

History of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center: Snowden Hall

by

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Front of Snowden Hall, December 1989

SNOWDEN HALL



Back of Snowden Hall, December 1989

If the walls of Snowden Hall could speak they would have some interesting tales to tell about Patuxent Research Refuge. They could tell stories that go back 60 years to June 3, 1939 when the nation's first wildlife experiment station was officially dedicated. Present at the dedication ceremony were dedicated and determined biologists like Dr. Ira Noel Gabrielson (Chief of the Biological Survey), who was to see his dreams fulfilled. Also present was his past boss, cartoonist-turned administrator, Mr. Jay N. "Ding" Darling, who led the nation on a conservation crusade during the 1930s. Both men sat on the lawn under the trees in front of Snowden Hall and must have taken some pride in the events of the day.

The original Snowden Hall was constructed by Richard Snowden in the 1700's. The site is a portion of a 10,000 acre land grant from King Charles II. Sometime between 1812 and 1816 the Hall burned and was rebuilt as "Rose Cottage." The cottage was one and one-half stories high with dormered windows, and constructed of hand-pressed brick salvaged from the first Hall. The brick was said to have been transported to the colonies from England in the hold of a ship as ballast then up the Patuxent by barge to this site.



Richard Snowden Seal

Sometime after the completion of Rose Cottage, the lady of the cottage visited England to learn to her embarrassment, only tenants lived in cottages. Upon her return she literally "raised the roof" of the cottage making it a two story dwelling. This change transformed the cottage into Snowden Hall. The

flat pitch of the roof may have been an economy measure. Either the supply of matching brick was short or funds were short. The result is that Snowden Hall cannot be readily identified with an architectural period or style. Although Georgian in character, the flat utilitarian pitch of the roof deviated from the classic Georgian.



Snowden Hall

Snowden Hall stands on large parcel of open land on the west bank of the Patuxent River between Laurel and Bowie. The building has been significantly altered in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not much is known about the events from the Rose Cottage period to 1938 when the old Bureau of Biological Survey took ownership. The government added the two wings, made major structural alterations, gutting the interior and generally reducing it to a government-styled office building. It seems almost a miracle that the Hall having endured so many remodeling throes has maintained its symmetry and architectural integrity.



Bricks of Snowden Hall

Snowden Hall is a two-story side-gabled brick dwelling, which stands on a high basement, and has a one-story brick wing added at each gable end. The Hall is constructed of hand-pressed brick in running bond, sturdy jack arch lintels, arched chimney hoods and a standing seam gabled roof. The Hall, like Kenmore at Fredericksburg and other houses in this part of Colonial America, had four rooms on each of two floors with servant quarters and kitchen in the basement. The main dining room on the west side of the Hall had a dumbwaiter in the wall when the government obtained the building. This was used to transfer food from the basement.

The door consists of six panes of glass over two molded panels. It has a three-pane transom, a narrow molded surround, and a flat brick arch forms a lintel above the door. A one-story pedimented gable-roof entry porch shelters this entrance; it is supported by double square paneled posts with molded capitals and bases. The exterior to the west boasted another portico on the present street side, which was originally the rear. This door (one glazed panel over two molded panels) has no transom, being cut off by the landing of the main staircase. The high porches rest on brick piers, and the wooden steps are bordered by "Chippendale" railings.

Before the growth of trees and the construction of the Gabrielson Laboratory in 1969, the river portico on the east side offered a sweeping view of the Patuxent River and its valley. The same Patuxent River, which about the time of the burning of Rose Cottage, was the main British invasion route in their assault and burning of Washington during the War of 1812. The east side originally had a large barn and old slave quarters, when the land was obtained by the government.



Snowden Cemetery



Snowden Cemetery

The interior main block consists of a central stair hall with flanking double parlors. The two-run open-string stair rises along the south wall of the stair hall, turns at a landing, and rises to the second story. It has a turned newel, with tapered balusters; the stair ends are bracketed, and the spandrel is plastered. The mantles in the parlors have plain freeze with inner moldings. Door and window surrounds have a plain one-step field, with molded back band. Baseboards are high, with upper molding on the second story, but not on the first. Floor boards on the first story are wide, random width; they have been replaced by new narrow boards on the second story. Several rooms have new partitions, creating closets and bathrooms.

