

Wrentham House (Indian Spring) *325 Ocean Avenue, Newport, RI*

The idea for Wrentham House, originally called Indian Spring, began in 1885, when William Edward Dorshiemer, a Buffalo, New York politician and attorney purchased the site. He commissioned the illustrious architect Richard Morris Hunt to design an appropriate home for the lot which Dorshiemer described as having “one of the most sightly locations on the island and one that can hardly be compared for beauty the world over.” The hill chosen to site the house sits high above Price’s Cove to the Atlantic, down to Brenton’s Reef and Point to the South and up Newport’s Atlantic Coast to the North. The hill held a beacon in the 18th century and a telegraph tower in the 19th century.

The landscape was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted had planned for Indian Spring to anchor a subdivision. However, apart from Wildacre, built for an Olmsted relative, and located just below Indian Spring on Ocean Avenue, no other houses were built for this subdivision. Mr. Dorshiemer suffered a financial setback in 1887, and died in 1888. In December, 1890, Mr. and Mrs. John R. Busk purchased the grounds from Mr. Dorshiemer’s widow, and promptly contracted Olmsted and Hunt to complete their designs for the house and gardens. Indian Spring provided the first full-scale collaboration between Hunt and Olmsted. Mr. J.R. Busk was Commodore of the New York Yacht Club, and his yacht *Mischief* successfully defended the America’s Cup. The house was constructed between spring, 1891 and spring, 1892, and was first occupied by the Busk family for the summer season of 1892.

Its architectural significance has been honored by a number of citations in architectural books. Paul Baker (*Richard Morris Hunt*) praised the structure as one of Hunt’s masterpieces: The rubble-course masonry is so rooted to the rocky coastal site that the house almost seems to be a part of it, the two story Busk House was one of the architect’s most successful conceptions.” (Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt*, page 340). Indian Spring marked a juncture in Hunt’s style, “Along one side of the irregularly shaped structure, the broad, low-pitched roof sweeps down to envelop a deeply recessed veranda,

echoing in this theme the relationship of the whole house to the site.” Perhaps in no other work did Hunt achieve such an organic and “natural” quality in a building” (Ibid, p.340). Hunt’s contemporaries in architecture preferred Indian Spring to the European-style palaces Hunt built for New York and Newport society, “Its horizontal extension and serene sweep express the power of design which had resided in the organic development, nourished, as we have said, by a sense of unity with the land. Montgomery Schuyler, in his review of Hunt’s work published in the *Architectural Record* after Hunt’s death in 1895, was evidently somewhat appalled by Hunt’s contemporary palaces and dwelt therefore as long as he could upon the Busk House. It deserves attention and should be remembered.” (Scully, *Architecture of Newport*).

The house has had only four previous owners – the Busks (1890 – 1920), O’Donnells (1949- 1962) and Van Alens (1962 -1999). In 1962 James and Candace Van Alen acquired and closed the property. Over the following forty years, vandals and thieves destroyed and/or stole most of the interior detail. The house’s exterior was defaced with graffiti. What was not destroyed by intruders was damaged by wind and water – large leaks in the roof and smashed windows allowed rain and snow to freely enter, causing major structural damage, which threatened the solid granite building’s very foundation. Much of the wood infrastructure had rotted to the point where floors had collapsed into the basement. The grounds were overgrown with native vegetation, some growing over and into the house itself.

Using photos from Hunt’s archives and from the Harvard School of Design library, the landscape architect, Lucinda Brockaway, visited the property and tagged original plantings for preservation, so overgrowth could be cut back to access the house and save original plantings, which were endangered of being choked off by native vegetation. The house is being restored by M and M Marques Construction of Fall River, Massachusetts, after four general contracting firms were interviewed and their restoration work and availability assessed by Failure Mode and Effect Analysis (FMEA) (software from Minitab Quality Companion). FMEA employs brainstorming (in this case with each contractor, with the architect who did the Wrentham House elevations and with others who had embarked on comparable restorations) to identify potential problems with the restoration process, rank their expected severity and likelihood, then rank possible solutions (in this case the preferred contractor) through a quantitative approach. In particular, M and M Marques demonstrated extensive experience restoring large,

nineteenth century stone buildings. They have been given the mandate to restore all exterior features, and when exterior features have been destroyed beyond use to exactly replicate the feature.

