

Millionaire's Retreat Now College Branch

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GROTON — The Morton Plant family members, original occupants of the three-story mansion at Avery Point in which the University of Connecticut Branch has temporarily located its administrative headquarters, must have been the "Jet Set" of their age, says William T. O'Hara, Branch Director.

And every extant detail of the elaborate, granite-block structure that was the summer home of a multi-millionaire, supports that description.

Branford House, as Morton F. Plant, noted railroad magnate, financier and yachtsman named it in honor of his native Connecticut town, has been called upon to perform the functions of a private home, a military headquarters and an educational institution in its 55-year history.

Built in 1903 at a cost of three million dollars, it has often been hailed as one of the nation's most beautiful country homes. Commanding a breathtaking view of Fishers Island Sound, it was designed by the first Mrs. Plant.

Although an architectural purist might be appalled by the freedom with which classical, gothic and romanesque modes

are mingled in the mansion, the elegance of its intricately carved walls, marble staircases and colonnaded porch can hardly be denied.

The extravagance with which the mansion was built has given rise to a many-versioned story, which does not clarify which parts of the structure were actually imported from Europe and which were the creations made here by imported Italian and German craftsmen.

Hundreds of small details contribute to an overall atmosphere of luxury — curved entrance portals, trapezoidal window seats in the bedrooms overlooking the water, glass doors with wooden grillwork, accordion shutters on the windows, a tiny, closet-like elevator, a dumb waiter, and a marble safe in a bathroom.

The 18,000 square-foot structure must have been designed for an enormous amount of sustained entertaining, judging alone from the clothes dryer in the basement, which operated on an oven principle. Hundreds of pieces of clothing could be hung on eleven metal laundry racks which slid back and forth into the "oven" area. The clothes "baked" dry from the heat which was forced into a network of pipes below the "oven" from fires built in two adjacent stoves.

There are mysterious aspects of the house as well. For instance, whole sections of the carved walls on the first floor swing open to reveal a blank brick wall. One can only speculate as to the original intention.

In an architectural spirit opposite to that which prevails today, many of the structural aspects of the mansion are disguised. Metal drainpipes, for example, are topped with gargoyles to conceal their unglamorous function.

About 1910 a westerly wing was added to the U-shaped mansion to serve as a music room. This room was imported in its entirety from Cornwall, England, according to Ret. Coast Guard Capt. John R. Kurcheski, now UConn Branch Director of the Physical Plant. Floors, wall carvings and an elaborate fireplace were dismantled in Europe, transported to Groton, and reassembled here.

Kurcheski, who occupied the mansion as commanding officer of the Coast Guard Training Center, says the carvings were done by hand, and their smooth features contrasted with the sharp edges of the machine carving which still adorns the walls of the mansion proper.

At the age of 18, Morton Plant launched the career in the business world which would earn

his millions (his fortune was reputed to be \$50 million in 1914). He became associated with railroad building, especially in the South, and in 1902 the Plant system, of which he was vice president, became a part of the Atlantic Coast Line railway.

He owned many prize-winning yachts, on which he crossed the Atlantic many times and made frequent trips to the West Indies and South America. In 1909 he had built the Iolanda, a steam yacht. The Iolanda was the third largest yacht in the world at the time, and its operating cost was said to be \$1,000 a day.

Plant also was known in the hotel field. Soon after he built Branford House, he erected the former Griswold Hotel at a cost of one million dollars.

Plant was a noted philanthropist, much of whose generosity benefited the New London-Groton area. His grants to Connecticut College made the establishment of that school a possibility.

Plant died in 1918 in New York, leaving life use of the estate to his son Henry B. Plant. One-third of the property was left to his widow, Mrs. William Hayward, and one-sixth to her son and his adopted son, Philip Manwaring Plant.

Henry Plant died in 1937 aboard his yacht. The estate was purchased for \$55,000 at an auction in 1939 by a New York attorney who was later discovered to represent Mrs. Henry Plant and Mrs. Hayward. Furniture and decorative

objects from the mansion were sold at auction soon afterwards.

In 1942, the Coast Guard acquired the land to be used as a Training Center for non-commissioned officers. The mansion was converted to an Administration Building, providing offices and family quarters for the Commanding Officer and the Executive Officer.

The west wing, converted to a station chapel by the Coast Guard, was almost completely destroyed by fire in 1963. Although the chapel was restored, the Coast Guard deemed it economically unfeasible to restore the building in its original form.

In 1967 the Training Center was removed to Governor's Island, N. Y., and the University of Connecticut opened its fifth branch at Avery Point.

The Branch has been using the mansion as a temporary administrative facility since May, while the former Coast Guard Barracks is being renovated for a permanent administrative headquarters.

UConn has long-term plans to convert the mansion to a seminar and conference building to serve the entire University. The project will involve considerable renovation, but present plans are to leave the beautiful main floor intact.

The former Coast Guard chapel in the west wing is serving as a library for the school until renovation of the former Coast Guard Institute Headquarters, Building 23, is completed.