Carnegie's Braemar Cottage

Sometimes even a well-trained eye can overlook a historic landmark when it is hidden behind siding and a full façade porch. So it was with Andrew Carnegie's summer home, Braemar, 75 miles east of Pittsburgh in Cresson, Cambria County. When the proud owner invited me inside and showed me Carnegie's lease, I realized the house had been hidden in plain sight.

While Carnegie worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad and lived for a year in Altoona in the late 1850s, he could not have helped but notice the successful clientele attracted to the Mountain House hotel in Cresson only 18 miles away. The railroad had purchased 300 acres on the mountain in 1854 and moved a wooden hotel building to the site, connecting it to the rail line by a plank boardwalk. 1 In the name of the Cresson Springs Company, a plan was developed in 1863 for 32 lots flanking the hotel on the east and west. Andrew Carnegie leased lot #14 measuring 100 feet by 100 feet in 1873. Part of the lease agreement stipulated that the company maintain a proper hotel with rooms for members and their guests at a one-third discount from the room rates for transients during the "summer watering season." 2 The resort provided its guests with access to the mineral springs and miles of wooded trails for hiking and riding. The railroad provided special excursion rates as an extra incentive to take advantage of the cooler summer breezes in the Allegheny Mountains.

Andrew Carnegie and his mother Margaret moved from Pittsburgh to New York City in 1867, living in hotels there. 3 Margaret preferred hotel living as it allowed her to have a staff without the worries of supervising a large house and hiring help of her own. She found the same ease of living in Cresson, as the nearby Mountain House provided dining and guest suites for a constant stream
of visitors. For over a dozen years the pair spent from June until late October “on the Mountain.”

It is unclear whom Carnegie hired to build their cottage, but a thorough inspection reveals several clues to its original appearance. There are remnants of the exterior’s board and batten siding on the interior where a porch was later enclosed; some jigsaw trim remains on the side window hoods outside the main bedrooms; and arched windows remain on the upper story. Inside there are 14-foot ceilings, which feature medallions and generous plaster moldings, as well as several sets of floor-to-ceiling windows and clever transoms above the doorways allowing excellent airflow. A set of enormous wooden bi-fold doors opens the two front rooms to one larger parlor for parties, small lectures, and musicales, and the fireplaces have carved surrounds appropriate to the 1870s. Carnegie chose to call the cottage “Braemar,” which in Scots Gaelic means “upper Marr,” a Highlands region and a village in Aberdeenshire, Scotland.

In 1880, the earlier Mountain House was replaced by a 900-guest, four-story, Queen Anne style frame building able to accommodate Carnegie’s guests in style. Andrew Carnegie so loved coming to Cresson that he bought 500 acres on an adjoining hill and planned to build a larger house for himself. The summer and fall of 1886 changed all of his plans. Louise Whitfield, his fiancée, visited Braemar in late July of 1886 and Carnegie wrote Louise in anticipation of her visit: “The Mountain will seem alive when you are upon it.” But, at his mother’s request, they continued to keep their engagement secret. It was to be Louise’s only visit to Cresson. In October of 1886, Carnegie’s only brother, Tom, developed a fever and died of pneumonia in Pittsburgh at the age of 43. At the same time Carnegie was suffering from typhoid and his mother was fighting her own bout of pneumonia. News of his brother’s death threw Carnegie into a relapse and he and his mother stayed in Cresson well past their usual October departure. On November 10th, 1886, Margaret died in the bedroom across from her son’s. The myth that her body was lowered out of the house through a window persists, but it is more likely that her body was removed through the library into the main parlor so that Carnegie would not be aware of her passing. He was told a week later when he was deemed strong enough to handle the information. Carnegie recovered and the following month left Cresson and never returned. He sold the 500 acres to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for a dollar, with the stipulation that a tuberculosis sanitarium be built on the grounds. Between 1913 and 1964 nearly 40,000 people were treated there.
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1 According to Sr. Anne Frances Pulling’s book, Around Cresson and the Alleghenies (Arcadia Publishing, 1997), p. 35, in 1854 the first Mountain House hotel was dismantled from its original site in Duncansville (near Hollidaysburg, just south of Altoona) and brought to Cresson on rail cars.

2 Plan: Cambria County Deed Book, Volume 25, pp. 36 and 37. Carnegie’s Lease: Cambria County Deed Book Volume 53, pp. 239-241. The lease stipulated that the water and fuel were to be provided to the lessees without charge, while any buildings built on the lot were to remain after the lease expired.


4 The present owner was told that the house next door to the north (1215 Third Street) was built by the same builder, but this has not been verified.

5 The Mountain House hotel closed in 1897 and was demolished in 1916. One of its conical towers was attached to a cottage a block away from Carnegie’s cottage. Several frame cottages remain, all have been altered. B. F. Jones’ large Queen Anne mansion on lot #13 gives a taste of the fleeting grandeur once found here.

6 The Pennsylvania State Sanitarium opened in 1913, closed in 1964, and became a hospital for the mentally challenged until 1983, when it became a state correctional facility.