

Charles S. Clark

"Allencrest," the site of Samuel Birch's cabin.

A Tour of the Birch Family Properties

BY CHARLES S. CLARK

During neighborhood walks, I try to visualize Arlington back when it was rural farmland, devoid of neon and modern suburban curbs.

This little local history game has sometimes centered on the extended Birch family, 18th- and 19th-century denizens who owned my East Falls Church neighborhood among other parcels. Three Birch properties in particular remain inhabited today, each of which was the setting for a rich set of stories surrounding the extended family whose members intermarried with other prominent Arlington families with names such as Shreve, Febrey, Thomas, Donaldson and Ball. There are also a couple of Birch cemeteries.

For an overview of the Birches, I turned to longtime Arlingtonian Gail Baker, an eighth-generation descendant who has performed the relevant genealogical research. She is directly related to the patriarch Samuel Birch (1790-1873), a colonel in the War of 1812. He served in a company with Arlingtonians William and Hugh Minor and earned a pension.¹

Birch and his brothers had inherited land from their mother, Janet Bowmaker Robertson Birch, whose father, James Robertson, had been deeded the Arlington acreage in a 1725 grant from Lord Fairfax.

Research on the Birches can be tricky, Baker says, because many came from large families, and “some children from different generations were almost the same age. Many were named for other brothers and sisters,” resulting in repeating names such as Joseph and Caleb.

For much of the 19th century, the Birches were small farmers and slave owners in what is now North Arlington, Baker learned from the 1840 U.S. census. According to the Census’s Alexandria County Agricultural Schedules, they owned livestock for their own families’ consumption—horses, cows and swine, all recorded in precise numbers, along with common crops: wheat, rye, Indian corn, oats, Irish potatoes and buckwheat.

Their properties would have been too small for growing plantation-style cotton, Baker says, noting that the 1840 census shows Samuel Birch’s household included one free black man and five slaves, four of whom were younger than 10.

During the Civil War, Birch family members fought on opposite sides, according to legal documents Baker studied that recorded Birch farmers making postwar claims for restitution. After the conflict, many Birches continued to farm their land until the turn of the century, while others became carpenters,

plasterers and farm laborers. A particular standout personality was Samuel's son William John Richards Birch (1816-1916). Because he was a veteran of the Seminole Indian Wars in Florida, his achievement of living a full century made him a common subject of early-20th-century newspaper profiles.

The Birch Cabin

A fascinating and often overlooked Birch site sits atop a hill near Powhatan and North 26th streets. Nearly 200 years ago, according to Eleanor Lee Templeman's Arlington Heritage, Samuel Birch built his cabin there.²

Today the property contains a three-story T-shaped house with white asbestos siding and blue trim that goes back at least to 1890. Called Allencrest for builder William Allen, the home with a view and boxy bay windows is owned by Jeanne Franklin and her husband, who kindly showed me the home's handsomely preserved interior.

Mrs. Franklin has documents on the property's ownership from Birch to Marcey to Allen to Morsell to Fadeley to Kleeb to Zell to her own family.

In 1982 the Arlington Historical Society held a daylong event showcasing the home her family bought in 1979. As reported in local newspapers, the tour cost \$5 and included cider made from a home press as well as recollections from two elderly women named Graham who grew up as renters in the house in the 1920s.

They mentioned Sam Birch's cabin (used as a stable, once the big house was built, until 1930) as well as open fields and pastures and a hired man who hauled crops along a dirt road that led to Lee Highway, the route the girls took to school in the District of Columbia. Franklin still has the society's printed program.

"We've tried not to disturb the essential character of the house as we love the land and respect the history and the people who came before," she says.

Preserving Allencrest's distinctive woodwork, doorknobs and brass door fixtures, the Franklins have refurbished original doors found in storage, mimicked old windows when replacing them with modern energy-efficient ones, and preserved a mantelpiece and tile surround and a cast-iron stove.

