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How the Piarists and the Docent Saved Frank Lloyd Wright's Graycliff

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"Dear Dar:

I have been-seen-talked to, admired one of nature's noblemen-Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright. He is not a freak-not a crank-highly educated and polished, a straightforward business like man with high ideals.

He would be pleased indeed to design your House. Mr. Wright says he don't want any man to accept his ideas just because they are his-he proposes to furnish a reason for his ideas and wants judgment made solely on the merits.

He will build you the finest, most sensible house in Buffalo. You will be the envy of every rich man in Buffalo, it will be published in all the Buffalo papers, it will be talked about all over the East. You will never grow tired of his work, and what more can you ask? He is pure gold." [i]

This letter, dated October 22, 1902, from Chicago businessman William E. Martin to his brother Darwin, would forever alter the architectural landscape of Buffalo, New York and establish a strong and enduring friendship between Frank Lloyd Wright and the Martins. Through the years, the distances and the personal and professional tumults, Darwin Martin and Wright remained steadfast in their mutual admiration. In his autobiography, Wright states "I would like to tell...especially of the lifelong interest and loyalty of Darwin D. Martin and the building of several houses for him..." [ii]

In 1904 Darwin Martin commissioned Wright to construct a house for him on a lot at Jewett Parkway in Buffalo. This house became the epitome of the Prairie Style home. It was the image of the Midwest prairie: a broad, flat, horizontal plain that meets the horizon. To translate this into architecture, Wright designed a horizontal building that was low to the ground as if it was growing from the soil. The architectural features of the Prairie Style incorporated horizontal rather than vertical lines. The roof was cantilevered to symbolize the branches of a tree. Usually the structure was two stories with a one story wing or porch. There were bands of casement windows and the other windows designed with colored patterns. But this created dark interiors

which did not suit Darwin's wife Isabelle. Belle, as she was lovingly called, enjoyed the brightness and colors of the outdoors and the amount of light entering the new house proved to be insufficient for her.

Due to sound investments, and a substantial salary as an executive at the Larkin Company, Darwin was a millionaire by 1907. When he retired on September 1, 1925, his estimated net worth was close to \$2,500,000. The couple planned to enjoy their retirement years and spent the summers at the Lake Placid Club in the Adirondack Mountains. But Belle's health and eye condition made travel more inconvenient for them.

The Summer House

There was no direct indication who wanted a summer home. The Martins had purchased property in 1909 in Bay Beach, Canada along the Lake Erie shoreline. Wright was initially commissioned to design a summer home there, but it was never built and the property later sold.[iii] In mid-April 1926, Darwin purchased an eight acre lot in Derby, New York, just twenty-two miles from their Jewett Parkway home, for the construction of the summer house. It was Belle's impaired vision that contributed to her continuing unhappiness with the "darkness" of the house at Jewett Parkway designed for her husband and she wanted something bright and airy. Aside from its shadows that plagued her, the house also failed to provide bedrooms of a size she preferred, and it lacked ample closets.[iv] By the mid-1920's, with Mrs. Martin's health inhibiting her vacation travel to Lake Placid, the decision was made to build a summer home closer to Buffalo. It would be the antidote to the Jewett Parkway house.

The ideal location was at the top of a fifty foot cliff on the shores of Lake Erie in Derby, New York. Darwin knew of the location from the Larkin Family when he was a guest, in the 1880's, at their nearby camp site known as Idlewood.[v] Darwin purchased eight acres from Dexter Rumsey, who owned a neighboring estate. This lot extended from Lake Shore Road to the cliff and was two hundred fifty feet in width.[vi] It would come to be affectionately known as Graycliff.[vii]

Wright encounters Isabelle

At this time, Isabelle wrote to Frank Lloyd Wright requesting: "Are you entirely free and fully disposed to design severely simple two story house for lake shore for Martin Family for early construction and occupancy. Specifications not important. No superintendent required..."[viii]

Wright was embroiled in his own personal difficulties at this time which consumed his energies and the letter went unanswered.

A few weeks later Darwin wrote to him requesting a reply. Wright responded: "Free and fully disposed to serve you to the best of my ability, terms regular." [ix] He invited them to Taliesin but Darwin telegraphed back:

"Your client is Mrs. Martin. She is unable to travel and everything must be made as easy as possible for her." [x]

He reminded Wright that in 1910 the architect had made a sketch for a proposed summer home, on the Canadian shores of Lake Erie, which was never constructed. That design might suffice for the summer home they now planned, except that Isabelle wanted bedrooms on the second floor. Darwin requested that a "black crayon on white paper sketch" for the design be sent as soon as possible for Mrs. Martin's inspection. [xi]

Several different design sketches were presented and either altered or rejected, not so much by Darwin but by Isabelle. Belle became fully involved in the planning and design of the summer estate at Graycliff. It was to be her house. While Darwin was in near worship of Wright, Belle was not as enamored of the architect. The continuous alterations made this a test of wills. In the frenetic correspondence between Martin and Wright, Darwin often had to remind the architect who he worked for: "Your client is Mrs. Martin. If a house is built it is only for her pleasure and we must make a joy to her of the very planning and building." [xii]