Features:

1891 Richard Morris Hunt, Architect

1890 Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Design

Historic Stone and Shingle 22-Room Masterpiece

R.M. Hunt's First Collaboration with Frederick Law Olmsted

Magnificent Views from Highest Elevation on Ocean Avenue

Complete Restoration 2003 - 2008

Recognized with 2008 RI Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission Award

Vaulted Ceiling in 40' x 24' Great Room with Baronial Fireplace and Orchestra Balcony

Original Quarter-sawn Oak Paneled Great Room and Entrance Hall

Elegant Dining Room with Original Plaster Ceiling

Custom Mahogany Library and Billiard Room

Gourmet Kitchen with Fireplace

French Doors open to 70' Front Porch

Home Theatre

Wine Cellar with Original Soapstone Shelves

Amenities:

8 Bedrooms

15 Fireplaces

13 Full Baths, 4 Half Baths

Gourmet Kitchen with Fireplace

Sub-Zero Fridge and Freezer

Double Viking Gas Range

3 Miele Dishwashers

Master Suite (1800 sq ft) with Radiant Heat in Master Bath

2 Bedrooms en suite on 1st Level with Fireplaces

2 Guest Suites

3 Laundry Rooms

All New Mechanicals, Plumbing, Electric

Hydro Air Heat/Central Air Conditioning

400 amp Electric

Security System / Intercom System

Central Vacuum

Schools:

Parochial

Cluny School – 95 Brenton Road, Newport (pre K – 8)

Private

St. Michael's Country Day, 180 Rhode Island Avenue (pre-K – 8)

St. George's School, 372 Purgatory Road, Middletown (9 -12)

Portsmouth Abbey School - Cory's Lane, Portsmouth (9 – 12)

For Brokers:

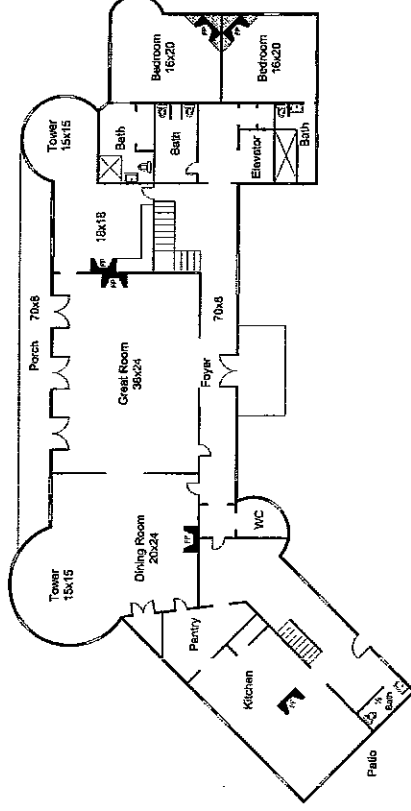
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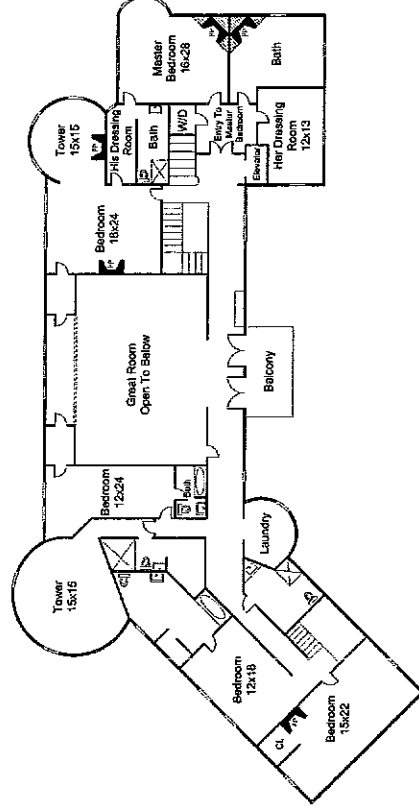


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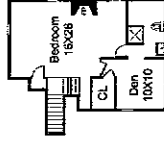
First Level



Second Level



Third Level West



Lower Level West

