

Thompson Park Visitors Center Restored After Fire

"Crown jewel" of Monmouth's parks reconstructed after fire

By JIM McCONVILLE
KEYPORT BUREAU

Published: APP.com, July 12, 2009 www.APP.com

Geraldine Thompson certainly would have approved.

In fact, the owner of the 19th-century horse estate called Brookdale Farm — who donated 215 acres of her estate, including its three-story mansion, to Monmouth County — might be hard-pressed at first to recognize that it is an impeccable restoration of her 1896 Colonial Revival mansion that serves as park visitor center for Monmouth County's Thompson Park in the Lincroft section of the township.

More than 200 spectators showed up on a perfect summer day to watch a formal dedication ceremony marking the reopening of the visitors center, which burned nearly to the ground Feb. 6, 2006.

"The new center respects the historic character of the former building and honors Geraldine Thompson's legacy to the people of Monmouth County," said Monmouth County Freeholder Lillian G. Burry, liaison to the county Park System. "One might say that the "Grand Old Lady lives again."

Thompson and her husband, Lewis, moved to Middletown from New York in 1896 after the mansion was built. The imposing structure contained 29 rooms, 15 fireplaces and six bathrooms.

The estate location was also once part of Brookdale Farm, a thoroughbred horse estate where Regret, the first filly to win the Kentucky Derby, in 1915, was raised. The property was donated to the county in 1968 by Thompson, a social activist who worked for prison reform.

Burry boasted that reconstruction and restoration of the center finished ahead of schedule and roughly \$1.3 million under its originally estimated \$10 million budget.

"That's remarkable in this world of government," Burry quipped.

The mansion fire started at roughly 11 a.m. that windy day and was battled by some 120 firefighters as winds gusted to 50 mph.

It took 120 firefighters nearly 12 hours to bring the blaze under control. Wind gusts of 35 to 42 mph spread the fire through the building, Smith said. The 10 staffers working inside escaped without injury.

"Now, today, three year later, this mansion proudly resumes its place as the 'crown jewel' of the county Park System."



Exterior of Thompson Park Visitors Center: Photo by T. Spader of the APP.com.

Investigators believe the blaze was sparked by a subcontractor using a grinder and acetylene-powered soldering torch to install rain gutters and downspouts. Officials said it appeared the torch

ignited the wood behind the piping in the southwest corner of the building and the fire entered the wall through a crack.



Interior Exhibit Hall of Thompson Park Visitors Center: Photo by T. Spader of the APP.com.

Coincidentally, the visitors center had reopened to the public only 11 months before the fire, having been closed for renovations since October 2000. The mansion had offices for Park System personnel, but also included a floor devoted to public use for historical galleries. There were also rooms used for Park System program offerings.

In 2006 the county Board of Recreation commissioners awarded contracts to reconstruct the visitors center. The work and related costs were covered by a fire insurance settlement, county officials said.

The restoration was designed by Farewell Mills Gatsch Architects and built by general contractor M&M Construction. Its interior furnishings designed by **Clarke Caton Hintz**.

The result: a modern and slightly expanded building (to 20,000 square feet) with accessibility at all levels, an elevator and a full sprinkler system, Burry said.

Yet, it was expressly rebuilt to retain its historic architectural character with its signature 22-foot high columns, side porches, dark metal roof, French doors, and pale yellow and forest green paint scheme.

However, unlike the original, the new building's siding replaces its wood clapboard with HardiePlank, a cement-based material that is both fire-retardant and an ecologically "green" product.

Regardless, county officials say they have essentially restored a historical fixture.



Interior foyer of Thompson Park Visitors Center: Photo provided by Monmouth County Park System.

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