"I made my way out a main thoroughfare called Fifth Avenue, lined with some of the finest residences of the city.... Here were homes of the most imposing character."

Theodore Dreiser, 1923

Aerial View of Central Oakland, 1924. By this date, the late 19th-century villa landscape of Oakland's Fifth Avenue had changed significantly. The "swan" (Holland House) and "ostrich" (Bellefield Presbyterian Church) are in the lower right corner opposite the site for the Cathedral of Learning, then occupied by the Frick houses. Cathedral construction, beginning in 1926, removed the latter, leaving Holland House as one of the few remaining representations of the villa genre. The Holland House later became home to the Knights of Columbus, WQED, and now serves as the University of Pittsburgh's School of Music.

HSP Library & Archives, From Life and Architecture in Pittsburgh (1938), with permission from the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation.

Inset: Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation
The Mysterious Origins of Oakland's Last Fifth Avenue Villa

By James Borchert, Ph.D.

By the end of the 19th century, the grand dwellings of Pittsburgh's well-to-do lined Oakland’s Fifth Avenue – “elegant’ suburban villas” architectural historian James D. Van Trump called them. From the S. B. Zug estate on the west to the Jennings’ home between Craig and Neville streets on the east, Oakland’s elite claimed major house sites along the thoroughfare. Since the early 20th century, however, massive classical and gothic structures of the city's cultural, educational, civic, social, and medical institutions as well as apartments have replaced this portion of Pittsburgh's "Millionaire's Row." Little remains of this residential landscape and even less of the large villas, with a notable exception: the Holland House at 4337 Fifth Avenue, on the corner of North Bellefield avenue. But it hasn’t been a home for years, hosting the Knights of Columbus in the 1920s, WQED in the 1960s, and now serving as the University of Pittsburgh's Music Building.

Despite its historical significance to this lost landscape, no plaque or marker identifies the building's previous history. Architectural historians have yet to definitively determine the building's architect(s), and they have confused its initial purpose. Van Trump correctly linked the residence, built 1890 – 1891, to Dr. William Jacob Holland, then pastor of Bellefield Presbyterian Church. But he hypothesized that Pittsburgh architect Frederick John Osterling (1865 – 1934), may have designed this “Manse” because at about the same time, he designed the adjacent church building which opened in September 1890 (only the tower remains). Walter C. Kidney also gave “tentative attribution to Osterling based on his having been the architect for the now-gone Bellefield Presbyterian Church.” Both architectural historians, however, expressed some doubt; Kidney, especially, wondered whether the “very polished Romanesque design” of the “Rectory” and the “very gawky Gothic” church across the street could have been done by the same hand. He asked, “can the swan and the ostrich hatch in the same nest?”

Other questions remain. Was the “polished” residence initially a “manse” or “rectory,” or was it more closely linked to Western University of Pennsylvania then located in Allegheny City (now the University of Pittsburgh in Oakland)? Histories of the school fail to link the “swan’s” origins to the surrounding university or the latter’s move to the East End.

The answers were found in the Holland Family Papers in the Archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.
William Jacob Holland (1848 – 1932), was the pastor of the Bellefield Presbyterian Church designed by Osterling; he and his family commissioned the so-called “manse” or “rectory” across North Bellefield from the church that historians attributed to the same architect. Holland, or “Will” as he sometimes signed his letters, carried on extensive correspondence with his parents, former Moravian Church missionaries who were living in Indiana. These letters reveal a long and extensive history of the planning and construction of the residence.

Holland was “undoubtedly the most talented and famous person to be connected with Bellefield [Church]”; he “was one of the last specimens of the Renaissance ideal of the ‘complete’ or unspecialized man.” His career encompassed impressive achievements in three different fields; Bellefield Presbyterian’s pastor (1874 – 1891), Chancellor of Western University (1891 – 1901), and naturalist and director of Carnegie Museum (1898 – 1922, director emeritus 1922 – 1932). While pastor at Bellefield, he taught Latin and Greek at the Pennsylvania College for Women, served as the “naturalist” for the U.S. Eclipse Expeditions to Japan (1887) and Angola (1889), became an expert on lepidoptera (butterflies and moths), and later authored several best-selling volumes including: The Butterfly Book (1898), The Moth Book (1910) and The Butterfly Guide (1915). Most importantly, Holland laid the groundwork for moving Western University to Oakland and helped transform an undergraduate men’s “college” into a co-ed “university” by adding graduate and professional programs.