The fireplace in the front living room, or parlor, is of an old red and cream design that features on either side an exotic dancing female, Jeanne Franklin says. When refinishing the attic rooms, she was surprised to find, in the walls behind the lathing that held the original horsehair plaster, two handmade demitasse-sized metal spoons. The handle of one is a copy of the dancing ladies in the tile. They may have been made by William Allen's son, a blacksmith. The Grahams recalled him as "old redheaded Joe" who stayed in the summer kitchen when their parents rented in the 1920s.

The original kitchen was furnished sometime in the early 20th century with an iron stove made in St. Louis in 1913 or 1915 that sits in the original kitchen fireplace, Franklin says. “Because of the condition of the original chimney, the stove has not been used since 1980. But it is too unique a piece to discard and it serves as a reminder of the past.”

In the yard of Allencrest, digs in a back corner over the years have yielded pottery and ceramic shards. Some of it is blue-and-white ware, commonly imported in the 18th and 19th centuries. Franklin believes there was a trash pile right outside the original Birch log cabin. There are also heavier gray pottery pieces, such as remains of storage jars, and one metal decorative metal button. One small piece of pottery she kept displays part of an identification with the words “Wash. D.C.”

In a deteriorating shed in the back yard, the Franklins found a broken plaque of a wooden horse with worn-off paint in an American primitive style. It is very similar to a fully intact freestanding early-American rocking horse Jeanne Franklin happened upon in Massachusetts. This confirms, she says, that “the horse plaque at Allencrest is but the small remains of a child’s toy from the 19th century.”

Today a single ancient maple tree towers over Samuel Birch’s onetime home. Stone vestiges of his water well exist underground on the edge of the current patio, as do stones now in the garden. “It’s not lost to history,” Franklin says.

Judging by a World War II-era postcard Franklin found in the attic, Allencrest’s original address was rural Lee Highway. You can imagine that at the time it offered one of the best views in Arlington.

The Birchwood Cabin

Almost two miles northeast of Samuel Birch’s hilltop, at the intersection of North Wakefield and 26th Streets, lies the modernized restoration of the cabin built in 1839 by Samuel’s brother Caleb Birch (c. 1779-1858), a farmer and constable, as noted on the Arlington Historical Society’s website. A stone’s throw from today’s fenced-off Washington Golf and Country Club and marked by a historical sign is the home called Birchwood Cabin.

It is the best-preserved Arlington site where Theodore Roosevelt, the nation’s 26th president, passed on horseback and made rest stops.

The original Birchwood log cabin, built around 1800 at 14 by 16 feet, burned and was rebuilt circa 1836. A second log cabin was added alongside a decade later. These two cabins shared a roof, forming what was called a “dogtrot” house.

The Roosevelt connection grew out of the president’s friendship with Admiral Presley M. Rixey, the White House physician (under President McKinley) and Navy surgeon general who in 1888 bought hundreds of acres of Arlington



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The "Birchwood" cabin.

farmland as a summer home. (He went on to buy hundreds more in Falls Church and further out.)

Rixey is best known in Arlington for having sold, in 1908, 75 acres that became the country club. Its clubhouse was on "Rixey Mountain," next door to Rixey's Mansion (which became Marymount University), on a fancy trolley stop known as Rixey's Station in "Cherrydale, Va." (Today Rixey's name adorns townhomes across Glebe Road.)

Rixey's memoir reveals that farming his properties in a "30 mile radius" was as important to him as practicing medicine. "Many happy hours I passed in company with the dearest friends in every walk of life," the doctor wrote, "among them President and Mrs. Roosevelt and their children, on horseback, or strolling among my cattle making plan after plan for the future."³

After Rixey helped establish the country club, he declared in 1923 that "these beautiful playgrounds will be one of the most attractive homes for lovers of the outdoor life in Arlington County (the future Arlington City) or any other locality in the world."

