

Cylburn

When in 1942 Major Bruce Cotten left the house he and his wife Edyth had shared for many years, his leave-taking could not have been totally free of nostalgia and some minor regrets. "My friends thought I was making a mistake to get rid of Cylburn," he told one reporter, "and move to Hamilton Street. But I knew I was right. I realized we were passing into new times, times in which there was no place for the kind of living that Mrs. Cotten and I had known for so many years." And today's visitor to Cylburn, now a City-owned Wildflower Preserve and Garden Center, must feel, as he drives up the narrow lane leading to the mansion, that he is somehow catching a glimpse of an age gone by — a time when vast summer estates like Cylburn were not uncommon in Baltimore, when gracious living meant a magnificent house set in an equally magnificent landscape.

Jesse Tyson of Baltimore originated the idea for Cylburn with the purchase of 180 acres of land in what is now the northwest section of the city. Perhaps the most colorful figure of the Tyson family was Jesse's grandfather, Elisha Tyson. A Quaker and an abolitionist, Elisha Tyson was one of the founders of the African Colonization Society, a group organized to send freed Blacks back to Africa.

Jesse Tyson, a wealthy Baltimorean whose fortune stemmed from his copper, chrome, and nickel mines at Bare Hills and Soldier's Delight in Baltimore County, decided to build a summer home for himself and his mother in 1863. Soon thereafter Tyson's mother died, and that event, coupled with the Civil War, suspended whatever work had begun on the house. The dates are uncertain, but it is clear that Tyson engaged George A.

Frederick to design his residence and that Tyson and his bride Edyth Johns first occupied it in 1889. Edyth was Tyson's junior by many years. She was young and beautiful, and is given much of the credit for decorating the house and planning the gardens and grounds that enhanced it.

George A. Frederick was also the architect of City Hall, and although City Hall quite definitely fits into the Second Empire mold, which Cylburn does not, the two buildings do share some characteristics, notably the mansard roof which enjoyed popularity in America at that time. A handsome house, Cylburn's beauty rests upon its strong Victorian lines, accented by the powerful mansard roof. It is a three-story building of gneiss, a gray stone tinged with green, from Tyson's quarries at Bare Hills. A tower and cupola, reminiscent of the Italianate design that crept into so many Victorian structures, break the roofline. Indeed, if the house were to fit neatly into any category, it might best be described as transitional from the Italianate to the Second Empire, for if one were to remove the mansard roof, he would see clearly the lines of the Italianate villa. A veranda runs along the south, east, and west facades, extending on the west to serve as a carriage entrance. Long French windows open onto this veranda, and guests arriving at Cylburn in inclement weather probably alighted from their carriages and passed directly into the house through the library windows.

Double front doors open into a vestibule, the floors and walls of which are covered by mosaics. The floors are now hidden by modern tile, but it is said that the wreath design in the leaded glass over the vestibule doorway was echoed by a wreath design in the mosaic floor.

The hallway is wide and handsome, its walls covered with tapestries believed to be of Belgian origin specially imported by Mrs. Tyson. These tapestries cover not only the hallway walls but extend up to the second floor, following the line of the black walnut staircase that rises at the rear of the hall. Wide leaded glass windows at the staircase landing flood the area with light, and the low windowseat beneath must have been a pleasant place to pause and read, think, or simply gaze out to the gardens beyond.

The first room to the right of the hallway was the Drawing Room, and it apparently was the show-piece of the mansion. Mrs. Tyson and her husband travelled extensively in Europe, and many of the ideas she incorporated into the house, as well as her furnishings, bore the continental mark. The Drawing Room was meant to duplicate the interior of the residence of the French Minister of Finance in Rouen. Ornate plaster designs still adorn the walls and ceiling and border its two large mirrors — one above the marble mantelpiece and one between the French windows at the head of the room. Mrs. Tyson furnished the Drawing Room with original Louis XV pieces, some of the tapestries covering the chairs having taken prizes at the Paris Exposition. Wall brackets for candles are said to have come from the homes of French kings.

Heavy double doors slide into the wall separating the Drawing Room from the Library. A much simpler room, with a much simpler marble mantelpiece, the Library was dubbed the “Red Room,” reflective of its furnishings and rug.

