

The Sanborn-Downes House, “Aigremont”, located at 15 High Street in Winchester is an early 20th century Beaux-Arts style suburban mansion on a prominent site overlooking the town center. The sophisticated architectural scale and detailing of the house, the dramatic site and commanding views, and the intriguing history of residential and institutional use combine to justify the preservation of the Sanborn-Downes House and its use in interpreting Winchester’s modern history.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

At its core, the Sanborn House is a classic private estate, carefully situated to provide an all-encompassing view of the domain for those in residence and to establish clear boundaries for those approaching from outside. While a private estate is by its nature somewhat set off from the community, it also cannot exist without a network of transportation and municipal services to support it. The mansion and gardens, carriage house and paddock had no productive capacity. In that sense, Aigremont is less a gentlemen’s country seat and more of a prosperous suburban home. The Sanborn house never produced income; it only consumed it.

Suburbanization

The gradual development of the railroad network in Massachusetts from the 1830s through the 1850s encouraged the growth and clustering of industrial development, but it also facilitated personal commuting between homes and commercial centers. Horse-drawn streetcars began serving the Boston area in 1856 supported by a system of iron rails laid out along major thoroughfares. Electric streetcar service was inaugurated in Boston in 1889. In 1891, Massachusetts appointed a special commission to make recommendations for an integrated transit system serving all communities within a ten-mile radius of Boston. The result was the establishment of the Boston Elevated Railway Company (1894) providing commuter rail connections to suburban communities and the nation’s first subway system (1897) providing service in downtown Boston.

Winchester, located only eight miles from downtown Boston, was one of many communities that witnessed the beginnings of suburban residential development in the mid-19th century. The Boston & Lowell railroad, which was laid out through what was then South Woburn in the 1830s, brought an influx of “Boston people” to the community by the 1850s. The influential bankers, lawyers, business leaders and professionals of that first wave outnumbered the local farmers and tanners and were directly responsible for erecting the Congregational Church



Entrance Hall

Conspicuous Consumption

and breaking away from Woburn to form the new town of Winchester.

The varied topography of Winchester, the reasonable eight-mile distance to Boston and the development of municipal water, sewer, lighting and transportation systems in the decades after the Civil War combined to make the town a prime commuter suburb for prosperous businessmen and their families. A second wave of suburban development in Winchester in the late 19th century helped define the residential character of the community. By the turn of the 20th century, tanneries and other industrial sites in the town center had been converted to parks and Winchester's upper class suburban character was accepted as trend of the future.

By 1900, the commuter suburbs surrounding Boston were numerous and heavily populated, but many communities were unprepared for the impact of rapid growth. Before the progressive implementation of zoning and building codes in the early 20th century, private residential development was only restricted by what an owner could afford to build. The Sanborn House is a prime example of the new affluent suburban estate that marked the third wave of Winchester's suburban development in the early modern period.

In the scale and detailing of the Sanborn House and what little is known of its original furnishings, the house stands out as a badge of prosperity. While it functioned adequately as a private home, it was in essence a stage set, brought to life periodically by the people and activities presented within it. As in any dramatic performance, the illusion of ease was maintained by a corps of workers behind the scenes.

The construction of Aigremont is evidence of a time when there were few regulatory constraints on what a man could accomplish. From 1872 to 1913, there was no Federal tax on personal or business income. Prior to the enactment of the income tax, "most citizens were able to pursue their private economic affairs without the direct knowledge of the government. Individuals earned their wages, businesses earned their profits, and wealth was accumulated and dispensed with little or no interaction with government entities."¹

The Federal income tax, enacted by constitutional amendment in 1913 was intentionally progressive, placing the greatest tax burden on those who were most affluent. Federal income tax rates initially ranged from 1% to 7%, but with the onset of World War I, Congress authorized increases in the tax rate. By 1918, the Federal tax rate ranged from 6% to a full 77%.



Foyer

History of Use

Private residence - Sanborn (1907-1921)

The rise of the labor movement in the early 20th century also served to counter the unrestrained profit-making of some businessmen. Massachusetts in 1912 was the first state to pass minimum wage regulations, but the law applied only to women and children and had no real penalties for noncompliance. A federal regulation setting the minimum wage at 25 cents per hour was not passed until 1938.

