

## Fire Destroys Historic Fairfax House

George's Horse Slept There, "Ghost" Haunted It

(picture-see article)

(picture caption: Stone walls and rubble are all that remain of what was once George Mason's barn in Falls Church)

by Mary Margaret Green  
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A neighborhood showcase has burned down in Falls Church taking with it more than 200 years of history and most of the family's memories.

The Thursday fire, in an immense stone house at 2824 Cameron St., started in the third-floor bedroom, apparently from faulty wiring, according to owner Dominique Hodge.

It could have been contained there, she said, but the water pressure gave out at the fire hydrant in front of the house just as firemen got the blaze under control. By the time hoses were attached to hydrants on Lee Highway several blocks away, the house's all-wood interior was beyond saving.

"All you could hear was, "Dammit! Where's the water?!" a neighbor recalled.

The house was built as a barn on George Mason's Greenway Downs farm, where George Washington would visit after serving as vestryman at nearby Falls Church Episcopal Church.

Washington's horse, according to local legend, probably slept in the barn while Washington and Mason set under a nearby elm drinking cider on lazy Sunday afternoons.

The barn was transformed into a house in 1934 when Carl Harper, an inventor who designed the Navy catapult and also taught Amelia Earhart to fly a twin-engine plane, covered the original Norway pine frame with stone from a local quarry.

Harper added many unique designs of his own, but he never installed ceilings, plaster or wallboard to cover the original exposed beams and foot-wide wooden planks, which had been carried as ballast on colonial sailing ships.

The Harpers moved in when the barn was barely habitable, according to neighbors. "Mrs. Harper told me once that she went in to (her son's) bedroom and the crib was covered with snow," a neighbor recalled. "That's when she told Mr. Harper that they had to do something to make the barn more like a house."

As modest suburban homes filled the surrounding farm meadow in the mid-1940's, the Harper house became such a neighborhood landmark that the Greenway Downs Civic Association printed a sketch of it on its directory and stationery.

Children still refer to the home as the "spook house" because Harper, who loved children, delighted in taking them on Halloween tours that always ended with a trip down a hidden staircase behind one of the chimneys, accented by eerie lighting effects.

The house has been owned for about five years by Ronald and Dominique Hodge and Mrs. Hodge's two sons by former marriages, Jody Soliel, 19, and Shaun VanSteyn, 32.

Soliel and Mrs. Hodge, as well as some neighbors and friends, insist that they have seen ghosts, including Harper and his wife, in the house at various times.

"I was standing on the first floor with a friend," Mrs. Hodge recalled yesterday, "when we looked up to the gallery (a four bedroom area that was once a hayloft) and we saw a short man with white hair and two deep lines on each side of his face. While we were looking up he stepped back into the shadows."

VanSteyn said a female guest was so frightened by "a man in a white wig" who was playing "hide and seek" with her that she left immediately.

When the fire began Thursday, only Mrs. Hodge, Soliel and two house guests were at home. VanSteyn was at a movie and Hodge was in Ohio. "His (Hodge's) father died last month; about two weeks ago he quit his job (as a space photographer), and now this," VanSteyn said, "so he really has a lot."

The family gave a New Year's Eve party for 200 members of the English Speaking Union and Mrs. Hodge was resting in bed Thursday when she heard a sizzling sound in the room immediately above her.

Although she ran upstairs immediately, she said the room was already filled with smoke. Her son and neighbor both called in alarms but, "I was numb. I went and lay in the weeds just watching until the boys (Soliel and friends) found me and wrapped me up," she said.

"They led me to a neighbor's house and I just lay under a table in their dining room." The Red Cross has temporarily sheltered the family in the Governor Quality Inn in Falls Church.

Everything the family owned and cared about, including two of their four Siamese cats...(the rest of the article is cut off...)