MANSION HILL NOW

The role of the inner-city in American life was changing just at the time Mansion Hill was coming to be. Ironically, even as the builders were busily laying the bricks and mortar, these houses were becoming obsolete, doomed by technological and social changes. Yet doomed or not, Mansion Hill's aura of elegance and respectability never totally faded, not even up to the present day. Strong conservation forces held on in Newport long enough for the pendulum of history to swing back in favor of the city. As American civilization progresses, the city seems to be automatically regaining its earlier importance as a place to both work and live.

Mansion Hill was fortunate, having been remarkably spared as a solid, compact and coherent entity, with few later intrusions and almost no gaping holes left by demolition. It has managed to maintain its essential integrity. Certainly it has suffered. Interstate highway construction eliminated 179 fine homes along the eastern periphery and slumlords have taken their pernicious toll. Yet the core remains intact. Intact not only in that the neighborhood preserves a nostalgic vision of the past (which it obviously does) but more importantly, intact in the sense that it can still serve its original purpose: as a place to live. Mansion Hill is not a museum piece, nor a tourist attraction. It is a living neighborhood of quiet tree-lined streets, of houses which are large and comfortable and solid, of small but lovely yards and gardens. The closeness of the houses fosters real interaction among people-cooperation, communication and friendliness. Proximity to shopping, employment, and recreational and cultural facilities is another great advantage. The neighborhood was built for people with legs, and one can walk to the grocery on the corner, or to restaurants, schools, parks, a museum, the library, doctors' offices or even to downtown Cincinnati. It is pleasant to stroll through Mansion Hill since it was conceived for convenience of humans, not machines. Also important as a factor in the area's attractiveness is the aesthetic aspect: the feeling of expanse created by high ceilings, the joy and delight in the myriads of small details, the knowledge that the materials and workmanship in these houses were the finest possible and can not be reproduced today. All of these elements combine to make Mansion Hill a highly desirable neighborhood once more, and for the same reasons as 75 years ago.

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MANSION HILL THEN

130 years ago, Bellevue, the Taylor family home, stood aloof in isolated majesty upon a knoll overlooking the Ohio River, Virginian Gen. James Taylor, forebear of what was to be one of Newport's founding families, had been granted 2500 acres in Kentucky County as a token of appreciation for his part in the American Revolution. His son Hubbard came to Kentucky in 1891 to survey the land, and in 1892 a second son, James, came to Newport and stayed. A mansion suitable to the stature of the family was constructed around 1840, actually the third house to stand on that site. Just outside the boundaries of Newport, it was surrounded by several of those original land-grant acres.

By the 1880's, Bellevue had some nearer neighbors, as the Taylor property began to be subdivided into "Additions". By 1900, houses crowded the mansion on all sides. The Mansion Hill Addition, from which the neighborhood takes its name, was platted ca. 1882, and is centered around the Taylor mansion on its hillock. Other "Additions" had come before; others came after. In all, the present Mansion Hill neighborhood comprises all or parts of 7 "Additions": Manufacturing Co.'s Add., Washington Ave. Add., Taylors East Row Add., Mansion Hill Add., Taylors Heirs Add. The last major phase of construction here was over by 1915.

Mansion Hill is something of an anomaly in that it is essentially a suburban-type development in an inner-city area. In the final decade of the last century, the wealthy families of the cities constituted the first wave of the flight to the suburbs. Transportation systems had been vastly improved; streetcars, new bridges, suburban railways, and in Cincinnati, the inclines, facilitated the movement away from the city centers. The hilltops were freer of the heavy pollution of the basin area, and there was the additional factor of greater availability of land on which to build sprawling Victorian houses. This was a time when Mt. Auburn, Clifton and Walnut Hills (in Cincinnati) and Highlands (now Ft. Thomas) were becoming fashionable. Nevertheless, it was still considered highly desirable to reside as closely as possible to the center of population and activity. Thus, as parcels of land in the Taylor estate became available, they were eagerly purchased. And, as the amount of land was strictly limited by earlier development and topography, the prices were extremely high. A typical 30' x 100' lot sold for $1375 in 1890. Due to the space limitation, the mini-mansions grew tall. They were built closer together and nearer to the street, being set off from the public right of way by low stone walls, wrought iron fences, or by slight elevation from the street level.

Since the houses could not overwhelm by sheer bulk, they were built to impress by lavish use of fine materials and exceptional artisanry. Noble woods were milled into doors and casings, carved into fireplace mantels, or laid into parquet floors. Art tiles, pounds of brass hardware and gas-electric lighting fixtures graced the high-ceilinging interiors. Stained glass, detailed stone carving and fanciful woodwork enlivened the exteriors.

What sort of people built and lived here? By and large they were representative of a species now becoming extinct, the small independent businessman: the grocer, the dry goods merchant, the owner of the tailor shop, the tobacconist, the corner druggist. There were also attorneys, doctors, teachers and other professional people. Residents of the middle-class employees were scattered throughout, and on Front St. (now Riverside) and 2nd St. lived many laborers. The big houses held big families, and not infrequently, at least one domestic to take care of the large household.

Well over 75 years have passed since the bulk of construction in Mansion Hill. The houses now show the patina of long years and weather. Saplings have grown into giant maples. The original inhabitants, and even their heirs, are long gone. Yet, the houses still stand in neighborly dignity, a testimony of the beliefs and way of life of that long-past generation.
335 East Third

(Illustrated on the cover).

