

South Meriden firm nears completion of mansion renovations

By **Richard Lee**
Record-Journal staff

WATERFORD — A company which has its roots in South Meriden is nearing completion of a \$3.8 million renovation of Eolia, an early 20th century mansion built by the Harkness family and now the focal point of Harkness State Park on Long Island Sound.

For the past 18 months, workers of Thomas J. Kronenberger and Sons Inc., with headquarters in Middletown and facilities in South Meriden, have been renovating the 42-room mansion on the 234-acre estate.

Kronenberger, the general contractor for the project which moved most of its operations to Middletown from South Meriden several months ago, is pointing to a June 19 opening of the building, constructed in 1906 for William Taylor.

Edward and Mary Stillman Harkness bought the estate in 1907 and used it as summer residence for decades.

They had permanent addresses in New York City and Florida. Edward Harkness, a partner in Standard Oil and a liquor distiller, died in 1940, and his wife, who bequeathed the property to the state, died in 1950.

Meriden resident Thomas Kronenberger Jr., co-owner of the business, said the building presented some unique challenges, one of which was the need to raise the intricately decorated vaulted ceiling and roof of the tea room.

He said the effort was necessary to repair the exterior walls and protect the ceiling.

"We ran I-beams under the ceiling and secured everything. There were outriggers supported by posts on the outside. It was almost floating on air by itself," said Kronenberger, operator of the business with his brother Brian, and father Thomas, who founded the company in 1946.

Thomas Kronenberger Jr. said the firm has been involved in many similar projects, but few have had the same interest as this one. "This was one of the governor's pet projects. I consider Harkness as one of Connecticut's best-kept secrets."

Designed in the Italian villa style, the exterior is composed of concrete blocks formed on the site and made to resemble stone.

Kronenberger, which still operates an office in South Meriden, moved to Middletown to obtain more space for its growing opera-

tions and to be closer for Brian Kronenberger, who lives in the city and is based at the office, said his brother.

The company recently hired two masons, said Thomas Kronenberger Jr., and now has more than 35 employees.

Kronenberger was the low bidder for the project with a submission of \$3.275 million, said Patrick Nolan, a spokesman for the state Department of Public Works, adding that the department was impressed by the company's experience.

"They're a unique company. They have an excellent record in historical preservation," said Nolan. "They had to completely restore the interior and exterior."

One of the major challenges, said Nolan, was restoring the porches, called prebolas, facing the waterfront. "One was completely falling down, and the other was in serious, disrepair."

The project also called for the upgrading of the mechanical, electrical and heating systems and the installation of a first-floor bathroom accessible to the handicapped.

Linda Levine, a DEP program specialist, lauded Kronenberger for its dedication to the project. "It's amazing. It was falling apart when I first saw it. Kronenberger literally supported the roof and ceilings and put it back together."

She said the project was funded through the state's 2010 program.

The project also calls for the restoration of the gardens and grounds. The estate will be open through Columbus Day in October. It will open in May, 1999.

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