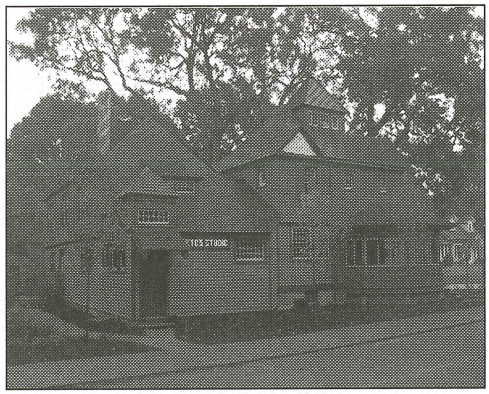
John F. Peto House and Studio Preservation and Restoration Project



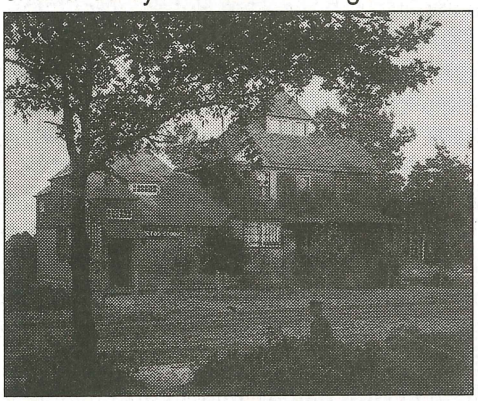
Today after restoration

By Victoria Lassonde

The 120-year-old home and studio of a famous 19th-Century Island Heights resident, painter John Frederick Peto, has been restored to its original character and selected to receive an historic preservation award from the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, a division of the county Department of Parks and Recreation. The award recognizes and applauds preservation efforts and raises awareness of the importance of preserving historic resources.

Division Director Tim Hart said he feels the project, under the supervision of preservation architect Michael Calafati, "has set a new standard for historic preservation in Ocean County."

Calafati's Trenton-based firm, Historic Building Architects, of which he is the principal, specializes in restoring such one-of-a-kind, historically significant buildings. Unique old structures have always held fascination for him, he explained. As a boy, growing up in Monmouth County, when given a choice between spending the day at the beach or at Allaire State Park, Calafati invariably chose the latter, enthralled by the historic village there.



Circa 1906

It may be a good time to be a preservation architect, especially along the Jersey Shore, Calafati suggested – in places like Ocean Grove and Cape May, there is a steadily growing appreciation for recapturing the way things used to be, with regard to historic buildings and landscapes.

While guiding a visitor on a tour of the Peto House and Studio restoration project, Calafati explained that Peto's home had remained in his family's possession and care for two generations and had been converted into a bed and breakfast along the way. The property had begun to deteriorate as its innkeeper, Peto's granddaughter, Joy Peto Smiley, advanced in years; after her death, several years ago, a philanthropist (who has requested to remain unidentified) rescued the building from an uncertain future by purchasing the property and funding its preservation and restoration.

Initially, Calafati explained, the scope of the project was small: just a new roof and some structural reinforcement. But before long the new owner decided to go the whole distance. For that, many residents of Island Heights are grateful.

"We were very aggressive in taking the house back," and in reinterpreting the house Peto knew with historical accuracy, Calafati said. Because "the concept of the property changed over time," he continued, getting back to the original look meant undoing those changes; removing additions and aluminum siding; rediscovering and re-creating the paint colors Peto had chosen.

Continued on page 6

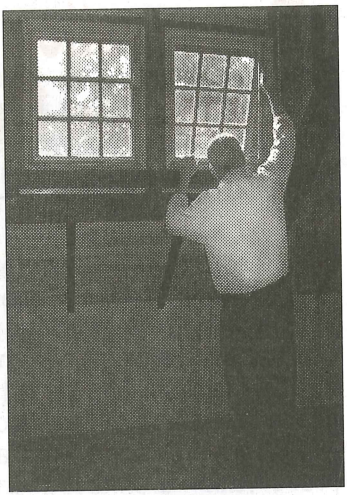
John F. Petro House from page 5

Involving no small amount of scientific study and investigation, a project like the Peto House relies upon three key determinants: physical evidence (or "building archaeology"), photographic evidence and materials conservation.

From early discussions to finished construction, the project spanned three years, 2005 to 2008.

The structure – in a style known as Shingle, which blended the English "Queen Anne style" influence with more rustic, Colonial American sensibilities – is believed to have been designed mostly, if not entirely, by Peto himself.

The artist's personality may be reflected in some of the idiosyncrasies of the house, some of the unusual choices he made in terms of colors, shapes and decorative details, from the interrupted octagon-shaped front porch to the brightly hued glass panes. The interior paint in his studio is a bluish green; elsewhere, colors include reddish browns, darker greens (avocado and hunter) and light blue. A triangular pediment on the south side of the building is a collection of small rounded pebbles embedded in stucco. The architect re-created the pediment on a west-facing dormer but added seashells to the mix of pebbles in stone, a subtle differentiation between the new and the old.



Historic architect Michael Calafati.

The physical evidence that was available helped in drawing up the plans for the project, e.g., remnants of footings they found when they "crawled under the porch" that indicated the porch's original dimensions, Calafati said. (They also found old shutters under there, he added, and remaining in the house are Peto's grandfather clock and the very chair he sat in while he painted.)

Meanwhile, the rafter tails under the porch's overhang are examples of exterior details that were reconstructed with the help of photographic evidence. Calafati said he was fortunate to have had numerous well-kept high-quality prints to work with.

The job of the materials conservator is to gather samples of wood and plaster from the building's walls (samples are about half the size of a dime, he said, carefully taken with a utility knife) and to analyze them in a lab, using "reflective light microscopy" and other techniques to determine the original colors, as measured using the Munsell Color System, which were then matched to the closest possible shade from Benjamin Moore.

Historic Building Architects is the only firm in New Jersey with its own materials conservation lab. In seven of the last 10 years, Calafati's firm has received New Jersey State Historic Preservation Awards for different projects throughout the state.