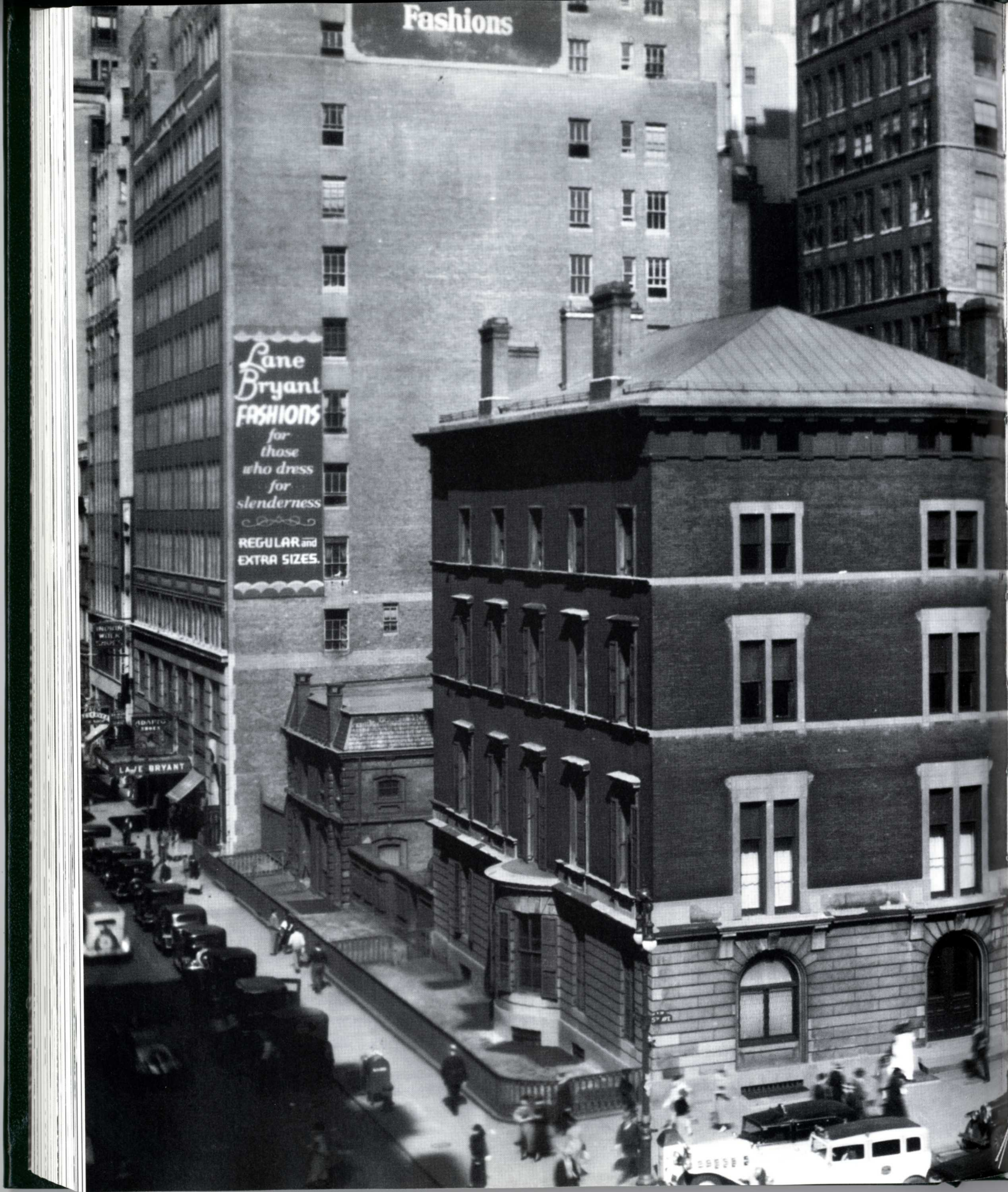


Fashions

Lane
Bryant
FASHIONS
for those
who dress
for
slenderness
REGULAR and
EXTRA SIZES.

LANE BRYANT



House of Mystery

THE WENDELS OF FIFTH AVENUE committed the nearly unpardonable sin for a wealthy New York family: They minded their own business. As the 1930s rolled along they no longer entertained anyone or let others entertain them. They amassed millions of dollars but never admitted the extent of their wealth either to the press or to the city's gossips. The Wendels were eccentric, or at the very least, strange, by 20th-century standards.

