

# The Castle<sup>©</sup>

A case study in Entrepreneurship

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And

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**Outcome Summary:** Students will gain insight, research skills, and appreciation of entrepreneurship in action, using the Bernelli University case study method about a family property in West Virginia USA.

## I. Case Synopsis.

*This case is about an old abandoned stone Castle (see photos) in Monongalia County, West Virginia, U.S.A., and offers a fascinating story of love for stone, entrepreneurial dreams, and a commitment to serve those in real need. The Castle and grounds represents a familiar economic dilemma regarding real estate property usage today: what to do about vacant and dilapidated property that has been unable to attract an interested buyer for reinvestment.*

*The castle and outparcels is for sale for the third time (\$2.8m as of May 2008.). The castle's builder, Thoney Pietro is dead since 1972; In 1949, Thoney deeded the castle and property to the Franciscan Order of the Catholic Church, and he lived out his final years in nearby Morgantown. A series of Friars served in various capacities at the Castle and additional facilities were constructed in the early 1950s...a chapel and a residential Friary to train new priests. The Castle's final protector and manager, Father Jude Milli, died in 2007. Fr. Mili was a well respected person in the community, and for a short period during his time at the castle, modest success in attracting religious retreats, student clergy, and parish support occurred, but did not endure.*

*The castle and grounds, now comprising 14 acres, (originally a residential homesite, and including later a Friary residence and chapel) are all in deplorable condition and the site was abandoned by the Franciscan Order three years ago, at the death of Father Mili. What will follow...a further decline or a renewal? What should follow?*

## II. Background.

During the 1920s, Thoney Pietro, a respected stone mason decided to build a home (castle) on 40 acres in Cheat Lake, West Virginia. By 1928, the plan for the structure was well under way. Finishing the 23-room structure required five years and \$200,000, a fortune then. (Note: *Fallingwater*, the Frank Lloyd Wright masterwork 35 miles away in Pennsylvania, was built about the same time and cost the Mellon family only about \$55,000). Pietro could afford to build the castle because by wit, will and skill, he had ascended from an immigrant manual laborer to become very wealthy as one of the prime masonry contractors in the tri-state area (Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Maryland).

The religious family of Thoney Pietro lived in the stone house until August 24, 1949, when they gave the castle to the Franciscan Friars. The castle property is located on high ground with desirable views of the surrounding hills, and the three buildings on the site contain more than 25,000 square feet of space. The 14-plus-acre property includes a dormitory and a romanesque chapel (originally) featuring imported stained glass windows and a domed ceiling made of Oregon Fir.

In 1949, the Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate Conception Province based in New York began their missionary efforts in West Virginia from the Castle. Father Jude Mili from the Order of Franciscan Friars became a resident of the castle in 1968, making it his and God's mission to turn the Friary into a retreat facility for anyone who felt the need to be closer to God's presence. They called it a Christian Renewal & Retreat Center for non-clergy. The Good Counsel Friary used the castle also as a church and training facility for Catholic friars for more than 30 years, until 2008. In May, 2008, the Castle was listed for sale for \$2.8m, but later reduced to \$2.5 million.

## **The problem statement**

***The general opinion of many area residents and authorities is that the property is a historic site, and it would be a shame not to preserve it. But, who should save it and how?***

In 2008 **Mary Anne Pietro Morris**, granddaughter of Thoney Pietro, said there are a lot of repairs that need to be made to the Friary, and she blames the Franciscan Friars for that. *"They have let this property fall into the horrendous state it's in,"* Morris said. *"It is the Franciscans' fault the castle is this way."*

Elsie Carvell, a member of the community of people who have been touched by the Friary, is one of the organizers aiming to keep the castle and the associated land as is. If approved, the Friary land would be the first historical district in West Virginia. In 2008, Elsie Carvell reported: *„The Franciscans came down and removed a lot of the statues and stone lanterns from the property and took it to other places. The chapel on the property was gutted except for what's embedded in the walls. We want to make sure that nothing else is taken away and that it is preserved."*

***Discussion Question:*** *Should the castle go into the hands of another religious group (who is able to buy the land and property) or can some good continue to come out of it in other hands? Be thinking of entrepreneurial alternatives.*

But before proceeding, let's learn more about the history of the castle and the people who played key roles in its existence and operation.

