

The Breakers

Patrons: Cornelius Vanderbilt II and Alice Vanderbilt

Architect: Richard Morris Hunt

The History

In 1885, Cornelius Vanderbilt II brought the original wood and brick house called the Breakers for his summer home. It was called the Breakers because of the waves of the Atlantic broke onto the rocks of the oceanfront property. The original house was completely destroyed by fire in 1892.

Vanderbilt hired Richard Morris Hunt to design a noble house befitting the patriarch of the Vanderbilt family. Cornelius Vanderbilt II inherited a massive fortune from his grandfather, Cornelius I, and his father who owned steamship and railroad lines in the northeast. Work on the mansion began in 1893, and was completed in two years.

On August 14, 1895 the Breakers housewarming and coming out party for daughter Gertrude Vanderbilt was held for over 300 guests. Three years later Cornelius died, but his wife still maintained and lived in the house. Mrs. Alice Vanderbilt, know as Alice of the Breakers died at age 89 in 1934. She left the Breakers to her daughter, who leased the house to the Preservation Society for \$1 a year. The house was later purchased by the Preservation Society of Newport County and is now open to the public. It is one of the most visited historic homes in the United States.

The Architecture

Hunt's design was grand and absolutely fireproof. Work on the mansion began in 1893, and was completed in two years. The design was Italian Renaissance plan influenced by a famous Renaissance architect, Andrea Palladio (1508-1580). The estate design consisted of a roofed central courtyard with the first and second floors opening into the central space. Hunt added two more floors, the third floor for bedrooms and 33 rooms on the fourth floor for the servants for a total of 70 rooms in the house.

The structure of the house was steel-reinforced masonry faced with Indiana limestone. Interest on the façade was created with arches, balconies and terraces. To further fireproof the mansion, the heating plant was placed away from the house under the caretaker's cottage with a wide tunnel joining it to the house. The two-story kitchen was in a separate wing and enclosed behind sealed doors so that no fire could escape into the house. The butler's pantry contained a 10-foot vault for silver and china storage.

The main entrance consisted of elaborate 30-foot gates with the initials CV and the acorn and oak leaf family seal of the Vanderbilt's on each gate. A long graveled path lead to the main door between arched open spaces with large windows. Small sculptures decorate the arches. Upon entering the house, there are two receiving rooms, one for men and one for women, on either side of the hallway. The 45-foot high great hall contains a curving grand staircase and alternating engaged and freestanding columns surround the room. Gold leaf decorative molding surround the ceiling with a *sotto in su* painting in the center.

Although hundreds of workers were imported from Europe to work on the house, in order to complete the house in two years, many of the interior rooms were constructed in Europe, taken apart, shipped to

Newport, reconstructed and then installed in the house. The French interior design firm of Jules Allard and Sons designed these rooms.

The library walls are covered with walnut paneling and gold embossed leather. The library contains comfortable chairs and book lined shelves. The billiard room has a masculine design. The pale gray green marble and carved yellow alabaster of the floor and walls are cool and solid. A huge mahogany pool table is in the center of the room under a large twin lighting fixture. This room has a mosaic floor rather than wood and carpets. Leathers and dark wood furnishings complete the room.

The most dramatic room is the dining room, which is two stories high, and over 2400 square feet. Twelve red and rose alabaster columns support the gild carved cornices. Small masks on the ormolu capitols and life-size figures are set against murals of classical scenery around the room. Gold leaf ornament is used all through the room. Two twelve-foot Baccarat crystal chandeliers, made of thousands of crystal balls, are hung from the ceiling's steel understructure. There are twelve matching crystal wall sconces equipped with gas and electric to fill the room with gleaming light. The dining table is massive, composed of carved oak, with matching chairs made specifically for the room and covered with red damask.

The second floor contains the bedrooms; while the rooms are slightly smaller, they are still in the grand style of the first floor. Alice Vanderbilt's large bedroom is light and airy with flowered wall fabric and off white bedroom furnishings in the Louis XV style. The adjacent dressing room matches the décor of the bedroom.

Cornelius Vanderbilt's bedroom is smaller and furnished with carved walnut panels. Cornelius preferred to be at working his New York Office and would generally only come to Newport for the weekends in the summer. On the second floor, there are smaller bedrooms for their children and guest bedrooms.

Each bedroom has an adjoining bathroom complete with fresh hot and cold water as well as hot and cold salt water pumped from the ocean. (Saltwater baths were considered very healthy at the time.) The water was stored in holding tanks on the roof and fed by gravity to the rooms. Mrs. Vanderbilt also had a large marble bathtub made up of one piece of marble weighing over a ton.

A large open loggia or sunroom on the second floor allowed for open air with cool ocean breezes and a magnificent view of the Atlantic Ocean.

The grounds of the Breakers were formally landscaped with exotic plant and tree specimens and patterned gardens. A stable and carriage house were built separately a mile away from the main house. A full staff controlled by the head gardener was needed to care for the grounds and raise flowers in the greenhouse for the flower arrangements and indoor plants.