

# The Building at 10 West Main Street

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The building at 10 West Main Street in Batavia, now serving as Batavia's Police Station, was Batavia's City Hall from 1918 to 2004. Prior to that, it was the Brisbane Mansion from 1855 to 1917. It is historically significant in part since it served as Batavia's first city hall and in part because it was home to members of what is arguably the City's most significant early family: the Brisbanes.

## The Brisbane Mansion

The mansion was erected by George Brisbane, the second son of James and Mary Brisbane. (More information about his parents and sibling follows below.) It was constructed by Thomas McCulley, a stone and brick mason. According to newspaper accounts, the mansion was the first building in Batavia in which pressed bricks were used. Since there were no bricklayers in Batavia who could lay them properly, it was necessary to get bricklayers from Buffalo and pay them \$5/day, a figure that was considered "outrageous." The roof was of slate. The building was completed in April of 1855 at a cost of \$25,000.

An interior description of the mansion published in *The Daily News* of November 24, 1917 read as follows:

"There are 30 or more rooms. The walls are plastered and covered with wallpaper. On the first floor a hallway, 9 ft. by 45 ft., traverses from the front to rear doors. In the center of the building, an octagonal rotunda admits daylight from the roof more than 40 ft. above. A walnut railing surrounds the opening on the second floor. To the east side of the hall on the first floor is a room extending the length of the building 16 ft. by 45 ft. There are double doors that open from this room in three places into the hallway.

"To the west side of the hall on the first floor are two large rooms. High windows and very high ceilings, as in the other rooms, afford plenty of light and ventilation. To the rear of these rooms there are a dining room, kitchen and servants' quarters large enough for a castle.

“To the rear of the building is the winding staircase, wide stairs, and walnut railing which leads to the second floor with a landing half way up. From the octagonal opening in the center there are seven large rooms.

“A stairway leads from the attic floor to the tower from which one could look over the roof tops of most of the houses in Batavia.

“The cellar walls are of solid masonry. There are five big fireplaces of imported Italian marble as well as several other fireplaces of smaller and less valuable construction.”

At some point along the way, toilet facilities with porcelain tubs were installed on all floors. A well house, presumably serving the mansion in the earlier years before municipal water, stood in the neighborhood of the current post office building. There were also a barn and carriage house on the property.

### City Hall

George Brisbane died in 1892 and his wife, Sarah Whitehouse Brisbane died in 1911. The property at that point passed to their only surviving child, James Brisbane. At this point, no one lived in the mansion and James, who lived in New York City, wished to sell the property which included the area that is now Austin Park. The County and the City were both interested, the County in order to erect a new court house and the City to establish a park. Both intended to raze the mansion if they took ownership. Meanwhile, real estate developers wanted to use this sole remaining open land in the heart of the community for building lots. In the end, the City acquired the property on December 1<sup>st</sup> of 1917.

At this point, the mansion presumably would soon have been razed. However, an unexpected turn of events occurred when Ellicott Hall, a building that stood where County Building 1 now stands, burned to the ground in early February of 1918. Ellicott Hall had been built when Genesee County was formed in 1801. Among other things, it had once served as a court house that included jail facilities. At the time of the fire, the City had offices in the building and stored documents in a basement safe. By then, the Brisbane Mansion had been discovered to be in excellent condition, contrary to expectations, and the notion of converting it into a city hall swiftly gained ground. The well-known local builder and architect, Frank H. Homelius, was engaged to draw up plans and specifications for alterations to the mansion. Contracts were awarded by Common Council on February 23, 1918 and the work started almost immediately afterwards. By the end of September 1918, the new city hall was ready for inspection.

