

# THE CREATION OF A LANDMARK: THE BISHOP HOUSE OF COLLEGE AVENUE

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**D**URING the early 19th century New Brunswick was a thriving manufacturing and shipping community, and among its most prominent citizens was Mr. James Bishop Jr., a wealthy merchant who made his fortune importing and exporting between South America, Africa, Europe and New Brunswick. James Bishop Jr., born on May 11th, 1816, was fifth-generation American and the first of two sons of James Bishop Sr. and Ellen Bennett Bishop, who married in 1816. James Sr., born in 1788, had migrated from his family's home in Woodbridge, New Jersey, to enter the shipping business in New Brunswick. In 1830 he owned a large grain depot and a dozen sloops that brought the grain from New Brunswick to New York. James Sr. also imported rubber and owned several local rubber goods factories.<sup>1</sup>

In 1839 James Jr. married Harriet McClelland, daughter of a Rutgers College professor. James Sr. died soon after, in 1845, and James Jr. took control of his father's enterprises. Shortly thereafter Harriet died childless. In 1850 James married 19-year-old Mary Ellis of Sing Sing, New York, and also transferred his shipping business to New York, as the railroad had made shipping from New Brunswick obsolete. Nevertheless, Bishop remained fond of his hometown, and in 1848 he purchased a desirable ten acre site along the Raritan River, between the present day College Avenue, Bishop Place, George Street and Senior St. According to a 1951 paper by William Sherman;

The land . . . was originally owned by Phillip French, a prominent citizen who became a Tory during the Revolutionary War. . . . All his land was confiscated by the Sheriff, Robert Stockton and sold. . . . A map showing acreage owned is on file at the Somerset County Clerk's office . . . the section of land in the area labeled L54 was sold . . . to James Cole in 1786. 300 acres of land in section L55 was (sic)

<sup>1</sup> William E. Sherman, Jr., *The History of the Bishop House*, 1951. Unpublished research paper on file at the New Jersey Room, Rutgers University Library, pp. 2-3.



*College Photographers, New Brunswick, NJ*

**BISHOP HOUSE AS SEEN FROM COLLEGE AVENUE, 1985.**

purchased in the same manner by Thos FitzRandolph in 1787. Both Cole and FitzRandolf sold . . . to James Parker in 1787. (Parker) died in 1797 (and) left his estate to be looked after by his son, James Parker Jr., and his son's stepmother who acted as executrix. . . . Part of the property was not owned originally by Parker, but was purchased . . . in the following order. (This land, on which the Bishop estate sits) . . . was in part originally owned through purchase from Sheriff Stockton by Abraham Suydam, Esq. This complete tract was sold by Suydam to James L. Graham on June 25, 1836 . . . (and divided into building lots by him in 1836). These lots were purchased by various individuals for building purposes. Lots 866-868 were purchased by the Parker estate from William Leupp in 1843. Lots 872-880 were purchased by the estate from William Boylan and wife in 1848. Lots 881-883 also were purchased by . . . the estate from John B. Hill in 1848. Lots 883-889 were originally owned by James Parker. These lots afore mentioned were deeded to James and David Bishop in their entirety on July 29, 1848 for the sum of \$525.00 and consisted of land beginning on

Seminary Pl. and College Ave., running NW along College Ave. to the property owned by the Boggs family. The intervening lots, 869-871, were purchased by James and David directly from John A. Graff and wife on July 29, 1848 for \$75.00. Graff had previously acquired these lots from Graham. The northerly portion of the Bishop property was originally owned by James Parker through purchase from Cole and FitzRandolf. In 1832 the portion of this land beginning on the low water mark of the Raritan River along the river from the NE corner of the property owned by James Mandyke to the land owned by James Neilson was purchased from the Parker estate by the Delaware and Raritan Canal Company for \$3700.00. This land . . . was purchased by the Bishops from the canal company in 1848, for the sum of \$995.00. The total purchase price of the land acquired by David and James Bishop was \$1595.00. In 1851 David and his wife deeded a portion of this joint purchase, approximately seven acres to James and his wife.<sup>2</sup>

In 1851 James Bishop began to build one of the largest and most elaborate private homes ever built in New Brunswick on this site, which today includes the present Hurtado Health Center, Clothier, Hegeman, Pell, Wessells, Leupp, Demarest, Mettler, Tinsley and Brett Hall Dormitories within its confines. When the Bishop House on College Avenue was completed in 1852, it was surrounded by landscaped lawns and views of distant countryside and was far from downtown New Brunswick. The house was the marvel of the county. It was filled with the latest in technology and decorated in the most stylish manner. No expense was spared. The house featured central heating, hot and cold running water and indoor water closets. The entire house was also piped for gas lighting, which had been introduced in New Brunswick in 1852 by James's brother David, a local politician. The house was obviously designed by someone with a thorough knowledge of current architectural styles, yet its architect is unknown. The house was built in what is known as the "Italianate" style.

