

# Brennen House

39 West Court Street

Hudson, New York

Built for John F.X. Brennen, a wealthy builder, newspaper publisher, politician and civic leader, this Colonial Revival stone and clapboard city residence was constructed at one of the best addresses in Hudson between 1894 and 1895. The house was designed by Michael O'Connor, a respected regional architect. The contractor was H.S. Moul and Company, who signed and dated the specifications for the structure on August 13, 1894. Construction would have begun soon after the signing. By December 9, 1894 the house was certainly framed and sheathed since one of the workmen, D. Heath, signed and dated a board on the west wall of the attic. The house was completed in 1895.

## The Owner

John F.X. Brennen (1854-1926) was the eldest son of Thomas and Mary McCarthy Brennan, who emigrated to the United States from Ireland in 1848 (at some point their son changed the spelling of the family name from Brennan to Brennen). Trained by his father to become a skilled stone mason and bricklayer, John and his younger brother, Thomas eventually formed the firm of J. and T. Brennen Co., Contractors. Among the buildings erected by this firm were the Firemen's Home, the Hudson City Hospital and the homes of E. Washburn Scovill and Mrs. Malcolm Gifford, all in Hudson. The firm also built the home of Levi P. Morton (a Governor of New York State and Vice-President) in the Village of Rhinebeck. According to the specifications, Brennen's firm supplied many of the fine elements for his own house, including the decorative glass windows and lighting fixtures.

In 1892, at age 38, Brennen married Miss Anna C. Clark of Hudson. Her sister was married to Dennis Kennedy, the President of the Record Printing and Publishing Company, publisher of the *Hudson Evening Register* and the *Weekly Gazette*. Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy also owned the house immediately south of the lot where the Brennen House would be built. John F.X. Brennen's new family ties eventually led him into a new career - journalism. In 1907 Brennen succeeded his brother-in-law as President of the Record Printing and Publishing Company, a post he held until his retirement in 1923.

Mr. Brennen was active in many civic organizations and held many positions of public trust. He was a founder of the Young Men's Temperance and Literary Society and a leader in the Hudson-Champlain Celebration. He served the City of Hudson as a member of the Board of Education and in 1912 was appointed Postmaster of the city. He also served as the President of the Board of Managers of the State Training School for Girls (which was located on the present site of the Hudson Correctional Facility).

A life-long member of the Roman Catholic Church, Mr. Brennen was an advisor to the Bishop in the Albany Diocese. He led the capital campaign to construct St. Mary's Church, and in his will he left a generous bequest to every church, of every denomination, in the City of Hudson.

Mr. Brennen was also a Democrat with ties to Tammany Hall. In fact, a Tiffany tall case clock, which formerly stood in the hall of the house, is said to have been a gift to him from Tammany politicians. Although the only elective office he held was that of alderman in the City of Hudson, he was a friend and advisor to political leaders on higher levels. Governors Martin H. Glynn (a resident of Valatie) and Alfred E. Smith counted him as a friend. He was also active in the young Franklin D. Roosevelt's campaign for a seat in the New York State Senate.

At the time of his death in 1926 John F.X. Brennen was publicly eulogized as "one of Hudson's most prominent and revered citizens... he lived an exemplary life, moulded a fine character, builded a large competence and by precept and example exercised an uplifting influence upon this community."

Mr. Brennen's influence on the City of Hudson is visible today in his newspaper (now the *Register-Star*) and his church, as well as the many surviving structures built by J. and T. Brennen Co. However, the most personal and tangible testament to his prominent position in Hudson is the residence he built and lived in for the last 30 years of his life. At the time of his death, as is the case today, 39 West Court was considered "one of the beautiful homes of the city." As Mr. Brennen and his wife had no children the house passed to his brother's daughter, Katherine C. Brennen Mulhern (Mrs. Thomas Mulhern). She, in turn, left the house to her daughter, Alice Keating Cummings (Mrs. Richard Cummings). After Mrs. Cummings' death in 1978 the present owners purchased the house.

## The Architect

Michael J. O'Connor (1851-1933) was born in Waterford, New York. He attended, but did not graduate from, the Polytechnic Institute (now RPI) at Troy. He began his career in Saratoga Springs, but moved to Hudson in 1879. He first appears in the City Directory for Hudson (a precursor of the phone book) working as a draftsman. In the 1883 directory he is listed as an architect. Obviously able, he attracted numerous desirable commissions. He designed *Midwood*, a riverfront estate owned by Livingston family descendants, in 1889. He supervised the extensive remodeling of John Henry Livingston's *Clermont* in 1893. He designed his own impressive town house at 455 East Allen Street in Hudson in 1892-93. O'Connor also designed several important public buildings, including the Firemen's Home, the Emmanuel Lutheran Church, and the Central Grammar, Sixth Street and Allen Street Schools.

Michael O'Connor married the former Eliza Lavery in 1884 or 1885. The couple had two children. A daughter, Isabelle, was born in 1886, and a son, William, was born the following year. William attended his father's alma mater, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and earned a degree in civil engineering. For several years father and son worked in partnership, as M. O'Connor and Son. Michael O'Connor died in 1933 at age 82. The local newspaper lauded him in his obituary as a "widely known architect and mechanical engineer... For half a century Mr. O'Connor engaged in architectural work and many buildings in this city, county, and state were constructed from [his] plans."

## The Builder

Henry S. Moul (1857-?) was born in Victor, New York, a community located about 20 miles south of Rochester. His ancestors, however, had settled in what is now the Town of Ghent in Columbia County prior to 1794. He was of Dutch descent.

