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Snowballing renovations
In Amherst, a new development has sprung up on a historical estate

By Aubin Tyler, Globe Correspondent
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AMHERST - In 1859, businessman Leonard M. Hills and his son, Henry, opened a straw-hat business next to the new railroad depot, a half-mile from town.

A few years later, the pair built twin Italianate mansions overlooking their factory. The architect had recently designed a similar showplace across the street for the brother of Emily Dickinson, the reclusive poet.

In 2007, Amherst native Jerry Guidera, a former journalist whose family runs a cultural exchange business in town, heard that the owner of one of the mansions - the Henry Hills House - was interested in selling. Intrigued, he called contractor Rus Wilson, who had helped him renovate his own house a few years earlier.

The men decided to go in together to buy the 2.8-acre estate at Gray and Main streets for \$1.12 million in January 2008.

"Having grown up in Amherst, I knew the building as the former Boys & Girls Club and always liked it," Guidera said. Across the street is the family business, the Center for Cross-Cultural Study, which offers programs in Spain and Latin America.

But what started out as a conventional renovation of a fine old home somehow steamrolled into a much larger undertaking. Guidera and his partner agreed to move two other old homes to their site and to renovate a third, creating a "new" block of housing that fit the neighborhood perfectly.

As part of the original purchase deal with the previous owner, developer Barry Roberts, Guidera and Wilson agreed to renovate the 1903 Chapin-Ward House - a commitment Roberts had made to the Town of Amherst. Since the house sat on a public park, the town sold it to Roberts in 2007 for \$500 and the cost of moving it to the Hills estate. Guidera and Wilson, the new owners, agreed to fix it up and sell it to finance their main venture.

"The objective was to make enough money from fixing up Chapin-Ward and selling the other lots" at the Hills estate "to be able to invest enough to restore the Henry Hills mansion and either move in with my family or sell it for a profit," Guidera said.

Then, Amherst College heard about Guidera's undertaking and offered the developers two more old houses, the Potwine and Tuttle Farm houses, for \$10 each.

"The houses are part of the historical fabric of the area," explained Aaron Hayden, the college's construction manager and a local selectman. "They're important to us - to the town. We love our houses, we just like to move them out of the way."

And, joked Guidera, "We were foolish enough to go along with it."

Amherst College, which also owns the Dickinson homestead and the Evergreens mansion just west of the project, paid to move the Potwine and Tuttle Farm houses for what it would have cost to demolish them.

Chapin-Ward was the first house to be refurbished, and last month computer consultant Brett McDowell, 36, and his wife Sandra, 39, bought the home and its two-story carriage house for \$590,000.

"We've been trying for two years to come here," said Sandra McDowell. "We never imagined finding a house like this."

Their new house, a four-bedroom 2,400-square-foot white clapboard, retains its original footprint, as well as its period woodwork and stained-glass. Otherwise, the house was gutted and modernized, complete with a new rear-angled Rumford fireplace, a type that was first designed in 1796 to keep heat in and smoke out (Thomas Jefferson had them at Monticello).

"So the entire house has a beautiful, old feel, but it's extremely efficient," she said.

Next door, at the Potwine House, Eric and Jessica Wilkinson and their school-age boys survey the shell of what they expect to be their finished home by the end of July. The couple, recent transplants from the Princeton, N.J., area, have the house under contract - it was listed at \$400,000 - and expect the renovations to cost another \$300,000.

"I wanted an older home," said Jessica Wilkinson, 39, an environmental policy analyst. "They showed us the Chapin-Ward House and we really loved it. Then we walked in next door and I had heart palpitations. I still do."

Like their first project, the developers plan to preserve the historical feel of the 3,000-square-foot Greek Revival structure, while updating it to make it energy-efficient.

"It's a great old house with great bones, and the things that usually go wrong - old plumbing, old electric - none of those issues are present," she said. It's "the ultimate in reuse."

Like the McDowells, Wilkinson and her husband, who is an environmental lawyer, were drawn to the in-town location, proximity to schools, the library, dining, and the railroad station.

The Potwine House originally sat on the Amherst Common and probably dates to the 1820s, according to Ed Wilfert, a Gray Street neighbor and local historian.

The Potwine or Potwin family are listed in the 1870 census with a daughter, a servant, and five students.

The house was moved from the common in 1868 for construction of Spring Street.

Now its most recent relocation from Spring Street allows for an expansion of the Lord Jeffery Inn, also owned by Amherst College.

The last building - the 4,200-square-foot Tuttle Farm House - was plucked from the top of a high grassy slope with a view of the Pelham Hills.

It had sat empty for years and had become a target for vandalism and arson. Yet its wide plank floors are in good condition and it has five fireplaces, including a brick hearth with two fireboxes for baking.

"That's what makes these old houses so worth saving," Guidera said.

The house is listed for \$400,000 "as is," but, like the Potwine House, he expects to renovate it with help from a prospective buyer.

The Tuttle House, built in Ware by the Miner family and then moved to Amherst in 1941, dates back to at least 1846.

In the late 19th century, two of the Miner family daughters married Amherst College professors; one of them was Charles A. Tuttle. The college bought the house in 1964 and used it for faculty housing until the mid-1990s.

And what of the old Henry Hills mansion, designed by William Fenno Pratt?

The 6,000-square-foot "Italian villa" occupies 1.25 acres and lists for \$850,000 - as is.

Next door, its twin, now the Amherst Woman's Club, is now part of a separate property.

The Hills House mansion still has soaring archways, a granite staircase, and five chimneys.

Its interior features include original parquet floors, 13-foot ceilings, eight marble fireplaces, oil-lamp chandeliers, and decorative crown molding, as well as servants' quarters in the rear.

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