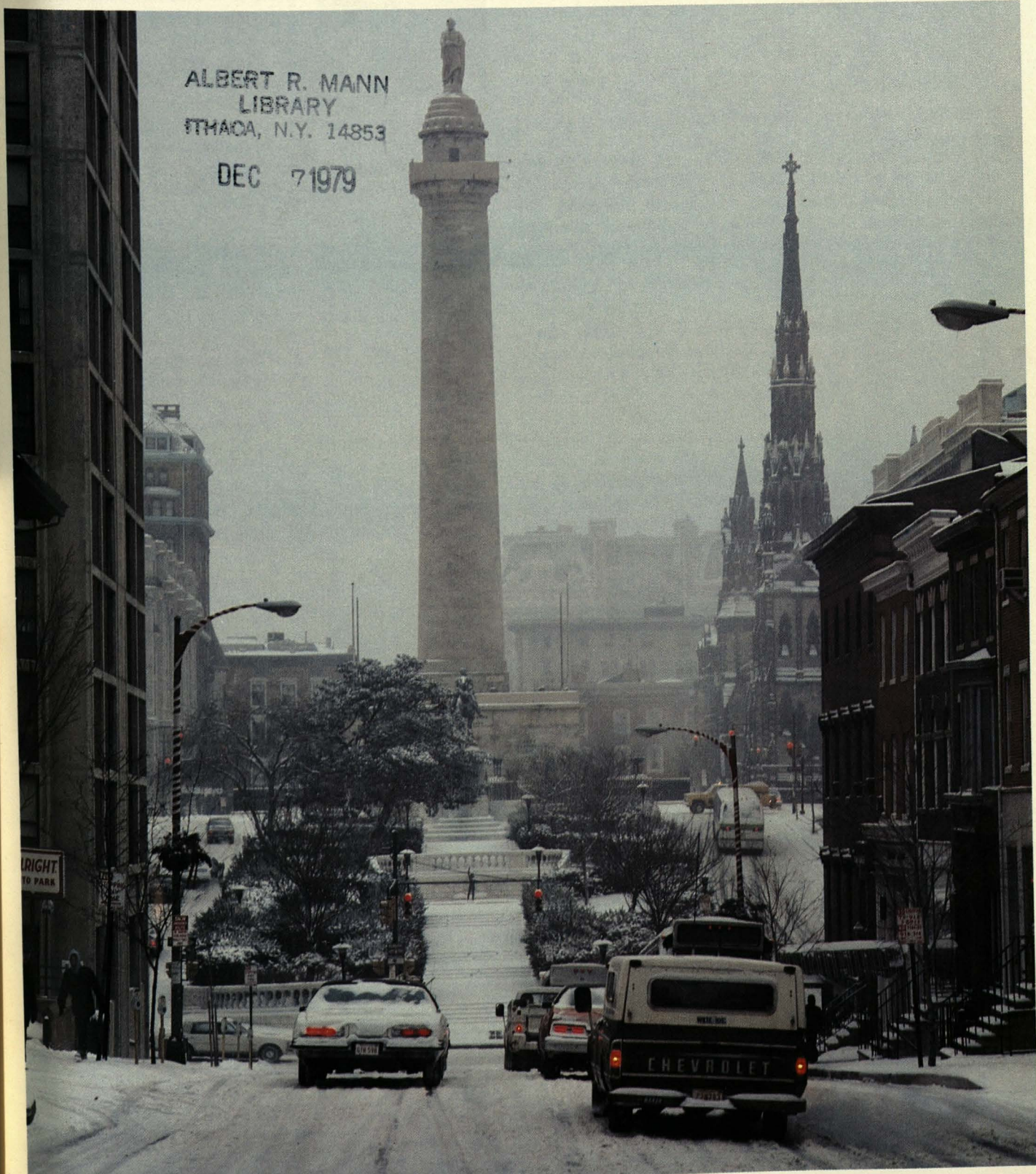


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COVER. Baltimore's Washington Monument and Paris-like Mount Vernon Square still reflect the best of that city's cultural past and present. Photo by Michael Pohuski.

