

Lorton History - The History of Laurel Hill House

A Revolutionary War hero's home right here in Lorton

By Irma Clifton

Many people today know Laurel Hill as a community along Silverbrook Road in Lorton, but the Laurel Hill of yesteryear, from which the community takes its present-day name, has a long and varied history.

Laurel Hill was the seat of William Lindsay, a contemporary of both George Washington and George Mason. Laurel Hill House was constructed in the 1780s, and was part of a 1,000-acre plantation. Laurel Hill was modest when compared to some of the other plantations of the day. The house was one and one-half stories built of well-seasoned North Carolina pine with a partial basement. That type was common during the late 18th century, containing a central hall flanked by a room on each side. Upper story space was created by the use of roof dormers. It is believed that the name Laurel Hill comes from the original Lindsay family estate located in the north of Ireland.

William Lindsay married Ann Calvert of Culpeper County, Virginia, in about 1767. Ann Calvert was a great granddaughter of Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore, the founder and proprietor of Maryland. Before settling at Laurel Hill the Lindsay's lived in Colchester, where Lindsay did business selling for the planters as a commissioned merchant. He was considered a wealthy man, although his fortunes varied greatly from time to time.

During the Revolutionary War Lindsay served as a Major in the Virginia Militia and received a severe wound at the battle of Guilford Court House in 1781 while serving under General Nathanael Greene. He came home to Laurel Hill to recuperate, and later became a gentleman planter. He died in 1792 and is buried in the family cemetery at Laurel Hill. Ann Calvert Lindsay outlived her husband by many years, and died in 1822 at the home of her son-in-law at Patapsco in Prince William County. She is buried in the cemetery at Laurel Hill beside her husband.

The plantation later became the home of James Dawson, and following his death in 1830 it appears from census records that the property became the residence for farmers working the surrounding property. A granddaughter of William and Ann Lindsay, Ann Maria, who was born in the house in 1810 married into the Dawson family in 1850 and moved to Laurel Hill House. In 1873 her descendants sold the house to Theresa Drexler, who in 1906 sold the home to a Washington attorney, Howe Totten, as a county property. Totten kept stables and raised championship Great Danes.

Totten did not have an easy relationship with the newly created District of Columbia Workhouse which was built in 1910. His letters to the editor of local newspapers complained of lax security among other issues. In 1914, 153 acres of the Laurel Hill property was condemned for use as a reformatory, and Laurel Hill House came into the possession of the District of Columbia.

From 1914 until 1970 the house underwent many significant additions and changes as it housed a variety of prison officials. It is believed that during the 1930s inmate labor and prison-made bricks were used to construct the classically designed gardens

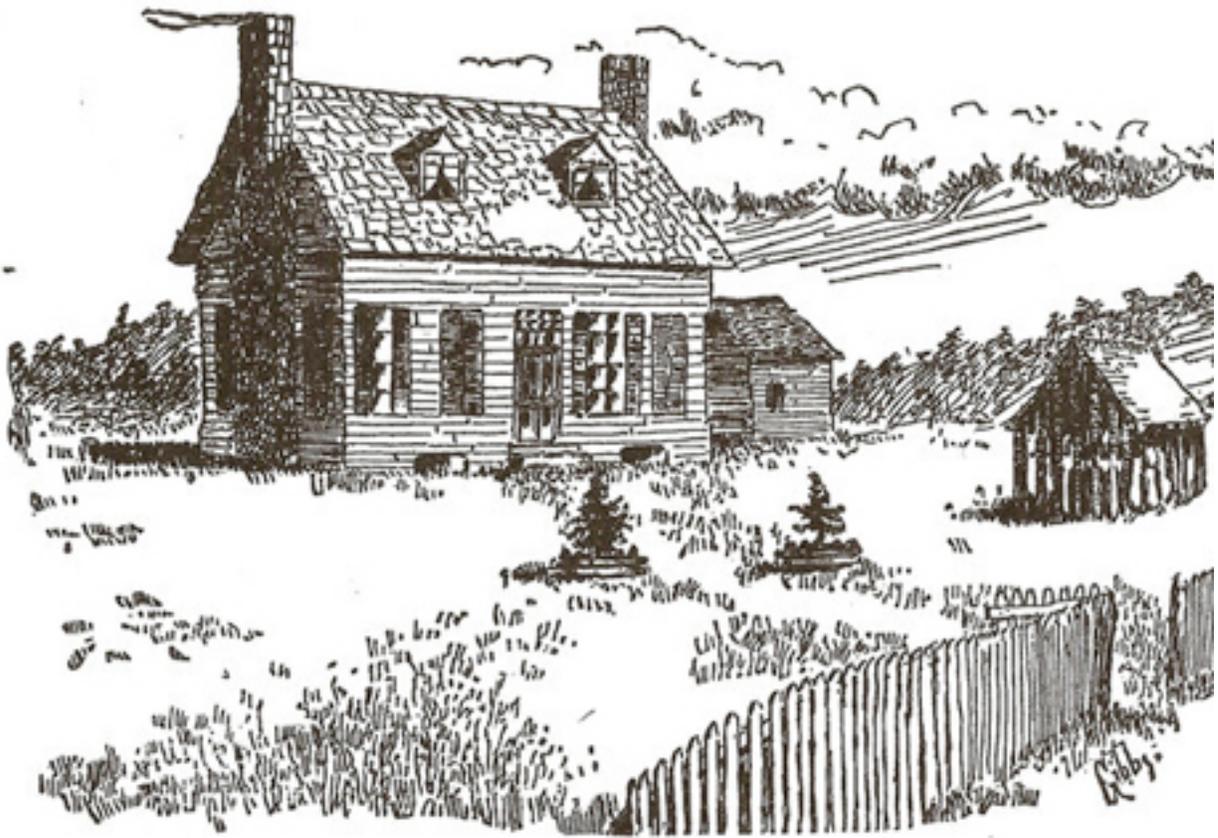
adjacent to the house. Although only remnants of plants which adorned the garden in earlier times remain, the brick-lined walkways and garden walls are still sturdy and visibly await restoration.

The graves of Major William Lindsay and his wife Ann have been marked by the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution and are enclosed within a low fenced area in what remains of the family cemetery. No other graves are evident or marked.

The house is listed as a contribution structure to the 511-acre District of Columbia Workhouse and Reformatory Historic District. Although there is no immediate plan to restore the structure or gardens, the county Department of Planning and Zoning has prepared an Historic Structure Report addressing three treatment plans. Access this report on www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpz/laurelhill/laurel_hill_house/development_history.pdf.



This photo of Laurel Hill House taken in the 1970s shows a well-maintained dwelling that bears little resemblance to the original structure. Photo courtesy Fairfax County Department of Planning and Zoning. Credit the Fairfax County Department of Planning and Zoning.



LAUREL HILL.

This sketch of Laurel Hill House appears in a book titled *The Lindsays of America, a Geneal Narrative and Family Record*, by Margaret Isabella Lindsay, a great granddaughter of Williar Ann Lindsay, published in 1889. It is said the sketch represents the original structure. Credit Clifton



Laurel Hill House today stands as a forlorn neglected relic that shows no honor to the Revolutionary hero who lived, died and is buried in its shadow. Credit the Fairfax County Department of Planning and Zoning.