

A Short History of Greenway Downs
By Joan Rodriguez
(undated and unpublished)

On January 1, 1976, the first day of our bicentennial year, Greenway Downs lost its most distinctive landmark. Known in the community as the Harper House—or simply, “The Barn”, is was located at 2824 Cameron Road. The imposing stone structure stood at the site of a barn on a farm once owned by Daniel Dulany, the first recorded occupant of the land which now makes up the community. For those of us who have lived here then, it was tragic beginning to the year in which we were to celebrate our nation’s 200th birthday.

Although the earliest recorded owners of the farm were the Dulany family, it has been said that the land was farmed by tenant farmers for George Mason. Whether or not this is true, George Mason, author of the Virginia Bill of Rights—many points of which were adopted as the first ten amendments of the U.S. Constitution—we do know that George Mason and George Washington were vestrymen at the nearby Falls Church and could have been visitors at the farm. There is no record that Washington’s horse slept in the barn, but we like to think that it did.

During the War of 1812, Commodore Thomas Tingey commissioned his aide Mordecai Booth to move gunpowder from the Navy Yard in Washington and see that it was delivered to Falls Church for safekeeping. After much difficulty in obtaining wagons and drivers, on August 13, 1814, Booth was successful in getting the stores of gunpowder to Wren’s Tavern (at what is now the 300 block of West Broad Street), one mile from the Dulany Farm. On Wednesday the 24th he wrote, “Desirous of having the powder delivered and under guard, I was on my horse at dawn of day and ordered the wagons to gear up and follow me to the Farm.”

In 1869 Silas Tripp from Dutchess County, New York purchased the 109 acres for use as a dairy farm. In 1880 he began operating a quarry. Uncle Charles Tinner, “a highly respected colored citizen” worked the quarry, referred to as “Tinner’s Quarry,” located where Sisler’s Stone is now. We have a tributary of Tripp’s Run passing through our neighborhood and nearby a place called Tinner’s Hill where Silas Tripp donated land to ex-slaves. The pink granite taken from this quarry was used in the building of the Falls Church Bank, once a landmark at the corner of Washington and Broad Streets, Columbia Baptist Church, Falls Church Presbyterian Church, St. James Church, and the Harper House were built of this stone, as were other buildings and innumerable foundations throughout the area.

In 1920 Ruby Lee Minar and William Hoge bought land from Tripp and subdivided the property into small lots. Further development of the land was slowed by the crash of 1929. Leroy R. Eakin Sr. bought some of the lots, including the one on which the old barn stood. In 1930 Carl Harper, an aeronautical engineer and test pilot, purchased the barn which as the time is said to have been not much more that four corners and a few roof boards. In time the Harpers had the barn covered with stone from the quarry and turned the house into a fascinating showplace which they graciously shared with the community. Mrs. Harper invited neighborhood children in for Halloween tours and had Girl Scouts over for tea at Christmas time when a giant decorated fir tree stood in the two story living room.

I met Mrs. Harper, by this time a widow, in the late 1960’s while doing volunteer work for the Cerebral Palsy Center on Cherry Street. I told her of our fascination with the house and she said we’d have to come over and see it. One evening a few weeks later she called and invited Henry, me, and our two sons to see the house. After finishing dinner we walked over, had a complete tour of the house and a short visit. I found it touching that someone I’d met only once would be so kind in sharing her home. I won’t describe the house, but instead am attaching an article from the 1970 Washington Post article written when the house opened for a house tour.