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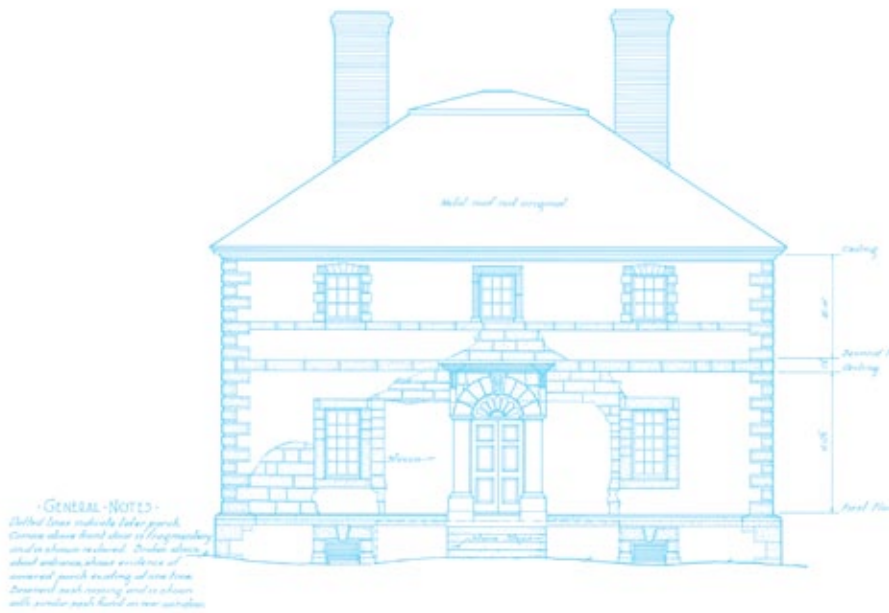


History, Under Glass

Menokin, the 18th century home of Francis Lightfoot Lee, is in dire need of restoration. But instead of a typical rebuild, the Menokin Foundation and some top architects have hatched a bold plan to recreate the home using structural glass—something that’s never been done before. The project would be lengthy and expensive, but if it is completed Menokin could become a “unique architectural statement,” according to one architect, and a landmark teaching school for preservationists.

■ By Erin Parkhurst

OKIN



In a serene corner of Richmond County, what is left of Menokin—the 240-year-old home of Virginia statesman and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Francis Lightfoot Lee—waits for its second act to begin. Uninhabited for more than 50 years, the house—once a fine example of 18th century Georgian architecture—has been reduced to near rubble. Only two original walls and parts of two chimneys remain standing.

The place represents a perfect opportunity for a typical historic renovation—paint, plaster and the carefully researched arrangement of pristine period antiques—but that is not in the offing for this National Historic Landmark. There is a much more ambitious plan in the works—one that involves preserving the story of Menokin's construction through the innovative use of structural glass. If this pioneering restoration effort succeeds, the once-moribund house will be transformed into an architectural teaching hospital of sorts—the first in the U.S. of its kind. Structural glass will recreate missing floors, walls and roof, and be combined with the extant structure to form a skeleton for reintroducing thousands of architectural elements extracted and carefully conserved over the decades as the building has deteriorated. "It's an extraordinary concept," says David Woodcock, professor of architecture and director emeritus of the Center for Heritage Conservation at Texas A&M University, who chairs the Menokin Foundation's advisory committee.

Matthew Webster, architectural conservator and manager of architectural collections for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and another member of Menokin's advisory committee, explains why: "If you were to reconstruct the house, you'd cover up some of the most interesting stuff," he says. "[With glass] we can actually see how an 18th century building comes together."

A preliminary construction study completed in 2007, funded by the Bryant Foundation in Stephens City, confirmed the glass house concept is feasible. But innovation on this scale presents a number of challenges, including the need to raise millions of dollars and marshal support

from individual donors as well as foundations and government funding sources—and that is no easy task. While the foundation's supporters are optimistic, there is no timetable yet for turning the concept into reality, and indeed, many stakeholders say the project is likely to take many years to complete.

Still, the opportunity is significant. The glass-house concept offers not just a chance to rescue a threatened historic Virginia landmark, say its advocates, but also a chance to position Menokin at the tip of the spear in the architectural preservation world. Woodcock says the glass house will make Menokin a "prime location" to experience 18th century building techniques. And that's not all. As Calder Loth, the former senior architectural historian at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and honorary Menokin Foundation trustee explains, the success of the glass house project could

also mean that other buildings like Menokin, whose original fabric is on the brink of destruction, may no longer be considered hopeless.

