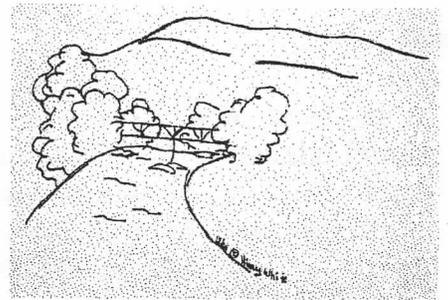


# Strasburg Heritage Association



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Strasburg, Virginia

## General Meeting

Sunday, February 22, 2004

*You are cordially invited to attend!!!*

Please join us for our annual meeting on Sunday, February 22, 2004, from 4 to 6 PM at the Old Mill Restaurant in Strasburg. At this meeting we will hold elections of our Board of Directors and will take this occasion to offer a special thank you to our friends who have generously opened their homes for our Heritage Homes Tours these past three years.

We are very pleased that our featured speaker will be Karen Cooper, who will talk to us about Early Shenandoah County Pioneers. Since Strasburg was the first area in the County to be settled, Karen will emphasize our own community, but she will also discuss the influence of the different settler cultures on the communities of Shenandoah County and how they shaped the personalities of our towns.

Karen has had a lifetime interest in local history and genealogy, with a particular interest in Isaac Zane and the Marlboro Furnace. She is a former history teacher and founding member of the Shenandoah County Historical Society and the Warren Heritage Society. Though she grew up in Warren County, her roots are deep into Shenandoah County and include such family names as Bowman, Funk, and Stover.

As a special treat our refreshments will be provided and served by the Massanutten

Garden Club, our Homes Tour partner. Please join us for what will be a very enjoyable meeting.

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## 2003 Christmas Homes Tour

By Diane Smith

Despite having been postponed due to inclement weather, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Heritage Homes Christmas Tour was a great success. Two hundred seventy-five tickets were sold for the event. The rich history of each of the homes was enhanced by our gracious homeowners who eagerly shared their knowledge of the past with the visitors. The homes were lovely and many attendees expressed how much they enjoyed touring them.

We give our heartfelt appreciation to: our wonderful homeowners [Annabelle Winkfield, Max Baker, Chris Foster, Bill & Martha Erbach, and John & Donna Huntsberger] for allowing us to feature their homes; the Massanutten Garden Club for providing the refreshments; and many thanks to all our volunteers who gave their time to help as hosts, hostesses, and parking guides.

We give a special thanks to our chairwoman, Samantha Johnson, who did a wonderful job organizing this year's tour and helping to make it the success it turned out to be.

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## Vesper Hall

By Kathy Kehoe

*"See the gorgeous, sunset splendor,  
As the sun sinks to his rest,  
Flooding all the vale with radiance,  
Earth, and sky, and mountain crest.  
Gradually the shadows lengthen,  
Far and near, the landscape o'er,  
As the nightfall softly nestles  
O'er the Vale of Shenandoah."*

The above quote is from the poem The Vale of Shenandoah by Mrs. M. L. Walton, who wrote it after viewing the Valley in the early 1900's from Massanutten Mountain. She was a distant relative of Colonel Jacob S. Pifer, who built the historic brick home one mile west of Strasburg called Vesper Hall. Perhaps Col. Pifer chose this name, meaning evening or evening star, for the peaceful time of the evening when the Pifer family sat on the front porch of their home.

If you travel outside Strasburg on Rt. 55 West, you might notice two houses on the left across from the old depot. The yellow clapboard house was made of logs in 1751 when this area was wilderness. The limestone houses along Cedar Creek, each a refuge from hostile Indians, were within a few miles of the Pifer homestead. Froman's, Bowman's and Frye's forts were also built in the mid 1750's. Henry Pifer was born in Germany and raised in Pennsylvania. As a young man, he traveled to the new Virginia frontier and settled at Capon Roads. The stone fireplace was built in traditional Pennsylvania style in the middle of the structure. In the attic, it resembles a stone pyramid rising to the roof. The family lived in the log cabin for a hundred years until Col. Jacob Pifer built the brick home around 1860. When the Civil War broke out, the decorating of the inside of the house was delayed. The family continued to live in the

cabin; and Vesper Hall was used as a hospital. It wasn't until 1865 that the family could enjoy the evening in the new brick house with a view of Massanutten Mountain. The old log structure still stands today, untouched by modern plumbing, the wiring strung along the ceiling beams, and the logs covered by yellow clapboard. By 1980, an appraisal specified that the Vesper Hall property "includes an old 2 story frame home of no value." The long history of one of the first homes built in this area had been forgotten.

