

What Mr. Rockefeller taught me about Green Building

By Kim Van Borkulo, [Build That Green](#)

I recently had a rare chance to visit the late James Stillman Rockefeller's home on old Long Valley Farm. Straddling the Cumberland-Harnett county line, his land now forms part of the new Carvers Creek State Park.



It's the 1,420 acre Long Valley Farm portion that has always held mystery for local residents, many of whom had heard it belonged to the famed Rockefellers, but few over the decades ever set foot on the property.

Within close sight of the house, we walked through a charming wooden picket gate and fence marking the boundary of cultivated lawn and the surrounding pine woods. I imagined 70 years of influential Rockefeller friends and family also entering that gate to visit "Mr. and Mrs.

James" in their 1939-era home.

I wondered what, if any, past architectural treasures could be adapted to design and build green homes today.

In 1930 Rockefeller started work at the family-owned National City Bank of New York. About eight years later, the 37 year-old executive acquired this North Carolina property and replaced the original farm house.

The southern country-style clapboard home is quaint and not overbearing in size. It features a two-story main house with Doric-columned double-decker porches both front and rear. A pair of connecting single-story cottages brackets the modest front lawn.

The backyard offers a long diagonal view of a 100-acre pond hugged by the pine forest. Topped with a Carolina blue sky, its siting is very appealing.

In my mind as I waited to go inside, the breeze carried gramophone music to the ghosts of rich and famous people mingling at a lawn party. I wondered what high-society New Yorkers thought about their banking associates in the wilds of North Carolina.

Within these walls, what creature comforts and splendors awaited? Was it like their house up north?

The backdoor opened with a glimpse through a pine-paneled foyer to the front door opposite. We stepped in and what happened next was quite unexpected.



I stood by the front door glancing back out to the lake, then down opposite ends of the center hallway and pondered the sight.

I felt slightly baffled and underwhelmed. Yes, underwhelmed.

Every surface not occupied by a window was oiled pine. Pine floors, pine walls, and pine ceilings. A bleached cattle skull hung above a closet door.

This rustic lodge interior was completely unexpected. In place of pretentious décor was a style of understatement. In place of an opulent palace, was an unassuming farmhouse?

It's not like the affluent Rockefellers didn't know how to do lavish. They could do lavish.

Take wedding gifts for instance. When "Mr. James" married American aristocrat Nancy S. Carnegie in 1929, his father William G. Rockefeller built them a 19,000 square foot brick Georgian manor on 11-acres in Greenwich, Connecticut.



On four floors, the New England mansion featured 11 bedrooms, 16 marble bathrooms, 12 fireplaces, an elevator plus an outdoor pool and English gardens. The estate was certainly worthy of meeting the expectations and standards of the young Rockefeller's rich and famous friends.

So standing in the pine hallway, I got my first lesson.

I realized the Rockefellers deliberately designed this home as an essential opposite to their life up north. In place of their formal Connecticut manor, was their informal North Carolina homestead. Instead of imported marble, they chose native wood. In place of celebrities, there were local farmers.

I wondered why that was so, but then I remembered the Overhills.

In 1921 at the impressionable age of 19, James Stillman Rockefeller's father William G. and uncle, Percy A. Rockefeller created the North Carolina Overhills Land Company. Ten stockholders invested close to \$200,000 in forty-six tracts of expansive pine forest north of Fayetteville.

Dissected with sand trails, clusters of buildings and farm fields spreading over as much as 40,000 distinctive acres, Overhills became an exclusive playground with a casual country character, for a group of wealthy northern capitalists.

No doubt the rapidly expanding Army post Fort Bragg, just east of Overhills, also attracted the interest of these banking and investment firm executives. At the very least, the post offered a source of qualified riders for special fox hunts and polo challenges.

The most symbolic building of the Overhills Country Club was the Clubhouse. It was a large craftsman-prairie-style building overlooking the prestigious Donald Ross golf course and served as the hub of activity. After a day of riding and recreation, the Rockefellers and other members would retire to the lodge hall for games and parties.

