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Gargoyles on Glatfelter Hall

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Gargoyles on Glatfelter Hall

Description

When one walks around the campus of Gettysburg College, Glatfelter Hall towers above them, as one of the College's most commanding edifices. One takes notice of the arched doorways, sunken windows, and the giant bell tower whose occupant chimes on the hour. What one may not notice are the eyes watching from the brownstone; faces and creatures at home in the stone, surveying your every move. Grotesques and gargoyles sit in the moldings, on the window sills and at the junction where roof and wall meet, hidden from the eye that does not have the compulsion to look. These architectural ornaments are not noticed outright because they tend to blend in with the stonework on the building. However, once you have seen them, you never cease to feel their eyes upon you. [*excerpt*]

Course Information:

- Course Title: *HIST 300: Historical Method*
- Academic Term: Spring 2006
- Course Instructor: Dr. Michael J. Birkner '72

Hidden in Plain Sight is a collection of student papers on objects that are "hidden in plain sight" around the Gettysburg College campus. Topics range from the Glatfelter Hall gargoyles to the statue of Eisenhower and from historical markers to athletic accomplishments. You can download the paper in pdf format and click "View Photo" to see the image in greater detail.

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Hidden in Plain Sight, architecture, Glatfelter Hall, gargoyles

Disciplines

American Art and Architecture | Architectural History and Criticism | Architecture | History | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Public History | United States History

Campus Location

Glatfelter Hall

Gettysburg College

Hidden in Plain Sight:
Gargoyles on Glatfelter Hall

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

Kate Anthony

Spring 2006

When one walks around the campus of Gettysburg College, Glatfelter Hall towers above them, as one of the College's most commanding edifices. One takes notice of the arched doorways, sunken windows, and the giant bell tower whose occupant chimes on the hour. What one may not notice are the eyes watching from the brownstone; faces and creatures at home in the stone, surveying your every move. Grotesques and gargoyles sit in the moldings, on the window sills and at the junction where roof and wall meet, hidden from the eye that does not have the compulsion to look. These architectural ornaments are not noticed outright because they tend to blend in with the stonework on the building. However, once you have seen them, you never cease to feel their eyes upon you.

Webster's dictionary defines a gargoyle as "a spout often having the form of a grotesque figure or animal and projecting from a roof gutter to throw rain-water clear of a building" or "any grotesquely carved figure." Similarly, a grotesque is defined as

a decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic representations of human and animal forms often combined with each other and interwoven with representations of foliage, flowers, fruit, wreaths or other similar figures into a bizarre hybrid composite that...may use distortion or exaggeration of the natural ... to the point of comic absurdity, ridiculous ugliness, or ludicrous caricature¹

The creatures on the wall of Glatfelter Hall are more easily categorized as grotesques because they serve no architectural purpose. They are simply decorative elements that do not fit the architectural style of the building. According to retired Professor Norman O. Forness, although there was a High Victorian Revival in the post-Civil War 19th century, Glatfelter Hall is actually a mixture of Queen Anne style architecture and Romanesque Revival features.² Therefore, there was no real reason for the grotesques other than the architect John A. Dempwolf's "penchant for decoration."³

¹ Webster's Third New International Dictionary, s.vv. "gargoyle," "grotesque, n."

² Norman O. Forness, telephone interview, February 22, 2006.

³ Ibid.

Gargoyles and grotesques are generally associated with Gothic architecture, yet have also appeared in Ancient Greek and Egyptian architecture as well. The function of the gargoyle as a water spout was originated in these countries, with the Greeks favoring the depiction of a lions' head and the Egyptians using a variety of animals. The word gargoyle evolved from the legend of the French dragon La Gargouille. Said to live close to the River Seine, La Gargouille wreaked havoc by swallowing ships, breathing fire, and regurgitating so much water that it caused massive flooding. To pacify the beast, residents sacrificed a criminal each year until, finally, around 520, a priest named Romain came to exorcise the dragon. After the creature was tamed it was burned at the stake, but its head and neck were resistant to the fire because it's habit of molten breathing. The preserved head and neck were mounted on a building, therefore providing the first model of the modern gargoyle.⁴

It was not until the Medieval period that these creatures were added to churches and cathedrals of Western Europe. The gargoyles of the thirteenth century became increasingly grotesque, moving toward the appearance of the most well known gargoyles. Although their purpose for drainage was well understood, there was great debate as to why gargoyles and grotesques were depicted in and around sacred buildings. Some conjecture that gargoyles were included due to the belief that the statues had the ability to provide protection and ward off evil. That was why many gargoyles were placed far beyond where they could be seen by the naked eye.⁵ It was also widely perceived that gargoyles were placed on sacred buildings to "help mold public behavior through intimidating images," but recent investigation shows that many of the clergy, including

⁴ Janetta Rebold Benton, *Holy Terrors: Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997), 11-12.

