



1944 Washington Slept Here

Early 1944

George Washington Slept Here. This was (still is?) a sign on a big white building on Route 44 off the eastern end of our road. Whenever we walked to Mansfield Depot we saw the sign and the house but, other than that, we weren't a whole lot interested in where George Washington slept.

But at about age 13 or so, I was invited to baby sit for two small children in that huge, old house. It seems that two professors from UConn had met my mother at one of her handiwork teaching classes. In a conversation, she had told them what a great sitter I was for my four younger brothers and sisters. I think that I walked there and the wife or husband would bring me home after their meetings at the college were finished.

The house was huge and just perfect. Not a thing out of place, and all the furnishings were colonial and in tip-top shape. The rooms were huge compared to ours and along the second floor there was a long hallway with many rooms leading off it. The children were always ready for bed and I might read to them for a while and then go downstairs and read some more.

The professors always left me a very nice snack and their evenings ended around nine or so. I was, and am, a voracious reader and what fun it was to read someone else's books as I was invited to do. I never finished a one, but I started many and then I always had a list to take to the library at the church. I might have been given a quarter, I don't remember. But the money was mine for something special. Since we lived in the country, there wasn't a whole lot special that I could buy.

The professors moved on and I never sat for anyone else the whole time that I lived in Coventry. Mostly, people sat for themselves as there were relatives close by and moms didn't work. My mother worked on and off in the thread mills in Willimantic whenever my father had an operation which seemed to happen every other year or so. How she got there, I don't know. She never did learn to drive.

The more I write, the more I realize what remarkable parents we had. They simply did whatever was necessary and we never heard a word of complaint. We also never knew why the operations, though I seem to remember Dad had trouble with his legs all his life. He also had some serious stomach or internal work done and, at an early age, he had the most beautiful teeth. His tops had been taken out and replaced. I never saw him without teeth but there must have been a period between hauling out and stuffing in.

We were blissfully ignorant and unobservant about a lot of things. But one thing I knew: we were different and encouraged to be. And at some point, I didn't like the idea a whole lot. Other girls could wear lipstick and they were always popular at the dances. I wanted to move to New York City and live in a penthouse and be an airline stewardess.

But there was a war on and now it was 1944 and our country, according to FDR, was very optimistic about winning. Also, Mr. Churchill was heard on the radio and he, too, told his people to have courage and never turn away from danger. Face it and conquer.

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Birthplace of Nathan Hale

Suddenly, it was June 6, 1944 D-Day. And our troops were all over the Normandy Beaches and our French teacher taught us the most about the war. She had maps and could tell us what was happening, and all in French. Once again, we heard what FDR wanted us to hear, so we knew a lot of soldiers had died. But our troops under General of the Army Eisenhower, US, and Field Marshal Montgomery, GB, were off to Paris. Wow!

Well, Paris (the German occupiers, that is) surrendered to us, the Germans went to Prisoner of War camps or went home, the French danced in the streets and, without television, we could only hear the sounds coming from a long way off on our radios.

And all that happened on August 25, 1944, the day after my 14th birthday.

Meanwhile, we heard of things happening in the Pacific and we all knew that there was a terrible Japanese general named Tojo. Truthfully, we barely knew Asia at all. I don't remember studying that part of the world except for one quick course in geography. In that course, I learned every country, its continent, its capitol, who owned it, and its principal product. And, by the way, all the owners did it for the sake of the occupied country in order to help it progress.

Our world was centered on Europe. I suppose because everyone we knew had originated from across the Atlantic. I've often wondered if in California, the people focused on Asia in their school lessons. I bet they had to learn about the Pilgrims and Plymouth Rock.

In any event, Tojo lost his generalship and our troops kept occupying one island after another in that vast ocean bordering California. General MacArthur was in charge and he really knew how to win a war.

And summer in the country was like every other summer. I was getting tired of it and I really thought I was too old for all that farm stuff. Too much reading, as my aunt would say, went to my head.

Respectfully submitted, Jean Thibault Castagno

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