His Birchwood cabin hosted visits from Roosevelt until the rough rider's death in 1919, according to recollections of one Richard Wallace. He was an African-American White House chauffeur whom Rixey hired to clear land for the golf course and who also prepared ice cream for Roosevelt. Wallace eventually moved into the cabin, planting apple trees. According to local histories, Rixey

relocated the tenth green to protect the structure before deeding it to Wallace.

After it fell into disrepair, Birchwood was reconstructed in 1936 by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Horn using the original logs. It is today a private home.

Birchland

A third family property, Birchland, is hidden by stately trees and an imposing stone wall where it has been ensconced for more than a century on the thoroughfare of North Glebe Road at Williamsburg Boulevard.

This elegant plantation-style home —among the county's oldest that is still occupied — also sits on property that may have played an intriguing role in Civil War intelligence-gathering.

Birchland rests on a site several Birches inherited in the late 18th century and where, by 1812, a cabin had been built on the hill. Newlywed occupants Billie and Elizabeth Birch named it Birchland Plantation.

That couple in 1828 was bequeathed the surrounding 320 acres, according to the current owners' reading of land records and the Templeman book.⁴ By 1861, the land became part of the union defense line of Washington. A tall southern red oak in the yard known as "the spy tree" is said to have served as a lookout post, and the cabin was reputedly a telegraph station briefly serving the headquarters of Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock. (The spy tree claim may best be described as "legendary fact," however. Local Civil War historians Kathryn Holt Springston and Walton H. Owen II agree that the primary sources documenting the use of Billy Birch's property include no mention of the tree or telegraph.)

The Birch clan in the 1880s sold the property to the Weaver family, founders of the W.T. Weaver & Sons Hardware still in Georgetown (Walter Weaver was an Arlington supervisor and chief of road building). The Weavers would own Birchland for 80 years, constructing the current three-story white plantation home with four front columns in 1897.

It 1961, the home was purchased by Harry and Jeanne Page. "It was pretty run-down, but the price was right," says Jeanne Page, who allowed me a tour. "It was a summer house, so the wind blew nicely through the front porch."

The high-ceilinged home with a stone foundation retains its original windows of leaded glass with no mullions, and a double-decker bowed triple window. It has an outside-entry basement door and remnants of what looks like an old coal chute. "We found things the Weavers left behind, which my husband kept," says Page. (Indeed, Weaver descendants continue to visit their ancestral home, I was told by Page's daughter Peggy.)

The tree, dated precisely to 1606, was cut down as recently as 1995 and is commemorated with a plaque. After three decades, Page says, her husband

worried the rotting tree was a threat to the neighbors' house. It is now an eight-foot-round ivy-covered stump.

In the early 1960s, Birchland was among several homes to have their front yards sliced off when the county used eminent domain to widen Glebe Road. "We were sore about that," Mrs. Page says. And though the owners couldn't prevent the new traffic-easing improvements, her husband demanded a quid pro quo for his cooperation. Colonel Page worked with county engineers, and the result was that the privacy of their historic home today is still protected by that handsome tall stone wall.

Two Burial Sites

In today's Arlington, the Birch clans' final resting places are visitable at two main locations (though more are scattered in other cemeteries). A set of fading gravestones is hidden by a stand of trees on the Marymount University campus. Known as the Birch-Campbell cemetery, it contains the graves of Samuel's brother Caleb Birch; his wife Mary Bowling; their granddaughter Mariah (1844-1936), who married a William L. Campbell; and their great-grandson Andrew E. Birch (1860-1920).

The patriarch Samuel Birch rests in the Birch-Payne cemetery at Sycamore and North 28th streets. That site contains about 20 graves: those of Samuel and two wives, children, grandchildren, and five or six "colored servants," as described by Templeman.⁵ Her 1959 book laments the damage to the site by Arlingtonians seeking Christmas decorations and rocks for gardens.

