

Local history comes alive at Bronson House

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HUDSON— A journey through history was offered at the Dr. Oliver Bronson House on Sunday, June 9 as Historic Hudson partnered with the Prison Public Memory Project to present the exhibition “If These Walls Could Talk.”

Installations were hung in several rooms of the house showing what life was like inside the former New York State Training School for Girls.

A group of first-time viewers of the house was led by Historic Hudson advisory board member Peter Watson. The house was originally built in 1812 for a wealthy Hudson merchant named Samuel Plumb. Watson said it was originally designed in a Federal style and then was extensively renovated by owner Dr. Oliver Bronson (1799-1875). Architect Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-1892) transformed the entire house in 1839.

Different renovations were made to the house at this time. A bracketed stable complex was added, along with the reconstruction of the driveway. The eastern part of the building was refitted in accordance with the “picturesque theories” advocated by Davis, said Watson. The second floor was expanded and trelliswork was added to the veranda with a concave metal roof to “give the house more romantic character.” This allowed guests to see the beautiful views of the Hudson River. The landscape used plant material from architect Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), who is considered Davis’ “collaborator in the picturesque.”

Another addition was constructed by Davis in 1849. A major addition was put on the western end of the home by including a bracketed tower and a number of other improvements. As the architect, Davis made sure to retain many of the architectural details of the original Federal-style design.

“The house is being given the renovations it deserves,” said Watson. The tour covered all three floors of the house. Watson highlighted the design and architectural history of the home and showed photos of different views of the house from various points in time. He described the tower-like appearance of the house in the front as “wedding-cake form.”

The former Bronson estate was purchased by the state in 1915 from Alice McIntyre, after a succession of several private owners. It became the superintendent’s home for the training school until the 1970s when the house was threatened with demolition. A National Register nomination in 1973 by noted Davis scholar Jane Davies stopped the demolition. After 24 years of the house

being abandoned, Historic Hudson began the 10-year process of acquiring stewardship over the home to restore it.

“If these Walls Could Talk” explored the life of different girls from age 12 to 16 inside the training school. The reform school for girls occupied the buildings and property of the Hudson Correctional Facility for 70 years. Beginning in the 1920’s, the house was a work site for the girls.

“We’re very fortunate to be able to do the exhibit in the house,” said Prison Public Memory Project Founder and President Tracy Huling. The exhibition was designed by the project’s co-founder and director Alison Cornyn with assistance from Beth Thielen. Huling said the exhibit was inspired by the discovery of a variety of historical documents and photographs. Hudson business owner and resident Lisa Durfee found the box at a local garage sale.

“The documents are unique and are related to the case history of the girls,” said Huling. The documents, from the 1920s and 1930s, include letters written between the girls and their families and telegrams. Blown up pictures of these documents from the training school were scattered on the floor throughout the house as part of the exhibit. Huling says that the documents were scanned at a high resolution at the Hudson Library.

Legendary jazz singer, Ella Fitzgerald, was the school’s most famous residence. Huling said that Fitzgerald was taken home by African American staff members on the weekends during her time at the school because she was not allowed to sing in the all-white girls choir. Upon her release from the school, she became a world-renowned singer. New York Times journalist Nina Bernstein had interviewed former staff members about Fitzgerald’s time at the school and wrote an article for the publication about it in 1997. Fitzgerald never spoke publicly about her experiences at the school.

The three floors of the house held art installations that featured several large prints made of the photos from the garage sale box. Scattered histories of the girls were also on display. Huling said that a common theme of the girls at the training school was that a majority of them came from a family background of suffering and abuse. Many of the girls were immigrants, as well.

The tour was a part of the “Path Through History” weekends being sponsored by the state. It was a way to connect to historical attractions across N.Y. during the first two weekends in June. For more information about the Prison Public Memory Project or Historic Hudson, visit prisonpublicmemory.org/blog or www.historichudson.org.