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HILLIG CASTLE: A Vernacular Landmark in the Southern Catskills



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By Neil Larson

Hillig Castle is located at the top of Washington Mountain, now eponymously Castle Hill, in the town of Liberty, Sullivan County, New York (Fig.2). The site overlooks the

village of Liberty towards the southwest and more broadly the southern Catskills with forested mountains 1000 to 2000 feet in height. To the east are vistas across the Hudson Valley and into New England. Accessed by local mountain roads and a long unpaved driveway, the castle is situated in a three-acre clearing, recently reclaimed, ringed by mature conifers planted in the 1940s when the mountain was tree-less.



Ruth Piwonka photographed with a venerable oak tree on Rt.21B in the town of Kinderhook when she was executive director of Columbia Land Conservancy. Photo by Paul B. Kniskern, Sr., 1988.

Obituary of Ruth Piwonka

Ruth Piwonka, 81, of Kinderhook, New York, eminent historian and preservationist, passed away peacefully in the presence of her family on August 2nd, 2021, in Albany, New York. She was born Edith Ruth Johnson in Chicago, Illinois, to Myrtle and Byron Johnson on February 14, 1940. She graduated from Maine East High School in 1958 and received her BA from DePauw University in 1962 where she was a DJ and jazz enthusiast. She earned her MA in 1964 from Indiana University in Bloomington. Ruth moved to Kinderhook, New York in 1969, where her intellectual pursuits led her to become an expert in local and regional history, particularly in the area of the Dutch colonization of New York.

Ruth served as Executive Director of the Columbia County Historical Society, guest curator for "A Portrait of Livingston Manor," consulting curator for "Dutch Colonial Arts and Material Culture," the first Executive Director of the Columbia County Land Conservancy, contract consultant for the New York State Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau and was a consulting researcher in the public and private sector.

Ruth was the recipient of numerous awards and honors, most recently the 2020 Martha Washington Woman of History, an award given annually "to a woman who has made a contribution to the history of the Hudson Valley through education, promotion, or preservation." She was an Elected Fellow of the Holland Society of America and the New York Academy of History, and at the time of her death, she was Trustee Emeritus of the Board of the Jacob Leisler Institute. Ruth served on the boards of many not-for-profit organizations, including the Columbia Land Conservancy, Friends of Lindenwald, and Historic Cherry Hill. She has been a member of multiple municipal boards in the Town and Village of Kinderhook, including the Village Zoning Board and Board of Trustees, and Comprehensive Planning, Historic Preservation and Environmental Protection Committees. A true dog lover, Ruth was member and treasurer for the Scottish Deerhound Club of America.

She had been the unofficial and official historian of Kinderhook for more than a generation. Her publications include *A Visible Heritage*, *A Remembrance of Patria*, *A Portrait of Livingston Manor*, and *Living in Style: Selections from the George Way Collection of Dutch Fine and Decorative Art*. Ruth is survived by her daughters, Christine Piwonka-Bernstein (Art Bernstein), of Kinderhook, New York, and Margaret Piwonka (John Jackson), and her grandchildren Anna and Arlo Piwonka-Jackson of Montague, Massachusetts. Donations in Ruth's name may be made to the Jacob Leisler Institute, P.O. Box 86, Hudson NY 12534; <https://jacobleislerinstitute.org/>.



Fig.1: Hillig Castle under construction, 1937. (All period photos from collection of castle's owners, most of which were found on the internet.)

Fig.2: View of Hillig Castle on top of Washington Mountain, ca. 1940.

The castle was constructed in 1937. Its owner Otto Hillig likely designed the building, and it was erected by local workmen (Fig.1).¹ It was modeled after mental images Hillig had of castles in Europe. It is smaller and more modest than most castle replicas, which tended towards lavishness. However, it shared with them the sense of being a landmark to be viewed in a natural landscape. Otto Hillig planned his castle to be his personal retreat, but it also was conceived as a picturesque asset for his hometown. The building has experienced long periods of abandonment and vandalism since Hillig's death in 1954. Subsequent owners did not maintain or protect the property effectively, nor did they make repairs following any preservation standards or with sensitivity to the building's significance. It is currently under a planned restoration (Fig.5).

