

MASSENA HOUSE, BARRYTOWN, NEW YORK

ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE HUDSON VALLEY

PROFESSOR WILLIAM B. RHOADS

BY

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MASSENA HOUSE AT BARRYTOWN, NEW YORK
(1797-1885, 1886-)

Washington Irving in his Rip Van Winkle says: "Whoever has made a voyage up the Hudson must remember the Kaatskill Mountains. They are a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family, and are seen away to the west of the river, swelling up to a noble height, and lording it over the surrounding country. Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed, every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains, and they are regarded by all the good wives, far and near, as perfect barometers. When the weather is fair and settled, they are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky; but sometimes, when the rest of the landscape is cloudless, they will gather a hood of gray vapors about their summits, which, in the last rays of the setting sun, will glow and light up like a crown of glory."
(1)

In this American paradise was built the estate known as Massena consisting of 300 acres located at Barrytown, Dutchess County, New York, opposite the Catskill Mountains, then 2 hours and 10 minutes from New York City by train. At that time, the station of the N.Y.C. and H.R.R. depot was located 5 minutes away from the East Gate, running adjacent to the river.

From the 18th century into the 19th century, a great many wealthy families purchased riverside property over a 20 mile distance on the east bank of the Hudson River in upstate New York. Among the prominent landowners who built their estates here were the Livingston family. They all seemed to have played an important role in the forming of America, for example; it was Phillip Livingston (1716-78) who was a member of the first Continental Congress and a signer of the Declaration of Independance. Among other members of the family were lawyers and statesmen, a Presidential aide, a mayor of New York and an Attorney General for the United States.

It was Major John R. Livingston (1755-1861), a brother of Chancellor Robert R. Livingston of Clermont, who in 1769 built the first Massena House by an architect named Marc Isambard Brunel. This was a copy of Chateau Beaumarchais in France and was noted for its octagonal iron and glass-domed conservatory. Among its visitors was the young Theodore Roosevelt who, at the age of nine years, began his diaries here. It was named Massena after one of Napoleon's marshals. Livingston lived into his nineties and continued to enlarge the mansion until it was perhaps the largest in the Hudson Valley. Nearly 170 feet long, the building was made of stone-filled wooden walls, and consequently, it was totally destroyed when it caught fire in 1885.

In 1860 the estate passed into the ownership of Mr. John Aspinwall, a New York shipping magnate, who had the old house enlarged by the edition of wings. After the fire Mrs.

Aspinwall employed the architect to build a smaller, different style house on the same site. Mrs. Aspinwall wanted the same house rebuilt, offered the necessary budget, and requested William Potter, the architect, to use building materials that would make the building fire proof. The expense of these materials resulted in a much smaller house and a disappointment to Mrs. Aspinwall. Mrs. Aspinwall, however, retained the mansion until her death.

W.A. Potter had 11 years earlier designed the Church of St. John the Evangelist for Mrs. Aspinwall, and was noted for his buildings in the High Victorian Gothic style and as an early practitioner of the Shingle Style. Here he incorporated brick, terra-cotta, and shingle into the mansion, which was completed in 1886.

The house that Potter designed, also called Massena (1885-86) is a curious cross between an English Gothic Castle and a "Queen Anne" suburban house. It seems to fit into a trend of the early 1880's that Scully terms "exacerbated picturesque" (more severe, ed.) and which he finds represented in the suburban work of the New York firm of Lamb and Rich. Potter's stone, brick and shingled residence certainly lacks nothing in the way of picturesqueness; it is as episodic as several of Potter & Robertsons' houses. Shavian groups of square windows light the main staircase. Here and there the roof is broken by half-timbered and shingled gables, and a tower at one end balances a cross gable at the other. Entrance is through a massive Gothic porte-cochere which also opens to a cloister-like veranda on one side.

The plan of Massena, an eighteen-room house, is virtually the same one that Potter & Robertson had used over and over again with variations, in their suburban houses. Mrs. Aspinwall was horrified to find that the rooms of the new house were not as large as those of the old one.

They were tiny-they were horrible. There was a dark hall and a little bit of a library and she stood there and said "I thought these were to be the same." They (presumably Potter and an assistant) said "No Mrs. Aspinwall, the amount of money you told us to spend on the house, which was to be brick so it would not burn down - a brick house is very expensive to build and that is all you can get for that money." So she had to put up with it, she and her daughter and daughter's children." (2)

In 1911 the estate was sold to the Kips, who in 1928 sold the property to the Christian Brothers for the establishment of a novitiate. Ninety-five local men worked for three years in the construction of the building. St. Joseph's functioned at Barrytown for approximately 40 years.

When the Christian Brothers could no longer draw the necessary number of students to St. Joseph's, even after opening the doors to area boys, the school was closed and put up for sale. The massive building defined the property as institutional.

St. Joseph's was sold to the Unification Church in 1974

for use as a training center. Several years later, the facilities became the Unification Theological Seminary with approximately 200 students, faculty and staff, offering a two-year program to students.

The seminary began a 3-year restoration program of the Aspinwall-Massena mansion in June, 1982. The gate-house to the first house remains to this day, and is also undergoing restoration. The project, the inspiration of a student, Simon Herbert, will be completed on the 100th anniversary of the construction of the building. An outside contracting company from Albany has been employed for making serious repairs, while students with backgrounds in architecture and carpentry contribute their talents and time to the project. The effort is gaining commendation from local historical groups.

The Annual Heritage Award was given by the Historical Society of Red Hook for this project.

The proposed use for Massena is as a facility hosting conferences for inter-religious dialogue and to house staff and faculty of the Seminary. These, on the second and third floors in six private suites by integrating essential conveniences with the overall integrity of the 19th century architecture.

The work to date continues to be performed by volunteer seminary students and professional crews, co-ordinated from the site office in the Massena House and directed by the President of the Seminary, David S.C. Kim.

REFERENCES

1. An Advertisement for the Estate of John L. Aspinwall, Newburgh, New York. Publishers, Redfield Bros. New York. (date, unknown)
2. Edward T. and William A. Potter: American Victorian Architects by Sarah Bradford Landau.

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