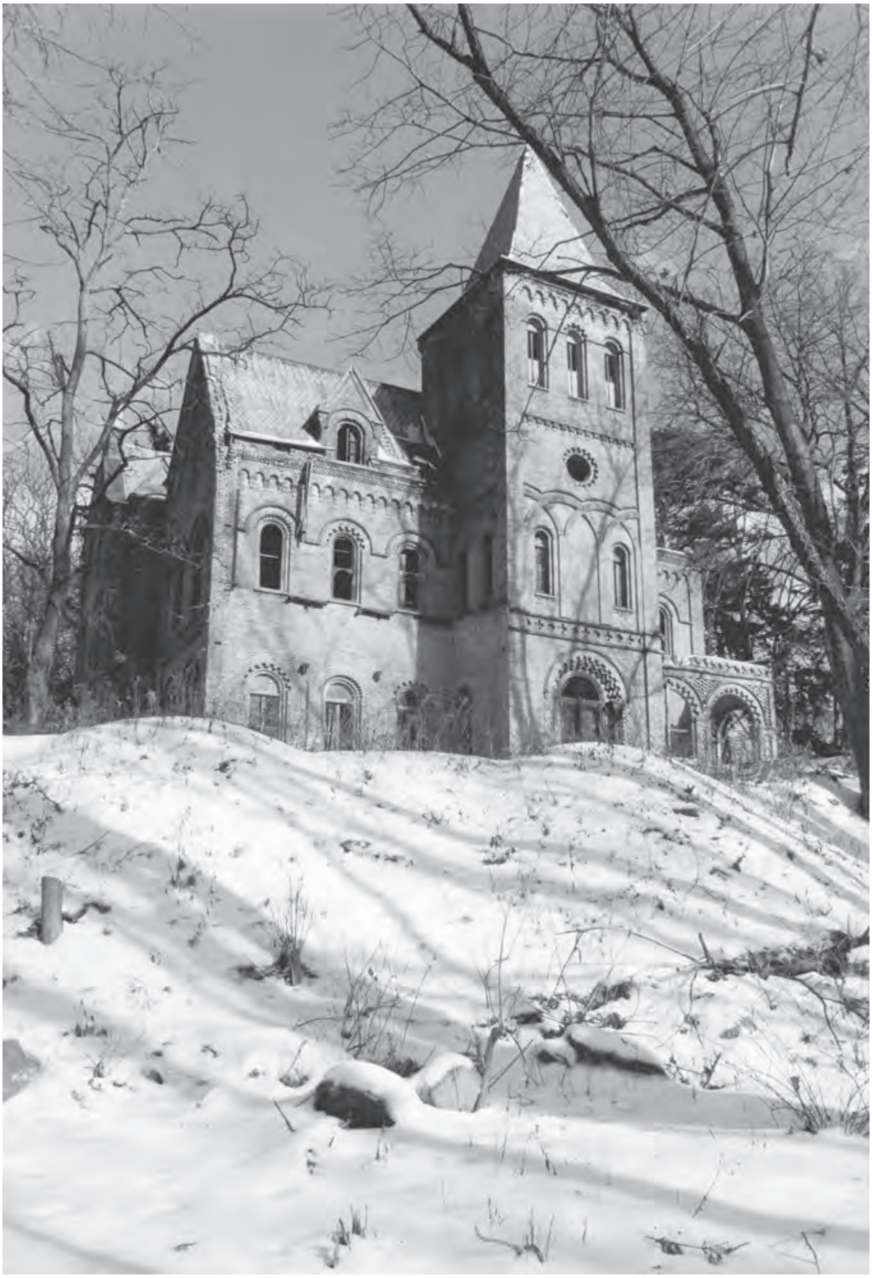


COPYRIGHT ROB YASINSAC / WWW.HUDSONVALLEYRUINS.ORG

The ruins of Wyndclyffe, presently being restored as a private residence

Finding the House of Mirth in the Hudson River Valley

Dale Bachman Flynn

When Edith Wharton wrote her 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, she set the action in a place she knew well: the Hudson River Valley. Her father had first taken her to Rhinecliff when she was a toddler, to visit his stern, unmarried sister, Elizabeth Schermerhorn Jones, a cousin of Mrs. William Astor of Ferncliff (*Backward Glance* 275, Zukowski and Stimson 180). Before this time, most of the Hudson River traffic consisted of steamboats and ferries. In 1863, Cornelius Vanderbilt began buying up railroads, so Wharton and her father were able to travel conveniently by train.

