

MANSION TOUR

Robert Allerton (1873-1964)

Robert Henry Allerton was born on March 20, 1873 in Chicago. He was the only son of Samuel Allerton, a self-made millionaire whose wealth came primarily from livestock raising and trading, banking, farming and related business enterprises. After studying art for almost 5 years in Munich, Paris, and London, Robert gave up hope of becoming a great artist himself. At the age of 24, he returned home to Chicago. When his father asked him what he wanted to do, Robert replied that he would like to become a farmer.

History of home

Fortified with \$50,000, Robert and John Borie, a young Philadelphia architect, spent the winter of 1898-99 studying country homes and landscape gardens in England. They found the model in Ham House, a magnificent seventeenth-century estate in Richmond, Surrey. Construction of Allerton House began in the summer of 1899 and was more or less completed in 1900. The brick-with-stone exterior, a modified H-plan and the Grand Gallery are clearly based on Ham House. For more than forty years, Robert continued to develop his estate, which he simply called The Farms.

Original parapet roof

Inspired by English manor houses, a tall parapet originally topped the exterior walls, lengthening the mansion's proportions. However, it was not entirely suited to the Midwestern climate. Ice and snow collected behind the parapet, and cyclical freezing and thawing opened up cracks that allowed water to run down the interior of the thick masonry walls. To remedy the situation, Borie removed the parapet and extended the roof beyond the exterior walls to form a traditional overhang. The façade was altered again in 1919 when Robert Work, eventual associate of Chicago society architect David Adler, enclosed the porch.

Entry and Marble Hall

Constructed in 1915 to join the stable to the main house, this marble hallway was architect John Borie's last project at The Farms. English country houses in the 17th century were usually entered from the side. The entryway to the Grand Gallery on your right was originally the Allerton House entry door. Adding the hallway provided the opportunity to relocate the front door. Doing so solved another problem - wind gusts disturbing the length of the house when it was opened.

The small sun porch at the far end of the marble hall was originally a greenhouse. Later, the sun porch served as a storage room for Robert's costume collection, which was kept in tall cabinets lining the wall. Robert delighted in bringing home exotic costumes from his travels and invited his guests to wear them during weekend house parties.

Original pieces

- Venus Italica, marble copy of original by Antonio Canova, 1812. Bought by Robert from a European deal, c.1920
- Blue and white Chinese bowls, located in the Biedermeier cabinet
- Chinese serving table, narrow table with mother-of-pearl inlay, date unknown
- Silk kimonos (2), part of Robert's collection of costumes
- Japanese radiator cover, 1803

Grand Gallery

The 90 ft. long Grand Gallery was an indispensable feature of the 17th century English country home. Traditionally, it contained few furnishings, which were placed against the walls, thus providing ample space for guests to “promenade” up and down the room in their party finery. The Allertons occasionally used the Grand Gallery for large parties, but Robert, who was hard of hearing, preferred smaller, more informal gatherings.

Original pieces

- Portrait of Samuel Allerton by Ellen Emmett Rand, 1901
- Upholstered couches (3), maker unknown, c.1915
- Electric wall sconces, originally had glass shades, c.1900

Butternut Room

The Butternut Room, so called because it is paneled in native white walnut or butternut, was originally intended to be the formal dining room for Allerton House. With its lower ceiling and cozy fireplace, it became the living room instead and was said to be one of Robert’s favorite rooms in the house. Artist Ellen Emmett Rand, a dear friend of Robert’s, painted the portrait of Robert as a young man. In the paneling above the portrait you will see a carved pineapple, the traditional symbol of hospitality.

Original pieces

- Portrait of Robert Allerton by Ellen Emmett Rand, 1901

Conservatory / Solarium

In England, a glass-roofed conservatory would create an enjoyable space. Unfortunately, in Piatt County, such a space turned out to be hot in summer and cold in winter. Robert had the glass roof replaced with a solid one in 1919 and had permanent heating installed. It was a space frequently used for casual entertaining. Note the striking view of the terrace, reflecting pond, and pastoral meadow framed with native trees. This portrait-like landscape is far from accidental – Robert Allerton created the pond by damming a nearby spring and planted many trees. Much of the wooded area you see now had been cleared for farmland at the time Allerton House was built.

Original pieces

- Brass chandeliers (2), electric with faux candle sockets, c.1900
- Bakhtiari rug, hanging on wall, pre-1946

Pine Room

This pine-paneled room was the original library, but eventually it proved inadequate for housing Robert’s every-growing collection of books. In 1941, it was turned into an office for John Gregg. John often said that his adoptive father couldn’t bear to throw a book away, and more than one room in Allerton House was remodeled to accommodate additional bookshelves.

Original pieces

- Portrait of Henrietta Maria (1609-1669) of France, Queen consort of England, Scotland and Ireland, wife of King Charles I (1600-1649). Purchased by Robert prior to 1900, originally kept in Music Room (now Library)
- Jacobean Chest on Stand, c.1670
- Tuscan walnut cabinet desk (secretary), unknown cabinet maker of the 16th or 17th centuries in Tuscany, Italy. Detached drop front and other pieces are stored within the cabinet.

