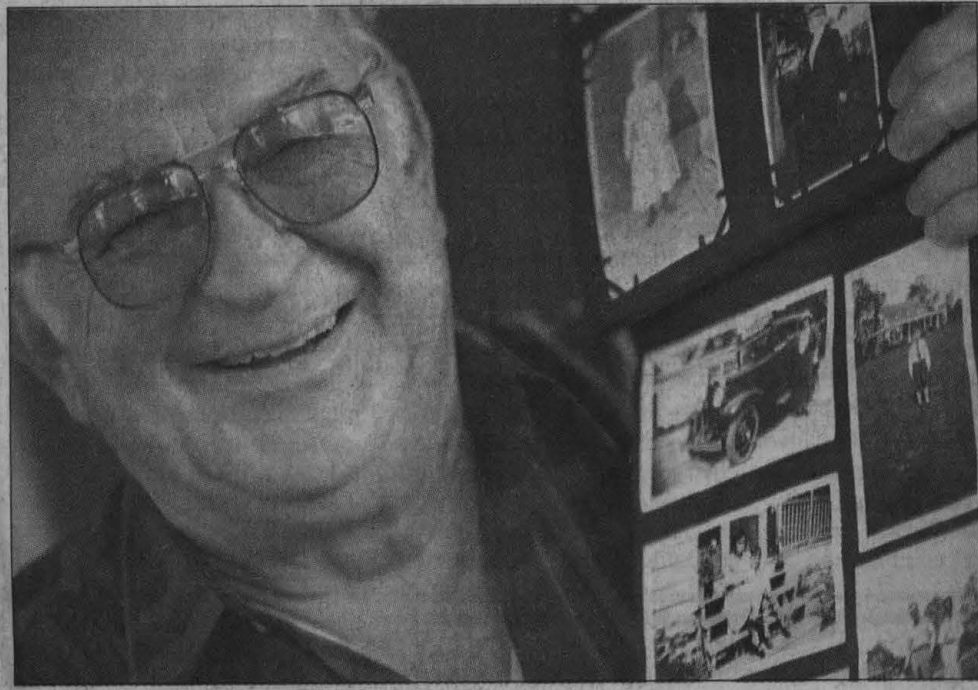


A boy's life along Potomac's shores



Cindy L. Davis — Staff Photographer

Ellis Blackburn Hawkins grew up in a house that sits on the same property as Rippon Lodge. Hawkins is named after Wade Hampton Ellis, who owned the lodge and hired Hawkins' father to manage the estate.

By KARI C. BARLOW
Staff Writer

When Ellis Blackburn Hawkins looks at Rippon Lodge, he sees more than another Colonial house where George Washington once slept.

The 70-year-old Hawkins sees home, a sprawling farm on the banks of the Potomac in Prince William County where he played and worked and grew to be a man.

"It was a real happy life, recalled Hawkins, whose father, Edward, worked as overseer on the property from 1929 to 1948.

Hawkins and his older brother, Cleggett, his father and his mother, Alice, lived in the caretaker's house across the lawn from the "big house," as Rippon Lodge was called in those days.

The elder Hawkins was hired by Wade Hampton Ellis, a wealthy Washington lawyer who owned the house, to manage the property.

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HISTORIC SITE FILE: RIPPON LODGE
PRINCE WILLIAM PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM
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Man revisits past at Rippon Lodge

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Built in 1725 by Richard Blackburn, who also designed Mount Vernon, Rippon Lodge is one of the oldest Colonial estates still standing along the Potomac River. George and Martha Washington are said to have been frequent visitors.

The stately, white house with its columns and dormer windows, is furnished in Colonial style with pine wood flooring and cherry wood paneling. Ellis was intent on renovating the house to resemble its counterpart a few miles away, Hawkins said.

"His primary objective was to have Rippon Lodge look as much like Mount Vernon as possible," said Hawkins, whose parents named him after both Ellis and Blackburn.

On the end of the house closest to the river, Ellis built a "river room," Hawkins said, perfect for viewing the Potomac.

