

THE BRIARCLIFF LODGE

Michael Molinelli AIA LEED ap

*The following appeared in their original form as articles in **Here At Home Magazine** in 2003. The document an attempt by the author to stir support for saving the Briarcliff Lodge and subsequently an epitaph for the building destroyed by fire late in the year.*



November 14, 1907

Gwendolyn looked persistently out the window, careful that her large brimmed hat would not touch the glass and shift unfashionably on her head. She was so excited she wanted to press her nose against the glass to see every hill, village and depot the train passed. Even though it was mid November some trees clung greedily to their leaves. In her seventeen years she had never been out of lower Manhattan; Grand Central Station was just a place to say “Good bye” to other people as they went off on adventures.

Here she was with her beau, Donald, and his family riding the heralded Putnam Railroad to Briarcliff. Briarcliff? It was a mysterious name she knew from the milk cans that horse drawn carts carried down her street each morning. Briarcliff was the home of internationally honored dairy produce: milk cream and butter won the Gold Medal at the Paris Exposition of 1900. Some say it is because the cattle are treated gently



and never hear a harsh word. The Briarcliff Roses would also be know internationally with as many as 2,000 flowers cut in a single day.

Donald's father was a business colleague of Walter William Law, Briarcliff's founder. Today was his seventieth birthday. A huge celebration was being held with the Manor at Briarcliff opened for public inspection.

At the station, a horse drawn carriage with fringe met them to take them to the Lodge. The fields were divided by rambling stonewalls that generations of workers had pulled from the fecund soils and stacked neatly into lines on the treeless landscape. A few motorcars chugged noisily passed them. Donald's father said that the first American International Road Race was being held in Briarcliff in April with \$10,000 in prize money. One hundred thousand people would be expected in Briarcliff that day and rumors say some of the cars would exceed 60 miles per hour.

The turnout climbed the winding road up the hill. Like an English Manor house in the Tudor style, the Lodge presided over the grand rolling farmlands. The architect was Guy King famous for his country clubs. Gwendolyn had memorized many facts so that she could appear intelligent should she find herself in conversation with a Vanderbilt or an Astor.

The surrey parked under the porte-cochère, which covered them like a mother protecting a child from the wind. Inside the great hall the walls were covered with dark rich woods but sunlight from the tall windows made things bright. A fire blazed ferociously in the great stone fireplace. The room had electric chandeliers and Gwendolyn heard that guests could make long distance phone calls. A grandfather clock at the first landing of the grand stairs chimed, it was 1 PM.

The luncheon was served. The guests toured the grounds, including the stables the automobile garage and the greenhouses. In the evening a dinner was held in the palm dining room at a table with a continuous row of Roses. An orchestra played while the guests feasted on a meal with individual courses including martinis, essence of celery, grilled salmon, iced cucumbers, larded tenderloin with mushrooms, stuffed Briarcliff Tomatoes, a cigarette course, (from which Gwen abstained), punch, Boneless Milk-fed Briarcliff Chicken and ending in with coffee liqueurs and cigars.





Modern Times

Gwendolyn and Donald are a fiction that I have placed in history to be our eyes as we view the Briarcliff Lodge through the nickelodeon of time. Our 21st century sense of history is distorted by instant media. We imagine Briarcliff as we first saw must be the way it has been for generations. But much has changed in the last 100 years. Indeed, much has changed in the last 44 years most of which I have been a resident in Briarcliff. When I was a child, the woods were new but fully grown. I have seen the trees get large enough to climax and fall in ice storms. I have seen the houses get bigger and the families get smaller. I have seen the pheasant disappear and the coyote return.

But Briarcliff Manor as Briarcliff Manor predates me by three score years. Her rich history is currently covered by woods and briars and housing developments. I am not advocating setting back our calendars a century in some sort of cosmic daylight saving, but I think we owe it to ourselves to consider what we have and what we ought to preserve.

I am uncomfortable with the epithet of "activist", but I have found in recent months, that I have been petitioning the Village of Briarcliff Manor to consider actions that would save the Briarcliff Lodge. Barrington Venture proposes to purchase from Blue Lake Properties what is currently referred to as the former King's College to establish a retirement community. I am generally pleased by their proposal. My only negative is that they propose to tear down the old Lodge building –replacing it strangely with a lesser version of it.

Based on the DEIS (Draft Environmental Impact Statement) and FEIS (Final Environmental Impact Statement) and comments made at open Village hearings, I have conducted my own study of the additional cost of adaptively re-using the Lodge. My figure comes under \$6,000,000 or less than 4% of their total construction costs for the project. Barrington Venture claims the figure can be as high at \$24,000,000 but have not substantiated that figure despite my requests. I have filed my report with the Village.



