



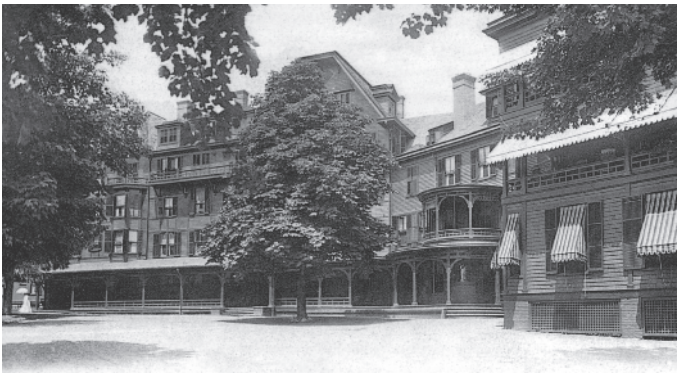
# FAIRCOURT

## FAIRCOURT, THE KUSERS, AND THE SOMERSET HILLS IN THE “GILDED AGE”

The communities comprising the Somerset Hills were fundamentally changed following the arrival of the railroad in Bernardsville in 1872 and the subsequent development of the large and luxurious summer resort hotel, the Somerset Inn, on the Bernardsville–Mendham Road. Both factors were key to exposing the area to prominent and affluent families from New York and Newark, many of whom liked what they saw and decided to stay.



*The original Bernardsville railroad station, from 1872 to 1901-02.  
It was later moved and is now the Bernardsville News office.*



*The Somerset Inn started as a boarding house in 1870,  
and grew to become a large and luxurious summer resort hotel  
hosting up to 400 guests. It burned to the ground in 1908.*

Except for the periodic excitement created by soldiers in the area during the American Revolution, what had long been a quiet, peaceful and relatively isolated area consisting of small family farms and quaint villages was transformed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth into a colony of large and elaborate estates. These properties were designed by some of the country's most prominent architects and landscape architects for a new class of financiers and industrialists who had amassed enormous fortunes in the years following the Civil War.

Although the increasingly crowded, noisy and grimy urban centers were the principal sources of this vast new wealth, these business moguls sought out the open and beautiful rolling countryside of New Jersey as a retreat from the city and a way to capture—and in many ways to create from scratch—what they saw as the fading ideal of the bucolic life.



*The open, rolling terrain of the Somerset Hills circa 1905  
(from the F.P. Crater Collection, Bernardsville Public Library.)*

Part and parcel of this movement to the country was a desire to display one's new-found wealth through the physical manifestations of the aristocratic life: large, immaculately maintained estate houses and gardens staffed by servants; the friendly competition of raising prize-winning flowers, crops and coddled animals; and the pursuit of leisure and the sporting life not readily accessible to their less-affluent neighbors and employees, with activities such as polo, fox hunting, golf, cricket, horseback riding, and carriage-driving. It was all about enjoying the country life picturesquely displayed for all to see; a self-contained world for living and entertaining on a grand scale with one's financial and social peers.

One of these great Somerset Hills estates was and remains Faircourt, a storied Bernardsville property.





*Faircourt today.*

## BLYTHEWOOD BECOMES FAIRCOURT

Today's Faircourt was called Blythewood by its builders and first owners, Henry and Mabel Kunhardt. The original house was designed in 1897 by New York architect Henry Rutgers Marshall, with an estate plan of carriage roads laid out by the prominent Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot firm of landscape architects. Under the Kunhardts' ownership, the estate grew in size to more than 250 acres, and the property line separating the Kunhardt and neighboring George B. Post estates was soon marked by the construction of a new public road, today's aptly named Post-Kunhardt Road.



*Henry R. Kunhardt Jr. (1860–1923)*

Henry Rudolph Kunhardt Jr. was born at his family's New Brighton, Staten Island home in 1860, the son and namesake of a German immigrant. His mother was of Irish and English descent.

Kunhardt's father, who was born at Hamburg, Germany, set out at the age of 20 for Valparaiso, Chile, and for the following two years met "stirring adventures of

storm and shipwreck in the South Sea Islands,” according to his 1895 obituary. He traveled from Chile to California in 1848 and formed a mercantile and banking business in San Francisco. When a devastating fire in 1850 “swept savings and profits away,” Henry Sr. moved to New York City where he gained employment in the shipping firm of Edward Beck & Kunhardt, in which his elder brother, George, was a partner. In 1857 the firm’s name was changed to Kunhardt & Co., and following his brother’s death three years later, Henry Sr. became head of the firm.

Henry Jr. attended private schools in America and Europe, and then was employed by the Atlas Steamship Company of New York. He joined his father’s firm in 1882. Kunhardt & Co. was general agent for the Hamburg-American Packet Company for thirty-eight years, importing coffee, cocoa, hides and logwoods from South America and the West Indies, while exporting a variety of United States products to that continent and to Europe.



