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What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

Reprinted from the October 12, 2011, issue of U.S. 1 Newspaper

Morven Finishes Its Restoration with a Big Splash

by Ilene Dube

Visiting the newly restored pool house at Morven Museum and Garden, once the playground of Robert Wood Johnson, I started thinking about the man behind the name we have come to associate with medical schools, hospitals, and large charitable contributions.



Morven's Pool House

Robert Wood Johnson II, son of one of the three founding brothers of Johnson & Johnson Corp., left \$1.2 billion to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation when he died in 1968 to, as they say on the NPR sponsorship blurb, "Help communities set and achieve ambitious goals to improve the quality of health care in ways that matter to all patients and their families." RWJ Foundation is New Jersey's largest charity, and the fifth largest in the U.S.

"The General," as Johnson came to be known after serving during World War II as chairman of the Smaller War Plants Corporation, an agency created to help small businesses as larger ones captured huge government contracts, was much more than a great fortune. One-time mayor of Highland Park and VP of his family's New Brunswick-based big pharma, he fired his own son and his nephew, J. Seward Johnson Jr. (By some accounts, the sculptor was thrilled to be thus launched onto his true path.)

During World War II, when RWJ focused his family business on meeting wartime needs, duct tape (a.k.a. duck tape) was developed for sealing ammunition boxes by adding a waterproof layer to adhesive tape.

In 1941, while leasing Morven, the yachtsman, who kept a car and a horse in the carriage barn, had a pool and an Art Moderne pool house built. RWJ hired Powell and Morgan of New York City to design the pool house, with bluestone patio steps that led to the circular pool. The 755-square-foot wood-frame structure on brick and block foundation walls uses three different wood sidings: clapboard, horizontal board and batten, and vertical board cladding.

A photograph from 1941 shows his daughter, Sheila Johnson, and a friend happily posing in front of the newly built recreational facility.

The property was once home to Richard Stockton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Johnson lived there from 1928 to 1944, while he was married to Margaret Shea, the second of two wives. When Johnson moved out, Governor Walter Edge purchased Morven and ultimately donated it to the state. A governor's mansion until 1981, Morven served as home to the families of five governors including Richard Hughes, William T. Cahill, and Brendan Byrne. Johnson's pool house was an added amenity to the style of living at Morven.

When Hughes was governor President John F. Kennedy visited Morven in 1962 during a campaign swing through Princeton. During the Byrne era, Princess Grace, Ethel Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, and Fidel Castro were guests.

Morven Museum & Garden, as it is now called, is listed on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places and is a National Historic Landmark. It completed the first two of a three-phase restoration plan in 2004. Phase I restored the outside of the property, and Phase II turned Morven the mansion into Morven the museum. The pool house restoration preserves

the period when Robert Wood Johnson lived there.

Princeton architect Veronica Bregenzer, who was also the architect for the gift shop and the carriage house, designed the pool house restoration. Since the renovation of Morven began in 1999, historic features of the grounds, including an 18th-century horse chestnut walk and a colonial revival garden, have been turned into a lush paradise.

Director Clare Smith, who has been at Morven since 2000, has seen the washhouse restored as offices and the interior restored into a museum. "During the time it was a residence, kitchens and bathrooms were added, and so we've restored it to 1850," she says. The state owns the property, and Historic Morven Inc. operates it.

Morven horticulturist Pam Ruch meets me in the garden, where we walk from the main house. We pass a Rose of Sharon with white blooms as large and lush as moonflowers. "It's an almost sterile hybrid," says Ruch, who came on board in 2000. "Instead of putting energy into seed, it just keeps blooming."

That can serve as a metaphor for Historic Morven. Rather than propagate new projects, it seeks to strengthen its historic worth.

Ruch has recently turned over the soil for a vegetable garden and planted oats as a cover crop. Interns from Trenton-based Isles will plant the garden next summer. The restored carriage house is used for tools and as a potting area for the interns.

Penny Baskerville, a garden volunteer and docent, arrives to pull weeds. "I love the house, and I love history," she says as she yanks out burdock. "That's what attracted me to Morven, and I've learned so much from Pam."

Bregenzer, who was born in Somerville, grew up in Hopewell and Pennington. In a family of builders, her father was a mason, and her mother was a nurse. She graduated from Catholic University in 1981 with a bachelor's degree in architecture.

She has an office on Stockton Street and lives in Lambertville, does all kinds of architecture, but enjoys preservation work best. She turned a former Masonic temple into Hopewell Borough Hall.

Prior to her arrival at Morven, the pool house was on the verge of collapse, and some questioned the importance of its restoration, suggesting it just be torn down.

