

A MEMORY TO CHERISH

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

It's a beautiful Friday evening in 1908, so let's take a stroll - if only in our imagination - from the center of the Village, up Church Street and over the knoll into the Town of Warren. From the crest of the knoll, we can easily see our destination. A special event is being presented at the Garden of the Mills, courtesy of Richard M. Montgomery, for benefit of the 'Good Roads' fund.

"Trolleys spin up and down bearing their loads of gay-hearted passengers. Stages, burdened with countless others, lumber over the hill and around the bend of the road to the gates, while others visitors wander leisurely up the hill from town, making their way under twinkling stars to the mystical gardens. The sight, whether from above or at closer range, is enchanting. Hundreds of electric bulbs illuminate waterfalls and lagoons; tiny candles light the way to mysterious byways; brilliantly hued Japanese lanterns, suspended on long bamboo poles reflect their colors in the lipid water beneath, while everywhere the splashing of rippling waters or murmur of the myriad brooks and pools form an undercurrent of melody. Jets of water flashed and fall and tall ferns line the paths with rocks in most artistic disorder lending their irregular outlines to the general picturesqueness of the scene. All is so perfect as the ingenuity of man and the innate beauty of nature could device.

Early in the evening, the Richfield band played on the stand outside while behind them, fireworks were dashed against the sky and gradually faded into oblivion. Later the musicians entered the hall whose gray stone walls formed a background for effective arrangements of goldenrod, cattails, loose falling sheaves of wheat and festoons of hops. Here, beneath the varicolored lanterns and the numerous incandescent lights, the dancers made merry until a late hour, or enjoyed a beautiful supper."

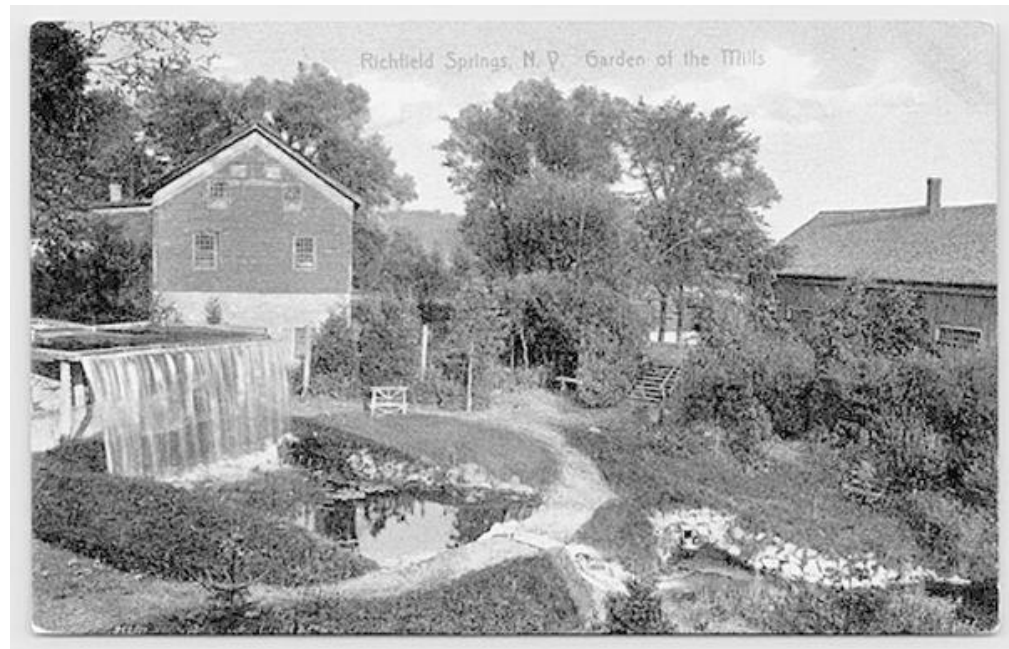
This same area was once the site of the Weatherbee Mills, described as one of the most prosperous centers in Central New York for milling, sawing and tanning, with four run of stone and one of the largest water wheels in the state. It specialized in buckwheat, but graham flour, cornmeal and feed were also produced in quantity.

The property, owned by Brayton A. Weatherbee, held a saw mill, located to the south of the grist mill. Over 20,000 feet of timer was cut there annually. The tannery, located at the rear of the grist mill, flourished during the Civil War period, employing thirty or so men working on government contracts to furnish leather for shoes for the army. Bark was used to tan the hides. Any discarded soft tan bark was used in making sidewalks for the area. It ceased operating in the 1890s and by 1897, the entire business was up for sale.

Enter the real estate broker, Richard Montgomery, from New York City. In 1903, he bought the Weatherbee property for his vision of creating an artists colony, being so charmed with Richfield and its surroundings that he made plans to transform his property into a show place of such unusual beauty that it would be the hub of social gatherings for artists and wealthy spa patrons.

The Garden of the Mills was created for nearly \$50,000, with oriental influences, artificial lakes, statues, waterfalls, flower line paths, pagoda-like shelters, little streams with picturesque bridges and hundreds of trees and shrubs. The artists studio, completed in 1913 with housekeeping facilities, would accommodate forty persons. Montgomery had a great interest in the world of art and music and in the betterment of the Richfield area. Many of his associates were important personages in the world of art and this influenced his dream of an artist colony at the old mill site.

He enlarged and remodeled the Weatherbee house in 1904, adding great fireplaces and 110 electric lights. A large south porch was added and the grounds landscaped. In 1907 he had a new golf grounds created on the large lot



to the east and south, using the Weatherbee house as a club house. His brochure said that it was to be a place where the leading landscape painters of the country would gather and live together to discuss the eternal laws of beauty.

The Montgomery family was always most generous in their contributions to local causes. One of their favorites was the Good Road Association. "Extensive preparations are being made for an entertaining evening's amusements. A concert by the Richfield Springs band will be given from 4 to 5:30 pm. Dancing will be from 9 to 11 pm. Tickets have been placed on sale at all the boarding houses and at Hyde's bookstore. The admission charge of 50 cents will go toward the fund, a subject in which every resident of Richfield and the surrounding country should be deeply interested in. If we are desirous that our summer visitors should bring their horses and add to the gayety of the season, it is necessary that we should provide good roads for their use."

Improvements to the landscaping and buildings were always being made and reported on in the major city newspapers as well as locally.

When the first World War started, Mr. Montgomery tried to attract the many landscape artists who had been accustomed to going to Europe annually. Loss of interest in the curative powers of the baths, easier travel allowing for greater distances to be easily accessible and concerns over the economy caused the beginning of the downfall of what had been experienced during the age of elegance. Through the war years, all activity ceased and by the end of that period, Richfield's star as a summer watering place had fallen.

By the summer of 1922, Montgomery had to give up on his dream and Charles W. Crim, formerly of Utica, and his son, Howell D. Crim, bought the estate. It comprised about 250 acres of land, a large farm with two spacious residences, barns, three cottages and the beautiful park which was built with a view to attract the cultured eye. Crim converted the artists studio into a dancing pavilion which was popular until about 1939 when the Crims moved on and were operating a hotel in Florida.

Richard Montgomery died in 1942. After leaving the Richfield area, he and his wife, Maude, had traveled extensively. Following his death, Maude returned to one of her favorite places and made her home in Richfield, passing away in 1951.

We may no longer hear the shouts of men and the stomp of horses as wagons pull up to the mill. No more will there be workers who are doing their part for the soldiers of the Civil War. We won't be able to see the gardens and waterfalls or hear the music and enjoy the gaiety of the thousands who attended the festivities of this place that inspired artists. They all have passed into history but the memory will be cherished.