

American Castles

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The Biltmore Estate¹

Before celebrities such as Donald Trump and Bill Gates built their lavish estates, there were a handful of wealthy families in the [United States](#) who made an art of building astounding homes, many of which resembled European castles and fortresses. Construction of the elaborate abodes could be viewed as a competition between the well-to-do, with their homes representing the fortunes they had to spend. Erected during the Gilded Age, the era between the Civil War and World War I, hundreds of these homes were constructed, mainly in the eastern states, with a concentrated amount first in [Newport](#), then on the [Gold Coast of Long Island](#). Today, many of these structures are used for a variety of purposes, as hotels, tour facilities and event locations for everyday folks to enjoy.

CASTLES FROM THE GILDED AGE

Whether built as a showpiece of wealth, power or love, there's no arguing that the castles found in America are spectacular pieces of architecture, combining old European castles with more modern styles. A concentration of these impressive structures are found in the North Eastern United States, with a scattering found in other areas of the country.

Biltmore Estate

Built by George Vanderbilt in [Asheville, North Carolina](#), between the years of 1889 to 1895, the [Biltmore Estate](#) remains the largest residence in America and is set on more than 8,000 acres (3,200 ha) of land.

The building alone encompasses more than 4 acres (1.6 ha) and contains 250 rooms, 65 fireplaces, 43 bathrooms, 34 bedrooms, three kitchens, an indoor pool, a bowling alley, priceless pieces of art and antiques, a winery and many other one-of-a-kind features. Until 1930 the home remained a private residence, but was opened to the public by request of the city of Asheville as a way to spur tourism in the area during the Depression.



Statues on the Biltmore Estate Grounds²

Biltmore Estate remains the center of Asheville's tourism appeal. Spread across the estate are extraordinary features, including the world-renowned, 204-room [Inn on Biltmore Estate](#), hundreds of acres of impeccable gardens, a variety of dining areas and restaurants, unique estate shops and much more. Also available are a number of activities, including guided biking and hiking tours, carriage rides, fishing classes, horseback trips and rafting excursions. Special to the estate is a driving school for Land Rovers, where people can test their all-terrain driving skills as they maneuver through the maze of trails found on the property. Visitors to the town can explore the Biltmore House and grounds through a number of specialty tours offered at the estate.



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Princess Anne Hotel



[Princess Anne Hotel](#)

Asheville's premier historic boutique Inn

Biltmore Estate

Visit America's largest home located in Asheville, NC



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'Iolani Palace in Honolulu, HI³

'Iolani Palace

Hawaii was an independent country—a status which changed in 1898 when annexed by the United States—that desired to prove its status as a modern nation to countries overseas. The decision was to build a palace in **Honolulu** for its royalty, comparable to ones found for monarchs in Europe. Construction began in 1879 when the cornerstone was laid and three years later **'Iolani Palace** was ready for King Kalakaua and Queen Kapi'olani to reside inside its walls. Nothing was spared in the construction of this building, as it incorporated many modern conveniences, like electricity and plumbing, that were uncommon to late-19th century architecture.

After the death of the king in 1891, the palace became the home of his sister, Princess Lili'uokalani. After an attempt to control the citizens of Hawaii and increase the monarch's power, Lili'uokalani was overthrown by the very people she sought to rule, leading to the creation of a provisional government.

Lili'uokalani tried to reclaim her power, but was arrested and forced to relinquish her claim to the throne. Ironically, 'Iolani Palace contained the debunked queen while she served five months of house arrest, instead of being sent to a hard labor camp. Many of the palace belongings were sold at auction after the queen's overthrowing and the building was converted to hold the provisional government offices. In 1969, 'Iolani Palace underwent a massive restoration and in 1978 was opened to the public. Many of the items that were auctioned were sought and returned to the palace.

