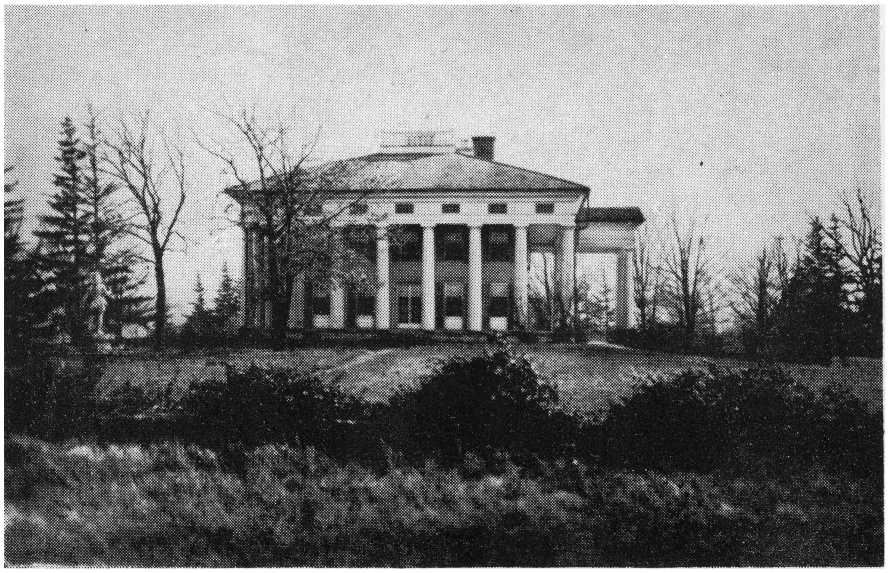
AISLE OF PINES

by

Ada B. Turner





Mansion at the Aisle of Pines
Below: The Gate House

AISLE OF PINES

ADA B. TURNER

A BLENDING of legend, gossip and reality worthy of a Hollywood star encompasses the old pillared mansion at Wayne, New York, known locally as the Big House. It has enjoyed two periods of prosperity and suffered many years of neglect. Abandoned, disfigured, and shabby as it is today, it still manages to appear dignified and impressive, and intrigues historians and sightseers as it has for nearly one hundred years.

The original builder and owner, Samuel Hallett of Canisteo, Steuben Co., New York, and Ann Eliza McDowell of Wayne, met at Alfred University. They were married in 1848 after his graduation from Albany State Normal School. Hallett entered the lumber business but left to become a banker in Hornellsville (now Hornell) in 1852. Later he visited Europe in the interests of the Hocking Valley R. R. Company. In 1856 he was candidate for Representative in Congress for the American party but was defeated. In 1857 he with his wife's brothers, Francis M. McDowell and George W. McDowell and Nirom M. Crane, another relative, organized the banking firm of Samuel Hallett and Company with offices at No. 53 Beaver Street, New York City.

Progressive young Hallett became interested in the development of the Nautilius Diving Bell and spent several months in Europe and South America in the interests of this project. This was the forerunner of the modern submarine and the Hallett family always contended that they failed to get the patent right due them. While in Europe Hallett became interested in the Atlantic and Great Western

Railroad and sold enough stocks and bonds to insure its completion. This added to his bank's prestige and in 1863 the Hallett firm associated with General John C. Frémont purchased controlling interests in the Leavenworth, Pawnee and Western R. R., the initial line of the Union Pacific. The name was changed to Eastern Division of the Union Pacific with Mr. Hallett personally directing it in Kansas. Funds proved insufficient and failure threatened, but Hallett appeared before Congress and through his efforts succeeded in overcoming this difficulty. General Frémont retired as one of the promoters and the work was continued by Hallett in his own name. The work was completed and invitations were out for the formal opening of the railroad, which was the first to connect the East and the West, when tragedy struck.

Samuel Hallett was shot and killed at Wyandotte, Kansas, on July 27, 1864, by an unknown assassin on horseback who galloped away, leaving Hallett mortally wounded and his tall silk hat rolling in the dust. His assassin was never apprehended. There were various rumors, one that the assailant was a discharged engineer, another a dissatisfied land speculator, also that he had a personal reason for the killing. At any rate Samuel Hallett's short life of thirty-seven years had been crowded with important achievements and proved him to be a man of intuition, self-confidence and versatility.

