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History of The Mansion House

“Hillcrest”

19 Barclay Street, Saugerties, New York

By Evelyn Sidman Wachter

1996

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**THE MANSION HOUSE**

**SAUGERTIES, NEW YORK**

**BY: EVELYN SIDMAN WACHTER**

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... circumstances of Margaret Winkler, whose grandparents had been early ...  
 ... on N Street and who was herself a Saugerties resident for some fifty ...



Erma Simmons on north lawn of Hill Crest, c.1900

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 ... of the ...  
 ... by Rev ...  
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 ... the church, but her grave has never been identified ...  
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 ... The evidence that the building was no longer used as a guest house.

Neither legend nor documentary evidence exists to certify when and by whom the Mansion House was built. It is known only that in 1828, when John Simmons arrived from England and was engaged by Henry Barclay as manager of the Ulster Iron works, he first stayed at the Mansion House. It was then serving as a private hotel for Barclay's business associates and personal friends, primarily from New York City. Since Barclay was acquiring his Saugerties properties ca. 1825, it is surmised that he built the Mansion House after that date, probably when his own home, "Ury" (no longer standing but at the eastern end of Barclay Street) had been completed.

In the reminiscences of Margaret Winslow, whose grandparents had been early settlers on Church Street and who was herself a Saugerties resident for some fifty years, published in the Saugerties Post in 1914, it is stated: "The Mansion House was built as a summer boarding house or Barclay Guest House and was generally full of prominent New Yorkers who were friends and relatives of the Barclays and Livingstons. Robert Livingston [the famous Governor of New York] was a favorite of Heights society."

In a deed of 10 October 1831, wherein Henry Barclay and wife Catherine Elizabeth sold the parsonage for \$600 to Mrs. Elizabeth Hammekin, the location was described as on "the S side of a road to be laid out 14 ft. in front of the building called the Mansion House Hotel." (emphasis added) This confirms the fact that the Mansion House was early regarded as a guest house.

However, it should not be imagined that the Mansion House looked the way people now living remember it. Earlier photographs, like the one on page 2, show it with a small stoop and a commonplace entrance. It was only in 1903 that the house front was transformed, when Mrs. Ovid T. Simmons had the stately white columns erected on the front porch, which was extended to its present size. More details are given later in the chronological account of events.

The first noteworthy happening in the Mansion House was the marriage of John Simmons, its future owner, to Nancy Minor Dewey, a widow who was the chatelaine of the Mansion House Hotel. The ceremony was performed on 1 October 1831 in the Mansion House by the Rev. Reuben Sherwood, Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church. Theirs is the first marriage entered in the church's record book. Nancy is believed to have been the daughter of David Minor and his wife, Mary Bishop, born 20 May 1798 in Colchester, Connecticut. Her first husband had been Ralph Dewey, on whom no information has been found. After two weeks at the Mansion House, the couple went to live at the Lodge on the Island in Lower Esopus Creek, as the Stone House where they would live was not yet ready. (Henry Barclay was constructing homes on the island for employees of the Ulster Iron Works and perhaps also for those of the paper company.) Sadly, the bride died of a flu-like ailment on 15 December of the same year, two and a half months after her wedding. Her funeral was conducted by Rev. Shewood in the newly dedicated sanctuary of Trinity Church. She was buried in the churchyard beside the church, but her grave has never been identified.

According to the history of Trinity Church, compiled in 1931 by Emma Simmons Sidman for its Centennial booklet, recently republished: "Rev. Hiram Adams assumed the duties of Pastor in 1838 and continued them until April 1848, a period of ten years. He occupied the Mansion House and superintended the education of a number of boys." This indicates that the building was no longer used as a guest house.

In 1852 Henry Barclay, industrial pioneer, devoted churchman and generous benefactor passed away. Memorial headstones for him and his wife stand in Trinity Cemetery. Besides founding Trinity Church (reportedly as a mission church of the famous Trinity Church in New York City) and to a large extent underwriting it, he established both the Ulster Iron Works and the paper mill, set a regular pay-day (unheard of at the time) and built houses for the iron-workers and mill hands on Persen's Island, as mentioned above.

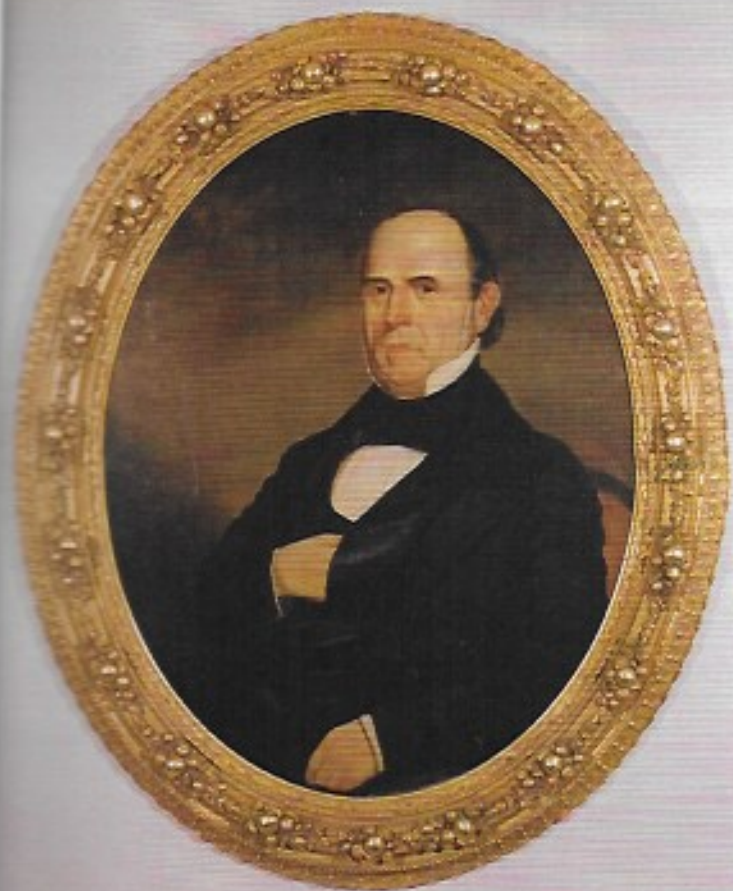
An article in "The Pearl" of 1875 declares that Barclay "was deceived by those with whom he had business transactions and mainly through others lost most of the large fortune he invested in Saugerties. To quote an old ballad: 'He suspected harm of none / He was himself so good.' But harm came both to health and fortune and he died almost a poor man."

