Was Yates Castle Really a Stop

"Yates Castle is Now Ours," read the headline in the Nov. 7, 1905, Syracuse Daily Orange: "The sensation of the month occurred yesterday in the announcement that the University has at last become the owner of the magnificent old castle at the foot of the bluff where John Crouse College stands.

"These new grounds, with their beautiful shrubbery, winding driveway, rustic bridges, greenhouses and arbors make a most appropriate addition to the present property. . . . Since the death of Alonzo C. Yates, the property has not been kept up to its condition; (it will be) put into first-class condition at once."

The Syracusan, the student magazine, showed the same pride in this "long coveted" castle: "What alumnus has not roamed through the grounds of the Castle? The walks in the shade of the trees on a pleasant afternoon with—well, we will not be too personal. Even then we dreamed of the time when these beautiful grounds should be the property of the University. We would then stroll by right and not by sufferance. For the realization of that dream we waited a generation.

"Volumes might be written on this topic. The midnight escapade; the disappearing coat-tails of the student over the wall as the policeman appeared on the other side—these and many other events have become enshrined in college tradition and are rehearsed when the old fellows get together."

The picturesque garden estate most know as Yates Castle worked the magic its architect had intended. After a half-century of growth, the planned harmony of the grounds made the Castle seem a place apart from the world, a place that could captivate the imagination.

There was a "whole feeling of fantasy" about the place, people said. It had "old world charm," was another frequent comment. The fantasies created many legends. When the Yates family abandoned the Castle, they took their family history with them. A vacant castle was bound to invoke mystery. The shuttered-up Castle, circled at night by bats and owls (as it was described) with its rundown appearance must have
looked the part of the old haunted mansion every town was obliged to have on hand for stormy nights and Halloween. Having been orphaned by the Yates, the Castle was a place in need of a story and the stories were casually embroidered over the years until they were local legends.

Once the Castle gates "were open to the world," it was caught up in campus traditions, the tales passed from class to class that honor or create the college's history. With a new student population every four years, the folklore was accelerated. When the journalism school moved into the Castle, the legends received wider circulation as they were repeatedly printed in The Daily Orange.

As in all local history, the stories told and retold are often what people want to believe happened, not the true history, but a story made to fit romantic requirements. How the legends grew can be explained by one story. Evelyn Shatraw [now of Albany, Ore.] spent her childhood playing in the deserted Castle on weekends as her grandfather, a janitor, cleaned the building. "We raced through the rooms playing hide and seek. We pretended we were Kings and Queens of ancient days and for now 'this Castle was ours.'"

"I remember particularly when we used to play around the beautiful lawns and often were beset with curious people longing to tour through the Castle. One day we interrupted my grandfather at work and pleaded with him to take one such woman through.

She had been inside, having attended one of the famous balls of the past. . . . We listened in awe as she related the story of the bride who left her death from the tower. Although it was not authentic, we were romantic (enough) to want to accept it. It made good story material and heightened the mystery surrounding the Castle." Today Shatraw is writing a Gothic romance set in the Castle.

During the 1920s and 1930s, people believed that the first owner, Cornelius Tyler Longstreet, had built the Castle as a duplicate of his wife's ancestral castle in England. Just before the Castle was finished, Longstreet's young bride committed suicide by jumping from the highest tower. Obviously distraught, Longstreet sold the Castle to Yates. The fact that Longstreet's wife, Caroline, was born in Syracuse to a pioneer family and outlived her husband, never interfered with the story.

The most persistent legend—and one still believed today—says that the Castle was a station on the "Underground Railroad" that smuggled freed slaves north to Canada.

Syracuse was an active center for abolitionists, and the Longstreets were believed to be "staunch abolitionists." In 1851, the year Longstreet returned to his hometown from New York City, Syracuse was host to an "Anti-Slavery Convention." Abolitionists at the meeting made history with the famous Jerry Rescue. Federal officers had captured Jerry, an escaped slave. An angry mob of abolitionists stormed the jail and freed him, signaling to the rest of the country that the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 could not be enforced. That law commanded all citizens everywhere, even in free states, to help federal officials return fugitive slaves to their owners.

Judging the abolitionist fervor of the times, one Syracuse newspaper concluded that Renwick Castle, completed four years later, with its "lush botanical garden . . . would have been an ideal haven" for escaping slaves. Somewhere in the Castle, there were secret rooms and passages that proved (or created) the legend.