Directly across the hallway from the Red Room was the Dining Room. Most notable here are the escutcheons, the Tysons’ crowning the entrance leading to the Library, and the Johns’ on the wall opposite.

Unifying the downstairs are the parquet floors of maple, oak, and black walnut, and the ceiling-to-floor French windows on the outer walls of every room. The latter provide air and light as well as splendid views of the lawns, gardens, and towering trees on each side.

Bedrooms and baths make up the second floor,

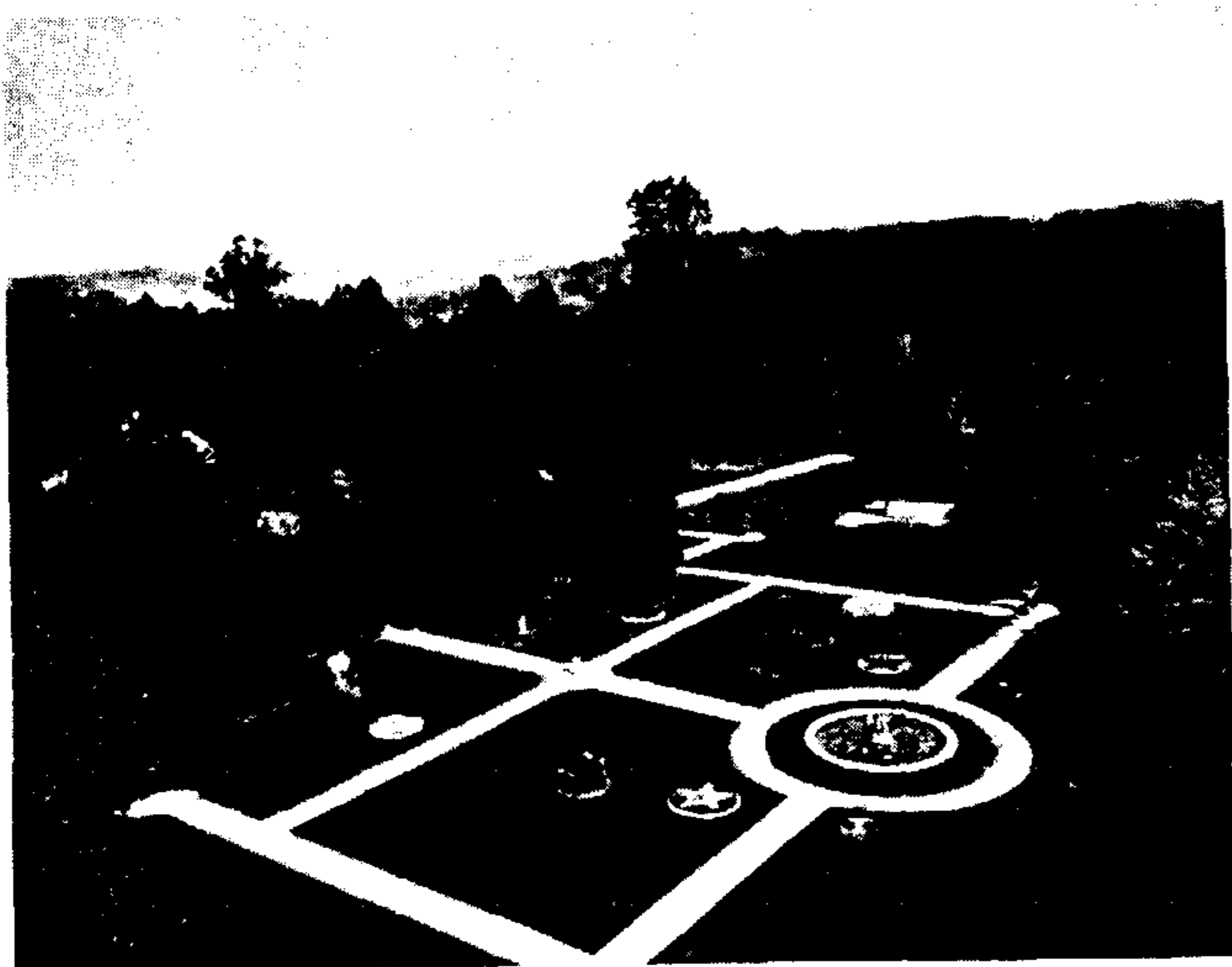


Cylburn, music room as furnished by the Cottens. From the Enoch Pratt Free Library collection. Reproduced by permission.

