

SEARS ROEBUCK HOUSES IN ARLINGTON

By

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Located within Arlington County are numerous Sears Roebuck houses which were ordered by mail, shipped by rail and assembled during the first three decades of the twentieth century. At least 200 of these houses are believed to have survived after the passage of fifty to seventy-five years.

Sears, Roebuck & Company, America's retail giant, marketed and sold single family homes from 1909 to 1940. Over 400 different styles were illustrated and described in special Sears house catalogs. At the height of Sears Roebuck's sales in 1930, nearly 50,000 houses were sold and large numbers still may be found in all regions of the United States, especially in small towns and suburbs.¹



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The Vallonia: Bungalow with modern addition on the right. Location: Cherrydale, Arlington.



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The Crescent: Bungalow with distinctive crescent shaped porch and columns. Location: Lyon Park, Arlington.



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The Westly: Bungalow with shed dormer opening onto balcony. Location: Lyon Village, Arlington.

During the middle of the 1970s a renewed interest in Sears Roebuck houses became evident. National magazines and newspapers published stories and photographs praising their merits; they were referred to as "chic," possessing "solid integrity," and being "historic treasures".² In the summer of 1989, two Japanese architects visited Arlington to study examples of affordable housing supplied by Sears, Roebuck & Company over fifty years ago.³ Most recently, local Virginia newspapers reported on plans by citizens of the City of Hopewell to feature its collection of Sears Roebuck houses as tourist attractions.⁴

In 1986, members of the Arlington Historical Society searched for and photographed a number of Sears houses in preparation for the Society's house tour organized by Catharine T. Saulmon. Since that time the author has continued to search and photograph many more.

A typical unassembled Sears house when shipped from the factory would fit into two railroad box cars. After the customer placed an order, material for the house's early stages was shipped in the first box car. This included framing lumber, floor joists, subflooring, building paper, siding lumber, nails, etc. Several weeks later, roof supports, roofing, gutters, flooring, downspouts, windows, doors, paint, varnish, laundry tubs, etc. were shipped in a second box car.⁵ Easy access to local rail facilities was an absolute necessity when purchasing a Sears house by mail.

In the first four decades of the twentieth century, Arlington was fortunate to have a number of railroad sidings at which box cars containing materials for Sears houses could be unloaded. Rosslyn, Thrifton, Cherrydale, Douglas and Livingston Heights stations on the Washington & Old Dominion Railway (along present-day Lee Highway and Old Dominion Drive) and several stations in central and south Arlington (Barcroft, Glencarlyn and Bluemont Junction) had freight sidings which served communities such as Fort Myer Heights, Clarendon, Lyon Village, Cherrydale, Maywood, Lyon Park, Ashton Heights, Alcova, Aurora Hills, and Virginia Highlands.⁶

At the height of the post-World War I housing boom, Sears Roebuck sold 30,000 houses in 1925 and 50,000 in 1930. This period coincided with construction of many Sears houses in Arlington. As the depression expanded into the 1930s, sales of Sears mail-order houses declined until the company discontinued their sale in 1940 as World War II approached.⁷

Sears house designs reflected popular American tastes. Only plans having broad appeal were selected for sale. Although Sears Roebuck house catalogs were available almost as widely as the regular catalog, the company had house sales offices in major cities throughout the United



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The Americus: Square house with full-width front porch with shed roof supported by tapered wooden piers. Location: Lyon Park, Arlington.



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The Hathaway: English country style frame house with stucco finish. Location: Aurora Hills, Arlington.

States, including one in downtown Washington, D.C.⁸ The nearness of the Washington sales office undoubtedly helped boost the total number of Sears houses ordered and built throughout Northern Virginia, the District of Columbia and the Maryland suburbs.

Among the many Sears houses identified to date by Arlington Historical Society volunteers, the Vallonia style bungalow is believed to be the most popular design selected by Arlingtonians. Nine have been identified to date. The Vallonia, with eight rooms and one bath, and a full-width front porch, was marketed over an eighteen year period from 1921 to 1939. Its price range was between \$1,465 and \$2,479, excluding the cost of land and labor for actual assembly.⁹ Vallonia style houses have been found in Lyon Park, Cherrydale, and South Arlington.

