Features

A 'hidden gem'

By Matt Rocheleau For The Sun Chronicle — Sunday, January 4, 2009 1:48 AM EST

Brian and Dawn Fitzgerald are in the second phase of restoring Wrentham's Proctor Mansion, which was built in 1861 and is now an inn. (Staff photo by Tom Maguire)

Couple returns Victorian glory to Wrentham's Proctor Mansion

WRENTHAM - When 73-year-old Hope Hall passed away in 1991, her lifelong home on 36 Common St., was left in disrepair. Hall's possessions, left behind in the then 130-year-old mansion, were auctioned off as requested in her will. The residence was bequeathed to the four churches of Wrentham, and the Original Congregational Church became its owner.

If you walked through that house 17 years ago it would have been difficult to appreciate the detailed, Victorian-style craftsmanship of its 1861 roots. And, since Hall's death, the condition of the home Thomas Proctor built had continued to deteriorate until recently.

Now, Proctor's vision is being brought back to life by Brian and Dawn Fitzgerald as they restore the estimated 9,000-square-foot mansion into a downtown inn. The couple from Sharon purchased the 18-room building, along with its nearly two-and-a-half acres of property, in spring 2007.

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After nearly one-and-a-half years of preparation, the Proctor Mansion Inn opened its doors to their first guests in late September. In the two months following, they have hosted visitors from several foreign countries including the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany and England, as well as local guests.

The inn's locale is one of its major attractions, Brian Fitzgerald said. It sits across from the town common, is nearly equidistant to Boston and Providence and is less than a 10-minute drive to shopping at Wrentham Village Premium Outlets and Patriot Place in Foxboro. Beyond convenience, the mansion's three-story interior offers a glimpse back to Civil War era living.

Fitzgerald said he believes the building stands as one of seven

A room with a view One of the mansion's bedrooms overlooks Wrentham Common and has a great view of the Original Congregational Church's steeple. (Staff photo by Tom Maguire)

Second Empire French Victorian style homes with its interior intact remaining in the United States.

Exhibited throughout the inn are 147-year-old stained glass windows, hand-painted walls and ceilings, authentic art and oil paintings, original floors, furniture, light fixtures and intricate, hand-carved mouldings.

The mansion's 11- to 13-foot-high ceilings are indicators of the Proctor family's prosperity. During the 1800s, the height of a home's ceilings often signified the economic status and social class of those living inside. Proctor attained this wealth by inventing and patenting the gimlet tip, or pointed, screw as president of American Screw Co., which employed around 10,000 workers at its peak.

And, Fitzgerald speculates Proctor may have not only provided a large number of jobs, but also a safe haven for people facing persecution. A red, circular glass window on the rear of the house may be a sign that the home provided shelter for slaves as part of the Underground Railroad, Fitzgerald said.

The first floor includes the L'Enfant Ballroom, which hosts up to 35 guests, a formal dining room, parlor, kitchen, and multiple pantries. The quarantine room is where sick people were kept and is has been the setting for at least seven births and 12 deaths.

Above the foyer's hand-carved mahogany staircase are six, second-floor bedrooms where Proctor, his wife and three children slept.

First phase of restoration

Currently in phase one of a four-phase restoration, the Fitzgeralds are renting three of those rooms as well as hosting small functions while they finish fixing the details of the downstairs.

Their second phase will involve completing the second floor's restoration and adding more parking. Returning the third floor to its original look is the next to last phase of the plan. The floor features a billiard room and was likely reserved for Proctor's 10 servants, said Fitzgerald.

The Proctor Mansion Inn's parlor showcases the style of furniture popular in the Victorian era and offers a view through arched doors to L'Enfant Ballroom, where a Victorian tea and historical tour were in progress. (Staff photo by Tom Maguire)

The final phase, which the couple plans to complete between 2010 and 2011, will be to restore the backyard's English gardens and convert the carriage house into a restaurant. The carriage house, separate from the inn, stabled horses. On the upper floor there are four bedrooms and a dance hall.

The duo said they are committed to doing all they can to keep the mansion in its original state. In fact, the only renovations, which are more drastic than restorations, are converting two second-floor closets into bathrooms.

However, all of this attention to detail adds up.

"Everything we estimate costs twice as much as we thought," said Fitzgerald, though neither he nor his wife would disclose exact figures.

Much of the high expense comes from hiring special craftsmen required for certain restoration projects, the couple said. Those workers are hard to find and often extensively interviewed to test their understanding of 1800 Victorian architecture.

As it turns out, the Fitzgeralds are no strangers to mid-19th century New England construction. About 18 years ago, Brian and Dawn bought and restored The Admiral Fitzroy Inn built in 1854 along the waterfront of Newport, R.I.

The couple continues to rent out the Admiral Fitzroy, which coincidentally was the start of an impromptu road trip that led them to discover the house in Wrentham.

"My wife and I were driving back from Newport and by happenstance decided to drive along [Route] 140 through Wrentham," said Fitzgerald. "As we drove past we noticed the 'for sale' sign on the ground."

It was then that the two became interested in purchasing what was then commonly referred to as Hope Hall Mansion.

Items of historical interest

Amid all the restoration work, the Fitzgerald's have come across some items of historical interest. Several written documents and a portrait, believed to be of Thomas Proctor, were found underneath some of the floorboards, said Fitzgerald.

The home's basement has turned out to be a treasure chest of 19th century artifacts. The couple has discovered missing pieces of the cast-iron fence in the front yard, 120-year-old radiators, a wood stove and decorative pillars.

"It's got all of the cool stuff," said Fitzgerald who described the basement as one of his favorite places in the house.

However, the focus on reviving the interior where guests are welcomed and stay has been above the cellar.

Lodging ranges from $105 to $215 per night depending on the room's size and when it is being rented. The inn offers organic, natural and local foods to their guests and a member of the staff is always available.

"We want them to feel pampered like the Victorians did with beautiful furniture, magnificent architecture and impeccable service," said Fitzgerald.

On Sunday, the Proctor Mansion Inn hosted its first Victorian tea party, which included a historical tour of the mansion, organized by Wrentham resident Donna Canavan.

"My husband is never impressed by anything, but ever since he saw this place the other day he was so in awe that he can't stop talking about it," Canavan said.

She said she thought the tea party, held in the ballroom, dining room and parlor, would be a good way to show local residents the building she describes as a "hidden gem."

"I thought this building was so beautiful to show Wrentham," said Canavan. "Everyone is really curious about what the inside looks like."

Her daughter, Kathleen, and Kathleen's friend, Hannah Guild, were similarly impressed.

"They've done amazing work renovating it and I'm excited to see what it looks like when they're done," said Kathleen Canavan.

"Wrentham has some cool history, so I think this is a good fit," Guild said.

More information is available on The Proctor Mansion Inn's Web site at http://proctormansioninn.com/ or by calling 877-384-1861.

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