

# “SOCIETY IS MY BUSINESS”

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

So said Ward McAllister when he visited Richfield Springs in 1887. It was reported in the MERCURY that: “Mr. McAllister of New York, a popular gentleman who some time since retired from business, is now devoting much time to the promotion of good spirits among society circles, is now at the Spring House.” He and wife again visited in 1888, 1890 and 1892. The NEW YORK WORLD remarked that “Mr. and Mrs. McAllister will help maintain the tone of Richfield Springs.”

This self-appointed guardian between the wealthy elite and the merely wealthy was born in Savannah, Georgia in 1827. At the age of twenty-one, he was sent to New York to study bookkeeping and entered the business world. This didn’t seem to be at all to his liking as he found the society of the north much more interesting than any business. He returned to Savannah to study law as his father and brother had. Although he was said to be a skilled attorney and civil leader before the Civil War, he still wasn’t satisfied.

In 1850, he and his father left for California during the Gold Rush to join his brother in setting up the law firm McAllister & Sons, making a great deal of money in their work of settling land disputes and issuing deeds, but this soon dissatisfied him as he didn’t like the climate or lack of good breeding.

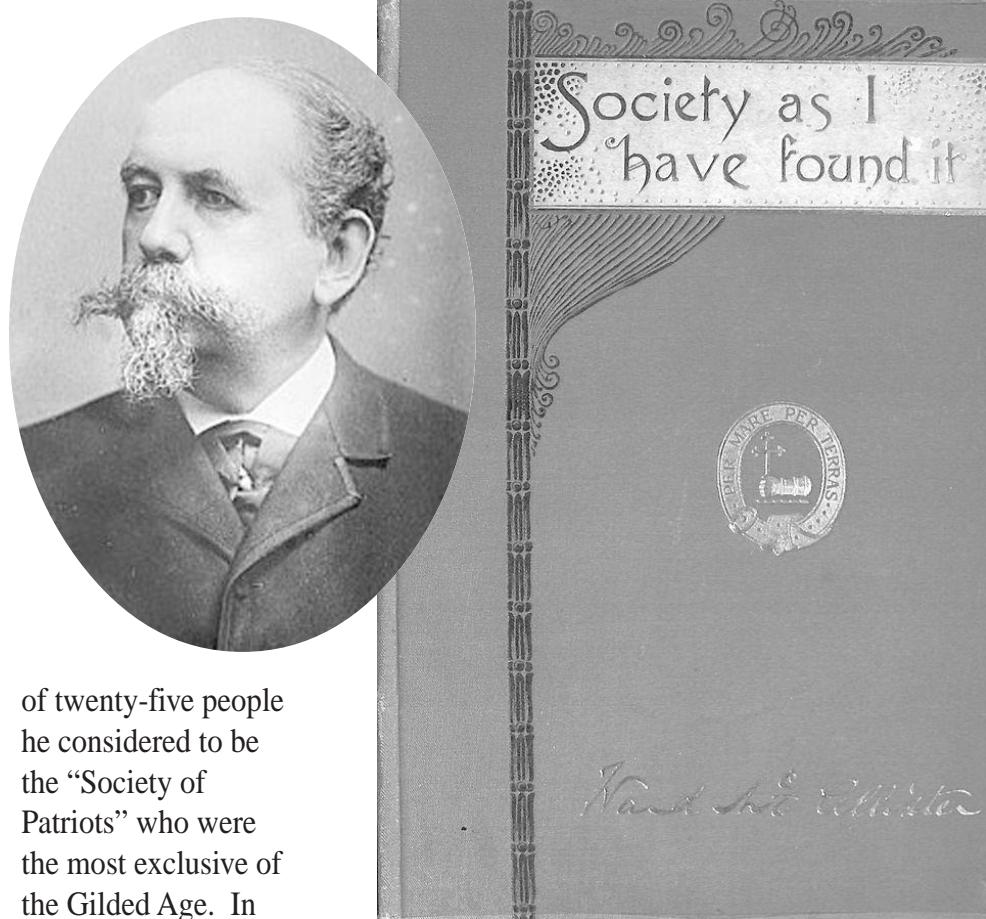
Returning to New York, he married in heiress Sarah Taintor Gibbons (1829-1909). That same year, he purchased Bayside Farm in Newport, Rhode Island. He knew he wasn’t a farmer by any stretch of imagination, but rented sheep and cows and planted acres of trees to create a scene where he could give parties which he called ‘rural festivities’. He spent money without much thought for the future. He had been advised of good investments by those who were successful, but he never took their advice. (Sarah gave birth to three children and later in life became a shut-in, never attending the gala affairs overseen by her husband.)

In 1857 he retired as a lawyer and devoted himself to a social life. The family then left for a tour of Europe for five years where it was much cheaper to live than it was in the United States. As they toured, he paid distinct attention to the customs, behavior, clothing styles, importance of reputation, wealth and anything that was an influence on the aristocrats. He became a connoisseur of French cuisine - all the things important to those of high European social standing.

He brought this learning back to New York and established himself as a self-made authority on how the real aristocracy, what was termed as ‘old order money’, should go about acting and having proper social functions. His purpose seemed to be to educate Americans who had the birth, background and breeding (he referred to them as ‘nobs’) to be like European aristocracy as opposed to the ‘swells’ who had to prove themselves in society.

MC, as he referred to himself, was a distant cousin of Caroline Schermerhorn Astor, wife of William Astor Jr. He established a relationship with her by upgrading the social events that she held, bringing them into line with his ideas of how the cream of society should behave, giving a touch of brightness to what he felt was their humdrum existence.

Working with Mrs. Astor, who previously had not been too successful in the results of her galas, he established himself as the ‘King of New York Society’. He offered his services as chaperone and teacher to young lady debutants who needed to learn the ways that were accepted in society. MC had published a list



of twenty-five people he considered to be the “Society of Patriots” who were the most exclusive of the Gilded Age. In 1892 he, with the influence of Mrs.

Astor, compiled a list of four hundred of societies’ best. This became known as ‘The 400’ who, in their opinion, were the people in fashionable New York who felt at ease in the ballrooms of high society. Depending on your status, you either were pleased that you were on this list, or you quietly tolerated that you were not included. The rumor at the time was that this was the number of guests that would comfortable fit in Mrs. Astor’s ballroom.

All was going well until ----seeking media attention, in 1890 he published his memoirs. Society As I Have Found It proved to be a look at 19th century American high society in which he told of the opulent lifestyles, social status and culture of the wealthy. It also proved to be his downfall. The biggest problem for MC was caused by his blending of personal anecdotes and social commentary. While he didn’t ‘name names’, the elite of New York had no trouble in knowing the individuals he was referring to and they didn’t like this public airing of their lives and activities. They valued their privacy. This book, of course, became very popular than as well as now as it served as a social history providing insights into the lives, customs and values of the era’s influential people. He no longer was accepted as the authority on these matters. In fact, he was thought intolerable and was left in a sort of social exile, labeled as someone who put on airs, an imposter and a professional snob.

His days as a social advisor were over for Ward McAllister. He died at age 67 on January 31, 1895 from an attack of influenza. The funeral was held at Grace Church in New York City with some of higher social standing in attendance for appearance sake only. Mrs. Astor did not attend, choosing to have a dinner party that day. Mrs. McAllister was unable to go to the service.

Perhaps MC would have been pleased to know that in future years, his book would be the reference for other books, movies and television because it gave the rest of the world an insight into the way life was lived, and changed, during the Gilded Age.