

Howard Historical Society previews its own history in holiday house tour



Martha Clark at home in Ellicott City, MD on Friday, December 2, 2016. As a member of the Clark family, Martha Clark decorates her home for her participation in this year's Howard County Historical Society holiday house tour. (Staff Photos by Jen Rynda)



By **Andrew Michaels**
Howard County Times

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The Howard County Historical Society's holiday house tour this weekend takes guests through 19th- and 20th-century farm homes dating back to the society's founding family.

ll rotate between five historic homes connected to ty's founder, Alda Hopkins Clark. Executive

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director Shawn Gladden said the board selects five of the hundreds of historic homes in the county every year for its holiday house tour, never visiting the same house within a 10-year period.

Gladden said Alda Clark founded the historical society after the death of her husband, former Howard County Circuit Court Judge James Clark Sr., in 1955. Based in Ellicott City, board members collect and restore historical artifacts significant to Howard County's history.

This year's sold-out tour marks the society's largest gathering since the annual event began in 1976, Gladden said. Decorated Ellicott City destinations include Clarkland Farm, Spring Hill, Valhalla Farm, Mount Ida and Wheatfield.

"I think anybody who has grown up in Howard County has seen all the building and development that's going on," Gladden said. "[They] know it's important for us to stay in touch with our history and the historic houses that were built generations, even, before Columbia. The homes we have on the tour this year are in one way or another related to the Clark family."

Clarkland Farm is the only home still owned by a member of the Clark family, Martha Anne Clark, he said. Clark, 61, is the granddaughter of Alda and James Clark Sr. and daughter of state Sen. James Clark Jr.

According to the society's archives, James Clark Jr. began farming the Clarkland Farm property in 1946 after serving in World War II. After renting the property from owner Dallas Brown for more than a decade, Clark, purchased the farmhouse in 1957 and combined its 160 acres with his father's Elioak Farm.

Clark farmed the property until his death in 2006, according to the archives.

"My parents spent most of their married life in that house. Part of it was built about 175 years ago," said Martha Clark, also a historical society board member. "The Wheatfield was my great-great-grandfather's home [and] I have a picture in my home of the whole family sitting on the porch of Wheatfield at the time of his 80th birthday."

Her grandfather was also shown in the photograph at 3 years old, she said, sitting next to her great-grandfather as well as many other Clark family members. Wheatfield was the first property owned by the Clarks, purchased by James Clark Sr. in 1850.

Martha Clark said her family has owned between 12 and 15 properties in Howard County over the last 100 years. In addition to Clarkland Farm and Wheatfield, the other three former Clark properties on the tour include Spring Hill, passed on to the Clark family in the 1920s; Mount Ida, purchased by the Clarks in the 1920s; and Valhalla Farm, purchased by James Clark Sr. in 1954.

Today, Martha Clark and her daughter, Nora Crist, continue the family farming business at Clark's Elioak Farm off Route 108. The family opened a petting zoo on the farm in 2002 and later revealed the restored structures and figures from the Enchanted Forest theme park, which were completed in 2015.

"I've got such strong roots in Howard County and on that farm that I can't imagine doing anything else," Clark said. "I love sharing the farm with everyone. They can run around and enjoy the fresh air and open spaces. It's just a delight to see people come and interact with the animals and get an appreciation of what farm life is like."

Clark said she's overjoyed to open her home to the society's holiday house tour on Dec. 10, when visitors can explore the seven-room house. People will also get a first-look at some Clark family portraits and heirlooms, including wedding certificates of various family member.

Freshly cut boxwood and pine will add to the holiday spirit, she added, as the entire five-home tour connects the Clark family history.

"It'll all be tied together, which I think is a fun part of the tour. Like, the furniture in my house is from Wheatfield," Clark said. "I have a map that we use at our Clark family reunions that shows the Clark houses in Howard County. I've been spending time getting that updated."

Joanna Benedict, a four-year board member, said planning the holiday house tour required hours of hard work, especially organizing bus routes. Older homes are often located on small back roads, she said, with gated entrances, unpaved roadways and low-hanging branches.

"Mostly we rely on the homeowners who are so generous to open their houses to the public," Benedict said. "The houses are always special and beautiful. We are very fortunate to have history lovers who own some of these properties."

Benedict said she understands the importance of an area's history, currently residing on a farm passed down through her family over four generations.

"We have a long family history in Howard County and in Maryland, in general, going back to 1600s," she said.

While each tour costs thousands of dollars to organize, Gladden said the historical society's tour will give some business back to Ellicott City's Little French Market and the Wine Bin, which will serve lunch and complimentary wine, respectively. Both businesses were among dozens on Main Street that were affected by the July flood.

The tour's sponsor, the Bob Lucido Team of Keller Williams Integrity, were instrumental in funding this year's event, Gladden said, which also marks Lucido's 40th year in real estate.

Since her grandmother founded the Howard County Historical Society more than 60 years ago, Martha Clark said its members have helped preserve much of the area's history, while helping families trace their roots.

"I think the historical society's mission is an important one and we're very happy to be a part of the house tour," Clark said. "There's support and interest in the historical society and historical homes in the county. I think that's all very encouraging that a lot of new people who moved to Howard County for other reasons can also enjoy the opportunities to discover its history."

The Howard County Historical Society's 40th annual house tour is sold out. Contact the Historical Society at 410-480-3250.

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