

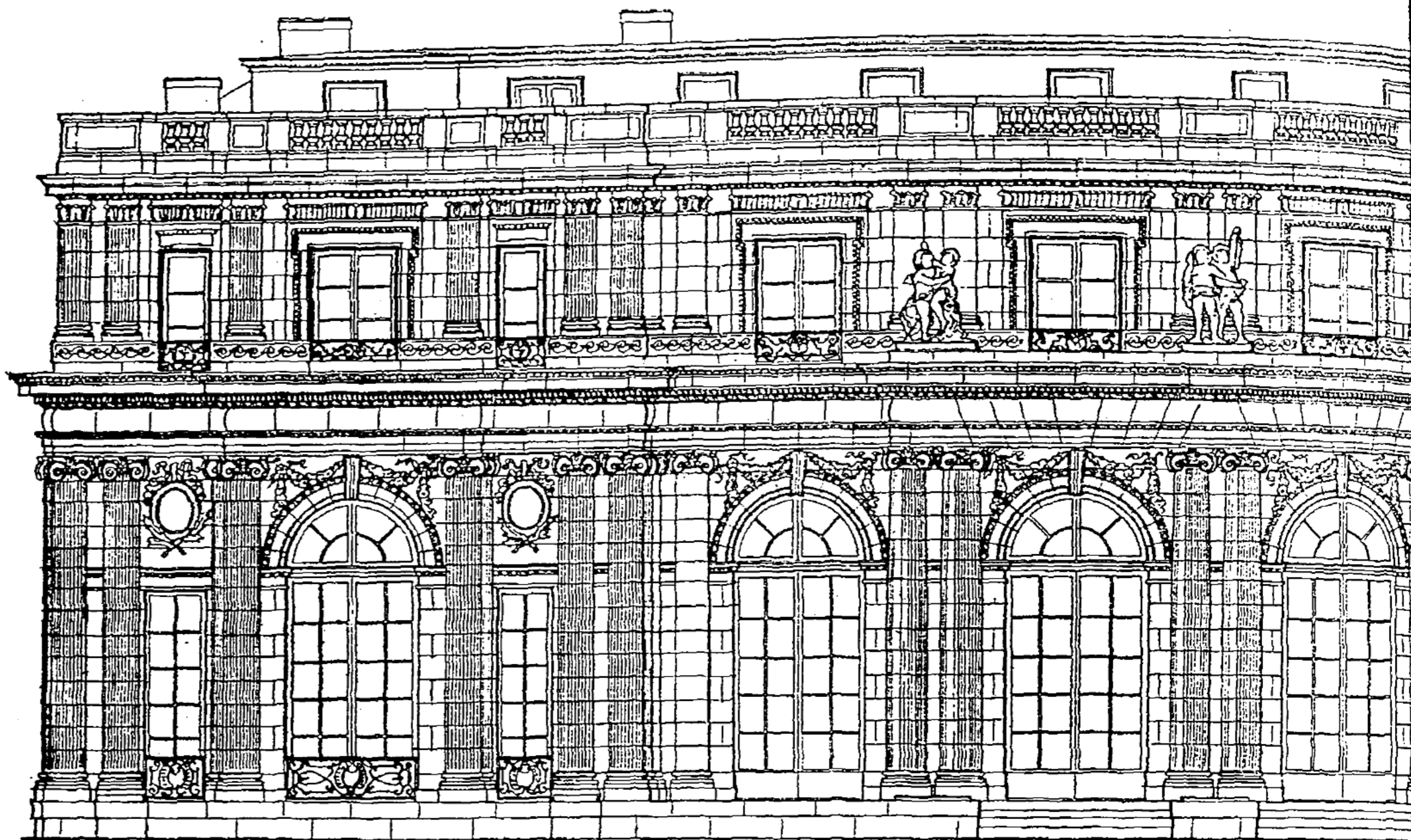
The RHODE ISLANDER®

Rosecliff
opens its doors
page 8



Richard Benjamin

Rosecliff's ballroom, the largest in Newport.



Another Newport

By GARRETT D. BYRNES

WHAT, really, is a house? Sticks and stones? Money? The neighborhood? The people who live, or have lived, in the house? What is their happiness, their contentment?

Let us settle for the people of the house while we are considering Rosecliff, the architectural confection of marble and molded terracotta on Bellevue Avenue as it nears the sea.

The house is of special moment this weekend because it joins for the first time the house-museums exhibited by the Preservation Society of Newport County. Rosecliff is a summer cottage dating from Newport's gilded age, akin to other houses-to-be-visited — The Breakers, The Elms, Marble House and Chateau-sur-Mer — houses which give delight and a feeling of gewwhiz awe to hundreds of thousands of Newport visitors every season.

In thinking about Rosecliff, we must think in colossal sums of money, the biggest domestic plumbing leak in the history of Rhode Island, and a mixed bag of characters ranging from a distinguished historian to a torch singer.

