

ACCENT

The Sunday Republican

Section

Refurbished, Expanded Gillette Castle Unveiled in Time for Memorial Day Visitors



CASTLE GIVEN ROYAL TREATMENT



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The \$11.5 million renovations over the past three years to Gillette Castle will be completed for the scheduled 10 a.m. Memorial Day opening of the state park, which offers incredible views of the lower Connecticut River Valley from the home high above the river.

If you go

Gillette Castle State Park, (860) 526-2336, will re-open at 10 a.m. May 25 after three years and \$11.5 million in renovations. The magnificent castle was built high on a cliff above the Connecticut River by actor William Gillette in 1919 after he achieved fame by playing Sherlock Holmes on stage. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$3 for children 6-17. Children under 6 are admitted free.

Directions

From Greater Waterbury, take Interstate 84 East to 1-684 East to 1-91 North to Route 9 South. Follow Route 9 to Exit 7 for Route 82 East over the Connecticut River through East Haddam and follow the signs to Gillette Castle. Sometime in June after repairs to its dock, the Chester-Hadlyme Ferry across the river will be running again. It is located on Route 148 off Exit 6 from Route 9 South, and adds another dimension to the trip to the castle.

When Gillette Castle in East Haddam re-opens to the public on Saturday, it will look exactly as it did in 1919 when noted stage actor William Gillette, who portrayed Sherlock Holmes, completed it after six years of construction.

"It will look like we haven't been here," said Patrick Nolan of the state Department of Public Works, which is overseeing the \$11.5 million renovations and expansion of the park to include a new visitors center.

Nolan said the quirky stone castle, which Gillette wanted to look like the ruins of a castle on the Rhine River in Europe, has been restored meticulously using all the original materials and stones.

"The work was done by Kronenberger and Sons, who specialize in historic restorations, and they've told us that the best compliment they can get is when someone tells them it doesn't look like they did anything," Nolan said.

But plenty was done, as the leaky castle

was brought up to modern mechanical codes, and state-of-the-art materials, such as mortar and roofing, were used in the work.

The state Department of Environmental Protection operates the park, which has always been one of the most popular in the state, with more than 100,000 visitors annually from Memorial Day to Columbus Day. "We think the number of visitors may double or even triple in the first year," Nolan said. "And the new visitors center will add to the experience."

It turns out that Gillette was no Sherlock Holmes when it came to construction. But he was building a structure so unusual that the likes of it had never been seen before.

To save that wonderful stone structure, that even has awnings over the windows fabricated of stones, the builders first had to correct some structural problems. Then the parapet walls could be restored, along

Please turn to 2G, CASTLE



CASTLE: Renovation is for keeps at state landmark

Continued from 1G

with copper roof replacements. Modern mortar and mastic will insure the integrity of the castle for years to come, Nolan said.

Gillette loved intricate woodwork, and doors and locks, in particular.

Visitors will get to see the various locks, all made of wood, that he had built into the intricate doors.

All of the interior was cleaned and restored with new sealants, that bring out the original luster.

The building's electrical, plumbing and mechanical systems were updated. Improvements were made to the windows, and it was brought up to modern fire-code standards.

Gillette had a small gauge railway, where he would take guest for rides around the grounds from a stone "Grand Central Station," which has also been completely restored.

All of the stone walls, thousands of

feet along drives and over bridges, have been rebuilt. And there is a new parking lot by the 3,800 square-foot visitors center that will open later this summer.

And while the opulent interior is a marvel, the view from the stone patio on the river side of the castle is spectacular, as the river broadens out and ebbs and flows with the tides of Long Island Sound downstream.

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Gillette Castle has been totally renovated inside and out, and a new visitors center is being built on the grounds. Visitors will once again be able to tour the magnificent home of actor William Gillette, who achieved fame and fortune playing Sherlock Holmes on stage.

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