*Blythewood circa 1897, as designed for the Kunhardts by Henry Rutgers Marshall.*

Blythewood’s architect, Henry Rutgers Marshall, was also a psychologist, author and college lecturer on aesthetics, and one-time president of the American Psychological Association. In the field of architecture, he is perhaps best known today for his 1892 design of Rudyard Kipling’s shingle-style home, Naulakha, near Brattleboro, Vermont. Naulakha has been lovingly restored and is now run as a bed and breakfast inn by the British organization, Landmark Trust USA. Closer to home, Marshall designed the original Voorhees Library at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

By 1916, Henry and Mabel Kunhardt’s three boys were largely grown and the family was spending less and less time at Blythewood, so the property was put up for sale. Bernardsville neighbors of the Kunhardts, Anthony and Susie Dryden Kuser, bought the estate and proceeded to enlarge and alter the house. The relatively simple Blythewood was transformed into an ornate home the Kusers renamed Faircourt, replete with marble floors, columns and staircase; elaborate plaster work and wood paneling, and an elegant new courtyard entrance.

To design these changes, the Kusers retained Hoppin & Koen, a New York architectural firm that had previously designed Berglotte, the since-demolished Bernardsville estate of attorney Frank Bergen. The firm's partners, Francis L.V. Hoppin and Terrence Koen, were distinguished alumni of the prominent and influential firm of McKim, Mead & White. Hoppin & Koen designed many notable residences, including Edith and Edward Wharton's Lenox, Massachusetts home, The Mount, and Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's home, Springwood, at Hyde Park, New York. Although best known for its country and urban residential work, the firm of Hoppin & Koen also designed religious and civic buildings, including the ornate Renaissance-Revival-style New York City Police Headquarters at 240 Centre Street (1905-1909). In the 1980s that elegant building was converted into luxury condominiums.



*Illustrated map of Faircourt from the 1950s.*

Faircourt was owned by the Kuser family for more than 45 years, and has had only five owners during its 120-year history. In 1962, the Kusers' daughter, Cynthia Kuser Earle, conveyed the then-216-acre estate to the Berkshire Land Corporation, a syndicate of local developers. The reported sale price was approximately \$180,000, or about \$833 an acre. The property was soon subdivided for new homes, with access via two new streets—Overleigh and Berkshire Roads. In a harkening back to the property's early history, the new streets closely followed the network of carriage roads that had been laid out 65 years before by the Olmsted firm.

## OTHER KUSER RESIDENCES

Today's Faircourt was the second of Anthony and Susie Kuser's houses in Bernardsville to bear that name. And, while today's Faircourt served as the family's principal residence, it was only one of their several estates, which included Los Incas in Palm Beach, Florida; Tall Pines in Aiken, South Carolina; and a mansion on their 10,600-acre estate at High Point, in Sussex County, which is discussed below.

### THE FIRST FAIRCOURT

The first Faircourt was located on a 40-acre tract the Kusers purchased in 1903 from the notable New York architect and Bernardsville resident George B. Post. The property, at the northwest corner of Claremont Road and Post Lane, included the Post family's original Claremont Farm residence.

At the time of the sale to the Kusers, Post's now-iconic New York Stock Exchange was just being completed, and he was engaged in the design of what would be his new, neo-Federal-style Claremont mansion, located on the hill to the south across Post Lane.

Documentary records about the Kusers' first Faircourt residence are scarce and unclear, but the house appears to have been either a new structure built on the foundation of the earlier Post house, or a substantial remodeling, in a neo-classical style, of the original structure.



*The Kusers' first Faircourt residence, located at the northwest corner of Claremont Road and Post Lane. Later called Langstone, it was demolished around 1949.*

With an abiding love of animals, especially birds, the Kusers established a private animal park on the estate. Opened to the public on Sunday afternoons, the park's many animals included deer, llamas and alligators. Up to 700 birds, representing some 180 species, flew in the extensive aviaries. Kuser reportedly also experimented with breeding, raising, and freeing birds in an effort to reintroduce to New Jersey native species that had become rare.

In 1919, three years after the Kusers bought the nearby Blythewood estate from the Kunhardts, the original Faircourt property was sold to Ferdinand J. and Lorol Dean Kuhn, who renamed the estate Langstone. That name can still be seen engraved on the property's tan-colored brick and stone entrance pillars. Ferdinand Kuhn, an 1890 immigrant from Germany, worked in the woolen business, managing the Botany Worsted Mills in Passaic, New Jersey.

After Kuhn's death in 1933 (Lorol had predeceased him), the Langstone property was largely abandoned for a number of years until it was finally sold at public auction. The house was razed around 1949 or 1950 and the property subdivided. The estate's entrance pillars and the tall iron fencing along Post Lane and Claremont Road and at the intersection of Mountaintop and Dryden Roads are the last vestiges of this once-grand property.

