

Historic homes can hold hidden treasures

By SARAH PEARCE
Times-Record

DENTON — Researching a house's history was the topic of a talk presented Sunday at the Museum of Rural Life by Michael Dixon of the Maryland Humanities Council spoke for the Upper Shore Genealogical Society.

Dixon said some people would like to know the exact year their historic home was built, but that date can be hard to pin down.

Instead, he encourages homeowners to frame their search by learning more about the history of the structure, the owners and what happened in the house.

Generations of families have lived in a historic house, he said, and they have made modifications to the home. Also, he encourages researchers to think about what historic events could have occurred while people have lived there.

He said researchers should have a research plan and keep good notes.

Dixon presented a research model that included checking on already completed research, searching the home, learning oral history from others, reading "documentary data," and physical evidence such as photographs. Research can be time-consuming, he said.

Depending on the age of a house, someone may have done research on it previously. Dixon said he would use such information as his "baseline data." He encourages researchers to start getting in touch with subject matter experts such as historical

society members, public librarians and genealogical societies. The Maryland Historic Trust also can be a good source.

"These are folks who can orient you to the history," he said. They can help researchers locate information already published about a property.

Dixon said he likes what he dubbed "attic archaeology."

Many historic treasures can be found in an attic that has been in private hands for many years.

"I like this stuff," he said. "I like plundering around."

He told an anecdote about a house a family sold to the council for about \$700,000. They took some family valuables out of the house, but left the rest. The house, which was in the same family from 1775 until about 2000, was piled with centuries of stuff, he said. Some of it included newspapers (some worth \$5,000), family prints, paintings and phone bills from the 1930s.

Researchers carefully sifted through the items. One researcher found an original letter from Thomas Jefferson in an old phone bill. A professional appraiser estimated the letter was worth \$700,000 to \$750,000.

As a researcher, it would have been easy to throw out those old phone bills, he said. A letter from John Quincy Adams also was found in the home.

"You want to do very carefully attic archaeology," Dixon said.

Do your due diligence so you find or unearth all history, he said.

Tax receipts and other docu-

ments can help researchers with such things as valuation and size of the property.

Routine things like receipts can tell a researcher about the installation of plumbing or electricity. Diaries, family bibles and letters also can help tell a house's story.

Wills can offer inventories of property. Once the house research is complete, researchers should begin finding oral history about a house, Dixon said. Interview neighbors, friends and family to learn about the people and events significant to the house.

Finding documents can be the most time consuming part of the process and requires a little bit of skill.

"Newspapers, first off, are a great way to waste time ... but newspapers are a source that you'll want to go to to find out what happened," Dixon said.

Many small towns had newspapers that wrote about little things such as which houses were being painted, who was painting a house, etc. "I love researching with them," he said.

Photographs and maps also can be a wonderful source of

research, Dixon said. Postcards with photographs were popular beginning in 1905 or 1906, he said, and many historical societies have hundreds of them.

The Maryland State Archives is an excellent repository for a lot of things, especially photography, he said.

Land records obtained from the courthouse are critical to construct a chain of holdings, said Dixon. Clerks can be very helpful. Other government records may include insurance records, deeds and mortgages.

Maps and atlases are excellent for research, he said.

Dendrochronology (the dating of an event using the rings on a tree) can help date a house by telling the owner when the wood was cut, to the season. Paint analysis also can date a house.

Dixon recommended those who complete house research write a report. It can make a wonderful Christmas gift for family members, he said. Give a copy to the public library and a copy to the local historical society, and that information will live on for future generations.

PREMIER CINEMAS

<p style="text-align: center;">THIS CHRISTMAS (PG) Wed.-Thurs. 12:30, 4:20, 7:00, 9:35</p> <p style="text-align: center;">BEOWULF (PG-13) Wed.-Thurs. 12:10, 4:10, 7:10, 9:40</p> <p style="text-align: center;">FRED CLAUS (PG) Wed.-Thurs. 12:20, 4:00, 6:50, 9:25</p> <p style="text-align: center;">BEE MOVIE (PG) Wed.-Thurs. 12:00, 2:25, 4:35, 6:55, 9:15</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">ENCHANTED (PG) Wed.-Thurs. 12:10, 2:40, 4:55, 7:20, 9:35</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MR. MAGORIUM'S WONDER EMPORIUM (G) Wed.-Thurs. 12:20, 2:30, 4:40, 7:10, 9:20</p> <p style="text-align: center;">FRED CLAUS (PG) Wed.-Thurs. 12:30, 4:00, 7:00, 9:30</p> <p style="text-align: center;">BEE MOVIE (PG) Wed. 12:00, 2:15, 4:30, 6:50, 9:10 Thurs., Nov. 22nd ONLY 4:30, 9:10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"Encore Art Cinema" 2 DAYS IN PARIS (R) Thurs., Nov. 22nd ONLY 4:00, 7:00</p>
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