

SKENE MANOR, THE MANSION THAT WAITED



Present Day

Having accepted a CEO position with a major hospital in upstate New York, my wife, Hannah, and I began searching for homes online. Nothing quite caught our eye, so we decided to spend a long weekend exploring in person, free from the pressure of pushy real estate agents.

We flew into Albany and drove north to Lake George, where Hannah had booked us into a delightful bed and breakfast. It was late September, and the Adirondacks were ablaze with an explosion of color, spectacular montages of red, gold, and amber. The scenery was so stunning, we nearly forgot we were house hunting.

After checking in and enjoying a quiet dinner and a shared bottle of wine, we turned in for the night. The next morning, we set out to explore. Finding nothing for sale that matched our tastes in Lake George, we continued north to the small town of Whitehall, once known as Skenesborough.

We spent the day browsing listings but found nothing that resonated. As we began the drive back, I made a wrong turn—north instead of south. And that’s how we found it.

Skene Manor.

A towering Victorian Gothic-style mansion perched high on a hill, it overlooked the town and Lake Champlain. A new, white *For Sale* sign stood planted in the lawn like an invitation.

Curious, we jotted down the number and returned to the bed and breakfast. The next morning, a Saturday. we called and spoke to a real estate agent named Sandi, who offered to meet us at the property within the hour.

We wolfed down our breakfast and made the drive back to Whitehall and up to the Manor. True to her word, Sandi was waiting on the wraparound porch when we arrived. Over steaming coffee, she welcomed us warmly and shared the mansion’s long, winding history before we stepped inside.

Sandi: “It is so good to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Young.

Me, taking a sip of coffee: “The feeling is mutual, Sandi. But please call me Neal, and my wife is Hannah.”

Sandi: “Wonderful, Neal and Hannah. I’ll give you a little background on the home and enjoy our coffee before going in.”

And with that, Sandi began with her historical information about the manor. “The house, she explained, was built in 1874 by Joseph Potter, a New York State Supreme Court judge, who named it *Mountain Terrace*. It had been designed by Philadelphia architect Isaac Hobbs and constructed by a local contractor. The sandstone had been quarried from nearby Skene Mountain, with skilled cutters brought in all the way from Italy to complete the work.

In 1906, the property passed to Edgar Lowenstein, who renamed it *Lowen’s Castle* and added modern conveniences: a carriage house, gas lighting, and a heating system. Then, in 1917, it was sold to Dr. Theodore Sachs, an optometrist, jeweler, and clock maker. The local Presbyterian church gifted him a massive timepiece, its 100-pound weights extending into the cellar. When Dr. Sachs died in 1939, the mansion stood vacant, and the lead weights were melted down for the war effort, silencing the great clock.

In 1946, Clayton Scheer bought the property, renamed it *Skene Manor* in honor of Whitehall’s founder, Philip Skene, and ran a restaurant inside its grand halls. Several owners followed: J.R. Reynolds in 1951, Leo Mulholland in 1968, and finally Joel Murphy, each continuing the restaurant business with varying success. When Murphy’s efforts failed, the house fell into disrepair.

The Skene Manor Preservation group restored much of the property in the mid-1990s back to its original glory, but soaring costs and high taxes eventually forced them to list it for sale, just three days before you found it.”

It’s worth mentioning here that I’ve always had a strange affinity for Victorian America. For as long as I can remember, I’ve carried the belief that I may have lived a former life in the late 19th century. I’ve never been able to explain it, and Hannah is the only person I’ve ever shared that with. She finds it silly.

Once Sandi finished her history lesson, she led us inside. The moment I crossed the threshold, I felt something intangible and familiar. I knew the precise creak the floor would make as I stepped inside. I knew the color of the wallpaper before I saw it. I even anticipated the slight dip in the left side of the staircase banister.

I couldn't explain it. But I had been here before.

As is common with homes of the period, the floor plan included many small rooms, each sectioned off with high archways and ornate trim. The downstairs was over-decorated, gaudy colors, with heavy furniture that had long since seen better days. But I knew each room intimately. I could feel their original purpose. I mentioned it quietly to Hannah. I leaned toward her, gently taking her arm, trying to draw her back a few steps from where Sandi was walking ahead.

Me: "Okay, Hannah. I saw those beautiful brown eyes roll. So, how about this: at the top of the stairs, if you turn left, there'll be a bedroom, probably a child's room, with two grand windows and light wallpaper. Want to bet on it? Winner gets breakfast in bed."

Hannah: "There's no way you could know that. Unless you Googled the floor plan before we came. But sure. You're on."

We climbed the grand staircase, its red carpet threadbare but still clinging to elegance. At the top, I turned left and opened the door.

Two tall windows and pale wallpaper with a faded floral pattern. A child's bed sat beneath one window. Hannah stared, blinking in disbelief.

