

Hill & James

Beaux Arts Splendor in a Suburban Setting

Roger G. Reed

The partnership of Clinton M. Hill (1873-1930) and Thomas M. James (1875-1942) lasted a brief four years, between 1905 and 1908. Both architects subsequently worked primarily on non-residential projects, for which they would become better known. Yet the two houses they designed in Winchester are outstanding interpretations of neoclassical design and are major landmarks of early twentieth-century residential work in this suburban community. Hill & James designed the Oren C. Sanborn house at 15 High Street and the Joseph Remick house at 4 Swan Road.

Hill, the elder partner by two years, was born in Cambridge on 12 September 1873 and attended architectural classes at the Lowell School of Design and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Between 1894 and 1895, he worked as a draftsman for Langford Warren and Lewis Bacon. By 1896 he established his own practice, moving his residence from Saugus to the Waban area of Newton, where both Warren and Bacon lived. Hill joined in partnership with Bacon in 1898, and this association lasted through 1904. Hill then formed a new firm with James, another Waban neighbor.¹

James was also born in Cambridge but received no academic architectural training. He first worked for architect Samuel J. Brown, but by 1893 Boston directories record that he was a draftsman at the office of Eugene L. Clark, a prolific designer of suburban homes. Clark took James on as a partner in 1897, although that association lasted less than two years.

From 1898 until early in 1905, James practiced alone.² The firm of Clark & James designed at least two houses in Winchester in 1897, one for George Fitch and the other for P. A. Nickerson. Nickerson, a local real estate developer, returned to James for the design of another house in Winchester in 1902, but this structure has not been identified.³

Hill and James built houses for themselves not far from each other in Waban in 1903.⁴ The two men formed a partnership

in February of 1905, and in 1908 they took on a third architect, Charles H. Whitaker.⁵

In the next year, Hill moved to New York City, and the Boston directory shows that James continued his practice alone. Hill worked in New York with two other architects, William W. Kent and John Jardine, and they designed a number of large office buildings. Hill died in Los Angeles on 21 September 1939.



FIGURE 1. In 1906, Hill & James designed an imposing Beaux Arts mansion for Oren C. Sanborn and his family. Located at 15 High Street, the house is sited on a hill overlooking the older part of Winchester.



FIGURE 2. The entrance facade, like the facade overlooking the town, is dominated by two-story columns.

James continued to practice in Boston, eventually gaining a national reputation as a designer of bank buildings. His banks were located throughout the northeast and were designed in styles ranging from neoclassical to Spanish Renaissance. James died on 8 July 1942, and his firm continued under his name until the 1960s.⁶

With so little known about the residential work of Hill & James, it would be difficult to assign to either man principal responsibility for the two houses in Winchester. Several house designs outside of Winchester have been identified as the work of both Hill & James and Thomas M. James, but no other domestic projects associated with these men are comparable to the Winchester houses. The monumental character of both buildings, however, is in keeping with many of the bank buildings later designed by James.

Oren Cheney Sanborn built 15 High Street as his home (figures 1, 2). He was the son of James Sanborn, co-founder of Chase & Sanborn, importers of coffee and tea. Oren entered his father's firm, married Lorena Armstrong in 1886, and fathered four children.⁷

By 1906 the Oren Sanborns had acquired more than nine acres at the edge of Myopia Hill, looking toward Winchester and the Middlesex Fells. For this site, Sanborn hired Hill & James to design a palatial villa

which would help establish him and his wife as leading members of Winchester society. According to local directories, his position in the Chase & Sanborn firm was that of "clerk," indicating that he was not the manager of the business. Although it is purely speculation, there is circumstantial evidence that Sanborn lived beyond his means and was eventually separated from his wife. At any rate, the house which was occupied by his wife and daughter Helen was sold in 1921 in a state of disrepair. Mrs. Sanborn and her daughter were said to have moved to Boston. Sanborn's later residence has not been identified, but he resigned from Chase & Sanborn and died in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1928.⁸

What is remarkable about the Sanborn house is that it was designed in a neoclassical style with a commanding location on a hill overlooking the town. The style and the siting were not typical of early twentieth-century suburban architecture in communities the size of Winchester. Indeed, the exterior of the house suggests that the architects or the clients were looking at the Gerard Foster house in Lenox by Carrère & Hastings or the Thomas Jefferson Coolidge house in Manchester by McKim, Mead & White, both of which were mansions built two or three years earlier. Closer to home was the Edwin Ginn residence, on Bacon Street in Winchester, now

demolished. Built in 1896 and designed by noted New York architect Ernest Flagg, the Ginn house established a local precedent for a residence of this grandeur and sophistication.⁹ These houses, as well as the Sanborn residence, were organized using principles taught at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Plans of such houses consisted of orderly, well-defined spaces logically laid out with each room designated for specific functions and ornamented accordingly.

