

# Peekskill

## Building an Arts-Friendly City

by [Goldee Greene](#) and photographs by [Dale Leifeste](#), [Susanne Moss](#), May 26, 2010



Clockwise from upper left: mural on Division Street; Inge Dube at Driftwood Gallery; Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art; Bruised Apple Bookstore

Peekskill could be nicknamed Hill ‘n’ Dalesville. This northernmost Westchester city was built on a bunch of mini-mountains overlooking the Hudson. Major hills like Mortgage, Chapel, Drum, Fort, and Society range from 300 to 400 feet high, with 600-foot Jacobs among the highest. Blue Mountain Reservation is over 700 feet, rising within city limits before spilling over southwards into Yorktown Heights.

Peekskill’s variable topography suits its evolving persona. Settled by the Dutch in the 1600s, it is reawakening like other Hudson River towns after decades of urban decline. Its 24,000 residents—including business owners, newly located artists, artisans, and other professionals—seem to relish the rarefied sensation of change within the context of solid, granite stability. And as a whole they’re feisty enough to fight for history, the environment, and people-friendly communities.

“More and more we see people coming to Peekskill to do work they’re passionate about,” says Mayor Mary Foster, in her spacious City Hall office on downtown Main Street and Nelson Avenue. The ebullient Pace University-trained CPA is in her second term.

“Writers, chefs, web designers, music teachers, videographers—the list goes on and on. And the passion for their work goes back into the community. We’re bringing Peekskill back to life with our diversity. Over 30 languages are spoken here.

Nonostentation in Peekskill is key. “You don’t have to have million-dollar mansions to have a great neighborhood. What’s more important are things like landscaping, fencing, litter-free fences and fresh coats of paint,” says Foster.

Chris Marras is the economic development specialist hired by the city's Department of Planning and Development. "My job is to help business retention and use the success of the arts community to get Peekskill on the public's radar screen," he says. "We're working with city landlords to find artists for live/work lofts." This is an expansion of the city's successful 28-unit Peekskill Art Lofts, which provides affordable housing for professional artists. Another vital connection between the city, business, and artists will be huge murals, coordinated by the Peekskill Arts Council, painted between the arches on the new Route 9 overpass.

### **City of Artists**

Larry D'Amico is president of the Peekskill Arts Council, formed in 1995, with over 100 members. Many have come to Peekskill to live at Peekskill Art Lofts. His light-filled, duplex art studio where he creates stunning acrylic landscapes would be the envy of any artist. Housed in the old Field, Library built in 1845, on the corner of Union and South, the space is currently dominated by the beginnings of the city's next outdoor mural.

"The Collaborative Mural Project invites seniors to partake in making large works of lasting, public art, thanks to grants from the Andrus Foundation. We've already produced two, based on Van Gogh's Sunflowers and Roses and Oleander that are already installed. The third here will be more abstract, based on the gridlike work of Sean Scully," D'Amico says, indicating the work-in-process set up on a huge table in the center of the studio. "Each artist paints a square for a combination of designs that make up the whole."

PAC member Sone Tower added her insight. "This is an art town, so people are always saying we need more art. And we have so many great ones, like Carla Rae Johnson, Wilfredo Morel, Susan Weinreich, Wendy Garber at the Flatiron Gallery, and so many others." The Peekskill Arts Council will be hosting its 13th annual open studio tour on June 5 and 6, when the public can visit 32 artists in the spaces where they work, and a dozen special exhibitions will be displayed in galleries and museums across the city.

Visual art is not the only creative engine in town. In April, HBO was in town to film a remake of Mildred Pierce starring Kate Winslet. The crew temporarily transformed parts of the city into 1930s Los Angeles. Local residents, including City Historian John Curran, were hired as extras.



Serge Onnen's sculpture "Planetariummonetarium" on the riverfront in Peekskill, part of the "Double Dutch" exhibit by the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art.

### **Law of Attraction**

The Peekskill Business Improvement District started in 1995. More than installing and maintaining fragrant flowerpots and banners, it produces concerts and other events. President Patty Villanova, a skillful textile designer and owner of Side Effects/NY boutique, has a wistful demeanor a bit like Dylan's "Sad-eyed Lady of the Lowlands." "I remember when this town was booming when I was a kid in the '50s," says Villanova. "Shops of all kinds, bars, restaurants, parades, movies at the Paramount, you name it. And crowds of people out and about. Then in the '70s, things just closed down. People moved out and the city seemed just a shell. In the '90s, artists starting coming to live in lofts, and now young professionals in their thirties and forties are really attracted to Peekskill. Let's face it: This is one of the last places in Westchester where you can get a house that is reasonably priced."

