MOUNT AIR
HISTORIC DISTRICT

Fairfax, Virginia
October, 1984

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MOUNT AIR
HISTORIC DISTRICT

Office of Comprehensive Planning
Fairfax, Virginia
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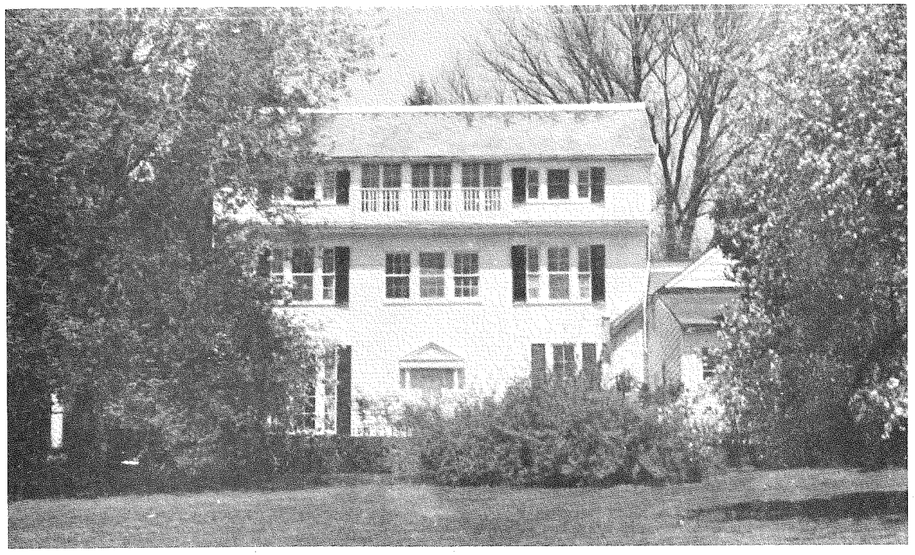
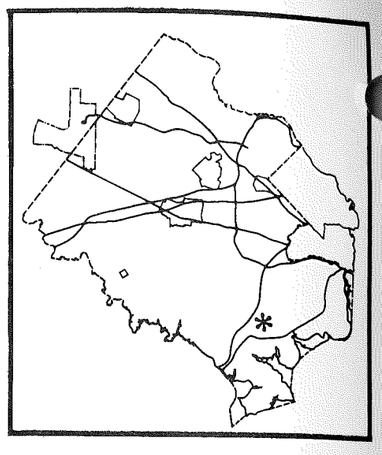
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LOCATION MAP AND VICINITY MAP IV
PREFACE 1
THE PROPERTY 2
HISTORIC AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE . 4
CURRENT ZONING 10
DEVELOPMENT TRENDS 11
HISTORIC DISTRICT 12
RECOMMENDATIONS 13



Mount Air, rear facade

Location Map



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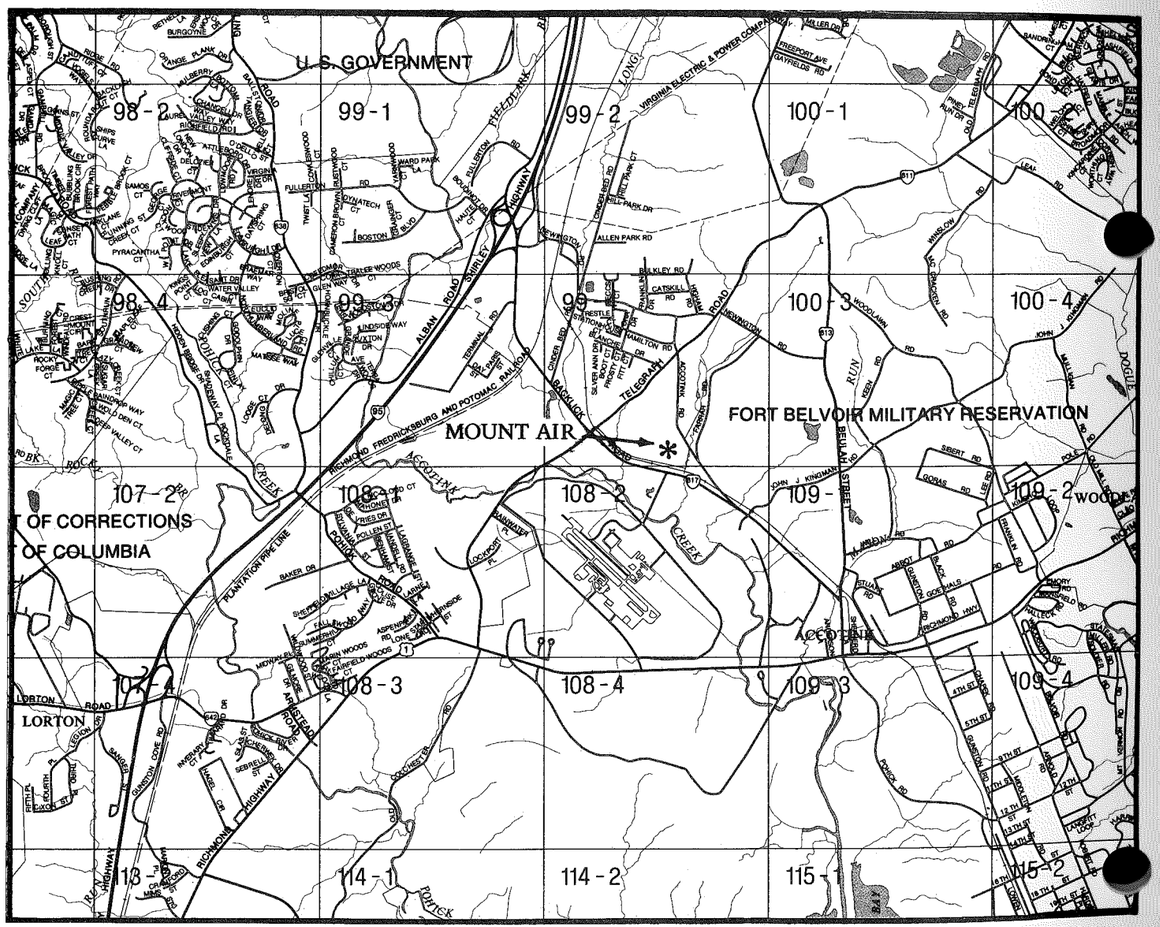


