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THE DEMOLITION

OF THE

McLEAN ASYLUM AT SOMERVILLE.

WITH

AN ACCOUNT OF ITS ORIGINAL BUILDINGS,

FORMERLY THE COUNTRY SEAT OF JOSEPH BARRELL.

BY EDWARD G. PORTER.

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THE DEMOLITION OF THE McLEAN ASYLUM AT SOMERVILLE.

AT a meeting of the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, held in Boston, on Thursday, April 9, 1896, the Rev. EDWARD G. PORTER made the following remarks: —

Mr. President, — Whoever has been out over the Lowell Railroad lately must have noticed the forlorn and dismantled appearance of the McLean Asylum at Somerville. We have been so long accustomed to enjoy the sight of that fine group of buildings, and the noble park in which they stood, in such agreeable contrast to the railroad purlieus of East Cambridge, that the present spectacle is a rude shock to our sense of the fitness of things.

Thus, one by one, the natural beauties of our metropolis are giving way to the imperious demands of our commercial growth. Fort Hill had to go; Charlestown and the older parts of Roxbury have lost their fine gardens and shade-trees; and now this well-known eminence just over the river must not only surrender its half-dozen large and well-built structures of brick and stone, its stately elms and its terraced gardens and orchards, but the hill itself is at once to be levelled to make room for a network of tracks and freight-yards.

We have no regrets for the asylum. Although it has been admirably quartered here for the greater part of a century, it has found a quieter site for its future needs in the ample demesne out among the Waverly oaks.

But the transformation of this picturesque remnant of an earlier time should not take place without some record of its history ; for soon the fact that there ever was a hill there, and a great institution upon it, will be known to but very few of the busy throng that pass that way.

Until near the close of the last century it was a rather rough, open area, used for pasture and tillage, and was commonly called "Cobled Hill," as spelled in letters of that time. About 1791 the whole promontory — then a part of Charlestown — was bought by Joseph Barrell, a wealthy merchant of Boston, who had a fine house on Summer Street, with gardens extending back to Franklin Place. Being on intimate terms with Charles Bulfinch, with whom he had shared a commercial venture in the expedition of the ship "Columbia"[1] to open trade on the northwest coast, he engaged that young architect to prepare the designs for a large mansion to be erected on the brow of the hill, some fifty feet above tide-water.

It was Mr. Barrell's ambition to create an ideal country-seat, adorned with all the accessories of lawns, trees, gardens, terraces, greenhouses, fish-ponds, dove-cotes, poultry-yard, stable, coach-house, a well-stocked barn, and an attractive boat-house. And here he was able to carry out his magnificent plan. All the resources of Nature and Art were combined to make Pleasant Hill — as it was then called — the most complete and sumptuous residence in the suburbs. The choicest plants[2] were imported from Europe, and gardeners to take care of them. Elms and poplars lined the winding avenues in different directions. At one time the place was called Poplar Grove. Trout and gold-fish were domesticated near a fountain by the summer-house at the foot of the garden.

Access to Boston was made easy by a barge with liveried boatmen, which the owner maintained for himself and his friends. There being no Craigie's Bridge at that time, it was necessary, in driving, to go around by Charlestown ; or one could take the longer route by the colleges and through Brookline and Roxbury. Dr. Everett says he remembers hearing that Mr. Barrell often drove into town that way with his fine horses. That he had a good stable is evident from the fact

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[1] See Proceedings for May, 1892 ; also "New England Magazine" for June, 1892.

[2] See Memorial History of Boston, IV. 636.

that at the time of Washington's visit, shortly before, he was chosen, with Samuel Breck and Dr. Eustis, as a committee of the town to escort the President from Worcester to Boston; and these gentlemen furnished their own equipages for that occasion.[1]

The crowning feature of this fine estate was the elegant dwelling-house — 74 by 42 feet — now in process of demolition. It was in Bulfinch's early style, taken from English models of the last century. The main part of the building had two equally imposing fronts; the eastern commanding a superb view over the garden and Charles River, and Boston with its many spires in plain sight. The western porch — for carriages — was supported by four Ionic columns, resting on massive square bases of Scotch granite. The steps leading up to the front door were of the same stone, as also the caps and sills and belt-course. A unique arrangement in the hall was a flying staircase, ascending at each end — 32 feet long — and coming together at a landing in the centre, supported by four fluted posts, and again ascending three steps to another landing, and then diverging right and left to landings connecting with each wing of the house as well as the centre.

The swell eastern front formed an oval drawing-room, one story high, on the roof of which rested two Corinthian columns, 16 feet long, with pilasters against the house, supporting the upper roof covering the balcony.[2] The main building was three and a half stories high, and the wings originally had two stories.

The walls were thoroughly laid in brick; and the timber of hewn pine, brought from the Kennebec, measures 12 by 12, and sometimes even 16 by 16, inches. In some cases, where the timbers were not long enough, ingenious splices were made with bolts and nuts, so that they were as rigid as the main timber. All the framing shows great care in providing against strains and for the support of weights.

The building has many other features not found in our modern houses. The floors are deadened by brick laid between floor joists, and an under floor laid over them. Back of the

[1] See Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society, I. lxvii. Address by the writer at the one hundredth anniversary of Washington's visit to Lexington.

[2] A good picture of this vine-clad front may be seen in the "New England Magazine" for November, 1890. Also a fine old engraving in the "History of the Massachusetts General Hospital."

base boards are brick laid in mortar, forming what we should call fire-stops, but what may have been intended for rat-stops. The same precaution was taken where spaces were unused, back of partitions and around the big chimneys. And so perfect was this work that the contractors tell me that the usual signs of vermin in such an old house are totally absent.

All the inner partitions, not of brick, are of two-inch pine plank set tight together, and split hemlock laths fastened with hand-wrought threepenny nails, forming a stiff partition only four inches thick when plastered. The wood cornices and panelling of the principal rooms were finely carved.[1] The outside columns are remarkably well preserved, owing to the free use of white lead and oil in the joints when put together. As to the masonry, the workmanship was everywhere a solid mass, without a crevice. The building, as I examined it in partial ruin yesterday, reminded me somewhat of Kenilworth Castle or of some old Yorkshire Abbey.

Here Joseph Barrell lived until his death, October 13, 1804.[2] He always exercised a large hospitality, and was generous in allowing strangers to visit his charming grounds. His son-in-law, Benjamin Joy, sold this part of the estate in 1816 to the trustees of the Massachusetts General Hospital, who added another story to the mansion, and made it the residence of the Superintendent and other physicians. The neighboring buildings, north and south, with their graceful domes also show the hand of Bulfinch. There were two fine rows of elms near them, which were allowed to stand for a while, but they were cut down afterward at the suggestion of Dr. Wyman. It was remarked at the time that the Asylum buildings were erected to accommodate the trees, and then the trees were cut down to accommodate the buildings. But they are all disappearing now together; and soon there will be nothing left of Pleasant Hill.

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[1] All the best wood-work is to be transferred to the new country-seat of Mr. Francis Shaw in Wayland.

[2] He was buried at night, by his own request, in the family vault at King's Chapel.