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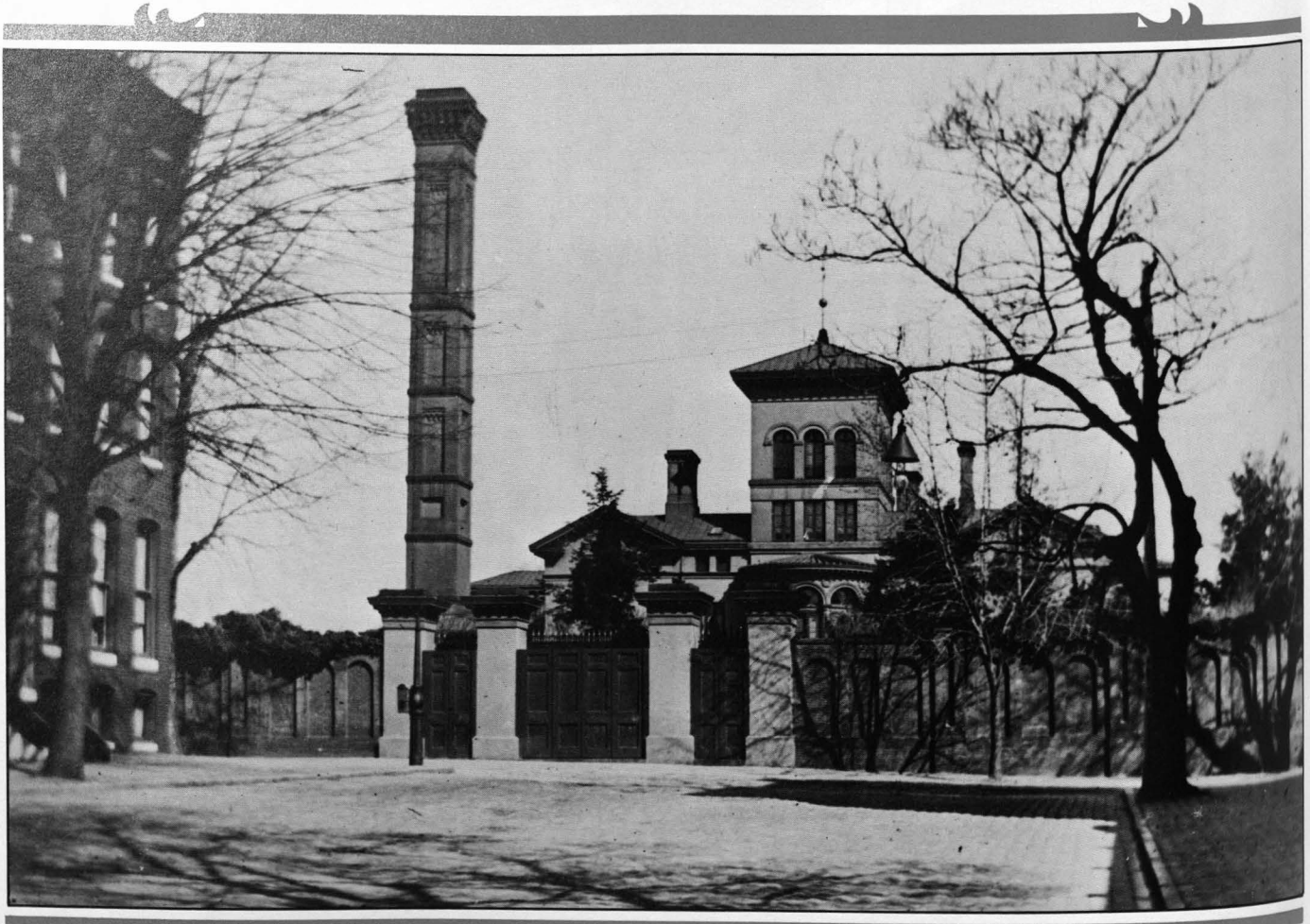
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One in a series of visits to noted Maryland mansions open to the public.

