

Searching for the truth behind a Castanea mystery house

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It sits there, with a kind of dilapidated majesty, on the southwest corner of Allison Street and Logan Avenue in the village of Castanea. For years it has been vacant, essentially abandoned, though the lawns surrounding the house remain immaculately manicured.

On the front door is posted a "failed inspection" notice, signed by Lock Haven Mayor Rick Vilello. Last summer, an enormous nest of wasps made their home under what is left of the decaying front porch. Windows have been shattered, decorative architectural elements have dropped off.

For a lot of people, that huge brick house is easily overlooked, practically invisible. Why would anyone care about a broken down pile like this, some would ask. But for those of us who have always been drawn to forgotten places, it holds a mysterious glamour.

What secrets do the walls of that old house hold? What ghosts - literal or figurative - walk its parlors? What tales lie between its bricks and mortar? I wanted to find out.

Built around 1870, at least according to the Clinton County Historic Sites Survey, the large brick Second Empire structure is unusual in many ways, as author Susan Hannegan pointed out in her survey report.

"In Clinton County, it is very unique (sic) to find a Second Empire style building outside of the more populated municipalities of Lock Haven, Renovo or Mill Hall," she wrote. "Castanea's proximity to Lock Haven undoubtedly influenced this construction."

She included a long list of architectural features of note in her report, including "the boxed cornice and curbing, the plain frieze accentuated by scroll brackets, the two-over-two windows, window hoods, straight-sided arched third story windows, the concave sided mansard roof, and the front entry with an arched panel door, transom and label mold."

Located within sight of the Castanea train station, the building was once known as the Castanea Hotel, according to interviews Hannegan conducted with longtime locals in the mid-1980s. Indeed, it was likely a fairly busy lodging house during the height of the railroading days of the late 1800s.

One Hannegan interviewee, the late Albert Poorman, said he remembered a sizeable basement kitchen with a dumbwaiter to the first floor of the property.

Poorman's nephew, Castanea native Bob Schadt, 77, said that from his earliest days through his high school years, the building had been used as a two-family home and as an apartment house. His mother, he said, once lived on the third floor.

"My mother's bedroom was on the top floor when she was a little girl," he said. "She's been dead for a while now. They turned it into apartments for a while. I'm pretty sketchy on it and I don't really know who knows anything about it. It just sits there. I would have bought it years ago and restored it if I had been living here at the time. But if you really scrutinize it, it's in pretty bad shape."

No doubt about it, the place is a wreck. According to the county assessor's office, it's currently owned by Alan K. Spotts of Morning Star Lane in Loganton. Calls to the Spotts residence last summer went unreturned.

"I don't even know the man," said Schadt of Spotts. "I've always wanted to go in there and tour it, because since I was a kid I've never been in the place. The current owner's done nothing with it. I have no idea what he might have done with the inside."

Schadt did go inside the house on occasion as a teenager, however.

"I used to go with a girl who lived there," he said. "All I remember is, it was kind of dark and it had big rooms. That's really, Matt, all I remember about it. I was never upstairs or anything."

He does believe it was once a railroad hotel, he said.

"People would come over from the railroad station and live there," he said. "My grandparents lived there. I think they were married in 1912. My mother was born in 1913, so somewhere in that time, from 1913 to 1920, she must have lived there."

Schadt's grandparents, Clyde and Stella Poorman, were members of a very old area family that continues to make Clinton County its home.

"My great Uncle Joe had a clay mine down the road," Schadt said. "There used to be a huge brickyard and a tea factory. I remember when they mined clay up there and the cars came down in little tracks. That burned down when I was very young."

As for the former Castanea Hotel itself, a bit of information on it can be gleaned from a deed search, but not terribly much. An early owner, William M. Bickford, was a wealthy lumberman and onetime owner of the historically significant Samuel Christ house, formerly located at 320 West Main Street in Lock Haven. It was ripped down by Lock Haven University in favor of additional parking space a few years ago.

Bickford died in 1889, probably of typhoid, after one of Lock Haven's great floods. It is said by family descendants that Bickford was standing on the front porch of his Lock Haven home, using a pole to keep huge floating logs from crashing through the windows of his house, when he lost his balance and plunged into the Susquehanna, which was then believed to be rife with water-borne diseases.

