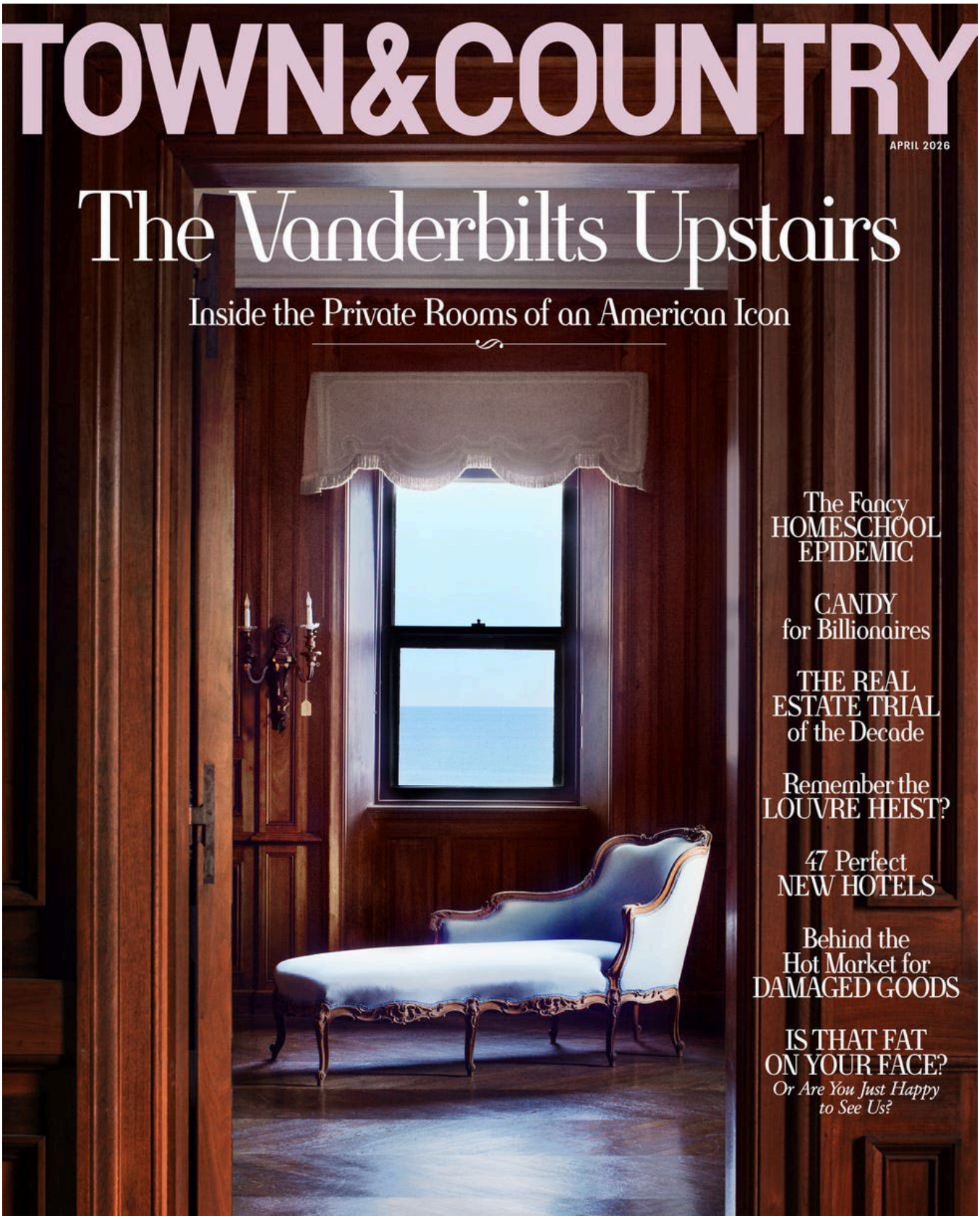

EDWARD ROLLITT

Inside the Private Rooms of an American Icon

BY REMY RENZULLO
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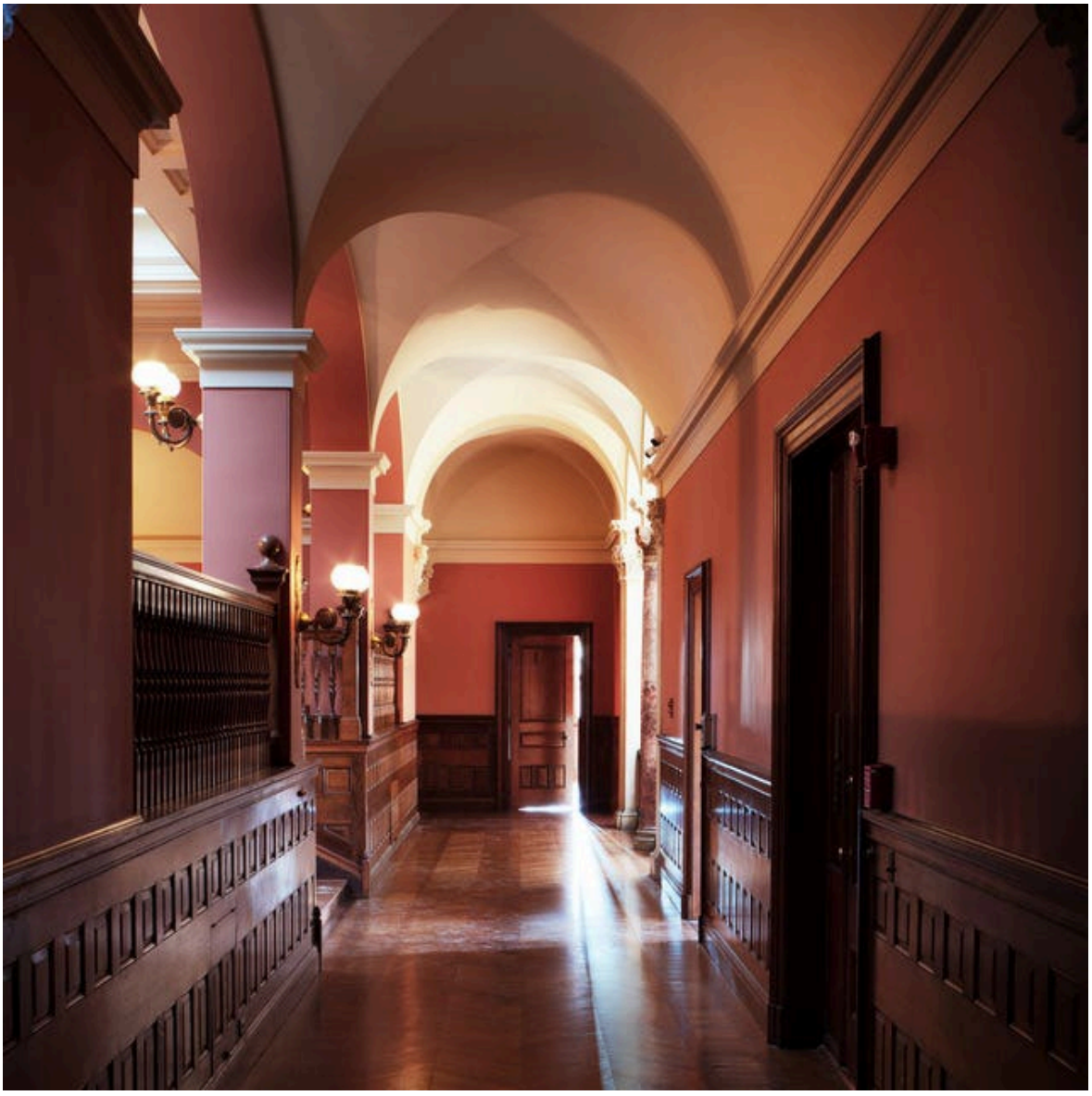
Visitors to the grand rooms of the Breakers might never have imagined that there were, until very recently, descendants of its builder summering above them on the third floor. Now the intimate family rooms of this aerie are open, revealing the real life of America's most famous house at last.



