

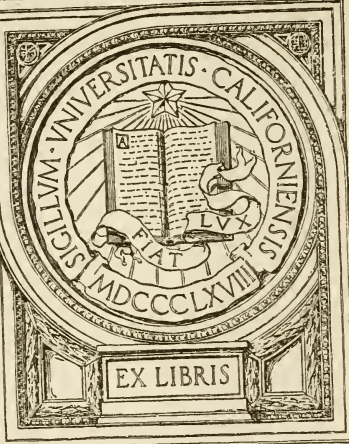
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THE POE COTTAGE
AT
FORDHAM

BY

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MEMBER OF THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY



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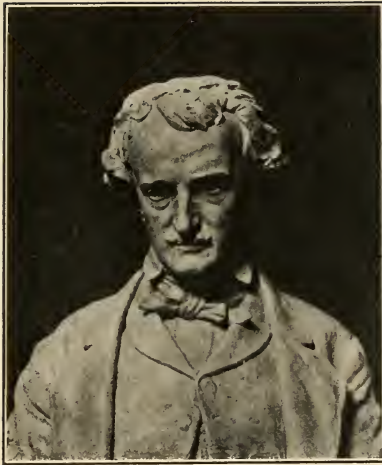
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EDGAR ALLAN POE

Edmond T. Quinn, Sculpt.



PECULIAR interest attaches itself to the little cottage in Fordham occupied by Edgar Allan Poe, for in all the great city it stands almost if not quite alone as a dwelling having direct and unquestioned association with the early literary history of the city. "Certainly no other house in this city can boast of having sheltered a poet engaged in the composition of poems of such haunting and melancholy beauty and of such enduring worth."

The small building which the poet made his home in 1846, with his wife and her mother, stood on the east side of Kingsbridge Road just at the brow of its steep descent to Fordham, at the present 192d Street. The locality known as Fordham, the old manor which was created in 1676, had a rather scattered population in farm houses

and cottages strung along the course of its most important as well as most ancient highway, the Kingsbridge road. On the east side of this old line of travel at the present line of East 192d Street, where the turn eastwards towards the Fordham road began, there was a triangular plot of ground of about an acre in extent on which before 1816 had been erected a frame dwelling house, of one story and attic, which, by 1846, had passed into the possession of John Valentine, a farmer resident in the immediate vicinity.

This is the little dwelling and plot which was leased that year on an annual tenancy, by Edgar Allan Poe, and here the last few months of the life of his wife and the last three years of his own tragic existence were spent. The situation was charmingly rural, yet fairly convenient. A station on the recently-constructed Harlem railroad had been established at Williamsbridge, a mile and a half to the north, and there had been some additions to the rustic population by well to do families, such as the Lorillards, who had built homes in the vicinity. The College of St. John had been established on the Rose Hill property, once the old Corsa farm, occupying the east side of the valley in which the railroad ran, and some of the priests composing the faculty became friends of the poet.

North of the Cottage was a wooded tract, an apple orchard across the high road covered the present Poe Park, and to the east the land sloped steeply to the valley through which Mill brook flowed. Southward, across a space of lawn, a wide outlook opened over the Bronx farm lands.

There were pleasant country lanes and paths in several directions. One of the latter which became a favorite of the poet was a footway along the recently completed course of the Croton Aqueduct which crossed the high road close to the Reformed Dutch church, and led through meadow and woodland to High Bridge, whence a distant view of the City of New York could be obtained over the Harlem flat lands. Another pleasant walk could be taken on the Fordham Landing Road, past the small burying ground of the Dutch Church, at the present Sedgwick Avenue, to the landing place at the Harlem River, across which were visible the farms of the Dyckman and Post families, their old Colonial roofs peering from among the fruit orchards that surrounded them. Poe frequently walked along



THE COTTAGE IN 1884

the highroad to Kingsbridge to visit the Macomb family, and down to Tremont village to call on the family of the resident doctor of the Home for Incurables.

Poe's dwelling stood rather close to the old road. Its west front was almost on the present building line, separated from the narrow roadway by a little strip of ground on which lilac bushes and a cherry tree grew. Until recent years the road climbed over the out-cropping ledges of rock, and it had no sidewalk: but a few flags of local blue stone formed the pathway to the porch.

