

THE STORY OF BUILDING OUR ALTAMONT CASTLE

by Thom Breitenbach, June 1, 2022
Location: 809 Township Rd., Altamont NY

(An earlier history of the property and area appears at the end of this article)



In 1961, when I was about 10 years old, my parents, Edward and Mildred Breitenbach, decided we would move upstate from Seaford, Long Island. They purchased 78 acres of woods and overgrown farmland from the Burlingames across the street. It was up the hill on Rte. 146, about a half mile from the village of Altamont. My dad designed and built a modern, redwood home, with generous overhangs. He was an architect. Some of his Altamont designs include St. Lucy's Parish Center, the Key Bank building, LaSalette Seminary's gymnasium and shrine, and a number of local houses, though his specialty was designing nursing homes throughout the Northeast. My mother and I built the stonewall planters around our house, giving me practice in laying stones. My parents later acquired an additional 30 acres which they gave to me in 1976, when I was ready to build my own home.

I had originally planned a contemporary house, but several factors helped form the idea of building a castle: 1) I was introduced to the hobby of constructing paper castles by a college friend, 2) I visited many castles in Europe while living in Italy on a fellowship, 3) My land (and my parent's land) had an abundance of free stones and timber, and 4) I read a book titled *The Octagon House* by Orson Fowler (which started a craze in Victorian times). It was a practical shape with the greatest amount of interior space and the least amount of exterior wall surface. Thus, it was cheaper to build and cheaper to heat. The stone material and the octagonal shape would certainly suggest a castle.

I was trained in architecture by my father, and I drew up plans featuring a 36-foot diameter octagon with an attached tower containing a spiral staircase. I dug the foundation in 1976. There was only two-feet of soil on top of bedrock, giving the future house a high profile, and eliminating the need to pour any footings for the building. The bedrock was perfect! That same summer I cast 250 concrete parts including all the door and window frames, and the spiral stair steps.

I was a struggling artist at the time, and so I looked to obtain as many free materials as possible to build the house. I collected and quarried stones (one as long as 12-foot) from the family's nearby creek. I cut down red oak trees (and maple for the countertops) and had them milled on-site to make furniture, cabinets, and moldings. LaSalette, our neighbor, allowed my brother and I to take down an old, partially burned carriage house for its hand-hewn beams and paneling. I bartered small paintings for: a hand-sculpted, brass and ceramic chandelier, comical bathroom fixtures, for all the concrete blocks used in the octagon, and for floor tile inserts with patterns I cut stencils for (in the future studio wing). From a neighbor I obtained numerous Federal Period brownstone carvings (salvaged from 1700's old Albany) and also piles of fossil rock, both abandoned in the woods by a former gardener.

I began construction during the summer of 1977. I wanted the house to be as fireproof as possible to protect my paintings. I knew an artist who lost 20 years of his life's work because of a studio fire. I also had in mind that this would one day be a museum to preserve my artwork after I was gone. I cast the basement walls and ceiling out of concrete (something I learned to do helping my father build houses one summer). In the upper floors, the exterior walls were concrete block (to be faced with stone at a later time), and the interior was furred out for additional insulation. Most of the interior walls were also concrete block covered with white stucco. I had spent the previous summer helping my brother build his windmill house, and so this summer I had my brother's help, and also my father's. We finished roughing in the basement and first floor.

I learned how to move large stones from a book titled *The Forgotten Art of Building a Stone Wall* by Yankee Press. It showed how the farmers did it using leverage, using a long metal bar, sometimes with boards and rollers. Basically, you try to never use your back while lifting heavy stones, and I NEVER hurt or sprained my back in all the years after—not once! I dragged the largest stones home by tractor and chain, and collected others with an old hay wagon. Hoists were used to raise large stones into place on the building. My father was quite fearful of hoisting and placing the 1,400 lb. lintel stone I selected for the fireplace, but after setting it successfully, the rest of the stonework on the house was easy! Other than the fireplace, I did not do any exterior stonework at this time. It would be too time-consuming.

During the summer of 1978, I finished roughing in the third level (second floor) and after putting on the roof held a party to celebrate. There, on July 15, I met my wife Debra who “crashed” the party, when a friend brought her along. We were married exactly one year later in the woods nearby. We built a stone heart on the ground to be married on.

In 1981 I began the exterior stonework, beginning with the solid wall facing northwest. The concrete block shell was already in place, and to that I applied a thick stone veneer, about 9 inches at the base. All exterior walls in the octagon (and the studio wing) are two feet thick.

It was difficult work climbing up and down a ladder all day, hoisting stone and cement up to the scaffold by myself. The following summer, I hired a student named Brian Whitlock to help. Now I could stay on the scaffold setting stones, while Brian mixed cement and hoisted everything. During lunch break and at day’s end, my wife Debra came out to clean the stones, and to rake the cement joints between them to a depth of about ½ inch. This leaves a nice shadow line. She also did much of the cleanup, shoveling stone chips and cement dust into plastic buckets.

