

THE STORY OF THE NORTHFIELD CHATEAU

Written by

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With romantic tales of medieval lords and ladies in mind, the traveler in Europe expects to find turreted castles on every hill and baronial mansions in every vale, but it is a great surprise to find a remarkably authentic French chateau in Pioneer Valley in New England. Many a visitor has asked the question:

"How did this most un-colonial riot of sculptured chimneys, cupolas, capitals and friezes happen to be built in the heart of colonial New England?"

Like so many things in Northfield, the answer goes back to the most famous native son, Dwight L. Moody, though he himself would never have been guilty of such a romantic anachronism. In the winter of 1889-90 Mr. Moody was conducting a series of meetings in New York City, and among those interested was a wealthy old New York family by the name of Schell. There were four distinguished brothers; Edward, a banker; Augustus, a noted lawyer; Richard, congressman; and Robert, a diamond merchant who later became president of the Bank of the Metropolis. The only surviving heir in all four families was Francis Robert, the builder of the Chateau, who had graduated from Yale and was preparing to become a lawyer.

Francis Robert Schell and his wife were deeply religious. They were greatly attracted to Mr. Moody, and through him became much interested in the summer conferences in Northfield. As they were also looking for a summer place, they asked Mr. Moody if such a place could be found in Northfield.

"Certainly," boomed Mr. Moody in his hearty way. "Just go up and look around for yourself. When you get there, ask for my nephew, Ambert Moody, at the Hotel. He'll help you find a place."

Mr. and Mrs. Schell arrived in Northfield July 5, 1890, and stayed at the Hotel while they looked for a house. In the area where the Chateau now stands, four large houses had been built. Entranced by the view, the Schells rented the house at the crest of the hill and moved in for the summer. They enjoyed the view so much that toward the end of the summer Mr. Schell went to Ambert Moody and said, "I want to own this place. The view is one of the most beautiful I have ever seen, and I have seen lovely views all over Europe."

So Mr. Schell bought the house, with about ten acres of rough pasture land around it, and for the next ten years this was their summer home. Every year they bought more land, improved the grounds, and made changes in the house, finally adding a brick wing four stories high. They now had a house of about forty rooms, the largest in Northfield, which would seem to have been enough for a summer home for two people. Two reasons have been given for their decision to tear down this house and build another in its place. Janet Mabie, in her book "The Years Beyond," writes:

Though the story may well be apocryphal, a small ridiculous thing is said to have touched off the next, decisive step. Suddenly the Schells found themselves and their house dominated by a singularly aggressive army of ants.

"Why, look at them!" fumed Mr. Schell. "They're defying us to drive them out. Well, they don't know about me... I can be obstinate too."

Mrs. Schell asked indulgently what he was going to do.

"Tear down this house and build one they can't get into!" he replied happily.

Ambert Moody says nothing about the ants, but attributes the reason for rebuilding to another cause. In 1900 Robert Schell, Sr., died, and his son inherited not only his father's large fortune, but also that of the three wealthy uncles. A palatial summer home had long been almost an obsession with him, and now he had a chance to realize his dreams.

"I care nothing about a yacht," he said. "I care nothing about horses, except for a good team for driving. I care nothing about many things for which wealthy men usually care. The one thing I do want and always have wanted is a lovely country place. Now I shall have it, and in the place that suits me perfectly, in Northfield, where I have one of the most beautiful views that I have ever seen."

He secured the services of Bruce Price, then considered one of the leading architects in America. Among his most famous buildings were the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec, the Gould mansion in Lakeville, New Jersey, and the Wesson House in Springfield. Now that the dream of his lifetime was about to be realized, Mr. Schell

and the architect spent many long hours poring over plans. Mr. Schell had traveled extensively in Europe, and wanted incorporated in his own house many of the features he had admired in the fine old country houses he had visited in France and England. Some say the plan finally agreed upon was based on Le Chambord, in the Loire valley southwest of Paris. This is one of the great houses in the chateau country and at one time was the favorite residence of Francis I. But Emily Post, Mr. Price's daughter, stated categorically that the Chateau was no copy of Le Chambord for the good and sufficient reason that her father was no copyist for Mr. Schell or anyone else.