In 1856, when John Daniel Wendel built the family's stone house on the corner of Thirty-Ninth Street and Fifth Avenue, the home was surrounded by open fields. By 1930, the Wendel mansion was the only private residence on Fifth Avenue below Forty-Second Street. The quiet, shuttered house affronted its "progressive" neighbors; even *The New York Times* called it a "House of Mystery." It had not always been thus. Once this was a house of gaiety, the showplace of a New York family of quality.

The family patriarch, John Gottlieb Matthias Wendel, arrived in New York from Germany in 1798 and a year later married Miss Elizabeth Astor, a half-sister of the famed fur-trader and millionaire-to-be, John Jacob Astor. Wendel became a furrier, invested modestly in city real estate, and, when he died in 1841, turned over a tidy fortune to his son, John Daniel Wendel. The son also had inherited his father's passion for land ownership and the unofficial Wendel motto—buy, never sell.

Adjacent to the tall Lane Bryant building that catered exclusively to people "who dress for slenderness," the mysterious Wendel home on Fifth Avenue became an affront to the fashionable when the family daughters shuttered the windows and minded their own business.

John D. Wendel's family increased rapidly. A son, John Gottlieb 2nd, was born in 1835. Then came seven daughters, Henrietta Dorothea, Mary Elizabeth Astor, Rebecca Antoinette Dew, Augusta Antonia Stansbury, Josephine Jane Steinbeck, Georgianna Geisse Reid, and Ella Virginia von Echtzel. Only the first daughter escaped the uncertain blessing of three given names.

John Daniel Wendel built the house on Thirty-Ninth Street. Its design for entertaining centered on a great first floor hallway, where bright gas lamps reflected off the polished white marble floor. The Wendels opened the house with a gala party in 1856 and entertained often thereafter. They educated their children well, sending John G. 2nd to Columbia University and then abroad for several years of study at Heidelberg and Leipzig. Mrs. Wendel took the seven girls abroad, keeping them in Europe so long that young Ella had to relearn English when the family returned.

To this point in time the Wendels were part of the main stream of society. The withdrawal began after John Daniel Wendel died in November 1876, two months after the death of Henrietta, the oldest daughter. Although his mother, Mrs. John Daniel Wendel did not die until 1894, John Gottlieb Wendel 2nd became the master of both the family fortune and his six remaining sisters. Or was he, as some insisted, merely their protector? He took over sole ownership of all the Wendel holdings, apparently with his sisters' consent. He carried on his real estate purchases in a quaint downtown office, refusing to install a telephone or any other modern convenience.



Counterclockwise from top left: John D. Wendel, father of one son and seven daughters; two of the family pets, Jude, a poodle, and Punch, a pug; the dominant brother, John G.; and Rebecca, who took charge in 1914 when brother John died.



Above, left, Mary Elizabeth Astor Wendel, second oldest of the Wendel girls, each of whom, except for the first daughter, bore three given names. To Mary's right are Ella, the youngest daughter, and Georgianna, second youngest. Below, at the family's summer home in Irvington, New York, Rebecca Wendel (later Mrs. Swope) plays with her dog. Mary is seated near a back door of the cottage.



The young girls enjoyed a reasonably pleasant life, filled with travels abroad, summer at the family cottage in Irvington, New York, and can- ters on horseback in Central Park with gentle- men friends. They returned always to the man- sion on Thirty-Ninth Street, growing gradually more spinsterish. Frugal to a fault, they contin- ued to wear the same old clothes, regardless of style. They never changed the furniture or the drapes in the mansion. It grew genteelly shabby. So did the Wendel girls.

