Blue Ridge Chateau: The Conceptual Design Evolution of Biltmore House

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BLUE RIDGE CHATEAU: THE CONCEPTUAL DESIGN EVOLUTION OF BILTMORE HOUSE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
R. Chad Stewart
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Accepted by:
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Dr. Vernon Burton
Abstract

This thesis explores the early conceptual designs for Biltmore House in Asheville, North Carolina. Examining architect Richard Morris Hunt’s surviving floorplans, elevation drawings, and a handful of other renderings, this thesis chronicles the evolution of Biltmore House on the drafting tables of the Hunt office from a luxurious but typical colonial revival mansion into the largest house ever constructed in the United States.

Additionally, the thesis explores the European precedents that inspired the design of Biltmore House by comparing its details with those of buildings frequently referenced as having inspired its design in several secondary sources. The result is a deeper understanding of how the largest home in the United States came to take the shape it did.
Dedication

To Landen and Laney
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my ever patient and long-suffering thesis advisor and committee chair, Dr. Stephanie Barczewski, and committee members Dr. Pamela Mack, and Dr. Vernon Burton. Your support has been invaluable. I would also like to thank all of the faculty of the Clemson University History Department for your support during my time at Clemson, especially Dr. Paul Anderson, current university historian and former graduate program director. Thank you for believing in me and giving me a chance. To my family and friends, thank you for your unwavering love and support.

Special thanks is due to Mari Nakahara in the Prints and Photographs Division at the Library of Congress. Thank you for your days of assistance digging through the archive of Richard Morris Hunt in the AIA/AAF collection. Additionally, I would like to thank several the museum services staff at Biltmore House, particularly Jill Hawkins, archivist; Lauren Henry, associate curator; and Leslie Klingner, curator of interpretation. Your patience with my many inquiries and interest in this project is most appreciated. Hannah Dale, assistant archivist at Waddesdon Manor in the United Kingdom also deserves thanks for her assistance in providing documentation to help establish the relationship between that house and Biltmore.
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Biltmore House in Asheville, NC, has always been an outlier. Its scale and design, as well as the creators who brought it into existence, make its presence in the late-nineteenth-century North Carolina backcountry extremely unlikely. At a time when most residents of western North Carolina lived their lives in modest circumstances typified by rough cabins and overworked farmland, Biltmore House stood as the private home of a family of three and an army of servants who kept the enormous domestic machine running in the manner of a large hotel or ocean liner. However, Biltmore did not only overshadow the domestic architecture of its nearest neighbors; it also outdid its contemporaries in wealthy urban power centers such as New York and Newport. No other single family home in America could compete with its size, even those built by owners of substantially more wealth than Biltmore’s owner George W. Vanderbilt. Not only did Biltmore House represent the top tier of domestic architecture in Gilded Age America, it was the absolute pinnacle. Built during a period of massive wealth disparity, Biltmore represents a lifestyle available exclusively to America’s wealthiest families for a brief period of history at the turn of the twentieth century.

However out of place Biltmore House was at the time it was built and lived in, it is even more so today when many of the contemporary mansions of America’s Gilded Age have long since been lost to the wrecking ball and the way of life they represented is now a distant -- and poorly understood -- memory. Even those great houses that do survive in the twenty-first century do so predominately in the care of public or non-profit institutions, while Biltmore House remains in the hands of George W. Vanderbilt’s descendants, who operate the 8,000-acre estate as a tourist attraction with the chateau as its principal draw. Not only does the house survive in
family hands, it also retains the vast majority of its original contents intact and in situ. This is another factor that makes Biltmore House an outlier and a particularly effective lens through which to glimpse the lost world of America’s Gilded Age.

The era in which Biltmore House was created, the late nineteenth-century Gilded Age, has many parallels to the modern day. Great wealth disparity and inequality, where those at the very top -- the 1% -- have more wealth and power than everyone else, are hallmarks of both periods. As the ne plus ultra of the Gilded Age domestic architecture, a more comprehensive understanding of Biltmore House and its creation can be illustrative in understanding the complexities of our own twenty-first century society. Nineteenth-century millionaires and the architectural legacy they left behind have much in common with the twenty-first century billionaire class whose wealth outweighs that of the masses who make up the vast majority of American society. Plutocracy, a system in which power is derived through wealth, remains a very harsh – however lavish – reality in American society in the twenty-first century. With American public policy geared toward the benefit of large businesses and billionaires at the expense of those less fortunate, plutocratic principles remain on stark display just as they were at the time Biltmore House was built. The architectural expressions of plutocracy may have changed over the last century, but the underlying conditions being expressed remain tragically unchanged.

Biltmore draws over one million visitors to Asheville every year and The Biltmore Company remains one of the largest employers in the region, making George W. Vanderbilt’s home a major economic engine for Western North Carolina. It not only produces revenue to maintain the private property, but also benefits the entire region, as guests spend money outside
of the estate in and around Asheville and other outlying communities. Therefore, it is important to more fully understand how the factors that draw these visitors came into existence.

One of the less prominent members of the expansive Vanderbilt brood, with no real involvement in the family’s many successful business ventures, George W. Vanderbilt is remembered primarily because of the house he built. Instead of being drawn to Biltmore because of its owner in the way that visitors are drawn to Mount Vernon because of Washington or to Graceland because of Elvis, people are drawn to Biltmore because of the house and the owner is remembered for building it. Biltmore is George Vanderbilt’s legacy. Without having built Biltmore, George W. Vanderbilt would likely be remembered as a mere footnote—the youngest son of his generation, who played no part in the expansion of the family’s wealth.

Vanderbilt hired the two most prominent men in their fields to create Biltmore: Richard Morris Hunt as architect, and Frederick Law Olmsted as landscape architect. Both were nearing the ends of their careers as the nineteenth century drew to a close. The Biltmore commission was the largest domestic commission either had taken on, and it proved to be the last great project either would engage in, with Hunt dying before the house he had designed was fully habitable. Therefore, Biltmore, which survives remarkably intact and unaltered, serves as a lens through which the design process used by Hunt and Olmsted to create their greatest work can be viewed. Such an endeavor is aided by the surviving archival material related to the project as detailed below.

Because of its significance to architecture, American history, the development and economy of Western North Carolina, and as the most intact example of Gilded Age domesticity surviving in America, Biltmore House is arguably one of the most important houses in the United States. Therefore, it is important to understand exactly how Biltmore House came to take
the shape it did. As will be demonstrated, Biltmore House could easily have become a much more modest and less remarkable building than what was built. When the project began, what exactly did George W. Vanderbilt have in mind when he hired Richard Morris Hunt to design his North Carolina home? What options were explored as the project evolved and what factors shaped the changes seen throughout the design process? How did the building evolve from a striking but not atypical mansion into the largest private home ever built in America? And when considering the house that was actually built, what buildings from the old world are represented within the form and details of the structure as completed? To answer these questions, several collections of primary sources will be explored.

Sources

Primary sources related to the design and creation of Biltmore House are plentiful; different collections of correspondence and design drawings survive in both private and public collections. However, the plenitude of surviving material speaks more to the scale and complexity of the project than to the completeness of that surviving documentation, particularly as it relates to the earliest development of the project and the early discarded design concepts. The design drawings of the Hunt office survive in two primary collections, the American Institute of Architects and American Architectural Foundation Collection (AIA/AAF) now at the care of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC; and the private archives at Biltmore House in Asheville, North Carolina. The AIA/AAF collection includes material left to that organization when the Hunt firm shuttered in the twentieth century, later transferred with the entire collection from the AIA’s Octagon Museum to Library of Congress in 2010. The material at Biltmore House has been held there since its creation in the nineteenth century.
The Hunt material in the AIA/AAF Collection related to the Biltmore project includes both informal and formal drawings, elevations, and floorplans related to the conceptual development of Biltmore House and the other structures the Hunt firm designed for the estate and accompanying village. This collection focuses primarily on the early design concepts and does not include plans for Biltmore House as-completed. While the material was cataloged within the AIA/AAF Collection before being transferred to the Library of Congress, at the time of this writing the material has not been fully re-cataloged and very few items have been digitized; the material is largely unsearchable digitally. Therefore, accessing the material requires an in-person trip to Washington and the assistance of the staff responsible for the collection’s care in the Prints and Photographs Division at the LOC.

While the material at the Library of Congress documents Hunt’s (or his office’s) evolving design concepts for the project, the archives at Biltmore House include the construction drawings for Biltmore House, those that represent the latest and final designs that were used by the men on the ground in North Carolina as the house was being built, in addition to the papers and correspondence of the George W. Vanderbilt family and household. In addition to the construction drawings, three watercolor elevations representing two early house concepts remain at Biltmore, which were likely sent to Vanderbilt by Hunt as they were working out the direction in which the project would go. The Biltmore Archive is privately held by the the Biltmore Company which is owned and controlled by George Vanderbilt’s descendants. Biltmore employees a professional museum services staff and access to the collection is tightly controlled. However, museum services staff did provide assistance with this project. Unfortunately, despite the plethora of correspondence and documents in the Biltmore collection, any such material that
may shed light on the early development of the house’s design does not survive, or has not yet been processed at the time of writing.

The Library of Congress also holds Richard Morris Hunt’s papers; however, like the material at Biltmore, correspondence relevant to the earliest development of the Biltmore project is not known to survive, making it difficult to discern the initial brief provided by Vanderbilt to his architect, and the motivation behind changes to the designs as the concepts evolved through late 1888 into the late summer of 1889. While Hunt’s Biltmore-related correspondence does not survive, that of his collaborator, famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, is preserved largely intact. Most of Olmsted’s correspondence has been published in the nine-volume *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted* series published by Johns Hopkins University Press. The remainder is available online through the Library of Congress. Therefore, it is possible to use the Olmsted correspondence and drawings along with the conceptual drawings from the Hunt collection to piece together the sequence of the house’s evolution, subtle as viewed incrementally, but dramatic when taken in its entirety.

In addition to the LOC and Biltmore, primary sources were also obtained from the archives of Waddesdon Manor in the United Kingdom. This material includes correspondence with their archivist who provided relevant pages from the Waddesdon Manor Guest Book and Visitors Book. This material is used to establish the reliability of an account stating that Vanderbilt and Hunt visited Waddesdon in the summer of 1889.

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Chapter I will introduce Biltmore House, its owner, George Washington Vanderbilt III, architect Richard Morris Hunt, and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Chapter II is an examination of the early conceptual designs for Biltmore House. The analysis includes Richard Morris Hunt’s seven more-or-less complete design concepts for the Biltmore project, and other ground floor plans and rough elevation sketches that appear to form a link between the last surviving complete house concept and the structure that was actually completed. These last informal ground floor plans, drawings, along with an early 3D architectural model, point to a “missing link” between Hunt’s surviving conceptual drawings and the house that finally resulted from this complex design process. This will be achieved by taking the earliest surviving design, the house as it was completed, and filling in the remaining design concepts based on their similarities to each other and correspondence which dates certain changes in the design.

In Chapter II, I will demonstrate that no one has fully studied Richard Morris Hunt’s original conceptual drawings for the Biltmore project, nor have they shown how these early concepts evolved into -- and are reflected in -- the French Renaissance Revival house that was ultimately built. Therefore, the current understanding of how the house came to take the shape it did is incomplete. Although John M. Bryan did examine parts of the Hunt collection and included several concepts in his 1994 book, G.W. Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate: The Most Distinguished Private Place, his analysis is incomplete in that he either neglected over half of the

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2 For the purposes of this survey, a complete house concept is one for which at least two elevations and two floor plans are known survive.
surviving Biltmore concepts, which are essential to understanding how the house design evolved through the design process.

In Chapter III, I will examine the connection between Biltmore House and Waddesdon Manor, the famous Rothschild house in the United Kingdom. The connection between Waddesdon and Biltmore, specifically the idea that the former greatly influenced the core shape the latter, is overstated in many secondary sources, including John M. Bryan’s *G.W. Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate: The Most Distinguished Private Place*, Denise Kiernan’s *The Last Castle: The Epic Story of Love, Loss, and American Royalty in the Nation’s Largest Home*, and Arthur Vanderbilt’s *Fortune’s Children: The Fall of the House of Vanderbilt*. It is generally understood that in May and June of 1889, George Vanderbilt traveled to Europe with his architect, Richard Morris Hunt and his wife, Catharine Howland Hunt, to get inspiration for the design of Biltmore House. It is stated that a stay at Waddesdon Manor ended up being the main influence on Biltmore House’s final shape. However, in Chapter III, I argue that documentation, particularly correspondence between Olmsted and Hunt, and dated plans from the spring of 1889, months before the trip to Europe, prove that Biltmore House had already taken shape on paper well before Vanderbilt and Hunt left for Europe later that summer.

Furthermore, the frequent claim that the traveling party visited (some say stayed overnight) at Waddesdon is based on a single primary source, an unpublished biography of Richard Morris Hunt written by his wife, Catherine. I will argue that this source is questionable, as she gets other details wrong. Moreover, the Waddesdon guest and visitors books from the time of their trip do not record Vanderbilt or the Hunts as having visited. I will argue that Waddesdon and Biltmore, while superficially quite similar, represent different expressions of the French Renaissance Revival style, demonstrating how thin the link between the two great houses truly
is. Lastly, I will argue that while it is true that Hunt and Vanderbilt did visit the chateaux of the Loire in the summer of 1889—including Blois, Chenonceau and Chambord—the primary inspiration for Biltmore’s final exterior decoration is drawn primarily from Blois, and not from the others. This argument is supported by the elements from Blois adapted by Hunt at Biltmore, and by surviving correspondence between Hunt and one of his assistants. The result of this study will be a deeper understanding of how Biltmore House as we know it actually came to be.
Chapter I

Blue Ridge Plutocracy:

George W. Vanderbilt and Biltmore Estate

“…wherever there is nobility of character, wherever there is gentleness of spirit, wherever there are all the things that make for Sweetness and Light, there George Vanderbilt has found his home.”

Episcopal Bishop Julius Horner, “Remarks Delivered at All Souls Church, Biltmore, Following the Death of George W. Vanderbilt.” 16 March 1914,
George Washington Vanderbilt (1862-1914) first came to Asheville, North Carolina, in late 1887 or early 1888 and, enamored with the topography of the western North Carolina backcountry and its expansive mountain vistas, soon set about building a home there. The house that resulted was the largest private residence ever constructed in the United States. In its modern role as a major tourist attraction, it now draws over 1.7 million visitors each year. Its life as a house museum has now surpassed the amount of time it spent as a private owner-occupied family residence.

Biltmore House is commonly understood by its staggering statistics, which boggle the minds of countless tourists in the twenty-first century just as they did to the few who were fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of the private enclave through the first quarter of the twentieth. The house contains 250 rooms covering 175,000 square feet, 35 family and guest bedrooms, 66 servant’s bedrooms, and 65 fireplaces, among innumerable other luxuries. Outside Biltmore House itself, the Vanderbilts and their guests had command of 125,000 acres of land which included landscaped gardens, a deer park, agricultural fields, and thousands of acres of professionally managed forests. In an age of cookie-cutter houses and sub-divided planned communities, Biltmore House draws the common masses to marvel at how a few wealthy American plutocrats lived in a very different Gilded Age world before the Great War.

As fascinating as Biltmore is as a structure, or what one houseguest admired as a “sheer piece of masonry”—it would hold its own against any competition in the new world and much of the old—it is the disjointed sense of place that really sets it apart from anything with which it

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3 “Let the Money Come,” *The Charlotte Democrat* (Charlotte, NC), 20 July 1888.
4 Biltmore House opened to the public on March 15, 1930. Except for a brief period during World War II, it has been open—at least seasonally—ever since. “Biltmore House Will Be Open to The Public Every Day Until Fall,” *Johnson City Chronicle*. Johnson City, TN, 25 March 1930.
5 “Fact Sheet: Biltmore by the Numbers,” The Biltmore Company, Asheville, NC.
might be compared. Although its situation on a hill overlooking the French Broad River valley is very similar to the Loire Valley that fostered the development of the renaissance chateaux architecture mimicked in its details, the hardscrabble backcountry of Western North Carolina is still a most unlikely place to build a Gilded Age mansion in the mold of an English country house, albeit wrapped up in a French dress.

Buncombe County, North Carolina, was not the typical stomping-ground of Gilded Age plutocrats. They could usually be found in great numbers in New York, Newport, Bar Harbor, and other wealthy cities and resort communities across the East Coast of the United States, and social hotspots across Europe. Therefore, Biltmore makes one wonder how came these things to Asheville, North Carolina? Answering that question will be the task of the last two chapters that follow. The remainder of the first addresses what Biltmore House is, who built it, and who had it built. Once this important “what” is answered, the “how” and “why” will follow.

The Vanderbilt Family

When exploring how an enterprise such as Biltmore came to be, one must begin with the money with which it was built. In this case, it was inherited wealth, vast amounts of it. Descendants of early immigrants to New Amsterdam, and of Dutch origin (the town of De Bilt, to be specific), by the end of the eighteenth century, George Vanderbilt’s ancestors had settled on a farm on Staten Island, New York. George’s grandfather, Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794-1877) was born on 27 May 1794 to parents Cornelius and Phebe Vanderbilt (or Van der Bilt as it was still often written). Cornelius was one of nine children.6

Cornelius took a few dollars borrowed from his mother, and within his lifetime transformed it into the largest private fortune in the history of the modern world up to that time. Having entered the business world by running a ferry between Staten Island and Manhattan, Cornelius, or “the Commodore” as he was dubbed, expanded his modest ferry into a profitable shipping and steamboat business. A shrewd and ruthless businessman with a knack for turning a profit, Cornelius eventually shifted his assets into America’s burgeoning railroad network, a move that proved to be fortuitous. At the time of his death in 1877, Cornelius Vanderbilt had turned the $100 borrowed from his mother so many decades ago into a fortune of approximately $100 million, making him the wealthiest person in the world.\(^7\)

At the time of his death, Cornelius Vanderbilt left the vast majority of his wealth to his oldest surviving son, William Henry (1821-1885), while his many siblings were forced to make do with roughly five percent divided among them. William Henry was the only descendant the Commodore trusted to maintain and grow his hard-won business empire after his death. The Commodore’s dying words to his son were, “Keep the money together, hey. Keep the [New York] Central our road.”\(^8\) His trust in William Henry was well placed. At the time of his own death in 1885, William Henry Vanderbilt had doubled his wealth, leaving an estate of approximately $200 million. However, unlike his father, he did not believe so strongly in the practice of primogeniture, and spread his wealth slightly more equitably between his male children in his will.

George Washington Vanderbilt

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\(^8\) Ibid. 52.
George Washington Vanderbilt was born to William Henry and Louisa Kissam Vanderbilt (1821-1896) on 14 November 1862. He was the youngest of the family’s children and named in honor of two deceased uncles, one of whom had been the Commodore’s favorite child. Young George was not like the other Vanderbilt children. As the youngest child, he was the only one still living at home with his parents in the family’s palatial house at 640 Fifth Avenue at the time of his father’s death. Relatives worried that his personality had been warped by his having been coddled and fussed-over for too long by his close female relatives.9

After William Henry’s death, the Vanderbilt railroad empire was transferred into the safe hands of George’s older brothers, Cornelius II, chairman of the New York Central; Willie K., second vice president of the New York Central and chairman of the Lake Shore and Nickel Plate lines; and Frederick, director of the West Shore and Canada Southern lines.10 While his brothers took over the operation of the family’s railroad and financial empire, George found himself drawn to more academic pursuits. With inherited wealth totaling about $12 million, George scoured the world for rare books, paintings, antiques, and other pieces of fine art. Even though he received little formal education, he was an avid reader who could read and write eight languages. His library would one day contain approximately 23,000 volumes. But above all, George Washington Vanderbilt was an attentive son to his recently widowed mother.

