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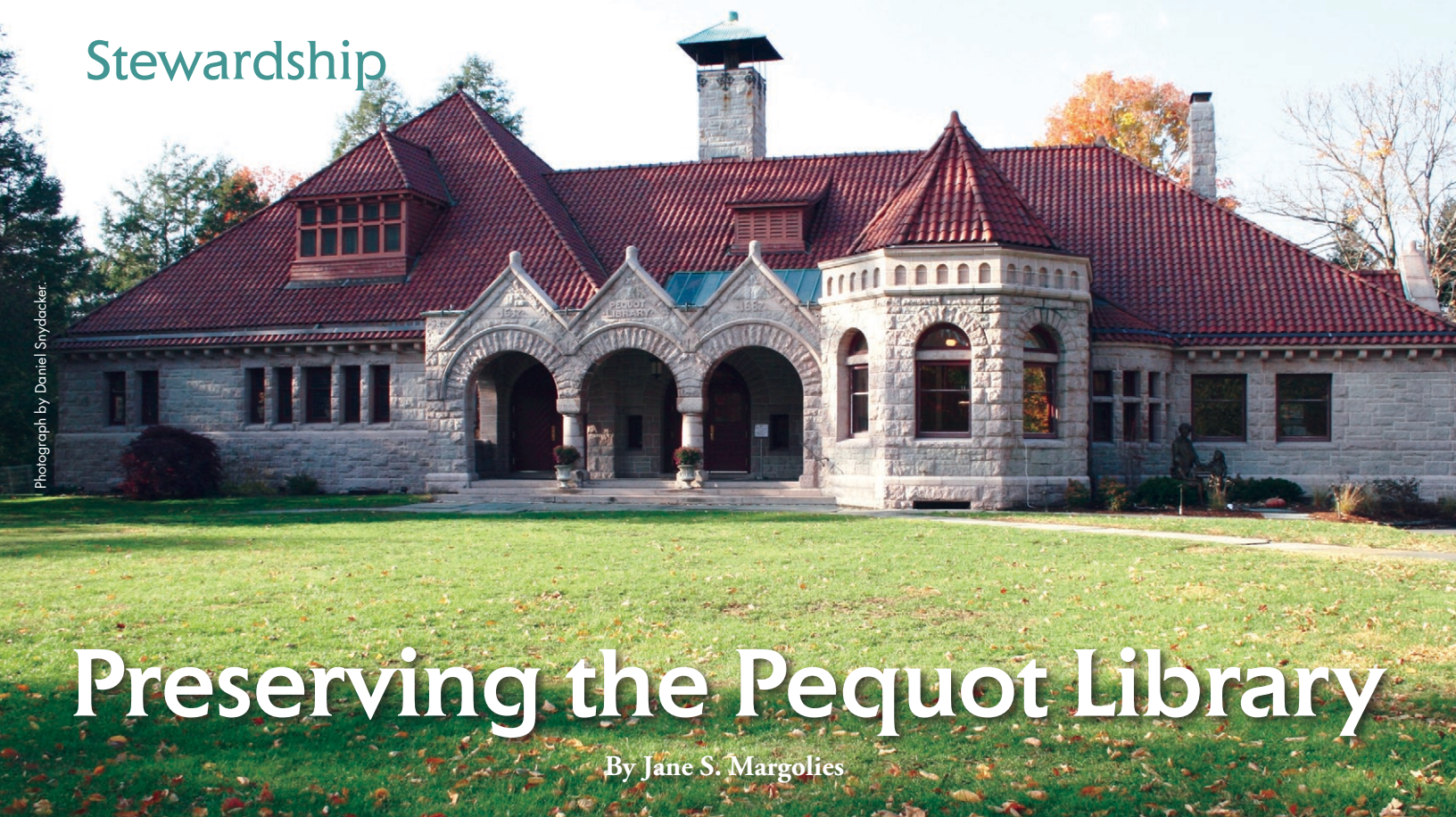
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Convict to Craftsman: Roycroft's Karl Kipp

Renewing a Most Unusual Library



Preserving the Pequot Library

By Jane S. Margolies



Photograph by Jeffrey Hoover.

