STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

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Montauk Historic Site History

Built in 1874 on a hill overlooking the Turkey River Valley, Montauk was named by Mrs. Larrabee for the lighthouse at the eastern end of Long Island, New York that guided her sea-captain father home from his whaling voyages. A widow's walk, like those used by the wives of sea captains to watch for ships, crowns the roof and gives a dramatic view of the Turkey Valley.

Surrounded by over 100,000 pine trees that Larrabee planted, the 14-room mansion is built of brick molded of native clay and kiln at Clermont. On the 46-acre grounds, where once peacocks strutted and turkeys roosted in the trees at night, are flower gardens and statues of Civil War heroes. Montauk was also a working farm with barns, farm animals, an orchard and grain fields.

Montauk reflects the wealth and lofty status of its occupants. Larrabee traveled widely and decorated his home with curios and souvenirs. Visitors today can see Tiffany lamps, Wedgewood china, statues from Italy, music boxes from Switzerland, a large collection of paintings and thousands of books. Each room has a marble sink, and most of the rooms are filled with paintings, marble busts and statues.

Still, Montauk is modest compared to the homes of other similarly prominent leaders of Iowa and the nation. This simplicity is a product of the Larrabees' conservative New England background. Because the house was lived in continuously for nearly one hundred years, the furnishings and appliances reflect changes in technology and style over time. Newer furnishings mix with older ones: in the kitchen, for example, a 1900 wood stove stands near a 1950s dishwasher. The Larrabee family was progressive in its use of technology. The house was built with central heat, a recent innovation at that time. Other new conveniences were added as soon as they were available -the telephone in 1900 and electricity in 1910.