

THE GRAND HOTEL

A Slide Talk by Annon Adams

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The Grand Hotel opened on June 22, 1881. The Hotel straddled the border between Delaware and Ulster Counties. It operated as a hotel 82 years, and outlasted better known hotels like the Catskill Mountain House and the Kaaterskill Hotel.

My talk will concentrate on the first third and the last third of the Grand's history.

In September, 1880 rumors began to circulate in Kingston that D. C. Overbaugh was talking with architect J. A. Wood about a new hotel near Pine Hill. Overbaugh owned a coal and lumber yard in Kingston, was a Republican Alderman, and active in the Albany Avenue Baptist Church, which Wood had designed.

J. A. Wood had completed a number of projects in Kingston including the Kingston Armory, the Kingston Music Hall, later called Opera House, the First Baptist Church on Albany Avenue and a carriage house for Thomas Cornell. A row of buildings was under construction on Lower Broadway also for Thomas Cornell.

J. A. Wood had also designed the Tremper House in Phoenicia for Thomas and Jacob Tremper, Kingston businessmen in the wholesale grocery business. The Tremper House opened in June, 1879 and at that time was the Catskill hotel closest to a railroad station, the Phoenicia stop of the Ulster and Delaware Railroad. The Tremper House was a success, and brought the hope that a hotel even closer to the train station would also be successful.

Though Thomas Cornell was not the person who planned the hotel, he would have approved the project. Not only was he founder and President of the Cornell Steamship Company, but he was also President of the Ulster and Delaware Railroad and the Rhinebeck and Kingston Ferry. The Railroad and the Ferry would benefit from the increased business a new hotel along the line of the Ulster and Delaware would provide.

The cornerstone for the new hotel was laid on September 30, 1880. Throughout the fall, bids were solicited for carpenter, mason, and plumbing work. By January 1 there were 30 carpenters at work.

On January 9, 1881 an article ran in the *New York Times* announcing the construction of the new hotel, then called the Summit Mountain House. D. C. Overbaugh was listed as the President of the corporation. The Board of Directors included William H. Romeyn, former owner and editor of the *Kingston Journal*, and former County Clerk Israel Snyder of Kingston and Lewis and Albert Rider of Rhinebeck, who had worked as contractors on many railroad projects.

The *Times* reported that: "The chief point in favor of the Summit Mountain House is its accessibility. The 3:30 train may be taken any afternoon at the Grand Central Depot and at 8 o'clock in the evening the traveler will find himself on the broad piazza of the hotel..."

On March 16, a special train on the Ulster and Delaware took out the Building Committee for the hotel plus Joseph Cornell, Thomas Cornell's half brother, and S. D. Coykendall, Cornell's son-in-law and business partner. The next day it was announced that the stockholders had voted to change the name of the hotel to the Grand Hotel.

Cost estimates for the hotel had risen from \$60,000 to more than \$100,000. Stories on opening reported that the cost of the hotel was between \$100,000 - \$125,000. It is probably at this point that Thomas Cornell decided to use funds he had available from the sale of the Wallkill Valley Railroad to complete the Grand Hotel. Joseph Cornell who owned the Citizen Steamship line and was a stockholder in the Grant House in Catskill and Coykendall were now his representatives on the Board of the company.

It was also announced that Romer Gillis would be the manager. He was an experienced hotel manager. As the pace of the construction accelerated, hiring began for other positions – leader of the orchestra, head of the livery stable, and a steward for the dining room.

At the end of April there was an ad for 50 more laborers. Under the direction of Kingston contractor, Henry Otis, they worked on making and grading the roads. The *Daily Freeman* reported that “Operations are being vigorously pushed, and it will not be long before the drives about the hotel will be in good shape.”

Advertising circulars were issued. The circular stated “...this hotel is situated upon Summit Mountain two thousand five hundred feet above the tide level and commands a view which is unsurpassed in picturesque mountain scenery, it being the center of a group of peaks made celebrated by artists, writers and historical associations....The piazza is constructed with special reference to being the living room for the guests, and with over three hundred and fifty feet in length has a commanding and pleasing view from every part.”

Excursions were planned to the hotel by church groups. Vassar College’s junior and senior classes were invited on an excursion to the Grand. Thomas Cornell was a member of Vassar’s Board of Trustees. He provided a steamboat to bring them to Rondout where they boarded a special Ulster & Delaware train to the Grand to preview the new hotel.

