

The

Biltmore Bugle

Asheville, North Carolina

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NORTH CAROLINA'S DOWNTON ABBEY



Biltmore House, America's largest home, built by George Washington Vanderbilt II outside Asheville, North Carolina and opened in 1895. *Story inside.*

North Carolina's Downton Abbey



Cousins Mary Wood, Beth, Hank and Nan stand on Biltmore House's back balcony

I frequently heard during my three years working for the *Asheville Citizen-Times* that George Washington Vanderbilt II – the tycoon who built the nearby Biltmore House – was comforted by the fact that when he walked out on his back balcony, he owned everything he could see.

Some of the Appalachian peaks that cousins Beth, Nan, Mary Wood, Hank and I could see from there Monday were more than 20 miles away.

“Only” 8,000 of the 125,000 acres that Vanderbilt once owned are still in family hands. A few months after his death in 1914, widow Edith sold most of the rest to the federal government at \$5 an acre to become the core of Pisgah National Forest, which covers parts of 12 western North Carolina counties.

The Biltmore House, opened on Christmas Eve 1895, is America's largest private house – three times the square footage of William Randolph Hearst's mountaintop castle in California's Big Sur – and is North Carolina's Downton Abbey.

Like the great estates of Europe, it afforded the lord of the manor a belief that his fields and forests provided all that was needed for his sumptuous survival, the welfare of those he employed and a profit to boot. But that economic model only works when the cost of help is inconsequential.

At England's Highclere Castle, the real life location for Downton Abbey, PBS's soap opera, an evening meal cost about \$100 per person at Lord Grantham's table. The footman who served it made \$40 a year, a
– **Continued overleaf**

North Carolina's Downton Abbey

– *Continued*

wage made possible because the English class system restricted who could do certain kinds of work.

Downton Abbey is failing in the TV series because that class system is breaking down. At Biltmore, built in the post-Civil War South, black workers were still restricted by Jim Crow laws but white wages, which had been depressed by slavery, were on the rise.

Both of the estates required infusions of cash to survive, and Lord Grantham's investments in a Canadian railroad soured just as Vanderbilt's steamship stock went south in real life. And it's not even 1929 yet.

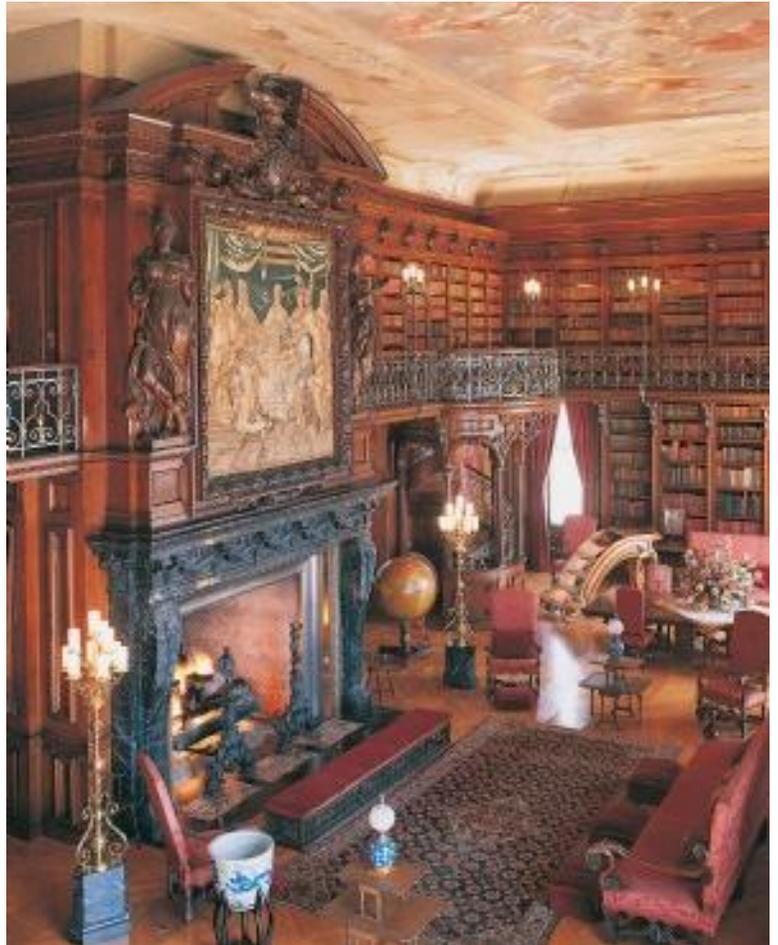
Today's Biltmore Estate is still owned by Vanderbilt's descendents and survives, like Highclere, by marketing aristocracy to the ordinary public through tours, wines, branded house wares and furniture, or a night or two in the estate's new inn. Biltmore Farms, which once delivered milk in five states, now develops and sells off housing tracts, condos and apartments, builds shopping malls and operates five hotels elsewhere in Asheville and its environs.

