

## Episodes in the History of The Oaks at Barrytown

This architecturally significant property at the intersection of Dock and Station Hill Roads has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1990 when the Hudson River National Historic Landmark District (in which The Oaks is identified as a contributing feature) was formally designated by the Secretary of the Interior. Along with its carriage house the house was built in the mid 1880's in the Queen Anne style, to the design of William Appleton Potter. Commissioned by the son and heir of John Lloyd Aspinwall, late owner of Massena, the large country seat adjacent to the north, it was intended as a wedding gift for his daughter Helen on the occasion of her marriage to Francis Shober, a seminarian at nearby St. Stephen's (now Bard) College.

The Aspinwall family were devout Episcopalians and philanthropically active, supporters of St. Stephen's and creators of the nearby Church of St. John the Evangelist in the 1870's. From the time of their purchase of Massena, the former John R. Livingston seat in 1860, their architects of choice were the half-brothers Edward Tuckerman and William Appleton Potter, whose forbears included two influential Episcopal bishops and whose cousin in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was Henry Codman Potter, Bishop of New York. (Their other grandfather, the Reverend Eliphalet Nott, was the founding president of Union College in Schenectady in the 1790's and continued in that post for 66 years; in his honor the Potters designed the extraordinary polygonal library at Union, now a National Historic Landmark.) In addition to St. John's and The Oaks, for the Aspinwalls the Potters designed the main house at Massena (extant) to replace the huge Livingston house destroyed by fire about 1886, and a subordinate house on the property for family use (demolished).

Francis Shober was an energetic, evangelical priest, developing an enthusiastic following in his congregations. In addition to serving as Vicar of St. John's he persuaded the Aspinwalls to fund the establishment of a mission chapel in the hamlet of Upper Red Hook, designed by Potter and named All Souls (now a residence and greatly altered).

The Shobers had several children, but after a few years the marriage fell apart, the rift triggered by Helen's romance with a live-in tutor to the children. The Aspinwalls turned against Shober and exerted their influence with Bishop Potter to terminate him in his local posts. He contested this publicly and his congregations rallied to his cause, for a brief time providing fodder for the local press. Divorce ultimately followed and he abandoned his calling. Some years later found him elected to Congress from a House district in North Carolina.

I do not know how long Helen and her children remained in the house, but about 1905 it was leased by her or her family to a well-known painter specializing in portraits of children, William Sergeant Kendall, and his artist wife Margaret. It was for (or by) them that the studio was built. The Kendalls came to Barrytown in part to be near their friends Elizabeth and John Jay Chapman who had just bought the Donaldson property across the road to the south and had commissioned Charles A. Platt to design a great classical revival house on landscaped grounds that they called Sylvania.

In 1911 the Aspinwalls sold Massena to Garret Kip, whose family owned Ankony at Rhinecliff, and his wife Carola dePeyster Kip, whose family owned Rose Hill in Tivoli (now the home of the painter Brice Marden). As the Kips had no use for The Oaks it was put on the market and bought as an investment by my Grandmother, Mrs. Richard Aldrich (nee Margaret Livingston Chanler), who owned Rokeby, her ancestral place a

mile to the south. She was Mrs. Chapman's sister, and the purchase may have been a way to enable the Kendalls to continue in residence. However, the Kendall marriage soon dissolved due to Kendall's taking up with an art student in his Yale classes, Christine Herter, and the next lessee was Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Wyatt. Mrs. Wyatt (nee Euphemia Van Rensselaer Cruger whose family home was on Cruger's Island near Bard College) raised her children at The Oaks from about 1915 until the Depression years, and it was in the hayloft of the carriage house that her daughter Jane began as a child her distinguished acting career, ending as a Hollywood star. Her earliest roles in the hayloft were in plays written for local children by the writer John Jay Chapman.

With the departure of the Wyatts my Grandmother leased The Oaks to her sister-in-law Mrs. William Astor Chanler for the use alternatively of her unmarried son Willie and her son Ashley, who about 1938 had married Maria Antonia deBraganca, granddaughter of Portugal's last king. It was in the house that their first child was born, Mafalda, now Countess Stenbock-Fermor. My grandmother sold the property during World War II. In the 1950's and '60's it was owned and lived in by two men, and eventually was bought by Dr. George Verrilli for use as a residence during his second marriage.

A postscript about the house situated behind the carriage house: this was designed by the great American architect Alexander Jackson Davis in the 1850's for his friend and patron Robert Donaldson, the Presbyterian Scots-born millionaire cotton factor who owned Edgewater at the foot of Station Hill Road and wanted a Presbyterian chapel on his premises. Donaldson's marked grave lies behind the building. Named Sylvania Chapel, it continued in use until early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After a period of disuse and deterioration it was deconsecrated and sold. Slightly remodeled, it served for many years in

the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the home of Allen Porter, long-time photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art.

John Winthrop Aldrich

December 2020

P.S.

In conversation with my brother about this history today he reminded me that the secondary house at Massena built by the Aspinwalls to the designs of Potter Bros. and demolished about 30 years ago was named Pinehurst.

He also reminded me that the two men who owned The Oaks for many years in the post-World War II decades were Wilson and Kent, one a celebrated commercial artist whose specialty was simple line drawings for published ads of women's high fashion garments.

Regarding Sylvania Chapel, Allen Porter may have also been MOMA's film curator, because it became a source of local excitement that Greta Garbo was his house guest on more than one occasion.

Wint Aldrich