



## Kip's Castle, Part 1: A Castle on the Hill

BY ROBERT L. WILLIAMS, HISTORIAN

**P**ERHAPS ONE of the most well known buildings in our area is Kip's Castle. Dating from America's Gilded Age, it prominently sits atop the First Mountain on the Verona/Montclair border and commands a view second to none of any eastern points.

I well recall the days as a young boy, when my friends and I would explore the mountaintop and somehow we would always come upon this mysterious place. We would conjure up stories of the mysterious people who lived therein. Along the upper stone wall, we encountered a small octagonal building with bars on the narrow slit windows and talked ourselves into believing that this was the place where people were detained years ago. That little stone building still survives but was more likely used by the estate gardener.

In my high school years, I was introduced to a young couple who rented the third floor of the castle and was allowed numerous tours of the place which proved to be very fascinating as the interior was untouched from the days when it was built. As you approached the front door, you noticed it was made of oak and was very heavy—it is still there today and features a small stained glass window containing the Kip family coat of arms. The main room was finished in dark oak—doors, woodwork, ceiling moldings, and the main staircase, which extended up three stories—it was spectacular! A huge stone fireplace was off to the side. There was also a chapel, with walls finished in gold-leaf paint, a mahogany mantelpiece with inlaid marble tile, and a painted medallion featuring the Virgin Mary, a game room trimmed in mahogany woodwork, a dining room with enormous French doors which open onto an outside porch and multiple original stained glass windows.

So, who were the Kips who left behind this beautiful lasting tribute? Frederic Ellsworth Kip was born in Passaic on New Year's Day in 1862. He began his career at the age of 16 when he was an office boy for Libby, Bartlett & Kimball of New York who were commission merchants in lubricating oils and paraffin wax. In 1883, he became a salesman for the Dry Goods Commission

house of Fred Viotor & Achelis and eventually became head of the department and selling agent for various branches in Europe.

It was around this time—October of 1884--that he married Charlotte Bishop Williams of New York City. He was 22 and she was 20. From all accounts, she was a beautiful woman inside and out. In school, she studied decorative art, color, and home furnishing and later applied what she learned to the building of the castle and the designing of the grounds. But at that time Kip still had a ways to go to create his fortune, which would fuel the financial challenge to build the place.

It is explained that in 1891, the McKinley Tariff Bill increased the duties on foreign pile fabrics which resulted in Sir Titus Salt, Bart., Sons & Co. of Saltaire in Yorkshire, England, to establish a pile fabric mill at Bridgeport, Connecticut. By 1892, when

Grover Cleveland was in office, he advocated significant reductions in import duties, which influenced Sir Titus Salt's Company to dispose of the Bridgeport plant. Seeing this as an opportunity, young Kip with two business associates, purchased the plant and created Salt's Textile Manufacturing Company of Connecticut. They greatly increased the facility and established two branch mills. At the turn of the century Kip was listed as its President and the company employed 500 people.

In 1897, after the death of Mrs. Kip's mother, they moved from New York City and leased a house on Bellevue Avenue in Upper Montclair. Thereafter, Frederic and Charlotte built a new home on the Verona/Montclair border in 1902, which they named Kypsburg. Thousands of tons of native trap rock used in the walls were hauled from the nearby Marley Quarry on Bloomfield Avenue and trimmed with Potsdam, New York sandstone. The building was designed to have features of a Norman castle and bring both grace and grandeur to the mountaintop estate. From a 1905 newspaper article, we learn that all the contractors of the Castle were Montclair men—Theodore Sigler having done the mason work, Fred Fass, the plumbing, and Joe Glaister, the electrical work. Mrs. Kip played a major role in the style and design of the building. The grounds were also designed by her and included small goldfish ponds set within spectacular gardens including an octagonal rose garden. It was surely a beautiful and storybook place.

After its completion, on February 5, 1905, Kip and his wife moved into their storybook castle. ■

**Part 2 to follow in our next issue.**



## Kip's Castle in the 20th Century: From Cults to County Ownership

BY ROBERT L. WILLIAMS, HISTORIAN

**Part 1 of Kip's Castle explored the creation of the castle by businessman Frederic Kip and his wife, Charlotte. We next explore what happened to Kip's Castle after it was sold.**

**A**FTER MRS. KIP'S DEATH in February of 1926, Frederic sold the estate to Signono Munoz, a wealthy Chilean immigrant, who paid \$175,000 for the purchase and another \$100,000 for renovations. It remained in his family for over forty years. My father recalled that during the Munoz ownership, my grandfather sent him up to Crestmont Road to solicit for donations for the Verona Fire Department. This was around the time of the Great Depression. Dad was just a boy at the time and upon walking up the drive, he was confronted by two huge Great Danes, which he said looked more like horses. He recalled my grandfather saying to never let a dog sense when you are afraid, so he grasped a stone in his hand and made it clear he was determined, and the dogs backed off. After reaching the house, he was greeted by Mr. Munoz who said, "Well, since you got past my dogs, I guess I have to give you a donation." He did.

Around 1972 the property was purchased by Peter Purvis and his partner Bert Aster. It was during their ownership in the early 1980s that the estate was offered to Verona for \$360,000. Sadly, after numerous town meetings and a commitment from Green Acres to fund half of the purchase price, the town lost an opportunity of a lifetime. Consequently, the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh Cult purchased the place for \$500,000 shortly thereafter making it their headquarters. During this time, nearly all of the interior woodwork was painted along with the gold leaf walls of the chapel room on the first floor. In addition, numerous stained glass windows, specifically from the second floor bay window, were removed—I remember seeing them stacked against the wall in the carriage house horse stalls. They were then sold to an antique dealer in Montclair. I fortunately managed to acquire

one of the smaller windows containing the Worcester family coat of arms (Kip's mother was a Worcester), along with two brass doorknobs. The cult, which created quite a stir based on their beliefs, did not stay in the mansion too long. In 1984, the castle was purchased by the law firm of Schwartz, Tobia, Stanziale Weisert to be used as their law office. They tried to restore parts of the interior by removing paint from some of the woodwork but to this day some remains covered awaiting further restoration.

Although Verona missed a golden opportunity to purchase such a special and unique place, Essex County was given the opportunity and acquired it in 2007 for the benefit and enjoyment of its residents. In the past decade, a considerable amount of work was done to revitalize the Castle to its original grandeur.

The purchase price was many times higher than when it was initially offered to Verona, but with its purchase, the mountain-top will remain green and the legacy of Frederic and Charlotte Kip will live on for posterity. ■



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