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# INTRODUCTION

EDWARD RENEHAN

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**H**arold Donaldson Eberlein's *The Manors and Historic Homes of the Hudson Valley* has been considered an essential and elegant resource ever since its first publication by J.B. Lippincott in 1924. Profusely illustrated with drawings, classic prints, and photographs (many of the latter taken by the author himself), the book not only discusses the architecture and beauty of more than 35 historically relevant estates and homesteads, but also contextualizes their varied histories amid key social and political disruptions, these ranging from the rise of the Dutch through to the American Revolution and the heyday of the patroonships overseen by such families as the Livingstons and Van Rensselaers and Van Cortlandts.

Eberlein himself was an interesting man. By the time he died in July of 1964 at the age of 89, he'd authored or coauthored some 50 books. The majority of these focused on historic houses and architecture, but Eberlein also wrote biographies such as *The Rabelaisian Princess* (1931), focusing on Elisabeth Charlotte, Duchess of Orleans, and contemporary of Louis IV. An 1896 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Eberlein at various times worked on the editorial staffs of *The Philadelphia Evening Telegraph* and *The Philadelphia Public Ledger*. In his later years, he served on the Department of the Interior's Board of Advisors to the National Park Department's Historic American Buildings Survey. He also held memberships in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, the Maryland Historical Society, and the Columbia Historical Society (Washington, DC).<sup>1</sup>

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1 See Eberlein's obituary: "Howard D. Eberlein, A Historian and Author of 50 Books, Dies," *New York Times*, 28 July 1964, Obituaries Section, p. 29.

Writing in 2001, Bradley C. Brooks said of Eberlein:

His success as an author was the result of several factors. He was extraordinarily industrious, particularly during the first two decades of his career. He was a sharp-eyed observer, with a gift for developing multiple works from a given source or group of sources. . . . To his good fortune, Eberlein's output found a market among readers who needed historical information for many reasons, most of them linked to the influence of the colonial revival that flourished during the first half of the twentieth century. Some probably needed practical information on historic architectural or decorative styles. As the twentieth century moved into its second decade, Eberlein helped to codify and disseminate new standards of taste that required greater knowledge of those styles.<sup>2</sup>

Eberlein dedicated *The Manors and Historic Homes of the Hudson Valley* to his friend Anne Stevenson Van Cortlandt (1847–1940), whom he cited as the primary instigator of his undertaking. At the time of her death just short of her 93rd birthday, she was the very last lineal descendant of Stephanus Van Cortlandt (1643–1700), the founding patroon of Van Cortlandt Manor. When she passed, she did so in the old manor house at Croton-On-Hudson, near the confluence of the Croton and Hudson Rivers, where she'd been born nine decades before.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps because of Anne Van Cortlandt's specific interest in the periods during which her family had been most prominent—the Dutch era, the pre-Revolutionary/Colonial era, and the Revolutionary and immediate post-Revolutionary period—that Eberlein chose to focus on structures from those times. Thus, he largely ignored historic homes of a more recent vintage, such as John Jacob Astor's *Rokeby* on the Hudson at Barrytown, built in 1811, or the Livingston family's home of later generations after that of *Clermont* near Tivoli—the home

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2 Bradley C. Brooks, "The Would-Be Philadelphian: Harold Donaldson Eberlein, Author and Antiquarian," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 125, No. 4 (Oct., 2001), 373.

3 See Anne Stevenson Van Cortlandt's obituary: "Anne Van Cortlandt Dies in Croton at 92: Last Direct Lineal Descendant of Founder of Family Here," *New York Times*, 6 June 1940, Obituaries Section, p. 36.

called *Edgewater*, at Barrytown, built 1824. Nor did he discuss *Lyndhurst*, on the banks of the river at Tarrytown, designed and built by Alexander Jackson Davis in 1838 for William Paulding Jr. In 1924, the year of the publication of Eberlein's book, this mansion was still in the hands of the family of Wall Street financier Jay Gould, who'd purchased the place in 1880.