## **III. Thoney Pietro: alias Ferdinando Pitassi**

### **How to succeed from a zero base?**

If a person, namely as an immigrant, wants to succeed in a highly competitive US environment, he/she has to be a workaholic, of course. He/she has to demonstrate the physical and mental capabilities of a superman/superwoman. First surprisingly, however, the person has to excel in an activity which is not his/her favorite and desirable life activity so that, only then, he/she can move on to his/her favorite life activity. Possibly, these were rules-of-thumb for the Thoney Pietro's successful *life game* in the U.S.A. At the end of his busy and fruitful life, many feel he left a legacy of stonework that should ensure he is remembered as a master builder for generations, if not centuries. Others, including some commercial interests do not see or share the intrinsic value of the property and see it as an eyesore and are thus indifferent. Further, Morgantown is a transient area, with one-half the population associated with West Virginia University, and the other half permanent residents.

Born in Italy in 1878, Pietro came to America 18 years later (1896). Pietro initially settled in Pittsburgh, Pa. and his three brothers followed, all eventually settling in the Morgantown, WV area to live and create a new life in America as stonemasons.

Thoney Pietro's real name was Ferdinando Pitassi (Ferdinando Pitasswi??? – according to a report by Bill Fichtner, a neighbor of Thoney Pietro in Morgantown). His Grandfather in Genoa taught him the ancient craft of stone masonry beginning at age 7. By the time Thoney emigrated to America he was a skilled craftsman. At immigration, the officers could not pronounce his surname, so Ferdinando told them to call him Pietro, which means stone in Italian. And how did he acquire the name Thoney? A boss on one of his earliest jobs called all Italians Tony, so Thoney gave it an unusual spelling and he kept it. Thoney died in 1972. The family had one daughter who lived for a time in the small stone house near the castle grounds, but later moved away.

The castle took five years to finish, even with skilled crews who were paid double the going rate (\$2.40 hr.) during the great depression. The stone was quarried from a nearby dale and Decker Creek. When completed it was magnificent with designed arches, stone patios, two turrets and parapets, a wrought iron staircase, and beautiful fireplaces. Ceiling mouldings, and other special decorative touches, along with state of the art fixtures, large wine cellar, three car garage, and special outdoor treatments adorned the structure and grounds.

According to Carvell, one of the most interesting things about Thoney is that he build the castle without any architectural blueprints. Thoney said that he remembered a castle in Italy when he was a boy, and decided to duplicate it.

Pietro wanted the castle to shine, so he added special touches to the construction. He broke small pieces of glass and mirrors and embedded them into the concrete between the stone, so that light always shone off the house. Later, he was forced by local authorities to remove some of them because they became a blinding hazard to vehicles passing by. During WWII, there were widespread rumors that the castle was being used as a lookout, and even that Thoney might be an Italian spy! On August 24, 1949, Thoney who was deeply religious, deeded the castle and half the 40 acre property to the Franciscans and moved into a small stone house nearby.

**Interesting Fact:** Neighbors tell this story about Thoney in his elder years: After acquiring the castle, the Franciscans had problems getting their cars up the narrow driveway and into the garages, so they tore down two arches to make the driveway wider. Thoney was furious, and used to walk up and down in front of the castle pointing his cane and hollering, *I thought I gave the castle to God, but instead I gave it to the devil !!!*

In 1955, the Franciscans build a chapel, and in 1968 an adjacent dormitory and offices (the Friary) using californa mission style architecture that did not complement the castle exterior, further troubling Thoney.

## **Thoney Pietro House on Kingwood Street in Morgantown / Retirement Years**

Pietro's home in Morgantown was less flamboyant than the castle he built, but was still a very substantial structure in the Italianate style he preferred. It is one of several structures he built on this block.

He once owned the world's record for bricklaying - placing an average of 136 pavement bricks per minute over eight hours at Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1900. His fame as a brick paver was such that in 1907, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette sent a writer to do a feature on his skills. He was timed on that occasion at 182 bricks per minute.

The young mason, already a contractor of some substance, came to Monongalia County in 1911. Like most people in those days, Thoney arrived in Morgantown by boat, says William Fichtner, who lived across the road from Pietro the last 20 years of the stonemason's life. When he came up the Monongahela River, he said his first look at Morgantown reminded him of the place in Italy he came from.