The Cottage itself is one of many of its type, perhaps a little above the ordinary workman's home, of which specimens may still be seen as one passes beyond the bounds of the great city. It is, however, probable that this dwelling which has been endued with a lasting interest through its occupation by the poet, will soon be the only survivor of its kind when all others of such humble character have been swept aside by the advancing city.

The Cottage is not, as has been incorrectly asserted, of Dutch design or construction. It is the simplest American form of frame

building, such as was abundantly erected in the decades of rapid growth of our population after the war of Independence. It appears to have been built about the beginning of the nineteenth century, judging by the materials used in its construction. Colonial influence and taste still prevailed to some extent even in such unimportant structures, as evidenced by its paneled doors, broad mantels, and small-paned windows, as well as its shingled exterior, but the cut nails, rude laths and mud plaster of its interior recall the primitive character of such workmanship during the period after the war.

The stone fireplace and brick hearth of the sitting room are an inheritance from earlier times, and the broad planks and hand-hewn beams tell the story of local construction. It originally comprised only two rooms on the ground floor and two in the attic, these forming the larger part of the present building, to which, not long after, the kitchen with its separate fireplace and chimney was added. This addition afforded the occupants the use of the large room as a sitting room or parlor, and seems to indicate its occupancy by some family above the grade of its original tenants. The lean-to, which was a still later addition, answered a similar purpose by affording better conveniences in the kitchen and space for stores and fuel.

We are fortunate in having photographs, taken in 1884, of the Cottage in its original position and with unchanged surroundings, prior to its first removal. The cherry tree, grown lofty with the passing years, still stood near the porch, a younger member of the same tribe had grown up in front of the parlor windows, a large maple flourished by the well near the door of the lean-to, and a clump of lilacs shrouded the kitchen window. In the rear of the sloping garden eastward an outcrop of rock afforded an eminence to which Poe frequently resorted in his leisure as a place for rest and contemplation. The rock is there still, with the maple trees which shaded it, the little hollow space once part of the garden is also intact though the well has been filled in: and the old foundation, altered in part at the first moving of the dwelling, can still be faintly traced alongside the residence—No. 259 Kingsbridge Road—of Mr. Joseph J. M. Chauvat, the artist and owner of this interesting site.

The opportunity for making such pictures soon ceased. The road was widened in 1896, and the Cottage had to be set back about



THE COTTAGE DOORWAY

17 feet. New residential buildings were erected, crowding close up to the house, so that its position became untenable, the danger from fire increased and its setting as a picturesque country cottage was quite spoiled. After the city had acquired the area of Poe Park, it was decided to purchase and remove the house from its original site to the park. This was accomplished in June, 1913, when the building was successfully transferred bodily about four hundred and fifty feet to the north, facing in the same direction and standing about at the same level as of old. The city then confided it to the care of the Bronx Society of Arts, Sciences and History.

As it has been placed, the Cottage stands several feet above the level of the land in front. In its original situation the lawn lay only a single step below the porch. By filling in the park area in front of the Cottage in the reconstruction of the garden, the old condition will presently be restored. The maple trees which are now standing by the Cottage occupy almost the same relative positions as those around its old resting place, so that the Cottage ere long may be seen exactly as it was in those pleasant days when Poe walked the garden sward and tended the flower beds of dahlias and geraniums of which he was so fond.

The plan now being prepared for a garden to the south of the Cottage will use for its simple pathways the irregular paving or stepping stones of which Poe wrote so approvingly, and it is hoped to secure from the old site one or more of the slabs from his own garden walks.

The moving of the Cottage involved some additions and some loss. In place of the old damp cellar a complete basement, dry and airy, was constructed, but the lean-to on the kitchen end was destroyed, giving the house a shorn-off appearance. This was corrected in 1917, by the reconstruction of the lean-to, the means for which were provided by a gift from the late Mrs. Russell Sage. This work and the later work of restoring the interior was done by Mr. John Harden, whose interest in it and whose experience in other restoration work, notably the Dyckman House, enabled him to secure materials from out of the way sources and to reproduce the original construction in every detail. Doors and windows were found that were duplicates of those in the Cottage, and bricks for replacing the kitchen flue and hearths were brought from the ruins of the old Macomb house in Kingsbridge, at which house Poe had been a frequent visitor.

