The men of my youth, those silent heroes, are rapidly departing. Gone is the tall lanky man with the missing arm—a reminder of a place called Guadalcanal. Gone, too, is the short dark-haired man who always wore long sleeve shirts, even on the hottest summer days to hide the shrapnel scars he received in Italy. They were, to use an expression of the day, just "average Joe's - G.I. Joe's".

As such, they have taught us all the meaning of the word hero. James Gerald La Marre would have been that type of man too—if he had lived. But, he was no less a hero.

Jimmy LaMarre was a skinny kid from Ft. Worth, Texas who moved to Virginia in the early 1930's. He was in Virginia almost as briefly as a Texas Twister. However, in his brief life he left us a legacy of service and sacrifice that was typical of his generation.

He was an outgoing youth who loved sports. Possessed of rugged good looks, he had piercing blue eyes, wavy black hair, and although tall at 5'10 1/2, he was skinny by anyone's standard at 160 pounds.1 Jimmy's father, James G. La Marre, Sr. had died sometime before 1935. Jimmy's mother, Grace, married a man by the name of Gerson Brownstein. Jimmy and his sister, Billie Lou, adopted their stepfather's name.

The Brownstein's settled in Washington, D.C. about 1935 where Jimmy and his older sister, Billie Lou, attended Paul Junior High School.2 In August 1936, Jimmy's mother bought a 178-acre farm bordering on the Town of Fairfax.3 The area now comprises Warren Woods and University Square Subdivisions, Providence Park, (a municipal park), Fairfax Villa Elementary School and a portion of George Mason University's Fairfax campus.

As a teenager at Fairfax High School in 1938, Jimmy's warm smile and charm helped him fit in immediately. That year, he became vice-president of the junior class, president of the Agricultural Club; president of the Fairfax High School Athletic Association; and an outfielder on the school baseball team. As president of the Fairfax High School Association, Jimmy worked hard to raise funds to organize the first ever...
Welcome New Members!

David Lee Cain
Paul & Pamela Cunningham
Mary Kincheloe
Kathleen & Laszlo Pentek
John & Cecilia Wilmes

The Board of Directors of HFCI extends a hearty welcome to all new HFCI members.

HISTORIC FAIRFAX CITY, INC.

Do you want to know more about the history of where you live?

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Just what is available to you as a member of HFCI?

A newsletter, 4 times a year announcing what is happening with all HFCI projects and events

2 general meetings a year, affording you an opportunity to meet and speak with people behind the scenes working to maintain interest in the history of Fairfax.

We are looking forward to having you join us. We need and value your support. Together we will preserve the heritage that has been left to us.

The Board of Directors of Historic Fairfax City, Inc.

HFCI MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/ RENEWAL

HISTORIC FAIRFAX CITY, INC. is a non-profit corporation (501©(3) organization)

Membership Classifications:

- Class A Individual ..........................................................$25.00
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- Class B-1 Non-profit Organizations ..................................$35.00
- Class B-2 For profit Organizations .....................................$50.00

Enclosed is my tax-deductible membership application and check made out to Historic Fairfax City Inc. for: $_________

Name or Organization: _________________________________
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Contact name: _________________________________
e-mail: _________________________________
Address: ________________________________________

Return to: Historic Fairfax City, Inc.,
Attention: Membership Committee
10209 Main Street
Fairfax, VA 22030

Website: www.historicfairfax.org
E-mail: info@historicfairfax.org

Karen Stevenson

On Nov. 8th at 7:30 pm, HFCI will present a program at Old Town Hall on the Civil War in Fairfax by Mr. Edward Bearss. Mr. Bearss is a nationally renowned historian on the Civil War. The Smithsonian hailed Mr. Bearss as one of the “35 who made a difference.” HFCI is proud to present this program which is free and open to the public. Refreshments will be served at 7:00 p.m.

Board member, Ellen Wigren is leaving the city and has resigned from her City appointed position as HFCI Board member. In honor of her outstanding service the City of Fairfax proclaimed Sept. 27th as “Ellen Wigren Day.” We are pleased Ellen will be able to stay on HFCI’s Board as a regular member.

As President, I would like to thank the Loyola Foundation for their $1,000 donation to HFCI. The donation was sent by Karen and Gregory McCarthy IV, Executive Director. They reside in Fairfax.

