The House That Wouldn’t Be

By NNYBiz
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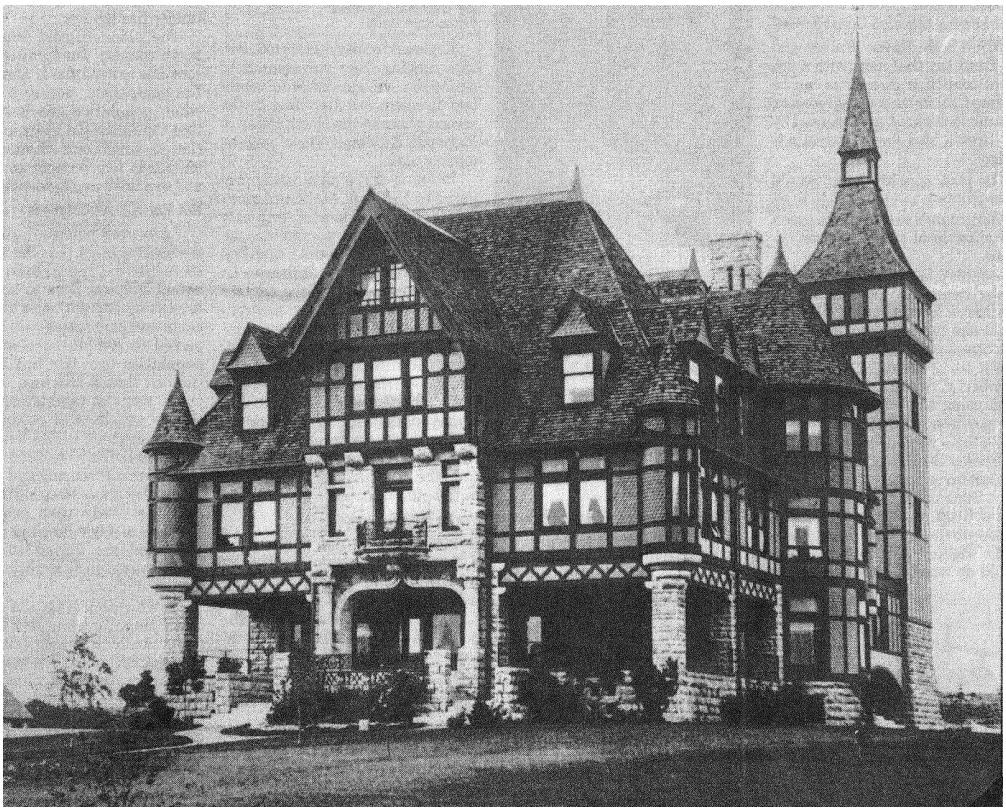

WATERTOWN DAILY TIMES FILE PHOTO
By NNYBiz

BY: Lenka Walldroff

Carleton Island, located a stone’s throw from the Village of Cape Vincent, is rich in legend and history. The island served as a refuge for civilian Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution but was “liberated” from the British by three enterprising Americans during the War of 1812 (and technically, the Jay Treaty that preceeded them by nearly 20 years.) We know that there are numerous historic burials throughout the island, including a large Native American burial site. We also know that the island was used at various points in its history- as many of the islands along the St. Lawrence were- by smugglers. And the story about a small vial of active smallpox virus taken from the 1885 Montreal smallpox epidemic being buried somewhere on the island? Well, we most sincerely hope that to be just a terrifying legend- like an epidemiological monster under the bed. Even so, we recommend that island residents garden with care.

True or false, the colorful stories lend the island a certain panache that makes the ghost of a Gilded Age mansion seem as natural a feature as its rolling green hills and ancient trees. Like a cross between a Caspar David Friedrich painting and a Diane Arbus photograph, the crumbling remains of the Wyckoff Villa loom forlorn on the southwestern corner of the island. This house has made it on numerous "Top 10" internet lists; oddly enough, the usual fare associated with houses of this kind- boilerplate tales of ghosts and hauntings, rarely make the villa's internet vignettes. Perhaps because ghouls and goblins are far less interesting than the house's actual history- a tale of personal tragedies, mysterious deaths, and fortunes gained and lost.

The Wyckoff Villa, also known as Carleton Villa, was built between 1894 and 1895. Renowned Ithaca architect William H. Miller, best known for his buildings on the Cornell University campus, was commissioned to design the villa by William Ozmun Wyckoff, a fellow native of Tompkins County, New York. Mr. Wyckoff was born in 1835 on the family farm in South Lansing, NY- the oldest of ten children born to Ira and Julia Wyckoff. The Wyckoff family has old roots, tracing its lineage back to 1675 when its Dutch ancestors settled on what is now Long Island, New York.