However that may be, the Northfield Chateau has many features similar to Le Chateau Chambord, the most striking being a very unusual "double revolution" spiral staircase, said to be found only in these two houses.

Mr. Price may not have been a copyist, but I am sure he must have compromised his architectural principles in order to include in the house the many unusual features which Mr. Schell insisted must be included. With feudal grandeur in mind, Mr. Schell wanted a huge central hall, a grand staircase, and many spacious rooms for entertaining guests. And he had a great fondness for towers and circular rooms, and circular rooms in a square house caused much waste space, many queerly shaped rooms, and complex passage ways.

After making his wishes known, Mr. Schell left details of construction entirely in the hands of the architect, and he and Mrs. Schell departed for an extensive tour of Europe. Construction was started in 1901 and was completed in 1903. No one knows what it cost, and no one seemed to care. It is certain that it could have been built only by an eccentric millionaire who cared nothing about the cost of either construction or upkeep.

One thing upon which Mr. Schell had insisted was that the house was to stand as high in the air as possible so that nothing could obstruct the view. To get further height, a neighboring hill was leveled off and the earth brought in to

elevate the site on which the house was to be built. A narrow gauge track was laid from the hill to the building site, and an engine and dump carts were provided to facilitate the work of forty-two Italian laborers who were brought in for this purpose. They were housed in temporary barracks in a field back of the Hotel, and some of the older residents recall that in the evenings the workmen would sit outside their barracks singing Italian folk songs, to the interest and delight of the Northfield youngsters.

Another Northfield legend tells how a team of horses fell over the edge of a deep ditch that was in the process of being filled in. As it was impossible to get them out, they were dispatched and buried where they lay, somewhere under where the Chateau now stands.

Mr. Schell kept in touch with the architect by mail, but never saw the house until it was completed. He told Mrs. Schell nothing about it, except that he was building for her a suitable summer home in Northfield. She probably expected something rather large, but she was not prepared for anything on such a grand scale. It is said that when she returned and first saw the Chateau, she sat down on the steps and cried. Some who knew her doubt this story as they say her temperament was such that she would neither sit down on the steps nor cry in public.

In any case, her first view of the Chateau must certainly have given her a shock. For a summer home for a family of two here was a castle 130 feet long by 130 feet wide, with towers and gables rising five stories high. If she ever took time to go through the whole house, which I doubt, she could have counted around 125 rooms, if store rooms, hallways, stair wells and all are included. There are six parlors, not counting social rooms for the staff in the basement, thirty-six bedrooms, twenty-three bathrooms, twenty-two fireplaces, a billiard room, a library, a formal dining room and a breakfast room, and a private chapel.

A rather awe-struck reporter for the Greenfield Gazette and Courier visited the Chateau in June, 1903, just before the Schells moved in. He wrote (in substance):

Birnam House, the elegant new country residence of F. Robert Schell of New York, is one of the finest pieces of architecture in the state. The exterior is on the plan of a French chateau, while the interior is of old English style. The huge foundation is of Northfield trap rock, much of it above ground, with wide openings spanned with large arches, giving an impression of strength and massiveness. The superstructure is of light brick, with terra cotta trimmings. The roof is of slate, the circular towers with copper finials adding beauty to the general effect.

Thirty granite steps lead to a broad terrace, which almost completely surrounds the building, and from which is obtained an unsurpassed view of the Connecticut Valley and the surrounding hills. The entrance is flanked by twin towers, between which are three arched entrances.

The main hall runs the entire length of the building, from the arched entrances on the east to the large bay window at the opposite end of the building. It is really three halls, so planned that for entertainment purposes they can be thrown together, making one hall twenty-three feet wide and nearly one hundred feet long, capable of seating over two hundred guests.

These three connecting halls are most impressive, with ornately decorated ceilings, brocade covered walls, glittering chandeliers, and massive furnishings. The mammoth fireplace in West Hall is seven feet high by six feet wide, and the one in East Hall is almost as large. These fireplaces are lined with metal on which is embossed the Schell family crest, a fox on a mitre.