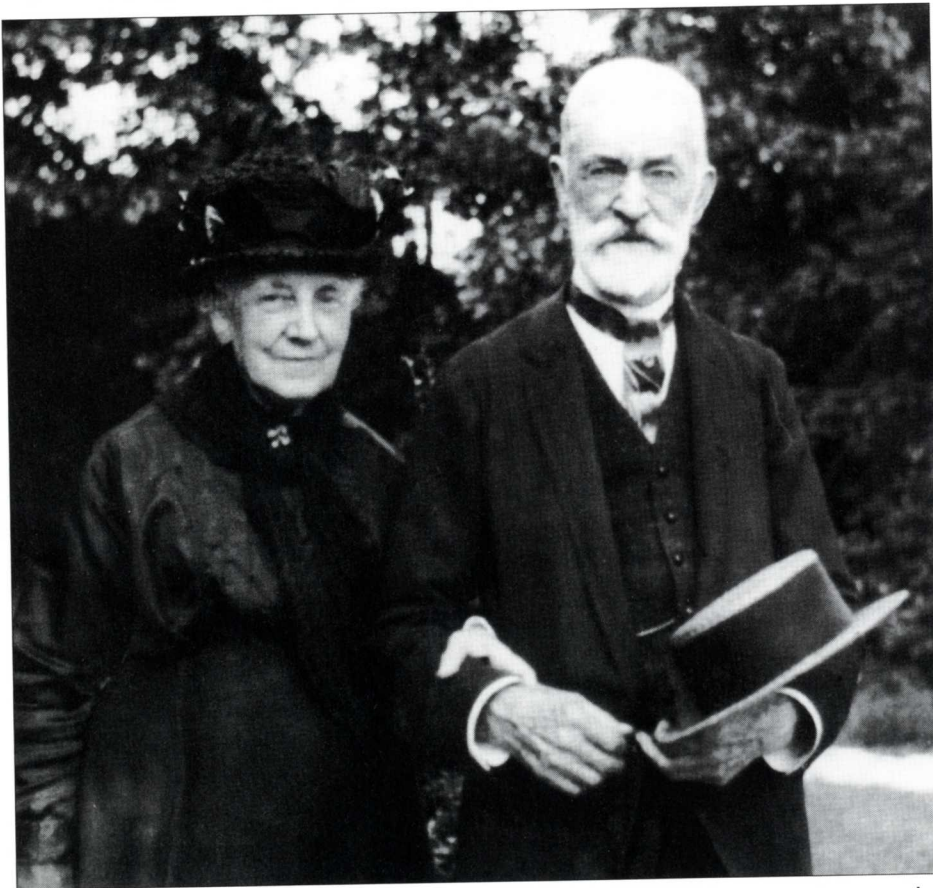
John avoided marriage despite at least one very serious love affair in the 1890s. Defying John's stern opposition, Rebecca Antoinette Dew Wendel was wed in June 1903 to Professor Luther A. Swope, a friend of the vicar of Trinity Church and also the son of an old New York fam- ily. John Wendel reputedly discouraged his sis-

ters from attending church thereafter, although he did not manifest any animosity toward the Rev. Dr. Henry Anson Buttz, president of Drew Theological Seminary, who performed the cere- mony.