February 4, 2003

At the meetings, Barrington Venture has stated that the building is structurally unsound that, about 1/3 of the roof is missing, that the building cannot be adapted to apartments, etc. Perhaps to convince me my assumptions about the building were incorrect, they invited me to get inside the Lodge. So on February 4, 2003, I was escorted through the building. I kept asking my guide to take me to the worst conditions. As my second report to the Village shows, the worst conditions were hardly catastrophic. It is revealing that one of the conditions of my visit was that I was not permitted to take photographs, so what I relate can only be verified by allowing others to make the same trip and perhaps take pictures.

It had been many years since I visit the Briarcliff Lodge. From the descriptions I heard at public hearings I expected to find the carcass of a building. I expected whole sections of roof to be missing like flesh torn from the bone. I expected the rafters to be crumbling under their own weight like failing ribs sun-bleached and brittle. I expect to smell death.

What I saw was the opposite. I saw a building sitting a top the hill lonely and neglected like the matriarch of family whose children do not visit or call. Briarcliff Lodge resides there with her chin raised with the eyes of her windows waiting for us to return. The roof is intact with some holes like small balding patches. The walls, rafters and floors are true and straight like strong bones never hinting at their age. True some water damage occurs at occasional intersections of wall and gable but like rheumatism creeping into joints, they are not debilitating. True vandals have taken the fancy bathroom fixtures and ornamental wood railing, but like hair carelessly hacked off it does not detract from her beauty. True the cold weather has caused paint to peel like the unattractive ruddiness on facial skin, but the flesh is solid and healthy. I am perplexed why no one is formally investigating the gross misrepresentations about the condition of the Lodge made at the meetings by Barrington Venture.

I find it ironic that an organization that talks of aging gracefully wants to euthanize the Grand Ol' Dame of Briarcliff Manor. Even now the application for a demolition permit to tear down the Briarcliff Lodge is in the Village. It cannot be issued until the owner's supply proof that all hazardous materials have been abated. I have not seen evidence of any abatement in progress, so for now and for the first time in my life I am exclaiming "Thank God for asbestos!"

An Epitaph (appeared as a separate article many months later)

The pager beeped and sputtered just before any hint of dawn. "To all fire department personnel: Smoke seen from Kings College by the water tower." It was happening. The thing we dreaded and trained for many years.

I gathered together a few items I needed and got into my car. The blue light on my dashboard ground stridently as it spun its light around the darkness. It was the only noise on this desolate Saturday morning in our village. Over my pager, I heard the engine and the ladder truck go into service. As I approached the firehouse, the light from the inside the bays made it look like someone with their eyes wide open and ready. I put my turnout gear into the back of the rescue truck and climbed in. The intercom announced "Rescue 37 responding 10-17" and we were moving.



Of all the apparatus the one in which you are the most isolated from the outside is the rescue truck. It is the size of an ice cream truck on steroids and packed with equipment. A couple of small tinted windows peek through among the rows of air-packs and lockers but they never seem to point to the action. So our only connections to the outside world were the voices reporting (without any hint of the adrenalin that we all had flushing through our bodies) as the trucks arrived. When Rescue 37 was on the scene, we opened the door on the rear and the compartment was flooded with orange light. I could see the skeletal wood timbers of the building darkly charred through the soaring flames reaching towards the top of the water tower. The rafters and beams clung desperately to the six brick chimneys before they would thunder consent and fall to the basement. The old building was completely engulfed. The clear sky was just turning from navy-blue to azure right behind it. It was Saturday, September 20th 2003 and the Briarcliff Lodge was burning.

What was the Briarcliff Lodge? For over a year I was eager to tell anyone who would listen. With the help of others I was waging a campaign to remind the villagers and village officials of its significance. Having spent most of my life in Briarcliff Manor, I did not realize how few people knew of the building. It had for the last ten years become just a phrase: “the old King’s College” which was deceptively understated.

Over one hundred years before the fire, the Briarcliff Lodge was the most significant hotel in the Hudson valley attracting the famous and the powerful. It was a dramatically textured example of Romantic Tudor on scale that astounded. It was built by Walter William Law, our village founder, who thought that only the best was good enough for Briarcliff. It was the grand ol’ dame of the Village, presiding over the rolling hills with sparse houses and trees spread around the Briarcliff Farms. The famous farms provided the Lodge and New York City with the freshest milk and produce and cultivated the award winning Briarcliff Rose.



Ted and I at the base of the aerial prep the ladder to water pipe operations. Photo by Larry Reilly

The interiors had spectacular pomp to them. Once you walked through the porte-cochère, directly ahead an immense boulder fireplace greeted you. To the right were a pipe organ and a delicate tiled fireplace done in an eastern European style for a more intimate sitting area. On the left was a baroque staircase with muscular balusters and a grandfather clock resting on the first landing. Just beyond the main lobby to the left was the dining room with detailed corbelled wood columns spreading out like trees to the coffered ceiling. Flat arched windows of leaded glass looked south and west towards the Hudson River.