And then I did it again. Room by room, I described each space before we entered it. A sitting room with a cracked mirror above the hearth. A study with walnut paneling and a scuffed leather chair. A linen closet with a missing doorknob.

Hannah stopped doubting. She just looked at me in wonder. She said nothing, but I could tell she was having difficulty grasping how I knew all this.

On the drive back to Lake George, we discussed the pros and cons of the house. I knew substantial overhauling would need to be done. I'm all for preserving historical homes, but not to the point of being uncomfortable. If we were to purchase this home, there would be new heating and cooling added, plus any additional amenities to make the house more comfortable. It would also be my intention to tear down a few walls to make the home more spacious. Plus, I was toying with the idea of doing whatever it might take to restore the grand clock. Then my grand idea, I wondered if we could sink a hot tub, and the obligatory

wine refrigerator, in the north tower overlooking the town. I knew we were looking at a big expense and told Hannah so, giving her a rough estimation.

When Hannah heard the amount, I thought she was immediately against buying it as it was just too expensive. I agreed with her, but then there was the matter of my familiarity with the house attracting me. I was seriously considering it, and hoped she'd agree.

The following day, Sandi took us to see a few more homes, definitely more modern, but they meant nothing to me. I kept comparing it to Skene Manor but said nothing to either Sandi or Hannah about it. In truth, I was just going through the motions, nodding and smiling, but with no true interest.

When we got back to the bed and breakfast, I got out my laptop and began researching the manor and its original owner, Judge Joseph Potter.

Unfortunately, not a lot was available online, but I did learn he and his wife, Catherine, had three sons, Sanford, Henry, and William. Judge Potter served fourteen years as a New York Supreme Court judge. A distinguished career and life, no doubt, but nothing remarkable that might explain my affinity for the house.

On the trip back to Albany to catch our plane home, Hannah and I discussed what homes we liked and didn't like. Never in our forty years of marriage had we been further apart than our selection of a home. Of course, I had talked myself into buying the Skene Manor, whereas Hannah wanted an almost new sprawling home back in Lake George, along the lake. This didn't come as much of a surprise to me, as we live in Cedar Point, Indiana, right on the lake. Hannah loves our house there and the community where she grew up. Just getting her to move to New York was significant, so I knew I had some persuading to do.

On the plane back to Chicago, we continued our discussion of the two homes in further detail. Every aspect of the Lake George house beat out anything I could say about Skene Manor, and yet, I was now obsessed with Skene. It beckoned me, and I could feel it. I couldn't explain why; it just felt right. Hannah was digging in her heels over our disagreement.

Me: "Hannah, this place is beckoning me. I can't explain it to you, hon, but I feel it."

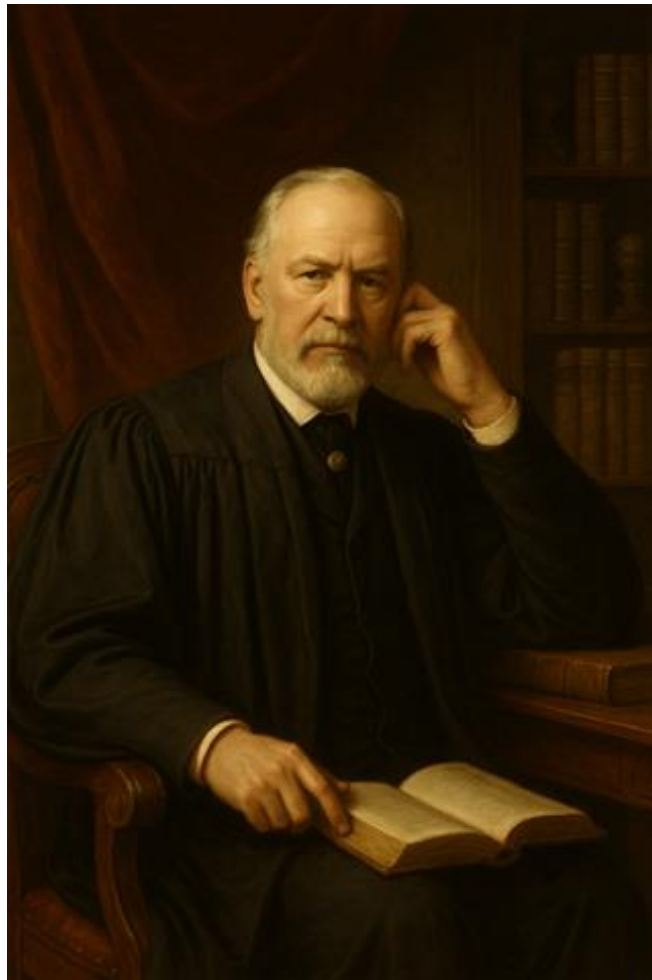
Hannah, looking at me incredulously, “Neal, we have no business buying an old home with ten tiny bedrooms or three dining rooms and then spending a fortune on it.”

Me: “But hon...”

