

Plenty of old Texas homes were built with cattle money, but in the 1870s, not many boasted indoor plumbing, central heat, and gaslight chandeliers fueled by a gasoline-powered generator on the property. That's why Oakhurst, the innovative, 29-room mansion built by jack-of-all-trades and Fulton town-founder George Fulton, became a state historical park. The home offers a view of the way George's upper-middle-class family lived at a time when Texas, for the most part, remained untamed.

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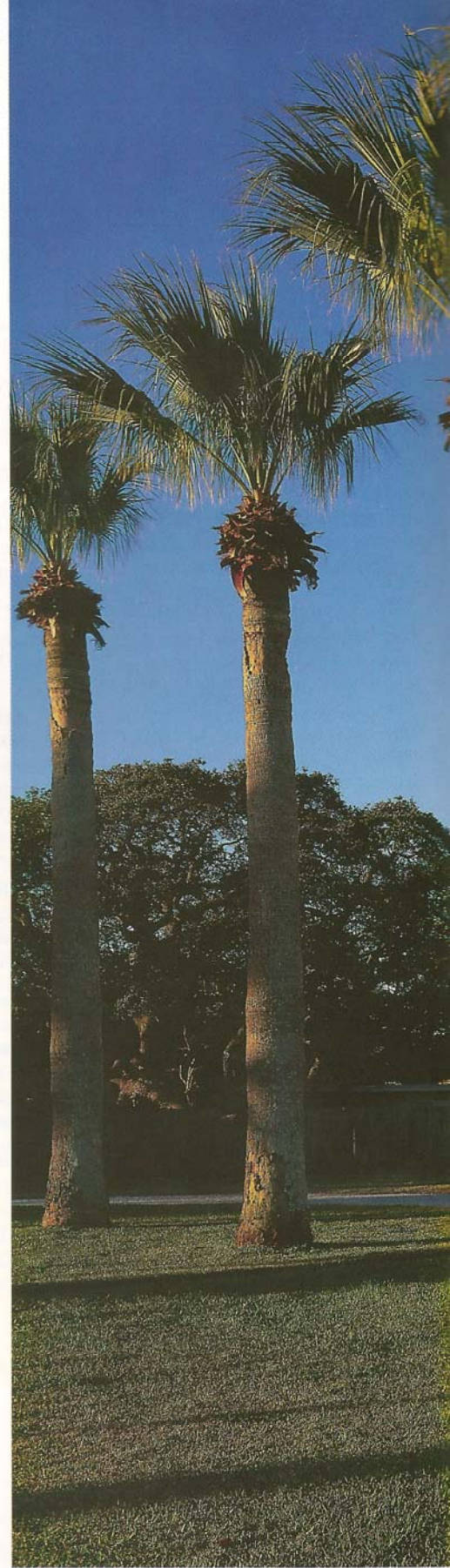
Fulton, a Philadelphian who had hoped to help Texians fight their revolution, did not arrive in Texas until late in 1836, after the war had ended. Nevertheless, he joined the Texas army and received a captain's commission and payment in land scrip. For cash, he found work at the General Land Office in Houston. There, he made the acquaintance of Henry Smith, the former provisional colonial governor of Texas. After a failed town-founding venture with Smith, Fulton taught school in Brazoria, married one of his students (Smith's daughter, Harriet), then in 1846 moved to Baltimore, where he worked for his brother at the *Baltimore Sun*. Later, in Ohio, Fulton learned and plied his trade as an engineer, working for more than 25 years on rail and bridge projects.

In 1867, after Harriet inherited land—most of it near Rockport, on Live Oak Point—the couple moved back to Texas with their four children. To increase the property's value, George tried to develop the area by establishing meat-packing and cattle-ranching operations and by working to get railroads into the region so he could move his products to market quickly.

Upon their return to Texas, George and Harriet lived in a beach house they called "The Long House." But in 1874, the couple began building what would become Oakhurst. Using lumber and supplies shipped from New Orleans, the East Coast, and Europe, they completed their seaside home in 1877. Its French Second Empire styling featured a steeply pitched mansard roof with dormers and slate shingles. With running water, English tile, and fine imported fixtures, the house definitely stood out. It even boasted a rudimentary clothes dryer—a large wooden rack for wet laundry that slid into the wall next to the basement furnace to heat-dry.