Barclay's estate was insolvent and to satisfy his creditors an auction of his real estate was held on 22 September 1858 at the Exchange Hotel in Saugerties. John Simmons purchased the Mansion House and surrounding property for \$975, with 10% down (\$97.50) and the balance paid to Jesse L. Bookstaver 21 November 1858 (John Simmons' Journal). The deed conveyed "a lot of about 3 A lying alongside of Burt Street." (Ulster County, NY Deeds 105:513).

*Caroline Campbell Stranora in 1856*



Nineteenth Century View of the Mansion House



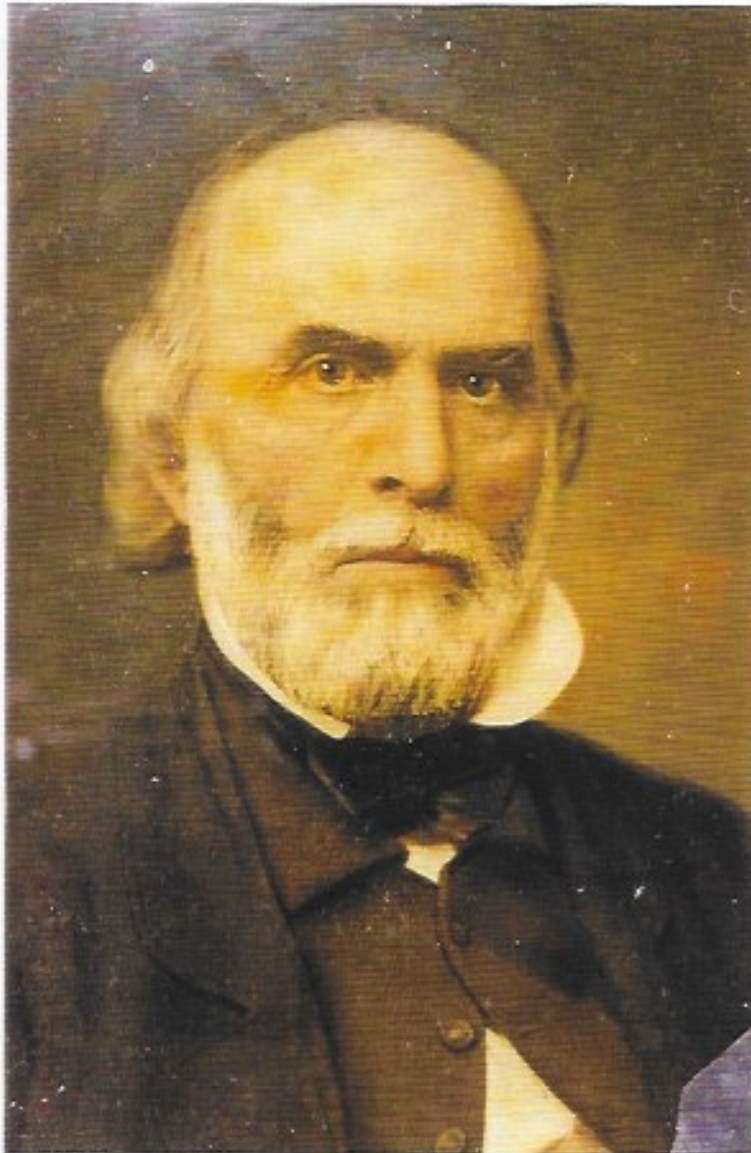
John Simmons in 1856

Caroline Campbell Simmons in 1856



The handsome portraits of John Simmons and his wife Caroline Campbell Simmons shown on page 3 were painted two years earlier in 1856. They are the work of a painter of the Hudson River School named Seamans. For nearly a century they were to hang in the hall of the Mansion House.

John Simmons had become Manager of the Ulster Iron Works in 1828. Before acquiring the Mansion House, he had purchased property at the corner of Barclay and Church Streets and built a house there in 1850. He had also bought other land on Barclay Heights and elsewhere on the south side of the village over the years. A portrait of him in his later years is shown below.



John Simmons in his Later Years

A self-made man with immense talent for inventing new processes and machinery, John Simmons had been born into the iron business. His father had been manager of an iron works in Bilston, Staffordshire, England. John himself had gone to work at age 11 in the iron mill and later as a young man had spent seven years in Audincourt, France, in the employ of Marshal Marmont, constructing and then managing an iron works. There he had not only mastered the French language but had learned a special type of puddling then unknown in England and the United States. In 1828 he had emigrated to this country from England in the steerage of a sailing ship, "The Salem". On arriving in New York, he had been invited to come to Saugerties, where he had been engaged by Henry Barclay to take charge of his foundering iron company @ \$700 a year plus a room. Simmons had introduced the new puddling process, as well as other inventions of his own, which had resulted in a highly superior product. Skilled iron workers being in short supply in this country, Mr. Simmons, on behalf of Mr. Barclay, had brought over from England, Ireland, and Wales a large number of experienced iron men along with their families, including his own four brothers and his father. Some of their descendants are still living in Saugerties.

John Simmons must have bought the Mansion House as an investment since on 20 June 1861 he sold it for \$3,050 (a \$2,000 profit) to Miss Mary Slater of Lansingburgh, NY. She later was married to Rev. R. G. Williams and together they opened a Young Ladies Seminary in the house. The only clues about its curriculum and fees are derived from the following notice published in the Saugerties Telegraph on 4 March 1864:

*This institution will re-open on Wednesday, 2d of September. A full competent corps of teachers will aid the Principals in their efforts to make this school worthy of patronage.*

*A library of about 1,000 volumes is accessible to all the students.*

*A large and sufficient apparatus for the illustration of the sciences of Philosophy and Chemistry has been added during the past year.*

*Arrangements have been made with Rev. John Lord, the celebrated historical lecturer, for a course of Historical lectures during the fall term.*

*Terms*

<i>Board and Tuition</i>	<i>\$300 per annum</i>
<i>Inst. Music</i>	<i>\$11 and \$18 per quarter</i>
<i>Use of Instruments</i>	<i>\$3 do.</i>
<i>Vocal Music</i>	<i>\$6 and \$11 do.</i>
<i>Ancient &amp; Modern Languages</i>	<i>\$6 do.</i>
<i>Drawing and Painting</i>	<i>\$7 to \$12 do.</i>

*Tuition bills are due and will be expected to be paid IN ADVANCE.*

*Circulars will be sent on application to either of the Principals.*

*Rev. R. G. Williams*

*Mrs. M.E. Williams*



*Copy of a letter written by Rev. Mr. Gaston, Pastor of the Ref. Dutch church, to a friend who had written to him, making inquiries in reference to the school. (Not written for publication but printed by permission.)*