The progressive Federal income tax, the economic pressure of World War I and the more equitable distribution of wages through organized labor and regulatory combined to rein in the habits of wealthier Americans and limit the extravagant excesses of the Gilded Age. The era of stately mansions and exclusive social events lingered through the 1920s, but collapsed abruptly with the stock market crash of 1929.

The evolution of the Sanborn-Downes house echoes the larger trends in American and New England history. Built in 1907 as the suburban estate of a successful Yankee Protestant businessman, Aigremont was a perfect setting to celebrate the aristocratic lifestyle. Eventually the social and economic demands of the lifestyle proved unsustainable and the house was sold at foreclosure in 1924.

The next owners were second-generation Irish immigrants from a working class neighborhood of Boston. Unlike Oren Sanborn, J. Edward Downes was a self-made man, building a successful lumber business of his own in Boston. The suburban retreat of Aigremont, acquired in 1925, was an outward sign of success, but not acceptance.

By the 1940s, large suburban houses were becoming white elephants on the market. Some were converted to multi-family homes; others became funeral homes, clubhouses, private schools or museums. Aigremont functioned as part of a parochial school campus (Marycliff Academy) from 1945 to 1969 and as part of a public school campus (Ambrose School) from 1969 to 2003.

The Sanborn House was erected as the private home of Oren C. Sanborn, a wholesale coffee and tea dealer who also invested in real estate.² His father James Solomon Sanborn, in partnership with Caleb Chase in Boston, had pioneered the retail distribution and sale of roasted coffee in sealed tins under the Chase & Sanborn brand in 1878.



Music Room

Oren Cheney Sanborn was born in Maine in 1867 and moved to Somerville (MA) with his parents by 1880. In 1886 he married Lorena Armstrong and they subsequently had four children: James Oren Sanborn (b. 1891), Helen Elizabeth Sanborn (b. 1897), Caleb Sanborn (b. 1899) and John H. ‘Jack’ Sanborn (b. 1902).

Oren Sanborn moved to Winchester in 1901, when the area was already well established as a stable suburban residential community. In 1904, he purchased the two lots on High Street in Winchester that would become the site of the family’s new suburban residence. Located a respectable distance from the suburban estates that were under development on nearby Myopia Hill, Sanborn’s four-acre lot was similar in size and orientation. The land stretched from a steep hill on the east to a broad open field on the west and was bordered on all sides by streets and trees so that there were no close neighbors. The house itself was set well back from the street on the brow of the hill and was designed to be seen and admired on its own rather than as part of a neighborhood.

The Sanborn House was designed by architects Clinton M. Hill and Thomas M. James and erected in 1906-07 at a reported cost of \$250,000.³ The house was named “Aigremont”, possibly in reference to any of several bucolic French villages, or perhaps as a bon mot alluding to the steep hill on which the house was situated. The Sanborn family moved into the house in 1907, although town assessors’ records suggest that portions of the building were still unfinished at that time.

The house and the extensive landscaped grounds soon became an important part of the local social scene. In addition to maintaining a paddock and coachmen, Oren Sanborn was an early adopter of the automobile, purchasing a Peerless brand luxury car in 1905. In 1909, the town assessors valued the property at \$50,000 for the house, \$15,000 for the barn or carriage house, and \$15,000 for the land (four acres), for a total of \$80,000.

In 1910, the gardens and grounds of Aigremont were the setting for a theatrical production of “Pandora’s Box.” Period photographs of the event in the Winchester Town Archives depict young women in classical garb striking artistic poses in the garden. At that time, the Sanborn household also included three live-in servants: Lucretia Millet, a 22-year old Maine native who served as a nurse for the four Sanborn children, Carrie Sutton, a 28-year old black woman from North Carolina who served as the family cook, and John Lang, a 31-year old Englishman, who served as coachman to the household.

