

IN THE REGION | NEW JERSEY

Almost a Tear-Down, Now a Treasure



Timothy Ivy for The New York Times

HISTORIC HOME Built in 1896 as a summer home for Robert Livingston Stevens, the estate and its 48-acre grounds were bought nine years ago by Natale Conti, who ultimately restored and furnished it.

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By ANTOINETTE MARTIN

A PRECIOUS icon has been put on the market, a work of such exquisite craftsmanship it can move a beholder to tears. Well, actually, it's a house. And the asking price without furnishings is \$18.9 million -- a sum that might by itself bring a tear to the eye.

But the house for sale atop the hill on Mendham Road is more than a building with a big price tag. It exudes American history, for one thing, having been built in 1896 as a summer home for Robert Livingston Stevens, whose family founded Stevens Institute of Technology and who established an engineering dynasty by pioneering the use of steam engines to power locomotives and ships.

For another thing, the magnificent estate has an intriguing personal history. Passed down

through various branches of the Stevens family -- including that of the famous cigar-smoking congresswoman Millicent Fenwick, who summered here as a girl in the early 1900's -- the property eventually wound up in the hands of the Stevens Institute, which did not have the wherewithal to maintain it. The estate fell into a deep state of disrepair.

Nine years ago, the Stevens home and its 48-acre grounds were listed for slightly more than \$4 million and bought "as is" by Natale Conti, founder of Conti Construction Company, whose family made its name in environmental cleanup. He subdivided the property and built several elegant homes on outlying acres.

At first, he intended to raze the original house, then decided to save it and then was moved to restore and renovate it with a Michelangelo-like attention to detail. "I just got the feeling after learning more about the history," Mr. Conti said, "that the house had too much beauty and character to take it down."

Working with a Warren architect, Jeffrey Beer, Mr. Conti decided to remove some areas of the house that no longer made sense -- the gentlemen's smoking room, for example. And he added an entirely new wing, extending every effort, he said, to make it imperceptible that he had done so. Ten original fireplaces and original leaded glass doors were embraced by the new construction, which also made use of rare wood paneling and ceiling trusses reclaimed from period buildings and antique barns.

Mr. Conti and his wife, Linda, a clothing industry executive, have been living in the house for five years. They are inveterate travelers who are continually acquiring antiques. "See that basin on the wall in the wine cellar?" Mr. Conti bubbled. "It's a holy water fountain from a church in France." And, "see that hand-carved chestnut mirror? I found it all banged up in the back of a shop in New York."

It seems as though every object is either old and distinguished, or handcrafted, or custom-designed. Each plaster sconce on the lower level of the house, for example, is hand-painted with an original design. In the kitchen, part of the antique terra cotta tile on the floor is laid right side up, and part is upside down, to provide a singular texture. The tiny strip of plaster wall beneath the exquisite mirror over the bar in the billiards room has been finished to resemble a piece of 18th-century limestone.

"Look at the stone on this wall, and then that one," Mr. Conti exhorted when showing off a parlor. "This is old. That is new. I bring people in the industry here, and the finest builders can not tell the difference."

Mr. Conti, the grandson of an immigrant stonemason, the son of a contractor, the head of his own company and a principal in another one run by his son, laid a hand on the stone of an archway and said the search for the right buyer is not really about the money.

"I know how that sounds," he said, glancing a bit sheepishly at his broker, Erica Levey of Weichert's capital properties and estates division. "People will probably laugh at that."

But Mr. Conti said what he really wants is the type of buyer who might cry. "I've had people cry!" he said. "They see what has gone into this, and it gets very emotional."

Mrs. Levey has spent many hours imbibing Mr. Conti's intimate knowledge of every detail and conducts tours for potential buyers that last two to four hours. Some of those who have looked at the house since it went on the market in March have been moneyed celebrities, she said. Others have been financial moguls, foreign business executives or Europeans familiar with a grand country lifestyle.

Mr. Conti said that when he first saw it, the mansion resembled "a haunted house created for a movie set.". The roof leaked, and big hunks of plaster hung from the ceiling lathes. There was three feet of water in the basement. The third floor had been stripped of its heating and plumbing and boarded up, so as to reduce the amount of living space on which property taxes were due.

"The grounds were all grown over," Mr. Conti recalled. "You could step out of the living room," which has floor-to-ceiling leaded glass windows, "and walk a few feet. After that it was all huge brambles, fallen limbs and thick weeds and bushes."

Now, the reflecting pool has been unburied and recreated as a swimming pool, with a magnificent fountain at its center. Mountain laurels more than 15 feet high and 100-year-old ginkgo trees abound on the 15 acres retained as the Stevens estate "yard." They frame Renaissance-style gardens with stone paths, geometrically trimmed hedges and flowering bushes.

Jacelyn Botti, a senior vice president at Weichert, said she and Mrs. Levey find themselves on a search for "the next great American family" to take stewardship of the estate. "It will be an accomplished family, with a legacy," Mrs. Botti asserted. "It will be people who step into the shoes of those who have made this home what it is."

Mrs. Botti acknowledged that "writing a script and selling a story" is part of the process of marketing a remarkable home.

For his part, Mr. Conti, who will not disclose how much he spent in restoring the home, insists he is ready to move on as soon as the right buyer appears. He resurrected another old manse in Murray Hill in the same fervent way, he said, and people asked him then how he could pour out his heart and soul, and then sell.

"It's about the creating, the art I produce with a bulldozer and a backhoe," he always answers, he said. "I love doing it. It gives me goose bumps to do this work." Mr. Conti is already at work on another beautiful relic in Summit, he said.

This house? "A new person will own it and feel for it," he said, "and that will give me tremendous joy."

Correction: June 26, 2005, Sunday An "In the Region" article in New Jersey and

Manhattan copies on June 12 about the restoration of a mansion in Bernardsville, N.J., misstated the celebrated smoking preference of Representative Millicent Fenwick, who summered there as a girl in the early 1900's. She was known for smoking a pipe, not a cigar.

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