## LOS INCAS, PALM BEACH, FLORIDA

Situated facing the Atlantic Ocean on a property that stretched all the way back to Lake Worth, Los Incas was Anthony and Susie Kuser's winter residence in Palm Beach, Florida, from the early 1920s until Anthony's death, in 1929.

To the south of the Kuser house stood the 37-room, Spanish Colonial-style El Mirasol mansion, designed by prominent Florida architect Addison Mizner and built in 1919 by Edward and Eva Stotesbury. El Mirasol was the first house designed by Mizner after his flashy debut on the Palm Beach scene the year before with his design of the exclusive Everglades Club.

Heamaw, a Beaux-Arts-style home designed in 1916 by Francis Burrall Hoffman Jr. for Henry Carnegie Phipps, occupied the property to the north of Los Incas. At the time, Hoffman, who had received his professional training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the prominent New York firm of Carrère & Hastings—architects of New York's iconic New York Public Library and the Blairsdon estate in Peapack-Gladstone—was gaining widespread recognition for his design of James Deering's Villa Vizcaya on Biscayne Bay in Miami. Of note, Hoffman had several residential commissions in the Somerset Hills, and also designed St. Brigid's Catholic Church, as well as a chapel at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, in Peapack-Gladstone.

Los Incas was originally called Dorcas Villa. Designed by an unknown architect—though some speculate it may have been Hoffman—it was built sometime between 1914 and 1917 for Michael P. Grace, who was associated in business with his brother, William, the founder of W.R. Grace & Co.



In 1918, Dorcas Villa was sold to cosmetics manufacturer Richard Hudnut, and a few years later, around 1921, Anthony Kuser purchased the estate for a reported \$250,000.



*Los Incas, the Kusers' ocean-front estate at Palm Beach, Florida from 1921 to 1930.*

Kuser retained Palm Beach architect Marion Sims Wyeth to remodel and enlarge the house into a much grander Beaux-Arts structure. Kuser renamed the place Los Incas, and retained noted decorator Elsie Cobb Wilson to handle the interiors.

Architect Wyeth, after receiving his professional training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, apprenticed, as had Hoffman, at New York's Carrère & Hastings.

Wyeth moved to Palm Beach in 1919 and began his architectural practice in partnership with Frederic Rhinelandter King. The firm of Wyeth & King would go on to design many notable residences, including Mar-a-Lago, in Palm Beach, for Marjorie Merriweather Post, and Shangri-La, in Honolulu, for Doris Duke. Anthony Kuser again retained the firm in the late 1920s to design the 221-foot-tall stone monument he built at High Point, New Jersey.

Following Anthony Kuser's death, Los Incas was sold to John Sanford, who owned another house, Villa Marina, nearby. Sanford's son, Stephen ("Laddie"), and wife, Mary Duncan, a stage and silent film actress, occupied the property until the late 1970s, when the house was razed and the property subdivided. The only remaining vestige of the Kuser home is the name of a new street, Via Los Incas, which cuts through the former estate.

## TALL PINES, AIKEN, SOUTH CAROLINA

Before Los Incas became their winter home, Anthony and Susie Kuser owned a large mansion on Whiskey Road in Aiken, South Carolina. Called Tall Pines, the nine-acre property, located adjacent to the exclusive Palmetto Golf Club, was one of the show places of Aiken's winter colony during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Kuser, a crack shot with a gun, may have been drawn to Aiken because he and two of his brothers had, since the 1890s, been members of the Chelsea Plantation Club, a 20,000-acre private hunting preserve about 100 miles southeast of Aiken.

In 1917, Anthony Kuser and William K. Vanderbilt became major supporters of the new Aiken Hospital and Relief Society, a project spearheaded by fellow Aiken winter colony residents Hope Goddard Iselin and her husband, C. Oliver Iselin. Kuser's financial support included the donation of gross proceeds from the local premier of the then-blockbuster movie, "A Daughter of the Gods," an elaborately filmed underwater fantasy said to have been loosely based on Richard Wagner's opera, "Das Rheingold." Produced by the Fox Film Corporation, of which Kuser was one of the largest initial investors, the 10-reel silent film, accompanied by a 17-piece orchestra, was considered rather scandalous because it was the first time an actress appeared fully nude in a Hollywood movie.



*Tall Pines, the Kuser estate in Aiken, South Carolina. In 1921 it became the Fermata School for Girls. It was demolished after a 1944 fire.*

The Kusers sold Tall Pines in 1921 to Marie Eustis Hofmann, wife of the Polish-American pianist, composer and inventor, Josef Hofmann. The Hofmanns converted the mansion into the Fermata School for Girls, which they had started two years before in their own home nearby. The school had been established to provide girls of families in Aiken's elite winter colony with the same educational opportunities afforded boys who attended the Aiken Preparatory School.

In 1930, not long after Anthony Kuser's death, his personal secretary, Oscar Creamer, reportedly arranged for Albert Willcox, proprietor of Aiken's legendary Willcox Inn, to deliver to Marie Hofmann an envelope containing a \$500,000 check (equivalent to more than \$7 million today) and a note signed by Kuser that read: "I wish to make this gift anonymously, and indeed I ask that no publicity be attached to your receipt of the enclosed. Please take good care of my home."