Oren’s wife Rena Sanborn played an active role in Winchester society and was



Oak Room



Dining Room

instrumental in founding the Winchester Hospital in 1917. By 1920 when the youngest of the Sanborn children turned eighteen, there was no longer a need for a nurse in the household. The family did retain two live-in servants: Crawford Lee, a 24-year old black man from North Carolina and Robert Guthrie, a 35-year old Irishman who worked as a groom. The household was probably supplemented by day help as needed.

In 1920, Sanborn negotiated to sell his Winchester estate to Mary E. Murray. The business or social relationship between the Sanborns and the Murrays is unknown, but the sale was most likely arranged privately.⁴ The price of the sale was not noted in the deed, but the assessors' records from that year place a value of \$60,000 on the house, \$18,000 on the barn and \$18,000 on the land (a total of \$96,000). The value suggests normal inflation over the course of the preceding decade and does not appear to indicate any significant improvements to the house or grounds in that time.

The Sanborn family retained occupancy of the house for a short time and hosted the social debut of their only daughter Helen at Aigremont in 1921. Helen's unusually late debut at age 24 and the fact that it took place in a house the family no longer technically owned suggest that the Sanborn finances were in some disarray.

Rena Sanborn and her daughter Helen left Aigremont for Boston in 1921, while Oren Sanborn eventually settled in Providence (RI) where he died in 1928. The Winchester house passed through a series of mortgage holders and real estate speculators until 1924 when it was sold at foreclosure to William N. Ambler, who resold it to Edward Ball.

Private residence - Downes (1925-1945)

In 1925, Aigremont was purchased by Mary Ellen (Murphy) Downes, the wife of James Edward Downes, for use as their primary family residence. J. Edward Downes was the son of Irish immigrants to Massachusetts and the founder of the Downes Lumber Company (founded 1899 and still in business in Boston). His wife Mary Ellen Murphy was a Rhode Island girl, also born of Irish immigrant parents. They were married in 1912 when he was 33 and she was 25 and lived for several years in Jamaica Plain (Boston) where all five of their children were born.

The acquisition of Aigremont in 1925 was a social coup that echoed the rising political and economic influence of Irish-Americans in Greater Boston. The house, built a short generation earlier by the second son of a Protestant Yankee coffee merchant, was now the home of a second-generation Irish Catholic family

who had achieved success in the lumber trade. At the time when Mary Downes purchased Aigremont, it was not unusual for a family residence to be purchased in the wife's name in order to protect the property from being entailed by the husband's business creditors.

When they purchased Aigremont in 1925, the Downes household included five children: Thomas Downes (b. 1913), James Edward Downes Jr. (b. 1914), Rose A. Downs (b. 1916), Philip Downes (b. 1918) and Richard Downes (b. 1925). The 1930 Federal census also indicates three live-in domestics (all born in Ireland): Ellen Heffernan (?), a cook aged 65, Catherine O'Connell, age 20, and Marlene (?) McHugh, age 19.

The purchase price of the property in 1925 is not noted, but the Downes children remember that their parents paid off the mortgage in only three years. The assessed value in 1930 was \$35,000 for the house, \$8,000 for the four-car garage, \$7,500 for an additional one-story house that Mary Downes had built for her father Thomas Murphy, and \$12,000 for the land (a total of \$62,500). The Federal census of 1930 also valued the house at \$35,000. By comparison, the adjacent properties were valued at \$8,500, \$12,000 and \$15,000 in the census.

The 40% decline in value on the house since 1920 is partly attributable to the economic depression that began with the stock market crash in 1929, but it may also reflect the amount of work that was required to restore the property. Throughout the northeast, former mansions were subdivided or demolished during the Great Depression as the cost of maintaining and heating them proved exorbitant. By 1940, town assessors valued the Sanborn-Downes house at \$30,000, the garage at only \$3,000 and the land at \$12,000.

The Downes children in more recent years recalled that their mother sometimes burned coal in the fireplaces in order to save on the cost of heating the whole house. They also note that the family abstained from alcohol and that the former wine cellar in the basement (connected to the Oak Room by a dumbwaiter) was used by them only for the storage of apples.⁵ The Downes children recalled that while they had a beautiful house and attended private schools, they knew almost no one in the neighborhood and never had the opportunity to play with local children.

