Barrytown mansion is being restored

BARRYTOWN – Separated by nearly 100 years, Simon Herbert and the late Jane Aspinwall reacted roughly the same way when they first saw Massena, the Barrytown mansion built by Mrs. Aspinwall.

Mrs. Aspinwall, who in 1886 built the mansion, reportedly did not like it, feeling it lacked the grandeur of the previous Massena, which was destroyed by fire.

In 1981, when Mr. Herbert first came to the house on the site of Unification Theological Seminary in Barrytown, his attention was drawn to the house's poor condition, the result of several years of neglect.

The eyes of the beholders saw decidedly different things, for Mr. Herbert immediately began to think of restoring the house to its original state, the one disliked by Mrs. Aspinwall.

His proposal for renovation won the approval of seminary president David Kim and work began. Though he didn't begin in that position, Mr. Herbert, a native of England, is now coordinator of the effort.

Beginning in 1982, seminary students and outside contractors began to repair the exterior where faulty drainage had eroded some of the brickwork and rotted some of the woodwork.

The brick work was repointed and the gutter system replaced around the house to stop further drainage damage by carrying the water harmlessly away from the building. The roofs of two porches on the east side surrounding the entrance were repaired.

Because of the extensive drainage damage, large portions of the stonework above the entrance needed to be taken down and rebuilt again.

The old wooden shingles around the house had rotted completely and were replaced by student labor, said Mr. Herbert. New floors went onto the porches to replace those that might suddenly take an occupant unexpectedly into the cellar.

The three owners since Mrs. Aspinwall's heirs sold the mansion and 250-acre site in 1911 made several changes on the first structure, including an addition by 1916 on the north side, or allowed its deterioration.

"We really want to try and keep the integrity of the building, inside and out," said Mr. Herbert. Sometimes, that means removing changes that came after Massena was first built.

The present Massena replaced one that was built in 1795 by John R, Livingston. John Aspinwall bought the estate in the 1850s to retire after acquiring a sizeable income in shipping. The first Massena, named for one of Napoleon's generals, burned in 1885.

Mr. Herbert said the plans of Massena's architect, William Potter, are rumored to have gone to the bottom of the sea with the architect in a shipwreck well after construction, but the loss is usually not as great as might be expected.

Old photographs are available, experienced persons know how things were done, or common sense simply indicates what might have been feasible, said Mr. Herbert.

"Sometimes, you don't have anything to go on. There are no photographs, no documents, no records of how things used to be done," he said. "You have to make things up as you go along."

An east-side porch that has been entirely enclosed will be opened again in the restoration, using windows, not wood, to protect the floor of the porch. The exterior work will include large changes on the early 20th century addition.

Mr. Herbert said a back entr
ance to the addition will be re
moved entirely and window
will replace it.

The project also calls for
thorough cleaning of the bric
and stone to remove paint tha
has been applied on top of it.

While the addition present
the most exterior work remair
ing, it is the addition's interio
that will be most important t
the future use Mr. Herbert see
for the building, namely as
conference center for theolog
cal meetings.

He intends to repair th
plaster inside the structure, in
cluding several moldings h
feels can easily be duplicated
Wallpaper may or may not g
back over the plaster on th
walls.

Much of the interior restora
tion work will be done this sum
mer, said Mr. Herbert, hopin
to make Massena ready for con
ferences this year. The entir
restoration could take anothe
two years, he said, though Mas
sena will probably need conti
nuous restoration in the future.

At one time this century, so
meone, probably the owner
trying to sell Massena, boaste
of the many conveniences th
house offered, among them
burglar alarm, electric ga
lighting, bells to ring the ser
vants, a furnace with automati
thermostats, a gas range in th
kitchen, and a trunk elevato
from cellar to garret in the ser
vants' quarters.

Mr. Herbert sees Massen
another way. "It should be
place where we can bring peo
ple and they can feel relaxed
where different religions an
different cultures can meet to
gether without feelin
intimidated."

"The differences which thes
groups and cultures and reli
gions have can be worked out i
a place like this, where they
can feel comfortable an

Barrytown's Massena

Massena, the Barrytown mansion built in 1886 by Jane Aspinwall, is currently undergoing restoration work by students at the Unification Theological Seminary to bring the building back to its original state. The mansion was named for one of the marshalls of Napoleon. (rw)