

By JANET DIMOCK

The house was once filled with elegance and charm. Ladies and gentlemen of style were entertained amid the formal gardens while water gently splashed from the marble fountain. The band played on the sweeping verandah and Chinese lanterns winked on in the gathering dusk. It was the turn of the century, and the house was in its prime.

As time passed, the fortunes of the large Victorian declined and by the time it was purchased in 1983 by Scott Heyl and Marie Burkart the once proud home had deteriorated almost beyond repair. It had been vandalized — marble-topped sinks ripped out — the supporting sills had rotted and the foundation was crumbling. Large trees and tangled undergrowth had overrun the formal gardens years before and hid most of the house from view. But to this couple, the 14-room house located on Huntington Road in Worthington was more than a crumbling, empty house.

"The potential was just so wonderful. Architecturally, it's a real gem," Heyl explained recently. "All its features are intact. It has beautiful details. It is a carpenter gothic, but its layout is Italianate. The verandah is Queen Anne." It is the combination of features in that eclectic Victorian style that makes the house so striking.

The wide verandah sweeps across the south side and front of the house. There are carpenter gothic scallop shingles and scrolls, and wrought iron work over the bay windows for eye-pleasing detail. The board and batten clapboards lead the eye upwards and a small tower perched on the second floor above the verandah roof completes the illusion of height.

Inside, the house offers large archways over two bay windows, a total of five working fireplaces — one of black marble — three staircases, molded plaster cornices around one ceiling, scrolled medallions around the ceiling fixtures, oak wainscoting in one room and an elaborately carved mahogany banister.

The couple originally came to the Hilltowns from Northampton in search of a Colonial home to restore, but this house caught their eye. "It is an unusual style for a house out here. It stands out among all the Colonials," Heyl said. Unlike other older homes in the area, this one was not built to be a full-time residence and, although still surrounded by 90 acres, it was never part of a farm. Instead, it was built in the mid-1800s to be part of a "country gentleman's estate" by Chauncey Pease of New York City.

The Pease family summered here in style — they owned two other large homes in the immediate area as well — and even built a covered boardwalk on property directly

across the street (an area that is now potato fields) to accommodate bathers strolling to a pond down the hill.

Paint scrapings show that the house was originally done in bright yellow with red trim, Heyl said. Old photographs show extensive striped awnings brought out from the eaves and a flag waving from a tall pole rising from the tower's peak.

"We basically had to start from scratch," Heyl said of the work that began in earnest 12 months ago. By that time it was "the proverbial haunted house," he said, an impression emphasized by the discovery of a headstone intended for 12-year-old Jenny Pease in the carriage barn. Windows were shuttered or covered with heavy damask curtains. Vandals had made off over the years with anything of great value, but the beds were all made up as though guests were expected at any moment, an eerie touch. The wallpaper was peeling, plaster walls had cracked, portions of the ceiling had come down — the victim of leaking pipes — and the floors sagged so badly that in many places they had separated from the walls altogether.

Fortunately, the couple could draw upon their combined professional and personal experience to see beyond the wreckage and envision the structure's future. Heyl spent seven years restoring his former home, a Colonial in Whately. "It was a beautiful place. I reluctantly sold it," he said. Heyl also did the design work for the restoration of the Dickinson-Baggs Tavern in Amherst. Heyl did the work as a member of a consulting firm formerly located in Northampton. Currently he is the director of Holyoke's Main Street project, a revitalization project for that city's downtown district that is made possible by the combined efforts of several state government offices and the Holyoke business community, with some federal backing.

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Ms. Burkart is involved with similar concerns as city planner for the city of Chicopee. Involvement in the "industrial heart" of the Connecticut River Valley and their own personal restoration project in the rural Hilltowns provides interesting contrasts, she noted. Besides, ripping out old plaster with a crowbar after a hard day at work is a great way to take out frustration, she joked.

Living through last winter in a partially restored home with no kitchen, no central heat and plenty of drafts required a certain amount of determination. Built for life in "the grand style" during the summer months only, the house was not designed with winter in mind. Windows on three sides of the bedroom



AT LEFT: Marie Burkart and Scott Heyl.

PHOTOS BY JANET DIMOCK

let in plenty of sunshine in summer and let the heat right back out during the winter. The putty had long ago dried out in most of the windows, so the panes literally rattled in their casings when the winter winds blew, Heyl noted. "We were cooking over a Coleman stove and washing our dishes in the bathroom," he recalled.

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Living in a house while simultaneously restoring it requires a positive outlook, Ms. Burkart said. "You have to be an incurable optimist. You are living in the future. You have to keep in mind what it will look like."

The necessary "hidden work" — all new wiring, all new plumbing, new sills, foundation work, a new kitchen, new inside chimneys and a modern gas-fired forced hot water heating system (with the small furnace cleverly hidden in the butler's pantry off the dining room) — has been their main focus over the past year. "We have all the hidden costs completed, so from this point it is all finish work. We are making strides now that are beginning to show," Heyl said.

Kitchen appliances and counters have been installed. Sandblasting revealed an attractive kitchen ceiling made of narrow poplar boards. The walls in what is now the living room have been re-plastered and painted. Installation of sliding glass doors lets the sun right into a room that has been transformed from dingy gray to a soft brightness. In that room, a 1950s-style yellow brick fireplace was taken out and replaced by one with carved period designs more in keeping with the house's design.

Restoring an old house of this type may sound romantic, but in the end it is costly and labor intensive, Heyl cautioned. Although this house was "on its last legs," there was still enough structural integrity to make the project worthwhile. Professional evaluation of an intended restoration project may be the critical factor. If the structure requires too much work, although the result may be attractive it may well cost much more than the house's market value. "I've seen it happen before. In this case we felt confident because I did much of the work myself." For example, Heyl plans to make a special mold to cast replacement parts for a plaster cornice. "I wouldn't advise anyone to launch into a restoration project

without enough information," he added.

The most striking change made to the exterior is removal of the overwhelming vegetation — "We've taken out 60 major trees so far" — and the application of gray primer over the dark green paint that had been on the exterior for some time. They plan to have the outside re-painted in shades of tan and brown by November. The colors will accent the interesting trim work without resorting to the slightly garish original combination.

There is still a good deal of work that can be done outside, Ms. Burkart noted. Landscaping the 90 acres that extend back from the road presents another challenge. Almost a century ago there were clay tennis courts on the north side of the property, a large marble fountain directly out front and extensive formal gardens to the south. Future plans will probably not be anywhere near as elaborate as that, but an old foundation slightly south of the house would make an attractive sunken garden — after the site is cleared and a considerable amount of debris is taken away, she added. This season they did plant annuals and rose bushes along the verandah.

"The architectural integrity made it worthwhile."

The house inspires a certain degree of attachment. The Pease family members held onto the property long after they stopped living grandly, Heyl pointed out. The Peases lost their piano business and their fortune during the Depression years. The other Worthington houses, the New York City brownstone, the family art holdings and much of the surrounding acreage was sold off over the years. But they held onto this house, and a Pease descendant sold the property to the couple very reluctantly. It is the first time the house has passed out of Pease ownership.

For Heyl and Ms. Burkart, the restoration project has meant a great deal of work and inconvenience, work in which the reward are slow in coming. "It's basically one room at a time," Heyl said. Much of the desired work, such as stripping layers of dingy paint from the mahogany trim in the hall, cannot be done for at least two years. Despite the length of time needed, the couple are not discouraged. Heyl explained, "The architectural integrity made it worthwhile."

A return to Victorian splendor