Features that characterize it as a castle are its stone exterior and crenelated three-story tower (Figs.3-4). Aside from the tower, the castle is a small, one-story domestic form with stone walls, wood frame gables, a tile-pattern

metal roof and a massive river-rock chimney. The tower was balanced by a rooftop turret at the opposite end of the building. The building actually was constructed of formed concrete walls with local river rock embedded in the exterior and wood studs for walling embedded on the interior. Windows also were domestic in character but distinguished on the exterior by brick surrounds and Queen Anne and lozenge-paned sashes.

The tower and rock walls are essentially intact, as are the window openings, although many brick jambs were deepened when another course of mortared river rock was added to most of the exterior shortly after completion, evidently to stabilize portions of the stone veneer separating from the concrete structure due to flaws in the embedding method. The base of the tower flares out at the base, above which three large windows are evenly spaced on the curving wall for a first-story room. Above these are three smaller windows at different heights indicating the location of an interior stair winding around the curve of the wall to a third-story observatory with windows on all

four axes and extra windows on the westerly side to appreciate the view. From this space, there would have been access to the roof ringed by battlements.



Fig.3: Castle front from SW., ca. 1940.



Fig.4: Castle from SE, ca. 1940.



Fig.5: Castle from west, 2021. Photo by Neil Larson.

The main floor of the house is elevated on a tall, at-grade basement. This was likely designed to provide a better outlook from the main floor, although it also added mass to the small building. The west elevation is the principal façade with the tower anchoring its southerly end and a cross-gable pavilion fronted by concrete terrace with a stone base on the other (Fig.3). The entrance is located in the side of the pavilion at the top of concrete-capped stairs running along the wall. The landing outside the entrance was the only connection to the terrace. The portion of the façade between tower and pavilion has a large picture window flanked by standard-width windows with arched transoms. This is one section where the original stone facing has remained intact with openings neatly framed with brick keyed into the stone.

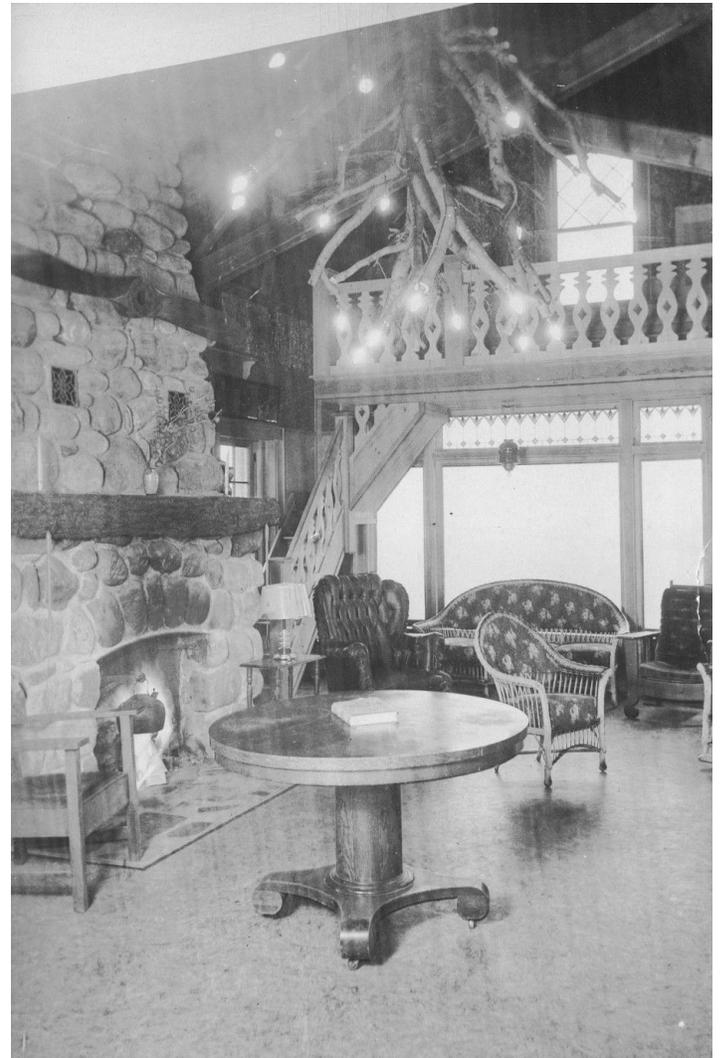


Fig.6: Great room looking south, ca. 1940.

