

***Was life at Biltmore Estate® organized by clocks?
For a “timely” answer, ask Jim!***



Dawn at Biltmore House®

©Jim VanOrsdel

Jim VanOrsdel is a 22 year resident of Charlotte, North Carolina, and the owner of The Clock Shop on Commonwealth Avenue. He is a member of the American Watchmakers-Clockmakers Institute, American Institute of Conservationists, the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, and the North Carolina Watchmakers Association; he is a practicing Horologist/Clockmaker.

Mr. VanOrsdel says of time, “There are many definitions of time. Time is the interval between one event and the next...Historically, Man’s need to measure time with at least some pretense of accuracy has been so great that clockworks were for some centuries his most sophisticated invention...”

Mr. VanOrsdel is currently the Horologist acting as conservator of the antique timepieces at Biltmore Estate®.

He describes a recent trip to the grand house in Asheville, North Carolina in 1993.

The trip to Asheville is never long when I consider that I will soon be restoring, conserving, documenting, and repairing the fine timepieces located at Biltmore Estate®. The history of Biltmore House® is well documented. I am often amazed however that George Washington Vanderbilt II, was so drawn to Asheville, North Carolina, after growing up in the busy, tumultuous social life of New York City. Mr. Vanderbilt was a shy, quiet bachelor when he first visited Asheville with his mother in the 1880's. Construction of Biltmore House® began in 1889; it was not completed until 1895. Mr. Vanderbilt selected Richard Morris Hunt, a famous nineteenth century Beaux Arts architect, to design his "country home" on his estate of 125,000 acres. Landscape architect Fredrick Law Olmstead built observation towers prior to construction to determine the height of the Loggia and the first floor windows for the best views of Mount Pisgah. He also had specified some 43,382 plants, including 669 varieties to the four acres immediately surrounding Biltmore House®. The house, fashioned to resemble a sixteenth century French Chateau, was designed to be a showcase for Mr. Vanderbilt's collections as well as a setting for elaborate house parties of the "Gilded Age."

Passing through the Lodge Gate located in Biltmore Village, I begin the three mile drive along the Approach Road. Fredrick Law Olmstead, the preeminent landscape architect designer in America, created a carefully executed approach to the house. Built at the bottom of ravines, the forest road parallels a stream and then turns to climb through sweeping pastures. When I see the iron gates flanked by early nineteenth century French stone sphinxes, I know that a right turn into the court will give me that first astonishing view of Biltmore House®.

The grand view of the house is a wonderful surprise that I always look forward to after the pastoral ride from the Lodge Gate. The bright blue backdrop of sky, with Biltmore House® standing majestically in the foreground, gives the house a look of a fine painting - almost a two-dimensional quality. Life at the house, however, was anything but two-dimensional. About 80 servants worked in the house, the gardens and the stable area. These faithful employees had to find direction for their efforts to keep the household running smoothly. From my perspective, that of a horologist, I immediately ask questions about how the house was organized on a timely basis.

The Turret/Master Clock: Regulator of the Slave/Secondary Clocks

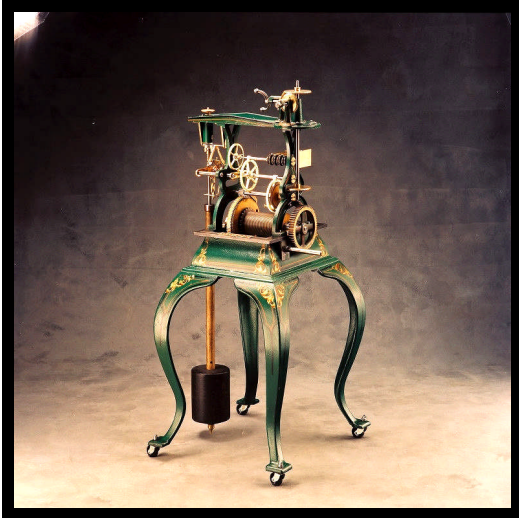
In my many years of work, I have learned that timepieces were a luxury in the late nineteenth century. The 80 servants would probably not have owned a personal watch or clock. How was the 250 room, 175,000 square foot chateau, often filled with the Vanderbilts and their guests, kept in order? What served as the “heartbeat” of Biltmore Estate®, including the House, Stables and Carriage House, as far as timekeeping was concerned? It had to be an arrangement that would kindle loyalty, one that all could honor and respect. I found that the “heartbeat” of Biltmore Estate® was a turret/ master clock, centrally located above the Carriage House. The exterior 36 inch, bronze numerated dial is very commanding and easily viewed in the Stable Courtyard from anywhere. The center of the dial is a bronze sunburst embedded in a limestone dormer. The hands have now been replaced by a true craftsman who were carved out of cedar and gold-leafed as were the originals. They are a prominent feature of the clock. On a cloudy or sunny day, the Southern exposure of the dial is bathed with warm golden reflections of the hands.



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The clockworks or movement is a rare E. Howard Double Three-legged Gravity Escapement Turret Clock manufactured in Boston, Massachusetts in 1895.

During this period, such movements sold for around \$425.00. On the basis of speculation from a letter dated November 6, 1895, I believe the clock was shipped by steamer. However, a copy of the original purchase order says, “N.Y.O. (New York Office) thinks that all rail may be as cheap as via Norfolk steamer.” Turret Clocks were massive, both in size and weight, causing shipment to be difficult and expensive. This letter also stated: “Clock is to be up and running by December 25th, 1895.