That’s about how the conversation went on the entire flight home and most of the week.

Eventually, after about two weeks, I talked Hannah into the mansion...with some stipulations of what she wanted, or the deal was off. I quickly agreed to her demands and called Sandi to put our offer in. Lo and behold, our offer was accepted that very day. Hannah, ever the pessimist, wondered why they were so quick to sell, and for less money than they were asking.

Sandi then got us in contact with a contractor, and we flew back out the following weekend to meet with him.



Skenesborough, New York – December 1871

New York Supreme Court Judge Joseph Potter was beside himself. Nearly four years earlier, he had purchased a parcel of land overlooking Lake Champlain from Melancton Wheeler to build a dream mansion for his wife, Catherine. But supply shortages and bureaucratic red tape had delayed construction at every turn.

He had hired a Philadelphia architect, Isaac Hobbs, and a trusted local contractor, his friend A.C. Hopson, to execute the plan. Yet now, with winter setting in, even nature had turned against them. The three men sat in Potter's Albany office, the air thick with cigar smoke.

Hopson: "Judge, we finally have the sandstone sitting there ready to go, but the weather's not cooperating. Mr. Hobbs agrees that we can't start digging the basement until at least April, once the ground softens."

Judge Potter: "Come now, Albert. These delays are costing me dearly. Catherine and I had hoped to spend Christmas in that house this year. And yet here we are, not even a foundation laid. You've both received your retainers. If you begin in April, how long until it's finished?"

Though not a man to raise his voice, Potter's patience was thinning. He looked across the desk, his expression hardening.

Hobbs: "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Judge, but by my estimation, it'll take about two years. A project of this scale can't be rushed. The footings must be set with great care. If they're not, the entire house could end up sliding into the lake."

As Hobbs finished speaking, a dead silence fell over the room. Potter leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled beneath his chin. The clock on the wall ticked loudly in the hush, counting off the seconds of disappointment.

"Two years," he muttered. "My God, Catherine will have given up hope by then."

Hopson shifted uncomfortably. "If we try to push the schedule, Judge, we'll regret it. The hill's steep. If the foundation's off by so much as a hair, we'll be rebuilding it every winter."

Potter rose slowly and crossed to the frosted window. “Then let’s get everything ready. I want the workers assembled and materials on-site the moment the snow begins to thaw. I may be a judge, gentlemen, but I am not always a patient man.”

Hobbs gave a small, respectful nod. “Understood.”

After they left, Potter returned to his desk and sat down. He opened the folio that contained Hobbs’ original design of his castle with high towers, broad porches, and deep stone walls. A grand place for entertaining.

But then something odd happened. As he stared at the sketch, the paper blurred. For a moment, he saw a strange light glowing in the second-story window. He blinked, and it was gone. He rubbed his temples. Lack of sleep, he told himself. Just a trick of the eyes.



Champlain Medical Center – present day.

As the new CEO, I took an office on the seventh floor rather than the plush office used by the former CEO. I preferred the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Lake Champlain. Something about the view had stirred something in me. I liked that I could see the manor from my office window. The nameplate they hung on my door said Dr. Neal Young, CEO

I was standing at the window, hands in my medical coat pockets, gazing out over the wintry landscape of Lake Champlain. It was the first snow day of the year. Beyond, barely visible through the light flurries, were the moss-covered remains of our new home, Skene Manor, or what was left of the once-grand stone mansion halfway up the hill.

So far, I have trusted the contractor and workers who are remodeling the house to our specifications. They wouldn't be able to start on Hannah's new pool until later in the spring. So far, the crew had been mostly tearing out what was unwanted.

We rented a small house in a nice neighborhood in Lake George while waiting for the improvements being made to the mansion. We'd told nobody, except Sandi of course, about buying such a grand mansion. For something to do, Hannah, a former nurse herself, took a part-time job at the hospital, helping out in the emergency room. We always lunched together on the days she worked.

I've been considering a new name for the home. A house that grand deserved a name. I think I prefer the name Young Castle, but it seemed a little pretentious. I am leaning toward Young Manor or Manor Young. Maybe Hannah will have an idea of what to name it.

I sat down at my desk, pulling a drawer open. I took out the antique folio I'd been given at the estate sale last week. It was unlabeled and cracked along the spine, but when I opened it, the sketches inside made my heart flutter. It truly is the house of my dreams.