The genesis of the project goes back to 1995. That is the year that the Menokin Foundation was established, thanks largely to the efforts of Martin Kirwan King, then a retired Exxon executive, who died in 2004. He, Loth and others looked at what was left of Menokin—a heap of moss-covered stone and broken timber—and wondered what to do. Certainly Menokin could be rebuilt, but as King told the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*: "Virginia needs another house museum like it needs a hole in the head." And so the foundation set out to recast Menokin as an education center—a field school—to train preservationists of all kinds.

The idea to use glass as a key element in the restoration effort was first conceived in 2006 by Annapolis, Maryland-based conservator John Greenwalt Lee and Winston-Salem, North Carolina-based architect Charles Phillips. While engaged in the tricky work of stabilizing one of the corners of the structure, they came up with the idea of reproducing the missing parts of the house with glass. "It's not like this is a completely new concept," says Phillips, who compares it to reliquary. "It has just never been done with a historic building quite like this."

The pair was inspired by the all-glass Apple Store on Fifth Avenue in New York City. In 2006 Lee and Phillips approached its designer, Tim Macfarlane, who is an engineer, structural-glass innovator and design partner of London-based architectural firm Dewhurst Macfarlane, and invited him to join the concept team. MacFarlane, an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, agreed. He was undaunted by the fragility of the structure, and says he approached the project with a sense of optimism and interest: "The conservators had dynamic thoughts about how elements could be taken out of the house and recovered, and then be able to go back in."

Sarah Dillard Pope, executive director of the Menokin Foundation, says the glass house concept offered more than any other possible preservation solution for the house, which is now sheltered under a giant metal canopy to minimize nature's daily assault. It keeps "true to our original vision of not reconstructing the house, but showing it in its parts and pieces so that we can teach people how these pieces were fabricated and fit together," she says. Besides, she adds, if the foundation had decided to rebuild the house, "Who would come and see it? Lee is not a Thomas Jefferson in the national memory, we have to be real."

Pope adds that to have someone of McFarlane's stature interested in and involved in the project is "a huge



Above: architectural drawing of the north façade and photo from the 1940 Historic American Buildings Survey. Right: installed in 2009, a temporary acrylic wall protects the east interior and gives visitors a glimpse at how the glass walls will be structured.



couple.” Macfarlane, Lee and Phillips have all presented the plan for Menokin at conferences around the world. Macfarlane says, “People are really intrigued by what’s being proposed here. It’s something that hasn’t been seen before, and the surprise of what we’re attempting grabs people’s attention.” He adds that curiosity inevitably leads to questions, chief among them: How will they connect multiple elements of the structure—joists, rafters, beams and walls—with the glass and retain what he describes as the “dimensional accuracy” of the original building? Macfarlane says that it is questions like these—and the challenges they pose—that make the project so captivating. Ultimately, he says, “The process will make the link between the 1760s and 2011 much more obvious and dynamic than if the house had just been rebuilt.”

Phillips agrees. “The glass house allows you to do something unique in terms of interpretation, but it also creates something in and of itself that will be a unique architectural statement.” He and others are hoping for no less than the Bilbao effect. Whether or not a glass-enclosed Menokin will become a major destination like Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain is, at best, uncertain. At the very least, the glass structure would eliminate the question that is to historians like the sound of fingernails on chalkboard: “Is this original?”

Dr. Douglas Sanford, professor and chair of the department of historic preservation at the University of Mary Washington, says he hears visitors to historic sites ask this all the time. Sanford—who is not connected with Menokin though he has brought students to the site for study—notes that the glass house concept is in concert with what historians and conservators regard as one of the primary goals of their work: differentiating between modern and original materials. He says, “You have to be honest and say here’s what’s original, here’s what isn’t.” The glass will do that.

And realism and authenticity are what visitors to historic house museums today are looking for. As Pope puts it, “Granny’s lace curtains just don’t cut it anymore.” Max A. van Balgooy, director of interpretation and education programs at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, emphasizes the importance of offering visitors ways to connect to historic houses on a personal level given the stiff competition for tourism dollars brought on by the poor economy as well as the decline in foot traffic some historic house museums have experienced in recent years. He says that “sites have to figure out ways to give people really great experiences,” and points to the Philip Johnson Glass House museum in Connecticut and the Gamble House in California as places that are getting it right by offering things like extended

private tours and the chance to interact with the craftspeople preserving them. Menokin could do the same, he says.

W. Tayloe Murphy Jr., current president of the Menokin Board of Trustees who served as Virginia’s secretary of natural resources from 2002 to 2006 under Governor Mark Warner and in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1982 to 2000, is a descendant of both the Lee and Tayloe families. He is betting that the combination of Francis Lightfoot Lee’s story—relatively unknown despite his important role in the cause for American independence—and the use of modern technology to preserve his house will provide the kind of experience van Balgooy describes. “I think people will be drawn to Menokin by the integration of modern fabric with old and the use of cutting-edge, 21st century technology to preserve a historic resource,” says Murphy.

