

HISTORY



At the turn of the twentieth century, Manchester was an established and popular summer resort destination for the Gilded Age society set. Newspapers recorded the famous visitors, who arrived on the Green Mountain Flyer with their or luxurious Pullman coaches, to enjoy Manchester's fresh country air and the new golf clubs established at Manchester and Dorset. In 1895, Albert M. Gilbert, a Chicago railroad industrialist, began his search for an extraordinary property. His friend Robert Todd Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln's son and president of the Chicago Pullman Company, recommended the fertile stretch of land on River Road in Manchester.

Gilbert named his sprawling estate 'Strawberry Hill' and hired architects from Chicago to design a baronial home combining Frank Lloyd Wright's modernism with the Arts and Crafts and English Tudor style. When the mansion was completed in 1902, Gilbert's 1000-acre farm was the largest private property in Manchester.

Only two years later, Gilbert's health and finances were failing. He sold acres of farmland on River Road to his friend Robert Todd Lincoln to become part of the Hildene farm. His daughter Louise had married Yale graduate Day McBurney. Her husband purchased adjacent land from Gilbert and built Louise a 25-room mansion. Only a few years later, the society papers reported the scandal that Louise had run off on a steamer to Europe, leaving behind her husband and son. She later remarried another social register fellow and moved to California. Louise's mansion was purchased by the Levis family in 2004 and is once again part of the Wilburton estate as the Battenkill Valley Mansion.

Gilbert died in 1909. His life insurance was worth almost two million dollars, but to cover his business debts, his family sold the inn at a drastically reduced price. Chicago banker James Wilbur (whose Royal Trust Bank bank held the mortgage) purchased the property and renamed the estate Wilburton Hall. He commissioned Wallace Nutting to create a portfolio of tinted photographs to celebrate his majestic new home.

James Wilbur was a self-made millionaire, the cashier of the New Haven Railroad and founder of a bank and mortgage company in Chicago. Wilbur was a scholarly man with a passion for American history and a true love of Vermont. He paid for the first paved road in the state of Vermont. Wilbur felt that Vermont revolutionary hero Ethan Allen's brother Ira was the unsung hero of the war. Wilbur wrote his biography and commissioned the Ira Allen chapel and statue at the University of Vermont. Wilbur left \$1.5 million for a University of Vermont scholarship that today exceeds \$18 million. The University's most generous donors are members of the Wilbur Society.

Wilbur died in 1928. A year later his heirs' fortunes crashed alongside Wall Street. They sold the remaining farmland and auctioned off many of Wilburton Hall's precious antiques and custom Steinway. Fortunately, the grandfather clock, the Oriental rugs and many of the original furnishings remain to convey a sense of the



history and grandeur of the era.

From 1940-1944, Max and Gertrud Bondy leased Wilburton Hall as the new home of The Windsor Mountain School. The Bondys were intellectual progressive educators who emphasized the arts. Like the von Trapps, the Bondys fled Nazi Europe and found a haven in Vermont. Their co-ed boarding school began each day with music. From 1945-1975, the school operated in Lenox, Massachusetts. Thelonious Monk, Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte were some of the many artists who educated their children at Windsor Mountain School.

In 1945, Wilburton Hall opened its doors as the Wilburton Inn. The resort season ran from May to October. Innkeeper Tom O'Neill reportedly began his hospitality career running a speakeasy. When he became a maître 'd at a New York City nightclub, he mingled with corporate leaders, celebrities, politicians and gangsters. This glamorous crowd was among the first guests of the Wilburton Inn.

Wilbur's Billiard Room was transformed into an elegant restaurant. Gentlemen wore white tie. Ladies wore fur stoles and gloves. Jockeys and horse owners came from Saratoga to celebrate their victories over dinner. The Billiard Room is still decorated with vintage racehorse prints and bronzes from this era.

In 1977, O'Neill's widow sold the Inn to RKO Pictures and General Tire. RKO had recently sold the

Equinox Hotel in Manchester so the Wilburton Inn became their new country getaway for discrete business meetings and movie star affairs.

In 1987, Georgette and Dr. Albert Levis dined at the inn to celebrate his 50th birthday. Albert, who was a full-time psychiatrist in Hamden, Connecticut, spontaneously decided to buy it. Inspired by his childhood in Athens, Greece, during World War II, Albert dedicates his career to understanding conflict resolution. He is the founder of the Formal Theory and Moral Science and has authored eight books, including *Science Stealing the Fire of the Gods*. Albert curates the Museum of the Creative Process on the Wilburton estate and The Moral Science Project in Manchester Village. Join him for a fascinating conversation on psychology, religion, education and art.

Georgette was the sister of Wall Street legend Bruce Wasserstein and Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Wendy Wasserstein. Georgette inspired Madeleine Kahn's Tony award-winning role of 'Gorgeous' in the Broadway hit, *The Sisters Rosensweig*. Georgette brought joy, families and weddings to the Wilburton. After 27 years as the beloved innkeeper, Georgette passed away in 2014.

Now Albert runs the inn with his children: Tajlei, a lawyer turned playwright, whose adaptation of Edith Wharton's *Glimpses of the Moon* is published by Samuel



French; Melissa, who entertained thousands of New York City kids with her band Moey's Music Party; Oliver, who runs Earth Sky Time Community Farm with his wife Bonnie and bakes the delicious breads at the inn's breakfast; and Max, a Harvard Religious School graduate who received his Ph.D. in psychology, sociology and social work from Boston University. Levis grandchildren include Manhattanites Theo & Noam, who attend the Heschel School; and Monty, who attends Buckley. Guv, Talula, Eden and baby Elijah live in Manchester. Jetson, the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, is the four-legged innkeeper.

Thank you for joining us and being a part of the Wilburton's vibrant history.

From lower left corner clockwise: Mrs. Wilbur circa 1912; Wallace Nutting hand-painted photo circa 1910; James Wilbur's Chicago bank monthly brochure; Louise McBurney; Battenkill Valley Mansion circa 1954; Library of Congress Trust Fund Board (1928), James Wilbur (second to right) and Andrew Mellon (center).