One staff member recalled "The whole thing was rustic. And they had lots of bedrooms upstairs and they were all just kind of spartan-like. But that's what they wanted. They wanted a contrast. "

They liked everything natural back then. Facing the huge fireplace in the main hall was a big sofa. In front of it was a foot stool made of a seven foot log. The top was cut off so it was flat, then on either end two little logs cradled the massive beam. A gigantic moose head above the mantle presided over many activities including the popular new game, Monopoly.

With the Wall Street crash in 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression, Overhills Land Company operated for years under the financial support of Percy Rockefeller. Indeed by 1934, Overhills had become largely the private country home of "Mr and Mrs. Percy", James's aunt and uncle.

James convinced his cousin Avery Rockefeller to sell him Long Valley Farm in 1937 to help pay estate taxes when his father Percy died three years earlier.

It's no wonder that when building his new house " Mr. James" sought in part to replicate the Clubhouse feel and all the happy memories it represented. Over the decades, all kinds of natural objects and curiosities found mostly in the woods and fields were hung throughout his house.

Long Valley Farm, situated on the southeastern edge of Overhills along the Lower Little River, was at one point a scientific farm, operating interdependently with Overhills.

The family acquired the farm when Mr. Robert W. Christian, an occasional visitor to the Overhills Country Club, died. Christian created a substantial farming operation at Long Valley, expanding it to nearly 1,000 acres. He had a variety of crops and livestock, using experimental farming techniques and even a grist mill.

Raised an outdoorsman, after graduating from Yale, James continued to maintain a keen interest in forestry and environmental studies. Valuing stability and a sense of tradition, Rockefeller continued farm operations until his death at age 102.

Until 2004, it was a place where the farm tobacco and strawberries, dairy and cattle provided income and self-sustainment. For decades he split the profits 50/50 with North Carolina farmers.

Besides the Fayetteville locals, “Mr. James” kept up with regional activity. Being a practical fellow and not prone to waste, he salvaged lumber from a demolished hardware store in Southern Pines 30 miles away. He ultimately reused more than a dozen beams to build his dining room ceiling.

Thus my second Rockefeller green build take-away concerns building supplies. Salvaging perfectly good local material made as much sense in 1939 as it does to green builders today. Plus, Mr. Rockefeller built most of his house using locally harvested heart-pine wood.

These days, green building celebrates the unique regional character of a place by incorporating as many locally made materials as possible. Using supplies and labor from within 500 miles or so of your project site also reduces transportation costs, which in turn cuts the project carbon footprint – all beneficial features. (As a banker, Mr. Rockefeller no doubt would have approved of cutting excess project costs!)

It’s interesting that over the decades as Fayetteville, Fort Bragg and surrounding communities expanded, the Rockefellers continued their low-key presence.

It was said the Rockefeller clan as a whole were not pretentious people and when they came, they came to relax and to be themselves. Throughout his life, “Mr. James” returned virtually every month to this place. Imagine the big city multi-millionaire needing a modest country house to recharge his soul.

Even though Rockefeller could easily afford it, he was sensible and practical about salvaging, reusing and recycling good materials instead of leaving them to waste.

Mr. Rockefeller loved this Overhills land and celebrated it by building a humble home that came from and complimented our regional landscape.

His niece, Ms. Cookie Model once remarked, “We had a family farm in North Carolina. It wasn’t fancy. It was country casual, comfortable, and safe. Some of my biggest memories are the smells of the Sandhills, the wonderful smell of the pines and the soft, soft air that never leaves you.”

I too remember the pine, and thanks to Mr. Rockefeller, some key green building lessons-learned.

In a world where so many obsess over the biggest and the best, I wonder if the real secret to happiness is actually found in humble things.

Because at the end of the day, it’s the humble things that seem to call you home.

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