

Water-Damaged Castle

By **GARY LIBOW**
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EAST HADDAM — As youngsters, Dot Hanna and Wilson Brownell were no strangers to quirky Gillette Castle. They found a playmate in actor William Gillette.

It was on the grounds of Gillette's massive home that the two rode the "Connecticut Nutmeg," the miniature train he loved to steer over 3 miles of winding track.

"He was very graceful. He was proud of his train, and away we went!" Brownell, 76, said of the actor who gained fame and fortune with his on-stage portrayals of Sherlock Holmes. "It was a thrill, especially when you came along the edge of the Connecticut River."

Hanna, 79, and Brownell, who still live near the castle, are both pleased that the state will spend millions to recapture the grandeur of the ailing fieldstone landmark.

Built between 1914 and 1919 atop a bluff overlooking the Connecticut River, the historic castle — which attracted 340,000 visitors last year — is indeed at a crossroads. The castle, purchased by the state after Gillette's death in 1937, is in danger of serious structural damage from decades of water seeping into its walls.

Starting Tuesday, the castle will be closed for the rest of 1998, awaiting craftsmen who are expected to work there for an estimated 18 months. During 1999, the castle will be closed except for Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from Memorial Day through Labor Day. The grounds will remain open.

These days, when it begins raining, staffers hastily scatter 30 to 40

buckets around the 24-room castle. Artifacts and artworks are removed from the walls for protection. Electrical boxes often fill with water.

For years, it was believed the roof was the source of the constant leaks. But some investigative work in 1993 proved otherwise. When a small section of the servants' quarters was dismantled, it was discovered that water was entering through the stone parapets, the vertice roof edges that give the building its primitive look, and snaking down the walls. Repairs in the servants' quarters proved successful.

The first rehabilitation phase will focus primarily on waterproofing the building. Within the next week or so, the state expects to select a qualified contractor to repair the castle roof and parapets.

Also planned is a new copper roof, the repair of stone walls scattered around the 120-acre estate and the backbone of a new electrical system, upgrading service from 100 to 400 amps.

It appears the structure has been leaking ever since 20 craftsmen spent five years building the castle of fieldstone supported by steel framework. Gillette tried, unsuccessfully, to stem leaks by building stone awnings with built-in catch pans.

The dashing actor closely guided construction of the rugged castle. It was a haven from the bustle of Broadway for Gillette, the son of a former U.S. senator.

The castle, built at a cost of more than \$1 million, features 47 carved doors, no two exactly the same. It also boasts thick stone walls, built-in couches, a movable table on

tracks, hand-hewn oak trim, strategically situated living room mirrors, a trick wooden lock to protect the bar, and Javanese raffia mats.

"It's a very interesting, but very quirky, type of building," said Hartford-based architect Roger Clarke, who designed the rehabilitation.

Don Goss, supervisor of Gillette Castle State Park since 1992, finds it ironic that blame for the leaks falls on Gillette's shoulders.

"He told builders he wanted it rougher and rougher and rougher. What he wanted was a castle that looked like a ruins. Basically, he got that," Goss said. "This leaks like a sieve."

"There's water damage just about everywhere. If the restoration isn't started within the next year or so, there is going to be some serious problems here," Goss said.

Tom Smith, the state Department of Environmental Protection's project supervisor, said workers will install flashing in the reconstructed parapets to isolate them from the rest of the structure.

In the second repair phase, the focus will move to renovation of the castle's interior, refinishing water-damaged walls and floors, upgrading the heating system and refinishing all interior furniture, fixtures and contents.

"When all is said and done, you're looking at about \$5 million [worth of repairs]," said Goss, who has overheard visitors lament the castle's worn state. "It's crying out for some help."

"I would hate to see it fall down into a pile of rubble," Hanna said. "It's been a part of my life forever."



Getting Royal Treatment



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REPAIR WORK ON GILLETTE CASTLE in East Haddam is set to begin Tuesday, and tarps have already been placed on some roofing. The historic castle, built between 1914 and 1919 on a bluff along the Connecticut River, is in danger of serious structural damage from decades of water seeping into its walls. Starting Tuesday, the castle will be closed for the rest of the year for repairs.