

FRIENDS OF *Florham*

Fall 2009

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Florham History and Mysteries: 1958

That magical year that Fairleigh Dickinson University first moved onto the Twombly estate, 1958, has always fascinated me. Just as at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway looked out through the night toward Manhattan and contemplated those early Dutch sailors first seeing the new world — “for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent” — so too must the first faculty and students have experienced a similar moment of wonder and enchantment when they first looked upon Florham.

Knowing of my interest in this transition year, Friends Board member, Carol Bere, arranged for Eleanor Friedl, reference librarian at the College at Florham, to send me the booklet prepared in 1999 in honor of Samuel A. Pratt, founding dean of the new campus. It was Dean Pratt’s daunting mission to turn a fabled Gilded Age estate into a university, a mission he accomplished with extraordinary results, while preserving the best of the heritage of the past.

It was, as Walter Savage, Friends board member and professor emeritus of English, reflected in the booklet, a time when “everything about the campus seemed somehow full of growth and newness.” The wonder of those days in 1958, the joy, the exuberance, fairly leap from this booklet, as do tantalizing clues to some of the mysteries of Florham.

- The booklet opens with a 1958 photograph of the mansion, catching the side piazza and front of the house — the lawn and plantings looking very well tended, the neatly trimmed ivy covering the front of the house up around Miss Ruth’s bedroom windows.

In this photograph, the mansion and grounds appear in pristine condition. Is this how it was when the University moved in, or was there a lot of

work necessary to bring it back to this level of perfection, four years after Ruth Twombly’s death? We do know from research Carol Bere has done that the Florham expenses dropped from \$250,000 to \$90,000 just before the University took over; how much of the estate was kept up and how much had gone feral?



The mansion during the Twombly’s time.

I had heard stories of the grass around the mansion being four feet high and had assumed the Twomblys’ small army of workers was let go after the June 1955 Parke-Bernet auction of the Florham contents. Imagine my surprise to read that “the estate’s experienced and dedicated staff was a valuable resource. Members of the buildings and grounds crew were retained on the Campus staff.” Perhaps their dedication to Florham maintained the high standards of perfection the Twomblys demanded, and that the estate looked very much as the Twomblys left it. If any of these loyal workers can be located, their

oral histories would be a wonderful addition to the Florham archives.

- The photograph shows shutters on every window, which gave the mansion more the look of a home than an institution. When were the shutters taken down? Were any stored? If so, where are they?
- The fact that at least some of the Twombly staff was retained makes this sentence from the booklet puzzling: “The Great Hall in the Mansion was restored through a gift from Alice and Leonard Dreyfuss and was dedicated as Dreyfuss Hall in January 1959.” What was it about the Great Hall that had to be “restored?”
- The door! That famous front door, so highly polished that Shirley Burden could see his reflection in it when he went to visit his grandmother, the door with the hinges of silver. The booklet reveals that:

(continued on page 4)



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President's Letter

I am happy to report that the lecture on March 29, "The Twomblys of Florham: The Beginning and End of an Era," was a great success. This presentation, hosted by Carol Bere and delivered by Vanderbilt historians Walter Savage and Arthur Vanderbilt, was taped and is available in the archives for students of the period.

At the May Gala, chaired by Dawn Dupak with the help of Kathy Atencio and Suzy Moran, guests entered the Great Hall and admired the new doors installed by architect, Nick Bensley. Lenfell Hall was at its most beautiful. Silver candlesticks with white tapers, bouquets of white flowers and soft green table linens made the room glow. Honoree Audrey Parker filled her tables with family and friends.

In June, board members hosted a tour of the mansion for New York's Beaux Arts Alliance led by David Garrard Lowe, author of *Beaux Arts, New York*. Vanderbilt and Savage were present to add to Lowe's wealth of information on life at

Florham. Lowe commented that the mansion was remarkably well preserved, given the fact that it is now a university property and used for receptions and classrooms. He said Florham was the most tasteful and restrained of all the Vanderbilt homes and commended us for our work in maintaining it.

