

Florham

Florham Building Contractor: Norcross Brothers

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Archive photo of the Mansion at Florham.

The Florham estate of Florence Vanderbilt and Hamilton Twombly was created in 1893–97 by three of the Gilded Age’s most prominent developers: building architects — McKim, Mead & White; landscape architect — Frederick Law Olmsted; and building contractor — Norcross Brothers.

Norcross Brothers was the leading building contractor during the period. The firm was established in 1864 and continued operations for 60 years. It had offices in Worcester, Mass., starting in 1868, and in the 1870s added an office in New York City adjacent to McKim, Mead &

White. Its works were typically in a level of grandeur which remains among the highest in American architecture. The firm constructed a tremendous number of buildings throughout the country — from Wyoming and Louisiana, to New England and Manhattan. Its building technologies and materials had a positive impact on the architecture of the period. Norcross Brothers received 18 U.S. patents (1889–1917) on construction techniques and materials and had holdings in 13 quarries, nine stone companies, two brick companies, five stoneworking plants and an ironworking and a woodworking shop.



Archive photo of the Mansion at Florham.

Norcross performed work for many of the major architects of the period — a total of 36 — and was key builder for the following top architects:

- McKim, Mead & White
- Carrère & Hastings
- Peabody & Stearns
- Geo. B. Post
- H.H. Richardson
- John Russell Pope

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President's Letter

We had such a wonderful talk October 23, and I hope you were there to enjoy it. Not only were we fortunate to have Mark Hewitt, the outstanding preservationist architect, presenting our program, but, for the first time, we were collaborating with another historical group, the Glen Alpin Conservancy. Incidentally, Hewitt was our second fascinating speaker on a very snowy day in 1992. We were very afraid that we'd have no audience, but thank goodness, many people braved the weather and came to hear his wonderful lecture, and it was a total success. As you know, the title of the lecture was "Glen Alpin and the Country Houses of Morris County," and it was fascinating.

When you next visit the campus this fall, I urge you to enter from our Danforth Road gate so that you can come through the Frederick Law Olmsted Cutleaf Maple Garden, which the Friends dedicated a year ago at about this time of year. Hopefully, the trees will be at their peak of fall colors. If so, it is breathtakingly beautiful!

It was a special hope of mine that we would be able to preserve this one particular area of spectacular beauty, which is the only part of the campus which is authentically Olmsted's and that has

not been touched. There was a scare that it would have to become a parking lot, but thanks to our President Adams, it was saved.

We are all very thrilled with the wonderful work that has been done by our Archivist Antonia Moser. We are extremely grateful for the gift of papers and records given to us by the great-grandson of the Twomblys, William Burden, a year or so ago. And we thank the Morris County Heritage Commission and the Morris County Freeholders for the grant which made it possible for us to hire Antonia. She has put everything in such order that we can now easily access the collection of the Vanderbilt/Twombly/Burden papers.

Our project — replacing the balusters in the balustrade in front of the Mansion and around the Italian Garden is underway (and our tremendous thanks go to Dr. Ames Filippone for his help in making the balusters for us). We are also working on restoring and/or replacing with similar fixtures the lighting around the courtyard in front of the Mansion.

Thank you all so much for your continued interest and support.

— Emma Joy Dana

'Treasures from Florham' at Macculloch Hall

On October 12, members of the Friends of Florham board were treated to a special tour of the "Treasures from Florham" exhibit at the Macculloch Hall Historic Museum by David Breslauer, its executive director. Highlights of the tour included the "skinny sister" gilded bronze and crystal chandelier, the set of Crown Derby dinner service, the Melchoir d'Hondecoeter fowl landscape and the pair of Chinese Chippendale side chairs. Board members Phyllis Conway, Linda Meister, Dawn Dupak, Elaine Earlywine and Susan Adams enjoyed hearing about how the pieces were acquired for the W. Parsons Todd collection.