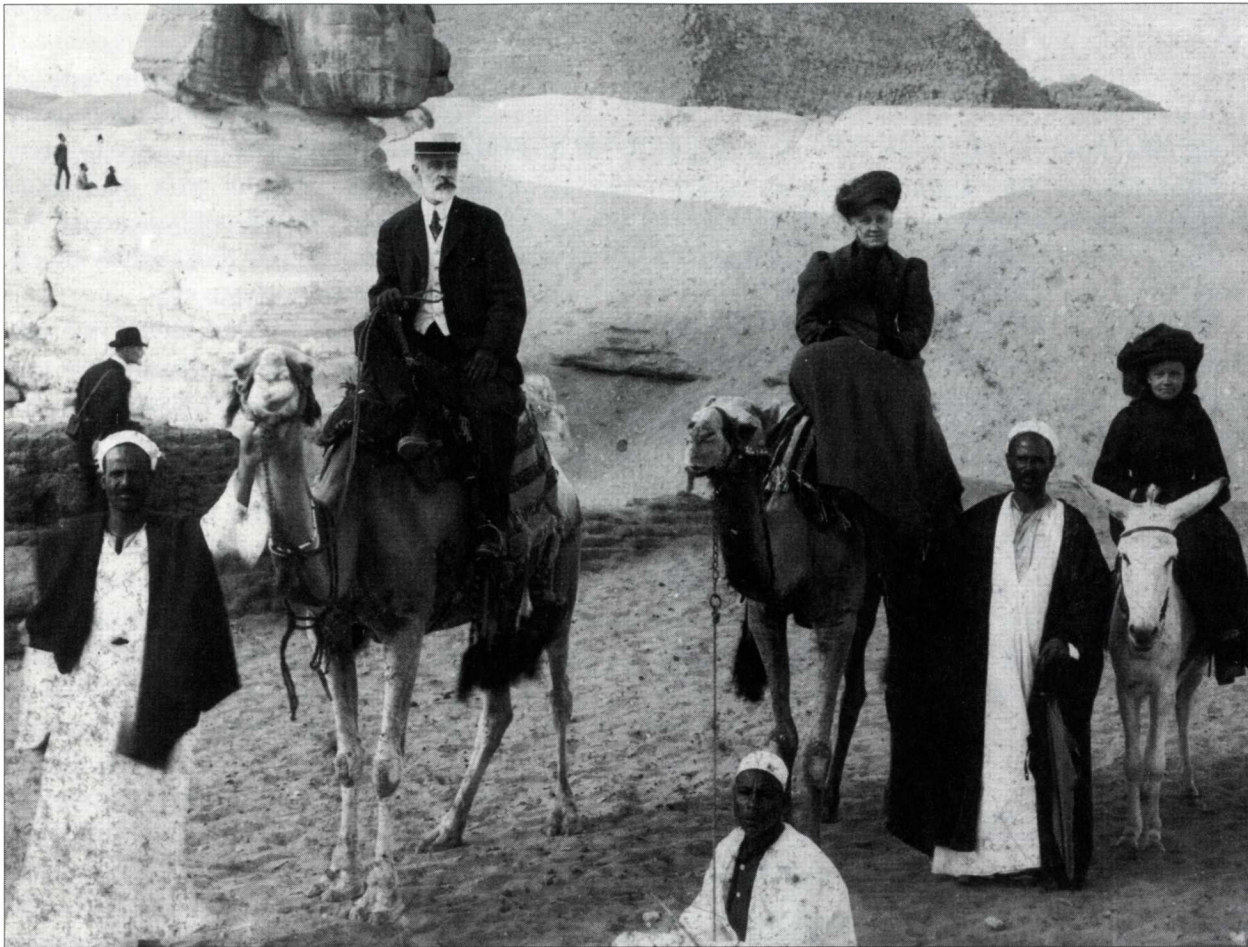
Another of the girls, Georgianna, rebelled in 1889, at the age of 50. Said to be the most beau- tiful of the Wendels, she left her brother and sis- ters while they were all at the country home in Irvington. She appeared alone at a Park Avenue hotel soon after and was charged by the manag- er with being boisterous. John had Georgianna committed to Bellevue Hospital's psychiatric ward and then to an asylum. On her release, she sued John for \$50,000 but dropped the action and returned meekly to live out her days in the family home. None of the other girls dared rebel, much less get married.

Josephine and Augusta died before John, whose death in 1915 left Mary, Georgianna, Ella, and Mrs. Swope to contin- ue the real estate busi- ness that John had built. The three unmarried girls urged their somewhat more worldly married sister to manage the estate. Rebecca Swope agreed and all property titles were transferred to her name.

New York City's growth threatened to engulf the sequestered Wendels. Skyscrapers rose on all sides of their once-open prop- erty. Fifth Avenue became lined with fashionable shops. The Wendel house and its little yard came to be



Rebecca Antoinette Dew Wendel defied her brother in June 1903 to marry Professor Luther A. Swope, member of an old New York family and a friend of the vicar of Trinity church. Brother John Wendel reputedly discour- aged his sisters from attending church thereafter.



In 1909, 66-year-old Rebecca Swope, and her husband Luther Swope, invited 55-year-old Ella to accompany them on a strenuous trip to Egypt. The Swopes journeyed on camels to visit the Pyramids; Ella rode a donkey. A year later, the energetic Swopes visited Alaska.

one of New York's strange sights, pointed out to tourists aboard sightseeing buses as the "House of Mystery." Sightseers peered at the mansion, set quietly amid the frenetic activity of New York, its shades drawn and its shutters closed. There was little movement in or out of the house, although a few people occasionally saw one or another of the sisters walking a dog in the back yard behind the high fence.

The four sisters still wore in the 1920s the round sailor hats and the black, full-skirted dresses that harkened back to the 1870s. Even Rebecca, dealing daily with the sophisticates of the downtown business world, dressed in old-fashioned garments and wore her gray hair pulled straight back under a sailor hat. Her sisters

admired Rebecca for her fortitude in venturing into the harsh world of business three times a week and thought she looked just fine. Rebecca occasionally attended performances at the Metropolitan Opera House, considered another act of daring by her sisters. Then Rebecca became blind; the Wendel sisters had no personal view left of the world.

