

Patrons: Edward Berwind and Sarah Herminie Berwind

Architect: Horace Trumbauer

The History

Edward Berwind began a naval career at age 17 when President Lincoln appointed him to the US Naval Academy. He later became an aide to President Grant. He left the military for the coal business and began accumulating coalmines in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky. He became the head of the Berwind-White Coal Company and the owner of the largest coal mining industry in America. He amassed great wealth at a time when there was no legislation on monopolies and no income tax.

In 1888, Berwind and his wife purchased a modest Victorian home in Newport known as The Elms for a summer residence. Berwind purchased more acreage and decided to build a new house on the property

Berwind hired a 31-year-old Philadelphia architect named Horace Trumbauer, who had recently designed three large mansions in the Philadelphia area. Both Berwind and Trumbauer were interested in the French Neoclassic style. Trumbauer used a French chateau built for the Marquis de Voyer in 1750 as his model for The Elms.

On August 9, 1901 the Berwinds held their housewarming party for over 500 guests. The 200 carriages moved through a specially designed carriage drive hidden by arches and flowers to the edge of the estate.

Eventually, the elm trees for which the Mansion was named died of disease. But the Elms retained the name and became one of the grandest estates in Newport's Gilded Age. Mrs. Berwind died in 1922, and Mr. Berwind's sister Julia became the hostess of the Elms. Mr. Berwind died at the age of 85 in 1936. Miss Julia Berwind continued to live at the Elms until her death at 96 in 1961. The Elms was sold to a real estate developer and destined to be torn down. The interior furniture and some of the works of art were auctioned off and removed. The Preservation Society of Newport County raised money and purchased the Elms. Many of the original furnishings have been returned to the Elms. The Elms is now open to the public for tours of the house and grounds.

The Architecture

Trumbauer created the illusion of a two story monumental mansion with a round central section and two wings. However, the balustrade on the roof hid a third floor that contained the staff quarters. There were two sub basements under the exterior steps leading to the entrance of the house.

The third floor had 16 servant's rooms, three bathrooms and a number of storage rooms. The functional rooms such as the kitchen, laundry and the heating equipment were in the basements. The Elms had the most modern electric and heating systems of the time. A generator in the basement furnished the electricity. The heating system was fueled by coal transported from the street to the sub-basement by small rail cars in a tunnel under the grounds.

The entrance doors of wrought iron and glass open to the grand hall and the ballroom. The white marble floor is bordered by marble columns with gilt capitals, and illuminated by ormolu and glass electric lanterns. The ballroom with the salon and dining room on each side dominates the first floor.

The dining room is decorated in the Venetian style with large paintings and gold leaf. Heavy ornamental cornices and a stucco ceiling decorate the huge room. A large mantel of agate, onyx, and marble take up a sidewall of the carved paneled room.

The small breakfast room is decorated with Chinese lacquer panels and a Ming dynasty blue and tan rug. This room was generally used only in the mornings.

The drawing room or salon has musical instruments depicted in wood, with relief carvings over the door. Elaborate molding and a *sotto in su* adorns the ceiling. This room is where ladies had tea and played bridge. Small musical recitals would also be held in the salon.

The library had inlaid walnut paneling and red damask fabric covering the walls. The men would go to this room after dinner to sit, smoke and talk.

The conservatory in the most airy rooms of the house with large windows and opened onto the terrace. It contained many plants from the greenhouse and marble statues and fountains.

The great hall is repeated on the second floor with marble floors and the sweeping staircase. The Berwinds' collection of art was displayed on the walls of the great hall.

The bedrooms were also very lavishly decorated. Mr. Berwind's bedrooms had a dark red marble mantelpiece and ormolu light fixtures. Mrs. Berwind's bedroom was much larger with green damask covered walls and furniture covered in gold and green silk. Additional smaller guest bedrooms complete the second floor. The Berwinds' collected many Renaissance and Baroque art including tapestries and object d' arte*. Their home was a magnificent showcase for their collections.

The 12 acres of the mansion were designed and maintained as classical gardens. There are elaborate groupings of marble and bronze statues, many of them marble copies of the statues from an 18th century chateau in France. The Preservation Society of Newport County raised money and purchased the Elms. Many of the original furnishings have been returned to the Elms. The Elms is now open to the public for tours of the house and grounds.