

13. The Cedars & the George Baker House

Introduced by Arthur Leavitt (AHL), with input from his son, John Leavitt (JHL), May Baker, and the author.



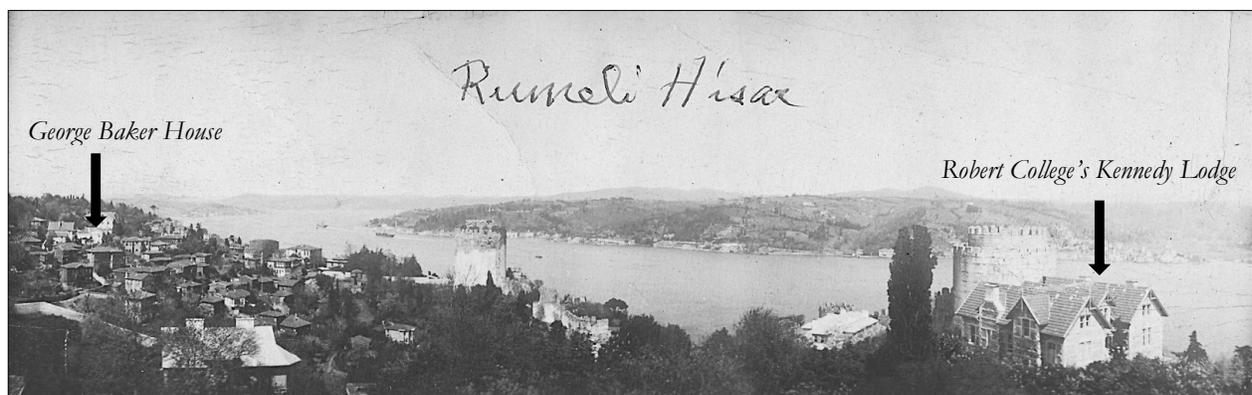
The George Baker House in Rumeli Hisar shortly after it was built in ca. 1880, with what came to be known as The Cedars to the right.

(AHL) Presumably through arrangements by the American [Embassy], my fellow Student Interpreters Edelman and Louis Heck were billeted with Mrs. Edward Seager in Bebek, while Binda and I were to stay with Louisa Edwards at The Cedars on the hill in Rumeli Hisar. Until August 3rd, however, we stayed with the Panaretoffs in Bebek because Mildred and Cuthbert Binns [Louisa's daughter and son-in-law] also lived at The Cedars, and the household was preoccupied with the imminent birth on 2 August of Howard Binns. Three days later, I was installed at Mrs. Louisa Edwards's house.

Aside from Victor Binns, who was in time to become Mildred and Cuthbert Binns's youngest child, this is the first we've heard of the Binnses, Seagers, and Panaretoffs. Like the Bakers, they were among the expatriate families who made up the foreign enclave in the adjacent villages of Rumeli Hisar and Bebek. As we know from Ruby Baker, the Bakers lived in a cluster of three houses on the hill behind the castle. At the time of Arthur Leavitt's arrival in 1909, Arthur Baker and his family were living in the George Baker House. Arthur's sister (and Victor Binns's grandmother) Louisa Edwards was on one side of them at The Cedars, her husband Charlie having died of food poisoning a decade earlier. Arthur and Louisa's brother Harry Baker was on the other side. He had died of cholera the year before, and it's presumed that his widow Mary and children Winifred and George Noel were still there. Luther Fowle, who welcomed Arthur Leavitt to Turkey, also lived near the Bakers in Rumeli Hisar with his parents, whereas the Panaretoffs and Seagers were in Bebek.

Before Arthur Leavitt's time, the Seagers had been neighbors of someone else we've met, American missionary Cyrus Hamlin. Fifty years earlier, Hamlin had almost single-handedly founded and built Robert College. It was considered by many to be the missionaries' crowning accomplishment in Turkey, although to his dying day Hamlin would insist that the school was inspired by Protestant Christians, yes, but truly a secular educational institution. We'll find out what that was all about—and who the Binnses, Seagers, and Panaretoffs were—when we look into how Robert College got its start and what, if anything, the Bakers had to do with it.

