

WARWICK Growing up, Anne Holst knew that the family home, a gracious gingerbread-trimmed stone mansion on a hilltop off Post Road, was large. The cavernous entry hall was a great place to pedal her tricycle, and when she was older she stayed active on rainy days by using the wraparound porch as a roller-skating rink.

She also knew it was filled with historic artifacts, from the top hats and puffy 19th-century ball gowns stashed in attic trunks to the Blue Willow china that filled the glass-fronted cabinets in the butler's pantry.

But to her it was just home, says Holst, who can remember tossing dog biscuits around the parlor for her Chesapeake Bay retriever even though it sent the big dog skidding around 5-foot-tall porcelain jardinières that had been a gift from the King of Siam.

She never felt as though she was living in a museum. But that is exactly what Holst wants now as she works to preserve the house that has been in her family for generations and reaches back to Samuel Slater, the 1700s mill magnate considered to be the father of this country's Industrial Revolution.

Construction of the estate at 4157 Post Rd., just south of Apponaug center, began in 1872 when William Smith Slater, nephew of Samuel Slater, decided that a new home would be an appropriate wedding gift for his daughter.

At that time the property encompassed about 500 acres, and blue granite for the house's exterior was ordered from a quarry in Cumberland. The contrasting blocks of pink granite were cut from another quarry, near Carr's Pond in West Greenwich, and dragged to Warwick by teams of oxen.

It took about five years to complete the 27-room, 15,000-square-foot house, resplendent with etched glass, black walnut woodwork, imported fireplace tiles, French wallpaper and nine-foot-tall front windows that look out over Greenwich Bay.

Once a working farm, the estate has shrunk to about 24 acres today. It is still in the family, having been passed down the maternal line for five generations.

With no heirs, Holst, 65, has spent the last few years looking for ways to make sure that the estate, long called **Clouds Hill**, will be preserved to give people from all over the world a glimpse of life during America's Gilded Age.

At first Holst and her business partner, Wayne Cabral, considered opening the mansion as a bed-and-breakfast, but strict fire codes enacted after the Station fire required too many physical modifications. "The changes would have been devastating to the historical and architectural significance of the house," according to Holst.

She and Cabral changed course and concentrated their energies on getting federal nonprofit status for the stately old house so it can operate as a museum. They succeeded last month - their entity is called the **Clouds Hill** Victorian House Museum - and hope that it will allow them to garner more contributions, apply for grants and expand the hours that the house can be open to the public.

Currently **Clouds Hill** is open by appointment only, except for a Christmas-themed weekend that was held earlier this month and a springtime participation in the state's Tour Rhode Island program.

"We're really excited for the mansion because it will give the city a real museum presence with such a fantastic permanent collection of Victorian artifacts and furniture - and it's almost all original to that house," Warwick Mayor Scott Avedisian said last week. "Getting their nonprofit status is such a big step. It took them a lot of time and a lot of work. But it will help enable us to promote them and give more people a chance to see the heritage that that house has to offer."

Holst said that although **Clouds Hill** has been open on a limited schedule in recent years, it has still drawn quite a crowd of fans. Couples have selected the house and its formal garden - with gazebo and small footbridge - as the backdrop for their wedding photos, said Cabral, who spent two years doing research and planting to create an accurate botanical accompaniment to the house.

Most visitors, he and Holst say, are history aficionados and include college professors and tea societies from London. The house never fails to impress, according to Holst, who said it is considered one of the finest examples of "high gothic" architecture in the country. Equally impressive, she said, is that most of the artifacts are original to the house. Unlike many historic sites of the same era, this one did not have to be decorated with replicas or period furniture from other locations.

One mannequin in the house is grandly clad in a gold beaded dress that one of Holst's ancestors wore to the country's centennial ball, held in Philadelphia in 1876. The dress shimmers with thousands of glass beads, each one sewn on by hand.

Saying that most people have had enough experience staring at static "gilt and marble" exhibitions in other houses and other museums, Holt said her goal is to have **Clouds Hill** serve as a place of "living history" with guides in period dress acting out activities of the day.

She has created such tableaux at Christmas for the past few years; this year, a friend's cooperatively cooing infant was swaddled in a cradle adorned with lace and satin.

Holst and Cabral said that they hope to launch collaborative efforts with art history and theater students from area colleges. They are dedicated to preserving the integrity of **Clouds Hill** and said that some people might be surprised to find that many items show their age, including the heavy curtains in the library and the old "blackout" shades from World War II.

After consulting with experts, Holst said it was determined that it was important to keep original materials so that people can see genuine fabrics made in the 19th-century rather than duplications

made today. It is also important from an academic standpoint, she said, for art students to see the effect of time and light on the fabrics, ceiling friezes and other decorative appointments.

Holst said that she also hopes to be able to offer classes in the arts and crafts pastimes of the day such as pressing flowers or needlework.

With ancestry that can be traced to Roger Williams, the Holst family is as interesting as its pastoral homestead, and Anne and her mother, the late Anne Crawford "Nancy" Allen Holst, are proof that strong women run in the family. Anne was the state Department of Environmental Management's first woman game warden; Nancy broke ground on many fronts.

Nancy Allen Holst created her own fire department, the Cedar Hill Fire Volunteer District, to protect the woodlands around **Clouds Hill** and also served as its chief. Holst said her mother also was a licensed pilot who flew planes for the Rhode Island Red Cross. One of her assignments was to survey the damage dealt to the Ocean State by the hurricane of 1938.

Holst still lives in the house - sharing the servants' quarters with Cabral and his wife, Christine. The fact that the house is still a home with people living in it who know the many stories it can tell is another thing that makes **Clouds Hill** so special, Holst said.

Among her favorite memories are the hot Fourth of July nights of her childhood when the family - aunts and uncles, parents and cousins - would sit on the third floor and watch a panoramic of fireworks that were set off to the west. Pyrotechnics blossomed from Rocky Point, Oakland Beach, the Warwick Country Club and Fall River.

Holst said that all the displays were visible from way up on **Clouds Hill**, right down to the last sputtering sparkles of red, white and blue.

For more information on **Clouds Hill** Victorian House Museum, call (401) 884-4550 or visit www.cloudshill.org.

Clouds Hill Victorian House Museum is a historic mansion in Warwick into a nonprofit museum.