

RESIDENT CURATOR PROGRAM Gives HISTORIC HOMES a NEW LEASE ON LIFE



As a U.S. Coast Guard pilot, Steven McCullough is no stranger to search and rescue missions. In some ways, his calling carries into his private life. He started searching for a home after receiving orders for his latest tour of duty in Washington, D.C. and stumbled onto a unique opportunity to rescue Stempson House, a 1930s-era historic property in desperate need of rehabilitation in Lorton.

"The house and grounds spoke to me," McCullough said as he recalled his first tour of the Park Authority-owned property which once served as the Lorton Reformatory warden's home. It had been vacant for more than two decades and wild vegetation had taken over the grounds. Despite its rough condition, McCullough saw the potential in this ultimate fixer-upper and signed a years-long commitment to rehabilitate the property as the Park Authority's first resident curator.

"It's a nice house on great property and in a great location," he said enthusiastically as he noted the home's obvious and probable connections to the old prison workhouse. "These bricks in the walkway were most likely made by prisoners," he said.

The Park Authority Resident Curator Program offers rent-free, long-term leases to qualified tenants in exchange for their financial commitment to rehabilitate and maintain historic properties, which reduces public restoration and maintenance costs. McCullough's experience includes restoring his last home – a 1930s-era New York farmhouse with a large barn and 50 acres of land. His work to rehabilitate Stempson House preserves an important connection to Lorton's Progressive-Era reform ideals and the early 20th century Women's Suffrage movement.

"I like architecture and brick work and masonry, and if you can save that history with the community, that's really neat," McCullough said.

In his first year as the Stempson House resident curator, McCullough has resurfaced and painted all the inside walls and ceilings, refinished the hardwood floors and installed new carpet and new windows in the upstairs bedrooms. He also installed a new kitchen including a tiled floor, new cabinets and new appliances.

"Getting it to look the way I want it to look is the motivating factor," he said. "There's a lot I can do with my free time, and my need is to feel I accomplished something at the end of the day."

As his second year as resident curator approaches, McCullough plans to paint the house and garage siding and to give the grounds more attention.

"I can envision the fact that this is a county park," he said. "I want it to look like a park, all cleaned up, with places for people to sit in the park."

Ultimately, he wants to open the grounds to the public for outdoor entertainment, such as movies or live entertainment. At that point, the Park Authority's first resident curator will know he accomplished his personal mission to save an important connection to the past for generations to come.

