The Holiday House
Of Washington

Article by Susan Hardcastle
The Holiday House on West Second Street in Washington, N. C., has fascinated me for years, for it represents an era that was suddenly and irrevocably "gone with the wind." This stately home epitomizes the charm and graciousness of Southern living prior to "The War." Built in 1840, the house was situated on Second Street, but the grounds extended to Third Street.

In 1920 the house was moved to a more centralized location on the lot, permitting the owners to plant ornamental gardens in front and behind the house. The original stables have been converted into a large garage; and the proud owner, Mitchell Norton, plans to locate his study in what was originally the smoke house. The kitchen house originally was located at the rear of the main house, but today overlooks the lovely gardens of the front yard. After many years of neglect and several more years of negotiations, Joann and Mitchell Norton purchased the Holiday House. The Nortons have begun an extensive restoration of one of Washington's loveliest homes.

How long have you been in the house?

Well, let's see. We moved in in January of '79.

So you've been here about four years?

Yes.

Are you from this area?

I'm originally from Sampson County. In fact, I spotted this house the first time I came to Washington. I was in law school at the time. I had an uncle that lives here, a stockbroker with E. F. Hutton. And while the tickers were running, I just got in the car and drove around and ended up on Washington Street and saw it, the house, and pulled up into the driveway. And I went back to Alabama and told my wife that if I ever ended up in Washington, North Carolina, I had found the house that I wanted. And so, as luck would have it, in about six months we moved here, and I started working for the District Attorney's office. And I started investigating the possibilities, initially found out who owned it. And once I found out it was owned by the McEwan family in New Jersey, I went to New Jersey and talked with them. They initially didn't want to sell it. Over the next four years I just kept up communications with Mr. and Mrs. McEwan. And finally they sold it. We've been fiddling, working on it ever since.

Could you tell us some of the early history of the house?

It has been in the same family since 1857.

You said it was built in 1840?

Somewhere in that period, yes. I haven't been able to pinpoint the date exactly, but somewhere in that area. The initial family that bought it was George Hubbard Brown, who, I think, was an uncle or relative of the Brown Library here in Washington. He was an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. According to the book Washington on the Pamlico, Brown was the president, or at least an officer, in the Clyde Steamship Company, which had home office in Norfolk and Philadelphia, as I recall, and he apparently
handled their operation here in Washington. He was also, I think, one of the founders of the Bank of Washington, which is the Interior Design place now, and was also a merchant and ship's captain. He apparently moved into the Washington area, saw a young lady by the name of Martha Bonner. He apparently liked what he saw and asked her to marry him. She agreed provided that he would either buy or build a suitable dwelling house in the City of Washington valued at at $6,000 to $8,000; it was a deal in the contemplation of the marriage. So in 1857 he bought this house; it initially called for five acres of land to satisfy Martha's requirements for the suitable dwelling home. He bought the house from John Gray Blount, whose name appears on the deed, and then the house was given in trust to her and her children. When she died, it went to her daughter, Hannah Holiday Brown. She married a McEwan from New Jersey. From her it went to Richard McEwan, her son, and those are the people I bought it from.

I was just asking Susan if this floor was the original.

All of the work on the inside is original. I think the house basically is like it was when it was built somewhere around 1840. A Historic Society [in Washington] pamphlet states that in the downstairs area all the mantles were marble. When the Federal troops evacuated Washington in 1864, I do believe that they broke all the marble mantles but one. This white one is, you can tell from the style and the design, the oldest one in the house. Out in the garage, or carriage house I think they used to call it, there are two wooden mantles that are identical to this one. So apparently what happened was the families, when the Federal troops evacuated, came back in at the end of the Civil War and either could not replace with white marble or didn't have the money to replace them. And I think the two wooden ones are in the garage were made identical to this one and were put in the dining room and then in what was originally the library. I'm using it now as a bedroom.

The black marble in the dining room is of a much later period. I think that was probably put in by Holly Russell or her mother back in the '30's or late '20's when the house was moved to where it is located now.

Where would they get this marble mantle from?

I assume that at that time it probably would have to have been brought over on ships from England. If you look through some of the magazines in Charleston and Savannah houses that were built in this period of time, you have basically the same interior design. And some of the marble mantles are almost identical.

Isn't the real focal point of the house its hallway?

Everything is symmetrical off the hallway. I think they did that because it would open it up in the summertime; the ceilings were twelve and a half foot ceilings so that you got a cross ventilation to cool the house down.

This floor, do you think that is the original?

Yes, all of the work inside the house--
the floors, doors, and the moldings and places around doors—are the originals.