We will present a lecture by Connie Webster, ASLA, on October 18. Webster, an emerita faculty member of Rutgers University, is an authority on French landscape architect, Andre Le Notre. While Florham's gardens are not specifically French in design, all formal garden designs in some way reflect French influence.

We welcome new board members Ann Wellbrock and Sam Convissor who will help us with the careful research that precedes each project. We appreciate your contributions and are acutely aware that these resources must be spent wisely. We will work to merit your continued support.

— Linda Meister

Two New Trustees Named to Board

The Friends welcome Samuel M. Convissor, a Fairleigh Dickinson graduate, who served 15 years as a member of the University's Board of Trustees, to our board. Sam brings a variety of professional and personal experiences to us, and we especially look forward to his input on the gardens and grounds.

After serving as a lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps, he received his MS from Boston University. His professional affiliations include Schering-Plough, General Electric and Mutual Benefits Life Insurance Company, where he served as vice president for government affairs.

Sam was president of Main Street South Orange, and he served on the board of New Jersey Future and Downtown New Jersey. He was a founding member of the Jewish Fund for Justice and the Jewish Historical Society of Metrowest. He currently serves as vice president of the board of trustees of the Children's Aid Society in New York City and is on the board of the Greater Newark Conservancy.

A widower, Sam's wife, Carol, served as director of special projects for the Juilliard School for 18

years. Sam has three adult children and six grandchildren.

The board originally met Ann Wellbrock when she was our docent for a tour of the Doris Duke gardens, and she impressed us with her knowledge of estate homes and gardens. Ann is originally from England and obtained her schooling there — but not at FDU's Wroxton campus! She has, however, visited that campus several times.

Ann first arrived in the United States as a nanny, but went on to take insurance and stock-brokerage exams, becoming a vice president with a small broker/dealer. Later she joined Prudential Insurance Company as a securities law legal assistant

responsible for variable annuity filings with the SEC.

After Ann's retirement in 2005, she was a guide at Duke Farms in Hillsborough conducting tours of Doris Duke's home, gardens and the 2,700-acre estate. For the past several years, Ann has worked on Raritan Valley Community College's (RVCC)



Ann Wellbrock

annual fundraiser with her husband, Richard, the retired chairman of the board of RVCC and an FDU alumnus. Currently Ann volunteers at Runnells Specialized Hospital.



Samuel M. Convissor

If You Knew Audrey

One of the highlights of the May 2009 Spring Gala honoring Audrey Parker was Rich McGlynn's a capella rendition of "If You Knew Audrey," a parody of the old show tune "If You Knew Suzy." McGlynn, a master showman and gifted vocalist, brought down the house with his amazing version of the popular old tune.

The song was only one of the tributes to Audrey expressing our appreciation for her support and enthusiasm through the years. FDU President J. Michael Adams gave Audrey the first "Florham Lily" pin, commissioned earlier by the Friends. President Linda Meister presented a framed Resolution written and signed by the board in her honor. We were pleased to welcome Audrey's children and grandchildren to the Gala and hope they all had a great time. A large dinner commit-

tee, co-chaired by Dawn Dupak, Kathy Atencio and Suzy Moran, worked together to plan and deliver another memorable evening.

Once again, Ed and Ruth Hennessy graciously supported the event and agreed to serve as honorary co-chairs. The Friends are grateful to everyone who contributed to the Gala's success. Thank you all for your continued support and ongoing attendance and please save May 22 for next year's Gala.



Linda Meister, right, president, Friends of Florham, expresses the Friends' appreciation to Audrey Parker, center, as FDU President J. Michael Adams looks on.

The Friends Host The Beaux Arts Alliance

The motor coach pulled up in front of Hennessy Hall on Saturday morning, June 13, and several Friends greeted almost 30 members of the New York-based Beaux Arts Alliance as they prepared to tour the mansion, the immediate grounds of the estate and for a couple of hours "live" the history of the fabled Vanderbilt-Twombly family. For the Beaux Arts members, Florham was the first stop in the group's initial visit to the Morristown area that day. And for the Friends, this was our first successful experience of the tour "business"; one that was filled with future possibilities.

