



Olcott House, 1997

## Enjoy Hospitality of Historic Proportions at Olcott House

by Thomas Vaughn

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*historic buildings used for both public and private purposes. He is interested in thoughts, comments or ideas from readers. Email him at [thomvaughn@msn.com](mailto:thomvaughn@msn.com)*

Olcott House Bed and Breakfast Inn offers visitors domestic tranquility, historic ambiance, elegant refinement and premier hospitality within the walls of a grand mansion on the shores of Lake Superior.

Completed in 1904, Olcott House stands as a testament to a unique time in Duluth, Minnesota history, when Duluth participated in a global movement of change and transformation. The years from 1870 to 1913 witnessed the greatest volume of global migration in history and significant declines in barriers to global trade. Global migration during this period was higher than it is today due to the millions of people willing to relo-

cate in the hopes of laying claim to a better economic future. Many of these people came to St. Louis County. The population grew from around 18,000 in 1885 to over 50,000 in less than ten years. Jobs cutting timber and extracting ore along with employment opportunities that supported the shipping and rail transportation of these raw materials caused many to believe that Duluth would become another Chicago. Contractors had paved Superior Street, completed the Garfield Avenue viaduct, extended street car lines and laid conduit systems in hopes of a gilded age triumph.

Like the new millionaires on the East Coast, wealthy Duluthians

built fine homes for themselves. Although no one in Duluth ever asked an architect to construct a monumental theme home like one wealthy New Yorker did who wanted a "houseleum," Duluth's homes represented the tastes prevalent on a national scale.

Such is the case with Olcott House. Having married in 1887, the Olcotts loved to travel. When vacationing in the southeastern United States, Mr. W. J. Olcott and Mrs. Fannie Bailey Olcott stopped in Macon, GA. Mrs. Olcott fell in love with a home crafted in the Georgian Colonial Revival architectural style. Mrs. Olcott shared her interest in having such a home of her own with Mr. Olcott. He

replied affirmatively, stating that any home she wanted would be fine as long as the billiard room could be on the first floor so that he could entertain his friends and business associates without having to take them down the basement or up into the family's private quarters. The agreement stuck and the Olcott family moved into their newly constructed home on Thanksgiving Day of 1904.

This ten thousand square-foot mansion with forty-two rooms and twelve fireplaces carries with it an interesting architectural history.

Architectural historians refer to some design aspects of this Olcott House as Revival style because they exemplify the classical architectural ideals "revived" by Thomas Jefferson in his home at Monticello. Such Revival style homes are found throughout the southeastern United States, as their original owners wanted to follow the pattern set by Jefferson who had designed large, columned porticos reminiscent of Greek temples. Serving both practical and aesthetic purposes, these large porticos kept the Virginia sun and heat away from family and visitors while recalling the serene dignity and grace of Athenian religious and civic buildings that enshrined life's daily social and economic activities within a democratic ethos. From Macon to Duluth, this Revival style stands today at Olcott House where arriving guests will enter the home under the protective guard of one of the most gracious and grand front porticos in the Midwest.

Depressed global economic conditions also encouraged architects to use Revival design styles because they harkened back to a supposedly simpler, less risky time. The Panic of 1893 brought a depression from Europe to America as banks reduced access to cash and credit. Investment in high-risk ventures,



*Fannie Bailey Olcott and William James Olcott in 1888.*

inflated credit schemes, and irresponsible speculation on the part of investors in the trade between Europe and America brought about this economic collapse. Railroads laid off workers, contractors laid off their crews. As a result, domestic architecture became much less flamboyant and ostentatious throughout the next decade. Both Mr. and Mrs. Olcott knew that building a home on a grand, dazzling scale could earn them negative attention. Therefore, they probably both thought that the domestic, bucolic simplicity found in a Jeffersonian Revival design would be best for their new large

lot on the forested edge of Duluth. Even though this design style might have been less impressive than some others used by the New York "millionaires mile" group a few years previously, the Olcotts were in vogue. Architects at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, an influential event held in Chicago, heralded the white-painted portico as a symbol of the propriety toward which domestic design should aspire.

Enshrining the domestic emphasis of Revival design, Mrs. Olcott maintained a sewing room on the second floor of her new home. This room, known around town

as "the Confessional of Duluth" offered relaxed seclusion for many women who came both individually and in groups to discuss issues of the day while Mrs. Olcott sewed on her traditional machine. Had she ever purchased an electric sewing machine, her sewing room might have lost its allure, so she never bought one.

Following the spirit of the times in her actions, Mrs. Olcott maintained a social concern for others' domestic needs as well. She coordinated many Girl Scout activities, supported the building of a girl's camp at Eveloth, and participated in activities at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Duluth.

A second mode of design, going back further in time, provides a visual context for the spacious porticos of Olcott House. Harking back to the founding of America, the Colonial style provides a national motif for the Jeffersonian innovations. A pristine, unadorned combination of white, painted trim and red-brick construction radiates a spirit of transcendent clarity which diffuses an innocent and honest hospitality ascribed to America's Colonial period.

