THE DREAM-LIKE LANDSCAPE OF THE FOLLY AT BAYWOOD
Photographed by Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr.
KING'S FOLLY

JAMES D. VAN TRUMP AND BARRY B. HANNEGAN*

We came to the Folly—the little castle at Baywood—in a golden mist of September light, through an avenue of baronial trees. Certainly we had not expected to find such a fanciful structure—called the English Parapet and dated 1898—on the former estate (it is now part of a public park) of a 19th century Pittsburgh manufacturer—one Alexander King. We had sought it through a maze of rumor and surmise, since no one seemed to know much about it, and finally, after we had traversed the long streets of an aging “residential” quarter, we found it, nestling near the weedy flank of one of the city's reservoirs. The subtle thrill of mock adventure possessed us as we crossed the rolling lawns toward the towers of this sham fortification which rose enticingly from a mass of wayward vines and neglected shrubberies.

Follies of an architectural sort are far to seek in America, although they are legion in England, and folly hunting if regarded at all may be considered an innocuous sport for those who have nothing better to do with their time. The folly in its day was little more than an architectural whim, a pleasantry either Rococo or Romantic which fashionable noblemen of the 18th century loved to construct on their grounds as evidence of their sensibility and taste. Castles, ruined temples or grottoes—they had no other purpose than to adorn a view or provide the background for the idle conversation of a summer day. It is a genre that possesses the engaging candor, the absorbing fragility of the useless, the frivolous and the lovely—the folly is an architectural lily of the field. The type has never been popular in the practical cultural climate of America and so it was that we, who had subsisted on an American

* Mr. Van Trump is the authority on Pittsburgh architecture of the Eclectic period (1850-1940) and he has written many articles dealing with various phases of the subject. He has recently been appointed Recording Collaborator for that period in the Pittsburgh area by the Committee on Preservation of Historic Buildings of the American Institute of Architects. Mr. Hannegan who is much interested in 18th and 19th century art as well as our regional architecture is now engaged in graduate work at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.—Ed.
diet of desolate gazebos and inept statuary, considered the King Folly as a feast for our starved sensibilities.

As we explored the little castle with a sort of bemused delight, we found it in no way inferior to its more illustrious English fore-runners. Four round stone towers with battered sides and crenellated tops, looking much like rooks from a giant's chess set were strewn along the brow of a small cliff. One entered these small turrets by narrow round-arched doorways, and in the sudden miniature gloom, peered out at the bright verdure through arrow slits. At one side was a larger brick "keep" with battlements, domesticated into a late Victorian garden shelter. A low stone wall, also crenellated, connected these towers into a sort of defense work against the wilds of Pittsburgh's Highland Park. A childlike atmosphere of make-believe brooded pervasively and enchantingly over this rambling structure giving it a tenuous charm that was more than merely historical. One seemed transported back to the very landscape of childhood itself.

Why was the Folly built? In this industrial city it seemed so magically inexplicable that we have forborne to enquire too closely into its past for fear that its mystery and charm might vanish away. It might have been "run up" as a sort of gigantic toy for some petted child, but there appear to have been no children in the family at the time it was erected. Certainly the spirit of Romance still breathed through the smoky atmosphere of Pittsburgh at the end of the 19th century and the little castle was built like those of its English prototypes simply as a contribution to the view. The Pittsburgh view included not seldom clouds of saffron colored smoke from the mills of the Isabella Furnace not far away, clouds that represented the harsh rigors of an industrial age from which the pseudo-medieval fort was an escape. The chatelaine of this domain, we did learn, was fond of giving garden parties, and it is not difficult to imagine the little bogus towers surrounded by beds of rose trees and geraniums, echoing to the clink of tea cups and the pleasantries of promenading Edwardians. As it was a place of refuge for them, it was also an escape for us and we today may regret two vanished worlds—the far-off medieval time and the nearer brilliance of the Edwardian era—an age which, if not quite golden, may at least be called parcel gilt.

Within these magic crenellations, this place so abundantly un-
visited, we were familiar of a world almost forgotten by time, a circle of enchantment, pale in the last September light, where it was easy to conjure up visions of childhood’s lost Arcadia or that Cytherea toward which Watteau’s ship so wonderfully embarked. It was a landscape for the fugitive solitary thought, of the bright word whispered to the waiting and receptive ear, of the rose and the bay that withers not. We lingered, we dreamed, but it cast a spell too potent for long endurance and so with languid steps, we left it to fade into the glimmering shadows of the “blue hour” among the sorcerer trees. But we shall return, on some other golden day, when the world is heavy with us, to savor its forlorn peace and its supernal calm.

Since the above essay was written, the authors have collected more historical information on the Folly and the Baywood estate which they append in the following footnote:

The estate and house of Baywood, now a part of Highland Park, are located at the Park end of Negley Avenue in the section of Pittsburgh known as East Liberty. The house, with the sham castle below it, looks like a large fantastic ship, a mansarded gunboat from some outlandish Victorian navy “gone aground,” as it were, on a peninsula of land between two ravines—little valleys which even on hot summer days seem cool and remote and which, at other seasons, are filled with mists. A century or two before the house was built, the mists would have hidden a wilderness of forests, small secret streams and trails which only Indian feet could follow. This primitive land, when the tide of European settlement flowed over it, was divided into acres which could be “granted,” bought and sold.

