



# Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

Vol VI No. 2

April 1990

## THE NORTHERN MONMOUTH COUNTY COUNTRY HOUSE

Patron and Architect 1891 – 1935

*Continued*

received the 1917 Architectural League gold medal. (Figure 29)

Isador Straus, principal owner of the R. H. Macy store, had three sons, Jesse, Percy and Herbert Nathan, who succeeded him in the business following Isador's loss on the Titanic in 1912. Percy and Herbert were early assemblers of farms for country estates. Their first purchases were in 1908. Percy's new house was described as one of the finest in the area. No picture is available. It was destroyed by fire in 1924.

Percy's family left afterwards. Mrs. Straus was disenchanted with the area, in large part due to locals looting and trampling the grounds, trees, shrubs, and flowers in post-fire "sightseeing".

Percy built a stable grouping near his house in 1915. (Figure 30) They were the first work in the area of Alfred Hopkins, designed in association with the Boston firm of Movius & Rotch.<sup>19</sup> The buildings are now private residences, standing at the northwest corner of Chapel Hill and Sleepy Hollow Roads. Brother Herbert later commissioned Hopkins' best work.

Herbert bought the Duncan Parmly farm on Cooper Road in 1908.<sup>20</sup> Records on the house are scant, but it likely contained a large new dwelling as Parmly's earlier house there was destroyed by fire in 1895.<sup>21</sup> The Strauses expanded



Figure 28. The spiral staircase in the Andrew Varick Stout house.

and remodeled it, but their major construction was directed first to farm buildings. (Figure 31) Plans to replace the house with a French Chateau-style structure were halted by Herbert's untimely death in 1933. New stables were needed

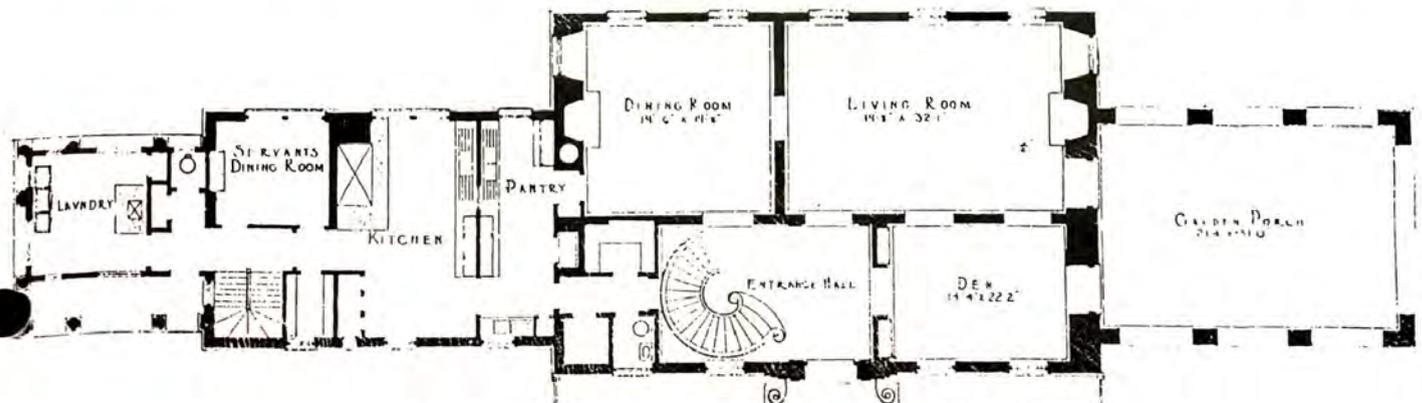
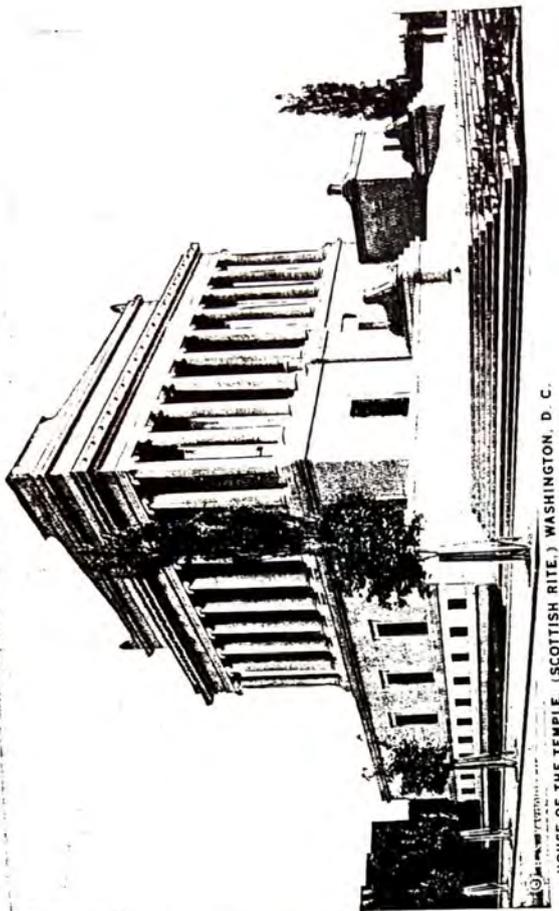


Figure 27. The first floor plan of the Andrew Varick Stout house.