The Revival and Colonial motifs found in Olcott House permeated America's national consciousness because of the influence of an 1876 event referred to as the Centennial International Exhibition. Similar to a world's fair, this festival, officially known as The International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures, and Products of the Soil and Mine, commemorated the risks, innovations, and achievements surrounding America's first century of contributions to the applied, industrial and mechanical arts that improved daily living.

Along with dazzling the more than ten million spectators with new inventions like the telephone

and Heinz Ketchup, the festival, held in the city of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, cultivated nostalgia for colonial civic commitment and inventiveness characterized in the person of Benjamin Franklin. During this time, further architectural innovations emerged, one being the grand, rectangular side porch. Such side porches can be seen on Olcott House and, indeed, are still fine locations to enjoy Heinz Ketchup during the summer months in Duluth!

Mr. Olcott could have been his own exhibit at the 1876 fair, although he was a bit young at the time. Born on 22 February 1862, W. J. Olcott earned an MA in Chemistry from the University of Michigan, which included training in mining concerns. John D. Rockefeller appointed Olcott superintendent of the Lake Superior Consolidated Iron Mines in 1894, the Duluth News Tribune stating that Olcott would have, "control and management of the mines." From 1909 until 1928, Olcott served as President of Oliver Mining Company, which eventually became part of US Steel.

Working directly under the supervision of John D. Rockefeller, Olcott maintained composure during a time of rapid change. Maneuvering himself between the demands of financial titans like Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Morgan as they leased, sold, bought out, and defrauded each other to keep their negotiating skills in tune allowed Olcott to remain at the heart of early twentieth century global history for a significant number of years.

While heading the Oliver Mining Company, Olcott oversaw the coordinated efforts of around forty thousand employees. After he took over leadership of the Duluth, Missabe and Northern



NEW OLCOTT HOME, DULUTH, WINTER, 1904

railroad, he sought to reduce the large number of derailments that occurred due to speeding on the tracks as employees tried to get their ore to the harbor quickly. Olcott's daughter, Dorothy, recalls that her dad ran a railroad "with the shortest mileage, but the highest tonnage in the world." Having met the mettle of a Franklinesque man of the soil and mine, W. J. Olcott died in 1935 at age 73, succumbing to pneumonia.

Like his wife, W. J. Olcott believed in social concerns to



improve domestic life. He encouraged the building of a YMCA in Proctor, stating publicly that "Conditions at Proctor are not attractive, to say the least." The Marble, Minnesota school district named a school after him and Olcott Park in Virginia, Minnesota bears his name as well. At home in Duluth, Mr. Olcott enjoyed participating in activities at St. Paul's Episcopal Church where he donated the money needed to add the entire west wing of the church building, which now houses offices, classrooms and rehearsal space. Mr. Olcott often carved turkeys during festive holiday functions at St. Paul's Church. Since Mr. Olcott was ambidextrous and used that quality to his advantage during billiards, children, and adults for that matter, must have enjoyed watching him work the utensils at

*John D. Rockefeller as a young man. After creating a virtual monopoly in the nation's infant oil business, the Cleveland capitalist quickly moved to control the shipment of iron ore in the Great Lakes. NEMHC Portrait File, in A County Built on Iron, by Bill Beck.*

cutting time.

While the exterior of Olcott House stands as Colonial Revival paean to American sensibilities, the interior is unambiguously Georgian. King George I of England, who took the throne in 1714, loathed the baroque style that melded materials, colors and textures into florid, vertiginous representational extremes. George I demanded a return to simplified linearity.

To accomplish his architectural goal, he looked to the recent English buildings designed by Inigo Jones, who had served as Surveyor of Works to the British Crown until around 1642. Jones had traveled to Italy and studied classical Greek and Roman forms of design known for their contemplative simplicity. Jones refined his knowledge of the various techniques for achieving internal and external equipoise for public and private buildings by studying the *Four Books of Architecture*, written by the Italian stonemason Andrea Palladio, who had died in 1580.

After viewing the classical buildings built by Palladio in Italy and Venice, Jones returned to England where he oversaw the building of several royal dwellings that showcased the motifs found in Palladian architectural principles. As a result of such royal endorsement, Palladian themes dominated British building and construction for over a century, as English cities and countryside sites gradually underwent an interior and exterior Georgian transformation.

Architects following after Jones continued to structure new buildings around rules from the Four Books to support and refine human interaction. When the colonists came to America, their public and private architecture based itself on Georgian design principles, which remained fashionable until just

after the death of King George IV in 1830.

Today, Olcott House maintains an astonishing Georgian atmosphere. Built by Duluth architect William T. Bray, in partnership with the firm of Carl Nystrom, all three forms of design present in this home coalesce to form the Georgian Colonial Revival style. Bray, recognized for his work with the Colonial Revival style, designed over twenty-five Duluth residences and also developed the internationally renowned Hibbing High School.

