

At Vanderbilt, Little Things Count

By George Wallace

Chances are you are aware of the general impression given by "The Vanderbilt," that great mansion across the harbor from Northport Village. In a sense, it seems as if it has always occupied that spot, in its precise configuration and condition.

It was, perhaps, to dispel such notions as these that Annette Hall of the Vanderbilt Museum gave her presentation at the annual meeting of the Northport Historical Society this past weekend. Ms. Hall, a warm and engaging speaker who quite clearly is conversant in the nuances of Vanderbilt history, made it disconcertingly evident that not only was Eagles Nest not always a mansion — it was a pretty modest-looking cottage before the embellishments and elaborations which were to become the Spanish Rococo edifice encountered today.

Her remarks on this subject came in the context of what amounted to a sparkling "footnote to history" type presentation, providing rapt listeners with a host of anecdotal insights into the lives and times of the Vanderbilts.

The Vanderbilt Mansion and Museum, every stucco-studded wall and balcony of it, started out as a seven room cottage, it seems. Surrounded, that is, by dozens of acres, a four story garage, and a boathouse. Then came the Superintendent's house, today known as Normandy Manor and located across the street. When William K. Vanderbilt II started his marine collecting, things got a bit more complicated. First he added a one-story specimen building. But before long, his world travels resulted in so many items that he had to build a second story to that structure.

It was not until more than a decade of using the property as a kind of sportsman's retreat that Willie II began to turn the cottage into the mansion we know today. Employing the same people who designed Grand Central Station, Vanderbilt called for

a recollection of the Southern Spanish and Moroccan buildings he had seen in his travels. He came home with hundreds of photos of those travels, it seems, from tile roofs to stucco walls; from baroque doorways to lacy ironwork.

Next came the Nursery Wing, and the Library and Moroccan Court. In short order, Willie II had created a two-story Spanish style house, enclosed on three sides to create a lovely courtyard. As for the detail work, Vanderbilt went eclectic, utilizing pebble mosaic motifs from the Mediterranean, Tibetan courtyard statuary, Portuguese tile work, and furnishings from sources as diverse as 17th century European monestaries and 20th century yacht furniture.

Finally, Vanderbilt added a memorial wing to the fourth side of the central courtyard, to memorialize the death of his son.

As with the lives of the Vanderbilts, throughout the mansion across the waters are to be found dozens of nooks and crannies with unusual stories revealed in the telling of them. Take the guest room, up in the bell tower. "It's so loud in there that it would knock you out of bed," said Ms. Hall. "You have to wonder what kind of guests they put up there."

Or take the dining room, with its adjacent closet which serves as a "warming pantry;" food would be brought up to that pantry by a dumbwaiter from below, said Ms. Hall.

Or how about the weapons which are to be found in the museum. "Suffolk County Police examined each of those weapons, and deactivated them before opening the museum," said Ms. Hall.

Anyone who has visited the Vanderbilt Museum will be well aware that the wealth of anecdotal material in the building is enough to occupy months of study. Which is one of the reasons why it is so refreshing to have someone as well-versed in the intricacies of the Vanderbilt story come to the local historical society — to remind us that such a treasure trove is within a few minutes of our homes.



Annette Hall of the Vanderbilt takes a moment after her presentation to talk with a member of the Northport Historical Society. Ms. Hall gave a refreshing presentation on some of the nuances and anecdotes which make the Vanderbilt Museum a treasure on our shores.

Photo by George Wallace



William K. Vanderbilt II incorporated architectural details from around the world in his mansion, like these eagles.

Civil War Draft Riots: The Novel

By George Wallace

Book Revue in Huntington hosted historical novelist Peter Quinn last weekend, treating visitors to an evening of wit as well as charming historical insight into a period in our history we don't hear too much about. Mention draft riots in America and you will probably get people thinking Vietnam. Mention ethnic strife and you will most likely get people thinking Black-White relations.

Try the Irish versus the English and Dutch. Try the American Civil War.

Such was the subject of the colorful, ambitious and extremely original novel of Peter Quinn, entitled "Banished Children of Eve" (Viking, 1994). Set in Manhattan in 1863 on the eve of the Civil War Draft Riots, the author explores tensions which culminated during this time in some of the bloodiest events in New York City history.

The book is as much a social history as it is a story of the Civil War draft riots. A social history told through the lives of individuals, of the Irish migration to the United States in the mid-19th century. Those elements, which correspond to the author's Manhattan Irish-American heritage, are at once compelling and resound with an authenticity borne of empathy. So too, the former speech writer's command of the facts and specific episodes of the social history surrounding Manhattan's Civil War era is evident in the unique "reportage" quality. As he noted in his presentation at Book Revue,

his research into newspapers, correspondences and state documents of the time are all put to good use.

Mr. Quinn meticulously researched his story, which pits the newly arrive Irish against "True Americans," as well as against free Blacks and white dock workers. As the drafting of soldiers begins, the city demonstrates that instead of being a melting pot, it is a place for brutally conflicting clashes of culture.