⁵ "Gargoyles," <http://www.ulrikehoinkis.de/gargoyles/gargoyles.html>.

the founder of the Cistercian order of monks Bernard of Clairvaux, were not pleased to have these grotesque creatures portrayed on such a holy vessel.⁶ They believed the creatures were intimidating and did not allow for the peaceful atmosphere they wanted to maintain within the church. Clairvaux even went as far as to say

What excuse can there be for these ridiculous monstrosities in the cloister where the monks do their reading, extraordinary things at once beautiful and ugly? . . . a beast with a serpent for its tail, a fish with an animal's head, and a creature that is horse in front and goat behind, and a second beast with horns and the rear of a horse. . . . One could easily spend the whole day gazing fascinated at these things, one by one, instead of meditating on the law of God.⁷

Although it is obvious Clairvaux disapproved of the inclusion of gargoyles, it also he appears that he could not help but be intrigued by them. Finally, non-religious interpretations of gargoyles suggest they were vehicles for promoting harmony with nature because they so often depicted creatures entwined with flora and fauna.⁸

While the meaning behind the gargoyles continues to be debated, what is clear is that there are many different varieties of grotesques and gargoyles. The most popular categories of gargoyles are Humans, Animals, and Chimeras, which are a hybrid between a human and an animal. Human gargoyles are often carved to be humorous and animals to appear fierce. However, no two gargoyles are carved in exactly the same fashion. "The variety in these carvings boggles the mind, and surpasses attempts to explain them as simple amusements."⁹

The carvings on Glatfelter Hall depict several different kinds of grotesques, none technically classified as gargoyles because they do not serve, or appear to serve, as a drain spout. While most of the carvings are simply faces, there is one in particular that

⁶ Benton, *Holy Terrors*, 22-24.

⁷ Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, "Gravely Gorgeous: Gargoyles, Grotesques, and the 19th Century, Imagination," <http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/adw/gravely.html>.

⁸ Dr. Charles Bergengren, "Review Sheet: Romanesque," <http://gate.cia.edu/cbergengren/arthistory/romanesque/>.

⁹ Ibid.

appears to be an animal and one that appears to be a “Green Man.” The Green Man is a very popular human gargoyle that harkens back to the pagan beliefs that were incorporated into the Christian church. Depicted as the face or entire body of a man entwined with and sometimes spouting greenery, the Green Man was a symbol of nature, fertility, and rebirth.¹⁰ “Death and renewal are celebrated as the “Green” that represents all life.”¹¹ This carving can be found on the west side of Glatfelter Hall in the corner where the wall intersects with the tower.

The only animal gargoyle on Glatfelter Hall is found in the same general area as the Green Man, except it is located where the roofline of the west entrance intersects with the exterior wall. This creature appears to be a sort of menacing cat or dog creeping along the pitch of the roof. It is the carving that most resembles a gargoyle in the sense that it is a full statue with frightening features. There is a carving of what appears to be a chimera in the scrolling surrounding the buildings’ main archway. Since it is hidden within a larger work and does not sit out on its own, it would not necessarily be considered a grotesque. However, a chimera is defined as “any grotesque, fantastic, or imaginary beast used in decoration,” so it should be included in discussion.¹²

The majority of the carvings on Glatfelter are arabesques, a gentler version of grotesque that have more human qualities. Many grotesques are disfigured and frightening, but more often they are exaggerated and comical. However, the arabesque serves as the representative of the beauty within the carvings. Forness noted that the carvings he remembered “did not strike him as ugly” and this is due to the fact that the

¹⁰ Benton, *Holy Terrors*, 77.

¹¹ “About Gargoyles,” Northstar Gallery, <http://northstargallery.com/gargoyles/aboutgargoyles.htm>.

¹² Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, “Gravely Gorgeous” site.

carvings on Glatfelter Hall are human faces without exaggeration.¹³ These faces appear on all sides of the building and most notably on the stone work surrounding the building's main entrance. A man's face adorns the rounded tower on the western front of the building. Two female faces can be found on the second story of the east side of the building, but are split by the addition that had been built for the elevator. The faces blend in with the building materials, so at first glance they are not as visually obvious as many gargoyles and grotesques. However, once their presence is detected, one cannot help but think that there are more hidden among the parapets in places too high to be easily deciphered. These are the carvings that guard the hall and its occupants.

But why are there gargoyles on Glatfelter Hall at all? Queen Anne style buildings did not use gargoyles as decorative elements. The Romanesque Revival led by H.H. Richardson in the late 19th century was more likely to have this ornamentation, but it was not widely used.¹⁴ Forness conjectures that it was architect Dempwolf's "lone determination" to add the creatures to the building.¹⁵ Dempwolf had a proclivity for grandeur and wanted to make all of his buildings larger than life. Other buildings designed by Dempwolf, including Brua and McKnight Halls on the Gettysburg College campus and Valentine Hall at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, are impressive creations of brick and Hummelstown brownstone.

