Like John Gaul, you too can have a Victorian mansion

Up the sidewalk to the imposing Victorian mansion at 2007 Franklin Street — the historic Haas-Lilienthal House — walks a group of senior travelers who call themselves road scholars. They are greeted by a gentleman from another era, properly dressed in a vested suit and bowler hat, carrying a silver-headed cane, who welcomes them inside.

It’s not John Gaul’s home, although sometimes people think it is. From a passing car comes a shout: “Hey, are you Mr. Lilienthal?” He bows ever so elegantly and welcomes his visitors inside.

Gaul is one of about 50 docents who lead tours of the Haas-Lilienthal House, which was donated by descendants of some of the city’s most prominent families as a home for San Francisco Architectural Heritage, the historic preservation group.

Heritage offers one-hour tours on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Docents guide visitors through the perfectly preserved wood-paneled rooms of the house, most still with the original furnishings. They explain the distinctiveness of Victorian architecture and the privileged lives of the family that lived there from 1886, when it was built, until 1973.

“There was polite uplifting conversation in the front parlor,” Gaul says. “In the second parlor, maybe a little gossip while waiting for dinner. In the dining room, all was refinement, with good food, good wine and good conversation.”

This month Heritage is inviting new docents to join its ranks. The training program begins March 13 at 6 p.m. and includes eight sessions of lectures by historians and architects, plus tips from seasoned docents, including Gaul.

“Style is as important as substance,” Gaul says. “The facts alone don’t make it come alive.”

To learn more about becoming a docent at the Haas-Lilienthal House, contact volunteer coordinator Dorothy Boylan at 441-3000 ext. 24 or visit sfheritage.org.