As a dutiful son, caretaker, and companion, at the age of twenty-six in the winter of 1887-1888, George accompanied his ailing mother to the small Appalachian town of Asheville, North Carolina, at that time a popular health resort drawing crowds in need of fresh mountain air.

9 Ibid.
This trip to Asheville would not only profoundly shape the rest of George W. Vanderbilt’s life, but also fundamentally transform that part of western North Carolina forever.

The Vanderbilts as Builders

Despite his vast wealth which would have enabled him to build any kind of house or palace he could have dreamed of, Cornelius “Commodore” Vanderbilt did not catch the building bug, his only real indulgence being expensive racehorses. ¹¹ Although his house on Washington Square was substantial and well-situated, it was no palace and did not stand out among New York’s many fine brownstone townhouses. However, the following generations of the Vanderbilt family would more than make up for the Commodore’s architectural reticence. His son, William Henry Vanderbilt, built a substantial house complex at 640 Fifth Avenue. The house, a squat but palatial affair designed by Joseph Snook in 1879, was home to William Henry, Maria Kissam, and their youngest child, George. ¹² A twin house next door, linked by a common entry, housed another daughter and her family. More than anything attempted by his father’s generation, William Henry’s 640 Fifth Avenue served as an architectural expression of the Vanderbilt family’s unbridled wealth and growing social status.

William Henry Vanderbilt’s Italianate palazzo was no doubt impressive. However, his children’s generation would prove to be the most prolific builders, erecting the largest private houses of America’s Gilded Age. The 1880’s and 1890’s ushered in a decade of massive Vanderbilt house-building. The first member of his generation to make his architectural mark

with the construction of the Richard Morris Hunt-designed “Petit Chateau” at number 660, just
down Fifth Avenue from his father’s house, was William Kissam Vanderbilt and his wife, the
indomitable Alva. The Petit Chateau marked the ascension of the French renaissance style into
prominence in Gilded Age domestic architecture. Hunt’s work for Willy K. and Alva
foreshadowed his later work in North Carolina. However, this Fifth Avenue prelude exemplified
the limitations from which Biltmore would one day free Richard Morris Hunt, by then very much
the Vanderbilt family’s architect of choice.

In 1883, Cornelius Vanderbilt II and his wife, Alice had a palatial residence, again in the
French style, erected at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street. The house, designed by
George B. Post, featured a busy red-brick body and limestone trim, complete with complicated
rooflines, heavy ornamentation, and a proliferation of whimsical turrets and towers, the whole
motif reminiscent of the Louis XII style featured at Blois. The structure was further expanded in
1895, with the addition of new wings and a second principal entrance facing Central Park. A
heightened spirit of competition, not unlike that between the Commodore and his business
adversaries which had built the Vanderbilt fortune, now between the children of William Henry
Vanderbilt—or more accurately, their spouses—spurred this Gilded-Age building spree.

The Vanderbilt house-building boom was not limited to the confines of New York; the
Cornelius II and Willy K. Vanderbilts next turned to the historic society resort of Newport,
Rhode Island. There Willy and Alva had R.M. Hunt design Marble House, a palatial seaside villa
in the mode of Marie Antoinette’s Petit Trianon at Versailles. However, as Michael Kathrens
has pointed out, Marble House exhibits “none of the lightness and elegant refinement attributed

13 Craven, *Gilded Mansions*, 130-149.
to Ange-Jacques Gabriel’s masterpiece.”14 Although to be fair, it is unlikely that many Gilded Age builders were aiming for lightness or overly refined detailing; this was an era of brash new wealth represented by equally brash architecture. Newport’s most lavish “cottage,” Marble House was where the couple could entertain the upper echelons of society, reinforcing their position as leaders of not only the family, but of American high society as a whole.

Not to be out-built by his brother and sister in law, Cornelius Vanderbilt II also set about making his mark on the seaside landscape at Newport. The Breakers replaced an earlier house of the same name that had been destroyed by fire. The new Breakers would become the largest and most lavish house in Newport, eclipsing Marble House only a few blocks away. Forman and Stimson describe the new Breakers as, “a typical Hunt-Vanderbilt undertaking, conducted at breakneck pace by a swarm of laborers,” and containing “about seventy rooms and thirty bathrooms, the latter equipped with both fresh and saltwater taps. Facilities for servants occupied fully 50 percent of the floor space.”15 Although begun after Biltmore House had already commenced its rise from the hills of North Carolina, the Breakers was “completed in just under two years, which was as much a tribute to Hunt’s planning and industry as to [Cornelius] Vanderbilt’s wealth.”16

As the creation of these grand Vanderbilt houses demonstrates, George W. Vanderbilt belonged to a family of great house-builders and he came of age at a time when his siblings, and the Gilded Age plutocracy as a whole, were in a race to outdo each other by erecting houses completely outside of the American architectural heritage in their scale, ornament, and

16 Ibid.
function. However, in much the same way that he differed from his business-minded brothers who were very much at home in high society, it would have been logical to assume the building gene too would bypass the quiet and bookish baby brother. After all, his inheritance paled in comparison to that of his older brothers, and his circle of friends was composed of artists, writers, and other intellectuals who complimented the friendships he did cultivate with a few other wealthy individuals. But in Appalachia, George Vanderbilt would defy expectations and cast an architectural shadow over everything else the prolific Vanderbilt brood had built or would ever build.

Biltmore

While his mother was convalescing at the comfortable Battery Park Hotel in Asheville in 1888, George elected to explore the surrounding country on horseback. Just south of the town, he came to a spot offering impressive vistas of the French Broad River valley and the distant Blue Ridge mountains to the west and decided that he would like to build a house there. The exact nature of the private retreat Vanderbilt envisioned in 1888 is difficult to determine over a century later, but as will be demonstrated in the following chapters, the initial designs offer a glimpse of what that house may have looked like. That first concept would not have been out of place in affluent neighborhoods in many American cities and would have been totally dwarfed by his siblings’ townhouses and summer “cottages” in Newport and elsewhere. However, those initial designs were not what was built.

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17 George Vanderbilt’s family was responsible for other significant pieces of domestic architecture not mentioned here. They include Shelburne Farms, Florham, and Hyde Park to name only a few. The New York townhouses and Newport “cottages” are highlighted because of the cutting edge role they played in transforming American domestic architecture at the end of the nineteenth century.
How those early house concepts morphed into what was built will be dealt with later. However, from the beginning, Vanderbilt chose two famous veteran architects to bring his dreams into being. And if his dreams were not big enough, his architects appear to have been prepared to supplement them with their own ambitions. As landscape architect he selected Frederick Law Olmsted. The house architect was his family’s favorite, Richard Morris Hunt. Hunt and Olmsted had experience working together—even if they had not been overly fond of each other personally in the past—and both had collaborated with Vanderbilt on the family mausoleum on Staten Island, not far from the early Vanderbilt homestead. The triumvirate’s shared vision, once it coalesced, would foster the creation of their common legacy.

Frederick Law Olmsted

For the work of shaping the landscape of his new home, Vanderbilt hired the preeminent landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. His resume boasted prominent projects including New York’s Central Park, and the renovated grounds of both the U.S. Capitol and the White House in Washington, D.C., among numerous other public and private landscape projects across America. Shaped by the work of figures such as Capability Brown in the United Kingdom, Olmsted’s signature ability was making highly manipulated landscapes look natural, but often more picturesque than nature was willing to offer of its own volition.

Vanderbilt had already purchased several thousand acres of land south of Asheville before asking Olmsted to take on the Biltmore project. The elderly landscape architect was not overly impressed by the quality of the property but agreed to try to make something of the young millionaire’s newly-purchased expanse of overworked farmland and depleted forests spanning almost 30 miles between Asheville and Brevard. Most of the property he recommended for use
as a managed forest, the first of its kind in America. He hoped that such an endeavor might help Vanderbilt offset some of the financial burden associated with owning and maintaining such a vast tract. For the remainder of the property, including the approach road to Biltmore House and the home grounds surrounding it, he planned a network of gardens in a variety of styles. These landscape features included a natural old growth forest in the European style for the approach which gave way suddenly to the stunning order and geometry of the esplanade leading up to the east front of Biltmore House. To the south were a series of terraces, an Italian garden, a nature-like “Ramble” of irregular plantings and meandering paths. Still further south was the English walled garden, conservatory complex, spring garden, and a network of trails connecting the home grounds to spots of interest such as the bass pond, lagoon, and the French Broad River still further from the precincts of Biltmore House.

Just as Biltmore had provided Hunt with his first opportunity to build a chateau on a truly European scale, so too it provided Olmsted with the opportunity to really spread his wings by creating a private domestic landscape on a scale unseen in America before or since. The Biltmore project was the masterpiece that crowned the careers of both men, who were appreciated as the masters of their respective fields.

Richard Morris Hunt

By the final decades of the nineteenth century, Richard Morris Hunt had become the preferred architect of America’s Gilded Age elite, including the Vanderbilt family. Trained at Paris’s famous Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Richard Morris Hunt hailed from a prominent New England family and was very much at home among his wealthy patrons. Having studied the architecture
of the old world, he was adept at translating those antecedents into his work in the new, however
with a very nouveau riche panache symptomatic of his American clientele.

At Biltmore, Richard Morris Hunt “boldly adapted, artfully massed, and richly
embellished early Renaissance forms for his own purposes.”\textsuperscript{18} One historian said of Hunt’s work
at Biltmore that the house “is a highly romantic building, evoking much beyond what
immediately strikes the eye.”\textsuperscript{19} The French Renaissance house built for Vanderbilt in Asheville is
a massive affair, stretching some 300 feet from north to south. Finished in an almost white
Indiana limestone, Hunt designed a house characterized by towers, steeply-pitched hipped-roofed
pavilions; and a generally complex roofline hallmarked by towers, chimneys, and ornamental
trim in both limestone and gilded copper. The composition is balanced but not symmetrical. The
main entrance tower dominates the center of the east entrance front with the massive spiral
staircase, elevator tower, and library wing to the south. To the north a ground floor conservatory,
or “Winter Garden,” a common Gilded Age indulgence, is enveloped within the u-shaped form
of the body of the house’s central masses. To the north is a bachelor’s wing, and massive stable
complex which shelters the forecourt and esplanade from harsh winds streaming from the north.

For all of its intricate carving, and occasional flamboyance, from the outside, Biltmore
House exhibits a bulkiness largely foreign to its antecedents in Europe. Of Hunt’s later domestic
commissions, Louis Auchincloss observed:

However much I admire certain aspects of the houses of Hunt, there remains with me
always a lingering impression of heaviness, of pomposity, almost at times of downright
vulgarity. Even Biltmore, the finest of the lot, even when it dazzles, lies a bit weightily on
the soul.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Auchincloss, Louis. \textit{The Vanderbilt Era: Profiles of a Gilded Age}. New York, NY: Scribners,
While harsh, Auchincloss’s remarks ring true. An advanced level of “pomposity” and “vulgarity” in private homes built on such a scale is impossible to deny.

While Biltmore House is consistent in the French Renaissance style of its exterior, the interior yields to a heterogeneity that, while representative of many traditional historical and international styles, is assembled into a sum that is strikingly American in its architectural diversity, however British in its function. As with the collection contained within the massive structure, Biltmore’s interiors appear as à la carte selections snatched from the global menu that markets all over the world offered plutocratic buyers such as George Vanderbilt.

The largest room in the house, the Banquet Hall was executed in an old English baronial style hallmarked by mounted animal specimens, flags, ancient Flemish tapestries, three massive fireplaces, and a table capable of seating as many as 65 diners. On the south end of the house the library, Vanderbilt’s favorite room, was designed in the flamboyant style of the Italian renaissance. The 10,000 volumes of George’s 23,000 book library were overlooked by “The Chariott of Aurora” by Pellegrini which the young millionaire had purchased from a Venetian villa during one of his many trips abroad. Upstairs bedrooms came in a variety of styles including Sheraton, Old English, Louis XV, Louis XVI, and other styles associated with both the old world and the new.21

In creating Biltmore House, for the first time Hunt was able to build a full sized country house without the limitations of many of his previous projects which had so often required him to squeeze his clients’ massive country house dreams onto their prime addresses—tiny city lots largely unsuited for such projects. Citing Hunt’s urban domestic architecture, Louis Auchincloss put it rather succinctly when he said that those houses:

George Vanderbilt gave Richard Morris Hunt the power that no other client had given him before—the power to compete with European architectural antecedents at full scale. George Vanderbilt’s house provided an opportunity for both architect and patron to make a statement.

Hunt and Olmsted did not produce simple buildings or landscapes; instead, they formed experiences for Vanderbilt and his guests. While at Biltmore, every detail was planned to provide a specific sensation and elicit a planned emotional response. The finished product formed one homogeneous project, despite the personal animosity the two creators had previously held for each other. This carefully planned experience, or more accurately the ability to create it, shows the power represented by Vanderbilt’s vast wealth. Just as he was able to purchase rare objects and fine art, Vanderbilt was also able to harness his wealth to create an environment, to force a contrived naturalness onto an unwilling barren wasteland in western North Carolina. Thus, there was a brand new forest that would grow into a perfect imitation of an ancient European example (albeit immature during Vanderbilt’s own lifetime) which meandered its way, through a faux nature, toward a French chateau perched above a broad river valley just like its contemporaries in the old world. None of these things, including the exotic contents of the chateau, belonged on a patch of previously overworked farmland south of Asheville, North Carolina. But the plutocratic power of a Gilded Age fortune made it all possible, however improbable. The whole Biltmore enterprise, from the gleaming copper and gold peaks of the chateau, to the meticulously

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22 Ibid. 58.
manipulated “natural” landscapes leading to it, comprised one great American fiction written in the language of the old world.

Perhaps it is the factors mentioned above, symbolism, wealth, and plutocracy, that made Biltmore—both the household and the larger estate—a striking mass of architecture and acreage, but a social outlier as a domestic entity that made little sense within its context. Henry James probably best summarized the common criticisms of Biltmore as a private home, even if he did so rather dramatically:

Roll three or four Rothschild houses into one, surround them with a principality of mountain, lake and forest, 200,000 acres, surround that with vast states of niggery desolation and make it impossible, through distance and time, to get anyone to stay with you, and you have the bloated Biltmore… utterly unaddressed to any possible arrangement of life or state of society.23

Biltmore House Today

George Washington Vanderbilt died in 1914, leaving the property in the care of his wife, Edith, until their daughter, Cornelia, came of age. The Vanderbilt women continued to live at Biltmore seasonally, even though they scaled back the household to a more modest apartment carved out of the Bachelor’s Wing. Cornelia Vanderbilt married the Honorable John Francis Amherst Cecil in 1924, and gave birth to two sons, George Henry Vanderbilt Cecil in 1926, and William Amherst Vanderbilt Cecil in 1928. The family continued to split their time between Biltmore and a home in Washington D.C. until the Cecil’s marriage ended in divorce in the 1930’s. At this time, Cornelia Vanderbilt Cecil moved to Europe while her ex husband stayed on in North Carolina to care for his sons’ future inheritance at Biltmore.24

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23 Henry James as quoted in Auchincloss, The Vanderbilt Era, 60-61.
The Cecils had first opened Biltmore House to the paying public in 1930 but the property did not become profitable as a house museum until several decades later. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Biltmore had evolved into one of the region’s major tourist attractions, and a hugely profitable one for the Cecil family. Although a major sale of forestland to the U.S. government, the development of Biltmore Forest as a residential community, and a division of land between family members reduced Vanderbilt’s original acreage dramatically, the 8,000 acres immediately surround Biltmore House and its environs survives intact, giving guests an idea of what once was. Biltmore received approximately 1,700,000 visitors in 2018 and remains one of Buncombe County’s largest employers and a major factor in the continued vitality of Western North Carolina.25

25 “Biltmore by the Numbers”
George Washington Vanderbilt eschewed the life of business and industry pursued by his brothers. Vanderbilt used his inherited wealth to indulge in art, literature, and travel; he sought out the company of artists and intellectuals over that of other plutocrats.

Figure 1.1: Sargent, John Singer. *George Washington Vanderbilt.* 1890. The Biltmore Company, Asheville, NC.
This map represents the core of Biltmore Estate as it appeared in 1896, one year after the completion of Biltmore House. However, it does not include the 90,000 acres of Pisgah Forest to the south and west. The estate eventually grew to approximately 125,000 acres. Approximately 8,000 acres survive today, primarily the historic home grounds on the east side of the French Broad River and agricultural land on the west. An additional 10,000 acres survive in the possession of other members Vanderbilt-Cecil family but are not included as part of the present estate.

Figure 1.2: Olmsted, Frederick Law, *Guide Map of Biltmore Estate*. 1896. Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, National Park Service, Brookline MA.
Frederick Law Olmsted’s genius was highlighted by his ability to manipulate landscapes on the micro-level so that the result mirrored (and many say improved upon) the best nature had to offer. This plan shows Olmsted’s extremely detailed plans for a small portion of the three-mile Approach Road. Each planting has been painstakingly planned—and number coded—to give Vanderbilt and his guests the impression that they were passing through a natural old growth European forest even though the land had been largely overworked and over-logged farmland only a few short years previously.

Figure 1.3: Olmsted, Frederick Law. *Planting Plan No. 72, Lower Approach Road.* c. 1892. Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, National Park Service, Brookline Massachusetts.
Although the landscape along the Approach Road was designed to block all views of Biltmore House until the road dramatically gave way to the Esplanade, during the years it took for this landscape to mature Hunt’s architectural masterpiece was visible from the Upper Approach Road. Once matured, Hunt’s landscape blocks all views of Biltmore House from the northeast.

Figure 1.4: *Biltmore House from the Upper Approach Road, 1895*. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
Biltmore House’s massive façade completely conceals all views of the distant mountains to the west; that view was reserved until the vista was revealed with great drama through the strategically placed windows and loggias on the opposite side of the house.

Figure 1.5: *South Wing and Entrance Tower of Biltmore House, 1895*. Richard Morris Hunt Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Chapter II

Becoming Biltmore:

The Conceptual Evolution of America’s Largest Home

“What Mr. Vanderbilt wants, as I understand, is a place in which to spend the winter and the harsh spring.”

Frederick Law Olmsted to Richard Morris Hunt, 2 March 1889
In this chapter we will explore eight alternative design concepts for Biltmore House, as well as a handful of informal drawings that link those complete concepts with the final house design as it was built. All conceptual designs for Biltmore House must be understood within the context of what was actually built: the largest private single family home ever constructed in the United States. However, even though many of the alternative concepts examined here are much smaller than the final design in whose shadow they are viewed, they nonetheless represent substantial house concepts in their own right, especially for the context for which they were designed: the rough and tumble backcountry of western North Carolina in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Even though documentary evidence—in the form of correspondence, memoirs, etc.—chronicling the early design process for Biltmore House is scarce, a cache of conceptual design drawings offer insights into how the house evolved on the drafting tables of Richard Morris Hunt’s New York office. As one archivist stated, “Looking at some of these drawings which showed what Biltmore might have looked like, I had a sense of listening to a conversation between Hunt and Vanderbilt.”

Why no one heretofore has taken the trouble to put all of these drawings in order to document the design evolution of the house is not known.

Certain design aspects are present throughout nearly all of the house concepts examined here. Examples include a prominent—if not outsized—library, billiard room, dining room, and some form of principal sitting room or main hall. However, the positions of these spaces within the house and in relation to each other evolve throughout the design process. Furthermore, other more specialized spaces appear as this process progresses and the house slowly expands.

