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Home's Literary Past Sparks Calls for Help

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From The Wall Street Journal Online

RHINEBECK, N.Y. (Oct. 8, 2003) -- It was the original McMansion, a home so grand that many believe it inspired the phrase "Keeping up with the Joneses." Now it's for sale, and it may well be torn down.

So imposing was Wyndclyffe, built in 1853 by Edith Wharton's aunt, Elizabeth Schermerhorn Jones, that it was the beginning of a craze for building ever-more-elaborate houses along the Hudson River. The Jones house had a four-story tower, intricate brickwork, 24 rooms, 80 acres of lawn and woodland and sweeping river views. Nearby estate owners soon were adding turrets, towers and extra wings.

Over the past 50 years or so, a succession of owners let Wyndclyffe fall into disrepair and sold off most of the land. Today, the red brick mansion is a ruin on a wooded 2.5-acre lot surrounded by contemporary-style houses put up in the past couple of decades. The house's current owner, who inherited the house from his father, has it listed for sale at \$275,000.

"My father looked at this place and saw the possibilities," says the owner, Teimoc Johnston-Ono, a 48-year-old judo instructor in New York who was on the U.S. judo team in the 1976 Olympics. "I see the problems."

As word has spread about Wyndclyffe's current state, the house has attracted defenders from around the world who want to restore the building or at least preserve it as a haunting ruin. But so far, nobody has put up the money to buy it.

"It would be a dream project for someone with energy, patience, imagination and money," says John Stubbs, 53, vice president of programs at the World Monuments Fund in New York. The fund rescues crumbling buildings around the world. Mr. Stubbs considered buying the house himself and converting part of the ruined structure into a funky walled garden. But, he says, "it's too rich for my blood."

Many locals regard it as a dangerous nuisance that attracts a stream of gawkers and trespassers, including teenagers in Goth garb holding séances in the ruins. Visitors park in the neighbors' driveways and dump garbage on the site.

"I have a big sign up which says 'No Trespassing,' but they think Rhinebeck is like Disneyland and that the signs are part of the decoration," says Allan Scherr, who is building a 9,000-square-foot house nearby. "I don't care what happens with it as long as it doesn't generate a lot of traffic," he says.

Miss Jones, Edith Wharton's spinster aunt, was a cousin of the Astors and entertained William and Henry James in the mansion. After she died, the house was purchased by Andrew Finck, a brewer who, legend has it, set up a beer tap that flowed from the basement to the tennis courts. During the Depression, Wyndclyffe was neglected, like many other lavish houses of the time, and then it had a string of owners, most of whom didn't live in the house or make repairs. Neighbors say Wyndclyffe briefly housed a nudist colony at mid-century.

After a skylight broke decades ago, water leaked into the building, and the house went further downhill. Today, the roof of the east wing has completely fallen in, although most of the outer walls, including the imposing tower, still stand. The grand wooden interior stairway has collapsed. Weeds sprout from the piles of bricks that have fallen from the house, and a beehive guards the front door. The real-estate listing warns: "It is unsafe to enter dwelling."

One neighbor, James Howell, a retired electrical engineer, keeps a log of the building's relentless decay. Wyndclyffe's round Eastern tower fell on March 26, 1998, according to his records. "It's going to be a sad, sad day when the building is torn down," says Mr. Howell, who has a framed picture of the mansion on his living-room wall. "It needs to be done, but it's going to be a sad day."

Over the years, there have been various proposals to save the mansion: Converting it into apartments. Turning it into a beer-history museum. Stabilizing it as a huge garden ornament, like the ruins in British country gardens. In 1995, a plan was hatched to turn it into an artists' colony. But nothing has come of any of these schemes.

Mr. Johnston-Ono's father was an eccentric antiquities dealer, who used many different names and who sometimes camped out in Wyndclyffe's library. His son gradually came to the conclusion that the house was "too overwhelming" to deal with. So, Wyndclyffe has been on the market for about a year and a half. His real-estate broker, Harry H. Hill, says it will probably be torn down and replaced by a new house.

In the meantime, preservationists have been mobilizing to save Wyndclyffe, often spelled Wyndcliffe today. Several Hudson Valley residents have created Wyndclyffe Web sites, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation featured the house in its online journal. But even preservationists call it a long shot, partly because the historic house is in the middle of a modern subdivision.

Edith Wharton scholars hope the home is rescued because the author visited the house in her childhood. "It has that spookiness about it that so frightened her as a little girl," says Stephanie Copeland, president of Edith Wharton Restoration, a nonprofit organization that has spent \$9 million restoring the author's Lenox, Mass., home, the Mount. The Mount's gift shop sells "Keeping Up With The Joneses" pillows at \$40 apiece.

No matter that Edith Wharton didn't even like Wyndclyffe. In her memoir, "A Backward Glance," she wrote of its "intolerable ugliness," calling it "an expensive but dour specimen of Hudson River Gothic."

Some Rhinebeck officials don't have a soft spot for Wyndclyffe, either. John Maasz, Rhinebeck's zoning-enforcement officer, worries that visitors will be hurt by falling bricks or beams. He has recommended that it be torn down.

Charles Eggert, who owned Wyndclyffe in the '60s and early '70s, can't imagine why anyone would want to keep the place. "Maybe some crazy idiot will buy it," says the retired documentary filmmaker. "I think it should be torn down."

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