

The View From/Waterford

Shimmers of Old Glory In Harkness State Park

By CAROLYN BATTISTA

VISITORS to the 42-room mansion at Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford eyed a little button on one wall. "To call the servants," explained a docent, Gail Hollingsworth.

Then came fine moldings, hand-painted Ceilings, intricate light fixtures ("Fabulous!" one woman said) and a bathtub where numerous knobs, spigots and shower beads dispensed both saltwater and fresh, heated to suit the bather. Visitors also checked out the servants' wing and gazed out the windows at the vine-covered pergola, historic gardens and vast lawn stretching to Long Island Sound. It was a preview to the Autumn Festival being held today from 10 to 4.

Now that a long-needed, \$3.6 restoration of the mansion and gardens is essentially complete, visitors can see a splendid piece of a bygone era. Those who worked on the project say it was full of challenges, surprises and satisfaction; park staff and volunteers point to more challenges ahead, notably restoration of the Harkness greenhouses.

For most of the first half of this century, the park's mansion, gardens, outbuildings and grounds made up the summer estate of Edward and Mary Harkness. Mr. Harkness's father had helped John D. Rockefeller start Standard Oil, and by 1924 the son was one of the richest men in America. He and his wife gave millions of dollars to charity. "These people were about helping people," said Marcella Wagoner, a chairwoman of the festival. Their shoreside manor was cared for by a staff of 60 or so.

When Mrs. Harkness died in 1950, 10 years after her husband, she left the estate "to the people of the State of Connecticut." Years of bare-bones budgets took their toll. By the early 1990's the mansion — with ancient wiring and crumbling masonry — was closed. The gardens, largely the work of the landscape designer Beatrix Jones Farrand, were a mess.

In 1992, then-Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. blocked the Department of Environmental Protection's restoration plans. But worried supporters formed the Friends of Harkness Inc., restored one garden (to demonstrate what could be done) and pressed for action. In 1995, Gov. John G. Rowland approved the release of funds for the restoration.

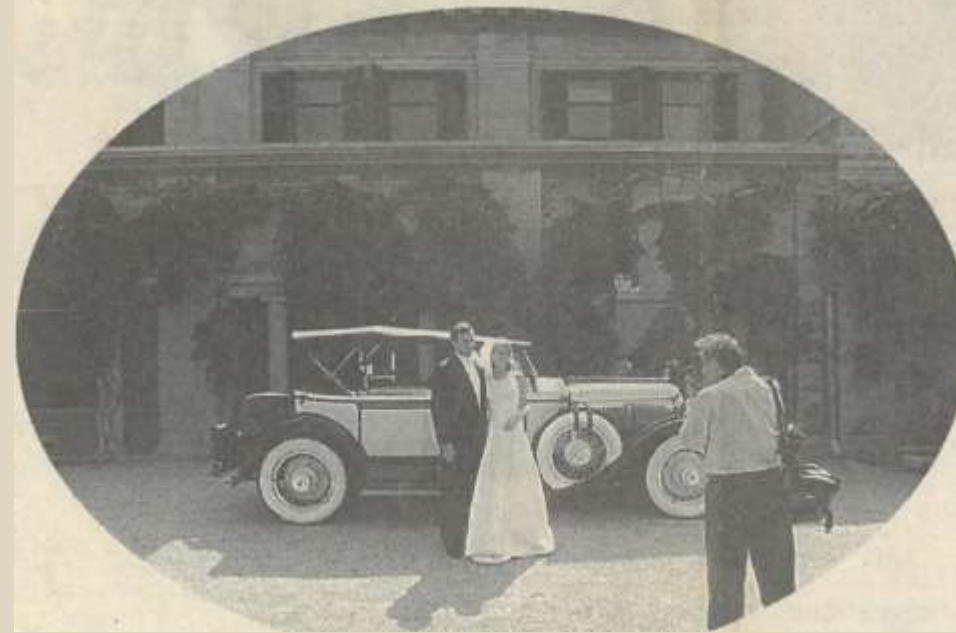
"It's been a long saga," said Roger Clarke, the restoration architect. Last November, the project's general contractor, Thomas J. Kronenberger & Sons of Middletown, arrived. Workers installed new wiring, updated old plumbing, removed paint, applied fresh finishes, took down what was

crumbling, saved what they could and replaced what they couldn't. "Usually," said Brian Kronenberger, "we had 12 to 16 men a day here. Many were truly craftsmen."