Visitors of 'Iolani Palace can travel through the colorful history of the building and its residents with self guided tours. Surrounded by iron gates, the palace property contains the reconstructed barracks of the Royal Guard, the coronation pavilion and several of the royal tombs. Inside the two-story building are a number of lavishly furnished rooms, including the Grand Hall, the Throne Room, Queen Lili'uokalani's Imprisonment Room, the suites of the King and Queen, and many other formal and informal areas. Located in downtown Honolulu on what some believe to be an ancient heiau site, or place of worship, 'Iolani Palace is near a number of additional [shops](#), [restaurants](#) and [attractions](#), such as [St. Andrew's Cathedral](#) and the [Hawaii State Capitol](#).

What was the Gilded Age?

Spanning from 1876 to 1914, between the Civil and First World wars, the Gilded Age marked the rapid changes in American society as it grew in industry, territory, economics and population. Immigrants from Europe came to America and found wealth in new sectors, such as transportation, lumber, oil, gold and steel. Out of this industriousness came a new group of wealthy individuals, the business man or Robber Baron, who amassed fortunes beyond their imaginations. Remnants of these fortunes are seen today in the many mansions and castles that were built during this era.

Hearst Castle

Before accepting the San Francisco Examiner as payment for a gambling debt, George Hearst made millions as a miner and a rancher. Being an avid hunter as well, he purchased

48,000 acres (19,400 ha) of ranchland near [San Simeon, California](#). Hearst passed away in 1891, leaving the land, which had grown in excess of 250,000 acres (10,000 ha), and the newspaper to his son, William Randolph. Tired of roughing it on his camping trips, W.R. Hearst asked architect Julia Morgan to “build a little something” on the land. Her answer resulted in one of the most extravagant homes in America: [Hearst Castle](#).

Modeled after Spanish-style architecture, the mansion and guest buildings combined contain an astounding 177 rooms. On the property Hearst had 127 acres (51 ha) of gardens grown, two pools—the Neptune Pool and the indoor Roman Pool—installed and trails installed to wind through the grounds and connect the different areas. For his guests, Hearst had three guest houses designed: Casa del Monte, Casa del Mar and Casa del Sol, which hold four, six and eight bedrooms respectively. Casa Grande was Hearst's main house, which totals 60,645 sq ft (5,634 sq m) of interior space and boasts 41 bedrooms, 38 bathrooms, two towers, a climate controlled wine cellar and many other distinctive features. Between 1923 and 1937, W.R. Hearst's property also contained a zoo with more than 300 field animals that roamed through his land, including species of zebras, antelope, camels, kangaroos, ostriches and yaks, as well as cages where more dangerous creatures were kept. The castle was under construction for 28 years until it finally met the mental picture Hearst had formed from the castles he saw on trips to Europe as a boy.



The Grounds of Hearst Castle⁴

Tours of the amazing grounds and buildings began in 1952, a year after Hearst's death. Over the years the tours have evolved to accommodate a variety of interests. All run for just under two hours and cover different parts of the estate, such as the Casa Grande, the gardens, the guest houses and pools. A number of seasonal and specialty viewings are hosted throughout the year.

CASTLES OF THE THOUSAND ISLANDS

Built in the early 1900s, two castles were built on private islands overlooking the St. Lawrence Seaway in the Thousand Islands-Seaway region between [New York](#) and [Ontario](#). Open to the public, [Boldt Castle](#) on Heart Island and [Singer Castle](#) on Dark Island can only be reached by taking a water taxi, [tour boat](#) or [private charter](#).



Boldt Castle on Heart Island⁵

Boldt Castle on Heart Island

While some of these magnificent dwellings were built to display personal prestige, others were built as mementos of love, as in the case of Boldt Castle on Heart Island. Overlooking [Alexandria Bay](#) in the Thousand Islands, Boldt castle was built as a trinket of affection from [Waldorf Astoria Hotel](#) mogul George C. Boldt to his wife, Louise, which he was planning to present to her on Valentine's Day in 1905.

Modeled after a 16th century Rhineland Castle from Europe, ground was broken for the six-story, 120-room mansion in 1900 on Boldt's private Heart Island. Planned to be a summer house for the family, the property was to include underground tunnels, gardens, a playhouse and a marina. However, the castle would not be finished until more than 75 years later. Construction was canceled in 1904 when Boldt's world changed with the sudden death of his

wife. Work on the building was not resumed until the property was purchased by the Thousand Islands Bridge Authority in 1977, who spent millions of dollars to not only finish the castle but also to restore the areas that were complete in 1904.