During their ownership, the Downes family led a fairly quiet life, but occasionally opened their home for charitable and social events. In 1935, the Winchester Chapter of the Guild of the Infant Savior (a Catholic women's charitable group that assisted orphans and unwed mothers) presented "A Pageant of Nations." Period photographs of the event in the Winchester Town Archive show costumed

Stained glass window at Main Stairway



participants outdoors before a seated throng of women and children. The program included dances and songs from many countries including Holland, Armenia, Italy, Egypt and France. Students from St. Mary's School served as "Quakers and Pickaninnies" in a time before political correctness.

As the Downes children matured and left home, the grand scale of the house became a burden. At the suggestion of Richard Cushing, the newly-appointed Archbishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, Mary Downes agreed to sell the house and land to an order of teaching nuns in 1945.

Parochial Education (1945-1969)

Through the intercession of Archbishop Richard Cushing, Aigremont was sold in 1945 to an order of nuns known as the Religious of Christian Education, Inc. The RCE order had been founded in Normandy (France) in 1817 and later moved to Belgium. The order founded and staffed a large number of schools in Ireland, the United States, Mexico, and other countries.

The RCE made plans to construct a private day school for girls' school on the former paddock site west of the main house. Aigremont was used as a convent for the nuns and a residence for school staff. The house also provided temporary classroom space while the adjacent school was under construction. Marycliff Academy for Girls opened in the new building in 1947 with an enrollment of three hundred students.

A trend of declining enrollment in private schools resulted in a decision to close Marycliff Academy in 1969. The remaining nuns at Aigremont moved to a convent in Milton (MA) owned by the same order.

Town Ownership (since 1969)

At a special Town Meeting in September 1969, the Town of Winchester was authorized to purchase the former Marycliff Academy and the adjacent house for public school purposes.

The Marycliff Academy building was renamed the Ambrose Elementary School and functioned as a public school. The main house was used primarily as school department offices. The former laundry area in the basement was used as a town archive c. 1974-77 and from 1977-94, the town archive occupied a wing of the carriage house.

The offices of the Winchester Recreation Department were later moved into



Mantel in Master Bedroom

Aigremont and portions of the house were used for Recreation Department programs and equipment storage. The Sanborn House was nominated and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1981.

In 2003, the building that housed the Marycliff Academy / Ambrose School was demolished in order to make way for construction of a new public school on the same site. The Recreation Department vacated the main house about the same time and the future of Aigremont was in some doubt.

At a Town Meeting in June of 2005, the Town voted to grant a 40-year lease on the Sanborn-Downes house to the Winchester Historical Society “to protect and preserve the property for civic and historical purposes.” At the same meeting, the Town granted a Preservation Restriction on the property to the Massachusetts Historical Commission in order to “protect the architectural, archaeological and historical integrity of the property known as the Sanborn House.”

The days of Aigremont as a private estate are long past and the current vision of the town is to preserve the Sanborn-Downes house as an artifact of the early modern era. Adaptive reuse of the mansion for community-based history, arts and cultural activities is strikingly non-exclusive, providing a fitting footnote to the history of the property.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Sanborn House is remarkable for the quality of architectural detailing, the careful arrangement of interior spaces and the incorporation of many modern household features. While the exterior of the house and the public rooms on the main floor are clearly designed for visual impact, the scale of the building is suited to the community and reflects the efficiency of a modern household with mechanical systems and appliances reducing the need for live-in servants.

Hill & James, Architects

The short-lived partnership of Clinton M. Hill (1873-1939) and Thomas M. James (1875-1942), which lasted from 1904 to 1909, was a juncture that inspired both architects to go off on their own and define their respective specialties. Both architects were born in Cambridge, launched their practice in Boston and were residential neighbors in Waban (Newton), but their careers diverged after their partnership.