The Fermata School, which drew girls from across the country as well as Europe and South America, closed its doors in 1941. The property then went through several owners who had various, ultimately unexecuted, ideas for its adaptive reuse. The mansion suffered a serious fire in 1944, which resulted in its demolition. Eight years later, a group of area families took over the property in order to establish a social club—today's Fermata Club—turning the school's former gymnasium into a clubhouse.

## THE KUSER FAMILY

Anthony Rudolph Kuser was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1862. He was one of five sons (one of which was his fraternal twin) and one daughter born to Rudolph Kuser, a German-Swiss mechanical engineer who emigrated from Zurich to the United States in 1837, and Rosalia Prieth, daughter of a prominent family in the Tyrol region of Austria.

After settling in Newark, Rudolph Kuser became a partner in the engineering firm of Baxter, Kuser & Thompson, inventors of the Baxter engine, one of the first portable, self-contained steam engines. The Baxter engine was later manufactured by the Colt Fire Arms Manufacturing Co. of Hartford, Connecticut.

In the early 1860s, Rudolph and Rosalia moved to a farm outside of Hackettstown, New Jersey. A few years later, in 1867, the family relocated to the former Timothy Lord farm in Hamilton Township outside of Trenton. It was in Trenton that the Kusers' sons began to establish, often in collaboration with one another, what would become a wide array of successful business ventures.

In the case of Anthony Kuser, his career would involve interests in a number of decidedly different businesses, as well as government service and support of cultural activities and conservation.



*Anthony Rudolph Kuser (1862–1929)*

Anthony received his early education at St. Peter's German School in Newark. In the early 1880s he earned a diploma from the Jonathan J. Mitchell Co. Cutting

School in New York, where he learned the tailoring business, reportedly becoming “an expert cutter” and “pants presser.” Reportedly he also graduated from a Newark business college.

## THE BREWERY BUSINESSES

After returning to his family’s home near Trenton, Anthony worked for a time as a streetcar conductor in that city. By 1885, however, when he was in his early twenties, he had become the Trenton distributor for the New York-based Peter Doelger brewery, of which his older brother, Fred, was brew master and general manager and the husband of Peter Doelger’s daughter, Teresa.

Of the five Kuser brothers, it was Anthony who often initiated the family’s business investments and provided much of the financial guidance and backing.

With help from the Doelgers, the Kuser brothers soon took over the bankrupt Trenton Brewing Company, and by 1899, the brothers were in a position to consolidate many of Trenton’s breweries under their newly formed Peoples Brewing Co., which had side businesses making and selling ice.



*The Kuser brothers established the Peoples Brewing Co. in 1899 to consolidate their ownership of several Trenton breweries.*

With business success, Anthony also began to acquire some of the trappings of that success. An article in the July 3, 1891, issue of “Town Topics,” a short-lived Trenton weekly, reported on the first cruise of Anthony’s new 62-foot schooner-rigged yacht on the Delaware River. The boat was christened the “Chelsea,” after the Chelsea Plantation Club in South Carolina of which several of the Kuser brothers were members.



## BUSINESS LESSONS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICE

The lessons of efficiency and profitability that Anthony learned in the consolidation of the brewery businesses would come to serve him very well in his later business ventures. He also realized the financial and personal benefits of keeping one foot in the world of business and the other in the world of government.

Beginning in 1890, he served on the personal staffs of three successive New Jersey governors, Leon Abbett, George T. Werts, and John W. Griggs, in the process being awarded the honorary title of Colonel. Always known for his ability to host parties, Anthony often brought together political and business leaders in friendly social settings that also served his and their very practical business interests.

Kuser was appointed to the New Jersey Board of Assessors, Highway Commission, and the Interstate Bridge Commission, and was one of the original directors of the Inter-State (or Trenton) Fair Association, which was organized in 1888. Several of the Kuser brothers were associated with the State Fair, which was located on a 110-acre tract in Hamilton Township just east of Trenton. In 1992, part of the former Fair property opened to the public as the Grounds for Sculpture, a showcase for contemporary sculpture organized by artist and philanthropist J. Seward Johnson.

## GAS AND ELECTRIC UTILITIES AND TROLLEY LINES

Financial success in the brewery and ice businesses soon led several of the Kuser brothers to invest in various public utilities, including gas and electric and streetcar companies.

Following the pattern used in many other lines of business in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and applying the lessons learned in their own Trenton brewery business, the Kusers worked to consolidate their control of these utility companies so as to monopolize the market.

In 1903, Anthony Kuser helped organize more than 400 electric and gas utilities and ferry and trolley companies into the newly formed Public Service Corporation, of which Anthony and his brother-in-law, Forrest F. Dryden, were officers and directors. Anti-trust concerns later forced the separation of the transportation operations from the electric and gas utilities, which later evolved into Public Service Electric & Gas, better known today as PSE&G.