How about this chandelier?

The chandelier, I understand, was brought in and I'm not sure, in talking to the people, exactly when it was done, but I understand it was brought in by train. And it was hung one afternoon, and they had a big party that night for the hanging of the chandelier. In the dining room I had to take the chandelier down and send it to Mobile, Alabama. I had it cleaned and polished; it is brass. There used to be a gas-operated carbine, some type of gas-operated light. It has been converted over to electricity, and I had taken that down, had it cleaned. So it's in the upstairs room now, waiting to get the cracks in the plaster patched before I put it back up.

Mitchell told us that he has learned to do some of the restoration work himself.

I have been learning myself to plaster for two months now.

This wall really looks in good shape even though there are a couple of cracks you can see back there in that corner.

Yes, structurally it is in good shape. I have had to replace some of the support beams under it and some of the exterior support beams in the perimeter of the house. I replaced 30 feet of those with those nine by twelve pine beams, and that sort of stabilized it. But the plaster is basically in good shape. There are some cracks inside, like this one. It has been painted several times and the paint has alligatored; I either have to sand it down or to recover it with plaster to get those little alligator cracks.

I notice you have got the sliding doors here between the living room and the dining room. Was that a feature of most of these houses built in this period?

I believe so. Some of the homes in Charleston and Savannah have this type of design. There is another house here in Washington that has the central or the divider with these doors, except they are hung on hinges, whereas these slide back into the wall.

Do they work all right?

Yes, they're very well balanced and slide back and forth easily.

Is this a supporting wall that the doors slide back and forth into?

I think so, and the door just slides back into it.

You don't see doors like these nowadays.

One man could not take these doors down and handle them. In fact, I took this one down when I was working on the walls. The contractor was here, and it took three of us to get that one down. Two men could do it, but they are very heavy, all pine, pine board. Some of these floor boards are what they call quarter-sawn pine. Turn them up on the edge and cut it across the grain of the wood. It makes it very, very tough, very strong, not only the way it was cut but the turpentine or resin.
Do the fireplaces work?

Yes. There are seven in the house; I used three of them. One is in my bedroom, which was originally the library, and one is here in the living room. And then the dining room has the gas logs in it. But the brick work, the mortar joints up in the attic, had some cracks in them, and I was afraid to use them. There is no way to get a flue line in and so I had the Climate Craft here in Washington to make stainless steel pipe in six foot sections. Jimmy Fleming has been helping me ever since I moved in, you know, my technical advisor. And Jimmy came around and we placed 30 feet of stainless steel in this chimney and 30 feet in the chimney in my bedroom to eliminate fire hazards and seal the chimneys. And then we
use it about twice a year here. The times I've used it, I had to go up on the roof to clean them up to get the creosote out. I'm my own chimney sweep.

These windows, are they original?

Yes, as far as I can tell. The windows are ten feet high. Quite a job cleaning them.

You mentioned the house was moved. That would have been in the 1920's?

Late '20's, early '30's. The house originally sat right on 2nd Street, and the house was moved by, as I say, late '20's, early 30's.

It was moved several hundred feet, wasn't it?

Right.

Do you know why they did that?

I guess it was to centralize the house on the lot. The lot runs from 2nd to 3rd Street. It is similar to Judge Rodman's home on Main Street. The Rodman home is up fairly close to the street, and he has the ornamental gardens in the rear of the house. What they have done here is sort of split the lot with the house.

How many acres do you have here?

It is an acre and 7/10, I believe.

It seems larger than that.

It really does when you start trying to
cut the grass!

So the McEwan family were not the original owners?

No, apparently not. The house was already here when they purchased it. Martha Bonner was apparently the first owner. I haven't been able to really check it and see exactly what her relationship was to James and Richard Bonner, who, I understand, laid out the Town of Washington, donated the land and laid out the streets. She was apparently either a daughter or a granddaughter of James or Richard, who, in effect, started the Town of Washington. And this Judge, Judge George Hubbard Brown, when he died, a portrait was painted and was donated to the Supreme Court and they had an unveiling of the portrait and a speech. I have it written down here somewhere. There is a little recitation of his family background and some of the things he had done.

They make reference in his family, that he was related to George, James, and Richard Bonner. He was also a direct descendant of a General Thomas Holiaday, who was a Major General, I believe, in the Revolutionary War. The house is known as the Holiaday House, and Martha's daughter was Hannah Holiaday Brown, later Hannah Holiaday McEwan. I don't know if the Holiaday name or house came from this General Thomas Holiaday or what. Interesting speculations.