It's not Vanderbilt's Biltmore anymore – hasn't been since 1930 when daughter Cornelia first opened it to the public, and especially since 1956, when the last of the family moved out – but it was fun for some while it lasted.

Biltmore's legacy extends beyond wealth and tourism, however.

Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect Vanderbilt hired to do his yard after seeing what Olmsted did with New York's Central Park and preserving

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Interior photography is not allowed at Biltmore, so I took this image of the library from the estate's website.



Yellow Biltmore Dairy trucks like this delivered milk to my house when I was growing up.



Retail aristocracy: Hank checks out wines in Antler Hill Village on the Biltmore Estate, one way the place brings in revenue to survive as a privately held property.

North Carolina's Downton Abbey

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Yosemite Valley, suggested to Vanderbilt that his North Carolina land, largely denuded of trees for crop cultivation, could and should be managed profitably as forest.

Vanderbilt hired Gifford Pinchot, who would go on to found the U.S. Forest Service and later win election as governor of Pennsylvania, as his estate's first professional forester. The Biltmore Forest School, founded in 1898 as the first school of forestry in the United States, was the idea of Pinchot, who had studied forestry in France.

Pinchot and Scottish-Californian John Muir were progenitors of today's environmental movement and advocates on opposite sides of the philosophical split that developed within it. The split persists today in separate federal bureaucracies.

Muir was the preservationist, valuing nature for its spiritual qualities, the ethos of the National Park Service in the Department of Interior. Pinchot, at first an ally of Muir, was a conservationist who placed a commercial value on all natural resources and advocated managed, sustainable exploitation of them, the ethos of the National Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture.



Parts of Antler Hill Village were once dairy buildings.

The main tree in Biltmore's Forest

In 1650 **Jan Aertssoon** emigrates to the Dutch colony of Nieuw-Amsterdam (renamed New York under British control) from De Bilt, Netherlands. Family name will be changed to van der Bilt, meaning "from De Bilt," and then condensed to Vanderbilt.

Great-great grandson **Cornelius "Commodore" Vanderbilt** (1794-1877) expands his father's New York harbor ferry service into a transportation empire including the New York Central Railroad, which makes him the richest man in America. Original benefactor of Tennessee's Vanderbilt University with a \$1 million gift, the largest in U.S. history at the time. Gives 95 percent of his \$100 million estate to William Henry Vanderbilt, one of his 13 children.

William Henry Vanderbilt (1821-1885) doubles his inheritance in nine years as a railroad tycoon, making him the world's richest man when he dies. Asked by a reporter why he discontinued a fast mail train popular with the public, utters the famous quote "The public be damned!" He and Maria Louisa Kissam have eight children, the youngest GWV II. Among his endowments are New York's Metropolitan Opera and the medical school at Columbia University.