*Saugerties May 1, 1863*

*My dear -----*

*Your letter asking "what is the estimate I place upon the Rev. R. G. Williams' School for Young Ladies has been received and I hasten to reply.*

*It gives me pleasure to assure you that I have the greatest confidence in the plan on which the school is established and also in the ability of those who have the school in charge fully to carry out the plan.*

*The pupils acquire, in my judgment, an unusual familiarity with the subjects of study, a familiarity which results partly from the habits of close attention upon which the school is based, requires and creates -- but more especially from the independent and thorough manner in which instruction is imparted.*

*The impression is very general in our community that the system of instruction adopted in this institution is well designed to promote the great ends of education -- the acquisition of knowledge and, what is still more important to the youthful mind the formation in the pupil of habits of independent thought, of regularity and method, and of constant and fixed attention when engaged in study.*

*The corps of teachers employed in this Institution is of the very first order.*

*The moral and religious influence that pervades the school is believed to be unsurpassed by any Institution in the land.*

*I need not say anything to you with reference to Saugerties as a place remarkable alike for its pure, healthy air and its beautiful surroundings. It is enough to remind you of the fact that the pupils at this school are privileged to lay an unsurpassed tribute both upon the Catskill Mountain and the Hudson River.*

*If you are looking for an educational home for your daughter, or if you have someone in whom you are interested in this behalf, I can assure you that this school is worthy of your confidence.*

*Yours very truly,  
(sgd.) JNO Gaston*

*From Rev. Mr. Minor, Pastor of the Church in Flatbush, who has had a daughter in the school for more than a year:*

*I heartily endorse the views expressed by the Rev. Mr. Gaston in the above letter.  
(sgd.) John Minor*

One notes that the school is to "re-open" in September -- and the newspaper is dated in March. Apparently hard times were already upon the Young Ladies Seminary or perhaps parents of potential students were stressed out by the Civil War. In any case, despite the glowing testimonials, the school could not have been a financial success, since in 1870 Mary Elizabeth (formerly Slater) Williams, then of Castleton, Vermont, and her husband, Robert C. Williams, sold the Mansion House property to George K. Snyder of Saugerties for \$ 5,500 (a \$2,000 profit) with unpaid mortgage for \$ 6,000 assigned to the purchaser.

An undated but probably 20th Century article in the "Catskill Mountain Star" states that "The Mansion House was during the Civil War days the site of a young ladies seminary under the guidance of Rev. and Mrs. R. G. Williams" (source not cited). The article goes on to declare that "The Mansion House was purchased in the early 1880s by Ovid Simmons for his recent bride, Eva Loretta Schoonmaker." The full story was more involved.

John Simmons died on 31 March 1878. A year later, on 31 May 1879, his widow Caroline C. Simmons and his son Ovid T. Simmons foreclosed the mortgage they held on the property which had been sold in 1870 to George K. Snyder by the Williams couple. Pursuant to a judgment against Snyder, Olive his wife and several other parties, the Mansion House was once again sold at auction. The high bidders, at \$2,700, were Caroline C. Simmons and her son Ovid T. Simmons, who thus repossessed Barclay's Mansion House.

Ovid Topham Simmons, the writer's grandfather, is shown in the photograph below.



Ovid Topham Simmons

The sequence of events regarding the acquisition and renovation of the Mansion House is recorded in Ovid Topham Simmons' diaries:

- 4-17-1879 - 1st notice of sale of Mansion House property under judgment foreclosure in Thursday's issue of Saugerties Telegraph
- 4-24-1879 - 2d notice
- 4-25-1879 - Was in Mansion House with Andrew Myer
- 6- 1-1879 - Last evening insured Mansion House by B. M Coon
- 1- 6-1880 - George Knorr today vacated apartment in Mansion House
- 1-29-1880 - Windows broken through basement wall
- 1-31-1880 - Heater wind boxes put up
- 2-14-1880 - Dan'l. Lamb putting up leaders to house
- 2-17-1880(NYC) - Bowls and washstands
- 2-23-1880- Decided to cut windows down to floor for south stoop [i.e., front porch; they did not end up that way.]  
[ Account interrupted by his marriage to Eva L. Schoonmaker  
26 Feb. and their honeymoon]
- 4- 7-1880 - Hall centres commenced
- 4-10-1880 - Arranged for reservoir for collecting water of spring
- 4-11-1880 - New hall floor looked well in its oiling
- 4-13-1880 - Painters commenced inside painting
- 4-14-1880 - Bathroom tub cases
- 4-22-1880 - D'l. Lamb connecting basins [to water]
- 4-24-1880 - Pipes laid today from Ram house & ram set working....  
'Front' or north stoop stone placed today.
- 4-27-1880 - Stair rail put up. This p.m. I took down plaster in parlors [note:plural] for purpose of putting in an arch [a stroke of genius, creating a large and stately room running from front to back of house on Burt St. side]

- 4-28-1880 - Ram put to work this p.m. pumping into house tank  
[on 3rd floor near maids' rooms]
- 4-30-1880 - Arch plastered
- 5- 4-1880 - Eva [wife] at house today putting up border [for wallpaper]
- 6- 8-1880 - Eva putting down matting
- 6-10-1880 - New house occupied ni'ts. 9:30 P.M. - escorted mother,  
Miss Hayes [governess] & boys [nephews] to their new home
- 6-12-1880 - Moved safe & piano [2d. piano probably acquired later]  
Eva & I at new house this night for the first
- 7-17-1880 - Doors to coach house completed, as also blinds on stable
- 7-28-1880 - Overflow of tank wet the room occupied by Willie [nephew]
- 8- 9-1880 - Painted some of new fence on Burt St  
[shown in early photo, page 2]
- 9-16-1880 - I busy measuring and cutting out oilcloth for 2d story hall
- 9-29-1880 - Oilcloth in girls' [maids'] rooms & matting in 3d story  
spare rooms
- 9-30-1880 - Parlor matting partially laid
- 10-18-1880 - Oilcloth from Butzel for 3d story hall & we all  
busy laying it
- 12-20-1880 - At Seamon's purchased Bedroom set with Boston rocker  
@\$38.50

One must realize that Emma Simmons, first child of Eva Schoonmaker Simmons, was born in early February of 1881. Therefore, Mrs. Simmons was pregnant when "putting down matting", etc. So much for the myth of the pampered Victorian woman!

Here in the Mansion House were born Emma Campbell Simmons on 6 February 1881 and Ovid Schoonmaker Simmons on 2 December 1882.