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THE STORY begins with the historian, George Bancroft, who had a green thumb. He summered in Newport in the intellectual golden age, the age of Julia Ward Howe and that outpouring of brains which had some money and lots of innocent merriment.

• Bancroft, author of a monumental, 10-volume history of America, was also a hard-driving gardener interested primarily in artichokes and roses, both of which he grew successfully on his estate between The Avenue and the Cliffs. As the greatest rosarian of his time, he called his summer retreat Rosecliff. The name continued into the gaudier future. In Annapolis, Maryland, Bancroft Hall recalls that as Secretary of the Navy under President Polk, he established the Naval Academy.

For the next skein in the Rosecliff story, we must go to Ireland where, in 1831, James Graham Fair was born of Scotch-Irish parents either in Dublin or near Belfast. The authorities differ and it doesn't matter.

During the potato famine of the late 1840s, the Fair family came to America and settled on a farm in Illinois. Like so many others when the cry of "gold" was heard from California, Jim Fair took out westward and sought his fortune in the Mother Lode country of California.

Fair wasn't interested in placer

mining. He was a hard quartz man intent on the big strike. About the time the Civil War started, Fair was in Angels Camp where he met Theresa Rooney, an Irish widow who ran a boarding house. Their first child was a girl and they named her Theresa. She, if anyone, is the



MONEY maker. Jim Fair, King of the Comstock, in his mining clothes.

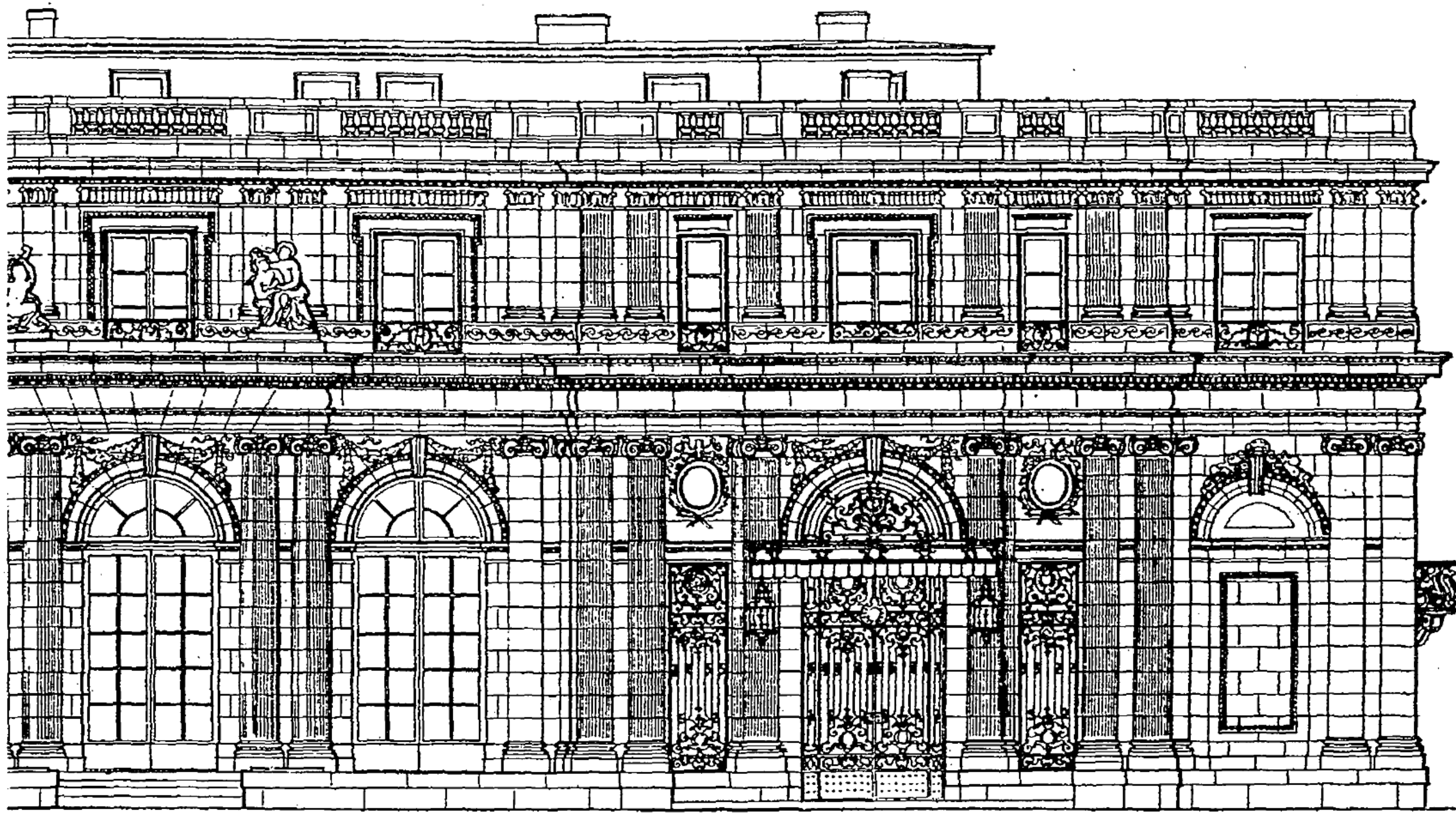
Pictures courtesy of Newport Preservation Society.

true heroine of the Rosecliff story.

