

FINAL EDITION

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# Rockefellers' hideaway

## Army lets media tour secluded Harnett estate

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**FORT BRAGG** — Few Harnett County residents knew that one of America's wealthiest families lived among them until the U.S. Army bought the Rockefellers' 11,000-acre estate in January, but those who did know have wondered about the place for years.

Before beginning work today to convert the Overhills estate, the Army invited a few visitors to marvel at its forested splendor.

Reporters and photographers were allowed in for the first time since 1920, when John D. Rockefeller's nephew Percy Rockefeller bought controlling interest in Overhills and turned it into a secluded family retreat.

In addition to two main houses — called Bird Song and Croatan — the visitors saw wood polo stables and fox hunt stables, a 64-acre man-made lake full of tall, bald cypress and its own boardwalk and waterfall, and numerous outbuildings, including an 1860s-vintage log cabin. The Rockefellers say the cabin may have belonged to one of the



The Army won't house troops in the mansion where the Rockefellers once lived at Overhills.

STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN ROTTET

freed slaves who settled the southwestern corner of Harnett County, then sold their holdings around the turn of the century to a group of land speculators.

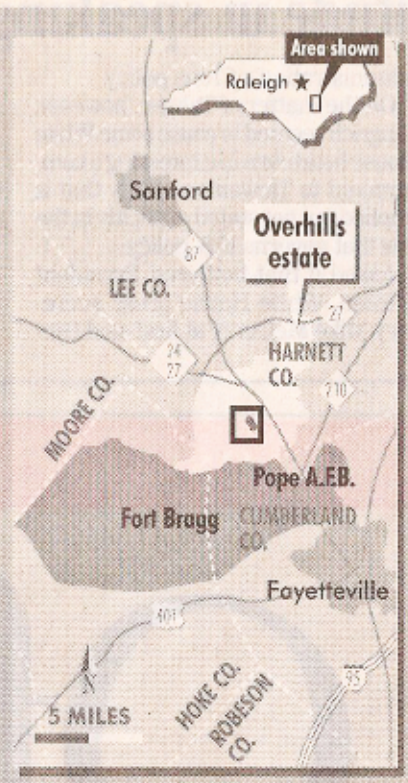
That group hired the famous Scottish golf course architect, Donald Ross, to design an 18-hole golf course and considered developing a Pinehurst-like resort around it before selling off the land to the

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## Mr. Rockefeller doesn't live here anymore

The U.S. Army bought Overhills, the former Rockefeller family estate, for \$29.4 million in January. The 11,000-acre estate, a secluded family retreat since 1920, is on the Harnett-Cumberland county line. The property borders a 12,000-square-foot area on the north side of the Army post.



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## ESTATE

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Rockefellers in 1915 and 1920.

Lois Byrd, 83, former state editor of the Sanford Daily Record, says she always wanted to visit the estate. In 1990, Byrd thought she finally had her chance when she tried to arrange a bus tour of Overhills as part of a public library tour of the county's historic sites.

"But they wouldn't let us in. All we saw was the driveway," she said.

Glenn Johnson, 50, is one of the lucky few who did get a peek. He caught his glimpse when he was 13 and a friend of the Rockefeller family gave him a tour to help him get his Boy Scout wildlife merit badge. He still remembers the carefully manicured lawns, the immaculate mansion and the estate's own hydroelectric generator.

"It was hard for me to believe that something like this existed in Harnett County," said Johnson, a lawyer

in Lillington.

Today, the new owners move in. "Enjoy it," Glen Prillaman, a Fort Bragg official, told the reporters, because the Army plans to convert its \$29.4 million real estate into a restricted training area for light infantry.

For Kim Elliman, 43, the Rockefeller heir who has been Overhills' general manager for the past 15 years, the tour was hardly enjoyable.

"It's my farewell," he said of the place he has known since he can first remember; this retreat, as he called it, where Percy Rockefeller's descendants came together to be a family. In the early years, they came down via a private line off the Atlantic Railroad that ran onto the estate. At that time, Overhills also had its own private railroad station, where in the 1920s and 1930s, family and friends from New York arrived for the Saturday morning fox hunt.

Overhills is where Elliman courted his wife. Bird Song is where his grandfather, Avery Rockefeller, lived out his final years and, in 1986, died. Through Thanksgivings, Christmases, sum-

mers, "people have lived here. People have loved here," Elliman said.

An old guest book shows last names such as Harriman and Guggenheim.

Elliman remarked that his grandfather was almost obsessive when it came to privacy for the family and their famous guests. In his last years, Avery Rockefeller lived at Overhills six months of the year, protected from the public eye by a devoted staff that guarded the estate's perimeters.

After his death, the 80 remaining family members couldn't agree on what to do with the place. Some wanted to develop it. Others wanted to sell off parcels. Some weren't attached enough to Overhills to care what happened to it. They finally decided to sell it intact to the Army.

Fort Bragg officials said Monday that the estate's many homes and buildings will be studied by the state Historic Preservation Office. That study is expected to take two years. After that, some buildings may be leveled. There are no plans for

troops of any rank to live in the houses, said Joan Malloy, spokeswoman for the army's 18th Airborne Corps.

Next week, the two main houses will be caged behind new security fences, and the windows will be boarded to keep out vandals.

The golf course will be overgrown and used as a helicopter landing area.

As the military officials spoke, Elliman's hands twisted and retwisted the cap of a felt-tip pen. He tapped his feet. His eyes glistened. This is a sad day for him, he said, "made sadder by the beauty of it."

"It's not without a good deal of regret that we sold Overhills," he said. "But we think the Army will be good stewards of this land — as we have been — and knowing that takes the edge off some of the sadness. This was an expensive infrastructure to maintain. And this is a different era."

Still, he said, "there is nothing like riding a good horse through the sandhills and longleaf pines of North Carolina. I will miss it."

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