

A Visit to Mr. Stickley's House

By Bruce A. Austin | Photos by A. Sue Weisler

On an early spring Saturday, still masked and distanced, we ventured out to visit the home of Gustav Stickley in Syracuse, New York. Almost 120 years ago, writer Samuel Howe did the same, reporting on it in the December 1902 issue of *The Craftsman* magazine under a headline from which the present one is adapted.

Gustav Stickley is arguably the best-known and most widely-associated name with the American Arts and Crafts Movement. The decorative art and design style first emerged in Europe and Great Britain in the third quarter of the nineteenth century; a quarter century later, about 1900, the "movement" reached American shores. Accompanied by a somewhat squishy socialist "philosophy," the style's artistic elements were part of a design trajectory emerging from the more restrained and naturalistic Eastlake-style of the (frequently flamboyant) Victorian period, coupled with the painful plainness of the Shakers.

Howe's article presented readers a view of the "envelope" enclosing and "securing [the] appropriate and simple decorative elements for the modern house." Previously, in the October issue of *The Craftsman*, Howe discussed furniture making at the workshops of United Crafts, Stickley's firm. Hardly a disinterested reporter, Howe's essays were published in Gustav Stickley's relatively new monthly magazine for which Stickley was editor and publisher; Howe's articles touched on promotional points benefiting Stickley's still nascent Syracuse furniture enterprise.

Our report serves a different purpose: We will offer background and information about the current status of the large-scale, long-term restoration of Stickley's Columbus Avenue residence under the careful, appreciative guidance of The Gustav Stickley House Foundation. GSHF is the not-for-profit organization now shepherding the restoration project's second phase, the home's interior.



Gustav Stickley's Columbus Avenue home with its restored exterior and front porch.

Driving leisurely on the combined NY Route 5 and US 20, we noted the impressive osprey nests near-by Montezuma Wildlife Refuge had been dismantled (and relocated), then, in Auburn, we stopped for a delicious lunch at New Hope Mills. Continuing east, we passed a pleasant half hour loitering at White and White Antiques & Interiors, while tourists and their dogs meandered Skaneateles sidewalks. A brief visit to Syracuse Antiques Exchange (North Salina Street) followed by a short drive to Dalton's American Decorative Arts (1931 James Street) brought us to our Stickley House host and personal guide: David Rudd.

Mr. Rudd, Dalton's proprietor for the past 40 years, has in one role or another been involved with the Stickley Columbus Avenue home for about 30; currently, he is the Foundation's president. He offered an informed and detailed personal tour and history of the Stickley residence and the ongoing restoration process. Fittingly, Rudd's antiques shop specializes in objects from the

American Arts & Crafts Movement, including those manufactured by Stickley.

Mr. Stickley's Home

Howe's essay resonates meaningfully today. He describes Mr. Stickley's Columbus Avenue home as "singularly free from pretension" and one possessing "qualities generally lacking in architectural schemes, where their details too often smack of the dust of the drawing-office." Stickley's house features

a "quiet harmony . . . characterized by singular uprightness and sturdy independence."

The soaring, three-story wood frame house perched on a gentle slope at 438 Columbus Avenue has a long history. Today historically significant, its chronology, as detailed by Coy Ludwig, indicates the house was originally numbered 416; it was renumbered in 1918, as were all the other homes on the street. A Queen

Continued on Page 4

New York's Largest & Finest Antique store with over 10,000 square feet of Signature room settings.

Vintage Lighting • Antique Furniture
Oriental Rugs & Much More

RELIVE THE PAST

ANTIQUE REVIVAL

Located 5 minutes east of Corning, at exit 49 off I 86
26 Palmer Road North, Big Flats NY
www.antiquerevival.com | 800-780-7330

A Visit to Mr. Stickley's House

Continued from Page 2

Anne-style home with Colonial Revival detailing, the house was commissioned by an S. Rosenbloom and designed and built by Wellington Tabor. By 1910, S. Rosenbloom & Sons would advertise their South Salina St. store as "sole agents for 'Craftsman' Furniture."

The unsigned Foreword to the December 1902 *Craftsman* immodestly previewed the Samuel Howe article on Mr. Stickley's residence for readers: the article "will be appreciated by makers of homes and by those seeking to produce, with simple materials simply treated, interiors which shall meet the requirements of the test proposed by William Morris, when he said: 'Have nothing in your dwellings which you do not know to be useful or believe to be ornamental.'" As much a product of the time it was written as a matter of editorial judgment, and perhaps quaint by contemporary standards, it is neither entirely inaccurate nor simple puffery.