Jim Fair thought his luck was running thin on the western slope of the Sierras, so maybe he salted his mine in Angels Camp and maybe he didn't. At any rate, he sold out for a good price and went over the Sierras to the Washoe and Virginia City, Nevada, where he and his partners in the depths of Mount Davidson — the fabulous Comstock — struck the richest vein of gold and silver in history. In six years, the owners took a hundred million dollars out of the mine and then the vein ran out. During the Comstock years, Jim and Theresa Fair had three more children, James, Charles and Virginia.

In 1881, Jim Fair took a hankering for the United States Senate. He campaigned in his old miner's clothes, spent \$350,000, and went to Washington where, after the first few months, he was bored silly. One term was enough.

When the Consolidated Virginia mine in Nevada played out, Jim Fair shifted his operations to San Francisco where he invested in real estate, railroads and other steady sources of income. His holdings in San Francisco property (which he let run down, claiming he couldn't afford upkeep because taxes were too high) turned him a quarter of a million dollars a month.



ARCHITECT'S drawing
of Rosecliff.

'cottage' goes public

Theresa Rooney Fair, a Catholic (he was a Protestant) filed for divorce, claiming "habitual adultery," and won her suit on May 12, 1883. Mrs. Fair got the two girls, \$4,475,000 in cash and securities, and the big Fair house on Pine Street in San Francisco. Jim Fair got the two boys who became boozers. One died a suicide, the other while he was driving his swift automobile in France.

The Fair girls — Tessie and Virginia (her friends called her Birdie) — were carefully and conventionally reared by their mother, the old boarding house keeper from the gold country. About 1889, reeking of money with more to come, the girls showed up in Newport and summered in a modest cottage near Ochre Point.

WELL-HEELED but not really wealthy, Hermann Oelrichs was a jolly, personable German, well thought of in New York and Newport society, and the American agent of the North German Lloyd steamship line. He was a prodigious swimmer who, with book and bottle, could stay out on the waves off Bailey's Beach for hours. Sometimes, when his friends got worried, the life boat service would go out to bring him in.



MONEY spender. Tessie Oelrichs, who spent \$2,500,000 on Rosecliff.

Hermann was a member of the Kat Bote Club, a coterie of swells not averse to good times and a tippie, and once, when the members were talking about the big fish they had caught, someone said, "That fish is as big as a man," and Hermann said, "Well, I could catch you." The "you" was a strong swimmer, but Hermann, with rod and reel, from a

raft off Bailey's, pulled the challenger in. He won \$50.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* on June 4, 1890, devoted three solid pages to its account of the marriage of Tessie Fair and Hermann Oelrichs, perhaps the most splendid wedding San Francisco has ever seen. An interested reader was Jim Fair. Reporters found him in his suite in the Lick House, which he owned, and asked him why he hadn't been at the wedding. "Because I wasn't invited." Then they asked, "What did you give the bride?" and the answer was, "A million dollars."