Grand Estate on Baltimore's Westside Alexandroffsky

By MARGARET McCAMPELL & LANCE GIFFORD
Photos Courtesy MRS. WILLIAM H. FISHER



Fifty-three years after the razing of *Alexandroffsky*, a college student picked through a lower level of ruin that had once been the great mansion. He found a shard of blue and white china, pocketed it, and returned triumphantly to "his side" of Hollins Street.

Thomas Winans' 3-acre estate once reigned in this neighborhood, and some of his oldest neighbors still remembered where it had stood. The new Little Lithuania Park now occupies but a part of the huge in-town property at Hollins Street at Parkin, west of Fremont Street in Baltimore.

This same spot had previously been considered by the City Board of Parks and Recreation. In 1925, the estate, comprising nearly a city block, including formal gardens and statuary, was offered to the city for \$400,000. The price was considered too high and the land was sold for \$260,000 to a New York/Baltimore syndicate which, in turn, parceled it off for commercial development.

Mr. Winans' summer cottage, *Crimea*, did become part of the city parks system, through a generous gift by J. Wilson Leakin, and still stands in Leakin Park. *Alexandroffsky* knew no such benefactor.

The names of Winans' two Baltimore estates originated in Russia where he had made his fortune building that country's first railroad. The original *Alexandroffsky* was a small town on the 400-mile stretch between Moscow and St. Petersburg, where Winans had lived and worked. It was in Russia, too, that Thomas Winans courted and married Mademoiselle Celeste Revillon.

In 1851, Winans returned to America with his bride and settled in Baltimore. He purchased a parcel of the old James McHenry estate, *Fayetteville*, and set about remodeling the structure (at one

OPPOSITE. Alexandroffsky, one of the finest mansions in the nation during the nineteenth century, occupied a whole block west of Fremont Street in Baltimore until its demolition in 1926. BELOW. Baltimorean Thomas Winans, son of Ross Winans, early railroad magnate, supervised the building of the Russian Czar's railroad. Photo from the Maryland Historical Society.

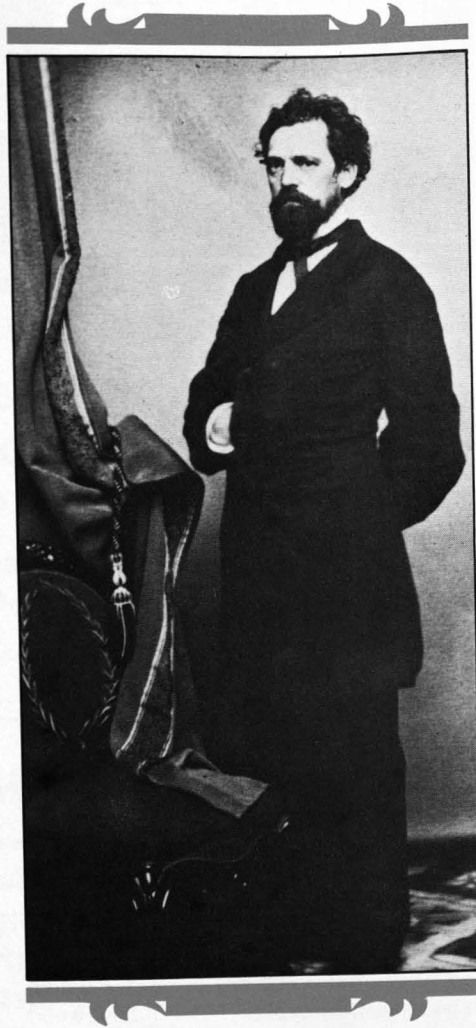
time a school for young ladies) to create a house befitting a Russian aristocrat.

Soon, *Alexandroffsky* became a primary landmark in Baltimore. It is easily located on century-old city maps; the *Baltimore Guidebook* in 1858 proudly proclaimed, "There is not to be found in the whole country a private establishment which can equal it in extent and grandeur." Modeled after the summer palaces of Russian aristocracy, furnished with a flavor of Europe and the Orient, and surrounded by a 12-foot brick wall which effectively blocked its interior from public view, *Alexandroffsky* evoked speculation of the mysterious and exotic.