The South facade, c. 1918

Preface

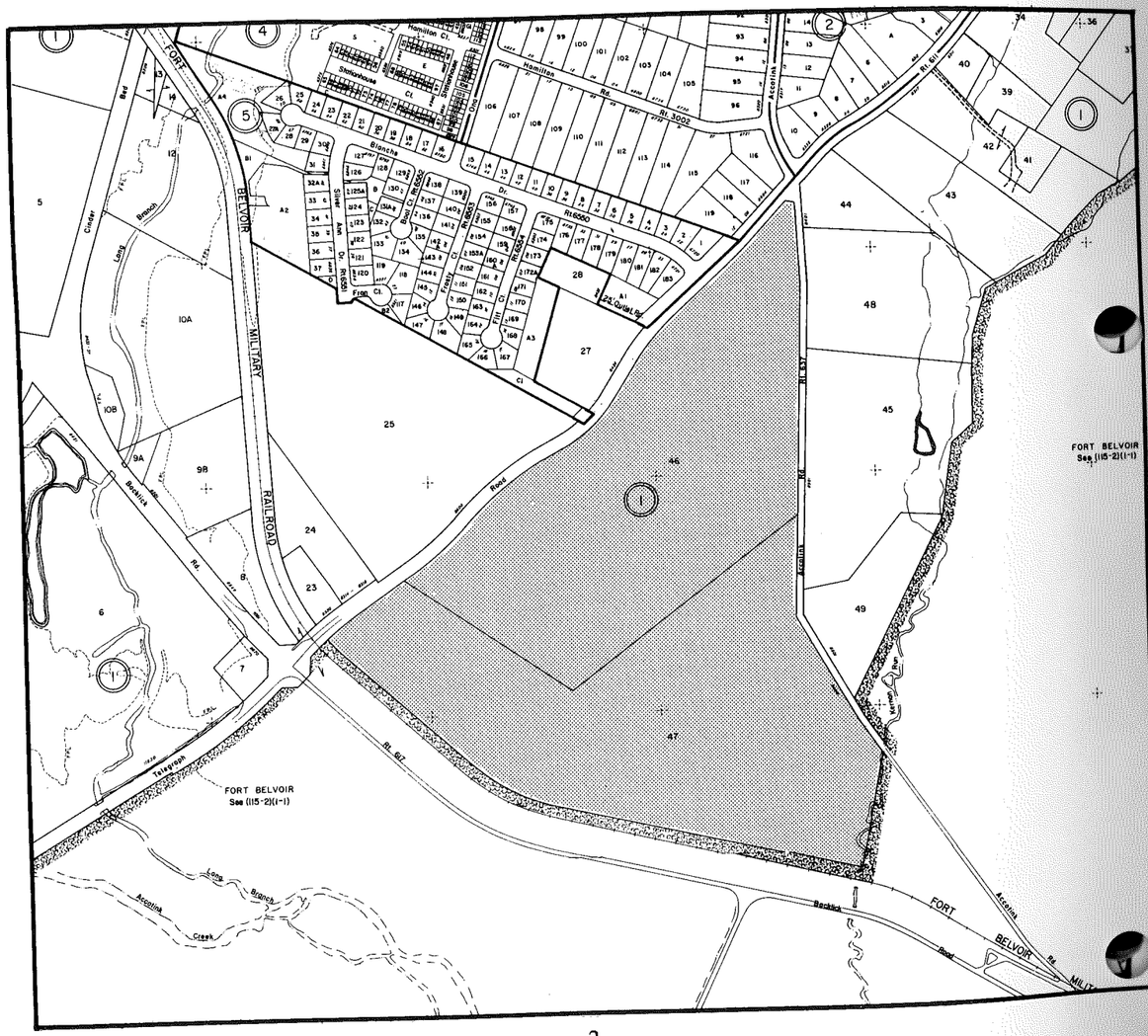
The creation of historic districts was authorized by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors to protect and enhance the county's historic and architectural landmarks. These sites are not only valuable but vulnerable—vulnerable to increased pressures for new development and to the potential for incompatible nearby development. The creation of a historic district affords protection by assuring that all new development and any alteration to existing structures will be compatible with the character of the historic site. After adoption by the Board of Supervisors, all historic districts are administered by the Architectural Review Board.

