



THE GREAT ESTATES GREENWICH, CONNECTICUT 1880-1930

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The Pryory



Entrance to The Pryory today. Gil Amiaga photo.

*Principal Owner: Samuel F. Pryor
Architect: Cross and Cross
Construction Date: 1916*

SAMUEL FRAZIER PRYOR (1865-1934) was born in Palmyra, Missouri, a few miles west of the Mississippi River, only days after the Civil War ended. The son of a Virginia-born physician, he moved to the larger city of St. Louis as an adult when he went to work for the Wabash Railroad. In 1894 Pryor married the former Ruby Permella Jacques (1868-1953) of Kansas, and the couple settled in suburban Ferguson, Missouri, where their four children were born—Samuel F., Jr., Jacques, Frederick, and Permella. While still living in the Midwest, Pryor's career took a variety of turns as he moved from being chief purchasing agent of the Wabash Railroad; to vice-president of Simmons Hardware Company; to president of the Southern Wheel Company, a subsidiary of the American Brake Shoe and Foundry Company.

In 1914 Pryor went east as president of Remington Arms Company in New York at a time when war in Europe would bring large contracts to munitions manufacturers. Before America's entry into World War I rumors circulated that Germans were trying to buy control of American arms factories in order to block supplies to the Allies, but Pryor stoutly denied that such a takeover would be allowed to happen at Remington.

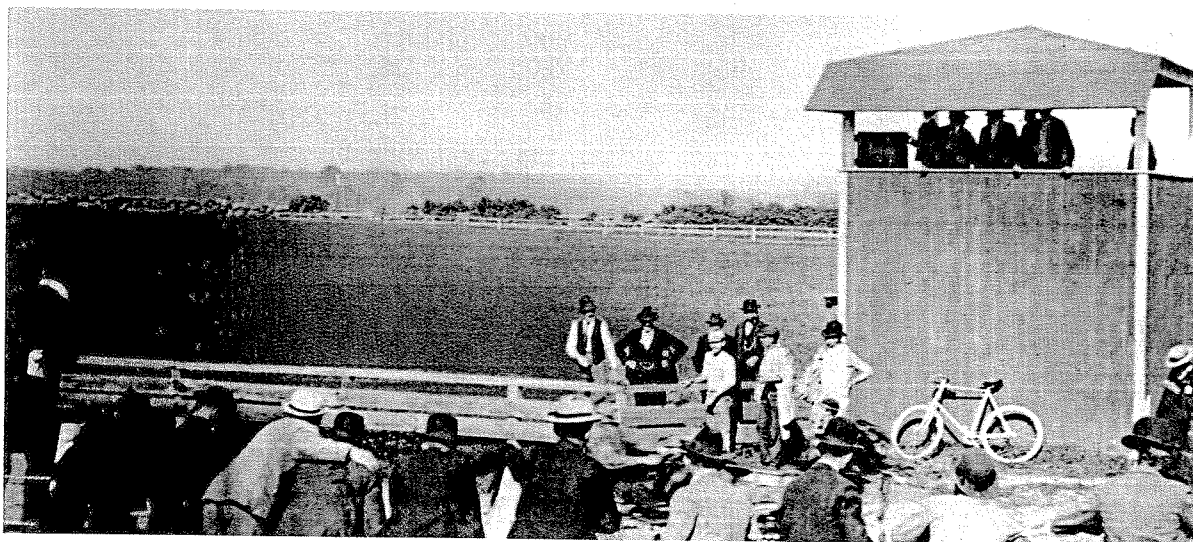
When the Pryors moved east, they went directly to Greenwich and lived for a time on Maple Avenue. They bought twenty acres in Field Point Park on the edge of a hill that sloped down to the water's edge. Although this neighborhood was being developed into a residential park, it had not entirely outgrown its earlier use as farmland. Adjacent to the fine new homes was the old farm built by Zophar Mead in the eighteenth century, and operated by his descendant, Oliver D. Mead.

Pryor called upon the architectural firm of John Walter Cross and Eliot Cross, a partnership of brothers active in the New York area, to design his house. At that time they were involved in construction of the

Eglise de Notre Dame on Morningside Drive, but they were better known for building residences for the upper class. In the decade after the Pryor project was completed they designed one of their greatest remaining buildings, the Barclay Hotel (now the Intercontinental) on East 48th Street in Manhattan.

The house they designed for the Pryor family was a marked contrast to the sophisticated city residences. In its rural setting it most nearly resembled a large cottage transplanted from the Cotswold Hills of England to the Connecticut shore. Brick walls were overplastered in stucco with random bits of brick exposed for an authentically rustic look. From the front entrance the steeply pitched roof was like a cloak of thatch draped over the two upper stories disguising the size of the residence. From this facade only two gables, exposed to their full three-storied height, suggest the house's true mass, but the back view is quite different. Here, where more fenestration was placed to take advantage of morning sun and afternoon breezes, the U-shaped design as well as the size of the house is apparent, and all seven of its tall, stuccoed chimneys are visible.

