

A castle of cement displays tile work

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By Linda George

In many homes, concrete forms foundations and sidewalks, but Henry Chapman Mercer's dreamhouse in Doylestown used this heavy substance in a massive way.

He chose this utilitarian material for his labyrinthian abode because of its plasticity and fire resistance. But mostly because it was the perfect medium through which to display his world-wide collection of hand-made tiles manufactured at the neighboring Moravian Pottery and Tile Works — Mercer's own company.

He dubbed his home of more than 40 rooms "Fonthill 'The Castle for the New World,'" and it is a National Historic Landmark.

Instead of planning from two-dimensional blueprints or drawings, Mercer planned the sandcastle from the inside out — all from a three-dimensional scaled plaster of paris mold, which might explain the mansion's irregular roofline.

Mercer was 52 when he started to build Fonthill in 1908. It took four years while delayed by frequent thunderstorms for eight to 10 hard-working laborers, hand-mixing cement, to complete it. The name "Fonthill" was also the name of a distant Virginia relative's estate, and it literally means a house that stands on a gentle slope near a spring of water.

Concerned about the potential problems of leakage and dampness, Mercer consulted several area engineers, including one who installed swimming pools. A ventilation system consisting of air spaces within the two-foot-thick walls was used to minimize dampness.

At first, Mercer wrapped corn stalks in paper and placed them between the cement walls. Once the concrete was set, the stalks would be burned. But the drawback was that

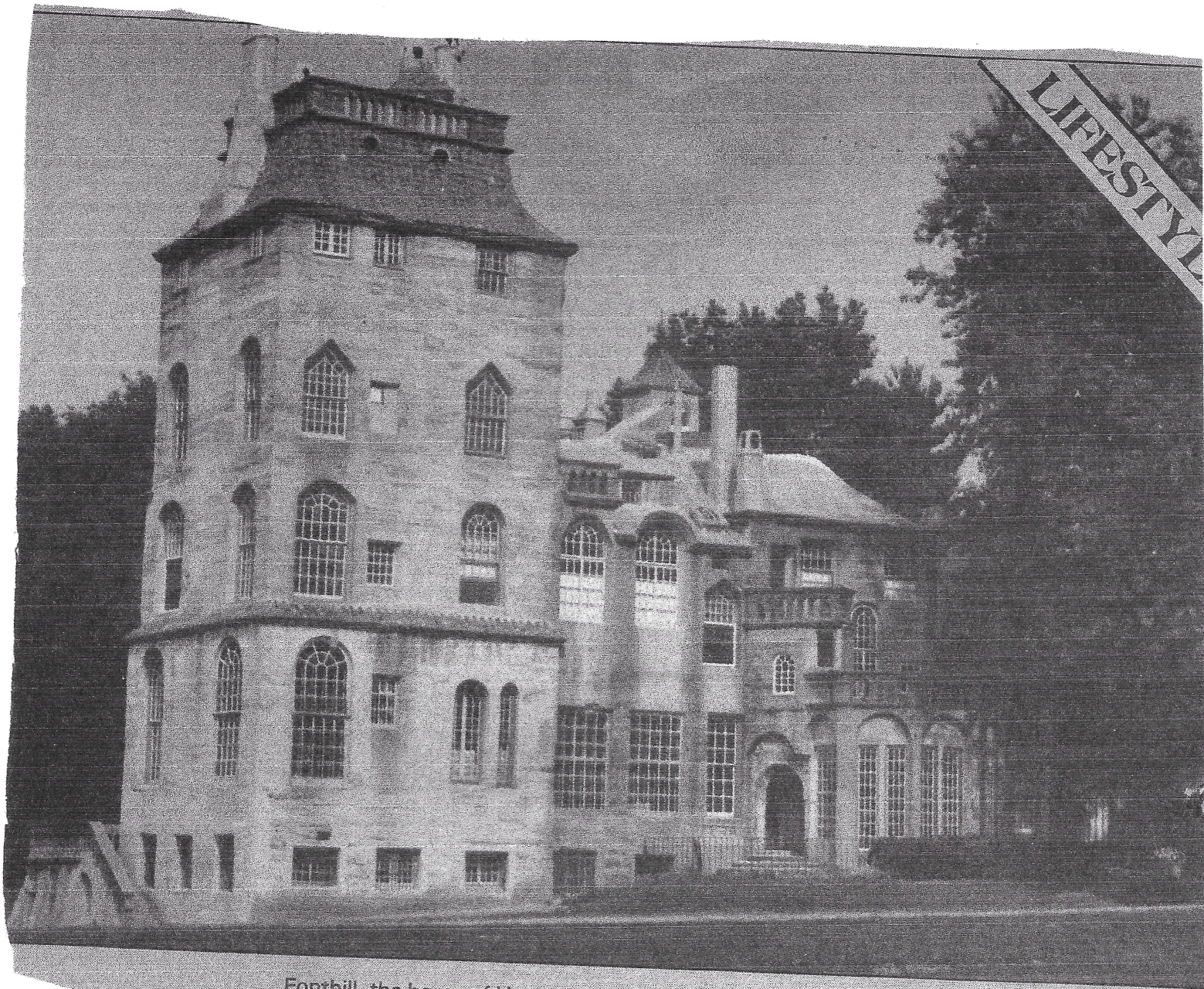
when the stalks mixed with the concrete, they did not burn well.