"Indecent" Statues

For more than fifty years that 12-foot wall taunted the puritanical conscience of the neighborhood. Prior to its construction, neighbors on Hollins Street complained of the "indecent" statues in full public view as a corrupting influence on their children's morals. Indeed, among the bronze and marble statues ornamenting the formal gardens were several nude and scantily robed figures, among them naked Pan hoisting an infant on his shoulders, and a winged Mercury sporting nothing more than his helmet. But these were considered too much for the impressionable minds of local Victorian youth, and the neighbors refused to condone such outrageous display. So they suggested to Mr. Winans, in the spirit of Victorian propriety, that he clothe the offending figures.

Winans was incensed. In feigned obeisance to local prudery, he blocked them from view by building a 12-foot brick wall around the entire estate. Then, no one could complain of his immodest tastes in art. The neighbors remained unappeased. The wall, they said, was worse than the statues; it should come down. The wall would stay, Winans responded. In fact, he became so adamant about it, he stipulated in his will that



under no circumstance was the wall to come down. If repairs were necessary, a temporary wooden facade was to be erected until the masonry restoration was complete.

Of course, not all the statues were nudes. Thomas Winans, through the course of his European travels, had acquired a vast collection of marble and bronze heroic statues and busts. He and his family took pleasure in the company of these classical dieties dotting the winding drive leading to the main house, in the gardens, and around the family's private tennis courts. Visitors to *Alexan-*

droffsky delighted in the montage of natural beauty and man-made classics found at Winans' city residence.

Another American Dream

The story of the Winans' fortune is but another rendition of the American Dream. The senior Winans, Ross, had met with quick success with the adaptation of his inventions to the newly developing American railroad technology. While not yet thirty years old, he had assisted Peter Cooper in 1829 in perfecting the Tom Thumb engine. He moved from New Jersey to Baltimore and continued to enjoy a profitable relationship with the B&O Railroad. His contributions to modern railroad technology were notable, among them the friction wheel for cars, outside bearings on axles, and the eight-wheeled car system. He is probably most famous for having developed the "Camelback" engine, particularly useful because of its unfailing ability to climb steep grades. His son, Thomas Winans, inherited his mechanical gifts and, with enthusiastic paternal encouragement, young Thomas early began to demonstrate an uncommonly superior mechanical aptitude.

By the 1840's American railroading was attracting international attention, including that of Czar Nicolas I of Russia. To protect his interests on the frontiers bordered by the Crimean Peninsula, the czar sought a means of expeditiously transporting troops and supplies. Though an experimental railroad was in existence, Nicholas wanted more expertise in the construction, maintenance, and handling of his railroad. To learn the latest technology he dispatched two emissaries to the United States.

The visitors narrowed their search down to two men: George Washington Whistler (grandfather of the painter) of New York, an authority on American and British railroads; and Ross Winans. The Russians asked both to supervise the building of the czar's railroad. The elder Winans declined

RIGHT. This is a closeup of the south side of the mansion that lacked nothing in comfort and culture. OPPOSITE. The frontispiece of the catalog used to itemize the 1,330 lots of furnishings auctioned off to the public in 1925.



because he thought himself too old. He was more interested in tinkering with his inventions. Instead, he suggested his sons, Thomas and William, for the job. So, in 1843, the two younger Winans teamed up with the Philadelphia contracting firm of Eastwick and Harrison and set off for Russia.

The czar wanted the most direct route connecting Moscow and St. Petersburg. Nicholas I is said to have placed a straight edge rule between the two cities, draw a line, and pronounced that to be the route. In exchange for completing the tracks and equipping the trains within a five-year period, the Winans and Harrisons would receive \$5 million.

The Americans set up shop in Alexandroffksy, a small town 4 miles out of St. Petersburg and established a depot for the major planning and train construction. The Alexandroffsky Head Mechanical Works became the birthplace of a legion of railroad accoutrements: engines, passenger, baggage and freight cars, and as many of their interior fixtures.

