GLENSESHEEN ESTATE

Glenesheen is the country estate created by Chester and Clara Congdon for their family home. It was built between 1905 and 1908. However the idea for the selection of the location and the design began many months before. In Clara's diary there is a notation that she and Chester visited the proposed site of the estate in 1904. This suggests that they had been aware of the potential of this piece of land for some time.

What attracted them to this site is not actually known. One can assume that its location adjacent to Lake Superior had some influence because of the inclusion of a boathouse in the preliminary plans for the estate design. In one drawing the boathouse was to be located in the mouth of Tischer Creek. This indicates that the availability of the Creek as a possible boat refuge appealed to the Congdons.

The gentle slope of the land down to the lakeshore must have been a contributing factor. On either side of this location, the shoreline has sharp dropoffs that range in height from approximately 5 feet to 30 feet. These abrupt edges were created and are maintained by the powerful wave action of Lake Superior. The landscape architect recognized the destructive force of the waves and proposed the construction of a riprap wall along several hundred feet of the estate's beach to protect it from further erosion.

The overall layout of the property is patterned after an English country estate. In this design the mansion is the focal point and is located near the center of the land mass. At Glenesheen this pattern is similar. The mansion, located between two creeks, is close to the center of the estate. The out buildings, carriage house, gardener's cottage and boat house, are on the periphery and provide support for the estate.

The Congdons also selected a site location that had a very good buffer zone around it. The cemetery on the west boundary was there for many years before they decided to build. As Mrs. Congdon stated "I will have quiet neighbors". The lake borders on the south and London Road borders on the north. The land to the east was purchased by the Congdons at the same time they purchased the land for their estate. This insured that no one would be able to build on this plot. Today this buffer zone still exists.

In the design presented by the landscape architect, there was a plan for a network of paths to traverse the estate proper and connect to another system that followed Tischer Creek up to Vermillion Road. The latter was part of a city park. This path system involved installing stone steps in the creek to allow crossing without getting wet. It also required steps to be carved or placed into the adjacent creek banks so that one could go up and down with little effort. In some spots wooden bridges were built to permit travel to continue. Remnants of this system still exist today but are in poor condition.

This path followed the course of Tischer Creek and eventually passed an area that had been developed as a water reservoir to supply the estate. This was located just east of Greysolon Place and along the west side of the creek. The reservoir system used gravity to direct the water into an intake and through an underground pipe to a filtering bed. From there the water is filtered through several layers of natural materials ranging from a top layer of fine sand down to a bottom layer of coarse gravel. This simple method allows dirt and debris to collect on the top layer as the clean water trickles down to the bottom. The sand on top can then be removed periodically with the filtered materials. A new layer of sand is again applied and the filtration process continues. Water that has been filtered falls into a holding tank that has a capacity of 60,000 gallons. This tank is covered. It is constructed of concrete and has a radius of approximately 25 feet. The interior floor is slanted to face the lake. This helps to create more pressure for the water that flows to the estate. This water is carried through a 10 inch main that crosses the creek and follows its west bank to the area near the railroad tracks. At this point it crosses overland to come out on the east end of the mansion.
The intriguing aspect about this water supply system is that it is gravity operated. The intake permits the natural flow of the water to force its way into it. The gentle slope of the terrain easily carries the water through the connecting pipe to the filtration bed. Once again gravity pulls the water through the filtration bed and out into the holding tank. There are valves located at the southern end of the holding tank that permit water flow to be regulated to the estate or to bypass the latter and to drain the tank. This last could probably be used especially when the tank needed to be cleaned.

The water that was provided to the estate through this system was used for several operations. On the grounds this system provided irrigation by means of small feeder lines that are located both underground and in numerous spots throughout the estate. Water hoses could be hooked up to these outlets and used to water the various parts of the property. This system permitted flexibility and easier maintenance. In the fall the feeder lines have to be drained in order to prevent them from freezing and rupturing.

Another section went to the fountain. There is enough pressure provided by this gravity system to propel the water approximately 75 feet in the air. Lily pads have been grown in the fountain pool for many years. One of the reasons why they have succeeded for so long is the tempered water that is feed into the pool via the fountain.