Florham was a natural destination for the Beaux Arts Alliance members. The nonprofit group promotes links between the United States and France, particularly the Franco-American cultural tradition — from Beaux Arts architecture as represented in the United States by Charles McKim, Stanford White and Richard Morris Hunt, to French impressionist art as practiced by American artists, to French-influenced literature and music. Tours to renowned Newport homes, visits to architectural gems such as the restored Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, even direct involvement in preserving historic buildings are all on the agenda of the group. Considering their brief, it is no surprise that "the group was impressed by the preservation of the mansion that had been accomplished by the Friends," said Sally Forbes, executive director of the Beaux Arts Alliance.

Friends board member, Walter Savage, offered a brief introductory overview to the estate, and David Garrard Lowe, lecturer, cultural historian and president of the Beaux Arts Alliance, led the tour beginning in the Great Hall, commenting on the architecture and filling in family history. The offices on the first floor, including the provost's

unique office with its spectacular marble fireplace, were open for the tour, and those of us who accompanied the visitors became increasingly aware, as the tour progressed and questions were asked, that the visitors were captivated: "The group expressed an awe of what they were seeing, and a fascination with the history behind it. They were interested in every bit of information about each room, of the family that lived there, of what their lives were like," commented Arthur Vanderbilt, II. This interest in "stories" was particularly clear as the group moved to the two second-floor classrooms that were the original bedrooms of Florence Twombly and her daughter, Ruth. In an ideal world, of course, and in a nod to future tourism, the University would sacrifice Florence's bedroom, allowing the Friends to restore the room to its original state with furnishings and bathroom.

Finally, the group went out through the French doors in Lenfell Hall onto the terrace, overlooking the restored Clowney Garden before they left for the next stop on their route, St. Peter's Church in Morristown, another McKim, Mead & White building. Helen Dudley Hamilton, a member of the Advisory Council of the Beaux Arts Alliance, who arranged the tour, remarked "you all have a real treasure" at Florham, "and I know how much work you all do to keep it going." The Friends appreciate the many favorable responses and are enthusiastic about offering future tours — perhaps expanding the "route" to capitalize on Frederick Law Olmsted's legacy at Florham — to groups interested in one of the gold standards of the historic era in the Morris area and, of course, in thoughtful and effective historic preservation.

— Carol Bere



From left, David Garrard Lowe, lecturer, cultural historian and president, Beaux Arts Alliance; with Walter Savage, professor emeritus of English and Friends board member; and Arthur T. Vanderbilt, II, honorary Friends trustee, during the Alliance's tour.

Florham History and Mysteries: 1958, continued from page 1

“In July 1958 the 59-year-old solid mahogany entrance door of the former Twombly Mansion was preserved. The door is 11 feet high and six inches thick. Modern building regulations required that the door be reversed so that it would swing outside. In the process five workmen were needed to lift the massive door.”

The prescient Dean Pratt thought enough of this door to preserve it. A later administration replaced it with the jarring modern glass and metal door just recently replaced by the Friends of Florham with a historically accurate door. But what has become of that original mahogany door? It seems unlikely that it was thrown away. Do University records give a clue to its fate, to where on campus it was stored? Anyone with clues as to the door’s whereabouts: please come forward!

- Dean Pratt and his wife and three-month-old daughter moved into the Gatehouse where the dean held receptions for faculty, entertained visiting scholars and dignitaries and conducted his sociology seminars. Picture him traveling around the campus by bicycle and foot on those quiet days before the first students arrived, the estate virtually to himself; assessing the wonders and opportunities contained on those 180 acres.

Students were housed in the mansion; anyone who has wandered around the second and third floors can see just how many guest rooms and baths and servants quarters there were, all with breathtaking views. What stories these students could tell! Rooms in the mansion were later converted to classrooms, offices, a temporary library, a bookstore, a cafeteria. Miss Ruth’s “Playhouse” was a center of activity, with its clay tennis courts — said to be one of the best in the country — and the heated swimming pool, in constant use by students and faculty. The wood-paneled salon where Ruth entertained her guests became the student lounge with piano, TV and hi-fi, and her 18-hole miniature golf course next to the Playhouse was a big hit with students and faculty. Where exactly was this golf course and when did it disappear?