The Italianate style as practiced in England in the early 19th century was an interpretation of various features of Italian Renaissance country houses as seen, for example, in the well-known paintings of Claude Lorrain, Salvator Rosa and Poussin. Within the next twenty years the style became popular in America, especially among architects, landscape designers and artists desiring an alternative to the

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-7.

formal, academic Greek Revival Style. In 1837 a pair of famous architects, Ithiel Town (1784-1844) and his partner Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-1892), published a volume entitled *Rural Residences* which embodied the ideals of designing for a natural setting. The most famous advocate of the Italianate mode was a short lived but extremely productive protégé of Davis, Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852). Downing wrote on a variety of horticultural, technical and architectural subjects. His book *Cottage Residences* appeared in 1842 and popularized the Italianate style. In 1850 he published his *Architecture of Country Houses*, which continued to promote the Italianate style in architecture. Downing was also active as an architect designing and inspiring many of America's Gothic and Italianate landmarks.

Thus, when James Bishop Jr. decided to build his house, the Italianate style was just beginning to become popular. It is doubtful that A. J. Downing designed the house, although it resembled those illustrated in his treatises. On the other hand, the design of Bishop House clearly reflects the owner's interests in this up-to-date mode with its picturesque architectural massing and naturalistic landscaping. The first Italianate house of this picturesque type to be built in the U.S. was the Bishop Doane House, built in 1837 by Philadelphia architect John Notman (1810-1865) and located in Burlington, N.J. It is of course possible that Notman was the architect of the Bishop House, given the geographic proximity of the Doane House and the similar elevations, which both include entrance towers, varied windows and complex massing. In addition, the interiors both contain similar entrance hallways with stained glass skylights and a strong sense of axuality. There is, however, no conclusive evidence of Notman's hand at the Bishop House or elsewhere in New Brunswick, and it is possible that the Bishop House was designed by a protégé of Notman's or a well-informed local architect.<sup>3</sup>

Bishop House was designed by an architect who had totally internalized the values of Victorian America, in which variety is the key element. Marcus Whiffen, a noted architectural historian, describes the typical Italianate home as follows:

<sup>3</sup> Morris J. Kafka Holzschlag, "An Historical Perspective of the background of Italianate Architecture and its Development in the U.S.," 1985. Unpublished research paper on file at the New Jersey Room, Rutgers University Library. pp. i-ii, appendix.

Buildings consist of well-defined rectilinear blocks, as a rule asymmetrically grouped, although the elevations of the individual blocks are symmetrical. Wall surfaces are smooth and uniform, roofs are of slight pitch, gabled, or hipped, or both, the eaves, which may be of considerable projection, are usually supported on brackets. Windows typically are roundheaded and are often grouped in twos or threes; . . . Bay windows are common features, as also are balustraded balconies, and houses nearly always have a verandah or loggia.<sup>4</sup>

Bishop House fits this description exactly. The variety of materials and decorative elements used in its construction is impressive. The house, set on a fine brownstone base, has brick exterior walls covered with stucco and scored to imitate limestone blocks, according to the convention of the era. The roofs were composed of carefully fitted rounded wooden shingles. The variety of excellently preserved windows is especially noteworthy, influenced as these windows are by Renaissance Venice, Medieval Europe and Early American traditions. In this respect, Bishop House is a particularly distinguished example of its style. There are stained glass windows in the main tower, and a stained glass skylight was once positioned over the staircase. Playfully-shaped round and arched windows are located in the gables and under the eaves. Several doors also featured high-quality etched panels with floral or geometric designs.

