

DOLDBRAN (Clement A. Griscom House)  
231 Laurel Lane  
Haverford  
Montgomery County  
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6059

HABS  
PA  
46-HAV,  
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Location: 231 Laurel Lane, Haverford, Montgomery Co., Pennsylvania.

Significance: Dolobran is one of the few remaining residences designed by Frank Furness and embodies the best features of Furness's work. The mansion was built in 1881 with subsequent additions for one of the county's most prominent citizens and exemplified the extensive country estates established by wealthy businessmen during the late nineteenth century.

Description: Dolobran is a three-and-one-half-story mansion which faces west on a site of approximately four acres of land. It is an irregularly massed building which reflects both Frank Furness's architecture style and its construction in several stages. The structure contains a mix of intersecting wings drawn out lengthwise with a corbeled tower and pavilion flanking each end. The overall character of the house is Shingle style, combining the colors and massing of the Romanesque Revival with certain details derived from the Georgian and Federal periods. The later gallery addition shows the Classical influence, while certain details are reminiscent of such diverse architects as Stanford White and Gustav Stickley.

Most sections of the house are three-and-one-half stories, with the first two stories constructed of fieldstone set in courses. The top story-and-a-half projects out slightly on wooden brackets with geometric detail and is sided with wood shingles in a fishscale pattern. Windows include one-over-one-light, six-over-six-light and sixteen-over-one-light double-hung sash in numerous groupings. The complicated roofline incorporates gables and clipped gables with hipped roofs on the tower and north and south pavilion. The original patterned-slate roofing material has been replaced by asphalt shingles. The chimneys are stone or brick; the brick stacks being particularly large and decorative. The various dormers, both gable and jerkin-headed, are pedimented with hoods often supported by brackets. Wall dormers are also common. The main entrance has a one-story entry porch with turned posts, open rafters and a gabled standing-seam metal roof.

The interior plan has thirty-six rooms featuring a center hall with Flemish influence evident in the heavily carved fireplace, the traditional motif of the carved screen attached to the sliding glass doors, and six other carved doors. The hall stairs are steep and likely based on the plate-construction of ships, with a wood filigree balustrade and a galleried stairwell. Flanking the entrance hall are a sitting room, dining room, library and parlor. A large gallery is entered through an impressive stair hall to the rear. There is also a servants wing connected by back stairs to the north. As completed, the house

strongly expresses the character of its owner as well as its architect. Some details characteristic of Furness's work include the windows with flower motifs in the lead patterning, cast and carved naturalistic ornament, especially in the many fireplaces. Both upstairs and downstairs the fireplaces display realistic cast and carved foliage and lilies, and abstract metal window screen tracteries. In the living room, exquisite peacock scenes are handpainted on the beamed ceiling.

Clement Griscom, the original owner, was a world traveller and an art collector; the present living room likely held his collection, which eventually grew to require a separate gallery. The dining room incorporated three large tapestries and was designed and colored to make them integral with the room. The main stair hall incorporates Delft tiles, in the fireplace, hearth and wall panels. These are said to have been brought back by Mr. Griscom following a term of service as ambassador to Belgium. The interesting fabric wainscot in the upper level of the gallery may, too, have been brought back from foreign travels. Mr. Griscom was owner of several steamships, for which Frank Furness designed interior spaces. Dolobran's gallery stairs, with their stern-like curved window bay, hawser handrails, and delicate ornamentation are strong reminders of this business interest, as is the weathervane, which may be read from geared dials on both the first and second floors.

History: Dolobran was built over a period of years, beginning in 1881 and concluding in 1895. All of the work during this time was done for the original owner, Clement A. Griscom, and was designed by Frank Furness and his partner, Allen Evans. In 1879, Clement A. Griscom bought a farmhouse with sixty-two acres and named it Dolobran after a family estate in Wales; the property eventually included as much as 146 acres. The farmhouse was demolished though part of its foundation was probably used for Dolobran. The original section of the new house was built by Furness & Evans in 1881. It was a two-story summer cottage built mainly of wood in the Stick style. It probably contained four rooms and a large porch on the first floor and no more than five bedrooms on the second floor.