Adoption of the Mount Air Historic Overlay District will bring to thirteen the number of Fairfax County historic districts.

Recommendations for the district stress retention of the residential character and the necessity for proper siting of any new development so as to reflect the importance of the Mount Air house.

The Property

The Mount Air property is located on the southern quadrant of the intersection of Telegraph and Accotink Roads. To the north, east and west the area is residential. South of the property is land which was once part of the estate but is now controlled by Fort Belvoir. The property consists at present of two parcels, the house lot with twenty-five acres and an adjacent parcel of forty-one acres. On the house lot sits the Mount Air house, a stable, cabins and a tenant house. There is at present no structure on the adjacent parcel, though an old house, once an overseer's house, has been moved from this lot to the east side of Accotink Road. The area is in woods and fields, as is the adjacent portion of Fort Belvoir.



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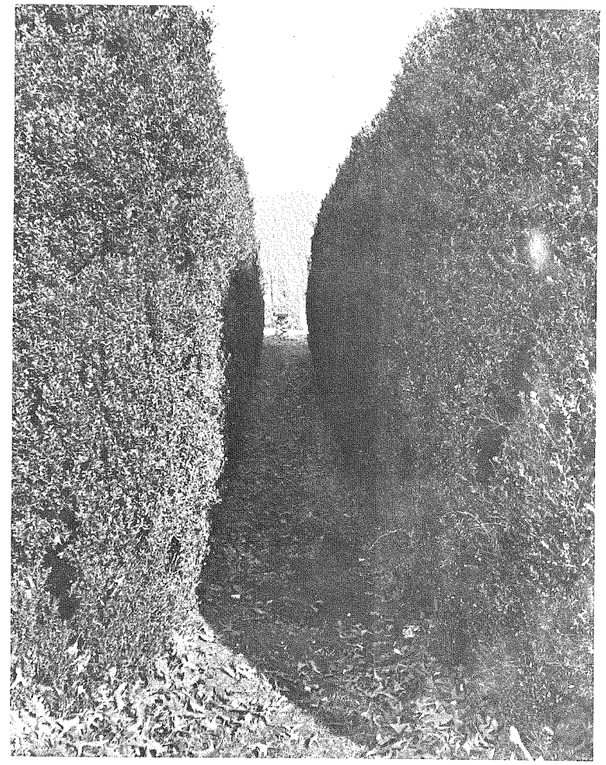
The boxwood allee is one of the most impressive features of the site.



Old building on the property, thought to have been slave cabin.

3

Historic and Architectural Significance

The property known as Mount Air was acquired by Dennis McCarty in 1727 and consisted of 522 acres on the north side of Accotink Creek, adjacent to lands bequeathed to him by his father. The McCarty's were a family of property and position in eighteenth-century Virginia. Dennis McCarty was made a sheriff of Stafford County (now Fairfax) in 1728, Justice of the Peace in 1728, and by 1731 was representing the newly-formed Prince William County in the House of Burgesses. From 1732 until the close of his life he was a vestryman for Truro Parish. McCarty's wife, Sarah Ball, was a second cousin to George Washington. One of the McCarty daughters, Ann, married William Ramsay, a trustee of the new town of Alexandria. Another daughter, Sarah, married George Johnston, a figure of major importance in pre-Revolutionary Fairfax County.

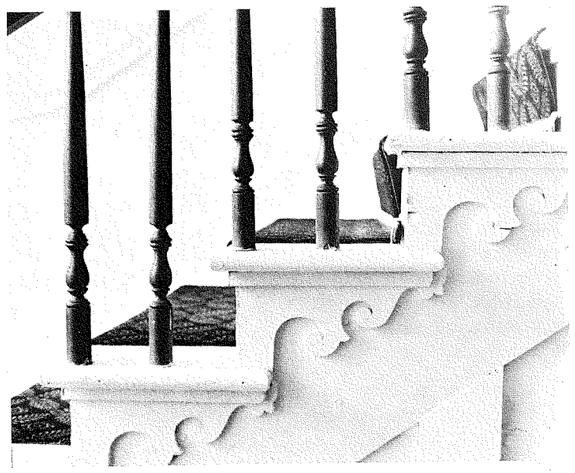
It is not known exactly when the McCarty family took up residence on the property. The earliest evidence of occupation is a bill of lading for lilac, hawthorne and gooseberry bushes sent from England in 1732. The magnificent lilac allee at Mount Air may well date from this order.

Patterns which are characteristic throughout the long history of Mount Air emerged early. The relationship of the owners to the Balls, Randolphs, Masons, and Washingtons is a recurring theme. So is the pattern of matriarchy. Dennis McCarty died eighteen years after acquiring the land, leaving his widow to carry on. Sarah Ball was the first of many widows at Mount Air, strong women who coped with wayward sons, Civil War and military occupation during both wartime and peacetime. Only three families have owned Mount Air. Dennis McCarty's great-grandson Daniel died without children. His aunt, Sarah McCarty Chichester, purchased the widow's dower rights in order to keep the property in the family. In 1860 the Chichesters sold Mount Air to Aristides Landstreet. In 1914 his daughters sold the now much-reduced acreage to George (*sic*) Kernan, the widowed mother of the present owner.