The proximity of a major brownstone quarry may have encouraged Dempwolf's use of ornamentation. The Hummelstown Brownstone Company, formerly the Pennsylvania Brown Free Stone Company, was a major producer of brownstone and was

¹³ Forness, telephone interview.

¹⁴ James F. O'Gorman, *H.H. Richardson: Architectural Forms for an American Society* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Forness, telephone interview.

located in neighboring Dauphin County.¹⁶ Used for a wide range of building projects, brownstone was highly durable and desirable. “This stone is commonly called freestone because it can be worked freely in every direction, a characteristic that made it popular with stone cutters and masons.”¹⁷ Due to the amount of ornamentation Dempwolf liked to include, it was not surprising that he chose Hummelstown brownstone as his primary trim material. It was also helpful that Hummelstown Brownstone had their own artisans and carvers that were “inventive and imaginative with [their] designs,” otherwise Dempwolf would have had to ship the brownstone to another location to be sculpted, then have it shipped back to be installed, which would have cost excessive amounts of money.¹⁸ Gargoyles in Medieval times were crafted from marble or limestone on the ground and then hoisted into place.¹⁹ It can be assumed that the carvings on Glatfelter Hall were placed after the fact as well.

The work on Glatfelter Hall has been considered Dempwolf’s most effective use of brownstone. “The tower is unique, while the crowned, serene head with its wisps of hair is one of the more gentle sculptures done by the artisans of Hummelstown.” There are actually two crowned heads on the entrance to the building, one on each side of the arch, facing in opposite directions. These carvings have become the most famous of Glatfelter’s ornaments, but all the others are equally intricate. In fact, Dempwolf was so pleased with the building and its ornamentations that he left his signature in a brownstone

¹⁶ Ben F. Olena, *Hummelstown Brownstone: A Study of the Hummelstown Brownstone Industry and its Contribution to the American Building Arts*, rev. ed. [CD-ROM] (2001: Forksville, PA: Ben F. Olena, 2004), 3.

¹⁷ Olena, *Hummelstown Brownstone*, 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 117.

¹⁹ Benton, *Holy Terrors*, 17.

block on the left side of the main entrance. His signature block was a trademark only left on his most prized accomplishments.²⁰

The grotesques of Glatfelter Hall have achieved their own kind of fame on the Gettysburg College campus, but only by people who have noticed them. However, many of those who have noticed the carvings have not investigated them. Professor William Lane included the gargoyles in his poem “We Know We Must Leave You the Light,” composed for *A Goodbye to Glatfelter Hall* when the English Department moved to Breidenbaugh Hall in the summer of 2003. Mentions include lines such as “gargoyles that sing, it is said, on Christmas eve” and “when the gargoyles talk, listen.”²¹ When contacted about his references for the poem, he replied “I guess I just made that up. They look like they might talk if given half a chance, don’t they?”²² Retired Professor Dr. Charles Glatfelter, who wrote the multivolume history of Gettysburg College, could offer no real insight into the gargoyles either. He, like Forness, believed they were Dempwolf’s desire.²³ The creatures are documented in Musselman Library’s Special Collections, denoting previous interest in their existence, but with one glaring error: A picture of the only carving that could truly serve as a gargoyle, a fierce cat-like creature, is not included.²⁴

Also not included in the pictures, or in any book, is the reason Dempwolf decided to grace the campus with these mysterious creatures. Perhaps, he wanted to give the talented artisans at Hummelstown Brownstone a task up to par with their skills. Perhaps

²⁰ Ibid, 92.

²¹ William Lane, “We Know We Must Leave You the Light,” *A Goodbye to Glatfelter Hall*, accessed through Gettysburg College Library’s Special Collections, 2003. See Appendix C for the entire poem.

²² William Lane, email interview, February 13, 2006.

²³ Charles Glatfelter, telephone interview, February 20, 2006.

²⁴ These pictures, provided by Gettysburg College Library’s Special Collections, can be seen in Appendix A.

he wanted to add playfulness to the academic purpose of the building. Perhaps he was simply taken with beautiful things and wanted all of his work to include them. As a building, Glatfelter Hall is commanding if not a bit intimidating. The grotesques add a teasing element that make the building not quite so austere. This building is Dempwolf's castle, his own fantasy that he has shared with generations of students, faculty, and curious passers-by. Look next time at Glatfelter Hall. Look into the eyes that stare back at you, and allow yourself a little fantasy as well.²⁵

²⁵ Thanks to Jeff Layton for proofreading this paper.

I took these pictures



Cat-like Creature



"Green Man"



West Front Parapet



Crowned Woman at the Buildings' Entrance



Chimera Carved around Main Entrance



Tower Beside Elevator Addition