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BY COLIN W. SARGENT

TOWN AND SHORE

BUILT ON A SOARING BLUFF for reporter, editor, poet, publisher, and lawyer **Sylvester Blackmore Beckett** (1812-1882), **Beckett's Castle** is a storybook retreat, stone by quarried stone. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, this one-acre estate with Norman tower and 350 feet of oceanfront is being offered for \$3.35M.



Below right: The rose gardens, planted by Harvey and landscaper Lynn Shafer on the granite outcroppings of Cape Elizabeth, caught the eye of international rosarian Peter Beales. Beales featured the garden in his 1996 book, *A Vision of Roses*.

Maine State Historian Earle Shettleworth Jr. has identified this Gothic whimsy as one of the first summer residences built strictly for vacation purposes on the Maine coast. To see it, head south along Shore Road, pass Fort Williams and Delano Park, then turn left on Singles Road until you reach No. 7.

The most recent resident is the late Nancy Brill Harvey (1930-2016), who adored her role as keeper of Beckett's Castle. Her daughter, Abby Harvey, is overseeing the sale.

DEAL OF THE CENTURY

"My mother bought the house in 1982, at a real auction and not before the auction, as I've read somewhere on the internet," Nancy's daughter says by telephone from Cambridge, Massachusetts. "She paid \$100,000."

By then, the castle was endangered and up on the block for back

taxes. After Sylvester Beckett died in 1882, the property passed to his daughter, Augusta Beckett Verrill. Sometime before 1963, it was bought by an Army officer who'd served at Fort Williams. Lt. Col Walter Singles left the castle "to his daughter," Edna Singles Thomas, but life dealt her an unlucky hand and she was unable to live the fairy tale.

In the end, a number of "squatters lived in the house," Abby says, doing what they could to stay warm in the dark winters. "Because the fireplace was no longer usable, they'd have fires in the middle of

the [living] room," having dragged in "a fire pit." There was a lot of "drinking and supposedly nudity."

A social worker with a 1981 Master's Degree from Boston University, Nancy Brill Harvey saw beyond the mountains of beer cans as she cleared and lovingly restored



Bas-relief of Sylvester Beckett by Benjamin Paul Akers, 1851.



the house and launched a private practice in downtown Portland "which she ran for 15 years," Abby says.

GALAXIES OF ROSES

In her mind's eye, Nancy also saw world-class seaside rose gardens shooting up be-

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An aerial photograph of Beckett's Castle, a large stone house with a prominent square tower, situated on a rocky, forested hillside. The house has a grey roof and a large glass-enclosed porch. The surrounding landscape is lush with green trees and shrubs, with a rocky outcrop in the foreground.

One of the Early Birds

Only a handful of vacation houses graced the Maine coast before **Beckett's Castle**. "To the best of my knowledge, the first summer cottage on the Maine coast is Glen Cove Cottage on Cape Elizabeth, which dates from 1853 and is now the home of Dr. Bruce Nelson on Shore Road," says Maine State Historian Earl Shettleworth, Jr. "The next one would be Grove Hall, the Goddard Mansion at Fort Williams, which dates from 1858 and is now part of Fort Williams Park. The first Bar Harbor Cottage was built by Alpheus Hardy in 1868 and is no longer standing. Several Bar Harbor cottages were built in the late 1860s and early 1870s—about the time of the construction of Beckett's Castle. Thus, Beckett's Castle is not the first summer cottage on the Maine coast but an early example of the building type."

tween the savage granite outcroppings of the castle's spectacular vantage.

So successful was she in creating these surf gardens with landscaper Lynn Shafer that word of her castle's beautiful mantle crossed the Atlantic. World-renowned rosarian Peter Beales came from London to visit Nancy and see the wonders of Beck-

ett's Castle's gardens for himself "a few years before his book *The Vision of Roses*, came out in 1996," her daughter says.

Of this coffee-table book, realtor Tish Whipple says, "If you flip to the garden before Nancy's, you'll see it was the Queen Mother's."

So it was Nancy Harvey herself, in a du-

et across more than century with the original Beckett, who discovered a way to divine and interpret the genius loci of Beckett's Castle.