The original plans featured a two-story living room on the lake side of the house, characteristic of Wright's own home in Wisconsin: Taliesin. [xiii] As architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock bemoaned, Graycliff has the same "vocabulary as Taliesin but as is it was unsupervised (by the architect) it is not one of Wright's really satisfactory houses." [xiv]

The two-story living room plan was dismissed because of Isabelle's declining health and heating concerns. More importantly, the Martins wanted a view of Lake Erie: "no two story living room, entrance hall wider and must have a vista to the lake." [xv] Darwin advised that this was to be only a summer residence, and he would relay his wife's revisions to the noted architect. Letters continued, nearly everyday in June and July, concerning alterations and adjustments. Belle's letter to Wright of June 29, 1926 was most detailed and, in a somewhat aggravated tone, requested that the architect: "move the maid's bathroom"; "what is the cost of the flooring material"; "stair may turn at right angle not winding"; "what is the cost of the copper pipe"; "move the south wall further out"; "all windows on the first floor are to open out" [xvi] Basically, these were the same questions that any homeowner asks the architect or contractor when they are designing a custom home.

A woman who knew her own mind was the kind of client Wright emphatically did not want unless she was a special kind of enlightened woman who wanted the kind of house he wanted.[xvii] Belle taunted the architect about her continued list of revisions writing “with all the realm of architectural design at your command your unparalleled genius surely will not balk at this small problem.”[xviii] Not wanting to offend this patron and lose the commission, especially at a time of personal financial difficulties, Wright wryly replied that Isabelle does not appear to understand what is involved in the design process and that “I will do my damndest, as she seems to be doing, ‘Angels can do no more.’”[xix] The experience of designing Graycliff would prove to be a joyless experience for everyone concerned.[xx] However her confidence in him slowly increased. By 1928, after her first summer in the house, Belle wrote to Wright proclaiming that “We can’t proceed a step without you.”[xxi]

The Grammar of Graycliff

Wright eventually developed the specifications for the lake house property. The house would be parallel to the lake with a garden wall connecting it to the garage and therefore forming an L shape. He connected the element of water to the house by placement of a pool in the center of the driveway circle. The L shape is repeated throughout and is the architectural shape-relationship or “grammar” of the house. Wright purposely set the house back from the cliff’s edge the same distance as the height of the cliff’s wall creating an L.[xxii] Wright believed that a house “should be a grammatical expression of an organic integrity”; it should be a complete design.[xxiii] By “grammar” Wright was expressing a relationship of the natural elements to the entirety of the structure. Wright observed:

“Every house worth considering as a work of art must have a grammar of its own. ‘Grammar’ in this sense means the same thing in any construction - whether it be of words or of stone or wood. It is the shape-relationship between the various elements that enter into the construction of the thing. The ‘grammar’ of the house is its manifest articulation of all its parts. Your limitations of feeling... your choice of materials for the doing (and your budget of course) determine largely what grammar your building will use.”[xxiv]

Driving onto the property through two stone piers, the visitor views Lake Erie and the horizon before any buildings are encountered. Wright developed a diagonal axis across the property aligning it with the setting sun to conform with the geology of the site.[xxv] The architect followed form in his use of natural light for the summer house:

“The best way to light a house is God’s way - the natural way, as nearly as possible in the daytime and at night as nearly like the day as may be, or better. The sun is the great luminary of all life. It should serve as such in the building of any house.”[xxvi]

Wright's personal dictum "out of the ground and into the light" referred to the organic process of building and, because of its nature, a structure is never finished.[xxvii]

Graycliff filled this descriptive pattern. After all the revisions, proposed additions and alterations, building started in 1926 and concluded in the early 1930's. At this time, Wright's life was an entanglement of personal crises (with his soon-to-be former wife) and financial difficulties (a pending foreclosure on Taliesin). On September 18, 1926, John Lloyd Wright, the architect's son, sent a letter to Darwin stating that he would be supervising the project "Have been requested to continue architectural services, trust I may be allowed to inspire your confidence in my ability to serve you in this matter." [xxviii] An agitated Darwin insisted that Frank Lloyd Wright be available to handle the construction of Graycliff personally "I hope you will understand and perhaps agree with me when I say there is only one Frank Lloyd Wright and no one can substitute for him. I hope Mr. Wright's retreat is not so remote that he cannot give us the cooperation promised." [xxix] John sheepishly replied "I am not trying to impersonate Frank Lloyd Wright, I am simply trying to help him, his work and you at this time." [xxx]

Wright originally designed the main house as two houses joined by a second story bridge, further defining the view of the lake. It would be a screen between the land and the lake. At the front of the house the porte cochere [xxxi] extends over its stone pier supports and continues over a stone basin from which water flows into a pool. [xxxi] Originally, the Martins requested that the architect "eliminate the porte-cochere and substitute glass awning as was verbally asked when you were here." [xxxiii] That request was ignored by the architect. Wright's vision was to create the natural impression of the lake flowing through the house; he later revisited this concept with his design of the Kaufmann House, better known as Fallingwater. [xxxiv]