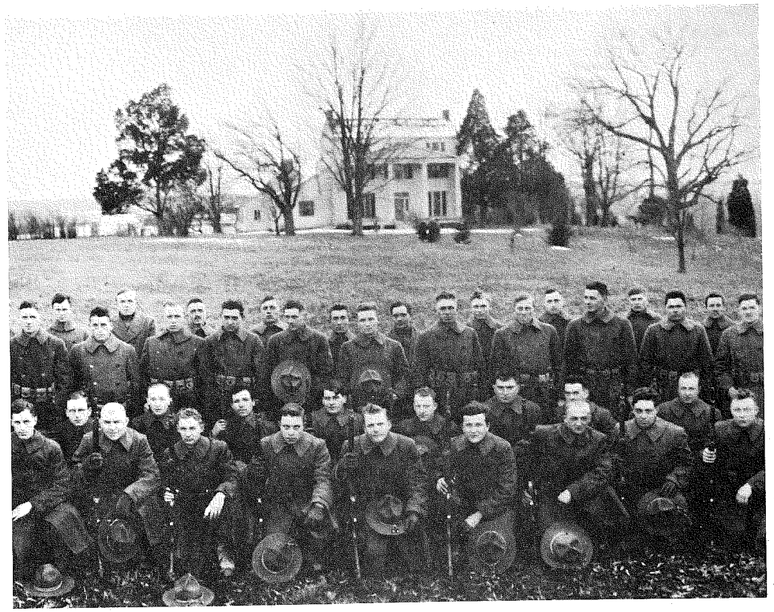
The tombstone of Richard Chichester after the storm damage.

Sarah McCarty Chichester survived her husband Richard by thirty years. Edith Sprouse, author of *Mount Air*, speculates that Sarah probably breathed a sigh of relief on entering widowhood. When Richard Chichester died at Mount Air his slaves said that the devil ran out from under his bed in the form of a red rabbit. Indeed his treatment of his slaves had earned him the nickname "Hard" Chichester. A bizarre footnote to this story resulted from a storm in the 1920s which damaged the graveyard where Richard lay buried. A portion of his tombstone was sheared away. Where once the inscription read "Sacred to the Memory of Richard Chichester," the remainder shows only 'hard Chichester'. But Sarah had more troubles with her son, Pitt, than with her husband. Indeed her grandchildren reported that she was virtually a prisoner at Mount Air, and they came to her rescue, removing her to the home of her grandson, Thompson F. Mason. Pitt himself died in 1833, leaving Fanny, his widow, to live on for another thirty years, another of the matriarchs at Mount Air. During that time the house was seriously damaged by fire, and in 1859 it was rebuilt. Shortly after the repairs were made, however, Fanny Chichester sold Mount Air to pay for the gambling debts of a granddaughter's husband.

The new owners, the Landstreet Family, occupied Mount Air from 1860 to 1914. Aristides Landstreet, his wife Mary, and their seven children moved to Mount Air shortly before the Civil War began. At forty years of age "Tide" Landstreet enlisted as a private in the Virginia cavalry. Two of his



A detail of the stairway in the entrance hall.



The 304 engineers at Mount Air in 1918.

sons also joined the army. Union troops occupied the plantation and Mrs. Landstreet was once imprisoned for three months on a charge of giving aid to the nearby Confederates. On her return home she was still able to signal the nearby Confederates from the attic window. Later in the war Mrs. Landstreet and the children left Mount Air for the safety of the Blue Ridge mountains, and on their return they found the property in need of much work. Portions of the estate were sold or divided for the children, and when two of the Landstreet daughters sold the property in 1914 there were only 117 acres left.

The new owner George (*sic*) Kernan, had by this time been twice widowed. On her father's side she was the descendant of one of Napoleon's generals. On the side of her mother, Caroline Shirley, she was related to the Randolphs, Balls, and Washingtons. Her first husband, John Shirley, was killed in an accident in Oklahoma Indian territory only two weeks before their child (the present owner) was born. She married again, but the death of her second husband left her with two small children, and she returned to Europe where she wrote for the Paris edition of the New York *Herald*.

At the beginning of World War I Mrs. Kernan and her two children returned to Virginia where she purchased Mount Air. When the United States entered the war the effects were felt at the Kernan farm. Mrs. Kernan granted the use of much of the land to the Army Engineers who arrived to build a new post to be called Humphreys (now Fort Belvoir). In her honor, the troops who camped on Kernan land referred to it as "Camp Merry Widow." Another of the remarkable women of Mount Air, Mrs. Kernan lived to be 96. Her acquaintances ranged from the Empress Eugenie of France to the outlaw Jesse James. For her work on their behalf in Florida she was made a member of the Carpenters Union.

In an almost uncanny continuance of the Mount Air tradition, its present owner, Elisabeth Shirley Enochs, was widowed after only two years of marriage. She has been a correspondent for the New York *Times*, worked for the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor, and represented the United States on the Inter-American Children's Institute.

