



Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

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THE NORTHERN MONMOUTH COUNTY COUNTRY HOUSE

Patron and Architect 1891 – 1935

The history of the Middletown area's residential character and the preservation of the region's architectural history have been the subjects of intensive research recently. This work embraces identification of the designers of our better buildings and study of the architects and houses in national and regional contexts.

The approaching end of the millennium will draw greater attention to all twentieth century history. Monmouth County has long honored its older buildings; we now also celebrate the finer ones. Most were architect designed. Most built from 1890 to 1935. Many were country houses.

There is no consensus definition of country house. They have been built since ancient times when man was first urbanized. Indeed, the earliest Monmouth County country house is William Bingham's place in Rumson. It still stands on Bingham Avenue. (Figures 1,2) He bought it in 1791, a

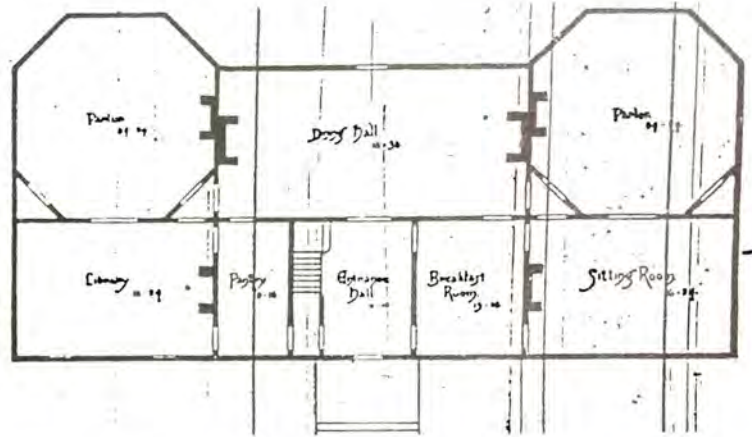


Figure 2. Plan of the William Bingham house as illustrated in *Scribners Magazine*, September 1890, Volume 8 Number

comfortable lifestyle were intended to be conveyed. English country houses were often in the midst of hundreds of acres. Although the largest American country house was surrounded by thousands of acres of mountain and forest, it, George Washington Vanderbilt's Biltmore, was established in sparsely settled western North Carolina. In brief, the country house is a large dwelling, usually artistically designed, built on an ample spread of land, located away from urban population centers, intended as a temporary home during the summer months. Shore land holdings were often smaller, although some assembled estates in the hundreds of acres. The shore houses were built to be temporary houses; some were part of farms. However, their suitability as year round homes was crucial to their survival. Many once larger estates have been divided with individual owners for their several buildings. Some others have passed into institutional use.

The founding of country house culture in the northern Monmouth area was based on traceable transportation patterns. Early recreational travel to Monmouth County was limited to the shore area. Water was once the only reliable way to travel. The Long Branch shore had a national reputation by the 1860s. Monmouth's first, the Raritan and Delaware Bay Railroad, originated at Port Monmouth in 1860s. It was announced as a road to the South, but was a thinly veiled attempt to break the Camden & Amboy's monopoly of New York to Philadelphia rail traffic. A major legal battle ensued. The Raritan and Delaware Bay did, however, boost shore traffic by providing an alternate route to Long Branch. An opposition line was established. The Long Branch and Seashore Railroad ran from a dock on Sandy Hook to Long Branch beginning in 1867. It later became part of the Central Railroad of New Jersey and dominated shore travel.

Two events in 1891 directly aided development of country house territory. The Federal government ordered the Central Railroad off Sandy Hook by the following year. A passenger railroad was no longer compatible on the narrow



Figure 1. The William Bingham house has been extensively remodeled. The octagonal corners on the south were built by Bingham.

hundred years prior to our period of study, greatly enlarging an old farm house. His estate was more than a summer spot on the shore as his family twice took refuge there from Philadelphia smallpox epidemics. The American country house is a product of English culture. Money, power and a



Figure 3. Reedmont from its driveway on the west side of Locust Point Road.

strip of land with the Army's extensive gun testing there. The second was the opening of the Oceanic Bridge connecting the bay shore and the Red Bank - Rumson peninsula. This land connection expanded travel opportunities at a time when an active movement of bicyclists was leading a campaign for better roads and public ownership of existing turnpikes.

