Valois Castle: A Fond History
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It is one of the beauty spots of God’s creation. It is in the heart of what is known as the Finger Lakes region so popular the past few years by tourists throughout the United States and Canada.
--Rev. Thomas F. Carroll, June 6, 1930

Approximately 11 miles north of Watkins Glen on the east shore of Seneca Lake once stood the Valois Castle. Nestled in one of the most picturesque spots of the Finger Lakes, between Peach Orchard and Valois Point, many notables were entertained within its portals. Local residents often referred to this Valois Castle as “a bit of France.”

The imposing 23-room two and one-half story mansion was built by the Count Arthur Valois, an international lawyer of Paris and New York City, in 1899, as his summer mansion. It was built on a dead-end road leading downhill to the Seneca Lake, with the nearest settlement called North Hector. No expense was spared in building and furnishing the dwelling, with much of the furniture brought from Paris, including many Empress Eugenie and Louis XIV pieces.

Evan L.M. Holt wrote a personal history of the castle and referred to it as “A Breath of Paris in the Finger Lakes.”
Dr. Thomas Evans Helps the Empress Eugenie of France

This part of the story begins with some important information about dentist Dr. Thomas Williams Evans. In 1847, after only four years in practice, Dr. Evans, from a good old Quaker family, won an award for his gold fillings at Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute. Dr. Cyrus Starr Brewster invited him to join him in Paris as part of his dental care business with many very high-class people there. Dr. Evans soon became the primary dentist for Louis-Napoleon, the nephew of the famous Napoleon Bonaparte. Louis-Napoleon had very sensitive teeth and was very appreciative of the fine dental services that “Handsome Tom” Evans provided. Louis-Napoleon pulled off his coup d’etat in 1852 and declared himself Napoleon III, Emperor of France. The Emperor Napoleon III of the Second Empire then appointed Dr. Evans to be “Surgeon-Dentist” to the imperial court. Dr. Evans was an honored guest when the Emperor married Eugenie Montijo, a Spanish noblewoman. His acceptance by the imperial couple led to other members of European royalty calling upon his services—not solely as a dentist. The dentist became “a useful pipeline for rulers who wished to keep in touch without formal summit meetings….When the crowned-heads of Europe wish to communicate with one another without any responsibility they send for Dr. Evans to fix their teeth.”

In mid-July 1870, the Emperor Napoleon III led France into the Franco-Prussian War. Six weeks after the Emperor had declared war on Prussia, France was invaded and defeated. Word of Napoleon’s surrender at Sedan on September 2 reached Paris on September 4, and the Second Empire collapsed. Late afternoon on that September 4, 1870, Dr. Evans returned home and found two ladies waiting for him—the distraught Empress Eugenie of France, heavily veiled and Madame Lebreton, her loyal lady-in-waiting. Earlier the Paris mob had stormed the palace gates, shrieking for the blood of “the Spanish woman,” so the Empress was coming to Dr. Evans for help. The Empress was asking Dr. Evans to help her flee to England where her 14-year-old son “Lou-Lou” was already safely there. Dr. Evans recruited Dr. Edward Crane, his associate, and they quickly made plans to get the Empress Eugenie to Deauville in Normandy to then find a vessel to take her across the Channel to England.

Dr. Evans apparently devised a good plan of escape. Using a pass the British Embassy had once made out for the use of a British doctor and his patient, Dr. Evans’ plan was for the empress to pose as the patient, and Dr. Evans would pose as her brother. Dr. Crane would be her doctor and Madame Lebreton would be her nurse. With the Empress dressed in the clothes of Dr. Evans’ wife, the next morning they set out in Dr. Evans’ coach. Dr. Evans had carefully placed the Empress in the left rear corner of the coach. This was crucially important when they were stopped at the city gates by a guard. Dr. Evans leaned out the window to answer the guard’s questions, effectively blocking the guard from being able to get much of any look at the face of the disguised Empress. Throughout the rest of the 100-mile journey through the countryside, they encountered aspects of the violence of the revolution. Dr. Evans bluffed and bribed officials en route. At one point, there was the scene of a policeman picking on a townsman. The Empress Eugenie rose from her carriage seat and loudly declared herself to be the empress and ordered the policeman to stop. The villagers stared at her. Smartly, Dr. Evans quickly gestured that she was “insane—tapping the side of his head with a forefinger—and they turned away with a laugh and a shrug.”
At Deauville, Dr. Evans and Dr. Crane found a 60-foot cutter named *Gazelle* to transport the Empress secretly to England. While the ship owner himself was not much in favor of smuggling the Empress across the Channel, he agreed when his wife was for the plan. At dawn the *Gazelle* slipped out of the harbor “with the two French ladies hidden below, bound on a storm-tossed voyage to safety.” The Empress and her son took up residence at Camden House in Chiselhurst.