The historic Ratcliffe Cemetery located between Oliver and Moore Streets will not be purchased by City Council. However, this historic cemetery will continue to be preserved under an “abandoned cemetery” status as it was before being considered for purchase. The City will continue to maintain the cemetery.

Cynthia Liccese Torres from the Arlington Office of Preservation and Planning and I spent a full day researching Sears houses in the City a few weeks ago. She has done extensive research in determining Sears houses in Arlington County. We spent an interesting day looking in attics, basements and at records in the Fairfax County Court House. If any of you have any information on Sears houses in the City, please contact me. Particularly, we are interested in obtaining the documentation sent with these "kit houses" from Sears. She has also written an article on Sears houses for this Newsletter which I know you will enjoy. I would like to thank her for all her work. She is planning a return trip in the near future for more research on Sears houses in the City. If you have any information on these houses please call me at 703-352-1255.

Karen Stevenson

John H. Rust, Jr. is a lifelong Fairfax resident and a graduate of Fairfax High School. He received his law degree in 1972 from the University of Virginia and practices law in Fairfax, Virginia with the firm of Rust & Rust, a professional corporation.

Jack has been on HFCI’s Board since January 2003 and has been an active member serving on our Audit, Historic Markers and Ratcliffe Cemetery Committees. His legal background and knowledge of the City have proven invaluable to the Board. Currently, the Historic Markers Committee is working on the funding and the finalization of four Historic Markers to be placed in the City. These four markers are: the Fairfax Rosenwald School; the Simeon Draper House, the Old Fairfax High School and the Mount Calvary Church Baptismal. He has been active recently in advising the Board on the preservation of historic Ratcliffe Cemetery. Ratcliffe Cemetery is the oldest cemetery in the City and includes graves of at least three generations of Ratcliffe family members. Jack has taken an active role in these projects.

In the City of Fairfax, Jack is the Chairman of the History of the City of Fairfax Round Table and was the Housing Chairman of the 2020 Commission. He is also a past President of the Central Chamber of Commerce and served as City Attorney from 1975 to 1978.

The list of Jack’s activities outside the City of Fairfax are extensive and vary from serving as a member of the House of Delegates in the Virginia General Assembly from 1980-82 and from 1997-2001 to his appointment to numerous commission in the State of Virginia.

Jack is married to the former Susan Mary Byrne and has three sons, J.W., Tom and Bob. In addition, he is also a member of the Camelot Players and has coached youth basketball with the Fairfax Police Youth Club.

HFCI is proud to have Jack as a Board member. Jack, we thank you for all your hard work to make this Board a success.

Karen Stevenson
Discovering Mail-order Dreams

By Cynthia Liccese-Torres, Arlington County Historic Preservation Planner

Former Sears, Roebuck & Company archivist Lenore Swoiskin once said, "Sears can't tell you that you've got a Sears house. You've got to tell us." Of the approximately 75,000 Sears houses presumably built nationwide between 1908 and 1940, only a little more than five percent of them have been discovered to date. This presents historians, researchers, and intrigued home owners with the daunting challenge of proving the authenticity of thousands of these rare pieces of American architectural history. In 2003, I completed my Masters Thesis on how to identify Sears houses and am continuing extensive research to identify authentic Sears houses throughout Arlington County.

My thesis research established two objectives: 1) how to authenticate genuine examples of Sears mail-order houses, and 2) whether or not they can be distinguished from similar examples of local stick built houses of the same period. Although earlier local studies suggest that Arlington contains about 200 mail-order catalog homes, these claims had not been proven in any systematic or comprehensive manner. So I focused my study on how to categorize specific architectural and stylistic details that may suggest mail-order origins. This process involves three separate methods of verification, including an exterior examination, an interior inspection, and historic research. To demonstrate the effectiveness of each method, I selected four homes in the historic Arlington neighborhood of Lyon Park to use as case studies. My analysis involved studying, photographing, and comparing exterior and interior architectural features of each home to copies of original catalog advertisements, as well as seeking original forms of Sears documentation.

My findings concluded that mail-order homes did not introduce new architectural design, but merely represented the popular styles and trends when they were built. Catalog and non-catalog houses feature the same types of materials, massing, proportions, and even architectural details. Sears used distinctive marketing strategies and was a great contributor to the American ideal of home ownership during the first half of the 20th century. Sears sold not only complete house kits, but also plans and materials. And Sears did not copyright its designs or limit purchasers to use the plans only once. Quite the contrary is true, which is why it is important to be able to verify a genuine Sears kit house. Despite their visual similarities, I prove that mail-order homes can be identified only after completing exterior and interior investigations and historic research. Through the case studies, I proved and refuted genuine examples of Sears homes through the discovery of original structural markings, shipping documents from Sears, mortgage loans issued by Sears, and historic building permits. Contrary to popular opinion, not all homes presumed to be Sears houses are indeed true examples of Sears houses.