HOUSE OF THE TEMPLE. (SCOTTISH RITE.) WASHINGTON, D. C.

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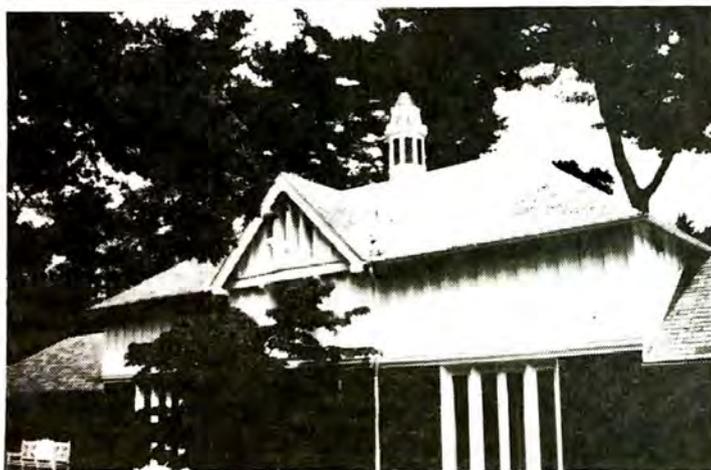


Figure 30. The Percy Straus Stable group, Chapel Hill Road, Middletown.

after the Percy Straus property was sold in 1929.

Alfred Hopkins was born in 1871 and educated at the Paris Ecole des Beaux-Arts. His diverse practice included banks, prisons and farm groups. He wrote extensively. His *Modern Farm Buildings*<sup>22</sup> described and illustrated the artistic and healthful farm complex. He was the leading architect for such structures for most of the first third of the twentieth century. Hopkins' career-demands precluded his building for himself until late in life. He designed a Gothic-influenced stone house and built it in Princeton Township. He resided there from about 1931 until his death in 1941. The Hopkins stable and dairy groups for the Strauses are arguably the Township's finest buildings of the country house era.

The stable buildings were built north of the main house, an exquisite example of French Norman style. (Figure 32)



Figure 31. The Herbert Nathan Straus residence, Cooper Road, Middletown.



Figure 32. The Herbert Nathan Straus Stable group, Middletown.

Detailing and finishings were the finest quality in every respect. Construction was overseen by Mrs. Straus, whose demandingness and skillful eyes were satisfied by nothing less than perfection. A square clock tower over a courtyard dominates the entrance from the south. A structure with a round tower reflects a key Norman design element. (Figure 33) The group is now a private residence.

The Strauses had long kept a dairy in older farm buildings. They replaced them in 1931 with the second



Figure 33. Tower, H.N. Straus stable group, Middletown.

Hopkins group, the Cobble Close Farm. The design incorporated Southern French elements. A pond upon the site was seized upon as a dominating feature of the plan. Across one end of it had been built a dam upon which an arcade was erected. (Figure 34) Statuary is throughout. A garden was designed by F. Burrall Hoffman, Jr., and landscaped by Martha Brookes Hutcheson.<sup>23</sup> A favorite feature of the architect was the entrance to the mens' quarters.<sup>24</sup> (Figure 35) The complex is now



Figure 34. The arcade over the pond, Cobble Close Farm, Cooper Road, Middletown.



Figure 35. Cobble Close, entrance to the mens quarters.

condominiumized residences. Architectural integrity is largely intact, a few modern intrusions notwithstanding. The view from the rear of the courtyard is the same as the Strauses enjoyed sixty years ago. (Figure 36)

Mrs. Straus retained the property until 1949. The two farms, the main house and superintendents house were sold separately at auction that December 3. The horse and dairy



Figure 36. View west from Cobble Close court yard.

farms brought \$35,000 and \$28,000 respectively. The main house sold for \$19,500 while the superintendent's place sold for \$30,000 although it was on a small parcel of land.<sup>25</sup> The poor prices reflected the precarious state of country house property then.

Hubert Templeton Parson's West Long Branch house, Shadow Lawn, the costliest ever built in Monmouth County, closes the local country house era. It has national ranking as a symbol of runaway ambition and spectacular collapse. Parson was a protege of Frank W. Woolworth. He hired him at age 19 as a \$12 per week bookkeeper. Parson rose through the ranks, earning his master's close personal trust. Perhaps he served as a surrogate son for Woolworth, father of three daughters. Parson succeeded Woolworth as president, imbued with the latter's urge to build. Woolworth in the period 1910-1916 built a handsome country house on Long Island and the Woolworth building. The latter was not only the tallest in the world, but a widely recognized symbol of Woolworth's power.