Six Crescent style bungalows have been identified in Arlington so far. They contain five or seven rooms and one bath, depending on whether or not the upstairs was finished. Marketed over twelve years from 1921 to 1933, the Crescent was sold in the price range of \$1,351 to \$2,410.¹⁰ Two Crescents are located in Lyon Park, two in Lyon Village and two in South Arlington. This is one of the easiest Sears houses to recognize because of its gabled front porch with arch supported by columns.

Another popular house chosen by Arlingtonians was the Westly, a two-story seven room bungalow with a front balcony projecting from the second story onto the roof. There are at least two Westly models in Arlington: one in Lyon Village and one on South Taylor Street just off Columbia Pike. They were sold over a sixteen year period (1913 to 1929) for between \$926 and \$2,543.¹¹ A somewhat larger two-story square house called the Americus, with six rooms and one bath, full-width front porch, and a shed roof supported by wooden piers, was sold between 1921 to 1929 for around \$2,000.¹² Two are located in Lyon Park and another in Cherrydale.

The Hathaway, a model in the style of an English cottage, was marketed during the 1920s for \$1,196 to \$1,970.¹³ Two excellent examples have been found: one, in Aurora Hills of south Arlington which has its original stucco siding, and another in Livingston Heights (just off North Glebe Road) which has its original siding of cedar shingles.

A Barrington style house with a matching garage is located on North Jackson Street in Lyon Park. Another Barrington is situated among a lovely grove of trees on North Irving Street a few blocks from Arlington Boulevard. A third, located in Lyon Village, also has a matching garage. This style was featured from 1926 to 1929 for a price ranging from \$2,329 to \$2,606.¹⁴



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The Barrington: English style with stucco finish and decorative flower box outside the second story double window. Location: Lyon Park, Arlington.



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The Maplewood: A story-and-a-half house covered with wood shingles. Location: Lyon Park, Arlington.

The Maplewood is a story-and-a-half house covered on its exterior walls with wood shingles. Containing six rooms, one bath, and a fireplace, it was sold only during the depression years 1932 and 1933 for approximately \$1,300.¹⁵ A good example is located in Lyon Park, next door to a Crescent style Sears house. Another is located in Cherrydale and a third on Thirteenth Street, North, west of Glebe Road.

Sears Roebuck house catalogs not only showed garages but barns.¹⁶ No Sears barn has been found in Arlington; however, there is one at Montpelier, the home of James Madison in Orange County, Virginia. It was built in the 1930s for Mrs. Marion duPont Scott, the owner of Montpelier.¹⁷

How do you identify a Sears Roebuck house? First, look carefully at the exterior of a house and compare its design features with those described in *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company* by Katherine Cole Stephenson and H. Ward Jandl. Second, find an owner who has saved the original Sears blueprints and other documentation such as bill of sale, delivery notices, materials lists or construction manuals which came from the Sears factory. Third, find a resident who will search for original numbers on the pieces of exposed roof rafters, floor joists, or the wood in partially finished closets, cupboards, or attics. These may be the numbers placed on each piece of lumber at the factory and used by the customer or his contractor to assemble the house when it was set up on the customer's lot.¹⁸

There are no hard and fast rules, however, for identifying Sears houses today. Owners may have modified an original Sears house during the years since it was built. They may have chosen initially an option such as adding a side door, moving the position of one or more windows, or "flipping" the floor plan from right to left or vice versa.¹⁹

Other characteristics of a Sears house which help to identify it are: roof lines, porches, porch columns, unique wooden pillars on the corner of a porch, the existence of a balcony or sleeping porch on the front of the house, exposed roof rafter tails, decorative braces under the eaves of the main roof or porch roof, notched barge boards, and a brick chimney with an indented space in the brick at about shoulder height for flower boxes. First floor ceilings usually were nine feet, basement ceilings were seven feet, floors all had subflooring underneath oak wood on first floors and pine wood on second floors.²⁰

Sears Roebuck houses had a tremendous guarantee — like no house of the 1990s. From the 1927 catalog: "We guarantee every Sears Honor Bilt home to be exactly as represented and to give perfect satisfaction or we

will return your money promptly, including freight charges.”²¹ Imagine a builder today making such a guarantee!