They worked on a mansion built in 1906 for Jessie and William Taylor, Mary Harkness's sister and brother-in-law. It was designed by Lord & Hewlett, architects who gave the house such classical features as a center hall and two loggias. "It was a country house," Mr. Clarke said. "It wasn't a big, bombastic Vanderbilt thing."

The estate, called Eolia after the home of the wind god, proved too windy for the Taylors. In 1907 they sold it to the Harknesses, who engaged the architect James Gamble Rogers to do interior renovations and the pergola (where Mary Harkness had afternoon tea), as well as the carriage house, with its vehicle-turning device, four-stall stable, dog-grooming room, squash court and apartments for the help.

Mr. Clarke marveled at how workers managed to take down one badly deteriorated wall of the mansion and replace it "without disturbing the kitchen tile," right next to



it. In the loggias, he said, "We had to take out all the columns, arches and everything else, and put in new ones that looked the same." Mr. Kronenberger described replicating the original, badly rotted timbers of the pergola and removing "at least a dozen layers of paint" in the mansion, finding long hidden details underneath.

Glen Griffin, a specialist in lighting resto-

ration, refurbished the old fixtures. "I took everything out, down to the last screw. Many were elaborately cast and put together individually," he said, clearly the work of master craftsmen.

Rex Newell, an artist with Glastonbury Restorations, was called in when patterns were spotted on the west loggia ceiling. He found a fairly clear border pattern, proba-

bly done first, with overlaps of a fainter flower-basket design. He wound up restoring the border pattern to the west loggia ceiling, but painting the flower-basket design on the east loggia ceiling, where it complements the "lattice room look," popular in the 1920's.

"I had to use the floral patterns I could see — and intuition," he said. Painting by hand, "I had my neck craned to the ceiling for quite a while," he said. "When I met Governor Rowland at the grand opening in June, he asked, 'How's your neck?'"

Mr. Newell didn't mind the neck strain. "Here was a place for craftsmen to really dig in," he said, "not just bang things together."

Mr. Clarke called the restoration "a nice combination of preservation with new, matching materials and structures," as well as a balance of the original, classic design of Lord & Hewlett with the changes made by the Harknesses. Equally important to the whole picture, he added, is the restoration of the gardens.

In the East Garden, the Friends followed Mrs. Farrand's detailed plans. This summer, with the restoration funds, the state hired New London Landscaping to work in the West, Boxwood and Alpine Gardens.

The park manager, Mark Darin, estimates that park attendance was up 10 to 15 percent this summer. The mansion can now be rented for weddings and other events,

with fees going into a fund for its maintenance. Fifteen weddings were scheduled in 1998, and so far 20 are lined up for 1999. -

Plans for the estate now include restoring garden ironwork and repairing garden sculpture. The Friends aim to spend \$1 million to restore the deteriorating — and now closed — greenhouses, built by Lord We-Burham and still housing the grapevines d* Harknesses imported from Italy. Jeanne Shelburne, president of the Friends, said, "We need a minimum of \$150,000 to stare; we'd prefer \$300,000," she said. "So far, we have about \$60,000."

Docents from the Friends, who lead mansion tours on weekends through Columbus Day, say that much as they enjoy telling visitors about the Harknesses and their estate, they like it even better when the visitors tell them — which happens often.

"Many people have a personal connection," said Nancy Hart, recalling the map who told her that his father had worked summers on the estate, to pay for college. One day after the estate manager told him that no, they couldn't afford to give him raise, the dejected young man was spotted) by Mr. Harkness, who sat down next to him, and learned what was wrong.

He approved the raise, telling the young man, "You're the only person in my whole life to tell me that I couldn't afford some thing