Following, the signing in May 1871, of the peace treaty ending the Franco-Prussian War, the ex-emperor Louis-Napoleon was able to join his wife and son in England. Louis-Napoleon died there following an operation for bladder stones. “Lou-Lou” became known as the young Prince Louis-Napoleon. After completing a military education in Britain, he was speared to death in the Zulu War in South Africa in 1879. His body was so mangled that the true identity couldn’t be determined except by Dr. Evans who checked the boy’s dental work. The distraught Empress Eugenie died largely unnoticed in 1920 at the age of 94.

Dr. Evans continued his dental practice in Paris. He did not charge important clients for fillings. Instead, he grew rich by using their inside information to buy and sell real estate in the fashionable heart of Paris. He did accept gifts, however, and they amounted to a treasure trove. We assume that out of gratitude the Empress Eugenie gave him many of her personal possessions. When his wife Agnes died in 1897, he brought her back to Philadelphia to be buried in Woodlands Cemetery. Dr. Evans died shortly after that. By the end of his life, he was worth more than $4 million, with some references suggesting it was $12 million. His will established a combined dental school and museum in Philadelphia, affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania.9

Many of Empress Eugenie’s furnishing ended up at Valois Farms Castle

Arthur E. Valois, an attorney of international reputation with offices in New York and Paris, acted as executor of the Dr. Evans estate. Through this role, attorney Valois came into possession of some of the finest of Her Majesty’s personal belongings.10 Later there seemed to be some legal issues regarding proper ownership of many of these possessions. (For more information on this, see last paragraph of section dealing with the fire that destroyed the castle in 1932.)

The big rooms of his Paris home and what became Valois Castle were filled with paintings, tapestries, mirrors and crystal mantelpieces that had previously graced the Tuileries Palace. In one bedroom was the royal bed of the Empress Eugenie. This bed, made of rosewood, had ornate hand carvings and massive frame, a design that won the first prize at the Paris Exposition of 1900. Through a portal from the reception room, one could enter the dining room containing a full dining room set from King Louis XI.11

Other Furnishings Inside Valois Castle

There were some notable objects that go back before the time of Christ. For example, there were clay oil lamps used about 1500 B.C. Also, in a cabinet there was a leaf bearing the inscription: “Buddha lived about 550 B.C. and preached his first sermon under Bodhi tree. A branch was then taken to Ceylon under King Asoka.
The tree still exists and therefore is about 2,500 years old, the oldest in the world. This leaf was taken from that tree.”

Some of the choicest antiques are the quaint plaques of the Watteau school, created by Jean Watteau, the French painter born in 1684. His paintings were characterized by their lightness, elegance and brilliancy.

On a wall in the ballroom hung a great oil painting of the Empress Eugenie and her secretary on the shore of France, gazing wistfully across the waters. The ballroom was softly lighted by crystal chandeliers which had once graced the Tuileries palace in Paris.

There were numerous trinkets from the battlefields of France, from Far Eastern countries where mysticism ruled, and from the western plains of America in the days of Custer and the Gold Rush. There was an elk’s tooth bracelet worn by the daughter of Chief Blackfoot, in Deadwood, N.D., at the last “Sun Dance” held in the United States.

As visitors entered the reception room, they saw a great gilt American seal, which once had hung above the door of the American Embassy in Paris.

The Evolution of Five Properties into “Valois on Seneca”

When Mr. Valois had to come from Paris to New York City on business, he would then sail his 40-foot yacht to Seneca Lake and then to Watkins Glen, where he would often “take a treatment” in the mineral water spa at Glen Springs. It was this “water cure” and the beauty of the region which largely influenced Valois to buy a summer cottage. He purchased the Weir cottage and vineyard near North Hector, where he made notable improvements including a private dock for his yacht.

When Arthur E. Valois decided to build himself a summer home—a dream home—on Seneca Lake, he proceeded to purchase more farms—making a total of five farms—so that he would have as large a tract of land as he desired. One of the properties he purchased included the Van Valkenburg cottage. Mr. Valois proceeded to have built an imposing structure, of modern architectural style, with elaborate workmanship and finish so that it deservingly could be called a “villa.” “It became the largest, most imposing and costly country seat ever erected on either side of the beautiful Seneca lake, or any other in Central Western New York.” Its interior was planned for summery effect, comfort and convenience.