Luther Swope died in 1924, leaving Rebecca \$90,000. Mary Wendel died in 1925, and Georgianna followed four years later. Since Rebecca continued living in her late husband's home at 249 Central Park West, Ella Wendel was alone in the house on Thirty-Ninth Street, except for her aging poodle and a few old servants. Death had concentrated the Wendel holdings;

now Ella and Mrs. Swope owned everything.

Ella took her poodle out for an airing in the garden after dark each evening, prompting newspapers to describe the garden as "a million dollar dog run." Occasionally, Miss Ella slipped out of the house for a brief shopping expedition. She kept the windows and doors shuttered, the shades drawn against curious passersby. Sometimes her wash hung out in the back yard in full view of thousands of skyscraper tenants. She kept the old-fashioned gas lamps in the house until her last year, when she had electric lights installed in the hall. Miss Ella was a "mystery woman," through no desire of her own.

When Mrs. Swope died in the family summer home at Quogue, Long Island, on June 29, 1930, no public announcement was made either of her death or of her burial two days later. Her lawyer merely conceded to the inquiring press that she had died and had willed Ella Wendel everything except for a few small personal bequests. *The New York Times*, careful in such



Ella, approaching old age, and her spirited poodle, Tobey, became the only signs of life on the Wendel property as curious neighbors of the 1920s looked down on her yard from the adjoining office buildings.

matters, estimated that the estate then was worth \$100 million.

One hundred million dollars, with only an aged recluse and her hobbling poodle dog Tobey to enjoy it! The outside world's curiosity grew ever greater and Ella Wendel grew ever more withdrawn. She was 76 years old, weary of living and properly annoyed by those who blatantly sought to pry into her private life.

Ezra Squier Tipple had been one of the very few people admitted to both the Swope and Wendel homes. He had regularly stopped by for twenty years, always with a small gift, a book of his own, perhaps, or some other memento of a sincere regard. The Wendels and the Swopes regarded Tipple as a genuine friend and he returned the affection. He was also the official ambassador of Drew Theological Seminary, a matter of longtime interest to the Wendel family.

Mrs. Wendel, mother of the big family, had heard John McClintock, Drew's first president, preach a powerful sermon in New York shortly after Lincoln's assassination and had written about it to her son John, then in Europe. After McClintock's death, she had been a leader in the McClintock Association. Randolph Sinks Foster, second president of Drew, had baptized two of the daughters in 1850. Buttz had married Rebecca to Luther Swope. Tipple had consulted the family often about the series of \$10,000 family gifts that had been presented to Drew since 1895 in memory of each deceased Wendel. He came as close as any outsider to being admitted within the tight family circle.

Tipple must have sensed that a substantial share of the huge Wendel estate might come to Drew, although there is no evidence in his voluminous correspondence that he mentioned this to anyone. Mrs. Swope's 1930 will provided for a \$30,000 bequest to Drew, and other gifts contingent on Ella Wendel's wishes. Who could know for certain