So what types of things should you look for if are trying to authenticate a Sears kit house? First, closely compare the building’s exterior appearance to illustrations in reproduction Sears house catalogs. Three excellent references are Houses by Mail, Small Houses of the Twenties: The Sears, Roeueck 1926 Catalog – An Unabridged Reprint, and Sears House Designs of the Thirties. Be on the look out for unusual exterior features, such as porch columns topped with decorative stick work, u-shaped notched framing pieces, five-piece decorative brackets, and massive masonry chimneys that extend from the ground through the roof line. If possible, an interior examination can reveal important clues. Compare the floor plan with those in catalog illustrations and be sure to note room functions and layout, circulation patterns, and unusual features like built-in cabinets or furniture. In many Sears houses you can find authentic stampings on original framing members in the basement and attic, and Sears labels on the backs of interior trim pieces. The stampings are in a dark colored ink and consist of a combination of letters and numbers. Basements, attics, closets, and other nooks are potential places to discover original Sears documentation, such as pages from...
Fairfax High School football team. During his senior year Jimmy served in the Student Government Association as secretary of athletics, acted in the Drama Club and played guard on the Fairfax High School Basketball team.

In July 1941, Gerson Brownstein, Jimmy’s stepfather, leased Myer’s Store on the southwest corner of Leesburg Pike and Chain Bridge Road at Tyson’s Corner. Jimmy got a job as a truck driver. Later that year World War II engulfed the United States in December 1941. Jimmy was 20 years old. He waited nearly a year however, before enlisting in the United States Army on November 4, 1942 at the age of 21. When he did so, he used his birth name James Gerald Lamarre. One possible reason why he waited so long was so that he could marry his fiancée before he went to war.

In 1938, Jimmy LaMarre (Brownstein) was Vice President of the Junior Class at Fairfax High School. Source: Fairfax High School Yearbook 1938. Courtesy of Lee Hubbard.

In 1938, Jimmy Brownstein was a Junior at Fairfax High School. He was President of the Fairfax High School Athletic Association. Source: Fairfax High School Yearbook 1938. Courtesy of Lee Hubbard.
Mail Order Dreams...continued from page 3.

the instruction manual, blueprints, or shipping tags. As you study homes, keep in mind that Sears encouraged its customers to request changes to personalize their order, such as altering roof lines, reversing floor plans, or selecting different materials. This only adds to the modern-day challenge of trying to read an old building and understand how it may have evolved over time.

Unless you find original stampings and/or paperwork from Sears, just looking at a building’s exterior and interior is not enough to prove it is a real Sears house. So next take all the information you gathered and combine it with the final step of the authentication process, conducting records research. Although Sears continues to maintain a corporate archive, unfortunately the records of its Modern Homes Program were not kept, if they were even created at all. Their website (www.searsmodernhomes.com) has some interesting background information and online images of many of the nearly 450 models Sears sold. You can also talk with owners, neighbors, and previous residents to learn what they know, remember, or may have found in the property. And perhaps the secret to whether or not a home is an authentic Sears house can be revealed at the County Courthouse. Using historic deed records, you can determine all of the previous owners of a property, glean when it may have been built, and more importantly, determine if the original owners obtained their financing through Sears. If they did, the mortgage record would be on file in the deed records. The names of several Sears trustees who signed the mortgage documents recently have been discovered by Sears researchers such as myself – which provide important clues to linking historic records to actual Sears houses. Although Sears did not finance all of the homes it sold, locating mortgage documents is indeed substantial proof. I already have come across nearly 200 Sears-issued mortgages for homes throughout Arlington. If you are interested in learning more about Sears houses and some of the other mail-order firms of the time, a copy of my thesis is available in the Virginia Room at Arlington Central Library in Ballston. Please feel free to contact me at (703) 228-3831 or clicceso@arlingtonva.us if you have specific questions about Sears houses or how to go about identifying them. Happy Sears house hunting!

his eighteen-year-old high school sweetheart, Ethel Rose Fox. The two were married on June 28, 1942.

