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## 2-year terrace restoration puts The Mount on solid footing for season



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Workers put the finishing touches Wednesday on a restoration of the mansion terrace at The Mount in Lenox that has taken two years to complete. The project tackled masonry work required by extensive water damage that had jeopardized the underpinnings of the terrace and portions of the mansion's foundation.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN - THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

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**By Clarence Fanto, Eagle correspondent**

**LENOX** — Resplendent in its springtime finery, author Edith Wharton's early 20th-century abode at The Mount is primed to welcome seasonal visitors after a massive structural renovation and cosmetic face-lift.

The just-completed, two-year restoration of the mansion's terrace, which hosts many events, such as the popular "Music After Hours" weekend evening jazz series in July and August, cost about \$760,000, said Executive Director Susan Wissler, at the helm of the nonprofit Edith Wharton Restoration. The project was funded by the town's Community Preservation Act, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, private donations and anticipated foundation support.

The urgently-needed project, handled primarily by contractors H&S Restoration of Woburn, tackled masonry work required by extensive water damage that had jeopardized the underpinnings of the terrace and portions of the mansion's foundation.

"Water infiltration had completely denigrated all the binding nature of the mortar, so the house foundation was essentially stones packed in sand, not stable," Wissler said. As a result, "the mortar rot, about 12 inches deep, had to be dug out, cleaned out and repacked with good mortar."

One section of the stairs leading to the terrace was deemed dangerous, she said, and might have required removal if the house hadn't been so solidly built.

"Over the past few years, the situation has become so unstable that fieldstones have been actually falling out of the foundation wall," she said. "We realized that structurally, the house walls, in the face of this extensive damage, were being supported by the framing around each of the main floor's French doors. Thank goodness Wharton liked French doors [and] there were so many, because that's what provided the structure."

Cosmetic work most visible to the public includes repainting of the mansion and exterior work at the Stable near the entrance of the property, including restoration of shutters "that break up the gleaming whiteness, and I think it's a beautiful touch for a beautiful building," Wissler said. The \$1.5 million, multiphase project began more than 10 years ago.

Recently upgraded utilities provide the groundwork for what Wissler hopes will be a reimagining of the Stable interior for year-round programming, offices, archival storage and a retail space, pending board of trustees approval. The entrance gatehouse, now offices for the administration, could turn into a home for writers-in-residence, according to her vision.

Attendance for 2018 remained stable, at about 50,000, up from 46,000 two years ago and double the total in 2011. The Mount is the third-most-visited attraction in Lenox, behind Tanglewood and Shakespeare & Company, and Trip Advisor rates it as the second-best attraction in town, behind Tanglewood and just ahead of Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary and Shakespeare & Company.

The Mount, \$4 million in debt in 2014, escaped a brush with bankruptcy, has been debt-free since 2015 and remains on an even keel, according to its just-issued annual report.

On a total budget of \$2.5 million, the nonprofit turned an operating surplus of \$300,000, which was plowed back into operations and reserves. The nonprofit's endowment, launched two years ago with a goal of \$12.5 million, stands at \$1.2 million and growing, Wissler said, thanks to a major bequest from the late Neil Ellenoff, a trustee for eight years.

Over the past 11 years, The Mount's position has improved by \$12.3 million, swinging from about \$4 million in the red to assets of nearly \$8.3 million, Wissler noted, citing the nonprofit's financial statements.

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Under her watch, Wissler has taken steps to open the property's extensive grounds to the public.

The National Historic Landmark's nearly 50-acre grounds, with an expanded trail system extending to Edith Wharton Park at Laurel Lake, are open, free of charge, from dawn to dusk from November through May. During the May-October season from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., access to the grounds is included with paid admission. The grounds are closed to the public during weddings.

Because of an especially troublesome tick season, the property is partnering with a Berkshire company, Moore Creations, to apply its "I'm Not Gonna Get Ticked" cedar granular and natural-based oil treatment in all outdoor public areas as a deterrent to help reduce the parasite population.

Weddings in May and June, as well as in September and October, continue to be a "robust" revenue source for The Mount, Wissler noted. She also hopes to expand winter season programming, which included two to three monthly events beginning last December, to fulfill the goal of becoming a year-round attraction.

Several major staff changes include:

- Pittsfield resident Earl Persip III, the new facilities manager, succeeds Ross Jolly, now in the facilities department at Tanglewood. Persip is a Pittsfield city councilor at large, an animal control commissioner and was employed by the Berkshire Family YMCA for 24 years.
- Michelle Daly is the new public programs director. She most recently was director of the Berkshire Cultural Resource Center at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams. She was recognized in March as one of The Eagle's annual "40 Under 40" movers and shakers.
- Ute DeFarlo, formerly in charge of development at the Austen Riggs Center and Shakespeare & Company, is now The Mount's development director, responsible for fundraising from individuals and organizations.

With the addition of several new trustees, bringing the total to 23, the Mount is approaching its bylaw maximum of 25 on the board.

"It's a very collegial, respectful board, and I feel very fortunate," Wissler said.

Seasonal programming highlights include a lineup of literary events still being booked, weekly Tuesday morning bird walks on the property's trail system with MassAudubon guides beginning Tuesday, a new, expanded sculpture show this summer and a family-friendly Shakespeare & Company outdoor production of "The Taming of the Shrew."

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