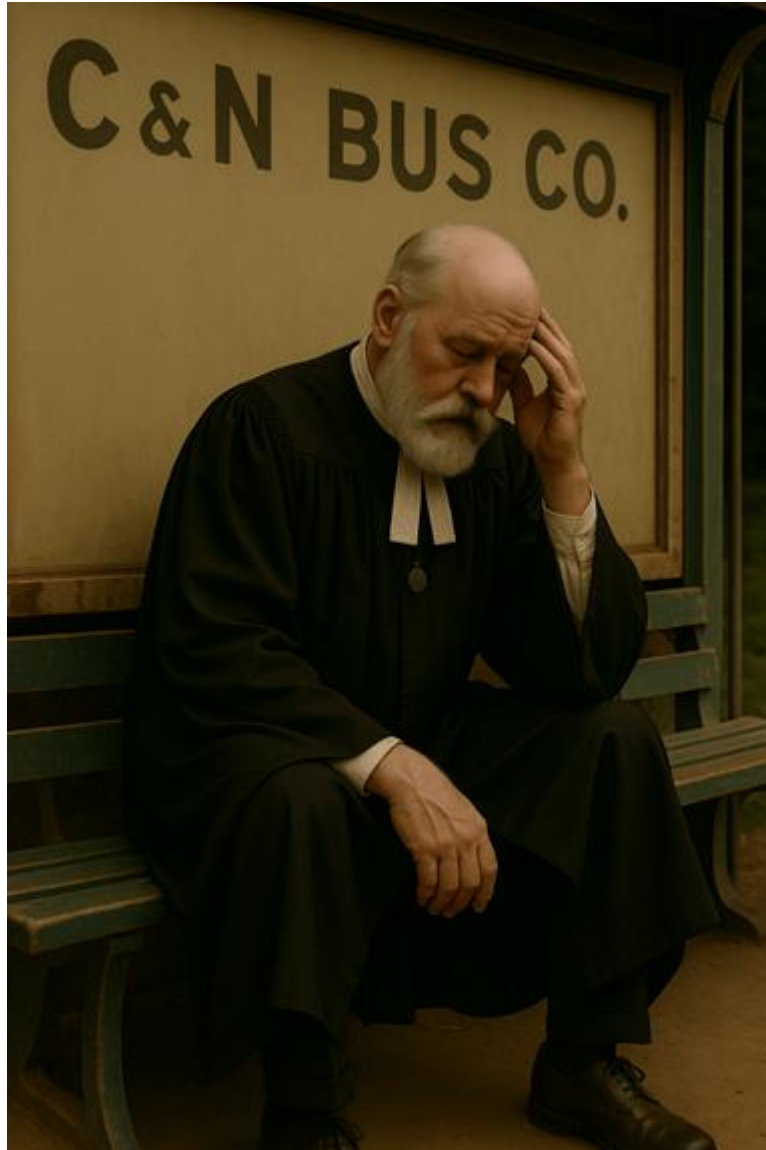
Looking at the sketch again, I absently muttered aloud, "If we don't start in April, we'll lose the whole year."

I hadn't meant to say that. Where had it come from?

The intercom crackled. “Dr. Young, the finance committee is waiting in Conference Room B.”

“On my way,” I replied, pressing the button. It would be my first battle with the finance people, trying to get more money out of them for the patients.

Standing, I couldn’t shake the sensation of something pulling at me from across a century.



Skenesborough, New York – May 1872

The digging had finally begun. The snow had melted, and the ground was soft enough for Hopson's crew to finally cut into the hillside. Blocks of gray sandstone quarried just up the slope were stacked like sleeping giants near the foundation site. The rhythmic clang of shovels and the low murmur of laborers echoed through the trees.

Judge Joseph Potter stood slightly apart, dressed in his judicial robe, from the work, observing in silence. With luck, summer would come early and they could make real progress. He'd even considered putting on a night crew.

In his hands, he held Hobbs' blueprints, poring over every detail. As he looked up, he spotted two diggers arguing. Hobbs quickly stepped in, exchanged heated words, and sent one of the men packing. Then he walked over to where the Judge stood.

"Sorry you had to see that, Judge," Hobbs said, brushing dust from his vest. "Foreman didn't think Farley was pulling his weight, so I sent him home."

"Was that wise?" the Judge asked. "I was just wondering why you had so few men digging. Seems to me we ought to have twice as many diggers out here. I'd like to see that foundation finished soon."

Potter removed his bowler and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"I suppose I could bring in more men from town," Hobbs replied reluctantly.

"Please do," said the Judge. "And I understand you'll need to charge me more. Double their pay. Let the word get out that it's good work, and well worth doing."

With that, Judge Potter turned and walked away.

On the way back to his office, he grew dizzy and weak, sweating heavily. He sat on a bench to rest. When he closed his eyes, intending only to rest, strange images filled his mind so vividly, he knew he couldn't be dreaming – this was something altogether different from a dream.

A long, sterile corridor, brightly lit, unnaturally bright, unfolded before him. It looked like something he had never seen before. The Judge thought he even smelled the antiseptic, the vision was that real. Just then, he saw a man in a white

dust coat, someone he didn't recognize, stepping briskly out of a room and disappearing through a set of double doors. Was that him or someone else, perhaps in the future?

Startled, the Judge opened his eyes. The vision vanished. He shut them again, but the corridor was gone.

