

Scandal, Murder, and the Story of the Mercyhurst Gates

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Public History 2021, Archival Assistant



The twenty-foot-tall iron gates that stand at the 38th Street entrance to Mercyhurst University, are a familiar sight for all associated with the institution. Designed in the French Renaissance style, the gates have been a permanent fixture of the university's architecture since they were installed in 1950. Their arrival at Mercyhurst, however, is less than simple. The gates belonged to the estate of eccentric Pittsburgh millionaire Harry K. Thaw, who among other things, was responsible for one of the most notorious murders of the 20th century. In an opportune purchase, the iconic gates have been reborn as an iconic symbol of education and prosperity.

Inheriting a fortune worth \$3 million after his father's death in 1889, Harry Kendall Thaw, lived a wealthy man's life. After a brief stint at the University of Pittsburgh, he attended Harvard, although he did not graduate, sometimes joking that he "studied poker". Thaw was known for frequently throwing elaborate parties, both at his estate in Pittsburgh and on his travels to Europe. He was wildly eccentric, often going on drinking binges, lighting cigars with \$100 bills, and spending large sums of money on gambling ventures.



Harry K. Thaw

Thaw was a notorious playboy and a routine guest at brothels across Europe. Splitting his time in the US between Pittsburgh and New York City, Thaw became a fan of Broadway, even if it was only to "study the chorus girls", as he liked to put it. It is at one such show that Thaw became infatuated with actress and chorus girl, Evelyn Nesbit.

Evelyn Nesbit was born in Tarentum, PA just up the Allegheny River from Pittsburgh where Thaw lived. She moved to New York City at a young age and became the model for Charles Dana Gibson's "Gibson Girl" as a mere teenager. Several years before she met Thaw, she drew the attention of renowned architect Stanford White, who, among other creations, had designed Manhattan's famous Madison Square Garden.

One evening, White, in his 50s, entertained the young model at his "love nest" atop the Garden. Nesbit posed for several provocative photographs, including one on White's red velvet swing, before drugging her drink and taking her virginity. The infamous incident inspired the 1955 film, *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*, which Nesbit helped to produce.



Evelyn Nesbit

head of Stanford White, blackening his face with the powder. He was killed instantly in front of a group of stunned onlookers.

After White's murder, Thaw was caught in the "Trial of the Century". His defense, including the finances of his mother, managed a hung jury in the first trial. A second trial followed. Mrs. Thaw offered Evelyn \$1 million and a divorce to testify on the behalf of Harry, and she accepted, though only receiving the divorce. This time, the jury found Thaw guilty by reason of insanity and sentenced him to a state hospital for mentally ill criminals.

After less than ten years in an asylum, Thaw was released, free to continue his lavish and curious lifestyle, though he would spend another seven years in an institution for an unrelated incident. Harry K. Thaw died of a heart attack in Miami in 1947 and he is buried on his family plot in Pittsburgh.

After the trial and divorce, Evelyn Nesbit would continue on to be a vaudeville star and actress, while raising her son Russell. She would only receive 1% of Thaw's net worth from his estate. Nesbit died in 1967 at the age of 82, capping an adventurous and occasionally perilous life.

A few years after the death of Harry K. Thaw, his estate was slated for demolition to make way for a housing project. The ornate iron gates that once stood at the entrance were headed for the landfill. Brandon Smith, the architect for the Taylor Little Theatre and Weber Hall on Mercyhurst's campus, found out about the gates. He notified Mother Borgia Egan, founding dean of Mercyhurst College, and she was quick to purchase the gates, valued at \$150,000 in 1950 (over \$1.5 million today) for just \$600.

Mercyhurst, founded in 1926, was still a small institution in 1950, and the gates provided a new and stately entrance to the campus that was originally designed by William Sullivan. Althof's Iron Works in Erie reconditioned the gates, which came complete with stone pillars and globe light

In the years following, Thaw relentlessly pursued Evelyn. He sent her many expensive gifts before her mother convinced her to give in and marry him. Thaw was shallow and a psychological mess. He became obsessed with Nesbit's previous relationship with Stanford White, unable to bear that White was the one who stole her innocence.

At a showing of *Mam'zelle Champagne* at the White-designed Madison Square Garden, Thaw and Nesbit noticed White sitting on the rooftop garden. Thaw, almost certainly under the influence of drugs, alcohol, or both, suddenly fired three rounds from a revolver he

had concealed in his coat into the



Stanford White

fixtures. Found on the inside of one of the iron pieces was the chalk inscription, "Bon Jour aux Americans—June 15, 1923", written by the French iron workers for the Thaws. The gates were dedicated at a ceremony lead by Bishop John Mark Gannon on May 9, 1950, bringing to close their incredible journey.

Mercyhurst was granted university status in 2012, and the gates had not been altered since their arrival to the property in 1950. However, in 2013, the institution decided to add its newly updated name "Mercyhurst University", to the them. While the move raised some eyebrows due to their historic nature, it solidified their place in Mercyhurst's history. The gates that once welcomed Harry K. Thaw to his estate, continue to welcome students, faculty, and alumni back to Mercyhurst's 38th Street campus, forever binding their tumultuous past with an enlightened future.

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A TRAGIC OPENING NIGHT

Singing Girls Pluckily Keep Up the Music as Sho Ring Out—Prisoner Refuses to Say a Word in His Cell.

TOLEDO, Ohio, June 25.—For the first time in the history of America the active heads of a criminal trust have been sent to jail on the specific charge of entering into a conspiracy for the restraint of trade and maintenance of exorbitant prices.

Five ice dealers of this city, members of the combine, were sentenced today to one year in the workhouse, \$1,000 fine and costs each.

The drastic punishment created a sensation throughout Northern Ohio, where every county prosecutor is engaged in a battle with some trust. It is the first time in the history of Ohio that the

TOLEDO, Ohio, June 25.—Harry Thaw, multi-millionaire, social exquisite and golf clubman, last night murdered Stanford White, the famed architect, on the roof of Madison Square Garden. He shot him twice in the back and, as the victim whirled around in agony, another bullet sped into his stomach, and White dropped lifeless, at a table where he had been laughing and fingering a girl in company with a woman.

Thaw is a prisoner in the Tenderloin police station. He