



cosmic society
OF PARANORMAL INVESTIGATIONS

The Wagner House of Palatine Bridge, New York



If ever there was a house that could get you to automatically hum the theme to the *Adam's Family*, it was this one. Donna, Carrie, Robin and I stood out in front of its rotting green facade looking up into what had once been one of the finest homes in the whole of Montgomery County. We'd been driving back from the Fort Ontario investigation (see *COSMIC CONNECTIONS* Issue 10#) when the sight of this decaying relic and its neat little historical marker brought us to a halt, just to snap a few pictures and catch the vibe.

The tidy little sign said it was 'The Wagner House,' home of Webster Wagner, creator of the sleeper and parlor railway cars. "A national historical landmark?" I thought out loud. "If that's the case, this nation needs to clean up its act. What a piece of trash!"

After wondering the grounds, picking our way across a porch that sank visibly with every step, we came away with the feeling of a strong male presence. A presence so strong it permeated every stick, board and pane of glass. It was overwhelming the old house was, in its own strange way of unchanging ruined elegance, demanding respect in a time when its a dinosaur and certain of its way in the face of uncertainty, the house sat. Sat in a town that was changing with the times and economic need. But in this little corner of Palatine, time and rot passed slowly.

Several weeks later Robin and I returned and spent the afternoon in the local library getting the low down on Webster Wagner and his fabulous home. Webster was born on October 2nd 1817, the son of a local doctor and the grandson of a German wheelwright who'd stepped forward when his new country decided to become just that and marched off to fight in the Revolution.



It was during the 1850's, with the inheritance of money and mechanical abilities, Webster Wagner took a idea and proceeded to make millions. His idea came from watching people traveling on trains. Railroad travel at the time was still an adventure in the quest to get there from here and down right uncomfortable for any length of time, especially at night. Wagner hit upon the revolutionary idea of creating a car that allowed the weary traveler to lay his head on something bed like during his rambles. In 1858 with the financial backing of such notables as Commodore Vanderbilt, the first sleeping cars were rolled onto the tracks. Soon to be followed by the parlor or saloon cars for those who wished further creature comforts as they traveled.

Webster Wagner was now rich, married and had built the most beautiful house in Palatine Bridge. Soon politics called. He was elected in 1870 to the New York State Assembly and the next year to the New York Senate where he would remain until his tragic passing in 1882.



The local newspaper, *The Radii*, would call it a 'dreadful accident...which will live long as a sad memory...' On the night of January 16th, the train carrying Senator Wagner, as well as other senators and assemblymen, had been stopped enroute due to brake problems just on the outskirts of New York City. Unable to move until repairs were made, a brakeman was dispatched to warn oncoming traffic of this motionless hazard. What happened to this brakeman? No one really knows, because his presence or lack of it set in motion a haunting when the Tarrytown Special, a local run, came barreling around a curve and full speed into the rear of the motionless train.

It is an ironic twist of fate that Webster Wagner should die in the very type of car he helped to create. His life was snatched away when the flames from broken lamps and overturned stoves turned the luxury saloon coaches in blazing pyres that burned despite all efforts until there was nothing left for it to consume. To further the irony, two days before, Wagner attended the funeral of a young acquaintance, where it was said he wept as if a child.

For his family it would be a truly sad affair with no final chance to say farewell to Wagner face to face. So badly burned and mutilated was the body that identification was made possible only by the discovery of a pocket watch and papers found on the clothes of the deceased. His funeral cortège became the event of the year. As with the funeral train of Lincoln 16 years earlier, people both common and great turned out along the way to witness

the Senator's final trip across New York State back to Palatine Bridge.

In a commemorative book, everyone from the President of the United States to the Masons from the local lodge Wagner was a member of, had their say about this man. The writing is flowery, overblown, a thing of its time but interesting all the same. He was laid out at home for 'viewing', even if the view was closed coffin, and then laid to rest in a the local cemetery. And that should have been the end of Senator Webster Wagner. But hey, if it was...*you wouldn't be reading about it here!*

The Wagner family would remain in the house for one generation more and then sell the property. It would then be sold and resold and until one day when no one would live there. According to the local librarian, the current owners have been approached from time to time by people interested in restoring this national landmark back to its former glory. But each time nothing comes of it. The figure quoted is fantastically high, with no apparent consideration of the amount of money needed on top of the buying price for restoration costs.

So what is going on in those dark silent halls? Could sudden death, unfinished business or the love of house and home be driving a man from the 19th century to remain on this earthly plane of existence? Is the unreasonable sale price, his influence to keep the house empty and his? A mention on the national register to keep the memory of Webster Wagner alive, even if it just in one small community, might just be enough to satisfy an ethereal ego. Even the final destruction of this grand home through time and neglect might even be a way of final reclamation. If he can't have it...no one else will.

All we can do is wait and watch and maybe someday have the opportunity to walk those silent halls before the Wagner house crumbles away into memory and Webster Wagner can be free at last to walk away..

By Nancy Ziegler

Dear Zieglars,

I was rooting around on the net and happened across your Webster Wagner House page...very nice. The situation has not changed, however. Probably the place will end up being condemned before the owner gets real. I don't suppose you know who owns it, do you? There was another monster next to it that was torn down about ten years ago.

I was all through that house many times from 1955 to circa 1980. At that time it was owned by an old gentleman who had bought it in the early 50's for a song. He and his wife ran an antique phonograph business in it and being a collector and living near by in Amsterdam, we became good friends. The Coppernols didn't have much money but then oil was cheap. The house then still retained many features and items from the Wagner era....huge old paintings of various Wagners....beautiful pendulum clocks and pieces of furniture built in as part of the furnishings...fireplaces with period metal inserts. Even the study held books still from the original period.

Jason retired around 1950 and started to buy and resell Edison cylinder records and horn phonographs and he stored the records in racks on the third floor, the back part of which had been for servants and was sort of run down. I was alone up there many times and yes, it was spooky. I always felt on edge up there. One time I was looking at records in one of the rooms and the light went out and I got out fast, but I never saw or heard anything unusual. Sorry.

You didn't mention the little enclosure across the street, the Webster Wagner Spring, an early source of water in colonial times. Wagner had a nice gazebo over it and a few seats set out and iron fencing around it and presented it to the town. The remains can still be seen.

The limestone walls in the cellar were placed exactly the same way the first floor rooms were laid out.

Fort Wagner, which belonged to his ancestors, is just a few miles west.

You might consider linking your site with one of several Mohawk Valley history link web pages...? Maybe

somehow interest could be renewed in protecting the old place. I miss Jason and those times.

Thank you for a nice Wagner page.
PS. It's Palatine, not Palentine.

Peter C. Betz Fulton-Montgomery Community College. pbetz@fmcc.suny.edu



Dear Peter,
Thank you for the nice letter and compliments regarding the Webster Wagner page on the Cosmic Society website. I will forward to the Zeiglars.

Just a note, we did actually take pictures of the enclosure/well across the street and if I remember correctly a large company is some distance away in the background - is it Beechnut?

I will update the site with the well photos, change the spelling errors, and add your comments and suggestion of linking to a Mohawk Valley site if that will in any way help to preserve a building that we at Cosmic Society were fascinated with. Do you have any link suggestions? Thank you again - Many Regards ~Donna Kent
Well...here's the well! :)

Dear Donna,
Here are the link suggestions:

www.global2000.net/fortklock/ Then on the left click on 'historical articles' I think it might fit in in one of those categories

www.routesweb.com/~nyherkim/index.html

Send mail to CosmicSociety@sbcglobal.net with questions or comments about this web site.

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