You mentioned that only this marble mantle was left after the Civil War. Was the house damaged much, or do you know?

I have no idea other than what I have been told about the mantles. Out in the front yard you can still find little bits and pieces of white marble. There is a slab of marble at least a foot square propped up against what my daughter calls the "goose house." I think they probably came from this back section.

What are the various outbuildings?

There are two in the front yard: the smokehouse--I have just had a new roof put on that last year--and the larger of the two was the original kitchen, which would have sat at the rear of the house. That is the one my daughter calls the "goose house."

Was that originally separate from the house?

Right, that was generally handled that way.

So there wasn't a kitchen, as such, in the house?

No, not in the house. The reason for that, I understand, is because of the danger of fires and things, and they therefore detached the kitchen.

How about the building in the back?

Right, the building in the back is a carriage house, and at one end it has the servants' quarters. It has a bathroom and a bedroom upstairs.

I wonder if, in the 1850's, they had any quarters for slaves?

I don't know. It possibly could have
An outbuilding, now used as garage

been used for that. I do know that across the back of the lot as late as the late '30's were horse stables. Some of the people that I talked with recall when stables and horses were still there. Holly McEwan Brooks lived here periodically in the '30's and early 1940's. She committed suicide in one of the upstairs rooms in 1941. She, I understand, was a very avid sportswoman. She loved hunting, fishing, parties. She had horses here during that period of time.
Mitchell told us another "story" associated with the house, involving one of his neighbors.

Before we actually moved in, a woman came here, and the statement that she made to me was that she especially wanted to know whether or not we had heard any noises or seen any lights in the upstairs window, things like that. We told her no, and we asked why. She said that she would not live in this house because of all the stories that she had been told. She would be afraid to live in it because of the ghosts. I thought it was funny because I hadn't heard any stories and still haven't, other than the fact that a few people have asked about ghosts in the upstairs room. But if they are here, they walk very quietly. Maybe you have to be out on the street to see the lights flashing.

I suppose that any house that is this old and this prominent looking would have some kind of story associated with it.

I am sure there must be.

How is the house as far as modern needs, like heating and cooling and that sort of thing? What kind of adjustments did you have to make and how has it been modernized?

Here again, somewhere in the early 1920's it had steam radiators. It has an oil fire and boiler in the basement. Originally, they just used the fireplaces. And these pipes and radiators and oil boiler were apparently put in during the '20's or '30's, probably when the house was moved back.

Have you used the boiler?
We used it in the first year we were here. We used it from January to March that year. The boiler has a nozzle that I had been told burns four and a half gallons of fuel per hour. And it only burns like 16-18 minutes—I very carefully timed it—at a time. I almost had a heart attack when I was told that.

At first, Mitchell related, he and his wife had to sacrifice to cut heating costs.

Back then, there was just the two of us, and I set the thermostat a notch below 55 degrees. You could lay in bed at night and blow smoke without having to light a cigarette! But it really didn't take long to get dressed in the morning. A little space heater in the bathroom and then take a shower, be glad to get away to warm up! Since that time, of course, I use the wood burner here in the bedroom. After the first year, I haven't used the boiler since.

We have an air conditioner for the summer-time, and I'm thinking about getting one of those wood burners to sit out in the back yard and set up the heat exchange and working it that way.

Mitchell explained that even though the old house is fairly cool in the summer, with all the rooms opening on the through hall, he has installed central air downstairs because of the humidity.

I have a central air system for the downstairs, and it keeps it pretty cool. Now, what I need to do, I think, is to put some of these ceiling fans in the other side of the house and the upstairs possibly to get it circulating.

I bet you really get a lot of pleasure out of just living in a house this old.

Yes, I have always wanted one. I have always been interested in history and old houses. That's why you see Stonewall Jackson over the fireplace and Robert E. Lee over the other one, and the rest of Jefferson Davis's group behind us. Yes, it's a lot of fun, but at times too, like I am sure Susan would tell you, it gets discouraging. You go in someone's home, a new house, and the windows all fit tight and close, the walls are painted, and everything is so clean and nice and comfortable. It gets discouraging. You work on it and work on it; you know there is still so much left to do.

Are you planning to live here indefinitely? I guess you would be with all this work.

Yes, and I hope it is a long, long time!

Mitchell's affection for his lovely home clearly showed through during our conversations with him, and we all envied him his lovely Holiday House. The grounds and the house are the foundation of many a fanciful thought, and in leaving we were all reassured that the Holiday House would be in Washington for generations to come.