

Gore Vidal At Edgewater

By Daniel Middleton, June 14, 2022

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It is a scene from a sly Noel Coward comedy. Imagine an elegant old house on the banks of the Hudson built in the style of a Roman temple. The simple box shape made of stucco and brick is distinguished by its front: a triangular roof supported by six large columns shading a lengthy portico with a stunning view of river and distant mountains. A warm evening in springtime is fading to darkness, and the guests make their way from porch to dining room which glows in the fading light. The drink is flowing and everyone is having a good time. Conversation is witty and competitive among the guests, many of whom are notables from the arts and academe.

Our host is an attractive man who, at 30, has already accumulated a lifetime of achievement: novels, essays, screenplays for television, Broadway, and Hollywood. He knows politics, too, and may still go that way if the time is right. His incisive intelligence is what people call “fierce,” and he loves to puncture the balloons of the pompous and mediocre. One of them has found her way into the dining room and is keen to address the gathering. While she is unaware that the train tracks of the New York Central Line run close to the house, our host is very much aware; he knows down to the minute when a train will roar by. He glances at his watch and smiles in her direction. “Miss X, why don’t you tell us about your experience with Mr. Y...”



Gore Vidal with dogs, Billy and Blanche, on the front lawn of Edgewater, c. 1965. Photo courtesy of the Classical American Homes Preservation Trust (CAHPT).

Thrilled, she begins, “Well...it all began when he...” but as she speaks, a subtle vibration fills the room, then a rumble, then a screech from a horn as a 200-car Albany-bound freight train plods northward. The noise is engulfing and seems endless. The speaker perseveres with a frantic intensity, but her words are inaudible. Drinks on sideboards shake. At last the sound fades, but new conversation begins. Our host is pleased. Once again the railroad has vanquished another dreadful bore.

Implausible as the vignette may seem, in this case truth trumps fiction. The house is one of the most beautiful in the valley, called Edgewater because of its location on the banks of the river. Our host, the writer Gore Vidal, still remembers how during his time at Edgewater he could rely on the punctuality of the New York Central when a windbag threatened the equanimity of one of his gatherings.

The Vidal era at Edgewater began in 1950 and lasted until he put the house on the market in 1964. It was a golden time not only for the young Vidal, who prospered both artistically and professionally, but for Edgewater, which was given new life after years of neglect. Unlike any time in its history before or since, the house was an intellectual locus for some of the most creative minds of the post-war period: Norman



Gore Vidal seated in the present day Dining Room of Edgewater, c. 1960. Photo courtesy of CAHPT.

Mailer, Saul Bellow, Diana and Lionel Trilling, Norman Podhoretz, Tennessee Williams, Joanne Woodward, and Paul Newman were among the luminaries who visited Vidal at Edgewater.

Like so many of the great river estates in Dutchess and Columbia Counties, Edgewater was built by one of the Livingston clan. John R. Livingston, whose estate Massena constituted much of the land which is now Barrytown, gave 250 acres to his daughter Margaretta upon her marriage to a South Carolinian named Lowndes Brown. The Browns chose the riverside for their mansion, and by 1820 it was complete.

Edgewater was unusual because of its location. While other nearby estates overlooked the Hudson from afar, Edgewater was built on a small peninsula jutting out into the water. Two acres of lawn and trees were all that separated house from river. The effect was dramatic: the wooded riverfront was continuous until a gap of sloping lawn appeared and a modest but elegant Greek Revival house surrounded by willows, beeches, and oaks shone in the sunlight. Its isolation was idyllic for the Browns, but their peace was shattered by the inexorable growth of the railroads. By 1851, the Planners of Progress had done their worst: the tracks for the New York Central had been laid a few yards from the eastern front of Edgewater. The noise and coal soot from the slow-moving trains were like a plague of locusts. The Browns despaired and sold out to a sharp businessman named Robert Donaldson who was less concerned with the trains than he was with refining the house and grounds. By 1855, many improvements were in place including a distinctive octagonal library (designed by Donaldson's close friend, architect A. J. Davis) which extends from the northern end of the house.