As with any custom built home, there will always be a degree of disconnect between the Client and the Architect. The Martins were continually altering the house designs and these changes exasperated Wright. Ultimately, Wright knew that his friend and client, Darwin Martin, would get the house that Belle wanted. However, this was not the summer cottage that was first envisioned by the Martins. They received a different type of summer house unlike anything ever conceived by Wright. He submitted designs that favored a hip roof, which the Martin's approved. Above the porte cochere, on the second floor, is a diamond shaped window. This configuration is repeated in the roof to the left and at the end of the porte cochere. This window is set in tichenor limestone, located ten to twelve feet below the surface of the property and also on the cliff face. [xxxv]

Wright built on the "human scale". He designed the house, and its corresponding objects, to

appear of normal size. He understood that people responded to differing scales and experienced space and form by way of empathic experience. A hulking fireplace with a low mantle combined with low ceilings made occupants feel taller and more in command of the space and vistas.[xxxvi] By doing this doors, windows, stairs, placement of handles and switches fell within the range of familiar experience.[xxxvii] It was the continuous presence of the organic in the details and an observed trait at Graycliff.

Isabelle, renowned for her floral arrangements, was at home in her garden, and Wright designed Graycliff to fulfill her needs with gardens at the front and rear of the house. The home was filled with her bouquets from the flower beds, and guests would leave with baskets of vegetables from the other gardens.[xxxviii] Eventually, the Martins hired landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman to reconstitute and revise Wright's landscaping scheme, including the removal of the pond in the circle.[xxxix]

Even though Wright designed the house it was understood, by all, that the summer house had always been Belle's concept. The Martin family enjoyed the summers there with Isabelle entertaining or holding afternoon teas. There was a genuine grace and charm to the residence because of Isabelle. By opening up the house, it allowed for nature and light to enter and bring the family together and make living more relaxed, certainly as it should be at a summer house.[xl] Wright planned this building to be in harmony with the bounty of the natural surroundings. It was a positive influence on the living patterns of the family. This truly mystical, if not spiritual, experience was only enjoyed for several more years.

The End of Belle's Summer House

The stock market crash of 1929 and an adverse tax decision in 1933 eroded the Martin's fortune and likely contributed to Darwin's declining health.[xli] Starting in 1929, Darwin sustained a series of mild strokes and a more serious episode, on December 17, 1935, resulted in his death. It was reported that upon hearing of Darwin's death, Wright stated he had lost his best friend and most influential patron. "I only wish I had been less taking and more giving where he was concerned" lamented Wright.[xlii] Over the years, Darwin loaned or gave Wright approximately \$70,000. None of it was ever repaid.

With Darwin's death, Belle was unable to cope with the financial difficulties. She attempted to sell the home and furniture on Jewett Parkway and even Graycliff, but there were no buyers. In 1937, Isabelle effectively abandoned the main residence in Buffalo, not even bothering to lock the door behind her. She moved into an apartment, owned by her son, located at 800 West Ferry Street in the city.[xlili]

In 1940, Belle, with her aide Cora Herrick, moved in with daughter Dorothy. She continued to summer at Graycliff until 1943 but stayed in the former chauffeur's apartment since she could not afford to open the main house.[xliv] Bedridden the last two years of her life, this gentle and gracious lady died on February 22, 1945 at the age of seventy-five.[xlv]

The summers at Graycliff were warmly recalled by Margaret Reidpath Foster, the granddaughter of Isabelle and Darwin Martin, on her visit to the estate in August, 2005. Her thoughts were of the house filled with sunlight, abundant flowers and refreshing breezes from the lake.change [xlvi] Margaret remembered the enjoyment of splashing in the fountain by the porte cohere and of sitting on the terrace and looking through the house to see Lake Erie. "We'd open all the windows in the music room and Aunt Polly would play the piano, and I would sing. Then the birds outside would sing. It was a harmonious place. Joyful. There was no sadness." [xlvii]

The Martin's grandson, Darwin Foster, also has fond memories of the summer house. He remembers limousines lining the drive when Belle entertained or held afternoon tea.[xlviii] Flowers could be found in the gardens and bouquets throughout the residence. Croquet on the front lawn or a house filled with over night guests was reminiscent of the civility and tranquility of the summer estate.

These pleasant times would not long endure. Just prior to 1929's "Black Friday" Darwin, in failing health, established the Buffalo Phoenix Corporation as an investment and insurance company for his son, Darwin R. Martin, to operate and manage the family wealth.[xlix] Due to under performing investments, the Great Depression eroded the Martins' fortune. During this time, both estates were owned and maintained by the Buffalo Phoenix Corporation. In 1946, the City of Buffalo took possession of the city property for back taxes, while the summer house remained vacant.[l]

Scholarum Piarum

In 1949 a priest of the Buffalo Diocese, Father Julius Szabo, petitioned Bishop O'Hara to introduce a religious order of men from Hungary into the diocese as they were accomplished in their education skills.[li] The Scholarum Piarum (of the Pious schools) or Piarist Fathers, were founded by St. Joseph Calasanctius in 1617. Moved by the misery of the poor children of Rome, he opened a free school for them in 1597, which was available to all children regardless of religion, and is considered to be the first modern public elementary school.[lii] The hallmark of this religious order would be the education of youth, especially the underprivileged, providing them with the highest quality of instruction.

