

Clouds Hill Victorian House Museum: Warwick's Hidden Treasure

Set on a 28-acre estate in the Cowesett section of Warwick is the Clouds Hill Victorian House Museum. If you haven't heard of it, it is because until 1997 it was simply the home of Nancy Allen Holst, whose Rhode Island lineage includes the likes of Roger Williams, John Slater, French Huguenots who settled early in these parts, and assorted members of the Ives, Reed and Gordon families which were all prominent in this state's history. Some of Nancy's Rhode Island ancestors made great fortunes in textile production and the East India trade.

The three and a half story mansion, constructed in the 1870s from granite hauled by ox-teams from a West Greenwich quarry, possesses many of the fine architectural details one might expect to see in a Newport "cottage." But Clouds Hill surpasses the Bellevue Avenue manors in terms of the authenticity of its contents. Everything in Clouds Hill, built by William Smith Slater for his daughter Elizabeth Ives, has belonged to one or another member of the family of the present owner, Anne D. Holst. Nothing has been sold off to museums or collectors, as is all too often the case.

A distant relative of Anne, Alfred Augustus Reed, was US consul to the king of Siam of the *King and I* fame. The king presented Reed with a pair of priceless 5' china vases which now flank the ornate fireplace in what is called The Parlor Room. That fireplace is further ornamented by beautiful wooden griffins carved by Charles Dowler of Providence who also created a pair of satyrs for the fireplace in the Library. In his time Mr. Dowler was merely considered a tradesman; today he would be deemed a sculptor whose works might grace a fancy Manhattan gallery or be found in the RISD museum.

Clouds Hill's Music Room has been called by Marcus Finney, editor of the well-

regarded British magazine, *Country Life*, "one of the most elaborate and extraordinary Egyptian Rooms to be found on either side of the Atlantic." Such rooms, complete with authentic artifacts, were fashionable in proper Victorian homes of the day because of the influence of the recently completed Suez Canal.

The theme of the Dining Room is water birds, among which are carved, life-size pelicans, walnut wood herons and ducks. The dinner table could seat up to 22 guests who would bathe in light produced by gas generated from naphtha, a novel, if somewhat dangerous, amenity at the time the \$136,284.53 house was built. The rare gas generator still survives in the basement of the house which was also among the first to be protected by a burglar alarm system that could telegraph an alert to the local police station.

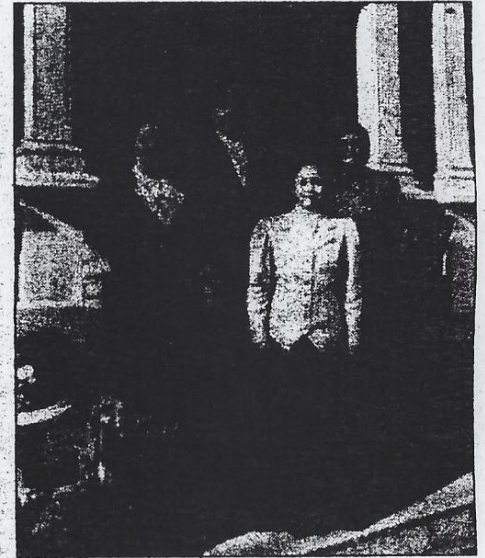
Clouds Hill, has never been owned by a man, relates Anne somewhat proudly. Perhaps that explains her mother's independent streak which led her to become a licensed aviator and a firefighter. And it may also explain Anne's confident inauguration of ambitious plans for the family estate which now "must pay its own way."

Anne had at one time taught horseback riding on the grounds and boarded 30, or so, horses at the stables on the property that was once the site of Warwick's "poor farm." There is still an indoor riding ring and one can see a number of jumps in the adjacent fields which have hosted equestrian events in the past. But when the estate passed into her hands, Anne saw the potential for creating a first class bed and breakfast. To that end a number of home improvement projects were initiated in bed and bathrooms that were not actually in very bad shape. Some bedrooms even have original flowered wallpaper and drapes; all have spectacular marble fireplaces and original Victorian antiques.

The front piazza of the home, from which one can see Greenwich Bay through the trees, was carefully restored so that guests might sip drinks from rocking chairs while taking in the grand view. Plans were drawn up to complement this comfortable space at some point with a gazebo of the same style.

But unfortunately, because of stricter fire codes that were drafted in response to The Station Nightclub fire, Anne's bed and breakfast plan became unfeasible. Replacing beautiful wooden doors and spectacular etched glass windows with steel doors, installing lighted exit signage, and making other required safety upgrades would destroy the charm and beauty of this Victorian jewel that has been so well preserved. However, Anne and her associates, Wayne & Christine Cabral, had a contingency plan for a museum that would showcase the Victorian manor which has to be among the best examples of the genre in the country. Importantly, all details of Clouds Hill's construction were well documented and the existing records will provide researchers with details such as the names of companies, tradesmen and artists who worked on the house and how much they were compensated for their services.

Anne also has plans to use her home and grounds for wedding photography for which the elegantly furnished and appointed rooms would be so eminently suited. It may also serve as a conference center. Anne, never lacking for creative ideas, is also considering hosting Ladies Victorian Weekends, where women would dress in period clothing which has already been procured for special events; listen to live music of the time, make desserts using Victorian era recipes, and learn to knit or sew. She would also someday like to convert the stables into an exhibit area for the Holst family's fine collection of carriages,



AT THE CLOUDS HILL VICTORIAN HOUSE MUSEUM staff and volunteers often dress in period costumes recreated from the original costumes or clothing patterns from the era.

gypsy wagons, sleighs and equestrian gear.

Anne has already opened the home to the public for music recitals to raise money for local charities and for The Governor's Tourism Day Tour promoted by First Lady of Rhode Island, Suzanne Carcieri, to help citizens learn more about their state.

Pending permits and variances, Warwick's Clouds Hill Victorian House Museum will host guests year round by appointment beginning in the fall of 2005 and will become an attraction and resource for all those interested in the Victorian period.

Information about Clouds Hill can be obtained by calling (401) 884-4550 or emailing office@cloudshill.org