

'Backstairs' tour at The Mount in Lenox helps tell servants' stories

By Derek Gentile, Berkshire Eagle Staff



Robert Oakes, left, acts out the role of Edith Wharton's butler, Alfred White, in what was once the laundry room of The Mount, but is now the gift shop during a backstairs tour of the Lenox site. The tour guides visitors through the life of a servant at the estate and introduces them to a cast of characters that lived and worked on the property from 1902 to 1911. (Photos by Stephanie Zollshan / Berkshire Eagle Staff)

LENOX -- In addition to author Edith Wharton and her immediate family, there were anywhere from 16 to 20 people living and working at The Mount during her time there from 1901-11.

All of them had a story, and the curators of Wharton's early 20th century mansion are trying to tell some of those stories this month.

"It's something we don't usually talk about," said Ann Schuyler, who is one of the guides of the 40-minute tour.

On Saturday, the site hosted "Backstairs at The Mount," an examination of the servants who worked and lived there, according to Ann Shea, one of the House Managers at the Wharton estate. The tours will also run on Dec. 7 and 14.

Guides dressed as some of Wharton's more prominent employees will bring visitors to the living quarters and work areas of the mansion.

Inspired in part by interest in the PBS television series "Downton Abbey," Mount officials said this tour was the most requested by visitors to the historic estate last year.

The Mount was built in 1902. Wharton designed the main building, while her niece Beatrix Jones Farrand designed the adjoining kitchen garden. Wharton and her husband, Edward, lived at The Mount from 1901 until 1911.

Although "Downton Abbey" was a partial impetus for interest in The Mount, Schuyler explained that not every servant lived on the grounds.

"Unmarried women lived on the top floor of the house, while the unmarried men lived in rooms over the stables," she said. Some married couples also lived in those apartments, said Schuyler, but a small percentage of workers lived in cottages in Lenox.

"It was a little less structured than Downton Abbey," she said.

And, according to Robert Oakes, another guide, there aren't a lot of secret passages in the house. Many Victorian mansions were honeycombed with unobtrusive stairwells and doors to make it easier for servants to appear and disappear quickly.

But the Mount has very few.

"Edith Wharton decided she didn't want to live in that kind of a house," said Oakes. "She wanted a more open place for her and her family."

The guides all dress like some of Wharton's more prominent servants. On Saturday, Oakes was dressed as Wharton's longtime butler, Alfred White.

White served as the family valet from 1884 until Edith Wharton's death in 1937. He lived in a cottage on her French estate until his death in 1942.

Oakes said Schuyler did considerable research on the servants, and each guide on the tour gives guests a brief backstory on the lives of the people they are portraying.

"I think it gives you a deeper appreciation of the people who worked here," he said. "They all had stories, and people deserve to hear them."

The Backstairs tours are scheduled for noon and 2 p.m. on the next two Saturdays. Anyone who knows more about the servants who worked at The Mount are asked to contact Edithwharton.org or call 413-551-5501.

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