## THE WALTER AUTOMOBILE COMPANY AND MERCER AUTOMOBILE COMPANY

Although the utility businesses were consistently profitable, they did not offer the fun and thrill—and potentially even greater profits—of new technologies, particularly automobiles, which soon captured the interest of the Kuser and Roebing families of Trenton.

Sharing a German heritage and a variety of business, civic, and social connections in Trenton, the two families were among the elite of that city and had the financial wherewithal and entrepreneurial spirit to invest in new and potentially lucrative businesses. The Roebings, of course, were wealthy and world-famous for their “wire rope” and as the designers and builders of the Brooklyn Bridge.

The two families’ first tentative step into the automobile business was the establishment, in 1902, of the Munger Automobile Tire Co., followed soon by their individual purchases of automobiles, which at the time were “all the rage.”

In 1906, Anthony Kuser and two of his brothers, his twin, John L., and Rudolph, attended the New York Automobile Show held at the iconic Madison Square Garden, designed by architect Stanford White and located on Madison Square from 1890 to 1925. The Kusers and the Roebings, who also attended the show, were quite taken by the cars hand made by fellow Trentonian William Walter, a Swiss-born manufacturer of confectionery machinery. Several of the Kusers and Roebings bought Walter’s cars and soon organized and invested in the new Walter Automobile Company, using a partially built brewery building the Kusers owned in Hamilton Township as the new company’s factory.



*Mercer Raceabout, Series C, 1912.*

Three years later, Anthony and John Kuser and brothers Ferdinand and Charles Roebing organized the Mercer Automobile Company, as the successor to the Walter firm. The high-quality, lightweight Mercer “Raceabouts” soon put Mercer (which also manufactured touring and other model cars) into the national spotlight after winning a number of important automobile races.

Of note, the Roebbling brothers were uncles of Washington A. Roebbling II, who owned the Boulderwood estate adjacent to Faircourt.

## FOX FILM CORPORATION

Anthony Kuser's talent for seeking out new business opportunities and cutting-edge technology led him, in 1915, to be one of the principal initial investors in the new Fox Film Corporation, which twenty years later evolved into 20th Century-Fox.

By 1915 the film business had grown from penny arcades and nickelodeons to something resembling a fully developed movie production, distribution and exhibition industry. That year, D.W. Griffith produced his silent, two-hour epic film, "The Birth of a Nation." Despite the film's blatant and cruel racism, it was a huge success and proved to investors the commercial potential of the movie industry.

Visionary entrepreneur William Fox capitalized on this potential and successfully enlisted several financial backers, including Anthony Kuser, to support his new company. During the heydays of the 1920s and early 1930s, the Fox company and its investors earned enormous profits. The company's first film studios were in Fort Lee, New Jersey, but soon a second, West Coast studio was established in Los Angeles. A couple of large buildings on New York's Tenth Avenue (one of which was owned by Kuser and leased to Fox) served as office and production space.

Fox lost control of his company in 1930, after announcing plans the previous year for a merger with Loew's Inc., which controlled hundreds of theaters across the country. Anti-trust charges, which appear to have been largely trumped up by Louis B. Mayer of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, were brought against the merger, which ultimately failed. Even Anthony Kuser's widow, Susie, filed suit against Fox claiming misuse of company funds. Fox vociferously denied the claim and publicly retaliated by releasing information showing the millions of dollars in profits the Kuser family had earned on its initial \$200,000 investment.

In 1935, new management merged Fox Film Corporation with Twentieth Century Pictures to form 20th Century-Fox.

## ANTHONY KUSER'S DIRECTORSHIPS

Anthony Kuser's 1929 obituaries reported that he had been a director of 54 corporations, not counting his service on the boards of several cultural organizations. Although many of his business interests were utilities firms, he also

served on the boards of the Fidelity Trust Co.; Lenox, Incorporated; Fox Film Corporation, and the Prudential Life Insurance Company, of which his father-in-law was the founder.

## THE DRYDENS AND STRONGHOLD

Anthony Kuser's wife, Susie Fairchild Dryden, whom he married in 1896, was the daughter of Cynthia Jennings Fairchild and John Fairfield Dryden, the founder and long-time president of the Prudential Life Insurance Company and a one-term United States senator.

Marrying Susie Dryden put Anthony firmly in the New York Social Register. The couple's wedding, at Third Presbyterian Church in Newark, was a large and important social event, with 1,500 invitations having been issued. Anthony's best man was Walter Scott Lenox, a close friend from Trenton who had started what became the world-famous china manufacturer, Lenox, Incorporated. Several members of the Kuser family were major investors in Lenox. Susie Dryden's maid of honor was the daughter of Theodore Runyon, a Somerville, New Jersey, native who was a Brigadier General in the New Jersey Militia during the Civil War, served as a mayor of Newark and was in banking there, and was later appointed United States ambassador to Germany.

