

GILLETTE CASE INTRIGUES RENOVATORS

Associated Press

EAST HADDAM — Over the past two years, David Barkin has found himself investigating a mortar mystery perhaps only Sherlock Holmes could unravel.

Barkin, a New Haven architect, has been lurking in a damp and musty castle, muttering things like, "What did he mean here?" as he uncovers mustard, green, red, black and burgundy mortar — the gooey material that, once dry, holds stone walls together.

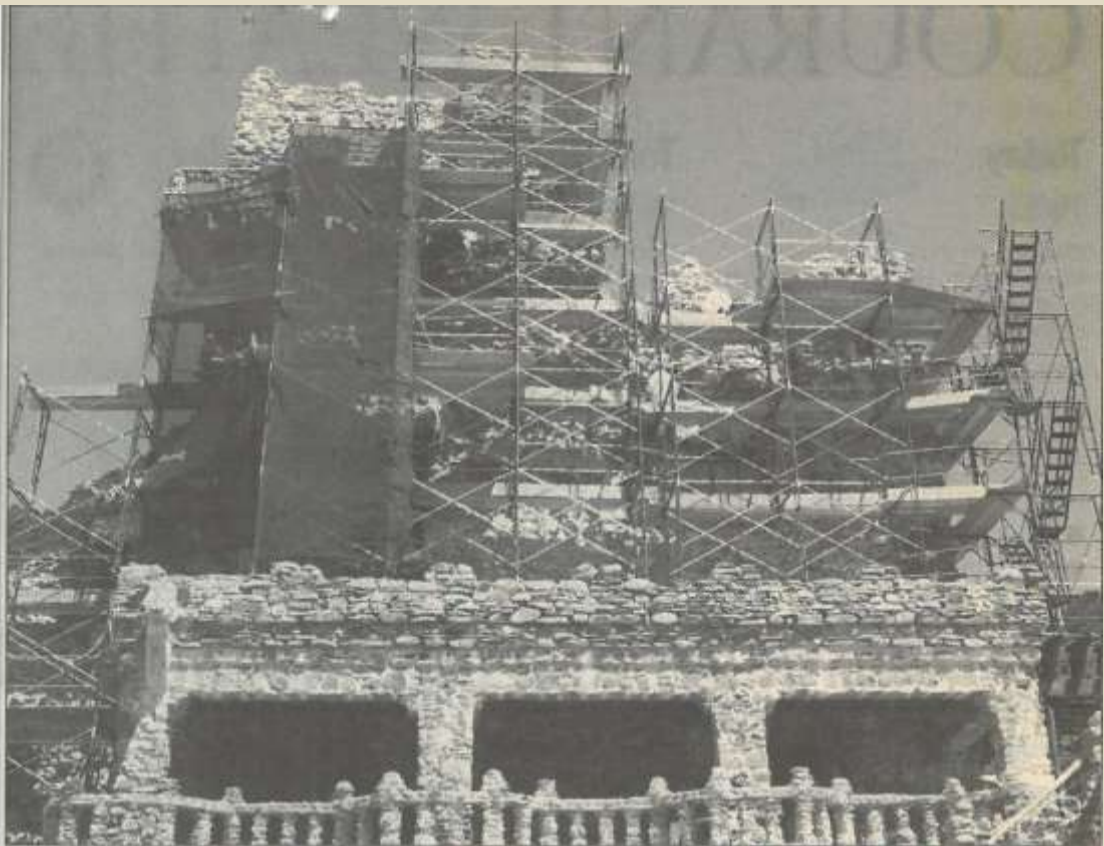
"He had a leaking castle from the day he built it," Barkin says of William Gillette, the man who designed and paid nearly \$1 million for the castle in 1919, using his ripe imagination and the money he had accumu-

lated over the years as one of the nation's leading actors. Most of Gillette's success had come from his portrayal, on stage and screen, of the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, from the novels by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Gillette Castle — closed now for nearly three years as it and the surrounding 184 acres of state park grounds undergo a \$10.1 million restoration and improvement program — had been intended by its eccentric first owner to resemble a ruin on the Rhine River in Germany. Part of the aesthetic, massive fieldstone walls undulate unevenly, allowing water to pool in certain areas — especially around the windows, which display evidence of awnings once having been deployed.

The resulting moisture problems haunted Gillette long after the castle's completion by the renowned Hartford firm of Porteus & Walker. And they continue to this day, as workers feverishly rebuild stone walls surrounding the castle and administrators prepare plans for a visitor's center, new exhibits and the re-introduction of Gillette's famed miniature railroad. Most of the improvements will coincide with the castle's planned reopening on Memorial Day weekend

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GILLETTE CASTLE in East Haddam and the surrounding 184 acres of state park grounds are part of a \$10.1 million restoration and improvement program. The tarps on the roof, in the photo below, are indicative of the leaks that have caused extensive water damage.

Gillette

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next year.

"This place is on the National Register," says Barkin, a partner in Barkin Andrade Architects, during a recent tour of the castle. "So whatever we do



GILLETTE

needs to be sensitive to the original design. Within that stipulation, there's room for a lot of interpretation.

It's a balancing act."

One area of interpretation concerns what Gillette had in mind with colored mortar.

"We think his intent was to have the look of a dry-laid wall with no mortar, based on the earliest pictures we've seen," says Barkin, who travels through the



FILE PHOTO

castle with a Palm Pilot and cell phone rather than a Holmesian magnifying glass.

Barkin says the state wouldn't want to pay for painting mortar every five years or so, and he doubts colored mortars would be able to achieve the same rich color that Gillette intended. So the repainting of the castle walls will proceed with an off-white mortar that matches the color already used on the castle parapets. Visitors, however, will be able to view the burgundy color at a display in the conservatory. Some of the other colors Gillette experimented with may be seen by sharp-eyed visitors once the home reopens.

The project at Gillette Castle State Park is in the second phase.

The final phase, scheduled to conclude with the castle's reopening next year, will be highlighted by the construction of a new 8,600-square-foot visitor's center that will double as a gift shop and office space for park staff.

Questions swirl around Gillette's use of insulation. It appears that he installed sawdust as an insulator, or perhaps as a sound-proofer. In either case, the material caused dry rot in the basement.

"I think someone sold him a bill of goods," Barkin says.

Another area of uncertainty involves the original paint covering the castle's walls and doors. An analysis, using a 30-power microscope, should reveal several lay-

ers of paint, as well as the likelihood of when each was applied.

Among the planned changes to the castle: a sprinkler and smoke-detection system; and the conversion of one room into an archive, where materials related to Gillette's castle and life can be stored for later exhibit.

"We spent 800 hours just documenting this building, measuring every square inch of it — every floor, every ceiling," Barkin says.

"If this is successful, people should expect to see a clean, restored castle, but they won't notice much beyond that," Barkin says.

One thing visitors will notice at some point, outside on the grounds, is the restoration of Gillette's famed miniature railroad.

"We will never run it the way Gillette ran it — all over his property," says Linda Levine, program specialist in the Department of Environmental Protection's state parks division.

Still, it won't be quite the same without the famous actor at the helm, a fun-loving fellow who used to host people like actress Helen Hayes, actor and director Charlie Chaplin and theoretical physicist Albert Einstein.

"He took all kinds of people in [the train]," says Levine, who is overseeing the Gillette Castle project. "He'd just open the throttle and take off. Some of his guests were not as pleased as others, but it was his hobby."