“The Gilded Age”

To label Cottage Hill Farm – with the word “cottage” is a misnomer. Hardly a cottage, this 42-room mansion, the largest private residence in Portage County, a mammoth main barn, two other smaller barns and several outbuildings contribute to make this one of the most outstanding country estates in Ohio. Its history includes secret passageways used in the Underground Railroad, rumors about rooms taken from England’s Buckingham Palace, a Cleveland pioneer in Ohio’s coal industry and his grandson, a tycoon who transformed it to resemble the estates of many of the east coast’s famous citizens of the Gilded Age. It began in 1834.

 That’s when New York City merchant Edmund B. Bostwick built the core of the house, which appeared on county tax records in 1835. Who designed it in Thomas Jefferson’s classic architectural style remains just as unknown as why Bostwick never lived in his mansion. Though he planned to use the home as a hunting lodge on a summer estate, he likely lost heart when his wife left him for a business partner. He sold the house in 1836. Over the next two decades, the farm passed through several owners until in 1860, at the beginning of the Civil War, when it was sold to Cleveland’s Sophia Lord Rhodes, whose husband Daniel Pomeroy Rhodes, born in Vermont in 1814, migrated to Cleveland when he was 21. An entrepreneur, he promoted the use of coal for Lake Erie steamers, which initially used wood for fuel. After his idea caught on, he opened coal mines in Youngstown as well as coal and iron ore mines in several Ohio counties. Residents of Cleveland, the Rhodes family used the Cottage Hill Farm near Ravenna as a summer retreat. After his death in 1875, writers and newspapers praised him for his economic development of the city of Cleveland.

 His wife Sophia continued ownership in the farm for 20 years after her husband passed, when she sold it to her grandson Daniel Rhodes Hanna, son of Charlotte and Marcus Hanna, also of Cleveland. Marcus was an influential Republican leader who managed two successful presidential campaigns for William McKinley. He also served as a U.S. senator and founded M.A. Hanna and Company, which expanded his father’s coal and iron-ore empire. His son Dan, born in 1866, joined the family business after finishing his education. Even though his father was running political campaigns at the time, young Dan chose a different path and took control of the company in 1895. He had plans for the farm. Between 1895 and 1913 he increased the property from 437 to over 2,000 acres, enlarged the modest farmhouse into a mansion with 39 rooms, and built many barns and outbuildings, transforming it into a model stock farm. It became well respected throughout the country.

 During the Gilded Age of Architecture, which lasted from 1875 to the beginning of World War I, families of wealth built luxurious mansions, sprawling country estates, and magnificent barns to house their prized racehorses. William Rockefeller built Rockwood Hall in New York, the Vanderbilts added the Breakers in Newport, Rhode Island and the Biltmore in North Carolina. Countless other affluent families played the “keep up with the Joneses” game, a phenomenon which spread throughout the country. Many of these buildings no longer stand, making Cottage Hill Farm a remarkable Ohio treasure.

 When Dan Hanna began his quest to join the Gilded Age “club,” he added rubble stone entrance walls, which wind gracefully from the main road, through forested land, and lead to the mansion. He built a number of agricultural buildings needed for a successful stock farm: a summer kitchen, a carpentry shop, a caretaker’s office, a maid’s house, granary, icehouse, a corn crib, and an 80-foot-tall water tower with a 100,000-gallon tank. He also built a barn specifically for bulls and one to house horses and their carriages, both of which I also painted. But his flagship was the cattle barn.

 At 118 feet long, 50 feet wide, and a towering 70 feet high, it was an ambitious, as well as an expensive, project circa 1900. Three gigantic louvered cupolas, their pointed caps tipped with lightning rods, are as decorative as they are functional. Originally, there were more of them – 10 in all – on two large barns joined together, as a photo demonstrates in the 1993 nomination form for the National Register listing. An open truss design in the roof allows for ample movement interiorly. The barns were so impressive that they earned a berth in Thomas A. Knight’s *The Country Estates of Cleveland Men*, published in 1903. In fact, they were large enough for Hanna to house his impressive herd of shorthorn cattle and his racehorses, both of which he bred.