Moul moved to Hudson about 1875, taking a job as a clerk. Two years later he commenced an apprenticeship to learn the carpenter's trade with James E. McClure. He was promoted to journeyman and, later, foreman, working for McClure for 11 years. On January 1, 1894 he formed a partnership with Frank B. Lasher under the firm name of H.S. Moul and Co., Carpenters and Builders. Eight months later the firm agreed to build John F.X. Brennen's fine residence. In 1896 H.S. Moul and Co. began to advertise itself as a firm of architects and builders. Moul was responsible for the design and construction of numerous houses in turn-of-the-century Hudson.

## The House

Brennen House is a two and one-half story residence designed in the then-fashionable Colonial Revival style. This architectural design style was popular between 1876 and 1926 (these years mark the Centennial and Sesquicentennial of American Independence). The booklet *Identifying American Architecture* comments, "... the Revival house is often a combination of various colonial styles and contemporary elements. Generally the Revival house is larger than its Colonial counterpart and some of the individual elements are exaggerated or out of proportion with other parts of the house."

Colonial Revival elements include the balanced façade with a center entry, the large entry porch with its paired classically derived columns and roof balustrade, and the elaborate cornice and frieze. The "Stereo Relief Ornament" in a bellflower swag design that forms the frieze was a manufactured element. Elements of the façade that remain from the vocabulary of the preceeding Queen Anne style are the textured wall surface which combines cut stone and clapboard, the projecting center bay on the second story with its projecting tower, and the large single-paned plate glass windows.

The house is an example of the advanced construction technology of the late nineteenth century. All trim elements on the exterior and interior were mass manufactured and ordered from catalogues by the architect.

### *The Center Hall*

The hall is generous in its dimensions and appointments. The room and stairwell are wainscoted in quartersawn oak. On the wall above is a grasscloth fill. The floor, like all those in the main room, is of quartersawn oak, laid tounge and groove, with ornamental parquet borders of oak, cherry or maple.

The sliding doors that separate the main rooms are veneered in woods appropriate to the trim of the room. The elaborately turned balustrade and the broad stairs are also of quartersawn oak. All of the wood trim would have been purchased from a catalogue. The owner supplied the art glass vestibule and stair landing windows. Research has not revealed the name of the manufacturer. During Mr. Brennen's occupancy a Tiffany and Company tall case clock stood in this hall (the one purportedly given by Tammany pols).

The present owners display Chinese tapestries and Japanese wood block prints on the walls. The ebonized Chinese Chippendale seat furniture dates from the nineteenth century. On the mantel shelf are a pair of Royal Teplitz figures that were a wedding gift to one of the present owners' grandparents.

### *The Library*

Traditionally, a library was considered a gentleman's room and was decorated in somber, dark colors. This room served the Brennen family as a sitting room, however. A second, more private, sitting room was located upstairs. The library is wainscoted in sycamore. The fill area is papered in a reproduction late nineteenth century wallpaper by Scalamandre. The Serapi rug was woven in northwest Persia.

On the walls are engraved views of Rome by Piranesi. The furnishings include two overstuffed chairs from the Brennen/Mulhern period of occupancy, a Jacobean chair, a rococco chair and low Turkish style tables. A collection of art pottery ornaments the mantle. The gas fireplace logs are porcelain. At the time of construction the house featured central heating and combination electric and gas light fixtures.

### *The Music Room*

The music room was delineated as the "Parlor" on Mr. O'Connor's floor plans. The Brennens, however, also referred to it as the Music Room. According to Mr. Brennen's will, a piano and a marble statue were among the furnishings of this room. The wood trim is of "first quality" white pine, which was originally finished with five coats of primer, paint and varnish. The elements that comprise the moulded plaster ceiling would have been purchased from a catalogue.

The furniture, in the French style, is of nineteenth and early twentieth century origin. French style furnishings were considered appropriate for a formal reception room where calls were paid. In the more rigidly stratified family life of the period this room would have been considered part of the "woman's sphere."

The rug is a Persian Mashad. The mid to late twentieth century paintings are by American artists. The painting of the restaurant interior depicts a failed assassination attempt. It illustrates a scene from a Mexican novel and is by the American artist Sue Daykin.

### *The Dining Room*

The walls in this room are wainscoted in quartersawn oak. The walls above are covered with the original Lincrusta Walton, an imitation leather manufactured in England and very popular in America during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The furniture is original to the room and is also of quartersawn oak. Note the built-in sideboard and china cabinets. According to the builder's specifications, "the china closet in corners of Dining Room to be furnished by the owner, but set in place by the contractor and finished to match trim in room." The mantel was also supplied by the owner. Note that the egg and dart moulding of the wainscoting matches the motifs on the table. The American portrait over the mantel is of an unknown man. The rug is an English Arts and Crafts product.

### *The Butler's Pantry*

A Butler's pantry would be found only in a house where the presentation and serving of meals to the family and their guests was of primary importance to the owner. This room served as a space for the storage of fine china and silver, and as a space for washing the delicate china separately from the heavy washing that would take place in the kitchen. This pantry serves the present owners as a bar.

### *The Kitchen*

The kitchen has been updated to serve contemporary needs. The original cast iron stove, however, remains in place. The floors are of Norway pine and the wainscoting of yellow pine. At the end of the room are the back stairs which extend from the basement to the attic. Just off the kitchen was an Ice Closet for refrigeration and the storage pantry.

### *The Garden*

The garden was designed in 1984 by the late Richard Barker, the former owner of *Teviotdale* (the Robert Fulton home in Livingston). It is designed to provide privacy and is said to be enjoyed from the second story porch.

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