After a few minutes, the weakness passed, though he remained unsettled. The illusion had felt too intense to dismiss. He was still thinking about it when he returned to his office and lowered himself carefully into the chair behind his desk.

He wondered if he was coming down with something or just over-exerted. Or did he somehow glimpse the future? Was that man he saw him or was he just over-exerted and needed a break?

Biographical Note

Judge Joseph Potter was born on November 17, 1820, in Easton, New York, in Washington County. He graduated with honors from Union College in Schenectady and, in 1845, married Catherine Eights Boies. Together they had three sons—J. Sanford, Henry, and William.

Sanford stayed close, practicing law in the county. Henry ventured to Mexico as an engineer. William joined the Navy and rose to Rear Admiral, traveling the world.

Joseph Potter's public record was unimpeachable. He served as district attorney in 1863 and was appointed to the New York Supreme Court in 1871. He was known as a stern defender of due process, a man of moral rigor and uncommon dignity. In portraits, he appeared solemn, upright, and precise, the very image of Victorian respectability.

But the portrait, like most, was incomplete.

Around 1860, Potter employed a young Irish housekeeper named Nora Fallon. She was barely eighteen, newly arrived from Dublin, with a brother working the rail lines in Albany. Nora was dutiful and quiet, invisible in the way domestic staff were expected to be.

Until she wasn't.

In 1862, she gave birth to a boy. The father, whispered among the household staff but never spoken aloud, was the less-than-honorable Judge Potter.

There were no formal accusations. No scandal. Nora was sent quietly to a relative's farm near Syracuse, and monthly support payments were arranged through Potter's clerk. The judge never signed his name, never wrote a single letter. The clerk didn't even know what the money was for, only that it was to be delivered, in cash, at the start of each month.

When the mansion was finally complete, Nora returned to resume her duties as housekeeper. The household had grown, and additional staff were needed. She brought her now twelve-year-old son with her.

The boy, named Oscar, had been attending school and helping out on the farm. Upon their return to Whitehall, he was put to work after school on the very house he would grow up in, Skene Manor.

Occasionally, Potter would leave a book or tool near the boy's workbench. A volume of Thoreau or Carlyle. A compass set. Never with a word, never with a note, but left deliberately, with the faintest trace of care unspoken.

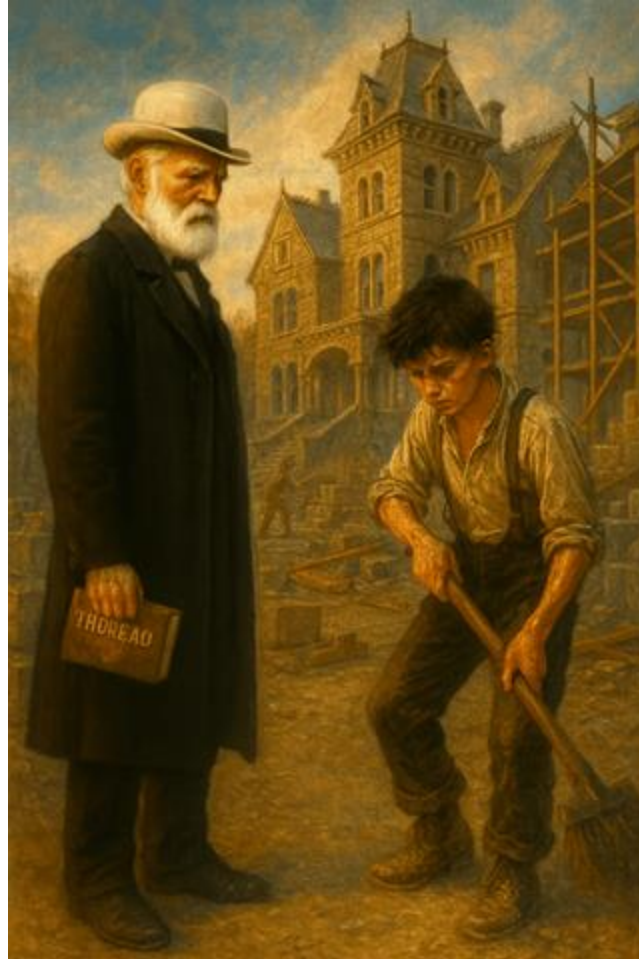
Oscar was never told who his father was. And Judge Potter never acknowledged him.

What is known is that Oscar Fallon grew up resourceful, capable, and bitter. His manner was guarded. He trusted few. And though he never spoke against the man he worked under for decades, something unspoken always lingered in his eyes.

Judge Joseph Potter carried the truth to his grave in 1902.

Or so he believed.

As a man, Oscar Fallon never left Whitehall. He took over management of the estate grounds a few years before the Judge's death. When asked about the Potters, he would only say: "They built fine things. But not always from clean stone."



OSCAR

Oscar Fallon was born in the spring of 1862 on a farm outside Syracuse, New York, where his mother, Nora, had been sent to avoid scandal. He spent his earliest years helping with chores, fetching water, and walking the hedgerows with a quiet, watchful manner well beyond his age.