Protection against fire has been provided by suitable apparatus, but the possibility of loss, involving more or less complete reconstruction has also been anticipated. The Architect of the Poe Cottage Committee has made exact measured drawings of the house and of every several part, including details of the mantels, mouldings and hand-wrought hardware. By the courtesy of the New York Historical Society, copies of these drawings are preserved in their vault.



THE PARLOR

The Poe Cottage Committee, appointed by the Bronx Society of Arts, Sciences and History, on taking charge of the Cottage, found it entirely bare of contents, painted liberally with white paint inside and outside, its walls and ceiling covered with modern wall paper, its old floor-boards painted, and steam radiators and gas fixtures obtruding themselves in all the rooms. If the atmosphere and appearance of Poe's home was to be presented to the public, it was evidently necessary to attempt to restore the interior to its early condition and to furnish it suitably.

A survey of the building was made in 1916, and the Committee undertook such repairs as have restored both the exterior and interior as nearly as possible to their appearance in 1846. For this purpose all known records were searched and several detailed descriptions of the rooms' appearance and of their contents were found, as well as Poe's descriptions recorded in some of his stories which were evidently derived from the surroundings of his own dwelling at the time of his writing them.

The congenial task of restoring the interior of the house was rendered possible in 1921 by the generosity of the Chairman of the Committee, and of her friend, Mrs. John Jay Chapman, under the direction of the professional members of the Committee. It involved considerable work. The paint was removed from the floors, and upon a close examination of the numerous coats with which the woodwork was covered it was found that the original color in the parlor had been a bluish green and in the kitchen a chestnut brown.

Five layers of paint were found upon the woodwork, and as many layers of modern paper were removed from the walls, revealing below them faint traces of colored lime wash upon the plastered surfaces. The earliest color scheme, which doubtless was of the period of the poet's tenancy, has now been restored, and with the original floor surfaces exposed, the interior presents again the appearance which rendered the rooms, in spite of their humble character, so refined and attractive to the poet's visitors.

It soon became evident that but few of the household articles used by the poet could now be found or secured. The family possessions were scattered after his death by Mrs. Clemm, who gave away many of them to those kindly neighbors who had befriended the poor little family. Of his personal belongings the Cottage has now in place his rocking chair, a looking glass and wooden bedstead, the latter rescued from an old barn in the vicinity. His writing-desk and some other objects are in the hands of collectors or institutions, and cannot be recovered. Still, if the atmosphere of the interior was to be recalled, it became necessary to provide furnishings as nearly as possible in keeping with the known character of Poe's belongings and with objects of the period of his occupancy.

In response to requests for such furnishings many friends offered household materials, and grateful appreciation of the good will of these givers is here recorded, although only a very few of the gifts could be accepted without overcrowding the tiny rooms, nor could many interesting pictures which were contributed be hung without detracting from the simple character of the interior.

Entering the house by the front door at its westerly end, the visitor steps into the little hallway which lends an air of retirement



THE KITCHEN

to the interior. To the left is the winding stairway leading to the attic above. It is said that Poe had a writing table and his meagre library in a room on this upper floor. This was doubtless the little northwest room, the window of which gave out upon the high road, and from which could be seen in the distance the tower of the old Reformed Dutch church of Fordham, across the fields of the Valentine farm. This room was unheated in winter, and could therefore, have been used in this manner only in warm weather. Much of Poe's writing was probably done in the parlor where the open fire provided all the heat that was available in the house. In the seclusion of these rooms some of the author's most ambitious work was done. The Bells, Annabel Lee, Ulalume, and Eureka, as well as some of his best fiction, were written there.

The closets on either side of the parlor fireplace are original parts of the structure. They doubtless held the poet's books when the poet himself was almost unknown. Now that he is known the

world over, they are again devoted to his books in a growing collection of various editions. In the parlor is a folding writing desk or traveling *escritoire*, once belonging to the Reverend Robert Bolton, of Pelham Priory, who was a contemporary and a distant connection of Edgar Allan Poe. This desk is very similar to the one used by Poe, though somewhat less in height. Poe's own rocking chair is the most important article in the room. Its companions, the little odd chairs and seats, are of his period, as also the small center table, the clock, the hanging book-shelves and the corner what-not.

These furnishings are in harmony with a contemporary description of the contents of this room—"The sitting-room floor was laid with check matting: four chairs, a light stand, and a hanging book-shelf composed its furniture. There were pretty presentation copies of books on the little shelves and the Brownings had posts of honor on the stand."