The hotel was announced to open on June 22. Last minute preparations continued. Henry Otis, the contractor from Kingston, told *the Daily Freeman* that “He thought he had seen men who could tack up lathe with great speed and expertness, but [the men from New York] when laying carpets would put almost half a box of tacks in their mouths and then going along the edge of the carpet with a hammer would put in the tacks so fast that it was almost a continuous rap, rap, and it seems impossible that tacks could be put in with that rapidity in any other way except by the men blowing them from their mouths so they stuck in the carpet just where they were needed.”

Five days before opening 15 colored waiters took the railroad to the Grand. Colored waiters were probably chosen because of their experience and availability. An 1880 photo of the dining hall at the United States Hotel in Saratoga includes their black waiters. At the opening celebrations they dressed in black with white vests and neckties with spotless aprons and towels. For the opening, there was a special train that left Rondout at 5:45 pm, and would leave the Grand at 1 am to return. Guests were greeted by Manager Romer Gillis and after looking around, went to the dining room for a meal of many courses. Afterward there was dancing in the parlor. The *Kingston Daily Freeman* headlined its description of the event: “Above the Clouds – The Grand Hotel Brilliant Opening”.

The architecture of the Grand can best be described as Eclectic. Wood would have called it Italianate in style. Others said it was a Queen Anne in design; however, Wood later wrote that no hotel he had designed “is in that beastly style which is at best no style at all...No architect with any knowledge of harmony of design, proportions, or beauty of outline ever stoops to disgrace the landscape with the so called Queen Anne productions.”

Early announcements about the Grand compared it to the Oriental Hotel at Manhattan Beach which had opened in 1880. Manager Romer Gillis had worked at the Oriental. Both hotels had a long piazza across the front, but otherwise their architecture was different. Perhaps the reference was to suggest that the Grand would be a high quality hotel like the Oriental. It was J. A. Wood’s intent that the Grand would have all the features of a quality hotel in the city. Guests were driven from the train station to the front entrance of the hotel. Their luggage was delivered separately to an entrance in the rear where a freight elevator was located and the luggage was delivered to their room.

Each room had a closet, gas lighting and had an electric bell with which to summon a porter. There were numerous bathrooms and water closets on each floor. Also, there were two suites with three rooms each which had a private bath.

There were five dining rooms. The Main Dining Room for guests was on the first floor on the right hand side, when facing the hotel. On the second floor was a dining room for children and their nurses. In the basement were dining rooms for the hotel's officers, guest's servants and servants employed by the hotel. Water came from a well 2,000 feet from the hotel.

The basement also contained a bar, billiard room and barber shop. On the first floor was a large entrance rotunda, a parlor and smaller rooms where guests could have more privacy.

The hotel had a telegraph office and a stand in the lobby with newspapers, magazines, books, fruit, etc. Also, on the grounds were a bowling alley, servants' quarters, and stables.

After the hotel opened, work continued on laying carpet and the bowling alley was completed.

The hotel was an immediate hit. So much so that the *Daily Freeman* reported that: "The halls were filled with cots and it was utterly impossible to move about the building with any degree of comfort.." A later article suggested that a person wishing a room could send a telegram to the manager to determine if rooms were available and make a reservation in advance!

For architect Wood, the success of the Grand Hotel led to hotel commissions in the South including the Piney Woods hotel in Thomasville, Georgia and the National Landmark Tampa Bay Hotel, now the signature building of the University of Tampa.

The Grand built on the Catskills established reputation for clear and healthful air, sublime views and the myths of Rip Van Winkle, however it was transportation that was the key to the Grand's success. Much was made of the fact that – as *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* reported – "the dreary, dusty, hot stage drive is done away with, and five minutes of a spanking spin replaces so many hours of misery."

There were three routes that could be used. People could take the Hudson River Railroad to Rhinecliff, cross the Hudson on the Kingston – Rhinecliff ferry, and take the Ulster & Delaware Railroad to Grand Hotel station.

A second route was to take a steamboat to Rhinecliff, or Kingston, if necessary, cross to Kingston by ferry and take the U & D railroad to Grand Hotel. The trip by steamboat could be more comfortable in hot weather.

Finally, the Erie Railroad ran what was advertised to be the first all rail train to a hotel in the Catskills. Leaving from the Erie terminal in Jersey City, the train used the Wallkill Valley line to Kingston and the Ulster and Delaware Railroad .

