


OLD
ROSLYN

GERRY

1954



ROBIN—ABOUT 1950



OLD
ROSLYN

by
PEGGY AND ROGER GERRY



Foreword by ABBOTT CUMMINGS, PH.D.
Photographs by JOHN PARROTT AND MORTON RUSSIN



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Foreword

Perhaps the more interesting of the older sea coast towns are those where styles meet and mingle. Such towns, whatever their actual geographic location, do not belong wholly to New England or New York or Pennsylvania, but fall somewhere between. The original settlers may have come from one center or the other, but their's is essentially a borderland. Inevitably it becomes a magnetic field, attracting ideas from both directions.

This is the case with Roslyn which has grown up between the two major centers of New York and New-England. While the earliest colonists came from across the Sound, the old houses we see today are more or less in the New York tradition. The explanation is, of course, that no houses remain from the first period when the town probably looked much more like a New England village. Instead one is impressed with the persistence of a single type that is by no means characteristic of New England. The proportions are high and narrow, the top story lighted by "eyebrow" windows, and the principal apartments and main entrance (occasionally a mock entrance) are apt to be located on the second floor.

It has been suggested, logically, that these houses, most of which seemingly date to the 1820's and later, are inspired by the hilly terrain of Roslyn, but it is equally important to see in them the characteristics of similar houses in New York and New Jersey. The high and narrow proportions could easily imply a rural transplantation of the narrow urban dwelling developed in New York and widely popularized in the published designs of the early 19th century New York architect, Minard Lafever. Many architectural ideas were transmitted by pattern books engraved with plans, elevations, and details. These were the source books of the rural carpenters who had no other formal schooling than an apprenticeship served with an older craftsman. Among the very popular pattern books was "The Practical House Carpenter", first published in 1830 by the Boston architect, Asher Benjamin. One of his designs for a front door has been copied in Roslyn and indicates that such builders' guides were not unknown here during a period when the light and graceful Federal styles, as seen in "Old Brick" were giving way to the more severe and angular Greek Revival forms.

The New England type is by no means absent, as a glance at the Williams House will quickly prove, nor are there lacking examples of the more substantial dwellings which in any period mark the existence of a local "gentry". In Willowmere with its gambrel roof and two story ell the New York flavor is strong, though the gambrel roof, often associated with the Dutch, was popular throughout the Colonies.

Of keenest interest to architects and art historians, perhaps is Sycamore Lodge, an unusually fine example of the mid-19th century with delicate Gothic detail and handsome Flemish gables. There were a few examples of the Flemish gable in the late 17th century, and then the form disappeared until the more recent rash of eclectic styles in the 1890's and early 20th century. There were a few exceptional outbursts just before the Civil War, however, of which Sycamore Lodge is one. The frieze of Italian wall-paper in the dining-room of this house is among the finest products of its period.

New York
May 5th, 1954

Abbott Cummings, Assistant Curator,
The American Wing,
Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Village



The villages of the eastern seaboard of the United States often contained a deeply-rooted dignity that our more modern communities do not possess. This venerable dignity sprang from a culture which antedated the settlement of the United States and actually stemmed from a medieval tradition. The settlements of the Atlantic Seaboard prolonged the social habits and institutions which were already rapidly withering away in England.

The early settlers laid out their villages in order to attain two objectives, i. e., the culture of the soil and the maintenance of a civil and religious society. In most instances these requirements produced villages of great beauty. These early villages were often planned with as much care as the so-called modern garden villages of our own time. Irregularities in the placement of houses which today present aspects of the quaint and picturesque, represent attempts at protection, climate control, and the desire to enjoy a view or the urge to secure privacy. The care in execution, style, and proportion which the houses of the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries have in common with the mill and meeting house, was the outcome of a common spirit in the community and the will to make the best use of the materials offered locally. As the desire for comfort increased and the fear of attack ceased, the stockade was abandoned, the half-timbered houses were clapboarded over for greater warmth, and the pine panelling and sheathing were placed over the rough plaster. The village carpenter, a product of the medieval guild system, gave his best, and worked, not simply for hire, but inventively and in the best traditions of craftsmanship, just as the builders of the great cathedrals of Europe had done before him.

The desire for style in the rural dwellings of the Northeastern States was well satisfied by classic motives ingeniously adapted to details such as fanlights, pillars and porticos, eyebrow windows, mouldings, and applied decorations to sidelights and overdoors. The principles of these decorations were prevalent in rural districts from Maine to New Jersey and New York to Ohio, and in those parts of the South which were not exclusively dedicated to a plantation economy. With the development of the Romantic, or Gothic, Revival and the beginning of the machine age on a limited scale, in the second quarter of the 19th century, greater attention was given to the "jigsaw" and highly turned types of ornamentation. Nevertheless, the basic proportions and plans of the buildings remained very close to tradition. Today the serenity and harmony found in the framework of the early villages have lingered on, even though the economic reasons for its structure have in most cases been removed.