The Fultons spent 16 years at Oakhurst, and their children, grandchildren, friends,

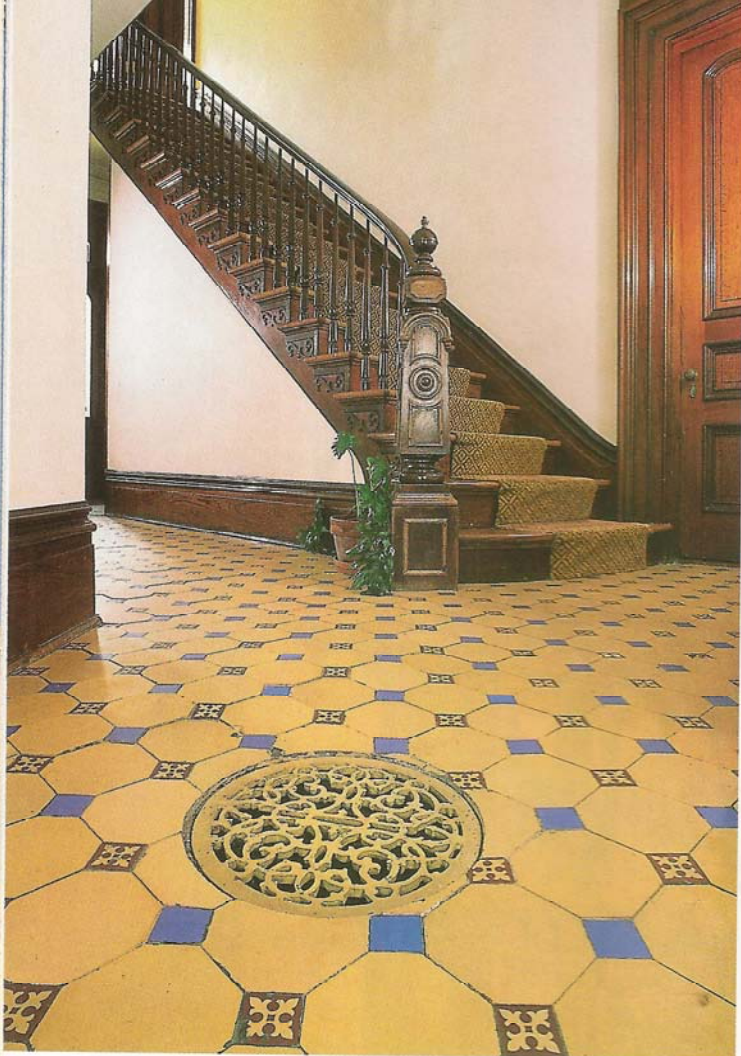
From 1874 to 1877, George and Harriet Fulton oversaw the construction of the 29-room home they called Oakhurst. With its French Second Empire-style exterior and fine interior furnishings, the coastal home, now known as Fulton Mansion, has served as a state historical park since 1983.



S P L E N D O R



BY THE SEA



Showy English tile, original to the home, surrounds a cast-iron heat register in the vestibule.

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and business associates stayed with them so often that the couple considered it unusual *not* to have houseguests. They had plenty of elbow room, as the house had three stories and a full basement, plus a tower room, known architecturally as a “Growlery,” where George could retreat to rest.

In 1896, three years after George’s death at age 83, Harriet left Oakhurst to live with a daughter in Cincinnati and died there in 1910. The family sold the house—at a loss—in 1907, and it eventually fell into disrepair. A mobile-home park occupied the grounds before the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department bought the property in 1976. The agency spent more than a million dollars restoring the house and furnishing it with items from the late 19th Century. Fulton Mansion opened for public tours in December 1983.

The fruit of all the painstaking labor is revealed during tours of the home. From the vestibule, with its original, brightly patterned English tile floor and ornate plaster ceiling-medallion, volunteer docents escort visitors into an era when details received their due. Formal and elaborately upholstered furniture appropriate to the period and its popular Renaissance Revival style furnish the home. Numerous windows allow plenty of light to shine in during the day.