Poe's description of a cottage sitting room, evidently derived from his own, was: "The more substantial furniture consisted of a round table, a few chairs (including a large rocking chair) and a sofa or rather settee, and its material was plain maple painted a creamy white slightly understriped with green."

The tiny bed-room, within the close walls of which the spirit of Virginia passed away on that sad Saturday in January of 1847, contains the wooden bedstead which they used. The ornamental knobs on one side are roughly cut away, doubtless to fit it under the sloping roof of the attic room overhead, where it stood during the months before her decease. A little painted chest of drawers, a small looking glass, and a hair trunk, are furnishings which seem appropriate to the simplicity and poverty of their circumstances.

The kitchen has been provided with such few and simple objects as it then doubtless possessed. The little cook stove given by Mr. John Harden, was one that was made in 1850, and is doubtless just such a novelty and treasure as the Poes found in the new stove which they substituted for the open kitchen fireplace. The little stove is said to have been purchased in order to save fuel, but more likely as a means of lessening the housework of baking and cooking on the old wide-open hearth. The kitchen fireplace was destroyed



THE BEDROOM

in the process of moving the house, so the opening is closed by a board screen, as it may have been in Poe's days, after the stove was obtained. Strange to say, when the present stove was put in place, its smoke-pipe dropped readily into the hole in the wall which had been made for its predecessor seventy-five years ago. An old-time table, some wooden chairs, a copper kettle and some old-fashioned chinaware, complete the kitchen furnishings. The old shelves in the recess on which the family china and glass were probably set out, have been replaced and enclosed with glass doors within which are placed some glassware, china and pottery of the kind generally in use at that period. The kitchen, as one visitor recalled it, had a "floor as white as wheaten flour," probably a rather exaggerated description of the well scoured surface of its old floor boards. "A table, a chair,

and the little stove it contained, seemed to furnish it completely." It would appear likely that the little family took their meals in the kitchen, as the parlor evidently had no suitable table for the purpose.

The east room which occupies the larger half of the attic was Poe's bed-room. Here the kindly Mrs. Gove, calling, found the stricken wife. "I saw her in her bed chamber," she wrote. "Everything here was so neat, so purely clean, so scant and poverty stricken. There was no clothing on the bed, which was only straw, but a snow-white counterpane and sheets. She lay on the straw bed wrapped in her husband's great coat, with a large tortoiseshell cat in her bosom." As her illness progressed and the winter came on she was removed to the little bed room on the floor below, and it is stated that at one time she lay on a mattress in the parlor before the fire. That she passed away in the tiny chamber on this floor is most probable, as the upstairs room was as cold as ice in the January weather when the end came.

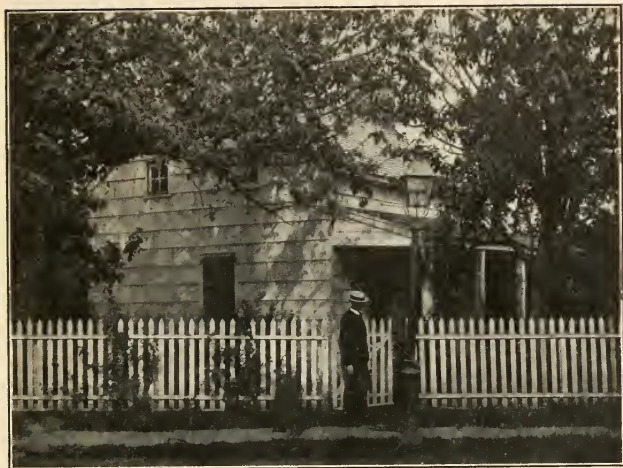
"Of this little home in the pleasant country," says Woodbury, "there are many reminiscences, curiously intermingling the beauty of nature with the poor life of the three occupants."

An English writer passed several weeks at the little dwelling in the early autumn of 1847, and described "its unrivalled neatness, and the quaint simplicity of its interior and surroundings." Mention was frequently made of the cozy home which Virginia Poe made, notwithstanding her limited means and contracted quarters.

Harrison writes of the family in their cheerful little dwelling, describing—"the wholesomeness, sanity, beauty and brightness of their surroundings . . . the direst poverty might reign as it did through life . . . yet there is none of its squalor . . . or seedy neglect."