Evidently he had always appreciated the beauty of the Finger Lakes region which was his wife's birthplace, and the home of many of their relatives. So Samuel Hallett, after traveling widely both in this country and abroad, chose a spot on the road back up the hill above the little hamlet of Wayne to build a family home. Named for General Anthony Wayne this little town at the head of Waneta Lake lies in two counties. The boundary line between Schuyler and Steuben counties passes through the town. This section was once the home of the Seneca Indians who had camps on the shores of Waneta and Lamoka Lakes. White settlers called these lakes by the prosaic names of Little

and Mud Lakes. Collectors of Indian relics have found this region a rich source of supply. Two miles in the opposite direction lies Keuka Lake, meaning in Indian language "a lake with an elbow," and called by early white settlers Crooked Lake from its formation which resembles a thumb and forefinger. It is noted for its beauty and fishing.

Here amid the lakes Samuel Hallett built an imposing three story mansion in southern style with twenty-four large pillars and thought by some to resemble Mount Vernon. This he named Lake Home. It was luxuriously furnished with the heavy carved furniture of that time. Much of the furniture was imported, some reported to be from the home of Louis Phillipe of France. Large floor to ceiling mirrors from France, beautifully etched glass in imported French doors, and an impressive display of books in the library, added to the grandeur. A large spring of water nearly a half mile above the house furnished running water for the hand-painted bowls in each bedroom, a luxury very rare in country homes of that time. It also supplied water for the two large fountainheads, Neptune and Aphrodite.

A double row of imported Norway Spruce some distance back from the house served as a windbreak. The yards were dotted with flowering shrubs, the barns held fine carriages and blooded horses for driving or racing on the private race track behind the pines. With all these attractions and plenty of servants to care for every want, it is not strange that so many noted people were entertained there. Among these were James Gordon Bennett, publisher of the New York *Herald,* Belle K. Spencer, novelist, Gov. Barrows of Tennessee, Countess de Pompon of France, and other foreign guests.

When Samuel Hallett was shot in Kansas, his wife and four children were on the ocean returning from Europe. Mrs. Hallett, though a poor sailor, had braved the slow ocean voyage to give her children the opportunity to learn to speak foreign languages. As there was no oceanic communication then, she learned the sad news of her husband's death when her brother met her at the dock in New York.

This was such a tragic blow that the widow gradually gave up all social contacts, became a recluse and a spiritualist trying to communicate with her deceased husband. She lived for thirty years but spent many of them as a bedridden invalid. Tradition says that she sometimes left her bed at night to ride a white horse over the estate and to her husband's grave, which was in a family burying grounds on the edge of a grove near the house. Here she had erected a stately monument which still stands. Later it became the burial place of herself and other members of the family. Those who were lovers of tall tales told of seeing the white horse and rider among the pines years after Mrs. Hallett's death, hence the name "The Haunted House on the Hill."

Without a master, the estate soon began to show signs of decay, bank accounts dwindled, and land was sold to pay debts. After the death of Mrs. Hallett and a son and wife, the four grandchildren were taken to Colorado to live with an uncle, Samuel I. Hallett, who was now the owner of the remaining 118 acres. Some of the furniture was sold, some including an ebony bedroom set was stored in Dundee where it later burned in a large fire, and some just disappeared. A tenant farmer lived in the Big House, which with the other buildings was rapidly deteriorating.

An amusing story is told of the elder Mrs. Hallett's distribution of her jewelry on her death bed. With a daughter-in-law on each side of the bed, each eager for her share, the dying woman divided a coveted pair of earrings by giving one to each aspirant. Legend does not tell whether the legatees were ever able to bargain or whether each still owned a useless earring.

