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The News Desk

AdChoices

Belmont's railing needs repair

BY CLINT SCHEMMER

If you'll pardon the metaphor, the smile on Belmont's face needs some dental work.

Which is to say that the ornate wrought-iron railing of the entrance stairs to Gari Melchers Home and Studio requires some TLC.

That's why Scott Kreilick, a nationally known expert in the conservation of metals and masonry, was inspecting the staircase Monday. He was asked to consult with the Falmouth site after the antebellum ironwork was named among the state's top 10 most endangered artifacts by the Virginia Association of Museums this winter.

Kreilick, whose company has conserved wrought-iron pieces in Savannah, New Orleans and Charleston, and monuments at many sites, admired Belmont's tall, double-curved Aquia sandstone stairs crowned with a railing decorated with iron curlicues and white-metal rosettes, topped by brass finials. "It's a well-made piece," he said. "But it may not have been made for this location."

That doubt is raised by the way the railing attaches to the stone blocks of the stairs. Finding an answer will require more research, Kreilick said.

Belmont's immediate concern is stabilizing the stairs, which have shifted over time, and properly protecting the railing against weathering, said David Berreth, the director of the national historic landmark.

The stairs and railing are solid now, but if the stairs continue settling, that could make them dangerous to use, he said. Getting expert advice will help Belmont estimate the cost of repairs and determine "how far we can go" in conserving the staircase, Berreth said.

Down the road, he hopes that the railing's inclusion on the Virginia Association of Museum's at-risk artifacts list will help Belmont raise money to get the project done.

Such work lies beyond the scope of its yearly operating budget, he said. The historic house and museum is administered by the University of Mary Washington, but it raises about 45 percent of its funds from admissions, memberships, special events and private donations.

The VAM listing should "draw attention to the need for preservation of these precious artifacts, not only among private donors, but among state legislators, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and other state agencies," he said.

"We hope it shows them that there are needs out there that are not being met, and that museums have things well worth preserving in which there is broad interest among the public."

Most museums don't have funds dedicated to conservation and preservation, Berreth said.

Belmont and its supporters established a small conservation fund a few years ago, but with seven historic buildings on the property, "that doesn't begin to cover our needs," he said. Conserving a couple of Melchers' paintings or frames per year, or tackling one building repair, exhausts the fund. Kreilick said he looks forward to investigating the railing's design, materials and creator.

"Iron's a funny thing," he said, noting that it's very difficult to date, unlike other metals.

He doubted Belmont's railing will bear a maker's mark. But its style and construction methods may provide clues,

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Kreilick said.

"It would be nice to know more about this piece's origin, to connect it with a blacksmithing center such as Philadelphia or Charleston," he said.

Beate Jensen—Belmont's supervisor of building and grounds preservation—believes the railing dates to the 1840s. That's when the house's owner, Joseph B. Ficklen, married his second wife, A.E. Fitzhugh.

About that time, Ficklen enlarged the Federal-style house, giving it the center-hall layout that visitors see today, adding porches, creating a boxwood walk with rose arbors and sculpting its high earthen terrace, Jensen said.

Those improvements may have pleased his bride, and were a way of signifying their status and wealth to the community, she said.

In those days, Berreth noted, visitors approached Falmouth's hilltop mansions from the Rappahannock River, and Belmont's terracing and stone stairs would have impressed those seeing them from below.

Ficklen, born in Culpeper, owned several mills in the area as well as the Falmouth bridge across the river. His son, William Ficklen, inherited the house and it was his wife, Julibelle, who sold it to the Melcherses.

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MOST AT RISK

The Virginia Association of Museums, in a first-ever 2011 competition that drew nearly 100,000 votes from the public, named these items the most endangered artifacts at Virginia museums, libraries and archives. In addition to its "Top 10" list, VAM also announced a "People's Choice" winner.

Booker T. Washington National Monument: (photographs with cellulose nitrate negatives), Roanoke
Fairfax Station Railroad Museum: (railroad semaphore), Fairfax

Gari Melchers Home and Studio at Belmont: (wrought-iron staircase railing), Fredericksburg

Hermitage Museum and Gardens: (Korean 18th-century Sakyamuni Triad silk tapestry), Norfolk
Historic Dumfries Virginia Inc.: (wood trunk covered in deerskin, circa 1800), Manassas

Kluge—Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, University of Virginia: (Yolngu bark painting), Charlottesville

Library of Virginia: (executive papers of Gov. Thomas Jefferson, 1779–81), Richmond
The Mariners' Museum: (USS Monitor's revolving gun turret), Newport News

Preservation Virginia: (John Marshall's Supreme Court judicial robes), Richmond

Virginia National Guard Historical Society: (1846 Mexican War national flag), Blackstone

PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARD

Norfolk Botanical Garden: (collection of 11 sculptures created by artist Moses Ezekiel), Norfolk

PEOPLE'S CHOICE RUNNER-UPS

Virginia Museum of Transportation: (Norfolk & Western SD45 diesel locomotive No. 1776), Roanoke
Nauticus: (USS Battleship Wisconsin), Norfolk

By Bill Tolbert on January 9th, 2012 11:05 pm

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