

# The Brisbane Mansion

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As almost everyone knows, there has been an ongoing discussion regarding the future location of the Batavia Police Department. A consulting firm was hired last year to develop possible options. More recently, a task force has been reviewing those options and will offer its recommendations to City Council this summer. Whether the final decision is to keep the Police Department where it is or to relocate to elsewhere in the City, the building at 10 West Main Street, aka, the Brisbane Mansion, will be affected. So, this seems like a good time to take a look at the building's history.

The Brisbane Mansion was erected ca. 1855 by George Brisbane. Born in 1812, he was the younger of two sons born to James and Mary Brisbane, a couple who were among the three wealthiest couples in early Batavia. James Brisbane, among many other things, owned and operated the first general store, was the first postmaster, was the largest shareholder of the first railroad to reach Batavia, and was a highly successful buyer and seller of real estate. In fact, at one point or another, James Brisbane held title to nearly 270 acres of choice property in our community.

After James died in 1851 (Mary died earlier), his inheritance went to his two sons, George and Albert, to share and share alike. Albert, who many regard as the more interesting offspring, left Batavia and, among other things, became nationally recognized as an advocate of Fourierism, a form of utopian communes. He also had four wives, apparently at least two at the same time, and fathered 10 and probably more children, one of whom, Arthur Brisbane, became a world famous newspaper editor.

George Brisbane, who remained here in Batavia, used part of his inheritance to raze his parents' home and build, in its place, the brick building standing at 10 West Main Street and currently serving as the Batavia Police Department. Unlike Albert, George was content to have one woman, Sarah Whitehouse, whom he married in 1848. They had only one child, a son named "James" after his grandfather.

The Brisbane Mansion was built of pressed brick, allegedly the first structure to be built in Batavia of this kind of building material. Because there were no bricklayers in Batavia who could lay them properly, it was necessary to get bricklayers from Buffalo and pay them \$5/day, a figure that was considered "outrageous." The roof was of slate. A veranda extended across the front of the building.

There were 30 or more rooms in the Mansion. On the first floor, a hallway 9 ft. by 45 ft. traversed from the front to rear doors. In the center of the building, an octagonal rotunda admitted daylight from the roof's cupola more than 40 ft. above. A walnut railing surrounded the opening on the second floor. To the east side of the hall on the first floor was a room extending the length of the building with double doors that opened from this room in three places into the hallway. To the west side of the hallway on the first floor were two large rooms. To the rear of these rooms were a dining room, kitchen and servants' quarters "large enough for a castle."

George and Sarah Brisbane also owned a home in New York City and split their time between the Big Apple and Batavia. He spent his time managing his inherited investments. From all accounts, George appears to have been something of a curmudgeon and, like his father, rather eccentric. He once sued the Village over smoke coming from the water plant across Main Street at 3 West Main Street, complaining that soot from the smoke fouled the water in his cistern and dirtied his wife's laundry. Children were purportedly afraid of him, but would nevertheless follow him down the street in order to gather coins he would toss their way.

After George and Sarah died, the Mansion became the property of their only child, James. In 1917, James sold the Mansion and the land behind it (now Austin Park) to the City for \$50,000. The deed specified that no house or other edifice could be erected to the rear of the Mansion. Within a year, James died leaving a wife and one son. Mistaken historical accounts that claim Batavia's first postmaster lived in the Mansion and then he sold it to the City are the result of confusion between the grandfather, James, and this grandson, James Brisbane.

In 1917, the City fathers (there were no City mothers, then) were thinking of razing the Mansion. But then good fortune smiled on the building when the former Genesee County Courthouse, erected in 1802, burned down in February of 1918. The old courthouse, standing where County Building 1 is currently located, was being used for City offices. Subsequently, Frank Homelius, a local builder and architect, was hired to remodel the Mansion and turn it into a city hall in order to replace the office space lost in the fire. Homelius completed his work by

the end of the year. The *Daily News* described the result as equal to the city halls of communities greater than Batavia in population, rank, and importance. Among other important architectural features, the central opening from the first floor to the cupola above was retained, affording daylight to the center of the building.

Unfortunately, over the years, the interior was chopped up by the erection of partitions throughout the building. In 1964, an addition was made to the rear of the Mansion to house the Batavia Police Department. Prior to that year, the Police Department had been located on School Street. Initially, this new facility included a jail, but in time inmates came to be housed in the County Jail located to the west across the parking lot.

Over time, the central opening and cupola were closed off. At one point in the 1960s, the cupola was actually removed, but then was replaced by a replica in 1983 when the Genesee County Landmark Society spearheaded a campaign to fund construction of a replica by the Industrial Model-Making classes at Genesee Community College. Today, the building is in need of significant repair, largely due to years of minimal maintenance.

The Mansion is one of the few remaining great houses that once graced a good portion of Batavia's main street. Gone is the Ellicott Mansion that stood where Dellinger Avenue now intersects West Main Street. Gone is the Cary Mansion that stood on East Main Street just east of the YMCA. Also gone is the Richmond Mansion that was once located at the site of the parking lot that now serves the Richmond Memorial Library and St. Joseph's Church (Resurrection Parish). What will become of the former Mansion that stands at the most prominent intersection of downtown Batavia?

Some have suggested, even if the Police Department remains in the building, that it would also be a suitable location for housing a small City museum. If the Police Department leaves, could the Mansion become a site for professional offices, a bed and breakfast, or some other use compatible with retaining its historic appearance? Will the site become another empty space? Batavians came up short when the futures of the Ellicott, Cary, and Richmond mansions were being considered. There are many regrets over what happened to those buildings. Let's hope we get it right, this time.