Here also were raised the three nephews and one niece of Ovid Simmons. Their father, John Simmons, had died 8 September 1876 in New York City, and had been buried in the Simmons Plot in Trinity Cemetery in Saugerties. Their mother Nancy M. Rushmore Simmons, had also died 23 November 1887 at age 48 in New York City and been buried beside her husband in Saugerties. These children were: Frank

Simmons, born 18 August 1868, New York City; William Rushmore Simmons, born 19 August 1869, New York City; John Edward Simmons, born 6 February 1872, New York City; and Caroline Simmons, born 19 June 1876, New York City and named for her grandmother, Caroline Campbell Simmons, second wife of John Simmons. In Saugerties the boys had a succession of governesses and Frank and Will attended Media Academy in Media, PA for one year in 1883. Carrie was educated in the Saugerties public schools along with Ovid Simmons' own children, and was in the first graduating class from the high school, the only girl among five boys. After training as a librarian, she was married on 3 April 1902 in St. James Church, New York City, to Walter John Lee, who became publisher of the Westfield, NJ *Leader*.

In its heyday, when the children were growing up, the Mansion House must have been a joy to live in. In 1889, Emma is known to have had a dog named "Gypsy". There were usually a hired girl in the house and a hired man who lived with his family over the coach house rent-free. He cared for the horses and carriage and the cows, as well as the donkey named "Donnie" and the donkey cart acquired for the pleasure of Emma and Ovid. Likewise, the hired man tended the furnaces, drove the carriage or surrey when needed, shoveled the snow and took care of the grounds, flower gardens, and, in another lot, sowed and reaped the hay (with helpers), nurtured the vegetable garden and harvested the fruits (apples, pears and grapes) from the Simmons orchards across Barclay Street later owned by the Mehlig family. Small wonder that on occasion he got roaring drunk and had to be reprovved.

However, for all its charms, the Mansion House ere long became a financial burden. On 22 June 1885 Ovid T. Simmons answered an advertisement published the previous day in the N.Y. World for "a gentleman's residence with 20 to 75 acres - Hudson River preferred - house must contain 12 rooms and be near depot and village - price under \$30,000 only full particulars noticed. Immediate cash. Box 105, World Office"

*In reply would say that I have a place for sale at Saugerties, Ulster Co., NY. It is accessible from New York City by the New York Central railway by 6 trains daily via Tivoli station & ferry to Saugerties. Also by the West Shore railway direct to Saugerties, by 7 trains daily, excepting Sunday. The time of travel is about 3 hours by either line of railway and my residence is about 15 minutes distant from West Shore railway station and 20 minutes from Tivoli station of Hudson River division of N.Y. Central railway. The residence is within the corporate limits of the village of Saugerties but upon its outer limits and 10 to 12 minutes walk from Post Office & Telegraph offices.*

*The residence is 2 1/2 stories, frame building with first floor of a Hallway running through the house of about 10 feet width. A parlor of 34 x 17 in size, a sitting room of 18 x 15. A dining room of same size. An upper kitchen or buttery of same size with basement & cellars in which are situated Kitchen, laundry, furnaces &c. with back hallway of 12 ft. x 4 1/2 feet, an office or reception room of 12 ft. x 10 feet. The 2d floor has 6 sleeping rooms 4 of which are extra large size & two medium size. On same floor is bathroom & water closet of 12 ft. x 10 feet. The upper floor has 3 good sized sleeping rooms besides apartments for help. The house is well supplied with press rooms & cupboards. Hot and cold water throughout the house. Water supplied to the house by a ram from a non-failing*

*& most excellent spring & in addition to this supply there are two large cisterns to take the water from the roof, both of which are connected with the house in the basement. The house stands east & west as to gable ends and has fronts both north & south, the north side having two piazzas or porticos both covered & from its northerly front has a beautiful & commanding view of the Hudson River of several miles in extent and also a Catskill Mountain view. The residence is situated on upland plateau about 165 feet above tidewater. There is excellent sewerage to the house the same being disposed about 200 feet away from the residence. There are fine large shade trees about the residence and also considerable fruit. The residence is 130 feet away from the main thoroughfare with fine lawn lying between.*

*A roadway runs along the easterly side of the building, the land contiguous to the residence running for a distance of upwards of 1,000 feet.*

*There are good commodious outbuildings attached to the place lying some 200 feet from the residence..*

*There are two entrances to the southerly front of the building by nice roadways.*

*On the opposite side of the roadway on the south, the main portion of the acreage lies, being the garden for the residence, an orchard with apples, cherries & pears & grapes and the balance tillable land, raising good crops of any kind & of easy cultivation. In all, some 13 acres. The land contiguous to the house with the 13 acres mentioned aggregates, a total of some 20 acres, and the whole is well watered by running brooks from springs.*

*The Hallway on first floor, the dining room and bath room have hardwood floors. The ceilings are on 1st floor 9 feet 10", 2d floor about 9 feet, and the upper floor about 8 feet. The house has an abundance of window light and is very airy. And is in good condition throughout, with large outlook in any direction.*

*The locality is unsurpassed for fine views and healthfulness. Mortality rate here as low if not lower than any other portion of the state. Taxes village.*

*The railway fare here from the city by either road is \$1.55. If you come by N.Y. central, buy your ticket for Saugerties as that includes the ferriage, otherwise your ferriage would be extra. Lines of stages meet all train & ferry arrivals ...*

*There is no reference to any response to this letter.*

The reference in the advertisement to a "water closet" bears out what the writer's mother told her, namely, that the Mansion House was the first home in Saugerties to have a flush toilet.

Almost a decade later, sadness reigned when Caroline Campbell Simmons, widow of John Simmons, passed away there on 12 August 1894 at the age of 82. She was the dowager of the family. In the absence of the pastor of the Reformed Dutch Church, of which she had been a member since 1869, Rev. Thomas Cole of Trinity Church conducted the funeral services and she was buried in the Simmons Plot in Trinity Cemetery with her husband and two of her three sons and her two daughters who had died in childhood.

Some three years later, Ovid T. Simmons, son of John Simmons and Caroline Campbell Simmons, died at home of Bright's Disease (diabetes) on 16 December

1897 following several years of poor health. He was survived by his widow, one son, one daughter, and the three nephews and one niece who had spent their formative years in his household and under his care. Ovid having been a prominent Mason, a Masonic funeral service was conducted in the Mansion House, with burial in the Simmons Plot in Trinity Cemetery.

When Mrs. Ovid Simmons inherited her husband's property (and debts), she was confronted with business and financial responsibilities for which she was unprepared. In the 19th Century, husbands kept their business affairs to themselves, not sharing them with their wives. It is to her everlasting credit that Mrs. Simmons courageously faced and solved such problems, as well as the task of raising two teenagers, Emma, then 16, and Ovid, then 15, alone.

