

Vintage Christmas cards from the Jezek family to be displayed at Gillette Castle State Park



CAPTION: From left to right, John "Jack" Hine, park supervisor, Wendy Vincent, the chair of holiday program and former president of the Friends of Gillette Castle State Park, Shea Jezek and Scott Jezek stand in the visitor's center with a sample of the vintage Christmas card collection which will be on display inside the castle through December 19. Photograph courtesy of Kelly Hunt, Cherish the Moment Photography.

EAST HADDAM, Conn. – Visitors to the century-old mansion of William Gillette can expect to enjoy a generous touch of holiday spirit in the weeks ahead.

Volunteers at Gillette Castle State Park and other local organizations have bedecked the interior of the late actor's eccentric home with yuletide lights and festive cheer and arranged for displays and events.

The decorated Castle is open for self-paced tours from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. Friday through Sunday on Thanksgiving weekend, as well as on Saturdays and Sundays of subsequent weekends through Dec. 19. Each day's final tour starts at 4 p.m. Tickets are required to enter the Castle, and may be obtained in limited quantity on the grounds or in advance at reserveamerica.com.

The park is open to visitors and visitors may stroll about the grounds during regular hours, 8 a.m. until sunset daily. The external decorations are expected to remain in place through Jan. 2, 2022.

One special highlight this year for ticket-holders is a collection of authentic vintage Christmas postcards, on loan from Scott and Shea Jezek of East Haddam. The exhibit may be seen on the Castle's third floor during regular hours.

Jezek, who worked frequently at Gillette Castle during the 1970s, started the collection of professional framed cards more than a decade ago when he purchased a group of cards at a Vermont antique store. Such elaborate postcards were popular during the period 1906 to 1916, Jezek said.

“It’s fun for everyone and reveals a much simpler time in American history,” he said, adding that he and his wife take a special pleasure in displaying the cards during the Christmas holidays.

“The most significant items are clearly those of Santa Claus dressed in other than red suits,” Jezek said. “We also have Santas depicted during World War I, Santas of color and operating the latest technology of the time, such as cars, airplanes, trains and telephones.”

In addition to providing the display inside the Castle, the park's Visitors' Center now is decorated with a life-sized Santa Claus figure loaned by Jezek.

Harold “Tyke” and Theodora “Teddie” Niver also are expected be on hand Sunday afternoons during the holiday season to greet and entertain visitors while portraying William and Helen Gillette.

In the days prior to Thanksgiving, members of Friends of Gillette Castle State Park gathered to decorate the grounds and exterior of the mansion at 67 River Road.

Members of Tri-Town Cub Scout Pack 13 of the Chester, Deep River and Essex region, along with their parents, recently gathered at the park to create nearly two dozen wreaths and other decorations festooning the park and mansion, including Gillette’s workshop and bedroom, the “secret passage” door and windowsills.

Also, local organizations and businesses contributing to the decorations included the Hadlyme Country Market, Goodspeed Station, the Eight Mile River and Scenic Watershed, I-Park Foundation, Hadlyme Hall Garden Club, Two Wrasslin' Cats Coffeehouse, Higher Grounds Coffeehouse, Stahley Farms, Friends of Hammonasset State Park and Friends of Machimoodus-Sunrise State Park.

Each group worked to decorate one room or region of the Castle, and many contributed to decorations on stairways and windows, said Wendy Vincent, former president of the Friends and organizer of this year's holiday program.

“For example, volunteers from Hadlyme Country Market decorated most of the Castle's great room and its main Christmas tree – and provided pastries for those helping the effort,” said Lynn Wilkinson, president of the Friends.



Caption: William and Helen Gillette (aka “the Nivers”) in front of the holiday tree decorated by the Hadlyme Country Market.

“We want to thank everyone for their generosity and hard work, especially because several hurdles had to be overcome in the process,” Vincent said. “This wonderful annual effort wouldn't be possible without such great support.”



Caption: Members from I-Park Foundation, a nonprofit East Haddam artists residency program, finalize the display in William Gillette's library. From left to right: Kimberly Monson, Lyme Academy of Fine Arts Professor of Sculpture, Daniel Criblez, I-Park November Artist-in-Residence, Joanne Paradis, I-Park Co-founder, and Richard Pasquarelli, I-Park November Artist-in-Residence.

The popular tourist destination is nestled atop the “Seventh Sister” hill in Gillette Castle State Park, situated in the towns of East Haddam and Lyme along the Connecticut River.

Gillette was the first actor to become internationally famous for his performances as Sherlock Holmes. The Hartford native died in 1937 after a long theatrical career and the state eventually took over ownership of his home and surrounding estate.

The Friends of Gillette Castle State Park is a nonprofit, all-volunteer group dedicated to the preservation, conservation and educational activities of the building and its grounds. More information about the organization may be found at www.gillettecastlefriends.org.