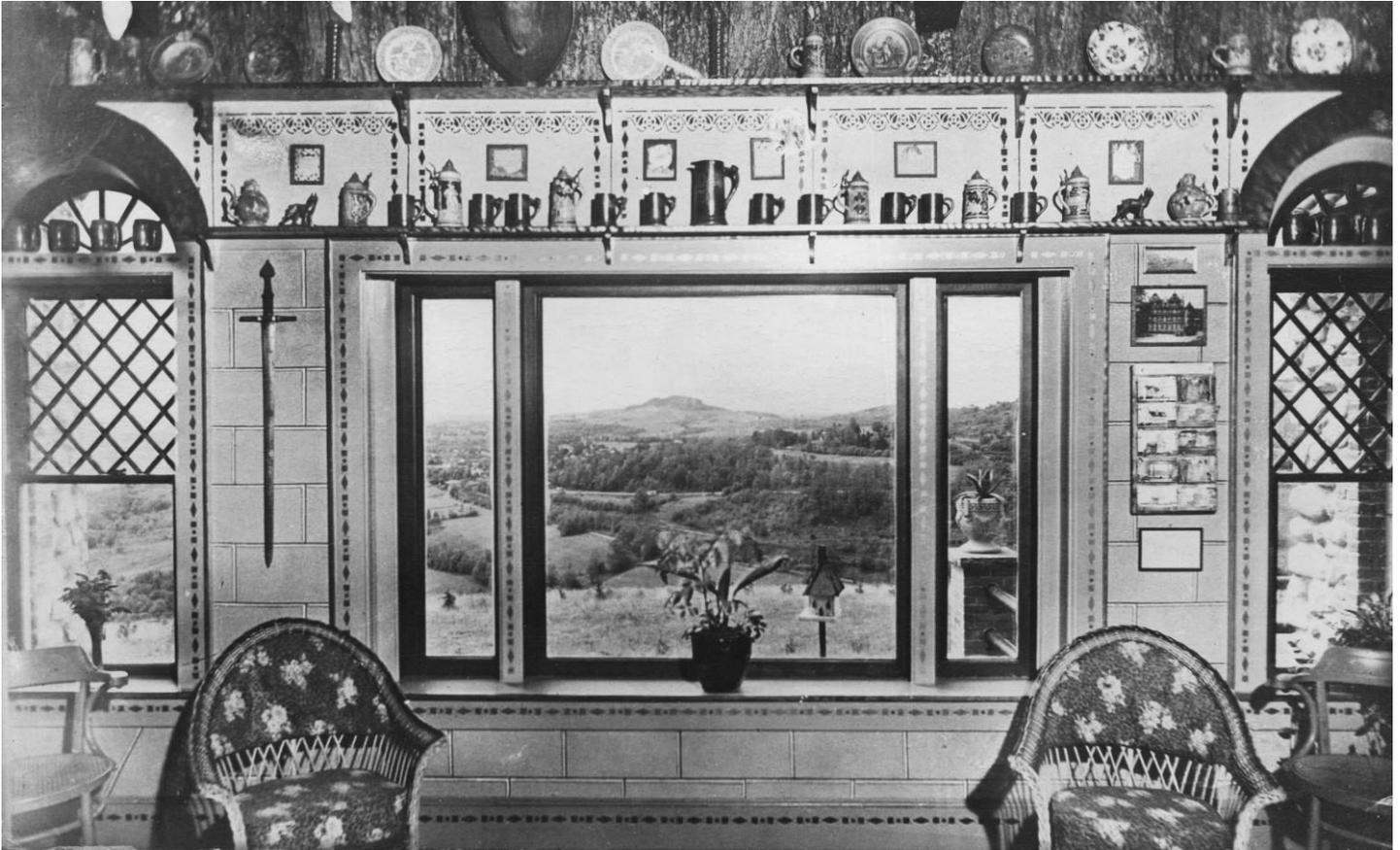


Fig.7: Great room, west window wall showing original decoration and view into Catskills. ca. 1940.