The Donaldson period had ended by the close of the century. Donaldson's feckless children were unable to maintain Edgewater at the sumptuous standard



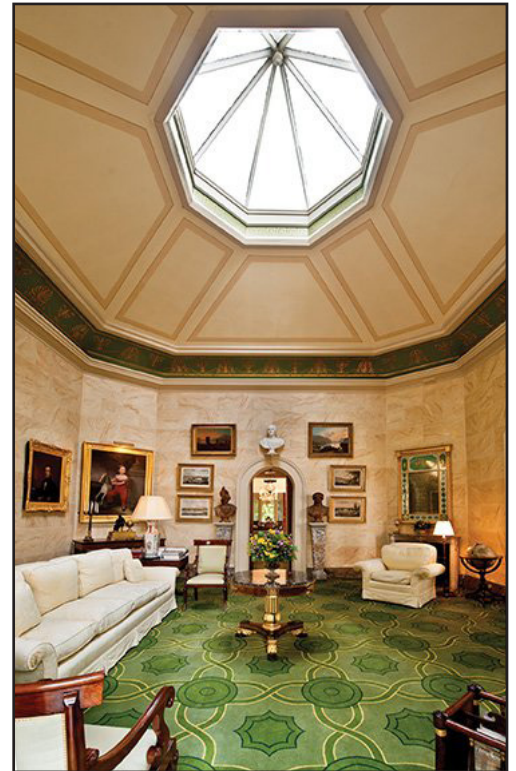
Front view of the Edgewater Estate. Photo courtesy of The Magazine Antiques.

their father had set. His collections of period furniture, art, and silver were gradually dispersed to the highest bidder. By 1900 the house was back in the hands of the Livingstons; this time it was Elizabeth Chanler and her husband, essayist John Jay Chapman, who took up residence at Edgewater. But they didn't stay long. Chapman found the stiff winter breezes intolerable. The Chapmans built a large house farther up the hill overlooking Edgewater. Some years later their son Conrad lived at Edgewater, but when he sold out, the Livingston connection had ended. What was once a vibrant estate was now frequently unoccupied, grounds and house giving in to the inevitable decay which comes with neglect.

When Gore Vidal was shown an empty Edgewater in 1950, he took on what he later called "a white elephant" for only \$6,000 down and a \$10,000 mortgage. Vidal was only 24, but already acknowledged as a writer on the rise. At 20, he published *Williwaw*, a novel inspired by his World War Two experiences as first mate on a freight-supply ship operating among the Aleutian Islands. *Williwaw* was critically well received; The New York Times called it "a sound, craftsman-like work that would do credit to a practiced novelist twice its author's age" and sales were strong. His second book was not a success, but the third, a novel about gay love, *The City and the Pillar*, published in 1948, gave Vidal a writer's most valuable commodity besides talent: notoriety. Vidal joined Orwell, Mailer, and Capote on the best seller lists and in no time became a ubiquitous presence on the literary scene. He visited New York, Rome, London, and Paris, becoming close friends with Tennessee Williams, Paul Bowles, and Christopher Isherwood. He met Evelyn Waugh, E. M. Forster, W. H. Auden, George Santayana, and André Gide. And the Beats too, first Kerouac, then Burroughs and Ginsberg.

As he wrote in his 1995 memoir *Palimpsest*, when he moved into Edgewater in July 1950, he was "oblivious of what [I] had taken on... I painfully restored the lawn... A small island went with the property and on hot summer days I'd swim out to it. In winter I'd walk to it over glacier-thick ice that creaked and groaned as the river's current broke the shifting ice floes." Heat and cold aside, Vidal found Edgewater creatively invigorating. Never a supporter of formal education, which he thought a fruitless exercise in repetitious banality, Vidal spent his first few years at Edgewater reading extensively and ridding his writing of what he called "the national manner...the gray, slow realism of most American writing, not to mention the strict absence of wit and color..."

