

Rio Vista -- From Gentleman's Farm to Country Club to Seminary: A History of the Land we call Home.... *Written by Dr. David Kopp, Architectural Historian and Resident of Rio Vista Mahwah*

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ramapo Valley of Mahwah became home to several wealthy New York City "weekenders" who came here as gentleman farmers. Though today, the names of Theodore Havemeyer, Clarence Chapman and Alfred B. Darling are largely forgotten, in their day they were known among the elite of Manhattan's business aristocracy. Clarence Chapman was a stockbroker and his shingle-style home on Ramapo Valley Road later became the Carmelite Retreat Center. Theodore Havemeyer was instrumental in developing sugar-refining techniques, and his large plant in Brooklyn eventually became part of the Domino Sugar Corporation. His three-story red-brick Georgian mansion still stands along Ramapo Valley Road, and along with 300 acres of his estate, is now part of the campus of Ramapo College. A. B. Darling was a hotelier and owned the luxurious and famous Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York. He and his wife came to Mahwah in 1872 to establish a breeding farm for horse and cattle, and part of his 1000 acre estate would eventually become the Rio Vista Community.



The Darling Mansion, Ramapo Valley Road (1875)

Darling's rambling mansion, now gone, was built on Ramapo Valley Road just south of the Darlington Schoolhouse in the area that is the parking lot of the Ramapo Reservation. The house stood in a grove of elms and maples surrounded by a lawn. The outbuildings surrounding the home included a bowling alley, stables, a dairy, a coach

barn and a half-mile track for the training of trotters, many of whom became championship horses on the National racing circuit. In 1890, Darling, one of the largest employers in the area, teamed up with fellow estate owner, Theodore Havemeyer, to finance the construction of a new Schoolhouse to accommodate the educational needs of the children of their expanding worker families. The restored Darlington Schoolhouse is now one of the architectural treasures of Mahwah and serves as the headquarters for the New York/New Jersey Trail Conference. When Alfred Darling died in 1896, his wife continued to operate the farm, but in 1901 the estate was sold and a new Mahwah millionaire entered the scene, one who would build the greatest architectural legacy in the community.

Born in Sacramento in 1856, George Crocker was the youngest son of Charles Crocker, a railroad pioneer on the West Coast who helped to build the first transcontinental railroad. Upon his father's death, George was left six million dollars with the provision that he reform his profligate ways. After an unsuccessful probation of three years, he finally gained the confidence of his father's executors and he came into his inheritance. In 1894, he moved to New York City and opened an office, taking over many of his father's business investments including banks, railroads, chemicals, sugar, gas, coal and iron and land companies. Soon after coming to New York, Crocker married Emma Rutherford, a California widow with three grown children. They owned a New York residence at 1 East 64th Street and a villa in Newport, RI, but they decided that they needed a country seat outside New York. George had been to the Ramapo Valley a number of times before July 1901, but it was then that he looked at the Darling property, and bought it in November of that year. Though he moved into the Darling mansion, he planned a more elaborate residence for himself and his wife on the hill behind the Darling house to the east of the River: As one visitor described: "situated on the brow of a hill, which slopes off abruptly at the rear, while in front as far as the eye can reach, stretches the historic plains of the beautiful valley of the Ramapo, and the in the dim distance can be seen the clove at Suffern. On the left side are the mountains which seem near at hand, but are in reality over a mile distant. At the foot of these silent sentinels, stretches the broad meadows with the rippling waters of the Ramapo river winding in and out." It was the ideal location for the great house he envisioned.

Some people have said that Mr. Crocker, not being accepted in all the social circles that he wished, was determined to express his wealth and taste through his new house. For his architect, he chose James Brite, who had worked for the leading firm of McKim, Mead and White. Brite decided to model the Crocker mansion, named Darlington, on the 17th century home of Prince Henry of Wales, the son of King James I. The Prince's estate was built in Hampshire, England, and was called Bramshill, for which Bramshill Drive is named in the Rio Vista Community. Laborers began to arrive in the spring of 1902. They would build the roads, winding ones from the valley to the site of the residence and across the river into the mountains to the site of a new large reservoir. Today, that road and reservoir are still extant in the Ramapo Reservation.



Bramshill House in Hampshire, England, built in 1612, the design upon which Crocker's estate was carefully modelled by architect James Brite.

