

Wealth Of History Gives Richness To County



With camera clicking, Catherine Cockshutt Bishir examines another old Warren County home to determine its historical significance and whether it should be included in the National Register of Historic Homes. She

is pictured above with Mrs. Jauncey McDougle, daughter of Dr. Thomas Haywood, who owns the mid-1800's house on W. Franklin Street in Warrenton.

By HELEN HOLT
News Editor

It is generally thought by most local historians, both amateur and semi-professional, that Warren County is a historical treasure. In terms of its architectural heritage, the county has a richness few other counties in North Carolina can rival. Equally well-known and supported by this same group of history buffs are the efforts to further preserve what is uniquely old, here. Restorations, though not yet commonplace, are on the upswing as more and more people realize the importance of keeping the county's heritage intact for future generations.

Contributions of time and effort have been made by numerous persons. Research has been done on old homes; appeals have been made not to destroy but to rebuild for a new life; money has been spent to save what will never be built again.

A familiar figure on the periphery of these activities is Catherine Bishir, better known to most before her recent marriage as Catherine Cockshutt, the lady from Raleigh who had the know-how and state contacts to push this county's historical beginnings into something permanent and acknowledged.

Employed by the N. C. Department of Archives and History, Bishir has been a direct link between Warren

County and the state cultural sources which likewise value the treasures here.

Through her work and the work of the Warren County Historical Association, a number of advances have been made to bring Warren County's history to the forefront.

Work has progressed steadily at the restoration site of Buck Spring, Nathaniel Macon's homeplace. A complete listing of 200 to 300 old homes in Warren County has been made and filed in the archives department. At least 11 homes in the county have been put on the National Register of Historic Homes. Restorations are under way already at Green-Duke House - one of the National Register Homes - in Soul City, and will be forthcoming at the Jacob Holt House in Warrenton.

Most of the town of Warrenton has been designated a historic district, thereby assuring the continued preservation of existing old structures within that district.

Although most of the old homes in the county have been screened, given the once-over several times and put on record in Raleigh, a few still exist that somehow escaped Bishir's careful examination.

She was in town again not too long ago to investigate three such homes: the Haley House on Franklinton Street; the John White

Cottage on Hall Street; and the Palmer House in Oakville.

The homes may or may not end up on the National Register. That is a decision of the archives department for whom Bishir performs research.

But their structural and historical data will be permanently recorded for generations to come, and hopefully, this detail will be one of many reasons for the owners to preserve the homes as they are.

Historical Features
What makes a home historical? What are the features the experts seek to put down in their records?

Some of these answers and more were sought during Bishir's most recent tour. First on the day's agenda was the Haley house, a large, handsome but weather-worn structure located atop the last hill within Warrenton's city limits on W. Franklin Street.

Formerly the residence of Dr. Thomas Haywood, the home - also known as the Sledge House - is now in the hands of his children, Mrs. Jauncey McDougle of Oxford, and her four brothers, all of whom live distantly.

The family wants to restore the home and plans to apply for a 50-50 matching grant from the National Park Service. Before grant money can be obtained, however, the home has to be listed on the National Register, according to Bishir. After her visit and

thorough examination of several weeks ago, she will do the determining research.

Because she has seen so many Warren County homes, many of which belonged to the same era, Bishir was able to make a fairly rapid assessment of the Hall Haley House.

"This is a vernacular Greek Revival House," she declared confidently while the shutter of her camera clicked in an emphatic aside. "It is very typical of Warren County houses during prosperous times."

"Prosperous times," clearly reflects upon pre-Civil War days, giving the home a construction date of about 1840-50.

In explaining the terminology familiar to architectural historians but unknown to others, Bishir described vernacular as "the local rendition of a popular style."

Greek Revival was the popular style throughout the country during the 1840's. Local architects - most notably Jacob Holt in Warrenton - took that style, added their own interpretations and created a structure unique to the area in which they worked.

"All over Warrenton are these boxy, classical houses," Bishir said. "I can't say Jacob Holt built them all but I would say their features are similar."

"Other counties have Greek Revival houses," she continued. "But the neat

thing about Warrenton and Warren County is that you have Greek Revival houses with original personality."

The result is that there is a unified architectural concept prevailing. And the main thing, as Bishir stated, is that "you still have it."

Yet, with a practiced eye, subtle differences can be detected. With the Haley House, for example, the front porch columns are not "fluted," the term used to describe the rippled effect in circular columns.

The home's floor plan, evident from the outside by the placement of a central chimney, is likewise unusual, Bishir noted. She also pointed to the molding around all the front and side windows as another uncommon feature although the front door treatment is "fairly typical."

As she circled the house, accompanied by Mrs. McDougle and several members of the historical association, Bishir let her camera do as much of the data recording as her pen.

Her notes were not extensive but were supplemented by sketches of the various architectural designs and structural components.

Once inside, the sketching resumed. The researcher took note of such things as: the door frames, typical of the period; the marbled baseboard; the "curious" little room, thought to be a nursery set off to the side of a larger room; the mantles over the fireplace; the number of rooms, their placement, their possible uses.

Bishir even poked her head into closets, one of which had the following message scrawled on the back wall: "I have no power to fight the Lord's Battles but his arm is mighty."

The inscription was dated March 14, 1871.

In commenting about the closets, Bishir, said the Warrenton area has "more closets for the period than any other area" she has visited.

The upstairs bedroom mantle she described as "your standard \$1.98 mantle that they cranked out like cookies" back in that era.

As a whole, Bishir classified the house as



Richard Hunter, left, member of the Warren County Historical Association, and Mrs. Bishir chat about both the typical and unusual architectural features evident in the Haley House, also known as the old Sledge Home.

"most interesting, very workable," being similar to Elgin, DelKeith, Shady Grove and other homes with like floor plans and features.

"It may or may not be a Jacob Holt house," she added. "Other builders were here then and this may represent a cross-fertilization of ideas. Who knows? We just don't know."

The only sure way of ever knowing is to somehow locate the original contract or bill of sale signed by the architect or builder. Chances of doing that are so slim that historical researchers usually discount that factor altogether.

But knowing the architect is not always as important

as having a building that represents something unique, irreplaceable. Whether the home receives National Park Service funding is not assured. Mrs. McDougle and her brothers however, may be interested enough in restoration to carry on independently.

"The family has been here for so many years, we just hate to see anything happen to it," said Mrs. McDougle whose grandmother, Nancy Skinner Christmas Haley, bought the home in 1901 from A. D. Harris.

"We have wanted to do things to the house before but I am so glad now that we didn't so it can be done right," she added, referring

to an authentic restoration.

For the time being, until the grant application is submitted next year, the owners plan to protect the building by repairing windows, and roof leaks and getting it inspected for termites.

Bishir advises this course of action for anyone with an old home, even if restoration isn't intended immediately.

Many homes in Warren County have been here for 100 years or more. With their external wounds protected and their foundations secured, a little attention is all that is needed to keep them here for centennial celebrations to come.

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