

# Restoration of Harkness now officially under way

## Governor, DEP head take part in ceremony

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**Waterford** — Walking the beach at Harkness Memorial State Park used to be Al Partridge's job.

The 77-year-old former first selectman worked as a lifeguard for Edward and Mary Harkness back in the late 1930s. Because he can remember the splendor of the stone mansion and gardens when the couple lived there, years of neglect by the state have been hard to bear.

"From the time the state took over when (Mary Harkness) died, I've seen it deteriorate," Partridge said. "It's like seeing a friend neglected that's healthy. Their health deteriorates and they're dying."

A \$3.3 million restoration project that began last month will revive the mansion named Eolia and its elegant [gardens](#). Gov. John G. Rowland, Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Sidney J. Holbrook and other state and

town officials visited Harkness Wednesday for a groundbreaking ceremony.

"Welcome to the governor's new summer residence," Rowland joked.

Multimillionaires Edward Stephen Harkness and Mary Stillman Harkness bequeathed the mansion and grounds to the state, which took ownership after her death in 1952. Since then, the house has fallen into disrepair. Rowland announced in September 1995 he would release state funds for renovations.

"Often, when you have a beautiful resource in your back yard, you take it for granted," he said. "Our philosophy is simple — when we have an asset such as this, we become involved."

Members of the Friends of Harkness, a local group that has been calling for the restoration for years, attended the ceremony and held a reception afterward. The contractor, Thomas A. Kronenberger & Sons of South Meriden, which specializes in historical renovation, has already begun work on the inside of the 90-year-old house. The project should be completed by May 1998, with all 42 rooms and adjacent gardens returned as close to original condition as possible.

The company plans to do interior work

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Jack Sauer / The Day

■ *DEP Commissioner Sidney J. Holbrook and Gov. John G. Rowland - attended a groundbreaking ceremony Wednesday at Harkness Memorial State Park. Helping to wheel Holbrook is Vito J. Santasiero, executive assistant for the office of the commissioner. A \$3.3 million restoration is under way on the Harkness Mansion.*

# Harkness is being restored to its former glory

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during the winter, such as fixing the heating and upgrading the electrical system. In the spring, the mansion's east face and garden walls will be rebuilt.

Kronenberger also will take down two stone loggias on sides of the house. The loggias will be rebuilt, using replicas of missing pieces.

About 60 years ago, Partridge watched Edward Harkness send a golf ball right through one of the loggias' windows while he was playing the estate's golf course's ninth hole, located directly in front of the house. Partridge said Harkness reacted by saying "Shucks."

Partridge remembers Eolia's former owners as generous and manner-conscious. While Edward Harkness wished to be addressed simply as "Mr. Harkness," his wife wanted servants to refer to her as "Madam."

"If you didn't, she'd correct you," he said.

Partridge, who served as first selectman, for six years in the 1970s, has lived with his wife Barbara around the corner from Harkness on Quarry Road for nearly 50 years.

Between 1931 and 1942, his parents occupied the Dorcas House — a home on the grounds built for young

victims of infantile paralysis from New York. The building is no longer standing. His father did maintenance in the building.

In the summers of 1937 and 1938, Partridge worked as a lifeguard and "general flunky" for the couple, who would sit under a sun shelter at the beach in wide-brimmed hats, bathrobes and bathing suits. The two never swam in water over their heads, and would breaststroke in shallow water parallel to the shore, he said.

Edward Harkness made his fortune through railroads and oil. Because of their wealth, the couple feared they might be kidnapped. When they visited the beach, Partridge stood at a respectable distance with a shotgun he kept in the boat-house to protect them.

Edward Harkness befriended Partridge, who said that the couple did not entertain socialites as much as other wealthy people did in their day.

"I think he was lonesome," Partridge said. Harkness often picked grapes as big as plums from the greenhouse and brought them to Partridge at the beach. The two would talk.

Once, Partridge's supervisor renegotiated on a 50-cent raise due to the

teen-ager, who was making \$3 a day. Harkness asked. Partridge what was bothering him one day at the beach, and Partridge said his boss told him Harkness couldn't afford to give him a raise.

"Harkness laid back there and roared," Partridge said, adding that Harkness told him, "I don't really think there's anything I can't afford if I want it."

Partridge's (glary was raised to \$4 a day.

According to rumors 'circulating at the time, the grounds were supposed to go to Waterford after the couple's death, Partridge said. He said that a dispute over the property's value, in which the town assessor allegedly told Harkness he was being taxed more because he could pay more, led Harkness to change his will.

Both Al and Barbara Partridge are members of the Friends of Harkness, and said that while the estate will never be the same, they look forward to its restoration.

"I'm glad somebody had enough brains in Hartford to appropriate the money and get this work started," he said.