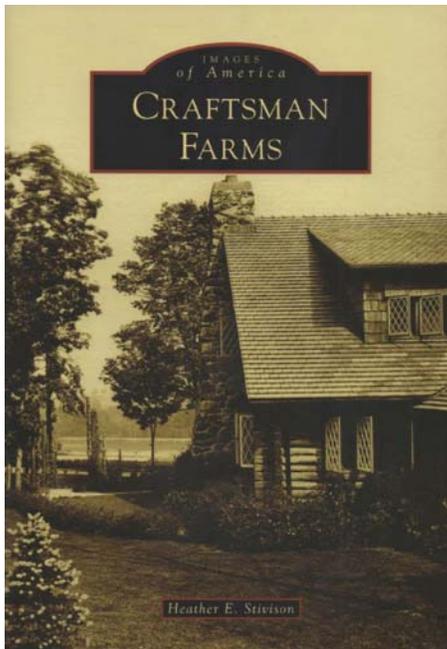




G S L R E V I E W S



Book:

Images of America: Craftsman Farms

Written by Heather E. Stivison

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Softcover, 127 pages, black and white

Review by Gordon Bond

★★★★

History is full of examples of utopian visions. From national revolutions to local planned communities, people occasionally embrace ideologies that they believe will create a new and improved society if only everyone would embrace their vision. New Jersey has been home to a fair share of such enterprises of varying degrees of longevity—the 1869 Methodist “camp meeting movement behind the establishment of Ocean Grove; the Civil War-era progressive/artist colony of Perth Amboy’s Raritan Bay Union; Union Township’s early 20th century answer for homelessness in the Self-Master Colony; etc. The Garden State was also home to one of the more interesting, if abortive, visions for a more healthful, morally uplifted, and industrious America.

The Arts and Crafts Movement was rooted in England but

BOOK RATING SYSTEM

★ Poorly written, bad scholarship / factual errors.

★★ Factually correct but poorly written.

★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

★★★★ Strong scholarship, well written.

★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship writing style and / or graphics / typography.

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matured throughout Europe and North America as a reaction to an increasingly industrialized, urban, and impersonal Western civilization. More and more people, it seemed, lived in unhealthy crowded tenements and toiled as unfulfilled drudges tending mechanized factories. Starting in 1880, there was a counter-movement that emphasized traditional craftsmanship to make by hand things like furniture, based on simpler forms incorporating medieval, romantic or folk styles of decoration. Embracing this ascetic, it was believed by the movement's fans, communities would engage in healthful, useful, and fulfilling endeavors. This was for them more than a design fashion, but a holistic means of social and economic reform that the working class and poor seemed to be in desperate need of.

Perhaps the movement's greatest disciple and proselytizer in the United States was Gustav Stickley (March 9, 1858–April 21, 1942). Born to German immigrants in Osceola, Wisconsin, Stickley would find his life's calling as a manufacturer of furniture rooted in the Arts and Crafts style and a business model incorporating its reform-minded goals. This was more than just making pretty furniture, but the trappings of an Arts and Crafts *lifestyle* he hoped would catch on in America. Between October of 1901 and December of 1916, his magazine, *The Craftsman*, promoted the idea of better-living aided by Arts and Crafts design sensibilities.

In 1905, Stickley had moved his headquarters and showroom to Manhattan, but was eyeing across the Hudson River as the location for perhaps his most-ambitious project. His vision settled on a school for boys to be built in the woods of Morris Plains (now Parsippany-Troy Hills). The goal was to bring up a new generation of young men in the principles of his Arts and Crafts paradigm. They would combine classroom work with hands-on handicrafts, feed themselves with the produce of the farm they worked, and become useful citizens.

Craftsman Farms, as it would be called, was a collection of buildings on 650 acres where boys would attend school, grow their own food, and learn handicrafts as trades. It was to be an entirely self-sufficient community, with gardens for vegetables



Gustav Stickley

and flowers, orchards, dairy cows, and chickens. It would support itself financially, in part, by both using the produce in a restaurant operated in his Manhattan furniture showroom and department store. Among the buildings constructed were craft workshops, stables, a dairy barn, chicken coop, other farm buildings, and three cottage dwellings. But the centerpiece was a fine main “Log House” designed to be used as a club house, dining hall, and place for students and guests to gather. Construction started in 1910 and the Stickley family lived on the property while buildings were completed and farm production got under way.

The flaw with Stickley’s vision, however, was that its economic engine depended on sustaining the popularity of his Arts and Crafts designs. While it may have been a long-term lifestyle to Gustav Stickley, to many of his customers, it was a fashion, vulnerable to being pushed aside by the next big thing. Indeed, demand for his furniture dropped and took his plans for Craftsman Farms with it. By 1915 he had filed for bankruptcy and two years later the Craftsman Farms property was acquired in a bankruptcy sale by Major George and Sylvia Wurlitzer Farny. Fortunately, the Farnys maintained the Arts and Crafts style of the buildings and landscape, occupying the property until 1989.

The social reformation Stickley desired to bring about would, of course, fail to materialize. Yet the Arts and Crafts style has maintained enough of a fan-base that, with no small irony, examples of Stickley furniture are now highly collectable, selling for large sums. Indeed, he left enough of an impression on American decorative arts history that when the Craftsman Farms land was threatened by the development of 52 new townhouses, a grassroots movement rose to encourage the Township of Parsippany-Troy Hills to obtain the remaining 26 acres through eminent domain. The remaining grounds and buildings have been restored as the Stickley Museum at Craftsman Farms, operated by the Craftsman Farms Foundation.

The rollercoaster ride of Craftsman Farms’ history has been captured by former Foundation executive director Heather E. Stivison in her contribution to Arcadia Publishing’s Images of America series, “Craftsman Farms.” Combing through archives



The Log House at Craftsman Farms

and private scrapbooks, she put together an impressive collection of images and ephemera that manages to cover the full breadth of the story. The book is divided logically into the chapters: Gustav Stickley Pursues His Drams; Landscape and Buildings; The Log House; The Stickley Years; The Farny Years; Rescue and Rebirth. The photos of the Stickley and Farny families are especially interesting since it shows how the spaces were intended to be *lived* in as well as well-designed.

The inclusion of maps showing how the grounds changed during the different periods are a nice touch. The introductory texts and captions do a solid job of putting the images in context.

Anyone familiar with the property, interested in Stickley and the Arts and Crafts Movement, or just learning more about a fascinating aspect of New Jersey's role in both decorative arts and utopian community history will find much worthwhile in this book.