Any desire to maintain or recover the peace and community of the early villages or the beauty and independence of its great houses must be based on a stimulation of the desire to recover the standards of craftsmanship and need for community integration which produced these harmonious and appropriate forms. The quality of our architecture is a permanent record of the quality of our own lives.

*In architecture, as in all other Operative Arts,
the end must direct the Operation.*

The End is to build well.

Well-building hath three Conditions, Commodity.

Firmness, and Delight.

Sir Henry Wotton, (1568-1639)

Old Roslyn



At the very beginning Long Island was claimed by the English as a part of New England, and by the Dutch as a part of their settlement of Nieuw Amsterdam. In the spring of 1640 a group of English colonists, from Lynn, Massachusetts, under the leadership of Capt. Dan'l Howe landed along the west side of Cow Neck and made an agreement with the Indians for the possession of the land along the Sound from the west side of Manhasset to the east side of the present village of Roslyn. This effort at colonization was short-lived as within a few days of the landing, Governor Kieft of New Amsterdam forced the party to agree to withdraw.

Permanent English colonies in the vicinity soon followed, and the names of some of the original settlers, i.e., Seaman, Titus, and Willis are still prominent in this area. Most of the local lands along the Sound were originally pasturage, and in 1658, sixty families fenced in an area which included parts of what are now Manhasset and Roslyn and grazed approximately three hundred cattle in the enclosure.

While the first colonists were English, the Dutch infiltrated into the district quite early. On April 24th, 1790, President George Washington visited the village and made the following entry in his diary, "I left Mr. Young's, Oyster Bay, before six o'clock Saturday morning and passing thru Mosquito Cove, (presently Glen Cove) breakfasted at a Mr. Onderdonk's at the head of a little bay where we were kindly received and well entertained. This gentleman works a grist mill and two paper mills, the last of which he seems to carry on with spirit and profit." The profitable paper mills are no more, but one of them has been restored and is now the headquarters of the American Legion. The grist mill still stands and is still competent to mill flour. It offers more highly processed fare today as the Roslyn Mill Tea House. The site of the Onderdonk house is now occupied by the George Washington Manor, and one can spend a sunny April Saturday as Washington did, looking at "the head of a little bay".

From its very early days the village was a pleasant place. In 1843, Benjamin Thompson, the noted early Long Island historian, described it as "pleasantly situated at the head of a beautiful bay". In that year the population was about two hundred and fifty and there were about forty houses, at least a few of which were quite imposing. Thompson goes on to describe the "truly grand, extensive, and beautiful" view from the summit of Harbor Hill and adds, "The scenery from the high grounds in the vicinity is highly interesting. The minute grouping of landscape and water, hill and dale, foliage and flower, with an infinity of light, and shade, present, altogether to the admirers of nature a picture truly delightful."

Originally the village was known as "Hempstead Harbor", but in 1844, a group of citizens announced in "The Long Island Farmer" the change of name from Hempstead Harbor to Roslyn. The reason given for the change was the confusion caused by the similarity of the names of Hempstead, North Hempstead, Hempstead Branch, and Hempstead Harbor. It is interesting to note that William Cullen Bryant, the poet, publisher, and legator of the Bryant Library, was one of the petitioners for, and in fact, one of the sponsors of, this change in name. While the reason for the change in name is well documented, there seems to be quite a bit of confusion as to why the name "Roslyn" was chosen. The most popular belief indicates that the "Ballad of Roslin Castle" was a favorite marching song of the British troops billeted

here during the closing days of the Revolutionary War, and that the air became so popular with the villagers that they took its name for the name of their home. Some even feel that a local girl tried to elope with a Scottish soldier by donning kilts and trying to march off with his regiment. Romantic as all these thoughts may be, it does not seem likely that a song would remain so popular for more than sixty years that it would influence the naming of a village. There is another theory that the village resembled a beautiful village of that name in northern Scotland. Thompson, the historian quoted earlier, writing within five years of the change, also seemed to feel that the name was adopted from the Scottish "Roslin", and it seems very plausible that this impression is correct. However, there is support for the romanticists, too, as Appleton's "Homes of American Authors", published in 1857 credits William Cullen Bryant with suggesting this name because the Royal Colonists sang "Roslin Castle" when they marched out of Hempstead at the close of the Revolutionary War.

The hilly terrain may have created at least one interesting architectural variation in Roslyn. In many of the houses the ground floors are at least partially under ground, and in these, the principle living rooms are on the second floor. This problem was met by having the entry on the ground floor with a window duplicating the entrance on the second floor, or by having the entry on the second floor, and some of the bedrooms on the first. Examples of these interesting variations may be seen at Numbers 20, 105, and 180 Main Street, and at 199 East Broadway. The builder of No. 94 Main Street left no stone unturned in his solution to this problem and placed principal entries on both the first and second floors. This was probably also true, originally of some of the other houses.