Long and wide verandas surrounded the sides of the villa—referred to at the time as “Valois on Seneca”—commanding a magnificent view of the lake and its western slope from the highlands of Dix, south of Watkins, to Long Point, a distance of over 30 miles. Back of the cornices on the main roof were six full-sized statues, in terra cotta, of Washington, Lafayette and one each of the four seasons. Each of the statues was in view from the ornamental grounds which contained choice trees, shrubs, and blooming plants, including some rare roses imported from France.
There were several “modern” enhancements. For example, a tall steel-frame windmill near the lake pumped water from the lake into an elevated reservoir east of the villa. Second, the villa and grounds were lighted electrically by a plant that was made to look like a “cottage on the cliff” and contained a dynamo operated by a 40-horsepower engine. This made it possible to illuminate the villa and grounds on moonless nights. A capacious new dock and boat-house were erected in front of the villa grounds. The boat-house accommodated two little yachts and a 40-foot launch. The dock was constructed so as to create a little harbor between the dock and the boat-house, with a “drawbridge” invented by Arthur Valois creating an opening to the lake at the northwest corner.15

At their summer home of Valois Castle, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Valois entertained diplomats, authors, artists and musicians—“the distinguished personages of the generation.”16

The Settings and Grounds

“In one of the most picturesque spots in the famous Finger Lakes Regions, Valois Farms Castle boasts a setting unsurpassed by the castles on the Rhine or on the Scottish lochs. Nature has given Valois Farms Castle something that is beyond man’s ken. You feel its seclusion, its intimacy, its serene contentment.” That is how the Valois Farms Castle is described in a pamphlet prepared to attract tourists to eat and stay at the Castle when it was a commercial hotel and restaurant. Visitors coming to the facility could see the blue expanse of Seneca Lake and many surrounding hills, with a cooling breeze coming from three directions. The promotional pamphlet went on to say that there was a “majestic splendor to the sunrise at Valois Farms Castle, as the sunbeams break over the woods back of the castle and fire glimmering darts of brilliancy at the silver statues dotting the lawns.” Noonday brought a quiet peace, with the lake taking on her most royal blue color. “But when night comes and the stars light immortal torches in the skies, Valois Farms Castle comes into her own, with a mystery, a spell that fires the imagination and makes one forget the morrow....”17

Outside of the residence grounds there were over 100 acres of land. Nearly ½ of these acres were devoted to grapes of the most popular varieties. The balance was mainly devoted to apples, pears, peaches, plums, etc. At one time there were as many as 2,000 fruit trees on the estate.18

The farm manager was Charles L. Stevens. He also served as the boatman, donning a uniform when in that role. Charles Rice and his son were in charge of maintaining and operating Valois’ yacht and three small boats. Rice lived in the boathouse which was located west of the castle.19

Mr. and Mrs. Arthur E. Valois

Arthur E. Valois was born in 184520 in Valois, Canada.21 He was a direct descendant of the Valois Dynasty that ruled France from 1328 to 1589, helping to explain why sometimes he was referred to by the title “Count.” 22 Mr. Valois was educated in the legal profession in the United States. For many years he lived in Paris as a noted expert in international law, while remaining a legal resident of New York. The Valois-Lobe law firm had offices in Paris, France at 32 Avenue de l’Opera, all the principal capitals of Europe, and New York City at 20 Broad Street.23 While he was living summers at Valois, he was also counsel to the French consulate general of the United States. He was one of the commissioners from the U.S. to the Universal Exposition of 1900, at Paris. He had been appointed by President William McKinley, with whom he had a close friendship. President and Mrs. McKinley were to have stopped at Valois on Seneca for a visit upon their return from the visit to the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo in September 1901. Unfortunately, this never happened because of the tragic assassination of the President. Mr. Valois was made a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor in 1901.
In December 1905, he was promoted to be an officer of the Legion.  

Mr. Valois enjoyed bass fishing, with some of the best on Seneca Lake only a short distance from his home. Almost daily, when the lake wasn’t rough, Mr. Valois would row across to Glenora for a fishing expedition. In a summer of bass fishing he caught between 400 and 500.

Mr. Valois owned a few boats. His biggest one was described as follows: “One of the largest launches to pile Seneca’s waters was a six engine, 85 foot Truscott Gasoline-launch purchased in 1902 by County Arthur E. Valois. The owner, a famed French attorney, spent his summers at North Hector, near the Seneca-Schuyler County line.”

The Watkins Express characterized Mr. Valois as “an unostentatious and unassuming gentleman, whom it is a pleasure to meet—frank, affable and cordial, of broad and liberal views, great natural and acquired intelligence, high legal attainments, and an eloquent and able public speaker.”