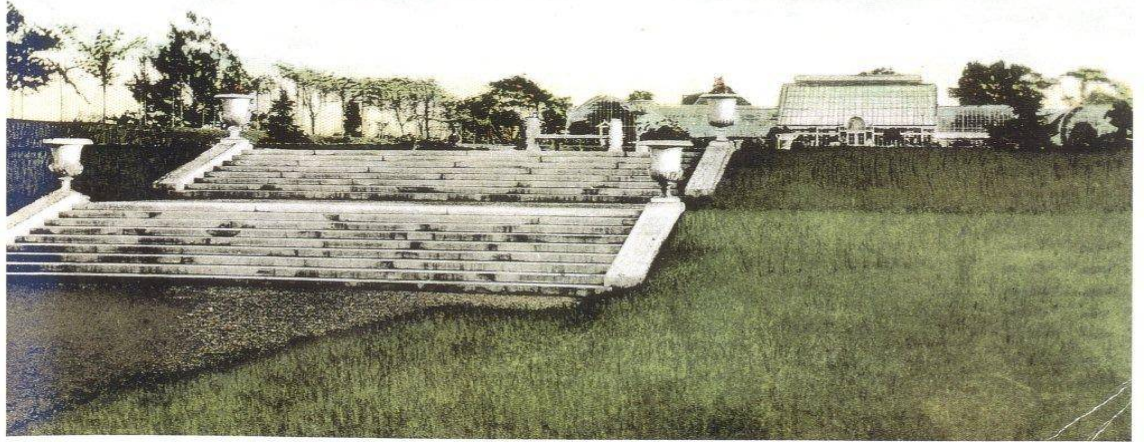
Tragically, before much progress had been made on the mansion, Mrs. Crocker became ill and died in July 1904. As a memorial George built St. John's Episcopal Church in Ramsey which still stands. Despite his personal loss, work progressed on the estate, and the house was finally completed and furnished in 1907. The three-story seventy-five room building was deemed the finest Jacobean house yet constructed in the United States. On the first floor was the great hall with balconies on the inside second floor, a vast fireplace, an Aeolian pipe organ, silver chandeliers, and two-story windows that overlooked the valley. The house was heated by steam, and had an elevator and phone switchboard. The rooms were richly paneled in wood, had elaborately carved stone fireplaces inlaid with marble and were furnished with paintings, tapestries, bronzes, rare plants and expensive furniture.



The Great Hall of the George Crocker Mansion, 1909.

Beyond the main building, there were a number of other structures. The most impressive were the greenhouses with nearly 16,000 feet of glass. There were terraces and extended walkways with a pond and fountain which operated using the water pressure from the reservoir high up in the mountains beyond the Ramapo River. Today, the restored fountain is the pride of the Rio Vista Community and the focal point of our formal gardens area. There was also an outdoor gazebo, a gatehouse on Ramapo Valley Road, a coach stable, garage, workshops and dairy facilities. Until the mansion was finished, Crocker used the old Darling residence, which had been refurbished. For transportation, he had the most advanced French automobile imported from Paris in 1902 and came to Mahwah in his own private railway car which he kept in a shed at Suffern station.

Entrance to Gardens Crocker Place, RAMSEY, N. J.



The steps leading up from the Crocker Mansion to the formal garden, fountain and greenhouses 1909.

While at Darlington, George Crocker was an active member of the Mahwah community, and would host elaborate fireworks displays on the Fourth of July. Sadly, like his wife, he too was diagnosed with cancer in 1909 and died in December of that year. The Crocker children decided to sell the estate. Self-made businessman Emerson McMillin purchased Darlington in July 1910, and paid over \$1,000,000 for its 1,100 acres, buildings and the fully furnished mansion. While at Darlington, McMillin pursued like interests to those of Crocker with dairy herds, horses and farming. He was also an avid hunter. After his death in 1922, Mrs. McMillin and her children put the estate up for sale. A new era began when it was purchased for \$685,000 in 1924 by the Darlington Development Company, which in turn made it available as the Darlington Golf and Country Club.



“Darlington” in 1910, the year Emerson McMillin purchased the estate. .