According to family history, the bricks for the new home were made on the premises by slaves and Mennonites. The molds used to make the bricks were still at Vesper Hall until they were sold at auction in 1981. The brick house had the luxury of larger windows and plaster walls. In July 1993, the Shenandoah County Historic Landmarks Survey described Vesper Hall as "perhaps the most spectacular display of decorative painting in the county." The survey described "a Greek Revival brick house of the mid-nineteenth century with parlor walls and ceilings painted in trompe l'oeil to simulate molded plasterwork." Local artist William F. Rupp, who emigrated to the US from Germany in 1854, probably did this fresco work. It was damaged in the 1960's when blasting the rock for Interstate 81 cracked all the plaster, giving the parlor an almost haunted house effect. Replacing the plaster would mean destroying the historic fresco stenciling painted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The fireplaces, the ten foot high ceilings, and large windows create a warm, charming home. Family folklore includes the story about the Italian artisans who were hired to paint the inside of the house. Because they were known to the family as alcoholics, they were locked in the rooms they were painting so they could not drink on the job. Walls in the attic hallway were

painted to look like marble, a very popular decorating technique of the day. Jay Monihan researched the history of the home in the 1980's when plans for the highway Corridor H threatened to destroy both houses. It is now part of the National Register of Historic Homes.

When Martha Williams died in 1929, her obituary made mention of her interment in the "family graveyard back of the home." The daughter of Col. Pifer, she had spent all her life at Vesper Hall. Pallbearers at her funeral included Senator R. S. Wright, E. E. Keister and Judge M. L. Walton, Jr. It is not known where the family plot is located or if it was moved when the Interstate divided the Pifer land.

The last Pifer descendant to live at Vesper Hall was Katherine Williams Warrenfeltz, great-great-granddaughter of the original settler, Henry Pifer. Current occupant Barb Sullivan tells how her cat refused to walk over a spot in the upstairs hallway. She later learned that was where Katherine had fallen and died. Barb believes there are other ghosts in the house. She has heard footsteps on the stairs that stop midway down. When she and her husband were taking down wallpaper, they discovered the spot where a stairway once stood—the same stairway that would have been in the house when it was used as a Civil War hospital.

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### *President's Letter*

By Sarah Mauck

It has been a pleasure to serve as president of the Strasburg Heritage Association this year. I remember in 2001 at our first board meeting when President Judy Bogner asked each of us to offer issues and ideas for a preservation plan. At that time my concern was that our beautiful vistas were

becoming cluttered with housing developments. Oh, boy, how things change in three short years. The American dream of "a chicken in every pot" has mega-boomed. Strasburg has certainly contributed its fair share to the 172 million new homes built in 2003 nationwide. Unfortunately, many of those dream homes are not necessarily owned by the family but by lending institutions which may not always be American (but that's a whole other letter.)

In the climate of such rapid growth and change it is all the more important that groups like SHA work with our local government, our neighboring battlefield parks, and each other to preserve the uniqueness of our town. I personally have gained so much insight as president of our Heritage Association that I plan to continue as an active board member.

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### **Nominating Committee**

By Babs Melton

A major item of business for the Feb 22 Annual Meeting is election of the new Board of Directors. The Nominating Committee proposes the reelection of Barbara Adamson, Dee Keister, Virginia Cadden, Judy Bogner, Doug Cooley, Don LeVine, Shirley Maxwell, and Babs Melton; and election of new member Fred Ritenour. This slate, and any nominees from the floor, will be voted on Feb. 22nd. The remaining Board members are Dennis Hupp, Kathy Kehoe, Sarah Mauck, Rich Orndorff, Diane Smith, Tim Taylor, Carla Wallen, and Mike Whittle, whose terms expire in 2005.

The current Board of Directors, which under SHA bylaws selects its own officers, approved the Committee's recommendations for 2004. Elected at the January 21 Board Meeting were: Babs Melton, President; Carla Wallen, Vice President; Barbara Adamson, Secretary; and Don LeVine, Treasurer.