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REGION

State unveils sparkling jewel in 230-acre seaside park



Jack Sauer / The Day

■ *The Harkness mansion in Waterford, built in 1906 and made a state park in 1952, is nearing the end of a \$3.8 million restoration project that began in November of 1996.*

HARKNESS MANSION

Returning to its Former Grandeur

By **HEATHER VOGELL**
 Day Staff Writer

Sometime during the last 18 months, renovators discovered that 20 to 30 coats of paint had smoothed over a geometrical carving in the cornice along the ceiling in Mary Stillman Harkness' bedroom.

In the music room, they found that enamel plates on the light fixtures were decorated with a floral pattern after decades of dirt were washed away.

Fresh gray and off-white paint now accentuates the cornice design and the flowers on the light fixtures shine in the mansion named Eolia, where \$3.8 million of renovations are drawing to a close. State officials and contractors led a media tour Monday previewing the newest attraction at Harkness Memorial State Park.

Since Mrs. Harkness left the property to the state when she died in 1950, thousands of visitors have stretched out on its lawns and raced across the grass with kites. But the forbidding concrete mansion, tormented by winds, rain and time, stood empty.

That was until November of 1996, when

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■ *Carol Connor of Friends of Harkness helped conduct a media tour Monday with Jim Sabith, superintendent for the renovations contractor, Thomas J. Kronenberger and Sons of Middletown. Connor will coordinate and lead tours of the mansion and gardens when the mansion opens to the public later this month.*

Eolia Revived, at

HARKNESS

PHOTOS BY JACK SAUER
STORY BY HEATHER VOGELL

From B1

contractor Thomas J. Kronenberger and Sons of Middletown began the tedious work of rebuilding, refinishing, repainting and restoring the house and gardens to their former splendor. It was a project Friends of Harkness had longed for, but wasn't launched until Gov. John G. Rowland announced in fall of 1995 that he would release state money for the renovation.

The state's investment will bring some return through fees for events held in the mansion. Already, 15 weddings at \$3,000 apiece are scheduled for this summer and nine for the next. Rooms in the mansion can also be rented for seminars, conferences and meetings.

Park Supervisor Mark Darin said his office gets two or three calls a day about renting the house, even though the state Department of Environmental Protection hasn't advertised. The park will remain open to the public during such events, something he said wedding planners have been warned about.

The mansion won't officially open until the end of the month, after which the Friends group will begin giving free weekend tours of the mansion.

The Roman Renaissance Revival-style mansion, named for the island home of the Greek god of winds, sits on 230 acres. Its concrete-block construction was both popular at the turn of the century and a precaution against fire, which had consumed two nearby mansions before it was built.

Under the direction of architect Roger Clarke of Hartford, Kronenberger restored the mansion's exterior to its condition when the Harknesses purchased it in 1907, and the 42 rooms inside to their state after renovations in the early 1930s. The gardens, designed by famous landscaper Beatrix Jones Farrand, are being redone based

on her sketches.

Besides putting new varnish on floors and paint on walls, contractors took down all pieces of hardware still in the mansion, such as light fixtures, and cleaned them. Portions of the wall in the east court were rebuilt with new foundations. The building was brought up to fire codes and has new electrical and heating systems.

Throughout the house, renovators left patches of work undone — spots on the wall still dingy, old brass bathroom fixtures not replaced — for purposes of comparison.

Some of the most striking changes came in the two loggias, or porch-like rooms, extending from the south side of the mansion. Two painted ceiling designs — one of which was hidden under another — that were uncovered in one loggia are being recreated. In one, baskets of flowers and vines grace the ceiling; in the other, a red and blue geometric design was painted.

