



# Pass Christian, Mississippi!

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Before Katrina came calling, Pass Christian was a charming little town consisting of tree-lined streets, quaint shops, and grand old mansions that hugged the shoreline along Scenic Drive. Since that time, Pass Christian has struggled to reinvent itself, but hope springs eternal, and progress is being made. The Pass, so named by the locals, has long been a watering hole for the rich and famous, who came from all parts of the country to enjoy its charms. But did you know that the Pass has a link to the famous New York ar-

chitectural firm, McKim, Mead, and White, the movie *The Great Gatsby*, and that most famous of all ships, the *Titanic*? As Sherlock Holmes was wont to say, "Patience Watson! All will be revealed!"

McKim, Mead, and White was one of the most prestigious architectural firms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It was founded by Charles McKim, William Mead, and Stanford White. Their firm was responsible for many of the country's grandest buildings, which included New York's Pennsylvania Train Station, and additions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The firm also designed some of America's most magnificent homes, homes that rivaled the palatial palaces and villas of Europe. But the firm was not without its scandals.

Stanford White, the youngest of the trio, was a known womanizer, who installed a red-velvet swing in one of his New York love nests. It was there he took impressionable young girls to "entertain" him. One of those girls was an actress named Evelyn Nesbit, who was one of the most beautiful, vivacious women of the Gilded Age. She and White continued their on-and-off love affair even after Evelyn married, which naturally infuriated her husband Harry Thaw. Thaw, whose father was a wealthy coal baron from Philadelphia,



Penn Station



Evelyn Nesbit



Stanford White



Harry Thaw

Pennsylvania, was insanely jealous of White. On a warm summer's evening in 1906, Thaw followed White to the roof top garden of Madison Square Garden, a building that White had designed. While a chorus girl sang, "I Could Love a Million Girls," Thaw shot White three times in the face at point blank range.



Needless to say, Stanford White's career came to an abrupt end. Thankfully, his career did not end before he had created one of his grandest houses, Rosecliff, located in Newport, Rhode Island.

Rosecliff was modeled after Versailles' Grand Trianon, which was a garden retreat for the French nobility. The magnificent house was commissioned by Mr. and Mrs. Hermann Oelrichs as their summer home, in the days when rich families like the Astors and the Vanderbilts summered in Newport. The Oelrichs fit well into Newport society, and were known for giving lavish parties. The most famous of which was their White Ball in 1904. Tessie Oelrichs (as she was known to her friends) adorned Rosecliff with massive bouquets of white hydrangeas, roses, orchids, and lilies. She ordered white swans for the garden fountains, and had a fleet of skeleton ships constructed, painted white, and floated off shore just beyond the estate. When illuminated at night, it appeared as if an entire fleet of white ships was anchored, awaiting Tessie's orders.

But after the great White Ball, things were never the same between Hermann and Tessie; their marital bliss went the way of the dodo. Hermann moved to San Francisco, surviving the great 1906 earthquake. But it wrecked his already failing health. When Hermann died in that same year, Tessie continued her lavish life style, until in old age, she slowly went insane. She spent her last days wandering through the vast, empty rooms of her huge mansion, engulfed in a diaphanous web of memories, while greeting imaginary guests on Rosecliff's

heart-shaped, marble staircase.

Tessie died in 1926, and Rosecliff remained in the Oelrichs family until 1941. In that year the Oelrichs' only son Hermann Jr. sold the house and its contents for \$65,000. It had cost 2.5 million to build and furnish. The house was sold twice more, the last time to a couple from New Orleans, Edgar and Louise Monroe.

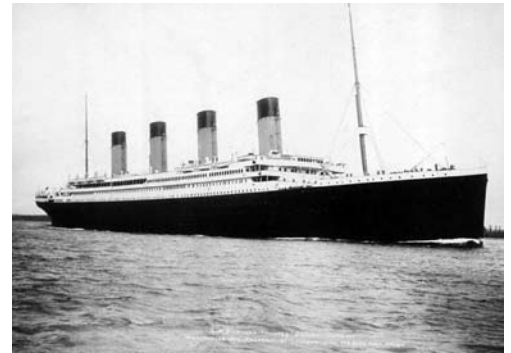
J. Edgar Monroe was a self-made millionaire. He acquired his fortune by purchasing bank and shipping stock for next-to-nothing after the 1929 Stock Market Crash. He then parlayed those stocks into a vast financial empire. In the 1970s, Mr. Monroe was listed as one of America's richest men by Forbes Magazine. Not a bad track record for a New Orleans boy born "on the wrong side of the tracks." His marriage to Louise, who was also born in New Orleans, was typical of the day - he had money, she had a place in society and a family tree that could be traced back to Louis XIV, but not much else. The Monroes, in keeping with their social position, often spent summers in Newport to escape the Deep South's sticky heat. While there, they fell in love with Rosecliff, and when it came up for sale in 1947, they purchased it. When they did, the grand old days at Rosecliff were reborn.