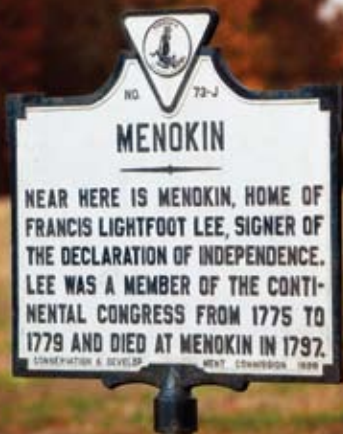
Lee did not attain the stature of Jefferson or Madison, of course, but his story is nonetheless compelling. He and one of his six brothers, Richard Henry Lee—both members of the House of Burgesses in Richmond County—are the only pair of siblings to sign the Declaration of Independence. Francis Lightfoot—known as Frank—was born in 1734 at Stratford Hall, the fifth of eight

Above, left: Menokin, beneath its protective metal canopy; right: gravel drive off Route 690 in Warsaw leads to the site. Below: W. Tayloe Murphy Jr., current president of Menokin’s Board of Trustees and his wife Helen, immediate past president of the board.

children of Hannah Harrison Ludwell Lee and Thomas Lee, head of the powerful Lee family. He served in the House of Burgesses first in Loudoun County, and then in Richmond County after his marriage in 1769 to Rebecca Tayloe—daughter of Col. John Tayloe II of Mount Airy. He served in the Continental Congress from 1775 to 1779, and in the winter of 1778, while serving on the Board of War, procured much-needed supplies for Gen. Washington and his troops at Valley Forge. In 1877 Mark Twain, in a series of essays about patriots of the revolution, lauded Lee as an uncompromising and selfless man. Twain wrote: “His life was a most useful and worthy one. It was a good and profitable voyage, though it left no phosphorescent splendors in its wake.”

That may be changing. Lee’s home could be the right house—at the right time—to launch another revolution, this time in historic preservation. One of the things that makes Menokin ripe for such innovation is that it has a remarkably complete





documentary history, according to Camille Wells, an architectural historian who has lectured at the University of Virginia and the College of William & Mary and written extensively about Menokin. For one thing, in 1940 the Historic American Buildings Survey (a Works Progress Administration project) produced detailed photography and comprehensive measured drawings of the property. Then in 1964, the original presentation drawings for the house—a rarity for colonial houses of the area—were discovered among Tayloe family papers in the attic at nearby Mount Airy. But per-

haps most importantly, the house was never added to, nor was the original footprint ever changed. “That’s why Menokin is such a treasure,” says Wells, “not a stick of wood was ever added and it was never plumbed or wired.”

In 2002, Wells secured a grant to hire paint conservator Susan Buck to study the woodwork of the Menokin dining room and determine how much interior painting may have taken place. (The woodwork has been on display since 1998 at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond: Dr. Paul Leventgood, president and CEO of the VHS describes it as “the highlight” of their flagship exhibition, *The Story of Virginia*.) Buck found that only three coats of paint were ever applied to the dining room woodwork, the last of which was probably done between 1840 and 1850. When the glass house is complete, then, it will reveal an 18th century house virtually in its original form, and thus a boon to those interested in learning about 18th century construction.

Menokin—and its original 1,000 acres of waterfront property on Cat Point Creek—was a wedding gift from Col. Tayloe to his 17-year-old daughter Rebecca when she married Lee, then in his 30s. Tayloe designed the house to be a reflection of his own home by building it with the same Choptank sandstone native to his estate and using the same brown and white exterior color scheme. But Menokin’s scale—an economical 42 feet by 44 feet

(the dimensions of Mount Airy’s formal offices)—make Mount Airy’s primacy clear.

Rebecca and Frank lived at Mount Airy for the first three years or so of Menokin’s construction (it would take almost six years to complete). Wells suggests that though Lee and Tayloe enjoyed a warm relationship (Tayloe would appoint Lee as one of the executors of his will prior to his death in 1779), Lee may have chafed under the rule of his father-in-law and expedited the construction. Thus, Wells explains, the house is filled with “idiosyncratic juxtapositions of elaborate and plain, polished and rough elements,” which indicate that the original vision for the house was much more elaborate than was ultimately executed. The keystone over the north doorway for example—now also on display at the Virginia Historical Society—is a design of expertly carved trailing vines, but was flanked by windows outlined with plain architraves. Whether Lee was simply rejecting Tayloe’s more elaborate aesthetic or was eager to live “under my own vine,” as he wrote to one of his brothers, William, in 1771 (referring to the Biblical passage the keystone carving was based on) has never been resolved. But the result is that, while a solid example of Georgian architecture, Menokin’s odd combinations of fine and rough make it more notable for its “inconsistencies than for its refinements,” says Wells.