Olcott House's hallways, compacted staircase, elongated curved archways, walls painted in pale, warm colors, white plaster ceilings, marble borders, understated elegance and semi-circular fan lights above doors would have greatly pleased King George. Town home design became ragingly popular for both aesthetic and practical reasons during the reigns of the Georgian kings. Interestingly, the main staircase of Olcott House, placed tightly against a main wall, exudes a very cosmopolitan town home feel that one might find in a Georgetown or London residence. The interior of the home calms the visitor with

suffused light and balanced use of shadow typical of Georgian design. Rooms are spacious and formal, yet become intimate as people gather within them. Woods are original and most wallpaper is authentic.

Several rooms at Olcott House enjoy special stylistic features. The music room is a delightful space where cloth wallpaper and a cone ceiling that is encased within overlaying sheets of copper that shape the plaster create a resonance that rings with sounds of voices and a grand piano. The Dining Room contains striking quarter-sawn African mahogany beams that lend a formal elegance to dining. Tiles throughout the home provide a discreet contrast to the airy feel in the rooms where they gleam. One fireplace even has a biblical verse emblazoned into the tiles surrounding it: "In the house of the righteous there is much treasure."

(Proverbs 15:6)

The carriage house, if not rented, is a special treat. While modernized to suit the needs of the contemporary guest, it formerly housed the carriage man's residence along with the carriages. A French Impressionistic mural of the Olcott gardens by locally renowned artist Brian Olson lends warmth and gentility to this suite. If secluded atmosphere is a guest's need, the carriage house satisfies.

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Running underground between the carriage house and the main house, a tunnel provides three-foot thick walls that house electrical and plumbing conduits. The Olcott children and their friends used to play games in the tunnel and

it may be viewed by guests today. A ballroom also exists within the home which the current owners are renovating into a guests-only antique shop.

The practical proportionality of this home as envisioned by Bray saved it from demolition after Mr. Olcott's death. Inherited by his and Mrs. Olcott's two daughters, Dorothy Olcott Elsmith and Elizabeth Olcott Ford, who were married and raising families elsewhere at the time of Mr. Olcott's death, the home suffered an identity crisis as the daughters could not return to Duluth to live in the home. The daughters decided that due to the large tax and maintenance expenses, the most financially feasible choice would be to demolish the home and sell the land.

Just before scheduled demoli-

tion, UMD approached the two women about donating the home to the university. They were happy to do so and UMD designated the home as Olcott Conservatory in 1939. The music department filled the home with activity once again. The Duluth News Tribune provided a description that reveals just what ten thousand square feet can offer. As a conservatory, the home supported:

One large rehearsal hall, sufficient to accommodate the band and orchestra and choral groups, three classrooms, four practice studios, four teaching studios, two study rooms, a music library, a storeroom and locker and administrative space.

Many students benefited from the generosity of the Olcott sisters who graciously allowed their family home to become a center where young people could enhance their music theory understanding and performance skills.

After UMD developed its new campus, the music department moved there in 1958. UMD sold the home to a Lutheran minister who ran the Golden Hour Evangelistic Association. This association maintained a Finnish-language Lutheran ministry, a seminary, and a broadcasting studio for a weekly one-hour broadcast that reached across St. Louis and Carlton counties. The pastor also raised his family of five within the home. The current owner's grandfather used to listen to the weekly broadcast all the way down in Kettle River.

After several years of ministry, the pastor sold the home for \$10,000.00 in a closed bidding process to Marlon and Judy Scholljegerdes, who moved to Duluth from Minneapolis with the intent of renovating the home into a B&B in 1989. This couple did much of the heavy refinishing

## *The Olcott House*

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work from which following owners have benefited. Then, in 1994, Don and Barb Trueman bought Olcott House. The Truemans also operated Olcott House as a B&B for twelve years.

The current owners purchased the home on September 28, 2006 and continue to operate it as a B&B. Olcott House has now become a luxury boutique B&B. Breakfasts are solid, and hundreds of antiques

grace the home. Suites and bathrooms are completely private, enhancing the romantic nature of a B&B experience.

As with Georgian Colonial Revival architecture, the bed and breakfast movement also began in England, when people wanted to enjoy more than one day in the country and needed places to stay. The movement arrived in America during the 1970s. Within

the next decade, the historic bed and breakfast movement started. Olcott House is a part of this historic movement. Providing the best in contemporary hospitality with authentic historic ambiance, the historic bed and breakfast movement is saving many historic neighborhoods from neglect as they connect tourists with history.

Dorothy Olcott Elsmith, in her memoir book entitled *From Log*

*House to Glass House*, stated that she had been fortunate to spend her early childhood within "the pleasant orbit of an old-fashioned neighborhood." Today, guests at Olcott House, though perhaps no longer children, may still experience the atmosphere and graciousness of a fine home in a still old-fashioned neighborhood.