

Historic mansion morphed into museum

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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 in November - 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 held last 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, including 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.

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

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