Completed in 1900, the house was purchased the same year by Gustav Stickley from Rosenbloom's estate. Not long after, a 1901 Christmas Eve chimney fire destroyed much of its interior. In a lemonade from lemons script, the fire served as the "incentive" that prompted Stickley to reconstruct and redesign the first and second floors. Blogger Samuel Gruber suggests Stickley was assisted by architect Gordon A. Wright.

As a result of the completed reconstruction project, the home's interior can only be understood as the fully articulated expression of Stickley's own distinctive Craftsman style. A living environment prototype wholly created by his own hand. The house and, especially, its interior design as empirical evidence and a model for the (life)style he espoused for the next decade and a half in the pages of *Craftsman* magazine.

Marking a significant aesthetic shift as much for domestic architecture as interior space design and material culture, the Craftsman style was adopted across the nation during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Regional variations – such as midwestern prairie-style or the bungalow-style of the Pacific coast region – demonstrate differences in particulars suited to their geographies while retaining fundamentals first expressed by Stickley on Columbus Avenue. The Stickley house interior "is the place where genius was revealed," Michael Lynch, director of New York State Division of Historic Preservation, would later say.

Syracuse City records indicate Stickley, his wife and six children resided at the Columbus Avenue address, although beginning late 1905 Gustav was spending considerable time in New York



Framing and corbels surround the front door to Stickley's home.

City attending to his Craftsman Workshops business there. In 1910 the Stickley family moved to Craftsman Farms in Morris Plains, New Jersey.

A classified real estate ad in the January 1901 *Syracuse Herald* announced the property's sale: "Beautiful home of Gustav Stickley, 416 Columbus Ave., for sale, containing 14 good sized rooms besides two ballrooms. House is elaborately finished and decorated, craftsman style predominating, in the finish of the different hardwoods. This very attractive property will be sold decidedly cheap and on reasonable terms."

Between 1911 and 1918, the house was occupied by Isaac Fleischman, an East and West Genesee Street (Syracuse) retailer of quality home furnishings – "Furniture of Character" – serving Central New York customers beginning 1898.

Fancifully, this may seem a coincidentally friendly real estate transaction between two sympathetically professional peers – one the furniture manufacturer and the other a retailer – though no evidence for such is extant. The home was sold to Fleischman complete with its original Stickley furnishings.

"I like Mr. Stickley's house," Howe unsurprisingly concluded in 1902. "It is strong, robust, [and] free from affectation," he explained. And, in a flourish of adjectival excess, he wrote that the home's "severe treatment is truly a welcome understanding [of the solution to the house-building problem], disciplined, chastened, yet always



A second-floor bedroom with a fireplace surrounded four-inch square mat green Grueby tiles.

wholesome, modest and noble."

In late 1918 or early 1919, Gustav's daughter, Barbara, and her husband, Ben Wiles, purchased the Columbus Avenue house from Fleischman, including the original furniture it still retained. Gustav may have lived in the Columbus home, briefly, in 1919, though his name does not again appear on Syracuse City records at the address until 1933. In 1939 he moved to Rochester to live with another daughter, Mrs. Mildred Cruess. Gustav Stickley's obituary, though, notes his death (April 20, 1942) after a three-month illness at the Columbus Avenue address.

In the mid-1950s, the Wiles sold the home. Until that point, the home's interior remained remarkably untouched and exactly the way Gustav designed it half a century earlier.

At some later point, the house was subdivided into five apartments, often rented to college students. Since April 1983 the house was designated as a "Protected Site" under the City of Syracuse local preservation law and the Syracuse Landmark Preservation Board's oversight. A year later, in 1984, Stickley's house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In the early 1990s, David Rudd purchased the house. Shortly thereafter, in 1996, the Audi family, owners of L. & J.G. Stickley Co. (today Stickley Audi & Co.), bought the house.

More or less, the house sat idle and unoc-

cupied for the better part of two decades. The Audi family donated the property to the not-for-profit University Neighborhood Preservation Association in 2016. Under UNPA's guidance, the Phase One exterior restoration occurred. Motivated by funding needs to enact the second phase of restoration – the Stickley home's interior – in May 2016 the nonprofit Gustav Stickley House Foundation was initiated. The Foundation serves as an advisory body for preservation and (future) programming of the property, though its most visible principal role is as a fund-raising entity.

Accomplishments Thus Far

All built structures require maintenance and repair. Century-old ones are no exception. In years past, and noticeable to even the most casual passerby, the Columbus Avenue home's exterior was desperate for attention. Thanks to the generosity of local historians, preservationists, Arts and Crafts enthusiasts, Stickley descendants, philanthropic organizations and help from state funding sources, restoration work on the Stickley house's exterior began in 2017. Initiated the week of August 14, the work was speedily completed eleven months later, June 2018. Outwardly, the house now appears exactly as it did when Gustav first resided there.

