

Ravensthorpe

Mansion in the southern style on the shores of Lake Ontario

By Peggy Wright

Ravensthorpe, a mansion built in a style reminiscent of the ancestral homes found in the American south, stands in a secluded position overlooking the lake at the bottom of Fitzhugh Lane.

The lane is named after the original owner, General Charles Lane Fitzhugh.

From a wealthy and aristocratic old Virginia family, landowners of some 70,000 acres in the state, Fitzhugh was the youngest Civil War brigadier-general in the Union Army.

The year of Charles's marriage to Emma Shoenburger, 1867, the Fitzhugh family began to spend its summers in Cobourg, a tradition which the two maintained until their deaths in 1923.

Before Ravensthorpe was built they stayed either with the Beatty family or at the Arlington Hotel, which stood opposite College Street on the south side of King.

Even the Fitzhughs' riches paled in comparison with the Schoenburgers. Emma's father, George K., was the wealthiest man in the state of Pennsylvania.

It was Schoenburger, along with his son-in-law, Colonel William Chambliss, who first came to the area. They both gained controlling interests in the Cobourg, Peterborough and Marmora Railway and Mining Company and persuaded Fitzhugh to join them.

It was these men who laid the cornerstone for the growing popularity of Cobourg as a summer resort for wealthy Americans.

Fitzhugh eventually purchased two farms, where the houses were to be built, from Captain Walter Boswell, RN, and his son-in-law, Captain Archibald MacDonald.

Building history

had planned on, he was nonetheless delighted at the generous wedding gift.

East House remained in the Fitzhugh family until Christmas Day, 1976, when it burned to the ground.

Ravensthorpe was sold in 1926 to R. B. Hickman of Louisville, Kentucky.

The property was severed in half at this time, in a line which ran down the centre of Fitzhugh Lane and a little to the east as it neared the lake.

Hickman had some sympathetic remodelling done by MacKenzie and Waters, a Toronto architectural firm with a reputation for quality restoration.

They also redesigned two servants' houses to the north of Ravensthorpe for Hickman's daughters.

The Hickman's were keen equestrians and kept horses on the property. To this end, there were two barns and a coach house, all now demolished.

In 1952, they sold Ravensthorpe to the late Col. John Wier Foote, V.C.

The house, white stucco over brick, remains much as it was when it was built. It is a large, square residence with the front entrance facing the lake.

The removal of the shutters is the most obvious change.

The front entrance has a large pillared front portico with Corinthian columns and ornamented pedaments. It also contains two beautiful lamps flanking the door.

There are several dormer windows set into the trapezoidal hip

larity of Cobourg as a summer resort for wealthy Americans.

Fitzhugh eventually purchased two farms, where the houses were to be built, from Captain Walter Boswell, RN, and his son-in-law, Captain Archibald MacDonald.

The land comprised a wide swath from King Street south to the lake.

Fitzhugh had Ravensworth built in 1902. At the same time he had another residence constructed for his son Carroll just to the east of his own.

Carroll had a design of his own in mind, but while he and his wife Mary Bell were on an extended European tour his father discarded the original drawings and had the house constructed in much the same style as his own.

Both were designed by Elzner and Anderson, architects from Cincinnati, Ohio, in the Beaux Arts Classical style, a style revived at the turn of the century. It could be bulky, ornate and very imposing, but when handled with restraint the results were beautiful and formal.

Both houses have greek revival front entrances, Ravensworth was constructed more in the style of an American colonial home than its neighbor.

Carroll's house acquired its name while it was under construction. To differentiate between the two, the builders marked one set of materials for Fitzhugh and the other for the "East House".

When Carroll returned to find quite a different residence than he

The front entrance has a pillared front portico with Corinthian columns and ornamented pedaments. It also contains two beautiful lamps flanking the door.

There are several dormer windows set into the truncated hip roof. The windows are large, and most are 12 panes over 12.

The west side of the house features a porte cochere — a drive-through for vehicles — and the east has a porch or sun-room opening from the drawing room. It was probably enclosed by Hickman. Both porch roofs are supported by doric columns.

The back facade contains a magnificent semi-circular arched window.

The main floor features a 12-foot by 45-foot hall, with a large staircase at the end. To the right and left is a drawing room and a study. The dining room, kitchen, pantry, and bathroom are at the north side of the residence.

The second floor has four bedrooms, four bathrooms and a large linen closet.

The attic floor contains another four bedrooms, a bathroom and a trunk room.

In the basement are small storage rooms, a laundry room and a walk-in safe, which is thought to have been storage for liquor during prohibition.

The Cobourg Daily Star would like to acknowledge the assistance of historian Rob Mikel who assisted with the preparation of this article and others in the building history series.

Correction

An article which appeared on the front page of the June 27 edition of the Cobourg Daily Star incorrectly stated that Asa Weller was the father of William Weller, the Cobourg stage coach magnate of the 19th century. Historian Rob Mikel says Weller descendants have researched the family and cannot relate the two men, although it is probable there is at least a distant connection. Mikel said the error is a common one. Asa Weller operated a half-way house at Carrying Place in Prince Edward County to service stage-coach traffic, but it is not thought that he owned a stage-coach line as stated in the newspaper article.



General Charles Lane Fitzhugh

Fitzhugh family (07-83)

The Cobourg Daily Star, Friday, July 10, 1908
Cobourg Star JULY 15, 1908



Ravensworth, circa 1910, showing the front of the house, facing the lake at the bottom of Fitzhugh Lane. The house looks similar today.

Photo courtesy of Rob Mikel