The miniature private chapel has all the correct liturgical fittings.

It is built in the form of a cross and finished in hard wood. The windows are of cathedral glass; those in the chancel bear the coat of arms of the Schell family, with a rose on one side and a cornflower on the other, emblems of his English and German ancestry. On a corresponding window in the transept is found the crest of Mrs. Schell's family, which is an oak tree surrounded by the inscription "Sub robore virtus." On either side of the crest are the rose and the thistle indicating her English and Scotch ancestry. (It is from the oak tree in Mrs. Schell's family crest that the house derived its name "Birnam," alluding to the battle in Scotland in which oak boughs were carried to conceal the size of the army.)

The chapel had one entrance for the family, and another for guests coming from the outside, with places in the gallery for the household staff. Vesper services were held regularly every Sunday during the summer, led either by a guest clergyman or by the rector of the Episcopal Church in Greenfield. Guests at the Hotel and other friends from the town were invited in for the service.

There are four means of access from the first to the second floor. There is the grand staircase, very impressive, with its wide marble steps and wrought iron banisters. There is the double revolution spiral staircase, which is one of the most unusual features of the Chateau. It is designed in two separate, overlapping spirals, enabling a person to go upstairs without meeting anyone coming down. Nearby is a ramp, like one Mr. Schell had seen in a castle in Europe, and for some reason or other admired. There is also a very small spiral staircase for service purposes.

The so-called basement is actually on the ground floor, with windows opening onto the passage under the outer foundations. This is the service center of the house, containing the kitchen, laundry and drying rooms, work and storage rooms; and a separate kitchen, dining room and social rooms for the staff. There are two or three bedrooms for servants on this floor, with nine more on the third floor.

The Schells must have maintained a very large service staff. Besides the butlers, the cooks and their assistants, the maids, the gardeners, a caretaker and a coachman, Mrs. Schell employed two full time laundresses and a full time dressmaker who made her clothes, but never saw her in eight years. The dressmaker worked from a tailor's dummy made to Mrs. Schell's measurements. Another employee said that she lived in the same house with Mrs. Schell for twenty-five years before she ever saw her.

Underneath the basement is the cellar proper, which housed the machinery needed for the utilities. There were furnaces to provide both steam and hot water heat. Incidentally, it is said that to take the chill off the building

before the Schells came for the summer, the furnaces had to be kept running for three or four weeks, and that just this preliminary heating cost over \$300. The Chateau was lighted by both gas and electricity, and in the early days it has its own power plant. Mr. Schell had difficulty in finding anyone who knew how to run all this equipment. At one time the man entrusted with this job came to Mr. Hatch for help. He told Mr. Hatch, "I want to be sure I know what to do. When you work for Mr. Schell if you make one mistake, out you go." So Mr. Hatch spent some time with him, demonstrating how to manipulate the various controls. Unfortunately, the man did not learn his lesson well, and soon lost his job.

Mr. Schell took much pleasure in the gardens and grounds, and over the years spent much time and thought on the landscaping. Adjoining fields were purchased until the property included about 125 acres. Of the four original houses of the land, one was torn down to make a place for the Chateau, and the other three were moved to other parts of Northfield.

A formal sunken garden in the Italian style was laid out just below the Chateau to the south. It was not actually a "sunken garden" as it was the original level of the land before earth was brought in to elevate the Chateau. A dam was built across the brook which ran through the estate creating a little lake from one-half to three-quarters of a mile long. For the entertainment of his guests, Mr. Schell maintained a launch in which he took them on rides around the lake and under the rustic bridge which spanned the stream near the head of the lake. He always took great delight in watching guests duck their heads when they went under the bridge, as it seemed much lower than it actually was. Unfortunately a spring flood washed out the dam and it was never restored.

Here in their turreted castle on the wooded hill above the little lake, the Schells spent twenty-five summers. They usually came in June and stayed until the autumn coloring faded. The townspeople always knew when they were present as they followed the regal custom of flying a flag from the top of the Chateau when they

were in residence. Mr. Schell was a strange mixture of sociability and aloofness. He loved to entertain guests, but trespassers and prying eyes were anathema. To keep people out, he had a high board fence built all round the property, and to make matters worse, it was painted an ugly red. This was an irritation to the people of the town, and a temptation to the small boys. Mr. Schell would often come storming into Ambert Moody's office in a furious rage, and demand that Mr. Moody drop whatever he was doing and come see what the rascally boys had done to his fence. He planned to replace the fence with a fine stone wall, but this was never done.