- Even the organ was in use! On May 10, 1958, the campus was opened to the public to see the changes. “A feature of visiting day was the playing of the Aeolian organ, which is being repaired.” Being repaired? What was the reason for the change in policy from “being repaired” to being removed? And when was that decision made? What became of that organ, 16 feet tall with 8,000 pipes — bigger than the organ at Radio City Music Hall?

- Harry Keyishian, professor of English, in his booklet tribute to Dean Pratt recalled fondly the Faculty Dining Room (located in the present Provost’s Office), which was the mansion’s

library, “an elegant establishment with white tablecloths, attractive décor and a companionable staff.” He considered the closing of this dining room after Dean Pratt left the University an incalculable loss to the University, that “nothing comparable ever replaced” that special spot “where intellectual exchange, the heartbeat of any academic institution, was cultivated and honored.” Professor Keyishian’s reasoning was impassioned and persuasive. A faculty dining room that could also be used for special University dinners could easily return, not in the Provost’s Office, but where Mrs. Twombly’s dining room was located, a mission the Friends of Florham could undertake to restore that space to the original look. A faculty club dining room would be beneficial both to the University and to those interested in seeing a few key rooms of the mansion preserved as they were, just as the old Breakfast Room and Billiard Room now serve University purposes while retaining much of their original look.

- That year, work began on converting the beautiful Orangerie into a modern library building. When the work began, was the Orangerie still filled with huge pots growing the grapes, figs and Persian melons that graced Florham’s dinner menus? If not, what became of them?

- Were the 10 huge greenhouses still filled with orchids from all over the world? Each day a perfect orchid was set before Mrs. Twombly at breakfast, a different one at lunch and another at dinner. Were the prize-winning chrysanthemums and lilies still abloom in the greenhouses? When were these plants removed? When were the greenhouses taken down?

As Dean Pratt wrote in 1963: “The University has been fortunate in acquiring one of the world’s most beautiful estates with outstanding buildings, gardens and landscaping. Because of the superlative standards established by the Twombly family, the students are uniquely endowed environmentally. It is a priceless gift.”

The University and the Friends of Florham continue to cherish this gift that Dean Pratt lovingly nurtured. Any institution should have a historical archive of its origins and on occasion reflect on its heritage. As the College at Florham passes its 50th anniversary, we should record the memories and recollections of the faculty, students and staff who witnessed that wonderful year of transition. No doubt, in the process more clues to Florham’s mysteries and gifts will reveal themselves.

— Arthur T. Vanderbilt, II

Arthur T. Vanderbilt, II, an honorary trustee of the Friends of Florham, is the author of Fortune’s Children: The Fall of the House of Vanderbilt, which covers the history of Florham.

“Because of the superlative standards established by the Twombly family, the students are uniquely endowed environmentally.”



The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt

T.J. Stiles, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 719 pp., \$37.50, hardcover

Anyone first seeing the mansion on the Fairleigh Dickinson University campus in Madison and learning it was once a home — and a country home at that, set on 1,000 landscaped acres — realizes that something very unusual is going on here. This 110-room vacation home was one of a number of visible relics of what still ranks as the largest American fortune. Florence Vanderbilt Twombly who built this country palace with her husband, Hamilton Twombly, was the favorite granddaughter of the founder of this fortune, Cornelius Vanderbilt.

At long last, in T.J. Stiles's *The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt* is there a biography worthy of the man. The book is so well researched, so well written, so balanced, so detailed and so engagingly entertaining in covering the life of this controversial man and the tumultuous times in which he moved, that it is likely a serious contender for a Pulitzer Prize.

The impact of Cornelius Vanderbilt on American history has never been well known, let alone the bare facts of his life. Born in 1794 in a small farmhouse on Staten Island close to the waters of New York Bay, Vanderbilt was taking passengers across New York Harbor in an old scow by the time he was a teenager. The young man who strutted about the waterfront and swore and cursed like an old sea dog was jokingly named, "The Commodore," a name which stuck with him for life. Strong, tough, hardworking, penny-pinching, he built up a small fleet of schooners, sold it, then went to work for a steamship operator at a time when steamships were a new form of transportation. A year later he started his own steamship line.

