

Drew's Southern Mansion Designated Historic Place

Mead Hall, Drew University's architectural centerpiece, has been added to the New Jersey State Register of Historic Places. At the same time, the State Review Committee has asked the National Park Service to designate it a National Historic Site.

This recognition was pursued not by anyone officially connected with the University but rather by two local history buffs—Mrs. Arthur B. Churchill of Chatham and Mrs. John H. Pickin of Madison. The most immediate, tangible result of their efforts will be one or more official signs proclaiming the historical/architectural pedigree of the 141-year-old structure.

At the same time, their work has prompted a growing desire among Drew people to learn more about and to preserve the heritage represented by the old mansion, the Southern origins of which are of more than passing interest, now that the top leadership of the University, the Theological School, and the College (not to mention the nation) also hails from the South or the Southwest.

As every Drew alumnus knows, Mead Hall, built between 1833 and 1836, was named in honor of Roxanna Mead Drew, wife of founder Daniel Drew, when he purchased it along with much of the rest of the estate from the heirs of the William Gibbons family in 1866.

An all-purpose academic building for many years, the mansion at first housed the library, classrooms, a chapel, offices, and even an apartment for the president and his family. Only gradually did it become specialized as an administrative center.

It was just last fall, in fact, that the last of the academic deans still working in the building moved to new (and preferred) offices in the main classroom building of his school.

The pre-Drew history of the structure—the portion reflected in its new public status—remains less well known among members and friends of the University, particularly those who have yet to read *University in the Forest* by New Jersey historian and Drew alumnus, John Cunningham.

The mansion, together with several other structures, all still extant, was built between 1833 and 1836 on some 1,000 acres assembled in a series of purchases by William Gibbons. He had come north in 1802 with his father, a prominent Savannah attorney and slave holder, to buy portions of the Elizabeth, N.J., waterfront and a half-interest in the New Jersey-New York ferry rights.

Ironically, one of their captains was Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, who was to figure so prominently in the life of Daniel Drew—first as cohort, later as sworn enemy and one of the men responsible for his financial downfall.

The other half-interest in the ferry rights soon came under the control of Robert Fulton and Chancellor Robert Livingston, with whom the Gibbons locked horns. The contest—marked by storied races between river boats and equally storied brawls between their crews—was settled in 1824 by Supreme Court Justice John Marshall, who opened New York harbor to wider competition and gave Congress control of interstate commerce in one of the most important of his landmark decisions.

Following the elder Gibbons' death in 1826, William, then 32, married into a socially prominent Connecticut family and settled in the New York

metropolitan area, though the bulk of his inherited wealth remained in the form of Georgia rice plantations worked by slaves.

In 1832, needing pasturage for his racing thoroughbreds (he once owned the filly Fashion, "Queen of the American Turf") William began acquiring land in and around Bottle Hill, as Madison was then called, at an average \$170 per acre. Construction of the 20-room mansion by a builder from New Brunswick began early the next year.

Though University archives contain receipts for much of the household furniture and furnishings, few bills for construction materials and no architectural drawings or records of labor costs have ever been found.

Designed in the classical mode popularized by Thomas Jefferson, the T-shaped structure was built of red brick from Benjamin Pierson Lum's brickyard in Chatham. Its mahogany woodwork was logged in Santo Domingo and hand-carved in England. Also designed and carved there the six wooden ionic columns, 36' tall, that grace the front porch. The back porch, long the stage of Drew commencements, originally contained a conservatory filled with tropical flowers and fruit trees.

To the right, on entering the front door, was the ballroom (now the Wendel Room); to the left Gibbon's office and library. At the rear was an enormous formal dining room (formerly the chapel, now the Founders Room) opening into the conservatory and providing an oak-lined vista into The Forest.

Upstairs were a dozen bedrooms, each with its own black marble fireplace, though a central coal furnace was installed in 1838.

Gibbons paid \$98,000 for the buildings and nearly again as much for its furniture and furnishings. Though some of these are still owned by the University, most have been dispersed to private collections in the Madison-Chatham area, to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and to local public collections like that of the Madison

Historical Society.

In *University in the Forest*, Mr. Cunningham tells how the family of William Gibbons was split apart by the Civil War—his son, Heyward, joining the Confederate Army, while his three daughters remained in the North. One married Ward McAllister, arbiter elegantiae of New York high society and coiner of the phrase, "The 400." Another continued to live in the mansion unmarried until her death in 1857.

The only use made of the house from that time until its purchase a decade later by Daniel Drew was a ten-day, non-stop garden party McAllister threw for his socialite friends in the fall of the war year 1862. Though as Northerners they had little to celebrate, the guests were reportedly awash in an ocean of Mr. McAllister's own wines shipped in from the city, along with "enough Madiera in the cellars of that old house to float a frigate."

Originally the mansion stood alone in The Forest, separated from other buildings of the estate by a distance of 100 yards or more. However, in 1937, Charles Z. Klauder, the noted campus architect from Philadelphia, designed the present University library in matching style, attaching it to the east elevation of the Gibbons mansion by means of a portico. It was his expectation—part of a grandiose campus plan—that the University would eventually erect a companion building flanking the mansion on the west. He died soon after completing work on the library, and his ideas were never carried out.

Architectural features of the mansion had already been incorporated into the College classroom building Brothers Hall (1929), however, by Summit architect Henry Birdsall Marsh, and would appear again later in the Hall of Sciences (1968), designed by East Orange architect Frank Bower.

It was Bower who ordered a century of paint (including the original gray) stripped from the bricks of Mead Hall and who established—largely through his own design of a dozen other campus buildings—the requirement that all new buildings be of red brick and designed so as to avoid clashing with the architecture of the mansion.

Now retired, he was also the consulting architect for the restoration several years ago of the Wendel Room and the Founders Room.

Mead Hall's Wendel Room, once a ballroom, now serves as a reception area for the administration building.