The house also made extensive use of wrought iron and cast iron. One of the Venetian style windows on the first story, with its arched top and round lunet, originally had an iron balcony attached outside of it. On the west side of the house is a large cast iron porch which features superbly crafted ironwork of the type popularized in New Orleans and imported to most of the cities of the Eastern seaboard by rail. Another iron balcony with unusual wooden console supports once graced the second story of this side of the house. A section of rare mid-19th century cast iron fencing surrounds the entrance to the basement on the east side of the house.

The exterior also featured ornament in wood. The front porch has well-preserved octagonal columns which originally had elaborately carved capitals and are exemplary of their era. A unique decorative frieze also ran around the top edge of this porch when the house was

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture since 1780* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), p. 69.

built. Adjacent to the porch, on the east side, is a pristine bow window which has curved panes of glass and arched sash. A castle-like battlement which originally topped this window was one of the unusual features of the house. To the north of the window is a small porch which had an elaborately-turned classicizing balustrade which added to the eclectic effect of the house. The main tower had a convex roof with rare bulls-eye dormers. The numerous chimneys, which have since been removed, originally were finished with tall, Tudor-style terracotta tops in a variety of striking geometric designs. Other masonry ornaments include creative brick cornices and medievalizing crenelated tower tops.

Even with this variety of ornament, which is a virtual catalogue of ornament from the period, the exterior is austere when compared to the interior. Entering the main hall is an extraordinary experience. The walnut staircase dramatically sweeps upward from the center of the original mosaic floor, composed of a rare and elaborate combination of five different shapes and colors of encaustic floor tile which were imported from England. The impressive woodwork and panelled ceiling of the hall are still surprisingly effective, despite the fact that the hallway is painted an institutional beige and the stairs have been carpeted.

Bishop House contains over thirty rooms. The Bishops and their children enjoyed more residential space than the President did in the White House in the 1850's. Most of the major interior spaces contain individually carved arched marble fireplaces, intricate parquet floors in a variety of woods and patterns, panelled shutters and mouldings carefully composed of dozens of pieces of hand-fitted wood in exemplary patterns of the era. In addition several spaces include delicate plaster cornices and originally had sculpted plaster rosettes on the ceilings.

On the first floor the two most notable rooms are the drawing room, on the west side of the hall, and the library on the east side. The drawing room is the largest room in the house. It is divided by a wide plaster arch set on exquisitely detailed brackets. This room has the two finest fireplaces in the house, decorated with a grape motif and crowned by seashells. Behind this room was a small room known as the cabinet which had murals painted on its walls. The library is directly across the hall from the drawing room. The library has tall Gothic style bookcases with glass doors as well as the most



*College Photographers, New Brunswick, NJ*

THE LIBRARY IN BISHOP HOUSE, 1985.

stunning floor presently visible in the house. The bookshelves and flooring are in excellent condition and are accurate reflections of the high standards of construction used throughout the house. The remaining rooms on the first floor are similar public areas or service spaces. A carefully crafted narrow flight of curving stairs winds from the cellar to the third floor in the rear of the house. The main staircase in the front hall forms a landing near the second floor level, divides, turns 180 degrees and continues the rest of the way up. This is one of the most dramatic staircases in any residential building in the area; it rises without visible support from the first floor to the landing, soaring up from the center of the hall.

The most important room on the second floor is the large room at the rear of the house directly over the kitchen. Known as the "Ship's Room" or "The Pamparo Room," according to tradition it is a replica of the cabin of Bishop's favorite clipper ship, *The Pamparo*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Sherman, *op. cit.*, p. 9.



*College Photographers, New Brunswick, NJ*

THE FRONT HALL OF BISHOP HOUSE, 1985.

The woodwork, wainscoating and shutters are of oak and the ceiling is constructed of heavy beams, darkened by time, on which once-colourful designs were painted. A dumbwaiter went down to the kitchen from the side of the fireplace, which has the only wooden mantelpiece seen in the house. The upper walls are stuccoed, and the floor is covered with thick, dark green linoleum, but underneath this modern addition is a parquet floor with an inlaid representation of the Pampero in full sail! This room is the most unique space in the house; it was created personally for Bishop and honored the source of his wealth. Fortunately this space is largely intact.