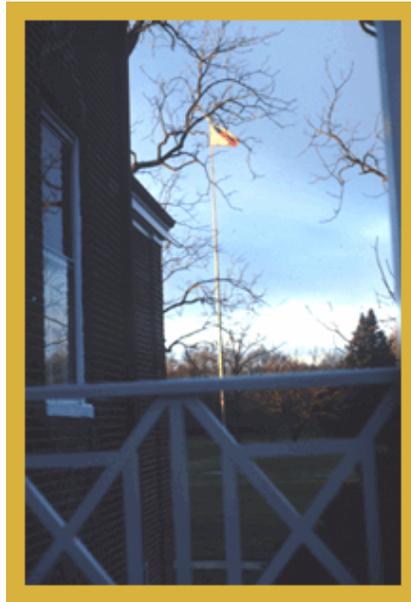
The basement, now fully finished with concrete and plaster, had packed clay floors and included a wine cellar and storage rooms when purchased by the U.S. Government in 1936. At that same time, there was a one-story frame kitchen wing attached to the south gable end. This frame wing was removed and the present brick wings were subsequently constructed. Bricks from nearby Gladswood (originally from England) were reportedly used in the reconstruction of Snowden Hall.

The brick walls of the building are laid in 5:1 American bond on the first story, and 7:1 above it. There is a corbeled brick cornice. Windows are 6/6 double hung sash, with plain wooden sills and flat arch lintels. There are no shutters, although old pictures show open shutters on each window. The shallow-pitch gable roof is covered with standing seam metal. There are two flush chimneys at each gable end; each corbeled brick chimney has a triple-arch brick cap. The high brick foundation encloses a full cellar, which is lighted by above grade 6/3 windows.



Both gable ends show evidence of rebuilding. Clearly visible in the brickwork are the lines of a lower, more steeply-pitched gable roof (one and one half stories high) from which rise the two original tall flush chimneys. Above this original roofline, and on both sides of the chimneys, the gable ends have been raised to their higher, but more shallowly pitched, roofline with the use of newer brick in 7:1 bond. Similarly, the second story of the east and west facades is laid in 7:1 bond.

At each gable end is a one-story hip-roof wing (built since 1936), one by three bays, and resting on a high basement. Like the main block, the wing has 6/6 windows, and 6/3 windows lighting the basement. Each window has a flat arch (rowlock) lintel, not splayed as in the main block. Each wing has a narrow boxed wood cornice with crown molding, painted white, and the hip roofs are covered with gray asbestos shingle.



View of Patuxent Flagpole from Snowden

Snowden Hall stands on open rolling ground approximately 3/4 mile west of the Patuxent River; it stands on a 260-acre parcel of land which was the nucleus of the Snowden family plantation. This parcel, together with nearly 600 additional acres of Snowden land, was purchased by the United States government in the early 1930s. Since 1936 the land has always been officially called Patuxent Research Refuge and is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service). Patuxent Wildlife Research Center is the research program conducted on the land, and though originally synonymous with Patuxent Research Refuge when under the USFWS, is now separate and part of the U. S. Geological Survey.



Conscientious Objectors, Snowden Hall

During the late 1930s the Hall was used to house workers, mostly college men, that were employed as research assistants on the grounds. From 1940-41 the Hall was used for training of government biologists from many areas of the country. This program ended with the outbreak of World War II. Subsequently, Snowden Hall was used to house and feed members of the Public Service Program, who were conscientious objectors to the War. After the War the Hall was used as an apartment building for five families at one time. Two families were in the basement, two on the first floor, and one family on the second floor. When the Hall was no longer used as apartments it was converted to office space, which is its present use. Snowden Hall is presently occupied by the Wetland Science Institute of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.