The group behind the Darlington Development Company included some very well-known individuals of the time on its board of governors: Mayor Frank Hague of Jersey City, United States Senator Edward Edwards, Judge Ruppert, and John Emerson, the president of the Actors’ Equity Association of New York. The mansion was turned into a hotel and the great hall into a restaurant. Some have suggested that there was also a “speak easy” on the premises tucked away in a hidden room. New construction included a private landing field for planes, a swimming pool and nine holes of golf. The grand opening was held on May 23, 1925 and included Sam “Roxy” Rothafel and his “Gang” of the Capitol Theatre in New York, a group of bathing beauties, an airplane stunt show, and fireworks. Despite its auspicious start, however, the corporation and the club were soon financially insolvent. The McMillin estate, which held a mortgage, pushed for the payment of interest. In addition, taxes had not been paid. The club closed its doors and auctioned all the furnishings purchased for the restaurant and hotel operation. The McMillin estate regained possession through foreclosure, and they began seeking another buyer.

In 1925, Monsignor Thomas McLaughlin, the rector of the Newark Diocese’s Immaculate Conception Seminary at Seton Hall University in South Orange was looking for a more rural campus to accommodate the growing number of seminarians. McLaughlin arranged to purchase Darlington from the McMillin estate in 1926 for \$478,000. Classes began at Mahwah in 1927, and initially students and faculty were housed together in the mansion. The great hall was converted into a chapel, placing the altar in the huge fireplace and utilizing the built-in pipe organ for liturgical accompaniment. Within the first year, the old Darling house down the hill from the

mansion was converted into a student residence. As the student body continued to grow, a plan was made to construct new buildings to properly address the needs of the Seminary. In 1936, in the midst of the Great Depression, Bishop Walsh (for whom Walsh Drive in Rio Vista is named) undertook a campaign to raise \$1.5 million to construct a new chapel and a student residence hall. Appealing to all members of his flock through the use of radio broadcasts, over \$1.8 million was pledged by parishes throughout the Diocese. George Crocker's greenhouses were demolished and a cornerstone was laid on September 26, 1937 for the new complex designed by Fanning and Shaw of Paterson. Construction of Walsh Hall, the seminarian residence, was complete by 1938, and the chapel, designed in an eclectic Gothic Revival style, followed in 1939. No expense was spared to make the Christ the King Chapel a stunning building inside and out. Elaborate mural paintings were done on the ceiling panels between the hand-carved beams and rafters and behind the high altar. Leaded glass windows were made to order in Munich, Germany and a Casavant pipe organ, designed by Dr. Charles Courboin of St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, was installed.



The high altar with reredos and mural depicting Christ the King 1941.

An interesting period of time in the history of the Seminary occurred during the height of the Cold War with the former Soviet Union. In 1954, thirty acres of the Seminary property along Campgaw Road were taken over by the Department of Defense for the installation of a Nike anti-aircraft ballistic missile base. Battery NY-93/94 was

connected to a radar “listening” station on the top of Campgaw Mountain in Franklin Lakes, now the Saddle Ridge Riding Center. In October 1962, during the Cuban Missile crisis, the Seminary was at full alert, with students taking cover in the basement of the chapel during air-raid drills and faculty members giving general absolution in the hallways.

In the 1950s, to help defer operating expenses, over half of the original 1100 acres of the Darlington estate property, including the original Darling house, was sold by the Seminary to the Bergen County Parks Department to create the Ramapo Reservation in Mahwah. By the 1970s, however, the student body was in steep decline and the Darlington site was becoming economically untenable. Plans were underway to move the institution back to Seton Hall. In 1984, the remaining 435 acres and buildings of the Seminary were sold to a group of six Bergen County investors, who were incorporated as Darlington Associates, L.P. A master plan for a new community of private homes was drawn and approved by the Mahwah zoning board, and Rio Vista was born. In 1997, the Crocker Mansion, Seminary Chapel and Walsh Hall were listed with the National Register of Historic Places to ensure that the rich history of our past is preserved. The former student residence, Walsh Hall, has been renovated as the Walsh Hall Condominiums; the Seminary Chapel and its undercroft have been restored and repurposed as the clubhouse and administrative offices for the entire Rio Vista Community; and, the spectacular Jacobean Crocker Mansion is again owned privately and has been painstakingly restored and mechanically updated.

For Further Reading:

Bischoff, Henry and Mitchell Kahn. *From Pioneer Settlement to Suburb: A History of Mahwah, New Jersey, 1700-1976*. South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1979.

Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology, <http://www.shu.edu/academics/theology/history/darlington-seminary.cfm>