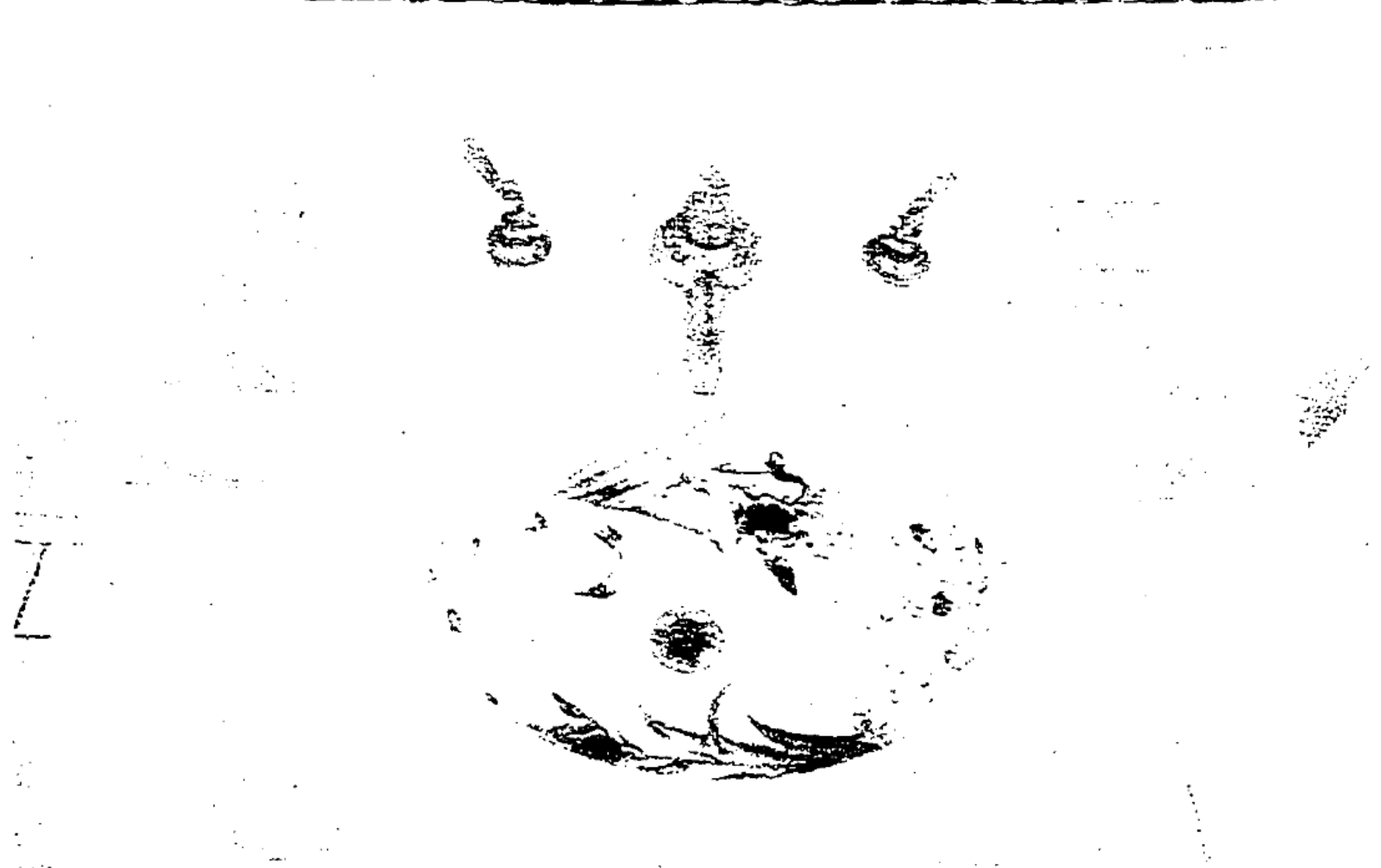
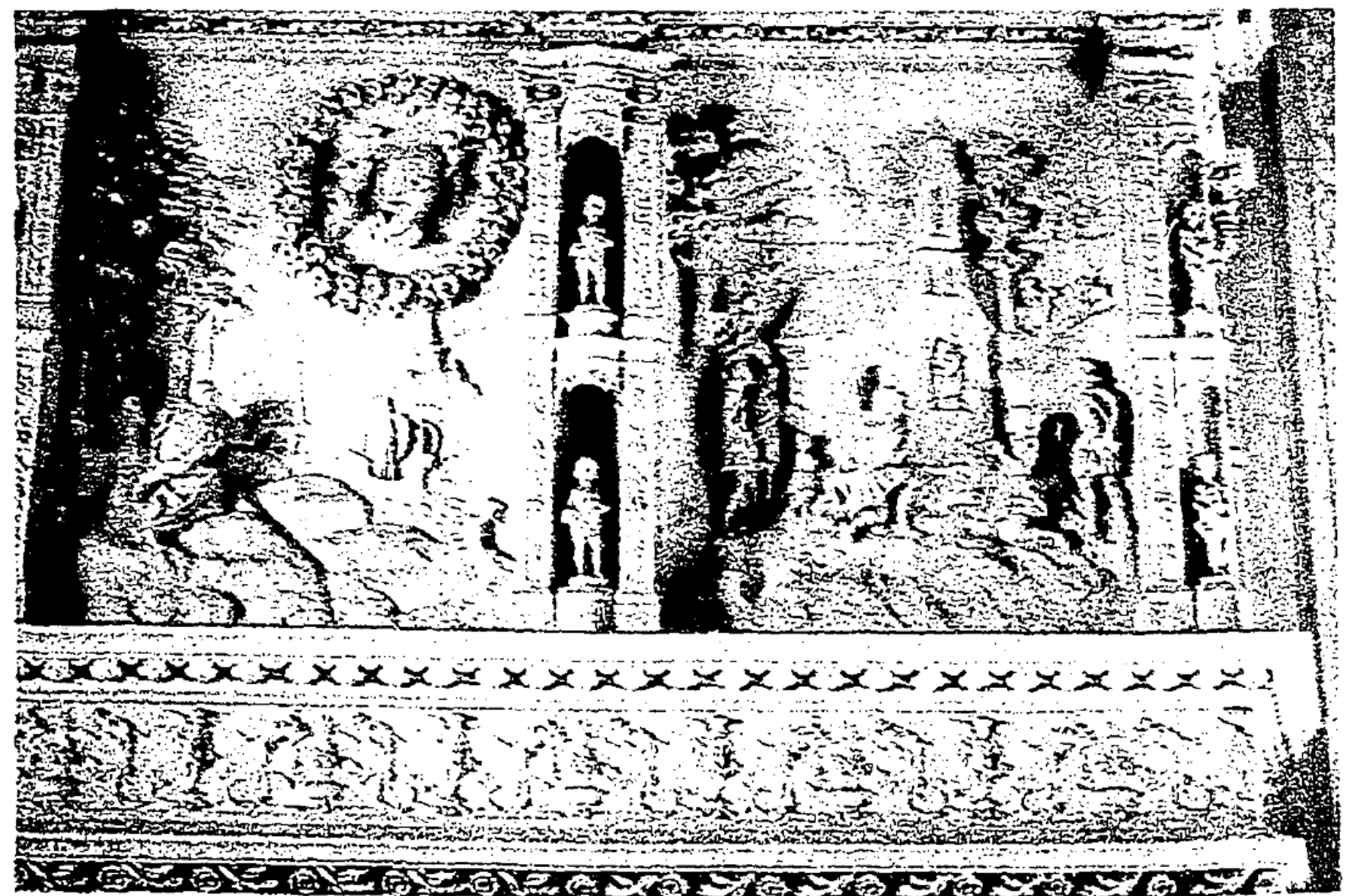
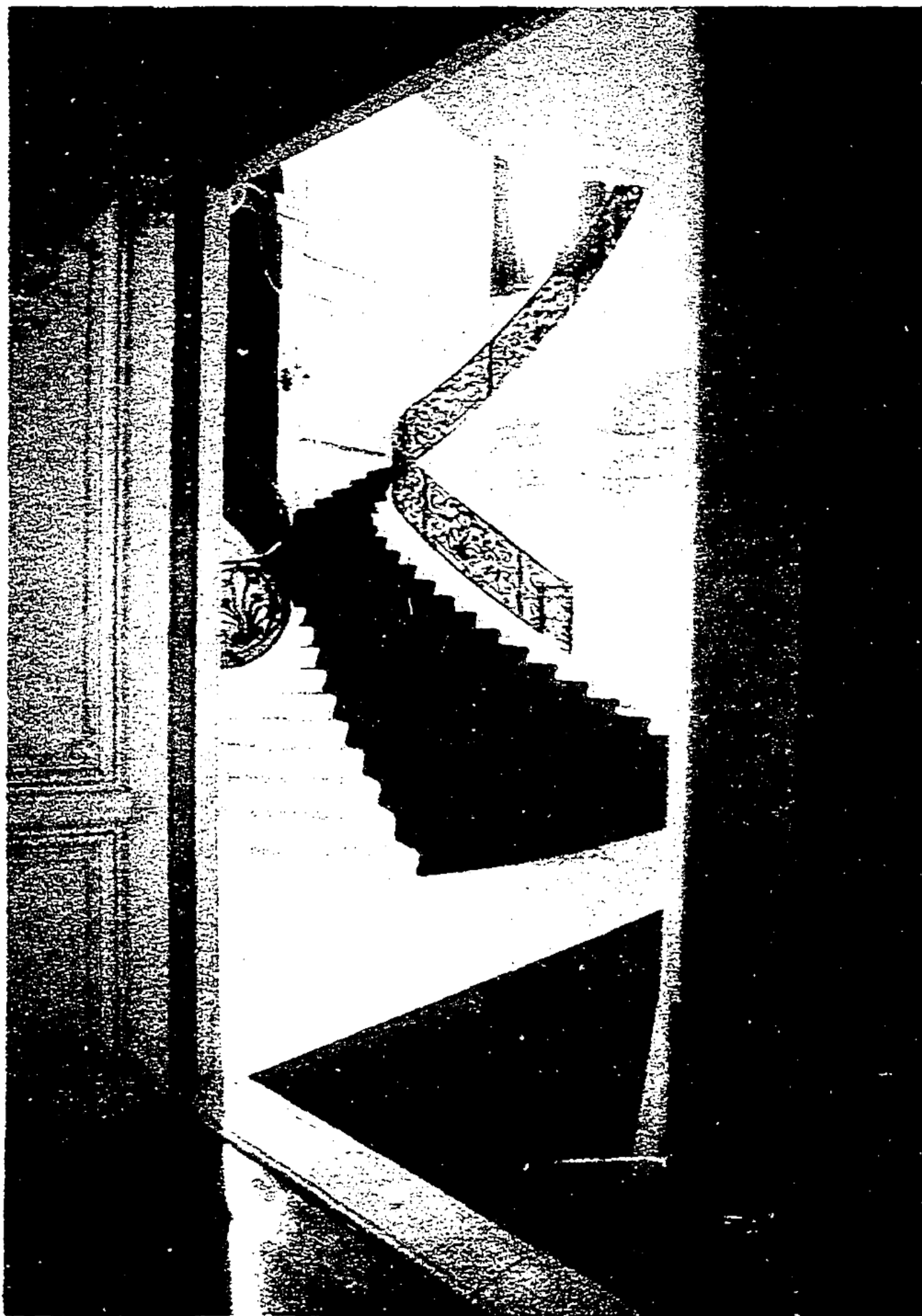
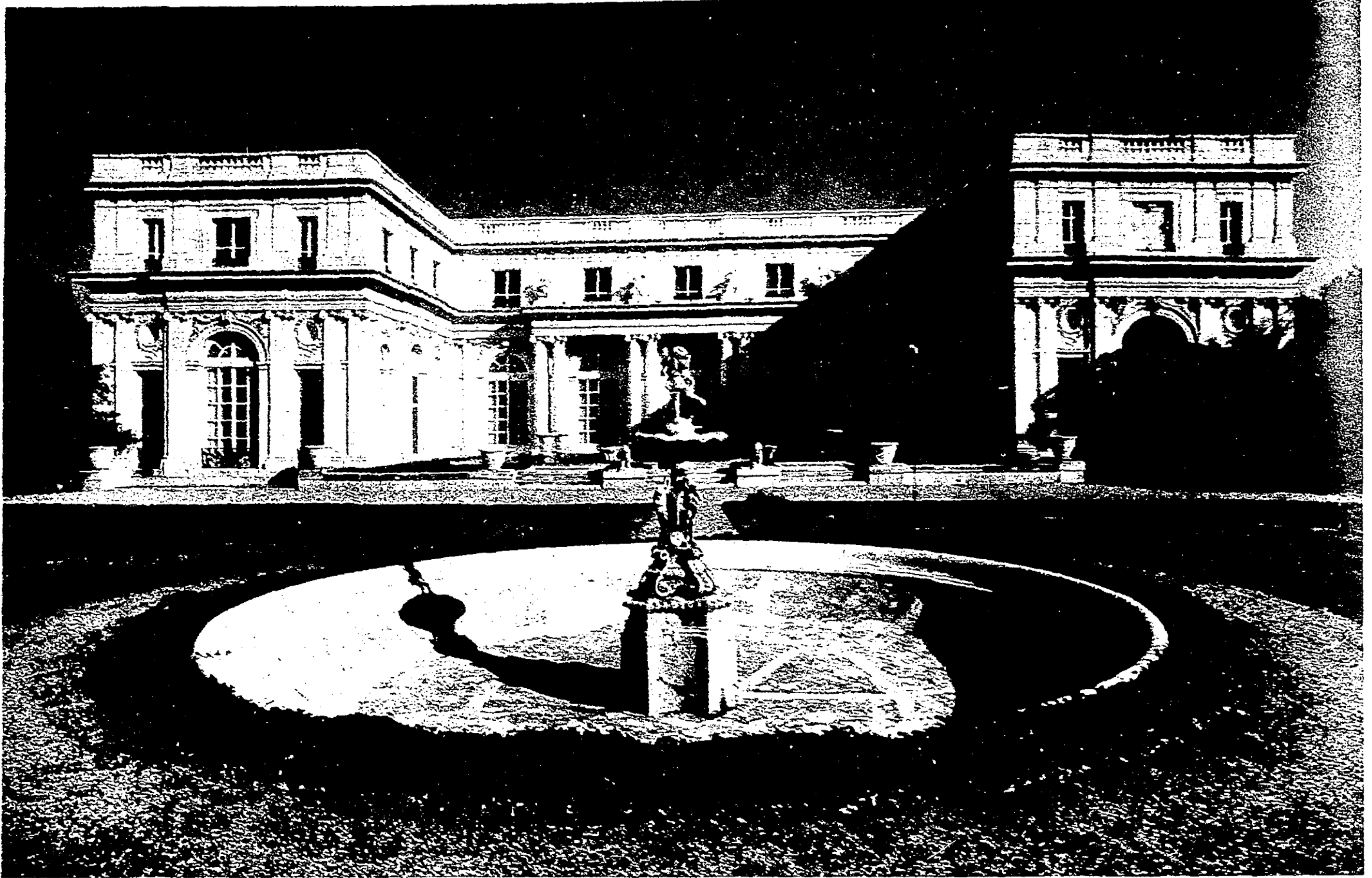
The newlyweds bought Rosecliff (Bancroft died in 1891) and began to make large waves in Newport society. Their only child was named Hermann. The agent of the German steamship company quickly lost interest in Tessie although she, by all accounts, continued to be in love with him. Nevertheless, Hermann Oelrichs spent much time in California, looking after his wife's financial affairs which were gathering size.