The castle-like house, set in New England hills, naturally attracted the curiosity of people passing through, and some were not bashful about trying to get a closer view. And Mr. Schell was not at all bashful about ordering them off. The story is told that at one time Mr. Schell sent word to a certain farmer that he wanted to see him about buying some flat rocks that could be found on his place. A week or so later the farmer was in town and drove around to the Chateau. Mr. Schell happened to be near the gate, and when he saw a stranger start to drive in, he peremptorily ordered him off. Without a word, the farmer turned his team around and drove away. A few days later he received a message from Mr. Schell asking why he had not come to see him. The farmer sent back word, "I did come to see you and you ordered me off your property, so now you can go to the devil for your rocks."

At that time, Highland Avenue did not stop when it reached the Chateau grounds, as it now does. It continued past the front of the Chateau, down the hill, across Mill Brook, and on to Warwick Avenue. Mr. Schell wanted more privacy and more space in front of his house, so through Ambert Moody he offered the town \$5,000 if they would allow him to close Highland Avenue at the entrance to his property. The Town Fathers of that day did not particularly like the idea, as they resented Mr. Schell's aristocratic exclusiveness, but they did want the \$5,000, so they accepted the offer and used the money to open up Birnam Road.

In spite of his grandiose ways, Mr. Schell was essentially a kind hearted person. He was deeply religious, an active church worker, and had a very great respect for D. L. Moody. He often told Mr. Ambert Moody that there were certain things he did and did not do in Northfield out of deference to Mr. Moody. Although the townspeople thought him to be an eccentric snob, and had little sympathy for his strange ways, he did many things for the town. Doubtless Northfield residents have crossed the Schell Bridge hundreds of times without ever giving a thought to the man who gave the bridge to the town. Mrs. Ambert Moody left with her children some notes, in which she told the story of the bridge.

For many years the railroad bridge had a lower story which served those who wished to cross with horses. To be on the bridge when a train passed over was quite an experience. The choking smoke and showers of sparks were bad enough, but even worse was handling the horses. The horses used to it behaved very well; new ones had various expedients to which they resorted. Sometimes they lay right down on the bridge floor; sometimes they ran and had to be guided skillfully at the end of the bridge to avoid crashing into the heavy stone abutment which faced the bridge. Mr. Schell had once had a very trying experience with some of his guests and always hated to cross the bridge.

The time came when the bridge had to be repaired and there was considerable agitation to separate the travel bridge from the railroad bridge. The only drawback was that there was no money. Ambert Moody, who knew Mr. Schell very well and had done much transacting of business for him, was well aware of Mr. Schell's dislike for the old bridge under the railroad track.

He also knew of Mr. Schell's great admiration for the British and their institutions and their memorials, and he recalled having seen memorial bridges in England. Since Mr. Schell's parents had recently died, Ambert Moody approached him with the proposition that he might like to give a new bridge to the town as a memorial to his father and mother. For the estimated cost of \$32,000 they could provide a useful and lasting memorial.

This seemed to please Mr. Schell's fancy. He and Mrs. Schell discussed the matter, and Mrs. Schell said, "Well, we have often given as much as \$32,000 in one year. Why not put it in one place for once and let it count for something?" After some consideration, Mr. Schell agreed to give the money for the bridge.

Strangely enough, when the question of accepting the bridge was brought before the Town Meeting, there was much discussion and some opposition. Some argued that the new bridge would

take trade from the Northfield Station and give it to the one at East Northfield. But one fair minded voter from the Northfield end swung votes to the bridge when he stood up in meeting and said, "Well, as far as I can see, you folks down here have been growling for years because the Moody horses kicked up so much dust in the streets coming to the station. Now it seems you are growling because you are afraid they won't kick up the dust any more."