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The Vanderbilts are America's most famous family, their name forever synonymous with the explosion of wealth, industry, and social mobility that epitomized the Gilded Age and arguably came to define the world's perception of the country. The Breakers, their vast Newport "cottage," is one of America's best-known houses. It's a veritable Genovese palazzo on the sea, its forbidding façade rising five stories and dominating the cliffs that it was named for. Open to the public since 1948, it is more museum than home. But what few realize is that until rather recently, descendants of its builder, Cornelius Vanderbilt II, continued the family tradition of summering within its walls. Their Breakers was not the public's "cottage." Hidden away on the third floor, beneath the eaves of the expansive roof, is another Breakers. Not frozen in aspic nor a testament to another age, it has by necessity evolved with the times and the changing fortunes of its occupants. That change continues today. With the departure of the family in 2018, the Preservation Society of Newport County, which has owned the Breakers since 1972, is in the midst of restoring this third-floor aerie. And it is now open to the public (**by appointment via a ticketed tour**), so you can witness the restoration as it happens.

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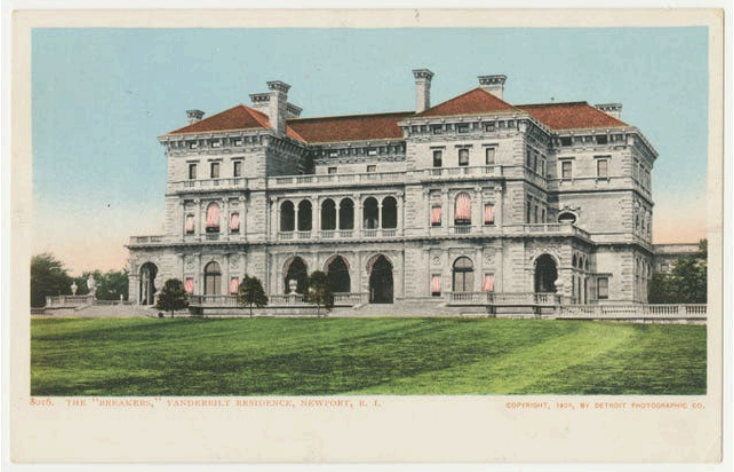
The Breakers we see today is not the original. Cornelius Vanderbilt II, favorite grandson of "the Commodore," purchased the estate, a rambling shingle-style home designed by noted Boston architecture firm Peabody and Stearns, from tobacco heir Pierre Lorillard IV in 1885. Vanderbilt and his wife Alice Gwynne loved the house, but tragedy struck in 1892, when it was consumed by fire. Vanderbilt immediately set out to rebuild, aided by the $70 million inheritance he received upon his father's death in 1885 (roughly $2.5 billion in today's dollars). To build its replacement he turned to the illustrious Richard Morris Hunt, who was something of an in-house architect for the wider Vanderbilt family. For the interiors he commissioned the grand Belle Epoque firm of Jules Allard et Fils, but due to the enormous scale and Vanderbilt's stringent timeline, an additional firm needed to be engaged as well; Vanderbilt chose the young and relatively green architect Ogden Codman Jr. It was perhaps an unexpected choice, but Vanderbilt had his reasons—and they went beyond simple distribution of labor. Codman may have been young, but he was precocious. Moreover, and of greater importance to the socially conscious Vanderbilt, Codman was a Boston Brahmin—a descendant of Bradlees—a bona fide New England aristocrat.



COURTESY PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF NEWPORT COUNTY

How Quaint Built as a "cottage" for Cornelius Vanderbilt II and his wife Alice, the Breakers has long been known as the grandest home in the grandest of Gilded Age enclaves: Newport, Rhode Island. Like any great house, it has done a lot of living since 1895. In addition to serving as a family home, it has been a museum, an air raid shelter, and a film set. Above: The entry to

the Vanderbilt apartments on the third floor, which were used by Vanderbilt descendants until recently. Now visitors can see it for themselves by appointment.

Codman had opened an office in Newport in 1891, through which he made the acquaintance of Edith Wharton, who would become one of his first clients. Though he has largely vanished into obscurity today, he is still remembered for his seminal tome *The Decoration of Houses*, written in collaboration with Wharton. Unlike many of the leading architects of the day, Codman did not look down on decoration as a tradesman's pursuit—rather, he saw it as the natural progression of architecture. It was through his association with the socially prominent Wharton that Codman first came into the orbit of Vanderbilt.