Mrs. Gove said that the Cottage "had an air of taste and gentility that must have been lent to it by the presence of its inmates. So neat, so poor, so unfurnished, and yet so charming a dwelling I never saw."

The building was recollected by Mr. F. M. Hopkins as "a small one containing only three rooms"—he evidently did not include the attic rooms—"a porch extending along its entire front, and standing with its gable end to the street. Instead of being clapboarded it was



THE COTTAGE FROM KINGS BRIDGE ROAD
In its original location

shingled as was customary in the early days in which it was built, making a good specimen of the dignified little homes that dotted Northern New York." "In Poe's time the cottage was pleasantly situated on a little elevation in a large open space with cherry trees about it." It was at the time of the English author's visit, "bordered by a flower garden whose clumps of rare dahlias and brilliant beds of fall flowers showed, in the careful culture bestowed on them, the fine floral taste of the inmates. Round an old cherry tree near the door was a broad bank of greenest turf. The neighboring beds of mignonette and heliotrope, and the pleasant shade above made this a favorite seat." Our informant found the poet with his mother standing on the turf below the cherry tree eagerly watching the movements of two beautiful birds that seemed contemplating a settlement in its branches.

Poe's taste in gardening is evidenced by his description of garden scenes in his works, where we can trace his imaginative reproduction of scenes of natural beauty and features of their artificial enhancement which as an artist he adored, and which were doubtless present to some extent in his own little domain. Here he describes "the pillars of the piazza entwined in jasmine and sweet honeysuckle—the numerous pots of gorgeous flowers, the vivid green of the tulip tree leaves that partially overshadowed the cottage . . ." and "the large, flat, irregular slabs of granite" that "lay imbedded in the delicious turf not nicely adapted, but with the velvety sod filling frequent intervals between the stones," that "led hither and thither from the house."

Flowers were evidently specially attractive to the poet. In "Landor's Cottage" he depicts a large vase of resplendently blooming flowers on the parlor table, "the fireplace nearly filled with a vase of brilliant geraniums," others on the shelves and on the mantel, while violets clustered about the windows.

In his own description of a garden, cages of different kinds were seen hanging from the boughs of the vine-covered pear tree—"In one, a large wicker cylinder with a ring at the top, revelled a mocking bird; in another an oriole; in a third the impudent bob-o-link—while three or four more delicate prisons were loudly vocal with canaries." His visitor in 1847, found that he had "rare tropical birds in cages which he cherished and petted with assiduous care." These were probably the tropical birds the English writer failed to recognize. Woodbury speaks of Poe "finding distraction with his pets, a bob-o-link he had caught and caged, a parrot someone had given him, or his favorite cat. The family seem always to have had a bird, or a cat, or growing flowers."

The early pictures, the few relics and these fugitive recollections of various friends and literary visitors afford intimate glimpses of the life of the poet, so humble and so secluded, in the little white cottage; a life and work beyond the vision of most of his contemporaries as it was entirely beyond their powers, poor indeed in outward seeming but making many rich.

POE'S COTTAGE AT FORDHAM

BY

JOHN HENRY BONER

Here lived the soul enchanted
By melody of song;
Here dwelt the spirit haunted
By a demoniac throng;
Here sang the lips elated;
Here grief and death were sated;
Here loved and here unmated
Was he, so frail, so strong.

Here wintry winds and cheerless
The dying firelight blew,
While he whose song was peerless
Dreamed the drear midnight through,
And from dull embers chilling
Crept shadows darkly filling
The silent place, and thrilling
His fancy as they grew.

Here with brow bared to heaven,
In starry night he stood,
With the lost star of seven
Feeling sad brotherhood.
Here in the sobbing showers
Of dark autumnal hours
He heard suspected powers
Shriek through the stormy wood.

Proud, mad, but not defiant,
He touched at heaven and hell.
Fate found a rare soul pliant
And rung her changes well.
Alternately his lyre,
Stranded with strings of fire,
Led earth's most happy choir,
Or flashed with Israfil.

No singer of old story
Luting accustomed lays,
No harper for new glory,
No mendicant for praise,
He struck high chords and splendid,
Wherein were fiercely blended
Tones that unfinished ended
With his unfinished days.

Here through this lowly portal,
Made sacred by his name,
Unheralded immortal
The mortal went and came.
And fate that then denied him,
And envy that decried him,
And malice that belied him,
Have cenotaphed his fame.

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