Finally, Mercer developed a collapsible box that could create an air space in the wet concrete and then be removed after the concrete set.

The resourceful Mercer built his home around a small 1742 stone farmhouse. Wooden forms for the concrete were once parts of demolished buildings. Iron for reinforcing was purchased at junkyards. A few of the outside doors were once planks for a covered bridge.

A discarded wood door was reincarnated into Fonthill's "Key Board," where the organized Mercer housed 60 key slots for the keys leading to a variety of special function rooms, including the morning room, oven room, map room, bow room and coal cellar.

A true Renaissance man, Mercer graduated from Harvard in 1879, spoke fluently in seven languages and had a passion for travel. His penchant for collecting was manifested in an amalgamation of tiles mounted throughout this monstrous house,



Fonthill, the home of Henry Chapman Mercer in Doylestown.

Staff photo by Bob Rain

reflecting Biblical and folk themes in colorful mosaics.

A tiled map of the original Old World adorns the ceiling in the Columbus Room, where this mason perfected his own technique to install the tiles within the high vaulted ceilings. An old-fashioned filament lightbulb lit in the midst of the Sea of Darkness is indicative of Mercer's subtle touches of humor.

The initials EL (standing for his beloved aunt, Elizabeth Lawrence) are inscribed atop every one of the room's asymmetrical columns, as it was she who introduced Mercer to the world of travel and who financed this mammoth mansion through bequests. Paw prints cast in a stairway entitled "Rollo's stairs" immortalize Mercer's Chesapeake Bay retriever.

The references to Latin made throughout Fonthill testify to Mercer's quest for knowledge. "PIVS VLTRA" cast within the library stairway, for instance, means "more beyond."

The saloon where this bachelor

entertained had a collection of Delft tiles, each with a catalog number recorded by the meticulous Mercer. An archeologist, Mercer permanently exhibited Babylonian receipts circa 2400 B.C. at eye level behind glass within one of the room's columns.

One rumor claims that Mercer was pyrophobic and chose cement for its fire resistant properties. Yet the mansion contained five different sources of heat, including hot air ducts, fireplaces and two old-fashioned Russian stoves. The electrical wiring was exposed but probably because of the difficulty of making repairs to wiring hidden in concrete.

Fonthill has been open to the public since the death of his housekeeper in 1976. It was truly an awesome experience to walk through rooms and rooms floored with terracotta tiles, pass through narrow archways and climb the many, many convoluted stairways — with tiles, tiles everywhere — while in wonderment of the productivity of Fonthill's master, Henry Chapman Mercer.