



The L. Caroline Underwood Museum

Yates Past

Newsletter of the
Yates County Genealogical & Historical Society



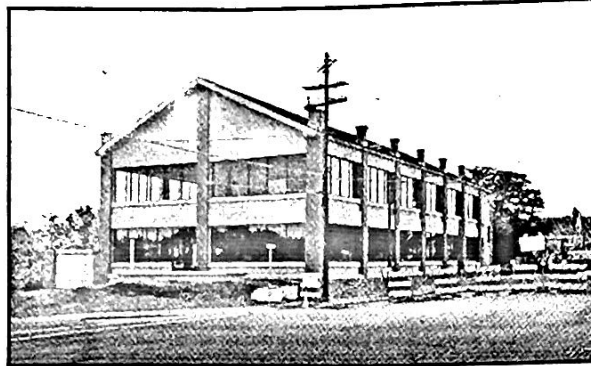
The Oliver House Museum

November/December 2011

Paul Garrett and Yates County

by Rich MacAlpine

*I drive past the old Garrett Wine building near the Liberty Street Bridge in Penn Yan almost every day....at least I did before they put the detour up. Workmen are busy renovating it and early indications are that it will look more attractive than it ever did. Most people aren't aware that that old building was once a major part of a national wine empire that included many thousands of acres of vineyards and 17 processing plants in six states. It was all owned and operated by Paul Garrett who spent summers on Keuka Lake between 1913 and his death in 1940. A local writer, Emerson Klees, recently published a book on Garrett and his wine empire titled *Paul Garrett: Dean of American Winemakers* which I read for background on this article. I also scoured through our files at the Underwood Museum and spent hours reading local newspapers from the time period that Garrett was in the area. I visited the Greyton H. Taylor Wine Museum in Hammondsport and met with Museum Director Paul Sprague to get his input. I was also in contact with John Barden of Rochester, a great grandson of Paul Garrett, who gave me feedback on this article and provided me with the photo of the Garrett family. I appreciate all the assistance.*



Paul Garrett was already "the Dean of American Winemakers" when he moved to Yates County. He went to work for his family's winery in North Carolina in 1877 at the age of 14 and eventually became the company's top salesman. After his father and uncle died, Paul worked for the new owners but eventually had a falling out with them over his sales commissions. Around 1900, he set off on his own and founded Garrett & Co. His best selling wine, Virginia Dare, with the distinctive taste of scuppernong grapes prevalent in North Carolina, became the best selling wine in America

as a result of Garrett's marketing techniques. When North Carolina enacted statewide prohibition in 1908, Garrett moved his company's headquarters to Norfolk, Virginia. When it became clear that Virginia would soon do the same, Garrett moved his headquarters to New York in 1912. He was familiar with the Penn Yan area, having bought

grapes from area farmers for several years and he even owned a small processing plant in Penn Yan which pressed grapes into juice to be shipped to his winery in Virginia. In April of 1913, he leased the building along the outlet on Liberty Street from William Wise, the "Grape King". Wise had used it as a warehouse to store fruit baskets. A company called Superior Tack & Nail was also using part of the building. Garrett converted the entire building over to pressing grapes. The juice was sent to his plant in Virginia in specially made railroad tank cars where it was made into wine. (Through a quirk in Virginia's prohibition law, wine could still be manufactured there; it just couldn't be sold there.) In 1914, Garrett bought land on the end of Bluff Point and had a beautiful summer home and boathouse built in 1917. At the same time he bought up farmland around the county for vineyards and made arrangements with area farmers to buy their grapes.

United States' involvement in the Great War in Europe in 1917 created a political climate that encouraged passage of national prohibition, a movement that had been building for decades. The 18th Amendment was passed by Congress in December of 1917 and sent to the states for ratification. By January of 1919, the required number of states had ratified the amendment and it was scheduled to take effect in January of 1920. During that year the specifics of enforcement of the amendment were written into the Volstead Act. The bill was largely written by the Anti-Saloon League, the main prohibition

lobby. Paul Garrett, representing agricultural interests (grape farmers), worked to have certain exceptions included. Among them was the provision that nonintoxicating cider and fruit juice could be made in the home for domestic use. That exception became a key factor in allowing Garrett & Co. to survive prohibition.