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However, Hunt sticks to his Beaux-Arts principles throughout. This analysis focuses primarily on the layout of the principal floor and main public rooms, largely avoiding the second and third floors, which are dominated by bedrooms. While the number, and material and aesthetic quality of bedrooms is no doubt considered an important aspect of the final house’s design, the architectural significance of these spaces, individually would have been largely dictated by their final finish and decoration, qualities not represented (and likely not yet considered) in these early conceptual drawings. Therefore, a detailed analysis of those spaces is not attempted here where the focus remains largely on the principal public rooms of the main floor, which shaped the house’s general form; and the more general massing of the entire structure and its exterior decoration.

In his 1994 book, *G.W. Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate: The Most Distinguished Private Place*, architectural historian John M. Bryan analyzes the evolution of the design of Biltmore House. However, his analysis is incomplete, omitting over half of the extant designs, and he places the those he does examine in the wrong chronological order. Bryan identifies three concepts for Biltmore House before the final French renaissance design is adopted; these are identified below as design concepts A, B, and C. However, he places these designs in the wrong chronological order, and totally omits D, E, F, G, and the informal sketches that link the extant concepts to the final house design. Why Bryan omitted so many of these equally important design concepts is a mystery, especially considering that the cache of drawings had been “discovered” in the AIA/AAF collection, a source he utilized, in the summer of 1988, well in advance of the 1994 publication of *The Most Distinguished Private Place*.\(^\text{27}\) The method utilized to place this collection of design concepts in chronological order involved using the final design

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
of the house as completed, and the generally accepted design of the first design concept, as
bookends between which the other concepts were placed based on their similarities to each other,
and supplemental documentary information detailed below.  

Design Concept A:

Colonial Revival I

The first of the Hunt firm’s known concepts for Biltmore House is a relatively modest
colonial revival house that would not have been out of place in the affluent neighborhoods of
many large American cities of the late nineteenth century. While the main block of the house
rendered in this concept is symmetrical when viewed from its east façade (Figure 2.1), the larger
composition is not due to the presence of a large angled service wing attached to the southeast

Figure 2.1: Design Concept A, Proposed East Elevation. Richard Morris Hunt
Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation
(AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress,
Washington, DC.

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28 This first design concept (A) is accepted as the earliest because it is the smallest, and its layout
is most unlike that of the other design concepts that followed it in a natural progression toward
the final design.
end of the house, and a projecting porte cochere opposite on the northeast corner. The central
block shows a hipped roof with two dormers on each side, and bay windows on either side of a
two-level Palladian-inspired door and balcony composition that dominates the east entrance
façade.

29 John Bryan explores at some length the probable association between this design for Biltmore
House and the William Edgar House in Newport, RI. The conceptual drawings for Biltmore are
clearly based on the earlier Newport example designed by McKim, Mead, and White. See Bryan,
John M. *The Most Distinguished Place: G.W. Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate* (New York, NY:

30 Hunt was known for incorporating symmetrical masses within larger, generally asymmetrical
compositions. Both this first design concept for George Vanderbilt’s house, and the final French
chateau that was eventually built at Biltmore display this characteristic. David Chase says, “In
compositional terms, Hunt’s country houses were naturally more diverse than the townhouses.
Generally asymmetrical, these houses characteristically incorporate major elements, often the
most forceful elements of any façade, which articulate only moderately subordinate internal
symmetries.” Chase, David. “Superb Privacies: The Later Domestic Commissions of Richard
The house’s principle entrance is located within the porte cochere on the northeast corner; a small porch complete with built-in bench seating leads to a small Entrance Hall or Vestibule (7’0” x 10’0”) to the south (see floorplan Figure 2.3). The Entrance Hall opens into the house’s central hub, the Main Hall (27’0” x 31’0”) from which the other public rooms of the principal floor radiate, each separated from this large gathering space by sliding pocket doors. From the lack of other alternatives among the specialized rooms on this floor, it can be inferred that the Main Hall as expressed in this concept would have served as both the principal reception

Figure 2.3: Design Concept A, Proposed Plan of Main Floor. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
and sitting room for this house. A large fireplace dominates the south wall, and the passage into
the compact main Stair Hall opens from the southeast corner of the room with the self-contained
service wing accessed further beyond the main stairs.

While more modest than many Gilded Age country houses of its era, this initial house
concept (see Figure 2.3) still features many of the specialized rooms common of its larger
contemporaries found so frequently in the traditional social meccas of the east coast such as New
York, Newport, and Bar Harbor.31 A small octagonal Den (9’.0” x 10’.0”) is nestled between the
northeast corner of the Main Hall and the Porte Cochere, its projecting windows mirror the form
of the Stair Hall on the south side of the east facade. However, it is worth noting that in this
initial concept the den is isolated, accessed from a single door on the northeast end of the Main
Hall. In later concepts, the den will take a more intuitive position near the Library. Private dens
were common in American country houses of the Gilded Age, much more so than in their British
counterparts of the same period.32

The spacious Billiard Room (17’.0” x 22’.0”), with expansive views to the north,
northeast and northwest, is also symptomatic of its time; such male-only rooms enjoyed immense
popularity in the Victorian era, which saw the age’s strict sense of moral propriety find distinct

31 Biltmore House took shape within the context of a larger network of Vanderbilt family homes. While Biltmore House would become the primary residence of the George W. Vanderbilts, he owned and rented homes in New York, The William K. Vanderbilt House at 640 Fifth Avenue, inherited from his parents; Newport, Rough Point, rented from a relative; Bar Harbour, Pointe d’Acadie, which he purchased and had remodeled; and several different residences in Europe. Many of the design concepts covered in the following pages would fit comfortably within this network of family houses that was eventually eclipsed by the final form of Biltmore House. It is impossible to know if the client or his architect had yet come to envision their Asheville project as a flagship structure within the Vanderbilt portfolio of domestic buildings.

32 American country house historian, Clive Aslet says: “One of the most revealingly American of rooms was the office or den.” Aslet, Clive. The American Country House (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990) 95.
architectural expression. At a time when the mixing of the sexes was tightly controlled, billiards and games rooms were usually male dominated spaces where gentlemen could retreat after dinner for billiards, cards, and talk of politics away from the intrusion of their female counterparts. This segregation anticipates the more substantial Bachelor’s Wing to come in the finished house.33

The largest room in this house concept, other than the central Main Hall, is the Library (18’.0” x 37’.0”). Of the many rooms occupied by George Vanderbilt in his parents Fifth Avenue mansion, the library was by far the grandest, and the space where the bookish bachelor spent most of his time. Given his passion for books and learning, and the importance of his existing library, it is likely that the prominence of the Library within his new house was dictated by George W. Vanderbilt early in the design process.34 The Library dominates the west side of the house, with four windows overlooking the expansive views to the west, and a large fireplace occupying the north wall. The Library would grow into the second largest and most richly decorated room in the final house; this early concept already anticipates the prominence this room held and would build upon as the house design crystalized and finally took physical form.

33 Mark Girouard says, “The nucleus of the male preserve was the billiard room,” and that “self-contained facilities for billiards became an increasing necessity in a country house of any size, and a separate and private room was provided for it. Ostensibly this was because the noise of billiards was a bore to the rest of the house; but one suspects it was as much because men liked a sanctum to retire to,” Girouard, Mark. The Victorian Country House (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979) 35. For a more in depth exploration of gender-segregated spaces in American country houses, including Biltmore, specifically, see Aslet, American Country House. 95.
34 Describing his apartment within the Vanderbilt family’s mansion at 640 Fifth Avenue in New York, one contemporary newspaper writer said that George W. Vanderbilt’s personal library “is where the millionaire spends so much of his time,” and that this room, “the especial haunt of the young man, himself,” was furnished with “luxurious Turkey divans, mother of pearl tables, and the like. There are decorated hookahs and water pipes, old pieces of bric-a-brac, picked up everywhere, and not a few real treasures of art.” “George Vanderbilt: The Scholar of Our Plutocracy.” The Los Angeles Times, August 27, 1893.
To the south of the Library, accessed from a pocket door near the southwest corner of the Main Hall, is a Music Room (18’.0” x 18’.0”). At a time when live performances, put on by both family and friends, and hired professionals, were immensely popular entertainments in private homes, music rooms became common in large American houses. This one sits at the southwest corner of the main block, with expansive views of the mountain vistas to both the west and south. Variations of this floor plan, and the west elevation, indicate a large five-section bow window dominating the western wall of this room, taking the best possible advantage of the western view of the French Broad River valley and the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance west of the house. A small porch, which likely also communicates with the dining room, is accessed from the south side of the room. Indeed, the positioning of the Music Room in this initial concept closely mirrors that of the Music Room in the final house, which sits at the southwest corner of the main mass of the house and communicates with an outside space, in this case the Loggia.

The Dining Room (18’.0” x 23’.0”) is situated on the southern end of the main block, sandwiched between the Music Room and the Stair Hall. While generous in its proportions, this first Dining Room gives no indication that its future forms will be anything extraordinary within the context of Gilded Age domestic architecture. In addition to the Stair Hall, the Dining Hall is linked to the small service wing projecting from the southeast corner of the house. The Butler’s Pantry (8’.0” x 12’.6”) links, and forms a buffer between the Dining Room and the Kitchen (16’.0” x 16’.0”). The Butler’s Pantry was a transitional space where the hot food from the kitchen was plated and prepared for presentation in the Dining Room, and likewise, where dishes were returned to the service spaces after use. It was common in the period, and practical to find Gilded Age dining rooms in close proximity to service spaces, due in large part to the fact that
formal dining required the most conspicuous utilization of domestic servants of any regular communal activity carried out within a large country house.35

The Servants Hall (12’.0” x 19’.0”), where servants dined and likely spent what leisure time they were allowed, occupies the southeast end of the service wing. A secondary staircase contained within the service wing leads to five servant bedrooms on the second floor. A dedicated separate servant/service entrance is lacking (or is at least indiscernible) in this house concept. While the elevation drawings give no hint of a possible basement level in this house, it is possible that had such a floor been envisioned, the main service entrance would have been located there along with additional servant bedrooms and storage.

The second floor of the main block contains five bedrooms, all with ensuite bathrooms and spacious closets. Although no floorplans for a third floor are known to survive, the dormer windows represented on the elevation drawings, along with with the main staircase on the second floor plan, indicate space for a third floor. However, it is impossible to know whether that space would have been utilized for more family and guest rooms, or more utilitarian servant rooms.

With the actual house site in mind, this concept appears to take little advantage of its natural surroundings; there are no large loggias or terraces facing the expansive views of the mountains to the west and the large outdoor loggia attached to the large Main Hall looks into the nearby hillside of Lone Pine Mountain to the east. This particular concept appears to represent the design work of an architect who had not yet visited or come to appreciate fully the natural setting from which his work would rise.36 While this first design concept is a world away from

35 See Aslet. 85-109.
what was eventually built, glimpses of what was to come can still be picked out, in form and function, if not yet in style.

Design Concept B:

Tudor Revival

The second house concept to emerge from the Hunt and Hunt office is not unlike its predecessor in size and overall layout—the main block of the house lies to the north of the composition, and the service wing to the south. It is also the second smallest in square footage of the footprint after Design Concept A. However, the compact envelope of the earlier design has been replaced with an elongated, slender arrangement many times as long (south-to-north) as it is deep (east-to-west). This house appears to take much more advantage of its situation as compared to the compact design that preceded it, the many windows across its expansive west elevation (Figure 2.5) looking out toward the distant mountain views to the west.37 The house’s exterior is typical Tudor revival, with sharply peaked gables, dark stone trim, and a complex composition hallmarked by turrets, dormers, and chimneystacks.38 However, the thoroughly modern conservatory on the east elevation (Figure 2.4) betrays its air of antiquity and makes

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37 The elevation drawings for Design Concept B were included in the 1986 book _The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt_, p. 118. However, the house was misidentified by the author, Susan R. Stein as being associated with a different project, the Levi P. Morton house, Ellerslie in Rhinebeck, NY.

38 Bryan argues that Design Concept B was “anticipated by Hunt’s design for Grey Towers (1884-86) in Milford, Pennsylvania, for James Pinchot…” Bryan, _The Most Distinguished Private Place_. 41.
clear the fact that this is a Gilded Age house speaking the language of a time and place far removed from nineteenth century America, and not the genuine article.

The main block comprises the north half of the house, with the service wing to the south, now aligned with the house’s elongated north-south axis (see floorplan, Figure 2.6). The elevations (Figures 2.4 and 2.6) and floor plans (Figure 2.6) for each level of this house appear to

Figure 2.5: Design Concept B, Proposed West Elevation. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Figure 2.4: Design Concept B, Proposed East Elevation. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
be associated with slightly different variations of the concept. For example, the plans of both the main and second floors show a porte cochere sheltering the main entrance on the east façade. However, this prominent feature is missing from the elevation drawing of the east façade. Furthermore, the ground floor plan and second floor plans do not align, particularly along the west façade, which is shown as being much more complex on the second floor than represented on the main floor plan. It is impossible to determine in which order these drawings were generated, or exactly which one represents the final version of this house concept before it was discarded in favor of the next.

Much like its predecessor, the principal entrance to the house is via a porte cochere or carriage porch on the east façade near the northeast corner, only here it has been aligned with the house’s main east-west axis. The front door opens into a small Vestibule, which itself opens directly into the Main Hall (22’.0” x 50’.0”). The Main Hall appears to be not only the principal reception room, but also the primary sitting/living room on the main floor. This massive room

\[ \text{Figure 2.6: Design Concept B, Proposed Plan of Main Floor. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.} \]
runs the entire depth of the house, from the doors of the vestibule on the east, to a bank of windows overlooking the western vista. When entering from the vestibule, the main staircase rises against the south wall to the left, a closet marked for Hats and Coats is sheltered beneath. To the right, another small vestibule provides access to a Toilet, the Den, and Library to the north.

The Main Hall’s 50’ north wall is broken up by a large fireplace in the center. This fireplace faces an open doorway in the south wall, which leads to the primary north-south hallway. To the west of the fireplace in the Main Hall is a set of pocket doors into the Library (20’.0” x 40’.0”), the second largest room in the house after the Main Hall itself. The Library has shelving around the entire perimeter of the room with large windows looking out to the west and north. A large fireplace dominates the east wall along with a doorway; the single doorway to the small vestibule at the eastern end of the Main Hall opens on the east wall south of the fireplace.

The Den (12’.0” x 12’.0”) occupies the northeast corner of the house, adjacent to the library and accessed from the same small vestibule as the ground floor toilet. While the Den has been moved adjacent to the library and can be assumed associated with it because of its proximity and their similar conventional uses, the two rooms still do not communicate directly, access being filtered through the small vestibule near the front door and the Main Hall. However, in this concept the Den is closer to the Library than that shown in the earlier plan, where the rooms were on opposite sides of the house. The Den features a fireplace angled in the northwest corner and a large oriel window on the east wall.

South of the Main Hall to is the Billiard Room beyond the stairs and against the east side of the house, and the Music Room opposite on the west side. The Billiard Room (18’.0” x
20’.0’’\textsuperscript{39} features a large fireplace on the west wall, and a set of three windows on the east. Double windows on the south wall look out into the Conservatory. The room is accessed via a doorway sheltered beneath the main staircase in the entrance end of the Main Hall, and another doorway into the north-south hallway.

Across the north-south hallway from the Billiard Room is the Music Room (18’.0” x 20’.0’’), which overlooks the expansive western vistas via a set of three windows in the west wall. Hunt’s plan features a sketch of the outline of a grand piano on the east side of the room, with pocket doors opening into both the Main Hall to the north, and the Dining Room to the south. Both the southwest and northwest corners of the room are filled by what appears to be a closet in the former, and a corner fireplace in the latter. The effect achieved by these two angled corners is very much like that of the ovular (actually octagonal in execution) Music Room which forms the ground floor of a similarly shaped tower in the final house.

Immediately south of the Music Room, and connected to it by broad double doors, is the Dining Room (22’.0” x 20’.0’’). A sideboard or dresser is indicated against the east wall between the pocket doors. A large fireplace dominates the south wall, with doors on either side offering access to the Breakfast Room on the west, and the passage to the hallway and servant’s passage to the east. The fireplace forms the focal point of a long enfilade\textsuperscript{40}, which extends through the entire body of the main block, from the Library, through the Main Hall, Music Room, and

\textsuperscript{39} On the plan for the ground floor of house Design Concept B, no dimensions are listed for the Billiard Room, but it can be inferred that its dimensions were the same as the Music Room across the hall to the west.

\textsuperscript{40} Although enfilade occur within single ranges inside many old English and European country houses, Aslet notes that the feature is a hallmark of Beaux-Arts planning where a building is designed to look like it is older than it is, giving the appearance of having been built up over time, while in reality is the result of a single plan and building campaign. The nearly house-wide enfilade is an expression of that unity of design and planning. See Aslet, American Country House, 9-10.
Dining Room. The elongated shape of this house concept lends itself to the utilization of an enfilade, much more so than the earlier compact plan.

Immediately south of the Dining Room is a separate Breakfast Room (22’.0” x 28’.0”). This room features doors into the Dining Room, primary ground floor hallway, the servant’s passage, and the Pantry (Butler’s Pantry). A small fireplace occupies the north wall alongside the door into the larger Dining Room. The west side of the room is composed of a large bay window which would have afforded views of the distant mountain views to the west and south. The shape of this composition forms the base of a two-story west-facing tower, much like the positioning of the Breakfast Room at the base of the north tower in the final house.

The only remaining public room on the ground floor, another addition not present in the earlier plan, is the large Conservatory attached to the east façade of the house. This prominent feature, highly in vogue in Gilded Age houses in America, as well as their Victorian counterparts in Britain, would persist in some form throughout all subsequent house concepts and the structure that was eventually built. The curving shape of the conservatory forms a transition from the projecting main block that comprises the north end of the house, to the recessed service wing to the south. In the final house, the main stair tower achieves much the same effect by connecting the dominant projecting entrance tower to the more recessed wings to the south. Even in these early concepts one can anticipate some general forms that will emerge in the final product, despite how far apart they may remain at this early stage.

Much like the earlier house concept, here the service wing occupies the entire south end of the house. However, in this concept, additional specialized rooms have been added. Like the preceding plan, the Pantry forms the transition between the servants’ domain and that of family and guests, most immediately represented by the Breakfast Room. South of the Pantry is the
Kitchen (17’.0” x 20’.0”) and Servant’s Hall (16’.0” x 17’.0”) on the southwest corner. A Stores room (10’.0” x 12’.0”) and Butler’s Room (10’.0” x 16’.0”) form the southeast projection of the service wing, with a secondary staircase in the passage. Access to the service wing is through a door at the south end of the main passage. The projecting L-shaped service wing on the south end and the curved glass wall of the Conservatory on the north end shelter a large east-facing terrace, again reminiscent of a similar feature that would emerge on the final house.

John Bryan includes this house concept in his study of the Biltmore project; however, he places it in the wrong spot within the chronology of the house’s evolution, switching it with Design Concept C. Since C is an obvious refinement of B, and idiosyncrasies of C are carried through subsequent concepts but are not present in B, it can be confidently asserted that Bryan’s chronology is off.

Design Concept C:
Colonial Revival II

The third surviving design concept for Biltmore House looks very much like a marriage of the two preceding concepts. It mirrors, more or less, the form of the second but in the colonial revival style of decoration from the first. The house, which the Hunt firm labeled “Old Colonial” on the plans, features a hipped roof with a handful of dormers scattered in pairs around the top of the main block. A large lantern cupula sits atop the center of the house, illuminating the circular Main Hall below. Overall, this design feels disjointed; the classical/colonial revival elements feel poorly suited to the house’s rather rambling asymmetrical form. When viewed from any angle, including that of the principal east entrance front (Figure 2.7), the house looks like the back of something else, making the disparate elements easier to appreciate in isolation rather than as a cohesive whole.
The main block remains on the north end of the house, with the L-shaped service wing to the south (see floorplan, Figure 2.9). The principal entrance and its sheltering porte cochere, however, have been moved toward the center of the composition, on the south end of the main block. The front door opens into a small Vestibule (8’.6” x 12’.6”) with access to a Toilet (6’.0” x 8’.0”) room and Billiard Room immediately to the north. Venturing further into the house, a small Entrance Hall (no dimension given) provides a transition into the home’s central hub, the
circular Main Hall (23’.6” diameter). Whereas the Main Hall in the first concept had been large and roughly square, and that in the second long and narrow, this circular Main Hall is literally a central hub from which the principal rooms on the main floor radiate. However, the new circular shape, centrality, and function as a crossroads appears to limit how much use could be made of the space as a functional sitting room, presumably one of its intended primary functions given the lack of alternatives represented here.41

From the Main Hall, the northeast doorway leads into the spacious Billiard Room (19’.0” x 24’.0”), which has switched locations with the Main Hall and Entrance from the previous plan.