The interior plan of the building is centered on a great room open to the trussed framing of the roof with a river rock fireplace and chimney as a focal point on the east wall (Fig.6). The room is flooded with light from large windows on the south and west walls; the one on the west is augmented by two flanking standard windows with arched transoms containing colored glass. When built, the west-facing windows provided a vista into the Catskills (Fig.7). The ceiling has been damaged by rainwater flowing in through the holes in the roof, but some original panels of diagonal beadboard survive between principal rafters and purlins (Fig.8). A hardwood floor has been lost as well, along with plaster finishes on the walls, now revealing the concrete core of the exterior walls in which studs were embedded (Fig.9). Original windows have been replaced with contemporary casement units.

Otto Hillig was born in 1874 in Gera, Germany, a textile center in a rural region fifty miles south of Leipzig.² His German background is currently unknown, as are the reasons for emigrating alone at age fifteen. He settled

in Brooklyn, New York, perhaps among kin in the large German community there, where it is reputed he found employment as a scab conductor during the Great Trolley Car Strike of 1895. This would be the first of many Hillig's adventures. It may have been due to this event that Hillig relocated to the southern Catskills around 1897 where while working at a number of menial jobs, he fulfilled an aspiration to become a photographer. He purchased a Kodak box camera and began photographing local scenes. He embarked on his career full time when he was fired from his job on a farm "up Sulphur Springs way" for spilling developing fluid on a windowsill.³ By 1898 he was operating out of a small photography studio behind Main Street in Liberty. An advertisement for "Hillig – Photographer" in the 1906 Liberty directory offered "Views of Residences, Groups and Summer Houses. Souvenir Photographs of Sullivan County" at the "Largest and best equipped studio in Sullivan County."

By 1914 he enjoyed enough success to build a new studio, a two-story brick edifice with an ornate façade containing



Fig.8: Great room looking south, 2021. Photo by Neil Larson.



Fig.9: Great room, west wall showing loss of plaster, lath and studs embedded in concrete wall, 2021. Photo by Neil Larson.

a glazed terra-cotta medallion cast with "Photo Studio" and a date block centered in the parapet. Hillig's name was cast in glazed terra pilasters at the corners of the façade and in iron grillwork beneath the display windows (Fig.10). Historic views show a functional studio with large windows on the north wall and an elaborate reception room decorated with a stone fireplace, paneled walls and ceilings and a small pool and fountain centered in the floor (Fig.11). It was a harbinger to the creativity Hillig later brought to the design of his castle. (The building survives essentially intact on the exterior, but interior spaces have been lost.)

Through his photography, particularly a large catalog of postcards with images of natural and cultural landmarks in Sullivan County, including hotels where tourists bought them to mail home, Hillig became well-known as a promoter



Fig.10: Otto Hillig's Photo Studio, Main St., Liberty, 1914.

of the region, which was developing as a summer destination for thousands in the city (Fig.12). He also provided portraits in the studio as well as stereo views, wide-angle group photographs and panoramic views. In 1940 he photographed a local panorama that was the largest that the Eastman Kodak Company had ever developed. Twelve feet long, it required special equipment.⁴

To say the least, Otto Hillig was quite a character. He attracted attention by various publicity stunts, notably photographing aerial views from an airplane, which was a daring novelty for the time, and owning one of the first motorcars in the county, both of which were not without mishaps.⁵ Hillig's most memorable automobile adventure occurred in 1916 when he made a transcontinental round-trip to California and back in a Buick-6 Runabout with his friend John L. Porter. They followed a northern route to San Francisco, making it there in three weeks, and they departed from Los Angeles on their return journey along a southern route. The round trip took 49 days and covered

7,462 miles without a breakdown. During the two-month trip, Hillig sent back reports to the Liberty newspaper and returned with photographs and motion pictures of places and encounters, such as at a Native American Pueblo outside Albuquerque, New Mexico.⁶ Typically, he promoted Liberty with a banner displayed in many of the pictures and drew attention to himself and his business as well.