Clinton M. Hill studied architecture at the Lowell School of Design and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His commissions in the Boston area included



Iron balcony

“a large number of schools, theatres, churches, libraries and private homes.”⁶ In 1909, he moved to New York and specialized in the design of high-rise office buildings, including several commissions in midtown Manhattan.⁷

Thomas M. James received private architectural training prior to his partnership with Hill in 1904. After the dissolution of the partnership in 1909, James specialized in the design of bank buildings with commissions in Boston, Springfield (MA) and New London (CT).⁸

While Hill and James both had successful later careers, there are very few buildings that have so far been attributed to their partnership. The Sanborn House is certainly their grandest residential design in terms of scale or detailing. The most notable result of the Hill and James partnership is the Shubert Theatre on Tremont Street in Boston (1908).

Hill and James did take one other residential commission in Winchester - the Remick house at 4 Swan Road in 1908. The Remick house is similar to the Sanborn house in its location on a hill overlooking the town and in its balanced symmetry and use of Italian Renaissance details. Both houses show a competent handling of Beaux-Arts and Renaissance principles.

As suburban American mansions, the Sanborn House and the Remick House are both very conservative designs. The careful proportioning and balanced symmetry derive from Italian Renaissance prototypes with relatively little individuality or artistic flair. While Harvard’s Chair of Architecture, H. Langford Warren, was advocating English prototypes and preaching aesthetic restraint for American architects, Hill and James sought to suggest aristocratic association by mining Italian Renaissance, French Baroque and Beaux Arts architecture for the design of the Sanborn House.

The social trend at the time was to legitimize American affluence by rooting it firmly in the best of European culture. It is therefore difficult to gauge to what extent the design of the Sanborn House reflects the talent of the architects or the tastes of the client.

Based on currently available sources, it is also impossible to attribute the exterior or interior design of the Sanborn House definitively to the creative energy of one partner over the other. An advertisement in the 1908 Yearbook of the Boston Architecture Club for the Sanitary Dust Removing Company of Massachusetts credits the Sanborn House to “Messrs. Hill & James, Architects.” A booklet printed by the Clinton Wire Cloth Company of Clinton (MA) in 1914, titled *Successful Stucco Houses*, credits Thomas James as the designer of the Remick

house. Since both sources are promotional advertisements, they may not be completely accurate. For instance, James may have been credited in the 1914 publication simply because he was still in business in Boston.

Beaux Arts / Italian Neoclassical Style

The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago introduced Americans to the Beaux-Arts glory of the White City. Whereas the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia had sparked an interest in the Colonial Revival as a way to reaffirm the character and superiority of the nation's English founders, the 1893 Columbian Exposition encouraged Americans to adopt the architectural forms and customs of the European aristocracy. As a result, the neoclassical styles inspired by the White City enjoyed a long run of popularity for residential, commercial and institutional buildings.

In the realm of residential architecture and interior design, the leading arbiters of taste in New England and New York at the dawn of the 20th century were the young architect and decorator Ogden Codman Jr. and the young writer and socialite Edith Wharton. Their collaborative publication, The Decoration of Houses (1897) became the standard guide for anyone wishing to build or furnish an appropriately tasteful house for social entertaining. Scale, proportion, symmetry and harmony were the guiding principles of architecture and interior decoration.

Wharton and Codman emphasized that architectural eclecticism was to be avoided and that a return to classicism (via the Italian Renaissance and French Neoclassical traditions) was the only way to achieve a comfortable and aesthetically pleasing house. They advised that the exterior of the house and the design of the interior rooms must echo the proportions of the classical orders. In addition, they pointed out that a mansion is not just a middle-class home enlarged, but rather a carefully orchestrated sequence of rooms designed to accommodate specific public and private functions.

The Sanborn House is a classic example of the modern mansion as envisioned by Wharton and Codman. The balanced and understated exterior conveys a sense of refinement and taste while clearly indicating a degree of affluence. The interior is staged to present a series of primary spaces that are social or public in nature, a realm of secondary spaces that are reserved for the use of the family, and a discreet arrangement of tertiary spaces that are designed for service and support.