As do many other religious communities, members of the Piarist Order, profess vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. In addition, the members of this order also profess a fourth vow to dedicate their lives to the education of youth. In 1948, Pope Pius XII named St. Joseph Calasanz the “Patron of all Christian Schools.”[liii]

With these prominent credentials, several Piarist fathers traveled from the provincial house in Devon, Pennsylvania to Buffalo, New York in 1949. Upon their arrival, the Fathers began searching for a property that could become a local foundation for a school, a residence for the priests and also to be utilized for other religious functions.[liv] The priests, mostly of Hungarian descent, became a welcomed addition for the ethnic Hungarians in western New York, southern Ontario and northern Ohio, receiving donations and assistance from this community. [lv]

The Piarists at Graycliff

In 1951, the Fathers decided upon the former Martin Family estate in Derby, New York and purchased the property from the Buffalo Phoenix Corporation for \$50,000.[lvi] It became a focal point for education and Hungarian culture in the area. The main residence and other buildings were suitable and would need some alterations to accommodate the needs of these unassuming and humble priests.

Initially, Mass was celebrated in the living room, but it was soon apparent that a chapel was needed for formal worship. The garage was considered but there were other future plans for that building. Consideration was given to building a separate structure, but the costs were prohibitive.[lvii] It was decided to enclose the south terrace and convert the space into a chapel. The work was done by a local contractor and volunteer members of the local Hungarian community.[lviii] The workers filled in the sunken garden area with concrete to bring it even with the stone terrace. An outer wall was constructed on top of the stone wall and the interior doors were moved to that wall to serve as windows. The clear glass was replaced by colored, opaque glass to simulate stained glass windows. The roof was extended from the cantilevered second floor corridor to cover the new structure.[lix]

St. Michael’s Chapel was a small, modest sacred space that could accommodate approximately fifty worshippers. Naturally, it was the *raison d’être*, the life of this small religious community. After the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the altar and tabernacle were moved away from the back wall; this was the only significant alteration to the chapel during the Piarist ownership.[lx] Flowers that decorated the altar and house came from the flower beds in front and along side of the main house. These were the same gardens that Isabelle tended.[lxi]

Prayer is central to the life of the priest and the community of faith and as such, daily Mass was celebrated as was the recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours.[lxii] The Chapel was also the central focus for special occasions. Christmas and New Year's Day Mass were particularly well attended by the local community with an overflow crowd into the living room and dining area. The holidays were fondly remembered by all the guests and visitors to the house. Traditional old world decorations framed the celebration, and there was the singing of Hungarian Christmas Carols. This was followed by a feast of Hungarian specialties shared by all.[lxiii]

The Piarist Fathers continued with their adjustments to the main building. An aluminum frame and glass enclosure was added to part of the second floor north terrace.[lxiv] This was the area facing the lake off of Mrs. Martin's room. The roof shingles were replaced in the late 1950's, as some minor leaking was discovered. The winters were brutally cold, with the lake winds penetrating the house designed as a summer residence. In the mid to late 1960's, a forced air natural gas heat system was added, which entailed alterations to the walls and the addition of duct work. The priests were told this would make the house warmer but it did not have a great impact so some areas of the house were closed off.[lxv]

The "heat hut" was later utilized as a wine cellar, but it was seldom used. It held sacramental wines and homemade wines given as gifts. It became a source of local folklore for all the wines that were not stored there. The priests were more proud of the homemade honey from the hives on the property that was also stored in the hut.[lxvi]

Father Stephen Gerencser, Sch.P. was the influential leader of the initial group of priests to settle at what the Fathers would simply call "the Derby House".[lxvii] He knew of the legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright and that the Order was fortunate to live in this special place. The mission of Fr. Gerencser was to start a school for gifted children from pre-kindergarten through high school, and so he began the Calasanctius School in Buffalo soon after the Piarists arrived.

In 1955, near the main entrance to the Graycliff property, a two story concrete block school building was erected. This building originally was used as a school, but by the early 1960's was converted to a boarding house for students attending Calasanctius High School.[lxviii] The high school was located on Windsor Avenue in Buffalo, and ironically was only a few blocks from Darwin Martin's home on Jewett Parkway. Due to financial difficulties the school closed in 1991.[lxix]

At the Derby House, the garage and apartments were also enlarged into living space to accommodate a novitiate.[lxx] The first novices arrived in 1966 and the novitiate program lasted until it was transferred to Florida in 1982. Duties for a young novice consisted of cutting

the grass, painting where needed, general maintenance and shoveling snow.[lxxi] Afterward this building, the former residence of Isabelle's daughter, was eventually used for religious retreats. During the course of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, refugees were temporarily housed at Graycliff while they sought asylum or were in transition.[lxxii] Additionally, the Fathers constructed a gym at the south end of the property in 1957.

By the late 1980's, enrollment at Calasanctius High School was declining and the number of Piarist Fathers who could staff the school was dwindling. To continue in the spirit of the order, the Evans Pre-School Center was opened at the site of the former school building in 1979.[lxxiii] Later, St. Michael's School, a Catholic elementary institution, was formed in 1987. Both schools unfortunately did not remain open for extended periods.[lxxiv]

The number of Piarist Fathers occupying the residence, not including novices, varied from as many as nine to the final two in 1999. The estate was always lively and filled with people- either novices, those on a spiritual retreat or guests.[lxxv] Every May, there was the May Crowning of the Virgin Mary. In July, the Piarist Guild conducted a Lawn Fete to raise money for the school and in August, the Fathers would hold a Garden Party to raise money for the upkeep of the property, which was in need of repairs.[lxxvi] These events were well attended and anxiously anticipated by the participants.