The exterior restoration work was meticulous and attention to authenticity scrupulous. As one example, the fortuitous discovery of a 1919 newspaper photograph of the house, showing its original front porch, revealed (otherwise missing) structural details for replication. And a second: unearthing a fragment of a porch column's capital permitted exact duplication for a new mold to fabricate precise replacements for those missing.

Altogether, the house's exterior required structural stabilization, asbestos abatement, masonry repair, a new roof, window preservation, wood trim and siding repair and replication, exterior painting, and reconstruction of the front porch. Conserving and preserving historical artifacts, including properties such as Gustav Stickley's house, invariably is time-consuming and ex-

pensive.

To accomplish the exterior work on the Stickley home, in addition to contributions by individuals, funding support was obtained from the NYS Environmental Protection Fund, Urban Initiatives Program of the NYS Housing Trust Fund, the CNY Community Foundation, William & Mary Thorpe Charitable Fund and Arts & Crafts Society of Central New York. The final cost for exterior restoration came in at just under budget, \$700,000.

By way of comparison is the Darwin Martin complex in Buffalo. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Larkin Company executive, it was built between 1903 and 1905. The Martin complex, far more elaborate than Stickley's home and an imperfect architectural analogy, in other words, has chronology as its similarity.

Like the Stickley house, the Martin house was a victim of neglect and fell into disrepair over the years. The initial estimate to restore Martin's interior and exterior was \$4.5 million. Twenty-seven years and \$52 million later, the project was completed.

The Next Phase

Following completion of the exterior work, ownership of the property transferred from the University Neighborhood group to the not-for-profit Greater Syracuse Land Bank in May 2019. Once the home's interior restoration is completed – the project's second phase – ownership will transfer to the Onondaga Historical Association. When OHA assumes ownership, it will operate the building as a unique historic house museum and a guest house. Providing ongoing support and guidance is the Gustav Stickley House Foundation. The bridge between organizations and GSHF will remain a not-for-profit "friends" group working in partnership with the historical association once the house is up and running.

The Stickley home's massive front door is as imposing as it is inviting. Outside, elongated corbels frame the doorway's upper corners. Between them, ten hammered amber glass



View from the front parlor to the stairwell.



The upstairs hallway with a view to a bedroom, the woodwork with Stickley's distinctive corbels.

Open Daily 10am-5pm

Early Owego
ANTIQUÉ
CENTER

Closed Tuesdays

90+ Dealers
earlyowego.com

f Exit 64, I-86, Owego, NY @

Continued on Page 6

A Visit to Mr. Stickley's House

Continued from Page 5

panes located at the top third of the door admit light to the generous-sized foyer inside. The door is a symbolic portal to another century; originally, from the nineteenth to the twentieth and now, as the restoration work continues, from the twentieth to the twenty-first.

Only Pollyanna discriminates between “neglect” and “benign neglect.” Most everyone else, though, concludes it is a distinction without a difference.

Step inside the Stickley house today and one observes ceiling paint that has peeled, dropping onto floors where boards are occasionally buckled, leading to some open-to-the-studs walls exposing electrical wiring. Upstairs, evidence of a leaky roof is as unmistakable as it is unsightly. Altogether, scanning the Stickley home's interior today almost automatically prompts recitation of a famous Bette Davis movie line.

A moment's reflection, though, and one concludes the house has “good bones.”

Indeed, despite current appearances, the house and its design integrity are remarkably present and in remarkably sound (stable) condition. The intact interior woodwork, including the Gothic-style corbels, is all dark-stained chestnut; floors are quarter-sawn oak. Square, mat green Grueby tiles surround two fireplaces. Gustav Stickley's home still arouses, in Samuel Howe's expression, “cheer by the welcome [it] extends to us.”

In the dining room, the ceiling “beams, row after row, mark and intensify the perspective, leaving long panels of plaster between them.” Howe observed: “This gives a variation of texture, a play of light and shade.” And all of it remains in place and nearly exactly as Gustav created it more than a century ago.

The Columbus Avenue home's distinctive Craftsman-style interior in intact condition is a rarity. The fact that [this](#) interior is the one designed by the nation's foremost Arts and



View of the dining room from the front parlor.



Light floods into the foyer leading to the front door in this interior view.

Crafts proponent doubles its significance.

Stickley's house is the very first fully developed Arts and Crafts interior as produced by the master's hand. Crawford & Stearns, preservation planners and the restoration architects for the project, note there is only one “first.” The Columbus Avenue home's “place in the overall development of American design history, its association with the American Arts & Crafts movement . . . and its specific association with

Gustav Stickley is unparalleled.”

Articulation of “Craftsman living” as expressed through architectural plans and interior designs published in *The Craftsman* served the dramatic growth of residential neighborhoods occurring across the United States. Its expression was as significant architecturally as it was sociologically.