Hints of Holland’s diverse career emerged earlier in his studies. An 1869 Amherst College graduate, Will studied medicine for two years while serving as a high school principal. In 1871, he abruptly changed career directions by enrolling at Princeton University’s Theological Seminary. Following his graduation in 1874, Holland became pastor of Bellefield Presbyterian Church.

Despite having attended elite colleges, it was his 1879 marriage to Carrie T. Moorhead that gave Holland access to considerable wealth. Carrie was the daughter of John and Annie C. (Turner) Moorhead. John Moorhead, a successful ironmaker, had purchased Pittsburgh’s Vesuvius Iron Works, renaming it Moorhead Bros. and Company.

Marriage into the affluent Moorhead family made it possible for Holland to move from
a renter of rooms in a Fifth Avenue house to the owner of such a house. In a January 1879 letter to his parents, Will discussed the new house he and Carrie were having built at Fifth Avenue and Halket Street in West Oakland opposite the home of his inlaws.\textsuperscript{16} In January 1882, after less than three years in their new house, the Bellefield Pastor announced to his parents that he “had been busy in thinking about and planning for a home.” He had bought a large lot on Fifth Avenue at Bellefield across from his church in central Oakland. Considering it was “the most eligible lot ... on the whole of Fifth Avenue,” he eventually sold the western half and kept the other for his new home. Holland had already consulted “with architects in regards to the work of building a home.” Unsure “whether I will really build or not,” he thought of “putting up a Queen Anne Cottage,” estimating that “such a house ... could cost ... from $15,000 to $18,000.”\textsuperscript{17}

Despite this flurry of planning, the Hollands did not immediately leave West Oakland. Many years later, Will recalled that they first used the new property “for a cow pasture.” Every morning their coachman “drove the Alderneys out Fifth Avenue to the lot and returned them in the evening to their stables.”\textsuperscript{18}

Not until early spring 1890 did Holland inform his parents that “the plans for our new home are completed and we are arranging to take bids...Our architects are Longfellow, Alden and Harlow of Boston and Pittsburgh.” Rather than the Queen Anne Cottage discussed earlier, the house, 43-by-75 feet, was to be of stone and a Richardson Romanesque design.\textsuperscript{19} Will also provided a drawing of the first floor layout, a practice he had begun at least as early as his first rented “room” in the East End.

This letter confirmed architectural historians’ suspicions that Osterling, architect of the “very gawky Gothic” church (an ostrich) across the street, did not design the “swan” of a house.\textsuperscript{20} In retrospect, Will’s choice of Longfellow, Alden and Harlow is not entirely surprising. Alden and Longfellow had worked for H.H. Richardson on the Allegheny County Buildings (1883 – 88). Longfellow and Alden’s first Pittsburgh commission was the impressive McClelland House, “Sunnyledge” (1886), east on Fifth Avenue in Shadyside. Although relatively new to Pittsburgh, they had also designed theDuquesne Club.
(1887 – 89). During the same years, the firm, joined by Harlow, became major players in Allegheny City with at least 11 residences and 2 churches to their credit. Most important for the Holland commission, in 1888 – 89, they designed Carrie’s brother’s home in Allegheny City.\(^{21}\)

Despite a “swan” of a design, construction did not go well. Holland had accepted the lower of two construction bids ($24,874 vs. $30,200), rejecting James C. Wilson, a local contractor who had just completed Bellefield Church at a cost of $43,820. Instead, he selected Erie-based Henry Shrenk.\(^{22}\) Holland’s letters to his parents chronicle the numerous difficulties he had in getting the work done right. In October 1890, he wrote that “some things were being done wrongly, and Saturday though it was, I had to go to town and stir out the architect and have the blunders made right.”\(^{23}\) Nor was this an easy time for Holland in other ways. Besides ministerial duties and construction oversight, Will suffered “from dyspepsia in a very acute form ... a terribly annoying disease.”\(^{24}\)

Holland also had significant problems with his employer. His frustration stemmed partly from his salary, which was “just what they paid me when I was a boy and came to them from the seminary.” Although he did not “need the salary in one way,” nevertheless, “they ought to pay it all the same.... I mean to resign and tell them ... my motive in doing so.”\(^{25}\) Four months later, Holland observed obliquely of his church work that “there are a great many things to discourage one at times.”\(^{26}\)

