A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST — Huning Castle, Albuquerque

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Prior to its demolition in the spring of 1955, Huning Castle had stood on Albuquerque’s West Central Avenue for some sixty-eight years. Undoubtedly the most pretentious and architecturally one of the most interesting residences built in New Mexico during the whole nineteenth century, this structure constituted an important milestone in the history of the Southwest. The loss of this handsome old mansion is irreparable and no amount of progress in the form of motel, filling station or super-market built upon the vacated site can compensate for its destruction. Later generations of Albuquerque citizens can deplore our demolition of this monument.

Showplace of the Territory in the 1860’s, Huning Castle comprised a farm of 700 acres, a mansion of fourteen rooms together with outlying service structures, a park-like garden complete with aviary, running fountains, a swimming pool, a private aviary, a veranda which must have reminded a visitor of a southern plantation, as well as a mansion. The mansion, said to have been built by Mr. John Huning, comprised a farm of 700 acres, a mansion of fourteen rooms together with outlying service structures, a park-like garden complete with aviary, running fountains, a swimming pool, a private aviary, a veranda which must have reminded a visitor of a southern plantation, as well as an old mansion near the railroad.

As a final preliminary, one might say something of the general prosperity and optimism that prevailed in this period. Files of the Albuquerque Daily Journal established in 1880, give an excellent picture of the situation. Frequent editorials expressed the conviction that Albuquerque’s location at the intersection of north-south and east-west railroad lines would surely ensure the dominant role for the city in all the Territory. A half page ad entitled “Let Your Light Shine” admonished Albuquerque citizens each day of the week to spread abroad the good word of New Mexico’s commercial advantages and her superior climate. The highest of hopes were entertained for the region’s copper and silver mines. The Socorro area was booming with mines while nearer home, promising copper finds had been made in Tijeras Canyon and coal deposits had been sited not far southeast of the city. Editors of the Journal constantly advised of the need to attract industry to the region and to the city, so that manufacturing and the establishment of factories would attract the Southwestern products of the region, as well as goods for shipment would have to be suspended for two weeks. In January of 1881 regular rail service extended as far west as Prescott, Arizona, while the Santa Fe’s cash receipts in Albuquerque for the single month were above $90,000. The newspaper gloated in an editorial of February 18 that “ALBUQUERQUE IS FIXED.”

It was amidst such optimism and prosperity as this that Franz Huning decided to build a mansion in character with the promise of his community. Sometime in the spring of 1881 work got under way on the dwelling; it was completed in the autumn of 1883, an event officially celebrated by a large Christmas party attended by guests from widely distant parts. Now, just as he was caught up in so many aspects of the town’s life, Mr. Humping became involved in the construction of his home. According to information from Mr. W. H. Keleher and Miss Erna Ferguson, granddaughter of the builder, Huning was his own contractor and designer. We also learn that the house was built of “terrones” which were cut in the owner’s meadows. (Terrones are a kind of adobe brick cut from turf with a spade. Equal in size to the usual adobe brick, the sides of the terrones are curved but the narrow ends vertical. The natural root system of the turf acts as a binder and an aid to even drying just as do the natural root systems of the adobes of the earth mud). These terrones cost $2.50 per hundred; the cost of the adobe masonry set in the wall was $11.00 per thousand brick; a total of 250,000 terrones were used. Additional information on the total cost of the mansion may exist somewhere in the Huning family papers, but these were unavailable at the time of writing.

The same authorities tell us that the doors and windows for the Castle were brought from Chicago. This is interesting in light of the fact that Albuquerque got its own sash and door factory in the spring of 1881. On the other hand, we are advised by Huning’s own distributor for mill work in the Journal that it stocked doors and windows. Presumably Mr. Humping was also prepared to act as his own distributor for mill work.

Old pictorial maps of Albuquerque give an idea of the way the Humping property was arranged. To the west, where today Laguna Blvd. intersects Central Avenue, stood Huning’s Glorieta Mill, equipped with machinery brought from New Mexico prior to the completion of the railroad. Next to the mill and just east of present Laguna Blvd. was the Castle itself. (fig. 1) This establishment consisted of several buildings: the main house with its two towers, additional service buildings, a windmill and a lacy arbor-covered walk leading from the house to an octagonal aviary. A pool with a running fountain interrupted the front walk which led from the street to the main entrance. At the property’s extreme eastern limits, an apartment house was reached by a small bridge over the irrigation canal, was located the family burial plot. Always interested in horticulture, Mr. Humping had brought specimens of bushes and trees from various parts of New Mexico for his gardens. Behind the house to the southwest and thus occupying the greater part of today’s Country Club district lay the remainder of the 700 acre estate.