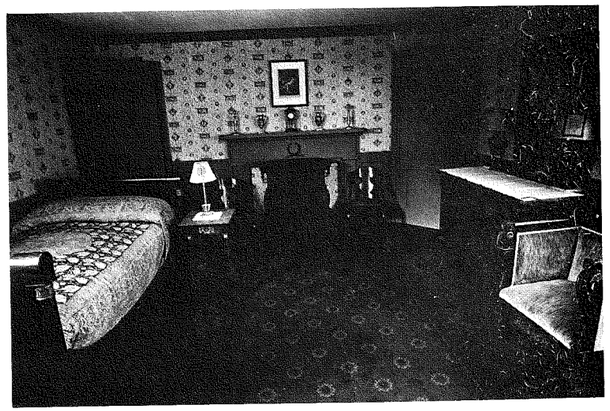
The house in 1920. Between the time of the 1918 photo and this one the wing to the left of the front had been constructed.

The Mount Air house itself reflects the many occupants who have lived in it and whose needs have resulted in repairs, alterations, and additions. It is known that Dennis McCarty had a house on the tract, but its eventual fate is uncertain. No above-ground trace of the house remains today, however an inscription on a board under the eaves of the main house, discovered during the twentieth-century repairs, states that "this edifice was commenced on Oct. 6, ____ . . . McCartys." An advertisement to rent Mount Air appearing in the *Alexandria Gazette* on December 17, 1806, mentioned "a large and convenient" house; on February 26, 1810, it was referred to as "a large and commodious dwelling," and the advertisement on October 22, 1811, described it as "one well calculated for the accomodations of a genteel family."

The present structure consists of two sections, one two-story, and a larger three-story main section. There is some architectural evidence that the basement foundation under the main portion of the house may be the foundation of an earlier house built before 1760. This would substantiate the inscription. There is known to have been a significant fire in 1859, after which repairs were made. In addition, occupation by Union troops during the Civil War necessitated more repairs during the 1870s, and other alterations were made during the twentieth century. It is thus difficult to decipher the exact architectural history of the present structure.

The roof lines of the kitchen wing are evidence of the many changes to the structure.

The drawing room mantal.