Bishop enjoyed life in his mansion for twenty years until he became ill in 1871 and left for a three-year stay in Europe. He returned to find that the Panic of 1873 had ruined him financially. He released his eighteen servants, moved the family to a small farm outside of Morristown and sold his house to Mahlon C. Martin and his three sisters in 1874. Bishop found employment as the Chief of the New Jersey Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1878 and moved the family



to Trenton. In 1893 he retired and the family returned to the farm, where Bishop died in 1895 at the age of 79.<sup>6</sup>

Bishop's Italianate mansion is the most visible reminder we have today of his life. He was a wealthy, educated man who spared not a penny in the construction of his home. It is known that he earned \$42,612.00 in 1869,<sup>7</sup> an enormous sum for that time. It is difficult to guess what his mansion cost to build, but he probably spent over \$25,000 on its construction. At that time building and loan companies in New Brunswick were lending residents \$200 to finance the construction of the average home, which cost less than \$500.<sup>8</sup> In today's dollars the Bishop House would certainly cost several million to replace.

The Martin family was not completely happy occupying the mansion, which was adjacent to Rutgers's new Neilson Athletic Field. There was constant agitation between Martin and Rutgers. Perhaps this is why Martin deeded the house to St. Peter's Catholic Church, with a life estate clause for his sisters. Martin died in 1895, leaving the three sisters alone in the virtually unaltered estate. In 1918 only one of the sisters, the widowed Mrs. Eliza Abbie, was still living. She was not Catholic and she saw no reason for the church to inherit the house when she died. Mrs. Abbie had to take the church to court, but she finally had the deed cancelled by court order. In April of 1925 the house was officially sold to Rutgers for the sum of \$200,000.00. Thus the University has Mrs. Abbie to thank for this large and central portion of our College Avenue Campus.<sup>9</sup>

For the past sixty years Rutgers has utilized James Bishop's estate without major alterations. Bishop House has been a Dean's residence, a Chaplain's apartment, a reception building for the University President, and headquarters for at least two academic departments. Today the offices of the Deans of Students for Rutgers College are housed here. Several of the larger public rooms, including the drawing room and the Pamparo Room, have continued to serve as classrooms since Rutgers purchased the house. Today Bishop House is obscured from the street by the adjacent university structures. The only remnants of its once elaborate former gardens

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Richard P. McCormick, *New Brunswick and its Industries*, 1980. New Brunswick: Gramercy Books, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Sherman, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

are several ancient pine trees still standing in the recently macadamized front area.

Despite this anonymous setting and occasional neglect, Bishop House is far from unknown. It is a designated landmark on both the state and National registers.<sup>10</sup> In 1983 it was featured in Helen Schwartz's book, *The New Jersey House*, as an exemplary Italianate villa. Schwartz wrote that "one of the most beautiful examples (of Italianate architecture) is Bishop House,"<sup>11</sup> as well as that "Bishop House, in the center of Rutgers University is (an) exceptional . . . high-style house."<sup>12</sup> In the popular 1982 movie, *The World According to Garp*, the drawing room of Bishop House was used as the setting for the classroom scene.<sup>13</sup>

Bishop House has served Rutgers well; over sixty years it has withstood without renovation the transition from a genteel residential structure to a heavily used public building through which hundreds of people have passed daily. The University has been wise in retaining the structure, but it is deteriorating quickly. The time has come to give this precious and useful piece of property some well-deserved attention. During the summer of 1985 The Hillier Group did an analysis of the structural condition and restoration potential for Bishop House. Their study found that:

While the building is basically in sound structural condition, conditions of deterioration, if allowed to continue, will damage the structure to the point where extensive reconstruction may be necessary. Major problems involve the entry of water into the structure . . . which indicates the potential for serious building damage. . . .<sup>14</sup>

The Hillier Group estimates that a complete structural overhaul and architectural restoration, which will make this unique National historic landmark building an efficient and attractively preserved academic building, will cost just slightly more than \$1 million if done before any more damage occurs to the structure. A sensitive and careful preservation program must be undertaken soon if we are to have the Bishop House to use, enjoy and learn from in future years.

<sup>10</sup> Richard P. McCormick, "New Jersey Historical Sites Evaluation," 1960. Unpublished worksheet on file at the New Jersey Room, Rutgers.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Schwartz, *The New Jersey House* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>13</sup> *The World According to Garp*, Dir. George Ray Hill, Warner Bros., 1982.

<sup>14</sup> *Feasibility Study for the Restoration of Bishop House* (Princeton: The Hillier Group, 1985), pp. 24-25.