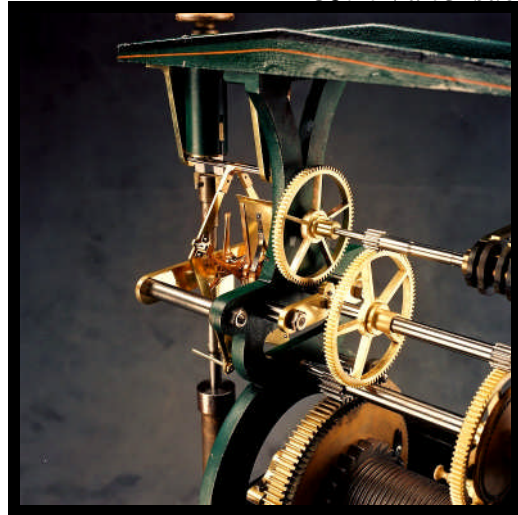
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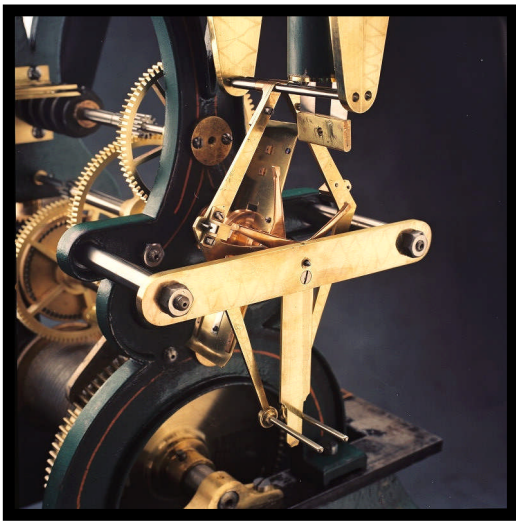


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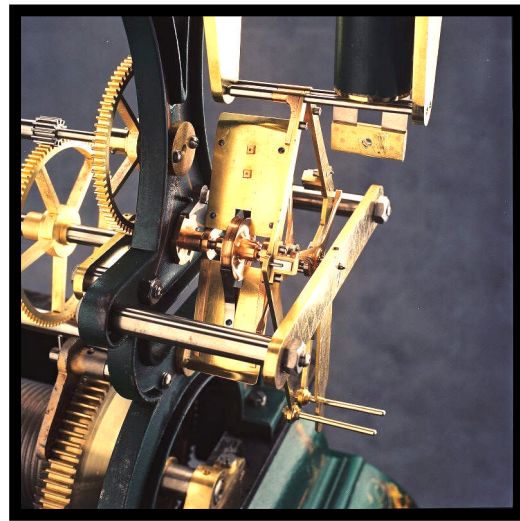
The beauty of the turret clock mechanism speaks to the craftsmanship of the maker. Constructed of cast iron, brass, and highly polished steel, the mechanism's frame is painted green. The frame's bed and legs display an oil painted motif of leaves and scrollwork richly highlighted with gold leaf. The cabriole legs of the frame lend an air of fine furniture. The custom-built parts are like those of a Rolls Royce®...they were not designed to be interchangeable with other clockworks.

This clockworks drives the hands on the exterior dial of the Carriage House. It has also been custom-fitted with a series of electrical contacts (12VDC) to serve as a "master" clock to operate 14 "slave" or secondary clocks strategically located in the servants' work areas (i.e. Butler's Pantry, the Servants Dining Room, the Laundry Room, Kitchen, etc.) throughout Biltmore House®.

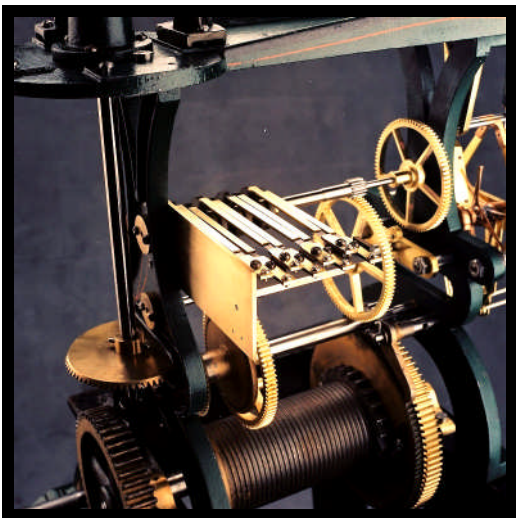
The 14 “slave” or secondary clocks are unadorned, functional timepieces. Designed to be quickly and easily read, they have 12-inch hand painted zinc dials. Each case is made of oak with a simple ogee curve. The “master” clock is designed to advance the secondary clocks once each minute through dedicated wiring to the clocks. This turret clock at Biltmore House® provides a nostalgic and beautiful timepiece that is a fully functional link to the past.



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It is extremely rare to find a turret clock, connected to its secondary clocks in a private residence. Usually they are in Municipal and University buildings. The synchronized manner of the advancing of the secondary clocks was apparent when I had all 14 clocks lined up on a display table during a “Treasure Talk” with Biltmore House® employees.



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While touring the servant’s areas in the basement, one can readily spot the secondary clocks. In the Pastry Kitchen, the secondary clock was used to time the baking of fine pastries. In the Main Kitchen, where most of the cooking was done, the clock directed the activities of the kitchen staff. In the Servant’s Dining Room, the clock constantly reminded the servants of their time schedules. Secondary clocks were even located in the Laundry Complex, as well as the servant’s halls outside of the Vanderbilt’s Bedrooms and quest areas. The Carriage House and Stable, now used as retail sales area and a café, also have these secondary clocks. The previously mentioned purchase order stated that “...all Vanderbilt’s clocks in this system, to be up and running before Christmas, 1895’, the date of the grand opening of Biltmore Estate®. Before the turn of the century, Mr. Vanderbilt’s vision of a time-coordinated staff could only be accomplished with this system of timepieces. These turret clocks were accurate to within a few seconds a week and this one had kept near perfect time for almost 100 years. I was fortunate to be the first Horologist to remove the entire clock and its secondary system for restoration and conservation.