Oak Room

The Oak Room was Robert's office. A portrait of Samuel Allerton, painted by Ellen Emmett Rand and now in the Grand Gallery, once hung over the fire place. The portrait you see here now is of Robert's godmother, Mrs. Anna Rathbone, also painted by Rand. French doors open onto the library terrace, where refreshments were often served. The wrought-iron outdoor furniture that is placed on the terrace during summer months is original to the house.

Original pieces

- Portrait of Mrs. Anna Rathbone, Robert Allerton's godmother, unknown artist

Library

The Library was originally designed as a music room, which accounts for its high ceiling. In 1940, John Gregg added the upper gallery (entered through a pocket door off of the Grand Staircase) and the wrought-iron railing. When Robert moved to Lawai-Kai, many of his books were removed, but 2,600 volumes of his collection remain. These are housed in the upper gallery to your left as you face the fireplace.

Original pieces

- Allerton and Thompson family books, upper level, south and west walls
- Wood and brass plaque, located on upper level above fireplace, German, 19th century or before
- Heriz rug, hanging above French doors, pre-1946

Grand Staircase

To heighten its dramatic effect, the staircase turns 180 degrees at the landing, where it divides into two for the final ascent to the second floor. The banisters are mahogany, and the carved trim is called double-scroll. The first landing provides access to the upper level of the Library through a pocket door hidden behind a mirror.

Robert Allerton's Bedroom (#5)

More than any other room in the house, Robert Allerton's bedroom illustrates the success John Borie had in carrying out Robert's request to give each of the main rooms a view of "earth, sky, and water." From the windows facing the front of the house, the reflecting pond, meadow and woods can all be viewed. In Robert's day, the window on the left offered scenic views of the woodland landscape and the Sangamon River.

Upstairs Hall Window Alcove

The small alcove is located between Robert's and John's bedrooms. In accordance with Robert's instructions to his architect, the views reflect "earth, sky, and water." From this sunny window alcove, one can see the lawn that leads to the woodlands and the river beyond. The windows of Allerton House are ordered and balanced, unlike the interspersed windows of its prototype, Ham House. This style is reflected in the Formal Gardens as well, which provide several examples of repetition and symmetry.

John Gregg Allerton's Bedroom (#4)

John Gregg met Robert Allerton at a Zeta Psi fraternity Dad's Day celebration at the University of Illinois in 1922. Robert, without a son, and John, without a father, were paired for the day. Sharing a deep interest in art and architecture, the two developed a relationship that lasted their lifetimes. Although much smaller than Robert's room, this room shares a similar view to the south and looks out over the shady back terrace, where many meals were enjoyed during the summer months. Each 2nd floor bedroom in the guest wing has its own fireplace, large bathroom, and splendid vistas of the grounds.

Guest Room (#6)

This room was originally two separate guest rooms that were remodeled by Robert into one larger room. The doorways to the two rooms were located down the main hallway. After remodeling, the doorway was placed near Agnes Allerton's room (#7).

Agnes Allerton's Guest Bedroom (#7)

Closely resembling the master bedroom, this spacious guestroom was used by Robert's stepmother, Agnes. A frequent and welcome visitor, she donated generously to the Allerton Public Library in Monticello and founded the Domestic Science School for Irish immigrants in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. She likely influenced Robert's philanthropy, not to mention his love to art and horticulture. She was also a great collector of lace and embroidery. To commemorate this interest and her powerful influence on his life, Robert created the Agnes Allerton Textile Wing in the Art Institute of Chicago in 1929.

Stable & Carriage House – Dining Room

This area was formerly the stable as well as an area for dirty carriages to enter and be washed and stored for later use. The dynamo room, coal bin etc. were located in the basement. The basement was also used as a garage in later years. The 2nd floor were servant's rooms.

When the hallway was added to connect this building to the main house, it was then used as a studio (John Gregg often used for an informal office) with extra guest rooms upstairs.

The floors and the beamed ceiling are original. The beams in the ceiling are black from linseed oil and shellac. Note the 6 circular windows denoting where each of the original horse stalls were located. The present-day kitchen is now in this space. Food is prepared in the basement and sent upstairs in a dumbwaiter where staff carry it to guests in the Dining Room.

Original pieces

- Serapi rug, hanging on wall adjacent to courtyard, pre-1946

Main House Basement

When Robert lived in the house, this area served as the coal bin, furnace fan room (Recreation Room) and ash bin (Brick Room). A wine cellar was also located in this area (Storage/T-Shirt Room).

SERVANTS' WING

1st floor

The first floor of the servants' wing held areas necessary to keep the house running, such as a pantry, kitchen, laundry room, ice house, meat and dairy rooms, and staff dining room. This area was located behind the current front desk and has been renovated into guest rooms.

Bedroom # 8

Originally this room was an extension of the Matron's bedroom to be used as a Morning Room. By 1916, this room was used by the butler, his wife and children. They were the only servants allowed to have children in the house.

Bedroom #9

Cook's bedroom

Bedrooms #10 & 11

Housekeepers' bedrooms

Chauffer, Stable Boys slept on 3rd floor