again the plan being a central hallway with rooms branching off at symmetrical points. At the front of the second floor there are three rooms — the mistress’s bedroom and bath at the southeast corner, a small morning room directly to the south in the tower portion, and the master’s bedroom and bath at the southwest corner. One might gain entrance to these rooms from either the hallway or through interior connecting doors.

The bedrooms and baths of mistress and master are identical in size, but totally opposite in decoration. The mistress’s is ornate, indeed rococo, with its multitude of cherubs looking down from the cornice of the coffered ceiling. Intricate and delicate plasterwork designs fill the walls, and a Gothic vaulted ceiling crowns the bath. The master’s bedroom looks severe by contrast. A simple room, it is free of decorative design, purely functional, and like its counterpart only in terms of layout and its many windows.

The morning room, located between the two bedrooms, was clearly Mrs. Tyson’s, the same kind of plasterwork designs being used here as in her bedroom. Throwing open the bay window in the morning afforded a lovely view of the lawns and surrounding hills, and perhaps faint glimpses of the city beyond. It is interesting to note that the arched leaded glass windows which one sees in this



Cylburn, gardens as planted by Mrs. Cotten. From the Enoch Pratt Free Library collection. Reproduced by permission.

bay from the outside cannot be seen from the inside due to a false ceiling. French furniture like that of the Drawing Room served here as well, and it said that from here Mrs. Tyson conducted her business and gave her orders for the day.

Two other large but simple bedrooms, in all likelihood guest rooms, open onto the second floor hallway. A rear extension of the house beyond the west guest bedroom provided quarters for some of the servants, but many of the 14 to 16 servants at Cylburn probably lived in the third floor attic. A doorway at the front of the third floor opens to reveal stairs leading to the cupola.

Unhappily, Jesse Tyson did not have long to enjoy his residence, for in 1906 he died. The beautiful Edyth Tyson remarried four years later. Bruce Cotten was then a young Army lieutenant who had fought in the Boxer Rebellion. In the summer of

1910 Edyth went abroad. Cotten, who was then stationed at Fort McHenry, followed her to London and married her. In 1917 he reentered the Army in a military intelligence division and resigned at the end of World War I with the rank of Major.

Although the Cottens spent much of their year travelling in Europe, they summered for the most part at Cylburn, and it was in their time that the mansion became noted for its elegant entertaining. Here it was that society gathered for musicales and receptions. Here visitors might stroll amidst the 30 acres of garden beneath towering oaks, walnuts, elms, and evergreens, lit in the evenings with hundreds of Japanese lanterns. They might walk down to the lily pond that lay not far from the house, or stroll about the fountains on the grounds.

It is said that in her later years Mrs. Cotten was confined to a wheelchair, and that she would often sit on the balcony on the east side of the house so that she might gaze across the cleared land to Cylburn's private railroad station and thus see her guests descending from the cars of the Northern Central line. A rustic road stretching through acres of woodland and garden ran to the house from the station just below Belvedere Avenue, and when her guests spied the house, they must have believed Cylburn at one with nature.

In 1942 Edyth Cotten died. In that same year Bruce Cotten sold the house and the surrounding acreage to the City for use as a park.