A small, dynamic woman, reputed to have been one of the Saugerties belles in her girlhood, she refused several offers of a second marriage, preferring to remain in the home to which she had come as a bride in 1880 and in which she was to remain for 40 more years. A picture of her is shown below.



Eva Schoonmaker Simmons

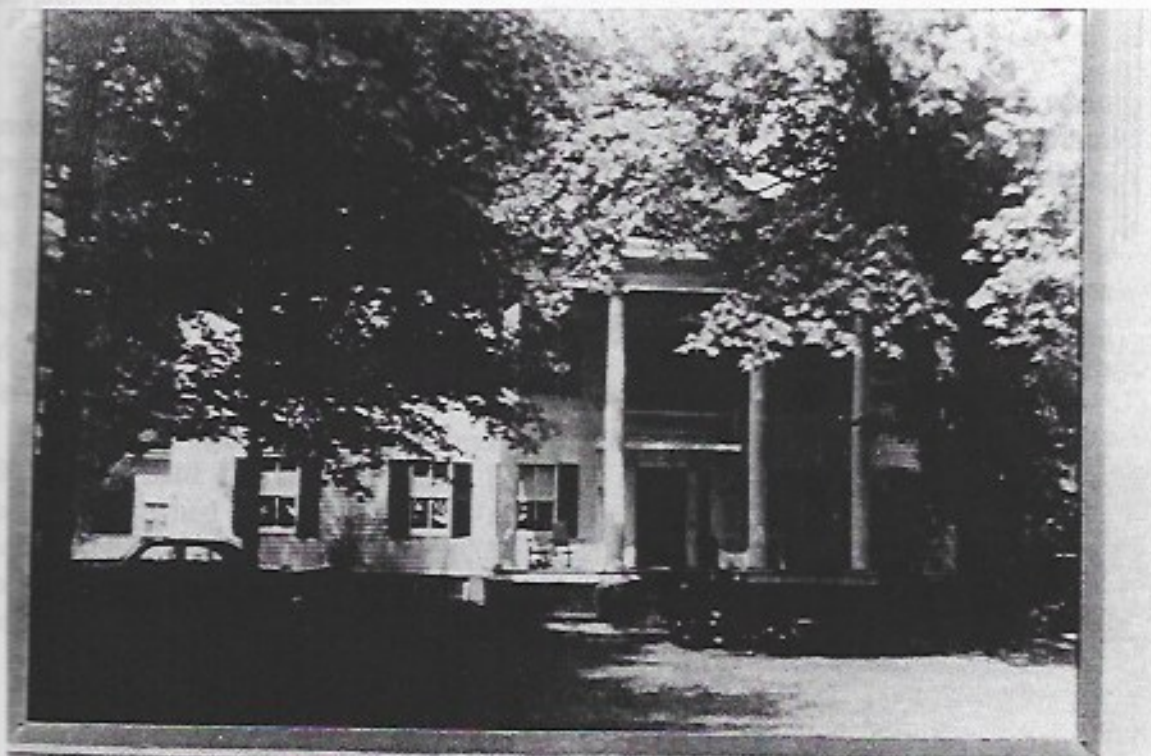
Mrs. Simmons took great pride in preserving and enhancing the beauties of Hill Crest. The 1903 transformation of the house front already mentioned was covered by contract with Howard and Valkenburg, Contractors, Builders, and General Jobbers of Saugerties. The specifications for the new front porch were as follows:

*Length 27'6". width 10'6" with steps partly in floor. Floor beams to be 2"x8", sills 4"x8", floor 1-1/4" yellow pine, free from knots or imperfections, laid in lead. To have no rails or balcony. To have 4 staved cypress columns, 20' long, 16" in diameter at bottom, 12" at top with turned capital and base. Architrave frieze and cornice to be same as porch on front side, gable windows to be same style. Roof to be good quality standing seam tin. Ceiling on Gable to be 7/8" yellow pine, no beads. Ceiling under to be 1/2 yellow pine with beads. Columns and outside woodwork except floor to have priming coat of paint made of white lead and oil no color. Porches to be supported by brick piers 8"x 8" under each column, resting on concrete footings, extending 3' below surface. Concrete to be composed of one part Portland cement and 4 parts cinders. All material and labor to be first class. Cost \$ 340.*

A handwritten codicil adds:

*This estimate includes finishing labor and material necessary to extend room on third floor and finish same as rest of room, with ceiled sides and ceiling and walnut and chestnut floor in alternate courses.*

The front of the Mansion House after the transformation is shown in the following picture.



Hill Crest in 1938



The half-moon window on the third floor front is another striking feature of the house, which like the rest of the facade matches that on the Hudson River side of the third floor.

That same year, in 1903, Mrs. Simmons offered the property for rental as follows:

*House situated on very high ground overlooking the Hudson River and is in the choicest residential neighborhood of the Town.*

*House exceedingly comfortable and spacious in every way.*

*Basement occupied by a large kitchen, separate laundry with all modern conveniences, dumb waiter, stationary ice chest and large cellars.*

*The third floor has 3 bedrooms, a sewing room, two furnished servants' rooms with running water, and large nursery or extra room.*

*Accompanying the house are a barn and carriage house, the former containing accommodations for 3 horses in box stalls, with plain stalls for more.*

*House for gardener or coachman near at hand can be rented for \$7-\$8 per month.*

*The grounds are ample and the house sets back 150 ft. from the street.*

*Both village water and water from a spring are connected with the house.*

*Price is \$1,000 for 3 months.*

*Besides the train service to Saugerties on both sides of the river, the Saugerties Line night boats run direct from New York to Saugerties.*

The writer would add that as late as the 1930's the Saugerties Line night boats were still running and the remembered \$1 cost of an overnight trip with stateroom fined Depression pocketbooks.

For better or worse, the house was never rented.

A landmark event for the Simmons family occurred on 31 October 1905, when Emma Campbell Simmons, daughter of Ovid and Eva, was married to Edward Arthur Sidman, son of Clark Sidman and his wife Ardelle Taylor, of Oil City, PA. She is shown as a bride in the picture on page 15. The wedding was conducted by Rev. Thomas Cole, Rector of Trinity Church, of which Emma was a member. It took place in the stately parlor of Hill Crest. Mr. Sidman was a graduate of St. Stephen's College (now Bard College) at Annandale-on-Hudson and of New York Law School and was working as a lawyer in New York City. The couple set up housekeeping on Brooklyn Heights. They had one child, Evelyn Ardelle Sidman.

It may be noted that over the years the Mansion House had come to be called "Hill Crest", until the large building formerly adjacent to Trinity Church (on the ground now owned by the church as a parking lot) had become a boarding-house which called itself by the same name. Eventually, that building was sold to Italians, who renamed it the "Isle of Capri." The Simmons house then became "Hill Crest" once again.



