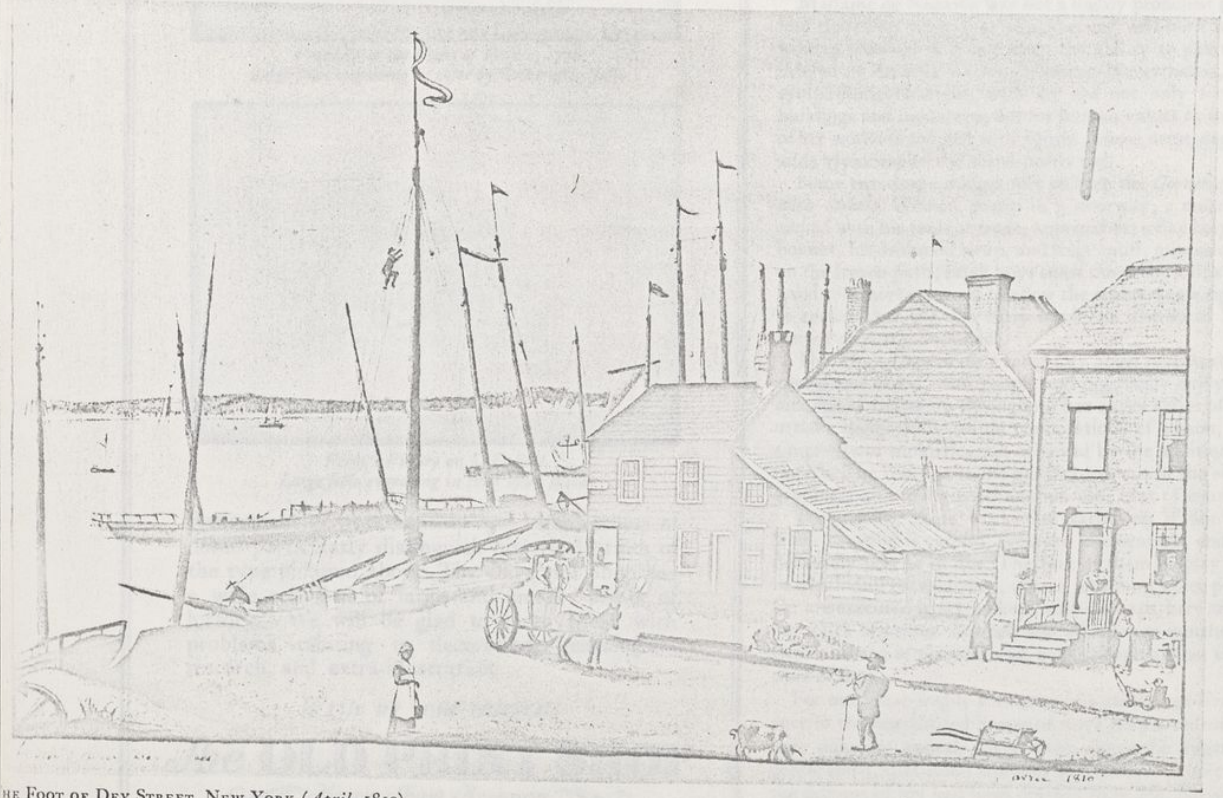
To the American experiences of the Baron and Baroness Hyde de Neuville is devoted a part of the three volumes, *Mémoires et Souvenirs*, in which are published the diplomat's personal journal and selections from his voluminous correspondence. This work has always been considered of value as reflecting political and social conditions in the United States during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Recently, however, it has assumed a fresh significance through the discovery, in Paris, of a number of water-color drawings of American scenes executed by the Baroness. Some thirty in all, these drawings are now on display at the galleries of Kennedy & Company, 785 Fifth Avenue, New York.

Quite naturally, as well as obviously, they fall into two distinct groups: those painted during the de Neuvilles' period of exile (*1807–1814*), and those belonging to the couple's term of official residence (*1816–1821*). In many respects, the pictures of the first group are the more varied and interesting. Soon after arriving in this country, the refugee pair made an extensive trip through New York State, traveling up the Hudson as far as Albany; thence to Balston Springs — already a health resort — and westward to Buffalo. On the first of September they saw "cette fameuse chute de Niagara." After that climax to their adventure, they returned to Albany, where they embarked by boat for New York. The winter of 1808 was spent in town, in a dwelling on or near Warren Street.