Mr. Wyckoff spent his early years on the farm, receiving a public school education and attending a few semesters at Ithaca Academy. He studied law with the intention of joining the New York Bar Association but put his studies on hold with the advent of the Civil War. William Wyckoff served two years in the 32nd N.Y. Infantry, rising from the rank of Private to that of Captain before he was discharged from service in 1863. In October of that year, he married Frances Valeria Ives, also of South Lansing, NY. Soon thereafter, he was admitted to the bar and graduated from Ames College in Syracuse with a degree in business. In 1866 he became a stenographer for the New York State Supreme Court, a position he retained until 1882.

In 1856, E. Remington & Sons (nee Remington Arms Co., known historically for its rifles) began expanding the business beyond firearms to include farm implements, sewing machines, and in 1873, typewriters.

William Wyckoff and E. Remington & Sons were like two trains that had long been running on separate tracks but destined to converge. That collision happened in 1875 when Mr. Wyckoff was presented with a new machine called a typewriter that was to aid in the transcription of court records. He saw the potential in the machine- in stenography and other fields, and was delighted to discover that he also had a latent talent for sales. After obtaining a sales license from E. Remington & Sons, the sale of typewriters became a profitable side business. So profitable, in fact, that in 1882, Mr. Wyckoff left his position with the courts and turned his part-time job in typewriter sales into his primary profession. With business partners Clarence Seamans and Henry Benedict, he created the firm of Wyckoff, Seamans & Benedict- the sole sales agent for Remington typewriters. The business was so successful that in 1886 Wyckoff, Seamans & Benedict bought the patent rights for the Remington typewriter as well as the Ilion, New York factory where they were manufactured.

A new American industrialist was born.

And what an age to be born into! The Thousand Islands Region was just beginning to come into its own Gilded Age splendor; by the 1890s it would be a veritable summer playground for America's elite. The Thousand Islands were the natural choice, then, in the early 1890s when Mr. Wyckoff began to look for an

appropriate place to build a summer cottage. Originally conceived to host weekend house parties in the English tradition, the approximately 5,000 square foot villa was designed in the Romantic style, with a 5-story tower, Tudor-style facing, 12 bedrooms, and deep water dock. It may interest readers to learn that while Mr. Wyckoff was building his palatial Thousand Islands retreat, Philo Remington, scion of the vast Remington fortune and president of Remington's typewriter division (that is, until it was sold to Wyckoff, Seamans & Benedict) maintained a relatively modest summer cottage in Thousand Islands Park.

Begun in 1894, Mr. Wyckoff's villa was finished in July of 1895. But sadly, the vision of it as a family retreat was not meant to be. Frances Valeria Ives Wyckoff, Mr. Wyckoff's wife of 32 years, died on June 1, 1895 of cancer- one month before the villa was completed. Mr. Wyckoff moved into the house on 11 July, 1895 and died that night of a heart attack. He was 60 years old.

Ownership of the house remained with the family until 1927. By then, the family fortune was largely lost to poor investments, Mr. Wyckoff's only surviving son Clarence Frederick Wyckoff (William and Frances had three, one of whom died in infancy) sold it to the General Electric Company. The Wyckoff Villa would never be lived in again.

General Electric bought the property with the intention of tearing the 32-year-old house down (as well as, it has been told, the nearby ruins of the American Revolution-era Fort Haldimand) and building a corporate retreat and golf course in its place. Architectural salvagers were invited into the house to take whatever they could use- mouldings, wooden paneling, doors, windows, stained glass- even entire sections of flooring were cut out and carted away. The Gouverneur marble at the base of the 5-story tower was also removed, undermining the stability of the structure. Sometime between the onset of the Great Depression and the Second World War, General Electric changed their plans for the building, however, due in part to the removal of the marble, the tower became so unstable that it posed a safety hazard and had to be torn down anyway. With the exception of graffiti left by a few vandals (here's looking at you "Pedro", whoever you may be!) the building has not been touched by human hands since. Mother Nature has set to the task of finishing what the General Electric Company started so many decades ago. The villa has been bought and sold over the years, and is currently in private hands- and for sale again once again.

The story of the Wyckoff Villa has all the makings of a Shakespearean tragedy- the achievement of the American dream, fortunes made and lost, mysterious deaths, and, like a Dutch still life painting- the opulent luxury of a forgotten age left to decay on the lonely, windswept shores of an island in Lake

Ontario. The Wyckoff Villa stands as a memento mori to all who pass by: “from out of the dust we came, unto the dust we shall return.”

It is the sincere hope of the historical preservation community that from the dust it shall rise again.