



The 35-room Brice House, a national landmark, will be sold at auction Saturday and Historic Annapolis, Inc., is trying to save it.

# Historic Annapolis has eye on Brice House

By Jay Spry

With the future of a national landmark once described as "the most beautiful house in the United States" at stake, the directors of Historic Annapolis, Inc., are hoping they can bid on the Brice House when the colonial mansion is sold at an on-premises auction in the state capital Saturday.

The Maryland General Assembly at its final session—only eight days ago—approved a \$600,000 matching grant to Historic Annapolis for the purchase and restoration of the 35-room Georgian structure at Prince George and East streets, declared a national historic landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior 12 years ago.

On the basis of exploratory talks before the General Assembly action, Historic Annapolis in the last few days has obtained commitments of about \$200,000, one-third the amount it needs to fully match the state grant.

"We will be at the auction and we hope to be one of the bidders—if we get enough additional support before Saturday," Mary Pringle Symonds,

president of Historic Annapolis, said yesterday.

It may not be necessary to fully match the state's \$600,000 contribution by raising another \$400,000 in the few remaining days, Mrs. Symonds said. She said that substantial evidence of further support would indicate the organization is certain to meet its goal soon and without major problems.

Celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, Historic Annapolis saved the William Paca House in Annapolis from demolition in 1965 and now manages the property, including the restored 18th Century Paca Garden.

Preservation of the Brice House for public access would be a "crowning achievement," according to Mrs. Symonds. She described the mansion as "a monument to Maryland craftsmanship" of colonial times.

In seeking and receiving support for the matching grant from Governor Hughes, Historic Annapolis noted that the Brice House was irreplaceable and called it as "a national patrimony."

Although it was purchased less than 60 years ago for \$55,000 by St.

John's College—for use as faculty apartments—the former owners, Stanley S. and Helen Robertson Wohl, spent several hundred thousand dollars restoring it over a period of more than 20 years. Builders have estimated the replacement cost at more than \$3 million.

The five-section dwelling was called the most beautiful house in the United States by the chief architect of the Williamsburg (Va.) restoration and "the most magnificent Georgian home in America" by another architectural expert.

The plans for Brice House were made and construction of its foundations was started by John Brice II, a wealthy plantation owner, member of the colonial Council of Governors and judge of the Provincial Court.

It was completed in 1771 by his son, James, later an interim governor and twice mayor of Annapolis. He entertained such dignitaries and George Washington and Lafayette, who recorded in their diaries the elegance of the mansion and the hospitality they received.

Brice House is 156 feet long and runs along a terrace looking down to-

ward the Naval Academy and the Severn River, with 90-foot chimneys towering over each end of the 2½-story central section. Two 1½-story wings, at right angles to the center section, are connected to it by passages called hyphens. The dwelling has 30-inch walls and 80-inch-thick end walls.

The grand staircase of San Domingo mahogany has carved relief capitals and grooved banisters. The well-preserved window panes are also mahogany, with adjustable shutters. Photographs of the plaster cornices and carved woodwork have been exhibited in major museums.

Mr. and Mrs. Wohl tore out partitions that had existed during the period of college ownership, restored the plasterwork and—after peeling off layers of paint—restored the delicate pastel colors that had been used originally.

Brice House is being sold by a Philadelphia bank at what is called a trustees' auction as part of the settlement of Mr. Wohl's estate. Mrs. Symonds said it would be discouraging for Historic Annapolis if offers go above \$1 million, "but we hope they will be much less than that."