

NEW YORK archives

Volume 10 • Number 3

WINTER 2011

\$4.95

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THE WESTINGHOUSE MANSION THAT ALMOST WAS

BY CHARITY VOGEL

George Westinghouse Jr., the young inventor from Schenectady, didn't get many things wrong. But he failed to please his mother when it came to home-building.

The house Westinghouse built for his mother in Schenectady is now a funeral home.

Sometimes, no matter what you do, you just can't please Mom. Inventor George Westinghouse Jr. certainly knew that feeling—at least for a little while in the late 1880s.

It all happened at a delicate moment for his family. George Westinghouse Sr., the Vermont native who had relocated his family to Schenectady to build his machinery business, had died in 1884. He left a widow, Emeline, who had borne and raised the couple's ten children, including George Jr., who had been born in 1846.

Concerned about how his mother would do in the wake of his father's death, George Jr.—who in 1869 had patented the automatic air brake for railroad cars, and had grown both famous and extremely wealthy as a result—decided to build his mother a present.

But not just any present. A mansion of the most singular sort.

It would be generous and opulent, Westinghouse decided, the sort of residence that would befit the mother of the owner of Westinghouse Air Brake, the substantial Pittsburgh company George

owned. He envisioned the mansion with twenty-three rooms, the exterior encrusted with fashionable cut-out gingerbread and ringed by covered porches. The whole creation would be perched on the crest of a hill overlooking the center of the picturesque industrial city of Schenectady, set on the Erie Canal not far from Albany.

The house cost the Air Brake King a pretty penny: \$22,500, which bought him the structure as well as a greenhouse and a magnificent sloping plot of tree-dotted land. The interior was filled

with quarter-sawn oak mantels and rich furnishings. Built to order, the house was designed by Albany architects, and according to some sources reflected George's fascination with Saratoga cottages. (Despite his endless appetite for work related to machinery, Westinghouse also dabbled in other areas of interest, including architecture. His own home in Pittsburgh, an imposing residence where he lived with his wife, Marguerite, and son, George III, was tellingly called "Solitude.")

But back in Schenectady, despite her son's extravagance, Emeline Vedder Westinghouse—a strong-minded woman who had helped her husband expand his threshing machine enterprise into a flourishing agricultural manufacturing business first in Central Bridge, New York, then in Schenectady—wasn't fully on board with the project. As the high-pitched roofline of the mansion rose above Erie Boulevard and Guilderland Avenue, about a mile from the center of Schenectady in what was then largely open farmland, George's mother realized two things: her new house was just too far from town and from the bustling social scene she loved. And it was a little on the large side for a widow.

Emeline, a native of Glenville (near Schenectady), came from old Dutch stock and knew a thing or two about stubbornness. One family story told of her keeping quiet about being in labor for



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the better part of two days, in order not to disturb her husband at his work.

So Emeline said to George, politely but firmly, "No, thanks." From then until she died in the mid-1890s at age eighty-five, Emeline Westinghouse continued to live elsewhere: in her comfortable old house on State Street in Schenectady, near her friends, the city's shops and cultural attractions, and the activity on the Mohawk

River. In her final months, she moved to Pittsburgh to be close to George and his family—a change that showed that Emeline harbored no ill will toward him for his efforts to move her into the fanciest house in town.

As for her inventor son, who was by this time also running the Union Switch and Signal Company and the Westinghouse electrical companies, he too never held a grudge over the matter. Later in life, as some sources in the Schenectady County Historical Society have it, George would jokingly dismiss the whole kerfuffle as "two weeks' pay" out of his pocket.

Today, though, Westinghouse's misdirected gift is still worth a detour when traveling in Schenectady. The Westinghouse Mansion That Almost Was has been a family-owned funeral parlor, the Bond Funeral Home, since 1929. It still crowns that graceful hilltop on the edge of the city, rising majestically above streets now studded with gas stations and convenience marts. Partially destroyed by fire in 1999, the house has been restored to vintage charm with period-appropriate paint and well-maintained woodwork.

So, no, George Westinghouse Jr.'s mom never slept there. But you can still see traces of her inventor son's hand in this all-American Victorian. Who else would have designed gingerbread work that looks like a piece of intricate machinery? ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

While doing research in Schenectady on George Westinghouse Jr. for a book about a railroad disaster in the era before the automatic air brake—the "Angola Horror" of 1867—I stumbled onto some clippings and records in the Schenectady County Historical Society's library about George's efforts to build the mansion for his mother. Fascinated, I found myself immersed in the accounts of how extravagantly the home was being constructed and how elegantly it was fitted out. The surprise ending to the story—that Emeline Westinghouse turned it down flat—made this piece of Westinghouse history even better. To complete my research, I drove from the historical society to the Bond mansion on Guilderland Avenue and enjoyed gazing on the structure that had once had a brush with the Air Brake King's life.