

Thomas de Kay Winans (1820-1878)

Nationality: American

Date of Birth: 6 December 1820

Place of Birth: Vernon, Sussex County, New Jersey, USA

Date of Death: 10 June 1878

Place of Death: Newport, Rhode Island, USA

Date of Burial: 21 June 1878

Place of Burial: Green Mount Cemetery, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Thomas de Kay Winans was the eldest child of Ross Winans, an important railroad pioneer, and Julia de Kay, daughter of Thomas de Kay, a wealthy landowner, and his wife Hannah Blain. He married Celeste Marguerite Louise Revillon on 23 August 1847 in Alexandroffsky, Russia. She was the eldest of eleven siblings by her father George Revillon and mother Marguerite Louise Bonjour. She was Russian born of Italian and French ancestry and died young following the still birth of her fifth child, Thomas Winans, on 19 March 1861, and was distinguished for her extensive charities including the Winans Soup Station. They had four other children: George (1849 - 1851); Ross Revillon (1850-1912); William George (1852-1871); and Celeste Marguerite (1855-1925). On 01 Jun 1854, Thomas Winans' younger sister, Julia de Kay Winans, married George William Whistler, son of Major George Washington Whistler and Mary Roberdeau Swift, his father's first wife; after her death he married his good friend and fellow railroad engineer William Gibbs McNeill's sister Anna Matilda McNeill, mother of James (Abbott) McNeill Whistler (of "Whistler's Mother" fame) and George William's half-brother. Thomas Winans was James (Abbott) McNeill Whistler's first patron and a collector of his early works of art including the Portrait of Anna Denny, the Fishwife, a copy after Boucher's 'Diane au bain', and Wapping. Some say Whistler prepared a portrait of Thomas Winans before he left for Europe, but it has not been found. Matthew Brady photographed Thomas Winans as a successful, affluent American citizen in the late 1850s.

Thomas de Kay Winans was a man of refined tastes, including literary, artistic and musical interests, and of peculiarities of character that made him seem eccentric, but to those who knew him well, he was a kind and considerate person leading a quiet and unostentatious life and following pursuits that gave him pleasure. Thomas Winans with little formal education became a partner in the locomotive iron works firm of Harrison, Winans and Eastwick (organized to handle the rolling stock, engines, and other equipment construction) in collaboration with George Washington Whistler who was contracted by Czar Nicholas I to construct the first Russian railroad connecting St. Petersburg to Moscow. In 1843, Thomas and his younger brother William Louis, at their father's request and with the agreement of Major George Washington Whistler, went to Russia to take charge of the mechanical department in this new venture by contracting with the Russian government to equip the railroad with locomotives, passenger and freight cars, and other rolling stock and established the Alexandroffsky Mechanical Works under a five year agreement valued at \$3 to \$5 million dollars. Through this venture, Thomas and William Winans grew wealthy with the first 5 year contract and the subsequent contracts. It is said that Thomas Winans made a personal fortune of \$2 millions from this first contract and that the subsequent contract had a bonus of over \$5.5 million payable to the Winans brothers.

Thomas Winans returned to America on 05 December 1850 with his Russian born wife, Celeste Marguerite Louise Revillon, who had been a "lady in waiting to the Tsarina of Russia," and with their surviving son Ross Revillon, as well as two of Celeste's younger sisters Mathilda and Marie Revillon. Thomas purchased Fayetteville (a large 34-acre Baltimore estate near the Mount Clare Station of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad on the edge of the city and its federal style villa from the McHenry family. James McHenry was a surgeon during the Revolutionary War and Secretary of War from 1796 to 1800 serving the first President George Washington. Baltimore's Fort McHenry was renamed for him.

In 1852, Thomas hired two young engineers who had worked for the B&O Railroad, John Niernsee and J. Crawford Neilson, having formed one of Baltimore's first architectural firms, to design and supervise construction of an expanded house and later enclosed estate called Alexandroffsky, named for the site of Winans' railroad shops in Russia, facing Hollins Street between Fremont Avenue, Poppleton and Baltimore Streets. Alexandroffsky House, a four-story villa featuring towers, projected bows, semi-circular arcaded porches, was unique for its size as well as its other amenities including the central radiant heating system built by Hayward, Bartlett & Company, who had leased and later purchased Ross Winans' railroad shops next to Mount Clare Station after 1858. The property was soon surrounded by small rowhouses built for B&O Railroad workers and Celeste was unwilling to indulge the American public in its habit of entering into and using large, private landscaped grounds as public parks for recreation and leisure, although on occasion the grounds were opened for more formal tours. Also, the public, including the City Council, objected to the number of classical, thus nude, statues decorating the Winans estate. For privacy, Thomas Winans had a twelve-foot high brick wall constructed around the entire city block sized estate of 6-acres. The beautifully landscaped grounds included gardens and specimen trees decorated with classical statues, some made of iron such as the lions that now reside at the city zoo. In 1871, Niernsee and Nielson added a large concert room containing a pipe organ invented by Thomas Winans, which made the organ as easy to play to the touch as a piano.

