

Astor home helped children in need

Anthony P. Musso 5:13 p.m. EST December 1, 2015



(Photo: Anthony P. Musso/For the Poughkeepsie Journal)

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[Astor Services for Children and Families](#), on Mill Street (Route 9) in the Village of Rhinebeck, provides children's residential treatment programs in order to reduce their need for psychiatric hospitalization. While it began operating at the site in 1914 as the Astor Home for Children its history dates to 10 years earlier in the Hamlet of Rhinecliff.

Mary Morton, the youngest of five daughters born to former New York Governor and United States Vice President Levi P. Morton and his second wife Anna Livingston Reade Street, founded Holiday Farm in Rhinecliff in the early 1900s. It was developed to give tenement children that were recently released from New York City hospitals a place to convalesce in a fresh air environment.

The former Hutton house, located north of the railroad depot in Rhinecliff, was refurbished to include running water, a kitchen and central heating, and in May 1902 the first 12 children arrived. The following year, Holiday Farm accommodated 70 children as it expanded.

In 1912, when the New York Central Railroad decided to double its tracks, 30 feet of Holiday Farm's property was taken and divided for that purpose. At that point, Mary Morton realized that a more spacious property was needed; the land that was ultimately chosen was familiar to her father.

Levi Morton purchased the Ellerslie mansion in Rhinecliff in 1887 and after tearing it down hired architect Richard Morris Hunt to replace it with a larger and more stately dwelling.

"Before he could move into Ellerslie, he had to find a place to live here with his second wife," said Michael Frazier of the Rhinebeck Historical Society. "He lived at Bois-Dore, which was the Huntington family's property; today the parcel is occupied by Astor Services.

"In fact, it was there that the delegation came from the Republican convention to inform Morton that he'd been nominated to be Benjamin Harrison's running-mate as vice president."

In 1914, two years after John Jacob Astor IV perished in the RMS Titanic disaster, his son Vincent met with his close friend Levi Morton and both men agreed that an appropriate memorial to the deceased Astor would be a building located on the site of Bois-Dore, designed to serve children in need. Astor previously purchased the property from Huntington.

A primary reason that the men considered the project was because Holiday Farm in Rhinecliff needed a new site.

"The Astor family was notorious for being slum lords in Manhattan," Frazier said. "They owned tenement housing in the city and that's the way they acquired most of their money."

While owning the tenements, the family never managed them but always had others doing it, which provided an easy out when residents called for necessary improvements. The Astors always responded by skirting the issue and telling residents that the building's improvements were up to the person leasing it from them.

"After John Jacob Astor died, Vincent Astor wanted to correct some of the sins of his father and the child care facility was one of them," Frazier said. "When they moved the operation to Rhinebeck, it was initially still known as Holiday Farm and eventually the name changed to Astor Home for Children."

In 1945, Astor donated the facility to Catholic Charities and since that time its focus and number of programs has grown considerably.

“Just a few years ago they changed the name to Astor Services for Children and Families, and while the Rhinebeck location is its home base, they now also have additional mental health counseling services throughout Dutchess, along with sites in Ulster County and the Bronx,” said Sharon Sherrod, who recently retired from Astor Services. “They also have special schools in Poughkeepsie and the Bronx. The kids board a bus to and from the schools, but also have all the resources they need such as psychologists and counselors on-site.”

Astor Services for Children and Families is at 6339 Mill St., Rhinebeck.

“Dateline” appears Wednesdays. To suggest a topic, email Anthony Musso at atrailcommute@gmail.com