



Vander-built



Rough Point is a mansion that seems intentionally designed for a cloudy day or a stormy night. One of the largest of the Gilded Age estates, this Tudor-inspired behemoth is perched upon ten acres at the end of Bellevue Avenue and the beginning of the Atlantic Ocean. There, the sea rages against the rocky shore in a ferocious, beautiful, and eternal conflict that gave the mansion its name.

The estate was commissioned in 1887 by Frederick William Vanderbilt, the third son of the first son of Cornelius - the original Vanderbilt gangster known as "The Commodore." At the time, Frederick's two older brothers were working on or dreaming of Marble House and The Breakers, meaning the siblings are responsible for three of the greatest "summer cottages" along Newport's historic Cliff Walk.

Completed in 1892, Rough Point would showcase a different style than the Beaux Arts Neoclassicism of Marble House or the Renaissance Revival of The Breakers. It was constructed of red sandstone and granite and built in the English Manorial style.

continued

Splendor and Turbulence at ROUGH POINT

WRITTEN BY CHRISTOPHER J. PLAMONDON



an architectural design that produced majestic yet charming country retreats for the absurdly rich. These homes tended to present a more personalized appearance than the cold and classical mansions these businessmen inhabited in their metropolitan power centers

The most common external features of this style include high-pitched gabled rooflines, stone or brick facades with intricate carvings around windows and doors, large groupings of three to four windows to flood the interior with light, and walls surrounding lush gardens. Inside, the style showcases single purpose rooms, pastel color palettes, carved stone fireplaces, and a striking blend of the classic and rustic – intricate millwork on crown molding or wainscoting alongside wide plank wood floors and exposed beams.

But Frederick was much more comfortable in his New York power center, so within a few years he began renting

Rough Point to those looking to escape the stifling heat of the cities. One of these lodgers, William B. Leeds, loved the location so much that he bought the place in 1906.

Leeds was known as the "Tinplate King" due to his stake in the American Tin Plate Company, but his business interests were wide and varied. He was a major railroad guy who also dabbled in biscuits (Nabisco), matches (the fire starters, not Tinder), canning, tobacco, mortgages, trusts, and various power concerns including gas, heating, and lighting. He was also an avid sportsman, which, at the time, meant he was a habitual rider of horses, an avid sailor of boats, and a member of the first automobile club in America.

Unfortunately, despite all the wealth and activity, Leeds died just two years later at the tender age of 46. His wife Nonie maintained ownership of Rough Point but spent most of her time in Europe. In fact, she spent so much time

overseas she eventually married into the Greek Royal Family and became Princess Anastasia of Greece and Denmark. This would quickly become a royal tragedy, however, because shortly after the wedding she was diagnosed with cancer. With her health failing, the princess sold Rough Point in 1922, a year before her death, to James Buchanan Duke.

Dukedom

Duke had amassed a fortune peddling the old and the new – tobacco and electricity – and is perhaps best remembered as the benefactor for Duke University (nee Trinity). But apparently the Vanderbilt home was not quite grand enough for James, so he hired architect Horace Trumbauer of Philadelphia to make it grander. Trumbauer tore out the tennis and croquet courts and found room for two additional wings and a seaside solarium, all of which were added seamlessly and brought the room count to 105.

Unfortunately, James' reign at Rough Point ended with another quick tragedy. Like the Tinplate King and the Princess before him, the Duke was dead just a few years later. With all its sellers and buyers expiring so quickly, one might have thought a rumor of a Rough Point curse would have materialized. But then James passed the estate to his twelve-year-old daughter Doris, and in terms of longevity, her reign would challenge the record of Louis XIV.

It was not just her enduring stewardship, but also the fanfare of a colorful and adventurous life, that made Doris Rough Point's most memorable owner. Soon after her inheritance Duke was dubbed "the richest little girl in the world," and she proceeded, over the next seven decades, to act accordingly.

After being presented to society at her debutante ball at Rough Point in 1930, the statuesque, 6-foot-tall Doris immediately set about presenting herself to the world. Her travels took her around the globe, and it seems with each stop she made news and broke molds.

She slung drinks in a sailor's canteen in Egypt during WWII and served as a foreign correspondent in ravaged post-war Europe. She wrote for Harper's Bazaar in Paris and studied singing with Beverly Sills' teacher in New York. She learned to surf in Hawaii, where she built a mansion on Diamond Head called Shangri-La, and scoured the planet to amass an impressive collection of art. These works included the requisite pieces by European masters, but it was her extensive collection of Islamic and Southeast Asian work that made her stand out as a trailblazing and unconventional eye.

She also became a philanthropist, donating money for AIDS research, preserving scores of colonial properties in Newport, funding child welfare programs, and, quite naturally, bankrolling the building of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram in India. She owned large dogs and even larger camels, and let her pets roam the grounds and halls of Rough Point. Her two Bactrians, Princess and Baby, were apparently sweeteners in the deal for a B-52 Bomber Doris bought from a Saudi arms dealer. She also once put up 5-mil to bail out her friend Imelda Marcos. But don't feel bad for Imelda – she had been detained at the Waldorf-Astoria, not Rikers Island.