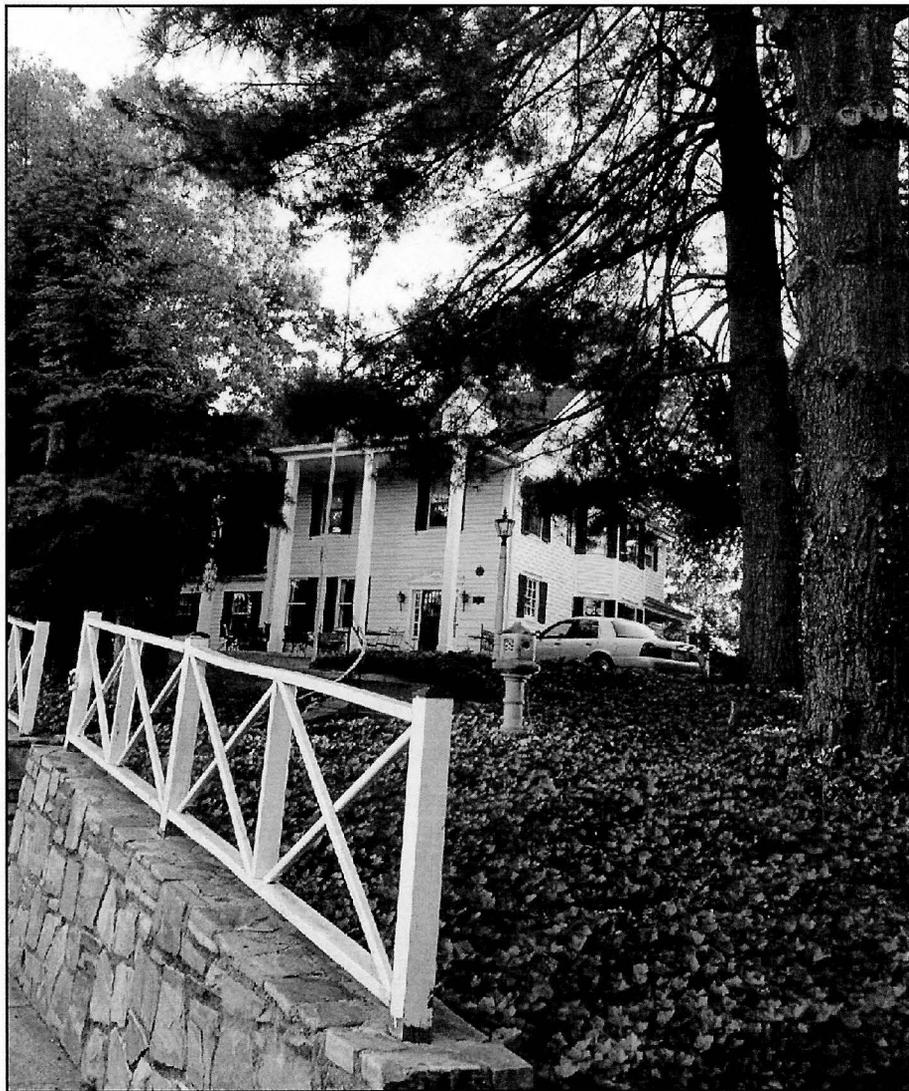
One of the Birch descendants, Amanda Karlson Crabtree, confirmed to me that her grandfather, on seeing the graves vandalized, arranged to have the Arlington Parks and Recreation Department care for the property.

Charles S. Clark, a longtime contributor, is a journalist who writes the "Our Man in Arlington" column for the *Falls Church News-Press*. His book "*Arlington County Chronicles*" was published in 2014 by The History Press.

Endnotes

¹ *United States War of 1812 Index to Pension Application Files, 1812-1910*, index and images, and 1880 census, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MCP6-FTJ FamilySearch> (Accessed 28 May 2014).

² Eleanor Lee Templeman, *Arlington Heritage: Vignettes of a Virginia County* (New York: Avenel Books, 1959), p. 156.



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³ Presley Marion Rixey, *The Life Story of Presley Marion Rixey: Surgeon General U.S. Navy 1902-1910* (Strasburg, Va.: Shenandoah Publishing House, 1930), pp. 258-260.

⁴ Templeman, *ibid.*, p. 150.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.