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Former first lady Laura Bush pays visit to Wharton's Mount

Calls it 'important to preserve'
By Clarence Fanto, Special to The Eagle
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LENOX -- In another of her frequent displays of support for The Mount, former first lady Laura Bush spent several hours at the local historic landmark during a recent private visit and called for the preservation of "this architectural masterpiece." The honorary chairwoman of The Mount's National Committee had toured the home of famed author Edith Wharton twice previously.



Left to right: Susan Wissler, executive director of The Mount; former First Lady Laura Bush; and local gardener Laura Walton visit The Mount. (Submitted photo)

A self-described devotee of Wharton's writings, Bush has been a high-profile supporter of the nonprofit Edith Wharton Restoration.

"As a schoolgirl growing up in a hot, dusty, West Texas town, I will never forget being transported to a cold New England landscape as I read Edith Wharton's 'Ethan Frome,'" Bush said in a prepared statement. "My love for Edith Wharton has grown beyond her written words to include a special fondness for her beautiful home. It is important to preserve this architectural masterpiece that she created so that future generations will experience directly this American novelist's spirit."

The Mount, still burdened by nearly \$4 million in debt payable by June 2016, has been seeking a long-term solution to its financial challenges. In 2007, the organization had owed about \$9 million to various creditors. Currently, most of the financing is held by Berkshire Bank. The site hosts at least 30,000 visitors annually during its May-October season.

Executive Director Susan Wissler floated an idea earlier this year for a partnership with Lenox that would include

the town's purchase of the 150-acre property surrounding the mansion where Wharton lived from 1902-11 and creation of a free open-space, public recreation area on the grounds.

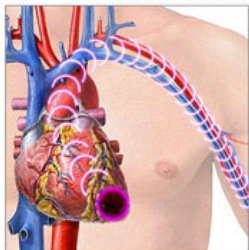
"Mrs. Bush's admiration for Wharton and The Mount has helped raise our visibility on the national level," said Wissler in an emailed comment. "Her support not only validates the importance of Wharton as a great American writer, but the need to preserve our history for future generations."

Laura Bush, along with President Bush, presented the Preserve America Presidential Award to The Mount at a Rose Garden ceremony in 2005. A year later, she visited the site in connection with the \$2.5 million purchase of Wharton's 2,700-volume library from George Ramsden, a private rare-book collector in Great Britain. In 2011, Mrs. Bush returned to view the results of an extensive 10-year, \$15 million restoration of the mansion and its lavishly landscaped gardens.

Last July, Bush was the keynote speaker at a fundraiser for The Mount held in Wellesley.

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Her most recent visit on June 22, unpublicized until now, included a guided tour of the 24-piece outdoor sculpture exhibition, "Confluence," led by SculptureNow Executive Director Ann Jon. The property's head landscape gardener Laura Walton displayed her handiwork for Bush and her small entourage.

Architectural historian Pauline Metcalf, a Mount trustee, led a tour of the mansion, where a re-creation of Edith Wharton's bedroom suite is in progress.

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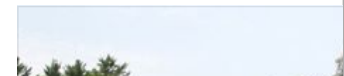
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"Mrs. Bush can see first-hand the impact her support has had on our progress," said Wissler.

Meanwhile, the organization announced on Monday details of its recent \$77,500 grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund to help winterize The Stable, the two-story Georgian revival structure at the property's entrance.

"The Stable is truly our 'diamond in the rough,'" Wissler said. "Having a heated facility will allow us to plan programs and events year-round, which will be beneficial for the public as well as for The Mount."

The restoration project at The Stable began in 2006 through private donations as well as local, state and federal funding. The roof, cupolas, chimney and underlying structure have been renovated at a cost of \$635,000. The next phase, expected to begin this fall for completion by next summer, still requires \$87,500 in additional support toward the \$310,000 cost of the utility overhaul project. So far, \$222,500 has been raised, including the latest state grant.

"It is our hope that we can secure the funds in the coming months so we can implement year-round programming in 2014," Wissler stated. "We're delighted so many of our summer events are sold out, and look forward to offering the same quality programs to our winter visitors."

The Mount is open to the public daily through Oct. 31. Information: EdithWharton.org or (413) 551-5100.

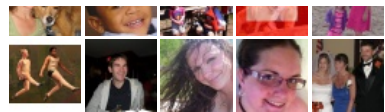
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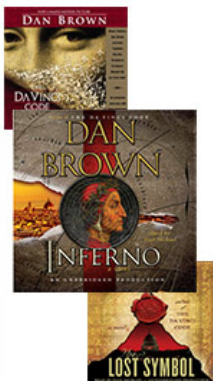
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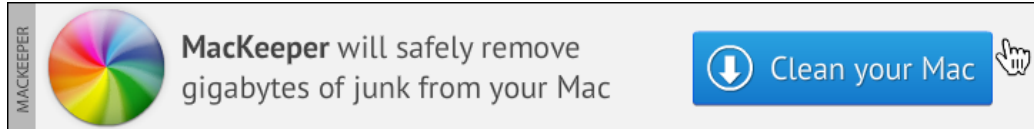
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