House Clocks to Regulate the Activities of the Family and Guests

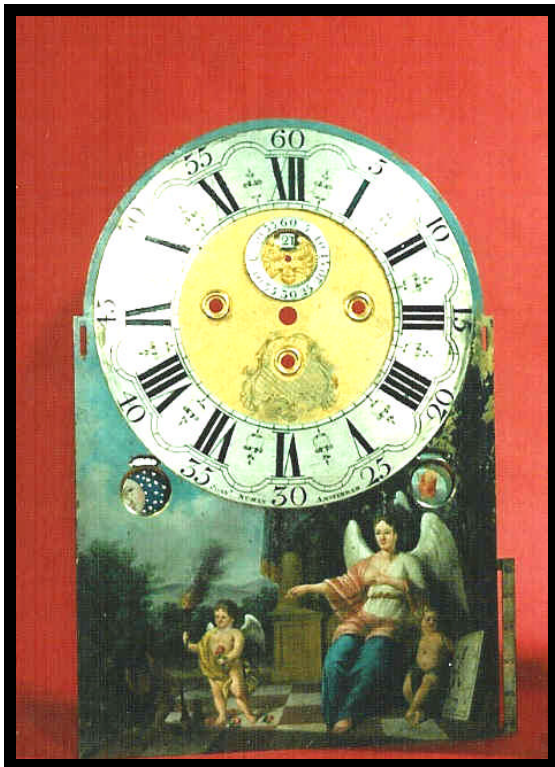
George Vanderbilt is well known for his collections of fine tapestries, paintings, carpets, prints, porcelains, bronzes and similar artifacts. I think most people don't realize that Mr. Vanderbilt was also a collector of fine timepieces. Eighteen clocks, antiques when he bought them, add the ultimate, functional touch to the lavish surroundings. Several antique clocks remain in storage awaiting conservation. For the convenience of the Vanderbilts and their guests, period clocks of all descriptions were located in the Bedrooms, Living Halls, and similar gathering areas. Today, the timepieces are the only functional artifacts, besides the Elevators, that are located throughout the house.



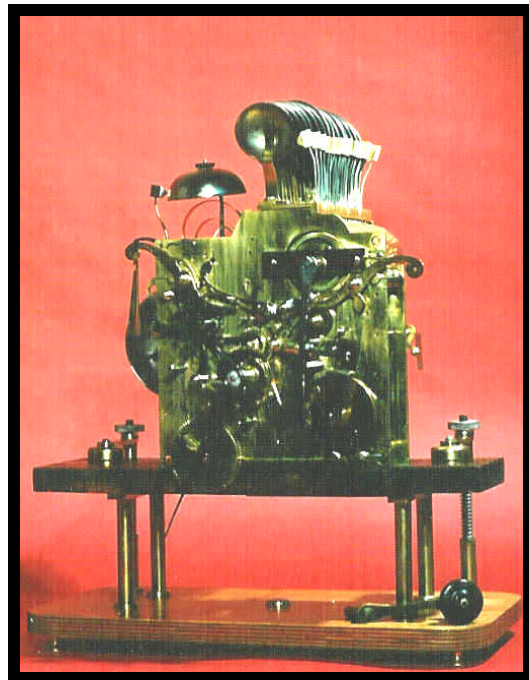
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Like most guests to Biltmore House®, I feel a sense of awe when I pass through the doors into the marble Entrance Hall. The first clock guests see, the Dutch Tall Clock. Circa 1750, crafted by Joan Numan, is located in the Entrance Hall. Standing almost ten feet tall, the case is constructed of select crotch mahogany. One has to stand on a short ladder to wind the three heavy weights on this clock, a feat that must be undertaken once a week.

The dial is an artist's work of fine art, hand-painted with oil paint on brass. It is an illustration depicting the "Passage of Time" in many facets. A black-winged cherub, holding a wilted rose and a snuffed-out torch, is almost hidden in a shadow on the bottom left of the dial. A white-winged cherub, with a rose in full bloom and a flaming torch held high, stands near the center. The central figure in the painting is a female angel with an hour glass on her head. She is seated holding a length of black chain in her hands. This angel has one white and one black wing. The cherub at the bottom right is holding a vertical sundial. The apertures display the day of week, the date, month, and lunar position in the sky.



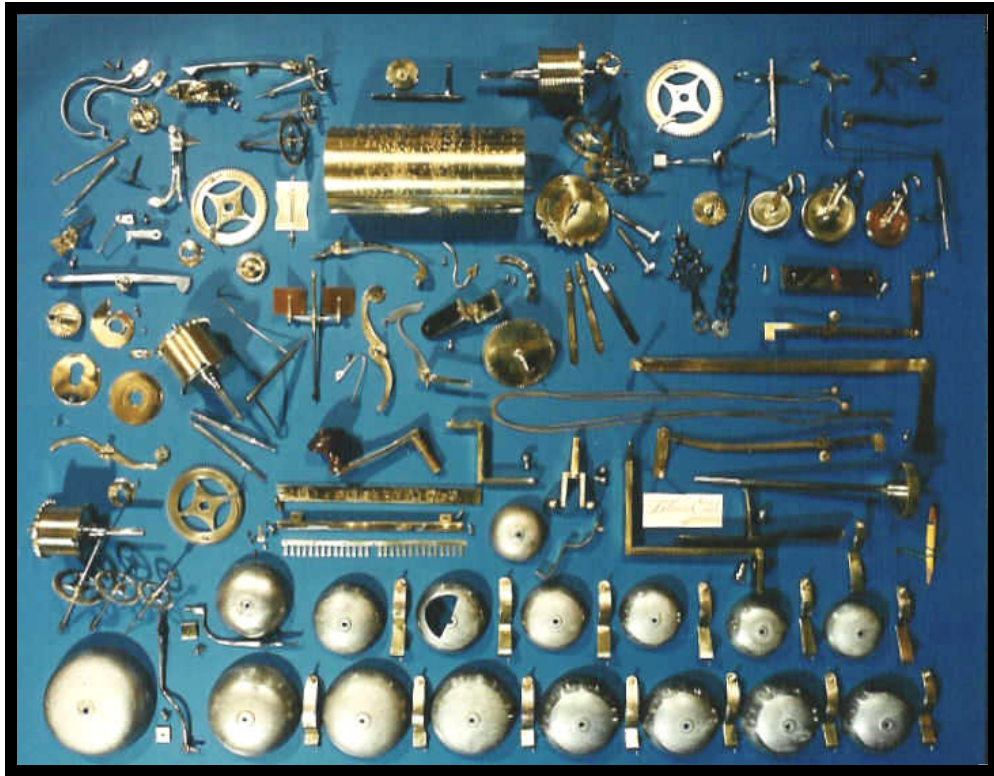
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The mechanics of this fine clock consists of over 500 individually hand-crafted parts, all made in the highest of quality and materials. The precision pieces are in full harmony with each other, and the clock is accurate to within a few seconds a week.