The first additions were made to Dolobran in 1885, leaving the original main block intact. On the first floor a large series of porches were added, along with a sitting room, and a large servants wing entered through a back stairway. The servants wing was built on a slightly different level than the main house due to the changing grade. During this phase, the front hall was redone with elaborate woodwork and the second floor nearly doubled; a new master bedroom was built along with a nanny's room and numerous bedrooms for the children and servants.

In 1890, further additions were made to the house. These included a study, the "Peacock Gallery", which was used as an entertainment salon and named for its oriental style peacock ceiling paintings, a three-story tower for servant space, a new master suite above the Peacock Gallery and several bedrooms on the second floor. With both the 1885 and 1890 additions, the exterior gained more shingles and stone, transforming from a Stick Style to a Shingle Style dwelling.

In 1895, the final Furness & Evans additions were made. The major addition was a Classical gallery to the rear of the building to house the owner's growing art collection. As noted previously, the gallery was entered on a wide staircase reminiscent of those that Furness designed for Griscom's grand passenger ships. The ceiling had gold painted plaster panels embellished with laurels of artist's palettes in addition to textured clear glass skylights, similar to the University of Pennsylvania's Fine Arts Library, also designed by Furness. In addition to the gallery, the dining room was expanded, a smoking room and a butler's pantry were added.

Clement Acton Griscom, a member of a prominent Quaker family, was a shipbuilder who became president of the International Navigation Company. He was recognized as having brought about a great advance in the type of steamships for passenger travel and received national and international awards and honors. He was also a director of numerous transportation and financial corporations and he and his wife, Frances Canby Biddle, were members of numerous social organizations. Furthermore, Griscom was considered a gentleman farmer. The landscape features of Dolobran are extensively described in Hotchkin's Rural Pennsylvania of 1897. At that time the estate included a heavily wooded ravine stream near a lake with boating and bathing facilities, a flower garden devoted to an "American wild garden" with forest pools, a stable, large greenhouse, and grazing pastures for a herd of Guernsey cattle and Shropshire sheep. Hotchkin also noted farm buildings and a dairy of special interest to the members of the exclusive Farmers' Club, of which Griscom was a member. There was also a private golf course and tennis courts on the grounds. Mr. Griscom's married daughter and husband, Mr. & Mrs. Beetle, and his married son, Rodman E. Griscom, also lived in separate houses on the property. Located across Gray's Lane from Dolobran were the estates of Alexander Cassatt and Dr. E.C. Evans, and Furness is thought to have designed both of their mansions.

The firm of Furness & Evans was formed in 1881, the year Dolobran was begun, when Frank Furness took on his chief draftsman, Allen Evans, as a partner. Furness, now considered one of Philadelphia's most important late nineteenth century architects,

was born in Philadelphia, studied under Richard Morris Hunt in New York. He is perhaps best known for his design of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1871-76, while in partnership with George Hewitt. In his long career, Furness designed about 400 buildings, most in the Philadelphia area, ranging from banks and railroad terminals to churches, hospitals, fire stations and residences. Furness is best remembered for his medievalized eclectic forms and his tendency to caricature the high styles of the day.

At the time of Griscom's death in 1912, Dolobran (and his famous art collection) was sold. The house entered a period of neglect. By the early 1920s it had become heavily overgrown, its windows gaping and vacant. At that time it came into its second ownership, that of the Griffith family. Their tenure in the house brought about its only redecoration, which attempted to erase many recollections of Victorianism. Over the last twenty-five years the house fell into a second period of neglect. Certain that it would be demolished upon their passing, the Griffiths did little to upgrade it. The gallery was closed, its ceiling long fallen to the floor. Dolobran has since been renovated under the direction of architects Craig Morrison and Jim Garrison. They discovered a great deal about the construction history of the house and have been successful in having much of the original fabric restored.

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