Garrett firmly believed that the "Noble Experiment" would not last long and he had plans underway that would allow his company to prosper even with Prohibition. He utilized the local press to reassure local farmers by telling them that he would construct a new plant in Penn Yan in order to make grape preserves and that he would need to buy five thousand tons of grapes a year from them. The *Yates County Chronicle* added "With this new demand for Lake Keuka's luscious fruit and the increased call for table grapes which there is every reason to expect, the grape grower need have few sleepless nights." In the months before Prohibition took effect, Garrett rented the White Top Winery near Gibson's Landing on Keuka Lake to step up wine production. He also bought two large boats, the *City of Rochester* and the *City of Elmira*, to ship grapes on the lake to his plants in Penn Yan, Hammondsport, and Gibson's Landing. By the time Prohibition took effect, Garrett & Co. owned 17 processing plants in six states (North Carolina, Virginia, Ohio, Missouri, New York, and California) which produced about 10 million gallons of wine a year.



Paul Garrett (1863-1940)
Photo courtesy of the Greyton
H. Taylor Wine Museum

Another important move that Paul Garrett made in 1919 was to buy a plant in Brooklyn and hire a chemist by the name of Bernard Smith. Company lawyers saw a loophole in Prohibition which would allow wine to be manufactured and transported as long as it was not to be sold as an alcoholic beverage. Garrett's plan was to ship his wine to the plant in Brooklyn where, through "a secret process" developed by Smith, the alcohol was extracted. The alcohol-free wine was sold under the name of Virginia Dare. Company advertising claimed, "All the flavor and aroma that have been a joy to connoisseurs for nearly a century. All the wholesome goodness of the health-giving grapes discovered by Sir Walter Raleigh. All the thirst-satisfying qualities of the famous beverage. Nothing missing but the alcohol and you won't miss that in the new delight of this fine wine." Well, people DID miss the alcohol and the alcohol-free wine never

caught on. What DID catch on was the extracted alcohol which was turned into flavoring extracts - vanilla, orange, lemon, coffee, etc. - and sold to the food industry and consumers under the name Virginia Dare Extract Co., a company that is still in business. Garrett sold the extract company in the mid 1920s to the family that still operates it today under the same brand name.

In the last years of Prohibition, Garrett focused on selling cans of grape concentrate with packets of yeast and instructions on how to make wine in the home. As mentioned earlier, the Volstead Act allowed nonintoxicating cider and fruit juice to be made in the home for domestic use (thanks to Garrett). By the late 1920s, the IRS had determined that the maximum amount that could be made was 200 gallons a year and federal court cases had basically rendered the term "nonintoxicating" meaningless. Garrett & Co. combined with a few influential California wineries into Fruit Industries Inc. and sold the product under the name of Vine-Glo. The federal government took Fruit Industries into court over that, but the wineries won the case in 1928.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Garrett family split their time between homes in New Rochelle, NY and Santa Barbara, California with occasional visits to their holdings in Virginia and other parts of the country. However, their summers each year were spent on Keuka Lake. Paul Garrett expanded his land base on Bluff Point, eventually acquiring 1200 acres including the entire end of the bluff. He also had large vineyards in Milo and Wayne near Keuka Lake. He became a major player in local business, politics and the summer social scene. He and his family spent their summers on the lake throughout the 1920s. He was Commodore of the Keuka Lake Yacht Club for several years and his son, Charles, and daughter, Evelyn, raced both sail boats and power boats in competition. For a while Paul Garrett had one of the fastest boats on the lake, the 33-foot *Virginia Dare*, which unfortunately caught fire in their boat house in 1927. It was immediately replaced with an identical Gar Wood boat which was named *Virginia Dare II*.

In 1923 Robert Moses, backed by Governor Al Smith, proposed a major expansion of New York's state park system. Garrett, realizing what a state park could do for the economy of this area, bought the Wagener Mansion on top of Bluff Point and developed a plan to create a