Huning Castle created an imposing impression as one approached it from Central Avenue—or Railroad Avenue as it was then known. A two story edifice with a flat roof, the entrance was marked by a three story tower. Each level of the tower’s vertical mass was interrupted by markedly projecting horizontal balconies while the whole was crowned by a strong cornice and balustrade. (fig. 3) A deep set arch emphasized the main door while a similar recess at the second level repeated the entrance arch on a smaller scale. Well behind the tower facade rose the main block of the building: flat-roofed, deeply corniced and enlivened by a lacy iron cresting. To the tower’s right was a narrow wooden veranda to this part of the building and a bay window that went through two stories. At the further end of the left wing was an open porch of two stories, the tower of which was glazed at a later time. Although constructed of substantial adobe walls two or in some instances three feet thick, the exterior of Humping Castle are unpretentious and architecturally one of the most interesting residences built in New Mexico during the whole nineteenth century, this structure constituted an important milestone in the history of the Southwest. The loss of this handsome old mansion is irreparable and no amount of progress in the form of motel, filling station or super-market built upon the vacated site can compensate for its destruction. Later generations of Albuquerque citizens can deplore our demolition of this monument.

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was veneered in wood. Vertical wood siding was used over most of the exterior surface but this was enframed at the corners by wooden boards shaped and bevelled to resemble stone quoins. Wooden architrave moldings en­
cased doors and windows while string courses and a sub­stantial wooden cornice completed the design. (fig. 6) The building tried desperately hard to look like an edifice built of stone. These wooden veneers, cornice and window trim were employed uniformly on all sides of the house except that flush siding was replaced by lapped vertical siding on the south (rear) elevation. Running around the one story kitchen wing and along the entire south facade was a twelve foot wide, wood floored portal. (fig. 5). A small enframed plaque in wood on the east face of the main tower gave the date of the dwelling's completion, 1883.

The main block of the house was connected by means of a one story wing to the east with a second tower. Though but two stories in height, this tower echoed the massing of the entrance tower. Behind the smaller tower a short distance stood a windmill sheathed in a wood facing in order to relate it to the architecture of the house. Nevertheless the battered walls and top railing seen in the old photograph of 1883-85 clearly reveal a char­acteristic windmill shape. We might speak of this second tower and windmill before we go inside the house as these elements collapsed about 1913, long before the house itself was demolished. The tower contained some kind of water storage tank at the level of the second story while an elaborate bath room occupied the first floor. Legend has it that this was the first bath room with running water to be built in New Mexico. Water
fig. 4—an Italian Villa design from Calvert Vaux's Villas and Cottages, 1887

fig. 5—exterior: rear

fig. 6—exterior: front bay window detail

fig. 7—interior: stairs at second floor landing
pressure from this tank provided for the garden fountains as well as the bath itself.

It is unfortunate that no good pictures of the Castle's interior have been preserved, though, in point of fact, the interior was a less architecturally interesting area than the exterior. Dominant feature of the plan was the sixty foot hall which was approached directly from the deep entrance vestibule. Despite the imposing dimensions of this area, the visual interest is less than the dramatic arrangement of the stair which hacked this space in two (fig. 2). Nor did the far end of the hall possess any inviting architectural feature such as a bay window or fireplace which draws the spectator into this area. Despite its length and fourteen foot width, it remained a dark "back hall.

To the left of the hall were two rooms. A front sitting room with a pleasant fireplace and five-sided bay window adjacent to the entrance vestibule provided direct access to the garden. The sitting room to the east was the afore mentioned tower bath room whose windows were the only entrance was through the bed room. Not until the era of the First World War did a later generation of Hunings convert this chamber into a ball room. Only then was there a third floor parlor through the door which was located off axis in order to align with the door to the dining room on the opposite side of the hall.