The central block of the Sanborn house is embellished with an entablature and a balustrade, which crowns a flat roof. On both the east and west elevations are shallow porticoes supported by columns, originally with capitals in the composite order. Most of the capitals have been removed, which has been the only major desecration to the house.¹⁰ Surmounting the roof is a low third story whose entablature reflects the detailing used on the main block of the house. On the south side is a rectangular loggia with Tuscan columns and a flat roof enhanced by the same entablature and balustrade that surmount the main building block. This open porch is balanced on the opposite side by the kitchen wing, which was not easily visible from public roads and was only minimally ornamented. Nearby is a large carriage house, designed in the same style as the mansion.

The body of the house is covered with stucco, and the wood trim has been painted a stark white. Chips in the paint reveal that a softer cream color was originally used. The contrast between the stucco and trim accentuates the neoclassical ornamentation, which is large in scale and contributes to the illusion that the house is more palatial than it actually is.

The tripartite organization of the exterior massing is repeated in the floor plan. The main entrance, on the west, leads to a spacious hall that is dominated by a grand staircase. The staircase landing above is lighted by a spectacular stained-glass window with a scene of an Italian garden. Directly opposite the hall are three doors leading into the living room, and these doors are mirrored by three French doors opening to the east, overlooking Winchester. This large room distinguishes the Sanborn house plan from plans designed for other well-to-do citizens, for its existence suggests the owners expected to entertain frequently.

At either end of the living room are the dining room and the library, and adjoining the latter is a study. The large scale of the neoclassical detailing on the exterior is continued in the interior woodwork. For example, the study has a mantel and overmantel which are boldly scaled in a manner that rejects the refined delicacy associated with the ornament of that period. The mantels are stylistically compatible with the flanking light fixtures, which are in an Arts and Crafts style. More traditional is the dining room, which has a bowed ceiling ornamented with Elizabethan strapwork. The large scaling of this ornamentation is less successful in that the weight of the ceiling is almost oppressive. Much of the design of the house, however, cannot be understood without its original furnishings. Moreover, the changes wrought by the building's long institutional use have left their mark.¹¹

The grand residence built by the Sanborns inspired one other local resident to build in a similar fashion. Joseph Remick, a stockbroker who worked in Boston, purchased almost three acres of land nearby on Myopia Hill and hired Hill & James to design another Beaux Arts villa (figure 3). C. H. Mead, a Boston contracting firm, began work on it in August 1908.¹² Little is known about Remick, who worked in a



FIGURE 3. In 1908, Hill & James designed 4 Swan Road for Annie Remick. Like the Sanborn house, the Remick house was built on a hillside and planned to overlook the town.

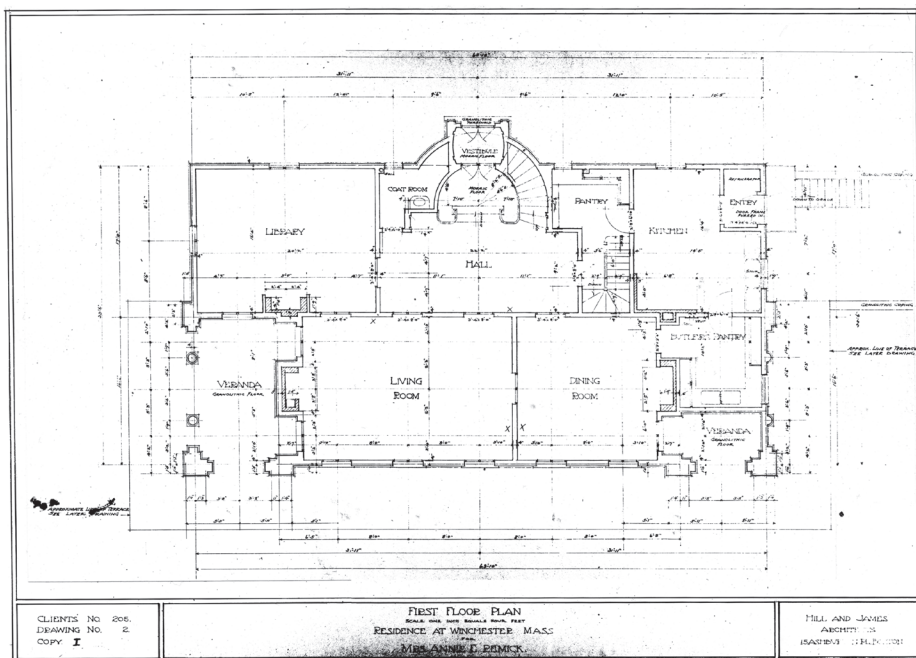


FIGURE 4. The plan for the first floor of the Remick house is marked throughout by balanced relationships. Symmetry is apparent in the planning of the hall as well as in the public rooms.

number of different brokerage firms. He lived in Winchester only until 1916, when he moved to an apartment house in Boston. It is not known what relationship there was between Remick and the Sanborns. The fact that both men vacated their palatial residences around the same time sug-

gests that there is more to the story than can be gleaned from public records.