The conservatory, off the vestibule, filled with windows and houseplants, catches the eye first. Growing plants was a hobby of Harriet’s, but the original house plan, according to docent Beth Wilson, did not include this room. Historians believe that while the house was under construction, the Fultons attended the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and saw a large, indoor-garden conservatory on display. “What we think happened,” says Beth with a smile, “is that Harriet said, ‘Oh, George, I’ve just got to have one in my house!’” However it happened, the couple

closed in part of the porch, and Harriet got her conservatory.

From the conservatory, you enter the library, where the shelves of the Fultons’ glass-front bookcase still hold some of their books. The room also features one of the home’s many faux fireplaces, which served as central-heating ducts fed by the furnace—evidence of George’s engineering skill at work during design and construction. The carpet, with its abstract pattern in gold and rust, matches the original one, which came from Alex T. Stewart & Co. of New York.

In the parlor, portraits of George and Harriet hang on either side of a bay window. The photographs may have been taken to celebrate the couple’s 50th wedding anniversary in 1890, an event that proceeded with some fanfare (and coverage by the *San Antonio Express*). Invited guests could easily make the trip, because of a railroad spur from Corpus Christi to Rockport, laid in 1881 under pressure from George, says park superintendent Diana Kirby. Despite George’s influence, the Fultons were not rich, but rather part of a new, growing social class.

“The Fultons were upper-middle-class,” says Diana. “They were very comfortable, and they lived better than most people did. But they were not wealthy people.” And like many modern middle-class families, the couple



A marble lavatory countertop displays health and beauty aids of the day, including witch hazel.

relied to some extent on borrowed money to cover their expenses. According to financial receipts now in the University of Texas' archives, George was \$10,000 in debt to one of his cattle-ranching partners in 1886, and Harriet could not afford to maintain the house for very long after he died.

The tour continues with a look at the large dining room, a distinctive feature of which is a high-chair that can convert to a rocker or a stroller.

Upstairs, visitors see the bedrooms, sitting room, and a bathroom fitted out with the very latest (1870s) plumbing, a deep copper tub,

and a commode whose seat resembles that of an outhouse. The master bedroom features Harriet's opera cape, a lady's writing desk, and the Fultons' black walnut half-tester bed. According to Beth Wilson, in those days, many people thought it unhealthy to sleep lying stretched out and preferred sitting up in bed.

Such a large house required plenty of upkeep, and Harriet oversaw up to 12 servants at any given time. Though labor was cheap, she often talked of the problems of finding and keeping good help. She herself had plenty to do in addition to directing the servants, gardening, and socializing with neighbors. "Harriet didn't have the luxury of not having to work," says Diana Kirby. "She did a great deal of supervising and running the household. And there were certain tasks thought appropriate to the lady of the house, such as washing the crystal and baking the bread."

One upstairs room of the home has purposely remained unrestored, to demonstrate the difference renovation made. Photos and diagrams of the restoration work, along with cutaway sections, reveal the stacked-plank wall construction and shellcrete (oyster shell-based concrete) floors. The unusually sturdy construction allowed the home to withstand the powerful 1919 hurricane, which caused more than \$20 million in damage along the Texas Gulf Coast and killed almost 300 people. Such construction would be prohibitively expensive now, Diana notes. Fortunately for lovers of old homes and Texana, Fulton Mansion's innovations and decorative details remain for all to enjoy. ★

Round Rock writer CASEY KELLY BARTON is currently working on a children's book about wildflowers. This is her first story for *Texas Highways*.

A portfolio by frequent contributor STEPHAN MYERS begins on page 32.



[CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT] The Fultons may have created their indoor-garden conservatory after seeing one at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The couple's half-tester bed dominates the master bedroom upstairs. Another room features a cutaway that shows the home's sturdy, stacked-plank wall construction.

WHEN...WHERE...HOW

Fulton Mansion State Historical Park

Fulton Mansion State Historical Park is at 317 Fulton Beach Rd. in Fulton, off Texas 35.
Hours: Wed-Sun 9-4; closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's days. Guided tours begin on the hour. Admission: \$4, \$2 ages 6-18 and college students with valid ID, free age 5 and younger.

Groups of 10 or more should make reservations at least a month in advance. The grounds are available for special events; call for details. Only the first floor is wheelchair accessible. Write to Box 1859, Fulton 78358; 512/729-0386.