The gargoyle-headed doorway was inspired by an entrance I saw while living in Rome, Italy. I dug up local clay (Albany slip) and sculpted a mockup of the gargoyle on top of the porch. Then I made a mold over that, and used the mold to cast the concrete head. The final artwork was carefully lowered into place. Later I added a steeple and bell, and topped it with a weathervane I made, resembling an art-



ist's palette and brush with colored glass inserted for the paint colors.

We continued building the castle for years. I was taking four months off each summer to do this. It was nice doing something physical after sitting at the easel the rest of the year, "moving just three fingers" as I like to say.

The interior of the house demonstrates many of the lost arts. I made leaded-glass windows, ironwork (using our new blacksmith shop), the cabinetry and moldings, a fresco on an interior wall, and furniture including scroll-back chairs, a grandfather's clock, a harpsichord (which I built when a senior in high school), my artist's furniture, sofas, etc. and of course my paintings hang everywhere. Debra sewed the cushions for our sofas (including a built-in sofa in our so-called "pit", a sunken entertainment space) and she made all of the curtains. I also installed all the electric and plumbing for the buildings myself, something else I learned helping my father with his projects.

The center hall or living room is 22 feet tall with leaded-glass windows at the top, a 2nd floor balcony overlooking it, large north-facing windows, organ pipes and console, and a floor-to ceiling fireplace. I always felt that if one is going to be creative, they need a tall ceiling. Otherwise, with low ceilings, one's imagination is somehow constrained. I studied pipe-organ building, but never did get to install the complete pipe organ I had in the barn, and eventually gave up on it.

The fact that one is inside an octagon is not apparent from the inside. The floor plan is very open and in a cross shape, so that no matter which room you are in on the first floor, you can look across and out another window at the far end. Triangular closets fill the remaining space, thus disguising the building's true shape.

My wife Debra is a fine gardener, with a special interest in English cottage gardens, which look more natural. When the stonework was complete she did a splendid job of landscaping around the house and grounds. Beautiful flowers bloom all over during the warm seasons.

It eventually became clear that we needed more space, and it was time to add a new wing to the castle. After having our second child we needed a third bedroom. Debra wanted office space too, as she is a certified social worker and wished to see some clients at home. I had been doing my paintings in our living room. As my business grew, I desperately needed a proper studio and other workspace. My new plans included a two-story primary studio with North-facing windows, an upper studio space (overlooking the lower one) for computer work, drawing, music composition and recording, and space to gesso large painting panels. The back of the main studio had my art library and office, with a smaller mailroom off of that for the poster business. The basement would consist of a woodshop, gallery space

for my paintings, and art storage. The basement gallery also served as an entertainment and exercise room while our children were growing up.

I started the addition the summer of 1987. Brian and my father helped me cast the basement floor, walls, and concrete ceiling. The following summer I hired two new students and we built the upper floors. We put up a frame building using 2x8s on the exterior (though concrete block inside) and huge, hand-hewn beams I obtained from the contractor who took down Agway's warehouse after a fire. The following two summers we added 16 inch deep stone walls all around the exterior. I always selected and placed the face-stones, a second helper filled in behind with scrap stone (and occasionally helped me set extra-large stones), and the third mixed mortar and hoisted everything up to us.



The scaffolding was quite interesting. We constructed the supports with long straight maple saplings going 40 feet into the air around the towers, crossbraced, then topped by sturdy planks. Once finished with a length of wall, the helpers, and my son Travis too, were quite amused as I yanked on the scaffolds with tractor and rope, and they came crashing down.

Debra continued creating beautiful gardens, and she also built a giant 48 foot diameter stone labyrinth in the woods, made of cobblestones. She collected and placed each cobblestone herself.

Much later, in 2010, I began construction on a three car, stone garage. I designed a nice interior which could be converted to a visitor's center, if necessary, when the castle becomes a museum. Several friends came over to help shingle the roof. The following summer I finished up the stonework, and began work on the



two gatehouse towers which were completed in 2012. I hired just one person to help with the stonework on these two projects, and of course Debra did her part.

After these buildings were complete, I concentrated on rebuilding or replacing some of the original stonewalls on the property, which go back a couple of centuries. I built a large stone arch at the end of a field to the west that had once been our orchard, and vegetable and herb gardens. A good friend, Travis Kline, helped me put up the dry arch. He had experience, and bigger stone-cutting tools than I did. We cut some large limestones into arch pieces, then trimmed them by hand. I got the stones from the highway department after they removed an old culvert under the highway at the lower end of my property. I built a round form for the arch and put up a scaffold. After the cut pieces were brought to the site, we hoisted them up, one by one, and set them tightly against one another, without using mortar. Once the center stone was placed, we removed the form and wallah! Everything stayed in place: a 7 ton, 6 feet wide stone arch, using no cement! I continued

adding artistic walls on both sides of the arch, including a built in stone “sofa” and a round peek-through hole.