Bickford was only 29 at the time of his death. He left behind a wife, Alma, and three minor children, Mabel, Harry and Muriel. In addition to the family home in Lock Haven (the one that was razed by LHU) the Bickford properties included the Castanea Hotel building. It was sold by the Bickford estate to Anthony and Rosanna Bush in 1898, according to deed records.

Four years later, the Bushes sold the property to Eliza Gross, the proprietress of the St. Cloud Hotel on East Clinton Street in Lock Haven. Despite her experience in hotel operations, it's likely that Gross was the individual who converted the Castanea property into apartments, as it was during the period of her ownership that, Schadt recalls, his mother and grandparents rented an apartment there.

When she died in 1927, Eliza left the Castanea Hotel building to her daughter, Flora Cluston. Flora, in turn, left the property to her son, John Cluston, and daughter, Eliza Smith, when she passed away 30 years later.

John Cluston, the inventor of a masonry tool, had enthusiastically run a demolition business for many years, and for that reason would hardly be seen today as a heroic figure to local historic preservationists. In fact, in 1962 he bragged to *The Express* that he had razed 52 buildings in Clinton County during an 18-month period.

Among the buildings obliterated in Cluston's demolition-happy architectural bloodbath were the "memorable old" 14th Street school building in Renovo and various Lock Haven properties, including John Shea barbershop on Bellefonte Ave.; Mae Harris bordello on Liberty Street; and Bill Murphy bakery near the Methodist Church on East Main Street.

"Mr. Cluston pokes a big hole in 'the good old days,' which are sometimes fondly recalled," *The Express* reported, "but people who think that all Lock Haven vicinity properties were constructed of prime lumber in the great local lumbering era are wrong in Mr. Cluston's expert opinion. 'It just isn't so,' he says. 'A lot of the houses were built of scrap lumber and then they surely didn't improve with age.'"

Thanks to Cluston, the self-appointed "expert" in charge of ripping down local structures and promoting his own inventions, many former Clinton County landmarks simply don't exist today.

"Mr. Cluston goes on his merry way, 'building up' his invention and tearing down buildings," the paper reported. "He presently has 18 more to go this spring and summer..."

In 1959, the former Castanea Hotel was purchased by Oliver and Betty Moon, a rare couple who actually resided in the house while owning it. Schadt says he remembers well the period when the Moons owned the property.

Aside from the Moons, however, he said, "I don't know that any of the people who owned it actually lived there. They used it for investment property."

While I had Schadt on the phone, I read him the family names of subsequent owners, to see if it jogged any memories. There were the Calhouns, for example, and the Snooks.

"Those sound like Lock Haven names," he said. "I don't think they were from Castanea."

Hannegan's research, however, seems to indicate the house's original owners were not only "from" Castanea, but were responsible for the creation of the village. She wrote that the property upon which the house now stands once belonged to Joseph Hamberger, who sold the original acreage for Castanea to Jacob Brown and J.W. Keller, the founders of the town.

"In 1871, Jacob Brown and P.W. Keller purchased the farm of Joseph Hamberger, near Harvey's Gap, on the south side of the Bald Eagle Creek, and laid out the town of Castanea," wrote John Blair Linn in his 1888 *History of Centre and Clinton Counties*. "Soon after their purchase they began selling lots, which were improved upon, and now the place presents quite a town-like appearance. It

has a good school house, some 40 dwellings, several groveries, shops, stores, etc. It is within a mile of Lock Haven, and offers pleasant and cheap homes for mechanics and others who prefer to live outside of the city limits."

Because of the age of the building and the fact that a few old timers in the 1980s still remembered a barn and numerous outbuildings associated with the property, Hannegan speculated that the structure may have once been the Hamberger farmhouse before it was converted into a hotel.

If so, was this the site where Keller and Brown developed concepts for the community? Was this where early maps were drawn up, plans made, lots haggled over, informal meetings with potential future landowners held?

There's no way of knowing today, but it's not difficult to imagine the two Castanea founders discussing the future of the village over drinks in the home's once grand front parlor, or pouring over documents and maps laid out on a dining room table.

"To really learn the history of that place, you have to find someone really old, and there isn't anybody left," said Schadt. "I'm trying to think of somebody you could talk to besides me but I'm telling you, Matt, I just can't.

"It really is a place of the past."

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