Because of the unique Sears system of numbering all pieces of lumber, providing blueprints, instructions, and specifications with each order, many purchasers were very successful in putting up their own homes. No matter whether the owner did the work himself or hired a contractor, he still had the home bargain of the century.

Mr. John L. White of Clarendon, Virginia, was quoted sixty-six years ago in the *1927 Sears House Catalog*²² as being very pleased with the amount he saved by purchasing his Hamilton model Sears house. If Mr. White were alive today, he undoubtedly would be more than pleased with an almost 3,000% appreciation on his investment. To buy a Hamilton model house about 1927, Mr. White probably paid a grand total of \$4,000 for the house, lot and for putting it up. Today his house probably would be assessed at \$120,000 or more, and his family would have had the pleasure of living in it for sixty-five years.

As Arlington Historical Society volunteers walk and drive through Arlington neighborhoods in their continuing search, perhaps one of the remaining Sears houses found will be Mr. White's Hamilton style home still standing on a quiet street in the Clarendon area of Arlington.

Notes and References

Darline Hannabass became interested in Sears Roebuck houses at the time of the Arlington Historical Society's Sears House Tour in 1986. Combining her interest in color photography and local history, she subsequently identified and photographed over 100 Sears houses in Arlington. She retired from the National Security Agency, Fort Meade, Maryland in 1983 after thirty-three years as a map and information specialist.

¹Katherine Cole Stevenson and H. Ward Jandl, *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Washington, DC: (The Preservation Press, 1986), p. 19.

²Kay Halpin, "Sears, Roebuck's Best-kept Secret," *Historic Preservation*, Vol. 33, No. 5, September-October 1981, pp. 24-29; Alan Murray, "Mail-order Homes Sears Sold in 1909-37 Are Suddenly Chic," *Wall Street Journal*, February 11, 1985; David M. Schwartz, "When Home Sweet Home Was Just a Mailbox Away," *Smithsonian*, Vol. 16, No. 8, November 1985, pp. 90-101; Paul Goldberger, "Mail-order House Plans: Are You Ranch or Tudor?" *New York Times*, February 13, 1986, sec. C-1; Lynda Mapes, "Sears House More Than Just a Home," *The Arlington Journal*, August 27, 1987.

³The author gave the visiting architects a tour of a number of Arlington's Sears houses and learned of their interest in possibly applying some of the design, construction and marketing techniques used by Sears, Roebuck to current housing needs in Japan. The visitors were referred to the Arlington Historical Society by a professor of architecture at Catholic University who was aware of the society's tour of Sears houses held in 1986.

⁴*The Roanoke (Va.) Times and World News*, January 3, 1993, p. 5; Susanne Hupp, "Mail Order Houses Catch Public's Attention Again," *The Chapel Hill (N.C.) Herald*, March 7, 1993, Real Estate section.

⁵Stevenson and Jandl, *Houses by Mail*, p. 30.

⁶Ames W. Williams, *The Washington and Old Dominion Railroad* (Arlington, VA: Arlington Historical Society, Inc., 1970), map inside front cover, map facing p. 1, and p. 64.

⁷Stevenson and Jandl, *Houses by Mail*, p. 9.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 289.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 303.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

¹⁷From tour guide at Montpelier.

¹⁸1927 *Sears House Catalog*, pp. 9-13 (lent to Arlington Historical Society, 1986-87, by unknown person); Stevenson and Jandl, *Houses by Mail*, p. 38.

¹⁹Stevenson and Jandl, *Houses by Mail*, pp. 29, 38, and 43.

²⁰Halpin, "Sears, Roebuck's Best-kept Secret," p. 27.

²¹Stevenson and Jandl, *Houses by Mail*, p. 29; 1927 *Sears House Catalog*, back cover.

²²1927 *Sears House Catalog*, p. 15.