To the right of the main hall was the library in front and dining room behind. Each room contained a fireplace and the library had two large and handsome double hung windows. No direct access, however, was provided to the small veranda to the right of the entrance (fig. 3). In order to get to the veranda one had to cross the hall which had frosted glass panes and the frames were quite elaborate. As stated before, Mr. Huning is supposed to have brought the doors from the castle on the Rhein River which Franz Huning had seen as a youth in Germany.

A legend which one often hears repeated in Albuquerque states that Castle Huning was copied in part from a castle on the Rhein River which Franz Huning had seen as a child. General Grant line and his partner, Mr. Gervase Wheeler is often cuffed as the one who designed the entire facade of the United States between 1840-50. One need only refer to typical Italian Villa designs published in plan books prior to the Civil war to see the relation of Huning's mansion to this style. The same features assail one in both designs: the centralizing entrance tower, an asymmetrical massing, protruding bay windows or projecting porches to reduce rigidity of mass, the emphatic corruge supported by paired brackets, abundant use of quoins and string courses and elaborate frames about all openings. It is true that the Italian Villa is often capped by a low-pitched roof. In the present example, on the contrary, the owner-builder very sensibly retained the traditional flat roof of New Mexico, but Huning Castle's consequent horizontality is completely in harmony with the Italian manner.

A word of caution should here be interposed about this term "Italian Villa" as it is used by some authors. It is used by some authors. This style with Italy is indeed remote. Rather, this style represents what the provincial Yankee builders of the 1840's imagined Tuscan architecture of the Renaissance to be than the buildings of the nearest and most charming villas. The most salient single characteristic of the Italian Villa style is the paired bracket support for the cornices. So obtrusive is this feature that some authors have labeled this movement the "Bracket Style." The brackets used at Huning Castle would alone be sufficient to identify its design as Italianate. Despite apparent complexity and suggestion of costly carving, these brackets were cheaply and quickly produced with the aid of lathes and jig saws. Rather than being carved out of a single block of wood, they were built up of two or three layers of boards which could be shaped separately prior to assembly. Complexity could be compounded by adding molding and lathe-turned rosettes. If the final effect is suggestive of painstaking hand carving, closer inspection reveals it to be the product of manufacture. This reliance upon the machine for inex­

expensive yet ingeniously elaborate decoration is, of course, not peculiar to Mr. Huning's Castle in nineteenth century America. Most elaborate of all the brackets were those which supported the balcony over the principal entrance (fig. 3). So insistently heavy and ornate are these that the modern viewer is moved more to indulgent de­

light rather than aesthetic indignation.

The house on the Suburb of the city, a house of which the builder of the Castle indicates a twenty to forty year time lag behind architectural developments of the Atlantic seaboard, there are also found here some slight indications of later American building fashion. The precise linear design on the horizon­

tal beams of the front veranda (fig. 3) suggests ornamentation found in New England after 1867. This sharp line ornamentation is cut with a jigsaw or grooved out. Orna­

mentation of this type is ordinarily not found in associa­

tion with Italian Villa designs but more often occurs on "French Renaissance" buildings, sometimes also called the General Grant style.

Family tradition tells us that Franz Huning himself designed the house. This seems very probable in the light of the straightforward relation of the main stair to the entrance hall and the inaccessible front porch off the library. It is evident, however, that Mr. Huning had access to current plans books similar to Calvert Vaux and Andrew Jackson Downing's "Cottages" (1857) or Gervase Wheeler's "Homes for the People in Suburb and Country" (1867) (fig. 4). Although considerable attention has been given to the matter, no plan or elevation illustrated in such a plan book has been discovered which provides an exact model for the Castle. On the other hand, almost all of the features here employed can be found within the contents of any single book of plans. To give an example, the arrangement of the veranda adjacent to the tower and the paneling around the arched entrance are very reminiscent of the Castle. In this illustration we also discover the bracketed cornices, the combination of large and small window hoods with ornamental brackets, the fadness for bay windows and the ubiquitous tower.

The design process followed in the Castle is a familiar one: feature A from one page, feature B from another. General Grant line and his partner, Mr. Gervase Wheeler, etc. One should also note that all of the "features" are loaded on the main facade. Seen from any other elevation than the front, the design is decidedly less elaborate or well composed (fig. 5). Still it must be admitted that Mr. Huning combined these features with some skill: the old facade did possess an impressiveness and dignity as well as a harmonious balance of diverse elements.