I also had been creating many trails on the property, and after inheriting another 20 acres and a 40 foot waterfall, I continued creating even more. I have close to 3 miles worth of trails, and all are wide enough to get my tractor around on them, as we heated with firewood most years. These 50 acres will be the basis of a nice preserve one day, to go with the planned museum.

One interesting thing about living in a mostly stone and concrete building is that the basement walls wick the earth’s temperature into the house, and the concrete, basement ceiling distributes it. This helps cool the house in summer and warm it in winter. Then the solid material all over the house holds the temperature (as do the two feet thick, well insulated, exterior walls) for long periods of time. So, were the power to go out during winter, it would take days for the temperature to drop substantially.

As you walk around the outside of the castle, you may notice some interesting stones. I especially like the large bluestones, mostly seen on the building’s corners, with smooth, wavy patterns. These stones are fabulously-shaped fossils of mud from when the entire area was a lake bottom, 250 million years ago. I quarried these from the nearby creek. Various kinds of cobblestones are interspersed in the walls and stick out a little, creating nice shadows. The cobblestones are not local but were carried south by the glaciers, many thousands of years ago. I tried to be very artistic in the arrangement of the stones. I gradually changed my style from a sort of mosaic pattern, on the first wall, to a design featuring more horizontal lines. I hope you enjoy the castle when you get to visit!

About the Artist:

T.E. Breitenbach studied architecture and fine arts at the University of Notre Dame. He left ND early for Italy when he became the youngest person to win a Rome Prize Fellowship in visual arts. He is best known for his painting *Proverbidioms*, a raucous and comical depiction of over 300 common proverbs and clichés. He also collaborated with Jim Morrison of The Doors, shortly before Morrison's death, on a painting intended for use on his *An American Prayer* album, and he wrote and produced a musical for PBS titled “Hieronymus, A Musical Fantasy”, about an artist with a ‘too-large’ imagination.

Visit tebreitenbach.com or OurMusical.com to learn more. A documentary is also available on those sites.

An Earlier History of the Property and the Immediate Area:

According to old etchings showing the hill west of Altamont, our property was for the most part clear-cut in the late 1800s. There are many stonewalls all about and I have found relics such as a cowbell, a horse shoe, the jawbone of either a cow or horse, and several iron plow tips, indicating the land's uses.

After my father plowed the field behind his house, I found two Native American stone pestles. The Iroquois Museum in Howes Cave, NY said they are genuine and are likely 500 to 3,000 years old. Respected local dowser Matt Stankovich once pointed to a location on a map and told us it was a Native American cremation site. Strangely there are two unusually large, and somewhat out of place, rocks sitting in that spot on a hillcrest. My brother and I used to like to camp there.

In 1961 Mary Burlingame (who managed the sale of property to my father) told us some local history:

- 1) Her family was quite well-to-do. Husband Wescott owned the first Oldsmobile car dealership in Albany, and they owned hundreds of acres stretching from Lewis Road, and on both sides of Routes 146 and 156, to the Altamont village line. Their estate was located on the north side of Township Road. There, they created a beautiful rose garden (surrounded on all four sides by fossil rock walls), put in a tennis court, and a large swimming pool next to a guest cabin.
- 2) There was a stone foundation between the Burlingame's house and the road, which she said was the original house that had burned down. I wonder however, if she was only assuming that it had burned down. Perhaps it was actually moved away: In 1919, Arthur J. Bedell moved a house to his location next door. The Burlingames didn't buy their property until about 1924. The original house may have been sitting there unoccupied and its owner agreed to sell it to Bedell who then moved it to his own property. It would be interesting to measure the old foundation, and then the Bedell house to see if they match up in any way.
- 3) The Burlingame's estate also once included a nearby roadside barn (and I remembering finding evidence of it), where she said one of their sons hung himself.
- 4) On our side of the road, there is a cobblestone chimney, just past my property to the east, where the Burlingames once had a cabin. Mary said they used to ski down the hill. A friend with a metal detector found a coin from the 1920s there.

- 5) Mary told us the location of a lookout for the Underground Railroad on a bit of a rise, just feet from our western boundary. It had a great view, but once discovered the house was apparently burned down. A stone square foundation can still be seen under the brush, and 60 years back there were still wooden door lintel pieces to be seen.
- 6) To the south of our property is an alleged tunnel, also used by the Underground Railroad. Mary told us it led to the escarpment, but I think it was merely a secret entrance to the basement of the old stone manor house, just downhill of the Peter Young Center. If it did lead to the escarpment, it would have been possible, from one of the two ravines in the back, to carve out the shale between the sturdy layers of bluestone. If you stand near the waterfall, you can clearly see these layers on the sides of the ravine.
- 7) The Stone House (off Rte. 156) dates to the 1700s and the owner had slaves. I know the location of a small slave cemetery near our waterfall where 8 of the most favored slaves were said to be buried. There are a few sunken in places that are a bit creepy, and you can clearly see rectangular stones taken from the creek, placed as headstones in two rows.