

Carroll House docents ensure history is visible for future generations



Charles Carroll House volunteer docents share a love of the house's history and hope to preserve the house for future generations. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR file photo)

By Maria Wiering

mail@CatholicReview.org

ANNAPOLIS -There's a scene that is rooted in the imagination of John O'Neill. It's of the Charles Carroll mansion in its heyday, when it was certainly host to the scheming of the Declaration of Independence signer and fellow patriots.

"I don't have any documentation, but I'm absolutely positive that people like Patrick Henry, George Washington and Lafayette, who had his encampment across the river, were all in there sipping brandy with Charley one night," said O'Neill, pointing across the house's great room to a parlor doorway.

O'Neill and his wife, Blanche, became Charles Carroll House docents about four years ago. They both love the house's history and hope to preserve the house for future generations.

The house was home to three generations of the Carroll family: Charles Carroll the Settler, an Irish emigrant and, briefly, a Maryland colony attorney general; his son, Charles Carroll of Annapolis; and his grandson, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only Catholic Declaration signatory. After his death, he gave it to his daughter, Mary Carroll Caton, who willed it to her daughters. In 1852, they sold the house to the Redemptorists, who made it their novitiate. The house is on the grounds of St. Mary's Church in Annapolis and its elementary and high schools, along a Chesapeake Bay inlet.

The house is open for public tours weekends from June to October. It also hosts special events: The Annapolis Chamber Players are giving two candlelight concerts there Dec. 6, and the Charles Carroll House is hosting boxwood wreath-making workshops Dec. 5 and 10.

Docent Betty Haislip said volunteering is "is in my DNA." Like most of the house's volunteers, she's a St. Mary's parishioner and a retiree.

“When you’re ... able to do things, you have an obligation to give back to the community,” she said. “Then everyone gets enriched.”

Several docents consider the house a religious freedom landmark. Religious liberty was promoted in early Maryland, but laws penalizing Catholics took hold by the end of the 17th century, after a change in British rule. When the Catholic Carroll family purchased the Annapolis house in the early 1700s, public Masses were prohibited under Maryland law.

The Carrolls - who left Ireland to escape religious persecution - held Masses in their home, and, according to the docents, clandestinely aided the area’s Jesuit priests. They and other Catholics would regain religious freedoms with the ratification of the U.S. Constitution.

“It’s not just the house (that matters),” said John O’Neill. “Brick and mortar is an easy thing. A house that has meaning, and a certain spirituality about it, is very unique.”

Despite the Carroll House’s long and significant history in Maryland’s capital, it remains a hidden gem. A Midwest transplant, Haislip said she lived in the state 40 years before she heard of it.

About 350-400 people visited it in 2014.

“Given that admission is free and the site is one of such importance to American Catholicism we consider it ‘under-visited,’” said Eileen Leahy, chairwoman of the board of trustees for the Charles Carroll House of Annapolis, Inc., which oversees the house’s preservation.

“A lot of people, we find, don’t even know we’re here,” added Sarah Hill, who also coordinates the house’s volunteers, including a dozen active docents. “We need to beef up the number of docent volunteers we have before we can increase the amount of things we do in the house.”

House history

An Irish emigrant and Maryland attorney general, Charles Carroll the Settler purchased the Annapolis property in the early 1700s and moved into an extant house on the bank of Spa Creek. His son, Charles Carroll of Annapolis, built a house next door with a passage way to the original house. His son, the Declaration-signer Charles Carroll of Carrollton, was born in the house in 1739. The family was among the wealthiest landowners in the colonies.

After schooling in England, Charles Carroll of Carrollton was married in the house and received it as a wedding gift. He also expanded the structure to its present appearance by the 1790s. In 1821, he moved to Baltimore City. He outlived his son, Charles Carroll of Homewood, who died in 1825 and is the only Carroll buried on the Annapolis property.

When Charles Carroll of Carrollton died in 1832, he was the last surviving

Declaration signatory. He left the house to his daughter, Mary Carroll Caton, who willed it to her daughters when she died in 1846.

In 1852, the sisters sold the house and property to the Redemptorists, who relocated their Baltimore novitiate there and made other renovations. Its priests and brothers have served the adjacent St. Mary's parish and school since, but discontinued using the house as a novitiate in 1968. Its second and third-story floors were recently remodeled for the order's administrative use.

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