The Lodge was designed by Guy King, a noted country club architect from Philadelphia. It included many innovative features for 1902 such as electric lights, mechanical ventilation and long distance telephone service to each room. These were amenities that served the elite who stayed there including Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Wiley Post, the King and Queen of Siam, Sarah Bernhardt, Talulah Bankhead, William Tilden world tennis champ and Mayor Jimmy Walker.



The Lodge's golf course spread across Dalmeny Road and engulfed the hillside including what are now Saint Theresa's School and the Trump National Golf Course. The hill from the lodge down what would become Cherry Court was the site of the ski jump that trained our Winter Olympic athletes. During winters when there was not enough snow, they shipped some down from Canada on railroad cars just for the ski jump. (Some say some Canadian Whiskey was hidden in the snow during prohibition days.) The Lodge's outdoor pool was reportedly the largest in the United States and hosted the USA Olympic swim teams. That is where Johnny Weismueller, who eventually became Hollywood iconoclastic Tarzan, trained. The Lodge's famous Briarcliff Garage hosted the contestants in the first professional automobile race in the United States and would attract 100,000 people to the Village to see cars go over 60 miles an hour.

In recent years, she had been left to the elements both natural and manmade. Her windows were smashed and many of her fireplaces and wood railings were vandalized. Her paint was peeling. Rain rotted a few of her joints. People and animals defecated in her stairwells. She sat there sadly alone still towering above her children, who generations later hid her behind a curtain of trees so she was unseen, while they played with their shiny toys in their diminutive little houses.

Still she was strong and sturdy. Still she could be brought back to life if someone would visit her and wash her and feed her. But at the time our Village Officials were planning our centennial, they were also planning on euthenizing her. They were going to give permission for her bones to be picked clean by the carrion circling overhead and then bury her with a bulldozer. Strangely the Saturday before an expensive abatement process was about to begin (a prelude to her demolition), the Briarcliff Lodge caught fire. Investigators have labeled the fire's origin as suspicious.

The Briarcliff Manor Fire Department is an all-volunteer force that is one year older than the Briarcliff Lodge. It is the melting pot of the village forging together life long residents with new. It members cut across the professions of the region and includes professors, engineers, plumbers, contractors, retirees, stay-at-home moms, students, accountants, lawyers and oral surgeons. I joined about three years ago to re-connect with my hometown after school and work took me away. I wished I had joined sooner.

Life as a volunteer firefighter and member of the ambulance corps has its minor rewards but mostly it offers fulfilling work. The fire department has responded to over 512 calls so far this year. (The ambulance corps has responded to another 500 calls.) Some of the fire calls are false alarms, but still they require you to put down what you are doing and get to the firehouse. We train at least monthly in addition to the required intense courses the county gives on a regular basis. We have additional work nights and have been know to have some food and beverage after a meeting. The image you might foster of beer-swigging yahoos would find little merit in our very open circle.

When we heard the call for the "old King's College" we knew what we were up against. It was our "big one." The oldest section of the Lodge was heavy timber construction, which is about 70,000 sf of "fire-load" spread on four stories. The 1904 addition was a concrete structure but with plenty of interior wood paneling to burn. The 1912 seven-story tower was also fire-resistant construction. While there was no electricity in the building to spark anything, the sprinkler system and alarm systems had not been functioning for many years. Any smaller fire could smolder for hours and burst into flames before anyone would know about it.



My company, the Hook and Ladder, had taken our truck up there a few times in recent years to practice operations of the 100-foot aerial ladder and develop strategies for containing a fire. Our primary concern would not be to save the building, but to contain the fire so it would not spread to neighboring homes. That Saturday morning was clear and calm. If the winds had been blowing like the day before (the aftermath of the periphery of tropical storm Isabel) the fire could have been swept around the building igniting nearby trees and homes.

As I walked up to the Ladder 40 truck to report to my officers, I saw our department calmly making preparations to fight the fire. All the training our current and recent officers gave us was going to be put to the test. All the experience of the senior members of the department would be needed to guide us plebes through the next twenty-one hours.

Early on, departments from other towns began to arrive to give mutual aid. The Pleasantville Tower Ladder parked next to ours. It was a newer bucket ladder truck, much more mobile and they could get right into the fire to shoot their master streams in the windows. (We felt a little like we drove to the prom in the family tan Chevy Nova and next to us the BMOG parked his Camaro. We were supposed to get such a truck but ironically the discussion with the developers of the Briarcliff Lodge site had contributed to the delay.) Companies from Croton, Millwood, Bedford, Ossining and other towns added more apparatus. They even pumped water from the Kings' College pond. The pond bottom, unseen through the green murkiness, is tiled – the remnants of Johnny Weismueller's outdoor swimming pool.