state park, using the mansion as the park's administration building. In August of that year, he held a big picnic there to get local leaders onboard with the idea. The next year he sold 100 acres to the State of New York for the purpose of establishing the park. The 100 acres stretched from the mansion down to the Keuka shoreline, where there were 1225 feet of lake frontage. The plan called for a large resort hotel, two golf courses, an airfield and rest camp for aviators, tennis courts, baseball fields, boulevards, a large picnic pavilion, automobile tourist camps, and an extension of the trolley line from Penn Yan and Branchport. He got Penn Yan's Walter Tower squarely behind the project. Tower was a realtor, President of the Penn Yan Chamber of Commerce, and on the Board of the newly-formed Finger Lakes Association. In August of 1923, they held a huge picnic and Virginia barbecue on the lawn of the Wagener Mansion. Over 600 state and local leaders attended for an afternoon and evening of good food, boat rides, baseball games, and tours of the grounds of the potential state park. A highlight was described by the local newspapers, *"And out of the skies over the sapphire expanse of waters came a government airplane, the first to use the plateau of Bluff Point as a landing field to demonstrate the federal government's interest in developing the point 1350 feet above sea level as an official landing field. The plane was sent for the occasion from Mitchell Field under government orders with the aviator, Lieut. E.H. Barksdale, one of the aces of the flying service, as a guest at the barbecue."* That was followed by speeches promoting the park concept on the front lawn of the mansion with that beautiful view of the lake in the background. Needless to say, the guests left Bluff Point that evening with a full head of steam to see the park become reality. In December of that year the State of New York agreed to buy the 100 acres for \$15,000 and the Bluff Point State Park looked like a sure thing.

While the plan was awaiting state funding, Garrett proceeded to further develop the end of Bluff Point. He proposed that the county build a road from Keuka Park along the Keuka shoreline and around the end of the Bluff. He described it as "14 miles of scenic splendor." The county didn't go for the idea, so Garrett bought a steam shovel and hired a contractor to build a road from the Wagener Mansion down to the end of the Bluff and eventually to the Keuka shoreline a mile north of his summer home. That roadway still exists. He even proposed to change the name of Keuka Lake to Guyanoga Lake. He thought that too many people from outside the area were confusing it with Cayuga Lake. Business

interests in Seneca Falls were going through the process of creating Cayuga Lake State Park at that same time. Garrett's idea created a wave of protest from the community and one critic wrote a poem for the *Penn Yan Democrat* ... *"Oh Keuka, Fair Keuka ... Thy fame they are trying to hide ... By taking away thy fair name ... To which we point with pride."* The idea never caught on with the public, the idea of the state park didn't catch on with the state legislature which never provided the funding for it, and the aviator's rest camp never caught on with the U.S. Air Service.

Left with few options for his land on Bluff Point, in 1929 Garrett agreed to sell 1200 acres to Francis E. Getchell of Pittsburg who represented "outside financial interests." Like Garrett, Getchell was a man who thought big and saw great potential on Bluff Point. His plan, which was an expansion of Garrett's, was to secure options on 6,000 acres of Bluff Point, on a line from Keuka Park to Branchport, and turn it into "a millionaire's paradise." Getchell formed a holding company, Bluff Point-Lake Keuka Management, Inc., with capital of \$10 million which would sell shares of stock. They would pump between 25 and 50 million dollars into Bluff Point. The centerpiece was to be a 1000 room hotel which would cost \$4.5 million. An airport was to be constructed along with a bank and "two or three of the sportiest golf courses in America, a game preserve, bathing casino, yacht club, and summer homes" according to the *Chronicle-Express* (September 26, 1929). Getchell said *"Such a plan may seem visionary to many but in the modern age of rapid transportation by road and air, people in a score of cities in the Eastern United States would welcome a resort with the natural wonders possessed by Bluff Point and Lake Keuka. With an adequate airport located on the upper portion of the bluff which towers some 800 feet above the level of the lake, many businessmen would fly back and forth from the bluff to do their business in a distant city."*

Several concrete steps were taken toward making all that a reality. Options to buy were acquired on 5,000 of the 6,000 acres on the Bluff involving over sixty property owners. A house was purchased on East Elm Street in Penn Yan to serve as corporate headquarters, and Getchell even bought Paul Garrett's speedboat, *Coquette*, to ferry prospective clients from Penn Yan to the end of the Bluff. The holding company was formed in Delaware in September of 1929, a Board of Directors was appointed and a President chosen (a Detroit financier). Penn Yan realtor Walter Tower and the Chamber of Commerce promoted the development locally.

Just as things were falling into place for Getchell and the Bluff Point project, he was arrested in Rochester on a warrant from Pennsylvania as a fugitive from justice. He was wanted on a charge of conspiracy to defraud for a land deal in Bucks County outside Philadelphia. Getchell proclaimed his innocence and fought extradition to Pennsylvania. He was extradited and taken to Philadelphia where he spent 14 days in jail before standing trial. Locally, people were assured by Walter Tower and the Chamber of Commerce that this had nothing to do with the Bluff Point project and that no money had yet been taken out of Yates County. Just before Christmas 1929, Getchell was acquitted by a jury based on a lack of evidence. He claimed that he was framed by business competitors. He wrote a major letter to local newspapers explaining his side of the case and trying to reassure property owners and potential investors. It was to no avail; his credibility was shattered. Getchell's arrest and the Stock Market crash that October combined to create a mood of economic and ethical uncertainty that doomed the project to failure.

