



FROM A MEZZOTINT ABOUT 1831

THE RUSSELL HOUSE

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY
HONORS COLLEGE

MIDDLETOWN
CONNECTICUT

THE RUSSELL FAMILY has been identified with Middletown for over two hundred and fifty years. Their first American ancestor was William Russell, who came from England in 1637 with Colonel Fenwick in the expedition of Lord Say and Seal. His son Noadiah, born in New Haven in 1659 and graduated from Harvard in 1691, married the daughter of one of the earliest settlers in Middletown, and in 1687 became pastor of the Congregational Church here. In 1700 he was one of the ten ministers who founded Yale College at Saybrook. Noadiah's son William was an early graduate of Yale, and succeeded his father as pastor in Middletown, serving from 1715 until 1761.

Samuel Russell, the founder of the Russell fortunes, was a great-great-grandson of the Reverend Noadiah. His father and grandfather were ship-owners and captains; his grandfather, the first Samuel, was in charge of the lead mine near Middletown during the Revolutionary War. Left an orphan at twelve, Samuel was put in charge of a guardian and trained as a merchant. At twenty-one he went to New York to learn the shipping

business; he sailed to Spain, and was employed by a firm interested in trade with China and India. In 1813, at the age of twenty-four, he established his own exporting firm, and five years later he became a member of the partnership which eventually became Russell and Company, probably the most famous and successful concern engaged in the China trade. The company continued in business for nearly a century, importing tea, silks, sandalwood, firecrackers, porcelain, and carved ivory. Their fast clipper ships competed successfully with the English merchantmen, and could outsail the pirates on the China Sea. These ships with the blue and white diamond flag of Russell and Company held the record of ninety days from China to America. In 1847 one of them broke the record from China to England; the profit from the cargo of tea on this trip was sixty per cent of the cost of the boat.

Samuel Russell lived in Canton, China for nearly twenty years. After his return to Connecticut he founded the Russell Manufacturing Company, and as president of the Middlesex County Bank used his own fortune to prevent its failure in the panic

of 1857. He was a liberal giver who did not limit his generosity within the bounds of any creed; for example, he contributed largely to the erection of St. John's Roman Catholic Church in Middletown. He is said to have given away as large a fortune as he had made in China. In character he was extremely modest, and so reserved that he seemed at times "almost a hermit." His closest friend was Houqua, a famous Chinese merchant.

Samuel Russell's first wife, whom he had married in 1815, died while he was in China. She was a descendant of the Mathers of colonial Massachusetts. Returning to America for a visit in 1823, he married her sister, Frances Osborne, who later gave the Russell Library to Middletown in memory of her husband. It was for the second Mrs. Samuel Russell that the Russell House was built in 1827-29, while her husband was winding up his affairs in Canton. He first saw the house when he sailed up the river in the summer of 1830.

The third Samuel Russell, born in 1847, was the grandson of the China merchant. An orphan from the age of three, he was brought up in the Russell House by the grandfather whose name he bore.

His first wife was a granddaughter of Commodore Thomas Macdonough, who won the naval battle of Lake Champlain. His son, T. Macdonough Russell, was mayor of Middletown and a leader in many civic activities. His grandson, T. Macdonough, Jr., presented the Russell House to Wesleyan in 1936.

The ownership of the land on which the Russell House stands can be traced back to 1654. At various times it belonged to members of the Sage and Starr families, both of which were prominent in the early history of Middletown. The house, as has been said, was built during Mr. Russell's absence in 1827-1829, under the supervision of his friend Samuel D. Hubbard.* Mr. Russell sent from China complete plans and a wooden model of the house. It was to be forty-four feet square and two stories high, with a basement floor below the street level. All partitions were to be of brick, and as little wood as possible was to be used. The owner hoped that the house could be built for

*Mr. Hubbard was later Postmaster-General of the United States in President Fillmore's administration. He built the house which is now the President's home at Wesleyan, and the College gave him the degree of LL.D. in 1854.

\$5000 but the cost turned out to be much greater. Correspondence still preserved shows that Mr. Hubbard was disturbed at Mrs. Russell's wish to enlarge the plans and spend more than her husband had intended. Mr. Russell, however, seems to have given her free rein. The fireplace mantels of black marble cost \$60 each; the window glass was ordered from Hamburg; the locks were "the best that could be bought in New York." The brass lock on the front door measures nine by twelve inches, and has a six inch key. Some of the bricks had been used in an earlier Middletown building and came from Europe. The Corinthian columns of the portico were originally made for a New Haven bank which failed: they were brought to Middletown by oxcart. The exterior of the house was covered with brown stucco.

The original house had twenty-two rooms. About 1860 the north wing was added to serve as a home for Samuel Wadsworth Russell, the younger son of the second Samuel. The east porch was enclosed, and divided into a dining room, a solarium and a butler's pantry. These changes made the total number of rooms forty-two. The present

depth of the house is fifty-four feet. The architect was probably Ithiel Towne; the builder was David Hoadley.

While the Russell family occupied the house, it contained much teakwood and lacquered furniture, and priceless Chinese vases, many pieces being gifts from the Chinese merchant prince Houqua. There were also various mementoes of Commodore Macdonough. Mr. T. Macdonough Russell had in his study a fine collection of ship models and guns.

The gardens and grounds include more than five acres. The boxwood was brought over from England a century ago. The potted trees and shrubs,—pomegranates, oleanders and crape myrtles,—came into the possession of the family about the time the house was built; probably the crape myrtles came from China.

Many famous guests were entertained by the Russells. In 1859 Edward Everett visited Middletown to give for the 109th time his lecture on Washington. (He devoted the proceeds of these lectures to the purchase and preservation of Mount Vernon.) He was entertained in the Russell House, and in a letter to his wife referred to it as "the

Russell palace." "Nothing," he said, "could exceed the luxury of my quarters."

In the house as renovated by the College, the social rooms on the first floor have been named the Thorndike Rooms in honor of three brothers, distinguished graduates of Wesleyan,—Ashley of the class of 1893, Edward of the class of 1896, and Lynn of the class of 1902. The house provides living quarters for two professors, and studies for seven. The furniture (except in the faculty studies) is the gift of Albert W. Johnston of the class of 1893.

Throughout the Russell House there are hung etchings loaned by George W. Davison of the class of 1892; these include prints by Arms, Blake, Canaletto, Cameron, Daumier, Dürer, Haden, McBey, Mantegna, Pennell, Rembrandt, and Whistler.