Mrs. Valois was a French lady of “charming personality, refinement and excellent taste.” Mr. Valois met this May Etta Briggs while he was working in the United States for his Valois-Lobe law firm of Paris. She was several years younger than Mr. Valois. She spoke English fluently. One person described her as a “gifted conversationalist, an ardent lover of nature, and thinks Seneca lake one of the fairest and most beautiful that smiles beneath the sun. She is proud of her native land, of her adopted country, of her husband, his success in life, the honors conferred up him…and proud…of her delightful summer home….” Despite her husband’s wealth, she spent her day at Valois Castle near a window in the tower, sewing and mending clothing while her husband was fishing on the lake.

Mr. Valois had first been drawn to Watkins by the Glen Springs, where he was a guest one summer. As the Watkins Express described the situation in a November 8, 1900, article, “the charm of the lake won him.” He purchased the Wear cottage and vineyard near North Hector.

In the brief years of his residence in the town of Hector, Arthur E. Valois became a much admired and respected gentleman in the area. Although he did little visiting with his neighbors, he maintained interest in the community. When he learned, for example, that North Hector, with a population of about 200, was struggling to equip and support a band, he contributed generously to the cause. Thanks to his help, North Hector had its band with many new brass instruments plus a handsome six-sided band shell at the corner of Lake and Main Streets. For years, there were regular band concerts, usually on Sunday afternoon, and the band performed for many holidays and special events.

The village of North Hector was renamed Valois in his honor in 1903. In a March 18, 1903, editorial in the Watkins Express, the paper defended those who had brought about this change in name by saying, “The name of North Hector means nothing….The name of Valois is musical; it has a meaning and one of its definitions is ‘benefactor.’…It seems that Mr. Valois is a world-wide traveler, who recognizes and appreciates the beauty of Seneca, with its vine-covered slopes, its nestling villages and natural resources, and wishes to do something to perpetuate the village of his adoption.”

Mr. Valois died April 13, 1915. Mrs. Valois died in 1946.

**Valois Castle after Arthur E. Valois**

In 1915, Joseph Holt purchased Valois Castle. He had been an intimate friend of Count Valois. For a number of years, he and his family from Bronxville, near New York City, spent their summers there. A brother, Evans L.M. Holt, also stayed there. After these elder Holts died, the structure “fell to idle days.”

It appears that in 1925, Mr. Holt opened Valois Farms Castle to the public as an exclusive restaurant and hotel. Its opening dinner on Memorial
Day of 1925 cost $12.50 per person. Similar prices prevailed throughout its existence of the next four years or so, “in an effort to perpetuate its exclusive atmosphere and social status.” The advertising brochure for this business venture described Valois Castle as “the right adaptation of old charm to new ways of living and a new and unique background. It is a little bit of ancient Paris nestling in the heart of the Finger Lakes Region of Central New York; it is a treasure-house of heirlooms, a repository of cherished traditions, reanimated by the life and gaiety of a modern resort deluxe, with music and dancing, punctilious service and metropolitan cuisine.”

An advertisement in The Cornell Daily Sun on May 21, 1926, referred to dances every Wednesday and Saturday, private dining rooms with special attention given to private parties and club banquets. This reinforces the concept of the “exclusivity” of the facility’s likely clientele.

In 1926, officials of the Finger Lakes Association (FLA) approached Evan Holt with the suggestion that the place be renovated to be used as a vacation home for President Calvin Coolidge. The FLA agreed to pay $50,000 towards necessary improvements. The front and side porches were enclosed so as to create one large sun porch whose windows could quickly be opened to Seneca Lake’s breezes. This work was done but President Coolidge rejected the offer. One reason was that he preferred to fish for brown and brook trout than the rainbow, salmon and lake trout of Seneca Lake. Another reason was that advisors to the President felt the place could not be adequately guarded in its rural setting. President Coolidge instead went to Paul Smith’s in the Adirondacks.

Orchestras from the Keith Vaudeville Circuit were featured regularly throughout each season—from the end of May to the Labor Day weekend. It was judged by the management that local musical groups would not fully satisfy the sophisticated taste of most Valois Castle patrons.
As many as 300 diners could be served at a time. Prohibition may have been the policy of the country, but a variety of alcoholic drinks were readily available at Valois Castle for the patrons.’ (The advertisement at left appeared in a 1929 Auburn, NY publication.)

The exclusive hotel and restaurant operation did not prove to be profitable and closed after about four years of operation.43

Fire Destroys Valois Farms Castle

On Saturday afternoon, May 21, 1932, a disastrous fire destroyed Valois Farms Castle. The damage was estimated by the owner, John Holt, of Bronxville, NY, and Edward Cooper of Valois, secretary of the Finger Lakes Association, at approximately $60,000. One newspaper described the former castle as a “mass of charred ash-covered embers, fallen stonework and masonry of the cellar and chimney silhouetted against the skyline” as the only remaining traces of this famous showplace of the Finger Lakes.