Emma Campbell Simmons as a Bride, 1905

On 18 July 1912, another funeral took place in the Hill Crest parlor, this being for Ovid Schoonmaker Simmons, only son of Ovid and Eva Simmons, who had died from an omnibus accident in the village on 15 July 1912 age 30, unmarried. The service was conducted by the Rev. Mr. Cole and Ovid was buried in the Simmons Plot in Trinity Cemetery.

After her son's death, Mrs. Simmons sold the orchards across Barclay Street to Miss Anne Steenken. Miss Steenken hired Saugerties native John McKeefrey, who had become a well-known New York builder, to construct the brick house later belonging to Carl Mehlig and now the Schmedbaur residence. Miss Steenken landscaped the grounds and built a concrete swimming pool part way down the hill toward the west.

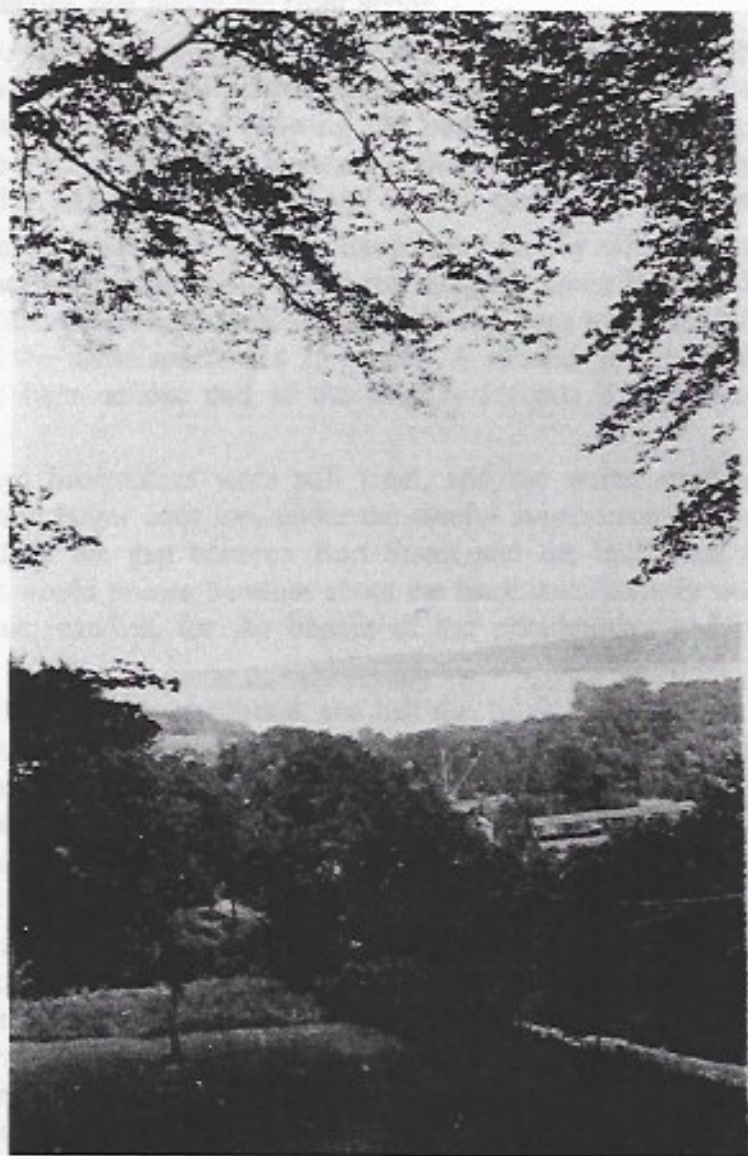
The remainder of her property Mrs. Simmons continued to maintain properly inside and out. In later years, Elmer Newkirk, who lived nearby and was employed by Cantine's Paper Mill, helped out with the heavy work such as mowing the spacious lawns, tending the furnaces in fall and spring, shoveling the winter snow on the unpaved sidewalk in front of the house on Barclay Street, putting up and taking down storm doors and windows, and handling repairs as skillfully as a professional plumber and carpenter.

Although Mrs. Simmons lived alone for 25 years in Hill Crest, she did not know the meaning of fear. Awaking one night to find a neighbor boy standing in her bedroom, she angrily demanded, "What are you doing here?", and he scuttled downstairs and out of the house.

A lifelong lover of nature, Mrs. Simmons thrilled to the friendly chirping of birds as she went about her outdoor tasks, devotedly cultivating the flowers, vegetable plants, shrubs, and shade trees at her home. In an oval bed running east to west on the front lawn near the house, she planted cannas and salvias, which were especially showy in the fall with their red blossoms. Near the catalpa tree behind the front hedge, she placed small evergreens from a Catskill nursery. The writer remembers being driven up there while her mother and grandmother examined the various small evergreens in their burlap bags. Two rustic rose arbors she had constructed for climbing roses soon enhanced the charm of her colorful garden. How often she could be seen on a torrid summer evening, lugging pails of water to revive a parched plant or bush.

Always proud of her Dutch heritage (she was born into the Schoonmaker family, who were among the early settlers of Saugerties), she was also half of English descent, her mother having been the former Rachel Jane Merritt from Coeymans Hollow, who married Peter Schoonmaker of Saugerties.

As a child and teenager, the writer spent most of her summer vacations with her mother at her grandmother's home in Saugerties. Her father came up by train from Brooklyn on weekends. In those days before air-conditioning, it was the custom for the wives and children of professional men to spend the summer months out of sultry and overheated Brooklyn.



View from North Porch in 1916  
Showing Esopus Creek and Hudson River

When 8 or 9 years old, the writer used to take "midnight strolls" in night clothes on the back lawn with a visiting playmate, never dreaming the adults knew what they were up to! Alone, or with a playmate, she played jacks or hopscotch or hopped on a pogo stick on the flagstones by the side door. Or she helped weed the lovely rose garden maintained by Mrs. Simmons, picked grapes from the arbors along the roadway or raspberries from the large patch down toward the garage (the former coach house). Sometimes she climbed some of the old apple trees (pippins, greenings, and crabapples) on the side of the back lawn near the garden or swung in a hammock stretched

out back between the two large maple trees. Often she climbed into the spreading branches of the catalpa tree inside the front hedge.

Many a day, the writer would sit on the front porch waiting for Charley Sickles, the mail man, who climbed Hill Street three times daily to bring mail to Barclay Heights. And you may be sure a growing girl pursued a lively correspondence with classmates at The Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, NY where she lived the rest of the year. Charley was always cheerful and friendly despite his exertions.