It is unclear if he would have resigned as pastor if another opportunity had not arrived. He had refused previous ministerial offers and was certainly in demand as a minister. In March 1891, however, Western University’s board of trustees nominated him to be chancellor, the equivalent to president today. Holland agonized over the decision for several days, noting that the church was “in a prosperous condition” and “the labors of the new position are certain not to be light, and the responsibilities very great.”\(^{27}\)

In early April, Holland accepted the position and resigned from the church.\(^{28}\) Two months later, he and his wife moved into their new home. Although a building trades’ strike left construction still incomplete, Holland wrote that they were “pretty comfortably fixed in the new house.”\(^{29}\) He also proudly reported that the site “is avered by many ... the prettiest street corner in the city” and “that is what I intended to make it.”\(^{30}\)
By the time they occupied their new home, William Holland was the Western University’s chancellor, not Bellefield Presbyterian Church’s pastor. As the Hollands owned the property, his resignation terminated any connection the house might have had to the church. Whatever their initial intentions, the Hollands never used their home as a “manse” or “rectory.” Instead, it became the school’s first, if unofficial, Oakland outpost.

Rather than the short walk across Bellefield Avenue to go to work, Holland now commuted to the university on Perrysville Avenue in Allegheny City. Perhaps it is for this reason, as well as the school’s problematic site, that in 1896 he urged the board of trustees to seek a new location. With their approval, Holland, joined by university trustee Andrew Carnegie, began negotiations with Mrs. Edward (Mary E. Croghan) Schenley, the owner of the huge pasture in central Oakland. Two years later, Holland convinced her to sell but the university could not raise the $400,000 for the 10 acres between Fifth and Forbes, Bellefield and Bigelow. It was not until 1906, after Holland had become director of Carnegie Museum, that the university was able to purchase the land from the Schenley estate.
The elite residential landscape of Oakland’s Fifth Avenue changed considerably over time. The Zugs and Jennings set their older country estate homes in a garden away from the street with long driveways leading from the street to the house and stables in the rear. In contrast, the newer Holland House (across Bellefield Avenue from Bellefield Presbyterian Church) adopted a more suburban landscape with a smaller lot, house closer to the street, and stable access off Bellefield rather than Fifth Avenue. Both the W.P. Magee “villa” (immediately to the west of the Holland House) and the Holland House (by 1914, the property of the Columbus Land Co.) also reflected this pattern.

Ironically, by resigning as University chancellor in 1901, while retaining his directorship at the Museum, Holland had dramatically reduced his commute to work to two blocks down South Bellefield.

But all was not well in the Holland household. Carrie’s letters to Will indicated she was overwhelmed with their son Raymond’s drinking problems and concerned by their expensive lifestyle, in part caused by extensive travel and vacations. In April 1905, she wrote Will that “I am just determined to sell this house and get a smaller one so that I can keep less servants and not be in misery all the time.” By December 1906, the Hollands had sold their house and moved to Squirrel Hill, where they rented a house at 5545 Forbes Avenue until Will’s death in 1932.

If the “swan” was not the prettiest street corner in the city as Holland had intended, it at least contained a distinctive house that continues to win architectural historians’ accolades. If it was a vexing structure to construct in 1890–91, it has nonetheless withstood the test of time and adaptability where so many other villas on Oakland’s Fifth Avenue failed. As Pitt’s Music Building, it symbolizes the university’s move from Allegheny City to Oakland and its transition from a college to a university. Most importantly, it remains as both an artifact and symbol of the area’s “elegant suburban villa” landscape.

Jim Borchert received his Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Maryland and is a professor emeritus of history at Cleveland State University. He is the author of Alley Life in Washington (1980) and co-author of Lakewood (1989).

The author thanks the staffs of the Pennsylvania Department at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, and especially the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania Library & Archives.


3 A very exclusive 1904 social directory listed 12 socially prominent households living on Oakland’s Fifth Avenue including Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Zug at 3407 Fifth Avenue and the Hollands at 4337 Fifth Avenue. Margaret A. Winans, comp., *Social Directory for Greater Pittsburgh* (Allegheny, Pa.: Margaret A. Winans, 1904). Only 6 years later, the less exclusive Social Register— Pittsburgh listed only 5 households on Oakland’s Fifth Avenue. Social Register Association, *Social Register—Pittsburgh 1910* (New York: Social Register Association, 1909).


