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Transcript

00:00:01 Tyler Parliman

Hello, my name is Tyler Parliman. I am interviewing.

00:00:05 Lisa Nanton

Lisa Nanton, president of the proprietary House Association, welcome Tyler.

00:00:11 Tyler Parliman

Thank you. Let's start with the interview.

00:00:15 Tyler Parliman

What can you tell us, What can you tell us about the construction of the proprietary house?

00:00:21 Lisa Nanton

Well, I can tell you that the construction started in 1762 and it was completed in 1764. The construction is really the house is built as a fortress. It's the walls are 4 bricks thick. That's including the interior walls. So when we try to establish a Wi-Fi system here, we had to wire everything because it would not go through the walls.

00:00:51 Tyler Parliman

I have a follow up question. What did the area around the house look like at the time of building it?

00:00:58 Lisa Nanton

Well, it was. It was a beautiful rolling hills, a very park like atmosphere and there's all different varieties of trees. And we were surrounded on three sides by beach. So and the beautiful Raritan Bay. It was described as a beautiful and wholesome place.

00:01:23 Tyler Parliman

Cool.

00:01:25 Tyler Parlman

What was life at the house when it was occupied by William Franklin?

00:01:30 Lisa Nanton

Well, I imagine it was very formal and we're sitting in the drawing room, which is where he met either other political afficiandos, or perhaps for social events, it they would all take place in this room and he had quite a few servants that I'm sure some were slaves. When their living quarters were in the attic, that's where they slept in the dormitory style, so they really had no privacy at all, except for the housekeeper, who had a room on this floor and the housekeeper's job was really to run the household and be in charge of the servants and for that, she was rewarded with her own room with actual fireplace, so she had heat and she had windows, so she had a little air, which you didn't get in the attic. But the only thing she didn't get was a day off or a vacation because she was responsible for making sure, especially if the visitors came after hours after the governor retired, she had to fix a meal and fix a room for them to stay overnight until the next day when they could meet with the governor. But most of his political and his governmental responsibilities were carried out right here, and his office was right off of the drawing room.

00:02:59 Tyler Parlman

Very interesting.

00:03:02 Tyler Parlman

How is the house used? While William Franklin was under house arrest or or under arrest because wasn't he under house arrest at one point?

00:03:10 Lisa Nanton

Yes, in January he was under house arrest. So basically he just lived same in the house the same way he had done, but he just couldn't leave.

00:03:18 Tyler Parlman

In the house.

00:03:23 Tyler Parlman

OK. And what about when he was under arrest? Was the house vacated or was?

00:03:28 Lisa Nanton

Oh no. He lived here. Oh, after his arrest. After his arrest, Elizabeth Franklin lived upstairs on the 2nd floor and the first floor was taken over by the military officials. They stayed down

here. Now, what's interesting about the 2nd floor? Elizabeth Franklin had a good friend, Elizabeth Skinner, who was the wife of Portland. Skinner, who was head of the General Assembly in the colony of New Jersey. And once the Portland. Skinner got wind of the revolution. He abandoned his family and escaped to Nova Scotia and left his wife and 13 children here. And when the Patriots won the war, they pretty much threw them out of their house. But because Elizabeth Skinner was friends with Elizabeth Franklin, she came here and asked for shelter. So Elizabeth Franklin took her in on the 2nd floor. And so the two Elizabeth's and 13 children lived up there for a year. And then finally, the military. Left and Elizabeth decided to leave because William he was imprisoned in Connecticut, and so she took all her belongings with her and moved to Connecticut and stored all her furniture in a warehouse there, which eventually burned. So all the furniture that was here when they lived here was destroyed.

00:05:11 Tyler Parliman

Wow, another I have another question for you. In the late 1700s, the house was booked by Mr. Rattone or Rattoone.

00:05:18 Lisa Nanton

Rattoone!

00:05:20 Tyler Parliman

That's how you pronounce it. What can you tell us about him and how he used the house?