While the essence of Boldt's dream may be captured in the finished product that stands today, it is unknown if the building would have appeared this way if his wife had not died. Visitors are invited to explore the building and the property, as well as the many nooks and crannies of Heart Island. Self-guided tours can be conducted of Heart Island, where six individual buildings, including the castle, can be explored.

Singer Castle on Dark Island

One of the few castles to be lived in during the Gilded Age, Singer Castle stands on Dark Island in [Chippewa Bay](#) (a village 11 mi/18 km from Alexandria Bay) since its completion in 1905. Constructed as a hunting retreat by self-made millionaire Commodore Frederick Gilbert Bourne, president of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, Singer Castle rises four stories in the air and boasts 28 rooms. Designed to resemble Sir Walter Scott's Woodstock Castle in [Scotland](#), the Towers, as Bourne referred to it, was built with secret passageways and dungeons. Prominent families such as the Astors and the Vanderbilts were entertained there during the summer and fall, when the Bournes lived at the castle. In 1919 Bourne passed away and the property was left to the LaSalle Military Academy. In 1965 it was sold to the Harold Martin Evangelistic Association, who renamed it Jorstadt Castle. Sold in 2001 to a private company and opened to the public in 2003 as Singer Castle, visitors are now welcomed take a guided tour of the structure and the grounds. There are many steps and stairs, making the castle unable to accommodate people with disabilities and children in strollers.

Robber Barons of the Gilded Age

These are some of the men who made fortunes during this industrial boom.

- John Jacob Astor (real estate, fur)
- Cornelius Vanderbilt (railroad, shipping)
- Andrew Carnegie (steel)
- Henry Ford (automobiles)
- Jay Cooke (finance)
- Henry Clay Frick (steel)
- Collis P. Huntington (railroads)
- John D. Rockefeller (Standard Oil Company)
- Leland Stanford (railroads)
- Daniel Drew (finance)
- James Buchanan Duke (tobacco)
- J.P. Morgan (banking)
- Jay Gould (finance, railroads)
- James J. Hill (railroads)



The Breakers Mansion in Newport⁶

NEWPORT MANSIONS

Discovered in 1639, Newport, [Rhode Island](#), was used as an escape for people looking for religious freedom. Soon the ocean community grew into an established seaport, sporting ornamental schooners and trade ships alike. Containing ample areas of natural beauty, Newport continued to transform into a vacation destination for the opulent. Throughout the mid to

late 19th century some of America's richest and most powerful residents used the area to build their vacation cottages, which appear more like mansions and mini-castles. Today some of these properties welcome guests inside to tour the homes of America's 19th century royalty.

The Breakers

Construction of the Breakers, a 70-room house, began in 1893 by Cornelius Vanderbilt II, grandson of family figurehead Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, who owned the New York Central Railroad. Modeled after 16th century Italian Renaissance palazzos, the [Breakers](#) remains one of the most extravagant displays of the Vanderbilt family's fortune. After being passed down through the family, the Breakers opened to the public in 1948 as a way to raise money for the [Preservation Society of Newport County](#). Inside are examples of turn-of-the-

century furnishing and fixture, original sculptures designed especially for the Vanderbilts and amazing seasonal decorations—most notably during the Christmas season. Today it is one of 11 properties that welcomes tour groups and hosts events throughout the year, allowing visitors to be part of the glamor that was the Vanderbilt family.

The Marble House

Another Newport Vanderbilt residence, the [Marble House](#) was built between 1888 and 1892 for Mr. and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt as a summer cottage. In keeping with its name, more than \$7 million of the \$11 million spent on the home went to purchase 500,000 cubic feet of marble from America, [Italy](#) and Africa.