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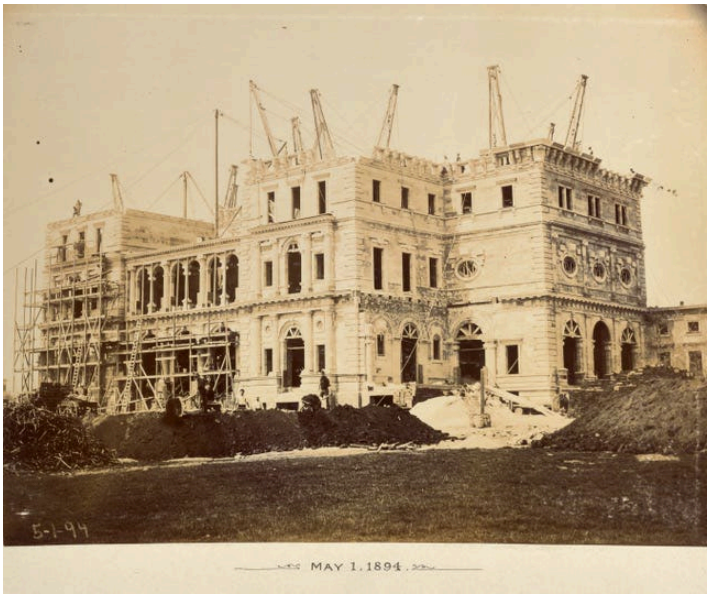
Unsurprisingly, the impetuous and confident-beyond-his-years Codman clashed with the august duo of Hunt and Allard. Codman could neither draft nor keep to a schedule; the latter fact is oft-referenced in surviving correspondence from the project. His work, however, humanized the imposing mansion. He was contracted to create a series of bedroom suites for Cornelius, his wife, and their daughters on the second floor, and a bachelor's apartment on the third floor for the three Vanderbilt sons. These spaces are devoid of the extravagant flourishes that are synonymous with the Breakers and the Vanderbilts. They showcase Codman's passion for the style of Louis XVI, with its clean lines and rigidity of form, a sober and tasteful counterpoint to Allard's exuberant fantasies. While Codman's work in the Breakers may not be purely original (the moldings and embellishments are largely lifted exactly from their *ancien régime* antecedents), it heralded a style of decoration that would become the fashion for America's newly rich upper class for decades.

Fast Track Richard Morris Hunt, one of the most sought-after architects of his day, worked on the grand design of the Breakers with the alacrity demanded by his patron. The interiors were entrusted to two teams: Paris firm Jules Allard et Fils for the first-floor spaces, and Ogden Codman Jr., who left his mark on the more intimate upper levels.



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Despite friction on the design team, the Breakers was completed in an astonishingly short period of time: barely two years after construction began, at the enormous cost of $7 million, in 1895. Whether due to the frenetic pace or just pure coincidence, Richard Morris Hunt did not live to see his masterpiece completed; he died shortly before it was finished. Only a year later Vanderbilt suffered a debilitating stroke and was able to enjoy only one season in the vast cottage of his dreams.

> “Recreating the family’s gathering spaces and showing the ways they ‘lived above the museum’ illustrate what makes the Breakers such a rare American story.”

Alice Vanderbilt outlived her husband by 35 years, and she continued the tradition of the family’s annual summer migration to Newport. Though she was still a rich woman when she died, in 1934, the advent of income and estate taxes, combined with the enormous running costs of her residences, made a sizable dent in the inheritances of her children. The Vanderbilts had long been the subject of public derision, and the newspapers doubted the ability of Alice’s daughter, Gladys, Countess Széchenyi, to maintain the Breakers after she inherited it. Whether this was true, or whether the sheer act of running such an establishment was a nuisance for the cosmopolitan Countess Széchenyi, she did not open the house for several years. In 1948, after the Breakers had sat empty for a time, she decided to open the house again—not solely for her family but, and rather boldly for the time, for the general public to visit. Széchenyi leased the house to the fledgling Preservation Society of Newport County, for the annual sum of one dollar, while continuing to pay the maintenance and taxes on the property. The Preservation Society had been founded

three years earlier to protect Newport homes of historical importance by Széchenyi's friend Katherine Warren. The Breakers was a runaway hit; by the time of Széchenyi's death, in 1965, nearly a million visitors had passed through the doors.