Tessie's mother died in September, 1891, leaving the boys a million dollars. The rest of the estate was split between Tessie and Birdie. Jim Fair, bulging with boodle, died three years later. His will left a carefully restricted trust fund

to his surviving son and the rest went to the girls. Tessie and Birdie were really rich.

Birdie, launched into Newport and New York society by the Oelrichses, became Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt 2nd.

TESSIE went on, with the help of McKim, Mead & White, architects, to plan and build the present Rosecliff at a cost of \$2,500,000, a pleasure dome with the largest ballroom—40 x 80 feet—in the cottage colony, not to mention a heart-shaped marble staircase, a salon with a carved fireplace surround, a billiard room, a large dining room, nine bedrooms, with adjoining baths and a third floor, artfully concealed by the roof ballustrades, where the help had quarters and the trunks were stored. Back in the service wing, there was an elevator and a dumb waiter to the big kitchen in the basement which also had the servants' hall and apartment for the chauffeur, the inevitable wine cellar and heating equipment. Stanford White drew heavily on Marie Antoinette's Trianon at Versailles for inspiration, and the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens provided the garden ornamentation. Little if anything was left of George Bancroft's beloved rose gardens. ▶11



ROSECLIFF

Tessie was a terror

As an offspring of the western mining camps, Tessie Oelrichs wasn't much for side. She ran Rosecliff like a tough top kick with morning inspections and she was not averse to doing some of the housework herself when it was needed. She was troubled by increasing deafness and a tendency to put on weight, a problem she solved by having a strong male servant lace her into her stays. An accident blinded her in one eye.

Despite these adversities, she shared dominance of Newport's social world with Mamie (Mrs. Stuyvesant) Fish and Alva (Mrs. O.H.P.) Belmont from the day that THE Mrs. Astor surrendered her crown. The triumvirate feuded and engaged in subtle social upmanship but held sway for many years.

Rosecliff was an imposing palace from which to share the tripartite throne and Tessie Oelrichs, with all those dollars from the Comstock and San Francisco, dazzled the summer colony with her parties.

Probably nothing equalled her *Bal Blanc* of August 19, 1904. It was a memorable day. The harbor was crowded with the boats of the New York Yacht Club. It was the day of the Astor Cup race and the weather was fine. ▶12

ROSECLIFF from the Bellevue Avenue side (top of facing page). Lower left, the grand marble staircase which was once a cascade of ice. Detail of carvings over fireplace in the salon (center right, facing page) and beneath it, one of the hand-painted wash basins. At right, the towering fireplace in the salon, seen from the ballroom. The carved Caen stone tells the story of a knight errant and his tribulations.



ROSECLIFF

Mamie was upset

To Rosecliff at 10:30 that evening came 406 guests. One hundred of them had been to a "white" dinner at Mamie Fish's, and Mrs. Pembroke Jones had dined eighty. The ladies were all in white with powdered hair or white wigs in the style of Mme. Pompadour. The gentlemen came in black soup-and-fish. The grounds were illuminated with white mazda bulbs, all of the floral decorations were white and it seems likely that this was the night when Tessie had a fleet of white mock-up ships moored off the Cliff Walk and bathed by search lights.

The terrace overlooking the sea was a Grecian arbor and in the fountain pools white swans paddled around and around. Tessie Oelrichs wore a white princess gown of lace and her head gear consisted of white feathers, pearls and diamonds with a Prince of Wales effect. Her sister, Birdie, who assisted in receiving the guests, was in white crepe de chine and wore a dog collar of diamonds and pearls.

Harry Lehr, the champagne salesman who had succeeded Ward McAllister as master of society's fun and games, led the cotillion to music by Mr. Mullaly's Casino orchestra and Mr. Berger's Hungarian band. There were white favors for all of the guests, most of them from Udall & Ballou, the jewelers up the avenue.

At midnight, a supper of modest proportions consisted of scrambled eggs and truffles, stuffed crabs, chicken pate, Virginia ham, cold chicken, Philadelphia pigeons, a salad chiffonade, assorted sandwiches, melon, sweets and mocha coffee, not to mention the Moet & Chandon champagne.

The newspapers said the white ball cost Tessie \$25,000.

HERMANN Oelrichs, pere, died at sea early in September, 1906. He was returning to America in the German liner *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*. They filed his will for probate in New York on September 10. The estate was worth about half a million. Tessie didn't get a nickel on the grounds that she already was well heeled — an understatement. All young Hermann got were some personal effects — cuff links, shirt

studs, stick pins and such—because Mamma would provide for him.

The chatelaine of Rosecliff did rather well by the young man. Long before the automobile became the carrier of the common man, the swells went in for the motor car in a large way, which explains why young Hermann on an August day in 1911 was to be found behind the wheel of a 90-horsepower machine given to him by Tessie.