Sometimes it takes a person with a keen political sense to find what it is in a story most worth telling. This Mr. Quinn has done, to admirable effect.

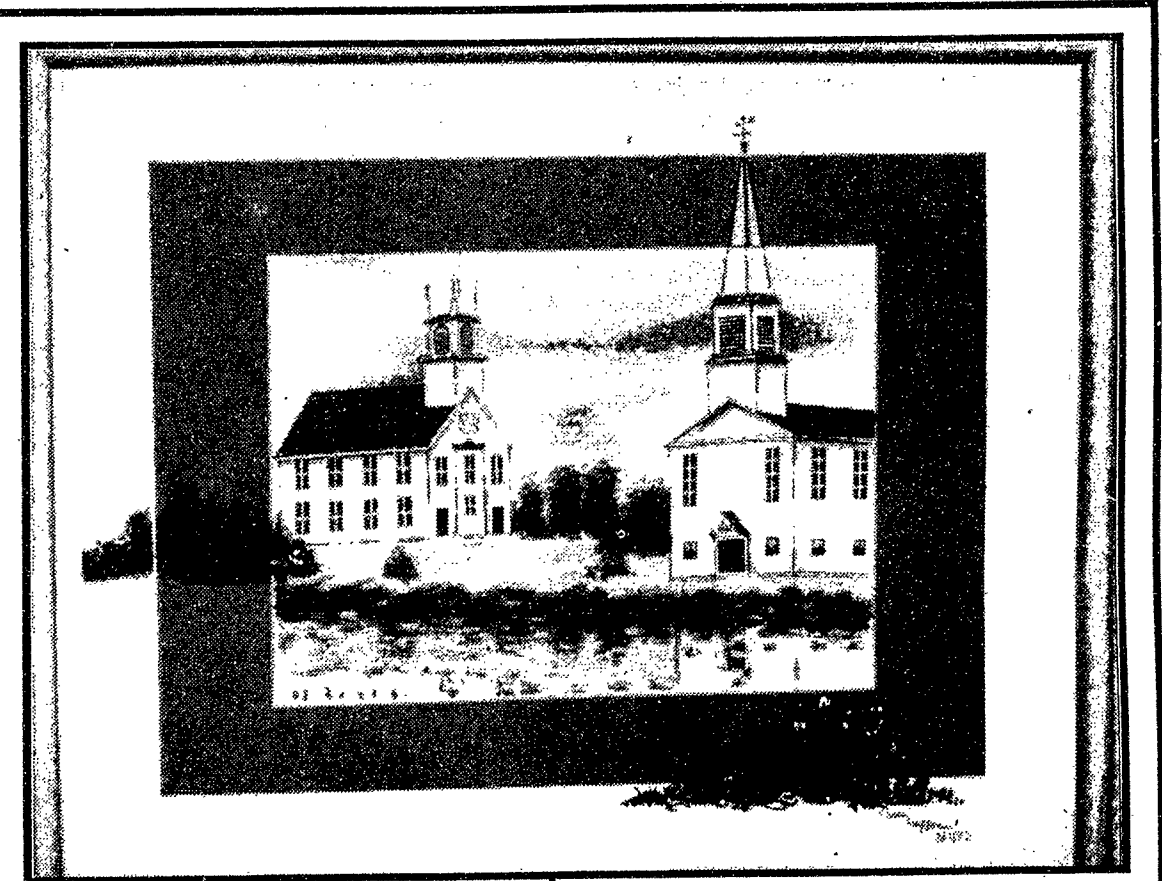
Moreover, Mr. Quinn is a man who comprehends many of the universal issues of human history: intolerance, ambition, and the conflict between an individual and the multi-layered institutional elements of the society in which that individual is placed. Critical stuff for historical novels, and at least in this case, he's got it.

Critically-acclaimed authors have praised Quinn's new novel — his first, by the way. Says Thomas Flanagan: "It seems to me one of the very, very best of modern historical novels." Adds William Kennedy: "an ebullient mingling of fiction and history. Quinn's characters...move imaginatively through this sweeping narrative."

Peter Quinn, formerly a speech writer for New York governors Hugh Carey and Mario Cuomo, is a chief speech writer for Time-Warner, Inc. His paternal grandfather came to New York in 1873, owned a bar on

11th Street, and was a labor organizer for the AFL. Mr. Quinn's father spent his life in politics as a New York State Assemblyman, US Congressman and

judge. Born and educated in the Bronx, Peter Quinn holds a Masters and an ABD doctorate in Irish History from Fordham.



Mom and Daughter-In-Law

Maria Pappas' singular blend of traditional decorative elements combine with a keen instinct for ironic commentary on the decorative process, as in this painting which creates dynamic tension between subject and the technical aspects of framing. Her work is featured, along with that of her mother-in-law Betsy Pappas, at LaMantia Gallery in Northport this month.

Photo by George Wallace