Mrs. Monroe - short, plump, with her hair in a bun - spent a month at New York's Plaza Hotel interviewing prospective servants and staff, who would be needed to reopen the old mansion and prepare

it for the upcoming summer season. And what a season it was! The parties that the Monroes gave were just as lavish as those of Tessie Oelrichs. Many of their parties had Mardi Gras themes, where the guests were expected to arrive in lavish costumes, complete with satin, sequins, and feathers. But unlike Tessie's parties, which were stiff and formal,

the Monroe's parties were like the Big Easy itself - spicy and easy going.

While at one of his parties, Mr. Monroe recounted the story of an old friend who had inherited, and then squandered, vast wealth after his parents perished in the *Titanic* disaster. Mr. Monroe's wealth was estimated to be over five-hundred million dollars at that time, and

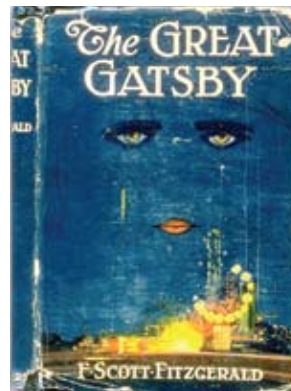


when telling the story he said, "Poor old fool! He's down to his last million!"

Befitting Rosecliff's history of lavish parties, it was no surprise when Hollywood came calling in 1973. Jack Clayton, director of a new production of *The Great Gatsby*, approached Mr. Monroe, asking his permission to use Rosecliff as Jay Gatsby's house.

Mr. Monroe consented, and all of Newport was giddy with the prospect of handsome Robert Redford and luscious Mia Farrow coming to town!

The film crew arrived with much pomp and circumstance, setting up shop on Rosecliff's lush lawns. The locals - everyone from Newport's



aristocracy to the hoi polloi - were auditioned for bit parts and crowd scenes. During the filming, Rosecliff's grand ball room reverberated with the sound of jazz, laughter, and clinking champagne glasses. But high above it all in his bedroom, Mr. Monroe was preparing for bed. He felt secure in the fact that Jack Clayton would honor his only request: "Clayton! You and your bunch had better stay out of my fountain! My wife's been on me for years to fix it, and I've just spent fifty thousand dollars getting the old thing to run. Stay out of it... you hear!"



Rosecliff's Fountain

For those who've seen the movie, you'll remember that evocative scene which takes place during one of Gatsby's fabled parties. Wine and champagne are flowing, lobster and caviar are in abundance, and dancers are doing the Charleston. Jack Clayton waited until the wee hours of the morning to shoot that scene, and when he knew Mr. Monroe was fast asleep, he shouted, "ACTION!" Then some of the people portraying Jay Gatsby's guests jumped

into Mr. Monroe's fountain, splashing and dancing until they heard, "CUT! It's a WRAP!" The film crew then began the arduous task of packing up and heading back to Hollywood. Later that same morning, Newport was awoken by a booming bass voice, as Mr. Monroe announced his disdain for "all that Hollywood trash" who had trashed his fountain.

Although the Monroes like the glitz and glamour of Newport, they were, after all, simple folks - especially Mr. Monroe. When they needed to unwind and escape to a simpler, more peaceful way of life, they often rushed home, not to Newport, New York, or abroad, but to a charming little town named Pass Christian. There they built a home in the early 60s. Modest in comparison to the grandeur of Rosecliff, it was nonetheless a grand home, all 11,000 square feet of it. In the last years of his life, Mr. Monroe could often be seen walking along Scenic Drive, resplendent in a white linen suit, his Brook's Brother's straw boater tilted downward against the wind, his gold pocket watch glistening in the late afternoon sun.

By the time of his death in 1990 at the age of 92, Mr. Monroe had donated Rosecliff to the Preservation Society of Newport County, where it can be toured today. He was also instrumental in the expansion of New Orleans' Loyola University. Through his generous donation of \$7.5 million dollars, the J. Edgar and Louise Monroe Library on the Loyola University campus was completed. It is a 150,000 square foot, state of the art facility, which was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the



J. Edgar and Louise Monroe Library

"Best College Library" category by The Princeton Review. Not a bad legacy for a lad from New Orleans who made it big due to hard work, determination, and old-fashioned gumption and common sense.

I would like to personally thank Mr. Jody Bailey and many of the citizens in the Pass for their personal memories and recollections of Mr. and Mrs. Monroe. The help was invaluable. Thanks again!

*Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless, and keep a song in your heart!*

Kal



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