Wright Returns

Of the many guests to visit Graycliff, the most notable was its designer: Frank Lloyd Wright. He first visited the site in April 1927 one year after the land was purchased and several months into the construction of the structures. He made a few other visits to the summer house, having dinner with the Martins in the Summer of 1929 and attempting to dissuade Darwin from a third floor addition to the main house.

In the Spring of 1936, several months after Darwin had died, Wright and some of his students were traveling from Buffalo to Pittsburgh. En route to Pittsburgh, they stopped by Graycliff to pay their respects to Isabelle who was not at the summer house. Upon entering the main house, Wright directed the group to remove the furniture covers, and the noted architect began to rearrange the furniture. After that, he instructed the students to get knives from the kitchen and cut some flowers which were placed in vases in the living room. Wright left a note for the Martins: "Stopped by to visit you, FLLW, your architect." [lxxvii]

But the most notable visitation, one that has taken on mythical proportions, was the architect's last visit to Graycliff in October 1958 just months before his death in April of 1959. The ninety-one year old Wright made a surprise visit to the property. He surveyed the changes to the main

house: the addition of the chapel at the south terrace, the new school building, and the overgrown gardens. According to then rector, Fr. Alphonse Vereck, the agitated architect emerged from his car and, shaking his cane at the house, clamored: "Who did this? Who made these changes? This is not my work!" [lxxviii] The priest explained to the noted architect that as a religious community of priests they needed a chapel. Wright replied in disgust: "Well, I guess if you need it." [lxxix]

The Sgraffito

Not all of the treasures at the Derby House can be credited to Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1967, noted Polish artist Josef Slawinski created a mural of St. Joseph Calasanctius in commemoration of the 350th anniversary of the founding of the Piarist Order. The large 12x18 foot mural graced the side of the school building erected by the Order. It portrays the Saint on a panoramic view of Rome surrounded by the children he sought to educate. [lxxx]

The mural is a sgraffito. This is a very labor intensive technique in which the artist applies four layers of pigmented cement to a wall surface. The first one is black, the second red, then yellow and finally white while all the cement layers are still wet. Then, the wet layers of cement are carefully scraped away to create the image. [lxxxii]

In 2001, the Polish Arts Club of Buffalo was contacted about preserving the mural as this building was to be demolished. Through the efforts of this cultural organization, the mural was saved and restored. In November, 2005, it was placed in a special wall structure on the north side of the E. H. Butler Library at Buffalo State College, Buffalo, New York.

The Fathers Prepare to Leave

In 1991, Calasanctius High School closed its doors, and only three priests remained in residence at Graycliff. Their primary duties were to minister to the local Hungarian community and assist the Church where needed. These clerics were in their late seventies, and so housekeeping and maintenance of the buildings and grounds was nearly impossible. The main use of the Derby House was as a private retreat center. The complex was nearing the end of its intended purpose. The buildings were showing signs of age and neglect. The roof, chimney, windows and driveway all needed to be replaced; there was a broken gas pipeline that had to be repaired. Heating costs proved to be a drain on the meager financial resources of the community. [lxxxiii]

During the 1995 annual visit by the Provincial, a dialogue began concerning the future health of the priests, their limited duties and the financial burden of maintaining the Derby House. The possibility of selling the property was realized. The priests were reluctant to leave their home. It

had become a place of contemplative prayer and beauty for them. Their mission was to minister to the faith community and conduct retreats, but their ability to continue was dwindling.[lxxxiii] Through the first half of 1996, the discussions continued and it was decided that the property would be sold and the remaining priests transferred to a small Hungarian parish, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in Lackawanna, New York.[lxxxiv]

During the years, the Piarist Fathers recognized that their house was significant because of the design and the architect. Fr. Miskolczy contacted the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy in Chicago for an assessment of the buildings and the current fair market value.[lxxxv] They responded that the estate was worth \$1.1 million dollars, but that was dependent upon the condition of the property. The estate, worn and weathered, tattered and torn could not justify the estimated value. The initial asking price was \$500,000 based on the recommendation of the real estate agency and Father Provincial.[lxxxvi] The "For Sale" sign was posted on July 12, 1996. While several potential buyers expressed interest, there were no serious offers to purchase the former Martin estate. The local government, residents and Frank Lloyd Wright devotees were concerned that the property would be sold to a developer and the buildings demolished to be replaced by lake side condominiums. But the Piarist Fathers were determined that this valuable Wright property remained intact.