Morgantown was a small town when he came here, says Fichtner, Pietro helped build it. He paved many of the streets in town with bricks. He paved High Street, Spruce Street, University Avenue, Park Street, Brockway Avenue. He built sidewalks and walls. I've seen a lot of the walls he made and I've never seen one that fell in."

Like his castle, Pietro's reputation has endured. According to Fichtner, a student at West Virginia University came out to interview him when he was 78 years old. She doubted he could lay 136 bricks per minute. Pietro told her to come back in a few days and bring a stopwatch.

Fichtner recalls that Thoney came over to my house and asked if I had any bricks. I only had about a half-dozen. He went all around the neighborhood collecting bricks. He was only able to find 111. When the student came out with the stopwatch, Fichtner watched his aging neighbor's performance. He piled the bricks four in a stack along-side the sandbed he worked, Fichtner recalls. He would lay four courses, or rows, consecutively. He would pick up a brick and slap it lightly in the sand to splash a little bit of sand against the next brick, like dry mortar. Then he would do the same with the next brick. He had a kind of regular swinging motion. That day he placed the 111 bricks in less than a minute. One of the streets in Morgantown officially bears Pietro's name. Countless others do, too, if you know where to look. Many of the bricks Pietro used were imprinted with his name. Though almost all the brick streets he built have been blacktopped over.

The street paving was done by the Thoney Pietro Company, the contracting firm that made the stonemason a rich man. The company's roots date back to Thoney's early years in America. By the late 1890s he was undertaking contract jobs in Pennsylvania, according to the 1958 sketch by Morgantown Professor Oscar Lambert. Pietro evidently was already doing some work in the Morgantown area before he moved there. In its heyday the Pietro Company was a sizeable general contractor, handling street paving, plumbing, sewerage and excavating in both states. In West Virginia Pietro operated statewide, laying streets from Monongalia to Mingo.

In 1940, Thoney Pietro, now a retired, wealthy general contractor and Morgantown area resident for many years, wanted to present the University with a gift as a token of his appreciation of happiness which had come to him since his arrival from Italy. Pietro ordered the bust of the famous Florentine 13th century poet,

Dante Alighieri, from Peter Bazzanti and Son of Florence. The colors on top of the pedestal were to be green and brown to blend with the colors in the University Library lobby. When completed, the bust was shipped to Baltimore, Md. Where it encountered problems with the U.S. Customs. Customs insisted on a \$113.00 e duty

even though Pietro had a letter from Customs headquarters stating that objects used for educational purposes were exempt from duty. After fruitless letters and even a futile trip to Baltimore by Pietro, Customs turned the bust over to the Treasury Department which in turn sent the bust to the Library of Congress in 1941. When University President Irwin Stewart arrived in July 1946, Pietro told him the story of the Dante bust. During a visit to Washington, President Stewart visited the Library of Congress and found the bust of Dante in the basement gathering dust. President Stewart wrote his former classmate and then Chief Librarian, Luther H. Evans, about the Dante bust and hoped he could find a way to have the bust sent to the institution to which it was originally intended. Evans was willing to help; however, under the law the Library of Congress could only turn over the bust if manuscripts or materials of equal value to the duty were exchanged. Library funds were inadequate to meet the monetary value; therefore, Pietro supplied the money for the microfilming of copies from the West Virginia Collection. The Library of Congress was then willing to accept the microfilm for the bust. Finally, on April 22, 1948, President Stewart notified Pietro that the „long-awaited“ gift had arrived. (Morgantown Post, November 21, 1959).

**Interesting Fact.** Fichtner still lives near the castle and believes it should be preserved. “I can’t see how altering it could lower property values.” Just the opposite would seem to be the case. Fichtner’s essay on Pietro found its way into Fichtner’s recent remarkable book, “My Side of the River,” available from the author.