Apparently, while the Baron busied himself with writing his journal, his helpmeet occupied her time by recording whatever



THE CORNER OF WARREN AND GREENWICH STREETS (*January, 1809*)
From a water-color drawing by the Baroness Hyde de Neuville



THE FOOT OF DEY STREET, NEW YORK (*April, 1810*)
From a water-color drawing by the Baroness Hyde de Neuville

picturesque or novel sight came within range of her vision: the straggling street of Balston Springs, overhung by a bleak, deforested hillside; the hamlet of Angelica, two hundred and fifty miles west of Albany, a sparse, pioneer settlement, whose chief crop still consisted of tree stumps in the forest clearing; Utica "as seen from the hotel," a dismal agglomeration of houses, over whose high-sounding community name the de Neuville journal waxes facetious.

These and other rural and semirural spots along her route of travel the artist faithfully depicted. The failure of the panorama to progress with its author beyond Utica seems, however, inexplicable, save on the assumption that the thirty drawings preserved are but a fraction of the industrious lady's original output. Buffalo, the shores of Lake Erie, and the grandeur of Niagara can hardly have escaped one who paused to trace the lineaments of the lonely white church at Amsterdam.

The de Neuvilles were interested in farming — particularly in sheep raising. Their trip to Angelica seems to have been prompted by a wish to confer on that subject with Philip Church, one of the first settlers in Genesee County; and, if I read the account aright, to visit a neighboring farm owned by Monsieur Dupont de Nemours. When they undertook agriculture on their own account, they purchased a small establishment in New Brunswick, New Jersey, which they soon transformed into a "jolie chaumière." Several of Madame de Neuville's drawings, dating from 1811 to 1814, and inscribed *La Bergerie*, probably represent this dwelling and its surroundings.

The interim between 1808 and 1811 was spent in New York, where the lady found a plenitude of enticing subjects for her sketches; the most characteristic of the latter are a winter view of Warren and Greenwich Streets, here reproduced, and a springtime vision of the foot of Dey Street.

The drawings of the de Neuvilles' ministerial period were done chiefly in Washington and Philadelphia. Among them is the tomb "du grand Washington au Mont Vernon . . . nous l'avons visitée le 22 juin, 1818." With New England the Baron and Baroness seem to have had little acquaintance, though, in the spring of 1814, they spent some time in "le petit port de Newhaven," whence they expected, at any moment, to depart on their way to warn Europe of Napoleon's contemplated eruption.

Madame de Neuville was not a highly proficient painter. Her training had doubtless been that which every well-born and well-bred young woman received in a day when the ability to paint and draw was considered an essential accomplishment. Nevertheless, she was a keen and sympathetic observer, with an eye not only for the picturesque in buildings and landscape, but for human values as well. Nearly every one of her works is peopled with figures, whose dress, deportment, or position adds vividness to the scene portrayed.

Some two dozen midget folk enliven the *Corner of Warren and Greenwich Streets*. Women gossip in a doorway; a mendicant wood sawyer, armed with his tools of trade, approaches; a fine lady, adorned with poke bonnet, fur-trimmed wrap, and huge muff, minces carefully lest she slip on the frozen path; small boys coast down the hill; a sleigh drawn by two handsome horses pauses to allow the coasters safe right of way. It is hard to realize that the now busy wholesale district of New York ever presented so rustic an aspect.

The *River Scene at the Foot of Dey Street* reveals the old city in mellow springtime mood, with people and pigs lazily enjoying the balmy April air. Again and again throughout her entire series of studies, we find the artist's delightfully subtle connotations of season, of domestic life, of simplicity or sophistication achieved by the addition of a few significant details. The result is to lift her pictures out of the realm of purely topographical and historic delineation into that of convincing narrative.

Technically, these works are satisfying if not highly stimulating. Their drawing is careful, accurate in essentials, and, for the most part, delicately precise in line. The best of them display a restricted palette, in which dull reds, browns, ochres, and faint blues predominate. A number are executed in sepia alone, with perhaps, here and there, a heightening touch of yellow. But one and all manage somehow to suggest a particular season of the year and, even though almost shadowless, a certain time of day.

For me, these fragile souvenirs of a cultivated French woman's existence in the raw United States of more than a century ago have a singularly poignant appeal. About them clings the fragrance of a sweet and gentle spirit, that could still find happiness in simple things — long after the fullness of joy had been drained from life. No effort of the imagination is needed to realize that their making must have brought some surcease from the bitterness of exile and the loneliness of strange and often uncouth surroundings.