It was finally voted to accept a new carriage bridge to be paid for by Mr. Schell. The bridge was completed in 1906, and at Mr. Schell's request was opened without any special ceremonies. He said that when it was ready he would like to have the people just begin using it. He did provide two simple plaques, one at either end, stating that the bridge was to be "an enduring memorial in Northfield to my honored father, Robert Schell."

Mr. and Mrs. Ambert Moody seem to have been the most intimate friends the Schells had in Northfield. Mr. Moody helped them in all their business affairs and in smoothing over misunderstandings with the people of the town. They turned to Mrs. Moody for help in more personal matters. She was often asked to help entertain guests and in her notes she gives the following description of social life at the Chateau.

Mr. Schell's family consisted of himself and his wife, but they usually had from four to eight house guests with them most of the time they were at the Chateau. They were gracious hosts, and loved to entertain large groups, often having as many as twenty-six in for dinner. One number they would never have was thirteen, as Mr. Schell was very superstitious and would never sit down at a table with that unlucky number. Many a time would Michael, the coachman, hurry to Mrs. Moody with an urgent summons for her to join them so as to make fourteen.

When one was a guest at the house, one rose at his convenience and came down to the breakfast room, where the butler would serve breakfast. Then the guests would go their own way or gather in the upstairs morning room, for their time was their own until two, when they met their host and hostess for lunch. Something was always planned for the afternoon, either a ride on the little lake or a trip to some nearby town.

Dinner was at seven-thirty, and usually others were asked in to join the house guests to add sociability to the evening. Mrs. Schell would greet the guests in the long hall with great courtesy and dignity, but more often than not would have to apologize because Mr. Schell was late. She would say, "Mr. Schell will be here soon; he is shaving." Sometimes one could glimpse a butler going through the wings with a pitcher of hot water, and some time later Mr. Schell would appear with visible evidence

that he had just shaved; much as though he had been engaged in a German student duel.

In spite of this unconventionality, dinner was always served with great formality and grace in the spacious oval dining room, which was very elegantly finished in white enamel. Guests always marveled at two enormous mirrors, six feet wide and more than six feet high, in gilt frames elaborately decorated with golden leaves and roses. There were many courses, and dessert and coffee were served in the drawing room, with its massive furnishings, heirlooms of the Schell family. There would usually be music or other entertainment and almost never were guests free to leave until twelve or one o'clock.

At the time the Chateau was built there was no electricity in town, so Mr. Schell installed his own system with a large series of batteries in the basement to keep the lights going after the engineer had left at 10:30. Sometimes the lights would grow dim and the guests would have to finish their evening by candle light.

There was an elegant electric elevator, beautifully finished and upholstered in velvet. It was supposed to be very useful to stout ladies who found it difficult to climb stairs. However, it sometimes caught between floors and an ironing board would have to be provided by which the stout lady could toboggan down to the floor below and safely make her exit to dinner.

There was a suspicion sometimes that these power failures were not always accidental, for in spite of their formality, the Schells were great practical jokers. Mrs. Schell once had a tiny rubber tube under the plate of a visiting bishop, and by pressing a bulb made the plate move, to the astonishment of the bishop and other guests who had not yet been initiated.

And Mr. Schell took great delight in locking guests in their rooms, where they either had to face the embarrassment of shouting for help, or else stay in their room until a maid came to make up the room or call them to a meal.

A psychologist friend of Mr. Schell's explained his penchant for practical jokes as due to a repressed boyhood. As the only young person in a very dignified family, with few companions except for private tutors, he had little chance for the fun and frolic common to most boys. So when the time came when he could do as he pleased, his repressed boyish desires found outlet in juvenile pranks.

One wonders if Mr. Schell's love of lavish entertaining and his dictatorial manner may not have been due to an inferiority complex. Full length portraits of both Mr. and Mrs. Schell still hang in the Chateau. Mrs. Schell gives an

impression of grace and attractiveness. Mr. Schell is small in stature, thin faced, rather bald, and not at all prepossessing in appearance. An observant visitor wrote:

Apparently the man behind the brush felt that something was needed to build up Mr. Schell, as the features, size and personality were not prominent enough. So he put a red hunting coat on the castle builder, though he had probably never been on a horse in his life. He had a team and carriage, but that was the extent of his interest in horses.

