

Devon Ladies Accused of Smuggling

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Devon is the acknowledged society center of the Upper Main Line. Within a few miles of the Devon Train Station and the Devon Horse Show, numerous estates and summer residences of the Philadelphia Main Line society attest to Devon's status as a magnet for wealthy residents.

So it seems a bit ironic that an 1892 *New York Times* report of attempted smuggling by two Devon sisters must have caused quite a commotion in the Upper Main Line community. The article reports that customs officers in New York examined four trunks which were owned by sisters Miss E.R.B. Simmons and Miss M.E. Simmons, which were searched after landing on the steamship *S.S. City of Paris*. The trunks were found to contain Paris-made ballroom dresses which had not been declared. The customs officers also found other contraband goods, including rings valued at about \$2,500.00, in the trunks. The "seizure" resulted from a tip received by the customs officers from Europe. The inspectors found a ruby ring and a pearl ring which had been sewn into a little pocket which had then been sewn into one of the Simmons' dresses.

The *New York Times* article stated: "According to the report made by the seizing officers, the trunks were found to contain new costumes, and the Misses Simmons were asked to show the bills from the dressmakers. In producing these papers one of them also dropped another receipt from Maret Frères of Paris for a fifteen-hundred-franc ruby ring, set with diamonds. Miss Simmons wore a ruby ring, but H.C. Clark, an appraiser, decided that it was a comparatively cheap affair, and an Inspectress found the other ring, with a pearl ring as well, in a little pocket in her dress."

In spite of this alleged smuggling event, in 1893, Miss Mary E. Simmons became the manager of the Devon Inn (renamed the Devon Park Hotel in 1926). The Inn was very popular among wealthy Philadelphia summer residents. As the Devon Park Hotel, it continued operation as a pristine resort with an entreating reputation until 1929, when it burned to the ground.



Above left, the Devon Inn, as shown in a 1906 photo from the TEHS Archives. Above right, the Devon Park Hotel in a 1927 Dallin aerial photo, courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library.

No report of this smuggling incident in New York made its way into the Philadelphia or local papers insofar as can be determined.* The Simmons sisters dodged the stigma of being charged with smuggling sufficiently that Ellen Simmons married John W. Patten, who owned at least part of the Devon Inn.

Mr. and Mrs. Patten built a seven and a half acre estate called "Buttonwoods," just north of the Devon Train Station. The Buttonwoods estate is in the triangle formed by Old Lancaster Road, Station Avenue, and North Waterloo Road. Railroad maps in 1887, 1897, 1908, and 1913 show that the entire estate was owned by the Pattens, but over the years, portions of this desirable property were sold, so that many homes now occupy the area. Recently, a local developer rehabbed the old Buttonwoods house and barn.



A contemporary view of the renovated Buttonwoods house and barn originally owned by the Patten family. *Courtesy of Dave Reid.*

The Devon area is one of the premier society locales on the Main Line, and captivating stories such as this alleged smuggling effort by the Simmons sisters only adds to the mystique of the area.

We are indebted to Mr. William Black of Inman Atlantic Liners, Inc., owners of the steamship *S.S. City of Paris*, for tipping us off to the *New York Times* report of customs officers discovering undeclared contraband in the trunks of Main Line residents.

References

"The Simmonses' Trunks," *New York Times*, April 1, 1892.

Robert Goshorn, *Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 4, p. 125.

* Ironically, there was another smuggling event involving the same ship, the *S.S. City of Paris*, with a New York woman carrying contraband costumes for her chorus troupe as "tools of the trade." "Agnes Huntington Sustained," *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1892.