

Brucemore Today

Margaret Hall's gift of Brucemore to the National Trust for Historic Preservation has allowed thousands of people to enjoy the estate each year. It has served as a place to learn about local history and as a backdrop for cultural activities. Since opening to the public in 1981, Brucemore has made the transition from private home to public historic site and community cultural center. The families' history and traditions have provided the foundation for tours and the inspiration for programs. Restoration projects have focused on maintenance and enhancing the story of Brucemore.

When a private home becomes a public place, many things must be added or changed to accommodate the many people who visit. The first changes made to Brucemore in 1981 involved providing for visitor safety. Parking lots, driveways, exterior lighting, and fire protection were all enhanced. In 1992 a maintenance building was built near the servants' village. It was the first new construction at Brucemore since 1912. The building was designed to match the historic structures while providing storage space for large equipment. The maintenance building filled this need. The rehabilitation of the Douglasses' 1911 barn into a Visitor Center was completed in 1999. This building contains two exhibits, the Museum Store, and staff offices.

One condition of Mrs. Hall's gift of the estate was that it be used as a community cultural center. When Brucemore first opened to the public, it was not a typical house museum. The mansion provided office spaces for non-profit organizations. The master bedroom suite was changed into meeting rooms, an example of adaptive use. Tours were offered by appointment only. The public interest in touring the mansion was so great that in the late 1980s the use of the estate started changing. The non-profit groups moved out of their offices, tour hours were offered regularly on a "drop in" basis, and rooms were restored to the Douglas era.

From its beginning as a historic site, Brucemore has hosted many cultural activities. The inspiration for the programs has come from the traditions of the three families. The Douglasses actively supported theater, visual art, and music programs. Evidence of their love of arts is found throughout the mansion and in their diaries, scrapbooks, and letters. The arts tradition at





Brucemore has remained strong. Each year festivals, theater productions, large music concerts, and activities for children attract people of all ages.

Margaret Hall continued her family's tradition of supporting the arts, but the Halls also used the estate as a means for promoting Cedar Rapids. Howard often entertained potential clients and business leaders at Brucemore. Since 1981, corporate members have used it for similar purposes. The Halls used their basement rec rooms and pool area for

casual entertaining. Today, Brucemore continues their traditions by offering events like the holiday open house, garden walks, and children's tea party.

In addition to events, visitors enjoy the gardens, walk the grounds, and play on the lawn. These activities reflect the families' daily use of their estate. Built a distance from downtown, Brucemore was a retreat from the commotion of the city. While Cedar Rapids has developed around it, the estate continues to function as a peaceful haven.

Brucemore has an important educational mission. Each year, thousands of visitors tour the estate to learn more about the families and their lifestyles. Restoration of the mansion's interiors has been an important part of teaching visitors. Decorating tastes changed over Brucemore's long history so it was necessary to select a time period for restoration projects. The Douglas era from 1910 to 1925 was chosen because these were important years for the estate and documents and historic photographs were available to guide the restoration. Between 1988 and 1997, the main rooms on the first floor were made to reflect the late 1910s and early 1920s. Several people who were alive during the Douglas era were interviewed to gather information.

For many years, staff offices were located on the servants' side of the mansion after the offices moved to the Visitor Center in 1999, more servants' rooms could be included on the tour. Servants were a very important part of the Douglases' lifestyle and the culture of the early twentieth century. Being able to talk in more detail about the people who did the work at Brucemore has brought an extra layer of reality to the tour.

The grounds are also a very important part of Brucemore's story. Each family used the space differently; for the Douglases, it was a key part of the country estate. They hired a landscape architect, O. C. Simonds, to sculpt the natural areas of the estate. Several features of the Douglases era grounds have been restored since 1999. Their circle drive was restored, and



the driveways were paved to look and feel like a gravel road. Trees planted along the driveways from the mansion to First Avenue have replaced those that died in the 1960s from Dutch Elm disease. In the future, other aspects of the Douglas era landscape will also be restored.

Some restoration projects have resulted from necessary maintenance. By the early 1990s, water had begun penetrating the mansion's foundation. This caused problems with electrical systems and standing water near entrances. During the foundation restoration project, the wall was waterproofed and insulated. In the process of digging around it, many artifacts were uncovered. These broken pieces of glassware, medicine bottles, and ceramics have provided many clues about daily life at Brucemore.

The mansion roof needed attention in the mid-1990s. Over one hundred years of exposure to the elements had caused deterioration of the five carved limestone chimney caps. Replicas of these caps replaced the originals in 1995. The mansion's roof was reshingled two years later. The asphalt shingles put on by the Halls had fallen into disrepair. Slate was chosen to more closely match the mansion's original appearance. Bea Eberhart, the Halls' accountant and an amateur painter, had painted a picture of Margaret's parakeet on one of the original shingles. Brucemore staff used this shingle to choose slate for the new roof.

The changes that have taken place at Brucemore since 1981 show that historic sites are not static. Just as the families altered the estate to suit their needs and interests, Brucemore has made changes to meet the needs of visitors. The stories historic houses and museums tell continue to develop as people find new information, artifacts, and ways of interpreting history. As a historic site, Brucemore will continue to evolve as more is learned about the site, its families, and its place in history.