The front vestibule opens to a stair hall with a nearly free-standing stairway rising through all three main levels of the house and connected with the third-floor hall by a bridge. The stairs were probably designed by the firm of Watt and Sinclair, which is credited with designing the handsome wood paneling used throughout the house. Adjacent to this hall is a two-room ladies' powder suite with wainscoting and a cozy fireplace, and nearby is a "lounge room" for the gentlemen. The entry is at the midpoint of the hallway that extends the width of the house. When stepping across the passage one has a sense of being outdoors again in an extensive loggia walled by the house on three sides with large windows open to the terrace, the lawn, and the sea beyond. On hot summer days the room's cool shadows and tile floors gave relief from



Race day at Field Point Driving Park, adjacent to The Pryory, circa 1890.

the heat, and in other seasons open fireplaces at either end of the space added warmth.

The spacious living room, high-ceilinged and formal with many tall windows and a pillared fireplace, was situated at the south end of the house. The paneling here included fluted pilasters with carved rosettes on the capitals, and the tracery on the ceiling was the same pattern used throughout the main floor. At the opposite end of the house the formal dining room was served by a well-equipped kitchen and butler's pantry. Beside the dining room at the house's northeast corner was a smaller breakfast room with windows overlooking fields and the sandy beach that linked Pryor's land with Round Island. On the second and third floors were eleven comfortable bedrooms, but a screened sleeping porch was the dormitory for the Pryor children in both winter and summer. The house was maintained by a butler, several maids, and a cook for most of the years the Pryors lived in Field Point Park.

On the northern edge of the entrance court was a large circular garden with intersecting paths, part of a landscape plan by Mary Rutherford Hay. Beyond this stood a combination gatehouse/garage. Built of the same walling and roofing material as the house, it appeared as likely to contain a Cotswold sheepfold as twentieth-century automobiles. This structure housed the chauffeur and other staff members and complemented the design of the main house.

Shortly after coming to Greenwich, Samuel Pryor retired as Remington's president and became chairman of its executive committee. During the Greenwich years he was a director of the Air Reduction Company, the American Brake Shoe and Foundry Company, the Shell Union Oil Corporation, and the Greenwich Trust Company. He was a partner with Percy Rockefeller and Fred Adams in the Owenoke Corporation, an investment company. Pryor remained active in business until May 1933.

Ruby Jacques Pryor involved herself with civic affairs. She served for many years as a member of the board of directors of the Marian Osborne Home in Rye and was active in the Greenwich Garden Club.

The Pryors spent many years vacationing in Florida, first in Winter Park, and eventually establishing a home in Hobe Sound. After Mr. Pryor's death in 1934, Mrs. Pryor continued to maintain The Pryory. In 1940 she asked her son, Sam, Jr., and his wife to share the twenty-four room house with her. The arrangement worked well in the spacious house, and the senior Mrs. Pryor occupied the entire third floor, which was easily reached by a telephone-equipped elevator.

Samuel F. Pryor, Jr. (1898-1985), a graduate of the Taft School and Yale College, served in the Navy during World War I and then went to work for the American Brake Shoe and Foundry Company, with which his father had been associated. He was married



The stairs from the second floor hall. Gil Amiaga photo.

in Pittsburgh in 1926 to Mary Taylor Allderdice (1905-1978), whose father was president of the National Tube Company, which later became a subsidiary of U.S. Steel. In 1940 Pryor joined Pan American Airways and was vice-president of public relations and governmental affairs during the years when the company was becoming a giant in the industry.

It was the second Pryor family's years on Field Point Circle that are best remembered in Greenwich. With their five lively children, Sam and Mary Tay Pryor filled the pastoral-looking estate with activity. Pets of all sorts were welcomed in the house. The tennis courts overlooking the water were a center of activity, and the sloping lawn was often the scene of tag and football games. The pier in front of the house was used for swimming and boating activities, and for a time Pryor moored his amphibious seaplane there. Flying was an important part of the family life. The Pryor children, together with the children of Sam Pryor's close friend Charles A. Lindbergh, were introduced to flying early in life and often practiced takeoffs and landings in the seaplane offshore near the family home.

The Pryors entertained a variety of visitors, including presidents and prizefighters, reflecting Pryor's varied nonbusiness interests, one of which was his vice-chairmanship of the Republican National Committee. In later years, guests would come to see Pryor's famed collection of dolls, which was begun when an associate at Pan Am, Mrs. Ann M. Archibald, willed



The rear facade overlooks the Sound. Gil Amiaga photo.

him three hundred dolls which she had gathered from all over the world. Pryor set aside a portion of The Pryory's ample basement for the display of the figures, and the famous Pryor Doll Library was begun. With their children grown, Mary Tay and Sam Pryor sold the old family house in 1960 and bought the Mead farmstead next door. They refurbished its ancient barn to house the doll collection, which had grown to some three thousand pieces. In these quarters the library was opened to the public, and Junior League members served as guides and researchers from 1963-1970.

In the years since the Pryor family left, changes have been made at The Pryory, and rooms have been reshaped to suit different families' needs. The roof of thatch has been replaced with more contemporary shingle, and the land has been reduced to two acres as sections of the estate were parceled off and sold. The view from the hilltop is less bucolic, but The Pryory is still known as a fine house which once again shelters an active, growing family.