00:05:23 Lisa Nanton

Yeah, well we don't know what happens between 1780 and 1790. All we know is the house was vacant. There's were can't find any records anywhere. So but we do know there was a fire and the fire mostly occurred in the back of the house. So we have to assume there was probably squatters in here. So a lot of the back of the house was destroyed. Now John Ratoon decides to buy that. So now remember I said the walls are 4 bricks thick, so the only thing that really burned was anything that was wood. So there was a staircase in the main foyer which that was destroyed and the roof was destroyed because the Timbers were wood. So surprisingly. John Rattoone tuned wants to buy it so he blow. He purchased it in 1792 or 1793 and for like \$1000. And he restores only in the back of the house. He restores only the 1st floor. So now he was pretty colorful character because John Rattoone was actually a double agent during the Revolutionary War. He owned a couple of Taverns. And at the end of the day, when the soldiers would visit the Tavern and they'd have a few drinks and you know their lips would start flapping and he would just listen and take out all the information and sell it to the other side. So I guess with that little nest egg, that's how

he bought the house and fixed it up, and then he ran for so then after the after the war, he actually ran for mayor of Perth Amboy and was elected. So this became the private residence of the Perth Amboy mayor.

00:07:30 Tyler Parlman

Gotcha. Now talking about how he was essentially a loyalist. How do you think he was able to slip through the cracks and, you know, do you think it was because no one suspected him because he was an owner of so many businesses?

00:07:51 Lisa Nanton

Mm-hmm,

00:07:50 Tyler Parlman

You think so? OK.

00:07:51 Lisa Nanton

Mm-hmm.

00:07:56 Lisa Nanton

I mean, technically he probably should have been tried for treason. I don't think Perth Amboy was that organized at that point.

00:08:07 Tyler Parlman

So another question about Rattoone. Do you believe that Rattoone bought the house because he wanted to? He wanted to live in it because it was owned and or had royal ties?

00:08:21 Lisa Nanton

I think that's a good conjecture, absolutely. It maybe it broke his heart to see it destroyed the way it was, you know, with the fire. But yeah, but he lived. He lived here for about 10 years and then he sold it.

00:08:39 Tyler Parlman

Gotcha.

00:08:41 Tyler Parlman

So another question for you. In the early 1800s, Richard Woodhull, if I'm pronouncing that right, hopefully bought the house and turned it into a hotel. How was how was Perth Amboy

at that moment? Like how how was the area? Was it built up? Was it still that kind of? I don't want to say coastal, but you know. Do you understand where I'm coming from?

00:09:13 Lisa Nanton

Yeah, it was. It was pretty much a still a pretty beautiful area. It wasn't built up at all. And when Richard Woodhall bought the house from John Rattoone, he just had this vision of a resort because it was so beautiful here, as I said before, we were surrounded. Three sides by beach. He added a wing, he added another floor and an attic, and so he definitely enlarged the building. There was also a building with the bowling alley here and game tables, and there were stables so you could go horseback riding or take a carriage ride. There are orchards here, so the orchards provided food for the hotel and you were on a direct route between New York and Philadelphia, so there was a lot of traffic and because we were beach community, we actually have a South Beach and it was very successful.

00:10:17 Tyler Parliman

Okay.

00:10:19 Tyler Parliman

Is there any remaining fragments or artifacts from the hotel period? That are that are still kind of around on the premises or?

00:10:28 Lisa Nanton

Well, I mean basically the building itself is is an artifact. So the wing is still in its in original condition. The ballroom, which is on the 1st floor, we're in the midst of restoring that. So if you want to take a look at that when we're done. You can get that.

00:10:47 Tyler Parliman

OK, OK, that's cool. After Matthias Bruen in 1849, the proprietary house became a retirement home for Presbyterian ministers, widows and orphans. Can you tell us about can you tell us about the house during those years?

00:11:11 Lisa Nanton

Yeah. So actually when the Matthias Bruen died. None of his kids really wanted the place, but two of them still had an apartment here. His two younger sons. The one was a physician and the other one was a realtor, and they thought they were. They would give the hotel another go around. And so they did open the hotel. Again, and it remained open for a couple of years, it didn't have the same success that it had the 1st time but well, the reason the hotel closed down was because the War of 1812 occurred and the country went into a

recession and the hotel closed down. So and that's when Matthias Bruen bought it, he bought it at a sheriff's auction. For pennies, pennies on the dollar, and so he used the whole hotel for his private residence. So Matthias Bruen actually became one of the wealthiest men in the country. And this was the largest private residence in the country. And he liked this spot for the same reason that the governor liked it because. He had a panoramic view of the Raritan Bay, where he's he made his fortune by importing and exporting tea, and so he could see all his ships coming in and out from the ocean. And so when he passed away, none of his kids wanted the place because it was too big to take care of. But the two younger brothers thought they would give the hotel another go, and so they did open it again. The Compton brothers were the managers of the hotel. And it remained open I guess. Between 10 and 15 years and but it really never had the same successful run it did when it first opened. I think because now the Jersey Shore started being established and a lot of resorts were opening up on the Jersey Shore. So that kind of that resort traffic started going southeast rather than southwest. And so this became a business traffic corridor rather than a resort and so.