(JHL) The village of Rumeli Hisar climbs precipitously up the embankment of the Bosphorus, skirting the north and west sides of the castle. In a hollow between Hisar and the Robert College Campus were scattered a number of New England style, white-frame faculty houses in a grove of tall cedar trees. From these, Louisa's house took its name 'The Cedars'. Across a narrow cobblestone lane less than 100 yards away was another large manor house built by Louisa's father George Baker in the early 1880s, with the help of her husband, Charlie Edwards. Surrounded by a garden and backed by towering pines, this is where Louisa's brother, Arthur Baker, ended up with his wife Leila and children Elsie, Dolly, Warden, Ruby, and May after George Baker died. Both houses had a commanding view up and down the Bosphorus, especially from the upstairs bedrooms.



From Arthur Leavitt's photo collection, taken ca. 1910.

According to May Baker (see her letter below), the original photograph of the house above was taken shortly after the house was completed. She thought the year was about 1866-67, but Arthur Baker dated it to 1880, which is probably more accurate. This can be inferred from the presence of the house next door. It originally belonged to Dr. Long, an early Robert College board member and professor after whom the college's Long Hall was named. It stands to reason that in order for Dr. Long to be at Robert College when George Baker built his house, the college already had to exist. Its first building, Hamlin Hall, was finished in 1871. Dr. Long's house—originally called 'The Long House' and later dubbed 'The Cedars'—came next, and the George Baker House after that in about 1880.

What this also tells us is that from the time of Robert College's construction in the late 1860s, the once poor, predominantly Turkish village of Rumeli Hisar was being inundated by American missionaries, Robert College faculty, and the Bakers, who settled into the valley and hills behind it. This mainly Anglo-American colony added a sizeable Western dimension to the former oriental character of the village. Yet, to read Harrison Griswold Dwight's description of the village, which we will momentarily, the two groups occupied relatively separate worlds.¹ When Arthur Leavitt got to Turkey in 1909, Dwight was an American correspondent writing a book about Constantinople and living at The Cedars. After Luther Fowle, he was to become Arthur Leavitt's second friend.

¹ Chapter XIV, A Turkish Village, *Constantinople, Settings and Traits*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York and London, 1915.

In the 1960s, Elsie's sister May wrote to Arthur Leavitt (and his daughter Ruth), enclosing the original photograph of the George Baker House above. Elsie was no longer living.

Dear Arthur and Ruth,

You will not all of you recognize the photo I enclose. It is my Christmas card to wish you all a Happy Christmas.

My Grandfather [George Baker] built this house at Rumeli Hisar on the Bosphorus in Turkey. I think that the year was 1866-67 [more like early 1880s]. He and his wife [Maria Baker] lived in it until he died in 1905.

Then my father [Arthur Baker] inherited the house and we lived in it in summer until about 1913. Arthur [Leavitt] will know more about it after that than I do. I don't suppose that Ruth [who was born in the house] remembers much, but I remember visiting when Arthur and Elsie [Leavitt] had the house [from 1919-1926].

At one time [after 1926] the Tubini's lived in it. Now I gather it is part of Robert College and that [Elsie and Arthur's granddaughter] Jane Leavitt is housed there. I hope that her dormitory room is at the top of the house, for that front window has a wonderful view and I can just remember seeing 3-masted sailing ships coming up the Bosphorus in the dawn mists.

The balcony below was zinc covered and it got the sun all day, so it was used as an airing space. All our lovely linen dresses, petticoats etc. were laid out on it after being ironed. Lavender was picked and laid on news-papers and we used to strip large bundles of it. Tomato paste too was dried up there and then packed away in tin with bay leaves to flavor it.

The house to the right was an old Turkish house, and Aunt Louisa Edwards lived in it and had two or three resident bachelors. Arthur can tell you more about that, too, as he was one of them!

...P.S.S. I've just done a bit of detective work on the original photo and discovered written on the back in G[eorge] Baker's handwriting:

*Hisar (Balcony Villa) House & Garden, Green House to left-
Dr. Long to the right-
terrace wall in front...*

*Designed & built by-
G. Baker - A. C. E. XL*

I think these [at the end] are A. C. E.'s own handwriting and was probably Auntie Louies' husband Arthur (?) Charles Edwards. (Charles Edwards went to Constantinople as a ship's architect to build a battleship.) The XL could be & love, for it's more like this. The G. of Grandfather's signature could be Geo, as the cardboard is torn a bit. He is the girls' Great-Great-~~Great~~ Grandfather, I think.

