

118-Year-Old Holly Bush Takes It All Like a Proper Victorian

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Holly Bush, a house that has had fame thrust upon her, is taking it like the well-bred architectural dawdler that she is. A proper Victorian of 1849, she had had her face lifted for the historic meetings with instant air-conditioning and instant summit décor.

The 22-room house is vintage Americana, with few additions or other changes in the 118 years of the course from stylishly new status symbol of a prosperous glass manufacturer to sedate home of a college president.

In its day Holly Bush was called a villa—which meant, according to the landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing, one of the great domestic tastemakers of the 19th century, that it took at least three in help to run it. A cottage took only two.

A Tower Makes It Tuscan

Holly Bush is what was called a Tuscan villa, although Tuscany never saw anything like it. What made it a Tuscan villa was the balconied, off-center tower with its projecting roof cornice, which suggested such Florentine towers as that on the Palazzo Vecchio to a newly rich generation of Americans who built their country houses for comfort and culture.

The houses were built according to the plans of Mr. Downing and of the architect Alexander Jackson Davis. Together and separately, the two men published several volumes of villas and cottages of Tuscan, Gothic, Greek and other exotic persuasions that were then constructed all over the American landscape. As a team, Downing and Davis were to 19th-century American houses what Fannie Farmer was to American cooking.

Few of the Downing-Davis gems survive. But the genre can still be found in small towns and on country roads, or occasionally in such examples as Holly Bush, under institutional protection and care.

Whether the decorative trim is Gothic icing or Victorian

valentine, they are all basically the same: asymmetrical in plan and mass, with the romantic touch of a tower and the practical touch of a porch and a full panoply of picturesque details. This, in fact, was the name of the style: the Picturesque.

These details often included delicately stained glass, as around the entrance of Holly Bush, and the round-headed doors and windows that were also labeled Tuscan.

Holly Bush's trim, much of it beautiful wrought iron, is painted white. In the heyday of the style, wooden doors and window frames would have been black or toned with the house's brownish stone, in one of a range of "earth colors" that Downing and Davis felt showed a refined affinity with nature. The colors were called "muddy Victorian" by later generations.

Shadowed and somber, the picturesque Victorian villa appealed to the romantic recesses of the Victorian heart and mind. It was an age, a mood and a style infinitely remote from the world discussed at Holly Bush in 1967.