Part of the land in the vicinity of Baywood consisted of a “plantation” with the pleasant name of “Heth’s Delight”—a tract which had been granted to William Heth of Henrico County, Virginia in 1789. Heth in 1799 sold it to Jacob Negley the elder, who gradually acquired a large estate of which Heth’s Delight with its house was the “home” farm. The Baywood property was, in the early 1850’s, the property of Jacob’s grandson, James Scott Negley (1826-1901), the horticulturist, business man, Congressman and soldier and who had achieved the rank of brigadier-general in the Civil War. In 1856, Alexander King bought the property at a sheriff’s sale and it
was this estate which served as a nucleus for the extensive King holdings which consisted, at their greatest extent, of almost a hundred acres. Part of this land was later sold for residential development, but in King's lifetime the place still retained something of that Romantic unspoiled rural quality which, in the mid-19th century, was one of the great charms of the American landscape.

Alexander King (1816-1890) the Pittsburgh importer, manufacturer and business man, was born in Ireland, but came to this city as a young man. After the death of his first wife in 1858, he married Sarah Cordelia Smith who died in 1911. Baywood, in his day, seems to have been the typical suburban "retreat" of the typical 19th century business man and it was not so very different a place from that of his 20th century counterpart, except that the pace of life there was definitely slower and the general tone, possibly, more cultivated. He was very fond of horses and kept a large stable. A Victorian biographer says that King read much and "revelled in the treasures of his library"—that he liked to entertain friends at his quasi-rural domain where "a shrubbery bloomed about him that a Shenstone might have envied." This 19th century allusion to the Leasowes, the celebrated garden created by the poet William Shenstone, is interesting because it proves that the tradition of the English 18th century Romantic garden, with its sentimental literary association had lingered, like a fading nosegay, in the cultural baggage of provincial Americans of the Victorian age. The Folly is thereby provided with a small local genealogy. We may assume that the remnant of that distant English horticultural fervor, transplanted to the alien hills of Pittsburgh, produced the sham castle as its ultimate flowering, its last memorial.

General Negley's old house burned in 1879 and the present structure with its aggressive "cupola" was erected to replace it. After Alexander King's death in 1890, his widow continued to "improve" the place and it was she who added the glassed-in verandah which is still so prominent a feature of the house. This winter garden with its tropical plants, its Arabian divans and its steam-heated "luxe" must have been very charming at one time and it was certainly more representative of its own day than the Folly.

The Folly was the creation of Robert King (1875-1954), Alexander's son, who inherited the house after his mother's death in 1911 and who lived there until he died. This cycle of ownership rounded
out for the estate almost a century of King occupation—rather a record for an industrial American city where no one stays for very long in one place. Apparently no architect was employed to make designs for the little castle; it seems to have been conceived simply as a Romantic garden ornament and Robert King employed a stone mason to build the structure according to his specifications. In 1956, a glass bottle containing some old papers (rather an "adventure story" variation on the corner stone theme) was discovered in a wall of the garden pavilion. Both Robert and his wife Mildred Kelly King gave much time to the care of the estate, and the Folly, surrounded, during their lifetime, by flower beds, was scrupulously maintained.

Mildred King died in 1949 and R. B. King, in December of the same year, deeded the property, which now consisted of twelve acres, to the city of Pittsburgh as a nature and conservation centre, with the proviso that he be allowed to live there until his death—which occurred in 1954. In 1955, the Parks Department gave possession of the house to the Zoological Society of Pittsburgh, which in turn, assigned quarters in it to other cultural and conservation groups including the Pittsburgh Plan for Art. The house and grounds have taken on an impersonal "municipal" tone, and the Folly has a neglected, forsaken air not inappropriate to so Romantic a structure. The people who conceived and cared for the estate are gone and they form a shadowy procession in the memory; the writers in the course of their rather desultory research have collected some "facts," some anecdotes about them, which it would be presumptuous to retail here and any readers who knew the persons concerned may add their own footnotes to this essay.

Historically speaking, the Folly is only of minor interest and as an architectural monument, an example of "garden art," it is of no great importance. It is, in the end, quite beyond history. Every one has his far-off country, his place of refuge against the world, his "hortus conclusus" where the verdure is forever green and the air sweet, the place where something wonderful has happened or might, possibly, happen. Only in the realm of the sensibility, of the imagination, does the little fort have its abundant and universal existence and there it reigns supreme.
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Since the research on this essay and its footnote was informal, only a summary and partial bibliography is here appended. Conversations with persons who knew Robert B. King and his wife, as well as with those connected with organizations presently quartered in the King house, yielded much information. Thanks are due to Charles C. Arensberg for his assistance in searching the deed books in the office of the Allegheny County Recorder of Deeds for records of the transfer of the Baywood property from Negley to King (Deed Book No. 125, pp. 134-136). Newspaper obituaries and biographical dictionaries, both local and national, provided information on Alexander King and Sarah Cordelia King, as well as James Scott Negley. There is a useful article on the estate in the Pittsburgh Bulletin, Vol. XLVI, No. 14, 24 January, 1903, p. 8, which contains contemporary photographs of both the enclosed porch of the house and the Folly. Those who might like to explore the English genealogy of our sham castle should consult Barbara Jones' Follies and Grottoes, London, 1953; almost any account of English 18th century landscape gardening would mention William Shenstone's famous garden.

The following local works have been serviceable: Clark, Annie C., Chronicles of Families, Houses and Estates of Pittsburgh and Its Environs, Pittsburgh, 1927; Nevin, Adelaide M., The Social Mirror, Pittsburgh, 1888; Thurston, George H., Allegheny County's Hundred Years, Pittsburgh, 1888; Wilson, E., ed., Standard History of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Chicago, 1898.

In the end it might be said, however, that there exists no sure atlas or true account of Thule nor are there any accurate guidebooks to castles in Spain.