Edith Wharton's aunt lived in a house called Wyndclyffe, a mansion on the Hudson River that had been built for her in 1853. Constructed in Norman style, this "truly monumental" home was grander and more ornate than others in the region. From its four-story central tower, it "commanded views up and down the river, with the Catskills as a panoramic backdrop" (Zukowski and Stimson 180). The obviously enormous outlay of wealth required to construct such a home, it was said, gave rise to the expression "keeping up with the Joneses" (180).

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton remembered the house like this:

> The effect of terror produced by the house at Rhinecliff was no doubt due to what seemed to me its intolerable ugliness. My visual sensibility must always have been too keen for middling pleasure; my photographic memory of rooms and houses—even those seen but briefly, or at long intervals—was from my earliest years a source of inarticulate misery, for I was always vaguely frightened by ugliness. I can still remember hating everything at Rhinecliff, which, as I saw, on rediscovering it some years later, was an expensive but dour specimen of Hudson River Gothic: and from the first I was obscurely conscious of a queer resemblance between the granitic exterior of Aunt Elizabeth and her grimly comfortable home. (28)

Henry Winthrop Sargent, who owned Wodenethe in Beacon and was thus a fellow resident of the Hudson Valley, spoke of Wyndclyffe in far more laudatory terms. Genuinely enthusiastic about Hudson River Gothic, he characterized Aunt Elizabeth's mansion as a "very successful and distinctive house with much the appearance of the some of the smaller Scotch castles" (quoted in Zukowsky and Stimson 180). Wharton herself must have retained *some* favorable impressions of the place, for she portrayed it (renamed "The Willows") in a largely positive light in her 1929 novel *Hudson River Bracketed.*

Wharton undoubtedly knew many other mansions along the Hudson River in addition to her aunt's. For example, Ellerslie in Rhinebeck had been built for Levi Parsons Morton and his wife, Anna Livingston Read Morton (Zukowski and Stimson 181). In 1879, Edith Wharton's debutante ball had been held in the Mortons' ballroom on Fifth Avenue (Lewis 33).

Having sold his Newport mansion in 1885, Levi Morton arranged for his friend Richard Morris Hunt to design an elaborate residence for him near Rhinecliff. Called Ellerslie, this mansion sat on a 1,000-acre estate. It consisted of two-and-a-half stories: "a first-floor elevation of stone was followed by a second story and gables fashioned with Tudor-style half-timber work" (Zukowski and Stimson 181). Exterior features, such as verandas, pavilions, projecting bays, and a porte cochere, added to the impressive effect of the whole (181).

Newbold carriage house

In the 1880s, Wharton's Uncle, Thomas Newbold, built a home on a thirteen-acre estate in Hyde Park, on land he had acquired in 1861. Eventually named Fern Tor, the Newbold mansion commanded a southern view of the Hudson River. The estate included formal gardens, summerhouses and greenhouses, a manmade pond, and a carriage house ("Fern Tor"). There is evidence that Edith Wharton sometimes stopped in Hyde Park on motor trips between New York and Lenox (Lewis 172-73).

What remains of Fern Tor was acquired by Marist College in 1997. The carriage house, which had been transformed into a private residence, is the only structure still standing and has been rechristened St. Ann's Hermitage ("St Ann's Hermitage").

Hyde Park train station

Steeped as she was in scenes of the Hudson River Valley, it is no surprise that Edith Wharton drew voluminously on her memories of the place in her fiction. *The House of Mirth* opens in the afternoon rush of Grand Central Terminal as Lily Bart is about to board the Hudson River Line—the same line that Wharton took as a child—for a weekend in the country.

After a fateful side trip to Selden's apartment, Lily Bart boards the train to Rhinebeck and Bellomont, the estate of her friends Gus and Judy Trenor. Although the original station at Rhinebeck was demolished long ago, several of the original Hudson Valley stations remain. The station at Hyde Park, for example, is typical of a destination station for a country weekend along the Hudson. It is the station that Wharton probably would have used to visit her Uncle Thomas Newbold. The Hyde Park Station has been restored, but is no longer in use.