If guests are near this clock at the hour or half-hour, they will hear one of six Mozart Melodies played on fifteen finely tuned bells by thirty-two miniature brass hammers. Two bells were cracked at the time of restoration as seen.



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Following the melody on the hour, the exact hour is struck on a large separate bell. Following the melody on the half-hour, the previous hour is repeated on a smaller bell. Two separate bells denote the first quarter-hour, and the third quarter-hour. As one can just imagine, this clock is very sophisticated and extremely complicated. Even at its age, it is still a very reliable timepiece.



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Even though there isn't a clock in the Winter Garden, it is certainly worth more than just a glance from visitors. The glass roof provides abundant light for the palms and other varieties of plants surrounding the center fountain. The sculpture in the fountain was designed by a Viennese sculptor, Karl Bitter, and it is titled "Boy with Geese". The oak woodwork and marble supporting the roof is beautifully carved and molded.

After passing through the Winter Garden, guests enter the Billiard Room. There they can view an English Bell-Top Bracket Clock, circa 1780. Crafted by Robert Harlow, the case has a mahogany veneer adorned with brass finials cast in a pineapple motif. This clock has a "double fusee" mechanism. The Billiard Room is one room of a suite of three rooms reserved for men. The suite includes the Smoking Room and the Gun Room. Gentlemen had access to the Smoking Room or the Bachelor's Hall through two concealed doors at the rear of the Billiard Room. The oak paneling of the Billiard Room lends a masculine air as do the many hunting trophies and sporting prints displayed on the walls.

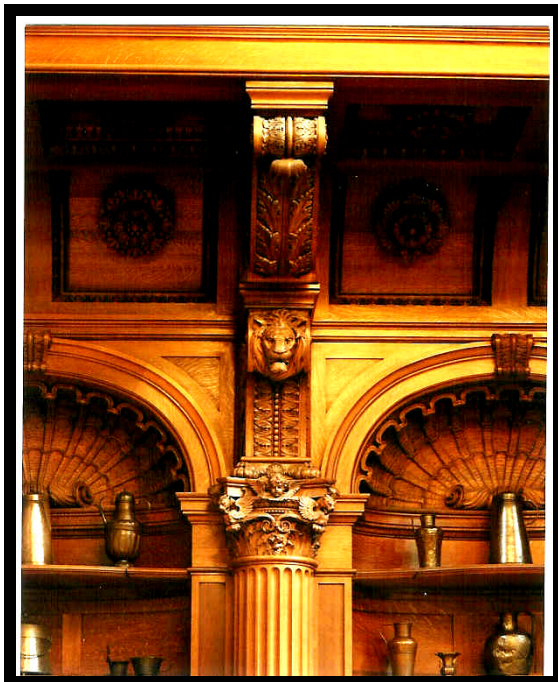


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The tour of the Biltmore Estate® continues through the Banquet Hall where sixteenth century Flemish tapestries illustrate the story of the love triangle of Venus, Vulcan, and Mars.



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Fine wood carving and molding detail are abundant in the Banquet Hall

The next room guest will visit is the Breakfast Room, used for informal dining; portraits of the Vanderbilt family adorn the Spanish tooled-leather walls. The clock on display is a six-marbled French architectural clock, circa 1870, made by Japy. Beautiful gilded *objects d'art* decorate the case.



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As guests enter the Morning Salon, they see a table and chess set. Both were owned by Napoleon Bonaparte while he was a prisoner on the island of St. Helena.

The next room guests enter is the Music Room. There they can admire an English Lancet-Top Bracket Clock, circa 1780, crafted by Coward and Company. The case of crotch mahogany and walnut stands twenty inches tall. The clock, which must be wound once a week, is embellished with two lions' head handles on each side and beautiful gilded brass claw feet. Several other objects in this room deserve special attention. One is the *Triumphal Arch of Maximilian* by Albrecht Durer (1471-1528). The 192 engraved blocks depict the family tree and the life of Emperor Maximilian I, as well as portraits from the era of the Holy Roman Empire. Twelve rare Baroque porcelain figures and candlesticks, known as the Meissen Apostles, are also housed in the Music Room.



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At this point, the tour turns back to the South of the Entry Hall to the ninety foot Tapestry Gallery and the Loggia. Two clocks serve as sentinels for the three tapestries which are part of the series of *The Triumph of the Seven Virtues*. The clock at the North end is an English Bell-Top Bracket Clock, circa 1685, crafted by Edward Burgis. The case of ebony wood stands twelve inches high. This elegant clock depicts the time only.



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The clock at the South end of the Tapestry Gallery is an English Basket-Top Bracket Clock, circa 1675, crafted by Edmund Card. This clock features an ebony case with a pierced gilded basket-top. An unusual feature is the silk lining inside the basket-top that permits the sounding of the bell to escape while preventing the entry of dust into the case. A portrait of George Washington Vanderbilt, painted by John Singer Sargent, hangs over the door leading to the Library.



Leaving the Tapestry Gallery, guests pass beneath the quiet gaze of Mr. Vanderbilt as they enter the Library. Just over 10,000 volumes, from Mr. Vanderbilt's collection of 23,000 books, are housed in the classical-baroque room. A Spanish style French Clock, circa 1880, made by Japy, rests on the Library Table. Four putti, hand carved and covered with gold leaf, surround the dial. This type or style could also be referred to as a "Toledo Frame Clock". The base, constructed of ebony with inlay, contains a drawer for the winding key, and trinkets to be hidden.



