

A Barn With a Past

By Heidi Sinick

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Those who love secret stairways, castle drawbridges and historic houses can find all three in one home featured on the Fall Church Home and Garden Tour.

The April 19 tour will include a pre-Revolutionary War barn that was converted by the Carl Harpers into a stone house with a drawbridge staircase. The staircase is modeled after the drawbridge of the Chateau Chaumont in France.

Harper, who died in 1964, had a master's degree in aeronautical engineering from MIT. He was both a designer and a test pilot in the Navy. He masterminded the renovation of the barn, purchased in 1933.

Harper became enchanted with the chateau when he saw it while doing research in France as part of his job as naval attaché in London. Later, when he and his wife bought the barn, he drew up plans and had a local carpenter build the drawbridge according to his specifications.

The wooden staircase in the two-story-high living room that was once a hayloft is mounted on chains and actually operates like a "drawbridge."

"Sometimes when the children were playing upstairs, we used to draw up the staircase," Mrs. Harper recalled.

A direct descendent of Pocahontas, Mrs. Harper furnished the stone house with family heirlooms and antiques. Now a blonde, vivacious grandmother, she moved out of the house recently and has rented it to several bachelors.

The stone manor at 2824 East Cameron Road is located on land reputedly once owned by George Mason, a Revolutionary War statesman and friend of George Washington. Local legend states that when General Washington attended services at the Falls Church, he stabled his horse in the barn.

The stone house remains an impressive testament to Harper's inventive mind. A naval engineer in 1918, he was something of a pioneer in his field. He designed the Navy flying boat equipped with hydrovalves, flight tested the Lockheed Sirius for Charles Lindbergh and taught Amelia Earhart how to fly twin-engine aircraft.

"I used to joke with Carl that he should have married Amelia," Mrs. Harper said laughing, "but he always said she was too domineering. I guess he needed someone like me who would go along with his ideas."

The Harpers bought the barn only two years after they were married. Their house was a wooden shell, so Harper decided to encase it in stone called Falls Church pink granite, cut from a local quarry.

Looking up at the peaked roof, Mrs. Harper said, "On sunny days, the rays of sunlight used to stream in through all the cracks, and on rainy days the water seemed to seep in everywhere except those cracks I had buckets set up all over and we'd have quite an orchestration going. Finally we decided to put a tile roof over the original one."

Harper's hobby was elephants and four stone ones that once served as counterweights for the drawbridge are now positioned outside under the eaves of the roof to help support the weight of the heavy tiles.

The original walls still preserved inside are made of Norwegian pine brought from Europe by colonial settlers. Most probably, the wood was once used as ballast in the sailing ships. Wherever it was necessary to replace or add new boards, an attempt was made to match exactly the original wood by using old timber from other farm buildings.

Above the flagstone chimney there is a window in the thick stone wall. This unusual feature was both functional and decorative since it was designed to admit light from above into the two-story living room, and could be used as a showcase for the children's tree at Christmas.

Harper designed the concealed stone door at the side of the baronial-size fireplace to open silently at the touch of a finger. When opened, the door reveals a stone stairway that leads to a large recreation room that was once a stable for horses and cows.

The hang balcony in the living room divides the two-story high former hayloft into two floors. The doors to the bedrooms upstairs slide up and down instead of opening out conventionally.

"When she was school age, my daughter used to tell the neighborhood children that we had ghosts to keep them from prowling around our house, but it was always a magnet for the curious ones," Mrs. Harper said.

While the ghosts at the Harpers' were acknowledged fictions, there are many local residents who swear there are real ones haunting the historic grounds of Cherry Hill Farm, another stop on the tour. (note: the article continues about the rest of tour)