

More Franklin Park Stories

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Robert G. Woodside and the Stone Mansion

Surrounded by modern office buildings and situated next to a busy interstate highway, the Stone Mansion welcomes visitors to an era when intricately carved mahogany, richly colored stained glass and highly decorative fireplaces graced the homes of wealthy Pittsburghers. Before becoming the upscale restaurant that most remember it as, the Stone Mansion was home to attorney, politician and military hero Robert G. Woodside (1876-1964).



The son of a Presbyterian minister, young Woodside arrived in Pittsburgh from his native Brooklyn, New York when his father accepted a position to preach in the city's First Reformed or as it was popularly called, Oak Alley Church. The family was immediately embroiled in controversy when a minority within the congregation refused to accept the Reverend as its new pastor and attempted to oust him. At one point, as reported in a newspaper at the time, "A regular Donnybrook melee ensued. Hats were smashed, clothes torn. Men were profane, women shrieked, and the crowd outside cheered on the sport." In the end, Pastor Woodside and his followers established a separate church where he continued to preach until his death in 1901.

Robert Woodside served in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War and after attending law school at the University of Pittsburgh, established a private law practice in the city where he became politically active. As a long time member of a Spanish-American War veterans' organization, Woodside was instrumental in the creation of the national Veterans of Foreign Wars organization (1914). With the outbreak of World War I, Woodside organized the U.S. Veterans Reserve as Allegheny County's home guard before volunteering for a second tour of wartime duty when Captain Woodside would be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Purple Heart and Silver Star.

Returning to Pittsburgh at war's end, Woodside was elected Allegheny County Sheriff in 1921 and later served as Pennsylvania Deputy Auditor General before being elected Allegheny County Controller in 1928, however, this did not preclude Woodside from continuing military service, when as Brigadier General, Woodside commanded the Pennsylvania National Guard during World War II.

In 1923, President Warren Harding appointed Woodside Vice-Chairman of the American Battle Monuments Commission, a position he held until 1954 when in retirement from public life, Woodside was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Dwight Eisenhower, who was Woodside's one time instructor during army training. As a commission member, Woodside established overseas U.S. military cemeteries along with the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington, Virginia.

Woodside continued to actively support and organize new Veterans of Foreign Wars posts, most notably signing up 3,000 new members while still in France at war's end. Woodside's numerous military medals and citations are on display at the VFW's National Home in Eaton Rapids, Michigan where he served on the Board of Trustees for many years.



It was while serving as County Controller, that Woodside purchased (1934) the former Ford farm on Wexford-Bayne Road in rural Franklin Township (Franklin Park Borough) and hired local builder Chester Fowler to build what became known as the Stone Mansion. Designed with a nod to Reverend Woodside's ancestral Irish home, the distinctive U

shaped dwelling resembles three stone cottages standing end to end. Elegant interiors from Pittsburgh mansions set for demolition were carefully moved to the Franklin Township home where they were restored to their former grandeur. Seven decorative fireplace mantels, including a twenty-foot carved stone fireplace from France, are featured in the three level dwelling, along with several stained glass windows. The most notable window is a wall-sized panel in the entry hall with the date 1594 emblazoned at the top.

Upon retiring from county government in 1948, Woodside sold the property to the William Hess Webb family who named the 80-acre estate Rolling Hills Farm. The property subsequently passed through additional owners before being purchased by Philip Stebler, a local developer and builder who constructed the Stone Mansion Drive town homes during the early 1990s.

The house itself was sold in 1989 and transformed into the Gryphon Restaurant, the first of three upscale eateries to occupy the site. The Stone Mansion Restaurant followed in 1994 and was replaced with Woodside's Grille from 2009 to 2011. At present, Robert Woodside's former residence is being converted into a funeral home.



(Stone Mansion photo courtesy of Phil Stebler. Other photos by Glenn Lewis)