The Syracuse Post-Standard claimed it had the proof on Sept. 22, 1905, in a story headlined: "Slave Refuge Discovered in Yates Castle." There were two secret rooms in the attic and a complete set of hidden passages. A friend of a sister of Caroline Longstreet was the source of the story.

The first secret room was reached by climbing a ladder in the closet of a second story bedroom in the front of the building and "crawling through an opening that would defy any chimney sweep." The Post-
The Castle on the Hill

The Castle on the hill, at sunset like a jewel amid the trees, was a landmark in the imagination of Syracuse for 100 years.

The 24-room mansion, built from 1852 to 1855, was known at various times as Renwick Castle, "Longstreet's Folly" and Yates Castle.

The Castle stood on 16 acres of landscaped groves and gardens. Spread out through the grounds were the Castle's outbuildings: a ten-pin alley, a greenhouse, an octagonal icehouse, two conservatories, a porter's lodge, a gardener's cottage, a gatehouse, a stable and a carriage house, various fountains and statues, and a rustic bridge that spanned a gorge on the property.

When the architect, James Renwick Jr. of New York City, arrived to work on the Castle in 1852, he was at the turning point in his career. The Smithsonian was under construction in Washington, D.C., and the next year he began drawing plans for his major work—St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York.

The Castle was built on an untouched wooded hillside east of the city for clothing merchant Cornelius Tyler Longstreet.

In 1855 when the Castle was finished, Longstreet advertised in the Syracuse Standard, to sell his "Folly," as he called it. Cut off by frequently muddy roads, Longstreet and his wife felt isolated from Syracuse society. Longstreet tired of his project and left the interior incomplete. He had spent $85,000 on the Castle and in "excess of $100,000" on furniture, craftsmen and landscaping.

In 1867, 12 years after he first advertised to sell the property, Longstreet sold the Castle to Alonzo Chester Yates, who had become a millionaire by speculating on the Civil War, stockpiling wool for uniforms. The Yates family gave the Castle a new lavishness. Their parties earned them a reputation and gave the Castle their name.

After the senior Yates died in 1880, the family fortune was dissipated by his son, poor investments by his wife and legal infighting among the family. In 1905 the Yates sold the Castle to SU for $50,000.

The Castle became the home of SU's Teachers College, bearing the name of Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage. Mrs. Sage donated money to cover the Castle's purchase in 1907 and made subsequent donations for the Castle and other University projects that totaled about $2 million.

Mrs. Sage, who had been a governess for Longstreet's children, inherited $64 million from her husband, Russell Sage, the "Money-King" of Wall Street.

In 1934 the Teachers College was moved to larger quarters in Achilles Hall and Yates became the home of the School of Journalism.

By the late 1920s SU had other plans for the grounds, having decided to build a medical center on the site. The University picked away at the castle and its grounds, painting over elaborate ceiling frescoes with flat grey paint, tearing down the carriage house, the icehouse and the gatehouse, and dynamiting the bridge during the 1930s. The Depression put off the demolition.

By the 1950s the Castle's 16 acres of gardens had been whittled away to less than two acres. Four hospitals and a medical school had been built on or near the grounds. The Castle looked as if it had been backed into a tight parking space between the seven-story Veteran's hospital and the medical school which was 3.7 feet from it. The front of the Castle faced the medical school's refuse door. Knowing that the Castle was going to be torn down eventually, the University did little maintenance.

In 1953 expansion of the medical school was announced. A wing would be built over the site of the Castle. SU had persuaded New York State to take the medical school off its hands and the Castle was offered as part of the deal. The price was settled in court.

Pleas from national experts, alumni, students and some city residents failed to save the Castle. Locally, few people favored saving the "ugly hodgepodge.

Yates Castle was demolished in April 1954. Only the large mirror and the front doors were saved. Now they are stored at SU's warehouse on Ainsley Drive.

Today all that remains of the estate is a low grey stone wall on Irving Avenue. Few people notice it as they walk by. The hospitals and medical school have made the Castle's history a secret, like a battlefield whose green grass soon buries the dead and denies all memorials.
Standard said. The room was “lighted only by three diminutive windows set deep in the stone casement... the story continued. “...In the Slave days, however, the initiate could find a dozen bricks which were placed in loosely and, when these were removed, crawl into a room about 20-feet square, of great elevation, but lighted only by a long window, less than 12 inches wide.” That was the odd window on the front that looked like it belonged to a third story. The article conceded that the room was not a complete secret: “In recent years the loose bricks have been removed and an entrance has been cut through the wall into the room.”

