

cover story

History

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nering among historical sites. It increases awareness of more historical options – and more historical stories – in the public eye.

Recently, for instance, Acorn Hall used five Windsor chairs on loan from the historical park to create a display that enabled it to participate in the multiday Revolutionary Times festivities this past July Fourth.

“It’s not 1933, when our park was founded, anymore,” Pfister said. “People simply do not look up to the founding generation the way they did 80 years ago. There’s no way we, as the park service, or any historic site, can survive telling the same story of the starving soldiers the same way to the same people for 80 years. It’s not going to happen.”

New stories to tell

Acorn Hall certainly provides some different and animated Morristown narratives.

On one end of its time line is the 1876 death of 27-year-old Mary Crane Hone, who grew up in the house and succumbed to typhoid fever. On the other is the colorful, globe-trotting life of her granddaughter and namesake, a glamorous Broadway actress and Franklin Delano Roosevelt supporter who stayed single her whole life.

It was the younger Hone who, in 1971, donated Acorn Hall to the historical society, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year.

In its 154 pages, “Morris County’s Acorn Hall” romps through the triumphs and tribulations of the two first patriarchs of the home — Dr. John Schermerhorn, who built the place but could not bear to live in it more than five years after his wife’s untimely death, and Augustus Crane, who listed his profession as “gentleman” on the 1860 Census and who named the estate after the many oak trees on its premises.

So, too, the book follows the interesting lives of their spouses, children and children’s spouses.

No personality so stands out, though, than that of Mary Crane Hone, born in 1904 to Augustus Crane Hone, who owned a consulting engineering business, and his wife, Alice Castleman, a Southern belle who hailed from Kentucky and was the daughter of John Castleman, an officer for the Confederacy during the Civil War who later fought for the U.S. in the Spanish-American War.

As an only child with such a pedigree, Mary Crane Hone had the money and freedom to follow her every impulse as an independent thinker.

“She knew she had talent. She knew she was photogenic, and I think she knew she had some inherent drawbacks,” Pfister said. “As an actress, she was her own worst critic. She was almost David Letterman-esque in being self-deprecating.”

“Though she wasn’t self-conscious of her lineage, she certainly was self-conscious of her accent,” he added. “In one letter she compared her language to what she would have heard from African Americans in the cornfields when she was growing up.”

Consequently, she journeyed to England to learn proper English for a stage career that brought her as close to home as a Broadway production of Ibsen’s “Lady from the Sea,” in which she played the lead, and to as far-flung places as Egypt, her only chance to act in Shakespearean roles.

But as women gained the right to vote, the Depression came and went, and World War II unfurled, Hone, a Southern Democrat evolved into a New Deal Democrat.

“As a Southern Demo-



Morris County’s Acorn Hall is home to the Morris County Historical Society. In its 154 pages, “Morris County’s Acorn Hall” romps through the triumphs and tribulations of the two first patriarchs of the home.

PHOTOS BY KAREN MANCINELLI/CORRESPONDENT



At left, clothing from 1906-1917 is shown in a girls room upstairs at Acorn Hall. At right, Nicole Rizzuto, a research assistant, talks to visitor Pete Edeman of Randolph about the 1840s furnishings of the home.



crat, she was an anti-Lincolnian,” Pfister said. “We first see her in politics in 1920 in San Francisco with her mother and her grandmother at the Democratic National Convention, which was the first year women were allowed to vote in a presidential election.

“It’s also the first appearance, on a national ticket, of Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” he added. “He was the vice presidential nominee for the Democrats. Of course, they lost that year. I’m guessing she and FDR met in 1920 because her grandmother was very much a figure in Democratic circles.”

‘Re-Re-Re-Elect Roosevelt’

Immersed in the political issues of the day, Hone left acting and embraced the initiatives of FDR.

In his book, Pfister writes Hone cared deeply “for the advancement of labor causes through organized unions.”

Combining her love of theater and the Democratic Party, she contributed to FDR’s final and fourth campaign with a song called “Let’s Re-Re-Re-Elect Roosevelt.”

She also loved the notion of the League of Nations, and then the United

Nations, to the extent she was offered a job at the U.N. in the early 1950s, which she declined, though she accepted a number of secretarial jobs through the years,

including one for the BBC.

All these activities distinguished Mary Hone from her mother.

“They were two different people when it came to their world views,” Pfister

said. “Mary’s mother came from a time and place where women certainly did not act and certainly did not work outside of the house.

“All the evidence points to her mother being more of the Southern belle,” he added. “She was concerned with the proper number of servants and the proper place settings at a table, all, of course, with a Southern twist. To her mother, there was certainly a class that ruled, or a class that led society. From what I’ve been able to tell, Mary didn’t see it that way.”

That preoccupation is shown in Acorn’s Hall interior opulent displays and bedazzling first floor, complete with dining room, library, music room and more, all open for tours.

Other facets of Hone’s life also are explored, including the tough time she had bequeathing Acorn Hall, finally settling on the county historical society in 1971 and then subsequently moving, in a state of somewhat typical unrest, to the Nantucket area.

A beautiful woman with many suitors, Hone never settled down.

“I think,” Pfister said, “she was a wanderer at heart.”

Amy Curry, director of the society, said it was an honor to have an historian as distinguished as Pfister chose Acorn Hall, and its generations of owners, as a subject.

“He illustrates why Acorn Hall is so special,” she said, “and why it’s so important to preserve this gem.”

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