Doris' personal life was just as eclectic. She counted Louis Armstrong, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Michael Jackson as



THE YELLOW ROOM

friends. She had an 8-year marriage to a New Deal Politician named Cromwell, and a 1-year marriage to an international playboy named Rubirosa. There were also numerous love affairs (allegedly), that included an actor named Flynn, a jazz pianist named Castro, a surfing pioneer named Kahanamoku, and a general named Patton.

But perhaps her most notable/infamous legacy, especially around these parts, involves the death of Eduardo Tirella at the gates of Rough Point in October of 1967. Tirella and Duke had known each other for many years, and he had assisted her with design issues and antique appraisal across several of her properties. He had also recently worked on movies starring Liz Taylor and Sharon Tate, and it appears he intended to leave the East Coast – and Doris' employ – to pursue his burgeoning design career in Hollywood.

continued



DORIS DUKE 1935



DORIS DUKE'S ASIAN KIMONOS, CAFTANS AND CHINESE ROBES IN VARIOUS COLORS AND FABRICS ON DISPLAY AT ROUGH POINT



DORIS DUKE'S CHINESE ART COLLECTION

This tragedy is a complicated situation that has never been fully resolved and at times sounds like a convoluted TV crime drama. There were claims of an official coverup, including a forged interview transcript and injuries that did not match the accepted narrative. There was the ensuing avalanche of money the heiress bestowed upon the town. And there was also a 13-year-old witness told to clam-up by his father, the retirement of the police chief only months after the incident, and a verdict in a civil case that did not exactly harmonize with the quick absolution bestowed by local authorities.

The official story accepted by the Newport Police came from Miss Duke. Her version was that she and Tirella were leaving the mansion in a Dodge Polara station wagon, and he stopped and exited the car to open the gate. While he was doing so, Doris slid over to the driver's side of the auto to pull it through, and the next thing she knew the vehicle lurched forward, struck Tirella, and dragged him across Bellevue Avenue before smashing into a tree.

It was the apparent strength of this story that led to the case being closed as an accident in less than a week. But there is another version.

This alternate account was exhaustively laid out in the book *Homicide at Rough Point*, by Peter Lance, and was later

backed-up by the 13-year-old paper boy (now in his 60's) who had been told to clam-up by a father afraid of retaliation. In this version, Tirella had just told Duke he was leaving to chase his Hollywood dream, and the two got in a horrible shouting match. Then, as they were leaving the property, Doris, in a possessive rage, purposely drove at Tirella. Eduardo initially landed on the hood of the car, injured but alive, so Doris stopped short halfway across the street, sending him tumbling to the ground, then accelerated again and crushed and dragged him under tons of chrome and steel.

Go ahead and research this story yourself. It seems like an awfully compelling argument. But, if you ask my opinion, I'll make like the kid and clam-up.

Museum

After 68 years as owner of Rough Point, Doris died in October of 1993. She passed at Falcon Lair, her Bel Air estate originally owned by Rudolph Valentino, but her spirit likely resides at Rough Point, which many believed was her favorite residence.

The mansion was bequeathed to the Newport Restoration Foundation, which Doris founded in 1968, and the estate has been operated as a museum since the turn of the millennium. Anyone looking for some exercise can get a good, free look at Rough Point's exterior out at the southern end of the Cliff Walk, but for a more intimate experience the estate is open for tours between March and November.

Outside you can walk the impressive grounds that were originally landscaped by Frederick Law Olmstead, the man who designed Central Park. There you will see the statues of the camels by the circular driveway, the extensive formal gardens, Olmstead's arched stone bridge by the shore, the expansive lawn that was designed to mimic the rolling of the sea, and what is perhaps the most sweeping ocean view on the island.

Inside you can analyze artworks and antiques either inherited from her parents or collected by Miss Duke over the course of a long, sophisticated, and acquisitive life. There is hand-painted wallpaper from China, furniture from France, carpets from Turkey, and tapestries from the 17th century.



ROUGH POINT VIEWED FROM BEHIND

There are items of clothing from the closets of a 20th century fashionista, sculptures of ancient Romans, musical automata, Della Robbia fruit baskets, a curiosity cabinet, and much more. Adding to the appeal of the tour is the fact that the place has been preserved as it was when Doris passed, from the position of the paintings and the jewelry to the placement of the magazines and the Tiffany hair brushes.

Rough Point endures as an homage to the grandest era of Newport's history, while its contents are a celebration of the art and culture of the world.

Like every great mansion, Rough Point has a colorful history all its own, a chronicle with depths we have barely plumbed within these pages. It was a home to magnates, a king, a princess, and some Dukes. It houses a Renoir, a Gainsborough, a Reynolds, and a Van Dyck. It was once a project for the father of landscape architecture, and later a playground for the richest little girl in the world. And bit parts were played by a playboy and a politician, an actor and a popstar, a world-class surfer, a conquering general, an iconic first lady, a Middle Eastern arms dealer, and a Great Satchmo.

There were early deaths, a long reign, endless summers, a tragic scandal, thousands of cloudy days and just as many stormy nights.



TOPIARY TRIBUTE TO PRINCESS AND BABY, DORIS DUKE'S PET CAMELS