Any modern work purporting to survey the historic homes of the Hudson Valley would necessarily have to include these establishments, as well as numerous others. Not the least of these are the elaborate Frederick Vanderbilt mansion at Hyde Park, built in the 1890s, and the 1905 Palazzo of Standard Oil partner and Treasurer Oliver Hazard Payne, which stares down the Vanderbilt edifice from its perch on the opposite Hudson River shore at the hamlet of West Park, in the town of Esopus.<sup>4</sup>

No small part of what makes Eberlein's book important is the attention he pays to the history of the Hudson Valley as evidenced in its historic homes. In fact, Eberlein saw the old manors and historic homes of the region as vital signposts to that history—a history “inseparably bound up with the old houses that stand upon both banks of the river, and [a history which] without them ... would lose its dramatic force and become a dull, dead abstraction.” For Eberlein, the homes and buildings he discussed represented “points of vital contact with the past ... the social, economic and political background from which the present has emerged.”<sup>5</sup>

All of these important buildings are, as Eberlein tells us, “visible symbols and reminders of past life ... specific tangible evidences ... [and] pegs on which to hang the links of memory.” For Eberlein, as for us, these elderly and elegant structures make history come alive “through force of association.”<sup>6</sup> Even the

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4 *Rokeby* today remains in private hands. *Edgewater* is today owned by Classic American Homes Preservation Trust. *Lyndhurst* is owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Frederick Vanderbilt Mansion is now a National Historic Site administered by the National Park Service. The Payne mansion is today owned by Marist College and operated as the Raymond A. Rich Institute for Leadership Development.

5 Harold Donaldson Eberlein, *The Manors and Historic Homes of the Hudson Valley*, p. vi.

6 *Ibid.*, p. v.

names associated with the homes and manors reek of history: Van Rensselaer, Verplanck, Van Cortlandt, and Livingston being the standouts among them.

Unlike when *The Manors and Historic Homes of the Hudson Valley* was published in 1924, many of the homes mentioned in the book are today open to the public. For example, *Clermont*—the original manor house of the patroon Livingston family (built 1740, burned by the British in 1777, and subsequently rebuilt)—was still in the hands of several Livingston heirs (those not living at the aforementioned *Edgewater*) at the time Eberlein did his work, but is today a State of New York Historic Site. As has already been mentioned, Van Cortlandt Manor in Croton was as well still occupied by Eberlein's friend Anna. Today, however, the Van Cortlandt Manor is owned and administered by the nonprofit Historic Hudson Valley. And the Mount Gulian manor house of the Verplanck family, in Beacon on the eastern side of the river, is now—after being destroyed by a fire set by an arsonist in 1931 and restored by a Verplanck descendant in the late 1960s and early 1970s—a museum run by a nonprofit.

The story of the most striking resurrection and restoration since Eberlein's time relates to Alexander Hamilton's mansion, The Grange, built in upper Manhattan in 1802. At the time Eberlein wrote, this once grand edifice was a shadow of its former self. The mansion was privately held by disinterested owners, empty, and had long before been moved two blocks south of its original location. Much of its beautiful exterior ornamentation had been removed, and the house cringed in the shadow of a six-story apartment building. Eberlein evidently did not have the heart to relay the grim contemporary truth of The Grange to his readers. Instead, he stressed its importance historically and described the house as it once had been. Fortuitously, however, in that same year of 1924, the place was purchased by The American Scenic and Preservation Society, which restored it and opened it as a museum in 1933. Today owned by the National Park Service, The Grange sits at St. Nicholas Park, facing West 141st Street, next to the City College campus of the City University of New York, and thus still sits within the bounds of Hamilton's original estate, having been moved there in 2008.

Other dwellings and buildings have also opened up. Thus, today's reader of Eberlein's book has a decided advantage over Eberlein's original audience in that a good deal more of the sites Eberlein discusses are ones that the reader may actually visit.

All this being said, Eberlein's book remains as enduringly timeless as the manors and homes he discussed and described so passionately. Here we have the elegant, engaging, and enlightening prose of a man who researched exhaustively and thought deeply about his subject matter—a man who embraced his work as something of a sacred trust and mission to breathe life into key architectural relics of the American past. And for this, we, of another generation, owe him a great debt.