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A grand staircase leads guests to the second floor where there are thirteen guest bedrooms and two master bedrooms as well as a Sitting Room and a Living Hall. On the Second Floor Landing, guests will find a rare Dutch Bookcase Clock, circa 1860. The maker of this fine clock is unknown. The clock, fitted with an alarm, was designed to alert those in the area when the alarm sounded at a predetermined time. The case is constructed of intricately carved solid oak panels.



Carved stringed instruments adorn the top of the arch. The oval aperture at the center of the case permits one to observe the swinging of the pendulum.



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Guests at Biltmore Estate® encounter a marvelous timepiece located at the top of the staircase in the Louis XVI Room. It is a French Cartel, circa 1760, by Louis Jouard of Paris. The case, made with fired gilt, is 27 inches tall. This clock is mounted at the center of a beautiful arched mirror.



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Christmas, circa 1991, in the Louis XVI Room....Biltmore Estate®



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Detail of hand-engraved "Hour Count Wheel"
Louis Jouard, circa 1760



©Jim VanOrsdel

Great Oriental influence, along with a boy blowing a horn, a dog, a reindeer, several oriental hats, sunbursts, and various flowers adorn the top.

Next the guest will enter the Second Floor Living Hall, originally used as an upstairs sitting room. The room contains a group portrait of the William A. V. Cecil family, as well as full length portraits of Richard Morris Hunt and Fredrick Law Olmstead. On the East end, there is an English Balloon Bracket Clock, circa 1820, crafted by Marriott of London. (Members of the Marriott family were clockmakers through four generations from 1715-1830.) The case is constructed of black lacquered veneer. The base, arched in front, rests on four bracket feet. The base supports the “balloon”, the round section housing the movement and dial. The arch is topped by a graceful wood spire ending in a fine brass finial.

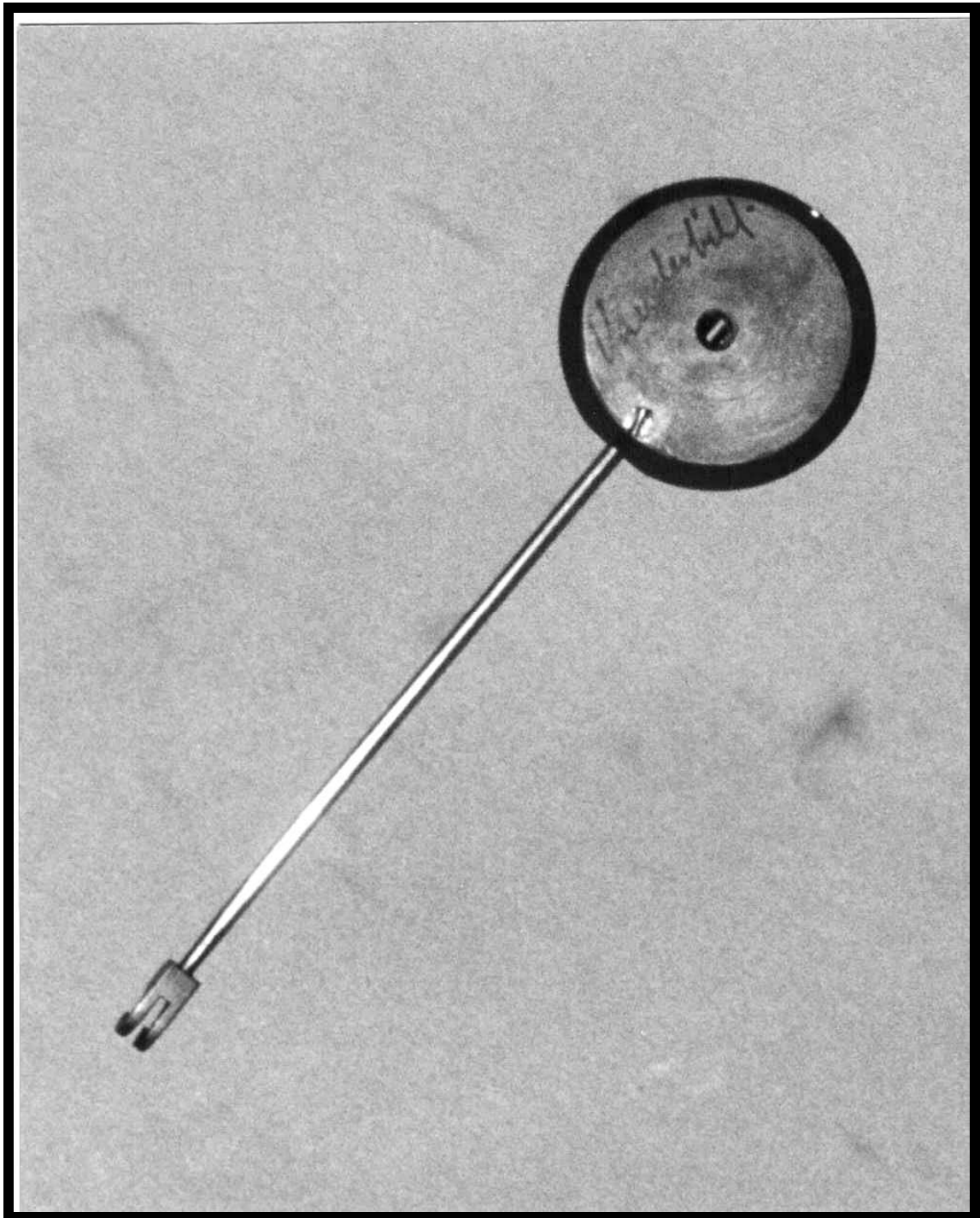


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On the West end of the Second Floor Living Hall, there is a French Drum Clock on a bronze elephant, circa 1889, by Japy. Both the case and base are crafted of brass with fired gilt. The base is a Rococo horizontal piece. The clock movement is mounted on the elephant's back in a brass drum. On the top of the clock, there is an eighteenth century depiction of an Asiatic lady holding a parasol (similar to a French lady's parasol). This unusual clock exhibits strong oriental influence.