In choosing to build in the neoclassical style, Oren Sanborn and his architects ensured that Aigremont would be conspicuous and distinctive in the community. While other estates on Myopia Hill followed English architectural prototypes

(Tudor Revival, Arts & Crafts, Colonial Revival), the Sanborn House was distinctively different. The neoclassical mansion is more similar to the elaborate “cottages” built in affluent resort areas (Newport, Rhode Island and the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts) and less typical of a mature residential suburb.

Modern Suburban Mansion

While the design of Aigremont adhered to Beaux-Arts ideals, the engineering of the house was distinctively modern and efficient. Instead of using traditional quarry stone to build in the best Beaux-Arts style, the Sanborn house relied on wood frame construction and wood details. The exterior walls consist of a stucco finish applied to wire lath which is set off from the sheathing by furring strips. This type of construction was widely advertised as being completely fireproof.⁹

The interior plan of the house is carefully devised to establish concentric realms of activity that do not cross or overlap. At the core of the house are the public or social rooms of the first floor, designed specifically for receiving and entertaining adult guests. These primary spaces include the vestibule and foyer, main stair hall, music room, dining room, library, the smoking room (Oak Room) and the piazza or verandah. The materials and finishes of the social rooms are the most expensive in the house - marble, mahogany, carved wood, decorative plaster and gold leaf.¹⁰ The walls were originally hung with silk wall coverings.¹¹ A large arch-topped stained glass window on the main stair serves as a colorful and artistic focal point in the main reception area.

Carefully removed from the social rooms are the spaces designed to be used exclusively by the family. These secondary spaces include the children’s corridor and staircase, the upstairs hall, the family bedrooms and bathrooms on the second and third floors, and accommodations for family guests. The materials and finishes of the family rooms are of good quality, but less showy - maple floors, wood and plaster mouldings, plaster walls and ceilings and (presumably) printed wallpapers. Even the porcelain, metal and enameled fixtures in the bathrooms and lavatories are of high quality.¹²

Furthest removed from the core of the house are the utilitarian spaces designed for service and support. These tertiary spaces include the working kitchens, pantries, servants’ stairs and servants’ quarters in the north wing, the wine cellar, laundry, electrical and mechanical rooms in the basement, and a variety of built-in storage closets and workspaces off the service corridors. Even the delivery door on the west side of the north wing and the below-grade laundry drying area on the north end function independently without intrusion on any other space. The service spaces are designed for ease of use with minimum care



- tile floors, paneled wainscoting, painted plaster walls, and varnished or painted wood trim.

The efficiency and health of the household are further supported by the design of the interior. The entry vestibule is finished in weatherproof materials (marble and tile), exactly as recommended by Wharton and Codman.¹³ The open stairway provides for natural airflow between the first and second floor. The large windows and French doors throughout the house insure a constant supply of healthful fresh air, even in the bedrooms. The forced hot air heating system with gravity-fed hydronic circulation and pneumatic controls provides more even distribution of heat than either fireplaces or radiators. A central vacuum system insured that the rooms could be kept clean and ready for guests.

The design of the Sanborn House goes beyond the norm in providing modern improvements and amenities. The large number of bathrooms and lavatories is designed to offer hygiene and convenience while maintaining the carefully designated realms of use. Electric light fixtures mounted on the walls and ceilings throughout the house ensure that the household can function efficiently in any weather and at any time of day. (As was often the case in the early modern period, some of the fixtures were designed to accommodate both electricity and gas, since the electrical current was notoriously unreliable in the early days.) Communication and movement throughout the house were facilitated by a system of electric annunciators (call signals), a passenger elevator and a dumbwaiter (from the wine cellar to the smoking room).

Unfortunately, the concentric realms of the Sanborn House are not all equally well preserved. The impressive social spaces have survived through subsequent periods of use with relatively little alteration save for supplemental lighting and wall-mounted air conditioning units. The family spaces have been more compromised with new partition walls, doorways and lavatory facilities being added to some spaces. The service spaces have been remodeled even more radically so that the original character of some spaces is hard to discern. As a result, the choreographic arrangement of the three realms (social/family/service) as part of an integrated design is difficult to present to visitors.