"My mother had this sort of contagious character," Abby says. "Her favorite spots were the kitchen and her rose gardens. She loved to cook. She really adored the people



who helped her restore and keep the house. She loved her children and grandchildren first, but she loved her house, too, and everyone who understood it. So she'd have people over to celebrate—everyone from architect Stockley Holmes to the painters to contractors to those who worked with her—or just appreciated her—gardens.” Who’d re-

fuse an invitation to a place like this?

Another drawing card was the magic of looking out and seeing four lighthouses: “Portland Head Light, Ram Island Light, Seguin Island Light, and [the East Tower of] Two Lights.”

Say it’s an icy day on Shore Road. What

did Nancy like to serve in her romantic castle? “Chicken cassoulet. Deep, rich stews. Of course, she’d have lobster. But the memories I have of what she served often came in a soup bowl.”

Nancy Harvey was what used to be called an original: “She liked to make up words. A ‘drooly’ day by the ocean on an overcast



day." If ever someone offered help when she didn't wish it, Nancy would laugh and say, "No need. I'm Miss Tuffington. I can take care of this all by myself!"

COME INSIDE

Who doesn't adore a castle on the Maine coast? "I love the bay window that's off the living room and dining room," says Tish Whipple. "It's all glass above wood floors. It has this amazing view up and down the coast." In the pre-dawn darkness and at sunset, "I love the way the light comes off Seguin Island."

The living room may be "a small space, but it has all those wonderful Gothic windows in it. It pulls the ocean in so you're on top of it. The house seems to grow right out of the granite rocks. There are wonderful masses of granite stones that the sea rushes over," so from the first you're hearing,



Above: Views from the kitchen and living room extend across the ocean. Stairs to the 30-foot tower lead "right out to the open air."



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feeling, experiencing this castle in Sensurround. “You almost feel as though you’re in a ship. It’s so dramatic.”

Outside, “Flowers may look fragile, but among these huge masses of stone and the granite outcroppings, they connect a tender beauty here. But inside, it’s that window that connects the drama of the ocean, windows, rocks.”

Of course, romantics will head straight for the tower. “The tower has its own persona.” It grabs you on sight. “You arrive at the property in a cobblestone circular drive and see a small cottage structure with a 30-foot stone tower. You enter the tower directly. The walls are probably a foot thick. Inside, you look up and you’re



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HOUSE OF THE MONTH

aware of the height. It isn't grim—you feel as though you've walked into a miniature baronial estate."

But there's a surprise at the top of the tower.

"It goes to the open air," Abby says. "As you're going up, some people expect to find a roof over their heads, but they don't. I've seen some people look as if they're about to throw up!" Halfway up, these guests are in a quandary: "I'm afraid of heights, but I have to see what's up here!"

For those who don't choose to head up to the ramparts, "The living room and dining room are lighter spaces and pull you into the body of the house," Whipple says.

RAISE THE PORTCULLIS!

According to the Rhode Island Society for the Examination of Unusual Phenomena (riseupparanormal.com), Beckett was born in Portland to "William and Grace (Blackmore) Beckett," who

sailed here from England. As a young man, "he took a voyage to the West Indies in the *Bud*, a sailing vessel; was shipwrecked; and his narrative of the event proved a thrilling

experience." Writing suited him. As a reporter, he filed stories for the *Portland Advertiser* and *Portland Bulletin*; as a visionary, he promoted the Grand Trunk Railroad and Portland as a freight destination and was "one of the original projectors of Evergreen Cemetery." As a successful publisher, his enduring gift to researchers is his annual *Portland Directory*, an indispensable street-by-street chest x-ray of life as it's shifted and changed across the years in the Forest City.

In 1842, Sylvester "married Louisa Mills Davis, daughter of James and Elizabeth Davis, of Maine," according to the site. "His wife left him a widower in 1857 and he never remarried. She bore him three children, two of whom, George Waller and Lizzie Grace, died in childhood.

The eldest daughter, Augusta, married George W. Verrill, an attorney in Portland.

"Mr. Beckett died at his home in Portland on December 2, 1882, aged seventy



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years, six months, and seventeen days.”

Sylvester died in Portland in his winter palace at 15 Gray Street. This elegant brick townhouse (pictured above), sadly demolished, was the equal of the well-known houses on Park Street Row. Beckett's Castle was his summer retreat.

Taxes for Beckett's Castle are \$12,546. ■



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