Charlie Edwards's full name was Charles Reed Edwards. What the "A." stood for is anyone's guess, but mine is 'Architect'. Ruby maintained as well that, as a naval architect and George Baker's good friend, Charlie was predominantly responsible for designing George Baker's house. For example, he is blamed for the overly steep pitch of the stairs leading up to the front portico, the reason given: 'Because that's how Charlie was used to the stairs being on his ships!' The angle is evident in this photograph I took in 1986. The plaque above the ground floor window reads, "The Cecil Tubini House."



*Front stairs to the
George Baker House
1986*

Under the same original photograph of the house in an old photo album of Arthur Leavitt's, he wrote:

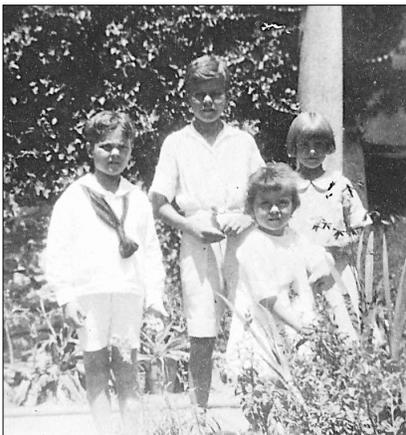
The Baker house in Rumeli Hisar, built by Elsie's grandfather George Baker. We lived in it at various times between 1912 and 1926, when it and the grounds looked far different. Elsie's father [Arthur Baker] gave her the house, I think after we left Turkey in 1926, but we could do nothing with it and sold it to Robert College. The house across the lane was "The Cedars," Auntie Louie's (Mrs. Charles Edwards's) house.

It is unclear whether it was Cecil Tubini or Robert College who bought the property from the Leavitts in 1926, but the Tubinis lived in it for some time before the college turned it into a girls' dorm, I believe following World War II. When my sister attended the college between 1966 and 1968, she never boarded in her great-great grandfather's house, but had occasion to visit school friends there.

Arthur noted how different the house looked when he and Elsie were living there. Here are two more from his photo album taken sometime between 1919 and 1926.



The George Baker House (left) when Arthur and Elsie Leavitt were living there between 1919 and 1926. The Cedars next door (below).



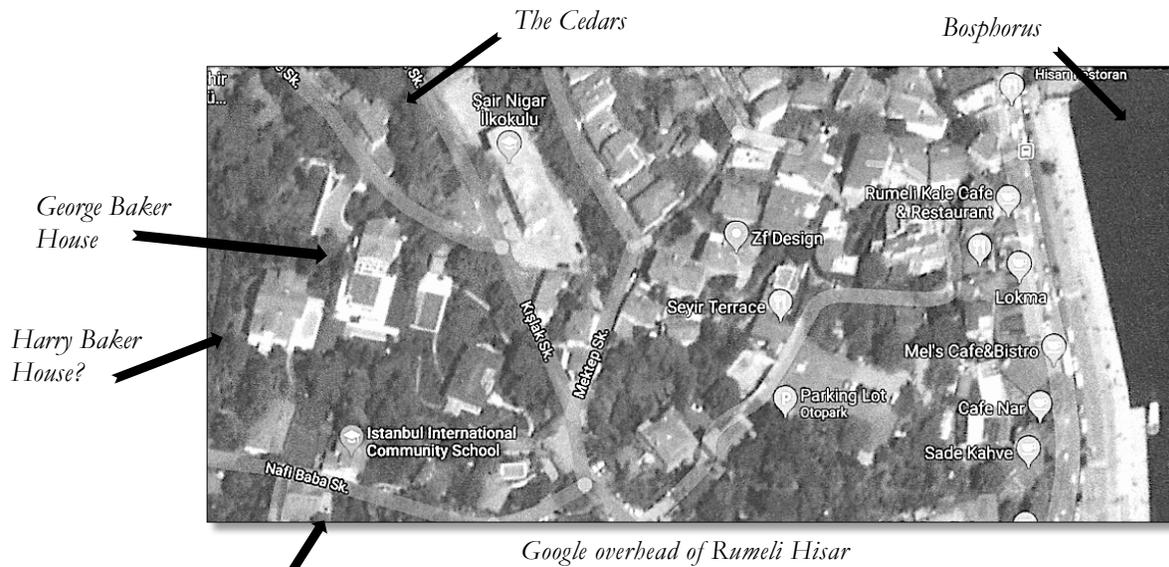
Arthur and Elsie Leavitt's children (l-r) John, Peter, Anne, and Ruth. Photo taken at the British Summer Residence at Therapia in ca. 1923.

