

## From Great Camps to Skyscrapers: Rediscovering the Remarkable Architecture of Robert H. Robertson

Robert H. Robertson, the architect of Camp Santanoni, in Newcombe, N.Y. and Shelburne Farms across the lake in Vermont, will be the topic of a lecture by architectural historian and historic preservationist Dan Snyder on August 17th at 7 p.m. at the Essex Community Church.

Robertson was born in Philadelphia in 1849 and did his training with other, well-known American architects. He did not go to Europe to study at schools such as Les Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris as did his contemporaries Richard Morris Hunt and others. This non-academic training is clearly evident in much of his work which is profoundly American in so many ways. Robertson led the way in the development of several important categories of American architecture. He competed successfully with the greatest architects of the late 19th century and, in some of his work, anticipated the greatest architects of the 20th century.

Ironically, Robertson has dropped out of sight among those who study American architectural history. Unfortunately, his papers and drawings apparently have been lost and this may account for the lack of interest among scholars. Many of his buildings, survive, however, and they bear eloquent testimony to the skill and creativity of their designer

Robertson worked in a broad swath down the East Coast from the Adirondacks, to Tuxedo Park, through the Berkshires, into both Southport and Newport, and then, with a flourish, he designed a string of handsome, groundbreaking tall office buildings and churches right down the middle of Manhattan. His commissions reached as far West as Ohio and included several lovely homes in New Jersey and on Long Island..

Robertson's architecture is human in scale. He had an unerring, firm control of massing. His roof lines are breathtakingly strong and powerful. He demonstrates a mastery of detail which he exercises with an often playful eclecticism that reflects the influence of William Morris, John Ruskin, and others in the arts and craft movement. The more one sees of his work, the more one recognizes his genius. The lecture will help put his local buildings into a broader context by circling out past the rest of his work and coming back again to understand the true importance of Santanoni and Shelburne Farms.

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Daniel Snyder, Ph.D., is executive director of Pequot Library (designed in the late 1880s by Robert H. Robertson) in Southport, CT where he came in 2004 after over 20 years as Executive Director of the Newport Historical Society. During his time in Newport, he served on the Rhode Island Historic Preservation Commission and on the Review Board for National Register Nominations, and won several awards for his work in the field. In Southport, he directed the restoration of the Library and the work won an historic preservation award from the CT Trust for Historic Preservation in 2006. In addition to his role at the Library, he teaches American Architectural History and Green Architecture at nearby Fairfield University, and Historic Preservation and Sustainability at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence on an adjunct basis.