

Walston: A Castle on Beacon Hill

Once the centerpiece of a sprawling estate that included nearly all of Beacon Hill, the Castle—or “Walston” as one long-time owner liked to call it—was completed in 1879 for wealthy New York City litigator Frederick J. Stone. Built in a popular Romanesque Revival style of the day, it was one of several lavish mansions in Dobbs Ferry, which had become a preferred site for country retreats by wealthy Manhattanites in these years largely because of the magnificent views of the Hudson River that it afforded. In addition to the castle, the original gatehouse to the estate survives at the foot of Beacon Hill Drive where it meets Ashford Avenue.



Walston circa 1910.



Walston in 2020.

Its most famous resident was Robert Green Ingersoll, who lived here at the end of the nineteenth century. A Civil War colonel and celebrated orator (in an age when oratory was a hugely popular form of entertainment), Ingersoll was known in his day for his fiery speeches and controversial opinions on politics, religion, and social issues. A progressive figure, he argued passionately for the abolition of slavery and woman's suffrage, among other things, and was a

good friend to multiple U.S. presidents as well as leading artistic lights of the nineteenth century American such as Mark Twain and Walt Whitman.



Portrait of Robert Green Ingersoll



Statue of Robert Ingersoll in Peoria, Illinois where the Ingersoll family lived for many years.

Ingersoll's daughter Eva, who along with her husband, the eponymous Walston Brown, owned the Castle and lived there as well, was also a fervent proponent of women's suffrage and was together with her father instrumental in eventually delivering the vote to American women.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton herself visited the residence on many occasions, conferring with the two on the large veranda high above the Hudson.



*Figure 1*Portrait of Eva Ingersoll.

Architectural and Ideological Context

Walston is one of a very few surviving “castles” built along the Hudson in the mid- to late nineteenth centuries. Such structures were fairly numerous at one time and were based in a general way on Anglo-Norman (English) models. The fully crenellated roof, squared tower, unfinished granite exterior, and overall verticality of the building loosely recall structures like the 11th century Rochester Castle and the Tower of London. This medieval concept was taken very seriously by Walston Brown, who went so far as to display suits of armor in the massive living room (mischievously used by his and Eva’s children as hiding places during games of hide-and-seek).



Rochester Castle, England, ca. 1087-1136.

Walston's closest relative in the Hudson Valley architecturally speaking is probably the somewhat more elaborate Fonthill Castle completed in 1852, currently part of the Mount St. Vincent's College campus in Riverdale.



Fonthill Castle, Riverdale. 1848-52.

Others in the same general vein include Ophir Hall, now Reid Hall on the campus of Manhattanville College in Purchase, as well Bannerman's Castle in Dutchess County.



Reid Hall, Manhattanville College, Purchase, 1892.

Less directly related are structures that are not fully castellated but which have significant castellated portions, like Ingleside, also in Dobbs Ferry on South Broadway (now part of the St. Christopher's School) and Lyndhurst in South Tarrytown.



Ingleside (now part of the St. Christopher's School), Dobbs Ferry, 1857. Photo ca. 1910.

As a group, these buildings represent a general desire on the part of elite Americans in the nineteenth century to create an explicitly European character in the Hudson Valley, similar to that of the Rhine Valley in Germany, which had many a castle high on its banks (indeed, the Hudson was often described as “the American Rhine”). To many at the time, imposing stone structures like these lent a legitimacy and historical weight to the area that showed America had become the cultural equal of its mother continent. (It did not matter that the American buildings—with their expansive verandas and many large windows—were clearly residential in nature rather than true fortresses.)

Walston and Dobbs Ferry

Its advantageous position on the Hudson caused Dobbs Ferry to be continuously inhabited from a very early date. Long before wealthy Manhattanites like Frederick Stone and Walston Brown came to admire the view, Native Americans took advantage of the river's abundant edible marine life (primarily oysters). A large village of the local Weckquaesgeek tribe existed at the point where Wicker's Creek near Mercy College meets the river from as early as 4500 B.C.

Soon after the arrival of Henry Hudson on the river in 1604, Dobbs Ferry along with the rest of Westchester was purchased by the Dutchman Frederick Phillipse. Phillipse rented out parcels of land in what would become Dobbs Ferry to a handful of tenant farmers. One of these was the now famous John Dobbs, who along with his son William, operated the ferry that carried so many early settlers to and fro across the Hudson. They established their service here because, unlike points further south, usable paths reaching directly to the water existed just opposite at Sneden's Landing, near Tappan, New York.

After the Revolution—during which Dobbs Ferry played a pivotal role because of its tactical importance as a river crossing—the village continued to consist largely of small farms (now owned by the farmers themselves after the deposition of the Phillipses, who were Loyalists). These gradually dwindled however with the arrival of the Old Croton Aqueduct and especially the railroad in the first half of the nineteenth century, setting the stage for the arrival of Gilded Age estates like Walston. The estates were in turn largely transformed into

condominiums and apartments buildings or ceded to college campuses and other entities in the twentieth century.