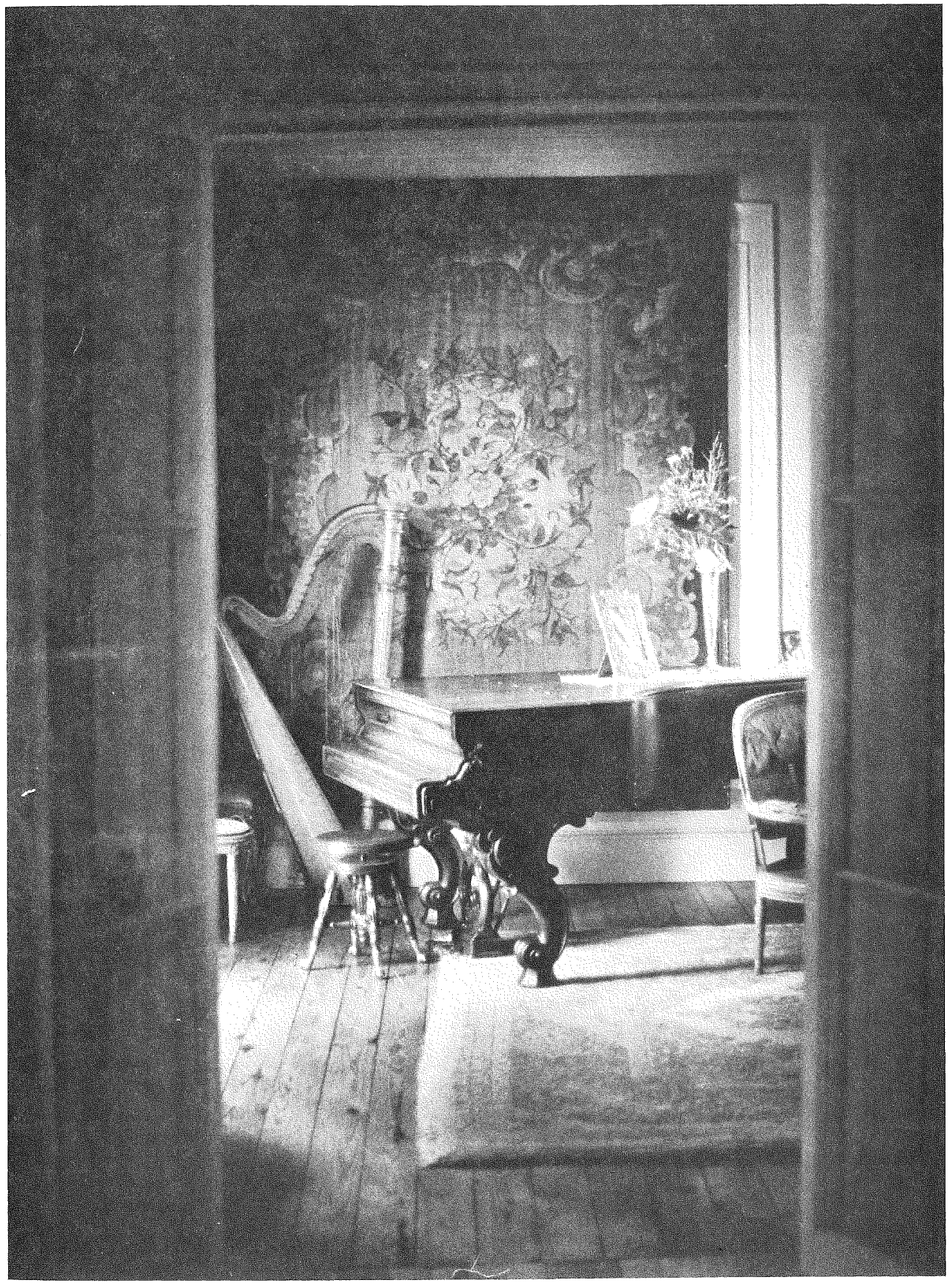


The furniture in this room was a gift of the Empress Eugenie of France.

The house is Greek Revival in style, with its most significant visual element being the two-story, four-columned portico topped by a pediment. The main door is flanked by a transom and sidelights, and topped by a pediment tracing the lines of the portico pediment. This door, as well as the windows in the main section of the house, are said to have been brought from Louisiana about 1840. T. Tripp Russell, an architect who has made a study of southern buildings, confirms this story. On examination of the windows and framing at Mount Air, he found them typical of French Louisiana. Because of the thinness of the muntins which frame the glass panels they are quite fragile and not often used in other sections of the country.

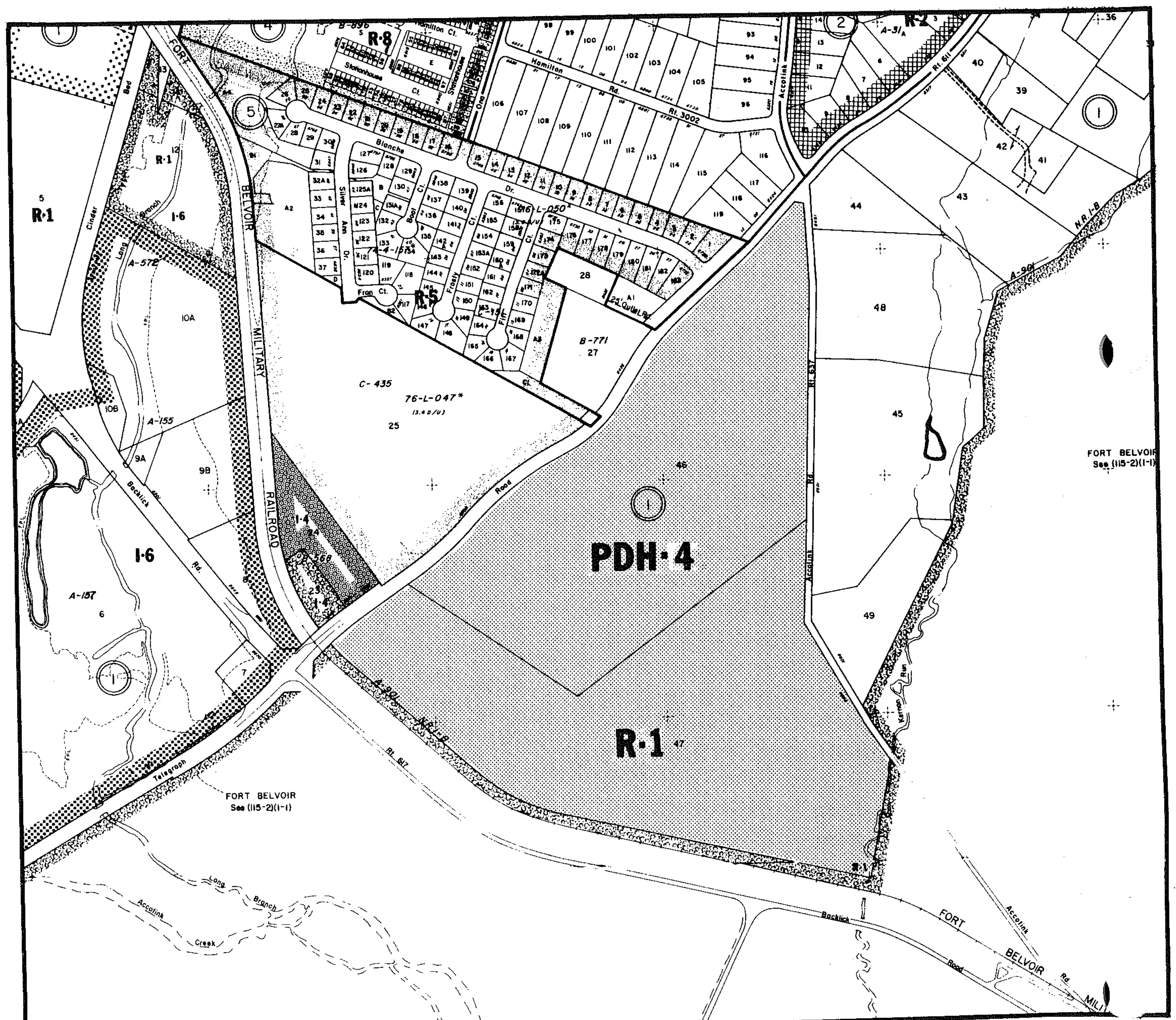
The gardens of the Mount Air property are impressive. On the north front of the building are three ancient trees. Two are ash trees, one 14 feet 11 inches and the other, inaccessible to measurement, even larger. The third is an osage orange, over eleven feet in diameter, a rarity in this area. The other outstanding feature is the L-shaped allee of lilac bushes on the east side of the house. These are believed to be the bushes referred to in the 1732 bill of lading. The allee partially encloses a series of boxwood-bordered gardens. These include lilac and peony gardens. At the garden's edge is a hundred-foot-long boxwood allee. According to Mrs. Sprouse's research, more than a third of the plant material used in Coloniel Williamsburg is also growing at Mount Air.