5 Van Trump, “Belleville’s Tower,” 220.

6 Van Trump, “Belleville’s Tower,” 220 and notes 28-30. Osterling (1865-1934), was a successful Pittsburgh architect having to his credit the Times Building (1892), the Union Arcade (1915-17), and the residences of H. J. Heinz “Greenlawn” and the expansion of Henry Clay Frick’s “Clayton.” In his *Works of F. J. Osterling*, J. Franklin Nelson makes no claims for Osterling to the Holland House nor does he mention Belleville Church for which he was the architect (Pittsburgh: Murdoch-Kerr Press, 1904).


9 The Holland Family Papers (1747-1933) MSS 168 comprise 54 boxes at the History Center’s Library & Archives. Hereafter, they will be cited as HFP.


14 Carrie and her five siblings each inherited $400,000 from their father’s estate, while her mother retained about $750,000 according to Adelaide Mellier Nevin, *The Social Mirror* (Pittsburgh: T. W. Nevin, Publishers, 1888), 85.


16 *WH* to Parents, 6 January 1879, 29 March 1879, folder 8, box 23, HFP, and “Traditional Building to Be Razored to Dust,” *Pittsburgh Weekly* 27 October 1926, p. 3 (copy in folder 5, box 53, HFP).

17 *WH* to Parents, 26 January 1882, 1 February 1882, folder 2, box 24 HFP.

18 “Traditional Building to Be Razored to Dust,” *Pittsburgh Weekly*, 3.

19 *WH* to Parents, undated letter filed between 18 February and 13 March 1890, folder 6, box 24, HFP. The choice of architects is further confirmed by bills from Longfellow, Alden and Harlow for various vendors in folder 2, box 39. Holland’s letters always indicate he bought and built their homes. In contrast, Van Trump claims that Carrie actually “bought the lot” while Robert Alberts embellished further by claiming that she “built” the house “as a present for her husband.” “Belleville’s Tower,” 220; and Alberts, *Pitt*, 39. Clearly Carrie’s inheritance provided the funds for their residential and investment properties. The Holland collection indicates she held them in her name, although Will seemed to manage them.

20 Kidney, *Pittsburgh’s Landmark Architecture*, 360. Van Trump more kindly notes the church was “not one of Osterling’s better efforts.” “Belleville’s Tower,” 221.

21 *WH* to Parents, 22 March 1891, folder 7, box 24, HFP; Margaret Henderson Floyd, *Architecture After Richardson: Regionalism before Modernism* — Longfellow, Alden, and Harlow in Boston and Pittsburgh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 176-80; 140-47; 159-76. Floyd’s definitive study does not identify the Holland house as designed by Longfellow, Alden and Harlow, but she notes that “more than a dozen [of their buildings] have been discovered within the six months preceding this writing. It seems likely that more will surface in the future.” XIII.

22 Folder 9, box 39, HFP. Additional features from oval windows in the housemaid’s closet to oak flooring for the first floor museum ran the costs up to $27,092.35, while other items such as a $4,150 stable brought the total to over $33,000. Van Trump, “Belleville’s Tower,” 220, n. 27.

23 *WH* to Parents, 19 October 1890, folder 6, box 24, HFP. Numerous letters trace his disillusionment and problems with contractors and others. It was likely that “the architect” Holland visited was Frank Ellis Alden (1859-1908), who probably also designed the John Moorhead, Jr. house. Longfellow remained in Boston, Harlow did not move to Pittsburgh until 1892, while Alden lived in Allegheny City from 1888 to 1890. He then moved to Point Breeze in the East End. Floyd, *Architecture After Richardson*, 162, 186-87.

24 *WH* to Parents, 20 November 1890, folder 7, box 24, HFP.

25 *WH* to Parents, 6 November 1890, folder 7, box 24, HFP.

26 *WH* to Parents, 8 February 1891, folder 7, box 24, HFP.

27 *WH* to Parents, 22 March 1891, folder 7, box 24, HFP.

28 *WH* to Parents, 30 March 1891; 5 April 1891, folder 7, box 24, HFP.

29 *WH* to Parents, 6 June 1891, folder 7, box 24, HFP.

30 *WH* to Parents, 2 August 1891, folder 7, box 24, HFP.


32 Carrie T. (Moorhead) Holland to *WH*, 9 April 1905, folder 2, box 27, HFP.

33 Chancellor Samuel Black McCormick to the University Trustees, October 1, 1920, on Holland’s contributions cited in Alberts, *Pitt*, 53.