Easter school vacation was spent in Saugerties, usually with a close friend from Brooklyn as guest, and the two girls would ride bicycles down Barclay Street to Glen-erie Falls to pick the first wildflowers. Needless to say, cars were still infrequent in the early 1920's and the usual speed was 15 m.p.h. A summer task was bicycling down to the Schroeder Farm at one end of the Barclay Heights Triangle to get milk for breakfast.

In those days firecrackers were still legal, and the writer used to set off tiny strings of them, and larger ones too, under the careful supervision of her father on the beam which bridged the gap between Burt Street and the Hill Crest driveway. As darkness fell, she would prance barefoot about the back lawn jauntily waving sparklers or shooting Roman candles, for the benefit of her grandmother and parents on the north porch.

Throughout the writer's childhood, she had the "pink bedroom" on the north side of the house adjoining the bathroom, with a fine view of the Hudson River and, more exciting to a youngster, a sizable clothes press, the upper part with hooks and a floor, the lower part with two huge drawers. This "tomboy" delighted in climbing in and jumping out of such a novel piece of furniture.

As far back as the writer can remember, the parlour of Hill Crest was a place of dignity and beauty. It was pure Victoriana. The two horsehair sofas, one rose-carved, the other grape-carved, did not make for comfortable sitting for a child in a romper suit, but of course they were supposed to be for special guests. There were five rose-carved side chairs and two gentleman's rose-carved chairs. One of the two pianos was glamourized by mother-of-pearl keys, on which Mrs. Simmons sometimes used to play and sing "I Wandered Today to the Hills, Maggie". She said she had always hoped to sing it with her husband when they were old together. On the mantel over the (closed) fireplace stood a beehive clock. All ten windows were framed in draped lace curtains.

As one entered the house, whether from the front or the back, one was impressed by the graceful staircase to the second floor, the newel post at its base supporting an elevated lamp globe with an etched design. There was a marble-topped table adorned with glass candlesticks. Large oil portraits of John Simmons and his wife Caroline Campbell Simmons (measuring 36" by 23") in ornamental gilt frames dominated the hall (shown on page 3).

The office of Ovid T. Simmons in the southwest corner of the first floor was attractive to a child because of his swivel chair, his huge desk with multiple pigeonholes, and his enormous safe in one corner of the room. Here the writer would sit and press flowers, a popular pastime of the day.

Upstairs the most intriguing room was that of Grandma Simmons, with its larger than king-size bed of carved oak, which at its base boasted a secret drawer well hidden

by the carving. The upright bureau had a huge mirror down to a marble shelf used for display of toilet articles.

Electricity was installed in Hill Crest in 1926. Prior to that, and within the writer's memory, gas was used for lighting as well as cooking. Earlier, of course, kerosene lamps had replaced candles as a source of illumination. The writer remembers Mrs. Simmons when well along in years sitting in bed at night reading the NY Tribune by the light of a kerosene lamp, which she maintained cast a softer light.

Time passed and in the 1930's automobiles became commonplace. Barclay Street in front of the house became Route 9-W, heavily traveled by the standards of the day. Despite numerous road signs warning of a right angle left turn ahead which were posted conspicuously by the State Highway Department, drivers traveling north too often missed the turn or saw it too late. Crashing through the guard rail, car and passengers would pile up on the front lawn of Hill Crest. Most of the drivers being inebriated, they escaped unscathed -- but not so Mrs. Simmons' property or the state fence. The local versifier, "Reegtherhymer", had a verse published in the Saugerties Post, date unknown:

*That Fence of Wood on Barclay Heights  
How well we know this fence of wood,  
How long this fence of wood has stood,  
And why it's there well understood.  
And auto drivers really could  
When turning there just have a care  
To notice that this fence is there.  
Has heavy planks that's black and white  
In view for you and right in sight.  
It's only careless drivers, too,  
Who keep on speeding, plowing through  
This fence, and should know what to do,  
When turning with this fence in view.  
Warning signs along the way  
That can be seen both night and day,  
Protects your auto, this fence, that's all --  
Behind it is A STRONG STONE WALL.*

*News Item: On Sunday morning of this week a record of the seventh time this fence has been demolished by a careless driver this year.*

Yes, as stated above, after many years of having to expend the meager resources of a widow to repair the damage to her lawn and trees, Mrs. Simmons had finally resorted to construction of a stone wall between her front lawn and the sidewalk. But even with this wall, careless drivers continued to crash on the lawn of Hill Crest. In July 1934, the following report appeared in the Saugerties Post:

## BARCLAY HEIGHTS NOTES

*Once again the well-known black and white protection board fence guarding the massive strong wall behind it has been run into by a blind driver (as it were). This wall has been known to real drivers for many months as a terminal to the thoroughfare 9W at this turn of the road. It looms up in real warning to all drivers and it is rank carelessness to not see it. It is well it's here to really protect the residence behind it, although an auto would fare badly in its trying to demolish the stone wall behind it.*

But not, we may add, a truck: One night in November, 1937, when Mrs. Simmons in her final illness was confined to bed with a nurse in attendance, a huge truck filled with cattle crashed through the stone wall, and the unhurt cattle went wandering about on the front lawn for several hours. The property damage was horrendous! In retrospect, one wonders if it might have been desirable to insure the wall.

Mrs. Simmons died in her own bed on 9 December 1937, ac. 83, in the home to which she had come as a bride 57 years before. Her funeral was conducted by Rev. William T. Renison of Trinity Church in the parlour of Hill Crest, and she was buried with her husband and son in the Simmons Plot in Trinity Cemetery.

Mrs. Simmons' daughter, Emma Simmons Sidman, inherited Hill Crest, the home of her childhood and girlhood. Mrs. Siman was, like her mother, small in stature but of such fine carriage that she appeared taller and had a commanding presence. She had only to enter a room, quietly enough, for everybody to turn to admire her. A beautiful woman, with jet black hair piled in an intricate arrangement on top of her head, she possessed a fair complexion and large grey-green eyes. In all her fifty-eight years, she never wore glasses. So small were her feet (size 2-1/2 C) and so high her instep and arch that the only shoes which were comfortable for her were sold at Saks Fifth Avenue. She had a brilliant mind, was at home in any group, and was indeed a complete extrovert.

Having graduated from high school at age 17, the future Mrs. Sidman had gone to visit her aunt, the Countess von Krockow, for a year in Dresden, where she was presented at the Court of Saxony in 1900. For this special occasion, she made the Court dress herself by hand, as she was an excellent seamstress. While in Saxony she painted two sets of Dresden china, consisting of chocolate cups, plates, and serving plates -- one set for her mother and one set for her trousseau. Both beautiful heirloom sets now belong to the writer -- but, alas, chocolate cups have long since gone out of style!

