

18th-century farmhouse is on the move

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As the development tide swells in Prince William County, many of the county's historic structures get swept away. Others sit empty, and are eventually swallowed up by a forest.

But in the early Sunday morning hours, one 200-year-old Catharpin house is being moved.

The Bushy Park house, a late 18th-century farmhouse that sits on land within the Catharpin Valley Estates housing development, will be picked up, moved to a new site and, eventually, renovated as part of a Gainesville library.

"A house that survives that long makes it significant, and it's well known in the Catharpin area," said Prince William County Historic Preservation Manager Brendon Hanafin.

The Bushy Park house, once a middle-class frontier house, is believed to date back to the late 1700s. Richard Williams, an area expert on historic structures, said there are a number of ways to tell the age, including by the nails used in the original construction.

"These are rosehead nails," he said at the site in April, holding up a somewhat crooked, certainly rusted piece of metal. The nail's slight imperfections make it apparent that it was crafted by human hands, and therefore it predates the nail machine that began to circulate around 1800, he said.

Williams said hundreds of these nails were pounded into a point on an anvil, and then the heads were pounded flat.

Early in the construction of Catharpin Valley Estates, county officials began to consider their options for the house. Dick Murphy, director of the Prince William Public Library System, suggested moving it for use as part of Gainesville's future library. The chosen site, on Lightner Road near the corner of U.S. 15, was originally set aside after the Dominion Valley development got the go-ahead.



Courtesy photo

Prince William County preservationists are moving the 18th-century Bushy Park House on Sunday.

"We see [the house] as a way to be the focal point for the construction of the library itself," said Murphy. "My vision of this, and it's a ways off, but maybe it would be in a garden setting adjacent to the library. But we really have to see what the site is like ultimately."

There are no funds allotted for library construction, but Murphy said he hoped the project could come up on the county's 2006 referendum.

Once renovation of the house and construction of the library begin, one of the house's two rooms could possibly be used as a children's reading room, and the other as an exhibit showing the house's history, he said.

After officials decided to move and reuse the house, the county recruited Williams to draft a plan, and Williams' company Deerchase eventually won the project bid. Deerchase, based in Middleburg, is a contracting company special-

izing in the renovation and sale of historic structures.

"There are a lot on the east side of the Bull Run mountains," said Williams. "I'd rather see them reused than in landfills."

The eventual plan called for temporary removal of the roof and second-story walls, to avoid power lines during transit. Rather than simply discarding them, the Deerchase crew will reassemble the pieces after the move.

Williams and his team spent a week in April dismantling the top sections and placing plywood over the windows, to prepare for transit.

"When you walk into an old home, you just feel something different," explained Williams, a 42-year-old Prince William County resident. He stood on the second floor of the house, which was newly exposed to the sun. "It's the proportions, the feel of the floor. Everything sags a little."

As Williams' team finished up

the preparations, the A-frame roof lay a few feet away from the house. Inside, the dusty smell of old wood was pervasive. Along the inside wall lay long, dark, discolored pieces of jagged wood that had once been crossbeams for the roof. Nearby sat the bannister they'd removed from the top of the stairs, in front of the original fireplace mantle.

"Everything has been tagged, numbered, photographed, sketched," said Williams. "We kind've got a little overboard, for when you put it back together later."

Not everything will be saved, however. The house had undergone some additions during its time in Catharpin, and Deerchase won't be using that material.

"Everything new gets trashed, because it doesn't belong here," said Williams.

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