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I made the determination that Jump & Company of London, a well-respected clock shop, perhaps had marked the pendulum of this French Clock by Japy with Mr. Vanderbilt's name for identification purposes. Mr. Vanderbilt bought several of his clocks for Biltmore Estate® from this establishment on his buying trips.

Mr. Vanderbilt's Bedroom, showing Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and American influences, contains what I believe is the oldest clock in Biltmore House®. It is an Austrian Miniature Tower Clock, circa 1650. The maker is sadly unknown. As with clocks all clocks made during this period, the clock originally had only one hand...an hour hand. Gearing to provide a minute hand was probably added during the eighteenth century, as was the practice during that period. The clock stands 22 inches high and the black-lacquered case has hand-embossed metal work making up most of the cabinet, columns, and finials. Atop the clock is a fine fired gilt Austrian soldier.

The dressing table, center table, chairs and sofas in Mr. Vanderbilt's Bedroom were designed by Richard Morris Hunt, the architect of Biltmore House®. Fine engravings from Mr. Vanderbilt's large collection nearly cover the walls of this handsome bedroom.



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Walking into the Oak Sitting Room, guests enter a room made elegant by seventeenth century Jacobean influences. The wood of the paneled walls provides a strong contrast to the plaster work on the upper walls and ceiling. Bronzes located throughout the room represent the work of nineteenth century French sculptors. In the Oak Sitting Room, guests will view a French Marble-based Clock with a bronze sculpture atop, circa 1795. During this period of clock making, many clockmakers employed the use of what is known as a “silk suspension” for the pendulum to hang upon, as is this one. The clock, from the Directoire period, is prominently displayed on a splendid ivory inlaid desk.



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A very fine Sandglass is also located in the Oak Sitting Room, and has two separate glasses...one to disclose the passing of the hour, and the other, the passing of minutes. These glasses are mounted in a finely engraved fired-gilt brass surround with the use of string, cork, and wax, and is very rare.



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After leaving the Oak Sitting Room, guest will enter Mr. Vanderbilt's Room. Oval in shape, the wall coverings of velvet match the upholstery. The magnificent clock that rests on the Marble mantle is a French Louis XV Porcelain Clock, circa 1760, crafted by Philippe Barat. A wonderful lady and gentleman stand beneath an arch of brass looking into a pond. There are thirty-two porcelain flowers that surround the clock and arch.



Christmas, circa 1993...Mr. Vanderbilt's Room ©Jim VanOrsdel



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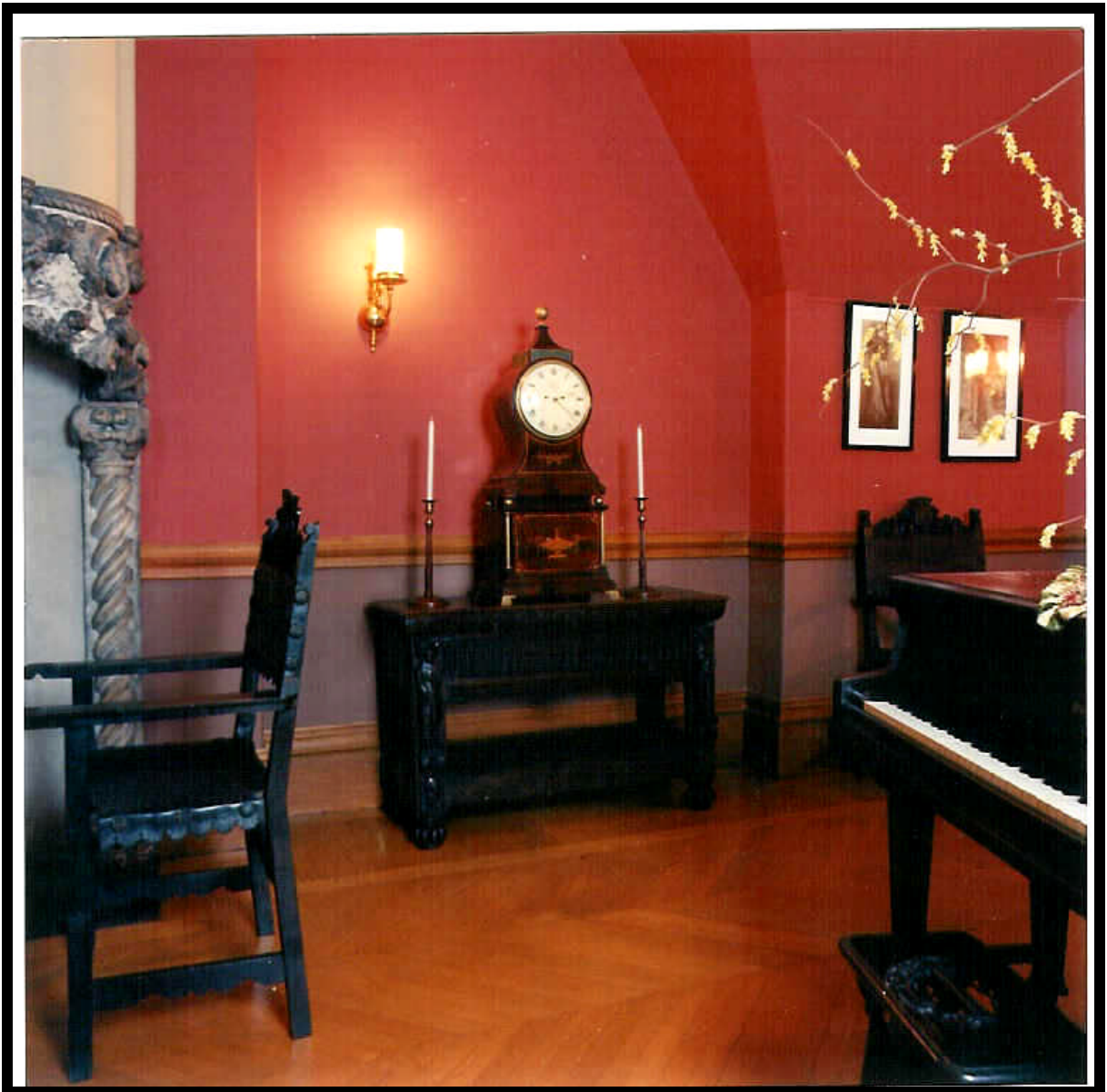
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Close-up of the Philippe Barat Clock in Mrs. Vanderbilt's Room