It is interesting to note that Francis McDowell, brother-in-law of Samuel Hallett, was one of the seven men who founded the Patrons of Husbandry, now the National Grange. He was the only one of the seven founders not in the employ of the government at Washington. After his association with the banking firm of Hallett and Company and trips to Europe in the interest of the Kansas Pacific R. R. his health failed and he built a fine home in Wayne

and took up grape growing on Keuka Lake to improve his health through outdoor employment. Just recently the National Grange, with appropriate ceremony in his honor, erected a bronze plaque set in stone on the edge of the McDowell cemetery below Wayne on the Wayne-Keuka road.

The second prosperous era for the Big House began many years later when George K. Birge, a millionaire business man from Buffalo, New York, touring this scenic region, was attracted by this dilapidated but still impressive mansion standing so forlornly near the roadside. George Birge was a farseeing business man respected for his business ability and integrity. He had amassed a fortune through his own efforts and was looking forward to a less strenuous life. His father, M. H. Birge, had come to Buffalo via the Erie Canal in 1834 and founded the wallpaper firm of M. H. Birge and Sons, the first wallpaper factory west of New York City. He died in 1900 and his son George K. Birge became president of the firm and expanded it, establishing offices in many foreign cities. This company has always been noted for the superior quality and artistic designs of its hand made papers. A grandson, also named George K. Birge, is now president of the company. The elder George K. was a Cornell graduate and wrote the college song "We Honor Thee Cornell." He married Carrie Humphrey, daughter of Judge Humphrey. Their three children were a son, Humphrey, and two daughters, Mrs. Thomas B. Lockwood and Mrs. George Carey. He was a director and active member of the committee for the Pan American Exposition held in Buffalo in 1900.

In 1896, Mr. Birge reorganized the Birge Bicycle Co. and made it the Pierce Arrow Motor Car Co., of which he was president.

They were soon turning out superior automobiles, and also supplied trucks to the government during the first World War. At the time of Mr. Birge's retirement, the Pierce Plants were sold for more than $16,000,000 to J. W. Seligman & Company of New York City. Besides these

responsibilities Mr. Birge was a director of several banks, trustee of the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy and Historical Society, and Vice President of the Arts Club of New York City. Although he was such a busy man, he realized the possibilities of the Hallett place as a summer home if rehabilitated and did not hesitate in trying to buy the property. The owner, Samuel I. Hallett of Denver, Colorado, son of the builder, refused to sell, though the farm barely produced money for taxes and the buildings were rapidly falling into decay. Birge then asked for a ninety-nine year lease but was refused and finally accepted a twelve year lease with a written agreement signed by Mr. Hallett that he or his heirs would renew the lease. Mr. Hallett died two years later. Mr. Birge did buy about three hundred acres of adjoining farm land.

He at once began an extensive program of restoring and improving the property which set all the neighborhood talking, and provided work for many in the community. The few remaining Hallett possessions were shipped to the owners or boxed and given to Hallett relatives for safe keeping. All that remained in the house were the massive mirrors and Hallett library and these were heavily insured by Mr. Birge. The huge house was moved some distance back from the road and turned completely around so that it now faced Keuka Lake. The new site was prepared by cutting out a center section of the double row of pines. The house was placed in this space so that from the west porch and the porte-co-chere one looked down through a broad shady aisle to the grove beyond. On the opposite side of the house a similar aisle led, by a turnstile, to the road leading to Keuka Lake. Hence the name which Mr. Birge now gave the place "Aisle of Pines" was very appropriate. A large wing was added to the rear of the house for kitchen, pantries, and servants rooms. A basement under all of the house had rooms and bath for the butler, housed a large furnace and water tank and provided storage rooms for foods and a dairy room. The porches which surround

three sides of the house were rebuilt with cement floors but the twenty-four stately pillars still remained.

Inside the house drastic changes took place. There was an entire new arrangement of rooms, new floors, more fireplaces, and large mirrors to supplement the old ones and a complete redecoration with beautiful Birge wallpapers. On the first floor the rooms were impressive but pleasant. One large room extended across the entire front of the house. The old French floor to ceiling mirrors at either end, the spacious fireplace, the abundance of windows with yellow silk draperies, the black rugs, and modern but harmonizing furniture blended well to make an attractive room. Opening from this, by way of those wonderfully etched old glass doors, was the pleasant dining room with a lovely view of Waneta Lake and a vista of distant hills. A screened porch opened from this and was often used as a dining room in pleasant weather.