Atlantic Highlands extended its railroad steamer pier in 1892 as a consequence of the Sandy Hook expulsion. The town became the major terminal for shore traffic. Rail links to existing lines encouraged real estate development of the nearby interior. Some new communities were restricted to better houses. The first, Highland Park, opened in 1893, but fell victim to that year's depression. Highland Park land now includes Croydon Hall and Beacon Hill Country Club.¹ A second, Water Witch Park, better timed in 1895, was an enclave of special appeal to architects. It retains its outstanding residential character and is now known as Monmouth Hills. By the early 1900s New York businessmen were actively buying farms along Navesink River Road and building summer homes.

The first country house-era settler was not a businessman, but an extraordinary woman, Caroline Gallup Reed. She bought a farm in Locust in 1869. The following year her husband, the Rev. Sylvanus Reed, died. The Reed property is of interest as an early family compound rather than for architectural distinction.

Mrs. Reed's first house was the Benjamin Burdge homestead. She remodeled and improved it several times. She built four houses for her children at her estate named



Figures 4, 5 and 6. The Reed houses on the "mount". A fourth house, not illustrated, is on the east side of Navesink River Road at the Oceanic Bridge approach.

"Reedmont". (Figures 3,4,5,6) The "mount" is an elevation west of Locust Point Road and north of Navesink River Road. She also owned property at Claypit Creek. The new houses were erected in the late 1880s and early 1890s by O.E. Davis and Nehemiah Brower, local builders who likely followed architectural plan books or their own designs.

Locust Point was a resort and fishing center in the 1880s. The Reeds, having been established there before the 1891 Oceanic Bridge connection with the ocean shore, likely traveled by boat to Mount's dock.

Mrs. Reed opened a fashionable private girls school in New York City. She was a moving force behind the 1898 founding of the Monmouth County Historical Association. She died at age 94 in 1914. Although the Reed houses have passed into separate ownership, the well preserved grounds still suggest a family compound.

The Donald MacLeod-Melvin A. Rice house, now home to the Middletown Township Historical Society Museum, became a country estate survivor of the failed summer house colony, Highland Park. The Edward T. Burdge family farm was sold for building lots in the depression year of 1893, the year after the Atlantic Highlands long pier opened. Donald MacLeod bought two lots and the Burdge farm house in 1894. He hired L. Jerome Aimar to design and build a major expansion in the Queen Anne style, now the main block of the existing structure. Little is known about Aimar or his professional training. MacLeod hired Thomas Emery for a remodeling in 1901. Emery had a varied career. He sold insurance and real estate and ran a bicycle shop in Atlantic

Highlands. He also managed to design a number of summer cottages, many built by his uncle Robert, the Atlantic Highlands National Bank and the Chapel Hill School.

Melvin A. Rice succeeded to the property by marrying the widow MacLeod, probably in 1902. Later purchases expanded the estate greatly. He became a leading gentleman farmer, raising prize winning livestock and advancing the cause of sanitary dairy methods. Although Rice's business, the Donald MacLeod Co. and winter residence were in New York City, he became active in Middletown's affairs. He



Figure 7. A view from the Rices' greeting card c. 1911 announcing the remodeling of their house. Card donated by Esther Cavanagh.

attained the presidency of the Township and New Jersey boards of education and an officership in the Monmouth County Fair Association.

A Rice remodeling around 1911 gave the building its present classical revival appearance. (Figure 7) Emery was likely his architect judging by stylistic similarities of the Rice house with the Oscar Unz house (Figure 8), designed by Emery in 1906. Rice died in 1924. His widow stayed there in reduced circumstances for about twenty years. A private school, Croydon Hall Academy, opened in 1947 and continued until 1975. The school's name still identifies the site, now owned by the Township of Middletown. The Middletown Township Historical Society occupies the first floor of the former house while several township facilities are elsewhere on the premises.

J. Christian G. Hupfel, a New York City brewer, hired Fair Haven architect Robert D. Chandler to design his



Figure 8. Oscar Unz house, Ocean Blvd., Atlantic Highlands.

country house at 458 Navesink River Road.² It is one of the Township's finest examples of Queen Anne architecture. (Figure 9) Hupfel's brewery and town house were located on East 38th Street in New York's Murray Hill. His Middletown property spanned both sides of Navesink River Road and included the sporting facilities characteristic of country life. Period photographs preserve the boat house and tennis courts and show the Hupfel family equipped for most other sports. (Figure 10)

Chandler is an enigma. He was a successful architect designing many fine houses on the Red Bank - Rumson



Figure 9. The J. Christian G. Hupfel house, now the home of Paul and Mary Angela Doherty.



