The Most Famous House in New Hampshire

It's a spectacular 1784 Georgian built on 141 stunning acres—but that's not why it's so well known.

Maybe you New England historians have already identified it from the photograph herewith. Yes, we're writing about the famous Ocean-Born Mary House in Henniker. Our files here at Yankee are full of magazine and newspaper stories about the Ocean-Born Mary House. We've even done a few ourselves, in 1972 and again in 1996. But when we learned it was for sale this spring (asking $1 million)—the house now fully restored, with those 141 gorgeous acres, a four-car garage, a carriage house, and a sugar shack, plus a rather new screened-in porch with spectacular views across the valley through which the Contoocook River flows—well, we couldn't resist bringing you the Ocean-Born Mary House once more.

So a couple of months ago we drove over to Henniker and visited with the current owners, Terry and Bob Stamps. Bob is originally from Nashville, Terry from San Francisco, but they had always yearned to live in an authentically old house in New England. When they both retired from many years at Hewlett-Packard in California, they began house-hunting trips, and in 2000 they found the Ocean-Born Mary House. “We knew this was what we were looking for the minute we walked in the door,” said Bob, as we settled into the family room in front of one of the biggest brick fireplaces we’ve ever seen (and there’s another, just as gigantic, in the adjoining room!). The restoration and renovation work they’ve done in the years since (including a brand-new “period” kitchen and a brand-new master bedroom suite, which has one of the house’s six fireplaces) is all listed, one thing after another, on three sheets of paper Bob gave us—single-spaced.
FROM TOP: Originally sited on 6,000 acres, the house has retained 140-plus acres of its quiet country setting; the family room's oversize hearth is among six fireplaces in all.
"The previous owners did much of the heavy lifting," Bob said modestly, referring to Bob and Mary Gregg, who'd purchased the place in 1972 (after seeing our article) and raised their four children here. In other words, due to the work done by the Greggs and particularly the Stamps, every inch of the Ocean-Born Mary House today is in pristine condition. So why are the Stamps selling? Well, because with advancing age they'd like to be where the winters are a little milder. We can understand.

Of course, during our chat with Bob and Terry that morning, we had to clarify why the Ocean-Born Mary House is so famous. No, it's not because it's more than 230 years old. And no, it's not because it's said to have been visited by the likes of General Lafayette, Daniel Webster, and President Franklin Pierce. Rather, it's because of two legends: one mostly true and one, unfortunately, not. So for those of you unfamiliar with either tale, here goes...

The mostly true legend: On July 28, 1720, the Wolf, on its way from England to Boston, was captured by a pirate by the name of Don Pedro (though some say that was not his real name). Among the passengers were James Wilson and his wife, Elizabeth, who had just given birth on the ship to a baby girl. When Don Pedro heard the baby cry, his pirate heart melted. He said that if the Wilsons named the baby Mary, after his mother, he would spare everyone and allow the ship to proceed. He even gave the Wilsons enough silk for a dress Mary could wear at her wedding. (On our recent tour of the house, we were fascinated to see a framed piece of that silk hanging on a wall in the den.)

Skip ahead to 1742, when the grown-up Mary, now living in Londonderry, where the Wilsons had settled, married James Wallace in a dress that some say was made from the pirate's silk. They proceeded to have
five children, one of whom, Robert, would go on to build what became known as the Ocean-Born Mary House in nearby Henniker, in 1784. Oddly enough, while Robert and his family lived there for years, Mary never did: After her husband died, she lived about a mile away with another of her sons.

According to one myth, the pirate Don Pedro buried treasure here—and he himself lies beneath one of the hearthstones.

Now, the legend that’s not true: The pirate, Don Pedro, actually built the house after retiring from the sea, eventually inviting Mary to live there too. Moreover, this version of the story says that Don Pedro buried treasure somewhere on the grounds and that he himself lies buried beneath one of the 3-ton hearthstones in front of those gigantic fireplaces. All of these fabrications were begun and promoted by a Mrs. Flora Roy, the house’s owner from the 1930s to the 1950s. She apparently enjoyed the attention her tale engendered; we’d bet that it also contributed significantly to the property’s fame.

So there you have it: our third Ocean-Born Mary House story in 45 years. Maybe someone who appreciates its historical authenticity and beauty will take over for Terry and Bob Stamps this summer. Then perhaps in 20 or 30 years it’ll become available once again … in which case we’d hope to mosey on over to Henniker for the fourth time.

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