Across a spacious hall was the library, a typical man's room with massive furniture, and the antique bookcases filled with rare volumns filling much of the wall space. The beautiful old wide stairway, with another floor to ceiling mirror confronting one at the first landing, led to four large master bedrooms on the second floor. These were furnished with either fourposter or wicker inset furniture and afforded fine views of the gardens and the surrounding lakes. Halls, bathrooms, and storage closets occupied the remainder of this floor. The third floor had commodious storage rooms and occasionally housed an extra maid. From this one ascended a short flight of stairs to the observatory above, where on clear days five or six lakes are visible and a wide view of surrounding country.

The elevation is about fifteen hundred feet. Mr. Birge was fond of telling friends that because the house was on the watershed, the water from one side of the house drained down to Keuka Lake, then via Seneca Lake and the St. Lawrence river northward to the Atlantic, while from the other side of the house it drained to Waneta Lake south-

ward through the Susquehanna river to Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic ocean.

Outside the house just as impressive changes took place. Extensive landscaping transformed bare fields into grassy lawns. Tons of rich soil were drawn in to fill up depressions, a drainage and water system was installed and graveled walks bordered by shrubs and flowers were built. A stucco cottage for the Superintendent was erected near the entrance gates. A matching garage faced it across the drive with a large fountain between the two. The garage housed the Pierce Arrows of the Birges and their guests, a drastic change from the racing stables of the Hallett days. The garage also provided rooms and bath for the chauffeurs. Some distance back from the cottage a cow-barn and chicken houses provided fresh dairy and poultry products for jaded city appetites. A swimming pool was also built on the grounds. A deep well was drilled to furnish water for all the buildings, the gardens, and fountains. Later it was thought the supply was inadequate for the swimming pool and fountains, so the old Hallett spring on the hill was cleaned out, four new wells were drilled nearby, and this water was again piped to the grounds to assure an ample supply for all needs. In the process of laying these pipes, sections of the odd old pipes used in the Hallett regime were unearthed. These were made of wood covered with cement and lined with tin. At that time electricity was not available. The underground supply of natural gas which was to make Wayne famous and supply all the country-side with a cheap fuel was then undreamed of, so acetylene gas was used for lighting. An old legend is that the Halletts declared there was gold on their land but that remains to be discovered.

On the side of the drive toward the Big House a beautiful garden was planted surrounding a fountain with the old Hallett fountainhead Aphrodite. Beds of beautiful roses around the fountain were separated by grass walks from bordering beds of peonies, lilies, Japanese iris, anemones, and other perennials and the whole was enclosed by a border

of various flowering shrubs. A summer house with rustic benches completed the picture. Across the drive was a similar garden of annual flowers and summer flowering bulbs, each bed a picture by itself. This was backed by a large vegetable garden which furnished succulent fresh vegetables of all kinds. The gardener and his helpers were kept busy. The lawn in front of the residence was encircled by a low wall over which honeysuckle clambered and a border in front of the wall held stately clumps of yucca and iris. A broad walk led from the front door past the fountain of Father Neptune to a look-out spot which afforded a wonderful view of Keuka Lake and majestic Bluff Point with historic Wagener House atop it. This point separates the two forks of the lake. This spot was called the rock garden although it was never completed as such, but was fitted with rustic chairs and had tubs of flowering plants and was planted to hydrangeas and other shrubs.

Because of his many business interests Mr. Birge was unable to spend as much time as he wished at the Aisle of Pines. But, gradually retiring from his arduous duties, he laid many plans for future improvements. At the time of his last visit to Wayne in the fall of 1917 he left blueprints for a teahouse to be built at the end of the Aisle of Pines and for a golf course in the field where the Hallett's had their race track so many years before. He remarked at that time that the place looked better to him than ever before. But the following February as he was about to leave for his winter home in California, he was stricken with pneumonia with complications. He died at his Buffalo home at the Circle in February, 1918.

The family never opened the Big House again except for a cleaning and airing each summer by former servants. They had the gardens planted and tended, and the grounds kept in order so that all would be in readiness for occupancy, but the place held so many nostalgic memories for Mrs. Birge that she never returned. She died a few years later on the Riviera and was buried in Buffalo. The George K. Birge estate was under the management of Langdon B.