Longtime Fairfax resident, Gladys Potterton, remembers both Jimmy and Ethel,

"Ethel and I were good friends. I used to love to go over to her house after school. The City bought it [Blenheim] a couple of years ago.

Jimmy was a real nice boy. He always seemed happy."  Unfortunately, Jimmy’s military service record, along with the service records of millions of other U.S. Army and Air Force veterans of World War II, were destroyed in a disastrous fire in 1974. Therefore, some of what follows is speculation.

After Jimmy enlisted in 1942, he was assigned to the U.S. Army's 18th Infantry Division. nicknamed the Big Red One after its shoulder patch. The 1st Infantry Division received their basic training at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, northwest of Boston. Jimmy too, may have trained here, but because he enlisted at about the same time the 1st Division was sent to North Africa, he may have been sent to any one of several “replacement training centers” established around the country. After 16

weeks of “boot camp” he was sent to North Africa as a replacement in the 18th Infantry Regiment. He probably arrived there in March 1943, just in time for the final battles of the North Africa Campaign.

From North Africa, the 18th Infantry participated in the some of the most brutal and, significant campaigns of World War II – Sicily, D-Day and the Normandy Hedgerows, the Hütgen Forest, the Battle of the Bulge, and the Roer. During this time Jimmy, no doubt, wrote home to his young wife. However, news from the men overseas was heavily censured in those days, and official news was usually not good. The Fairfax Herald reported that Jimmy LaMarre was wounded in Belgium on October 4, 1944. 4 If accurate, from surviving regimental accounts, this would indicate that Jimmy was wounded near Aachen, Germany. Aachen, with a prewar population of 150,000, was the first large German city threatened with capture. As an important symbol, Hitler ordered a fanatical house-by-house defense to the last man.

The winter of 1944–1945 was one of coldest on

Europe. Snow covered the ground the entire winter. On the evening of February 1, 1945 the 18th Infantry was ordered to capture Ramscheid, a tiny German village about a mile from the Belgian border. Because the orders came late that the evening, there was no time to reconnoiter the village. Ramscheid was heavily fortified. The German defenders had encircled the village with wire, antitank obstacles, minefields, and at least six pill boxes. Again, because of the short notice, the engineer and pioneer companies , with their mine detectors and specialized training for clearing defenses, were not available.

The attack began at 4 a.m. February 2nd. A lethal full-moon silhouetted the men against the snow as Company F moved out. After cutting their way through wire entanglements and making their way past the antitank obstacles the men ran into a minefield.

“Koenig's [Captain of Co. F] platoons continued to press on, losing men to exploding mines, but this formed a path his soldiers following them needed to get through. Captain Koenig then
Hometown Hero...continued from page 5.

rushed his whole company through this
gap in a single file.” 10

The men of Company F then moved directly into
Ramscheid taking each pill box “one by one.” 11

At some point during this action, Staff Sergeant
James G. LaMarre, who was just shy of his 24th birthday,
was killed in action. Because his service record was
destroyed, it is not certain whether he was killed in the
minefield or in the later taking of Ramscheid. However,
what is certain is that the men of Company F later received
the Presidential Unit Citation for their “extraordinary heroism”. 12

Three months later, the war in Europe ended.

Ironically, on the very day Jimmy was killed in
Germany, the Fairfax Herald ran the following item about him:

“S/Sgt. James La Marre, husband of
Ethel Fox La Marre, and son of Mrs.
Grace Brownstein, has recently returned
with the First Army after spending three and a half months in a
hospital in England from a wound received on September 10, 1944.” 11

Of course, the news of Jimmy’s death had a
devastating effect on his family and friends back home.
His brother-in-law, James S. “Stewart” Fox, who was
Jimmy’s best man at their wedding recalls this about his
sister,

“She [Ethel] was never quite the same
afterwards. She remarried Marcel
Pfleugert but never spoke of Jimmy
after that. I don’t know if she ever
even told her children that she had
been married before.” 12

Although many of the young men from the Town
of Fairfax and the surrounding area had gone off to fight,
most had been spared. Just four men from the village,
including Jimmy LaMarre, were killed during all of World
War II. The others were:

S/Sgt. Maurice M. Williams, 116th
Regiment, 29th Infantry Division, KIA on
D-Day, June 6, 1944, buried Normandy
American Cemetery, Colleville-sur-Mer, France.

