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Rough Point exhibit detailing Doris Duke's killing of Eduardo Tirella modified in light of book

Sean Flynn Newport Daily News
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NEWPORT — An exhibit title outlining what happened on Oct. 7, 1966, when billionaire heiress Doris Duke killed Eduardo Tirella with her car, has been changed from “The Accident at the Rough Point Gate” to “The Incident at the Rough Point Gate.”

Donna Lohmeyer, Tirella's niece, sent the Newport Restoration Foundation a letter in March this year asking the wall exhibit inside Duke's Rough Point mansion, now a house museum, be corrected based on the findings of a new book, [Homicide At Rough Point](#) by Newport native Peter Lance.

Lance presents an accumulation of compelling evidence in the 412-page book that Duke intentionally murdered Tirella at her Bellevue Avenue estate.

More: Eduardo Tirella's family wants Newport Restoration Foundation to correct errors in its exhibit, niece says

Besides calling what happened to her uncle an “accident,” Lohmeyer was most disturbed by the concluding line of the display: “In 1971, the Tirella family brought a civil suit against Doris Duke for damages and lost wages from Eduardo's death. After several days in court, Duke settled the case with the Tirella family.”

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The Incident at the Rough Point Gate

On the evening of October 7, 1966, Doris's friend and interior designer, Eduardo Tirella, was struck and killed while opening the front gate at Rough Point. Doris was driving the car. While we can never know exactly what happened, it is undeniably a tragic event.

We do know that Tirella and Doris were on their way to dinner that evening. She was driving a rented car and unfamiliar with the transmission. Eyewitnesses said Doris was incoherent and clearly in shock following the incident.

Many rumors and half-truths surround this tragedy. Some say Tirella was Duke's lover and he had wronged her, so she killed him—except that Tirella had romantic relationships with men. Some locals claim Doris paid off the Newport Police chief (who retired six months later) and her \$25,000 donation to the Cliff Walk restoration was hush money for the accident.

Perhaps the most persistent tale is that Doris Duke founded the Newport Restoration Foundation as a way of apologizing to the city. While Doris Duke did found NRF two years after the accident, she had been in talks with other preservationists about possible historic preservation projects as early as 1965, based on correspondence in the Doris Duke Archives at Duke University.



The modified exhibit inside the Rough Point museum. *Peter Lance Photo*

The Newport Restoration Foundation has removed any reference to the civil lawsuit or a “settlement” in the modified exhibit at Rough Point and with good cause, as Lohmeyer explained in her letter relying on Lance's findings.

Lohmeyer said Duke and her lawyers rejected an offer by her family to avoid trial for a settlement of as little as \$200,000.

More: 'Homicide at Rough Point' review: Tales of old Newport abound in examination of Doris Duke killing

During the damage phase of the trial, after Duke's attorney denigrated Eddie's reputation, the final judgment that Doris was ordered by the court to pay was only \$75,000 plus interest, she wrote.

“There was never a settlement,” Lohmeyer wrote. “For the NRF to continue to insist that there was, casts my family in a false light and insults Eduardo Tirella's memory.”

After the family's lawyers took their cut, each of his five sisters and three brothers were awarded \$5,620 in court-ordered damages, according to Lance. At that point, Duke, who was heiress to the American Tobacco Company fortune, was earning interest of \$1 million a week on her fortune, he wrote.

The Newport Daily News over the past two weeks made multiple attempts to contact Mark Thompson, the chief executive officer of the Newport Restoration Foundation, for comment on the changes to the exhibit. He did not respond.

When contacted by The Daily News this week, Lohmeyer also preferred not to comment on the exhibit changes.



Eduardo Tirella had spent 10 years doing design work at Doris Duke's five estates and acting as curator for art she purchased. *The Providence Journal, File*

The Accident at the Rough Point Gate

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The original exhibit inside the Rough Point museum. *Peter Lance Photo*

There are some other statements in both the original and the modified exhibit that have been contested. The original and reworked NRF exhibit each say Duke was “driving a rented car and unfamiliar with the transmission.”

However, in a police transcript of an interview conducted after the accident, Duke was asked: “Had there been any difficulty with this car?” She responded, “No, I drove it twice previously. I went to meet Mr. Tirella at the airport and I had driven it on Friday morning.”

When Duke took the stand in the 1971 wrongful death trial, she repeated that statement, according to Providence Journal coverage of the trial.

The modified Rough Point exhibit also says: “We do know that Tirella and Doris were on their way to dinner that evening.”

More: Newport native Peter Lance investigates death caused by Doris Duke for book 'Homicide at Rough Point'

But Lance quotes a contemporary who says they were heading to The Blue Cat, a shop owned by John Perkins Brown to pick up a bust that was the Reliquary of Saint Ursula created to hold the bone fragments of the saint. Duke wanted Tirella to appraise the reliquary, now part of the Rough Point museum, before he left her service.

When The Daily News initially contacted NRF's Thompson for a response to Lohmeyer's request for corrections, he provided a written statement from the organization on March 25.



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“We received Ms. Lohmeyer's letter on Tuesday late afternoon,” the statement said. “In light of her letter, we will examine that portion of the exhibit text regarding the resolution of the case to ensure its accuracy.”

That has happened.



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