

Buildings that stand the test of time

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

An article taken in 1888 from the New York World, states the following: "A gentleman who has just returned from Richfield Springs says that Robert Westcott, reputed to be worth about \$2,000,000, and the proprietor of Westcott's Express, is doing wonders for the improvement and development of this well-known fashionable resort. He has fitted up a large building on Main Street in a sumptuous fashion and divided it into fine modern apartments, such as are common enough in New York but are exceedingly rare at watering places. These are occupied by people who take their meals at a hotel. Westcott has done something in this direction, only more elaborately. In this new apartment building as good a suit of rooms can be secured as anywhere in New York City, with bathroom and all modern conveniences. It is lighted by electric lights and the beautiful grounds are illuminated in the same way. The effect is said to be very beautiful. He has offered the town of Richfield \$17,000 for a piece of land of seventeen acres, overlooking the village and if he secures it, he proposes to put up a very handsome summer residence there."

About a week later, there appeared in the Richfield Springs Daily a letter to the editor regarding a correspondent's slurs: "In a recent issue of the New York Herald, its Richfield correspondent goes out of the way to slur one of our summer residents, Mr. Robert Folger Westcott and his estimable family. It would be hard to put more lies in a given space than in this paragraph. Mr. Westcott probably does not care two straws for such newspaper scribbling, but it is outrageous that his family should be subject to such abominable misrepresentation. The article says the family is 'not popular here' and 'puts on airs' and hints they are 'exclusive', etc. The fact is that more hospitable, unaffected, sensible people than the Westcott family would be hard to find. They reside here six months of the year and are considered residents more than visitors. They have built a beautiful and comfortable home here and surely have a right to enjoy it with friends of their own choosing. Mr. Westcott and family have always been prominent in good works here. He has helped liberally every public project without solicitation and has always deprecated publicity and has the right to be unmolested. The people here are justly indignant that he should be the target for such malicious meanness."

These articles were published two years after the local news describing the new construction by R. F. Westcott, Esq. in May 1886: "The new brick block just erected by R. F. Westcott of New York is the handsomest, most substantial building that has been built in Richfield Springs. It is situated on the south

side of Main Street in the most central part of the village and is a great addition to the business portion of our town. It is most thoroughly constructed of hard-burned brick, including the partition walls. The front is of pressed brick with terra cotta trimmings. The block was built from plans furnished by Worthy Niner, Esq., a skillful architect of Fultonville, New York and has been under constant supervision during the entire period of its construction and reflects credit to the architect and the liberality and taste of the owner.

Mr. W. B. Ward of this village was the builder and he has reason to be proud of his work. The building is 65X80, three stories in height. The first story contains three large handsome stores not surpassed by any in Central New York, occupied as follows: A. J. Smith & Son, Druggists; Jas. A. Storer, bookstore, telegraph and express office; and Miss M. Seeber, millinery store. There are also two commodious halls leading by easy flights both front and rear to the second and third floors which are finished with handsome rooms en suite with bath."

Additional notes: Later known as the Gladstone Block, the glass fronts were installed in 1889. They were all plate glass, full size, except for some small colored lights on top. Everything about the block was being done in the latest city style and served as a great ornament to the town. The sidewalks were of Ohio limestone and the street in front of the building was paved out some distance.

In 1921, the Gladstone Block was sold to Horace D. Buck of Brooklyn, New York, father of Ainslie Buck of this village.

The same year of 1886, an article appear in the Richfield Daily outlining the new home of Mr. Westcott which he called 'Bella Vista'. "Among improvements made here during the year, the new residence of R. F. Westcott, near Woodside Park, deserves special mention. The grounds, about 18 acres, bounded by Main Street, Lake View Avenue and Woodside Park, certainly make the most charming spot for a country residence in this vicinity. (Lake View Avenue ran at that time from the edge of Main Street, past the entrance to Bella Vista, and up to Woodside Park). Situated about 150 feet above the village proper, facing the south and west, it affords the most lovely view imaginable. From the windows and verandas of Mr. Westcott's spacious mansion, the eye takes in at a glance the whole expanse of the lovely Canadarago Lake, set in a frame of emerald hills, while far beyond are seen the hills of Otsego and Burlington. To the west and north the scene is also beautiful, nearly every house in this village being in sight, while Pray Hill to the west and South Columbia to the north, appear to be near neighbors.



These Views, Richfield Springs, N.Y.

To any person familiar with the grounds a year ago the transformation is wonderful. The natural beauties all remain while enhanced and made easily accessible by the skillful direction of

Mr. Westcott, who has personally planned and supervised the whole work. A small army of workmen and teams have found profitable employment here for nearly a year. The wholesome employment of our laborers and mechanics has been of no slight value to our village during the dull season.

The house itself has been so admirably placed as to command the most salubrious air and diversified scenery. It is large and spacious and is a commanding object from every approach to the village. The cottage is English in style, built not for show but for comfort. Spacious and cool piazzas and verandas, broad halls, generous rooms and easy fireplaces render it delightful and inviting. Mr. Westcott has put down splendid gravel walks and drive with cut stone curbing along the entire Main Street and Lake View Avenue fronts. On the latter street, he has two rows of handsome trees set in turf that look as though they have been planted five years, although only set out last fall."

Additional notes: The home cost about \$60,000 to

build. In 1890, two stone piers costing \$800 were built at the main entrance of this grounds. In 1896, it was wired for electric lights.

The Westcott family had for many years been one of Richfield's most prominent summer residents. Prior to his death, Robert F. had been made honorary President of the Village and his public enterprise established the Westcott Express Company. He was also a stockholder in several railroads.

While driving near Mt. Otsego, he was thrown from his wagon. After righting it, he fell down and died in a short time. Miss Gardner, whom he was taking to the observatory at Mt. Otsego, was also thrown from the wagon but uninjured. His death, in the opinion of Dr. W. B. Crain and Coroner Ward, was caused by apoplexy.

Born on September 19, 1828, Robert Folger Westcott died on July 19, 1901. The funeral service was held from the Bella Vista and in the evening, when the casket was loaded on the train for Orange, New Jersey, all the church bells in the village tolled in unison. As a tribute to his friend, Thomas R. Proctor had a watering trough placed at the accident site.

SUMMER STORY TIME

Stories Come Alive at the Richfield Springs Public Library will take place on Fridays at 12 Noon during July and August.

An age-appropriate book will be read to those ages 18 months through 7 years each Friday. We welcome all Home Schoolers! Child(ren) must be accompanied by an adult. A themed craft will be available to take home. Come join in on the fun!

Stories Come Alive is a collaboration of the Richfield Springs Public Library, Richfield Springs Community Center and the Community Literacy Partnership Committee, which is an initiative of the Richfield Springs Central School District to improve literacy and test scores.

For more information or questions call Mindy Baker, Librarian, at 315-858-0230.