The following description of the remodeled mansion appeared in *The Daily News* of September 28th, 1918:

“Visitors who go to the new City Hall today will readily admit that the structure cannot be inferior to similar buildings of cities of greater population and higher rank and importance than Batavia. The dominant note that is sounded everywhere is permanency, solidity, massiveness. Wherever possible, the original materials in the construction have been left untouched and the architect has contented himself with restoring, refinishing and redecorating. All the old gas fixtures of solid brass and unique ornamentation have been left intact and simply wired for electricity. All the heavy Italian marble fireplaces have been retouched and made ready to do service again with the open grates. There are two such invaluable fireplaces in the large room that will be the new council chambers.

“Throughout the first floor of the building, from front to rear entrance, is a wide hallway with tile floor in modern mosaic style, and in the hallways on the first and second floors are automatic drinking fountains of marble, which will afford a sanitary way of drinking Batavia’s new filtered water. White enameling work predominates in the treatment of interior walls, doors, windows and wainscoting, but delicate tints of blue and buff are used in different offices.

“To the right of the main entrance, on the east side of the hallway, is the spacious room which will be used as the Council Chamber. The center section is reserved for the desks of the mayor, city clerk, and six councilmen while at either side is a railed enclosure for the public. There are three entrances through wide and high doors to the almost regal room.

“At the left of the main entrance, to the west side of the building, are the offices of the city clerk. The front office is reserved for a private office, while the second office is meant for the public and for the clerks and stenographers. The vault which opens from this office extends through to the second floor of the building, where it is accessible from the office of the city assessors and treasurer. To the rear of the city clerk’s office is the office of the Commissioner of Charities [Lorenzo] Burns. Access to this office may conveniently be obtained from the outside, as a walk has been built around the building to the entrance to this office. There are modern toilet rooms with tiled walls and floors on the first and second floors of the building and many small rooms may be used for storage purposes.

“Through from the first floor hallway even to the roof of the building is an octagonal-shaped rotunda, which serves to afford daylight to the center of the building. The rotunda is railed about on the second floor and attic floor. The stairway at the rear of the first floor hall has a landing a portion of the way up which leads to the office at the west side of the building just over that of the Commissioner of Charities. This office will be occupied by the Civil Service Commission.

“On the second floor the offices which will be utilized by the various department heads open into the hallway in the center of which is the opening for the rotunda. At the visitor’s right, near the head of the stairs, is the office of the city assessors, Edward L. Gillons, D. W. Spencer, and E. G. Grinnell. Then comes the office of the Treasurer, John W. Pratt, and in the front of the building on the west side is the office of Plumbing Inspector [Sherman] Hall.

“Mayor [William] Haitz’s private office is in the center at the front of the building, directly opposite the head of the stairs, and continuing the journey around the rotunda, the visitor comes to the office of the health department, Dr. [John] LeSeur being the health officer. The rooms adjoining this office will be used for physical examination of school children and the dental clinic.

“There are great reaches of space in the attic of the building for storage purposes. Fire Chief [William] McBride has decorated the walls of this floor with his collection of war posters.”

Unfortunately, over the following years and before city government moved to the new city hall at City Centre, the mansion underwent many changes that greatly detracted from its original splendor. According to a report filed in 1980 with the Division for Historic Preservation of N.Y.S. Parks and Recreation, the rotunda was eliminated in 1958 with the space replaced by a ceiling on the first floor and flooring and ceiling on the second floor. In 1964, the first floor windows were shortened, the arched front doors replaced, and a police station and council chamber were added to the back. (This addition is distinguished by modern brick.) Sometime in the late 1960s, the cupola was removed. Three marble fireplaces were also removed. Fortunately, the Landmark Society of Genesee County replaced the mansion’s cupola with a replica in 1983.

#### The Brisbanes

Who were the Brisbanes? To fully appreciate who they were, we need to quickly review our history from the late 1700s. Prior to 1800, the western 3 to 3-1/2 million acres of New York

State was pretty much a wilderness except for Seneca Indians who lived here in rather limited numbers. In 1797, the Holland Land Company, a group of Dutch investors, acquired this area in a deal that extinguished Seneca rights to the land in exchange for \$100,000 and the establishment of Indian reservations. The Dutch then hired Joseph Ellicott to survey “the purchase,” as it was called. When the survey was completed in early 1800, the Dutch hired Ellicott to be the resident agent in charge of the land sales. The building now at 130 West Main Street became the main land office.