00:13:28 Tyler Parlman

Gotcha.

00:13:37 Lisa Nanton

It closed down again. So the hotel closed down again.

00:13:42 Tyler Parlman

And after the Bruen family got done with the household it, it was obtained by the Presbyterian Church. Right? it turned into like a Presbyterian Church, if I'm not mistaken.

00:13:58 Lisa Nanton

Right. So when the hotel closed down for the second time? This is a great part of American history, I think, because really the first immigrants to land here were the Scots in 1652 and they were escaping religious persecution because they were Presbyterians. So they named the city in honor of the Earl of Perth who financed their voyage here and The Earl of Perth never lived here, but in gratitude they named the town Perth, but when they got here the Lenni Lenape, they were already living here, and so the Lenni Lenape called this area the point, because we're really a peninsula that. Judges out into the Raritan Bay and their word for point is Amboy.

00:14:55 Tyler Parlman

Ah, so they.

00:14:55 Lisa Nanton

That's how we got our name.

00:14:57 Tyler Parlman

And put two and two together.

00:14:58 Lisa Nanton

Yes. So Matthias Bruen, who becomes one of the wealthiest men in the country.

00:15:06 Lisa Nanton

Is a Presbyterian.

00:15:09 Tyler Parlman

Gotcha.

00:15:10 Lisa Nanton

And he makes his fortune by importing and exporting.

00:15:15 Tyler Parlman

Gotcha. And and during that time that, that he lived here, I don't know if this is an easy question or not. If you look now, there's houses scattered all around and you really don't have a clear view of the water. Where the houses, where their houses being built up at this point? Or was it still pretty clear to the Bay?

00:15:45 Lisa Nanton

It was still pretty.

00:15:47 Lisa Nanton

Ohh to the Bay, it was absolutely clear. Yes, actually most of the houses on this street were built around 1920.

00:15:50 Tyler Parlman

OK.

00:15:58 Tyler Parlman

So.

00:16:01 Tyler Parlman

We Fast forward so, so Bruin owns the house, then the House is owned by it. A Presbyterian Church for ministers, orphans and widows. About 100 years later, because they've owned the House for the longest time, the state of New Jersey acquires the house. What were do you know, any motivations the state had to obtaining the house?

00:16:33 Lisa Nanton

Well, I think they recognize the importance of the building. I mean, I think this is the only royal governor's mansion that's still in existence. So I know there's one in Williamsburg, but that's a replica. That's not the original. A lot of the other governors residences were their own private homes, so, but this is an official Royal Governors mansion because it was built by the government for the royal governor specifically for that purpose.

00:17:02 Tyler Parlman

Gotcha.

00:17:05 Lisa Nanton

And the ballroom. Which was built by Richard Woodhall with the wing. That's 1809. That's the only 1809 ballroom in existence.

00:17:17 Tyler Parlman

Really.

00:17:18 Lisa Nanton

Mm-hmm.

00:17:20 Tyler Parlman

Like the only ballroom. What do you mean by the only ballroom like?

00:17:25 Lisa Nanton

Built in that era.

00:17:28 Tyler Parlman

Ohh

00:17:29 Lisa Nanton

That's still standing.

00:17:33 Tyler Parlman

Wow, I didn't know that.

00:17:35 Lisa Nanton

We're tough here.

00:17:37 Lisa Nanton and Tyler Parlman

Laughs*

00:17:37 Tyler Parlman

Another question for you in 1966, the proprietary House Association was created. What was the goal of the organization.

00:17:50 Lisa Nanton

I think to preserve the building and to restore the building, actually the very first it was called the Westminster Society at that point. And I think it was few years later they decided to change it back to the proprietary House association. Why? I don't know. I said. Why would they pick a name that nobody can pronounce and nobody knows how to spell? Just to make marketing a little bit more difficult. But the original organization, the original nonprofit. Was called the Westminster Association.