He asked a few questions about his absent father. Nora gave fewer answers.

When they returned to Whitehall in 1874, Oscar was twelve, lean and strong, and already carrying himself with the reserve of a man twice his age. He was enrolled in the local schoolhouse during the day, but by late afternoon, he was back on the estate, working with the grounds men, hauling tools, sweeping stone dust from the unfinished halls of the new mansion that would come to dominate the hill.

Skene Manor. The very place he had unknowingly been born to build.

Though he never received formal credit, some of the intricate flourishes in the stonework, the carved cornices, the arched cellar windows, were shaped by Oscar's hand. He was naturally gifted with tools and a keen eye for proportion, learning from older masons and carpenters by keenly watching.

Judge Potter saw the boy nearly every day. Sometimes he paused to watch him work. But he never said a word.

Oscar, in turn, remained silent, but he was uncomfortable with the stares, as if he was shirking his duties. Something darkened in him during those years. He grew private. Cynical. A man who knew his place in the world had been decided for him, by proximity, not by acknowledgment.

At twenty-four, Oscar married Abigail Swanson, the daughter of a local watch repair shop. Slim and pretty, Abigail was quick-witted and unbothered by Oscar's silences. They appeared nothing alike, but she saw something in his steady hands and tired eyes, someone who had carried more than he ever said. Together, they made a quiet life in a modest stone house at the base of the hill, one of the first built with leftover material from the mansion above.

They had three children: Nolan, born in 1887, who became a schoolteacher and remained in Whitehall his entire life. Ruth, born in 1890, who married a lawyer and moved west to Buffalo, and Willy, born in 1893, who served in World War I and returned changed, quiet, even odd, but resilient.

Oscar worked for decades at the Skene Manor, staying on with each new owner. He never missed a day of work. Never asked for a raise. Never spoke ill of anyone.

But privately, Abigail knew better. On rare nights, after too much rye and a glance toward the manor's silhouetted spires, Oscar would murmur, "He could've said something. Just once."

Abigail never pressed. She only reached for his hand and held it.

Oscar died in 1931 at the age of sixty-nine, buried next to his mother under a modest stone in the Our Lady of Angels cemetery, and with no mention of the Potters. But the bloodline survived. His son Nolan had a daughter. That daughter

married a man named Young, and they had a son. And that son, many years and generations later, had a grandson. His name was Neal.

And though Neal would grow up never hearing the name Potter, the past had its ideas, and it caught up to him. Some truths wait patiently beneath the surface. Others climb the family tree.

One hundred and twenty-three years later, a man named Dr. Neal Young stood in the shadow of Skene Manor, unaware that the blood of Oscar Fallon, of Judge Joseph Potter himself, ran in his veins.



Present Day

The reconstruction of Young Mansion took eight months, but at last, we moved in. Central air and heating were now in place. Where there had once been ten cramped bedrooms, there were now four spacious rooms on the upper floor, and a grand master suite on the main level, carved from what had been an unnecessarily large formal dining room. One of the former dining rooms had become a game room for the grandkids. The pool Hannah had insisted on was nearly complete, along with a three-car garage and a vast putting green where I might practice a short game.

Nearly fifty trees had been planted around the property, along with a full expanse of new turf.

I tried to preserve the library as nearly as possible to its original state, though it now featured fresh oak flooring and rich hunter-green walls with oak trimming. It had become my sanctuary, a home office layered in old books and solitude. My desk was a magnificent antique I'd salvaged from a dealer in Albany, and it now rested in front of an alcove of shelves, some of which still held legal volumes dating back to the time of Judge Potter.

The exterior door, once located in the alcove, which had led out to the wraparound porch, had been sealed and replaced with more shelving, this time for medical texts, though most were obsolete given my access to the hospital's main server. To the left of the alcove: more shelves, more books.

One afternoon, while dusting the old volumes along the left side of the alcove - books long forgotten and thick with age and construction dust - I noticed one particular spine that seemed out of place: a worn leather volume on Plato. I reached for it, but as I tried to slide it free, it caught awkwardly, stuck on something. Before I could investigate further, the entire bookshelf groaned, then slowly pivoted outward on a concealed hinge.

Behind it was complete darkness.

A narrow hallway extended beyond the shelf, its walls draped in cobwebs. I stood still for a moment, heartbeat quickening, then crossed to my desk and grabbed a flashlight from the drawer before stepping inside.

The flashlight's beam cut a narrow swath through the dust and webs, revealing walls of old stone and the scent of dry rot. I moved slowly, having no idea where the hall led. Within no more than ten feet, the hallway turned sharply and opened into a hidden room, about the same size as my home office. It looked oddly similar to the office I had remodeled.

