State House

'Did you know Washington?' State House guides are asked

By George Schaun

Expecting the unexpected is part of the job for each of the four women who serve as guides in Maryland's State House.

"Were you alive, 200 years ago, when George Washington was here?" one of the guides was asked.

Before she could respond to this question uttered by a fourth grade schoolboy, a girl in the same group said: "Of course she was. That's why she knows so much."

Unintended compliments of this kind, being spontaneous, tell much concerning informative ability of these women who represent Maryland each year as they receive about 160,000 visitors.

Two serve year-round: Evelyn Q. Price, senior guide, and Joan Vahlkamp. Their associates, on a part-time schedule throughout the year, are Margaret Fowler and Doris A. Ferguson.

Every day, except Christmas and Thanksgiving, 20-minute history heritage tours are conducted, beginning at 10 A.M., 11 A.M., noon, 1.30 P.M., 2.30 P.M., 3.30 P.M. and 4.30 P.M. Groups (especially if they come at other times) usually make advance arrangements by phoning 269-3400, or by writing to: Hostess, Maryland State House, Annapolis, 21401.

Like many schoolteachers, Mrs. Price knows that numerous students regard history as "something not really relevant to me because it happened a long time ago."

To help in removing this barrier of indifference, many changes have been made recently in the State House. Other important ones, scheduled for the near future, have steelclad deadlines for completion before the General Assembly meets, early in January.

Meanwhile, the guides convey a wealth of human interest daily, based upon history that was enacted, written and discussed in the very building. Its architecture and adornments, in themselves, can well serve as extensive examples of Maryland's lovely Georgian-era testament to beauty.



Visitors to the State House may be greeted by (from left) Evelyn Q. Price, the senior hostess, Joan Vahlkamp, hostess, or Mianna Jopp, of the state tourist office.

Not every visitor from other states (or every Marylander, either) knows that this is the only State House in America that served as the nation's capital (from November 26, 1783, to August 13, 1784).

Peering into the newly activated archives room, you can see a gleaming silvery record picturing highlights of Maryland history, county by county, with place of honor given to Anne Arundel county and Baltimore.

The numerous pieces were designed and wrought by the old Baltimore firm of Samuel Kirk and Sons, Inc. This silver service was given by Maryland's citizens and schoolchildren, in 1906, to the armored cruiser Maryland (part of the Great White Fleet). When that ship was deactivated, the silver was transferred in 1921 to the battleship Maryland (no longer in existence.)

Whenever another American warship is given that name, this same silver will go aboard. Consequently, all landlubbers who hope to see it ashore are warned that now is an excellent time for viewing it.

The archives room adjoins the legendary old Senate Chamber, where Gen. George Washington resigned as commander of the Continental Army December 23, 1783, thereby helping to establish our unbroken tradition of civilian control for the armed forces. In this same room, our War for Independence came to an end January 14, 1784, when the Treaty of Paris was signed and ratified.

There's more. Many, taking the tour, think that "history made visible and audible" really justified two or three times the number of visitors during the bicentennial (161,165). Frequently, they comment about "how clean the building is," perhaps in contrast with their previous glimpse of lower Main street.

Inside, their view may include a neck-stretching upward look at the huge wooden dome, largest in the United States. It was built by using long-lasting cypress beams fastened together by wooden pegs (sometimes called trunnels or tree nails.) Twice each day, security officers climb the 149 steps to raise and lower the black, gold and red Maryland flag—the only state displaying a family heraldic design.

Outside, passersby see that the dome is embraced by scaffolding to permit application of white paint. Shingles are being replaced as a corrective for some awkward roof leaks (not the kind for which a corps of "plumbers" was recruited in the Nixon admnistration in Washington.)

Other changes are being made. That remarkable tabletop map of Broad Neck Hundred (showing Seventeenth Century settlements on Greenbury Point) is now in the first large room to the left. Tour information has been moved from the great marble-lined entrance hall, also leftward, into well-marked room 124. There, at long last, the guides have an office and a handsome, well-stocked literature rack.

A room behind that, not yet opened to the public, contains many folding chairs that quickly can become small tables. Piles of other equipment testify mutely to the fact that color films and slides (a la Williamsburg) will show and explain some areas where visitors could not go without disrupting official business (the Governor's offices and the two legislative chambers, when in session).

This short leap into the future will make possible some long leaps into the past, so that young and old can remember its lessons and, hopefully, try not to repeat its mistakes.

The one great lesson of the Maryland State House, serene in its years of youthful welcome to all who come, is that history does have meaning. As you leave, strolling past a cannon that guarded St. Marys city in the Seventeenth Century, you'll also see that nearby areas are, as Historic Annapolis says, "a museum without walls"—but it's one with lively relevance for those having eyes to see, ears to hear and the great gift of understanding.

Mr. Schaun is an Annapolis free-lance writer.

Workmen scale State House to shingle and paint the dome

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other board bounced against the supports of the scaffolding as it made its way to the top of the 190-year old dome. The workmen quickly secured it in place and lowered the rope for

do but let the scaffolding stand and wait.

The Charles F. Ruff Company, a Baltimore roofing firm, has been hampered in its attempt to put a new roof on the State House and refurbish

find that mines the type he needs.

He said he has had slate on order there since last October, not only for the State House job, but for other jobs as well.

The $272,400 project in

It is the first time in at least 50 years that repair work has been done on the exterior of the dome or the roof, Mr. Ruff and Mr. Sikorski agreed.

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