George W. Vanderbilt II

George Washington Vanderbilt II (1862-1914) is not interested in business as much as travel (he's fluent in eight languages, with a Paris apartment), art and learning. The house he builds in Asheville, N.C., is intended as a summer home and its library consists only of books he actually read - 10,000-plus volumes. In 1898, he marries Edith Stuyvesant Dresser, an orphan and descendant of Peter Stuyvesant, the first Dutch governor of Nieuw-Amsterdam, They were booked on the *Titanic* in 1912 but changed their reservations. Their only child, Cornelia, inherits Biltmore.

Cornelia Stuyvesant Vanderbilt (1900-1976) marries British aristocrat John Francis Amherst Cecil in 1924. He's a descendant of William Cecil, chief adviser to the first Queen



Cornelia and Edith Vanderbilt

Elizabeth in the 16th Century and founder of a dynasty that included two British prime ministers. After giving birth to sons George and William, she and Cecil divorce and she moves to Europe for the rest of her life. She marries twice more, the last time in 1972 to William Goodsir, a London waiter.

George Henry Vanderbilt Cecil (1925-), who inherits Biltmore Farms, and **William Amherst Vanderbilt Cecil** (1928-), who inherits Biltmore House, hit home runs as businessmen after being born on third base. While boys in England during World War II, they were bumped from an airline flight for *Gone With the Wind* actor Leslie Howard (Ashley Wilkes). The plane was shot down by German forces, killing everyone on board.

Cecil, pronounced SEE-sul, is probably some guy who drove a Biltmore dairy truck or waits tables at the Inn on Biltmore Estate. Cecil, pronounces SESS-ul, owns the place.

Biltmore in the movies

Before Tom Hanks was Forrest Gump, Peter Sellers was Chance, the gardener, in the 1979 movie *Being There*, the first of 14 movies to use Biltmore as a primary location.

A simple-minded man whose entire life was spent in the Washington, D.C., home where he worked, Chance is turned out into the streets when his wealthy employer dies. He's promptly struck by a limousine whose passenger, Eve Rand (Shirley MacLaine), instructs her chauffeur to take the slightly injured man back to her home where he can recuperate. The film follows the limo down a couple of Washington streets, then around a corner and into the Rand's estate (convincingly played by the Biltmore Estate), inside which the rest of the story takes place.

Eve and her billionaire husband Ben (Melvyn Douglas) misunderstand their guest to be Chauncey Gardiner, a wealthy businessman judging from his high-quality clothes. Chance's/Chauncey's cryptic conversational speech leaves everything he says open to interpretation.

Based on his presumed background, his few words are taken as pearls of wisdom by Ben and a succession of his friends, who include the President of the United States.

Being There's final scene comes after Ben's funeral when Chance walks Jesus-like across the estate's Lagoon with Biltmore House in the background.



Peter Sellers as Chauncey Gardner walks across the Lagoon behind the Biltmore House in the final scene of *Being There*.

President: Mr. Gardner, do you agree with Ben, or do you think that we can stimulate growth through temporary incentives?

[Long pause]

Chance: As long as the roots are not severed, all is well. And all will be well in the garden.

President: In the garden.

Chance: Yes. In the garden, growth has it seasons. First comes spring and summer, but then we have fall and winter. And then we get spring and summer again.

President: Spring and summer.

Chance: Yes.

President: Then fall and winter.

Chance: Yes.

Ben Rand: I think what our insightful young friend is saying is that we welcome the inevitable seasons of nature, but we're upset by the seasons of our economy.

Chance: Yes! There will be growth in the spring!

Ben Rand: Hmm!

Chance: Hmm!

President: Hmm. Well, Mr. Gardner, I must admit that is one of the most refreshing and optimistic statements I've heard in a very, very long time. [*Benjamin Rand applauds*] I admire your good, solid sense. That's precisely what we lack on Capitol Hill.



The Lagoon during our visit.



Vanderbilt's back yard.



Goodbye from
Biltmore House