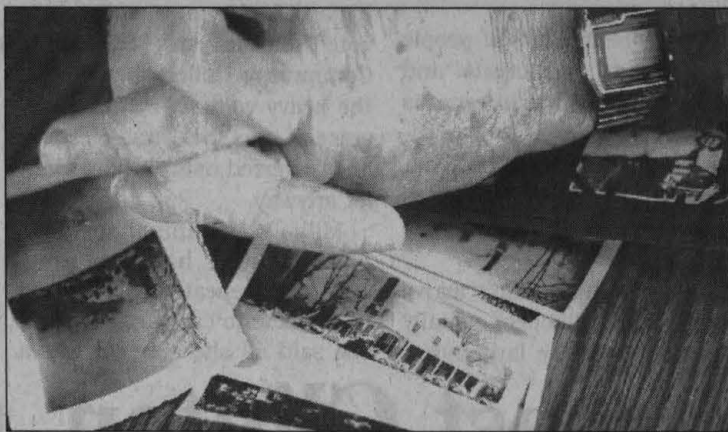
Today, Rippon Lodge is known as the oldest house in Northern Virginia and is on the market for \$1.6 million. Prince William County officials have expressed interest in buying and preserving the house.

"We're very much interested in buying it," said acting County Executive Craig Gerhart. "It has a fundamental place in the county's history and it's the kind of property that should be available for residents and visitors to see."

Preservation of the old estate is a move Hawkins strongly supports.

"It's still of great historical interest and we have to recognize that it's getting older all the time," said Hawkins, who lives in Woodbridge. "I just hope somebody does get it and preserves the old place."

But while growing up in the late 1930s and early 1940s,



Cindy L. Davis — Staff Photographer

Pictures of Rippon Lodge cover a table where Hawkins sits. The house, as it appears today, is shown in the middle photograph.

however, much of the house's esteemed history was lost on the young Hawkins. He simply loved the old farm's acres of fields and forests that were filled with animals and good hiding places.

"I've got a real love for wildlife," said Hawkins, who is retired from the Possum Point Power Station. "We had bird feeders everywhere on the property and I spent a lot of time walking around in the woods."

One of the most exciting places Hawkins and his brother found to play was an underground tunnel that extended

from the back of the estate.

"We always somewhat assumed that was put there to escape from the house in the event of something ... maybe from Indians," he said with a chuckle.

Another favorite place was the grand foyer where legend says a duel was fought that left one man dead and one man standing. Hawkins said he grew

up hearing many tales of ghosts but never saw anything the least bit scary.

"When you're in an old house, you can always hear groans and squeaks and moans," he said. "But I never saw any ghosts."

As he grew older, Hawkins helped his father and farmhands manage the wheat, corn and tobacco crops — as well as a handful of cattle, horses and chickens.

Hawkins' mother grew and canned her own vegetables, made her own butter and sold eggs to neighbors. The Hawkins family always saved half of the bounty for the Ellises and half for themselves.

"It was hard work," he said of life on the farm. "It was working to provide your own food, but it was a good life."

Some of the most exciting times at Rippon Lodge were when Ellis and his wife would arrive for their summer visits.

"They would come down for at least a month each summer

and they held big lawn parties for the dignitaries in Washington," Hawkins remembered. "They were very fancy — it would be quite an affair. We would get the grounds all prettied up with flowers when the people came."

That was also a time when Hawkins was expected to make himself scarce.

"I used to sneak out to see the big automobiles," said Hawkins, who remembers limousines and other luxury cars parked on the lawn near his house. "I would talk to the chauffeurs — that was something."

When the United States entered World War II, the farm experienced a shortage of workers, and Hawkins was placed in charge of the grounds. His job was to mow — by hand — the 35 acres of lawns surrounding the house.

"I enjoyed that," he said. "I always felt very proud of it when it was all freshly mown. It was very pretty."

But the late 1940s were also marked by loss — his older brother Cleggett, a U.S. Navy pilot, was killed in the war and Hawkins' father died suddenly in 1948.

Ellis had died a few years earlier and his wife chose to sell the estate. In 1949, when Hawkins was 19, he and his mother moved away from Rippon Lodge.

Hawkins recently visited the old estate and was struck by how much bigger it had seemed in his younger days. But the beauty of the grounds — the mysterious tunnel, the old stone fence and perfect view of the Potomac — still brought a smile to his face.

"It was just a wonderful place to live," he said.

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