John and Cynthia Dryden resided in a large house at 1020 Broad Street in Newark—now the site of Newark's Symphony Hall—and at their Bernardsville estate, Stronghold, on Claremont Road, which was designed, and on several later occasions added to and altered, by architect and Bernardsville resident George B. Post.



*Stronghold, the estate John F. and Cynthia Dryden, in 1904,  
when John Dryden was a United States Senator.*

In his lifetime, Post was known as “the dean of American architects” and “the father of the tall building in New York.” In more recent times, he has been described by “starchitect” Robert A.M. Stern as “one of the most prolific, prominent and professional architects of the second half of the nineteenth century.”



Although Post was primarily a designer of commercial, civic, and educational buildings, he, along with two of his sons, William Stone Post and James Otis Post, also designed from scratch, or made alterations to, more than two-dozen residences in Bernardsville. Most of those houses are extant and comprise the greatest concentration of residential architecture by the Post firm.

In addition, the Posts executed design work for several area churches, designed the original clubhouse above Ravine Lake for the Somerset Hills Country Club, and made alterations to the former Bernardsville Public Library and the previous headquarters of the Visiting Nurse Association of Somerset Hills on Olcott Avenue in Bernardsville.

Stronghold was designed by Post and built in 1886. It was called Crow's Foot by its builders and first owners, James Coleman Drayton and his wife, Charlotte Augusta Astor, the daughter of William Backhouse Astor and the indomitable Caroline Schermerhorn.

In 1892, following a very public scandal involving Charlotte Drayton and a Bernardsville neighbor, Hallett Alsop Borrowe, the Draytons, who soon divorced, sold Crow's Foot, furnishings and all, to New York attorney Thatcher M. Adams.

John Dryden bought the estate from Adams in 1899, renamed it Stronghold, and commissioned Post to undertake the first of several exterior and interior additions and alterations.

Nearly ten years before, Dryden had selected Post to design a new Newark headquarters for the Prudential Life Insurance Company. The result was a twelve-story, stone-clad Romanesque-style building, with both the exterior and interior embellished with art and sculpture. In 1899, the same year Dryden bought Stronghold, he commissioned Post to design additions to the original Prudential building and design three additional buildings that were constructed on Prudential's campus-like site.

Stronghold was owned by the Dryden family until 1940, when it was sold to Miss Gill's School in the Mendham Hills. In 1972, the Gill School merged with St. Bernard's School in Gladstone, and for a time the school maintained both campuses. In the 1990s, however, what had become the Gill St. Bernard's School consolidated all of its activities on the Gladstone campus and the Stronghold property was sold. It has since remained in private ownership.

## THE KUSERS' CHILDREN

Anthony and Susie Dryden Kuser had two children who lived to adulthood: John Dryden, born in 1897 and known by his middle name, and Cynthia Genevieve, born in 1910.

### DRYDEN KUSER AND BROOKE RUSSELL

A 1919 graduate of Princeton, Dryden Kuser, on April 26th of that year, married the barely seventeen-year-old Roberta Brooke Russell—later to become the famous Brooke Astor—at a glittering Washington wedding. The service was held at St. John's Episcopal Church, nicknamed the “church of the presidents” due to its location across Lafayette Square from the White House.

The couple had first met when the young (then age sixteen) Brooke was asked by a friend at The Madeira School who was ill to stand in as the date for the friend's brother at his Princeton University senior prom. The friend's brother was John Marshall Harlan, who would later become an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court. At the prom, Brooke met Dryden, another graduating senior who had signed her dance card. Dryden, who was a member of one of the Princeton debating societies, managing editor of the “Daily Princetonian,” possessor of a sports car, and who, according to Brooke, “had the bluest eyes I had ever seen,” swept the naïve Brooke off her feet.



*Dryden and Brooke Russell Kuser in Venice early in their marriage.*

Faircourt became the couple's first marital home, residing there with Dryden's parents and younger sister, Cynthia. In 1922, Dryden's parents offered the couple a house of their own, which was another large residence on the estate. Given a large budget by her in-laws, Brooke retained local architect, Albert Musgrave Hyde, to make alterations to the house, which the couple called Denbrooke.

The year before, when the couple were still residing at Faircourt, the entire Kuser family, as well as Brooke's mother and the servants, eighteen people in all, were chloroformed in the middle of the night by robbers who made off with a great deal of jewelry, including Brooke's engagement ring.

Dryden and Brooke Russell Kuser had one child, Anthony Dryden Kuser (who later took the last name of his mother's second husband, Marshall), but the marriage was not to last, due primarily to Dryden's violent verbal and physical outbursts, drinking, and extra-marital affairs. The couple legally divorced in 1930, not long after Anthony Kuser's death. Dryden would go on to have four more marriages.

In 1933, a year after the sensational kidnapping and murder of the Charles Lindbergh baby, and when Dryden was married to his second wife, Vievea Fisher Banks, he was the target of an unsuccessful kidnapping threat.