Pvt. George T. Sutphin, 38th Regiment,
2nd Infantry Division, KIA Normandy
Hedgerows, July 28, 1944. Buried
Normandy American Cemetery,
Colleville-sur-Mer, France.

1st Sgt. A. Bruce McClure, 116th
Regiment, 29th Infantry Division, KIA near
Munchen-Gladbach, Germany, March 1, 1945. Buried Fairfax Cemetery.

Veterans Day is November 11th. American soldiers are once again overseas - in Afghanistan and Iraq. Let’s remember all of our veterans.

Epilogue

Over the next twenty-five years, Grace and Gerson continued to live on their farm. The couple sold a few small
plots to individuals for residential housing. However, in
January 1964, they sold 11.5 acres to the Fairfax County
School Board. 13 This became the location of the present
Fairfax Villa Elementary School.

LaMarre Drive in the City of Fairfax is named for Staff Sgt.
James G. LaMarre, KIA action at Ramscheid, Germany, February 2, 1945.
Source: Photo Credit Page Johnson, August 2006.

Grain of Staff Sgt. James G. LaMarre, Arlington National
Cemetery, Section 13, Grave 708.
Source: Photo Credit Page Johnson, August 19, 2006.

After his death Jimmy’s body was buried in a
temporary grave in either Germany or Belgium. In 1949, he
was re-interred at Arlington National Cemetery.

In 1946, Jimmy’s mother Grace purchased several
lots near Vienna and constructed a home. They temporarily
leased out their Fairfax Farm. By 1952, things were
changing fast around Fairfax. That year, the Warren
Construction Corporation was organized by Alexandria
Dr. Irving Harvard Rosen with offices in the Ford
Building on Rt. 123 in Fairfax. 13 That same year, construction
began on a new subdivision in Fairfax. 14 Warren Woods
was named for Dr. Rosen’s young son, Warren Jay Rosen. 15
Between July and September 1953, the Brownstein’s sold
22.9 acres in two tracts to the Warren Construction
Corporation. 16 This tract became Section Two of Warren
Woods and included the dedication of a new street, LaMarre
Drive, named in honor of Grace’s deceased son, Jimmy. 17

Grace Brownstein died in 1966. She is buried at
National Memorial Park in Falls Church, Virginia. Shortly
after her death, Gerson married Grace’s sister Bertha Ellen
Nicolai of Indiana.

In 1968, the City of Fairfax, through eminent
domain, purchased 17 acres of Gerson & Bertha
Brownstein’s land for the creation of Providence Park. 18
That same year, the Brownstein’s sold 66.9 acres to the
Fairfax Arlington Alexandria and Falls Church Control
Board on behalf of George Mason College (now George
Mason University). 19 20 This acreage now includes the
GMU athletic fields on the extreme southwest portion of
the GMU’s Fairfax campus.

Gerson died in 1972 and was buried beside Grace.
Bertha inherited the remaining farm. In 1973, Bertha sold
the remaining 55.7 acres of the Brownstein farm to the
Fairfax County Redevelopment and Housing Authority with
the sale to take effect upon her death. 21 Bertha died
in 1975 and was buried in Indiana. In 1979, the Fairfax
County Redevelopment and Housing Authority sold the
land to Richlynn Development, Inc. Over the next four years
Richlynn developed University Park subdivision, a cluster of
165 homes. 22

(Endnotes)
1 Physical description from U.S. Army Induction Index, pg. 1, Fairfax County Circuit Court Clerk’s Office, Fairfax, VA.
3 Fairfax County Deed Book G-12, Page 245, August 18, 1936, Fairfax County Circuit Court.
4 Fairfax County Deed Book A-15, Page 599, July 31, 1941, Fairfax County Circuit Court.
5 At present, it believed that Pvt. LaMarre served in Company F as this Co., with a few men from Co. G, were the sole participants in the action at Ramscheid, Germany on the day LaMarre’s death on February 2, 1945.
6 Fairfax Herald, October 13, 1944, p. 1.
7 Fairfax Herald, December 8, 1944, p. 1.
9 Ibid 8.
10 Ibid 9.
11 Ibid 10.
12 Ibid 8.
13 Ibid 11.
14 Ibid 10.
16 Ibid 12.
18 Ibid 11.
19 Ibid 12.
21 Ibid 12.
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Hometown Hero...continued from page 5.

