

## Beauty's hidden cost

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### Living for free in six historic properties will require hard work and a bit of eccentricity

By Tania deLuzuriaga, Globe Staff | November 25, 2007

NEWBURYPORT - Set amid four idyllic acres overlooking the Merrimack River, the Coachman's House at Maudslay State Park could be a Transcendentalist's dream home. Once part of one of the most lavish manors in the Merrimack Valley, the shingle-style residence built in 1903 features crossed gambrel gables, built-in hutches, and diamond pane windows.

A lucky person could soon live there free - but would have to be willing to work for it.

The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation is offering the coachman's complex - and five other "unique historic properties" - to anyone who promises to take care of it. In exchange for promises to fix up and look after decaying state properties, the DCR is granting long-term leases on the likes of a mountaintop lodge and old farmhouses "in some of the Commonwealth's most beautiful natural settings."

Interested parties should be warned: The work is not trivial or inexpensive. At the Coachman's House, the roof needs to be replaced, as do the septic, electrical, heating, and plumbing systems. The sun shines through a hole in the ceiling of the kitchen pantry and what may very well be lead paint is coming off the wall in chunks. Mushrooms are growing on the ceiling on the second floor and behind the house; the holes of a 100-year-old latrine have been boarded up.

"Structurally, it's in pretty good shape," said Kevin Allen, who manages DCR's Historic Curatorship program, one of a handful of such programs in the country through which private parties rehabilitate, reuse, and maintain a historic property in exchange for credit toward a long-term lease.

Started in 1994, the program has previously put nine sites under agreement. Launching its first marketing effort in five years, it is now looking to add six, including the Coachman's House; Smith Farmhouse at Borderland State Park in Easton; Harlow Farmhouse at Ellisville Harbor State Park in Plymouth; Lamson House at Bradley Palmer State Park in Topsfield; Headquarters House at Beartown State Forest in Monterey; and Bascom Lodge at Mount Greylock State Reservation in Adams.

"They all have some historic value," Allen said. "Most of them have histories tied into the parks and the region."

For example, Smith Farmhouse was built in 1880 by a clairvoyant healer and eventually became part of an estate owned by artist and suffragist Blanche Ames. The Civilian Conservation Corps built Bascom Lodge, which sits atop Mount Greylock, in the 1930s.

Most of the properties were summer estates for wealthy business owners that were bequeathed to the state when there was no one left to take care of them.

"Luckily these people didn't have children or they had miserable children that they didn't want to give the property to," Allen said. "Otherwise it would all be subdivisions."

Often, the land included a structure, or in the case of Maudslay State Park, several structures, that have sat vacant for years, eventually becoming victims to the elements, vermin, and vandals.

"Who would want this?" said Tammy Hood, a maintenance worker at the park who cleaned out Coachman's House after squatters were evicted several years ago.

Trash was piled chest high in some rooms, Hood remembered. A closet had been used as a toilet, and animals had gotten in and chewed up the window sills trying to get out. She hopes someone will lovingly restore it.

"It might make a good B&B," she said. "It would be really nice to see somebody that loves to take care of it."

With more than 450,000 acres and dozens of historic structures under its stewardship and an estimated billion dollars in deferred maintenance, the program helps the state maintain properties that might otherwise fall into disrepair.

"It's a race against time on all of these," Allen said.

Prospective curators go through an arduous process that requires them to come up with a use for the structure that compliments its location. Business plans, renovation plans, and budgets, sometimes totaling millions of dollars, have to be submitted. Leases are generally for 25 years.

The perfect curator candidate has a rare combination of skills, money, and eccentricity that enables them to confront a variety of challenges. One property has had issues with bat infestation, another floods periodically, and a couple do not have functioning septic systems.

"You have to be willing to tear down a wall, not knowing what you might find," Allen said. "It could be a family of possums."

While some of the properties are renovated by couples, others are taken over by groups. For example, the Walter Baker Co. Administration Building in Dorchester, once home to a chocolate factory, is now a complex of artists' lofts, while the old Bradley Palmer Mansion in Topsfield plays host to weddings and corporate parties.

"It's definitely not for everyone," said Briar Forsythe, whose parents renovated the mansion.

The family spent 10 years and \$1.5 million renovating the property, repairing water damage, putting on a new roof, and installing a sprinkler system.

"I think with every renovation, even when you do have realistic expectations, it's always a little more than you think it will be," Forsythe said.

Despite the lengthy and costly process, Forsythe said, her parents probably would do it again.

"You can't just find properties like this to buy," she said. "They don't make them like this anymore." ■