Dryden was involved in local and state politics for fourteen years, serving on the Bernards Township committee and the first borough council of Bernardsville between 1922 and 1926. This was followed by a five-year stint in the New Jersey Assembly and six years in the state Senate. His term in the New Jersey Senate was notable primarily for legislation he introduced to name the Eastern Goldfinch as the state bird.

After leaving politics, Dryden held a number of very different jobs. For a time he was a vice president of the Trenton-based china manufacturer, Lenox, Incorporated, with which his father and uncle had long been financially associated. Having moved to Nevada at one point to obtain a divorce, he worked as a columnist for a newspaper there. Later, he was a real estate agent in Somerville and worked as a consultant to what is now the State Parks Service of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. For several years in the mid-1950s he sold Kriska King Crab from Alaska out of a truck in Bernardsville while making his home at the Bernards Inn.

In 1958, Dryden left Bernardsville to live in a cottage on the High Point State Park property that his parents had donated to the State in 1923. It remained his home until his death, in 1964, at age 67.

As a young man, Dryden shared his parents' interest in ornithology. He wrote two books about birds, "The Way to Study Birds" and "Birds of the Somerset Hills." When he was sixteen he organized the Somerset Hills Bird Club and served as editor of that organization's newsletter, "The Oriole."

In 1921, Dryden wrote a book about Haiti, following a trip he made there with his wife, Brooke, to whom the book was dedicated. Brooke's father, Marine Corps General John H. Russell, Jr., was based in Haiti for much of the time between 1917 and 1930. In 1922, he was appointed by President Harding to be the American High Commissioner to Haiti with the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary, a post he would hold for nine years. Before his retirement, Russell served as Commandant of the Marine Corps.

## CYNTHIA GENEVIEVE KUSER

Cynthia, the younger child of Anthony and Susie Dryden Kuser, was a very intelligent and beautiful woman who was said by some to look like the movie star Lana Turner, although leaner and more athletic. She was fluent in seven languages, and in the period just before her death was learning two more, Apache and Japanese.

She was strongly independent and could be reckless, a femme fatale according to some. Her son describes her as having "abundant charm" and as a free spirit and constant seeker of adventure. It has been credibly reported by those who knew her that she had affairs with such wildly different men as General Motors chairman Alfred P. Sloan and the famous Spanish matador Manolete, as well as with cowboys, tennis pros, manual workers and intellectuals. Bright and curious with many and diverse interests, Cynthia established and ran a New York publishing firm, the Dryden Press, and also raised prize-winning English cocker spaniels at her Faircourt Kennels in Bernardsville.

Cynthia was first married, at age 21, to Theodore Wilhelm Herbst. The two were business partners in a company that Theodore ran called Kem Plastic Playing Cards. Cynthia's face was emblazoned on the ace of spades in each deck of cards. Herbst, however, was said to be abusive and controlling, which were not traits that would have been countenanced by a financially and personally independent woman like Cynthia. The couple divorced in 1947.



*Cynthia Kuser holding playing cards manufactured by the Kem Plastic Playing Cards Co., which she and first husband Theodore Herbst owned. Cynthia's face graced the ace of spades in each deck of cards.*



The year before, Cynthia attended a party in New York in celebration of a recently published best-selling book, "I Chose Freedom." At the party she met the author, a Ukrainian man named Victor Kravchenko, and the two soon fell in love. They never married, out of security concerns arising from Victor's defection from the Soviet Union, but they had two sons, with Cynthia entering into a sham cover marriage with another man, Arthur Hinckley Earle, who legally adopted the boys.

Kravchenko, a mining and steel engineer, was working in the Soviet Union's lend-lease office in Washington during World War II when, in 1944, he sought asylum in the United States. At the time the Soviet Union and the United States were allies in the fight against Nazi Germany, and Kravchenko's defection made front-page news and caused concern at the highest levels of the United States government. Stalin demanded Kravchenko's return, which would have been a death warrant, but in 1945, on the day after Franklin D. Roosevelt's death, the application for asylum was granted.

The following year, at the beginning of the Cold War, Kravchenko published his first book, "I Chose Freedom," a scathing critique of Stalin and the Soviet system. It became an international sensation. A few years later, after a French Communist weekly published harsh comments about Kravchenko's character, he sued the publication for libel. Although he won the trial in a French court, he was awarded only small, symbolic damages. Kravchenko wrote about the trial in his second book, "I Chose Justice," which was published in 1950.



*Victor Kravchenko, a Stalin-era Soviet defector, was Cynthia Kuser's long-time partner and father of her two sons.*

In 1966, twenty years after publication of his first book and his serendipitous meeting with Cynthia Kuser, Kravchenko committed suicide in his New York apartment. Cynthia Kuser died in 1985, leaving a daughter and a son.

