

# How Wood Became Menokin's Savior

By Michelle Smith

There was time when Richmond County was at risk of losing a key historic landmark. Menokin's structural existence and its status were in jeopardy.

## Finding Menokin

It was 1965, and three students in UVA's architectural history program planned a tour of historic, privately owned properties, such as Brooke's Bank, Mount Airy, and Menokin.

Before setting off, those students-- Bob Nylander, Peter Hodson, and Calder Loth -- wrote to the property owners to get permission to visit.

Menokin was an exception. They didn't know who owned the property or exactly where it was, but they had a good idea. While driving on Rt. 690 looking for the place, they saw a woman walking along the road, asked her if she'd ever heard of Menokin, and she directed them to the property.

"Sure enough, there was Menokin, wide open," Loth recounted. "At that time, it was completely intact, although it was in very neglected condition... All of the woodwork was there, all of the paneling, and that was in a relatively good state of preservation even though it was getting no maintenance."

Nylander took photographs throughout Menokin, a decision that would later prove to be a wise and important one.

"So we were satisfied we had the privilege to see the house, which we pretty much had to trespass to see. But nobody was there to say that we shouldn't be on the site or who told us to get away," said Loth.

"We heard rumors that it was owned by a man with a shotgun that was trying to keep people away. I don't know if that was just a tall tale to keep people from trespassing. But there was none of that there," he added.

## A disappointing return

A couple of years later, Loth and Hodson returned to Menokin and were totally surprised to find that all of the woodwork had been stripped out. It was a devastating discovery. They asked around and tried to find out what happened but nobody knew.

It was assumed that the woodwork had been stolen or sold. The truth remained a mystery for the next couple of decades.

## Heirs seeking help

In the mid-1980s, Dora Ricciardi reached out to Loth who, by then, was a senior architectural historian for the Department of Conservation and Historic Resources (DCHR).

Ricciardi explained that Menokin belonged to her and her brother, T. Edgar Omohundro, and they received a letter saying the house was so deteriorated and had lost so much integrity that the National Park Service was considering stripping its National Historic Landmark status, the highest official recognition that an American landmark can receive.

With Menokin being the home of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Francis Lightfoot Lee, and given that the historical landmark status put it on the same playing field with properties, such as Mount Vernon and Monticello, Ricciardi didn't want the property to lose that designation.

But Menokin was in terrible condition, and Ricciardi and Omohundro weren't in a financial position to do anything about it, she told Loth. They didn't have money to invest in the old house, and they had a sister in nursing home and needed money to look after her.

Ricciardi said the siblings were open to selling the property, but they would only sell it to an organization that vowed to preserve it as a historic shrine. She wanted Loth's help.

Although he knew the house was dilapidated and it had been stripped of its woodwork, Loth agreed to help, but told her it would take time.

## A shocking discovery

Loth explained that they sought buyers and solutions for Menokin. They went to Mary Washington University, which had a preservation program. They went to the preservation program at UVA. "But we got nowhere with that."

Meanwhile, "We talked to the park service, and said look, don't do anything now...Just work with us because we're working on some sort of preservation. So, they said fine."

At one point, there was a meeting of some interested people at George Washington's Birthplace. One of those individuals was Martin King, a retired Exxon executive. He lived in the area, knew of Menokin, and had been concerned about it.

"He kept pressing me with questions... And I realized, we could use this guy. He was retired. He had executive experience. He was very interested in history." But it wasn't clear exactly how King would be helpful at that point because there still wasn't a plan.

On August 22, 1985, the prospects brightened for Menokin. Loth, Laura Feller of the National Park Service and Richard Rennolds of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) went out to the property to see the condition.

It was a stark sight. Only two corners of the house were still standing and a broken tree was leaning against the front corner, a document about the visit reveals. Trees were growing out of the foundation, the rear corner showed serious structural cracks, and there was rubble lying all around.

As the group was leaving the site, they met Omohundro and expressed their concerns. The house was in such extremely poor condition. The woodwork, which would have increased its historical value, had vanished...

But wait, the wood hadn't vanished, Omohundro explained. He had it removed.

People had been coming and taking things. Knowing that he was unable to protect the house from pilfering, Omohundro explained that he had skilled carpenters carefully dismantle all of the woodwork and it was stored in an old house near Lyells Crossroads. He invited them to go see it.

## Relief and dismay

The group arrived at an abandoned bungalow. "It wasn't secure at all," said Loth. But Omohundro was correct, the wood was there and in good condition. It had been carefully removed.

Not only was the lack of security alarming but they were also dismayed to find a section of the front wall had fallen out, the rain had poured in on portions of the woodwork, and "most disturbing--there were recent automobile tracks around the front of the house," and Omohundro said some furniture had already been stolen.

Preservation of the woodwork was essential. Omohundro and Ricciardi were made aware that without it, Menokin was not worth restoring or being kept on the National Historic Landmarks List.

Rennolds said the APVA would be willing to accept custodianship of the woodwork, have it removed, and store it so that it could be cataloged and preserved. The siblings agreed.

Menokin's woodwork was taken to Bacon's Castle in Surry where it stayed for several decades.

## Gifting Menokin

In the years that followed, King indeed came in handy.

Ricciardi died, leaving Omohundro as the sole heir of Menokin. King tried to persuade him that because he was a bachelor with no children, he should donate the property to the Menokin Foundation. Omohundro agreed.

"The funny thing was, there was no Menokin Foundation. We had to put it together very quickly so that the property could be legally accepted," said Loth.

In 1995, the newly formed foundation accepted the Menokin house and 500 acres of land.

In 2004, having raised enough money, the Menokin Foundation built the Martin K. King Visitor Center with a storage facility attached. The following year, Menokin's wood was returned to home grounds.

If Menokin had lost its historical landmark status, it would have been a horrible psychological blow. That would have meant that from a national perspective, it ceased to be important, Loth explained.

If Menokin's woodwork hadn't been discovered and saved, it certainly would have put a damper on us trying to make a convincing case that the house was worth preserving, said Loth.

"A pile of stones without the woodwork would have very little meaning or value to anybody. The preservation of the woodwork opened up enormous possibilities for what could be done with the site," he said.

Omohundro gifted Menokin to be used a field school for architectural conservation and architectural study. The plans called for the phased reconstruction of the house as an educational activity.

That reconstruction is underway with the Glass House Project, an innovative initiative that involves only partially restoring the Menokin house while showcasing much of the dilapidation in glass.

"We feel that even though this might look kind of strange, that it does promote curiosity and interest about an important part of Menokin's history. And this that it went into a period of decline and neglect and abandonment and collapsed. And we're graphically displaying that part of its history by not putting it back exactly as it was, by putting some of the missing pieces of the wall back in glass," said Loth.

"We have to make Menokin interesting for the future. Just having another historic house really isn't needed. We have a different story to tell."



The house in Lyells where Menokin's woodwork was kept.

Photo: Menokin



Woodwork being removed from Lyells to go to Bacon's Castle.

Photo: Menokin



Woodwork stored at Bacon's Castle.

Photo: Menokin



Woodwork currently stored and cataloged at the Martin K. King Visitor Center at Menokin while the house is being recreated.

Photo: Michelle Smith