Many of the houses have, or had, fine mantles and doorways. It is likely that these were not made locally, but were imported from Hempstead or possibly New York. Their delicate woodwork and applied metallic ornaments may be seen in other houses of the first half of the 19th century in Hempstead, New York, and the DuPont Museum at Winterthur, Delaware, as well as locally, and are typical of the exquisite millwork of the period.

Many of the houses in Roslyn are older than they appear to be today, as during the years many changes, which were not always improvements, took place in the name of modernization, as styles changed, and increasing affluence made alterations possible. One of the best examples of this type of "progress" may be seen in the Valentine house, at the rear of the Library, which has recently been saved from almost complete decay by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The original house was built in the late 18th or very early 19th century and was made longer and taller when the ballroom was added about the time of the Civil War. The great enclosed porch was added as recently as the early years of the 20th century. With its mansard roof and marble ballroom mantle, it looks today like a country house of 1875 and there remains only the simple stairway to indicate that it was built almost a century earlier.

This past year has not been a good one for the old houses of Roslyn. One has been torn down to make way for a parking lot, and another has been almost undermined. One of the best is located in an area which has been zoned for "light industry", and old houses so placed do not often survive. Perhaps this one may be the exception.

The houses shown on the following pages are examples of the several types of Roslyn architecture, as it developed from the early 18th to the late 19th centuries. Contemporary photographs of each house are shown. Early illustrations, when available, have been reproduced at the bottom of each appropriate page.



Willowmere

RESIDENCE OF MRS JAMES F. CURTIS
Bryant Avenue

No. 1

Willowmere is reputed to have been built by Nathaniel Pearsall in 1685 and was originally known as "The Pearsall Mansion". Much of its architectural character present today is of the 18th century. It was purchased in 1839 by the Cairns family who made extensive alterations, especially of the interior. At this time it was called "Clifton" and was illustrated in the 1843 edition of Thompson's "History of Long Island" and was referred to as the most beautiful and romantic residence in the area. With the exception of the porch and dormer windows, the facade has been practically unchanged since before 1845. The grounds of Willowmere are exceptionally lovely and are reminiscent of the lithograph below which shows how they looked in Thompson's History. An ancient elm is over seven feet in diameter and was probably planted by the first colonists.

The interior contains so much of interest and importance that it is impossible to adequately describe it in a limited space. The various architectural innovations of the several owners are worthy of notice. The whitewood panelling and bolection mantle in the "Pine Room" are in large part of the 18th century and are typical of Long Island. The earliest furniture is English and American Chippendale. The furniture of the later periods is almost all American. The breakfront cabinet in the living room is outstanding, and is presumably of New York origin. There are several fine paintings and prints of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Like many other old houses, Willowmere has its legends. It has been often told that John Guelph Barrell, whose portrait hangs in the main hall, when he was Consul in Malaga, was the father of the Empress Eugenie of the Second French Empire, and on fine spring evenings the ghosts of the Pearsall aunts still tread the attic stairs to guard the house they loved and prevent its loss by a profligate nephew with a passion for horse-racing.





Sycamore Lodge

RESIDENCE OF MR. AND MRS. GLENN E. RIGGS
Bryant Avenue

No. 2

Sycamore Lodge is a white clapboarded house, on a brick foundation, which was built between 1843 and 1849, and which is a distinguished example of the early Victorian country residence in the United States. It is unfortunate that its architect is no longer known as he apparently exerted his best efforts in its design and no expense was spared in its construction. It incorporates much of the character of the Gothic Revival which had started earlier in England, but utilizes certain continental elements as demonstrated in its steeply pitched roof and picturesque Flemish gable ends and dormers. The exterior doors and windows are original and employ a variety of exterior shapes including high and flat Gothic arches and round and ogee mouldings. Sycamore Lodge is almost completely original, but in those few instances where additions have been made they have successfully continued the basic spirit of the house.

The interior detail and mouldings are original and in contiguity with those of the exterior. The wide mahogany floor boards are somewhat newer than the house, but are nonetheless unusual. The central hall contains a stairway typical of Roslyn and, on a more grand scale, similar to those in the Wood and Lowing-Edwards houses. The dining room contains a fine Italian wall-paper frieze of the early 19th century depicting a scene of Venice from the arcade of the Doge's palace. There is a portrait of the school of Leonardo da Vinci in this room. The sun room, which is a more recent addition, is papered with painted French wall-paper of the 19th century. Throughout the house there is a great feeling of light and space, and each room has a pleasing sense of continuity with its own vista. This esthetic combination of dignity with a feeling of comfort and well-being is rarely seen in any house, and is all that can be required of successful domestic architecture.

General of The Armies John J. Pershing wrote his memoirs in Sycamore Lodge.