Figure 2.9: Design Concept C, Proposed Plan of Main Floor. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

41 In the preceding concepts, the Main Hall had formed one of the larger ground floor rooms which implies a great deal of importance and intended utility.
This masculine domain features a large fireplace on the west wall, sandwiched between the curved portals from the Main Hall in the southwest corner and Library in the northwest corner. The toilet room (mentioned earlier alongside the Vestibule) is accessed from a door on the east side of the room. A large Alcove (9’.0” x 17’.0”) fills out the remainder of the east end. The north wall contains a door into the Den (13’.0” x 22’.0”) which occupies the northeast corner of the house. Of the three house concepts examined thus far, the Den shown in Design C is the largest, being the same width as the massive Library next-door to the west. The fireplace on the west wall in the Den backs up to the fireplace on the east wall of the Library.

The Library (37’.0” x 43’.0”) is the largest room in this house concept. It dominates the north side of the house, filling the space west of the Den and north of the Main Hall and hallway. The room is hallmarked by a large bow on both the north and south walls, the former with three windows looking out to the north, and the latter with portals opening into the Billiard Room, Main Hall hallway, and Music Room. Three windows on the west wall opposite the fireplace overlook the large exterior terrace and distant mountain views. The prominence of the Library in this (and all other plans) underscores the room’s understood importance to George Washington Vanderbilt.

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**Figure 2.10:** “Old Colonial House for Geo W. Vanderbilt, 1/2 Section.” Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Vanderbilt.
South of the Library, and northwest of the Main Hall, is the Music Room (19’.6’’ x 23’.6’’). Its oval form is very much like that planned for the final house, only here the broad end of the oval faces the outside.\(^{42}\) The curved wall of the music room forms the center from which the exterior Tiled Terrace radiates across the entire west side of the main block of the house. This terrace anticipates the loggias, terraces, and balconies that would come to hallmark the west face of Biltmore House in its final form. Of the three house concepts explored to this point, this one takes the most advantage of its site and distant mountain views across the French Broad River Valley. To the east, directly across the hallway from the Dining Room is the curved glass Conservatory, very much like its predecessor shown in the previous plan. It too visually links the masses of the house and overlooks the expansive east Terrace. The conservatory shown in this plan looks like it shelters an indoor garden, complete with plantings and pathways, instead of being a room for the display of potted plants.\(^{43}\)

Across the hall to the south of the Music Room is the Dining Room (19’.0’’ x 22’.0’’). Unlike the previous concept, here there is a single dining space and no Breakfast Room. The Dining Room sits at a 45-degree angle from the rest of the house, its large Palladian window facing to the southwest and Mount Pisgah in the distance. A doorway in the northwest wall

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\(^{42}\) Although the final floor plans for Biltmore House show the Music Room as being an oval shape, that room and the Salon next door were never finished during George Vanderbilt’s lifetime. When it was finished by Vanderbilt’s grandson in the 1970’s, it retained the octagonal shape of its existing exterior walls instead of a finished oval as originally indicated on the plans drawn up by the office of Richard Morris Hunt. Why the room was never finished in Vanderbilt’s lifetime remains a mystery.

\(^{43}\) The conceptual drawings vary in their detail in relation to the exact nature of the plantings intended for the conservatory space (planted beds vs. potted plants). Ultimately, the Winter Garden, as the conservatory concept was eventually named, was floored in marble and all plants contained within it were potted or grown in large freestanding wooden planter boxes. However, it should be noted that these are early conceptual drawings and the details such as plantings wouldn’t be resolved until much later in the process.
opens out onto the Tiled Terrace. A large fireplace fills the curved northeast wall, backing up to another fireplace on the southwest side of the circular Main Hall. A door near the south corner leads to the Butler’s Pantry (10’.0” x 15’.0”) and the service wing beyond. Much like the previous plan, the rest of the service wing features a large Kitchen (15’.0” x 22’.0”), Servants Hall (15’.0” x 16’.0”) at the southwest corner of the house; and a Store Room (7’.0” x 11’.0”), and Butlers Room in the L-shaped projection to the east. Another small room whose use is not specified has been added to the northeast corner of the L-shaped projection under the service stairs.

One extant drawing (Figure 2.10) shows a lateral cross-section of this design concept, the only such interior drawing to survive for any of the unbuilt conceptual designs for Biltmore House (see Figure 2.10). However, it does not completely align with either this plan, Design Concept C, or the one that follows. The cross-section matches the two-story form, and the colonial revival decoration of Concept C, but it includes the spiral staircase present in the floor plans of the Arts and Crafts house that follows in Design Concept D. This disparity indicates the likelihood that there may have been refinements made to the colonial revival Design Concept C that are not reflected in the surviving floor plans, i.e. the introduction of the spiral staircase that will appear throughout succeeding plans. John Bryan misplaces this design as second in his chronology of three concepts. While this may be due in large part to the similar colonial revival styles of A and C, as has been demonstrated above, B goes between them chronologically as C builds upon B, and D upon C.

44 The original drawing now in the possession of Library of Congress is a carbon copy, and therefore a mirror image. It has been reproduced here after having been digitally returned to its original orientation.
45 Bryan, 40.
Design Concept D:

Arts and Crafts

The fourth design concept for Biltmore House, Design Concept D reflects the same basic layout as Design C, but with several minor changes to the floor plan (Figure 2.13), the addition of a full third floor over the north main block, and a completely different decorative motif, in this case

Figure 2.11: Design Concept D, Proposed East Elevation. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Figure 2.12: Design Concept D, Proposed West Elevation. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
arts and crafts. Structurally at least, it appears much the same house as its predecessor, just outfitted in a different dress (See Figures 2.11 and 2.12). The arts and crafts style adopted in this concept is very reminiscent of the buildings Hunt conceived for Biltmore Village, including the estate’s business office. However, the arts and crafts style, which is so well suited to cottages and manorial dependencies, hangs awkwardly on such a large and rambling house, almost giving the impression of an office or hospital rather than an inviting country house.

The layout of the principal floor of the main block mirrors closely that of the earlier colonial revival concept (Design Concept C). However, the porte cochere sheltering the front door in all preceding house design concepts has been replaced by a small porch. The Vestibule (12’.0” x 12’.0”) features a large window overlooking the interior of the conservatory on the

Figure 2.13: Design Concept D, Proposed Main Floor Plan (August 16, 1888). Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
south wall, a doorway into the Billiard Room on the north wall, and the main door into the interior of the house to the east. Beyond the door, the Entrance Hall (12’.0” x 12’.0”) opens into the circular Main Hall (30’.0” diameter) with the same compliment of rooms radiating from its center as shown in the previous design concept. However, the layout of the design has continued to evolve, even if only in subtle ways.

The Billiard Room (28’.0” x 32’.0”) has expanded, now taking up the entire space previously occupied by the toilet room and alcove. In the Den (20’.0” x 24’.0”) next-door, the ground floor plan shows alternative plans for a large bay window on the east side of the room. Otherwise, the room is depicted in much the same way as in the previous plan. The same can be said of the Library (24’.0” x 55’.0”), and Music Room (23’.6” x 27’.0”). On the southwest side of the Main Hall, the Dining Room (27’.0” x 34’.0”) is positioned at a 45-degree angle from the other rooms in the house; its size has increased considerably from the previous plan. A bank of windows looks to Mount Pisgah to the southwest while two others overlook the Tiled Terrace to
the northwest. On the southeast wall, a doorway leads into the Breakfast Room (no dimension given).

While a Breakfast Room had appeared in an earlier plan, Design Concept B, it had disappeared in the intervening one, Design Concept C. Its return here has forced a realignment of the spaces in the service wing to the south. The room as drawn is octagonal in shape, helping it accommodate the conflicting orientations of the rooms surrounding it. The northeast doorway from the dining room leads to the circular Main Stairs. This is the first appearance of a prominent design feature that will endure through all succeeding design concepts, including—on a very grand scale—the finished house.

East of the Main Stairs, in the same position as on the previous two design concepts, the Conservatory (no dimensions given) has been expanded, stretching all the way from the outer front door and porch to the Main Stair, still dominating the eastern Tiled Terrace. Access to the Conservatory is through a portal on the southeast side of the Main Hall. Expanding the Conservatory has created space for a large semicircular terrace attached to the upper Main Hall on the second floor.

Beyond the Main Stairs to the south, the service wing has become larger and more complex. Immediately south of and connecting directly to the Breakfast Room is the Pantry (no dimensions given). South of the Pantry is the Kitchen (20’.0” x 24’.0”) with attached Scullery (8’.0” x 9’.0”) and small room for Stores (8’.0” x 12’.0”). The projecting arm of the L-shaped service wing contains the Servants Hall (17’.0” x 20’.0”) and a particularly spacious Butler’s

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46 The plan of the main floor shows 28 steps between the main and second floors. The spiral is interrupted by a landing between steps 18 and 19 where the second floor of the service wing attaches to the Min Stairs. See Figure 2.13.
Room (14’.0” x 25’.0”). The service staircase occupies the northeast corner of the generous Servants Stair Hall adjacent to both Pantry and Kitchen.

**Variations on Design Concept D**

Design Concept D is obviously a refinement of Design Concept C. Its basic form is the same, only more refined and larger, with the addition of a full third floor over the main block at the northern end of the house. Three surviving drawings, including two elevations (Figures 2.14 and 2.15) of the north side of the house, and one large elevation of the east front (Figure 2.16) indicate that the architects in Hunt’s office continued to refine this house design, toying around with the idea of dressing the structure in different architectural styles (see figures 2.14 and 2.15). However, no complete set of plans and elevations survive—if they ever existed—to piece these disparate drawings together into a unified design concept independent of concepts C and D.

The variant east elevation line drawing (Figure 2.16) obviously represents a house built on a similar plan as Design Concept D, only here rendered in the colonial revival style. However, changes to the structure, particularly the conservatory/winter garden and service wing, the former made angular, and the latter plainer in its detailing and decoration, means that this single

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**Figure 2.16**: Elevation of a Large Colonial Revival House (Probably Biltmore House for George Washington Vanderbilt). Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA-AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
elevation does not align completely with any extant floor plan but is likely associated with the two elevation drawings mentioned above. Collectively, they could represent an incomplete concept between D and E. However, one other possibility is that once the design represented by this drawing was abandoned in favor of the concept that succeeds it (Design Concept E), this variation of the design was put on file for possible future use for a different client.\textsuperscript{47} The fact that the plan says “House for____ at____,” leaving blank the spaces where “George W. Vanderbilt” and “Biltmore, N.C.” are unusually listed on other drawings for the project lends credence to the theory that the plan may have been built upon the Biltmore concepts, but altered and put on file for later use elsewhere (see Figure 2.16).

Design Concept E:

Italianate I

\footnote{Richard Morris Hunt was known for keeping house concepts on file and offering his new clients several different options from which to choose as a nucleus for the design of a new house. See Stein, Susan R. “Role and Reputation: The Architectural Practice of Richard Morris Hunt.” In \textit{The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt}, 107-119.}
The fifth design concept is a large Italianate composition that represents a fundamental shift in the design evolution of Biltmore House. In the preceding four design concepts, the house has had essentially the same basic form with the main block of the house containing the principal public rooms to the north, and an L-shaped service wing to the south. Within the main block, the Library has dominated the extreme north end, with a Billiard Room on the east, the Den on the northeast corner, the Music Room in the center of the western side of the house, and the Dining Room and Breakfast Room leading toward the service wing to the south. This design concept totally reverses that former dynamic by switching the floorplan into what is almost a mirror image of its predecessors (See Figure 2.18).

The only elevation that survives for this design is a line drawing (Figure 2.17) of the east elevation. This drawing shows a large house with a three-and-a-half-story main block on the south end. The general appearance of this elevation is very much like the alternative east elevation drawing shown in Figure 2.16 above, only here rendered in reverse. The main block is almost symmetrical, showing five bays, the north and south bays projecting from the main body of the building, the former sheltering the large arched front door composition. A five-bay arcade at the center of the main block shelters an east-facing porch between the projecting bays.

North of the front door, a blind arcade of nine arched windows denotes the location of the indoor Palm Garden; it covers over one third of the width of the east façade between the main block and the eastern projection of the service wing to the north. Near the center of the house, the

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48 While the Hunt Archives now at Library of Congress include both detailed and well-finished floor plans and elevations for all of the preceding design concepts, it contains only two rough floorplans and a single line drawing for the east elevation for this design.

49 The similarity between the two drawings indicates that the drawing shown in Figure 2.16 may represent a complete plan (for which all drawings do not survive) that more directly connects Design Concept D and E. However, it is equally likely that these disparate drawing represent the extent to which these intermediate designs were developed.
circular Main Hall at the center of the house finds exterior expression through a semi-circular shape near the center of the house. This circular mass is topped by a large lantern cupola, with a gallery large enough to offer Vanderbilt and his guests views of the estate from the top of the house.\textsuperscript{50}

\textbf{Figure 2.18}: Design Concept E, Biltmore House Preliminary Ground Floor Plan. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

The interior layout of the ground floor is almost identical to the previous two concepts, only here rendered in reverse. The outer front doors of the central entrance bay open into a small vestibule which leads from the ground level (or at least the level of the terrace in front of the house), up several steps to the inner front door. Once inside, a small Lobby opens into the circular Main Hall (40’.0” diameter) the hub around which all of the principal rooms of the ground floor radiate. A doorway on the northeast side of the Main Hall leads down several steps

\textsuperscript{50} In the final house, the fourth floor Observatory and its connecting balconies and walkways serve much the same purpose.
into the recessed Palm Garden (38’.0” x 85’.0”), the largest such space to appear in any of the designs thus far. While this Palm Garden clearly anticipates the final Winter Garden in both function and position within the larger composition, this version is rectangular and accessed from a single point in the southwest corner of the room.\(^{51}\) The space is further isolated from the rooms around it by the presence of windows, where the final version features an open arcade on all sides. A “Fernery” occupies a raised niche in the northwest corner.

The north end of the Main Hall leads to another Lobby which itself opens into the circular Stair Case Hall (24’.0” diameter) the eastern side of which projects into a bow of windows in the west wall of the Palm Garden. The Breakfast Room (20’.0” x 26’.0”) is accessed through a doorway in the west side of the Stair Hall, its fireplace occupying the south wall, and large windows looking west. Accessed through a doorway\(^{52}\) in the west wall of the north Lobby is the Dining Room (28’.0” x 40’.0”). The northeast and southeast corners of the room are angled, the former housing a niche, and the latter compensating the curving wall of the Main Hall beyond. On the west wall, the architect has erased a large window and expanded it into a rectangular projection.

Another square Lobby (18’.0” x 18’.0”)\(^{53}\) on the western end of the Main Hall connects the Dining Room to the oval-shaped Music Room (dimensions illegible) which gives very much

\(^{51}\) In the final house, the space (called the Winter Garden) is accessed from portals in the short sides of the octagon. Other than railings in the remaining arches, the space is open to those around it.

\(^{52}\) The ground floorplan is obviously a rough working drawing in that it shows indications of several elements having been changed around (obvious eraser and pencil overdrawing). The entrance of the Dining Room and how it interacts with the rooms around it is one of the features the draftsmen appear to have worked with. While the doorway is shown opening into the northern Lobby, it appears that it was originally drawn as leading directly from the northwest side of the Main Hall, where the fireplace is shown.

\(^{53}\) Of the four lobbies surrounding the Main Hall, this westernmost one is the only one for which dimensions (18’.0” x 18’.0”) are shown. The remaining three are likely the same dimensions.
the same impression as that shown on Hunt’s floor plan for the final house in both its elongated shape, east-west orientation, and position on the southwest side of the house’s main block, in this case the Main Hall. The semi-octagonal projection of the room’s western end anticipates the shape of the bases of the north and south towers of the final house, the former of which is also occupied on the ground floor by the final Music Room.

The south end of the house is occupied by the Library (35’.0” x 74’.0”), with the Den on the southeastern corner of the house. The Library is an enormous room with the fireplace occupying the short east wall, a large doorway into the Lobby and Main Hall on the north, two windows on the west, and a large square bay of windows looking south. The Den (21’.0” x 32’.0”), is shown as a simple rectangular room with windows looking out to the east and south, and a large fireplace on the west wall beside the door into the library. Another door near the northeast corner leads out to a small covered porch which runs the width of the adjacent Billiard Room, connecting it to the central tower.

The Billiard Room (29’.0” x 32’.0”) occupies the space between the Library and Den on the south side, the southern Lobby and Main Hall on the west, and Vestibule and eastern Lobby on the north. The main entrance to the room is through a door in the southeast side of the Main Hall. The doorway balances a closet in the opposite, southwest corner of the room, the two framing the fireplace in the center of the west wall. Doors on the south and north walls lead into the Library and eastern Lobby. A bank of three doors lead to the small covered porch which also communicates with the Den as mentioned above.

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54 As mentioned earlier, while the Music Room is shown as an oval on the final floor plans for Biltmore House, it was not finished in that shape when it was completed in the 1970’s.
55 The Den is unlabeled on this plan but its dimensions are still given and its identity can be inferred by its association with the library, and consistency with the location of the room in other concepts.
The L-shaped service wing occupies the north end of the house. It has grown both larger and more complex. The hallway of the service wing connects to the main part of the house via a passage in the north end of the Stair Case Hall. The Butlers Pantry (20’.0” x 22’.0”), also communicating with the Breakfast Room, opens from the servants wing hallway. A cluster of small rooms including the Scullery (10’.0” x 12’.0”) links it and the Kitchen (22’.0” x 26’.0”) at the north side of the house. The large northwest porch off the Breakfast Room runs along this entire range of service spaces. A doorway at the northern end of the service wing hallway leads to an exterior doorway and a small entrance porch beyond. The eastern part of the L-shaped service wing contains the Servants Hall (18’.0” x 20’.0”), Stores Room (10’.0” x 18’.0”), Gun Room\(^\text{56}\) (10’.0” x 18’.0”), and two smaller rooms in the northeast corner. The elevator rising adjacent to the service staircase is the first time such an innovative feature is indicated in the plans for Biltmore House.

The ground floor plan (Figure 2.18) appears to be a working drawing, showing both bold blue lines showing walls, in addition to pencil overdrawing showing amendments. It is due to these penciled-in amendments that this floorplan corresponds to the matching elevation drawing. Using the pencil, the draftsmen have reshaped the Den, removing a hunk from its northeast corner to allow for the southernmost of the two projecting bays of the main block, and expand the arcaded porch at its center. Likewise, penciled-in amendments have pushed the main block and its northern entrance bay slightly north into the Palm Garden.