The founder of Macculloch Hall Historic Museum, former Morristown mayor and millionaire W. Parsons Todd, spent about \$10,000, at a spirited two-day auction, managed by Parke-Bernet Galleries, of essentially all of the furnishings from the estate of the late Ruth Vanderbilt Twombly at "Florham." The longer-term significance of the "Florham" auction was that it marked the twilight of a way of life that will probably never be replicated in the United States. While the almost 600 objects put up for auction could provide an exemplary case study of the Golden Age, the size and scale of most of the furnishings dictated that many homes could not accommodate these pieces.

The Friends of Florham enjoyed the "Treasures from Florham" and recommend a visit to anyone interested in the history of the Vanderbilts and the Morristown area. Macculloch Hall is located at 45 Macculloch Avenue, Morristown, N.J. For more information call 973-538-2404.

The chandelier is called the "skinny sister," and it hung in Lenfell Hall, The Mansion, Florham. It is a Louis XV gilded bronze and cut crystal 12-light chandelier from 1895. Last August, it was lowered for cleaning, description can be found in an article "The Skinny Sister takes a Bath" at http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=14971468&BRD=1918&PAG=461&dept_id=506567&rfi=6.



David Breslauer, left, executive director of Macculloch Hall, gave a special tour for Friends of Florham members, from left, Phyllis Conway, Dawn Dupak, Elaine Earlywine and Linda Meister.



Gilded Age Lifestyle

The Gilded Age lifestyle was elaborate and followed very closely the rules of fashionable society. The grand mansions needed to be staffed with skilled household help who kept the homes of the well-to-do running smoothly. This article focuses on several key members of that staff and their important roles.

The Superintending Housekeeper

A superintending housekeeper was often employed and her job has some similarities to an office manager. She was required to manage all of the servants working in a household including hiring and firing the domestic help. Her job included paying the servants and the household expenses and keeping the books and monthly accounts of all her expenses. In addition, she was in charge of the linen room which had an important role in homes of this time as table linens were in constant use. The superintending housekeeper had a daily meeting with the mistress of the house to review the chef's menus for the day and to make any necessary changes. She met with the butler to discuss luncheon and dinner plans for the day. After meeting with the chef and the butler she next spoke with the second cook, the kitchen maids, the head laundress and all other members of the domestic staff. Notes were made as to whatever supplies the staff needed as well as any necessary repairs in the house. She then made a complete tour of the house carrying with her a set of keys for all doors. She inspected every refrigerator, cold storage room, pantry, all cupboards and all drawers. After her daily inspection, she would seat herself at her desk to address her paperwork.

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Modern conveniences such as electric bell communication throughout the house, telephones and elevators streamlined her work and optimized the superintending housekeeper's time.

The Lady's Maid

The original bona fide lady's maid like the original bona fide chef was traditionally French. Her role might best be summarized by these simple words — "a place for everything and everything in its place." As the Gilded Age progressed, birthplace became secondary to experience and competence. A competent lady's maid received between \$25 to \$40 a month based on her experience and length of service.

A lady's maid was required to understand hair-dressing as well as all else pertaining to the personal needs of a well-dressed woman. She was

also gentle, well mannered and unobtrusive as well as available at all hours and under all circumstances. Her duties were primarily with the wardrobe and appearance of her mistress.

A lady's maid always worked around her mistress's routine. A typical day might begin with the after-breakfast toilette. The daily paper and writing materials were placed within easy reach. She then laid out garments for the morning. Depending on the day, a society woman would change outfits several times. Her maid prepared and adjusted each change of clothing. Here was her chance to enhance every advantage and hide every flaw of the woman she was serving. When a mistress was kind and pleasant her maid was proud and fond of her and even a bit jealous lest some other woman outdo "her lady" in style or beauty. During the gay season, she must anticipate short hours of sleep as she often accompanied her mistress to a function or met her upon her return home to help her disrobe for the night.

Another duty of the lady's maid was assisting with dinners or dances in the home. Here, she must assist arriving and departing guests with carriage wraps and boots. Additionally, she might wait upon house guests who had left their own attendants behind. She went room to room offering her services to the guests and making sure all trunks were unpacked with care. At the conclusion of the visit those same trunks were repacked expeditiously.