Figure 10. Sporting life at the Hupfels'. Brewer Christian is on the left.



Figure 11. Rohallion, Bellevue Avenue, Rumson, before remodeling.



Figure 12. The Hermitage, 79 Rumson Road, Rumson.

peninsula. He ceased practice to devote full time to boat building, perhaps not coincidentally at the time of New Jersey's 1902 architect licensing law. A Chandler design on the National Register of Historic Places is the Shrewsbury Township Hall, now the Red Bank Police Station.

Edward Dean Adams of Rumson held many important business positions, including the presidency of the Niagara Power Company. Adams played a leading part in the utilization of Niagara Falls for producing electricity. Adams conceived the plan of a great central station for distribution of power and wrote a two-volume book on the harnessing of the Niagara.³

Adam's relationship with the McKim, Mead & White firm embraced his business, city, and country houses. He bought from friend Henry Villard an Italian Renaissance connected townhouse on Madison Avenue in New York. The



Figure 13. The M.C.D. Borden stable, West River Road, Rumson.

firm designed Adam's well known Rumson mansion, Rohallion, in 1887. (Figure 11) Extensive remodeling give an appearance little like the shingle style house designed by McKim, Mead & White. The firm's most ambitious project for Adams was the Niagara Power Company's Generating Station and company village.

The McKim, Mead & White firm designed many outstanding, well-known institutional and residential buildings. Two of the former are the Brooklyn Museum and the Century Association headquarters in New York. Two fine nearby houses are the Joseph Pulitzer house on East 73rd Street in New York and the Frederick W. Vanderbilt mansion at Hyde Park, New York.

The firm was long active on the shore, having designed three houses in Elberon in 1877-8 when they were known as McKim, Mead & Bigelow. They had later commissions in Elberon, the since demolished home of Brayton Ives, *Lowmoor* in Sea Bright, and another house in Rumson.⁴ The latter is the finely restored William A. Street house, *The Hermitage*, at Rumson Road and the Avenue of Two Rivers. (Figure 12)

Reminders of Middletown Township as horse country remain at Thompson Park and the Brookdale Community College campus, both once part of Brookdale Farm. The Park contains what is likely the Township's earliest house designed by an architect with a national reputation. Thomas Hastings was typical of the well born architect who used the connections of social position to obtain major commissions. He was the sixth to bear the name. His ancestry dated from the 1634 settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His father, the Reverend Thomas Hastings, was a distinguished New York City clergyman and president of the Union Theological Seminary.⁵ He summered in Rumson, where his son designed his stable in 1889.⁶ Hastings' Rumson work of the period also includes the 1885 Oceanic Presbyterian Church⁷ and the M.C.D Borden stable on West River Road. (Figure 13) He formed a partnership with John Mervin Carrère in 1885. Their best known work is the New York

To Be Continued

1. See M.T.H.S. Newsletter, October, 1988, *Nineteenth Century History of the Croydon Hall Region*.
2. Monmouth Building Contract No. 3341 dated September 16, 1893.
3. *Red Bank Register*, May 27, 1931.
4. Many shore-area houses are attributed to McKim, Mead & White, or typically Stanford White. The claims are usually blatant fabrications.
5. Hewitt, Mark Alan. *The Architect and the American Country House*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990, page 27.
6. Monmouth Building Contract Number 2630 dated April 20, 1889.
7. Monmouth Building Contract Number 1760 dated November 21, 1885.
8. Monmouth Building Contract Number 2629 dated April 20, 1889.

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DEDICATED TO RESEARCHING, COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING THE HISTORY OF MIDDLETOWN TOWNSHIP.

Museum: In the main building at Croydon Hall on Leonardville Rd. between Chamone and Bellevue Aves. in the township's Leonardo section. Open Saturdays & Sundays.

Meetings: 8:00 PM at the museum, generally on the fourth Monday with occasional exceptions for major holidays.

Donations of historical materials: Please see a museum guide or write to the Society.



MEMBERSHIP DUES PER CALENDAR YR.

Individual — \$5.00
Family — \$10.00

Dues for new members joining after Oct. 1 include following year.