*Floor Plan Reorientation*

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\(^56\) This Gun Room appears to be a more utilitarian space than the finely finished and larger Gun Room included in the Bachelor’s Wing of the final house. Its size suggests it was precisely what its name suggests, a room for storing guns, hence its presence in the utilitarian service wing. The Gun Room in Biltmore House as-built is a combination of masculine sitting room, including glazed cases for displaying trophies and firearms.
Design Concept E represents a fundamental shift in the design process, setting it apart from all of its predecessors. Therefore, it is important to examine why this shift occurred. Answers can be found in the correspondence between Richard Morris Hunt and Frederick Law Olmsted. As explained above, as landscape architect, Olmsted was more familiar with the actual building site, having spent much more time there than Hunt in the years following Vanderbilt’s land acquisitions in the 1880’s. In planning the gardens around the house, Olmsted put much thought into the interplay between the structure and its surroundings, in particular how and when Vanderbilt and his guests would utilize both. As shown in his correspondence, Olmsted placed special emphasis on how the form of the house would affect his plans for the gardens, and how the whole enterprise would respond to what he understood to be George Vanderbilt’s desires for the entire scheme.

Writing to Richard Morris Hunt on 2 March 1889, Olmsted says:

What Mr. Vanderbilt wants, as I understand, is a place in which to spend the winter and the harsh spring. But it is an exceedingly bleak place. When the wind chops round from south to north the effect is often terrible. In all the neighboring region fruit buds are oftener killed than they are here or in Washington. Being so much more open to the north west, the climate will at times be more severe than that of Asheville. Now and then the force of a gale sweeping from the snowy peaks in the north will be frightful. The compensating circumstances are that the greater part of the time the winter and spring air is of temperature pleasant to anyone exercising even moderately, and is of a bracing quality. Various facts of vegetation indicate that even though the mercury falls at rare intervals for a short time, lower than at Washington—or even I believe at New York—the climate is much less trying on the whole. Plants, and probably men, of such hardy constitution, are happier in it.

That is one compensating circumstance. The other is the advantage offered for making it pleasant for people to be out of doors; that is to say, first for a short stroll or promenade which shall be as it were part of the house—from which while walking the great view westward—the valley and the distance with its far away snow-capped hills can be enjoyed. (This would suggest more terrace walk, closely associated with the house than your plan yet provides).

But no promenade south of the house with a western outlook would be available for use with an icy northwester sweeping across the valley doubled in force as it would

57 Likely a reference to Design Concept D.
by the current deflected and concentrated by the walls of the house. Hence a place out of doors is wanted, which attractive at all times in a different way from the terrace, will be available for a ramble even during a northwester and in the depth of winter. This would be a glen-like place with narrow winding paths between steepish slopes with evergreen shrubbery, in the lee of the house on the Southeast. Look at the map and you will see that the topography favors the suggestion. You will see also that a terrace thrown out southwardly from the house, a little but not much lower than the floor of the house, would still further fend off the cold winds from such a place and make it more secluded and genial.

One thing more. East of the entire length of the house you have in view, I presume, a broad plateau; the hill top being raked down so as to open a view to the eastward from the lower story. A carriage approaching the house will be facing the northward and if nothing is done to prevent it will catch the northwest wind sweeping around the north end of the house and the plateau will have a very bleak character, far from welcoming to guests coming from the north with anticipations of a milder climate and Southern hospitality.

On this point much would be gained if there was a substantial wind break stretching eastward from the north end of the house, such as would be supplied by a range of offices and stables. Let there be walled courts in front of these, some warmth of color in the material, green ivy spreading over them, a columbarium with doves hovering about, and I think the establishment would be much less bleak-looking. As neither you nor Mr. Vanderbilt have said anything about stables near the house I suppose that there may be objections in your minds that I don’t take sufficiently into account. If so I want you to advise me as I find something of the kind is rather a starting point in all my imaginings of what can be made of the place.  

Read in the light of Hunt’s previous designs, it is difficult to understand how Olmsted’s recommendations could be implemented without starting the house design process over again. Olmsted called for a large terrace on the southern end of the house adjacent to Hunt’s previous service wings, an illogical pairing. He proposed a utilitarian range of “offices and stables” for the north end of the house adjacent to the house’s prime public and family rooms. Olmsted’s well thought out recommendations appear incompatible with the basic layout Hunt had arrived at by the time of this correspondence. However, as can be seen by examining both Design Concepts D and E, Hunt did not discard his earlier house designs to conform to Olmsted’s wise

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recommendations of a large garden-sheltering terrace on the south, and wind-blocking stable/service wing on the north. Instead, he replied by simply flipping the existing floor plan from south to north. In doing so he placed the Library adjacent to the future terrace, relegating the service wing to the north side of the house, a more logical arrangement where it could communicate with the other utilitarian spaces of the future stable block as suggested by Olmsted. Instead of starting over whole cloth, Hunt retained the basic floorplan; the rooms and spaces in concept E function and relate to each other in the same way as its immediate predecessors. Hunt was still able to answer Olmsted’s recommendations by reorienting the same general floorplan he had already developed.

In summary, the reorientation or flipping of the floorplan was in answer to Olmsted’s recommendations. By flipping the plan, Hunt was able to retain his existing floorplan while moving the family and public spaces to the south where they could communicate with Olmsted’s terrace and gardens, and the service wing to the north where it could communicate with the stable block placed there to shelter the forecourt and approach to the house from harsh northern winds. All of this was achieved by adapting the existing plan, not starting over with a completely new one.

Design Concept F:

Italianate II

The sixth design concept for Biltmore House is a second Italianate composition, the exterior of which hallmarked by a large five story tower marking the house’s principal entrance on the eastern façade (Figure 2.19). To the south of the tower is a three and a half story wing containing the library and den with two levels of Italianate arched windows on the first and second floors on the east side. North of the entrance tower, the central block and northern L-
shaped service wing form a U shape which is filled by a massive enclosed “Palm Garden”
marked by a blind arcade on the house’s east front connecting the entrance tower and service
wing to the north. A large terrace, very much in the mold of Olmsted’s suggestions to Hunt,
wraps around the southeast, south, and west sides of the house.

The western façade (Figure 2.20) shows clear signs of Hunt’s hand at work; while the
entire composition is not symmetrical, it is balanced, and the central section exhibits a symmetry
denied the rest of the building, all very much characteristically Hunt. While the Italianate design shown here offers a different visual experience than the French Renaissance scheme of the final house, the basic massing of the structure has been established. The north service wing defers to the main block of the house. Two engaged towers anchoring the central block anticipate the semi-octagonal towers that dominate the west façade of the final version of Biltmore House. When compared to the final house, the area north of the main block remains unsettled and will continue to evolve as the design process progresses.

The interior layout (Figure 2.21) closely follows the shape of the preceding Italianate plan. The Library remains on the southern end of the house, a large rectangular Bay (10’ 0” x 25’ 0”) in the south wall looks out over the terrace and mountains to the south. As a whole, the southern end of the main block has retreated west, allowing the entrance tower to dominate the composition. To achieve this, the Billiard Room has been relocated elsewhere and the smaller

![Figure 2.21: Design Concept F, Biltmore House, Preliminary Ground Floor Plan. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.](image-url)
Den\textsuperscript{59} (40’.0” x 40’.0”) shifted from its former location at the eastern end of the library; it has shifted north and is shown nestled between the library and the entrance tower, a similar position formerly occupied by the Billiard Room in the previous plan.

The remainder of the main block mirrors the layout of the previous plan. The Vestibule (20’.0” x 32’.0”) leads into the Entering Hall (18’.0” x 18’.0”), which itself opens into the circular Main Hall (40’.0” diameter). From south to north, the Music Room (30’.0” x 40’.0”), Lobby, Dining Room (19’.0” x 45’.0”), and Breakfast Room (20’.0” x 29’.0”) fill out the western side of the main block. Likewise, the circular Stair Hall projects its curvature into the west wall of the massive Palm Garden (48’.0” x 74’.0”).

As noted above, the Billiard Room has been removed from the southern end of the main block. Here it has been moved to the northeast end of the service block. The Billiard Room (26’.0” x 36’.0”) is shown as being totally isolated from the service spaces to its west. The only entrances being from a small set of steps in the northeast corner of the Palm Garden, and a small entrance adjacent to the main service entrance on the north face of the house. A utilitarian Gun Room (6’.0” x 14’.0”), essentially a large closet, is north of the Billiard Room, also accessible from its vestibule (6’.0” x 11’.0”).

The rest of the L-shaped service wing contains the Butlers Pantry (16’.0” x 24’.0”), Scullery (12’.0” x 12’.0”), Kitchen (25’.0” x 25’.0”), Servants Hall, Store Room (11’.0” x 12’.0”), and a handful of closets. One noteworthy feature that appears at this point is a refrigerator on the east side of the kitchen. This, and the absence of a lamp closet indicates that

\textsuperscript{59} Again, the Den is not labeled on this rough plan, but its identity can be inferred from its size, location adjacent to the Library and how those factors compare to other design concepts.
the technological innovations that hallmark the service spaces of Biltmore House as-built have
begun to appear in the conceptual plans for the structure.

Design Concept G:
French Renaissance I

Design Concept F is the final design concept for which both east and west elevation
drawings (Figures 2.22 and 2.23), and first and second floor floorplans (Figure 2.24) are known
to survive. This design is an adaptation of the previous design, rendered here in a French
renaissance style. The main difference between this plan and its immediate predecessor is the
introduction of a large four and a half story pavilion sheltering and marking the entrance near the
center of the main block. The ground floor plan shows the Vestibule opening into an elaborate
entrance scheme dominated by a double staircase which itself leads to the central Main Hall
(40’.0” x 62’.0”). Unlike in the previous plans, in this concept the Main Hall is not shown as
circular. However, the western end retains a semi-circular shape due to the angled doorways into
the Music Room to the southwest, and Dining Room to the northwest.

The introduction of the large entrance tower and double staircase into the center of the
main block has forced a repositioning of the rooms of its eastern end. The Library (40’.0” x
62’.0”) remains at the southern end of the house. However, its attached Den (22’.0” x 20’.0”) has
been removed from its eastern end and placed to the northeast filling the space between the
Library and main entrance and staircase. The Billiard Room (30’.0” x 42’.0”) which formerly
occupied this space has been moved to the north of the entrance and staircase. However, the
introduction of the 40-foot-wide\(^{60}\) entrance and staircase composition has resulted in the Palm

\(^{60}\) While no width is shown for the entrance and staircase, it is the same width as the adjoining
Main Hall which is 40 feet in diameter.
Garden (41’.0” x 41’.0”) being pushed further north and made smaller, a compact square instead of the sprawling rectangular space that dominated over one third of the previous east façade. The surviving floorplan does not clearly delineate how the Palm Garden was to be accessed from the

**Figure 2.22:** Design Concept G, Biltmore House, Preliminary East Elevation. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

**Figure 2.23:** Design Concept G, Biltmore House, Preliminary West Elevation. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
rooms around it as its doors and windows are indistinguishable from each other on the drawing. However, it is possible that the openings bordering the Billiard Room and adjacent corridor are doorways.

With the staircase having been made part of the main entrance composition, the circular Stair Case Hall that had formerly occupied the space north of the Main Hall and northern Lobby is shown as a large rectangular corridor terminating at the southwest end of the Palm Court. The Dining Room (38’.0” x 42’.0”) retains its location on the west side of the house adjacent to the Breakfast Room (20’.0” x 24’.0”) to the north. Likewise, the service wing remains on the north end of the house, embracing the northern and western sides of the Palm Garden. The positions of the Pantry (14’.0” x 24’.0”), Kitchen (20’.0” x 24’.0”), and Servants Hall (18’.0” x

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61 The fact that the staircase has been pulled from the interior of the house to a location near the main entrance is another factor that helps place this plan chronologically as the main stairs will remain in some form near the front door throughout all succeeding designs.
24’.0”) remain largely unchanged. The smaller service spaces such as the room marked Stores (12’.0” x 15’.0”), Scullery, and Gun Room (12’.0” x 20’.0”) have changed in size but remain close to their previous locations.

One small room labeled Lamps (5’.0” x 12’.0”) in the service wing between the Stores room and Gun Room indicates that to this point, electric lighting may not have been part of the plans for Biltmore House. This highly specialized room, presumably for the storage and maintenance of lamps and candles, would have been necessary due to the size and number of rooms expressed in these house design concepts if electricity had not yet been adopted as part of the overall scheme.62

It is also noteworthy that this plan, like the one that precedes it, includes a large Terrace accessed from the south and west sides of the house. Every room facing those directions opens onto it, except those of the service wing at the north end of the house. This feature answers the recommendations that Olmsted outlined in his letter to Richard Morris Hunt cited above.

Missing Links

Design Concept G is the last more-or-less complete design concept in the Hunt collection. While the floorplan has begun to coalesce and familiar forms are emerging in both the floor plans and elevations, it is nonetheless clear that the concept expressed in G is a long way from Biltmore House as it will finally be built. Although no additional complete concepts survive, two rough ground floorplan sketches, one landscape drawing that includes a ground

62 The machinery and other infrastructure required to keep Biltmore House electrified takes up several large spaces in the sub-basement. Rooms are devoted to batteries, dynamo engines, and all sorts of various other electrical machinery. The size and position of the Lamps room shown here clearly demonstrates the contrast between the age old method of interior lighting and the wildly innovative technology that was just emerging in the late nineteenth century that can still be seen at Biltmore House. See Henshaw, Cathleen. *From Boilers to Dynamos: Turn-of-the-Century Technology at Biltmore House* (Asheville, NC: The Biltmore Company, 1991).
floorplan, and a series of photographs of a three-dimensional architectural model survive to offer insight into the intermediate plans that link the last complete design concept and the final design for Biltmore House.

*Transitional Floorplan I*

The first of these sketches (Figure 2.25) shows a house that has expanded drastically since Design Concept G. While the basic layout is the same, significant alterations have been made that elongate the entire composition and make the general footprint very much like the final house. The Library (34’.0” x 62’.0”) still anchors the southern end of the house. The Den (28’.0” x 24’.0”) has been relocated to the western end of the Library at the southwest corner of the house. While in previous design concepts the Library and Den had been attached directly to the main block of the house, here they are separated by a long, thin north-south range formed by a narrow Main Hall (28’.0” x 86’.0”), itself opening onto a west-facing Veranda.

*Figure 2.25: Transitional Floor Plan 1, Biltmore House, Preliminary Ground Floor Plan. Richard Morris Hunt Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.*
The service spaces are no longer arranged in an L-shaped wing. Here they are arranged in a U-shape which opens to the north and surrounds a circular service drive or courtyard. These service spaces include a Butlers Pantry (21’.0” x 24’.0”) and Store Room (17’.0” x 28’.0”) on the west side. The Kitchen (23’.0” x 29’.0”) and Servants Hall (23’.0” x 29’.0”) form the center section and open onto a porch overlooking the service entrance. The eastern arm is made up of the Laundry (20’.0” x 29’.0”), Ironing Room (14’.0” x 21’.0”) and Gun Room (14’.0” x 21’.0”).

The western side of the main block is composed of the Breakfast Room (32’.0” x 32’.0”) adjacent to the Butlers Pantry to the north, the Dining Room (28’.0” x 46’.0”) in the center, and the Music Room (32’.0” x 42’.0”) anchoring the southwest corner of the main block, projecting out beyond the Veranda and Library wing further south. Two spaces are drawn but unlabeled; they are the Palm Garden or Winter Garden sheltered between the public rooms on the south and west, and Kitchen and Servants Hall on the north. The large room directly south of this indoor garden space is also unlabeled. It obviously anticipates the Entrance Hall that would be included in the final design, but its use here remains unclear as the larger main entrance scheme remains unsettled.

While layers of overdrawing make it difficult to discern exactly what the architect was going for here, it appears that he was considering two variations for the main entrance. The first, and more thoroughly fleshed out is a Carriage Porch, slightly south of center on the east façade. The Carriage porch opens into a vestibule with stairs in the center immediately inside the front door. It is difficult to determine exactly where these stairs may lead or how much lower the Carriage Porch is from the ground floor. Assuming the Carriage Porch is located at a significantly lower level than the ground floor, it probably means that these vestibule stairs lead from the front door up to the main floor. A rough pencil overdrawing suggests that Hunt or his
associates also considered angling this entrance diagonally to the southeast. A narrow corridor, much like the exterior colonnade in the final house, links the main entrance to the Library to the south.

Immediately north of the Carriage Porch is a semi-octagonal staircase centered on both the east façade, and the central east-west axis shared by the Music Room and the large centrally located unnamed room south of the Winter Garden. While its location at the center of the composition, and its positioning north of the main entrance, differentiates this staircase from the one that would be built, it represents the introduction of a Blois-style stair concept that would become a signature characteristic of Biltmore’s east front. Although much remains unsettled, the final house is beginning to emerge in the basic layout of the ground floor coalescing.

Transitional Floorplan II

The second transitional floorplan (2.26) is a much rougher and less comprehensible drawing than those examined above. Since the basic layout, casually rendered in pencil here, matches the earlier floorplan, the purpose of this drawing appears to be an attempt to sort out the layout of the larger entrance and stair tower scheme. Through the jumble of drawing it is possible to discern that what is likely the main entrance has become more forceful, extending further out to the east from the main composition. Furthermore, a faint circle drawn to the south matches the final location of the main stair tower. Although the plethora of other scribbles testifies to the ongoing design process, it is possible that this drawing represents the first moment when the final entrance scheme—with central entrance tower with large circular or semi-octagonal stair tower attached to its south—began to crystalize.

Architectural Model, Informal Sketch and Olmsted Floorplan
The next available glimpse of Hunt’s evolving design for Biltmore House is a three-dimensional model (Figures 2.27, 2.28, and 2.29) for which no complete set of plans or complete elevations are known to survive. However, the architectural model was extensively photographed at the time it was created and still survives in the collection at Biltmore House showing later alterations. There is also one surviving landscape drawing by Frederick Law Olmsted that includes the plan of the main floor and appears to match the house depicted in the architectural model. The architectural model was delivered to Hunt’s New York office with much fanfare on 20 October 1889. By the end of the month, newspaper descriptions of the miniature chateau had

Figure 2.26: Transitional Floor Plan II, Biltmore House, Preliminary Ground Floor Plan. Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
reached Asheville. Quoting the New York Tribune,63 Asheville’s The Weekly Citizen reported on 31 October 1889:

A model of the house which George W. Vanderbilt will build on his estate of 5,000 acres at Asheville, N.C. attracted much attention yesterday afternoon in front of The Tribune Building. The model, about five feet long and three feet wide, was taken from a wagon in Nassau-st. to the office of Richard M. Hunt, the architect, and while it was passing the crowd feasted their eyes on its towers and turrets, its suggestion of magnificent distances and imposing proportions.

Mr. Vanderbilt owns land for four miles along the banks of the French Broad river, and on a plateau which commands a wide range of mountain and valley, with a high bluff at one side and a succession of terraces leading to the valley on the south and east. Mr. Vanderbilt will build his country house. It will be a chateau in the French Renaissance style over 300 feet long, with steep roofs and towers, and sharp gables, and generally elaborate ornamentation. A prominent feature of the chateau will be a stately octagon tower near the center. This tower will enclose a massive stone staircase and will be lighted on tree sides by great square windows. On the side overhanging the bluff will be a loggia, or great promenade, its roof supported by stone pillars which will frame the views of the river and valley below in a succession of arches. The house will be of buff Indiana limestone, will be roofed with dark slate and will of course contain the appointments of a luxurious country house…

Quoting the New York Sun, the Weekly Citizen continues:

Figure 2.27: East Elevation, Architectural Model of Biltmore House, 1889. Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, National Park Service, Brookline, MA.

63 Richard Morris Hunt’s New York office happened to be located in the Tribune Building.
A wagon bearing a miniature house was driven to the Tribune building at 3:30 yesterday afternoon [20 October 1889], and a hundred people at once gathered around to speculate about it. It proved to be a model of the castle which Richard M. Hunt is going to build for George W. Vanderbilt at Asheville, N.C. The model was about six feet long, and showed not only the house itself but a part of the greensward of the surrounding park.