Howe wrote the home's interior possesses the “evidence of serious thought and honest intent, with abundant freshness and whole-

someness.” And Howe contrasts the Stickley interior with those inferior and populated by “machine carving and jelly mold enrichments.” Sentiments doubtlessly endorsed as much today as they were more than a century ago.

Not-for-profits of all flavors and permutations share perennial and persistent fiscal concerns. In many ways, to call forth another (Vivien Leigh) line of movie dialogue, they rely upon the “kindness of strangers.” The benevolence of philanthropists, the abilities of local and regional governments, and the charity of well-intentioned individuals are never assured.

One way the Stickley house intends to ensure its long-term economic viability is built-into its future plans. The restored interior will include a total of five guest suites to be located on the second and third floors as well as a lower-level apartment to accommodate a full-time caretaker for the house. The guest suites will be modeled on upscale bed and breakfast establishments. Rentals will afford a revenue stream to ensure the ongoing fiscal security of the house and its interior.

The Phase Two restoration of the Stickley house's interior, is expected to cost \$2.5 million.

Despite the interruption caused by Covid-19, the Gustav Stickley House Foundation's interior restoration campaign began auspiciously. A grant of \$500,000 from the Save America's Treasures (SAT) Program, under the National Park Services Historic Preservation Fund, was received in September 2020. Significantly, it is a matching grant.

The SAT program was established “to help preserve nationally significant historic properties . . . that convey our nation's rich heritage to future generations.” SAT's endorsement for the merits of the Stickley house restoration unequivocally establish and endorse the credibility of the effort.

The Foundation must raise \$500,000 in order to receive the full half-million SAT grant.

The campaign's launch unfortu-

The Original Antique Show Says “The Show Must Go On”

ANTIQUÉ SHOW DATES MAY 12 – 15, 2021

BRIMFIELD, MA : Birthplace and originator of the World’s famous “Brimfield Antique Show” will go it alone this May.

Following a devastating 2019 for the 20+ Brimfield Show Promoters of the collective “Brimfield Antique Shows,” where all three dates were cancelled due to COVID-19, State and local officials gave the green light at the end of March to allow the shows to reopen in May. Tens of thousands of Antique dealers/collectors, hundreds of thousands of visitors and the many local communities that welcome the influx of business were all affected by the closing of last year’s shows.

It only makes sense that the authentic field that started it all will be the one to kick off the 2021 shows. Brimfield Auction Acres is seizing the opportunity to conduct their individual show despite the fact that the other promoters have decided to sit out the May reopening. “Our dealers have been out of work all last year and they need a venue to sell an abundance of wares collected,” says Kate Corriveau, co-owner of Brimfield Auction Acres. “Our fairgrounds have enough acreage and manpower to conduct the show in a safe and responsible manner in accordance with the guidelines from the state. It is our utmost priority to provide a safe environment in which dealers and visitors can once again get back to business.”

In the exact field where visionary and auctioneer Gordan Reid started his vision of creating “The greatest outdoor antique show under the sun” in 1959, the current owners will have to innovate once again as the sole Brimfield Show this May 12th – 15th. The responsibility is on the Corriveaus to set a precedence and instill customer confidence that an outdoor show can operate safely and successfully, paving the way once again for the other fields to do the same come the July Show.

“Because we are the only show this May, it is shaping up to be the largest individual show in New England,” says Rusty Corriveau. “It is truly reminiscent of the days of origin when Auction Acres was on its own for the first decade of operation. Never in the 60 years of operations has Auction Acres ever had to suspend business until 2019 and it will be great to be back up and running.”



View from the second-floor staircase to the first.

nately coincided with the Covid pandemic. After “pausing” the campaign, but not their commitment, the Foundation intends to re-launch the fund-raising effort to preserve the home’s interior this year.

Samuel Howe’s prescient 1902 narrative is as relevant today as 120 years ago and he gets the last word: “The soul of the workman is manifest” in the Stickley house and “a quiet sense of humanity pervades it.”

More information on the House, including photos and videos, the Gustav Stickley House Foundation and the current fund-raising campaign is available on the Foundation’s website: <http://gustavstickleyhousefoundation.org/> Or call Dave Rudd, Foundation president: 315-463-1568.

23RD ANNUAL ANTIQUÉ SHOW

SATURDAY
MAY 15, 2021

10:00am - 4:00pm
Tickets on sale now!

FRIDAY EXCLUSIVE
PREVIEW PARTY
MAY 14, 2021

Visit gcv.org or 585.538.6822

gcv&m
• MUMFORD NY •

Over 30 dealers
Fine & primitive antiques
Mid-20th century vintage