 Though Dan Hanna proved that he knew how to grow successful businesses – he owned Cleveland newspapers, he acquired vast iron-ore interests, developed shipping lines, built Cleveland landmark buildings, and owned large estates in Lenox, Massachusetts, and Ossining, New York – his marriage record was dismal. Not only did he divorce four times, each of his ex-wives successfully sued him for damages. He began early – at 21 in 1887 – in his first foray into matrimony. His wife, Carrie May, daughter of a prominent Cleveland family, bore him three sons but they divorced in 1898. Less than two years later, he married Daisy Gordon Maud, whose grandfather William J. Gordon, upon his death in 1893 donated his 120-acre estate along Lake Erie to Cleveland, which became known as Gordon Park. As a gift for his wife, Hanna purchased 15 acres across the street from the park and built yet another mansion, calling it Gordon Hall. With a staff of 25, a stable for 25 horses, and a mention in *Architectural Record Magazine* in 1904, it was one of Cleveland’s finest homes, one where they welcomed their first daughter. However, despite his wealth, Hanna couldn’t make the marriage work; divorce came in 1907. Both of his wives sued him successfully.

 Only days after his divorce from Daisy, he married again, this time to Mary Elizabeth Stuart on June 24, 1907. Relatively speaking, this marriage was successful and produced more children: four daughters. But they divorced in June, 1916; his third wife won her lawsuit, based on statutory offense; and won custody of their children. Three years earlier, Hanna left the family firm, after squabbles with his partners.

Not done yet, the ink still wet on the divorce papers in 1916, Hanna wed for a fourth time – to Mollie Covington Worden – and soon afterwards transferred ownership of his estate in Massachusetts to his new wife, where he rebuilt a villa, another in his portfolio of Gilded Age mansions, this one on the west shore of Mahkeenac Lake, near the Carnegie and Astor estates. Certainly, if money and mansions could buy happiness and matrimonial bliss, Dan Hanna would have been blessed with both. But his fourth wife sued him on the grounds of alcoholism in 1921 and won. Once again single, obesity caught up with him and he died of a heart attack, only 54 years old in 1921, the same year as his fourth divorce. He died at The Croft, another of his Gilded Age estates, this one on 168 acres in Ossining, New York.

After his death, the Cottage Hill Farm ran downhill until it was purchased by Frank Faegol in 1937, during the dark days of the Great Depression. Faegol restored the mansion and sold off acreage, reducing the total to 650, selling 200 to the nearby Ravenna Arsenal. However, apparently unable to keep funding it, he sold the estate in the early 1950s to a developer, who turned it into a private club, The Silver Spur Ranch. During the 1960s deterioration continued with vagrants breaking in, smashing windows, and starting fires. Fortunately, the mansion and the great barn survived. P.L. Frank Construction bought it in 1971, as the parade of owners continued, and converted the mansion into apartments and office space. That failed, too.

Twenty years later Mark and Beth Schmidt purchased the estate to use as a private residence and renamed it Stoneridge. They began extensive renovations, about two million dollars worth, and historically minded, they successfully listed the farm, as The Cottage Hill Farm, on the National Register in 1993. Meanwhile, the barns and outbuildings, unused, continued to deteriorate. They tried to sell the farm in 1994 and dropped the price by a million dollars a year later.

The next owner, hoping to revitalize the property, had good intentions. However, Dale Adams went through a messy divorce and he and his current wife Patti simply couldn’t continue restore the property, once again for sale. Enter Craig and Cara Norris, who became the newest owners in 2021 – he a businessman and originally from East Liverpool and she originally from rural farmland outside of Chicago. They live and breathe barns and want to restore the grounds, especially the mansion, effectively the first house built in Portage County. They’re aware of the long-standing history of the place, including the Indian burial mound, which may trace back hundreds, if not thousands of years. But they’ve got work to do. The barn, its siding and doors missing, cupolas struggling, and windows broken, needs serious attention. In my painting, I decided to remove the many vines and shrubs that hide its beauty, which is still there, just hidden. What will become of this 72-acre estate? An event venue? An educational facility? A working farm? Only the future will tell but, as of right now, Cottage Hill Farm lies in the good hands of a young couple, anxious to return it to its grandeur of the Gilded Age.