The Valet

The valet, like the lady's maid, usually served just one person. He was often designated by his employer as "my man." His job might seem monotonous if it were not for the fact that one who could afford to keep a valet generally had a lifestyle far removed from monotony. When his master traveled, his valet accompanied him and tended to the packing and unpacking of trunks and cases, buying tickets, securing transportation and making hotel and other arrangements. A major component of a valet's work was maintaining his employer's attire. The valet took away his master's "laid off" clothing with each change of attire. Nothing was returned until it had been brushed, freshened and equal to the tailor's best



The superintending housekeeper would meet with the chef and all members of the domestic staff.



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Gilded Age Lifestyle, continued from page 3

efforts. In the morning, the valet prepared a bath and laid out appropriate clothes. The morning toilette depended on the lifestyle of the man he dressed. Generally, a man of society retired late and rose late often breakfasting in bed. A great deal of preparation was required to put together the look of the tailor-made man. The amount of closet space required for a fashionable man's wardrobe often rivaled that of a lady and required high levels of maintenance.

Housemaid/Chambermaid

The duties conferred with this title were principally connected with the private apartments and suites occupied by the family and their guests. The housemaid was often assigned charge of an entire floor including the hallway and occasionally the main stairway. Exceptional order and cleanliness were paramount standards the housemaid strove to achieve on a daily basis. Halls and stairs should always be cleaned before the family left their bedrooms in the morning. As much as possible, the housemaid remained unseen while doing her job. If it was necessary for her to be seen attending to her duties, quietness and unobtrusiveness preceded all of her movements. Utilizing a feather duster, cheesecloth and a length of silk, a well-trained housemaid allowed no dust to gather in any corner no matter how remote.

Another important responsibility of the housemaid was tending the fireplaces. Steam heat was primarily used for maintaining the general temperature of the house. Most rooms had individual fireplaces and tending to the open fires was no small task. Upon entering a room, one might expect a cheerful fire or a clean, tidy fireplace ready for a fire but never dead, dull ashes. Laying the fire and maintaining supplies of fuel were all part of this job.

Airing of the bedchambers and bedclothes was another important job of the housemaid. This task allowed clean, fresh air to circulate freely in the rooms and promoted good hygiene and lessened the threat of illness. While the rooms were airing, she would clean all basins and tubs leaving each one perfectly dry. All faucets would be polished and every used towel replaced with a fresh one.

Absolute neatness in her appearance and dress was paramount in her role. The housemaid had a morning dress and an afternoon dress that was provided by the household. She was generally entitled to a few hours off each day, one afternoon and evening each week and one half of every other Sunday.

The Butler and his Staff

The bona fide butler was originally English and renowned for his remarkable aplomb. The re-

quirements for a capable butler in Gilded Age homes were years of experience in handsome, well-managed households. Honesty, sobriety as well as a clear and level head with a good knowledge of basic human nature were other desirable qualities. A butler possessed a great deal of executive ability and dignity. Diplomacy was also a valued trait. The butler may have been a married man with a home of his own. However, he most likely had a furnished room in the house for late nights when he could not go home. He and his staff typically had winter and summer morning suits. Following luncheon, he most likely dressed in a similar fashion to his male employer's dinner dress. Often he would be the lucky recipient of his employer's closet and be furnished with suits barely worn and re-tailored for him.

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By 3 p.m., the butler and one or two of his men in livery took their posts in the main hall during calling hours. On the "at home" day of the hostess, the butler's entire staff was needed. Each was assigned special duties all under his supervision. These white-tied and white-gloved men retained a rather serious and blank countenance. The butler's staff oversaw cleaning of the dining room silver, waiting on door and housebells and caring for the billiard room. Other tasks included serving meals, going about the house with trays of water or drinks and carrying trays to those ill or under the weather. While not hard work, their title of "footmen" was well deserved.

