

JUST IN
JERSEY



Photo by Hunter Hulbert



Mansion of Mystery

Discover the grandeur of the Gilded Age
in an intriguing Essex County estate

BY HUNTER HULBERT

Photo courtesy of Getty Images



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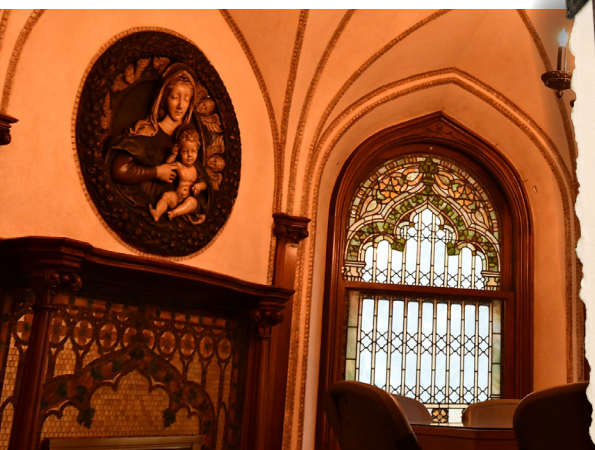
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Photo by Glen Frieson



Photo by Hunter Hulbert



The family chapel features a cathedral-style ceiling, Tiffany-style stained-glass windows and a beautiful Madonna and Child relief.

Photo by Hunter Hulbert



Frederic Kip, left, stands with his son Ruloff and wife Charlotte on the front steps of their estate. This photo is believed to have been taken on move-in day in 1905.

Photo courtesy of Essex County Division of Cultural Affairs

RESTING ALONG THE CREST OF FIRST MOUNTAIN IN VERONA AND MONTCLAIR, KIP'S CASTLE IS A 116-YEAR-OLD ESTATE MODELED AFTER THE STYLE OF A MEDIEVAL STRONGHOLD.

The saying goes that each house has a story to tell, but if the walls of Kip's Castle could talk, there'd be more than enough for a blockbuster novel.

While the vaulted ceilings, Gothic arches and lavish light fixtures do drop a few hints to its history, there's still an aura of mystery that fills the air when you visit the magnificent, 9,000-square-foot mansion in Essex County. Maybe it's because some have reportedly heard a ghost roaming its halls. Or, perhaps it's from the last vestiges of the cultish past that still linger on the walls. Regardless of the reason, there's only one way to ensure you see it all. Let's flip to the first page, shall we?

Like any good book, Kip's Castle wastes no time in setting the scene. Walking up the windy entranceway along the border of Verona and Montclair reveals a fortress that rises strongly against the foreground, striking visitors with its extraordinary, Medieval-style exterior. Such was the intent of textile tycoon Frederic Kip and his wife Charlotte when they constructed the storybook home from 1902

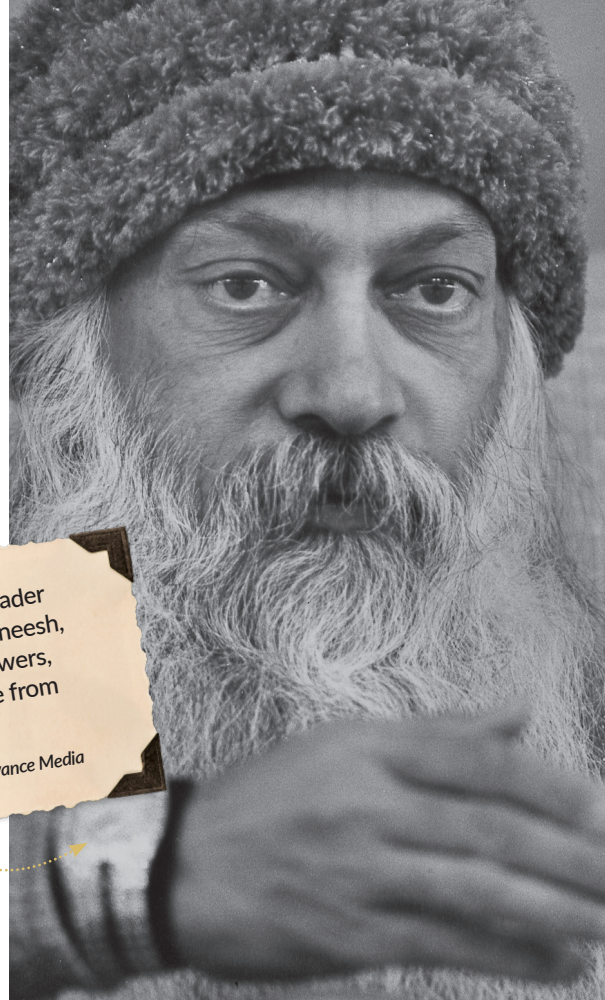
through 1905. They wanted their "Kypsburg" estate (as it was originally named) to reflect the rugged appearance of an indomitable, French Normandy stronghold, so they opted for local trap rock trimmed with sandstone to accomplish the edgy look.