Many see the building of the Marble House as the turning point in Newport from simple wooden abodes to exorbitant showpieces of the wealthy. William gave the deed to Marble House to his wife, Alva, as a present for her 39th birthday. Three years later they divorced and Alva moved down the street to [Belcourt Castle](#) after marrying Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont. Alva kept the Marble House and built a Chinese Tea House on the property, which served as a gathering place for woman's suffrage meetings and remains on the property overlooking the ocean for visitors to tour. Inside the home are elaborate trimmings, marble Corinthian columns, 18th-century tapestries, gold leaf walls, crystal lights and many other intricate details. Alva was the driving force behind the design of the house, which she wished to be the biggest and best summer house in Newport, and even in the United States. Tours of the Marble House and Belcourt Castle are available year round and include special holiday events at Christmas, when both houses are thoroughly decorated and often host events to celebrate the season.



The Marble House in Newport⁷

Beechwood Mansion

For eight weeks out of the year, [Beechwood Mansion](#) was used by the Astors, a family made rich by the fur trade and real estate. William Backhouse Astor and his wife Caroline Schermerhorn Astor—who demanded friends and family refer to her as The Mrs. Astor—acquired Beechwood in 1881, about 30 years after it was constructed. Under The Mrs. Astor's watch, the house was transformed into a hub for New York socialites and hosted a number of events from inside its walls, which had been transformed by the Astors to be worthy of accommodating and entertaining the American royalty of the times. Daily tours of the Marble House are conducted and during the year it host a number of events, such as living history evenings, murder mystery gatherings, theatrical performances and Christmas celebrations.

LONG ISLAND'S GOLD COAST

Since the late-1800s, Long Island, New York, has been used as a playground for some of the richest families in American history. Often called the Gold Coast, property on the island's north side was desired because of its proximity to [New York City](#). During the island's heyday in the 1920s, there were more than 500 mansions, all containing between 50 to 100 rooms and sprawled across the countryside. Only about 200 remain today, including Otto Kahn's [OHEKA Castle and Estate](#) and the Vanderbilt's [Eagle's Nest](#).

Eagle's Nest

Once the summer home of William K. Vanderbilt II, the Eagle's Nest was built in three stages between 1910 and 1936. Located in [Centerport](#) the mansion contains 24 rooms, but is considered one of the smaller

properties owned by the Vanderbilts. The mansion's Spanish-Revival design is rare among the Long Island estates and the inside contains many of the original possessions of its first owner. Impeccable gardens surround the Eagle's Nest and pools, fountains, walkways and additional structures also decorate the grounds. Now the [Vanderbilt Museum](#), the house contains numerous exhibits about Long Island life and delves into the history and the lavish lives of the Vanderbilt family members. While touring the property, visitors may encounter guides posing as characters who once lived inside.



The back of OHEKA Castle Estate⁹



The Vanderbilt Museum/Eagle's Nest⁸

OHEKA Castle Estate

OHEKA Castle in [Huntington](#) is second in size only to the Biltmore Estate for a private residence in

America. Completed in 1921, the French chateau sits on the highest point on Long Island and contains 126 rooms, a golf course, detailed gardens with walking paths and fountains, a gazebo and many other fine details, making it a must-see. The name OHEKA was derived from letters found in its owner's name: Otto Hermann Kahn was a wealthy financier, philanthropist and arts lover who built the house as a summer residence. Today the OHEKA is a historic luxury hotel which continues to make use of all the rooms and 23 acres of the original 443-acre property.

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3. Hawaii Tourism Japan (HTJ); 'Iolani Palace, Honolulu, HI, USA
4. Courtesy Hearst Castle(r)/California State Parks; Aerial view of the Hearst Castle grounds; San Simeon, CA, USA
5. The Thousand Islands Bridge Authority; Boldt Castle on Heart Island; Alexandria Bay, Thousand Islands, NY, USA
6. Patrick O'Connor, c/o The Preservation Society of Newport County; The Breakers, Newport, RI, USA
7. John Corbett, c/o The Preservation Society of Newport County; The Marble House; Newport, RI, USA
8. Long Island Convention & Visitors Bureau; Vanderbilt Museum Tower, formerly the Eagle's Nest; Centerport, Long Island, NY, USA
9. OHEKA Castle; The back view of OHEKA Castle Estate, Huntington, Long Island, NY, USA

[Article Index](#) > [Next Article](#)