Wood of Buffalo until Mrs. Birge's death. When the lease on the Hallett property expired on October 12, 1923, members of the Birge family attempted to release it as originally agreed, or to buy the estate. Julia E. Hallett, widow of Samuel of Denver, refused to do either. Many others tried to buy it for a summer home but she would not sell or lease. Mrs. Hallett visited the place in the autumn of 1923 and stated that she was going to bequeath it as a home for elderly women. She did not want to provide for proper care but did hire a caretaker to live in the superintendent's cottage to guard the premises. The adjoining 300 acres were sold by the Birge estate to Clay B. Turner who had been superintendent of the estate eight and one-half years for Mr. Birge. Some of it is now part of a Waneta Lake development called Sylvan Beach. The Birge furniture was all removed from the Big House by the family or sold when the lease expired. Julia E. Hallett died May 14, 1933, in Denver, Colorado, aged 86 years, leaving an estate estimated at about $700,000. The heirs immediately began litigation over a will which gave the Wayne property and all but $25,000 of her estate to the State of New York for creation of a home for aged gentlewomen. In 1930 Mrs. Hallett was said to have torn this will to bits in the presence of a friend, saying that times had changed for aged gentlewomen as for others, and that they too wanted bright lights and movies instead of a quiet country life. The contest was over proof of her sanity at the time she destroyed the will. New York State lost the first trial as she had not been declared incompetent by a Colorado court until at a date later than the destruction of the will. Later, heirs deeded the Wayne property and $12,000 for its upkeep to the State of New York with the understanding that it was to be used or sold as a public institution.

Julia Estelle Hallett met her husband in New York City at a boarding house conducted by her mother. Brought as a bride to his mother's house, the Big House, she was not too popular with her new relatives and in the early 80's she and her husband, Samuel I. Hallett went to the west to

seek their fortune. He was a mining engineer and after years of privation, he through a lucky strike, made a fortune. Samuel died in 1913 and his widow brought his body to the Hallett family private cemetery for burial. At the time of the trial she was described in the Denver courts as a dominating, argumentive, fearless, stubborn but witty woman. She liked to drive and ride fast horses and later purchased eleven speedy automobiles. She had jewels valued at $100,000 but dressed very simply. She was said to carry about in newspapers bonds valued at $100,000 yet trusted very few people. She had a laundry built in her home which cost thousands, then used kitchen tubs. She had a big mansion filled with art treasures and objects gathered through the years, yet she lived in a few rooms.

For some years after the State of New York acquired the Big House property they hired a caretaker, but no gardens were planted and very little care given. The Big House was opened to visitors, who carried away everything available for souvenirs and plants and shrubs were dug from the gardens. Twice the house was set on fire by careless visitors, but was saved by the quick work of the Wayne village firemen. At various times rumors had it sold as an aviation school, an orphanage, a girl scout camp, and other uses but all proved untrue. In 1947, an Elmira priest, the Rev. Thomas J. Toole purchased the property from the State. **Shortly thereafter illness caused him to discontinue his plans for the ageing property. Sometime later the place was sold to Jack Robbins and his sister of Elmira, New York. After many years of being vacant and several acts of vandalism by unknown people the property changed hands again.**

How many changes this old building has seen! Fast automobiles and huge trucks replace the horses of its early days, the old steamers and yachts on the lakes are gone, and power boats now cut swiftly through the waters. The Big House saw a Curtiss Bi-plane come winging through the air with Humphrey Birge, son of the former owner aboard, and alight in the field in front where long ago had been the

Hallett's racetrack. It has seen the hard labor of its first years abolished by the use of electricity and gas to power modern machinery. Radio and television have brought far places near. The smashing of the atom, which doubtless the first Samuel Hallett in his college days learned was an impossible hope, has been accomplished.

In April of 1957, the new owner, J. S. Pease started the tremendous task of restoring and converting the place into a hotel and a vacation resort. For years Mr. Pease has been engaged in restoring historical places. The Aisle of Pines is again under constant care and vast improvements are making it a place of beauty once more.