Are you confused? In 1881, the Grand Hotel employed Albert Hasbrouck as their agent and guide about the ferry boats, cars and steamers coming to Kingston. The *Daily Freeman* reported "This will be a good thing for travelers, as too often they are led astray and miss trains, and meet many other inconveniences, through ignorance of how to reach their destination."

There was also a special Saturday night train which left Kingston at 7:45 pm. "...every Saturday night during the season, a Pullman Palace Car will come from New York over the Erie and Wallkill Valley Railroad, to this city [Kingston], and go up the Ulster and Delaware Railroad..." to the Grand Hotel. "It will be attached to the Saturday evening special."

Even the first summer, what came to be known as the "Husband's" train was in operation. . . . On Monday mornings a train left the Grand Hotel at 5 am. Passengers connected by ferry to the Hudson River Railroad train to New York City.

Service improved in later years with the completion of the West Shore Railroad in 1883.

In 1890 the *New York Times* reported that "The West Shore Road will accommodate business men wishing to spend Sunday in the Catskills by running a train of sleepers to the Grand at 3 A.M. Sundays. The cars will be put into the station at 9 o'clock Saturday night. This train will reach all points in time for breakfast. There will be a return train Sunday night, which will reach New York at 1:30 Monday morning when they will be sidetracked, and passengers can occupy their births until 7:30 o'clock."

Every year workers would arrive before the Grand opened in late June to get the hotel ready for opening. If the previous summer had been a good one, improvements would be made.

When the Grand opened in 1882, it had a fountain in front and its own government post office. Awnings had been installed and there was a new laundry and gas house. The grounds were improved. There were also rustic seats and summer houses.

In the spring of 1884, the Board of Directors decided that "...the westerly wing as first designed should be erected." This increased the length of the hotel by 150 feet for a total of 650 feet. There were a total of 100 rooms added, "...which are so arranged that they can be occupied *en suite* or singly." There were now accommodations for 500 guests. A "music hall" for entertainments was added, and also, a cozy little breakfast room, a smoking and card room for gentlemen, a ladies' sewing room and an elevator for guests.

In July of 1885, the *New York Times* had an article on the Grand, which began: "If one has kidneys and they are worth preserving to a green old age, and if he can overcome conscientious scruples about the use of water, he can pass a very agreeable existence in the Western Catskill chain in the summer. They have a spring hereabouts called Diamond, I believe, whose diuretic properties, acting in conjunction with invigorating atmospheric conditions of the region, it is said, will tone up any system so that its nerves and muscles will have the tensile strength of fiddle strings. The Shamokin Indians are said to have used it for medicinal purposes. The old spring has been reopened and named Diamond because its water is so clear and sparkling."

A hotel needed to guarantee good water, and if it could get doctors and ministers to testify to its purity and healthful properties, the water could be turned into a selling point for the hotel, and this is what the Grand did. The article also noted: "Its sanitary arrangements have been improved and a system of sewerage has been adopted which is regarded as perfect."

Nine years later in 1894, the *Times* reported that: "Guests at the New Grand will have the finest of spring water to drink this season. A water company has been formed at Highmount, and has been given a contract to supply the hotel for ten years. The water will be brought from the head waters of Birch Creek."

Managers generally lasted two or three years, until about 1887 when Joseph Cornell and his son, Samuel became active managers as well as stockholders. Managers hired the staff and brought to the Grand their web of contacts. In 1882, Romer Gillis hired black waiters from the Williard Hotel in Washington. In 1883, the manager placed an advertisement in the Kingston paper for 25 experienced dining room girls. In 1884, Capt. Edward Gillette who had served with distinction in the Civil War, hired a chef who had worked at Delmonico's. Having good cooking was important.

The managers also had a strong influence on entertainment provided. Capt. Gillette organized a "broom brigade" made up of "...31 young girls, most of them pretty, healthy and fresh looking. They entered into the spirit of the drill with great zeal and became in a few weeks after the brigade had been organized very expert not only in handling brooms but in military maneuvers. Captain Gillette made an excellent commander."

Activities for guests included outdoor walks, drives and hikes. Some even went trout fishing. There were outdoor games. Croquet and later, lawn tennis were available. In 1885 it was reported that two single and two double tennis courts had just been completed. Bowling and tennis tournaments were arranged. Guests would bring their own horses and coachmen and enjoy pleasant drives with pleasing scenery.