During World War I Mrs. Sidman successfully sold Liberty Bonds as a volunteer to help the war effort. Later, in the Twenties, she worked as a saleslady in a friend's antique shop, but quit when the owner told her to fib to customers about the period of an antique.

Mrs. Sidman had a superb sense of style and a flair for wearing her clothers. Indeed, her daughter's friends in after years admitted to envying her for having a mother who was so stylish and charming. She was always patrician, with innate dignity of manner, yet kind and generous and of ready sympathy.

Mrs. Sidman took a lively interest in the theatre, politics, and international developments, and was an animated and interesting conversationalist. She made an adventure out of living and was great fun to be with. Her devotion to her family was utter and unflagging but she never tried to dominate her daughter's life and gave her plenty of rope to hang herself if she chose. She made her home a place of beauty and charm, pervaded by love and good cheer. When confronted by adversity and ill health, she displayed enormous courage. She loved poetry and encouraged her daughter to memorize favorite poems.

Unfortunately, by 1937, Mrs. Sidman was in failing health and had little opportunity to enjoy Hill Crest, to which she also was devoted. Probably her greatest contribution to Hill Crest during her ownership was having professional pictures taken of the house from several angles. She took this step after the New England hurricane of 1938 which she had experienced while visiting a friend in New Hampshire. In case a similar disaster should strike Sauterties, she wanted a permanent record of what the building looked like.



*The North Side of Hill Crest in 1938*



A few months later, on 27 April 1939, Mrs. Sidman passed away at her home in Brooklyn from a stroke suffered three weeks before. Bedside services were conducted there, and her funeral was conducted by Rev. Mr. Renison in Trinity Church. She was interred in the Simmons Plot in Trinity Cemetery.

As the only Sidman child, the writer, Evelyn Ardelle Sidman, became the owner of Hill Crest. She lived in Brooklyn and worked in New York City from 1939 to 1945, but spent many spring, summer, and fall weekends at her grandparents' home, which was ably and devotedly cared for by Mr. Newkirk, who had worked so faithfully for Mrs. Simmons. He it was who had found her lying unconscious from a heart attack in her basement kitchen in October 1937 and had summoned Dr. Lester Sonking.

When Miss Sidman came to Saugerties, she would usually drive up from New York, alone or with guests, arriving late Friday evening. She was never afraid to enter the empty house, as she knew that Mr. Newkirk had "cased" the premises a few hours before. Moreover, in those long-ago days of the 1930's, crimes were infrequent. It must be confessed that when she was alone she left her car in the driveway in front of the house rather than brave the dark drive to the unlighted garage through the shrubbery. Her bedroom was still the "pink room" (second floor, rear of the house) and she did hastily shut all three doors to it before retiring!

In 1942, the parlor at Hill Crest was the scene of a Bridge Party which Miss Sidman gave in honor of her friend Miss Helen Bradburn, step-daughter of the Rev. E. Lewis Howe, Rector of Trinity Church. At the time, Miss Bradburn was a teacher of physical education in Kingston. In 1945, a second Bridge Party was held in honor of Mrs. E. Lewis Howe, the Rector's widow, who was like a second mother to Miss Sidman after the death of Mrs. Sidman, who had been her close friend.

Then came the end of World War II. On 10 November 1945, Miss Sidman was married to Lt. John H. Wachter at the First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn by Dr. Phillips Packer Elliott. Lt. Wachter, of Brooklyn, NY, had been honorably discharged in October from the U.S. Air Force after three years of service, and returned to civilian life. While the couple lived in Brooklyn, they made frequent weekend trips by car to Hill Crest, which Mr. Newkirk continued to keep in top condition.

Following the births of their two children, Kenneth in 1947 and Lucy in 1948, Mrs. Wachter and the youngsters spent the entire summer at the ancestral home, with Mr. Wachter commuting from his office in New York on weekends. A highlight of each summer, for children and grownups alike, was the Fourth of July parade, which in those days used to form in Lovers' Lane and march to Church Street and down Hill Street to the main part of the village. The Wachter family used to sit out on the sidewalk in front of Hill Crest and enjoy a close view of the marchers, the floats, the drums, and the band all bubbling with patriotic fervor.

For several years the Wachters enjoyed the company of Mrs. Dorothy Smith Coleman, a Wellesley College friend from Washington, D.C., who is now a distinguished writer and lecturer on antique dolls. Her two children, Elizabeth Ann and Evelyn Jane, were slightly older than Kenneth and Lucy Wachter. Elizabeth Ann Coleman, now a noted authority on costumes and founder of the Victorian Society, used to play "dress-up" in the Victorian garments found in the attic trunks. Hill Crest

was once again the setting for carefree days for little folks, as they played in the army surplus tent, splashed in the small canvas pool on the back lawn, pulled the cart around with baby Lucy in it, went off to daily Vacation Bible School at the Congregational Church, or played "rainy day school" in the big house.

But as all good things must come to an end, so it was with the carefree days of many summers. The Coleman family went to live in England, and the Wachter family found it increasingly onerous to be separated during the week. At last, with the utmost reluctance, Mrs. Wachter decided to put the cherished homestead on the market, much as she knew Mrs. Simmons would have grieved over its loss. In June 1954, the antique furniture, china, etc. were sold at public auction by Jack and Marion Hilton on behalf of the Wachters, the house and grounds having been purchased by David and Annie Ryder of Bogota, NJ for less than \$10,000. Four years later, in 1958, the Ryders resold the property to Mrs. Genevieve Stafford of Mt. Marion. Much later, the Wachters were horrified to learn that the grand old house had been used for illegal and immoral purposes after they had parted with it.

In 1960, the property was acquired by the Knights of Columbus "at a very depressed price", reportedly because of the disrepair of the building. (Letter of John Welch, Deputy Knight, Knights of Columbus, Saugerties Council No. 4536, 8/4/1966). Today this Hudson River landmark gives little sense of its former elegance and majesty and the magnificent sweeping view of the Hudson has all but disappeared as trees down the hill have grown so much taller.

A macadam parking lot has replaced the tree-lined driveway, the former flower bed and the well-kept lawn. To accommodate today's large gatherings, the present fraternal owners had no choice. The Mansion House is now home to an extended symbolic family. The building may survive for another century and a half. The imposing architecture still elicits comments and questions, which the foregoing story should help to answer. The original structure of the 1820's has undergone change before. Yet it continues to preside with enduring dignity and aplomb.

\*



The author, age 9, in front of side fence on south lawn