Although Vidal was prospering artistically, his bank account was too meager to maintain Edgewater, so in 1954 he gave up novel writing for a time and went into television, theater, and the movies. Over the next ten years he was remarkably prolific, writing 30 plays for live television, at least two hits for Broadway (*The Best Man* and most particularly *Visit to a Small Planet*), and contributing to numerous film scripts for MGM (*Suddenly Last Summer*, *Ben Hur*, etc.). His bank account went from moribund to robust,



Edgewater's Octagonal Library, designed by AJ Davis and added by Robert Donaldson in the 1850s. Photo courtesy of The Magazine Antiques.



Red Room at Edgewater. Photo courtesy of The Magazine Antiques.

and Edgewater was in better shape than it had been for 70 years.

Then in 1960, a complete departure from writing: local Democrats persuaded Vidal that the seat for the 29th District of New York State was vulnerable, so why not become a congressman? Vidal agreed—after all, he was the grandson of Oklahoma’s first senator, T. P. Gore, and had grown up in Washington, D. C. The campaign got under way. Vidal visited Hyde Park frequently to receive the counsel of Eleanor Roosevelt, and Harry Truman vouched for him at a rally in Poughkeepsie (“Hope I haven’t done you any harm,” he told

Vidal afterward). Vidal’s slogan was “You’ll get more with Gore,” but many Republican voters in the 29th were happy enough with what they got from their man, and Vidal lost, though he did carry the bigger towns such as Kingston, Poughkeepsie, Hudson, and Beacon. Indeed, the Democrats were pleased enough with Vidal’s performance to recommend that he run for U.S. Senate in 1962, but Vidal declined.

Whether writing or politicking, Vidal always entertained, and those years at Edgewater were vibrant with the pleasures of good conversation. An English writer named Elaine Dundy, first wife of the theater critic Kenneth Tynan, recalled those years at Edgewater as “luminous...just the sight of Gore standing at the Rhinecliff station as I got off the train...had the effect of cleansing my palate... then would follow evening enlivened by the company of Gore’s neighbors...” Neighbors like Saul Bellow, who would walk down the hill from his rented apartment on the Chapman place to describe his latest tussle with his irascible landlord, Chanler Chapman (once, he accused Chanler of murdering his cats); or perhaps the distinguished literary critic and literature professor at Columbia, Fred Dupee, whose own house overlooked the Hudson; or Rhinebeck resident Richard Rovere, the Washington D.C. correspondent for *The New Yorker*. In an era of stiff, even frightened conformity, with McCarthy rants and Red Scare paranoia enforcing a cowed silence on many, the unconventional thinkers who gathered at Edgewater remained defiant.

[The year] 1964 saw the end of the Vidal era at Edgewater. He was finished with Hollywood and television for a while; it was time to go back to Rome and start writing novels again. And so another phase of the Vidal career began: bestsellers like *Juulan*, *Myra Breckinridge*, *Burr*, *Lincoln* were to come, as well as numerous cultural and political essays commenting on the increasingly fractious American scene. As for Edgewater, purchased from Vidal in 1969, it was been meticulously restored by financier Richard Jenrette to the condition it was in at the time of Robert Donaldson; after years of persistent sleuthing, Jenrette has recovered many of the Donaldson treasures which had been dispersed throughout the country and abroad.

The Vidal legacy at Edgewater has given way to the inevitable erasures of passing years. And in this age of multitudinous forms of instant communication, memories have become very short. The thought of

an artistic legacy, like footprints preserved in stone, may seem harder and harder to imagine, but as long as people are curious and read and think, times like those with Vidal at Edgewater have a good chance of not only being remembered but understood.



Parlor of Edgewater, Barrytown, Dutchess County, New York. Photo courtesy of CAHPT.