Upon reaching the Third Floor Landing Hall (an informal area for the Vanderbilt's guests), one encounters a grand English Case-on Case Balloon Clock, circa 1815. Standing an impressive forty-two inches in height, it has a case of crotch mahogany. It was crafted by Robson of Cripplegate in London. It has great bracket feet, and wonderful marquetry work throughout the case. The rarity of this artifact is that the balloon clock sits atop of the base, and the pendulum swings in the lower portion.

The clock shares the room with works by American artist James McNeill Whistler and several objects and pieces of furniture from William H. Vanderbilt's home. Many items collected by George W. Vanderbilt during his world travels are also displayed.



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Detail of the Robson, Cripplegate Balloon Clock showing the fine inlay.



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Rear of movement with engraving.



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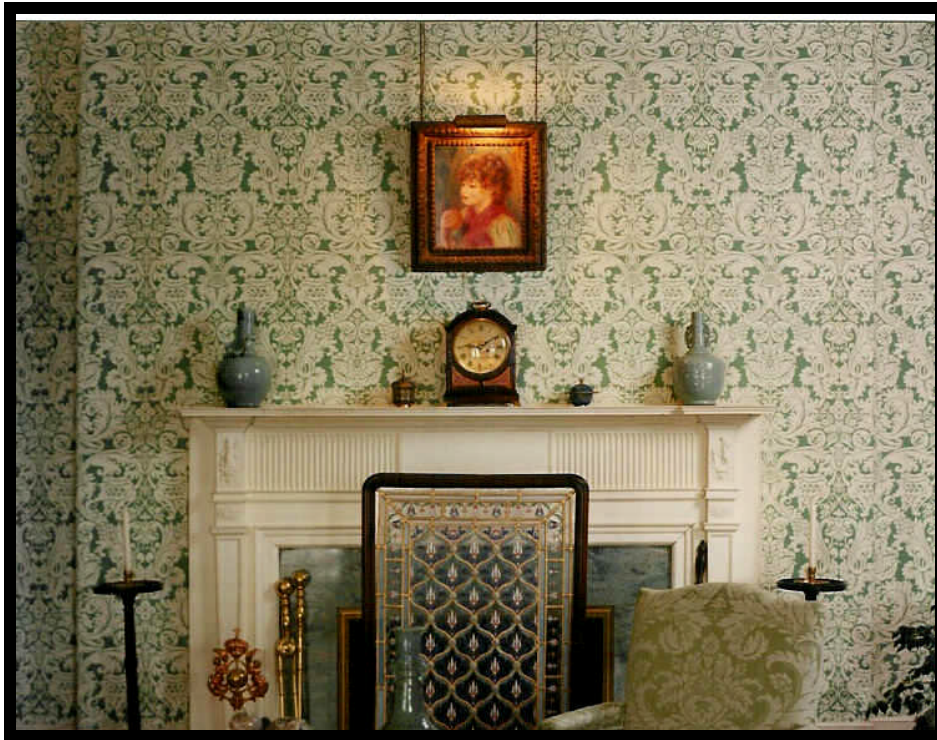
Close-up of the Robson clock.

Returning to the second floor by the Grand Staircase, visitors will find the Sheraton Room, one of three guest bedrooms. The furniture in this room is based on designs published in the late eighteenth century pattern books by Thomas Sheraton. A French Arch-Top Boudoir Clock, circa 1800, is located in this fine Guest Bedroom. Since the majority of clocks referred to as Boudoir Clocks did not strike the hours, Mr. Vanderbilt's guests were not disturbed by unnecessary sounds.



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The Chippendale Room has dark mahogany furniture done in the style of Thomas Chippendale, an eighteenth century British designer and cabinetmaker. This guest bedroom is the location of an English Broken-Arch-Top Bracket Clock, circa 1790. It was crafted by Matt Hill. The case, constructed of rosewood veneer, is supported by brass bracket-feet. The arched dome is surrounded by a cast brass carrying handle. Unusual features include the splendid moldings repeated on all four sides of the clock, and a faux pendulum swinging in the arched aperture in the dial. A French oil painting *Child with an Orange*, circa 1881, by Pierre Auguste Renoir hangs above.



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Display of parts for the Matt Hill Bracket Clock.

The Old English Room is decorated in a seventeenth century style of decoration. The English Inverted Bell-Top Bracket Clock, circa 1825, located in this guest bedroom was crafted by Andrew Flockhart. This exquisite clock stands fifteen inches high on brass ball feet. The case is constructed of black lacquered veneers inlaid with thin sections of brass in beautiful patterns. The top of the arch rises above the brass molding. Rising above the inverted bell-top is a brass plate and carrying handle. The side openings are finished with a brass fretwork done in a fishscale pattern to allow the sound of the bell strike to escape the case. Silk lining on the inside prevents dust from entering the case.



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As the tour continues, guests see the recreational and work areas in the Basement before arriving at the Bachelors' Wing on the main floor of the house. There one enters the Smoking Room. The gentlemen could retire to this room for cigars or a Pipe and enjoy brandy after dinner or relaxing in the Billiard Room. A French Boudoir Round-Top Clock, circa 1870 keeps the time in this all male retreat. Resting on four brass ball feet, the clock wears a decorative apron with acanthus leaves. The case is veneered in rosewood. It has marquetry in light wood with an outline resembling a clamshell. The Smoking Room also holds many volumes of the large book collection.



The Gun Room was also a part of the all male retreat. It is the location of an English Chamfer-Atop Bracket Clock, circa 1810, by an unknown maker. An interesting dial is formed by all of the numerals pointing toward the dial center. The Gun Room documents activities such as wild game hunting.