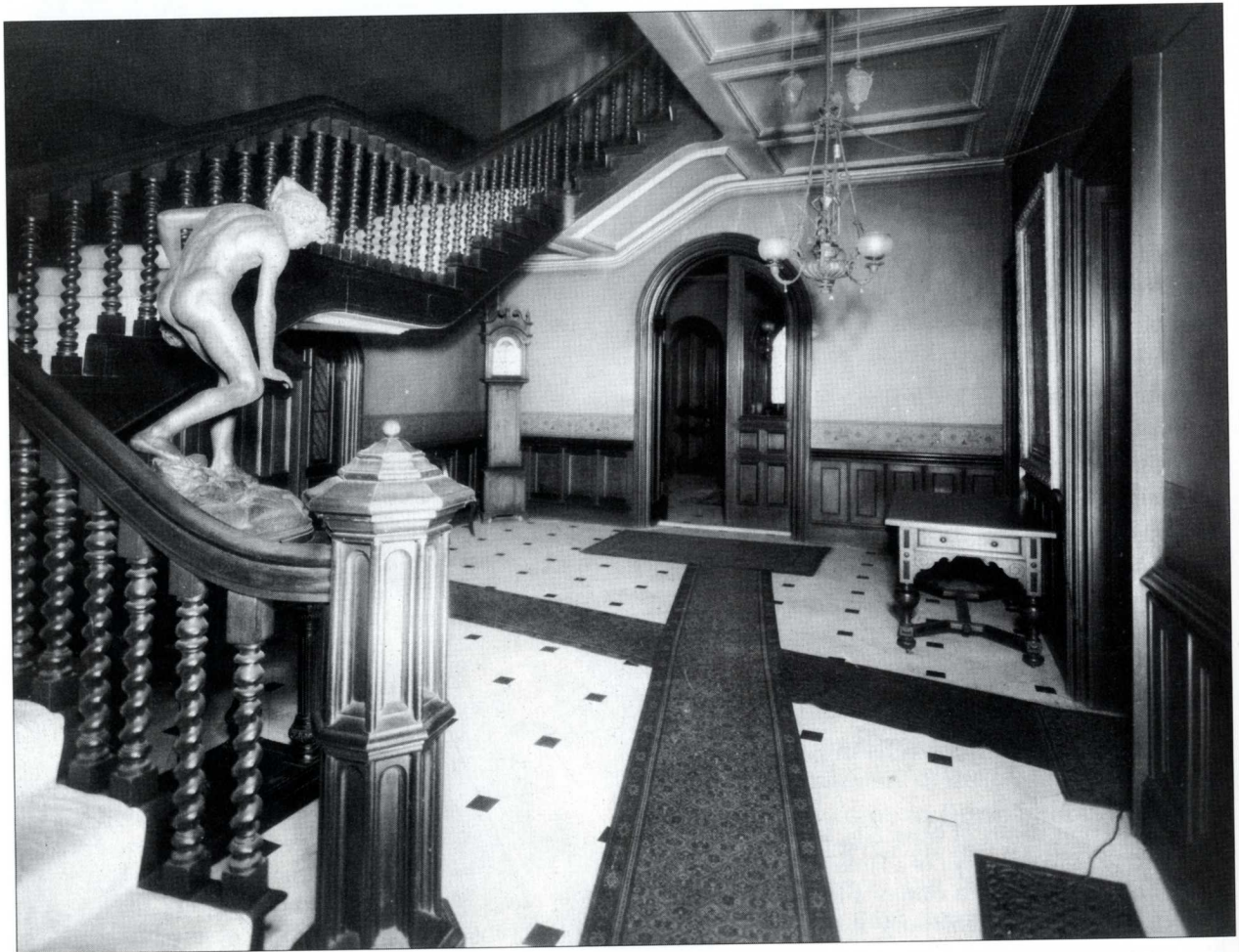
What had they done to merit such treatment? Nothing, so far as I know, except their desire to live their own quiet life in their own way.

I knew John G. Wendel. He was the first of the Wendels I knew, his father, John Daniel Wendel, having died in 1876. John G., when he replied to a persistent real estate broker who insisted on knowing why he wouldn't sell that valuable Fifth Avenue lot, that if he wanted to keep it for his dogs it was his own business, was simply dismissing the would-be purchaser with the first unlikely reason that flashed through his mind.

John G. Wendel, who took over the management of the estate on the death of his

father, was a man of wide experience. He was college trained, had lived in Europe for some years, spoke numerous languages, had traveled extensively, and knew real estate values. His mother was still living—she died in 1894—and in the home were six sisters, the oldest daughter of the family, Henrietta Dorothea, two years younger than her brother, John, having died in 1876.

He was a man of fixed purpose, but in no sense tyrannical. He was rigid in his business exactions, but strangely generous in his dealings with his tenants. There is no ground for the oft-repeated assertion that he forbade his sisters to marry. Those sisters of his were individualists, as independent and determined as was he. He was proud, but his was



Contrary to published reports (written by reporters who never had been in the house) and freely offered gossip that the Wendels lived in wretched quarters, photographs revealed that the mansion's interior reflected both order and a good taste of the period. The front hall with its long stairway (above) and the dining room (opposite page) would have fit well into any wealthy New Yorker's home.

not the pride of power or of possession, but of family. The Wendel family was an ancient family, with ancient and honorable traditions. They had marched with kings in lands beyond the vast ocean. Moreover, they had achieved wealth and fame in the "new world." John Gottlieb Wendel had come to distinction in New York, but he did not parade his wealth or make demands upon the basis of his achievements. He was strong and resolute, but not haughty, often brusque but without malice. Many are the stories of his unostentatious kindnesses, of his gracious considerateness, of his generous deeds.