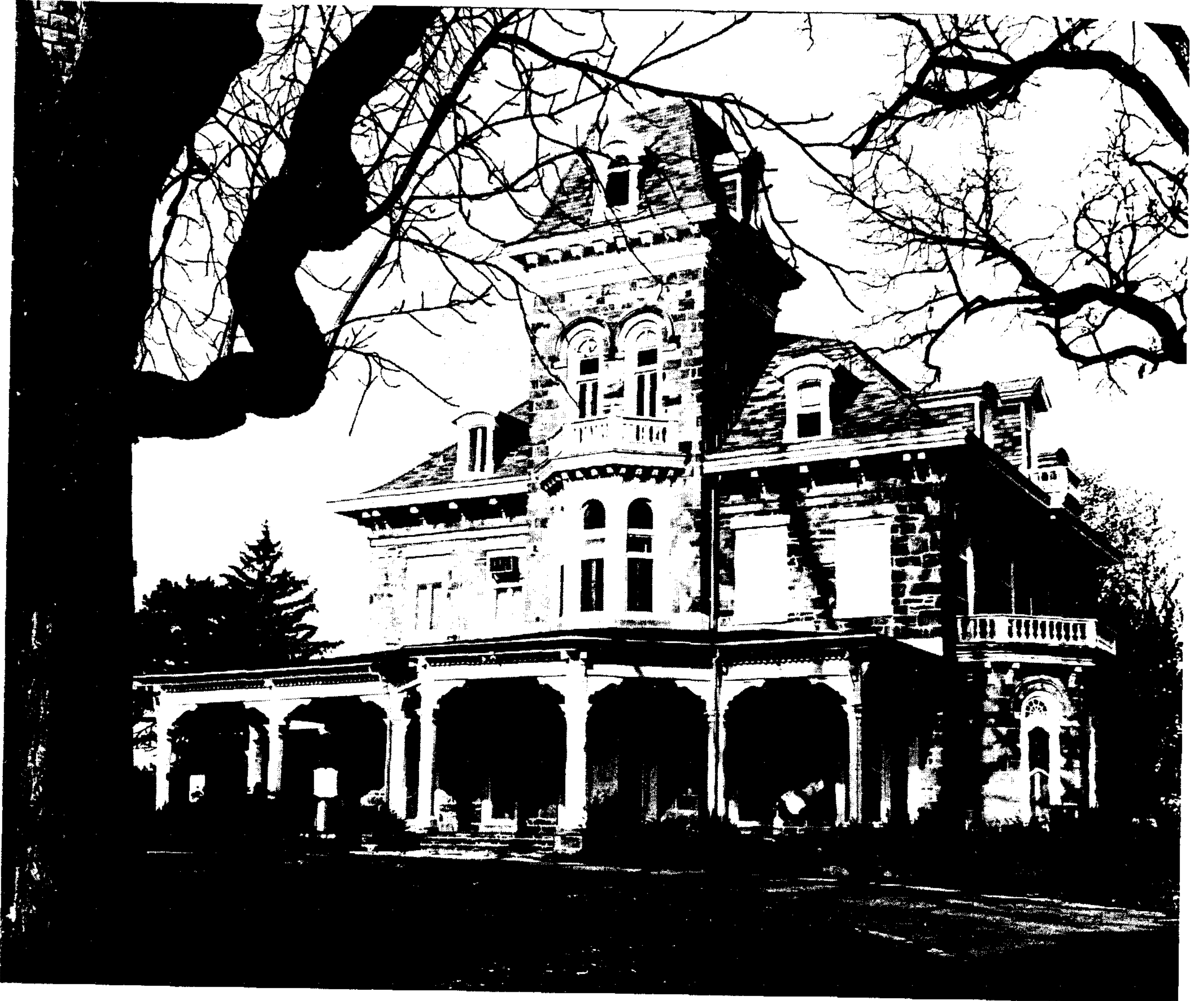
Though today put to practical use, it is not at all difficult to imagine Cylburn in her prime. For she is a true Victorian lady, a delicate house in all, in excellent condition even now — a house of light and air, of continental elegance, a house that easily becomes a home in the mind's eye.

Cylburn: A Beauty Spot of Baltimore's Environs." *The Sunday Sun*, July 2, 1911.
 "Home of Mrs. Bruce Cotten, Cylburn, Will Be Public Park." *The Sun*, September 29, 1942.

National Register of Historic Places — Inventory Nomination Form, September 1, 1970. CHAP.

Snyder, William T., Jr. "Cylburn." *Baltimore*, July-August 1945.

Stump, William. "Street Signs: Cylburn Avenue." *The Sun*, July 18, 1954.



Cylburn, facade. Photograph by Judith A. Chamberlin.