Foreign Yet Familiar

For the small community of foreigners, Alexandroffsky was simultaneously foreign and familiar. Though at first the Russian culture may have seemed strange to the Americans, they easily integrated themselves into a new way of life. They befriended the local gentry and, lavishly and frequently, entertained their new-found friends. It was during this time that Thomas Winans met and fell in love with a woman of French-Italian descent, Celeste Revillon. They married August 23, 1847.

Within four years, 400 miles of track had been laid, a cast iron bridge constructed over the River Neva, and the St. Petersburg and Moscow Railroad fully equipped. The czar's pleasure with the end result was manifested in a second contract worth an additional \$2 million for any necessary repairs and "remounting," or

maintenance work for a period of six years, beginning in 1850.

In 1851, the Winans brothers agreed that William would take over the supervisory duties and Thomas would return to America. Thomas and Celeste Revillon Winans returned to Baltimore, having amassed a fortune worth nearly \$2 million.

Victorian Elegance

It was there that the Winans set up the new *Alexandroffsky*. It lacked nothing in the way of comfort and culture. One entered the grounds through an elaborate gateway, guarded by a 12-foot wrought iron gate, at the foot of Parkin Street. The drive curved gracefully, heading north to the main entrance of the house. Along the way, a winged Mercury, the *Discobolus*, and a bust of Napoleon rendered silent greeting as did large pedestaled urns containing potted flowers and palms.

The grounds harbored busts of Russian czars shaded by cypress trees and boxwood shrubs. The scent of roses permeated the air around an immaculately-tended garden of domestic and imported roses. Nearby, a Victorian rock garden with rustic garden seats provided a meditative atmosphere for a contemplative marble Minerva. At the center of the garden, a willow bowed gracefully over a pond near which a bronzed maiden gazed at her reflection. Beyond, busts of Peter the Great and other Russian heroes graced the tops of marble pedestals. A bridle path passed the tennis courts, and farther down were forcing houses and hot houses, protective winter-time wombs for germinating seed-

lings and growing delicate flowers in anticipation of spring display in the great house.

At the northern boundary of the estate, near the corner of Fremont and W. Baltimore, were the stables and a carriage house. The stables, reminiscent of a gingerbread-like *dascha*, with a carved wooden cornice extending from the roof, accommodated eighteen horses. Cast-iron hooks driven into the brick walls held the tack. (Remnants of its foundations and part of the wall still stand on Booth Street today, behind the C&P Telephone Company building.)

What is a palace without a secret passage? A life-time resident of the neighborhood and a one-time playmate of the Winans' grandchildren, recalls pushing a secret panel in the main house. The wall gave way to stairs descending to the cellar, to an underground corridor surfacing at the stables.

Not far from the stables was the carriage house where five carriages, three Victorias, a Brun carriage, and a Landau, waited in readiness for a drive.

It was not uncommon, long ago, for such carriages to bring visitors up the Winans' drive. A combination of Italianate and Russian architecture greeted the eye. Cupolas and towers alternated with Italianate spires, bay windows, and balconies. The *porte-clochere* entrance faced east, a bastion against inclement weather.

International Interior

Once inside the foyer, a winding staircase of white marble, with a dark ma-

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hogany hand rail secured by sixteen silver brackets, led to the second floor. South of the foyer was the drawing room, where treasures from Thomas Winans' two business ventures with the Russian railroad were displayed. On the parquet floor were Oriental rugs and arctic bear skins. Chinese tapestries and Turkish hangings adorned the walls. At one time, a grand piano stood near the window.

Across the central corridor was the ballroom. Overhead, a leaded-glass ceiling covered the expanse of the room. At one end, stood a floor-to-ceiling pier mirror 12-feet tall and 4-feet wide, its mercury glaze giving the room an appearance of even more grandeur. Its gold leafed, elaborately carved wooden frame was crowned with a baroque *cartouche*. In keeping with the Victorian penchant for symmetry, two valences of matching gold leaf on wood festooned the drapes over windows at the opposite end of the room.