In 1891 the *New York Times* reported that "Louis Stern of Stern Brothers, New York City, with his wife, mother, four children, four servants and five horses and carriages, is at the New Grand Hotel."

In 1890 there were three concerts a day. There were entertainments by the magician, Herman the Prestidigitator, or a stereopticon show or musical programs. For example, a glee club from Kingston performed.

During the summer of 1882, Oscar Wilde caused a sensation in the Hudson Valley. He performed at the Kaaterskill, and was listed as a guest at the Grand.

There were weekly dances and a special “hop” in August which was attended by guests from other hotels. In 1891 the annual hop was described by the *New York Times* as a “...successful affair. The number of guests was 500. The parlors and halls were brilliantly lighted and Chinese lanterns illuminated the approaches and long piazzas of the building. The festivities began at 8:30 o’clock and supper was served at 11:30. The goodnight signal was sounded at 2:30 A.M.”

Donations for worthy causes were raised from guests – to pay off the debt of the Pine Hill Methodist Church, for example. In 1891, the children put on a program consisting of a series of tableaux. Tickets sales benefitted the Children’s Fresh Air Fund of New York.

Hotels competed for famous guests. The Grand had some foreign diplomats as guests. When President Arthur vacationed in the Catskills he decided to stay at the Kaaterskill and didn’t even visit the Grand on a day trip!

In September, 1884, Jay Gould had his dinner at the Grand. During dinner he received stock quotations by telegraph and said he was better pleased with the Grand than the Kaaterskill.

Alf Evers in his book, “The Catskills” writes about the role of ministers in the Catskills. Two well known New York City ministers, Dr. Theodore Cuyler and Dr. Howard Crosby, switched their allegiance from the Catskill Mountain House to the Grand. Both praised the Grand in print, and both conducted Sunday services there.

As the Grand began its 22nd season, the *New York Times* wrote the following: “The Grand Hotel is the only caravansary in the Catskills that is reached without staging. It has its own station on the Ulster and Delaware Railroad, and it is but a step from the train to the hotel office. Situated on a terrace of Summit Mountain, 2,500 feet above sea level, it commands scenery that holds the new guest in rapt attention. Advantages of the hotel are its elevation, insuring cold dry air; a home character in arrangements, service, and equipment; splendid grounds, purity of drinking water, quiet, its dairy farm and cuisine of the first rank, and a liberal administration to which the guests owe all modern hotel comforts, tennis, croquet, golf, bowling, ping-pong, billiards and an excellent livery. The hotel has a Post Office and a resident physician.”

In 1904, an advertisement called the Grand, “The Leading Hotel of the Catskills...Remodeled, redecorated and refurnished since last season. A magnificent resort for pleasure and health: all the comforts and luxuries of a high-class city hotel in the heart of the Catskill Mountains.”

Evers also discusses a more sensitive topic – Jewish guests. In 1889 a *New York Times* article said there was a story going the rounds that Catskill Mountain hotel and boarding house operators were not going to receive Jewish guests. The article asserted that it wasn’t true. There were some who printed “No Hebrews need apply” or “Jewish patronage not desired” or “Hebrews not admitted” but it wasn’t the case universally.

The management of the Grand was uneasy about the topic, and put a Special Notice in that year’s circular which said “In order to exclude the mixed and undesirable element, who are at times found in summer hotels, it is our intention to be very strict in making engagements. Each applicant will be required if not personally known to give references.”

From examining guests lists published in the *Kingston Daily Freeman* and the *New York Times*, it seems clear that the Grand was what Evers calls a “mixed” house. “Most of the guests had one thing in common: they were rich or tried to seem so.” He asserts that it did not become a Jewish hotel until it had Jewish management.

I don’t know when the management became Jewish. Joseph Cornell died in the 1890’s, his son, Samuel Cornell died in December, 1899. When S. J. Coykendall died on January 14, 1913, his obituary listed him as the owner of the Grand Hotel.

Evers is also the source of information on the moveable office and bar at the Grand which he notes is firmly fixed in oral tradition. He writes that “When Shandaken refused a liquor license, the barroom was merely moved into Middletown at the other end of the vast building. When Middletown prohibitionists grew hostile, the barroom traveled back to the now-wet

Shandaken. The sliding barroom of the Grand proved one of its greatest attractions. The hotel office was also a wanderer, for tax reductions could be induced by shifting the office from one town or county to another.”

