



Brice House in historic Annapolis exhibits the "five-part" plan, where the main house is flanked with wings and passages.

Maryland 'Masterpiece'

By GEORGE FLYNN

Star Staff Writer

THE BRICE HOUSE in Annapolis elicits from its visitors such descriptions as "the finest," or "a masterpiece," or "the most magnificent Georgian residence in America."

As valid as these accolades may be, the real miracle of the sprawling and towering structure is this: It is still a lived-in home, complete with the features that made it the most imposing private house of pre-Revolutionary times.

The harbinger of the "great era" of American mansions, the building was boldly conceived by an architect or architects whose role is shrouded in mystery, then constructed with such fine workmanship that even today it seems imperishable.

When Mr. and Mrs. Stanley S. Wohl bought the property from St. John's College in 1953 and began the task of restoring Brice House to its pristine condition, they found they faced no structural handicaps, only a tremendous job of scraping and painting and polishing.

"This," says Mrs. Wohl, an authority on the decorative arts, "was due to the fact that the mansion was built between 1740 and 1770, and was one of the first great residences of the era to use interior paint

throughout, instead of the customary polished woods. The result is that the fine carvings and hard oyster shell plasters, for which the edifice is famous, survive in all their beauty."

No "ruin," a description that might be applied to many historic homes before restoration, the Brice House was occupied continuously, serving as an apartment house for faculty members of St. John's before the Wohls took it over.

As Mrs. Wohl and her husband, a former newspaperman, began their five-year task of refurbishing the 35-room mansion, they faced what Mrs. Wohl describes as "original but wretched" conditions.

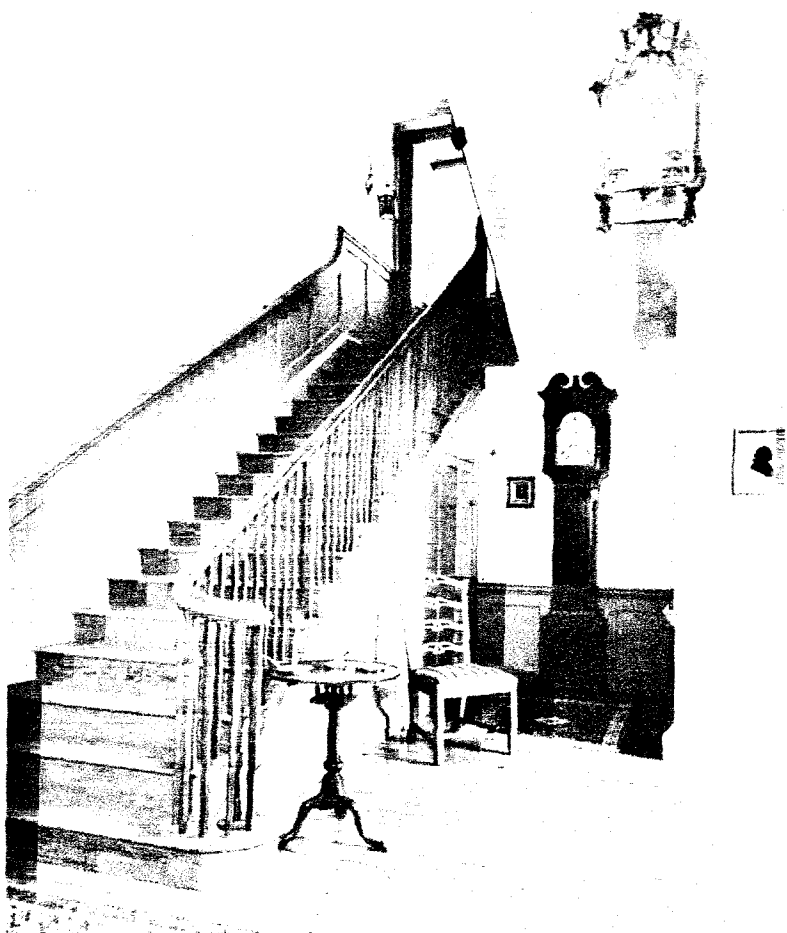
In the dining room, they uncovered 16 coats of paint before reaching the delicate, faintly yellowish green with which the room originally was painted. By contrast, the little-used ballroom showed only seven coats.

Altogether, eight shades of paint were traced, perhaps a record for a period when paint still was used sparingly.

Such lavishness is typical of the house, whose builders seemed intent on surpassing in expensive detail other homes of the time.

The building, it is believed, was the

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The ornate staircase has a finger-grip bannister rail and the uprights have metal bracing, painted to look like wood. Ends of the steps exhibit carving seen on silver of the period.

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creation of Col. James Brice, a hero of the Revolution and later a Governor of Maryland, who married Juliana Jennings, a niece of the first Duchess of Marlborough.

Apparently it was completed by 1770, for it is known that between then and 1775 and between 1781 and 1786 it served as the scene of some of the most elegant entertaining in America, opening its doors to George Washington, James Madison and Gen. Lafayette, among others.

