

CROSSROADS

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The News Journal/SCOTT NATHAN

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INTO THE PAST



Smyrna's annual walking tour puts historic structures on display

By CAROL CHILD

Special to The News Journal

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As in Christmases past, bright holiday lights strung along the mansard roof danced like candlelight illuminating songbook pages. The hands on the tower clock pointed to 5:45.

Someone looked up. Fire! It was coming from the roof and spreading fast. Strong winds showered sparks onto nearby buildings while firefighters from nine companies chased the escaping flames long into the night.

As firefighters dowsed surrounding structures, the water froze on the buildings, sheathing them in ice. When it was over, a stalwart fireman had to be chipped from his ladder, where the freezing spray from his hose had frozen

IF YOU GO

Candlelight Walking Tour

WHEN: 3-8 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Smyrna Opera House and more than 10 homes will be open for the fourth annual tour of historic Smyrna.

TICKETS: Purchase tickets at The Heart of Smyrna or from other Smyrna merchants.

BENEFITS: Smyrna Main Street Association

in 1870, the building became the home of the opera house, fire department, police station, jail and library, and also served as a lodge hall.

Opera-house entertainment included "General" Tom Thumb, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and lectures by Frederick Douglass, suffragettes Lucy Stone and Olive Logan, politician William Jen-



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Mary Turner, executive director of the Smyrna Opera House, whose stage featured many famous names during the 19th century.

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As firefighters dowsed surrounding structures, the water froze on the buildings, sheathing them in ice. When it was over, a stalwart fireman had to be chipped from his ladder, where the freezing spray from his hose had frozen him to the rungs for two hours.

More than half a century later, the renovated opera house will be among more than 10 structures — ranging in age from pre-Revolutionary through Victorian — that will be open Sunday for the fourth annual Candlelight Walking Tour of historic Smyrna.

The opera house is one of more than 490 buildings in Smyrna qualifying to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Built

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Opera-house entertainment included "General" Tom Thumb, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and lectures by Frederick Douglass, suffragettes Lucy Stone and Olive Logan, politician William Jennings Bryan and actor Douglas Fairbanks Sr.

One might imagine women swooning in the aisles at the sight of Rudolph Valentino shimmering across the silver screen as "The Sheik" in 1921 — about the time the second floor was converted to house the Roxy moving-picture palace, which endured until the end of World War II.

After the 1948 fire, it seems, a

Tour: Structures reflect town's past

FROM PAGE K1

great, romantic era had collapsed. The clock tower and third floor were destroyed. The building was reduced to two stories, which for many years housed civic organizations and the library.

In 1994, the Smyrna-Clayton Heritage Association was formed, led by John W. Dickinson until his death in 2001. To restore the opera house, the association raised \$3.6 million, half a million dollars of it donated by Smyrna-Clayton citizens and businesses.

Local craftsmen performed all the work on the opera house and its new annex. After the work was completed, the original lightning rod was replaced atop the structure, having been found in the backyard of one of the carpenters.

"We were scheduled to open with a four-day gala Feb. 20, 2003, the weekend of the great snow," said Mary Turner, a Smyrna native and executive director of the opera house.

Performers had to be contacted and the event postponed until March 15, among them Frederick Douglass IV, the great-great-grandson of the famous orator and author.

A lingering presence

"Oh, I have ghosts," said Jane Jane Leverage-Willis while raking leaves in front of the Pope-Mustard Mansion, which she will open for the tour.

The mansion, built about 1768, subsequently was owned by Col. Charles Pope of Revolutionary War fame and by Col. John Mustard, who purchased it in 1837, added the third floor and transformed the commanding residence into the Federal style with Greek adaptations.

