

Closter Historical Society Newsletter Excerpt

Fall, 2006

EMINENT CLOSTERITES: TWO OF AN ON-GOING SERIES

WHAT A MAN!

Many of the old folks in town will remember Robert Alexander Baillie (October 10, 1880- November 1, 1961), an artist whose talent was exceeded only by his kindness and good works. He was born in Scotland, the son and grandson of carvers. Robert came to America when his father Alexander Baillie moved himself and his family to work as the studio foreman of J. Massey Rhind, at that time one of the best-known of American sculptors. Rhind had his studios in Closter, and there the Baillies settled, in a farmstead near where the Belskie Museum now stands.

Young Bob Baillie was taken into the studio at the age of fourteen, learning modeling and carving through the tuition of his father. School followed, and soon after graduation from the Cooper Union, he got a job carving pavilion decorations for the 1904 Saint Louis Exposition. He returned to Closter with enough money to buy his widowed mother a farm and to set up a studio.

Word of his talent blossoming, Baillie earned many commissions executing the designs of other sculptors; at one time, most sculptors created a model in clay or plaster and had craftsmen like Baillie realize them in stone.

In 1906, Baillie met the sculptor Gutzon Borglum, Borglum admired the younger man's ability at wielding a mallet, and soon the two were working together, creating a monumental bust of Lincoln, enshrined in the Capitol Building, Washington, D.C. Baillie taught Borglum, heretofore a modeler in clay, the ways of the chisel, the assistant effectively becoming the teacher; of course, you know that Borglum used his knowledge well, becoming the creator of Mount Rushmore.

Baillie's success continued. It got so that he had no time to express his own creative spirit, and he had to give up his dream of becoming a portrait artist as the commissions kept flowing in.

It is no exaggeration to say that a good portion of America's public sculpture was carved right here in Closter: James Earle Fraser's majestic sculpture of Ben Franklin, in Philadelphia's Franklin Institute; Anna Hyatt Huntington's Joan of Arc, in New York; and William Wheeler's Wave of Life, in Houston, Texas, the largest sculpture in the U.S.A. carved out of one piece of marble. All monumental, all requiring countless tons of stone, all great undertakings.

There are still people in town who can recall how, as children, they sat on curbstones as great parades of muscular riders mounted on monumental snowy white horses inched their way from his studio on Demarest Avenue to the railroad tracks, to be then taken by railroad to all points of the nation.

This writer believes that there is still, in Closter, an example of Baillie's art on public display: a panel of the Virgin, set into the east wall of St. Mary's Convent. I suppose no one would mind if you ran a careful finger over its surface. Notice the masterful chisel marks, and how well they describe the rhythmic volumes of the forms; though not signed by name, these grooves are as representative as his signature.

WHAT A WOMAN!!

S.A. Speake was a daughter of Closter, born and bred on Chestnut Avenue off Piermont Road, of which her family owned large parcels. After her studies in Closter and Manhattan, she became the Controller of a large Manhattan advertising agency. In 1927, alarmed by a growing shortage of affordable housing in the borough, she started developing her Chestnut Street properties. In 1935, she began construction on "Closter Colonial Cottages" along the north and south sides of High Street between Closter Dock Road and Piermont. As of 1938, S.A. Speake had built twenty-one homes, and the population of Closter increased by seventy-eight people. She advertised Closter as nestling "... in the foothills of the beautiful Palisades."

Perhaps you are domiciled in a Closter Cottage, or in one of S.A. Speake's Chestnut Street houses, or in another of her many properties. If so, you probably feel quite comfortable., because S.A. Speake built to please the common man and woman. What this community owes to her foresight and concern!

Can you imagine? A developer concerned about providing affordable , comfortable housing in Closter!!! Lord, send us another!