

ROKEBY

(Please refer to the 1973 essay by J.W. Aldrich for historic background on this important country seat.)

EXTERIOR

Original two and 1/2 story stuccoed fieldstone house was built in the French taste by General John Armstrong and his wife Alida Livingston Armstrong. The exterior walls are three feet thick.

Warner Richards, a Scotsman, was the builder, but the architect is unknown. It was possibly the Frenchman J.J. Ramee. The house was begun in 1811 but construction was interrupted by the War of 1812, during which Armstrong served as Brigadier General in charge of the defences of New York City and later, Secretary of War, under President Madison. In 1815, the family moved into the as yet uncompleted building after the farmhouse they had occupied temporarily, burned to the ground.

General Armstrong's only daughter, Margaret, married William B. Astor, son of the original John Jacob Astor, and about 1858 they added the Corinthian columned piazza on the south, a full 3rd story and mansard roof, a kitchen/laundry and servants wing to the north and the striking five-story polygonal tower on the west. Subsequent alterations to the interior, designed by Stanford White, were made in 1895.

In the late 19th-century the stucco exterior had been painted an off-white and scored to resemble masonry. The trim was tan. At the time of the interior modifications the exterior was resurfaced with pure white beach sand or marble dust, and the shutters painted dark green at the suggestion of Chester H. Aldrich of the firm of Delano & Aldrich, architects. Aldrich was the brother-in-law of Margaret Chanler Aldrich, an Armstrong/Astor descendent who had bought out her brothers' and sisters' interests in the property. The barely visible murals on the piazza walls were painted by Mrs. Aldrich's brother, Robert Winthrop Chanler, whose work appears within the house as well.

Rokeby is on the National Register of Historic Places and its lands are part of the Mid-Hudson Historic Shorelands Scenic Area, designated by the State of New York.

LANDSCAPE

In the 1840's the Astor's employed the German landscape gardener Hans Ludwig Ehlers to layout a new driveway in the romantic taste, make changes to the grounds near the house, adding flower gardens and specimen trees probably including the rare giant Ginko tree to the south of the house. There is a Ginko of comparable size at the Vanderbilt Mansion in Hyde Park. During the same period, the gatehouse was added and a service road from the river was refined into a sylvan path, known as the "Poet's Walk" in honor of the Astor's' friends Fitz-Greene Halleck and Washington Irving.

In 1911, Margaret Chanler commissioned the Olmsted Brothers to improve the landscaping to the west of the house and added a private riverside dock. Rokeby is fortunate to have 25 acres beyond the railroad right of way, including a scenic headland known as Astor Point.

The stone wall which runs along River Road was built as an act of gratitude by a family retainer, Josiah House. Aided by a young assistant, he completed the wall over an 8-year period, completing the wall in 1888, at the age of 80.

NOTES ON THE INTERIOR

Entrance Hall

Walls: marbelized at the direction of Margaret and William B. Astor c. 1836.

Hall furniture and tapestries: came from the New York City townhouse of Laura Astor Delano, the Astors' youngest daughter. The house stood on the site presently occupied by B. Altman. Cabinets: Italian, early 19th-century.

Portraits:

On the left: engraving of General John Armstrong
ink drawing of Napoleon Bonaparte as first consul.
Lewis Chanler, Lt. Governor of New York
Margaret Aldrich Rand (blue sweater) by Ellen Emmet Rand
Eliza Astor Von Rumpff (near clock)
(plaster bust) Lewis S. Chanler

On the right: John Jay Chapman
(bronze bust) Samuel Ward

The original staircase was remodeled for Margaret Chanler in 1895 by Stanford White, who added railed passageways on the landing, now covered by tapestry panels.

"Home Parlor"

Wallpaper: selected by Stanford White c. 1895. Paper applied to fabric, hangs free of wall surface to protect from dampness of thick masonry walls. (Small panel to left of fireplace preserves a small sampe of original and later papers.

Mantle: dates from the mid-19th century remodelling.

Prints and paintings include:

1. 1870's oil painting from an earlier photograph of Rokeby as it looked in Armstrong's day.
2. Caricatures of Sam Ward and Hamilton Fish
3. Mathew Brady photographs of Mr. and Mrs. W.B. Astor
4. Print of Hudson River ice yachts and 100 year old photograph of the ice yacht Jack Frost. The Aldrichs' own and continue to sail a collection of similar 19th-century ice yachts.
5. Chromolithograph of Frederic Church painting of Niagara Falls in a frame selected by Church (who charged 25¢ to view his original, panoramic view of the Falls.)
6. 1960's painting of west front of house.

Dining Room:

Woodwork in this room is original except for mantle, which was installed by Stanford White in 1895; replaces a Victorian marble mantelpiece.

Ongoing restoration of room has revealed early blue and red triangles on faux bois graining running around the outer margin of the ceiling.

Furniture and portraits are temporarily returned to the room for the tour.

Mirrors and consoles between the windows are among the half dozen pieces of French empire furniture which the Armstrong's brought from Paris in 1810 and which remain in the house.