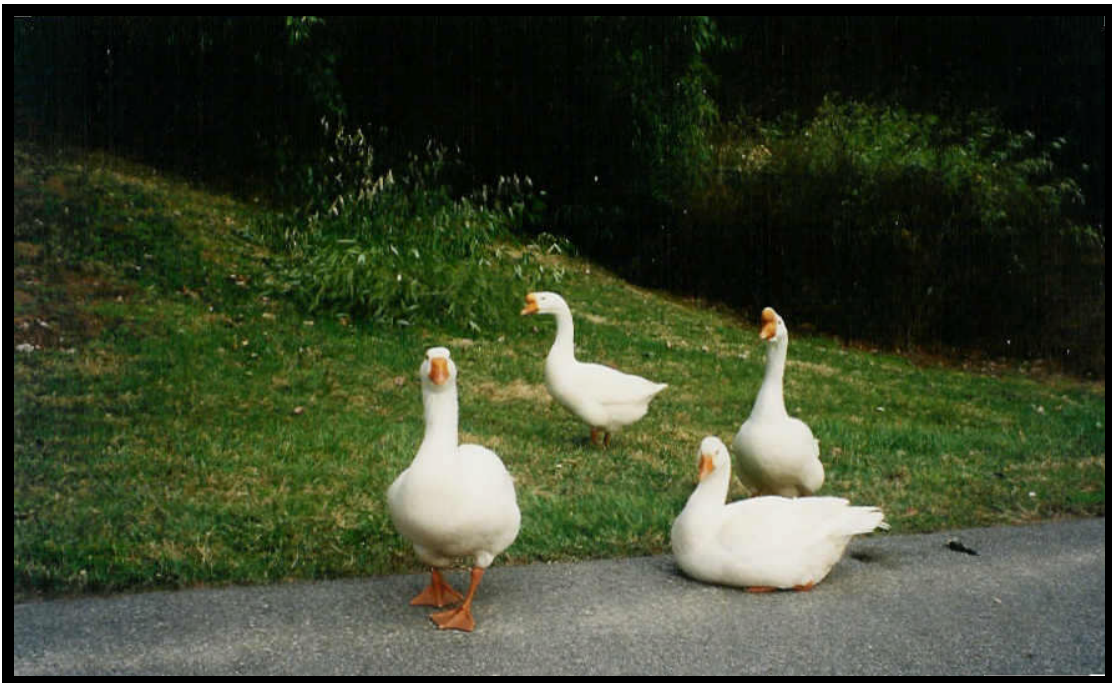
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Exiting Biltmore House® through the Porte-Cochere, guest enter the Carriage House courtyard. There the attention of the Turret Clock on the Carriage House exterior commands attention. It isn't hard for me to imagine the Vanderbilt's guests glancing at the dial to schedule their comings and goings to the Biltmore Depot to catch trains.

Seasons Regulate the Gardens, Forest and Winery

Leaving Biltmore House®, guests pass through several areas where time is regulated by the changing of the seasons. Fredrick Law Olmstead designed diverse gardens for Mr. Vanderbilt. The Library Terrace and the Italian Garden offer guest a view of Mount Pisgah. The distant peak was part of the original estate; it is now part of Pisgah National Forest. The color of the Ramble or Shrub Garden changes with each season. The Ramble's gently inclined walls lead to the four-acre English Walled Garden. Both the Rose Garden and the Conservatory merit a leisurely visit.

Even further from Biltmore House®, guests pass through the world's most complete Azalea Garden. As the road winds through the grounds, fat geese from the Bass Pond approach cars begging for food. Forests on Biltmore Estate® were overseen by Gifford Pinchot (the first trained American forester) and Carl Schenck to reclaim the badly eroded land east of the French Broad River. As the road winds through pastures, several bucolic views of Biltmore House® entice photographers. If time permits, guests can visit Biltmore Estate Winery or stop for a meal at Deerpark Restaurant. Both facilities are grand and well maintained in the tradition of Biltmore House®.



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Biltmore Estate Winery, opened in 1985, is housed in buildings originally used for part of the Biltmore Dairy operation. Richard Morris Hunt, the architect, designed a Clock Tower as part of the dairy barn. Originally, three large dials were visible to employees working in the fields; a fourth dial was added in 1989. The Clock Tower houses a clock constructed by E. Howard & Company of Boston Massachusetts. It is larger although similar to the Stable Master Clock. The steam whistle once connected to the Winery Tower Clock is gone, but the 75 pound pendulum still regulates the movement of the nineteenth century clockworks.



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Inside the Winery, three mosaics composed of painted Portuguese tiles illustrate the Harvest of the Grapes, Production of Wine, Celebration, the fourth tablet is the dial of a clock with working hands telling the correct time. Mr. William A.V. Cecil commissioned the tablets during a trip to Portugal early in 1983. Delivered during the winter of 1985, each tablet is approximately eight feet tall and five feet wide. The illustrations evidence the importance of time in winemaking.

Musing on Biltmore House® as I Journey Home

As often as time permits, I stop at Deerpark Restaurant before beginning the drive home. The building housing the courtyard restaurant was originally a dairy barn. Designed by Richard Morris Hunt in the 1890's, the building complements the landscape. A quiet meal at the restaurant provides me the opportunity to reflect on the many facets of Biltmore Estate®.

One impression always lingers after each visit to Biltmore Estate®...all the separate parts are magnificently preserved. When experienced together, I feel like I had visited one of Europe Castles. This experience is fostered by the commitment to preservation at Biltmore Estate®. That strong commitment is quite evident concerning all of the collections. My involvement with the clock collection is a source of great pride for me. Conserving and repairing Mr. Vanderbilt's antique timepieces reinforces my deep convictions about maintaining a high quality of horological standards. The quest for excellence is a daily adventure in my store. Each opportunity to work at Biltmore House® leaves me looking forward to my return trip to Mr. Vanderbilt's retreat.