Amidst the elegance, Thomas Winans' flair for the experimental was evident. One-inch holes perforating the floor allowed steam to rise from hot water pipes fitted across the basement ceiling below, providing heat for the room. After all, *Alexandroffsky* was the first house in Baltimore to enjoy a central heating system. A special building had been constructed in the early 1850's to house the Haywood-Bartlett boiler for it. In a cold winter, as much as 1/3-ton of coal was burned daily to heat most of the twenty buildings on the estate. Gaslight fixtures, so designed by Winans as to prohibit noxious fumes from permeating the house, glowed warmly from many of the main house's walls.

Near the northwest side of the main house stood a structure 34-1/2 x 24 feet, and 40 feet tall, housing what was, at one time, the largest pipe organ in America. It was Winans' fascination with mechanical invention that impelled him to design this building and the two-story tower to house its pipes. The organ's music could



be heard as far as a mile away.

For all their extravagance and perhaps even eccentricity, the Winans were charitable neighbors. The wall enclosing *Alexandroffsky* did not insulate them from the plight of the less fortunate. Thomas Winans and his father, Ross, dispensed milk to the poor from their jointly-owned dairy herd at cost or less than cost. Celeste Winans opened a soup kitchen on the West Baltimore Street side of the estate, and is said to have fed over a hundred people a day when times were hardest. Even after her death, in 1861, her husband carried on its operation.

Both the elder and the younger Winans experimented with inexpensive housing, the result of which led to development of the twentieth century concept of public housing. They designed and financed construction of a terrace of houses on McHenry Street for occupation by employees of the nearby B&O Railroad.

In 1868, Thomas made a second trip to Russia, ostensibly for another contract

of eight years' duration. After just two years, the Russian Government assumed control over all maintenance and supply of the railroad, at which time Winans returned to Baltimore once again, where he lived in semi-retirement until his death in 1878.

After Thomas Winans' death, the estate changed hands, passing to his daughter, Celeste, and her husband, Guan Hutton, a one-time attache to the American consul in Russia. Throughout their lives at *Alexandroffsky*, the Huttons entertained occasionally, but in private, thereby further enhancing the aura of mystery surrounding the estate.

As lady of the manor, Mrs. Hutton made a major addition to the character of the house. She loved birds and their song, and built an aviary adjoining her personal apartments on the second floor of the house, where literally thousands of birds serenaded her day and night. The chorus consisted of just about every kind of American song bird as well as two night-

ingales imported from southern France, linnets, Irish blackbirds, and split-tongued parrots. On occasion, select trilllers were carried about the house or garden to sing for Mrs. Hutton. Cages of all sizes, made of brass, bronze, and even two of marble, were constructed to allow flight and nesting. The aviary remained a part of *Alexandroffsky* as long as Celeste Hutton lived there.

The Iron Gates Open

Mrs. Hutton shared her parents' sense of civic duty. Through her generosity, the Women's Board of the then fledgling South Baltimore General Hospital was able to raise enough capital for the new hospital's linens, blankets, and surgical gowns, as well as for renovations in the nurses' quarters. Celeste Hutton volunteered *Alexandroffsky* for a card party held April 16, 1923. One hundred tables were set up in the ballroom, each seating four players. For the first time in a half century, the great gates were opened to

This the site (see P. 26 photo) as it appears today. New Little Lithuania Park occupies but a part of the estate which stretched a full block to Baltimore Street in the background. (Photo by Al Karalius.)

the public. The magnetism of its mystery drew the curious and the civic-minded up the driveway, through the gardens, to the mansion. Once there, while engaged in philanthropy, patrons indulged their curiosity about the "scandalous" statues and the elegance of a Russia which no longer existed.

Less than two years after the card party, Celeste Hutton died, leaving the fate of *Alexandroffsky* in peril. Heirs to the estate, her two daughters, Elsie C. Hutton of Baltimore and Lucette M. Prichard of Mt. Kisco, New York, chose to sell the estate rather than assume proprietorship. They offered the property for sale, gardens and statuary included, to the City. The value of the parcel was estimated at \$228,000. The City Board of Parks and Recreation, which twelve years earlier had pursued the idea of buying *Alexandroffsky*, declined the offer. Also refused was a suggestion to appropriate it as the site for a City Art Museum.