His sisters were his comrades, and had his same pride of family, but were not dominated by him. They sat in at the family councils, but had their own opinions. Nevertheless, they dwelt together in unity, and in the assurance of their own individuality. They were not miserly or inhospitable, as has been written of them....They were highly sensitive and shrank intuitively from the gaze of curious people. Their home at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-ninth Street is built on a level with the street. In these last years, when there was so much talk concerning "mystery," strangers passing the house would press their faces against the windows in the hope of seeing something or somebody. What was more natural, therefore, than that the curtains should be down and the shutters closed? Most of us like some measure of privacy.

Mrs. Tipple and myself have known best Miss Mary, Miss Ella, and Mrs. Swope, with whom we enjoyed a close friendship for a score of years. They were kindly souls, touched by the misery and distress of the world, and eager to help in every possible way. They were responsive to disinterested friendliness and deeply religious.

But that is not the stuff of increased newspaper circulation. New York journals assigned reporters to record their versions of the funeral of "the mystery woman" in the "mystery house," thus getting more information in Miss Ella's death than she ever would have given them in

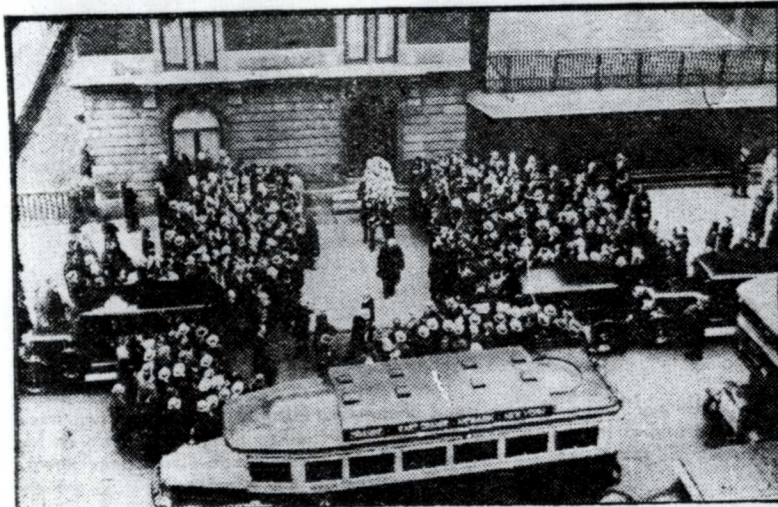


life. The correspondent for the *Times* wrote a factual account, dwelling on the details of the funeral and the actions of Miss Wendel's restless poodle during the ceremony. The brash *New York Daily News* came directly to a crude point in a banner headline over two photographs taken at the cemetery: *The Grave Gets Her Body but Who'll Get Her \$150,000,000?* The *Daily News* estimate of the estate was the highest; most other papers, including the *Times*, settled for something in the more modest neighborhood of \$100 million.

The *Times*' estimate dropped to \$75 million on March 24, 1931, the day after Miss Wendel's will was probated. That document at least cleared up the mystery of the chief beneficiaries. After several relatively small bequests to various people, Miss Wendel asked that the remainder of the estate be divided into 200 parts. Five institutions—Drew Theological Seminary, the Theological Seminary in Nanking, China; the New York Society for the Relief of Ruptured and Crippled; the Flower Hospital; and St. Christopher's Home for Children in Dobbs Ferry, New York—each received thirty-five parts, or roughly 17 percent. In addition, Drew was to receive the family mansion and property at Thirty-Ninth Street and Fifth Avenue. In her last paragraph, Miss Ella wrote a finish to the tight

Ella Wendel, Last of Clan, Buried in Ancient Vault

Last of the Wendels Goes to Rest



Casket containing body of the wealthy recluse, Ella Wendel, being carried from her house at 5th Ave. and 39th St. as crowd looks on. (Mirror)

Oak Box for Heiress to 100 Million

By JANE FRANKLIN.

As dusk settled over Trinity Cemetery, 153rd St. and Broadway, the last of the Wendels was laid in her place in the family vault.

And the door of the vault was sealed forever. The entire clan lay within.