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In opening the Breakers to the public, Széchenyi may well have saved it from destruction, and in inviting the public in, she also made it a family home again. The spaces Codman had conceived on the third floor for Széchenyi's teenage brothers became an intimate, though still fairly grand, setting for family life in the summer. Hidden away above the vast staterooms, they provided privacy for another generation of Vanderbilts and a more manageable space to run.

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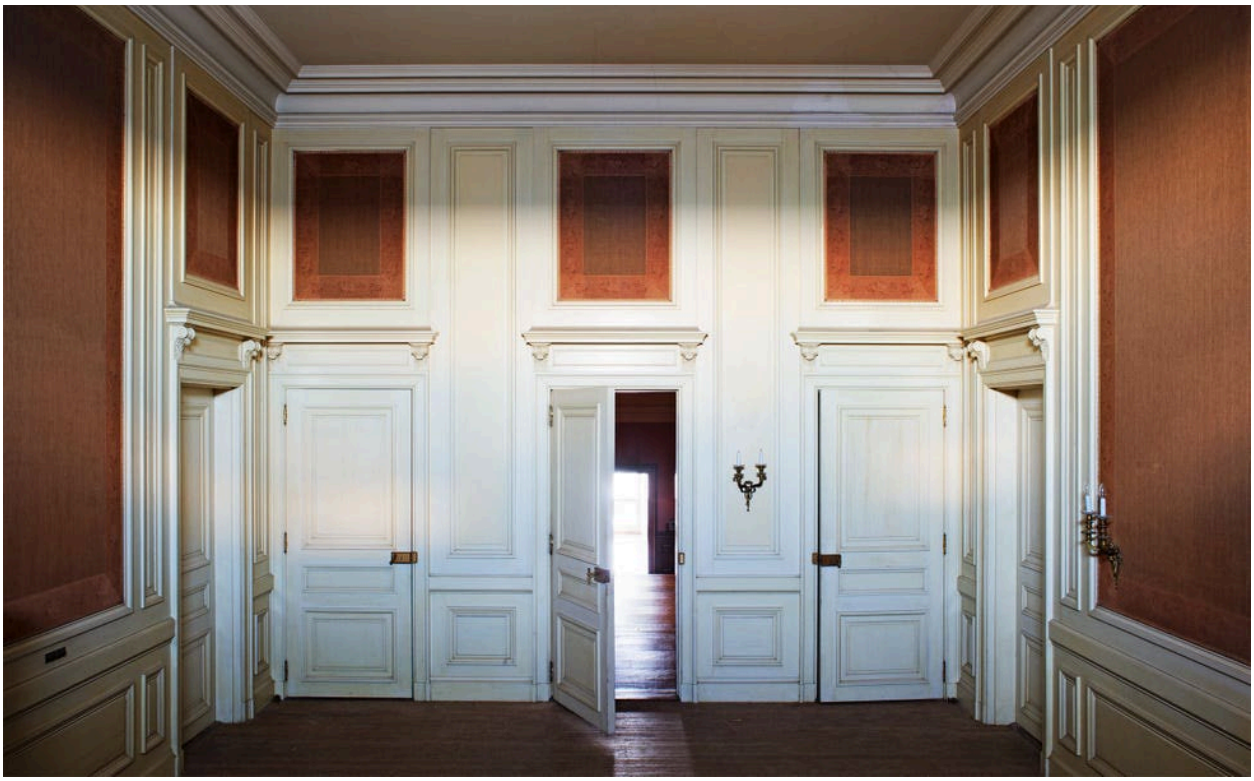
Previously, on the rare occasions when it was necessary, the Breakers could sleep nearly 50 servants, though it was typically maintained by far fewer; the servants' wing has 27 bedrooms. Up on the third and fourth floors, they are reached by a vertiginous and exhausting staircase that connects all six internal floors. After the Breakers was opened as a museum, this would become the family's point of access to their own apartment. The servants' rooms remain as they were when the house was built; in many cases they have the original furniture, the result of both obsolescence and necessity.