Remick's house is smaller than Sanborn's and more in scale with the living standards of today.¹³ It is also a well-designed house. The floor plan (figure 4) is similar

to that of the Sanborn house, except there is no study. The centrally located hall leads directly into the living room and the dining room. The library is located to the right as you enter, while to the left is a hall that leads to the kitchen. All of the principal rooms are linked by doors with large rectangular panes of glass. These glass doors allow natural light into the rooms and create a sense of openness, eliminating any impression that there are sections of the house where access is discouraged.

The decorations in each room are generally more refined than those of the Sanborn house in terms of their scale and detailing. In the living room is a marble fireplace mantel with a chimney breast incorporating a mirror surmounted by Renaissance garlands. The staircase in the main hall has a cast iron handrail and newel post, also festooned with garlands. Most impressive of all is the dining room, which is designed in an Art Nouveau style, rare in any house outside New York City. The walls and ceilings are embellished with intricate floral motifs and cherubs fabricated in "Dutch copper", which was gold leaf with a green wash added to simulate aged copper. The decor of this room is unusual and may have been the work of an interior decorating firm rather than the architects.

The exterior of the house is difficult to fully appreciate because the main entrance is obscured by tall pines. As with the Sanborn house, this elevation faces west, but there is no columned portico. The house was originally approached by a long curving drive from Myopia Road rather than the present driveway close to the garage on Swan Road.

The west front of the house illustrates how, in American architecture, Italian Renaissance motifs were typically filtered through nineteenth-century English interpretations. For example, the central bay containing the main entrance projects with a bowed front which, with its smooth stucco facing and iron balcony, suggests English Regency precedents. The iron balcony over the entrance is extraordinary for its delicate pattern. As with the interior, the exterior doors have large rectangular glass panes which bring more natural light

into the house and enable one to see through the house toward the east and the town of Winchester. These doors are the same size as the windows, which are all casements. The vertical emphasis of the fenestration is balanced by the horizontal belt course and roof balustrade.

Later developments and screens of trees have altered the impression these two houses make today. Although no longer prominent visually as a pair of modern Italian villas on the hill above Winchester, the houses remain outstanding examples of early twentieth-century suburban architecture.

Editor's Note: Since the publication of this article in 1994, more has been learned about the Sanborn and Remick houses. The Remick house has been identified as the work of Thomas James through the discovery of a booklet, *Successful Stucco Houses*, printed by the Clinton Wire Cloth Company in 1914. It seems likely that James also was the architect responsible for the Sanborn house. The firm of Hill, James, and Whitaker designed the Shubert Theater on Tremont Street in Boston in 1908–10, and James designed the State Street Trust Building on Franklin Street, Boston, in 1929.

NOTES

1. Withey and Withey, *A Biographical Dictionary of Architects (Deceased)*, Los Angeles, 1970, 286; Boston City Directories, 1893–1909.
2. Withey, 320–321; Boston City Directories, 1893–1920; Thomas M. James obituary, *Boston Herald*, 9 July 1942.
3. *American Architect and Building News*, 27 Feb. 1897, 24 Apr. 1897, 18 Dec. 1897; *Banker and Tradesman*, 27 Sept. 1902. Thanks to Maureen Meister for the references from *American Architect and Building News*.
4. *Banker and Tradesman*, 6 June and 21 Nov. 1903.
5. *Banker and Tradesman*, 11 Feb. 1905. Charles Whitaker is listed as a partner in the 1908 Boston Directory. I have not found any other information on this man.
6. Laura de La Torre Bueno, the leading compiler of the work of Thomas M. James, has assembled a list of his projects. She also owns a house in

Somerville which James designed as a young man for his family.

7. *Winchester Star*, 13 June 1928; Boston and Winchester Directories.
8. *Winchester Star*, 14 Jan. 1921, 13 June 1928.
9. The house was illustrated in the *Architectural Record*, Apr. 1902. Thanks to Maureen Meister for pointing this out to me.
10. The house was photographed for an advertisement which appeared in the Boston Architectural Club *Yearbook* for 1908. This photograph is the source that credits Hill & James as architects of the Sanborn house, which was not known until Stephen Jerome of the Brookline Historical Society kindly shared this information with Maureen Meister.
11. In 1947 the house was acquired by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese to house approximately twenty nuns. The Catholic school located behind the house was built at that time. Today the house is owned by the town of Winchester.
12. *Banker and Tradesman*, 8 Aug. 1908; *Winchester Star*, 17 July 1908. The documentation that Hill & James designed this house derives from the plans, which the present owners shared with me. It should be noted that the client name on the drawings is Annie Remick, Joseph Remick's wife. A death notice for Remick appeared in the *Boston Herald* on 4 Feb. 1945.
13. The present owners, Robert and Marta Frank, kindly allowed me to visit and photograph their house.

Number 1, 1994
Reissued 2001

THE ARCHITECTS OF WINCHESTER,
MASSACHUSETTS

Published by the



WINCHESTER HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

15 High Street
P.O. Box 127
Winchester, MA 01890

EDITOR
Maureen Meister

GRAPHICS
LMY Studio, Inc.