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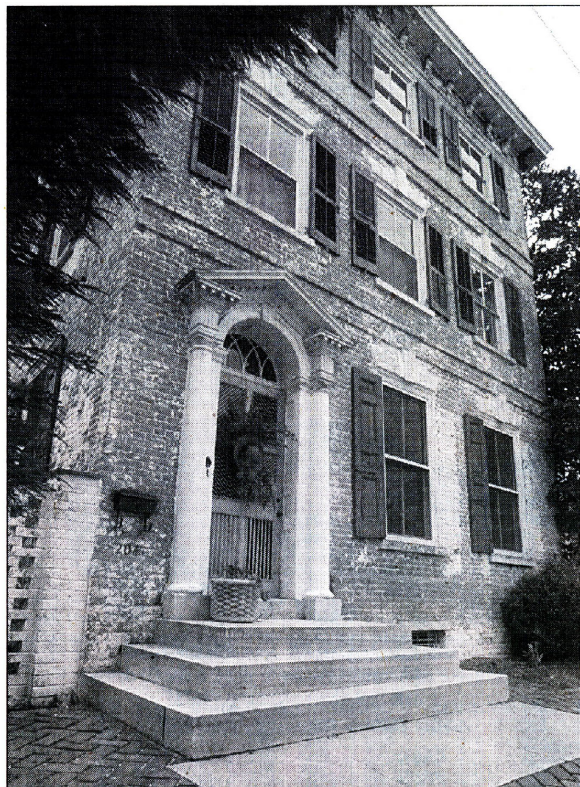
Smyrna Opera House

The Smyrna Opera House was built in 1870 as the Town Hall to bring together communities breached by the Civil War. The walls are 18 inches thick. The Opera House hall features a hand-painted coffered ceiling, a balcony, refurbished original stage and sprung hardwood floors. The walls have been hand-painted and gilded by members of The Smyrna-Clayton Heritage Association, a nonprofit organization formed to offer arts and cultural opportunities to the community. A teacher is retained to give lessons on the piano, donated by Delaware Piano and Organ of Dover, in the art gallery/facility on the third floor. The Dickinson Room can be rented for banquets.

This year, among others, The Ardensingers will perform "The Mikado" and The Underground Railway Theater Company from Arlington, Mass., will perform "Are You Ready My Sister," a play taken from Harriet Tubman's autobiography; quilts include freedom quilts and shadow puppets.

tion holds that the mansion was a stop on the Underground Railroad," said George Caley, Smyrna historian and author of "Footprints of the Past," a history of the town's historic homes.

Leverage-Willis, who has lived in her home since 1975, told of a beautiful, young, dark-haired woman in a long white dress who walked through her darkened bedroom one night — and of a man dressed in a Revo-



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On Sunday, walking-tour visitors will be able to enter the 18th-century Pope-Mustard Mansion on Mount Vernon Street.

lutionary War uniform who walked past her kitchen. Both of the apparitions smiled and waved, she says.

A friend who boarded with Leverage-Willis for nearly a year said, "I always felt as if someone, a friendly spirit, was watching me."

"I've seen her ghost," said Edwin Sullivan, who owns a historic home across the street. "I've seen movement across the third-floor window."

Returning from vacation last year, Leverage-Willis came home alone to find a squirrel had gotten into the house. The place was a mess. She sat down in the kitchen by the brick cooking fireplace and cried.

"Then," said Leverage-Willis, "I felt a comforting hand on my shoulder and everything was all right."

Everything is all right at The Smyrna Opera House, too. "We like to think [John Dickinson] is still with us, watching over us, and is happy with the results," said Turner.

Commander: Second woman directs Post 6

FROM PAGE K1

commander," McBride says without hesitation.

When she does, Sheriff, also a Navy vet, actually will follow both parents in the top role. Her dad, Bob McBride, also commanded Post 6.

As the leadership baton passes to the next generation, McBride's tradition of serving strengthens. Growing up in Albany, N.Y., she was surrounded by veterans.

"My father was an Army veteran of World War I and my three brothers were World War II veterans, two in the Army and one in the Marines," she says. And Sheriff's husband and son are Navy vets as well.

"The day I graduated from high school, I went down to the Navy recruiting office. I decided I wanted to sign up but I was only 17 and my parents wouldn't sign for me so I worked for a couple of years. When I was 20, my father signed," McBride said.

