

A Brief History of the Massena Estate in Barrytown, NY

The Massena estate is a former Livingston family land holding. The Livingstons came from Scotland to New York in the 1600s, and became wealthy land owners in this area, owning most of the land along the Hudson River and all the way into Massachusetts.

Judge Robert Livingston, who lived in the family's Clermont mansion in Germantown, was the 3rd and last Lord of the Manor. His brother Philip, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and his son, Robert helped draft the Declaration, but was called away and didn't get the chance to sign it.

When Judge Livingston died in 1775, his wife, Margaret Beekman Livingston, bequeathed to each of their 9 children large estates along the Hudson River. John R. Livingston, their 3rd son, (1755-1851) was given the land which now comprises most of Barrytown. In 1796 he built the original Massena Mansion which was an exact replica of a famous French chateau. He named it after one of Napoleon's generals. John's sister, Alida, received the land south of Massena and built the mansion which now stands at the Rokeby Farm. His sister Janet built the Montgomery Place mansion to the south of Massena on that land given to her.

In 1860, John Aspinwall, a wealthy New York City merchant purchased the Massena estate, and used it as a summer home for his family. He was related to the F.D.R. branch of the Roosevelt family. In the summer of 1868, 9-year-old Theodore Roosevelt came to Barrytown with his family and stayed for the month of August, while the Aspinwall's were away. On the day he arrived, he started his life long diaries which begins, "Three weeks of my life age nine years, August '68."

Young Tweetie, as he was affectionately called by his family, wrote a number of letters with drawings to his nanny, Dora Watkins, who returned to New York City after a day or two. He wrote of daily pony rides to Crugers Island; wild dogs chasing him and his cousin through the woods; swimming and rowboating on Tivoli Bay; and of his budding interest in all types of small mammals, insects, snakes and birds, which he began to collect. They became part of his "Roosevelt Museum of Natural History." The whole collection eventually wound up in the Museum of Natural History in New York City, which his father helped to found.

The original Massena Mansion, which was considered one of the most beautiful homes in America at the time, was destroyed by fire in 1885 and replaced by the High Victorian Gothic style house which still stands on the site of the first mansion.

When the house burned down, the widow Jane Aspinwall commissioned William A. Potter, a renowned New York City architect who designed some buildings at Princeton University to build her a house which "won't burn down." She left for Europe where she stayed until it was finished. When she returned and saw the heavy brick and stone gothic building which replaced her beloved Massena House, she was appalled, but had to live in it for the rest of her life.

After Mrs. Aspinwall died, the estate went into the hands of a couple of different owners, until, in 1929, it was purchased by John D. Rockefeller, who built the immense brick school building for the Christian Brothers in exchange for their property adjacent to his estate in Tarrytown, NY.

In 1974, the Unification Church, under the leadership of Rev. Sun Myung Moon bought the estate and established the Unification Theological Seminary which opened it's doors in 1975.