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In 1938, Jimmy Lamarre (Brownstein) was Vice President of the Junior Class at Fairfax High School. Source: Fairfax High School Yearbook 1938. Courtesy of Lee Hubbard.

In 1938, Jimmy Brownstein was a Junior at Fairfax High School. He was President of the Fairfax High School Athletic Association. Source: Fairfax High School Yearbook 1938. Courtesy of Lee Hubbard.
**HFCI MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/ RENEWAL**

**HISTORIC FAIRFAX CITY, INC.** is a non-profit corporation (501©(3) organization)

Membership Classifications:
- Class A Individual .................................................. $25.00
- Class A-1 Additional Household Member ............... $10.00
- Class B-1 Non-profit Organizations .................. $35.00
- Class B-2 For profit Organizations .................. $50.00

Enclosed is my tax-deductible membership application and check made out to Historic Fairfax City Inc. for: ___________________________

Name or Organization: ____________________________
Telephone #: ____________________________
Contact name: ____________________________
e-mail: ____________________________
Address: ____________________________

Return to: Historic Fairfax City, Inc.,
Attention: Membership Committee
10209 Main Street
Fairfax, VA 22030

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**Getting To Know You**

HFCI Board Member Hon. John H. Rust

John H. Rust, Jr. is a lifelong Fairfax resident and a graduate of Fairfax High School. He received his law degree in 1972 from the University of Virginia and practices law in Fairfax, Virginia with the firm of Rust & Rust, a professional corporation.

Jack has been on HFCI’s Board since January 2003 and has been an active member serving on our Audit, Historic Markers and Ratcliffe Cemetery Committees. His legal background and knowledge of the City have proven invaluable to the Board. Currently, the Historic Markers Committee is working on the funding and the finalization of four Historic Markers to be placed in the City. These four markers are: the Fairfax Rosenwald School; the Simeon Draper House, the Old Fairfax High School and the Mount Calvary Church Baptist. He has been active recently in advising the Board on the preservation of historic Ratcliffe Cemetery. Ratcliffe Cemetery is the oldest cemetery in the City and includes graves of at least three generations of Ratcliffe family members. Jack has taken an active role in these projects.

In the City of Fairfax, Jack is the Chairman of the History of the City of Fairfax Round Table and was the Housing Chairman of the 2020 Commission. He is also a past President of the Central Chamber of Commerce and served as City Attorney from 1975 to 1978.

The list of Jack’s activities outside the City of Fairfax are extensive and vary from serving as a member of the House of Delegates in the Virginia General Assembly from 1980-82 and from 1997-2001 to his appointment to numerous commission in the State of Virginia.

Jack is married to the former Susan Mary Byrne and has three sons, J.W., Tom and Bob. In addition, he is also a member of the Camelot Players and has coached youth basketball with the Fairfax Policy Youth Club.

HFCI is proud to have Jack as a Board member. Jack, we thank you for all your hard work to make this Board a success.

Karen Stevenson

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**Welcome New Members!**

David Lee Cain Paul & Pamela Cunningham Mary Kincheloe Kathleen & Laszlo Pentek John & Cecilia Wilmes

The Board of Directors of HFCI extends a hearty welcome to all new HFCI members.

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**Do you want to know more about the history of where you live?**

JOIN HISTORIC FAIRFAX CITY, INC.

Just what is available to you as a member of HFCI?

A newsletter, 4 times a year announcing what is happening with all HFCI projects and events

2 general meetings a year, affording you an opportunity to meet and speak with people behind the scenes working to maintain interest in the history of Fairfax.

We are looking forward to having you join us. We need and value your support. Together we will preserve the heritage that has been left to us.

The Board of Directors of Historic Fairfax City, Inc.

Karen Stevenson

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**HISTORIC FAIRFAX CITY, INC.**

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Karen Stevenson

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Welcome New Members!

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Welcome New Members!

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Discovering Mail-order Dreams
By Cynthia Licene-Torres, Arlington County Historic Preservation Planner

Former Sears, Roebuck & Company archivist Lenore Swoiskin once said, “Sears can’t tell you that you’ve got a Sears house. You’ve got to tell us.” Of the approximately 75,000 Sears houses presumably built nationwide between 1908 and 1940, only a little more than five percent of them have been discovered to date. This presents historians, researchers, and intrigued home owners with the daunting challenge of proving the authenticity of thousands of these rare pieces of American architectural history. In 2003, I completed my Master’s Thesis on how to identify Sears houses and am continuing extensive research to identify authentic Sears houses throughout Arlington County.