Inside were shelves crammed with more old and decaying books, but what caught my eye were the crated canvases, dozens of them, stacked against one another, draped in yellowing cloth. Some were tied with brittle string. I set the flashlight down and gently unwrapped the first painting.

A man stared back at me. Stern. Black-robed. The unmistakable figure of Judge Joseph Potter. But the painting's style was far more modern than it should have been. The paint still had texture. It couldn't be more than fifty years old.

I unwrapped another painting. And another. Each portrait showed a similar face, sometimes bearded, sometimes clean-shaven, but always with the same dark, deep-set eyes. The man changed with the decades, his clothing evolving through time: Victorian, Edwardian, 1950s, even something eerily like Neal's own favorite blazer.

I froze when I uncovered the last portrait. It was me! And I hadn't commissioned it.

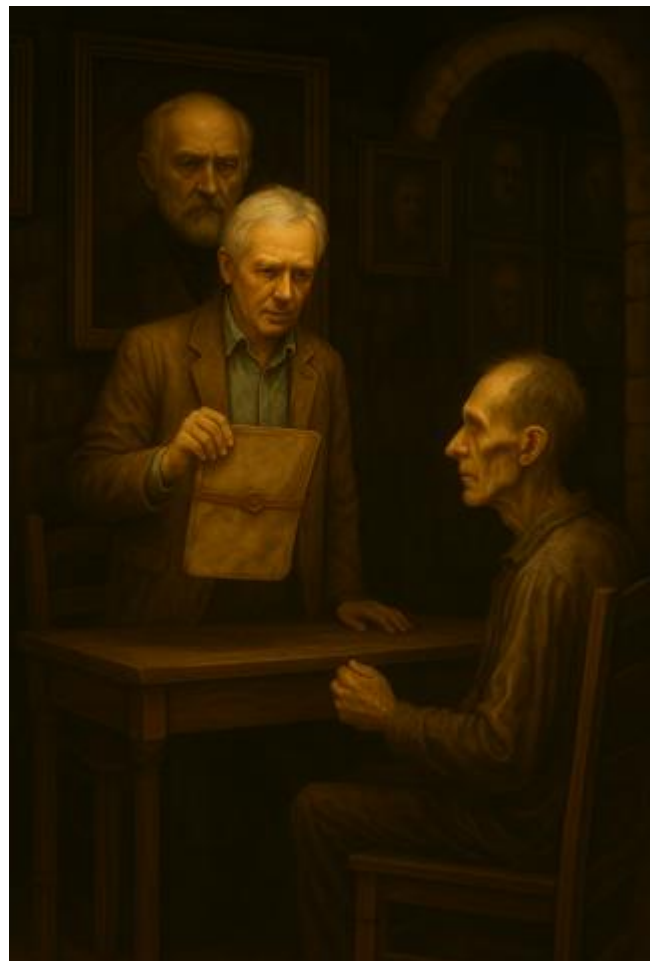
The face on the canvas matched the one I saw in the mirror every morning, the same hairline, the same quiet seriousness behind the eyes. Even the tie color matched what I had worn in the hospital headshot taken last week.

I turned the canvas over. A date was penciled on the back: 1992. The year I graduated from med school.

And below it, scrawled in a series of revisions:

Potter
J. Potter
Joseph
N. Potter
Neal P.

A chill swept over me. For a moment, the flashlight flickered. Then, I heard something creak in the hallway.



I was standing in the center of the room, holding a file I had discovered a few days earlier on a shelf in the vault. A faded brown folder that had, at one time, been wrapped in twine and sealed with a broken wax emblem. The file contained the incomplete case of a man named John Jackson. Mr. Jackson had died while waiting for a trial that never came. The judge for the case was none other than Judge Joseph Potter, who had failed him miserably.

Now, standing in the hidden heart of the house, surrounded by a gallery of my own past lives, I placed the file on the table. A single chair sat opposite, its legs uneven on the cobbled stone floor. The portraits looked on in silence.

“This is the trial of Gabriel Jackson, accused of the murder of Jacob Fielding in 1872. This hearing was never held. The court shall now convene,” I said.

The flashlight flickered. From the corridor behind him came footsteps, slow and deliberate. A figure emerged from the dark.

It was John Jackson, a terminal cancer patient I had been overseeing treatment at the hospital. Except it wasn't. His face flickered in and out of time. One moment, a pale man in a hospital gown; the next, a prisoner in soiled 19th-century garb, wrists shackled, eyes hollow with injustice.

“You brought me here, Judge,” the figure said. “Took long enough.”

I swallowed. “You were never tried. You died in jail. Is that correct?”

“I waited. I begged. But you, Judge, you never came.” John faded in and out with Gabriel.

I opened the file. The first pages confirmed the accusation: murder of a landowner, Jacob Fielding. But deeper still were pages Potter may have never read:

- A confession letter from Jackson's sister, Matilda, written in frantic script.
- Testimony from a farmhand who'd seen Fielding draw a pistol first.
- A sheriff's suppressed statement.