Above The library's spectacular auditorium features a 35-foot-high pyramidal ceiling, muscular dormers, and inventive angled corner trusses. Architect Robert H. Robertson, himself a singer, made sure the room had superb acoustics—which musicians and listeners appreciate to this day.

Top Exterior work on the 1893 Pequot Library included repointing the granite walls, reflashing the roof, redoing the gutters, and replacing missing Ludovici roof tiles. Fortunately, the tile company was still in business in Ohio—and still making the exact same tiles.

It is noon at the Pequot Library, a handsome granite-block building on a sweep of lawn in Southport, Connecticut. In the main reading room, a mother maneuvers a stroller and an armful of picture books to the circulation desk while a teenager taps on a laptop and members of the local knitting club unpack their needles and yarn and settle into leather armchairs in front of the paneled-ash fireplace.

Says Daniel Snyderdacker, executive director of the library and loving caretaker of the 1893 building, "The founders always envisioned this place as a lively center of the community." And now, thanks to a three-year, \$3 million renovation, it once again looks the part. The carved fiddlehead ferns edging the wainscoting curl crisply. The Tiffany windows glow. And in the soaring auditorium, where harp concerts and poetry readings take place, the pyramidal rosewood ceiling has been restored to its original luster.

But the library is more than a buffed-up example of turn-of-the-20th-century design; it's also the repository of an outstanding collection of books and manuscripts. How many neighborhood libraries



Photograph by Daniel Snyder.

Above During the restoration, the water-damaged stacks wing was gutted. Today the metal shelving system gleams after meticulous cleaning. At the end of the aisle, a Tiffany window portrays two pioneers of printing history: William Caxton, the first English printer, and Aldus Manutius the Elder, the Venetian organizer of the Aldine Press.

Right, top to bottom By 1966, the fireplace in the trustees room (now the gallery) had been painted over; by 2003, it had been stripped of its original carving, though the tiles had been left in place. During restoration, carver Sten Havumaki used the 1966 photo to recreate the original mantel.

possess a 1474 report from Christopher Columbus to Queen Isabella, not to mention the illuminated 12th-century letters of Saint Gregory?

The visionary who started it all was Virginia Marquand Monroe, a Southport resident and heiress to a jewelry and real estate fortune. She and her husband were among the philanthropists who built public libraries across the country from the 1880s through the 1920s (the most famous patron, of course, being industrialist Andrew Carnegie, who funded almost 1,700 “Carnegie libraries” in the U.S.). When Monroe tapped Robert H. Robertson to design the building, the Philadelphia-born, Rutgers-educated architect had just completed the Adirondacks great camp called Santanoni, as well as Shelburne Farms, the model agricultural estate in Vermont. (He would go on to design skyscrapers in New York, including the 30-story Park Row building, the world’s tallest office tower at the time of its construction in 1899.)

Robertson’s long, low, many-dormered Pequot Library has been labeled “Richardsonian Romanesque,” implying that Robertson was under the sway of H.H. Richardson, the best-known architect of his day. But Snyder, who teaches architectural history at Fairfield University and is writing a Robertson monograph, bristles at the idea that the architect was a mere copyist. “They were all coming out of the pre-Raphaelite style and coming into the Arts and Crafts movement,” says Snyder, who particularly admires Robertson’s attentiveness to human scale and his fondness for idiosyncrasy—for instance, the library’s arcaded portico is situated slightly off-center.

Monroe and her husband not only commissioned the library building, but also began amassing its inventory, which in addition to circulating materials includes a Special Collection of 30,000 rare works. Although the Monroes focused on Americana from the Colonial era—diaries, sermons, journals, letters, and hymnals—the



Photograph by Historic American Building Survey



Photograph by Daniel Snyder.



Photograph by Daniel Snyder.



Photograph by Howard Newman.