The Docent

The Darwin Martin House in Buffalo, was in the midst of a renovation and rehabilitation of the property in the 1990's. It was the more well known of the Wright structures in western New York and so it received the lion's share of attention and funding. It was here that the seeds of salvation for Graycliff were planted. A volunteer docent at the Martin House, Carol Bronnenkant, and others were discussing the sale of Graycliff in December, 1996. It was assumed that a developer would purchase the site, demolish the buildings and construct high valued condominiums, as was done at the former Dexter Rumsey Estate.[lxxxvii]

This docent, with a thirst for preserving architectural history, was interested in viewing the interior of the house before its presumed destruction. In discussing Graycliff with her husband, it was decided to contact the realtor and visit the estate under the alias as a potential buyer.[lxxxviii] The family toured the house the following month and realized that the structures were in need of a major renovation. However, walking through the structures and absorbing the vistas of Lake Erie, Bronnenkant received her avocation at that moment. She was determined that the estate should be saved and not be a part of local architectural infamy like Wright's other significant structure in Buffalo, the Larkin Administration Building, which was demolished in the 1950's.

The Graycliff Conservancy

Bronnenkant realized that this was a movement that she alone would foster. A call to action meeting was scheduled on March 18, 1997 at the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. It attracted over one hundred and twenty Wright enthusiasts. From this, a core of thirty formed the nucleus of what ultimately became the Graycliff Conservancy Incorporated.[lxxxix] Their venture was profoundly simple: purchase and restore Graycliff to its elemental beauty. The final goal was to return the estate to the 1930's as if Belle was still there, somewhere on the property, anticipating the arrival of her guests for afternoon tea.

To do this, funding was needed to first secure ownership and then preserve the property. The money came from grants, fund raising efforts and corporate support. However, the Conservancy's first task was to secure enough money to take an option on the property for \$20,000 by December 1, 1997.[xc] The Conservancy had bid \$420,000 for the estate, which was \$30,000 less than the selling price. They still needed to raise the additional amount within nine months. There were more than fifty interested parties and better offers, but the Conservancy appeared to have had a more "workable" plan for the purchase.[xci]

Bronnenkant was pleased that the Piarist Order supported the Conservancy's bid as she stated: "I view it as a sign of trust from the Piarist Fathers. It shows that they still care about the property. Our conservancy feels like we've been entrusted with this property and entrusted to preserve the area's architectural heritage." The priests who still resided at Graycliff realized the value of the property from an historical and aesthetical perspective. Their personal feelings, as well as those of the Piarist Order, was to save and preserve the property as a museum type of structure for the enjoyment of future generations. [xcii]

Fund raising events continued which included arranging for the Martins' granddaughter as a speaker and black tie gala functions brought in enough money to meet the option deadline. Obtaining the additional funds was an equally daunting task, and due to foresight, extensions were negotiated into the sales contract. This enabled the Conservancy to gain extra time to find the necessary supplemental revenue streams and also allowed for some creative methods to raise awareness of the project.[xciii]

While the Piarist Fathers were still in residence, tours were offered of the Derby House. It was an arrangement that suited all parties. For Bronnenkant, the numbers were staggering. Four thousand people toured the estate in the first year (1998) and many became paid supporting members of the Conservancy.[xciv] The Piarist Fathers were very supportive and

welcoming of their guests. The priests believed that the tours were good for helping the Conservancy buy the house and it was an opportunity to show the visitors who the Piarists were. It was hoped by seeing the Chapel, that some would be reminded of “who is the real Creator of this place.” [xcv] However, money was still an issue.

In late 1998, the Baird Foundation became a viable partner in the efforts to save Graycliff by agreeing to underwrite the purchase of the property by the Conservancy. The Foundation’s manager, Catherine Schweitzer, stated that the “purchase and restoration of Graycliff will benefit the entire community.”[xcvi] The Foundation provided a \$200,000 cash grant with a guaranteed \$450,000 bank mortgage for the acquisition of Belle’s summer house. With the newly acquired funds, the Conservancy was able to commission an historic structures report on the cost to restore the property and determine how the complex should be utilized.[xcvii] On April 5, 1999, the Graycliff Conservancy took formal possession of the property from the Piarist Order; the estate had been rescued.

The journal entry in the *Historia Domus* for April 5, 1999 begins:

“The day of doom for Derby House; the selling has been effectuated this day, Our Motherhouse gone!”[xcviii] For the humble, elderly priests, it was a sad day to leave their home. The Mass that day was somber as that of a funeral liturgy. It was followed by a procession around the grounds with incense in thanksgiving for what had been and as a blessing for those past, present and future guests to this sacred place.[xcix]

Items from the chapel were donated to a local retreat house and others either given away or taken to the new Piarist residence in Lackawanna, New York. Naturally, the priests were dismayed at leaving. This now closed the door on the Derby House, which had been the Piarist Father’s home for nearly fifty years.

It also was the end of Graycliff as a family dwelling and residence, originally for the Martins and then the Piarist community. This space is one of beauty, that melds the elements of nature to the structure. At Graycliff, the visitor senses the gentleness of the surroundings and realizes that it is actually Isabelle’s lingering presence: a warm and genuine welcome for her guests. This space, one that was sacred first in an earthy and then a religious way, would now begin a rebirth, returning it to the essence of what was originally Belle’s summer house.

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[i] Letter from William Martin to Darwin Martin of October 2, 1902. Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 1, Folder 1. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).

[ii] Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography*. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), p. 253.

[iii] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[iv] Ramona Pando Whitaker. "The Belle of Graycliff", Buffalo as an Architectural Museum website. [HTTP: //ah.phpwebhosting.com/a/DERBY/belle/index.html](http://ah.phpwebhosting.com/a/DERBY/belle/index.html).