The runaway slaves did not reach these rooms by closet ladder, but by a labyrinth of secret passages that had been lost when the University remodeled the Castle. After all, “there is little romance” in climbing through a closet, the newspaper said, adding that secret passages presented, “a cross section view of the politics of the United States in the days that preceded the Civil War.”

The entrance to the secret passage was said to be in the kitchen. “Starting (in) back of the oven — where no pursuer would ever think of looking — the passageway led between two narrow walls through a secret panel into one of the servant’s rooms. From there it followed a tortuous course, around practically the entire roof of the complex old structure to the first of the garret rooms.”

There were frequent searches for the lost passageway and hidden rooms. Each expedition into the recesses of the Castle came back with its own secret: hidden staircases, underground passageways and sliding panels. Any irregularity in the Castle’s construction was taken as a hint for the slave hideout: the top step on the main staircase was two inches higher than the other steps; the tower attic was rumored to have a “double floor” since it was one foot higher than nearby parts of the attic.

The attic was the subject of the most searches. The two secret rooms “discovered” by The Post-Standard were rediscovered by each generation of students. Daisy D. Dudleston, who later taught at the SU Teachers College when it was in the Castle, remembered an expedition that she made as a student with “a group of girls from Haven” shortly after SU bought the mansion.

She recalled the day they opened the door to a “very dark closet. Our leader had been told to look for a narrow stairway on the left. After our eyes were accustomed to the gloom we found it and cautiously crept up, one at a time, to find ourselves in an attic crisscrossed by many huge supporting beams.

“It looked impassable, but by climbing over and crawling under the beams toward a corner which seemed better lighted, we finally reached a fair-sized room with a good floor several feet down below the attic floor and with small slit-like windows which were in some of the recesses of the coping. They were not noticeable from the grounds.” They had found the first secret room described by The Post-Standard.

Dudleston also remembered “a small window about eight inches square which was
above the doorway to the central hall and
which had been used for signaling to the
attic. . . During the eight years I taught in
the (Castle) I often wondered about the
anxious faces which 'once upon a time' had
watched for the 'all clear' signal from
below."

But only fairy tales begin with "once upon
a time." The stories of slaves being hidden in
the Castle are false. The Onondaga Histori-
cal Association has pursued the story ex-
haustively, finding no proof.

The legend was apparently started some
40 years after the Civil War. There was no
need to use the Castle for the Underground
Railroad. The abolitionist sentiment was so
strong in Syracuse that the Underground
Railroad moved the freed slaves through
downtown houses. Those movements were
sometimes advertised in the newspaper.

The irregular ceiling heights in the Castle
were probably designed that way by James
Renwick to enhance the Castle's picturesque
roof line. With the front attic window, for
example, Renwick made the Castle's left side
taller until it offset the design of the front
tower on the right side.

The final word on the Underground Rail-
road legend belongs to Ella Longstreet. She
told The Syracuse on Oct. 15, 1915, that
her parents "were not abolitionists, but were
opposed to the movement." She continued:
"There was no underground passageway,
but there was a large room in the attic which
was playfully called by the entire family 'The
Fugitive Slave Room,' but where my child-
hood friends and I often played.

J. Richard Street, dean of the Teachers
College from 1906 to 1917, was willing to let
him go of the legend immediately upon hearing
her explanation. "It is only tradition," he
said. "When the building first came into
possession of the University such stories
were in vogue, and I, like a great many
others, was foolish enough to believe them.
The construction of the attic might suggest
such."

Although Ella Longstreet disproved the
legend less than a month after The Post-
Standard had caused a stir over its "dis-
covery," the legend persists to this day, out-
living the Castle. — Howard Mansfield

This article is based on an excerpt of a book
exploring the Castle's full story—fact and
legend—written by 1979 alumnus Howard
Mansfield. An American Castle started as
his senior honors thesis in American studies.
The American Life Foundation of Watkins
Glen, N.Y., will publish the book this fall.

"Yates Castle is a classic example of how
an important building gets torn down,"
Mansfield says. "It serves as a good
barometer of the American attitude toward
architecture from the Civil War to the
Korean War—before the widespread interest
in preservation."

Along with historical photographs, the
book will contain architectural drawings
recreated from descriptions, photos and
measured floor plans. Those renderings,
shown here, are the work of Robert W.
Cove, who earned an architecture degree
from SU in 1961.

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Rear Elevation Facing East

In 1898 the interior furnishings were
auctioned off by the Yates who locked up
the estate until it was sold to SU.