The butler oversaw everything pertaining to the dining room and service of meals. Flowers and care of the wines also came under his jurisdiction as well as the supply of table linens. He wrote the menus for the family's meals and managed the household safe. He was responsible for closing and locking all doors and windows. The physical requirements for the leading man on the household stage were height, bulk and impeccable grooming. His movements should be calm and deliberate. While the butler's individual duties required great amounts of time, he and his staff should never appear hurried.

Many were employed in these grand households, and the positions carried great amounts of responsibility. Duties and loyalties of the various staff made life in the great mansions flow seamlessly for their wealthy owners.

— Elaine Earlywine



Glen Alpin, Country Houses of Morris County

The Friends of Florham and the Glen Alpin Conservancy co-sponsored a wonderful event on Sunday, October 23, when Mark Alan Hewitt, AIA, well-known preservation architect, gave an interesting and important lecture, "Glen Alpin and the Country Houses of Morris County." At a time when land use is continually threatened and when important historic buildings fall victim to the wrecking ball, the significance of local history, preservation of historic homes and protection of land cannot be underestimated. Yet there are some remarkable historic homes in the Morris area, which have been preserved. Hewitt talked about some of these sites, particularly Glen Alpin, the storied Gothic Revival-style house built around 1840, and set on 9.5 acres at the corner of Mt. Kemble Avenue and Tempe Wick Road. Both the Glen Alpin residence and land have recently been protected through the efforts of the Trust for Public Land, the Township of Harding and the Harding Land Trust.

Hewitt's expertise and reputation as a leading preservation architect are well earned. He is a graduate of Yale University, with an MA in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania, and is a principal of Mark Alan Hewitt Architects, Bernardsville, N.J., a firm that specializes in creating, restoring and remodeling vintage and historic homes. He teaches historic preservation in the department of art history at Rutgers University

and has taught at many major universities including the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University. Hewitt has also published several books on historic preservation and architecture such as *Gustav Stickley's Craftsman Farms: The Quest for an Arts & Crafts Utopia* (Syracuse, 2001) and the more recent *Carrère & Hastings: Architecture & Urbanism* (2005, and 2006 forthcoming, Acanthus Press).

The Glen Alpin Conservancy, the Friends' partner for this lecture program, was formed to raise funds for the rehabilitation of Glen Alpin and works toward the rehabilitation, preservation and enjoyment of the historic grounds at Glen Alpin. The Conservancy also promotes knowledge of local history through its research on the historic, archaeological and natural resources of this unique site.

The Friends and the Glen Alpin Conservancy welcomed their guests to Lenfell Hall in the Mansion at Florham. A reception including wine, microbrews and cheese was held in the Great Hall following the lecture, which benefited the historic preservation projects of both the Friends of Florham and the Glen Alpin Conservancy.

— Carol Bere



Glen Alpin

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Norcross Brothers constructed more than 360 major buildings of many different types. Following is a list of some of the firm's most important works.

Public Buildings (53)

- Albany (New York) City Hall
- Boston Public Library
- Corcoran Art Gallery (Washington, D.C.)
- Penn Station (New York)*
- Rhode Island State Capital*

Educational Buildings (55)

- Amherst College*
- Bowdoin College*
- Columbia University*
- Harvard University
- Princeton University
- Yale University

Commercial Buildings (59)

- New York Stock Exchange

Banks (30)

Monuments (23)

- West Point Battle Monument*
- Nathan Hale Memorial*

Private Residences (43)

- Florham*
- Hyde Park Vanderbilt*
- Goelet

Club Houses (5)

- Harvard Club (New York City)*

Ecclesiastical Buildings (35)

- Trinity Church & Parish House (Boston)

Industrial Buildings (14)

Stations and Bridges (45)

*McKim, Mead & White architecture

The above list shows that Norcross Brothers certainly constructed some of the greatest buildings in the United States, and its talents are obvious as well in Florham.

— R.C. Simon



Vanderbilt Mansion under construction and today

(Source of the information in this article is from a book *Mastery in Masonry: Norcross Brothers, Contractors and Builders — 1864–1924* researched and written by Christopher F. Girr, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation — Columbia University — 1996.)



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