**Discussion Question:** *Analyze the entrepreneurial character of Thoney Pietro and his ethnic background...can you site several descriptive personality traits and work styles he might have had?*

#### **The Castle and Thoney Pietro Summary Timeline**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>
----	1878	Ferninando Pitassi (Pitasswi)...born in Italy [later, aka Thoney Pietro]
7	1885	Grandfather teaches him the art of stonemasonry
18	1896	Pitassi arrives in America...becomes skilled craftsman in Pittsburgh, Pa.
21	1899	Now married, vacations to Fairmont...likes Morgantown WV
33	1911	Moves to Morgantown...Thoney Pietro Company w/three brothers
50	1928	Now a rich contractor, begins work on Castle (dream home)
55	1933	Moves to 40 acre castle property after 5 year construction

62	1940	Retires a rich man...rumors he is an Italian spy using castle during war years
71	1949	Gives castle and one half of estate to Franciscan Order...later remorseful
73	1952	Thoney moves into Morgantown, seven miles away
---	1955	Chapel constructed by Franciscans, using different exterior...Thoney mad
---	1968	Fr. Jude Mili arrives...Friary built using yet another exterior...Thoney mad
94	1972	Thoney dies in Morgantown, WV
---	late 70s	Sales attempt to sell castle with all equipment, furnishings, and three vehicles
---	68-2006	Property in use as a seminary and religious retreat center not very successful
---	1980s	Franciscans attempt again to sell property (internally) but attempt fails
---	2007	Fr. Mili dies...Franciscans put property up for sale third time (\$2.8m)
---	2010	Property essentially abandoned and in serious run-down condition

#### IV. THE ENVIRONMENT:

**Castle Grounds and local surrounding area.** (Interview with neighbor John Lojewski, 8/1/10)The castle is located about 7 miles from Morgantown, WV, in a residential area called the Cheat Lake subdivision. Of the 40 original acres, some 14 acres remain of the original parcel....Thoney sold an adjacent lot for private residential home construction. This dwelling is now occupied by descendents of Luigi Diboni, to whom Thoney sold to. Two additional lots beyond the Diboni property with houses on them are occupied by the Billie families sold to them by the Franciscans as funds were needed by the Order. The original property (40 acres) rests on a crest of an abandoned strip mine, and has beautiful views of the surrounding hills...an enchanting vista. During WWII there were rumors the castle was a lookout (?). The castle grounds appear to be in a high tax area with expensive homes surrounding the area. In its heyday, the congregation at the chapel numbered about 50. It was never a designated parrish with full sacrament offerings however. The last person who lived in the castle was Deacon George Doerr. This is the third time the castle has been for sale:

1. Late 70s...Franciscans offered as is, fully furnished, 3 vehicles, all equipment \$675K.
2. Late 80s...Charlestown, WV Diocese (now Wheeling - Msgr. Annie) but Fr. Mili blocked, because area citizens did not want it used for rehabilitating felons/law offenders. Msgr. Annie backed off. Property became a 'white elephant'.
3. Current sale offer by the Franciscans at Fr. Mili's death.

Fr. Mili had convinced superiors he could make a 'go' of the property by developing a Retreat Center for other faiths, utilizing the chapel and underused friary, succeeding the failed seminary, but this did not ultimately happen as revenues were scarce due to lack of promotion and interest. At his death, the Franciscans again put the property up for sale, gutting what they wanted and left the premises to the elements.

Lojewski knew Thoney in his declining years...reports the old gentleman used to walk up and down the street in front of the castle, waving a cane and cursing the Franciscans, whom he blamed for destroying a part of his stonework (the Franciscans tore down a driveway arch to accommodate vehicle access to the castle). Thoney never drove, but rode the bus system in his aged years, and reportedly remarked, " I thought I gave the castle to God, but I gave it instead to the devil"!! Thoney early on (advent of cars) was forced to remove some of the glass work from the castle exterior as the sun reflection blinded drivers.

The property also contains overgrown hiking trails, a picnic area, and several producing fruit trees (apples & pears) planted by Fr. Mili. Further, there is an unusable olympic size swimming pool and a bath house behind the Diboni property which is now no longer part of the castle grounds.

**Morgantown:** ([www.morgantown.com](http://www.morgantown.com))

County: Monongalia

Settled: 1772

Incorporated: 1810

Government: City Manager / Council

Population: est at 29K (2008 = 29,642...wiki) plus WVU adding 28,839 (Fall enrollment, 2009)

Transient area...many are indifferent to the outcome of the castle. Low unemployment (WVU). (Lojewski).

Transportation: Hart Field = municipal airport; Regional airport at Clarkburg =(American Airlines and Southwest) but...most travelers go in and out of Pittsburgh (90 minutes away).

