

Rural Renewal in Princess Anne

By Bill Thompson, October 2004

What do a rotting front porch, a parlor piano, and a nest of honey bees have in common? As Somerset Historical Trust Chairwoman Gale Yerges has discovered, when you undertake to save old and neglected houses, you should be prepared for the unexpected.

For the past decade, the Trust has quietly but diligently mustered funds and friends to assist in restoring three buildings in Princess Anne. The structures – all more than a century old – are situated in the heart of the Somerset County seat, and all had fallen into regrettable states of disrepair.

The trust, a not-for-profit organization of about 250 history-minded individuals, was incorporated in 1973 to help identify, celebrate, and protect Somerset County's rich heritage. Part of that heritage is a distinctive array of 18th and 19th century architecture, and it seemed only natural that the Trust step in to address the question of how to save structures in severe decline.

But it wasn't easy in the beginning. Yerges noted, and it took time and concrete results to demonstrate to the community at large that preserving old buildings is worth the expense. Once a prosperous tidewater county whose merchants grew wealth on produce, lumber and the bay's seafood harvests, Somerset has experienced its share of tough economic times. Many locals naturally wondered whether money allocated for fixing up old houses could be better spent elsewhere.

Over the years, the Trust built a reputation as the expert on local properties and buildings. Numerous structures were nominated for placement with the National Register of Historic Places. And in 1990, in conjunction with the Maryland Historical Trust, the group published historian Paul Baker Touart's *Somerset: An Architectural History*, and impressive Baedeker of the county's historic buildings.

Searching land records and compiling lists of old buildings is one thing. Rolling up the sleeves and tearing out rotten timbers is another. When a small band of Trust volunteers put down their pens and picked up crow bars, they were about to change how people viewed the organization.

"While our survey work and nominations to the National Register were vitally important, people as a rule don't always understand what all that means," said Yerges. "But when they see a roof being raised, bricks being repointed, and the stunning faux grained doors in one of the houses, they begin to appreciate the work we are doing. Now that it understands our mission, the community has responded very positively."

Frank White, president of the Princess Anne town commission, agreed. "I think what the Trust has done is wonderful" he said. "Not only do they fix up houses, but when they sell them they bring nice, talented people to town. We're very happy with the Trust and we'll do anything we can to help them in the future."

The Brittingham House

On two occasions John Nicholson fell through the front porch of the dilapidated apartment building on Beechwood Street. Known as the Thomas Brittingham House after the original owner, Nicholson and his wife, Penny, purchased the two-story frame dwelling and its one-acre lot from the Trust in 1994 for \$44,000, approximately the sum the Trust spent getting it ready for a buyer.

Erected in 1817, the building once was a handsome residence, equal to its peers in this fashionable part of town. But time and neglected took their toll. When the Trust acquired it in the early 1990s, it had been converted into apartments. Yerges enlisted the help of other volunteers, and they began the arduous task of stripping the building down to its bare and original infrastructure.



"Our goal was to gut it," Yerges said. "Keep the roof on and sell it 'as is' so the buyer could see what had to be done. We didn't want the buyer to have any surprises."

Aside from stepping through the porch, Nicholson, a contractor by trade, was pleased with how the Trust had readied the house. "The reason I bought it was because they had gutted it," he said. "It was a big selling point."

The Littleton Long House

When it was time in 1996 to move the 1830 Federal-Greek Revival frame dwelling from its original lot on the corner of Somerset Avenue and Washington Street, Yerges was concerned because a piano was still standing in one of the two parlor-like rooms on the first floor. What happens if it rolls against a window and breaks the frame, Yerges wondered.



Nothing to worry about, assured Jerry Matyiko, a principal with Expert House Movers, Inc. who had been hired to relocate the structure one block west on Church Street.

Expert House Movers was an experienced outfit – three years later it gained national attention moving the 5,000-ton, 198-foot-tall Cape Hatteras Lighthouse some 2,980 feet away from the beach – and the Littleton Long project went off without a hitch.

Plans for the Littleton Long House were ambitious and called for a complete restoration, especially of the splendid and mahogany and tiger maple staircase and the unusual faux tiger maple decorations found on the interior doors and the stair posts.

The Trust took possession of the house in 1995 and, nine years and countless work hours later, sold it to Jim and Simonne Theiss. The Long Island couple had been looking to buy a home on the Delmarva peninsula and discovered a listing for the Littleton Long House on the web. They traveled to Princess Anne to inspect the house and were immediately impressed.

“As soon as we walked in, we knew we were on to something,” said Jim. “We’re a good fit for the house and the house is a good fit for us,” said Simonne.

The trust calculated it had invested about \$300,000 – including five matching grants totaling \$145,000 from the Maryland Historical Trust and a \$14,000 grant from the Neighborhood Business Development Program to move the structure – into the house and sold it for \$275,000, recouping nearly the entire investment. Homeowners agree to abide by perpetual preservation easements that ensure the property stays relatively true to its historical origins.

Yerges said the sale was a good deal for all parties, including the town and county, which benefit from the increase in property taxes.

There are other benefits as well. One of the first organizations Jim and Simonne joined after they moved to Princess Anne this past June was the Trust. “They have been the entry point for us in this area, and we were thrilled with what they did to the house,” said Simonne.

The Pinckett House

Unlike the Brittingham House and the Littleton Long House – which in their glory days held well-to-do Princess Anne residents – the humble Pinckett House on Beckford Avenue is one of three remaining tenant houses of seven erected in the 1870s to house freed slaves from the neighboring Beckford estate.

The building on its modest lot to houses away from the Littleton Long house contains a couple of rooms on each of its two floors and not much else.



The latest occupants have seen birds, who find their way inside through missing window panes, and a nest of honey bees.

Although the Trust does not yet own the property – paperwork with the Maryland Historical Trust is unfinished and grants are still being sought – Yerges and her volunteers already have seen that the overgrown yard was cleared and that the interior of the house was swept.

“We have no idea how long this project will take,” Yerges explained, “as we have found in the past, the funding comes in fits and starts, and it often takes a great deal of time for us to gather the necessary bids and papers expected by the state.”

The Trust hopes to begin work on restoring the tenant house before the end of the year.

“If you’ve got the drive, you go out and do it, if you know you’re doing the right thing,” said Yerges. “We hold this community, this historic county, and these environs in trust for those who come later. Isn’t that what this is all about?”

Yerges said her interest in helping save old structures was ignited in 1967 when she was living in St. Louis and she attended the annual meeting there of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. When she and her late husband, Howard, moved to Somerset County, she was invited to attend a gathering of Somerset County Historical Trust members. She joined the organization the following month and not long after was named chairperson, a position she has held for more than two decades.

Bill Thompson is a former weekly newspaper editor and ‘Baltimore Sun’ reporter. He is a recipient of Washington College’s Sophie Kerr Prize, the country’s largest undergraduate award for writing. He has written or contributed to three books dealing with the Eastern Shore of Maryland, his adopted home. He is currently a freelance writer and photographer in Easton.