



The Roost

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IRVINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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2003

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The McVickar House

Dear Members:

On March 14th, the New York State Board for Historic Preservation reviewed The McVickar House's application for listing on the State Register of Historic Places. We are pleased to announce that the house's application has been approved and the Board has recommended the nomination. The application will now be sent to the Commissioner for his signature. The Commissioner then lists the property on the State Register and forwards it to the National Park Service for review and listing on the National Register.



Signs of the extensive interior demolition of the McVickar House.

Meanwhile, here on Main Street, the McVickar House may look sadder on the outside but not so on the inside! Certainly those who have passed by over the past several weeks, have seen the signs of the extensive interior demolition underway.



The interior demolition was completed on time and under budget.

With the interior demolition done (under budget), we now have the opportunity to examine the infrastructure

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The McVickar House, continued

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for any weaknesses not seen during early inspections. We also can now plan which interior walls we might move or remove to utilize space to the maximum.

On the main floor there will be three areas (rooms) for exhibition. The Warnock Room will house exhibits on the history of Irvington. The larger main room will have rotating exhibitions and the enclosed porch area may focus on people important to our village's history.

The lower level (basement) will house the Education workshop and resource area. This area will house and display educational items in our collection. Some such items would be games and toys from days gone by, old-fashioned school day needs, and examples of dress. We look forward to hosting local students for workshops, craft projects and educational programs.

The second floor will house the Society's library, the Trustees Meeting Room, and office space for the Society, the Village Historian, and the Curator.

The third floor will hold our map, gown and accessory collection and provide additional workspace for the curator.

The budget for this extensive renovation/restoration is \$450,000. Initially, several private donors pledged a base of \$230,000. Now we have appealed to our membership to raise funds toward our goal. I have already had the privilege of thanking many of you for your generosity and I look forward to thanking each and every member of the Society. We are half way there. However, we have a long way to go. The challenge is exciting because the McVickar House is for all of us. Thank you for caring about our village's history. ❧

Betsy Griggs Wilson

President of the Board of Trustees

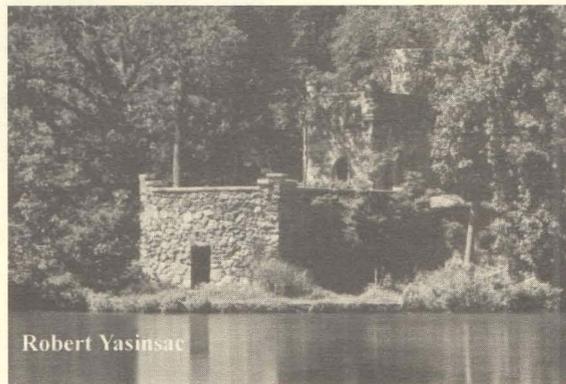
Irvington Historical Society



May Program

On Friday May 9th, the Irvington Historical Society will present an illustrated slide presentation "Hudson Valley Ruins" by Rob Yasinsac. A graduate of Irvington High School and the State University of New York at Oswego, Yasinsac is an award winning photographer with a vast knowledge of the Hudson Valley. His slides depicting the historic mansions, estates, abandoned buildings and ruins of the region provide a unique perspective into the history of the area.

We will travel along both sides of the Hudson River, from Rockland County to Greene County and from Westchester County to Columbia County. Those who have had an opportunity to see Mr. Yasinsac's work in the past know that this is an evening not to be missed. So please join us. The program will be presented in the Program Room of the Irvington Library at 8P.M. ❧



A recent photograph of the Beltzhoover-Halsey Tea House taken by Rob Yasinsac.

The Beltzhoover—Halsey Castle

This article, originally written by Lee Barton, was adapted from the March 1978 edition of *The Roost*

“Rochroane”, set off Harriman Road in Irvington, was one of the most beautiful castles along the Hudson. It was a replica of a German castle on the Rhine; the architect, Arthur J. Manning, of New York City, was instructed to copy the original “to the smallest detail, even to its defects.”

The castle was built in 1905 for Melchior S. Beltzhoover and the stone was quarried from the land upon which it was built. Mr. Beltzhoover had previously been living on an estate on Broadway where he had a dairy farm. At the castle, the cows were kept in a large barn and field near the present day Lewis Road.