Together, the house and gardens tell the story of two-and-a-half centuries of a Fairfax County property whose occupants put their mark on the county, and, most emphatically, on the land they owned.



Current Zoning

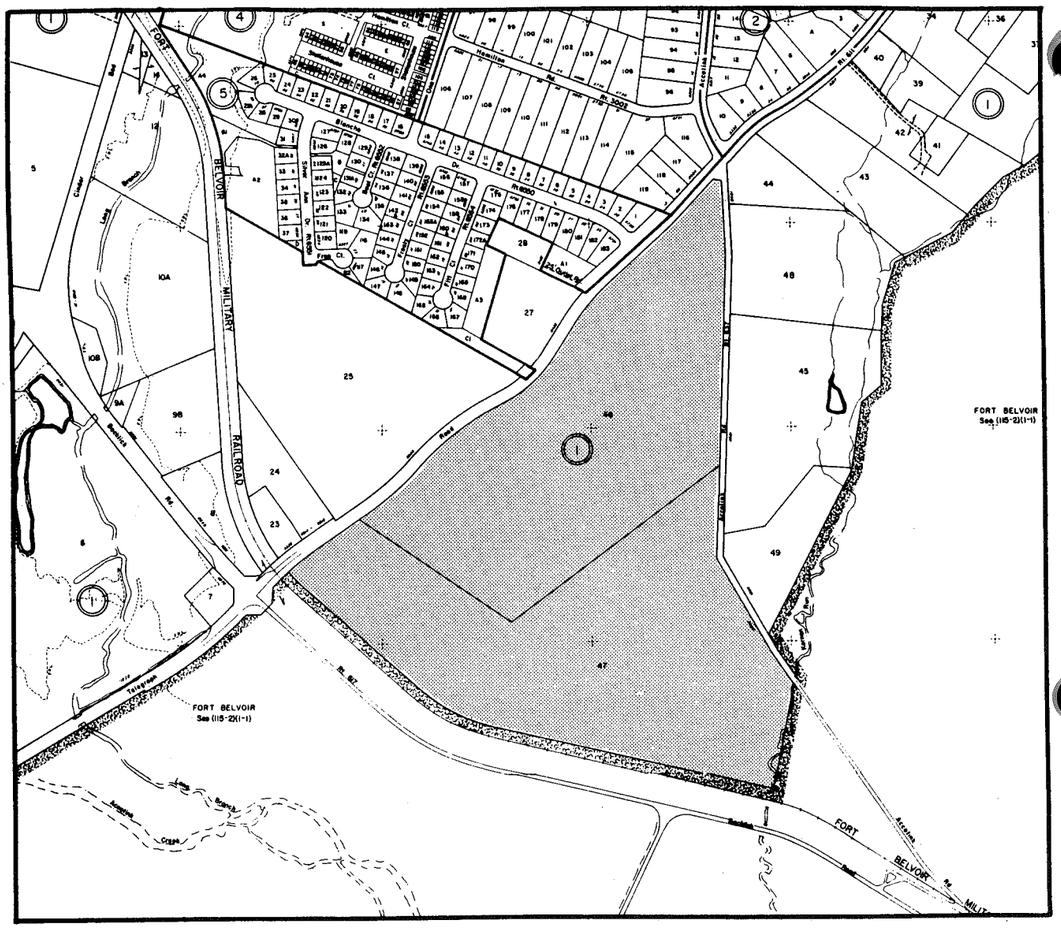
The house lot is zoned for single-family residential development (R-1). The property is located in Community Planning Sector S6 (Newington Community) of the Springfield Planning District in Area IV. According to the provisions of the plan, an objective is to ensure environmentally responsible development of the parcels east of Telegraph Road through a planned unit development of 4 dwelling units per acre. Provision is also made in the plan for Planned Development Housing (PDH) a category of zoning which encourages clustering of residential development so as to leave greater amounts of open space than possible under traditional residential zoning regulations. The lot adjoining the house lot has recently been rezoned to the PDH-4 category.



Development Trends

The family of the present owner puchased 117.4 acres of land in 1914. As a result of both purchase and condemnation of that land during both World War I and II by the Corps of Engineers, the house lot is now just under twenty-six acres. The present owner purchased an adjacent forty-one acres as protection. These parcels and the immediate neighborhood have long been rural and are characterized by residential acreage. On the west side of Telegraph Road is a subdivision, zoned R-5. South of the property, the Fort Belvoir land is wooded. An application to rezone and develop the forty-one acre lot under PDH-4 zoning provisions has been granted.