I next picked up the threads of the Grand’s history in 1938 as reported in the *Catskill Mountain News*.

On August 5, 1938, the newspaper reported that “The Grand hotel had a very busy weekend. On Sunday incoming guests were sitting on the porch waiting until other guests checked out and made room for them. State Senator Joseph is now among the Grand’s distinguished guests.” In 1939, the Grand was called “...the Ritz of the Catskill Mountain summer palaces.” Sounds like nothing has changed!

The hotel was managed and I think, owned, by Frank Seiden and his son, Leon. Charles Seiden, another relative was also involved. The Seidens were very important to the history of the Grand in it last 25 years. They were involved in the ownership or management every year except 1947 – 1949.

In 1947, Robert Wyer who had a photographic studio in Delhi took a series of photos at the Grand, and I think these photos give us a feel for the hotel, its employees and its guests.

Until 1954 guests could arrive by train, but most probably arrived by car.

In 1941, a teacher at Margaretville High School, who had worked at the Grand, gave a class for high school students who wanted to be waitresses and bell hops to train them for employment. Others were probably from outside the area, as a note in the newspaper said “It begins to seem like ‘The good old summer time’ again. Every incoming bus brings employees to the Grand Hotel.” In 1955, a Chinese man from Hong Kong was working at the Grand, and was arrested by immigration authorities.

A swimming pool had been added, and must have become quite a complex. In July 1955 there was a fire at the solarium and locker room near the pool. Mentioned also are a kitchen and pantry of the pool-side restaurant and damage to adjacent handball courts.

Guests could also enjoy dancing in their swim suits to a small combo. The tennis courts were located beside the pool. Guests could also play golf. Ping pong tables were located under what was now called a veranda.

Guests could still enjoy the piazza or veranda, and the deck above what was now the front entrance, or sit quietly on the grounds taking in the view. They could have meals in the dining room, have cocktails in a bar room, take dance lessons, and also dance to the music from an orchestra in the Clubhouse. They were entertained by Broadway’s finest talent or at a costume ball. A brochure says that there were: “moonlight weenie roasts and outdoor concerts under the stars” at the Grand Hotel “Your Castle in the Sky.”

The brochure also said that “Children have their own little world...supervised day camp, separate dining room, wading pool, indoor and outdoor playgrounds...a land of make-believe come true.”

Grand guests and employees continued to contribute to community and other philanthropic causes. The Grand Orchestra played at the fundraising ball for Margaretville Hospital, guests contributed to the Red Cross appeals during World War II, and Jewish philanthropies. From about 1949 until 1956 the Grand was owned by Tisch Hotels, Inc., which was the forerunner of Loews Hotels, and was owned by Al Tisch and his sons, Preston and Lawrence Tisch. Charles Seiden managed the Grand for them. Charles and Ira Seiden purchased the hotel from Tisch in 1956.

In September 1963, Charles and Ira Seiden announced that they planned to replace the Grand with a luxury motel. Over the winter, Ira Seiden died and a hotel property they owned in New Jersey suffered a fire so even the plan for a luxury motel wasn’t carried out. The furnishings from the Grand were sold at an auction over the July 4th weekend in 1964, and the process of demolition began after the sale.

In September, 1888 the *New York Times* reported that: “The managers of the larger houses say it does not pay to keep them open unless they have a full complement of guests and that the houses really make more money by keeping open only 10 weeks than they would by entertaining guests for four months.” The Grand never opened for winter skiers, as it just didn’t pay even when Belleayre opened for skiing in 1950.

By the time the Grand closed and was demolished in 1964, tourists were flying to exotic locations or traveling on the interstates for their vacations farther from home. Not many guests spent a full week at the Grand. Most guests were there for a weekend. Weekenders who loved the area had purchased their own homes.

Further, historic preservation was not yet a movement. Large hotels had been disappearing from the Catskills for a long time. Some burned down. The Tremper House burned in 1908 and the Kaaterskill in 1924. Others were demolished. Churchill Hall in Stamford was torn down in 1943. The Grand closed at a time when business was generally down in the Central Catskills, and the Grand was part of the trend that included diminishing business in both Pine Hill and Fleishmanns.