"What is unique about Morven is that (visitors can see) how it has evolved over time," says Bregenzer. "The main house and wash house are from the mid 18th century, the carriage house is from the late 1890s, and the Art Moderne Poolhouse, from 1941, are all on the same property. General Johnson wanted the pool house for his family, and when the governors lived here they used it for entertaining. You start to forget that 1941 is 70 years ago — there aren't too many Art Moderne buildings around."

A self-described purist, Bregenzer admits it was tremendously expensive to restore. Private funding was raised. "In the state it was in it was hard to be fond of — you could put your foot through the floor, and the windows were boarded up," she says. "It required vision."

Every restoration project begins with research, and Bregenzer started with five old exterior photos from the collections, as well as memories shared by Johnson's daughter, Sheila, until recently a board member.

The tennis court Brendan Byrne used will be turned into a lawn area for games, and the pool will become a fountain. "The pool house needs those things to make sense," says Bregenzer.

Its distinguishing features are shallow-pitched batten roofs with deep overhangs. There was only one batten surviving, and Bregenzer had to take it apart to see how it was built.

The original batten was wood covered with asphalt, and it was put on in the wrong direction. "It was an experiment at the time, and it failed," says Bregenzer. "It was folly-like and not built for the ages. It is now."

Her research showed that batten roofs popular at the time were constructed in copper and zinc. She has wrapped wood with copper that has a tin-zinc coating.

Bregenzer, whose grandfather was a builder, has an uncle, Mike Bregenzer, who is a roofer (Princeton University's Whitman College, one of his projects, was featured in U.S.1 on September 19, 2007.) When the original pool house roof was riddled with holes, he patched it pro bono. Then he helped to deconstruct and reconstruct the battens, after winning the bid for the project.

She describes the job as forensic architecture. On the patio, every stone was picked up, catalogued, and put back. There was paint analysis on every layer used since 1941. Brick was deteriorating and had to be replaced, and capstones that had been meticulously marked like a jigsaw puzzle were put back.

There is a porthole window, and the porch has dark blue inside, evoking a nautical theme. There are picture windows so occupants may have a view of the tennis court and the pool. Except for special occasions, the pool house will not be open, but visitors will be able to look inside the large windows.

There are three distinct sections: the living room, the bathhouse, and the mechanical room. The living room, with a restored dark wood floor, has one wood-paneled wall with birch and walnut roundels — Bregenzer and Ruch show me the secret doors in it. The fireplace has been rebuilt and uses gas logs.

Because there were no photos of the interior, Bregenzer had to imagine the type of furnishing that would be used and selected wicker furniture from the 1890s.

A kitchenette off the living room has the original sink and faucet, but no cooking facilities or refrigeration. With the original cabinets, fan, and screen-less windows, the room was probably used for making drinks.

The changing room, with a separate entrance, has been restored to look as it did in 1941, with a red wood floor and benches and pegboard.

To celebrate the pool house restoration, Morven is hosting an outdoor sculpture exhibit, "Ripple Effect," on view through Sunday, October 30. Works by sculptors Rory Mahon, Robert Canon, George Olexa, Ina Brosseau Marx, Puttie Porter Firestone, and Richard Chenoweth enhance the already magical landscape and help to celebrate the completion of the Pool House restoration.

Ruch says that when the planned fountain is completed "it will be a big draw to families. Fun is part of our vision for Morven. It's a beautiful space, and it's open free of charge."

Ruch, who was born in Philadelphia and grew up in Berwyn, PA, earned a bachelor's in horticulture from Temple University in 2000. She is completing a master's in environmental science from Green Mountain College in Vermont.

A love of plants runs in her family. Her mother's father came from Sweden in 1911 and started a nursery. He named his twin daughters Lily and Rose. Ruch's father was an engineer and her stepmother a bacteriologist and homemaker.

She walks me around the property to see the sculpture that suggests water. In one corner, a wooden fish stares out of an eye popping out of its head.

Ruch explains how the sculptor, Ina Brosseau Marx, had been walking the property with her and noticed a fallen tree. "See that fish?" Marx remarked to Ruch, pointing to a section of the fallen locust. Ruch helped Marx load the snaggly piece of wood into her trunk. Marx took it home, played with it, added an eye, then brought it back and set it into the landscape from which it came.

Morven Museum & Garden, 55 Stockton Street. Hours: Wednesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, noon to 4 p.m. \$6 adults; \$5 seniors and students. 609-924-8144 or www.historicmorven.org.

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Historic Morven Museum & Garden, Princeton, NJ.