Mr. Vanderbilt is apparently to have plenty of room for himself and a caller or two should any friend pass his chateau. Bystanders estimated the general dimensions of the castle at 300 feet by 150 feet. It looks a little baronial. Its height should be about four stories, extended by sharp and lofty gables.

The model was taken to pieces and carried up stairs to Mr. Hunt’s office, where it was put together again. It is understood that the plans may be subject to some modifications in detail.64

The architectural model depicts a house on approximately the same floor plan as the rough sketches examined above. Only here the scheme for the main entrance and staircase towers has been settled through the creation of a composition of these elements near the center of the east façade. A squat entrance tower rises around the front door, south of the conservatory or

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64 “Mr. Vanderbilt’s Plans. What He Proposes Doing with His 5,000 Acre Purchase,” The Weekly Citizen (Asheville, NC), October 31, 1889.
Winter Garden. South of, and engaged with the entrance tower is a soaring elevator tower and semi-hexagonal stair tower, whose decorative inspiration is obviously adapted from the famous example at Blois. The elevator and staircase towers tie the composition to the larger masses of the house to the south. Due to the five-story height of both of these tower elements, the entrance tower, at only three stories, to which they are attached feels grossly undersized to be the focal point of the main entrance front. A lone surviving sketch (Figure 2.30) shows what is most likely the early emergence of this scheme for the center of the main façade.

One of Frederick Law Olmsted’s drawings for the landscape features immediately surrounding the house includes a ground floor plan of the structure; this plan appears to match the structure depicted by the architectural model. It is also noteworthy that Olmsted’s suggestions regarding the general layout of the house, and how it interacts with its immediate landscapes, as outlined in his letter to Hunt on 2 March have been adopted in their entirety.

Figure 2.29: Oblique View from Northwest, Architectural Model of Biltmore House, 1889. Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, National Park Service, Brookline, MA.
The main public rooms of the ground floor have taken their final shapes and positions.

Figure 2.30: Probably Hunt, Richard Morris or Warrington Lawrence. *Sketch for Proposed Entrance Composition.* Richard Morris Hunt Archive, American Institute of Architects/American Architectural Foundation (AIA/AAF) Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
The Vestibule opens into the Main Hall which itself overlooks the Winter Garden (48’.0” x 48’.0”) to the south. A wide corridor, typical of the strikingly generous circulation spaces in Biltmore House, surrounds the Winter Garden, arcaded openings connecting the recessed space to those around it. To the south of the Main Hall is the Stair Hall toward the east end, and the massive Gallery (28’.0” x 90’.0”), which like its predecessor opens onto a west-facing arcaded Loggia (16’.0” wide) through a range of six sets of French doors.

The Gallery’s south end contains the double doors into the massive Library which anchors the south side of the house. The Library (36’.0” wide)\(^6\) is dominated by a large fireplace in the north wall. Two small windows look out toward the east, and two large sets of doors and

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\(^6\) This plan does not show the dimensions of the Library. However, the final plan says that the room is 36’.2” wide and 72’.0” long.
windows open onto the Library Terrace (40’.0” wide) to the west. Beyond the terrace is Olmsted’s much hoped for South Terrace, here identified for use as Tennis Courts. Doors on the west side of the library open onto the Loggia and into the Den (20’.0” x 37’.0”) at the southwest corner of the house.

Returning to the main block, the Music Room (32’.0” x 46’.0”) shares a central axis with the Main Hall and Vestibule. Directly to its north, the room earlier identified as the Dining Room in the other floorplans is now labeled as a Salon (25’.0” x 48’.0”). Further north, the Breakfast Room’s projecting bay of west-facing windows mirrors those of the Music Room (32’.0” x 37’.0”), forming a symmetrical mass within Hunt’s otherwise asymmetrical composition. The Butler’s Pantry and a Stores room fill the remaining spaces to the north.

The large space heretofore occupied by the Kitchen and Servants Hall has been consolidated into one large room, the Banqueting Room (42’.0” x 72’.0”), which has replaced the Dining Room formerly located on the west side of the house between the Music Room and Breakfast Room. The Kitchen and Servants Hall have been removed from the ground floor altogether, and as the final house shows, relegated to the basement. Two staircases are positioned directly west of the Banqueting Room, one at the east end and another at the west end. The two are connected at this level by a narrow east-west corridor.

The northwest end of the house contains the Billiard Room (32’.0” x 42’.0”) which opens to both the corridor around the Winter Garden and the Banqueting Room. A third door in the north wall adjacent to the fireplace opens into the L-shaped Hallway that leads to the Porte Cochere, which is itself at a lower level than the ground floor and is therefore accessed by a flight of ten stairs. North of the Billiard Room is an Office (20’.0” x 28’.0”) which opens into both the Hall and the exterior landing at the top of the Porte Cochere. A Closet (7’.0” x 12’.0”),
Gun Room (11’.0” x 19’.0”), and Toilet Room (11’.0” x 19’.0”) fill out the rest of the northeast wing.

This floorplan is the first to include a glimpse of the stable complex at the northeast end of the house, opening through the north end of the Porte Cochere. Just as Olmsted had suggested to Hunt, the stable complex extends eastward from the house, sheltering the entrance court and driveways nearest the house. A range of six Sheds for Carriages extends eastward from the Porte Cochere, with a round Dove Cote, another Olmstedian addition, anchoring the northeast corner of the entrance court. Across the Stable Court stands the main stable block. Although this side of the drawing is damaged, the Carriage House (36’.0” x 96’.0”) is visible on the west end of the building. Even though the stable block is not centered on the same north-south axis as the Porte Cochere as in the final house, the main body of the stable block does appear to be symmetrical in and of itself.

The Built Design

As noted when the architectural model was seen on the street outside Richard Morris Hunt’s New York office, it was “understood that the plans may be subject to some modifications in detail.”66 Indeed, the plan did evolve after the first architectural model was created. While the floorplan remains largely unchanged from that associated with the model, with the exception of the northeast Bachelor’s Wing, the refinement of the composition surrounding the front door is the most notable difference. The truncated entrance tower has been raised from three to four floors, and the decoration of this focal point enriched. The adjacent staircase and elevator towers have been shortened from five to four stories, now deferring to the entrance tower to which they are attached. The result is a balanced, however asymmetrical composition that draws the eye to

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66 “Mr. Vanderbilt’s Plan.”
the center of the massive east façade instead of losing the viewers gaze in a jumble of awkwardly joined roofs and towers competing with each other for supremacy.

The northeast or Bachelor’s Wing has been expanded and refined by moving the remaining service spaces downstairs to the basement. The Billiard Room has gained a 10-foot-wide vestibule on its south end adjacent to the Winter Garden. North of the Billiard Room are the Smoking Room (19’.0” x 19’.2”) and Gun Room (14’.10” x 19’.0”). The Office (13’.1” x 24’.10”) has been moved to the extreme north end of the house overlooking the stable courtyard. Restroom fill the curved space created by the semicircular shape of the courtyard.

Correspondence suggests that it was Richard Morris Hunt who devised the scheme for the Esplanade based on French precedence. Just as Olmsted had influenced the design of Hunt’s

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67 The earlier design concepts give no indication of what shape or functions basements may have taken if they had been considered at all to that point. As mentioned above, this oversight may have been due in some part to Hunt’s having avoided the actual building site until sometime in October 1889. However, once a generous basement was developed it enable the kitchen and service spaces to be relegated to the basement, thereby opening up a large part of the main floor to be redeveloped into additional family and public rooms. Most notably, the Dining Room on the west side of the house was replaced with the massive Banquet Hall (placed in the void previously occupied by the kitchen complex) dominating the north side of the house. The old Dining Room then became the Salon, one of the two main floor rooms George W. Vanderbilt never completed during his lifetime. Perhaps it was its status as an afterthought that contributed to its long-term unfinished state; it ended up more a space that needed filling than a deliberate and needed living space. The expansion of the basements and the resulting open spaces on that level likely led to the introduction of the innovative recreation spaces such as the indoor swimming pool, bowling alley, and gym for which Biltmore House is so well known. Quite simply, there was a lot of empty basement space to fill.

It appears Hunt and Olmsted collaborated on the house’s final position in relation to the hillside into which it was built. The result was a house built higher up into the hillside and to the east of the earlier plans which not only allowed for generous basement spaces but also reduced the amount of site work required and minimized the “violence to nature” as Olmsted observed. See Frederick Law Olmsted to Richard Morris Hunt, 5 December 1889, and Richard Morris Hunt to Frederick Law Olmsted, 17 December 1889, as referenced in Rojas, Patricia McNally, “Olmsted at Biltmore: The Design of Biltmore Through the Drawings of Richard Morris Hunt and the Correspondence of Frederick Law Olmsted,” MA Thesis (University of South Carolina, 1992) 115-116.
house and helped shape it to better interact with its surroundings, Hunt likewise played a part in shaping Olmsted’s landscape. Hunt suggested that the main floor of the house be four feet above the level of the Esplanade so that the house did not visually sink when viewed from its far end. For the Esplanade itself, Hunt recommended a broad level expanse with two drives on either side instead of one in the center as earlier considered, rows of linden trees in the manor of his favorite French chateaux, and a low central fountain in the middle of the lawn. Although the trees selected by Olmsted were tulip poplars instead of linden, Hunt’s general scheme was otherwise executed to much success.\(^{68}\) A level forecourt extends the entire width of the east façade with terraces attached to the front of both the Winter Garden and the space between the Library, main stairs, and entrance towers. The Esplanade has expanded to the east, creating a large formal expanse upon which to approach the house, a stark contrast to the rugged naturalness of the more distant meandering approach.

**Conclusion**

As has been demonstrated by examining the different designs concepts, floorplans, and the architectural model, at no point in the design process was the underlying scheme for Biltmore House thrown out and started over from scratch. Instead, the design evolved in sometimes subtle ways, but so profoundly over the entire scope of the process that it is difficult to associate Biltmore House, in its French renaissance grandeur, with the early design concepts that led to it. However, all of these discarded concepts are reflected in very discernable ways within the final house. These connections can be found by following the progression from Design Concept A through Biltmore House as it was actually built. Step-by-step changes mark the path from the relatively modest colonial revival house that Hunt first proposed to the French Renaissance

\(^{68}\) Ibid.
chateau that ultimately rose from the hills just south of Asheville. The final house owes much of its basic layout and functional form to these predecessor designs where the Beaux-Arts principals upon which it is built first found expression.

Despite their obvious specialties, both Richard Morris Hunt and Frederick Law Olmsted each influenced the work of the other. Olmsted directed Hunt’s designs for the house toward an arrangement that would more logically interacts with its surroundings and environment by making suggestions that lead to a complete reorientation of Hunt’s designs for the house. Likewise, Hunt shaped the landscape in front of Biltmore House, the expansive Esplanade which was executed in the style typical of French chateaux. Biltmore was a true collaboration between the two masters.
“…I have seen the Chateau Blois—and am now ready to die—it is grand. I wish I could tell you all I feel regarding it—I don’t wonder any longer that you admire so much the Francis premier wing. It is undoubtedly a fine piece of design, my preference is still for the Louis XII—I think that brick and stone combination on the Court one of the finest things I have ever seen, and by the way we have seen some fine things since we left home.”

Warrington Lawrence to Richard Morris Hunt, 15 September 1889.
Introduction

Both the sequence of Richard Morris Hunt’s beaux arts floorplans and the general architectural massing he composed for Biltmore House have been chronicled in considerable depth in the preceding chapter. However, it is possible to delve still further into the structure’s evolution by identifying the specific buildings that inspired the final decorative motif expressed in the house as it was completed. As demonstrated earlier, the architect and his office considered several different historical revival architectural styles for George Vanderbilt’s house before finally settling on the French Renaissance Revival idiom for which Hunt was already so well known. While Hunt expressed this distinctive style in an identifiable Huntian way, it remains possible to discern several specific older European structures from which he borrowed elements for

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69 Virginia and Lee McAlester say that by the time the Hunt office landed the Biltmore commission, the architect's well known French Renaissance Revival, or “Chateauesque,” style had become “all the rage among wealthy Americans throughout the country. But the demand for these high-style dwellings had to be met by other architects because Hunt himself created only six more houses in the style. Biltmore is not only the largest of these but also the finest in terms of the mastery with which the architect incorporated French motifs into an original creation that is suited to its site and to George’s personal vision of aristocratic country life.” The fact that Richard Morris Hunt took on the project speaks to George Vanderbilt’s status as a patron, and the personal relationship developed between the him and his architect. See McAlester, Virginia and Lee. Great American Houses and Their Architectural Styles (New York, NY: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1994). 235. In addition to Hunt’s well known commissions completed in the French Renaissance Revival idiom, such as Biltmore, the Petit Chateau at 660 Fifth Avenue, Ochre Court, and the Elbridge Gerry Mansion, among others, surviving drawings indicate that the style was considered for other commissions that ultimately took a different stylistic direction. One notable example of this is the Breakers, the Cornelius and Alice Vanderbilt “cottage” in Newport, RI, that was working its way through the Hunt office at the same time as Biltmore House. See Chase, David. “Superb Privacies: The Later Domestic Commissions of Richard Morris Hunt, 1878-1895.” In Stein, Susan R. (Editor). The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1986). 158. This reinforces the argument that Hunt often developed his domestic commissions around set Beaux Arts principles independent of the final decorative motif with which he would eventually wrap them. This is exemplified both at Biltmore and the Breakers.
adaptation at Biltmore. It is also possible to determine approximately when some of these elements are likely to have been incorporated into his plans for the house.

Authors frequently identify several structures as the primary sources of inspiration for Biltmore House’s final exterior decorative motif. These buildings include Waddesdon Manor, the great Rothschild house in Buckinghamshire, England; Palais Jacques Coeur, a French Renaissance palace sited in an urban environment; and three famous chateaux of France’s Loire Valley: Blois, Chambord, and Chenonceaux. While it is important to explore how these structures may be expressed within Hunt’s work at Biltmore, it is likewise important to understand why these structures specifically have been identified as those having provided the inspiration for Biltmore House, and whether or not these identified linkages are accurate.

As will be explored in depth below, the claims that these houses and chateaux represent the originals copied at Biltmore rest on only three primary sources: an unpublished biography of Richard Morris Hunt which chronicles what is often described as a formative trip to Europe in the summer of 1889; photographs and sketches left in Richard Morris Hunt’s and George Vanderbilt’s archives; and visual comparisons of these European buildings and Biltmore House. Which European buildings are expressed in Biltmore House, and the exact nature, and purpose of the summer 1889 trip chronicled in the unpublished Hunt biography, and what role that trip played in shaping Biltmore’s final form, remains at least partially misunderstood, and oversimplified in most books that cover the topic. There are characteristics that most French chateaux share such as the utilization of light colored stone, hipped roof structures (usually quite steeply pitched), and stone window mullions. Therefore, finding the specific structures that inspired Biltmore House which was built in this same general idiom, requires an in-depth look at some of its most notable features.
Biltmore’s most notable French Renaissance features and details compose the house’s principal east façade. These include the projecting pavilions that anchor the south and north ends, the central entrance tower, semi-octagonal stair tower, square elevator tower, arcaded colonnade, hood molds, and wall dormers. In addition to lending Biltmore House its unique flair, these features were some of the last to coalesce as the design evolved, coming as they did toward the end of the process. Where did these features come from?

Primary Sources

_A Summer Trip, Photos and Sketches_

Between 1895 and 1909, architect Richard Morris Hunt’s widow, Catherine Clinton Howland Hunt authored a biography of her late husband. Although it was never formally published, the expansive manuscript is the dominant primary source referenced in secondary publications that explore the Vanderbilt-Hunt trip to Europe in the summer of 1889 in any depth, and what shape that trip had on the final design of Biltmore House. In this manuscript Catherine Hunt says the couple went to Europe, “with George Vanderbilt for a brief stay, in which to visit some of the historic chateaux and to collect treasures for that of Biltmore.”

Later chronicling the trip in some detail, she says:

We sailed for Europe on the 15th of May [1889], as I have said, with George Vanderbilt. When we went on board the night before, [Richard] had to be carried, owing to a bad attack of gout. Dr. William H. Draper thought the rest of the sea voyage, and entire change would be the best remedy, as was proved by his being the gayest of a very gay party which filled one long table, and it was on the whole the pleasantest voyage we ever made. We had a daily newspaper and all kinds of fun, written and spoken. England is full of hotels as large as New York ones nowadays, but the Grand hotel, at which we stayed, on Trafalgar Square, was then an almost unique exception, and one could only go there if they were introduced by a stock-holder. G.W.V. was insatiable in his desire to see beautiful interiors and pictures, and I can see him now as he surreptitiously paced historic rooms and announced with glee that the long gallery at Biltmore was a few feet longer or

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broader. He and [Richard] stayed with Reginald [Rothschild], his house being said to be the handsomest country place in England. The Shah of Persia had stayed there just before and committed such havoc by his filthy habits, that the [Rothschild] house, as well as the palace of St. James, where he was officially ‘put up,’ had practically to be done over.

One beautiful spring day we spent at Knole, Weald of Kent, beginning at Sevenoaks, where Lord Sackville had asked us to lunch and spend the day, although all the family were on the continent. If any of you ever go there, as I hope you will some day, notice the collection of beautiful old chairs ranged along the long gallery, and oh, enjoy, as we did, the romance of lady Betty’s room, where the ivy from outside has crept in through the chinks in the old stone and covers one side of her chamber.

Hatfield was another joy with its Elizabethan gardens and its wonderful interiors; and one long Sunday they spent at Haddon Hall, when I was too tired to follow. Indeed the days were full, for [Richard] was also sitting for his bust to miss grant to be used at Biltmore, of which we have the replica.72

In addition to inspiration-gathering and sightseeing, the party also indulged in some much-needed shopping for items to furnish the ever-growing house. Mrs. Hunt continues:

One morning we spent at the great oriental carpet warehouse of Robinson, where G.W.V. selected three hundred rugs for the house yet to be built. When [Richard] was called to Paris by the [William Kissam Vanderbilts] who were clamoring for his presence to arrive at certain decisions for the interiors for Marble House, I stayed behind in London with G.W.V. while he terminated various negotiations. I think [Richard] arrived in Paris Saturday night, at any rate the W.K.V.’s insisted upon his going to the races at Chantilly on Sunday.73

While at the races, the Duc d’Aumale invited the Vanderbilt-Hunt party to his home at Chantilly which they visited. Of visiting the palatial French pile, Mrs. Hunt says:

It was quite a new sensation to mount in the beautiful gold court carriages awaiting our arrival. It was my first glimpse of Chantilly, although [Richard] had often been out to breakfast before, and it was altogether a memorable occasion. Chantilly, with its beautiful parks and gardens, its moats and its wonderful staircase, and henri Eugene Phillippe Louis d’Orleans, Duc d’aumale, head of the great house of Conde, its host74

71 Here Mrs. Hunt apparently misremembers the name of Waddesdon’s owner, Ferdinand, Baron Rothschild (1839-1898).
72 Hunt, Unpublished Biography. 336-338.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid. 343.
As Mrs. Hunt points out, although the experience of the luxurious French country house was a
new sensation for her, it was not so for her husband who had spent years in Europe studying
architecture at the Ecole Des Beaux Arts, followed my many subsequent trips for study, touring,
and sketching.  

Secondary Interpretations

Mrs. Hunt’s account of the 1880 trip is mentioned and interpreted in many secondary
sources. These include Fortune’s Children: The Fall of the House of Vanderbilt by Arthur
Vanderbilt II; The Last Castle: The Epic Story of Love, Loss, and American Royalty in the
Nation’s Largest Home by Denise Kiernan; The Vanderbilt Era: Profiles of a Gilded Age by
Louis Auchincloss; The American Country House by Clive Aslet; Richard Morris Hunt by Paul
R. Baker; Biltmore: An American Masterpiece, Biltmore’s in-house guidebook; and G.W.
Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate: The Most Distinguished Private Place by John M. Bryan. These
authors interpret the 1889 trip and Mrs. Hunt’s telling of it in different ways.