The iconic corner turrets are an impossible feature to miss as they bulge outward and upward from the stone walls, as are the arches and deep-set windows, which pierce the imposing façade. Charlotte delicately balanced the roughness with romance throughout the surrounding grounds, most notably by using small goldfish ponds set within serene gardens. While some of her handiwork has since faded, a stroll around the 11-acre property continues to conjure up the look and feel of fluency while providing a tease of the splendor that can be found inside.

Upon entrance to the mansion, Charlotte's vision unfolds in front of you across 30 distinguished rooms — four of which can be toured today on the first floor. Fix your gaze on the decorative details, like the various Kip family crests, the old English oak woodwork and the ornate fireplaces, and you'll get a tangible view of the grandiosity that came to define America's Gilded Age. From the foyer to the dining room to the family chapel (which is studded with Tiffany-style stained glass windows), every room showcases a glimpse from this glitzy period of time, along with a dash of the unexpected. Whether it be in each space's shape and size or in a structure that presents a surprise — like the airy conservatory with its awesome views of New York City — you'll undoubtedly discover some point of



Photo courtesy of Essex County Parks System



Controversial cult leader Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, along with his followers, owned Kip's Castle from 1981 to 1984.
Photo courtesy of NJ Advance Media

The arrival of winter will mark the return of the ever-popular holiday tours, which features the castle decked out in seasonal décor.



appreciation for this fascinating treasure before your eyes.

"It's important to recognize how finite of a resource this structure is," said Robert Williams, capital historian for the Township of Verona. "When you come to a place like Kip's Castle, you appreciate it for what it is, but you should recognize that it could've gone the route that a lot of other historic structures went. There was a time that it was proposed to build several apartment buildings up on top of the mountain, and luckily that did not happen. This is a resource that is part of America's heritage and part of the community's heritage ... so it's fortunate it was saved."

The compelling story of Kip's Castle doesn't stop there; surely, no novel is complete without some twists and turns. After Charlotte Kip died in 1926, a heartbroken Frederic sold the estate the same year to Signono Munoz, a Chilean immigrant who started a nearly 50-year reign over this regal piece of land that spanned multiple generations. Then, the 1970s came, and so did a series of sales that ultimately landed the castle into the hands of controversial cult leader Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and his followers in 1981.

Their stay in the castle created quite a crazy chapter. Among other things, Rajneesh took out an advertisement in Time magazine preaching about a peculiar idea: spirituality through sex. Sure enough, it took little time for a flurry of rumors to emerge surrounding this Rolls-Royce-obsessed guru. As some local residents stated in an infamous New York Times article from Sept. 16, 1981, they

were "panic-stricken" and "very concerned" by the "unusual sexual practices" that may have been happening behind the closed doors of the castle. While there's no way to know what really went on, the group unquestionably left its mark.

"These people wore this really weird outfit, like a reddish-purple outfit with beads around their neck, and at the bottom of the bead chain was a little picture of Bhagwan," Williams said. "I was told that they had to paint everything white because of purity for (Bhagwan). The most important stained glass windows were not taken out (of the castle), and the windows that were taken out were not the prettiest; certainly, those are still in Kip's Castle."

The departure of the cult in 1984 meant a welcome period of peace after a tumultuous three years. A law firm bought Kip's Castle from Rajneesh and used it as their office for a few years while restoring some of the structure back to its original state. It wasn't until Essex County purchased the estate in 2007, though, that the castle really sprung back to life. Through funding from both Green Acres and Open Space Trust Fund grants came a decade-long revitalization project that finally returned this New Jersey gem to its former glory.

But what about the ghost? Well, some believe the spirit of Charlotte Kip still roams inside. Rumor has it that one could hear the sound of papers turning or footsteps going up the main staircase while alone in the house. Those who want to (potentially) experience it firsthand can typically take one of the Essex County Park System's self-guided tours, but

most are on hold because of the pandemic. However, the arrival of winter will mark the return of the ever-popular holiday tours. For those who prefer to admire from afar, the grounds are freely accessible from dawn to dusk daily.

"Time your visit with the holidays. It is the most magical time to see the castle because it is decorated with lights, candles and decorations, and it really makes you think about how this family would've been spending the holidays in this huge castle," said Essex County Parks System Deputy Director Kate Hartwyk of the "Holiday at Kip's Castle" program, which runs on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays in December from noon to 4 p.m. The castle will be closed Dec. 24, 25 and 31. (Visit essexcountyparks.org/parks/kips-castle-park to stay updated with times, dates and other details. The experience is free.)

Spooky and mysterious stories aside, the foundation of Kip's Castle was built on an unbreakable bond of love that will never be forgotten. Still 116 years later, the palatial property rises above the rest as a lasting symbol of the Kip family's legacy. When you behold the beauty of this bucolic landmark, be sure to appreciate each of its incredible chapters, and don't forget you can only find it ... **Just in Jersey.** ❖

Kip's Castle is located at 22 Crestmont Road, Verona, N.J. 07044