Our aerial ladder was in place near the 1904 addition outside the collapse zone of the stucco, brick and stone facade. Ted, the chief driver operating the aerial, had walked with me through the building a few months earlier as we toured with Village Officials. We were showing them how structurally sound the Briarcliff Lodge was. We showed them the existing wood details, the stone fireplaces. Ted went to the Kings' College, as did his parents. But he grew more familiar with the building when he worked as a security guard there. He had come to know the intricacies of its history and was able to give our tour some of the soul of the building. Today, he was in full turnout gear and he told Anthony and me (both newer members) that the ladder was ready. There was no fair way to decide who should climb, so we shot it out. I chose odds and won. I put on my ladder belt and ascended to the top that extended seventy-five feet in the air. I climbed slowly to the top and hooked on the massive karabiner from my belt and aimed the master stream nozzle. Midway up the ladder another unmanned nozzle also sprayed a water stream. For the next forty minutes I hovered above the ridge of the building as Ted manually pivoted the ladder so we could spray into the windows. We were drowning the fire, which was spreading into the wood panels doors, and wood framed roofs of this section. While it was not in immediate danger of collapse as was happening to the oldest portion, the fire needed to be stopped as soon as possible.

From that elevated perch, as the smoke began to dissipate, I could see other streams coming from the firefighters on the west side of the building. Their crews had hauled multiple 5" lines from the bottom of a fifty-foot tall steep incline. I could see the Pleasantville Ladder, now closer to the old section spraying the still burning wreckage. When I looked down behind me, I could see our ambulance crews on the scene and our company officers coordinating the fire ground. Our chief had his ubiquitous pipe. There is something about a fire chief who walks around with his own personal inferno smoldering in the bowl of his pipe that just gives you confidence that he knows how to command a fire scene. Just below me, I could see the other members of the Ladder



Company, Bob, Mike, Frank, Steve, and another Bob overhaul sections of the exterior with pike poles, bring their own hose in to fight the spread, and move ladders around the perimeter to assist the movement of firefighters. Some of our seasoned members were on scene giving advice and lending a hand with the equipment.

I could see both valleys that define Briarcliff, from the hill of the Lodge to east and to the Hudson River and I wondered if our village would ever see such glory again as was Walter William Law's grand ol' dame, The Briarcliff Lodge.

Anthony and I traded places and I took bit of a rest. By the early afternoon the major fire had been knocked down. I was in one of the crews that went inside the 1904 addition still standing to search for any smoldering fires. The many teams were lined up like relay runners in turnout gear and air-packs waiting for one team to come out before another went in. Inside, the atmosphere was eerily calm - like a wake. Smoke moved through the halls dancing around the sunlight streaming in from glassless windows. The rhythm of my breathing the air from inside my mask was the only sound I heard. Small fires burned innocuously in corners of the wood paneling as if they knew they would be ignored for a while.

Once out, we continued to pour water on the rubble of the collapsed section that fumed steadily for hours. A firefighter from the Engine Company chided me about my efforts to save the Lodge. I referred jokingly to this as a minor setback and perhaps we should change the slogan from "Save the Briarcliff Lodge" to "Rebuild the Briarcliff Lodge." But the old Lodge is gone. The second phase of the old lodge on the north side and stylistically indiscernible from the original was a concrete structure and still stands. It is, of course, totally charred and scarred with fire. The later seven-story addition still stands on the back. Since the building was going to be demolished anyway, sadness was not what I felt. It felt like hearing that a close relative with terminal cancer has died in a car accident instead. You know the end was near, but it is never easy to take when it becomes so final.

Our crew lingered on the site into late afternoon, when we were dismissed in stages to allow us to go home, shower change and return. That evening an emergency call went out for more manpower. I abruptly stopped my quick dinner with Gina and the kids and returned. Paul came in from work and Chris had joined the ladder crew, having missed most of fire because he was home alone with his young son. He heard as much as he could from the pager and the news. We manned hoses to fight the flare-ups from the smoking debris, knocking them down wherever they would spring up. Before midnight our truck returned to the firehouse but was called back immediately. Fire was burning at the top of the elevator tower to the 1912 addition. Ted then another Mike took their turns at the summit of the aerial ladder to douse that flame. We returned to the firehouse around 1 AM and pulled off all the equipment, to wash it, reset it, refuel it or replace it. We repacked the truck just in case there was another call and went home. An engine stayed on site well into the next morning pouring water on the smoldering rubble.

If this was then, funeral pyre for the grand ol' dame of Briarcliff Manor, perhaps it was better this way. I felt closer to the building because I could be there the day she died. She could go the way she lived, impressing those of use who were there on that last day and making headlines.

.....

