

January 9, 1994

Habitats/Mike Tyson's Former Mansion; Grand Plans Gone Awry

By TRACIE ROZHON

IT is a very straight, very long driveway that leads to Kenilwood. In the 20's, it was clogged with liveried chauffeurs driving huge touring cars up to the front door to deposit Astors -- an ancestor had married Caroline Astor -- and Posts, Wilsons and Welleses.

In the late 80's, young neighborhood boys nervously scampered up the driveway to knock on the imposing oak door of the 1897 Gothic Revival stone mansion and ask for an autograph from the new owner, the heavyweight champion of the world, Mike Tyson.

When Mr. Tyson bought the mansion, on Memorial Day 1988, many in this part of New Jersey's hunt country said he had paid too much, especially for the two lots that bracket the Bernardsville estate. He paid a little over \$4 million for the house on 14 acres and \$950,000 for each of the two five-acre lots. At the time, similar lots were going for \$650,000, according to Jack Turpin of Turpin Real Estate in Far Hills, N.J.

"He was the first person in the sports world to come to the Somerset Hills, and he paid well over market, especially for the lots," Mr. Turpin said.

Turpin Real Estate, with Sotheby's International Realty, listed Mr. Tyson's house -- he lived there for two years -- after he had been sentenced in 1992 to six years in prison for rape. It sold again a little more than a year ago for \$3 million. The lots remain unsold.

By the time the house was listed with Turpin and Sotheby's it had been vacant for several years, except for a caretaker and two prowling Rottweilers, the broker said. To sell the house, the Rottweilers were given away, the gutters were cleaned, a dozen urns were planted with pink geraniums and yellow marigolds (to discourage deer) and the lawns were watered.

With the approval of Mr. Tyson's manager, Don King, plastering and painting was done inside the house. Heat was installed in the kitchen, where past owners had relied only on a large commercial gas stove to keep the cook and other servants warm.

There are imposing stone pillars and iron gates across the front of the property, but they were not erected until Mr. Tyson moved out, said Gerry-Jo Cranmer, the listing agent, who supervised the renovations. She said that Mr. Tyson nevertheless had planned for the gates, and for gold-painted boxing gloves to rest atop the pillars, but that the gold gloves were never put up.

Around the back, where Kenilwood's 12-stall, 10-car carriage house/barn is visible, are several dozen young evergreens planted by the present owners to eliminate the sight of an asphalt turnaround. The cul-de-sac was created by a developer, who once had grandiose plans for the estate.

After Kenilwood was sold by the descendants of the original owner, George B. Post Jr. -- founder of the Wall Street brokerage firm of Post and Flagg, whose father was the architect of the New York Stock Exchange, the house was bought by the developer, Harold Hamilton, who paid \$5.25 million for it and 64 acres.

At that time, in the summer of 1986, he told reporters he would divide the property into 10 lots and build houses to sell for up to \$2.5 million each. Mr. Hamilton said he would "refurbish" and sell the 18,000-square-foot mansion, which had earlier been featured in House and Garden and Architectural Digest magazines.

But the plummeting real estate market hurt the project, and the lots were sold off without houses.

Kenilwood, with 14 acres left, was sold to the prizefighter, who added a tennis court, where Martina Navratilova played at least once. The stone walls in the four-tiered formal gardens were repointed, the bluestone on the terrace was replaced and a new floor was installed in the loggia.

In addition, the moldings in the dining room were accented with 24-carat gold leaf.