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Peyton Place

Revisited

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Grace Metalious was a perceptive observer of the New England townscape and its architecture, but this aspect of her talent was obscured by the fuss over her 1956 novel *Peyton Place*. An exposé of the secret lives and passions of a small New England town's denizens, its frankness created a national sensation. The book sold over 10 million copies, making it one of the best sellers in history. Today, it seems incredible that either the novel or the movie based upon it (filmed in Camden, Maine, after the residents of Gilmanton, New Hampshire, and Woodstock, Vermont, denied permission) could have caused such a scandal, but in the more inhibited 1950s parents were horrified when they caught their offspring devouring *Peyton Place*. Mrs. Metalious's husband was fired from his post as Gilmanton's grammar-school principal, because, as the novelist said, "To a majority of people who live here, it is a dirty book. People suddenly decided that George is not the type to teach sweet, innocent children."

Yet Mrs. Metalious was a not inconsiderable crafts-woman, especially for a hitherto unpublished and relatively unsophisticated thirty-one-year-old housewife. That the setting and the other details that embellish the narrative go unnoticed in the telling of

the larger tale is perhaps one mark of a good novelist. From the opening sentence ("Indian summer is like a woman"), *Peyton Place* is filled with handsomely turned descriptions, especially of townscape ("She could see the belfry of the grade school, the church spires and the winding, blue road of the Connecticut River with the red brick mills, like growths, attached to one of its sides"). Grace Metalious appealingly and convincingly captured the character and feeling of northern New England, from the courthouse ("a large white stone building with a verdigris-colored dome"), with its "wooden benches which seem to be a part of every municipal building in America's small towns," to the general store and the annual town meeting. Beyond the six-block business district along Elm Street, Peyton Place's wealthier residents lived in grand manses on Chestnut Street, but the houses in protagonist Allison MacKenzie's neighborhood were mainly "simple, well constructed, one-family dwellings, most of them modeled on Cape Cod lines and painted white with green trim."

Any architectural historian who has labored over building analyses for survey forms cannot help but admire Mrs. Metalious's succinct description of the

Peyton Place high school: "It was made of brick, with windows so large that each one made up almost an entire wall, and it had a clinical, no-nonsense air of efficiency that gave it more the look of a small well-run hospital." The elementary school does not fare so well; it is dismissed simply as "Victorian architecture at its worst." Her paragraph on the annual spring hop will strike a familiar chord in anyone who has ever tried to transform a high-school gymnasium, with its basketball hoops and cinderblock walls, into a ballroom with the aid only of crepe paper and balloons.

The most imposing, and architecturally the most interesting, structure in Peyton Place is Samuel Peyton's castle, a dark and sinister granite pile that overlooked the town. The model for Grace Metalious's castle is undoubtedly Stanton Harcourt in Windham, New Hampshire. Stanton Harcourt was erected between about 1906 and 1915 by one of America's richest men, the enigmatic Edward F. Searles of nearby Methuen, Massachusetts, who inherited a fortune from his much older wife, who had, in turn, been the widow of railroad financier Mark Hopkins. Local legend holds that Windham's castle is a copy of Searles's ancestral estate in Oxfordshire, a

fifteenth-century Tudor manor house of the same name, but Stanton Harcourt (and thus Peyton's Castle) was in fact designed by Henry Vaughan (1845–1917), the Anglo-American architect who was responsible for such Gothic Revival monuments as the school chapels for St. Paul's and Groton, and the first designs for the Washington Cathedral. The huge granite walls and the portcullis gate are mentioned in *Peyton Place*, and one of Mrs. Metalious's characters even goes so far as to declare: "Every stick and stone, every doorknob and pane of glass in the castle was imported from England. . . . I'd be willing to bet that this here is the only real, true, genuwine castle in New England." Stanton Harcourt may not be a transported Victorian baronial estate, but it was reputed to have cost \$1.4 million, and it does contain a fireplace from the Tuileries. It is easy to understand how this imposing curiosity close to the novelist's native Manchester would have become such an important presence in *Peyton Place*.

In addition to architecture itself, Mrs. Metalious also uses zoning, long anathema to the independent small-town Yankee, as a theme in her book. Mill owner and old-style capitalist Leslie Harrington stands out solidly against any sort of

planning in a way that reaches far beyond his own one American town: “When you start telling a man he’s got to do this, that or the other thing, you’re coming pretty damned close to infringing on a citizen’s rights.” A voter asks at town meeting, “You mean to say that you kin tell a man what kind of house he’s gonna build?” when moderator Jared Clarke defends the board of selectmen’s right to restrict the type of dwelling that can be erected in Peyton Place. As part of the story’s broader background, the author introduces a variety of problems that arise in a New England village’s attempts to reconcile economic growth with the preservation of an historic past.

Unfortunately, the descriptive qualities and cultural insights of *Peyton Place* are absent in its sequel, *Return to Peyton Place*, written quite literally to cash in on the sensationalism spawned by the original. Two later novels, *The Tight White Color* (1960) and *No Adam in Eden* (1963), have mill towns as their settings—the latter includes a long description of that sublime nineteenth-century industrial complex, the Amoskeag Mills in Manchester. But *Peyton Place* remains the only one of the group that—in its descriptions of a small northern New England town in the Eisenhower years—evokes a sense of place.



Stanton-Harcourt, Windham, New Hampshire; Henry Vaughan, architect, c1906–1915. The model for Peyton’s Castle in Grace Metalious’s novel *Peyton Place*. (Photograph by Ernest Gould)