It had a rated top speed of 110 miles an hour, pretty swift for Second Beach, Middletown, where there was to be a race between five or six cars. The Oelrichs machine

Mamma provided well for Hermann

was well in the lead when it burst into flames and Vincent Astor in the following car swerved quickly into the surf where the waves broke over the front end. No one was hurt, beach sand put out the fire, and a team of horses pulled the Astor car out of the sea.

The three social leaders continued to maintain a firm rein on Newport's glittering whirl but they were not above trying to outdo each other. When Mamie Fish gave her famed Mother Goose ball at Crossways in August, 1913, Tessie Oelrichs took some of the gloss away by having 150 guests in for a dinner earlier in the evening. The dinner, too, was a Mother Goose affair with Mrs. Oelrichs as Mother Goose; she was done up in blue brocade with pink roses and wore a tall peaked hat, just as in the story books. The center pieces on the tables were such as Jack and the Beanstalk, Cinderella in a coach of flowers, Jack and Jill, and Little Red Riding Hood complete with wolf. The Shinnecock Quartet played southern melodies and after dinner, there was a program by professional entertainers which ran on long enough so that everyone got to the Fish house late and Mamie's nose was out of joint.

The first World War took the wind out of the sails of the summer colony and it wasn't quite the same afterward. Tessie Oelrichs, when

ROSECLIFF

Sold for \$21,000



TORCH singer Gertrude Niesen got Rosecliff as a birthday present.

she wasn't in France, continued to hold sway until, in the mid-Twenties, this Irish daughter of the bonanza king and the boarding house keeper went into a decline. For two years, she was an invalid at Rosecliff and on Monday, November 22, 1926, she died.

The next afternoon, there was a private funeral in the Tapestry Room, conducted by the Rev. Joseph P. Coleman, rector of St. Augustin's Church. Mrs. Oelrichs' sister, Birdie Vanderbilt, was abroad but Birdie's daughters, Mrs. Frederick Cameron Church Jr. and Mrs. Earl E. T. Smith, formerly Muriel and Consuelo Vanderbilt, were there. So, of course, were young Hermann and his wife, and the brother and sister of old Hermann. That was about all. That evening, a private train carried the body and the mourners to New York where Tessie Oelrichs was buried next day at Woodlawn.

As the father had expected, Tessie left everything to her only son.

Hermann Oelrichs sold Rosecliff to a New York real estate dealer in 1941 and soon, at auction, the estate went to Mrs. Anita Niesen for \$21,000.

Mrs. Niesen bought the place as a birthday present for her daughter Gertrude, then at the top of her fame as a torch singer on the radio and in the movies, night clubs and vaudeville. She wore slinky gowns, worked in a baby-blue spotlight and had a sultry, sexy voice. The Niesens—Gertrude, Anita and Monte (the father)—were in Newport on October 10, 1941, and became legal residents.

Rosecliff hitherto always had had a resident caretaker but the Neisens thought they could get by without one, depending on the oil burner to keep the house warm during the winter. The oil burner got out of kilter, the pipes froze and burst, and eventually the lovely heart-shaped marble staircase began to look like Niagara Falls in winter. The flood went through much of the house and into the basement, doing much

damage. The water bill alone came to more than \$800.

This disaster dulled the Niesen interest in Rosecliff. They sold the estate to Ray Alan Van Clief who sold it to the New Orleans financier, J. Edgar Monroe. The Monroes restored Rosecliff, furnished it with taste and elegance and enjoyed it as their summer home. On September 2, 1949, they entertained 400 guests at a ball, which may have been the largest party the old house had seen since Tessie's *Bal Blanc*.

LAST AUGUST, Mrs. and Mrs. Monroe gave Rosecliff, fully furnished, to the Preservation Society of Newport County. With the gift went an endowment of \$300,000 restricted for the care and upkeep of the property.

Thus, Rosecliff this weekend becomes one of the mansions of the Preservation Society open to the public. It will be open, like the other houses, on weekends only until Decoration Day. During the season, it will be open daily.

The Monroes also passed along to the Preservation Society a small amount of Fair and Oelrichs memorabilia — scrapbooks, photographs, papers relating to the protracted fight over Jim Fair's will and fortune, a fine picture of the king of the Comstock in his mining clothes, and two "Dear Mamma" letters written by young Hermann in the early Twenties. They relate to financial matters and one of them reveals that the then mistress of Rosecliff, among other sources of fixed income, was getting \$120,000 a year from her old investment in the Fairmont Hotel. □

For assistance on the article about Rosecliff, the Rhode Islander is grateful to: The Newport Historical Society, the library of the R.I. Historical Society, the Providence Public Library, Monique Panaggio, Leonard J. Panaggio and Stanleigh Arnold of the San Francisco Chronicle.