His most renowned adventure occurred in 1931 when he made a non-stop flight across the Atlantic in a small monoplane piloted by his buddy, barnstormer Holger Hoiriis (Fig,13). At his friend's suggestion, Hillig bought a monoplane from Wilmington, Delaware, aviation engineer G.M. Bellanca, covering the \$22,000 price tag with a settlement he won from the Graf Zeppelin Co. after suing them for bumping him off the reservation list for the first dirigible flight circumnavigating the globe in 1929. The story goes that William Randolph Hearst, who had committed \$100,000 to the project, claimed exclusive rights to photographs from the trip, and Hillig was an unwanted competitor.

Future flights were grounded by an injunction granted for Hillig's case, which motivated the German company to reach a settlement reputed to have been \$25,000.

Their destination was Copenhagen in the homeland of the Danish-born Hoiriis where they were welcomed by the King of Denmark and a crowd of 60,000 citizens (Fig. 14). Upon their return to New York, the pilots were praised by New York's governor, Franklin D. Roosevelt and received an official welcome at New York's city hall. Afterwards, they made a triumphal return to Liberty. This accomplishment was reported by the press far-and-wide and recalled in print long afterwards, particularly in Hillig's hometown. There are scores of newspaper articles and photographs

of his airship "Liberty" emblazoned with crossed flags of the United States and Denmark, often with portraits and autographs of the two pilots. From then on, he was known as the Flying Photographer.

As with his other adventures, Hillig was not blind to the public relations value of the trip, both for him and for Liberty. On the morning of their reception at city hall, Friday, July 17, 1931, the *New York World-Telegram*, published a lengthy interview with the two fliers; yet, Otto Hillig's greatest reception was in Liberty. He was feted by a parade, clambake and ceremony unmarred by a rainstorm. Hillig's arrival was memorable, as reported in the *New York Times*.

So the town was ready, as, in fact, it had been for days, when Otto came back, flying through the mists of the Catskills, just as he had gone away a month before, in midafternoon. About a fourth of Liberty's 3,500 people were at the links of the Sullivan County Golf and Country Club, the only available landing field when he dropped out of the sky on the green little golf course set in the midst of the hills.

For several hours, while the crowd waited, thrilled with its new airmindedness, farmers who were carefully groomed for the occasion talked wisely of barrel rolls and spins as they and their families watched the stunts of a visiting plane and the flights of an autogiro.

Soon after 2 P.M. word came that Hillig and Hoiriis, flying in a Bellanca from New York with an accompanying escort of three planes, having landed at Wurtsboro, about fifteen miles south of Liberty, because the pilots were afraid they might not be able to bring down their speedy craft on the small and bumpy golf links.

The autogiro flew down to meet them, Hillig and Hoiriis climbed in, and about 3:20 o'clock Otto came home.

The crowd was fairly orderly at first, staying behind the ropes. The girls of Hillig's photographic studio on Main Street, led by Mrs. Mary Linderman and Mrs. Myrtle Garigan, got to Otto and gave him and Sir Holger bouquets before anything happened. Then some of the planes that had landed at Wurtsboro swooped out of the sky, and Otto, jumping up and down with



Fig. 11: Reception room in Photo Studio building, ca. 1914, showing features and ornaments to be later used in castle.



Fig.12: Postcard view of Clements Lake Farm House, Liberty, N.Y., a typical postcard produced by Otto Hillig in early 1900s.



Fig.13: Send-off of Hillig and Hoiriis on their transatlantic flight from Sullivan County Golf & Country Club, 1931.