Wells attributes the lack of material improve-





Facing page, clockwise from top left: historic marker; Menokin's dining room in 1940, now on display at the Virginia Historical Society; interior support; staircase in 1940; view of the temporary acrylic wall. Facing page, bottom: the late Martin Kirwan King. This page, clockwise from top left: plain architrave; view of the interior from the basement; Sarah Dillard Pope; the north doorway in 1940.

ments at Menokin to the waning fortunes of its successive owners. Frank and Rebecca Lee—though a devoted couple—were childless when they died within one week of each other in 1797. Ownership of the house and property reverted to Rebecca's only brother, John Tayloe III—who would later build Octagon House in Washington D.C., one of the finest examples of 19th century architecture. He sold Menokin in 1823 to Benjamin Boughton, a longtime employee, and thus it left the Tayloe family.

A handful of owners followed, and the 1,000-acre property was split in half in 1887. In 1935 the Omohundro family of Richmond County inherited the property and occupied it intermittently until around 1960. By then the house was beginning to collapse, and the Omohundros started to extract the interior woodwork. They had help from the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, which stored the woodwork at Bacon's Castle in Surry County until 1998, when it was moved to the VHS. Edgar Omohundro donated the house and remaining 500 acres of land in 1995 to establish the Menokin Foundation.

Thanks to the Omohundros' foresight, roughly 80 percent of the house's original materials have survived. Thousands of elements have been meticulously identified and tagged, and are housed in the foundation's King Conservation and Visitors Center located on the property. In 2005, the foundation conveyed a conservation easement on 325 of its 500 acres to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and now the property is part of the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

Despite the energy surrounding the glass house project, innovation typically comes with a large price tag. Before construction on the glass house can begin, the trustees, with the help of the advisory committee—an assembly of the architectural preservation community's heavy hitters charged with making sure the plan to transform the house has the right stuff—must resolve many issues ranging from the pedestrian (how will the glass be kept clean, what with birds and bad weather) to the profound (how will the structure be cli-

matized). "We're committed to using sustainable methods of heating and cooling the space," says Pope, who adds that they are exploring how to use photovoltaic units to absorb sunlight.

According to Wells, reversibility is another issue the foundation must take into consideration: "If a new generation of preservationists comes along and says, 'We've learned more, we need to do something different,' we need to be able to act on that. Early restorationists didn't think of that. We've tried to learn and to always ask 'Can this be taken out?'" As proof of the need for circumspection, Wells cites Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where the addition of steel beams ended up threatening the original fabric of the building and had to be removed.

But this group needs no reminder to move with caution. In fact, Woodcock and Pope both say that it's time to "fish or cut bait" on a project that's been in concept phase now for four years. "One of the issues with a number of preservation groups is that it is such fun working on the project there is a tendency to tinker," says Woodcock.

Of the formidable list of questions the trustees must tackle before work on the glass house can begin, one of the most salient is this: How much of the original fabric needs to go back in to the building to satisfy the foundation's mission to educate visitors about 18th century building techniques? On this point, Phillips is unequivocal. If you have the technology to put it all back in, he says, then it should all go back in. And they do. John Greenwalt Lee has developed the use of carbon fiber technology to make damaged or rotted pieces of timber capable of serving as load-bearing members again. The downside to the technology is that it makes for slow progress. To prepare just one piece of timber could take up to a week.

Woodcock and the advisory committee have a different viewpoint. They have suggested that returning just some of the more than 2,000 artifacts that have been extracted and catalogued during years of careful excavation may satisfy the educational goals of the foundation, thus expediting the project. Those elements that are

not returned to the structure then can be used for ongoing conservation work.

And the price? Woodcock says it's not clear yet how much the project would cost. Pope estimates the total for the project could be anywhere from \$10 million to \$30 million. The final figure will depend on how much of the original fabric will be returned to the structure and whether the trustees decide to invest in making that fabric load-bearing again. Pope expects those decisions will be made in early 2011 after which the foundation will conduct a funding feasibility study and formulate a plan. They have set a tentative date of 2015 for beginning the first phase of the project—getting four walls back up.

Even on the crisp cloudless day I visited—when the property was at its best and the phalanx of stolid oak trees leading down a gravel road to the site glowed with fall color—the house appeared forlorn, and its future, uncertain. "We're breaking new ground," says Murphy, and indeed the rush of blazing a new trail seems to be what is keeping Menokin's stakeholders galvanized—in spite of the slow going.

As Phillips puts it, "The potential exists to do something that hasn't been done before, and that's what makes it a 'wow project.' Menokin can become an international project that goes beyond preservation. By including glass it becomes art—people who are interested in modern art, in architecture, will be excited about this," and he adds, "they'll want to contribute to it." *Menokin.org* ●



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