In weatherbeaten letters on the small tombstone above the ground is the legend:

1841.

Wendel Vault.

Thirteen mourners accompanied the body of Miss Ella Wendel from

The press paid one last tribute to Ella Wendel when she died in her sleep at her home on March 13, 1931. A throng gathered because of newspaper hype that insisted she had left an estate of \$100 million, one fifth of which would go to Drew. The final figure gave Drew about \$5 million, a princely sum for the Depression years.

land-holding policies of her grandfather, father, and brother. She authorized her executors to sell or transfer any property in order to carry out the provisions of her will.

Word flashed around the world: Drew was rich beyond its wildest dreams! Inflated reports circulated through the metropolitan area: Drew would get \$17 million, \$20 million, \$25 million. Within a week, however, it became clear that the shares would be less valuable than the first rash estimates.

TIME magazine on April 6, 1931, analyzed the deflated figures and the reasons for what it

called "favoritism toward Drew." An article told of the Drew-Wendel friendship that had begun with John McClintock and had grown with all the presidents up to Tipple. *TIME* said, somewhat gratuitously, the Drew community thought:

Drew recently became a university as the result of a paltry \$1.5 million bequest. With \$5 million or so from the last Wendel, it may begin to make its title a fact under its present president.

The news magazine's prediction of the size of the Wendel gift proved surprisingly close to fact, although several years of litigation kept about

250 lawyers busy handling thousands of claims against the estate. The "heirs" came from as far away as Czechoslovakia, lured by the scent of money and encouraged by lawyers with the same delicate sense. Eventually, more than 2,300 claims were sifted and all but about twenty discarded as baseless. Included among the claimants were a self-professed "granddaughter" and a self-named "son" of John G. Wendel, the brother who had so carefully protected his sisters. Both of these "blood relations" proved to be pretenders—the "son" so false but so persistent that he received a jail sentence for fraud. Handling the hundreds of claims, despite the fact that most of them were patently bogus, nibbled more than \$2 million from the estate.

Drew and several other major beneficiaries organized the Wendel Foundation to consolidate the scores of real estate parcels and other Wendel holdings, since individual negotiations would have taken years to accomplish and hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional legal fees. Noel E. Bensinger, brought in by Tipple in 1920 as a skilled financial expert and raised in 1929 to the newly created post of university treasurer, skillfully represented Drew's interests in the foundation.

The Wendel mansion could not be drawn into the legal whirlpool. That belonged entirely to Drew, a matter of only minor satisfaction at first. The mansion, for all its Victorian splendor, was a costly anachronism on one of New York City's most valuable corners. It had to go.

The furnishings and antiques in the home were sold at public auction in September 1933, and most were bought by Drew. The following spring, twelve truckloads of "odds and ends" that the auctioneer could not sell were hauled to storage on the Madison campus. The empty house was closed. William N. Burdett, Drew's superintendent of grounds, told reporters that he knew

of "no plans for the rental, sale, or demolition of the house."

But negotiations were proceeding quietly between Drew and the S. H. Kress Company for the prized real estate. The company leased the site late in 1934 for twenty-one years, with options for two similar periods, and announced plans for a new building. Kress agreed to pay a fixed annual rental and a small percentage of gross sales in their store.

Wrecking balls pounded the old mansion to rubble late in 1934 and Kress raised a nine-story office building and store on the site. The owners assembled the Kress employees for a small ceremony to dedicate the new building to the memory of the Wendels on October 26, 1935. Tipple spoke briefly, once again seeking to establish the Wendels as a family of quality rather than as a collection of eccentric misers. The employees listened quietly, even interestedly, then returned to work—perhaps convinced, perhaps not.

When the new Kress store was finished, Drew was permitted to affix a large bronze marker on the front of the building. It contained a replica of the departed mansion and in these words recalled an era nearly faded from memory:

Upon this site for more than seventy years stood the home of John D. Wendel, Esquire, and his family. On the death of Rebecca A. D. Wendel Swope and Ella V. Von E. Wendel, the last surviving members of the family, the property passed by will to Drew Theological Seminary of Madison, New Jersey, which by this tablet makes grateful acknowledgement of the gift.

So ended the Wendels, forever, on the corner of Thirty-Ninth Street and Fifth Avenue, in the midst of New York's most fashionable street. They might have appreciated the marker. They loved the old house more.