Joining home and history

By Mary Anderson

Patience and Tom McIlhenny have spent two years restoring the 100-year-old Bernhardt-Demarest House in Tenafly. The house is one of the oldest in Tenafly, and it has been in the McIlhenny family for three generations. The house is a significant part of Tenafly's history, and the couple has worked hard to preserve its original features.

The Bernhardt-Demarest House is a two-story, four-bedroom home with a garage and a basement. It was built in 1887 by Charles Bernhardt, a successful businessman who made his fortune in the leather industry. The Bernhardts were one of the first families to live in Tenafly, and their house was a symbol of their wealth and status.

In 1910, the Bernhardt family sold the house to George Demarest, a local businessman. The Demarests lived in the house for 75 years, and it remained in the family until 1987 when it was sold to the McIlhenneys.

The McIlhenny family has been working hard to restore the house to its original condition. They have removed wallpaper, repainted the walls, and restored the original woodwork. They have also replaced the windows and doors, and added a new kitchen and bathroom.

The house is now a museum and is open to the public. It is a testament to the rich history of Tenafly and the importance of preserving our cultural heritage.
Couple restores a house with 200 years of history

Brinkerhoff-Demarest House more than a museum

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Victoriana and golden oak antiques when he met Patrice four years ago. Together they would go look for antiques and take tours of old houses in Rockland County. But they were looking for an easier commute to Manhattan.

When they walked out of the Brinkerhoff-Demarest House after they first saw it, Patrice says, “We wiped the cobwebs off our farm and made a bed on the house. They purchased it in November, 1884 for $120,000. They hope to sell it in 30 years.”

The house stands on land originally given by Indians to Sara Kendrick, a New York widow, in gratitude for her service as translator to Oratam, the chief of a great Indian village at the bend of the Tenneck creek.

The construction date of the house was thought to be 1716, but research Wright has done indicates that the land wasn’t purchased by the Brinkerhoff family until 1784. By 1874, Hendrick Brinkerhoff had bought out his brothers’ share of the land, and probably started construction.

Hendrick was 20 years old that year; his first wife had died in childbirth the year before. On the 20th birthday of his second wife, he started building.

Selling was outlaying land on the Tenneck and the Tenneck land was able to buy 18 acres and sold a comfortable house, Wright says.

All original

Two hundred years later, another woman came to admire Hendrick’s house.

“Tom,” Wright says “All like brasses and the hardware were original.”

Glimpse in Patrice: “The general floor plan is the same as the day they built it.”

Evenson in the front, on the south side, was the formal parlor; on the left, the man’s parlor — or informal parlor — on the right. Back parlor have built in cupboards adjoining the fireplace and built-in glass in the hallway doors.

“The ‘grandparents’ room’ — the only room with a door that leads down to the inside, for privacy — is behind the man’s parlor. Behind the formal parlor is a room used for dining. This room has a coffee door.

“The Dutch had a door to bring coffee in and out for wakens,” said Tom. “They didn’t waste space. They built these skinny little doors.”

Around 1860, the house underwent a major modernization. The kitchen wing was added cooking had probably been done in an outside oven. The second floor was turned into living space, and the original bedroom closets in the first floor were plastered over.

“At that time, beams were unusable,” said Patrice. “They were signs of poverty.”

“To us, this is not a museum. This is our home and we are comfortable here.”

— Patrice McMahon

Today, the beams are visible once more, in all their hand-hewn strength. The random-width pine floors, once painted, are striped and hallowed. The Dutch doors on the north and south sides of the house were infarri; Tom and Patrice have had those doors rebuilt. The three fireplaces have been restored, as have the walls.

Beams visible once more

“Some people would have Sheetrock, but we found a woodman who knew how to replaster,” said Tom.

“It was like opening Pandora’s box,” said Patrice. “We had to take the plaster walls down to the mud and the straw and rebuild them.”

Ceilings were too low in some houses that the McMahon had the floor dug out to give more headroom. The kitchen fireplace with its Dutch oven was built 20 years ago when the county acquired Tenneck Road. “(It was a slight move on the county’s part),” said Tom, “because Sara Demarest was such an outspoken preservationist.”

The McMahons have re-created a cooking hearth in the north end of the kitchen using old brick.

The Brinkerhoffs lived in the house until 1829, and apparently grew melons on their farm. Much of Bergen County was in the truck farm business in the 1700s and 1800s, shipping fruit and vegetables to New York City. Muskmelons were a big product, said Seaburn curator, Wright, as