[v] Patrick J. Mahoney, "Frank Lloyd Wright, Unexecuted Designs for Western New York." *Western New York Heritage*, Spring 1999 Vol 3, No, 1, p. 38.

vi] Docent handbook material from Graycliff Tour, 2005, p. 5.

[vii] In September 1928, a house guest Paul A. Harsh, suggested the name of the residence be called "Graycliff" in honor of its location at the top of the bluff and the gray hues of the surrounding rocks. From Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, p. 6. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).

[viii] Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-23. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).

[ix] Anita L. Mitchell. Darwin D. and Isabelle R. Martin. Docent material from Graycliff, January 2005, p. 6.

[x] Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-23. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).

[xi] Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-23. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).

[xii] Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-24. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).

- [xiii] Mahoney, "Frank Lloyd Wright, Unexecuted Designs for Western New York", p. 39.
- [xiv] Henry-Russell Hitchcock, In *The Nature of Materials, The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright: 1887-1941*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1942) p. 79.
- [xv] Letter of Darwin Martin to FLW of May 5, 1926. Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-23. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).
- [xvi] Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-24. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).
- [xvii] Meryle Secrest, *Frank Lloyd Wright, A Biography*. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992), p. 236.
- [xviii] Anita Mitchell, "The Belle of Buffalo, The Life & Love of Isabelle Reidpath, Mrs. Darwin Martin". *Western New York Heritage*, Summer 2005, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 13.
- [xix] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- [xx] Brendan Gill. *Many Masks, A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), p. 320.
- [xxi] Mitchell, "The Belle of Graycliff", p. 13.
- [xxii] Docent material from Graycliff Tour, 2005, p. 4.
- [xxiii] Robert C. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright, His Life and His Architecture*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1979), p. 108.
- [xxiv] Gail Satler, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Living Space*. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), p. 46.
- [xxv] Patrick Mahoney, "An Architect's Descriptive History of Graycliff", Graycliff website <http://graycliff.bfn.org/pathistory.html>.
- [xxvi] Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Natural House*. (New York: Bramhall House, 1954), p. 154.
- [xxvii] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- [xxviii] Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-26 (University Archives, University at Buffalo).
- [xxix] Letter of Darwin Martin to John Wright of September 21, 1926. Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-27. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).

[xxx] Letter of John Wright to Darwin Martin, dated simply September 1926. Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-27.

[xxxi] A porch roof projecting over a driveway at the entrance to a building providing shelter for those getting out of a vehicle. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1969), p. 1021.

[xxxii] Docent material from Graycliff Tour, 2005, p. 6.

[xxxiii] Letter of Darwin Martin to FLW dated July 21, 1926. Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 4-25. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).

[xxxiv] Norris Kelly Smith, Frank Lloyd Wright, A Study in Architectural Content, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 128-129.

[xxxv] A stratum of hard bluish gray limestone 10 to 14 inches thick at all exposures from Onondaga county to Lake Erie, showing little variation in character. Likely to contain mineral additives such as quartz or oxides. D.D. Luther, "Geology of the Auburn-Geneoa Quadrangles", New York State Museum, Museum Bulletin 137 (1909), p. 23.

[xxxvi] McCarter, ed., On and By Frank Lloyd Wright. A Primer of Architectural Principles, p. 304.

[xxxvii] Edgar Tafel, Apprentice to Genius, Years with Frank Lloyd Wright. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1979), p. 50.

[xxxviii] Mitchell, "The Belle of Buffalo", p. 14.

[xxxix] Shipman was a contemporary of FLW and considered the "Dean of America Women Landscape Architects." She utilized geometric organization contrasted with lush flower plantings. Her work was uniquely American and meant to augment existing architectural styles. She designed private gardens for Ford and Rockefeller and locally, worked with the Knox family, the Schoellkops and other prominent Buffalo area families. In April 1929, Darwin had purchased 50 assorted pines in addition to the 220 he previously bought from John D. Larkin, Jr. for the summer house. (Darwin Martin Papers, MS 22.8, Box 4, Folder 5-19, University Archives, University at Buffalo).

[xl] Tafel, Apprentice to Genius, p. 51.

[xli] Mitchell, Darwin D. and Isabelle R. Martin, p. 9.

[xlii] Letter of FLW to Isabelle Martin, December 1935. Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.8, Box 6. (University Archives, University at Buffalo).

[xliii] Mitchell, Darwin D. and Isabelle R. Martin, p. 9.

[xliv] Mitchell, "The Belle of Buffalo", p. 15.

[xlv] Isabelle and Darwin Martin are buried in an unmarked plot at Forest Lawn Cemetery, Buffalo, NY.

[xlvi] John Conlin, "Graycliff". Buffalo Spree Magazine September 1997, p. 56.

[xlvii] Tom Beckman, "Martin kin sheds light on creation of Wright house." Buffalo News, July 9, 1997 no pagination.

[xlviii] Anita Mitchell, "Belle of Buffalo, The Life & Love of Isabelle Reidpath, Mrs. Darwin Martin." Western New York Heritage, Vol. 8, No.2, (Summer 2005), p.14.

[xlix] Leona M. Ketterl, "Graycliff, A Proposal for the Rehabilitation of a Master Work." May 1997, without pagination. Darwin Martin papers, MS 22.2, University at Buffalo Archives.