Fig.14: View of crowd celebrating arrival of Hillig and Hoiris in Copenhagen. The two flyers can be seen waving in the second story window left of the entrance architrave.

excitement, used his bouquet to flag them down out of the sky, vehemently insisting that they land.

He forgot all about the townsfolk and the welcoming committee headed by Ernest J. Hoos and Mayor Edmund Hallenbeck until eight planes had landed, one after the other, on the small field. This opened a scene of wild confusion, and Liberty, not to be outstripped by New York, made the golf course a second Roosevelt Field.⁷

Otto Hillig was regaled for his accomplishments at home in Liberty and abroad. He was called upon for interviews and public presentations.⁸ He became a celebrity and Sullivan County's favorite son. The media generated by his exploits placed him at the forefront of the national consciousness. His popularity led to his being elected to the New York State Assembly in 1936, a position for which



Fig.15: Great room looking north, ca. 1940.

he lacked interest and held for only a year. Hillig sold his plane to brothers Benjamin and Joseph Adamovicz, soda makers in Brooklyn. As they flew with the plane, renamed "Warsaw" to Poland, police raided their factory and found a still. On their return, the Adamovicz brothers were jailed. Left in Poland, it is believed the plane was destroyed during World War II.⁹

At 55 years of age, Hillig had reached a pinnacle of success few individuals could claim and unexpected even for him. But at his homecoming he announced his intention of staying at home and getting back to work in his photographic store and studio. Soon after, he purchased a mountaintop site overlooking Liberty, with panoramic vistas across the

Catskills and eastward into New England. Obviously, he had something dramatic in mind. He imagined a castle conceived from memories of those he recalled from Germany and, according to at least one account, from one he saw after the Liberty landed in Denmark. Hillig's Castle became an instant local landmark visible high on Washington Mountain and a pleasure ground that Hillig opened to his neighbors on weekends.

The interior was planned around a great room open to the trusses and rafters with a fireplace and chimney constructed of large river rocks of varied colors (Fig.15). Wicker furniture shown in historic photos conveyed the sense of a summer camp. Historian Van Etten described the interior of the castle as filled with fancy furniture, hundreds of pictures, beer steins and mementos of Hillig's Atlantic flight (Fig,7). "It really was somewhat of a museum and he delighted in giving people a tour and talk about his flight across the ocean. Many social affairs of the Masonic Lodge were held there as well as endless picnics and get togethers."¹⁰

When the castle was completed in 1937, it was a singular object on a barren mountaintop (Fig.2) The ring of trees on the periphery of the clearing that even fifty years ago hid the castle from view were planted by Hillig in 1940s. He obtained thousands of spruce and evergreen seedlings and hired Preston LeRoy of the White Bridge area to plant them.¹¹ Another account says Hillig enlisted the help of the Boy Scouts to plant trees. The regrowth of trees on the sides of the mountain was also permitted from the beginning. "On the side of the mountain facing the Young's Gap Hotel, Mr. Hillig had the word LIBERTY spelled out with flat rocks painted white. The top of the tower had a red neon electric tube about it and lit as a beacon for aircraft."¹²

Otto Hillig sold his photography business and studio building in 1947 after accumulating 60,000 photographs and 50,000 glass plate negatives. He had sold over a million postcards. He died on September 12, 1954. The *Liberty Register* published a long obituary recounting once more, in detail, his transatlantic adventure, calling him "Ocean Conqueror" and "Immigrant German Boy Whom Danish King Knighted." He was mourned as a heroic figure. He was buried in a local cemetery with a simple

marker; a plaque was erected on the golf course at the Sullivan County Country Club as a tribute to his historic transatlantic flight.

His will distributed his estate, estimated to have been about \$100,000, to eleven churches, eighteen relatives and twenty-five friends. (He explicitly excluded his divorced wife "for the reason that she abandoned me forty years ago and has ever since refused to live with me.") The castle was left "absolutely and forever" to the Grand Lodge of Masons of the State of New York, of which Hillig was a proud member. The Masons had no interest in the property and never used it. In 1960 they sold it to Max Jaffe, a Liberty realtor, for \$4,000, who evidently was interested in the mountaintop tract; the castle was left vacant for more than a decade and became derelict. The next owner was unsuccessful in recovering the building and sold it again in 1978. Local historian Delbert Van Etten made an attempt in a 1976 article in the Liberty newspaper to rouse public interest in preserving the castle as a monument to the village's most historic figure, but he found little if any support.¹³ The castle has languished since then, and recently was sold once again to owners intent on restoring it.