There have been two Shadow Lawns. The first mansion was built in 1903 by John McCall, president of New York Life Insurance Company. McCall died in 1906 shortly after being disgraced in an insurance scandal. Joseph Greenhut bought the house, giving the estate the Shadow Lawn name. He offered it in 1915 to Woodrow Wilson for use as a summer White House. The house received national notoriety as Wilson conducted his 1916 reelection campaign from Shadow Lawn. Parsons bought it in 1918. The first Shadow Lawn was destroyed by fire in 1927.



Figure 37. The Hubert T. Parson house is now Woodrow Wilson Hall, Monmouth College.

Horace Trumbauer, a Philadelphia architect, built massive country houses for Main Line families. One of his finest designs, however, is an urban example, the New York City townhouse for James B. Duke at Fifth Avenue and 78th Street. Trumbauer is also known for his Collegiate Gothic design of Duke University. Trumbauer had a Monmouth shore patron, Martin Maloney of Spring Lake. He designed for him a White House look-alike, the since demolished house Balingarry and St. Catharine's Church, built by Maloney as a memorial to his daughter. A well-known Trumbauer outside the area is The Elms in Newport, Rhode Island.

Hubert and Mazie Parson saw one of Trumbauer's greatest Pennsylvania palaces, Whitmarsh Hall, the Stotesbury house in Chestnut Hill. They commissioned Trumbauer to design a palace in the French neoclassical tradition, a house with several motifs reminiscent of Versailles. (Figure 37) Shadow Lawn has been called the Versailles of America. Lavish furnishings, excesses and design changes, some of them whimsical or ill-conceived, notably an Aztec-style solarium which required extensive structural alterations, ran the cost to \$8,000,000. The place was finished in 1930. It was little used; the Parsons were no socialites.

Hubert took an immense pride in ownership, but his time there was short. His decline was swift. The depression reduced the value of his stock holdings. He reached Woolworth's mandatory retirement age of 60 in 1932 and lost his \$650,000 salary. The cost of maintaining Shadow Lawn was estimated at \$350,000 annually. Debts and tax arrears mounted. He lost his Fifth Avenue house to foreclosure in 1936. An attempted sale of Shadow Lawn in 1937 was predictably unsuccessful. The Parsons left in 1938, the year lenders foreclosed Shadow Lawn. The Borough of West Long Branch bought Shadow Lawn at public auction in 1939.



Figure 38. The Parson Aztec solarium. Printed with permission of W. Edmund Kemble.



Figure 39. Main hall, the Hubert T. Parson house.

Its bid, the only one, was a token \$100. The age of splendor was over.<sup>26</sup>

Mazie Parson held a four week auction of furnishings in June 1940. Prices realized were poor. So was Hubert's health. He died of a heart attack two weeks after the auction.

The Parson house is now Woodrow Wilson Hall, an administrative and classroom building of Monmouth College. It is a National Historic Landmark. Much of its interior splendor remains despite modification for educational use. (Figure 39)

The country house era in northern Monmouth has left a gracefully aging stock of fine houses and an ethic that has encouraged land use planning. In addition, a number of former country houses are now institutional buildings; some

*Continued*

19. Monmouth Building Contract Number 9345 dated November 1, 1915.
20. Monmouth Deeds Book 836 page 85-7.
21. *Red Bank Register*, January 1, 1896.
22. *Modern Farm Buildings, Being Suggestions for the Most Approved Ways of Designing the Dow Barn, Dairy, Horse Barn, Hay Barn, Shepcote, Piggery, Manure Pit, Chicken House, Root Cellar, Ice House and other Buildings of the Farm Group, on Practical, Sanitary and Artistic Lines.* First published in 1913 by McBride, Nast & Co.; New and Revised Edition published 1920 by Robert M. McBride & Co.
23. *Architectural Record*, Volume 49, Number 4, April 1921.
24. *Architectural Record*, Volume 70, Number 2, August 1934.
25. *Red Bank Register*, December 8, 1949.
26. Maher, James T. *The Twilight of Splendor, Chronicles of the Age of Palaces.* Boston. Little Brown and Co. 1975.

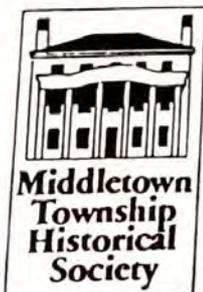
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DEDICATED TO RESEARCHING, COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING THE HISTORY OF MIDDLETOWN TOWNSHIP.

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.