

Historic Jamestown house has a storied past

By Sam Bari

High on a ledge at the southeast end of Jamestown, a magnificent, but little known estate known as Wetherledge overlooks the entrance to the East Passage of Narragansett Bay.

Built in 1889, the main house boasts 21 rooms that include eight bedrooms, four full baths, a large kitchen, laundry room, butler's pantry, billiard room, entertainment room, dining room, living room, sunroom, library, and a large screened-in porch. The building is listed in the Town Hall Records as a summer cottage, grossly understated by today's standards.

The history of the estate is sketchy at best. The builder was allegedly a lady only known as Mrs. Rice, of Worcester, Mass. She is not listed as the original owner as the town records for the property only go back to the early 1900s. The property was purchased from Mrs. Rice by B. Edwin Hutchinson, a vice president and board member of the fledgling Chrysler Corporation when it still operated under the name of the original founders, the Dodge Brothers.

Hutchinson, who likes to be called "Hutch," said it is rumored that his father enjoyed throwing lavish parties at the estate. Some people have said that sometimes the opulent affairs lasted for as long as two weeks. They also said that the gatehouse was used as a transfer station for illegal booze during the days of prohibition.

Hutch said that the aforementioned rumors made great stories, but stories are often a good distance from the truth. The truth is that his father was so involved with his work getting the Chrysler Corporation off the ground that he was seldom there. The two-week parties were nothing more than relatives and friends of the family who came to visit during the summers.

In those days, transportation



Wetherledge sits overlooking the East Passage of the Narragansett Bay. Photo by Sam Bari

was not what it is now. A trip from Philadelphia or Chicago was a weeklong journey or longer. And the only way to get to and from the mainland was by ferry.

Guests didn't come to the island for a two-day weekend, Hutch said. They stayed for two weeks, and sometimes more. This was common practice all over the island.

The gatehouse with the apartment above the garage was not built with the intention of having a place to store illegal booze waiting to go to the mainland. It was built for male guests who were not married so they did not stay in the same house as the women. The gatehouse was called "the dog pound," and it provided single male guests with a place to sleep when they were banished from the main house at night.

"In those days single men and women did not sleep in the

same building unless they were married," Hutch said. "And the illegal alcohol was not used to quench the thirst of guests at pre-Gatsby styled parties involving the wealthy, the famous, and the infamous. My mother didn't serve alcohol during prohibition."

During the winter, when the "dog pound" was not in use, a few of his father's friends used the garage as a transfer station for the illegal booze. This angered his father when he heard about it because they never left him so much as a single bottle, Hutch said. Such was the status of Wetherledge at the time.

Wetherledge witnessed the Spanish American War and W.W.I. When W.W.II came along, the elder Hutchinson "gave" the property to the government for tax purposes. Fort Wetherill was expanded and the military post surrounded the property after

nearby farmland fell into government hands through eminent domain. The estate was used as an officer's club throughout the war until the troops were sent home in 1945.

The government put Wetherledge up for sale in 1946 when it was purchased by George and Margaret "Peg" Crawford. The Crawfords built an additional wooden, six-car garage closer to the main house. Other than the garage, they did little to improve the property.

Jane Scott, the present owner, purchased Wetherledge from the Crawfords in 1985. She found the estate quite by accident. She drove down from Maine with a friend to see the tall ships in Newport. They took a wrong turn and ended up in Jamestown. Charmed by the village, Scott took a tour of the island and found the property.

"I just had to have it," she said. "I fell in love with the house as soon as I saw it." Scott, who is the daughter of the founder of Scott Stereo, is a real estate investor, an occupation she says she fell into.

When her father took ill and suddenly passed away, he left her with a house and a modest inheritance that allowed her to invest. One property led to another, and before she realized it, she was in business, buying a house, making improvements and selling it for a profit.

Scott found Wetherledge in a state of disrepair. The Crawfords only lived in the house during the summer because they had another home in Florida. As they grew older, they lived in the house less and less. When Scott purchased the estate, it hadn't been lived in year round for 20 years, she said.

"I had to sell two properties so I could buy Wetherledge mortgage free," Scott said. "I used all of the profits from the sales to purchase the property and make extensive repairs to restore the main house. Raccoons and skunks had moved in to keep warm during the winters and had nearly taken the place over," she said.

And restore it she did. Today, perched atop a ledge with commanding views of Narragansett Bay, Wetherledge greets ships and sailboats with elegance and grace reminiscent of days gone by. The main house, surrounded by colorful gardens and vast expansions of meticulously manicured, lush, green lawns, displays Mother Nature dressed in her Sunday best. Wetherledge won second place in 2000 for garden design at the Providence Flower Show.

No estate is complete without its own ghost, and apparently, Wetherledge has one. Scott says that she has never seen the woman known as "the Gray Lady," but several of her guests have witnessed the apparition.

"All of them described her in the same way," Scott said. "Tall, slender, blond, and elegantly dressed. We suspect she might be the ghost of Mrs. Rice, but we don't have a picture that is clear enough to really tell. Whoever she is, she seems happy and she hasn't caused any harm."

Jane Scott lives in the main house at Wetherledge with her daughter, Emily, her grandson, and her dogs. She occasionally hosts a wedding on the estate grounds, and rents the gatehouse to select guests for short periods, mainly during the summer.

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