

PARK GATE

Home's restoration became labor of love

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Places

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NOKESVILLE — Dean and Gail Niedernhofer are on an never-ending mission. They have taken on a project to restore one of Prince William County's great historical treasures: Park Gate, the colonial manor house that once served as the home of George Washington's niece.

Park Gate is located four miles north of Slate Run on Va. 653, three miles west of Va. 611. It has been the Niedernhofers' home since 1976.

No one knows exactly when Park Gate was built. Records on file with the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission puts the date sometime between 1750 and 1780.

But Dean Niedernhofer, who has spent much of the past 14 years researching Park Gate's roots, says he's found evidence suggesting that the house may have been built much earlier.

Scratchings in the stone foundation of an outbuilding on the property that once served as slaves' quarters read 1691.

"That coincides very neatly with a will left in 1691 by George Brent, who first owned this land," Niedernhofer said. "According to the will, a manor house was supposed to have been built."

Brent was a sea captain. His roots were in St. Mary's County, Md. His brother, Giles, was Maryland's first governor.

"One theory has it that George Brent spotted this house in St. Mary's, had it disassembled and delivered here, where he had it reassembled," Niedernhofer said. "One thing's for certain: there's nothing else around here that looks like this house."

Indeed, the architectural design of the house is more common to the Tidewater area. Much of the bricks in the foundation are laid in the Flemish-bond method and the fireplaces are of the keystone design.

Its steep roof has been completely refurbished with cedar shingles, a project that Mrs. Niedernhofer personally com-

pleted when contractors, fearing the 60-degree pitch, refused to do the work.

Some historians argue that the structure was not the Brent plantation manor house, but a tenant house. That is a notion the Niedernhofers quickly refute.

"There's no way this was a tenant house," Niedernhofer said. "When this house was built, the only other dwellings that were around here then were log cabins, shanties by comparison."

What the historians do know is that the house was built on a tract that was originally 795 acres. In 1789, Daniel Carroll Brent, who inherited the estate from his father, William, sold it to lawyer Thomas Lee, the eldest son of Richard Henry Lee, a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

In 1793, Thomas Lee moved from Dumfries to Park Gate with his wife, the former Mildred Washington, niece of George Washington. The Lees are buried at Park Gate.

The Niedernhofers spent two years searching for a house like Park Gate. "That was our dream," said Mrs. Niedernhofer. "We wanted to find some place with a historical past, something we could restore."

The couple, along with their three children, had to camp in the front yard when they first took possession of the property, Niedernhofer said.

"It was in terrible shape," he said. "Much of it had to be taken apart and put together again."

Fireplaces in the 10-room house were covered over and had to be reopened, he says. The walls were torn down and all the woodwork completely refurbished. One side of the house had to be raised with railroad jacks.

"We had to replace a sill beam that had completely deteriorated," Niedernhofer said. "Great pains were taken to restore and save every board and every nail that came out of the house."



Courtesy of Central Library

Scratchings in the stones of Park Gate's cellar say it was built in 1691.

It took five years to get the house into "showable" condition, Mrs. Niedernhofer said. "And we're still not finished. We'll never be finished with it."

Oh yes, one other thing: the place is haunted.

"Yep, we've got what I like to call a cold ghost," Niedernhofer said. "It's not a mean ghost or anything like that. It just makes certain places in the house seem unusually cold. Actually, it's sort of handy in the summer. We hardly ever use our air conditioner. Most of the time when the cold ghost is around, we have to grab our sweaters."

In the winter, though, the "cold ghost" is no pal, the Niedernhofers said. "It doesn't matter that we keep the furnace going. It just stays cold in certain places in the house," Niedernhofer said.

Brushing ghost tales aside, Mrs. Niedernhofer said the couple assumed a special responsibility when they assumed ownership of the estate.

"We're from the Midwest. There's nothing like this there. That's why we came to Virginia — to find this place. We're very fortunate."