GREY TOWERS
450 S. Easton Road,
Beaver College
Glenside
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6035

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

GREY TOWERS HABS No. PA-6035

Location: Easton Road and Limekiln Pike, Beaver College, Glenside, Montgomery Co., Pennsylvania.

Significance: Grey Towers is a grand American Gothic Revival castle that demonstrates the eclectic nature of architecture in the late nineteenth century. Its opulence, replete with the finest examples of craftsmanship, symbolizes the social status of its original owner, William Welsh Harrison. In addition, it was the first major commission for well-known Philadelphia Architect Horace Trumbauer. Grey Towers is a National Historic Landmark.

Description: Grey Towers is an imposing three-story mansion patterned after Alnwick, a medieval English castle. The main fabric of the castle is Chestnut Hill grey limestone, with Indiana limestone serving as the exterior trim of the windows and doors and for the balustrades, gargoyles and crenellations. All of the buildings exterior features are Gothic-inspired designs. The L-shaped plan measures approximately 225′ x 185′. The main entrance is on the east facade within a porte cochere. The doorway consists of wood glazed double doors framed within an elaborate stone surround with Gothic detailing. Six towers with battlements stand at the northwest, northeast, and southeast corners, at the west end of the kitchen wing, in the east wall beside the porte cochere and in the south wall overlooking the south porch. Small towers, also with battlements, rise from within the larger towers. All of the roofs are flat, concealed by the crenelated parapets. The extraordinary single, paired and ribbon windows are framed within elaborate stone surrounds with drip-mold crowns. The windows themselves have single-light lower sash with either rounded or pointed arch fixed upper sash. The upper sash have intricate diamond-light leaded glass with varied coat-of-arms designs. Much of the glass is curved as it follows the rounded walls of the turrets and projecting bays. Open porches line part of the east and west walls, a covered porch extends along the north facade, and a porch with balustrades runs along a portion of the south facade with a double-curving limestone stairway leading to the drive.

The forty-one room interior is dominated by the three-story great hall with a coffered, vaulted ceiling and walls of handcarved mahogany woodwork. Two large fireplaces with ornate Caen stone mantels are set in the north and south walls and a grand stairway with handcarved mahogany balustrades rises at the west end. The design of the balusters is based on roof finials found on such French Renaissance chateaux as Chambord in the Loire Valley, erected in the sixteenth century for Francis I. The inspiration for the ceiling is also found at Chambord, while the two Caen stone mantels are interpretations of a Renaissance mantel in the Salle des Gardes of the Francis I wing at the Royal Chateau of Blois. Galleries surround the hall on three sides at the second

and third floors and the stairway ascends to a landing and divides at the second floor gallery. Large tapestries with scenes of forests and distant castles are set above the wainscoting around the second and third floor galleries. The tapestries were made by the William Baumgarten Company (signed and dated 1898), the only tapestry works in the United States at that time.

At the landing of the stairway, a large archway provides entrance into a music room. Each pier of the arch has a mahogany mask, drapery swags, musical instruments and a cupid. The mahogany mantel, like those in the great hall, was derived from the Salle des Gardes at the Chateau of Blois. A tapestry by Baumgarten representing an allegory of music decorates the wall at the south end.

The library, on the south side of the great hall, has walls lined with inset cook cabinets. Renaissance-style carved walnut frames outline the cabinets and the ornamental plaster panels above. The ceiling is coffered and below the ceiling cornice there is a molded plaster frieze with cupids and garlands. On a panel above the fireplace mantel appears the date 1897. This room has been slightly altered to serve as the president's office.

Also positioned south of the great hall is the dining room. The wood paneled walls and mantelpiece are framed by classical Renaissance-style walnut columns and consoles, reminiscent of interiors at Fountainbleau, as is the strapwork ceiling (now altered with low dividers for suspended lighting).

A breakfast room is located west of the dining room, attached by a corridor. The walls have walnut paneling with tapestries of hunt scenes above. Painted canvas panels fill spaces between the ceiling beams and marble mosaic work decorates the fireplace. In 1907, this room was enlarged with a glass and metal extension matching that of the previously extant conservatory. The kitchen and service rooms to the west have been altered for office use.

