

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin
County
Historian

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ARCHITECTURE DESTROYED PART VII

Swan-Hart Residence 1877-1941

Among the most prominent and fabulous homes on Albion's South Main Street in the 19th Century was the residence of Wm. G. Swan. The house was designed by Wm. V.N. Barlow and was constructed in 1877. Basically, it was Italianate in style which was a popular mode of architectural design from the 1850's through the 1870's. Characteristic features of Italian Villas such as this one are: high and dominating towers, low-pitched roofs supported with decorative brackets and rounded or arched windows. Mr. Barlow, the architect, who also designed our Court House, made three elevation drawings of this residence which now hang framed in Swan Library. They are the only known drawings in existence signed W.V.N. Barlow.

Wm. G. Swan, for whom the house was built, had been a long time resident of Albion and was for a number of years, in the dry goods business. He was also part owner in Albion's Electric light plant and a Village Trustee. For thirty-eight years he was superintendent of the Niagara Railway Suspension Bridge and later became its Treasurer. Upon his death in 1897, he left a bequest of \$35,000 for the establishment of a community library (Swan). With this background, I'm sure you can see that Mr. Swan was indeed wealthy. His home was in its day, one of the most lavish ever built in Orleans County.

After the death of Mrs. Swan in the early part of this century, the house was acquired by Mr. and Mrs. E. Kirke Hart. Following the death of Mrs. Elizabeth Hart, the property was sold and in 1941 this magnificent residence was razed. A most unusual door with frosted window picturing a swan was salvaged from the house and is now used in the upper hall at Swan Library. The site of the former Swan-Hart residence became the Atlantic gasoline station which ironically was also razed just a few years ago to make way for the Arco station which within the last year has under gone extensive remodeling to become the AM PM market.

"To me, Beauty is the wonder of wonders.

It is only shallow people who do not judge
by appearances." --- Wilde

Taking another approach to this thesis, we hope readers of the Journal-Register are not missing County Historian Will Lattin's current series on "Architecture Destroyed". It has run so far in seven parts and should have opened many eyes to the disappearance of a collection of absolutely magnificent Albion mansions - the ornate homes of some of Albion's most prominent families.

In our view, this is not just an exercise in nostalgia. It is a poignant lesson on the effects of rapid commercialization. Many of the stunning homes involved in this series of articles stood at or near the main intersection in Albion, the intersection of S. Main St. and West Avenue. The demise of the homes led to a circle of gas stations and markets which at one time made the center of the County Seat village look like one of the busiest commercial zones in the U.S.

At the same time, it robbed a most beautiful village of a great deal of its grace and charm and it can be argued that this did irreparable harm, both psychologically and in the dollars and cents of civic magnetism.

In Albion's case no single person deliberately attempted to disrupt the aura of a great residential neighborhood. A small flood-tide of "business today, business tomorrow" swept everyone in its wake.

The whole up-shot of Historian Lattin's series should be to make us take a long look at how abruptly we discard the architecture of the past for concrete and glass veneer.

It is a certainty that Albion Mayor Donna Rodden has these very thoughts in her mind when she spearheads her "Historic District" projects.

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