It's Electric In 1948, the year the house opened to the public, a new kitchen was installed in a former bathroom (below and above left) by Cornelius and Alice's daughter Gladys, Countess Széchenyi, who inherited the house from her parents. The original stove and icebox are still there, plus other remnants like the servants' wash basins and chamber pots (in a separate closet, natch, top right). The countess's decision to turn the house over to public tours, for $1 a year, is often credited with keeping it standing.

With Gladys Széchenyi's death, so went the live-in staff, as the family continued to economize. These rooms found new purpose as guest accommodations for the ever multiplying members of what is still a very close-knit family. As recently as the June 2000 Newport Tall Ships festival, dozens of Széchenyi descendants crammed into the third floor for a jolly weekend party, filling it to capacity.



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Today the parties are over, a memory of another time. In one suite of three connected bedrooms, one room retains its original wallcoverings, while two received a chintz application believed to have been an unauthorized change made in the 1920s by Cornelius's son Neily Vanderbilt's controversial wife, Grace Wilson (they eloped). Mattresses are stacked up to the ceiling in one corner, and felt-covered card tables are neatly piled nearby, decks of cards long since removed. It is a house in transition, suspended between a gilded past and a more democratic future. Yet the sadness that often accompanies a family's departure from its home of generations does not haunt the third floor. Fabrics may have faded and paint peeled in places, but this is not a ruin; the third-floor apartment has escaped the neglect that frequently follows a change in fortune.

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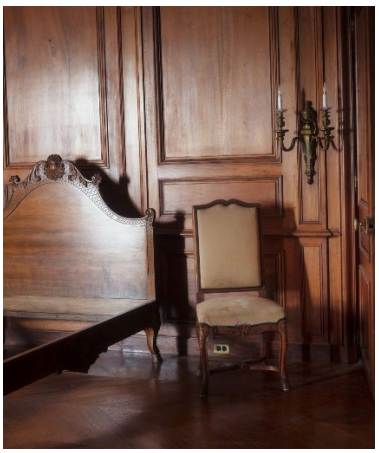
Upon Széchenyi's death the Breakers was inherited by her four living daughters and the children of a fifth who had predeceased her. After several years of negotiation, the heirs sold the Breakers to the Preservation Society in 1972. Under the terms of the agreement, Széchenyi's daughter Sylvia Szapáry could continue to use the apartment for her lifetime. Szapáry, much like her mother, was a considerate and proactive custodian. In preserving her family's home, Szapáry also preserved her generation's narrative for future audiences.



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Today, rather than restore all these spaces to their original condition, the Preservation Society has decided to conserve and preserve the third floor much as it was found upon the family's departure in 2017. "Too often we encounter a guest who believes the historic house museum is designed to be static,' says Leslie Jones, the Preservation Society's chief curator and director of museum affairs, "as if the family up and left, never having made a change to any room across the years. Recreating the family's gathering spaces and showing the ways they 'lived above the museum' illustrate what makes the Breakers such a rare story in the American landscape."

Upstairs Downstairs For decades Mrs. Vanderbilt's bedroom has been a highlight of the museum's public rooms (you can even take a digital tour on the Breakers website). The well-maintained round, fabric-covered room is in the Louis XVI style, just like some of the bedrooms that the Vanderbilt descendants occupied upstairs from 1948 on—though those haven't fared so well. But even with their peeling walls and stacks of long-discarded mattresses, the rooms on the third floor, pictured here and opposite, are a fascinating study in preservation.

Codman's original suite of rooms for Cornelius's sons remains virtually as built, but with the patina of more than a century of occupancy—an extraordinary survival of a particular moment in American social and decorative arts history. Less historically important to keep, but wonderful to see, is the tiny serving kitchen that Gladys Széchenyi installed within a bathroom when she first moved upstairs. Separated by a thin plasterboard

wall are the original circa 1895 bathtub and a gleaming postwar GE electric oven.

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Perhaps Széchenyi was more prescient than pragmatic in opening her home to the public. This act, far from sullying the Vanderbilt name for its extravagance, has lionized it. Indeed, the decision to open the Breakers' third floor to public tours for the first time has, in Jones's mind, "been entirely driven by the family's multigenerational legacy of preservation." Many families are unwilling or unable to see the inevitable on the horizon, and so cling to their patrimony. Not here. More than a century on, a monument to one man's quest for social acceptance is now a monument to his descendants' sense of noblesse oblige.