In Fortune’s Children, his popular biography of the extended Vanderbilt family, Arthur
T. Vanderbilt II writes: “Young George Vanderbilt, accompanied by Richard Morris Hunt and
his wife, had traveled around Europe in the summer of 1889 to visit some of the historic chateaus
of France and to collect treasures for Biltmore.” While Arthur T. Vanderbilt does not offer
much on what he sees as the trip’s purpose or outcome beyond visiting and collecting, other
authors have not been nearly as reticent in filling in the gaps.

75 Mrs. Hunt devotes several pages of her manuscript to describing how Richard Morris Hunt
was frequently mistaken for a Frenchman, a misconception the self-described “American
Yankee” was usually quite eager to correct. Ibid. 338-340.
76 Vanderbilt, Arthur T. II. Fortune’s Children: The Fall of the House of Vanderbilt (New York,
In *The Last Castle: The Epic Story of Love, Loss, and American Royalty in the Nation’s Largest Home*, Denise Kiernan goes much further in offering additional details—as it turns out largely conjecture in light of what Mrs. Hunt actually provided—of what she sees as the purpose of the 1889 trip:

That summer, George set sail for England and Europe and Hunt and his wife, Catharine, in search of inspiration—and to do some shopping. Hunt pushed bravely through his latest bout of gout, and the travels began. The group planned to travel to English manors and French chateaux, taking in varying architectural styles. George would examine exteriors and accompanying gardens, considering which might be best suited not only for the southern Appalachian setting but also for the lifestyle he had begun to envision for himself, his guests and, most important, his mother…

The group went first to England, where George and Hunt visited the Rothschilds’ Waddesdon Manor—the site for many a “Saturday to Monday” fete. (The term “weekend,” though long in existence, was foreign to many for whom a workweek had never existed.) The traveling companions admired Elizabethan gardens near Hatfield House, lunched with Lord Sackville in Sevenoaks in Kent. The offerings of a particular Oriental rug warehouse in England must have struck the right aesthetic chord. While there, George purchased three hundred rugs, and later in the trip jaunted over to Brussels in search of tapestries. Measurements of purchases were dutifully recorded for Hunt. Afterward, the group headed to Paris, where they visited with George’s Brother Willie K. and his wife Alva, who also demanded Hunt’s attentions as they were embarking on yet another construction project, a home called Marble House on Bellevue Avenue in Newport. Then the entire group was off to Chantilly. The Loire Valley offered numerous architectural delights, the Chateau de Blois, Chenonceau, and Chambord held particular allure. This was the style George sought, and this was the style that Hunt, celebrated student of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, knew well as anyone in the Western World.

Hunt had a fatherly affection for George; and Hunt’s wife, Catherine, marveled at young Vanderbilt, whom she found “insatiable in his desire to see beautiful interiors and pictures.” She noted that George delighted any time a particular gallery paled in comparison or size to the expanding designs Hunt planned for George’s own spaces.77

Here Kiernan asserts that the trip was to gain inspiration (for what precisely she doesn’t say), “do some shopping,” presumably for antiques and furnishings, and was an opportunity for the party to “examine exteriors” of varying architectural styles, “and accompanying gardens” for

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models suitable for replication in the North Carolina mountains. Of the flamboyant French Renaissance style of architecture on view in the Loire Valley at Blois, Chambord, and Chenonceau, Kiernan says “This was the style George sought.”78 Kiernan paints a picture of an architect and client scouring western Europe for inspiration for a house that had not yet crystalized on the drafting table, even one for which an exterior architectural style had not been settled upon. In her telling, almost everything that would define Biltmore House and give it its unique character—other than its location and mammoth size—would be determined in the months of May and June 1889.

Another interpretation of the summer 1889 Vanderbilt-Hunt trip comes from Louis Auchincloss in The Vanderbilt Era: Profiles of a Gilded Age. There he says:

In 1890, when building started on the project, the architect was sixty-three and his client twenty-eight. The latter had already traveled with the Hunts in Europe to be advised in the purchases needed to furnish so vast an edifice. Hunt had even taken him to Chantilly to meet the duc d’Aumale, son of Louis-Philippe, who had recently donated his renovated palace with its whole splendid collection. The young George, looking around, must have had ideas of what he, too, could do on this scale. His mentor became more than a friend, almost a father figure.”79

While Auchincloss accurately captures the nature of the relationship between Richard Morris Hunt and George Washington Vanderbilt, he muddles the purpose of their 1889 trip. At different points he says that the trip was intended as an opportunity for Vanderbilt to be “advised in purchases needed to furnish so vast an edifice,” which implies they were buying items to fill a house that may have already existed as a concept, if yet unbuilt. However, he later he says that at Chantilly the young millionaire “must have had ideas of what he, too, could do on this scale.”

78 Ibid.
which implies that he was still in search of inspiration for what his house would become architecturally, not just what would fill it.\(^80\)

To further complicate matters, later Auchincloss offers:

When [Vanderbilt] met Hunt, who was working on so many of his family’s projects, and came under the spell of that vigorous and eclectic imagination, he conceived his vision of what he and the great architect might do in the high French Renaissance style, freed of the restrictions of Fifth and Bellevue avenues. It was a great gamble, of course, for a young man to take, but who is to say it was not worth it? Biltmore has brought George a kind of immorality.\(^81\)

Here he states that having Hunt conceive a house in the French Renaissance idiom was in Vanderbilt’s mind when he enlisted the famous architect’s help with his North Carolina project. As demonstrated by the plenitude of discarded house concepts examined in great detail in the previous chapter, this claim by Auchincloss is simply false. Therefore, his is at best a contradictory understanding of the subject.

In his book *The American Country House*, Clive Aslet says:

Having studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, [Hunt] knew France well, and looked so much like a Frenchman that he was frequently mistaken for one—much to his fury. Not only did Hunt conduct his client on a visit to the chateaux of the Loire, but he took him to stay in one of their modern counterparts in England, a Rothschild country House [Waddesdon Manor]. Once the fire caught, it proved unquenchable. Some of the fierce competitiveness of the Vanderbilts emerged in George’s attitude to building. When in Europe, he would pace out the grandest rooms of the palaces he visited and joyfully declare his own gallery to be a few feet longer or broader. He also sought to excel contemporary house builders in the United States, creating what Louis V. LeMoyne, author of *Country Residences in Europe and America* of 1898 would call “probably the largest and finest estate in America.” The *Architectural Record* went further: it doubted whether a “nobler residential edifice” had even been build on either side of the Atlantic.\(^82\)

\(^80\) Ibid.
\(^81\) Ibid. 60.
Although not explicitly cited, Aslet is clearly drawing much of his information from Mrs. Hunt’s biography. However, he goes farther than any others in stating that not only did Hunt and Vanderbilt visit Waddesdon, but that Hunt “took him to stay” there. However, like others, Aslet too paints a conflicting picture of the traveling party seeking inspiration for the basics of Biltmore’s form one second, and stating how Vanderbilt would “pace out” the dimensions of rooms in other houses to see how they compared to the dimensions of the rooms planned for his new house back in the U.S., never explaining how these rooms could have dimensions if the house had not yet been planned to some great extent.

In Richard Morris Hunt, his biography of the revered architect, Paul R. Baker says “On various European trips—including the short 1889 visit with the Hunts—Vanderbilt had accumulated art objects, furnishings, and architectural elements for his dwelling, and it soon became evident that a very large house would be needed to accommodate his collections.”83 While brief, Baker’s references the 1889 trip to Europe illuminates his view of what he thinks its purpose was—buying. However, he ventures a bit in arguing that the size of Biltmore House was the result of Vanderbilt’s bloated collection. In reality, it appears the opposite was likely true and that the collection had to grow in response to Hunt’s ever growing house designs.84

Biltmore’s official in-house guidebook, Biltmore: An American Masterpiece offers what is likely the most accurate assessment of the 1889 trip. “The interiors [of Biltmore House] were inspired by European properties, such as the English country estates of Knole, Hatfield House, and Haddon Hall, which Hunt and his client had visited in 1889 while on a buying trip for

84 As Mrs. Hunt’s account demonstrates, in the years during which the Biltmore project was being developed George Vanderbilt was buying in bulk (purchasing 300 rugs at one time from a single dealer), activity that clearly shows a man on a mission.
furnishings." Of all of the references to the trip, this one alone rings true. The authors safely say that the trip was for buying furnishings and that the country houses visited lent inspiration to Biltmore’s various interior decorative schemes and not the architectural decoration of the exterior.

The most thorough examination of Biltmore’s exterior detailing is found in *G.W. Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate: The Most Distinguished Private Place* by John M. Bryan. Regarding Biltmore’s exterior, and the Vanderbilt-Hunt trip to Europe in the summer of 1889, Bryan says:

> During their trip to England and France in May and June 1889, Hunt and Vanderbilt visited the greatest of the new French Renaissance-style estates in England—Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire, built between about 1877 and 1883, with a west wing added in 1888-89, for Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild. The estate was designed by Hippolyte-Alexandre-Gabriel-Walter Destailleur (1822-1893). Judging by the similarities of the principal facades, Hunt apparently drew upon Waddesdon for the final east elevation of Biltmore, much as his office had drawn upon the Edgar House during the earlier states of the design. Both estates feature a projecting pavilion on the north façade flanked by a spiral stair tower clearly inspired by the famous Francois I Wing at the Chateau de Blois in France. At both Waddesdon and Biltmore the spiral is reversed so the ascending lines lead the viewer’s eye into the adjacent pavilion. The sculptural detail of the tower at Biltmore is certainly derived from Blois, but like the Waddesdon stair, its windows, dome, and direction of ascent may owe something to the corner towers in the courtyard of the Chateau de Chambord. Both Hunt and Destailleur balanced the projecting, vertically oriented forms of the stair towers and pavilions against a screen of colonnaded openings. The similarities suggest that Hunt may have taken Vanderbilt to see Waddesdon to confirm what he had in mind for Biltmore.

In England, in addition to Waddesdon, Hunt and Vanderbilt visited Knole, Haddon Hall, Hatfield, and Sevenoaks, where their reception provided Vanderbilt with a firsthand view of the cosmopolitan English lifestyle to which few Americans were exposed. In France, the Hunts and Vanderbilts took the train to Chantilly, and Duc d’Aumale had them whisked to his chateau in a gilded carriage. They apparently stayed in France about two weeks, and hunt took time in Paris to confer with the William Kissam Vanderbilts concerning Marble House. Chantilly must have been only one among

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many chateaux they visited. Hunt probably took Vanderbilt to those he had first seen as a student, when his mentor Lefuel had worked at Chateau Meudon (1848-52), Chateau Sevres (1852-53), Fontainebleau (1853), and the Tuileries (1854). Hunt’s own student sketchbooks contain lists—“Monceaux, Conflans, Montmorency, St. Onen, St. Cloud, St. Germain, Gaillon, Chambord, Magny, Vaux le Cicomte, Versailles”—and sketches of numerous chateaux that he may have shown Vanderbilt as well. They both owned photographs of the fifteenth-century palace of Jacques Coeur (c. 1400-1456), capitalist and finance minister to Charles VII, and its principal entry tower and ornament are evoked at Biltmore. 

Bryan goes the furthest in unpacking the sources of Hunt’s inspiration for Biltmore House. He devotes a great deal of space to the comparison of Biltmore’s architectural details and those found on several structures in Europe. He draws on the Hunt biography, visual comparisons of Biltmore and its old-world antecedents, and the photograph and drawings collections of Vanderbilt and Hunt to fish out from where he thinks Biltmore’s detailing was drawn. However, despite the fact that he provides a rather extensive list of inspirations for Biltmore House, a thorough examination of the evidence he provides actually leads one to conclude that his list is too expansive and that as completed, Biltmore House likely owes an architectural debt to a smaller handful of structures than he asserts.

Challenging Conclusions

John Bryan’s examination of Biltmore House draws on the most comprehensive collection of evidence and available source material that might shed light on Biltmore’s architectural development. However, Bryan and the other authors mentioned above do not completely demonstrate a convincing understanding of exactly how the buildings they identify actually find expression at Biltmore, if at all. Indeed, an examination of both the buildings

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87 Ibid. 42-45.
themselves and the limited number of available primary documents proves that some of them can actually be eliminated as possibilities altogether.

First, those authors\textsuperscript{88} who argue or imply that the Hunt-Vanderbilt trip in the summer of 1889 was intended as a chance for the architect and his client to gain inspiration for Biltmore’s basic design and general massing are wrong. Dated drawings in both the Richard Morris Hunt and Frederick Law Olmsted archives prove that the overall design of Biltmore House, if not yet

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\textsuperscript{88}Kiernan, Auchincloss, and Aslet make statements that either directly argue this is their view, or at least imply it.
all of its fine detailing, had coalesced by no later than March 1889, two months before the party left for Europe (See Figures 3.1 and 3.2).89 Additionally, correspondence between Frederick Law

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89 As noted in Chapter II, the final layout of Biltmore House was shaped largely by the principles expressed in Frederick Law Olmsted’s letter to Richard Morris Hunt on 2 March 1889. With that date in mind, it is all but certain that the Olmsted and Hunt teams on the ground had already been working on plans that anticipated Olmsted’s letter and that the letter itself was a confirmation of what had been worked out by those understudies on the ground. It is unlikely that the design
Olmsted and Richard Morris Hunt suggests the house plan was completed, at least to a great degree, by late February 1889, and definitely by March.\(^90\) With the exterior massing and general layout all but finalized (independently of any final decorative motif, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, and some form of French decorative motif arrived at\(^91\)), it is likely that the trip was an opportunity to acquire antiques and furnishings to fill the massive house that had grown exponentially under Hunt’s supervision since the project’s inception the previous year, and to gain inspiration for interior detailing. And even though the trip did not inspire the general shape or French Renaissance style of the house’s exterior, it is possible, even likely that as Bryan asserts, Hunt used the trip as an opportunity to show Vanderbilt examples and existing prototypes of what he had already arrived at in his plans for Biltmore, if not individually, then perhaps collectively.

Not only does this argument align with the timeline of the project, but it also makes sense when comparing the houses visited by the traveling party in 1889, and finished interior architectural elements and reproduction furniture utilized at Biltmore House which is clearly based on those earlier European models. A set of seating furniture reproduced for Biltmore House after seventeenth century originals found at Knole House, a stop on the 1889 trip, is a could have evolved from Design Concept E (the first that conforms to the principles expressed in Olmsted’s letter) through F, G, and subsequent sketches in the space between Olmsted’s letter of 2 March and the informal sketch of the final design dated 11 March. Detail Sketch of East Elevation (March 11, 1889). Richard Morris Hunt Archive, AIA Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC; and Frederick Law Olmsted to George Washington Vanderbilt, March 2, 1889, in The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Volume VIII: The Early Boston Years, 1882-1889. Edited by Ethan Carr, Amanda Gagel, and Michael Shapiro. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). 616-620.

\(^90\) See Frederick Law Olmsted to George Washington Vanderbilt, February 20, 1889.

\(^91\) Note how many of Biltmore’s signature features such as the dominant entrance tower, Winter Garden, western towers, and Beaux Arts floorplan had developed before the house took on its final French flavor.
perfect example of this adaptation of older European forms for the interiors and furnishing of Biltmore House. Indeed, the phenomenon can also be seen in interior millwork, plaster ceiling designs, and other elements throughout Biltmore House.

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If the full panoply of country houses and chateaux identified by Bryan and other authors—Waddesdon, Blois, Chambord, Chenonceau, Chantilly, and Palais Jacques Coeur—are not really all expressed within the final design of Biltmore House to the degree commonly claimed, it warrants examining each one and its influence on Biltmore House in its final constructed form individually.

_Waddesdon_

Catherine Howland Hunt mentions specifically that her husband had visited Waddesdon with George Vanderbilt in 1889. As noted above, she said that the pair stayed with Baron Rothschild, and that his house was “the handsomest country place in England.” She also says that their visit followed shortly behind that of the Shah of Persia who had apparently “committed such havoc by his filthy habits” that the house “had practically to be done over.” However, Mrs. Hunt’s account of this portion of the 1889 trip is problematic for several reasons.

First, and perhaps somewhat frivolously, she gets the name of Baron Rothschild wrong, calling him Reginald instead of Ferdinand. Secondly, she claims that the Shah of Persia’s calamitous visit had necessitated extensive work to put things right after his departure. However, no record of any such reparative work following the visit, nor documentation of any unusual

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damage is found in the archives at Waddesdon.93 Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Richard Morris Hunt and George Washington Vanderbilt are not recorded in either the Visitors Book or Household Book at Waddesdon Manor, even though other guests—including George Vanderbilt’s brother and his wife—are documented as having been there at a different time that summer.94 Hunt and Vanderbilt are not recorded as either having spent the night or been hosted for a meal at Waddesdon, not in 1889 or at any other time covered by the extant household records. These details prove that Mrs. Hunt’s account of the Waddesdon visit is riddled with serious faults and that her description of an overnight stay at the Rothschild house may be wrong.

Despite the fact that many of the details in Mrs. Hunt’s account are undermined by the surviving documentary evidence, does not necessarily preclude the fact that Waddesdon could have inspired Biltmore House to some extent. Waddesdon was a well known house in its own time, designed by the prominent French architect Hippolyte-Alexandre-Gabriel-Walter Destallieur; and both Hunt and Vanderbilt were well connected in aristocratic, plutocratic, and architectural circles which theoretically could have opened doors to many European stately homes had the pair wished to visit. However, in this case no such in-depth visit can be documented or definitely confirmed.

John Bryan argues that Biltmore House owes a great deal to Waddesdon. He claims that the two principal entrance facades are so similar as to be certainly linked. However, a

93 Hannah Dale, Assistant Archivist, Waddesdon Manor, email to Chad Stewart, 27 February, 2019.
comparision of the two facades suggests otherwise. Generally, Waddesdon exhibits a greater deal of restraint than Biltmore; while not perfectly symmetrical, it is much more so than Biltmore. Waddesdon’s façade is full and busy, each surface crammed with intricate detailing, engaged pilasters, carvings, and a plethora of architectural flourishes. This is in stark contrast to Biltmore’s limited (and strategically placed) decoration and large expanses of smooth open stonework, features that lend Biltmore House a unique weight and heaviness not shared by Waddesdon. Likewise, the classical Italianate detailing of Waddesdon’s façade in imitation of later renaissance styles is not mirrored at Biltmore which adheres more closely to a gothic revival idiom common of a time before the emergence of classical forms into Renaissance France. Biltmore and Waddesdon are both built in the style of the French Renaissance, but each is based on different models that themselves represent different expressions of that style.

Another feature that sets Waddesdon and Biltmore apart from each other is the shape and visual mass of each house’s roof structures. Waddesdon has steeply pitched roofs on the pavilions at each end of the house, but the dominate lateral central section of the façade has a low pitched roof that recedes behind an army of dormers and chimneys when viewed from ground level. In stark contrast, the roof at Biltmore is steeply pitched and forms approximately half of the house’s visual heft, most noticeably in the lateral wings which present their broadsides to viewers looking at the house’s east front, no matter the angle at which it is viewed, either from a great distance or up close. This striking contrast makes these two structures quite distinct from each other visually.