A Billiard Room lies behind the stairway of the great hall. It is entered through a sunken landing with sliding doors. The room is oak paneled but much of the original decoration has been removed.

On the north side of the main hall, a circular entryway with a gilded, domed ceiling leads into the mirror room or ballroom. This room, possibly the picture gallery or reception room, was significantly altered by Trumbauer in 1900. Five windows in the west wall were removed and replaced with French doors and a doorway leading to the north terrace was sealed. The present gilt-paneled room has mirrored doors, a corner fireplace with a

marble carved mantel and a ceiling painting representing the four seasons by Francois Lafon (or Lafor). The room is in the Baroque or early Louis XV style and is believed to have been ordered through the New York branch offices of Lucien Alavoine and Jules Allard (Allard as the designer, Alavoine as shipper of the materials and skilled men to install it).

The drawing room adjoins the ballroom through a pair of sliding doors. The room is ungilded and the ornamentation is considered typical of late Louis XV style. In one corner there is a fireplace with a marble carved mantel. The various paintings and wall fabrics in this room were all produced by the Baumgarten Company.

The second floor contains bedroom suites with dressing rooms, fireplaces and marble baths. These rooms, along with those on the third floor, have been altered to serve as dormitory rooms.

Throughout the house heavy Belgian glass, sometimes beveled, is used in windows, doors, mirrors and skylights. In several rooms, bronze chandeliers, wall sconces and lighting standards are still in place. Much of the wood and stone craftwork was reputedly done by European craftsmen who had settled in nearby Edgewood Hill.

In the attic there are heavy beams of both steel and oak. In the basement, a set of large fans circulated cool air into the building during the summer. Heat and electricity came through pipes and lines laid in underground tunnels leading from the power plant (now the Fine Arts Building). Each room had a mercury thermostat for controlling the heat supply.

History: Grey Towers was originally the home of William Welsh Harrison, owner (along with his siblings) of the Franklin Sugar Refining Company. In 1881, Harrison purchased Rosedale Hall from J. Thomas Audenreid. Over the next two decades he purchased additional acreage, vastly increasing his estate. In 1891, Harrison hired Horace Trumbauer to enlarge Rosedale Hall. He updated the plumbing, electricity and steam heat, and also designed a gate house, stables and conservatory. The gate house and stables, which still exist, are in the medieval Norman style, with the stables receiving additional medieval French brick-work. In 1893, Rosedale burned down during a blizzard. In that same year, Harrison hired Trumbauer to design a new dwelling on the site of Rosedale. The March 8, 1893 issue of the Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide carried a detailed account of the plans completed by Trumbauer. The article specifically stated that the building would be fashioned after Alnwick Castle. No mention of the decorative styles of the interior were made, but the completed rooms show French influence from the

Renaissance through Louis XV. The result was a stylistically mixed building which reflected the Eclectic movement in the United States.

The castle was completed in 1898. In 1900, Harrison hired Trumbauer to design a ballroom, and in 1907, a circular, glass conservatory on the south terrace with an adjoining aviary. An estimate of the cost of the castle in 1907, not including furniture, was over $500,000.

In 1927, Harrison died, leaving Grey Towers to his wife and son. Beaver College purchased the 138 acre estate in 1929 and it has been owned and used by the college since that time.

Horace Trumbauer received his architectural training with the Philadelphia firm of George W. and William D. Hewitt, whom he joined in 1884 when he was sixteen years old. He established his own office in 1890 and completed a series of designs for the builders and developers Wendell & Smith. Grey Towers was his first major commission and its acclaim placed him in great demand among America's wealthy. Throughout his career, Trumbauer designed all types of buildings along the East coast, ranging from town and country houses to academic and religious structures. He emphasized French seventeenth and eighteenth-century designs, yet he was equally competent with Georgian and Tudor revivals. After 1902, his chief designer was Julian Abele, the first black graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Architecture.

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