

NY banker, philanthropist who restored colonial-era home on STX dies at 89

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ST. CROIX — A New York banker, philanthropist and preservationist of classical American homes who restored more than a dozen residences to include his colonial-era house on St. Croix, died recently at the age of 89 at his primary residence in South Carolina.

Richard Jenrette, who was surrounded by family and loved ones, peacefully passed away April 22 after a battle with lymphoma at one of his restored homes — the Roper House in Charleston, according to a statement released by Classical American Homes Preservation Trust, which Jenrette founded in 1993 to preserve residential homes dating back to the early 19th century.

Margize Howell, CAHPT co-president, described Jenrette as a “giving man” when contacted Thursday.

She said classical architecture and classical decorative arts were his primary loves in life.

“He was a very thoughtful person, insightful, intelligent — had a real kindness for people,” she said, adding that Jenrette was a humble person with a good sense of humor.

Jenrette owned more than a dozen homes that he had restored to preserve as examples of classical American residential architecture, including one in Estate Cane Garden on St. Croix that dates back to 1784. He hired architects Frederik Gjessing and William Taylor to help him preserve his house on St. Croix.

Taylor, whose architectural firm is located on Company Street in Christiansted, said the Cane Garden house was the only one Jenrette owned outside the U.S. mainland. He said Jenrette hired him and Gjessing to complete the design for the preservation of the residence.

“He’s sort of the godfather of residential historic restorations,” Taylor said about Jenrette.



JENRETTE:

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Jenrette and the two architects — Taylor and Gjessing — received the Caribbean American Express Preservation Award in 1994 from the U.S. National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites.

The Cane Garden house is an example of a small, classical Palladian Villa, which in this case also happens to have a strong resemblance to the White House, according to CAHPT.

After being built in 1784, Cane Garden was extensively remodeled in the 1820s in the newly fashionable classical style, with columns added on both the front and back sides of the home.

The Cane Garden house's similarity to the White House might not be a coincidence considering William Thornton, one of the architects of the White House and a close friend to former President Thomas Jefferson, was a native Virgin Islander, according to CAHPT.

Thornton even returned to the Virgin Islands for a visit about the time that Cane Garden was built and could have served as a consultant or taste arbiter on the project.

'Southern gentleman':

David Crowther, who has managed the Cane Garden estate for the past 25 years, said Jenrette spent the majority of his time on island from December to March.

"From the second I would meet him at the airport, his contagious smile

would rarely leave his face," Crowther said.

Crowther described Jenrette as a true southern gentleman who immediately made people feel like they were the most important people in the room. He said he spent many afternoons with Jenrette at the Cane Garden property enjoying a Cruzan Rum cocktail and taking in the views of the ocean and landscape while discussing a wide range of subjects.

"He was always interested in your point of view on matters and listened intently to your concerns," he said. "He was extremely humble, dedicated, generous and kind."

Crowther said his wife, Dulcie, and two sons, Wylie and Cooper, have enjoyed the sense of being part of Jenrette's family rather than employees. He said the same can be said for Hyacinth Armentrading and her family, noting Armentrading has been working to maintain the estate for three years longer than himself.

"To me, he was a friend with vision and passion for beauty in architecture and nature," Crowther said. "It was an honor to spend the last 25 years assisting with this vision. I respected him on the highest levels, as I believe he did I."

Architectural impact:

Taylor described the impact Jenrette had on architecture.

"Both the quality and breath of his residential restorations are unmatched in the history of American architecture," he said.

Jenrette, who visited St. Croix annually, held fund-raising events at

all of his properties to include his Cane Garden home to benefit local charities and nonprofit organizations to include the St. Croix Landmarks Society, Taylor said.

"He was generous and philanthropic," Taylor said.

Sonia Jacobs Dow, St. Croix Landmarks Society executive director, said Jenrette also contributed to the Landmarks Society by donating seed money to create a grant fund for the restoration of vernacular houses on island as well as by purchasing items during the Landmarks Society's annual antique furniture auction.

"We're very appreciative of everything he did," she said. "He'll be missed."

Dow said Jenrette even allowed the Landmarks Society to do house tours of the Cane Garden estate as part of one of its programs.

"That was always a big draw," she said. "Cane Garden is a beautiful property and it's very well restored."

Dow said Jenrette was an inspiration because of his dedication to his trust, which she noted he referred to as his collection of houses.

"He restored them and made them available to the public and was really committed," she said.

In addition to being admired as a leading preservationist and collector, Jenrette was known as "the last gentleman" of Wall Street, according to the CAHPT statement.

"He was an honorable man — both in his Wall Street dealings and in his dealings with Mr. Gjessing and myself, and the laborers who restored his home," Taylor said.