Apple green French porcelain was brought in quantity in France for the Astors for use as their summer service for Rokeby.

Red painted leather fire bucket was purchased in the north of England; it came from the original Rokeby, about which Sir Walter Scott wrote.

Painted standing screen, "Death of the White Hart", is a work by Robert W. Chanler.

Portraits:

South wall- General John Armstrong, copy of original by J.W. Jarvis.

Alida Livingston Armstrong and her daughter Margaret,
in Paris ca. 1810, by J. Vanderlyn

North wall- Richard Aldrich by Ellen Emmet Rand

Margaret Livingston Chanler Aldrich by Ellen Emmet Rand
Benjamin Clarke Cutler

West wall- Susan Cutler Aldrich by Ellen Emmet Rand

Rosaline Aldrich Michahelles

William B. Astor (behind door)

West wall (cont.)- Kosciuszko. Armstrong

Pair of oval portraits:

"Maddie" Ward

"Maddie" Aldrich (her granddaughter)

Bronze bust of Robert W. Chanler

Reception Room

Mantle: Mid-19th Century, replacing original

Wallpaper: Original French paper brought back by Alida Livingston and husband John Armstrong in 1810 after his tour as Minister to France.

Floor: Copy of a parquet in Austria; installed in the early 20th century.

Pleyel Piano: similar to one owned by Chopin, belonged to Emily Astor Ward.

Astor & Company spinet piano (made at Cornhill in London).

John Jacob Astor emigrated from Germany to England where he worked for his older brother making instruments long enough to learn English and commerce. He continued on to New York as his brother's salesman, but soon went into the lucrative fur trade where he built his fortune.

Chinese porcelain urns: acquired by John Jacob Astor.

Astor traded beaver pelts from the Columbia River region for Chinese porcelains and other goods. His ships circumnavigated the globe in pursuit of trading opportunities, and the profits of all his activities were increasingly invested in Manhattan real estate.

Screen: decorated by Robert Chanler

Portraits:

1. Alida Livingston (a copy of the original in the dining room, with demure clothing and Hudson River landscape added.)
2. Laura Astor Delano and Alida Astor Carver, daughters of W.B. Astor (above the spinet).
3. Sisters Julia Cutler Ward and Louisa Cutler McAllister; Mrs. Ward was the grandmother of Margaret Astor Ward Chanler (above the Pleyel).
4. Emily Astor Ward (oval).

Drawing room

In 1895, Margaret Chanler engaged Stanford White to create a new drawing room by combining two smaller rooms. His firm, McKim, Mead & White, supplied the moldings, wallpaper and mantles. The scheme included green wall-to-wall carpeting which seemed to extend the green lawns seen through the original tall French windows.

Mirrors and clock from the Astor period.

Cabinets by Alexander Roux, flanking the settee were loaned to the Metropolitan Museum for its exhibit of 19th-century furniture.

Malachite lamps from Laura Astor Delano (Mrs. Franklin H. Delano), whose estate, Steen Valetje, was just south of Rokeby. (The estate has been sold out of the family and the Delanos' magnificent Italianate villa has been remodeled into a red brick Georgian-style mansion which can be seen from the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge.) Mrs. Delano was one of the six children of Margaret and William B. Astor. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was named after his great uncle Franklin H. Delano.

Decorative Screen by Robert Chanler.

Pair of Steinway pianos belonged to Margaret Chanler Aldrich and her husband Richard, who was music critic of the NY Times until his death in 1937. (His "cartoon" portrait by Robert Chanler hangs on the left in the library vestibule.)

Framed Imperial Chinese Embroidery was salvaged by Margaret Chanler

when she toured Peking for the Red Cross in the aftermath of the Boxer rebellion (1900). It has been used to cover a sandbag during the emergency. (shown under library)

Portraits

1. Margaret Chanler Aldrich as a young woman on the Rokeby piazza

Library:

Around 1858, William B. Astor and his wife, Margaret Armstrong Astor, greatly enlarged Rokeby, including adding the 5-story tower in which this library is located. Three floors of libraries were built to house the extensive book collection of General John Armstrong and the rapidly expanding Astor collection. The ground floor octagonal library is thought to be one of the finest Gothic-Revival rooms in America and resembles the work of Alexander Jackson Davis who designed the mid 19th-century additions to nearby Montgomery Place and Edgewater as well as the original Blithewood (since demolished), the Blithewood gatehouse which still stands, the "Swiss Cottage" in Annandale and the Delamater House in Rhinebeck (now owned by the Beekman Arms).

The design features faux bois Gothic groins of plaster. All of the wood graining in the room was hand painted to unify the architectural elements made of wood and plaster.

The small settee and matching chairs as well as the Aubusson carpet are French.

The ceiling hook was designed for a chandelier or candelabra, but has not been used since 1876 (if ever).

The bookcases contain much of General Armstrong's personal library and include numerous works on agriculture, military and political affairs. There are approximately 4,000 volumes in this room and 12,000 elsewhere in the house.

Bronze bust portrays William Astor Chanler, congressman and African explorer; it is a copy of the original by Saint Gaudens.