Records show that William Buckland, one-time indentured servant who rose to eminence as an architect, had a hand in the final design and decoration of the Brice House, for he was paid a fee for some work. How much he contributed to the original design still is unknown. It was an era when "master builders" were not dignified as architects and when gentlemen like Jefferson played at the role with outstanding success.

Buckland is identified as the designer of Virginia's Gunston Hall and Hammond-Harwood House in Annapolis.

The Brice House will be one of the highlights of the tours of Heritage Week, opening today under the sponsorship of Historic Annapolis, Inc.

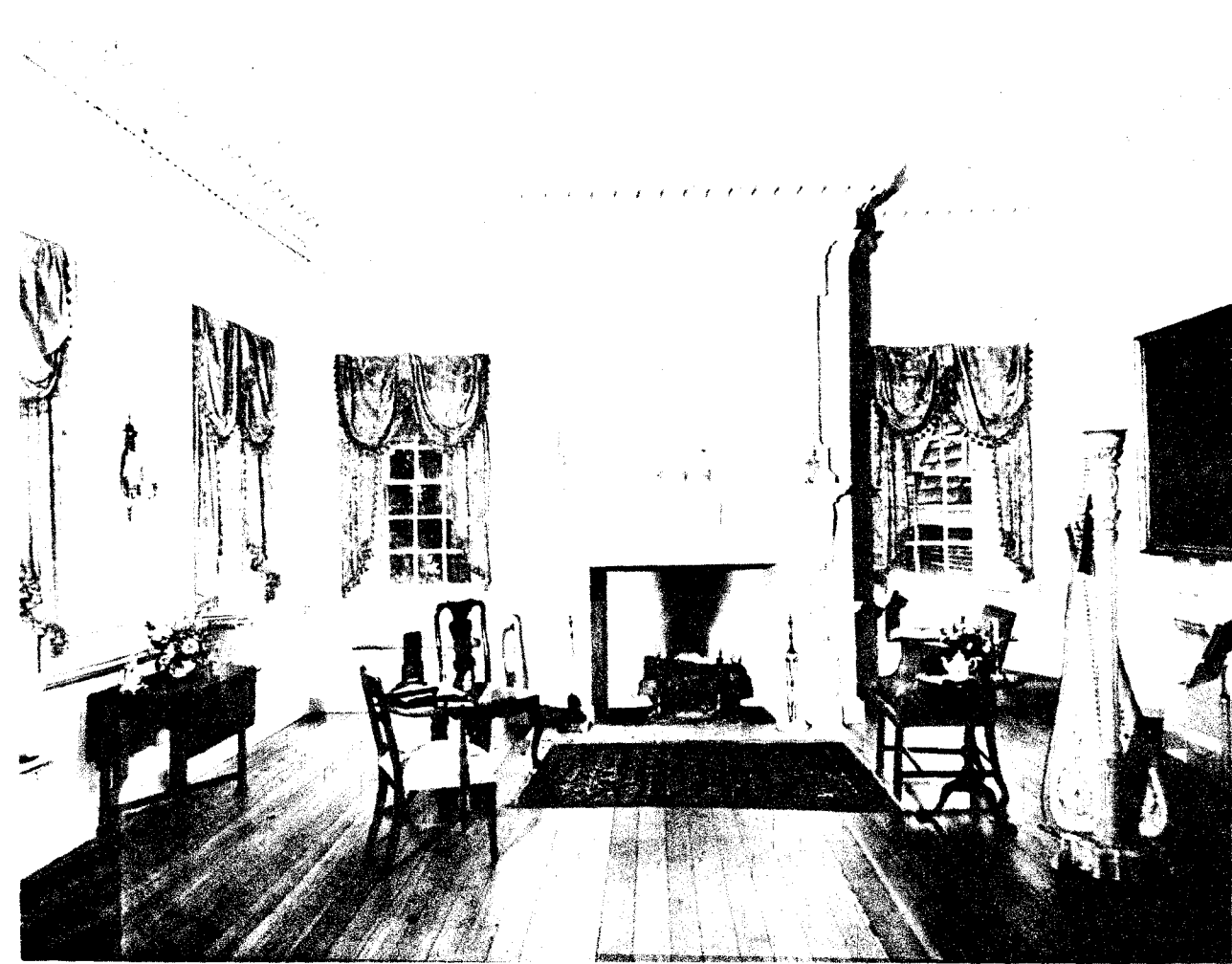
Guided tours will take place at 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Open house tours will be available from 1 to 5 p.m. today and next Saturday and Sunday.

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STAR PHOTOS BY PAUL SCHMICK



A Waterford glass chandelier lends beauty to the paneled dining room. Period furniture fits the pattern, but the coal-burning grate in the fireplace was considered rare at the time.



The largest of the 35 rooms of Brice House is the ballroom, which also has its fireplace and carved mantelpiece. The moldings, frieze and decorative work copies Marlborough House, in London.



Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Wohl, owners and restorers of Brice House, stand in the herb garden. Early 18th century homes had them.