Although the area is largley undeveloped this old house is located on Accotink Road, nearby.



The Historic District

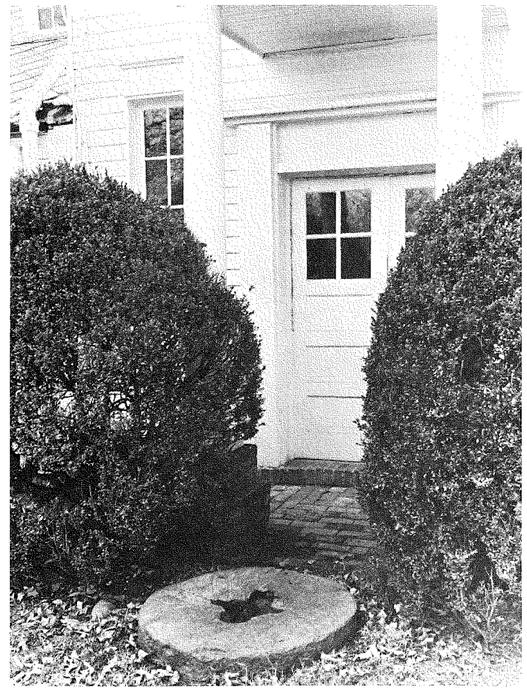
The following factors indicate the need to establish a historic overlay district around Mount Air:

- The historic and architectural significance of the Mount Air site.
- The need to protect the site from adverse environmental influences, including inappropriate development of the adjacent forty-one acre parcel.
- The need to protect the house lot and the structures from inappropriate alterations or additions.

Recommendations

The following policies are recommended in order to protect and enhance the character of the Mount Air area.

- Uses should be in accordance with the residential plans proposed for the area.
- Development of the larger parcel as proposed for PDH-4 should be carefully planned and sited so as to relate to the mansion house site, while providing adequate open space and visual buffering.
- The house, outbuildings and gardens all form the site complex and it is important that all elements be protected in any plans for alteration of the mansion house site.
- A long term goal should be the acquisition of an easement on the mansion house site.



The mill stone is said to be from George Washington's grist mill.

Board of Supervisors Actions

- Adoption of a declaration that the Mount Air property has both historic and architectural significance requiring protection against destruction and encroachment.
- Adoption of the Mount Air Historic District report which substantiates the historic and architectural significance of the area.
- Adoption of the provisions of the Mount Air Historic Overlay District by amending Appendix I of the Zoning Ordinance to add a new Part 13.

A 1918 photograph is the old cabin.

PART A1-1300 MOUNT AIR HISTORIC OVERLAY DISTRICT

A1-1301 Purpose and Intent

The Mount Air Historic Overlay District is created to protect against destruction of the historic and architectural quality of the landmark; to encourage uses which will lead to its continuance, conservation and improvement; and to assure that new uses within the district will be in keeping with the character to be preserved and enhanced.

A1-1302 Permitted, Special Permit, and Special Exception uses

All uses permitted by right, special permit, and special exception in the underlying zoning districts.

A1-1303 Use Limitations

1. The provisions of Part 2 of Article 7 shall apply to all land within the district.
2. All uses and development within this district shall be in strict conformance with the development policies and recommendations set forth in the adopted comprehensive plan.
3. Any new improvements, to include structures, signs, fences, street furniture, outdoor graphics, and public and private utilities shall be designed and installed to be compatible with the historic landmark.

A1-1304 Lot Size Requirement

As specified in the underlying zoning district.

A1-1305 Bulk Regulation

1. Building height should not exceed 35 feet.
2. Minimum yard requirements: the location and arrangement of stuctures shall not be detrimental to existing uses or prospective adjacent uses.

A1-1306 Maximum Density

As specified in the underlying zoning district.

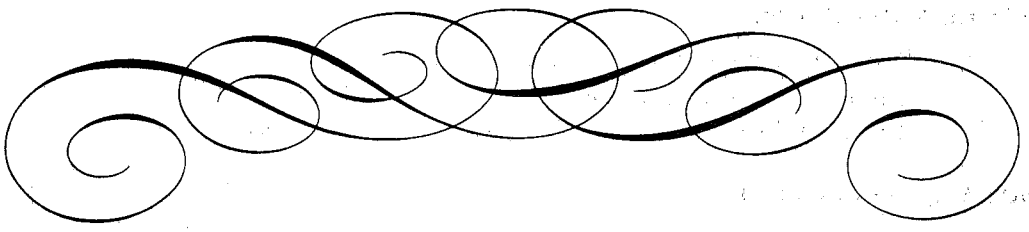
A1-1307 Open Space

As specified in the underlying zoning district.

A1-1308 Additional Regulations

As specified in the underlying zoning district.

When George Kernan rebuilt the gun room fireplace she inscribed in the wet cement the following lines from Longfellow's poem "Haunted House" which evoke the centuries of McCartys, Chichesters and Landstreets whose home this was.

All houses wherein men have lived and died
Are haunted houses. Through the open doors
The harmless phantoms on their errands glide
With feet that make no sound upon the floors.

We hold no title deed to house or lands;
Owners and occupants of earlier dates
From graves forgotten stretch their dusty hands
An hold in mortmain still their old estates.