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Castle does not appear on the list of Historical Places, because the Society has no control.

Climate: Avg. high= 63F Avg. Low = 42F Precipitation = 43.3 inches per year

Recreation: Cheat Lake, river

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Other demographics: (2000 census)

26,809 people, 10,782 households, 4183 families in the city.

Population density: 2,736 people per sq. mile.

Racial make up: White 89.48%; 4.15% African American; 0.17 Native American; 4.15% Asian; 0.05% Pacific Islander; 0.51 other; 1.48% from two or more races; 1.54% Hispanic or Latino.



Age Distribution: (WVU influence!)...young town

Under 18 = 11.1%

18 – 24 = 44.7%

25 – 44 = 20.4%

45 - 64 = 13.5%

65 /over = 10.4%

Median Income: In the City = \$20,649                      Family = \$44,622

Below Poverty = 38.4% (23.3% under age 18 and 8.3% over age 65).

Media: Privately owned –                      The Dominion Post (daily, public)

Mountaineer Jeffersonian (Weekly via WVU Students – free)

Daily Athenaeum Weekdays for/at WVU in session (free)

Eleven TV Channels and 10 radio stations

#### **V. Teaching Notes and Research Questions\*. Think like an entrepreneur...(class discussion)**

1. Should the castle be restored or demolished? (based on its intrinsic value / economic value)
  - a. Is the castle “just” a house...or historical significance? Explain
  - b. What is the value if nothing is done (including no sale) Explain
2. If the three buildings are demolished, what are best alternative land uses?
3. If restored, what logical potential uses can you suggest?
4. Discuss the area economic impact based on uses in #2 and #3
5. Develop appropriate funding sources and partnerships if restored.
6. Contrast local interest, support, promotion, Public Relations, media.
7. What is the long term viability of the property (tax considerations: profit vs. non-profit)
8. What can/should be done with the chapel / Friary?
9. Governance: what impact from Fed, State, County, Local regulations (building codes)
10. What might be additional physical additions? (based on usage)
11. Develop a cost estimate (for various selected uses) and set a time line to accomplish them.
12. Why hasn't some local authority or foundation taken an interest in the property.
13. What might be the true or fair value of the premises? How might that be determined?
14. Assume *you* are the decision maker, would you buy it? How? Formulate a Plan.
15. Speculate on why the castle did not sell for the smaller sum of \$675K.
16. Why do you think Thoney did not give the castle to his daughter?
17. What sort of a relationship do you think Thoney had with Fr. Mili, whom everyone liked and who tried to save the castle and property?

\*Final questions selected TBD based on degree of difficulty by grade level (K-12, CC, UD, MBA)

## VI. References and Additional Research Sources.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos.mcgervey/1649744604>

<http://mymorgantownmusings.blogspot.com/2009/08/good-counsel-friary.html>

<http://www.libraries.wvu.edu/history.briefhistory.pdf>

[http://goodcounselfriary.blogspot.com/2009\\_02\\_01\\_archive.html](http://goodcounselfriary.blogspot.com/2009_02_01_archive.html)

<http://www.icprovince.org/>

<http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs0081102191220051/archive/11103545942297.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/franciscan>

[www.ofm.org](http://www.ofm.org)

Morgantown Chamber of Commerce: 1009 University Ave. 304-292-3311

Morgantown Builders: 304-284-0099

Economic Partnership: 955 Hartman Run Rd. 304-296-6684

Public Library System: 304-291-7425 (Cheat Lake: 284-7401)

Senior Center: 287 Eureka Drive 304-296-7002

Board of Parks & Recreation: 304-296-8356

Museum / Historical Society: 211 Adams Street (Fairmont) 304-367-7037

Possible follow-up interviews / Enhancements to the case:

Pictures / maps of the castle and grounds / Thoney & family.

More contact with neighbors: Lowjewskis –John/Shirley, Seamons', DiBonis'

More contact w/Great Granddaughter: Mary Haddock & family tree members

More contact w/Realtor: Howard Hanna

More contact w/Franciscans (Pittsburgh) where artifacts were taken

More contact w/George Doerr, last castle resident (moved to Florida)

Morgantown: J. W. Rudy Foundation (gave \$30m to hospital)