As the prospect of the City's take-over faded, *Alexandroffsky* went on the general real estate market. Not included in the bill of sale, however, were the contents of the house and gardens. These were auctioned off by the E. T. Newell Company of Howard Street. Everything was catalogued for public auction, furnishings, linens, statues, carriages, down to the last boudoir fixture.

Again, the great iron gates of *Alexandroffsky* opened to the public. Beginning at 11:00 on the morning of November 5, 1925, and continuing until all goods were sold, the curious and speculative were invited to buy a Landau, a winged Mercury, or a Turkish wall hanging. The auction catalogue listed 1,330 lots for sale. For the bibliophile, there were 219 choices of book lots: biographies; volumes of histories of the United States, Russia, and England; original French and Russian titles; philosophical treatises; music books; English works translated into French, French works translated into English; and

a not-to-be-passed-up collection of "3 vols Essays on Old Maids." For the china fancier were collections of Dresden, Doulton, Limoges, and Wedgewood. Also for sale was a pair of satin-covered settees, just one possibility among scores of cabinets, chests, tables, and chairs. For the music buff were lots of banjos, pianos, violins, mahogany-framed harps, even the pipe organ that could be heard a mile away. For the traveler there was an assortment of trunks, suitcases, hat boxes, even a chest of clothes. One's garden could be admirably fitted with any of the urns, statues, chairs or potted palms, and perhaps a marble and glass fish pond. For the horseman, there was a real bargain in a box of saddles. Catalog Item C285 offered the "Contents of Small House." There was something at *Alexandroffsky* for almost any taste and desire.

People flocked to the sale. So many that a police escort was necessary to keep crowds from overflowing the rooms. There were the curious, those who merely wanted to see what the Winans and Huttons had collected over the span of a half century; and more importantly, the bidders, who attended in hopes of getting a "bon marche," and there were many to be had! A French Ormula chest, especially made for Thomas Winans at a cost of \$8,000, sold for a mere \$375. The bidding, under the experienced gavel of James H. Galton, was heated at times. Even members of the Hutton family were outbid; a chandelier sold for \$210, \$10 above the final family offer. Five days later, the last book, box, and bag were carried away by their new owners.

Once the premises were empty of goods, auctioneers, and buyers, *Alexandroffsky* was left, deserted for a winter, to await the wrecker's ball. Everything, the wall, house, gardens, greenhouse, the especially-built structure for the organ, and the first boiler room for central heating in Baltimore, was to be razed in preparation for the construction of new commercial

outlets to be built along West Baltimore Street. The following spring, one by one, the buildings came down. And slowly, the new buildings went up.

A Curse (?) Survives

There was a rumor, as neighborhood legend goes, of a curse on the new commercialism. Two brothers were convinced that the area around Baltimore and Fremont Streets would blossom into *The Retail District*. They put all they had into building and stocking a department store on the southwest corner. By coincidence, a wall of the Winans' stable was built into the new store's rear wall. But tragedy struck. One brother died before construction was finished, a result, it is said, of the stress of a new and shakey financial endeavor. Shortly before the store's opening, the other brother committed suicide. Few outside the neighborhood really paid much heed to a somewhat macabre rendition of the local lore about curses and the like. But the dominant retail district at Howard and Lexington remained, and the new Baltimore Street enterprise, though modestly prosperous, was ravaged years later during the riots of 1968.

Today, not much is left of *Alexandroffsky*. The new city park covers a part of the old gardens. A statue of Mercury now resides on Underwood Road in Guilford. Three of his comrades are retired in a city warehouse. Parts of the old stables are still easily visible from the Booth Street side of the neighborhood grocery, and foundations of the wall, almost in a tribute to Thomas Winans' will, persist in breaking through Booth Street's macadam.

Also, in well-tended condition, though not a part of *Alexandroffsky*, is a Russian cupola, added on to Ross Winans' nearby house. He would go up there and look across Hollins Street over his son's wall. Now it provides an excellent view of the new park and, for those with a bit of imagination, a memory of the gradeurs of *Alexandroffsky*.