[l] Ada Louise Huxtable, Frank Lloyd Wright, (New York: Penguin Group/Viking Press, 2004), p. 98.

[li] Historia Domus, p. 66. This is the official record and journal maintained by the Piarist fathers during their ownership of Graycliff. Entries were recorded by the rector of the house several times weekly and contain information about significant events or the mundane daily routine that would affect this religious community.

[lii] Fr. Calasanz Bau, Sch. P., Saint Joseph Calas Sanctus. (Madrid: ICCE Publications, 1976), p. 145.

[liii] Ibid., p. 402.

[liv] Historia Domus, p. 70.

[lv] Oral history interview of Fr. Kalman Miskolczy SchP. and Fr. Nicholas Fodor, SchP. on May 16, 2006. These two Piarist priests were the last residents at Graycliff and had resided there during irregularly extended intervals since the 1950's until 1998.

[lvi] Ketterl, "Graycliff, A Proposal for the Rehabilitation of a Master Work", without pagination.

[lvii] Oral history interview of Fr. Kalman Miskolczy SchP. and Fr. Nicholas Fodor, SchP.

[lviii] Fr. Miskolczy indicated that many of the volunteers had experience as carpenters and builders and documents show a "Mr. Lee" as a hired contractor. The project was completed within several weeks.

[lix] Docent handbook material from Graycliff Tour, 2005, p. 7.

[lx] Interview of Fr. Fodor.

[lxi] The priests were pleased to know that they utilized the same space as the previous owners for gardening. Different priests would plant flowers and vegetables for their use.

[lxii] The official daily prayers of the Catholic clergy.

[lxiii] Interview of Fr. Miskolczy and Fr. Fodor.

[lxiv] Ketterl, "Graycliff, A Proposal for the Rehabilitation of a Master Work", without pagination.

[lxv] Interview of Fr. Miskolczy and Fr. Fodor.

[lxvi] Ibid.

[lxvii] *Historia Domus*, p. 117.

[lxviii] Interview of Fr. Miskolczy and Fr. Fodor.

[lxix] Diocese of Buffalo Archives, Calasanctius High School folder.

[lxx] A novitiate program is an intense year or two of introspection and development of a religious candidate preparing him for the priesthood. This is usually done during theological studies.

[lxxi] *Historia Domus*, p. 136. "There always seemed to be a lot of snow!" per Fr. Fodor.

[lxxii] For related information refer to Buffalo News article of February 3, 1999 by Tom Beckman, "Former Refugee Recalls Role of Piarist Fathers in Preserving Graycliff." Fathers Miskolczy and Fodor confirmed that refugees were on site but would not elaborate.

[lxxiii] *Historia Domus*, p. 118.

[lxxiv] Interview of Fr. Miskolczy and Fr. Fodor.

[lxxv] Both priests stated that sometimes a visitor would stop by as they were interested in seeing this particular work by Wright.

[lxxvi] Ibid. The *Historia Domus* indicates that the 1979 money went to repair a broken water main on the property.

[lxxvii] Edgar Tafel, *Apprentice To Genius, Years with Frank Lloyd Wright*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.,1979), p. 93.

[lxxviii] John H. Conlin, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Last Visit to Graycliff", The Graycliff Conservancy Newsletter, 2000, 2nd Edition, no pagination.

[lxxix] Fr. Fodor recalls Fr. Vereck telling them of this incident that evening at dinner. The priests could not fully understand why the architect was upset over the addition of the chapel and thought it a bit amusing at the time.

[lxxx] Polish Arts Club of Buffalo website: <http://pacb.bfn.org/projects/graycliff/>.

[lxxxi] Ibid.

[lxxxii] Interview of Fr. Miskolczy and Fr. Fodor, and the Historia Domus.

[lxxxiii] Ibid.

[lxxxiv] Historia Domus, p. 108.

[lxxxv] Historia Domus, p. 177.

[lxxxvi] Document entitled: "Our 'Mother house' in Derby, NY " by Fr. Miskolczy detailing the selling of the property in 1996. Fr. Miskolczy believed the offering price was too low for such a significant property.

[lxxxvii] This property is located on Old Lake Shore Road next to the Graycliff property. It was sold in the 1980's and housing was erected on the site.

[lxxxviii] Christina Abt, "Doing the 'Wright' Thing." EVE Magazine, Winter 2001.

[lxxxix] Author not listed, "Restoring the Legacy-Graycliff Restoration", Frank Lloyd Wright Quarterly, Spring 2005, Vol. 16, No. 2, p. 20.

[xc] James Fink, "Preservationists take option on Wright's Derby complex," Buffalo Business First, November 17, 1997.

[xci] Ibid.

[xcii] Ibid. From the oral history interview of Fr. Miskolczy and Fr. Fodor and the Historia Domus.

[xciii] Christina Abt, "Doing the 'Wright' Thing". EVE Magazine, Winter 2001.

[xciv] Ibid.

[xcv] Fr. Miskolczy interview.

[xcvi] Tom Beckman, "Foundation Will back Acquisition of Graycliff," Buffalo News, November 15, 1998.

[xcvii] Ibid.

[xcviii] Historia Domus, p. 118.

[xcix] Historia Domus, p. 122.