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Lifestyle

## Flaglers' dining furniture returns to Whitehall after almost 100 years

**By Susan Salisbury, Special to the Daily News**

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The exotic satinwood dining furniture that graced Whitehall when Henry and Mary Lily Kenan Flagler lived at the Gilded Age estate has returned to the Henry Morrison Flagler Museum after close to a 100-year absence.

The original ca. 1900 French Renaissance-style dining table, 24 chairs and two sideboards, the work of noted New York design firm Pottier and Stymus, journeyed through multiple owners before coming home. The museum at One Whitehall Way, Palm Beach, purchased the furniture in 2018, and a year-long restoration followed.

The furniture returned to the museum in November, but the restoration of the sideboards was completed two weeks ago with the installation of new cornices.

Museum Trustee Thomas S. Kenan III said in a statement, "After the furniture was sold from the Whitehall estate in the 1920s, the furniture was in many different homes, leading to the ultimate purchase in the late 1950s by Old Republic Life Insurance Company of Chicago for their Boardroom suite.

"Jean Flagler Matthews, our Museum founder, and I tried valiantly together to orchestrate the return of the original Francis I Dining Room furniture back to Whitehall during the 1960s and 70s. It has truly been a decades-long journey, but we always remained hopeful. Thanks to all our Trustees past and present, on this effort.

"We are also grateful to our staff and directors, particularly former Director John Blades, for his tireless work in securing the appropriate agreement with Old Republic. Now all our visitors from around the world can see it as the Flaglers saw it, in the glorious dining room at Whitehall," Kenan said.

The terms of the agreement with Chicago-based Old Republic were not disclosed.

Erin Manning, the museum's executive director, said the museum is grateful to Kenan and the Stockman Family Foundation for their generous donations toward the return and restoration of the furniture.

"It has been a long journey back. We are just thrilled to have it fully restored and back in its room," Manning said Monday. "For this Gilded Age home, for the museum, it is such a big deal to us because of the beauty of the furniture, the design of the furniture and the fact that Mary Lily and Henry Flagler sat at the table.

"We want everyone to see it up front and personal," Manning said. "Things like this take a long time to find and seek."

After Flagler's death in 1913 and Mary Lily's in 1917, Whitehall and its contents were inherited by Mary Lily's niece Louise Clisby Wise Lewis. Most of the contents of the home, including the dining room suite, were sold. Over the decades as the furniture changed hands, occasional repairs, refinishing and reupholstering occurred.

Manning said the museum has known for decades that the furniture was at the insurance company, where it has been since 1959, and has always had contact with its executives. Over time, through personnel changes at the firm, the museum's patience won out. The company had kept it safe and intact. The furniture was the last remaining major suite missing from the museum.

F. Carey Howlett & Associates was hired by the museum to research, examine and conserve the furniture. Shortly after the museum acquired the furniture, it was transported to Howlett's facilities in Montross, Va.

Howlett, who has worked with the Flagler Museum in the past, said it's extremely unusual for a museum to be able to locate and acquire furniture that has been elsewhere for many years.

"I think the Flagler is extremely fortunate they were able to get this back and to be able to track it through that many owners. It is really remarkable to finally have an owner who recognized the furniture was of more importance to the

Flagler Museum than it was to his or her company,” Howlett said.

“One piece missing from the dining room is an elaborately carved china cabinet. Nobody knows what became of that,” Howlett said.

It's also a small miracle that all 24 chairs survived, although some were broken or had been poorly repaired. The massive five-foot-wide table that expands from 12 to 20 feet with its four leaves was in better shape.

“It went through several owners, and obviously, some of the pieces were altered. The original finish was lost and replaced by an extremely dark, opaque finish, probably the single most disfiguring thing that could be done to the pieces,” Howlett said.

The furniture now glows with its original light honey-colored satinwood revealed once again.

Howlett recalls seeing the furniture for the first time at a warehouse in Fort Lauderdale. It was impossible to determine what type of wood it was due to two or three layers of a dark stain plus one or two layers of a dark coating. He thought perhaps it was birch.

Howlett devised his own minimally toxic solvent gels to remove the dark coatings.

“The satinwood was a discovery in and of itself,” Howlett said. “It is West Indian satinwood that is native to the Caribbean, including the Florida Keys. It still grows down there but is no longer commercially viable. You would not be able to harvest commercially because it is such an endangered species.”

By examining a slice of the wood's cell structure with a high-powered microscope, an expert confirmed it is satinwood.

The chairs, table and sideboards have been on display at the museum since November, but the sideboards' original mansard roof-style cornices had disappeared. In February Howlett installed reproductions of the cornices. The sideboards had been taken apart and the upper sections had been turned into freestanding servers, Howlett said.

Using early black-and-white but surprisingly sharp, detailed photos that were scanned and digitally enlarged, Howlett and his team were able to determine what the cornices had looked like. The carved details match those of the fireplace and mantle.

“If we had not had the archival photos to work with, we would not have had any idea of what the cornices looked like,” Howlett said.

A Wisconsin sculptor trained in the decorative arts worked with Howlett to create drawings of the original intricate sideboard carvings that were then translated into sculpture form in clay. A casting was made and sent to the wood carvers.

Creating the cornices was the biggest challenge in terms of effort and hours, Howlett said. Yellowheart, a Brazilian wood with a color and sheen like satinwood, was chosen for the reproduction.

“It was extremely labor intensive and required head-scratching as well as sheer artistry, skill and physical labor,” Howlett said.

Howlett's team of a dozen people worked with other specialists including Ian Agrell of Agrell Architectural Carving, who divides his time between California, England and France, in the restoration that included carving small wood pieces on the chairs. The chairs' crests had undercut leaf curls which had to be re-applied and re-carved.

At some point the chairs had been reupholstered, in what Howlett said was “an inappropriate deep red damask type fabric.” Springs had been placed in the seats, giving the chairs an overstuffed look that was unlike the original more flat and squared seats.

The restoration job was easier because the original Aubusson tapestries, although no longer on the chairs, had been cleaned, conserved and framed. A few were in tatters but were stored in boxes.

One chair was restored using an original tapestry, but no one could be found to reproduce tapestries for the other chairs. Instead, Eaton Hill weavers out of New England wove a custom grosgrain fabric similar to tapestry fabric.

Decorative artist Suzanne Collins of Newport News, Virginia, painted the fabric using mostly oil paints. The result is that from two or three feet away, it isn't possible to tell that the designs featuring classical gods and goddesses as well as fruits and foliage, are painted, Howlett said.

Howlett said he feels honored to have worked with the Flagler on the impressive furniture that is part of the museum's collection that demonstrates the skill and artistry available in the period the house was built. The work is a combination of art, art history, science, craftsmanship and chemistry.

But he enjoys trying to prove people wrong about one thing.

"People say, 'They can't make things the way they used to,'" Howlett said, "What we try to do in our work is to make things look the way they used to. As a conservator, my job is to preserve the historic evidence. As a craftsman I am trying to preserve the traditional craft. In some instances, those things come into conflict."

For more information, call the Flagler Museum at 561-655-2833 or visit [flaglermuseum.us](http://flaglermuseum.us).