00:18:33 Tyler Parlman

Okay, and the Proprietary House has this long illustrious history where it's it tells a story. And if you look at from the start to where we are now. It's almost full circle. It started with the Royal Governors House, and then it was it served that purpose. But now we're coming back and we're talking about that. And that's the the big draw of the house. It's this. This big Royal Governors mansion or house, whatever you want to call it. What do you think the House can, What do you think the House means to Perth Amboy as well as New Jersey? In in a history context, if that makes sense.

00:19:37 Lisa Nanton

Well, I think. It's it's interesting. It's it's kind of a double edged sword because for years in the latter years before the state bought the house, it was a boarding house. So these rooms, like the room we're sitting in, this was cut up into four rooms and this would have been somebody's apartment. Same thing with the dining room. Same thing with the wing. And. So when the the first group of Westminster associations started the renovation, it was taking down all these walls. All these drop ceilings there was like 12 layers of wallpaper on everything. If that was the hardest part of the restoration and that was around 1980. So everything after that was cosmetic. So. So the room we're sitting in now, when Franklin

before Franklin moved in, he wanted this room done in yellow silk damask, which is the material on the chair that you're sitting on. And so. Everything that you see, that's wood would have been painted white and the walls from the chair rail to the crown molding would have been wallpapered in a yellow damask pattern. And you would see that damage pattern in in a lot of programs about England or even the Gilded Age. Everything was wallpapered and that was a very common pattern, was a Dallas pattern. So now the ceiling is as it would have been that gold stripe on the ceiling. And then the white the the white molding. That's the that is accurate. As to when William Franklin lived here. So now we're just on the tail end of the \$3,000,000 restoration here, so this to redo this room has kind of taken a back seat to the three million that we have spent and that was a restoring 149 windows, it was repointing. The brick exterior replacing some of the bricks, but most of the bricks were in pretty good shape and don't forget if it's. If it's four bricks thick, it was only the very exterior brick that had any wear and tear, and it was actually all in the front and it was all pretty much on the northeast corner, which is where we get hit with storms. And there used to be a porch in the front. So having a porch myself, I know porches are like wind socks for everything, and I think that's why. That's where most of the damage was, because that's where the porch was. So because the roof compressed the weather. It really. That's where the bricks really took its toll. So the roofs, the roof has been any broken slates have been replaced on the roof, the gutter gutters and leaders, they're all and so some of the rooms in the interior have been redone, but it's, you know, we're volunteers. So we've been managing a \$3,000,000 grant, which is the largest ever given to a historic site. So we know that they're looking at this building as being a visitor Center for the Revolutionary War celebration in 2026.

00:23:22 Tyler Parlman

OK. And and talking about the future, what are some future plans or events that people could look forward to coming to or seeing come? I guess alive and in the future.

00:23:39 Lisa Nanton

Well, we're open every Sunday from 1:00 to 4:00 where we provide tours. We also open the tea room the last two Sundays of the month. In the month of June, we have the reenactment of the governor's arrest and we usually have two performances of that reenactment at 1:00 and 3:30, and that's on June 23rd, I believe, which is that Sunday, but the actual date. Is June 19th his arrest during October? We have a haunted Lantern walk which all the residents of the house. Come alive again and then they take the Lantern walk to Saint Peters Graveyard, where a lot of the residents are buried. So Matthias Bruin is buried there. Thomas Mundy Peterson, the first black voter, is buried there. John Chapman, who was the first pastor of Saint Peters from 1685. Is buried there, so it's a. It's a

very historic graveyard, but the characters actually come out from behind the tombstones and talk about themselves. So and then the holidays, we always decorate to the nines so.

00:25:02 Tyler Parlman

Well, thank you for the interview. I appreciate it and I don't know. I don't know what else to really say it it's it's such a beautiful house. It's. I mean it's it's, it's gorgeous, everything. Seems just right, if that makes sense. Would you like to say anything?

So well, you can always we have a website which is info at the. proprietaryhouse.org and all our activities and events are listed on the web page along with some pictures, and we also have a Facebook page. So anybody who's looking for information about us can always visit that site or go on Facebook.

00:25:51 Tyler Parlman

All right. Thank you for the interview.

00:25:52 Lisa Nanton

You're welcome, Tyler. My pleasure.