Although there are other contenders, Louis Auchincloss suggests that Wharton modeled Bellomont on the country estate of her friends, the Odgen Millses (68). In 2005, the docents at the Mills Mansion responded to that suggestion by setting up several of the rooms to conform to descriptions from *The House of Mirth*. Whether or not Wharton had this particular mansion in mind, the Mills estate serves as an elegant example of the great homes built by America's financial and industrial leaders during the Gilded Age, as stated in John Zukowsky and

The front façade of Staatsburgh

Robbe Pierce Stimson's *Hudson River Villas* (164-67), and it certainly fits the tone of Wharton's novel.

The Millses' house had originally been built as a twenty-five-room Greek Revival structure in 1832 by Morgan Lewis and his wife, Gertrude Livingston, replacing an earlier residence that had burned down. Ruth Livingston Mills, wife of financier and philanthropist Odgen Mills, eventually inherited the house and, in 1895, the couple commissioned the prestigious New York City architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White to redesign and enlarge it. The house was transformed into a Beaux-Arts mansion of sixty-five rooms and fourteen bathrooms. Its exterior included "a white stucco façade enhanced with floral swags, pilasters, and fluted columns" (164).

The interiors were equally elaborate, "finished with ceilings of molded plaster, marble fireplaces, natural oak paneling, and parquet flooring" (164). To Auchincloss and many other readers, several of the rooms in the Millses' mansion suggest settings Wharton employed in *The House of Mirth*. The drawing room, of course, provided a principal setting for evening activities. On her first night at Bellomont, for example, Lily assembles there with the other guests to play cards.


Drawing room at Staatsburgh (left) and bridge table

After playing bridge into the small hours and losing a considerable amount of money, Lily lingers on the stairs looking down into the hall below:

> The hall was arcaded, with a gallery supported on columns of pale yellow marble. Tall clumps of flowering plants were grouped against a background of dark foliage in the angles of the walls. On the crimson carpet a deerhound and two or three spaniels dozed luxuriously before the fire, and the light from the great central lantern overhead shed a brightness on the women's hair and struck sparks from their jewels as they moved.
>
> There were moments when such scenes delighted Lily, when they gratified her sense of beauty and her craving for the external finish of life; there were others when they gave a sharper edge to the meagerness of her own opportunities.(22)

The library at the Mills Estate resembles in some respects the library at Bellomont, another important setting in Wharton's novel. She loved to parody the libraries of the wealthy—or, in any event, the uses to which the wealthy put their libraries.

> The library was almost the only surviving portion of the old manor-house of Bellomont: a long spacious room, revealing the traditions of the mother-country in its classically-cased doors, the Dutch tiles of the chimney, and the elaborate hobgrate with its shining brass urns. A few family portraits of lantern-jawed gentlemen in tie-wigs, and ladies with large head-dresses and small bodies, hung between the shelves lined with pleasantly-shabby books: books mostly contemporaneous with the ancestors in question, and to which the subsequent Trenors had made no perceptible additions. The library at Bellomont was in fact never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation. (48)

Staatsburgh, west lawn as seen from below the terrace

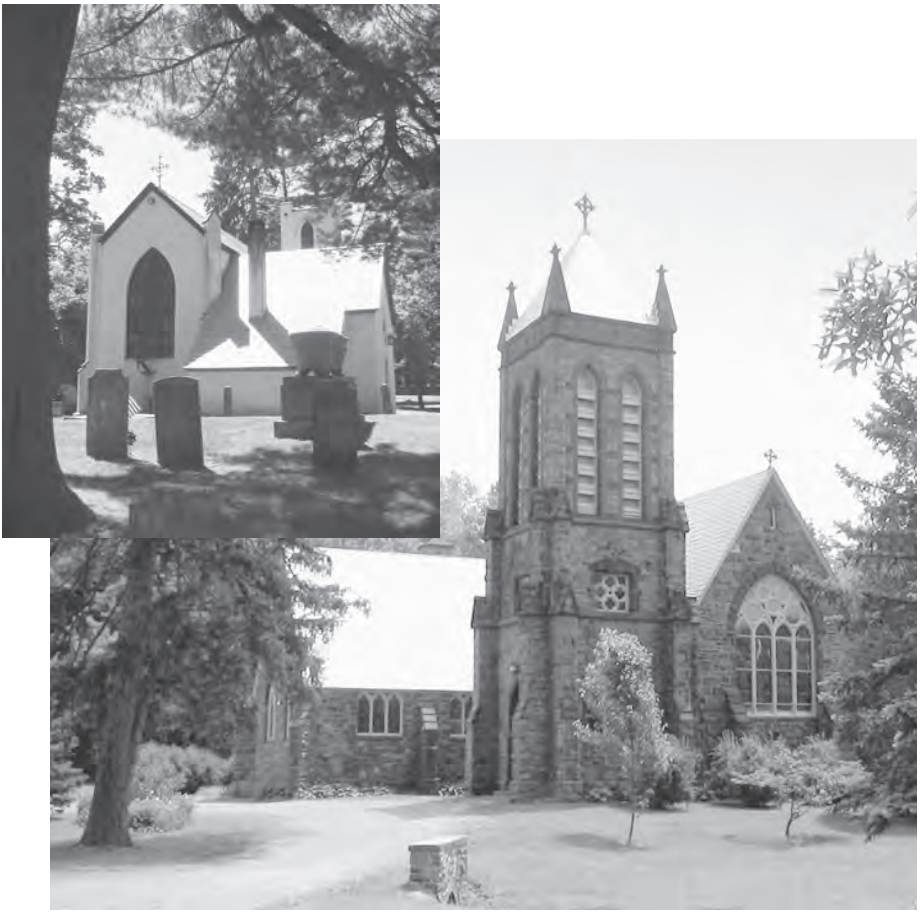
Moving to the grounds of Bellomont, Wharton continues to evoke the landscape of the Hudson River Valley. On the terrace, Lily affects a pose to capture the attention of Percy Gryce:

> The terrace at Bellomont on a September afternoon was a spot propitious to sentimental musing, and as Miss Bart stood leaning against the balustrade above the sunken garden, at a little distance from the animated group about the tea-table, she might have been lost in the mazes of an inarticulate happiness. (39)

Lily does capture Gryce's attention and promises to attend church with him on Sunday morning. But Lily never makes it to church. Instead, she takes a walk, hoping to run into Lawrence Selden.

> Higher up, the lane showed thickening tufts of fern and of the creeping glossy verdure of shaded slopes; trees began to overhang it, and the shade deepened to the checkered dusk of a beech-grove. The boles of the trees stood well apart, with only a light feathering of undergrowth; the path wound along the edge of the wood, now and then looking out on a sunlit pasture or on an orchard spangled with fruit. (51)

The great manor houses along the Hudson frequently included their own churches. Within walking distance of the Mills Mansion is the very picturesque St. Margaret's Episcopal Church. Across from the Vanderbilt mansion in Hyde



St. Margaret's Church, Staatsburgh. Inset: St. James Church, Hyde Park

Park is St. James Episcopal Church. When Lily's cousin, Jack Stepney, marries Miss Van Osburgh, Lily attends the wedding near Peekskill in a church such as one of these:

> The Van Osburgh marriage was celebrated in the village church near the paternal estate on the Hudson. It was the 'simple country wedding' to which guests are convoyed in special trains, and from which the hordes of the uninvited have to be fended off by the intervention of the police. (69)

Lily, of course, is not destined to enjoy such a wedding herself. If Lily Bart had had a paternal estate on the Hudson instead of a father named Hudson, her fate would have been far different. Instead, Wharton uses Lily rather like one of those

Dutch mirrors that she likens to Mrs. Peniston's mind:

> She had always been a looker-on at life, and her mind resembled one of those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows, so that from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity they might see what was happening in the street. (32)

Through Lily, Wharton takes us on an intimate tour of the life of the wealthy on the Hudson River, revealing as she does the greed and vacuity at the heart of that society. Wharton took the title *The House of Mirth*, of course, from Ecclesiastes: "The heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Wharton's earliest memories of such houses started in the Hudson River Valley.

Works Cited

Auchincloss, Louis. *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Times*. NY: Viking, 1971.

"Fern Tor." *Marist Buildings and Place Names*. 2 September 2004. Marist College: Archives and Special Collections. 23 August 2006 http://library.marist.edu/archives/MHT/Buildings. html

Lewis, R.B.B. *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. NY: Harper, 1975.

"St. Ann'e Hermitage." *Marist Building and Place Names*.

Wharton, Edith. *A Backward Glance*. 1934. NY: Scribner, 1964.

-----. *The House of Mirth*. 1905. Norton Critical Ed. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. NY: Norton, 1990.

Zukowsky, John, and Robbe Pierce Stimson. *Hudson River Villas*. NY: Rizzoli International P, 1985.