Bryan also points to the staircase towers of the two houses, their positioning between the main lateral wings of the house and similar projecting pavilions as evidence of a direct relationship between the two. However, despite how much the stair towers at Biltmore and
Waddesdon share, they are actually variations on a theme, each drawn from different—however related—French prototypes. As noted above, Bryan points out that both Biltmore and Waddesdon “feature a projecting pavilion on the north façade flanked by a spiral stair tower clearly inspired by the famous Francois I Wing at the Chateau de Blois in France. At both Waddesdon and Biltmore the spiral is reversed so the ascending lines lead the viewer’s eye into the adjacent pavilion. The sculptural detail of the tower at Biltmore is certainly derived from Blois, but like the Waddesdon stair, its windows, dome, and direction of ascent may owe something to the corner towers in the courtyard of the Chateau de Chambord.”

Here Bryan’s argument is flawed in multiple ways. He points out that Waddesdon features a staircase attached to a pavilion on the north side of the façade, and that the direction of the spiral is reversed from what he identifies as the prototype for both at Blois. He says that these characteristics of the stair tower are matched in the stair tower at Biltmore and that this means that the latter was obviously adapted from the Waddesdon example in addition to that at Blois which Biltmore more obviously resembles in its form and decoration. However, he neglects to mention that the stair tower he describes at Waddesdon is one of a pair; it matched by another that is its mirror image on the southern end of the façade, also attached to a different projecting pavilion. This other stair tower spirals in the opposite direction (the same direction as that at Blois), and is attached to its adjoining pavilion on its south side. Therefore, Bryan’s argument that the direction of the spiral of the staircase at Waddesdon, and its attachment to the south side of a pavilion to its north means that Hunt copied it at Biltmore is at best a stretch.

The pair of stair towers at Waddesdon are not directly drawn from the example at Blois as the detailing of Hunt’s example at Biltmore obviously is. Instead the Waddesdon versions take

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95 Bryan, 42.
their form and detailing from the two examples in the courtyard at Chambord, particularly the more completed version on the north end. The Waddesdon stairs mimic their Italianate detailing such as classical columns and figural pilasters. Both sets of examples share a common style with matching window/openings and railings. The top two levels of both the Waddesdon and Chambord staircases feature almost identical arched windows. Even the domes are nearly identical and the crowning pinnacles more than similar.

Bryan points to the fact that both the Biltmore and Waddesdon staircases are glazed as evidence of a direct link between the two. However, this is not so much an indication that they are directly related as it is that they were both constructed in the same era of country house building, the nineteenth century. The fact that they are enclosed reflects the more controlled interior environments of their time, not some unique anomaly Hunt was copying from Waddesdon. Likewise, the fact that one of Waddesdon’s staircases spirals in the same direction as that at Biltmore, which he claims is a link between the two, is reflective of each architect adapting the European prototypes to the particular needs of their projects. After all, Bryan neglects to acknowledge the second spiral staircase at Waddesdon, that spirals in the other direction, even exists. To say that the stair towers at Biltmore and Waddesdon are similar is true. However, to say that Biltmore’s is a derivative of those at Waddesdon—or of the half of the pair Bryan chose to highlight—is to venture beyond the scope of the existing evidence and to ignore the obvious details that link Biltmore’s and Waddesdon’s staircases to their more closely linked antecedents in France.

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96 The example in the southern end of the courtyard at Chambord was never completed as originally conceived and remains devoid of much of the final decoration and detailing featured on its counterpart to the north. See Trézin, Christian. *Château de Chambord* (Paris, France: Monum, 2002). 42.
If the architectural detailing of Biltmore House was not derived from that at Waddesdon, what purpose could a visit there have served to Vanderbilt and Hunt if they did go there? Like Waddesdon, Biltmore was a thoroughly modern house dressed in the guise of Renaissance France, copying details from earlier French idioms for modern use. However, unlike what John Bryan argues, Biltmore and Waddesdon draw their inspiration from different sources, Waddesdon primarily from Chambord, and Biltmore primarily from Blois, as explained below. However, Waddesdon may have served as an example of how this process of adaptation of older forms into a modern full-size country house had been achieved and could be again in North Carolina, even if it did not directly lend its specific architectural expression to Biltmore House.

Blois

If John Bryan overstated the relationship between Waddesdon Manor and Biltmore House, he could not do so for that between Biltmore and Blois, a relationship that he does explore. Nearly all of Biltmore’s exterior detailing is derived from examples found at Blois, but not just Blois generally, but two wings of it specifically, mostly the Louis XII wing with the stair tower from the Francois I wing. Of all of the country houses and Chateaux likely visited by Hunt and Vanderbilt, and those documented in their photograph collections and sketches, it is Chateau de Blois that is expressed most convincingly within the architecture of Biltmore House as it was actually completed.

All of the features of Biltmore’s main east entrance façade that were not created whole cloth by Hunt, or derived specifically from their nineteenth century Gilded Age architectural context (such as the prominent glass-ceilinged Winter Garden just north of the center of the composition, for example) can be found at Blois. Bryan and others acknowledge the obvious
linkage between Biltmore and this particular Loire Valley chateau. However, this relationship is more exclusive than is often argued.

As mentioned above, it is known that Richard Morris Hunt studied in France and visited many well known structures throughout his lifetime, amassing a massive collection of photographs and architectural sketches along the way. He also took George Vanderbilt to visit some of these places on their 1889 trip. While not mentioned specifically in Mrs. Hunt’s account of the trip, there can be little doubt that Blois was a stop. The famous chateau is reflected in photographs brought back by both Hunt and Vanderbilt, and in sketches by Hunt, perhaps from his earlier travels as a younger man.

Shortly after his and George Vanderbilt’s return to the United States from Europe, Richard Morris Hunt apparently sent one of his staff architects, Warrington G. Lawrence to Europe to visit relevant sites and make detailed architectural sketches. As Bryan explains, Lawrence is credited with doing much of the day-to-day work on the Biltmore project for the Hunt office. As his correspondence with Hunt clearly illustrates, Lawrence was absolutely taken with Blois, writing:

Blois Sept 15, 1889

My dear Mr. Hunt,

We have been some time in getting here—but now we are here, and I have seen the Chateau Blois—and am now ready to die—it is grand. I wish I could tell you all I feel regarding it—I don’t wonder any longer that you admire so much the Francis premier wing. It is undoubtedly a fine piece of design, my preference is still for the Louis XII—I think that brick and stone combination on the Court one of the finest things I have ever seen, and by the way we have seen some fine things since we left home.

97 At least one brief death notice for Lawrence, who went on to a successful architectural career in his own right, even gave him credit as Biltmore’s designer, describing him: “Warrington G. Lawrence, 78, retired New York architect and member of the American Institute of Architects, had designed the Biltmore, N.C. home of George W. Vanderbilt.” “Warrington G. Lawrence” The Courier-News (Bridgewater, NJ), August 2, 1938.
We took a nice little trip through Holland and Belgium—spent two weeks in Paris—and are now on our way down the Loire—We have been to Marnenon (what a beautiful chateau it is), to Chartres, to Orleans—where we saw that beautiful renaissance work in Diana Poitiers, and Agnes Sorrels houses, also Beaugency—where we saw some fine work in the Hotel de Ville, to Vendome, and now at Blois. We have had a fine time and have seen many beautiful things, made some sketches and taken many notes which I hope will be very useful to us in our work by and by. We went to Versailles one Sunday and saw the water works—it was a grand sight—enjoyed it immensely. Was very much pleased with the rooms in the Grand and Petit Trianon. We went also to Fontainebleau where we again saw some fine rooms—I think tho. the finest room I have yet seen is in the Royal Palace in Amsterdam—perhaps you remember it—it is a room 56’ x 120’ high with a barrel ceiling. I will stay here about a week. Then we leave for Tours and the other places of interest.

I hope you are well—and that work is progressing on Mr. V.’s chateau, I am very anxious to see what changes have been made.

Kind regards to Mr. Fornachon and the office.

Respectfully
Warrington G. Lawrence.98

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There can be no doubt that Blois, and specifically the Louis XII wing, really caught Lawrence’s and Hunt’s creative attentions, and examining Biltmore House in comparison with Blois leaves no doubt that this specific old world example supplied the primary inspiration for Biltmore House.

Blois is an eccentric building built up in an accretive manor over several centuries with wings built and rebuilt in the varying fashions of the day. Hubert Fenwick accurately describes Blois’s architecture as “a symposium of taste and fashion throughout many centuries.”99 This mix of styles, sometimes similar in ways but generally disjointed, lends the structure an air and profile of a village or academic campus much more than that of a single royal domestic and administrative structure. The main surviving wings of Blois are the aforementioned Louis XII wing, Francois I wing, and Gaston d’Orleans wing. Of these three wings, only two are translated at Biltmore, the Louis XII and Francois I wings, with the later d’Orleans wing, which is much more obviously classical and late Renaissance, totally left out.

The Louis XII wing, through which one enters the chateau passing into its expansive quadrangle is executed in red and blue brick, and beige stone. Of the wings at Blois, it is this one that shows the least Renaissance or classical revival Italian influence, favoring “all the richness and fantasy of late or flamboyant Gothic,” which Louis XII preferred over the increasingly popular Renaissance influences then rapidly advancing north from Italy.100 The wing features “anses de panier” (basket handle) arches forming a 9-bay colonnade, “florid dormer finials and

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rich armorial sculpture.”¹⁰¹ A square tower with a steeply-pitched hipped roof anchors the northern corner to the older Salle des Etats (State Room), and a smaller tower anchors the eastern corner, the two linked by the colonnade running along the base of the southeast range which itself is hallmarked by stone trimmed windows, richly decorated wall dormers, figural corbels, and a steeply-pitched roof (See Figure 3.3).

Hunt clearly borrowed the larger of the two towers from Blois’s Louis XII wing for use at Biltmore, where it is translated into the central entrance tower on the east front. Their basic forms and proportions are too similar to be denied, as is the spiral corner detailing, cornice detailing, roof structure, metal ridge cap, and symmetry along the broad southwest-facing front. However, the version at Biltmore is much more heavily decorated (on a Beaux Arts scale) as is suited to its place as the focal point of the house’s primary entrance front. The Blois example lacks Biltmore’s attached elevator tower, but the thoroughly modern feature (at least in function) obviously owes something of its detailing and relationship to the larger tower to the turret attached beginning at its third floor of this tower at Blois which is round and smaller in both size and proportion than Biltmore’s. Despite the Beaux Arts sculpture and elaborate outer entrance door Hunt added at Biltmore, there can remain no doubt that Biltmore’s main entrance tower is drawn directly from the Louis XII original at Blois and no other.¹⁰²

The most obvious, and cleanly translated features from Blois that Hunt adapted at Biltmore are the richly decorated columns along the northeast colonnade. As Bryan so clearly

¹⁰¹ Fenwick. 129.
¹⁰² Biltmore House was not the only project for which Hunt turned to Blois—and its Louis XII wing in particular—for direct inspiration. The Elbridge P. Gerry Mansion, like Biltmore House completed in 1895, was built in this style, even as a more direct copy employing the red brick with stone trim Hunt ultimately abandoned for the Biltmore project. Bryan also points out that Hunt went so far as to reuse sculptural models from the Gerry house at Biltmore. See Bryan, 105.
demonstrates, the examples at Biltmore are nearly exact copies of those at Blois.\footnote{For a side-by-side comparison of several Blois features adapted at Biltmore, see Bryan, 43. It should be noted that Bryan does a good job tracing these features, however, the problem with his work in this regard is the introduction of other houses he argues are also influences in addition to Blois when they were not.} In fact, the entire range is clearly copied on that linking the stair tower to the library wing at Biltmore, from the colonnade, second floor carving (only slightly more reticent at Biltmore), and wall dormers. Even the wider basket handle arch at Blois, the principal entrance to the chateau, is copied in the middle of the range at Biltmore even though it shelters no such passage.\footnote{Another difference between Hunt’s interpretation of this theme at Biltmore and the original is that at Blois, the central bay above the widest arch contains a window on the second floor and a wall dormer on the third. However, at Biltmore, the windows and dormers on the upper floors are positioned above the bays to either side of the wider central arch. Both buildings have the same alternating pattern of windows and dormers above every other bay, but Hunt reverses it so that the central bay is blank. However, looking at the first architectural model shows that before the final design was adopted, the version modeled more closely matched that at Blois with three bays with windows and dormers, including over the central bay. See Figure 2.27.}

One of the most distinguishable features that sets the Louis XII wing apart from many of its peers is the striking combination of red brick and stone trim, the feature that Warrington Lawrence described as “one of the finest things I have ever seen.” However, Richard Morris Hunt did not adopt this scheme at Biltmore House where the exterior is rendered completely in India limestone. But that is not to say that the Blois brick scheme wasn’t considered for Biltmore House, even if not ultimately adopted. A single surviving drawing in the Hunt collection shows the north façade (showing the north wall of the Banquet Hall facing the Kitchen Courtyard) and gives a glimpse of how this scheme may have looked at Biltmore, and confirms that at least one designer in the Hunt office considered it (See Figure 3.4).\footnote{No other drawing representing this brick motif survives in either the Richard Morris Hunt AIA collection or in the archives at Biltmore.}
While Louis XII had resisted the classical trends coming from Italy with the Renaissance, later Francois I embraced them. Of the disparate wings at Blois, of that credited to Francois I Christopher Hibbert says “it is the finest, marking as it does the triumph of the Italian style.”

Where Hunt had borrowed heavily from the Louis XII wing, recreating its forms and decoration all over Biltmore House, only one feature of the Francois I wing was utilized, its distinctive semi-octagonal stair tower. This tower is engaged in the wall of the courtyard face of the wing.

Fenwick describes this staircase as “more a thing of wonder than of beauty, since five of its eight sides project beyond the face of the wall of the building rather clumsily, and the mechanics of the construction are exposed more in the manner of twentieth-century buildings in steel and concrete…” However, Fenwick is in the minority as the Francois I stair tower is a well loved and frequently copied piece of architecture, including to a great degree by Hunt at Biltmore.

Even though Biltmore’s stair tower was obviously inspired by the Blois example, the North Carolina specimen only pays it homage, and is not an exact copy. Of all of the Blois-like stair towers that followed this François I original—including those at Chambord and Waddesdon—Biltmore’s is the most unique in that it is not a spiral staircase at all, having steps on only three sides angled against the exterior walls with the remainder of the space forming straight landings against the north and west sides of the space at each floor. The large space in the middle forms a large well into which hangs a massive wrought iron chandelier. In contrast, at the original at Blois, and in the other examples inspired by it, the staircase is a true spiral with a central pillar from which all of the steps radiate.

Hunt’s stair tower is structurally and functionally his own creation, even if he did dress it in the clothing of Francois I. Therefore, even though the exterior form and detailing was largely adapted from the original at Blois, due the unique shape and function—the way the staircase is integrated with the other rooms of the house—the Biltmore example owes as much to its context and the designers in Hunt’s office as it does to Blois. But whatever it owes to any other older stair tower, as it was finally built, Biltmore’s example owes it to Blois and not Waddesdon as indicated by Bryan. This is seen in the rectilinear pillars, statuary niches, window shapes, grotesques, and balustrade unique to Blois and Biltmore.

107 Fenwick. 130.
Blois provided the inspiration for Biltmore House’s unique exterior. However, John Bryan and others point to several other French chateaux as providing additional inspiration for Biltmore. With the dominate influence on Biltmore House now established, there is little room left for these houses to find meaningful expression within the design of their American cousin as it was completed, even if they did at some point or another pass through the minds of its designers.

Chambord

Unlike Blois which is an assemblage resulting from the different building campaigns in varying styles, Chambord was originally designed to take more or less the shape it did, even if it remains incomplete. The building presents a massive symmetrical profile. This unity of design (if not execution) is something this chateau shares with Biltmore House. However, architecturally they represent different expressions of the French Renaissance style. Chambord was commissioned by Francois I, who also built the wing that bears his name at Blois. Indeed, that wing and Chambord are very much alike in their detailing, including classical details such as pilasters, wall dormers, and other stone trim.

Chambord also features two spiral stair towers, which as mentioned above lent their features to those at Waddesdon, which are similar in concept to that at Blois, and by association Biltmore. However, as was explained above, despite their superficial similarities, Biltmore’s stair tower was adapted (in as much as it was adapted from any antecedent) from the original at Blois, and not filtered through those at Chambord or their copies at Waddesdon in England as Bryan argues.
It is important to note that a few surviving sketches and renderings do indicate that the Francois I style, and that of Henry II who continued work on the chateau, exemplified by Chambord (and the Francois I wing at Blois) was on the minds of Hunt and his aids while they were creating the designs for Biltmore House, even if it is not expressed in the final product. One sketch (Figure 3.1) shows a portion of Biltmore House with dormers featuring classic pediments, and a stair tower trimmed out very much like the one in Chambord’s northern courtyard, and the twin Waddesdon copies. However, it is clear that the influences from Chambord and elsewhere, when they did appear, were discarded in favor of the Blois idioms so favored by Richard Morris Hunt and Warrington G. Lawrence, and are not expressed within Biltmore House as it was completed.

*Palais Jacques Coeur*

Jacques Coeur’s fifteenth century house is, as Hubert Fenwick points out, “not a chateau, though as large as one and called a palais…”\(^{108}\) Of the author’s whose assertions are mentioned here, only Bryan specifically mentions Palais Jacques Coeur as having in some way inspired Biltmore House. He links Biltmore’s entrance tower to that at Palais Jacques Coeur because George Vanderbilt owned a photograph of it and may have visited it with Hunt, as Hunt had surely done at some point on his own, but the resemblance is largely superficial.\(^{109}\)

As demonstrated above, Biltmore’s entrance tower is drawn from the large Louis XII tower at Blois. The entrance tower at Palais Jacques Coeur is not wholly unlike the Blois and Biltmore examples in that they share a broader French flavor, even if they are not compositionally the same. However, detail-wise, the entrance tower at Palais Jacques Coeur is

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\(^{108}\) Fenwick, 153.

\(^{109}\) See Bryan, 106.
quite different from Biltmore’s and offers little that Hunt could not have taken from that at Blois; the only exception being the carving of the hood molding above the main entry which is similar to that over Biltmore’s front door, the large arched window of the Billiard Room on the north projecting pavilion on the north side of the east façade, and the portals leading to the Porte Cochere and Stable Courtyard beyond. However, the figural corbal that Bryan pictures in his book is not unique to Palais Jacques Coeur and is typical of those found elsewhere, including the Louis XII wing at Blois.  

The primary similarity between the two structures is, however, compositional. Both the Jacques Coeur and Biltmore entrance tower examples are near the center of their facades and form the primary entrances to those buildings. But this similarity is negated in that the two buildings are actually quite different in their overall situation. Palais Jacques Coeur is sited in an urban environment within the town of Bourges, its best prospect being from a small square at the main entrance, and offers no distant view from which one can take in the entire composition. In contrast, Biltmore House is viewed from across the flat expanse of its Esplanade, specifically designed for broad sweeping views of the house’s impressive east front.

Conclusion

Biltmore House is a masterpiece of domestic architecture and was Richard Morris Hunt’s crowning achievement, the project coming as it did at the end of his life. However, the development of its design has been at different times both oversimplified, as in the last chapter examining the full plethora of discarded design concepts, and overcomplicated, as here in the understanding of the houses that inspired the final built version of Biltmore. The documentation tracing Richard Morris Hunt’s inspiration for Biltmore House is limited, including only the

\[110\] Ibid. 107.
unpublished biography by his wife, his and Mr. Vanderbilt’s collection of photographs and sketches, and the buildings themselves. However, this small pool of evidence speaks volumes.

Despite a variety of houses being mentioned by authors as having inspired Biltmore House, the bulk of its inspiration can be traced to Blois if by nothing else than a thorough comparison of the two buildings, the Lawrence-Hunt letter, and a few sketches. However limited this evidence may be, it still clearly points to the fact that Bryan overstates Waddesdon’s influence on Biltmore House. Chambord, Palais Jacques Coeur, and other French chateaux mentioned by several other authors have at best a superficial relationship with Biltmore House because it is really Blois from which the great American behemoth borrows its details.
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