Epilogue

The lore and ephemera of Otto Hillig's adventures are preserved on the Internet, and his pictorial postcards are well-known to collectors. Images of the castle are popular among enthusiasts of the mysteries of ruins. Hillig also is associated with a story of World War II espionage and a lost treasure that has become popularized through a current guide to the Catskills.¹⁴

The story goes that during the war, saboteurs planned to blow up a railroad trestle in Ferndale, near Liberty, to cripple the transportation of armaments. Needing to purchase explosives from a source on Long Island, two Nazis commandeered Otto Hillig and Holger Hoiriis and their plane to fly them there. (Hillig had sold his plane prior to the war and Hoiriis was stationed in Delaware at the time.) Once in the air, Hoiriis rolled the plane to knock them off balance while Hillig grabbed a gun and shot and killed them. The two airmen reported the incident to the authorities but kept the saboteurs' money. Hillig and

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Hoiriss buried the treasure, vowing to use it only for noble causes. Before he died, Otto Hillig directed an assistant to retrieve the money and place it in a savings account in a bank in Liberty. Then he was to place a large coin engraved with the initials OH on the spot where it had been buried and to provide clues to its whereabouts in newspapers and on the radio. The one who finds the coin can redeem it for the bounty. (What became of the noble cause?) The Town of Liberty Parks and Recreation Department has published a brochure with 26 clues by which to find the coin.

ENDNOTES

¹ Local historian Delbert Van Etten, wrote that John Kelly worked on the excavation for the footings and Allie Frey did the masonry work. John Rohrback, Andrew "Dutch" Rampe and Walter Norris, some of liberty's finest carpenters, worked on the building (Fig.1). Stones from the Neversink River were hauled to the site by James Bailey and his helper Charles Bivins.

² Although local biographers vary in their locating of Hillig's German home, in newspaper interviews following his transatlantic flight, he refers to Gera as where he had a reunion with his mother, brother and school friends in 1931, such as in "Denmark Fliers Get Dressed Up For Reception," *New York World-Telegram*, Friday, July 17, 1931.

³ As recalled in "Triumphant Fliers Hailed in Liberty," *New York Times*, July 22, 1931.

⁴ "'Flying Camera Man,' Hillig, Retires at 73," *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1947. This photograph survives in a private collection.

⁵ The local newspaper reported in 1911 that Hillig's Haynes automobile developed a leak in the gas tank and caught fire one day on his way home and quickly burned to the ground. Another article described a collision with his automobile and a horse-and-buggy, which killed the horse and damaged the car. Hillig, it was said, claimed that the buggy was on the wrong side of the road. There also were reports of plane crashes.

⁶ As quoted by Maurer without citations.

⁷ *New York Times*, July 22, 1931.

⁸ According to Maurer, "Otto Hillig: Freemason and Hero of Liberty, N.Y." "Mr. Hillig still admits he knows nothing about the technic of flying and is scared to death when he is in the air. He makes no claim as a speaker. But those among the thousands who have heard him give the dramatic humorous talk about his experiences on and after this flight will assure you that Mr. Hillig is a discovery as a new humorist and most entertaining talker. Last May he gave his talk before the Leonard S. Morange Post in Bronxville. He kept his large audience in continuous roars of laughter and at a highly-pitched interest for over an hour." Like Maurer, Hillig was an active Mason, and he was a popular speaker at lodges throughout the region.

⁹ As related by Maurer.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Otto Hillig, Liberty's Flying Dutchman," *The Sullivan County News*, Nov. 18, 1976.

¹⁴ Francine Silverman, *Hunter Travel Guides: The Catskills Alive* (Edison NJ: Hunter Publishing Co., 2003).