The mansion also benefited from the gravity feed system. The vacuum pump that operated the radiator valves was operated by this source of power. The propeller in the Mass Coil Room was turned by a waterwheel that was powered by this water. This propeller forced hot moist air through the house by means of copper ductwork. The ductwork still exists except for several sections that have been disconnected or removed near the Mass Coil Room. Although the humidification system is no longer in operation, it provides evidence of the creative use of nature’s power.

The power source was plentiful and renewable and the system required minimal maintenance. Even today, after 75 years, the supply of water still exists and the delivery system is still in relatively good operating condition.

Thus it seems that the Congdons did indeed see the potential of this site for more than just a home. They saw their home fitting into and complementing the environment that it inhabited. This is evident in the way the landscape architect and the architect located the main house and the way the approaches to the mansion are laid out. The house is situated so that it is predominant. The out buildings are all below the height of the main house and are screened from the view of the occupants by the natural vegetation that grows on the property.

The main approach from London Road is through the west gate. The road does not come straight in but instead follows the natural contour of the slope creating an approach in the shape of an "S". Viewed from the street the mansion can be hardly seen. This may have been one of the reasons for such a design. It also made it difficult for carriages and motor vehicles to enter or leave the property because there is a sharp turn, nearly 90 degrees, at the gate. This also may have been intentional.

The road from the west gate was built to meet and follow the natural contour of the slope. This may have been necessary because the natural slope was too steep. If the road was to be carved into the bank, it may have had to follow a path that would have put it further east of its present location. By building a road up to meet this slope, this problem was eliminated. It may also have been relatively easy because there was a ready supply of dirt, from the house excavation, to fill in this foundation. Whatever the reason, there was no ugly scar created. Instead the natural beauty of the land remained even though this roadway had intruded into this pastoral setting.
In constructing the estate itself, the landscape architect only excavated those sections of the property where buildings or gardens were to be located. The natural vegetation was left intact and the construction went on around it. When the buildings were complete and the gardens were finished, they did not appear in a highly devastated background. There was some cleaning up and planting to do near the structures but the surrounding sections still looked natural. This is evident in the photographs that were taken during the three years of construction. This probably was not done because of the amount of work involved and because it was unnecessary. Unlike today where there are large vehicles used in building, horses, wagons and men were the rule in 1905-08. These did not require a lot of working room and, therefore, there was no need to clear large land areas.

The utilities that feed the property are not visible because they are underground. Electrical, water, gas and telephone sources were put in ducts and pipes in the ground. This prevented any intrusion into the pastoral setting of the estate. On the property there are manholes that provide access to these. Over the years the telephone and electrical wiring was deteriorated because of the corrosion caused by water and the freeze-thaw cycles. Repairs that could not be attended to via the manholes required that the ground be dug up and the necessary work accomplished. Currently a high pressure gas line and a new telephone cable have replaced the original ones. In both cases they were buried in the ground but not as deep (below the frost line) as the first ones. The electrical source will probably be the next utility that will have to be replaced.

On the east side of the estate there are the vegetable gardens, flower beds, tennis court and bowling green. Each has been segregated by means of terracing. From the top on the bowling green, the view towards the lake looks unified at first but a longer glance separates the areas into distinct sections. These distinctions are very evident when looking from the bottom towards the top. Again the landscape architect was attempting to use the natural contours to the best visual advantage.

The greenhouses that were built were attached to the back of the gardener's cottage which faced the lake. There attachment was necessary because the cottage housed the heating plant for them. One of the rooms was also used for potting purposes. Protection from the lake breezes may also have required that they be situated on that side. The greenhouses were positioned opposite the vegetable and flower plots so this may have been another reason for their location. Bob Wyness states that several dollars worth of seeds were purchased each year and then planted for germination in the greenhouses. In the spring the young plants were transplanted into the outside beds. Many of the plants and fresh flowers that were used in the house were also grown in the green houses. At some point in time, a wind break was planted east of the green houses to further protect them and the vegetable and flower beds from the strong cold lake breezes. While they did offer protection from the wind, they also created another hazard, falling branches or, worse, a fallen tree. The green houses graced the estate and provided colorful and exotic plants until 1971 when they were dismantled. They were uneconomical to operate at that point and the decision was made to remove them. The area where they existed has been filled in and terraced. Unless told they existed and where, visitors would not easily know they were there at one time. On the back side of the gardener's cottage there is evidence, a roof outline, that points out where the green house was attached to the cottage.