At the corner of North Division and Park, William Powers, acting president/CEO of the Hudson Valley Gateway Chamber of Commerce, emphasizes the city's primary focus over the past 10 to 15 years. "We're utilizing artists, their artwork, and skills to really incorporate them into the community," he says. "Artists from all over the region come here because it's an artist-friendly town. Between the business community, artists and local government, it's been a good blend and that's good for the economy. Also, the Paramount Center for the Arts is an incredible anchor." The 1,500-seat Art Deco masterpiece opened in 1930 with *The Big Pond* starring Maurice Chevalier and Claudette Colbert. Now it has been spectacularly renovated and presents about 60 concerts a year by headliners such as Doctor John, the Beach Boys, and Smokey Robinson.

Longtime faves like the Bruised Apple Bookstore, Division Street Grill, and the Peekskill Coffeehouse still top every Peekskill-phile's list. But downtown's girth is expanding beyond the North Division corridor as increased traffic from shoppers and diners support businesses. "This is not a one-street town anymore!" notes Ted Bitter, owner of the 15-month-old Bean Runner, located in a former hairnet factory. This elegant yet cozy restaurant's 1850 brick walls prominently display local artwork. It also features a large children's playroom and a music performance stage. "We have jazz, R&B, and pop music every weekend, and the joint is jammed," he says. The Birdsall House is another recently opened old-made-new hot spot, featuring small production breweries—with an emphasis on New York—and farm-to-table cuisine powered by local providers.

The city's diverse Hispanic presence offers not only Mexican, but Guatemalan, Columbian, Puerto Rican, and Cuban cuisines. And Ruben's Cafe on North Division serves a mixed bag of music along with Mexican fare.

### **Hello, Yellow Brick Road**

All Peekskill foothills eventually lead to the river, with a spectacular view of the Bear Mountain range. Riverfront Green Park, with public waterfront access, is adjacent to the Metro-North station. One could never tire of seeing a southbound train coming `round the

mountain from Garrison, arriving in Peekskill in a dramatic circular swoop. Then here comes the outbound that left Grand Central Station a scant 55 minutes ago.

“On the way home, who can resist a stop at the Peekskill Brewery?” asked assistant manager Morgan Beradi. “We’ve got a New American menu restaurant and a brewpub with our flagship beer, Pale Ale. Another favorite is Yellow Brick Road Ale.” This was microbrewed in response to strong evidence that a fading yellow brick road near Hudson Street informed the fictional one in L. Frank Baum’s Wizard of Oz. Baum was born in Kansas, but attended Peekskill Military Academy in the 1860s. The road existed at that time, extending to a portion off Water Street, behind the landmark 1855 Standard House building.

Historically speaking, the city is working with Scenic Hudson Land Trust on two new waterfront parks adjacent to Riverfront Green Park, one being the four-acre Peekskill Landing Park and the other is the Lincoln Depot Museum and Plaza. This is sited near the railroad tracks where Lincoln spoke to a crowd of 3,000 en route to his inauguration in 1861. Four years later, Lincoln’s funeral train also stopped in here, a city with several Underground Railroad sites.

Downtown and the waterfront, although topographically separate, are two faces of the Peekskill coin. “Both areas feed and nurture each other as residents, artists, businesses, and visitors flow uphill from the river to town and visa versa,” mused artist and Driftwood Studio Gallery owner Inge Dube, on North Division Street. “I love going to the waterfront where I find, well, driftwood. I consider that nature’s sculpture. At the same time, I think of downtown as Peekskill’s windows on the waterfront.”

“The Metro-North station on the riverfront is a really important gateway to the city,” says Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art assistant executive director Jessica Denaro. “We’re located downtown, but we also exhibit on the waterfront. Our latest is the Double-Dutch series.” Many of the artworks in this exhibition of emerging Dutch artists have site-specific works on the waterfront.

City Historian John Curran touts recent as well as seasoned yore. “Former governor and Peekskill mayor George Pataki is a Peekskill High grad. So is NBA star Elton Brand, who rose from humble beginnings at the Dunbar Heights Housing Projects. He’s currently on the LA Clippers. Actor Mel Gibson lived here till he was 12.” Curran runs the Peekskill Museum, quartered in one of the city’s many “painted lady” Victorians. The former Herrick House is a sensibly majestic, multigabled specimen of 1870’s elegance. Inside is a wealth of Victorian and Revolutionary War exhibits, including an original redcoat of a British soldier captured on Drum Hill that is eerily still bright-as-new.

Arlene Daigle is a sculptor and longtime Peekskill resident who has lived both on the waterfront and downtown. She summed up the city’s arduous journey as she sat in front of Bruised Apple Books. “In a way there’s chaos because so many things have been broken and need to be fixed here,” Daigle says. “There is no right way to do things, and

the many points of view will have to be channeled. This includes the movement to decommission Indian Point in the next couple of years. We're in for a lot of noise!"