

Hoping the rumors are true

Historic Maxwell home is prepared for visitors as a connection to British occupation is sought

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Maxwell Hall in Hughesville is a little known historic home, located just a bit over the border into Charles County.

The house is now only being used for meetings and occasional trolley tours that are sponsored by Charles County, said Tom Roland, Charles County's chief of parks and recreation. However, the Gov. William Smallwood chapter of the U.S. Daughters of 1812 is partnering with the county to get the house ready for visitors.

The hope is that a connection can be made between the home and local activities during the War of 1812. It's the kind of connection that could establish the home as a tourist destination.

Right now, there are no historical records that link Maxwell Hall with the War of 1812, although Benedict is only a few miles away from the property, Donna Dudley, Charles County's chief of tourism, said.

"There's no documentation that connects the invasion of the British in Benedict with the house," Dudley said. "There are rumors that British officers stayed at the house but we can't find any proof of it." But finding some kind of connection would be a sure-fire way to draw more attention to the site, particularly with the approach of the anniversary of the War of 1812.

Charles County purchased the land for Maxwell Hall Park in 1990 and two years ago the 18th-century house on the property and 22 acres surrounding it were purchased with \$791,500 of the state's Program Open Space money, Roland said.

The house — a historic home surrounded by the park's 670 acres that meander around Swanson Creek and down to the Patuxent River — was restored by Edwin Swann and his late wife, Marion.

The couple purchased the property in 1980 and when it was time to sell the house the couple hoped it would be purchased by someone who wanted to preserve it, said Cathy Hardy, the county's community planning program manager.

"It's wonderful that the property has been preserved," she said, adding that the house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. "It's in very good shape. It was meticulously restored by the previous owners over the course of 20 years. It's fortunate that the county has taken it on after all of their efforts."

Pete Swann, who lived with his parents from 1981 to 1990 to help them restore the house, said his mother is smiling in heaven because Maxwell Hall is preserved forever. Swann's brothers, Mike Swann and the late Pat Swann, and their families gave a lot of indirect support to the restoration effort, as well, he said.

"My mother would be very pleased and proud that the house is available for public use," he said. "My mom was very particular about how the restoration of the house was done."

Swann said the house was in bad shape when his parents purchased it. "It was in total disrepair," he recalled. "The house was almost invisible because of the vines and brush surrounding it."

"In the future we want to open the house up for special events," Roland said. "We're really gearing up to try to participate in the state's [200th anniversary of the War of] 1812 celebration. We hope to tie the property in to some of those celebrations."

The federal government is working on a corridor management plan for the 300-mile Star Spangled Banner National Historic Trail, which will start at Fort McHenry in Baltimore and wind through Virginia, the District of Columbia, Prince George's County and end in Southern Maryland, Dudley said.

The trail includes the British water advance and withdrawal on the Patuxent River and the British Army's landing at Benedict in 1814.

The state is working on a corridor management plan for the 100-mile Star Spangled Banner water trail that will also be included in the Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Waterfalls Network.

Dudley said that Maxwell Hall will be considered for the trail. "But how it's going to play out is not clear right now," she said. "The house is a little gem. The county deserves kudos for preserving it."

Maxwell Hall, originally known as Maxwell's Seat, was built in 1764 by George Maxwell, a wealthy tobacco merchant, said Mary Pat Berry of Port Tobacco, president of the Smallwood chapter of the U.S. Daughters of 1812. The chapter has 23 members who live in Anne Arundel, Charles, St. Mary's and Calvert counties.

The chapter wants the property to be included on the Star Spangled Banner National Historic Trail, Berry said. "We want to make sure that the county is on the map for it," she said. "We're a little, forgotten county so we want to be put on the list. We need to stick our fingers in that pie, too. The British did land in Benedict ... The chapter has a very personal investment in this."

"We hope to tie the house into some of those celebrations," Roland said. "We hope that visitors will take a side trip to see our facility. We hope to show a different side of the river. This area was ground zero when the British invaded American soil before marching to Washington [D.C]."



Staff photo by EMILY BARNES

Mary Pat Berry, foreground, president of the Gov. William Smallwood chapter of the Maryland State Society of the U.S. Daughters of 1812, holds the hand of her granddaughter, Leanne Berry, 5, as she walks down the steps of the historic Maxwell Hall house in Hughesville with Tom Roland, the county's chief of parks and recreation, and Carol Whitsell, president of the Maryland State Society of the U.S. Daughters of 1812.

But right now some work needs to be done to dress the house up for the celebration, including finding period furnishings and artifacts to fill the rooms, Roland said.

"Little by little we'll make improvements to the house as time and money are available," he said, adding that the Charles County Garden Club just planted an herb garden near the house. "We're trying to accumulate some things so we can open it up."

The county wants to put interpretive displays in the house that will tell the story of Maxwell Hall and the county's significance in the War of 1812, Roland said.

Maxwell Hall Park, purchased for \$3 million in the 1980s, offers visitors a variety of recreational opportunities daily from dawn to dusk, including a little more than 15 acres of equestrian and hiking trails and fishing, Roland said. The land harbors an enormous amount of tidal wetlands and mature forests.

Some of the land is being farmed as well, Roland said.

"There are a lot of people who just want to enjoy the scenery," he said. "It's a great place for people to hike, jog, ride horses and fish."

To take a hike into history Maxwell Hall Park, a 670-acre parcel containing a little more than 15 miles of equestrian and hiking trails that overlooks the Patuxent River, is located off Maxwell Hall Drive in Hughesville (off Route 231 and Teagues Point Road, near Benedict.) The park is open from 8 a.m. to dusk. No admission charge. The park features riding trails, open fields, a jump course, wooded areas, steep terrain, shoreline, beach rest locations, parking area and a trail course. There is a \$25 annual charge for equestrians to use the facility. For more information call 301-932-3470.