The Beltzhoovers were originally from Natchez, Mississippi. They kept their family home there and would return to it every winter. Melchior Beltzhoover was village president of Irvington from 1904 to 1916, serving without pay. His popularity caused him to be placed on both village tickets in 1905; he received all the votes (426) cast for this office that year. He had previously served as a trustee from 1902 to 1904 and became the first president of the Irvington National Bank in July, 1902.



Melchior Stewart Beltzhoover, born May 14, 1868 and died July 20, 1918. Beltzhoover went to school in Europe until he was 21. He spent a great deal of time in Germany and was so inspired by Castle Rheinstein that he had it copied when building “Rochroane.”

Beltzhoover married Virginia Lee Kountz, on September 1, 1891. They had two children, Melchior and Roanne.



Virginia Lee Kountz, incorrectly identified in our last edition of *The Roost*, was born in Natchez, Mississippi on April 19, 1862. She was named for Gen. Robert E. Lee and the state of Virginia. She was the eighth and last child of Mary Roane and George Washington Kountz.

The Beltzhoover castle was huge and dark, a particularly formidable structure to the children’s playmates. However, the vast and interesting grounds provided a wonderful place for them to occupy themselves. Popular games were “playing house” and croquet. The Beltzhoovers also kept Belgian hares and different kinds of strange birds in outdoor cages.

One early friend of Roanne’s, Mrs. Mary Nesbit Rand, recalls that the main attraction was the pond. It was a beautiful and big pond, complete with swans, a gazebo, and a small island very close to the shore.

On this island Roanne had a play house which included a main room, kitchen and possibly, a bathroom. The island could be reached by a rowboat, and the girls spent most of their time there. Other playmates, Mr. and Mrs. George Dickinson, remember that the pond was too deep to swim in but in winter it was great for skating.

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Beltzhoover-Halsey Castle, continued

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Melchior Beltzhoover made his money in the cotton business and when he lost his fortune, he was forced to sell the castle and moved back to Natchez.

The castle was sold to James Shields in 1916 and in 1927 to Benjamin S. Halsey who renamed it "Grey Towers." Benjamin and his wife had five children. His son, Sheffield, remembered the interior of the castle in this way:

The front door leads directly to an entrance room. To the right is a spacious music room that runs the length of the castle. It has a vaulted ceiling and a beautiful stained glass window at the back.



The Tiffany window, originally in the music room, is presently housed in the Corning Museum of Glass.

It is furnished formally and contains a magnificent organ, one or two stories high, that was installed by Melchior Beltzhoover.



The opposite end of the music room with the pipe organ.

To the left of the entrance room there is a formal parlor with gilt furniture, used mainly as a reception room. Toward the back is a dining room and a billiard room. Also, there is a sitting room. All of these rooms, like most of the rooms in the castle, have fireplaces.

The front tower contains an elevator but there is also a staircase with hand-carved newel posts, leading out of the front entrance room.

The second floor contains three family bedrooms and another sitting room. The third floor also contains three family bedrooms. Because of the height of the music room, there is a second-and-a-half and third-and-a-half floor, both containing two guest rooms and two servants' rooms.



Virginia Lee's boudoir

On the fourth floor there are four bedrooms and a large cedar closet. There is a fifth floor which is a photographic studio with a skylight roof. The basement contains the kitchen. Food was transported by a dumbwaiter.

The front wall of the castle is imbedded with a large sundial with the inscription "I work only in sunny hours" in Latin. There is another sundial in the front archway which tells the calendar date.

A long wall winds around the land near the castle with three towers at different intervals. There is also a small square building right near the house. It no longer has a roof and it has been filled in, but during the Beltzhoovers' stay it was used as an ice house.

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Curator's Corner

By Barbara Sculli

One of the most interesting assets of the Society, donated by the Warnock family, is a fine shirt once worn by Washington Irving. Rachel Forkill Mann was the seamstress who made this unique item. Her story, which follows, contrasts the lives of working people who populated Westchester from its early days. The artifact was sent to the Textile Conservation Workshop, Inc., South Salem, New York for treatment and preservation.