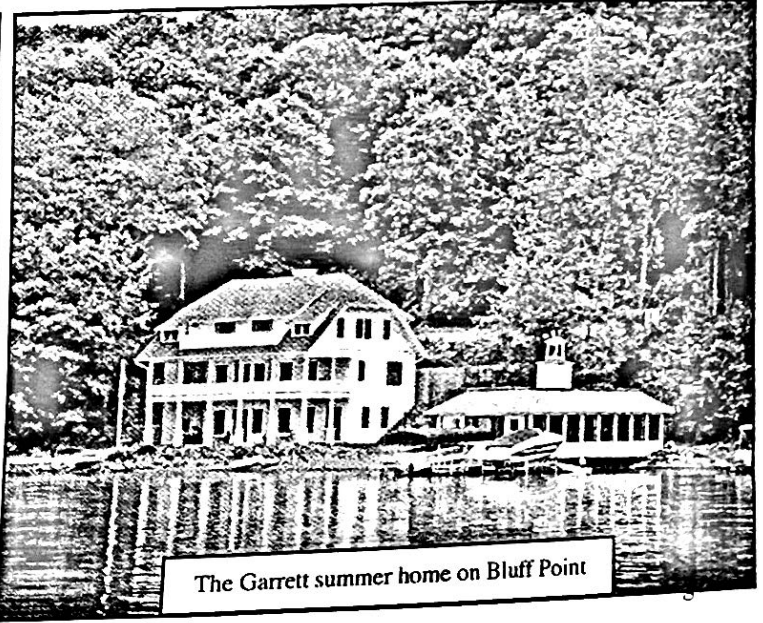
With the option off his 1200 acres on Bluff Point, Paul Garrett formed his own holding company to oversee any future development of the land. He had been distracted by the rapid worsening of the health of his only son, Charles. Paul Garrett intended for his son to take over his business empire but Charles suffered for years with tuberculosis. He died in Tucson, Arizona in January of 1930. His last words to his mother were "Don't leave me out here. Take me home to Bluff Point, take me home." His remains were put in a mausoleum in Los Angeles while his father made plans for "the Little Chapel on the Mount" on Bluff Point. The May 22, 1930 edition of the *Chronicle Express* reported "Mr. Garrett Plans Chapel on Bluff Point Property' Mr. Garrett is very much impressed by the Spanish type of architecture which

makes the beautiful Kirk of the Heather, near Los Angeles, where the body of his late son Charles is reposing. It is possible that this small edifice will be practically duplicated here, being used by the Garrett family for worship and interment." Construction was started that summer and the chapel was dedicated in July of 1931. Charles' body was brought back from California and buried in the crypt as were the remains of three other children of Paul Garrett's who had died in infancy.

When Prohibition ended in December of 1933, with his wine making facilities basically intact, Garrett was ready to resume the sale of Virginia Dare wine. The problem was the shortage of scuppernon grapes which gave the wine its distinctive flavor. Southern farmers had shifted their land over to other crops during the 1920s. Garrett blended in other varieties of grapes, but he could not recapture the distinctive taste that Virginia Dare Wine had in previous years and its popularity declined. Throughout the 1930s, Garrett promoted the use of different varieties of grapes for wines and became the major spokesman for American-made wines. He wrote several pamphlets on the topic and when the Liberty League used French wine at a dinner to honor former New York Governor Al Smith in 1936, Garrett protested loudly. In the late 1930s, he unsuccessfully petitioned for federal legislation to have wine classified as a food product. He felt that by removing the liquor tax from wine, thus lowering the price, U.S. wine could compete favorably with foreign wine. Early in 1940 Paul Garrett caught pneumonia and died in New York City at the age of 76. His remains were brought back to the chapel that he had built ten years earlier on Bluff Point for his son and he was buried in the crypt. He had been in the wine business for 62 years, leaving a major impact on the industry and on Yates County during the years he spent here.



Summer 1925 - Paul Garrett & family on the north stairs.
(standing: Dorothy, Charles, Paul, Evelyn, sitting: Emily, Evelyn)



The Garrett summer home on Bluff Point