Surveying The Purchase required a considerable number of men and they, in turn, required substantial supplies. In the spring of 1798, while in Philadelphia where the American headquarters of The Holland Land Company were located, Ellicott hired 22-year-old James Brisbane to oversee the provision of supplies. On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1798, together with a number of other men, James departed Philadelphia with a supply of stores. It appears he first set up at a location on the Genesee River between current-day Geneseo and Mt. Morris, but then relocated the storehouse to present-day Stafford in October of 1798 where he served as “principal clerk.”

After the survey was completed, James Brisbane chose to become an entrepreneur. With the help of a \$3,000 loan from the Holland Land Company, he established the first general store in Batavia in May of 1802. It was on a 0.2 acre parcel, about where the drive-thru parking lot for today’s post office is located. In July of 1802, he was appointed Batavia’s first postmaster. In addition to serving as the postmaster, James Brisbane also came to serve as the County Clerk and County Treasurer. However, the fortune he eventually accumulated largely came from buying and then selling land on The Purchase. That included over 269 acres in Batavia itself. The land he acquired also included parcels in what became downtown Buffalo. He was also the principal incorporator and largest shareholder of the Tonawanda Railroad, the first railroad to reach Batavia. Along with Hemen Redfield and James’s brother-in-law, Trumbull Cary, he became one of the three wealthiest men in Batavia.

James and his wife, Mary Stevens Brisbane, had two children, Albert, born in 1809 and George, born in 1812. Like their father, both sons have been described as eccentric.

As a young man, Albert traveled throughout Europe and studied under several notable personages of the era. Albert came to promote Fourieristic communes, a form of utopian society based on the ideas of Charles Fourier. In the 1840s, at least 40 such communes were attempted, generally located in the Northeast and upper Midwest. Albert was described by some as a “brilliant speaker” and America’s “finest orator;” and the communes appear to have been largely the result of his efforts. Albert’s personal life was also unusual. His prolific love-life included four wives, perhaps sometimes more than one at the same time, and innumerable

children. Albert was also an inventor whose inventions ranged widely in scope. Other than for his childhood, he spent little time in Batavia.

Aside from also being eccentric, George was dramatically different. He was married just once, in 1848, to Sarah Whitehouse, a woman about 14 years younger. He had only one child of record, a son named "James," likely named after his grandfather. A biographer, Oliver Carlson, described George as having a horizon bounded by personal problems, family interests, and the social life of Batavia. His brother, Albert, viewed George as having a very limited outlook on life, meaning, in other words, that George was much more focused than Albert on money matters. Just as his father made money readily, so did George. He was one of the original directors when the Batavia Gas Light Company was organized. According to an 1883 newspaper account, in that year alone, he added \$100,000 to his fortune by speculation in stocks.

Mary Brisbane, James Brisbane's wife and mother of Albert and George, died in 1841. Her place of burial is unknown. It has been speculated that it might be somewhere in an unmarked grave in Austin Park. James died in 1851 and is buried in the Batavia Cemetery on Harvester Avenue. When he died, he left his estate jointly to Albert and George. The estate being held jointly by the brothers was a sore point between them. Albert had little interest in managing the resulting financial matters. In any event, George assumed control of his father's property on West Main Street and proceeded to build the mansion that became his home, later Batavia's City Hall, and today's police station. I assume that his inheritance paid for the structure.

There are Brisbanes living today, but none in Batavia. George's side of the family has died out. By contrast, Albert's multiplied mightily. Among them has been Arthur Brisbane, a son of Albert who became a famous newsman associated with William Randolph Hearst. I had the opportunity to meet many of Albert's descendants in 2015 when they held a family reunion in Batavia that I had a hand in organizing. I can say without fear of contradiction that Albert's enthusiasm for life lives on.