The public finally got an invitation to see the great house in 1923 and walk the grounds when a benefit was held by Thomas Winans' daughter, Celeste Marguerite Hutton. Two years later the property was sold and the house and brick walls torn down. A portion of the property and a brick wall survives as the Little Lithuanian Park on Hollins Street at Parkin Street.

In 1857, Thomas and Celeste built Orianda House also designed by Niernsee and Nielson on the 900-acre Crimea estate as a summer country home between the Gwynns Falls and Dead Run in West Baltimore. The estate was so named to remind the Winans of fond memories of Russia and the Crimea War (1853 – 1856) had just ended. The Winans brothers favored the Russians in this conflict with England and France. The architects designed Orianda House, which survives to this day, as a three story cube built of native fieldstone with hipped roof and a large gazebo at its apex that was part of the interior ventilation system. The house has an idiosyncratic style, somewhat resembling an Asian pagoda, French windows and wide verandas on three sides. The Orianda House is on a high hill that slopes south toward the Dead Run and surrounded by other buildings on the Crimea estate including farmhouses, stables, at least one round barn, and handsome Gothic board and batten style chapel that also survives to this day. After the tragic death of his wife Celeste, Thomas by choice remained a widower. His daughter Celeste became his hostess and did not marry until after his death. Later she married Guan McRoberts Hutton, an Irish-born American diplomat she previously met in the court of Czar Alexander. Later the "Honeymoon" cottage, which survives to this day, was built on the Crimea estate for their son Reginald Winans Hutton and his bride Mabel Finn. When Alexandroffsky House was torn down in 1925, many of the statues there were relocated to the Crimea estate. It was Reginald Hutton who attached the two iron Russian eagles to the Windsor Mill Road entrance to the Crimea estate. Other well know artifacts of this estate include the remains of an 1870 era iron water wheel that was part of the water ram pumping system designed and built by Thomas Winans, a root cellar remaining from a former barn, and a mock fort overlooking Franklinton Road rumored to keep the passer-bys at a distance.

In 1858, Ross Winans with his sons Thomas and William purchased 123-acres near Fort Covington, later called Winans Cove, and devised an iron cigar-shaped boat for smoother and faster transatlantic travel,

which they continuing to experiment with on the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River and in England and France until their deaths. The “cigar boats” were of such radical naval architecture that they were a scientific and popular cultural sensation in both America and Europe. During the Crimea War, William Louis Winans built two vessels for the Russian government similar to the cigar boats and several smaller ironclad boats armed with guns on a disappearing carriage. In 1859, the French Navy’s La Gloire (“Glory”) was constructed as the first ocean-going ironclad battleship developed following the Crimea War. Soon after, John Ericsson, in 1861, designed and constructed the first American all iron warship, the Monitor. The iron plate for the Monitor’s turret was manufactured and rolled in Baltimore at the Abbott Iron Works along Harris Creek in Canton. Horace Abbott was a contemporary of Ross Winans and purchased his iron mills from Ross Winans’ friend Peter Cooper. It is thought that Jules Verne used the Winans’ cigar boat as his model for the submarine in his book “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea” published in 1870, since he refers to the submarine as “cigar shaped.”

In 1859, Thomas emerged from retirement to serve as a director of the B&O Railroad, and during the Civil War he helped his wife established a soup station outside his Alexandroffsky estate in Baltimore City, which fed six hundred people daily. In 1866, he was called to Russia by his brother William to manage issues under the Winans new railroad maintenance contract. The business interests were taken over in 1868 by the Russian government with the payment of a large bonus. Thomas devoted the rest of his life to creating a series of ingenious inventions, including glass feeding vessels for fish (adopted by Maryland Fish Commission), improvements in organs, pianos, residential radiant heater, ventilation, and plumbing; and notched wheels for carriages to escape mud ruts.

In 1864, Thomas Winans also built a villa facing Pirate’s Cove in Newport, Rhode Island, named Bleak House after Dickens’ novel and his then state of mind. He devised a way to use the undulating waves to pump spring water to a reservoir on the top of his villa. This cottage was demolished in 1894 and rebuilt in a grander style by his son Ross Revillon Winans who retained the name of the original house. In 1878, Thomas Winans died from a lingering illness of six months caused by pulmonary consumption, paralysis and dropsy leaving an estate valued at \$5 million.

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