A synopsis of the company's report states, "This long-sleeved white man's shirt (circa 1850) is completely and superbly hand-stitched. All the seams are finished on the inside as flat-fold. The design includes a stand-up collar, and center front opening with button-closures. The sleeves are gathered at the shoulders and at the wrists into cuffs. The shirt exhibits severe overall yellowing and some brown spots due to soiling. There is a two-inch tear on the lower right front, which had been repaired. The repair is stable and the stitching is neatly done. In the center back lining are two two-inch openings where the seam line is broken. All four buttons are securely attached."

The subsequent treatment:

1. Written and photographic documentation at the beginning and end.
2. Vacuuming -- The shirt was cleaned of dust

and particulate soils.

3. Wet cleaning -- It was immersed in cold de-ionized water in order to remove surface soil. A second warm bath was used, during which it was gently sponged with a dilute Orvus W.A. paste. The shirt was soaked in a detergent bath and then treated with a mild oxidizing bleach bath. Finally, it was rinsed thoroughly with purified water.
4. Block and dry -- The artifact was gently blotted and then air dried on a padded hanger.
5. Restitch all seams -- Cotton thread was used to imitate the original stitching.
6. Pack for storage -- It was placed in an acid free box with the fewest possible folds. These folds were padded with acid free tissue.

The room for subsequent storage must be clean and kept at fairly constant temperature and humidity, conditions necessary for all objects in the Society's collection. The cost of treatment and professional conservation of this specific highly valuable artifact, \$650.00, was donated by a patron of the Society. Washington Irving's shirt in its storage box was exhibited during the Society's Open House in October 2002. ❧

Barbara Sculli is the Curator for the Irvington Historical Society



Rachel Forkill Mann

John Fawkill was one of three brothers who came to this area from Europe after the American Revolution. In 1826, he and his wife settled with their daughter, Rachel, into a farmhouse located north of Broadway near the present location of Sunnyside Lane. Rachel was then just twelve years old. Both father and daughter became well-known craftsmen: John a shoemaker and Rachel a seamstress. When Washington Irving moved to Sunnyside during the following decade, he gave the family his trade. John made many of Irving's boots and Rachel made many of his finer muslin and linen shirts, and the separate fashionable cuffs and collars. Typical cost for a shirt was twenty-five

cents. The last such item was made in 1859, shortly before Irving's death.

Over the years, the spelling of the last name was changed from 'Fawkill' to 'Forkill'. Rachel married David Mann in 1838. It is known that Irving considered the families more than just tradespeople. In 1842, in a letter to his brother from Madrid, he specifically asked to be remembered to his "country neighbors", including the Manns and the Forkills. Rachel's daughter, Ellen Mann, subsequently married Theodore Miller. Though changed, their family home can still be seen today, a yellow wooden farmhouse which stands perpendicular to Broadway. It was called the Miller Farm-

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Rachel Forkill Mann, continued

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house at the beginning of the twentieth century when it was occupied by Rachel's grandson, Harry. The land included a quarry, whose stone was used to build Tarrytown's Christ Church. Irving was said to facilitate the sale of this stone.

Rachel lived to an advanced age for that time: 95 years. The Irvington Historical Society has received from the Warnock family many items associated with her life including account books, photographs, schoolbooks, and a copy of Rachel's will. The picture of Rachel, her daughter, and her grandson illustrates this wealth of information. The picture was taken near the end of the nineteenth century when Rachel was in her eighties. ❧

From Tarrytown's Daily News, May 11, 1914, and research by Peter Oley, the Irvington Village Historian.



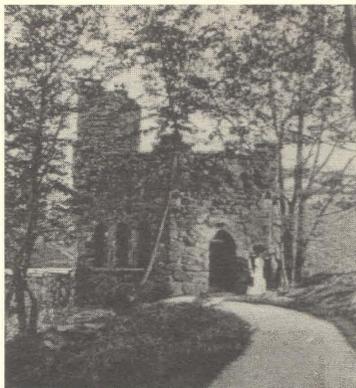
Rachel Forkill Mann, her daughter, Ellen and her grandson, Harry.



Beltzhoover-Halsey Castle, continued

Continued from page 4

Near the pond, which Sheffield Halsey said was artificially made out of swamp, there is a stone tower and balcony. The inside of the tower is wooden and it was used as a tea house complete with stove.



The Tea House on the lake where they could have tea and watch the children playing.