Fielding had been harassing the Jackson family for months over a land dispute. He had confronted the sister, who was standing on her porch before him with a

shotgun in her arms. When he stepped forward, he shot him. She had confessed, in writing. But the letter was never presented.

John reappeared. “My sister killed him. She told me herself. But you, Judge, you buried it.”

The air seemed to thicken in the vault. Where once it had been cool, now it seemed warm and humid. Portraits along the wall began to change. Judge Potter’s likeness grimaced. Another seemed to be weeping blood.

“And now you ask me for mercy?” the figure tiredly stated.

“No,” Neal shouted. He rose, voice trembling but clear. He pointed directly at John Jackson. “Now I will give you justice.”

I looked directly into the eyes of the man before me and said:

“You are exonerated, Mr. Jackson. I will close the file. You go free.”

Stillness followed. Then the stone walls began to tremble. Dust fell in steady lines. Some of the portraits faded to blank canvas.

The Jackson figure smiled faintly. “Then let this house forget.” And he was gone.

Days later, after John had passed away at the hospital and the dust had settled, both literally and in my mind, I selected one of the paintings from the vault that had survived to hang in my office. It wasn’t the one that looked like me either. That one I’d left in the vault, buried forever.

I selected the figure in black robes: Judge Joseph Potter. Had it cleaned and reframed, then hung it above the mantel in my home office, the very room that had once been the Judge’s private study. It felt right, somehow. A nod to the past. A tribute to the man who had built the house.

One evening, as I was starting a fire in the hearth, and happened to look up. The Judge’s eyes seemed to be looking down at me and met mine.

And then something strange happened. The room dimmed. The fire crackled, and the shadows stretched unnaturally long. I stood, but felt my knees weaken. I gripped the edge of the desk as I was experiencing something, but I didn’t know what.

Flashback: 1873 – Chambers of Judge Joseph Potter

The gaslight hissed as Judge Joseph Potter rubbed his temples and stared at the stack of cases on his desk. The stack never seemed to get any smaller. Rain beat at the window behind him, persistent and indifferent.

He flipped through the next file. Jackson, John. Vagrancy. Assault. Petty larceny. The ink was fresh. The testimony was contradictory. A thin case.

Potter sighed. Another name lost in the endless flood.

He looked toward the larger case awaiting him: a land dispute involving a railroad magnate, three lawyers, and half of Washington County watching. That one would be in the papers.

This one, Jackson, would be forgotten.

He reached for the dismissal stamp but hesitated. Somewhere in the back of his mind, something tugged at him: the image of a frightened young man in chains, claiming he'd never touched a soul. A prime candidate needing attention.

But his docket was so full. The pressure from politicians was immense for the railroad case. And the gavel waited.

Potter closed the unsigned Jackson file and slid it to the edge of the desk. "I'll return to it," he told himself. Tomorrow perhaps, or the next day at the most.

He never did.

Return to Present Day

The room was still. I shook my head, unsure of what had just happened. I looked again at the portrait, the hard-set mouth, and the tired eyes.

I whispered aloud, almost involuntarily: "Why didn't you help him?"

But no answer came. Silence hung heavy in the air.

Epilogue

Back in my library, the alcove was sealed. The hidden hallway had vanished, the vault along with it. Even some of the portraits were mysteriously gone.

Strangely, the deep sense of familiarity I once felt with the Manor, the feeling that I had been there before, had faded completely. Perhaps reincarnations can be broken, like a spell lifted at the end of a long, forgotten tale.

Only one portrait remained now, hanging solemnly on the office wall: Judge Joseph Potter.

I stood beneath it as the fire in the hearth cast flickering shadows across the bookshelves. I reached up and touched the frame, then let my fingers rest upon my reflection in the glass. My face looked unchanged. But I knew it wasn't.

I was no longer just Neal Young. And he was no longer just Joseph Potter.

We had become something else. two men, separated by time but joined by unfinished duty. I was the one who had completed the work. I had spoken the words he never did, the ones that should have echoed from the bench more than a century ago.

On the final page of the Jackson file, just before I sent it anonymously to the courthouse, I had written:

“Justice delayed is still justice... if the soul survives to speak it.”

And finally, it had.

Concluding Admission

This story is a work of historical fiction. Judge Joseph Potter was indeed a real figure, serving in the latter part of the 19th century, and, by all accounts, was a man of integrity and respect. To my knowledge, he never fathered a child out of wedlock, nor did he suppress evidence in a criminal case. His wife and three sons, as mentioned in this account, were real.

Neal Young, Oscar Fallon, and John Jackson are entirely fictional, as are the events and characters connected to them. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and a product of imagination.

Skene Manor does exist in Whitehall, New York. It still stands today and can be visited. The manor is currently owned and preserved by Whitehall Skene Preservation, Inc., and remains a testament to the grandeur and mystery of a bygone age.