

Yggdrasill... Yggdrasill?

By Vic Bary

The first time I encountered the name of this rambling 19th century home that once stood at the corner of Prospect Avenue and Riverside Avenue I thought it must be a made-up name, and an odd one at that. Recently, while reading Robert MacFarlane's Under Land, I discovered that the name came from Norse mythology and described a giant tree which supported the home of the gods with its branches, and whose roots extended into the underworld; a quirky name for a quirky structure which would later become Fannie Bates' second Cranford boarding house, "The Riverside".



Yggdrasill

This portion of Sheet 5 of the 1908 Cranford Sanborn fire map shows the location of Yggdrasill to the left of Thomas Sperry's estate on the north side of Prospect Street, and above William Sperry's estate on the south side of Prospect Street and Riverside Avenue. Earlier Sanborn maps did not cover this section of town.



From 1908 Sanborn Fire Map

Brothers Thomas and William Sperry would combine forces with advertising magnate J. Walter Thompson to initiate the Roosevelt Manor development in late 1894. This May, 1894 plot map for Roosevelt Manor shows Yggdrasill already in place but before Mary Bennett bought the two plots immediately above it.



May 1894 Roosevelt Manor Plot Map

So What was the Story behind Yggdrasil?

Yggdrasil was built sometime before 1894 by Mary Ritchie Bennett, the well-to-do widow of John Bennett. The January 12, 1894 *Cranford Chronicle* reported that the ‘Financial Redbook’ placed her wealth at more than \$300,000 (\$8,755,000 in today’s dollars).

While one source has been quoted as saying the house was built circa 1888, it does not appear on either the 1882 map of Cranford (at which time Prospect Street ended at Forrest Street – later renamed Claremont Place) nor on the 1888 map of Cranford (at which time Prospect Street had been extended to Riverside Avenue, but the only dwelling shown on this section of Riverside Avenue was at the intersection with Union Avenue North). The same source states that Yggdrasil was the first house in Cranford to have an elevator.

Since Cranford had no newspaper until November, 1893, and no street directories until 1901, the only thing we can say with certainty is that newspaper references to Yggdrasil and Mary Ritchie Bennett’s ownership first appear in 1894. The April 18, 1894 *Cranford Chronicle* recorded that she added a laundry room to her Riverside Avenue house. Two months later the same paper recorded that Mary Ritchie Bennett had named her home “Yggdrasil”.



Bennett dock at Yggdrasil

Other than that, not much else is reported about Mrs. Bennett except that she also maintained a Manhattan property at 150 West 77th Street where she spent her winters. As we noted earlier, she was a very wealthy woman.

Death and Yggdrasill

On July 2, 1900, Mary Bennett's son, Harry, died suddenly of heart failure in Los Angeles at age 37. Shortly afterward his body was returned to Cranford and a funeral service was held at Yggdrasill. Four years later, on January 24, 1904, Mary Ritchie Bennett herself died at age 68 at the Riverside Drive home of her daughter Julian.

On June 10, 1904 the 12 Riverside Avenue property on which Yggdrasill stood was put up for auction sale. On January 31, 1907 it was purchased by Fannie Bates, owner of Hampton Hall and a local activist referred to as the "Mother of Cranford". Her activism included arranging for garbage pick-up, building a public library, and founding the Village Improvement Association.

Fannie Bates and "The Riverside"



Fannie Bates

Fannie Bates' plans for 12 Riverside Avenue were to make it her second boardinghouse in Cranford after Hampton Hall.



Hampton Hall

A month after purchasing the property and making renovations for it to be suitable as a boarding house, Fannie Bates renamed it “The Riverside” and placed a Miss Oakey in charge of running it. Sometime after that she added a separate structure and connected it to the original dwelling.



The Riverside

The Riverside would suffer two fires during the next ten years but recovered from both. In March, 1913 a fire in a closet between two rooms would do \$2,000 worth of damage (nearly \$52,000 in today’s dollars). In January, 1918 the servants’ quarters at The Riverside burned with a \$6,000 loss (a \$102,000 loss in today’s dollars).

The Riverside after Fannie Bates’ Death

Fannie Bates died May 9, 1918 after a long illness. Her daughter, Fannie Bates Snow, took over managing The Riverside almost immediately and would guide it for most of its remaining twenty years. Finally, in 1938, The Riverside (formerly Yggdrasil) closed its doors forever. Today, the stretch along Riverside Drive (it was renamed from Riverside Avenue to Riverside Drive between 1927 and 1929) from Union Avenue North to Casino Avenue, once the site of the William Sperry mansion, Yggdrasil/The Riverside, and the Cranford Casino, is completely dominated by apartment buildings/condominiums.

Sources:

1. Bary, Vic, “The Sperry Family in Cranford Part II: Thomas and William”, *The Mill Wheel*, Fall, 2019
2. Bary, Vic, “Lemuel Evans – Casino Steward”, *The Mill Wheel*, Holiday, 2019.
3. *The Cranford Chronicle*, various
4. *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*, various.
5. Fridlington, Robert and Fuhro, Lawrence, *Images of America: Cranford Volume II*, Arcadia Publishing, Dover, NH, 1996, p.20.
6. Pencinger, Julie, “Fannie E Bates ‘The Mother of Cranford’”, *The Mill Wheel*, Holiday, 2009.
7. Wagenblast, Bernie, “Cranford Radio – Cranford Then and Now”, 6/16/2019.