The grounds also boasted a building used as both a stable and a garage, tennis courts, and a garden with gravel paths that was in the shape of a cross. Near the garden were cages where Mrs. Halsey raised pheasants.

Benjamin Halsey died in December, 1956 and for some years his wife, Katherine W. Halsey, was the only occupant of the Castle. The property was given to Immaculate Conception Church of Irvington in 1970. In March, 1976, the castle was stripped of its interior furnishings. The Tiffany window was later acquired by the Corning Museum of Glass (see article "Spring Fundraiser" page 7). After standing derelict and open to the elements for a year, the castle was gutted by a spectacular fire on the night of April 8, 1977. ❧

The photographs which accompanied this article were the generous gift of Virginia Beltzhoover Morrison.



This Tiffany window entitled *Landscape with Hollyhocks* was originally commissioned by Melchior Beltzhoover for "Rochroane." The window is composed of five arched panels, below a Gothic arch with fitted panels. It depicts a Hudson River scene with trumpet vines, hollyhocks and clematis.

Tiffany Day

On Saturday, the 26th of April, the Irvington Historical Society will hold its first major fundraising event to benefit the McVickar House. The day will be a celebration of Louis Comfort Tiffany and his intimate connection to the village of Irvington. There will be a number of activities connected to this event, the highlight of which will be a presentation by Michael J. Burlingham, great-grandson of Louis Comfort Tiffany, at the Irvington Town Hall Theater at 7 P.M.

Mr. Burlingham will invite his audience to visit with the Tiffany family during this profusely illustrated slide presentation. Commencing with the Tiffanys' ancestry and New England roots, Burlingham draws on extensive research and family memorabilia, including many unpublished images from the Tiffany family archives, to bring artist Louis Comfort Tiffany to life from infancy to old age. The family, the homes, the gardens, the workshops, the studios, the travels, the fetes—Burlingham touches on all that combined to make Tiffany an enchanted name in a Gilded Age, with a special look at the period between 1863 and 1902, when Louis's father, Charles Lewis Tiffany, founder of Tiffany & Co., summered at Irvington in what was then called Tiffany Park and is now Matthiessen Park. Young Louis Comfort's exposure to the vistas of the lower Hudson River Valley forged an artistic sensibility that he carried with him throughout life, as he progressed from painter to decorator to glassmaker extraordinaire.

As author, editor, and, since July 2002, an Irvington resident, Burlingham has been researching and writing about the Tiffanys for over two decades. In 1989, Atheneum Press published *The Last Tiffany*, a biography of his paternal grandmother, Dorothy Tiffany Burlingham, which was recently reissued as a paperback under the new title, *Behind Glass*. Currently writing a biography of his great-grandfather, Louis C. Tiffany, for John Wiley & Sons, Burlingham has lectured at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery and Cooper Hewitt Museum, the Mark Twain House, the Corning Museum of Glass, the Museum of the City of New York, the Nassau County Museum, Christie's and other venues. In 2001, he was featured in the Arts & Entertainment Network Biography, entitled "Tiffany: The Mark of Excellence."

In addition to the presentation, there will be free guided tours available from 3:00 to 4:30 at each of the four village sites that boast of Tiffany's artistry: Irvington Presbyterian Church, St. Barnabas Church, the Town Hall Reading Room and Irvington Public Library. The public is invited to visit any or all of these sites during that time period.

Tickets for the lecture and slide presentation are available through the theater's box office, 591-6602. 

The Roost

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Submissions

The Irvington Historical Society is always looking for suitable material, whether historical essay or personal reminiscence, for *The Roost*. We believe that many of our members have information or stories that would be of interest to our readers. If you have a suggestion or idea for an article, please contact Pat Ryan, 591-7809, e-mail jppjryan@aol.com.

In addition, while every effort is made to insure accuracy, the Society cannot assume responsibility for statements made by contributors. 

Wish List

The Irvington Historical Society is presently developing a list of local residents who collect historical items which might be available for program exhibits. Those who attended the recent exhibits on dolls and trains realize what a valuable resource such collections are. With the expansion of our programs and the development of the McVickar House, there will be even more opportunities for exhibits such as these. If you, or someone you know, would be willing to exhibit your collection, please contact Betsy Wilson at 591-2564. 