

POST
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A Barn With a Past

By Heidi Sinick

Those who love secret stairways, castle drawbridges and historic houses can find all three in one home featured on the Falls 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.

The renovation includes not only the drawbridge staircase, but a 12-foot high soapstone and flagstone fireplace, a suspended balcony and a secret stone door that leads to a narrow spiral stairway.

Harper became enchanted with the chateau when he saw it while doing research in France as part of his job as naval attache 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 hydroplanes, 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 to domineering. I guess he needed someone like me who would go along with all 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 sailing ships. Whenever 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 hanging balcony in the living room divides the two-story high former hayloft into two floors. The doors to the bedrooms up stairs 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.

Located on Park Avenue next to city hall is the unrestored colonial barn and buildings recently given to the city by members of the Riley family.

According to George Long, chairman of the Historical Commission, chunks of an old tree in a shed outside of the barn are part of the "hanging tree" recently cut down nearby. Local legend says that the tree was used to hang Union spies. It is their ghosts and those of their gray-clothed adversaries who are believed to haunt the grounds.

On tour day, however, what visitors will see inside the barn are photographs of the museum proposed by the Historical Commission. Plans are now awaiting approval from the city council.

There will be 12 stops on Sunday's tour to be held from 1 to 5 p.m. to benefit the Falls Church Episcopal Day School. Tickets are \$2.50 for adults, \$1.25 for students. Tea will be served during the afternoon at the church.

For further information and reservations, phone 534-8687 until noon daily. Tickets will also be available on the day of the tour at each house. Descriptive brochures are also available.