Boot camp in Bainbridge, Md., was "tough," she remembers.

"I think everyone should do it. It's a wonderful way to grow up." Stationed in Norfolk, Va., she met her husband-to-be at an enlisted men's club dance.

Three months later, they wed.

Pregnancy ended her enlistment after 13 months. The couple left Norfolk in 1955 and returned to New York. Bob McBride retired from AT&T 30 years later.

"We always went down the Delmarva Peninsula on our way to Nags Head [N.C.]. We decided to look for a retirement home and stopped all along the coast. We found Seaford and fell in love with it," Ruth McBride says. They moved here in 1993.

Bob McBride soon joined Post 6. "The commander at the time, John Damen, kept asking me to join. He needed an adjutant. So I agreed in 1994 and served for eight years under four commanders, including my husband," Ruth McBride says.

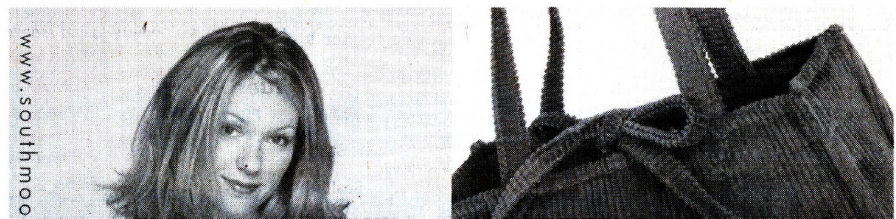
After serving as first vice commander, she was installed as commander in May 2002. Her term expires next April. "Ruth's very enthusiastic and does a tremendous amount of work [at the post] not a lot of people realize," says Drummond.

"I'm just sorry I didn't get in sooner," McBride says. "I hope we'll be seeing more women in leadership roles. We're all vets. Both men and women should lead."

Seaford senior cited by Hispanic program

Cristina Garmendia, a senior at Seaford Senior High School, has been recognized by the Col-

lege Board's National Hispanic Recognition Program for exceptional academic achievement.



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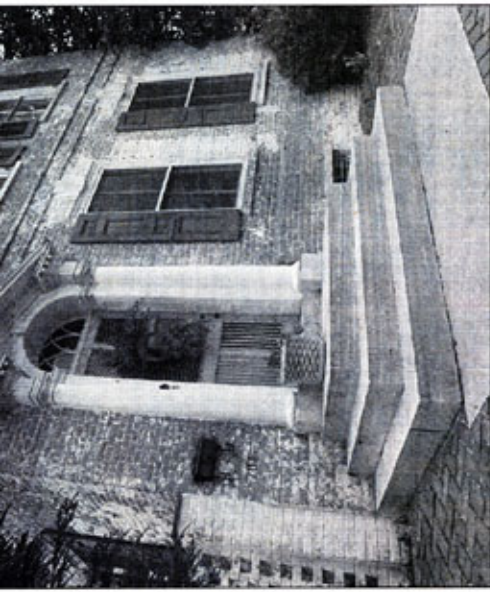
FYI

Pope-Mustard Mansion

The Pope-Mustard Mansion, 204 W. Mount Vernon St., Smyrna, was built on 1,000 acres sold by William Penn to his nephew, William Green. Samuel Ball built the original structure about 1768. It was two stories tall, with an A-shaped roof, and features Flemish-bond brickwork, keystone lintels and

wide, square chimney tops. The home was sold later to a noted Revolutionary War soldier, Col. Charles Pope.

Tradition holds that the home housed Revolutionary War soldiers and that, after Col. John Mustard bought it in 1837, it was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Col. Mustard, who owned a nearby tannery, transformed the home to a Federal-style mansion with a classic Greek entrance.



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The home gained national prominence during the ownership of Mr. and Mrs. Warner W. Price Jr., when in 1952 it was featured on the cover of *Antiques* magazine. The Prices added the kitchen rotisserie, built from bricks taken from the streets of Smyrna when macadam was laid as a replacement.

The Pope-Mustard Mansion has been owned by Jane Willis since 1975.

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