Arthur and Elsie's four children grew up in the George Baker House, including my father John Leavitt. His own account of this comes toward the end of our story. His younger sister Anne was born in the house, in the front room on the right. He recalled being taken in to see her for the first time when he was three. He was warned to be especially gentle and quiet with the baby; two qualities, he said, that were not presently in his nature. He and his older sister Ruth attended the American Community School, along with the Tubini children and Judy Acheson, who wrote her own brilliant version of the experience in *Judy of Constantinople* as a twelve-year-old. A school picture of them all can be found in [Chapter XX](#).

In those days, the grade school consisted of two rooms attached to Robert College. Today it's called the Istanbul International Community School, which is partially housed in a building directly across the George Baker House. I've been unable to ascertain if the school building, or another close by, was Harry Baker's old home.

There has been confusion among Baker fans and descendants as to the location of the George Baker House and The Cedars. It is not surprising. When you don't know where to look, or have a photograph to go by, they are hard to find. For one thing, the George Baker House is today hidden behind a compound wall. When I tried to locate it in 2011, lacking days to scout Rumeli Hisar's near vertical tangle of lanes and footpaths, I failed. I had better luck on Google overhead photography, their locations confirmed by my sister in 2016. She

identified both properties and discovered that the George Baker House was a high-end condominium in the midst of a full renovation. The best way to find the George Baker House, she reported, is by going to the Istanbul International Community School yard and looking over the gate.

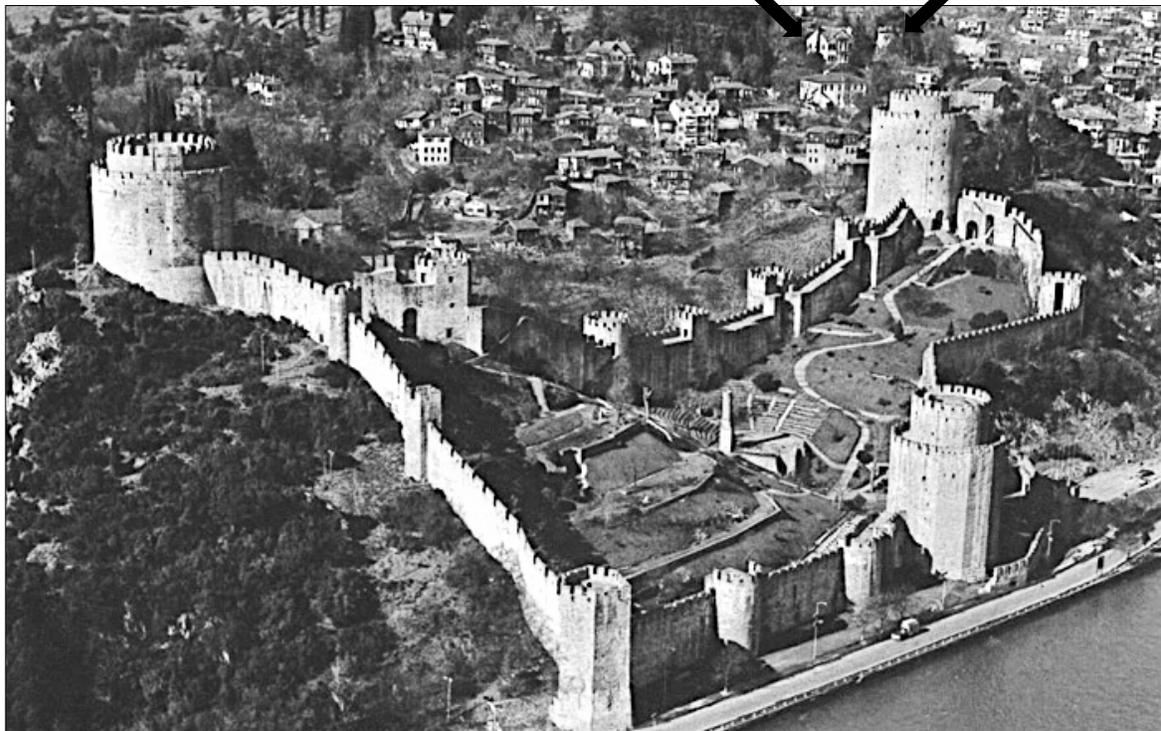


Google overhead of Rumeli Hisar

Istanbul International Community School

George Baker House

The Cedars



'Bosphorus 19' from the Levantine Heritage Foundation website levantineheritage.com.