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library has since acquired works from many periods. Today it owns 42 of the 52 books of the Kelmscott Press, the 1890s publishing house that William Morris founded to return to the printing and typographical styles of the 15th century. Also in the library's possession is *The Ideal Book*, containing Morris's essays on the art of book design, published in 1900 by the Doves Press.

In 2003 when the library recruited Snyder from the Newport Historical Society, the cream of this Special Collection was off-site (in the 1950s, almost 2,000 items were loaned to Yale University's Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library). And the building was in need of repair and restoration: the flashing around the dormers and chimney was gone, and malfunctioning gutters had caused structural damage; the mortar, originally white, had been tinted a garish red; some of the Ludovici roof tiles had fallen off and broken. Inside, the mechanicals were outdated, leaded-glass windows had been removed, and carved mantels and woodwork had been sheet-rocked over, coated with layers of detail-obscuring paint—or completely ripped out. The place was in a state of “architectural confusion,” says Jeffrey Hoover, principal of Tappe Associates, the Boston architecture firm hired for the renovation (Petra Construction was the contractor).

The game plan was to tease out as much of the original detail as possible, and recreate the rest. A battery of pros,

Right The Pequot Library owns nearly all the titles published by William Morris's Kelmscott Press, many embellished with illustrations by Edward Burne-Jones.

Opposite, top and bottom The architect even designed the shelf-ends and supports for the library stacks, all of which have now been meticulously restored.



Photograph by Daniel Snyder.

from paint analysts to lighting artisans, sprang into action. Newmans, Ltd., metal conservators of Newport, Rhode Island, had the daunting task of restoring the bookshelves in the stacks wing. More than 6,350 cast-iron parts—including the supports for the pine shelves, originally ordered from the Library Bureau company run by Melville Dewey, of Dewey Decimal fame—were taken apart, labeled, nestled into custom-designed color-coded cardboard boxes, and transported via two moving vans to Rhode Island. There, the shelf ends were cleaned of years of dirt and greasy carbon deposits dating to the time when the library was lit by coal gas, then lightly sprayed with matte black boat paint to prevent further oxidation. The copper-plated columns were bathed in a chemical wash, hand-polished, and coated with clear lacquer.

Meanwhile, new architectural details were made for rooms that had been stripped of originals—an effort that was greatly aided by a cache of old doors, balustrades, stained glass, and brass light fixtures found in the basement (“The great thing about libraries is that they save stuff,” says Hoover gratefully). Old black-and-white photographs also proved invaluable, enabling the architects to make detail drawings for fireplace carvings. Fortunately, the tile on one of the fireplaces was still intact, so North Prairie Tileworks was able to reproduce the 1-by-4-inch earth-tone rectangles for the other two. In the same way, the existing decorative battens on the ceiling of the periodicals room became

the models for new battens in the main reading room. Daniel Snyder and David Frasinelli, chair of the library building committee, were involved in every decision, even getting down on their hands and knees in the stacks wing to make Xs on the white penny-round floor tiles that were cracked and needed to be replaced.

Now, with the renovation triumphantly complete, the library is already preparing for its next act: an addition, designed by Robert A. M. Stern, to include a children’s wing, a technology center, and a state-of-the-art archival storage facility that will make it possible to bring all the items in the Special Collection “home again,” says Snyder. For now, the library puts a selection of its treasures on rotating display in two archival cases. Once a week Snyder orchestrates a ceremonial turning of the pages—first raising the display case’s plexiglas bonnet, then sliding out the deck on which rests, say, the 554-page Kelmscott Chaucer, considered by many to be the most beautiful book in the world. This ritual accomplishes two things, according to Snyder: education (members of the public get to see different parts of the book) and conservation (no single spread is exposed for too long, nor is undue strain placed on any one part of the binding). “It turns something static into something dynamic,” says Snyder, who has shown that a 116-year-old library can be a very dynamic thing, too.

The Pequot Library is located at 720 Pequot Ave., Southport, CT 06890 (203-259-0346 or www.pequotlibrary.org).