The Valois fire department, which was 2.5 miles away, had only meager fire fighting equipment. No other fire departments were summoned to try to put out the fire. Watkins Glen was more than 10 miles away. Significantly, it was difficult to access the Castle by road because of several bridges that could not possibly hold heavy fire fighting equipment.

Mr. and Mrs. John Holt had visited the place earlier on that Saturday to make it ready for summer occupancy. They turned on the electricity. They left briefly. When they returned about 3:20 p.m., they found the place so filled with smoke that they couldn’t make use of fire extinguishers inside, nor could they remove any furnishings. In an interview, Mr. Holt said he believed that rodents may have chewed through the wires, making a short circuit, which resulted in the fire.44 Some local residents have speculated that the cause of the fire was suspicious.45

None of the furnishings from the Empress Eugenie were in the Castle when it burned. E.L.M. Holt said there was some mystery about the present location of the furniture, but went on to say that most of it found its way to the homes of private collectors, generally in the New York City area. Mrs. Edna Reed of Watkins Glen, who worked about at the Castle during the summer in 1903 and 1904 as a “second girl,” reported that a visitor came one summer to address concerns about some furniture pieces. She also said that Mr. Valois returned to France and was involved in a legal suit pertaining to ownership of some of the furniture.46

Summary Comment

The pamphlet promoting Valois Farms Castle summed up the greatness of this place as follows: “Valois Castle is the right adaptation of old charm to new ways of living and a new and unique background. It is a little bit of ancient Paris nesting in the heart of the Finger Lakes Region of Central New York; it is a treasure-house of heirlooms…” Fire may have destroyed the Castle, but Valois Castle remains a fond memory of something truly beautiful.
1 Letter written by Rev. Thomas F. Carroll from St. Mary’s of the Lake Church, Watkins Glen, NY, June 6, 1930, to Sister. St. Louis of Gonzaga
4 Ibid.
5 “Famous Valois Castle Completely Destroyed by Fire,” May 22, 1932 newspaper article (name of newspaper unknown).
7 While most references use “Williams” as his middle name, it appears that his formal middle name was ‘Wiltberger.” He was born December 23, 1823, and died November 14, 1897.
9 Ibid. Please note that much of the wording in this section of the article is largely that of the article itself.
10 Valois Farms Castle pamphlet
11 “Valois Farms, Suggested As Summer White House, Is Touch of Old France,”
12 “Valois Castle In Glory and in Decay,”
13 Watkins Express, March 10, 1903 article.
14 “Valois Castle In Glory and in Decay,”
15 EXPRESSions column, Watkins Express and Review, September 17, 1902
16 Valois Farms Castle pamphlet
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
23 EXPRESSions column, Watkins Express and Review, September 17, 1902.
25 “Valois Castle In Glory and in Decay,”
26 EXPRESSions column, Watkins Express and Review, September 17, 1902.
27 Quoted from Hilda Watrous, A History of Seneca County NY 1876-1982: The County Between the Lakes, p 171, and taken from the November 7, 1902 issue of the Farmer Review
28 Ibid.
29 “Valois Castle In Glory and in Decay,”
31 “Valois Castle In Glory and in Decay,”
32 Ibid.
33 “Editor Review,” Watkins Express, March 18, 1903
35 EXPRESSions column in an 1982 issue of the Watkins Express and Review
36 “Famous Valois Castle Completely Destroyed by Fire,“
37 Several sources perused by the writer of this article suggest that the facility was opened to the public after the invitation to President Coolidge was declined, with several sources indicating that the invitation to the President was extended in 1925. Because the newspaper articles clearly indicate that the invitation to the President was extended in 1926, this writer has concluded that the Valois Farms Castle opened in 1925, the year before the presidential invitation was extended. It is important for the reader to understand that various sources also have Mr. Arthur E. Valois passing away in 1914.
38 “Valois Castle In Glory and in Decay,”
39 EXPRESSions column in an 1982 issue of the Watkins Express and Review
40 Advertisement in The Cornell Daily Sun, May 21, 1926, p. 2
41 “Valois Castle In Glory and in Decay,”
42 “Famous Valois Castle Completely Destroyed by Fire,“
43 “Valois Castle In Glory and in Decay,”
44 “Famous Valois Castle Completely Destroyed by Fire,“
45 April 7, 2010, email from Jim Covert to Walt Gable