Though the Schells were exclusive in some ways, they seemed to take real pleasure in sharing with many the fairy land they had created. Many a Mount Hermon graduate still remembers the glamorous evening when the entire graduating class was invited for dinner. And teachers at the Northfield School for Girls were often invited to bring in groups of girls for an evening party. Mr. Schell arranged games for them, with competitive races up the grand staircase, around the hall and down again. He found out in advance which girl needed it most and arranged it so that she was the one who received the prize, usually a five dollar gold piece.

During the summer conferences, whole delegations would be invited for an afternoon party on the terrace or on the lawn. Mr. Schell took great pleasure in seeing the young people having a good time and enjoying the place that he himself loved so much.

Until 1915 the Schells spent active, and presumably happy summers at the Chateau, but from then on their lives were saddened by Mr. Schell's increasing disability due to arthritis. His health was not helped by his own dictatorial nature, which led him to do as he pleased, regardless of his doctor's advice. At last the ramp leading from the first to the second floor, which had been considered so unusual and so unnecessary, came into its own, as this made it possible for Mr. Schell to be wheeled from his bedroom to the dining room. Guests were still invited as before, but as Mr. Schell was unwilling for them to see his

infirmity, he would be seated at his place in the dining room before Mrs. Schell brought in the guests.

In the summer of 1928 it was almost impossible for him to be moved at all, but he insisted upon coming to his beloved Northfield. So that year he made the trip to and from New York in an ambulance. That was his last trip as he died in December of that year.

It is said that Mrs. Schell had never liked the Chateau, and after Mr. Schell's death she refused to live in it. She still came to Northfield in the summers, but stayed at the Hotel, and insisted upon having a room on the far side where she could not see the Chateau. The place was offered for sale, but no one was interested, which is not surprising, as it was too large and expensive an establishment for any ordinary purposes. Finally it was sold to the Hotel for the nominal sum of \$34,000, which included the land, the house, and most of the furnishings.

Since then it has been used in the summer as an annex to the Hotel. Many guests prefer the romantic setting of the Chateau to the more modern comforts of the hotel proper. Here John R. Mott held a preliminary conference for the purpose of making arrangements for the meeting of the World Council of Churches in Madras. He has been quoted as saying it was the most perfect set-up he had ever had for such a gathering.

When the Youth Hostel Movement was first organized in America its headquarters were in the Chateau, and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt came to share in the dedication of the spacious basement floor as the first Youth Hostel in America.

Possibly the most important group to meet in the Chateau was the committee of distinguished scholars who gathered here for the preparatory work on the New Revised Version of the Bible. For eight summers they worked here under the leadership of Dean Luther Weigle of the Yale Divinity School.

As far as the young people of the Northfield Schools are concerned, the most important use of the Chateau has been for the annual senior dances. One could not ask for a more romantic setting; dancing in the great hall under the glittering chandeliers, or strolling on the broad terrace under the stars, with medieval towers outlined against the sky. I am sure it would have pleased Mr. Schell to hear the youthful chatter and the rippling laughter, and to have seen the boys and girls, dressed in their best, enjoying the place that he loved so much.

The Chateau is one of the most picturesque landmarks in New England, but unless someone can be found to underwrite its restoration, I fear its days are numbered. The roof is leaking, the plaster falling, the glory fading. The lake is gone, the formal gardens are a tangle of unkempt vines. Restoration would cost a small fortune, and the Northfield Schools, who are the owners of the Hotel, just do not have that much money for that purpose. The Chateau is beautiful, it is romantic, but completely impractical as far as the Schools are concerned. It is a crumbling monument to an age that has passed forever.

Note.

This story of the Chateau is a compilation of information gathered from many sources, but principally from newspapers dating as far back as 1903, and from notes left by Mr. and Mrs. Ambert Moody, which were very kindly made available by their daughter, Esther Moody Loos. Some anecdotes from their own experience were provided by Mr. Roy Hatch and Mr. Fred Pallam.