## THE KUSERS' CULTURAL INTERESTS — ORNITHOLOGY AND CONSERVATION

Anthony Kuser was an avid fancier of animals, but particularly birds, and maintained a large aviary on the Faircourt estate. He became keenly interested in the work of writer, naturalist and ornithologist Charles William Beebe, curator of the New York Zoological Society, now the Wildlife Conservation Society. Over the course of his career, Beebe led more than 60 scientific expeditions to study birds, insects, mammals and fish, and his travels took him to the heights of the Himalayas and the depths of the oceans in a bathysphere.

In 1909, Kuser, who had become a member of the Zoological Society's board of managers, donated funds to underwrite a 17-month, worldwide expedition by a team led by Beebe to identify and research all species of pheasant. At the time, the Zoological Society's board of managers also included other prominent Somerset Hills residents Percy R. Pyne, C. Ledyard Blair, and Grant B. Schley.



*Kuser's Blood Partridge, one of the many illustrations in the four-volume work, Monograph of the Pheasants, which was underwritten by Anthony Kuser.*

The Beebe expedition resulted in the publication of a limited edition, large-format, four-volume work titled “Monograph of the Pheasants.” These lavishly printed volumes included prints of many Audubon-like paintings by some of the most skilled bird illustrators of the day. When the volumes were published, Kuser donated significant additional funds to help defray the printing costs. Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr., the long-time president of the Zoological Society, opined in his preface to “Monograph of the Pheasants” that the work was “by far the most important scientific achievement as yet undertaken” by the Society.

Kuser had taxidermists at the American Museum of Natural History prepare, stuff, and mount the birds that had been found by Beebe during his expedition through Asia. The birds were exhibited in three large, diorama-like glass-fronted cases in

the pheasant room at Faircourt. Together, the cases measured nearly 27 feet long by 10 feet high and nearly 7 feet deep. The life-like settings for the birds featured background scenes painted by Hobart Nichols based on sketches and photographs he made during the expedition, as well as earth, stones, grasses, and bamboo that had been brought back from Asia. In 1926, Kuser donated the complete collection to the Newark Museum.

Anthony Kuser was also a founding member of the New Jersey Audubon Society, which is now headquartered on Hardscrabble Road in Bernardville. He served as the Society's board president in 1916 and 1917, and his son, Dryden, held the same position from 1919 to 1926.

## HIGH POINT

In 1910, Anthony Kuser and his twin brother John purchased a 1,700-acre tract at High Point in Sussex County, New Jersey. The following year Anthony's father-in-law, John F. Dryden, purchased 7,000 adjoining acres. Anthony subsequently made additional land acquisitions, and eventually he and his wife gained title to all of what became a 10,600-acre property.

An existing summer resort inn on the property was soon converted into another of the Kusers' mansions—it became, literally, the highest house in the state. Early plans for the large tract included its possible development into a private residential club along the lines of Pierre Lorillard IV's Tuxedo Park in the Ramapo Mountains of New York. Although plans for the club never materialized, Kuser did establish a 1,200-acre fenced private game preserve in 1912.



*The mansion on the Kusers' 10,600-acre High Point estate. The entire tract was later donated to the State of New Jersey as a park and nature preserve.*

After several failed efforts during the years following World War I to sell all or parts of the vast property, in late 1922 Susie and Anthony Kuser decided to donate the entire tract to the State of New Jersey to form a public park and wildlife preserve.

It is likely that Susie Kuser played a major role in the decision to donate the land. Her father, John F. Dryden, had initially purchased the bulk of the property and it had been his long-standing wish that the land be somehow protected as a nature reservation. Moreover, it was Susie who formally presented the tract to the State in 1923 in memory of her father, and the names on the deed conveying the land read, “Susie Dryden Kuser and husband.” The deed also contained a significant restriction requiring that the Commissioners of High Point Park “provide that there shall be no shooting or trapping of birds” on the property, a provision clearly reflecting the Kuser and Dryden families’ passion for the protection of wildfowl.

Five years later, in 1927, Anthony, who had long intended to erect some sort of observation deck at the summit of High Point, sent a letter to Governor A. Harry Moore offering to pay for the construction of a tall monument to honor New Jersey’s veterans. With the generous offer accepted, a 221-foot-tall structure, somewhat modeled after the Bunker Hill monument in Massachusetts, was designed for Kuser by the architectural firm of Wyeth & King, the same firm that had designed alterations to his Palm Beach home years before. The Hoffman Construction Company of Bernardsville built the light-toned, quartzite-faced tower.



*The 221-foot-tall High Point monument, donated by the Kusers to honor New Jersey’s veterans. Constructed by the Hoffman Construction Co. of Bernardsville, it was dedicated in 1930.*

In June 1930, a year after Anthony Kuser’s death, his son, Assemblyman J. Dryden Kuser, formally presented the High Point monument to the State of New Jersey.

---

The 120-year history of Faircourt and its owners is colorful and complex, and it adds another fascinating chapter to the rich ever-evolving story of the Somerset Hills.

W. Barry Thomson  
May 2016