

THE HARTFORD COURANT

TRAVEL

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SECTION F

THE LILY POND, below, and the stonework, right, grace the grounds of Gillette Castle in East Haddam. The state, which bought the castle for \$30,000 in 1943, began an \$11.5 million restoration in October 1999. The landmark reopened Memorial Day. Under the new roof are refurbished or new hand-carved banisters, wood floors, ceilings, heating system and carpeting.



CONNECTICUT'S CASTLE REDUX



PHOTOS BY BOB MACDONNELL / THE HARTFORD COURANT

MOUNTAIN LAURELS in full bloom, above, point the way to the Gillette Castle entrance. Below, a new bridge stretches along the trails of the 184-acre state park in East Haddam. Actor William Gillette signed the castle, built as his dream home between 1914 and 1919.

By **JIM SHEA**
COURANT STAFF WRITER

In his will, William Gillette instructed that upon his death his beloved home not be sold "to some blithering saphead." While one might argue that the state of

Connecticut does, or does not, ordinarily meet the criteria, in this instance it is probably safe to say Gillette would be pleased with the owner and the job it has done in protecting and preserving his medieval digs.

Since buying Gillette Castle for \$30,000 in 1943, the state has undertaken several restorations of the 14,000-square-foot dwelling, the largest and most comprehensive of which is just winding down.

The popular East Haddam tourist attraction — drawing 340,000 visitors in 1997 — was closed to the public in September 1998 because of extensive leaking. When it rained, as many as 30 or 40 buckets had to be spread throughout the 24 rooms. Over time, the leakage damaged interior support beams so severely that in some sections the roof almost collapsed.

In October 1999, an \$11.5 million exterior and interior restoration project was launched in an effort to return the stone structure to its original condition.

The castle has been open to the public since Memorial Day, and for those revisiting the landmark, the contrast is striking.

Outside, the roof has been replaced, all the stone masonry re-pointed, the windows rehung, re-glazed and repainted.

Inside, everything — from the hand-carved banisters, to the wood floors and ceilings, to the heating system, to the carpeting and the Raffia mat wall coverings — has been refurbished or replaced.

The structure also has been brought up to building-code standards, with new wiring, smoke detectors and a sprinkler system.

Although some interior work remains to be finished, furniture moved back in and additional rooms opened to



**WILLIAM GILLETTE WOULD BE PROUD
OF HOW THE STATE HAS RESTORED
HIS MEDIEVAL PRIDE AND JOY**

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A Refreshed Gillette Castle

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the public, the quirky essence of Gillette Castle is readily apparent.

Purchasing a ticket at a booth near the parking area, it is impossible to miss the new visitor's center under construction, and expected to be opened by Labor Day.

Although one is free to hike the trails and picnic on the grounds surrounding the 184-acre state park, access to the castle interior is by guided tour only.

Our guide this day was Sarah Smith of East Haddam, a 2002 graduate of the University of Connecticut who was well versed in the life and lore of the castle and its creator.

The 45-minute tour began in the large main hall and slowly wound its way to the third-floor library and art exhibition room.

Although Gillette had no formal training as architect, he conceived, designed and supervised the construction of his dream home, and the finished product represents his vision, ingenuity, eccentricity and flare for the dramatic.

Touring the house, one encounters intricately carved doors, wooden light switches, a genuine Tiffany light, built-in furniture that moves on tracks, ingenious wooden window hardware, and even a secret room in one wall



BOB MACDONNELL / THE HARTFORD COURANT

A TOUR GROUP gets a close look at the Gillette Castle living room.

where Gillette could hide if he wanted to avoid someone.

Gillette's sense of humor also can be seen in the bar room, where a closed bar was equipped with a trick locking mechanism. Gillette would often leave guests in the bar room and then watch them trying to open the bar via a series of mirrors he positioned strategically throughout the house.

Gillette was born in Hartford in 1853 to U.S. Sen. Francis Gillette and his wife, Elisabeth Daggett Hooker, a descendent of Thomas

Hooker, one of the founders of the Capitol City. He was the youngest of six children.

His parents wanted him to be a professional, but Gillette wanted to become an actor, a pursuit that was said to have been encouraged by one of his neighbors, Mark Twain.

Gillette became famous, and

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After Update, Castle Worthy Of Name

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rich, for playing the Arthur Conan Doyle character Sherlock Holmes, a part he played some 1,300 times between 1899 and 1932.

Author Booth Farthington once wrote to Gillette: "I would

rather see you play Sherlock Holmes than be a child again on Christmas morning."

Tall, slender and handsome, Gillette married Helen Nickles of Detroit in 1882, but he was widowed six years later and never remarried.

Gillette died in 1937. He and his wife are buried in the Hooker family plot in Farmington.

It was in 1913, while vacationing on his houseboat, Aunt Polly, that Gillette anchored one night on the Connecticut River near the Chester-Hadlyme ferry.

He quickly became captivated with the beauty of the area and was especially taken with a series of hills running along the river called "The Seven Sisters." He eventually purchased the tallest of the hills and 122 surrounding acres.

Gillette had been intending to build a house on Long Island but canceled those plans and set about constructing a replica of a German castle, which he would name "The Seventh Sister."

Between 1914 and 1919, Gillette watched over the construction, which was estimated to have cost more than \$1 million. Tons of fieldstone were gathered from local fields and transported to the mountaintop via an aerial tram. For the castle's 47 doors, Gillette imported white oak from Georgia.

Gillette took great delight in his home and entertained such guests as Charlie Chaplin, Helen Hayes and Albert Einstein.

A more recent brush with fame occurred in 1982, when the castle was the location for an episode of "As the World Turns," in which it served as the home of Mr. Big, a menacing midget whose drug pedaling empire was threatening the fictional town of Oakdale.

Gillette was also a train buff and constructed a three-mile miniature railway on his proper-



WILLIAM GILLETTE

The state bought Gillette Castle for \$30,000 in 1943 and just completed its latest restoration.

ty, powered by two locomotives — one steam, one battery — that he had specially built in Hartford. He was said to have particularly enjoyed taking visitors for hair-raising rides on his train.

The custom-made 'train and most of the tracks were acquired years ago by the Lake Cornpounce amusement park, but one of the locomotives has been returned and will be on display at the castle after it is refurbished.

No, Watson, there was nothing elementary about William Gillette, his home, or his toys.

Trip Tips

The Gillette Castle and Gillette Castle State Park is at 67 River Road, East Haddam, which is a beautiful drive through the lower Connecticut River Valley.

A visit to the castle can easily be turned into a full-day excursion that might include such nearby attractions as the Goodspeed Opera House, the Essex Steam Train and Riverboat, the schoolhouse where Nathan Hale taught, the Chester-Hadlyme Ferry, the Griswold Inn and the quaint towns of Chester and Essex.

To get to Gillette Castle from Hartford, take Exit 7 off of Route 9.

The castle is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. through Columbus Day. The park grounds (no admission) are open from 8 a.m. to sunset. From Columbus Day to the last weekend before Christmas, the castle is open weekends from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Admission for adults is \$4, children ages 6 toll \$2, 5 and under free.

For more information, call 860-526-2336, or go to www.tourism.state.ct.us.

—Jim Shea