Much has been written about Bellevue, the Taylor family mansion, and although there is still considerable disagreement on some points, it seems safe to say that the present house was built in 1840. It is claimed that Latrobe, the architect for the White House, also drew up the plans for Bellevue. Greek Revival architecture was noted for its simplicity, spaciousness and grace, and this is no exception. The oversized rooms of the formal first floor radiate a feeling of elegance, and the grand staircase is a complex and sophisticated interplay of curves and sweeping lines. The present facade was added ca. 1889, reorienting the house toward the southeast and away from the Ohio River, very possibly because of the unpleasant view of the smoke-belching steel mills just one block away on the river bank. At the same time, the west wing was razed, and the east wing moved to the rear where it is now.

329, 331 East Third

Little has been researched about these two nearly-twin houses. Even the dates of their construction are open to speculation, as their eccentric architecture defies dating. General proportion and layout are similar to local 1880's houses, yet the heavy use of large stained glass windows (now gone), and Romanesque and Gothic detail, point to the early 1890's. To further confuse the issue, in the gables are idiosyncratic versions of Palladian triple windows which are generally not seen here until almost 1900. In any case, they must be considered superb examples of the stone mason's craft.

337 Washington

This fine old mansion, with subtly-proportioned, severely-symmetrical Italianate palazzo facade, was apparently built for Martha Saunders, daughter of Col. James Taylor, and granddaughter of James Taylor who built Bellevue. Martha lived here from about 1873 with her husband and their children until Dr. Saunders' death around 1889, at which time mother and children moved in with brother John Berry Taylor on East Third. Samuel Bigstaff, banker, developer (he subdivided the Mansion Hill Add.), Taylor trustee, Vice President of the South Covington and Cincinnati Street Railway Co., major instigator in the Central Bridge Co., and one of the area's prime movers, took over the house and resided there until about 1898, when he moved to Ft. Thomas.
413, 415, 417, 419, 421 Washington

These Washington Avenue row houses are typical of the mid 1880's (although unique in Mansion Hill) with their rhythmic repetition of classical elements. The front steps are actually gracefully arched stone bridges over the basement entries.

608 Nelson Place

Circuit Court Judge John T. Hodge purchased lots 1 and 2 of the Nelson Place Add. on May 17, 1898, for the princely sum of $8000. That was the price for a normal lot with house at the time, and even today a respectable price for only 10000 sq. ft. of ground. Shortly after 1898 Judge Hodge had a unique (at least in Newport) Swiss chalet-style home constructed. The gingerbread wood trim would have appealed to the Victorian taste, but the emphasis on horizontal lines marked a radical departure in design concept.
610 Nelson Place

Showing all the attributes of Colonial-Revival architecture on the outside, the interior of this buff brick mansion betrays a strong late Victorian influence in the heavy woodwork, and highly unusual Art Noveau decoration. The original owner, Joseph A. Cloud, an insurance agent, built 610 around 1903-04.

401 Park Avenue

George Wiedemann Jr. was the younger of the beer baron George Wiedemann's two sons. While elder brother Charles labored to turn the Wiedemann Brewing Co. into a major enterprise (and Kentucky's only surviving brewery), George Jr. was more inclined to enjoy the fruits of the family's wealth. His magnificent home was built in 1899, but George died a few short years after moving in. The exterior is purely Colonial-Revival, yet the interior still shows many traits of the turn-of-the-century Victorian. It has an impressive central hall and grand staircase in oak with a tall stained glass window in the curved landing. A secret compartment can be found in the newel post of the back staircase. A large walk-in safe is built into a wall of the basement.
502 Monroe

A lumber merchant named Veith set aside a fine selection of wood several years before beginning construction on his house in 1898. In style, Veith's house is basically late Queen Anne with some exuberant decorative details, such as the intricate little balcony above the front porch. However, the triple Palladian windows hint that the Classic Revival was coming into vogue.

523 East Fourth

In 1893 Charles Willis was living at 718 Monmouth, above the store where he sold sheet music and pianos. The next year, he moved into this massive turreted mansion. An imposing structure, it typifies the Romanesque-Gothic tendencies seen in many of the buildings in Mansion Hill. Charles Willis was founder of what became Cincinnati's Willis Music Co.

522 Overton

James and Susan Taylor sold the large lot on the corner of Jefferson (now East Sixth) and Overton to John R. Yungblut on May 11, 1874 for $5885. Yungblut, son of German immigrants, was a prominent Kentuckian, and according to the 1875 city directory "a dealer in drugs, paints, oils, dyestuffs, etc." John B. Tangeman bought the property in 1884 for $9000. Oliver Thompson, a major contractor in the city, bought 522 for $10,000 in 1892, and nearly twenty years later added a north wing, now 520 Overton. Examples of Italianate design detail are seen on many old buildings in Newport, yet large, purely Italianate structures are rare. This is an exceptionally fine example, with its central tower and restrained, elegant ornamentation.

306 Overton

306 Overton contains some of the finest art glass to be found anywhere. In 1890 goods merchant Henry Willenborg spared no expense in making his home a showplace. Even the ceilings are painted with decorative motifs and a large mural on one wall of the stairway landing depicts a seascape, reflecting the nautical theme of the huge stained glass window and of the woodwork in the stairway itself.

301 Overton

Victorian flamboyance ran rampant; the eclectic Queen Anne style was carried to the limits in this exterior. The location and sheer bulk of this corner house are imposing, but it is the complexity of fine detail which is almost overwhelming. After considerable restoration, the house is no very much as it was in 1889, when a boiler manufacturer, Thomas McIlvain, had it built. Even the sandstone slab sidewalks are intact.