Throughout his career, his business methods were always the same: cutthroat competition — cutting rates until he drove away competitors, then cutting the quality of the service, thereby increasing profits. It was a winning formula, as monopolies are inclined to be. By 1862, when he was 68, he operated a fleet of more than 100 steamships which employed more men than any other business in the country, and was worth 40 million dollars.

Sixty-eight years old. Forty million dollars. The richest man in the United States. He and his 13

children and assorted in-laws were set for life. Time to retire? Not the Commodore. He was just beginning, buying up the short unprofitable railroad lines that came into New York City and consolidating them into the New York Central. It was a time, after the Civil War, when the northeastern part of the country, from New York to Chicago was booming. The New York Central became a cash cow, creating another fortune which the Commodore lovingly nurtured right up until his death in 1877 at 82, leaving an estate of \$105 million, more money than was in the United States Treasury.

In *The First Tycoon*, T.J. Stiles follows the course of Vanderbilt's life, along the way debunking myths and bringing vividly into focus the background of the times.

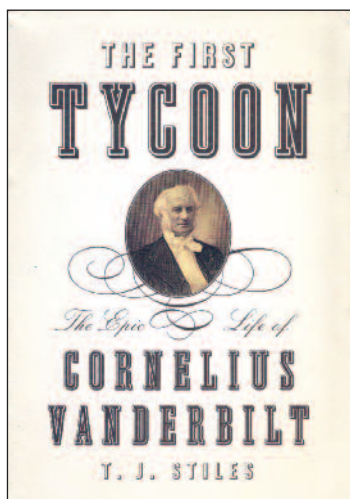
The author clarifies Vanderbilt's place in our country's history: "Probably no other individual made an equal impact over such an extended period on America's economy and society. Over the course of his 66-year career, he stood on the forefront of change, a modernizer from beginning to end.

He vastly improved and expanded the nation's transportation infrastructure, contributing to a transformation of the very geography of the United States."

But the most engrossing part of this book is the author's illumination of the Commodore's character, for here truly was an American original. As Stiles comments, "His admirers saw him as the ultimate meritocrat, the finest example of the common man rising through hard work and ability. His critics called him grasping and ruthless, an unelected king who never pretended to rule for his people." Surely Vanderbilt was some of each, and the author judiciously assesses and balances each: "Vanderbilt was many things, not all of them admirable, but he was never a phony. Hated, revered, resented, he always commanded respect, even from his enemies." It may well be that the Commodore saw something of himself, of his own personality, in his favorite granddaughter, Florham's Florence.

The First Tycoon is biography at its best, a keeper of a book and a special treat for anyone interested in what gave rise to an estate like Florham.

— Arthur T. Vanderbilt, II





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Please Join Us!

The Friends of Florham fall lecture this year features Connie Webster, ASLA, professor emerita, Rutgers University, Department of Landscape Architecture, and is on Sunday, October 18, at 3 p.m. The lecture is in Lenfell Hall, Hennessy Hall, the cost is \$25 at the door and the reception following is included. The title of her talk is: "Beyond Versailles: The Influence of Andre Le Notre in Europe and America."



Connie Webster

Webster will talk about the classical gardens of Andre Le Notre, Louis XV's landscape architect. Among the notable gardens and parks designed by Le Notre are Versailles and Chateau Fontainebleau. These gardens and others designed by Le Notre set the tone for urban design among the royal families of Europe. The American examples in Colonial America, the plan for Washington, D.C., and later the gardens of the Gilded Age are also inspired by this period. Webster will conclude with some recent photos and commentary on how the gardens at Florham are influenced by the European tradition of formal gardens.

The Friends are looking forward to Professor Webster's lecture, and we hope you can join us.

Become a Friend

Join the Friends of Florham. Participate directly in our efforts to preserve the architectural history of Florham, and support our informative program series. Your support will make a difference.

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