My thesis research established two objectives: 1) how to authenticate genuine examples of Sears mail-order houses, and 2) whether or not they can be distinguished from similar examples of local stick built houses of the same period. Although earlier local studies suggest that Arlington contains about 200 mail-order catalog homes, these claims had not been proven in any systematic or comprehensive manner. So I focused my study on how to categorize specific architectural and stylistic details that may suggest mail-order origins. This process involves three separate methods of verification, including an exterior examination, an interior inspection, and historic research. To demonstrate the effectiveness of each method, I selected four homes in the historic Arlington neighborhood of Lyon Park to use as case studies. My analysis involved studying, photographing, and comparing exterior and interior architectural features of each home to copies of original catalog advertisements, as well as seeking original forms of Sears documentation.

My findings concluded that mail-order homes did not introduce new architectural design, but merely represented the popular styles and trends when they were built. Catalog and non-catalog houses feature the same types of materials, massing, proportions, and even architectural details. Sears used distinctive marketing strategies and was a great contributor to the American ideal of home ownership during the first half of the 20th century. Sears sold not only complete house kits, but also plans and materials. And Sears did not copyright its designs or limit purchasers to use the plans only once. Quite the contrary is true, which is why it is important to be able to verify a genuine Sears kit house. Despite their visual similarities, I prove that mail-order homes can be identified only after completing exterior and interior investigations and historic research. Through the case studies, I proved and refuted genuine examples of Sears homes through the discovery of original structural markings, shipping documents from Sears, mortgage loans issued by Sears, and historic building permits. Contrary to popular opinion, not all homes presumed to be Sears houses are indeed true examples of Sears houses.

So what types of things should you look for if you are trying to authenticate a Sears kit house? First, closely compare the building’s exterior appearance to illustrations in reproduction Sears house catalogs. Three excellent references are Houses by Mail, Small Houses of the Twenties: The Sears, Roebuck 1926 Catalog – An Unabridged Reprint, and Sears House Designs of the Thirties. Be on the lookout for unusual exterior features, such as porch columns topped with decorative stick work, u-shaped notched framing pieces, five-piece decorative brackets, and massive masonry chimneys that extend from the ground through the roof line. If possible, an interior examination can reveal important clues. Compare the floor plan with those in catalog illustrations and be sure to note room functions and layout, circulation patterns, and unusual features like built-in cabinets or furniture. In many Sears houses you can find authentic stampings on original framing members in the basement and attic, and Sears labels on the backs of interior trim pieces. The stampings are in a dark colored ink and consist of a combination of letters and numbers. Basements, attics, closets, and other nooks are potential places to discover original Sears documentation, such as pages from...
The men of my youth, those silent heroes, are rapidly departing. Gone is the tall lanky man with the missing arm - a reminder of a place called Guadalcanal. Gone, too, is the short dark haired man who always wore long sleeve shirts, even on the hottest summer days to hide the shrapel scars he received in Italy. They were, to use an expression of the day, just “average Joe’s - G.I. Joe’s”.

As such, they have taught us all the meaning of the word hero.

James Gerald LaMarre would have been that type of man too - if he had lived. But, he was no less a hero.

Jimmy LaMarre was a skinny kid from Ft. Worth, Texas who moved to Virginia in the early 1930’s. He was in Virginia almost as briefly as a Texas Twister. However, in his brief life he left us a legacy of service and sacrifice that was typical of his generation.

He was an outgoing youth who loved sports. Possessed of rugged good looks, he had piercing blue eyes, wavy black hair, and although tall at 5’10 1/2, he was skinny by anyone’s standard at 160 pounds.

The Brownstein’s settled in Washington, D.C. about 1935 where Jimmy and his sister, Billie Lou, attended Paul Junior High School. In August 1936, Jimmy’s mother bought a 178-acre farm bordering on the Town of Fairfax. The area now comprises Warren Woods and University Square Subdivisions, Providence Park, (a municipal park), Fairfax Villa Elementary School and a portion of George Mason University’s Fairfax campus.

As a teenager at Fairfax High School in 1938, Jimmy’s warm smile and charm helped him fit in immediately. That year, he became vice-president of the junior class, president of the Agricultural Club; president of the Fairfax High School Athletic Association; and an outfielder on the school baseball team. As president of the Fairfax High School Association, Jimmy worked hard to raise funds to organize the first ever...