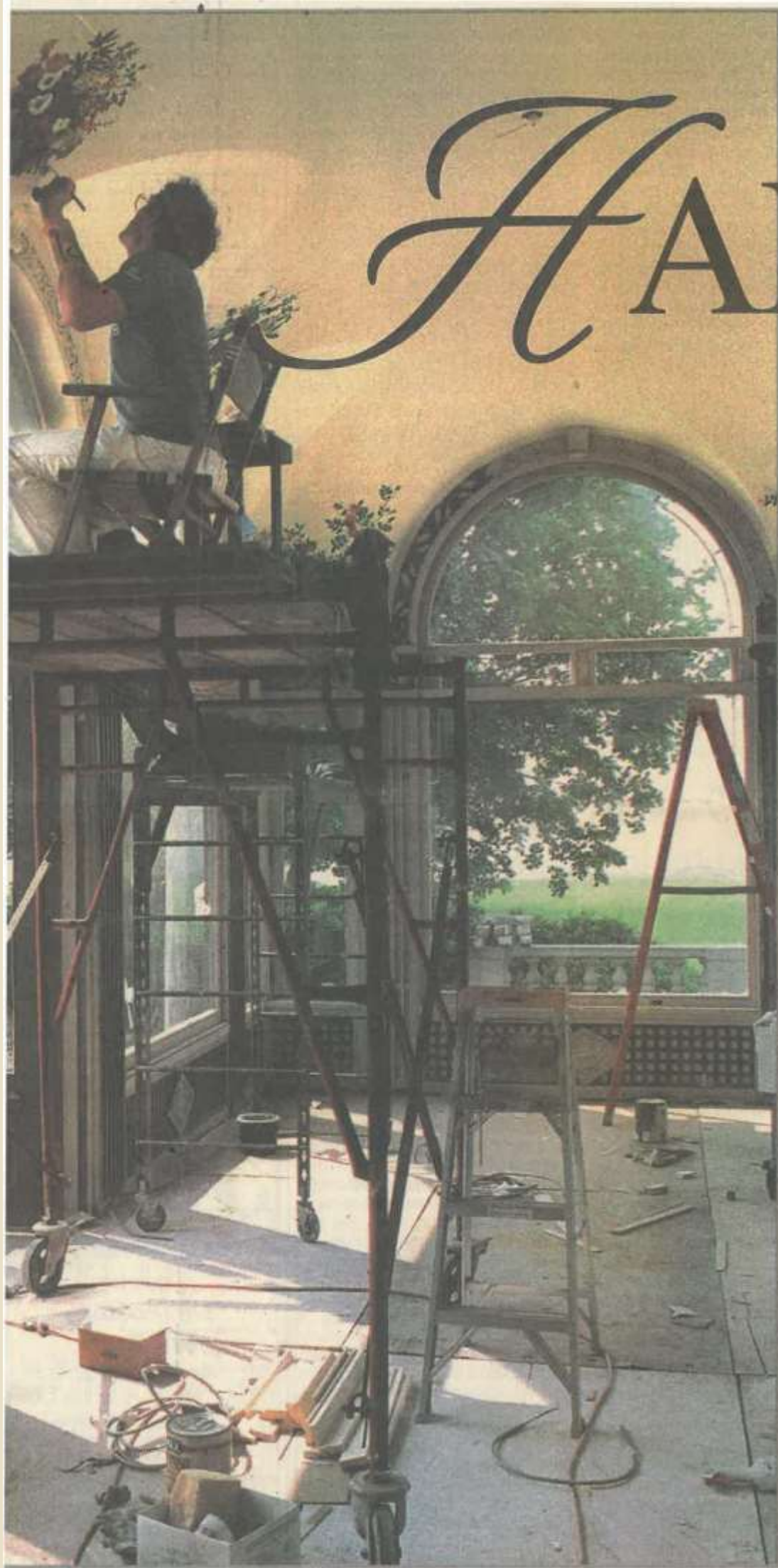
The only furnishings will be in an upstairs room where brides will get ready for ceremonies. It will have seating similar to what Mrs. Harkness had, and a working bathroom.

In the gardens, the greatest undertaking was reconstructing the pergola, a gazebo-like structure where Mrs. Harkness had tea, built by famed architect James Gambel Rogers, who also did the interior renovations.

Darin said that he cannot predict how many more visitors will be drawn to the park by the mansion's reopening.

Mrs. Harkness specified that her land benefit the public good — a use that, with the crowds it has brought, contrasts sharply with the quiet luxury that characterized Eolia during her time.

With the renovations, some of that luxury has been restored. The quiet, however, is unlikely.



■ Above, Will Natale of All Star Athletic Floor, Middletown, sands a downstairs floor. The floors will be covered with a satin finish varnish.

■ Left, Mike Edwards and Tom Campbell paint exterior trim on the east loggia. The two projecting galleries, east and west, were reconstructed from the roof down.

■ *Moe Cushman of Kronenberger and Sons, Middletown, prepares a window to be painted*



■ *Tom Campbell of Chapman Painting and Decorating, Middletown, paints the main stairway. The paints and finishes are as close a match as possible to the mansion's decorative scheme in the 1930s.*



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