

HOME

Brice House in Annapolis: Just the thing for a growing family

By Randi Henderson

Looking for a house for your family to grow up in? Maybe something charming and distinctive that will give you lots of room to expand, has a yard for the kids to play in yet is handy to downtown civic and cultural happenings. Are you looking for your dream house?

Consider, then, the Brice House in Annapolis. It provides all the space a growing family can use. It has 33 rooms. At the corner of East and Prince George's streets, it is in the heart of historic Annapolis, but it has nearly an acre of ground and portions of the backyard are discreetly shielded by tall hedges.

All this and more, for only \$1.4 million.

If the price seems a bit excessive, take a look around. There probably isn't a house in the country that can match the beautiful detail work and elegant accoutrements that distinguish the Brice House.

The house was begun in 1766 by John Brice 2d and completed by his son James in 1781. Obviously the Brices were men of taste and discretion, and obviously no expense was spared in decorating the house. According to the Brice account books, the total construction cost was 4,014 pounds, 8 shillings, equivalent to \$147,712 in modern-day pounds.

That amount may not seem like that much in today's inflated world but it was a fortune in the Eighteenth Century. About 15 years ago a contractor estimated that the modern building cost would be more than \$3 million. That figure will probably have doubled by the time the Eighties get here.

The Brice House is a distinctive looking one, even in a city full of architectural masterpieces. The exterior is stark—a solid facade of brick, with white-framed windows and a sharply peaked roof. It looks more like an institution, maybe a posh boarding school, than a private home.

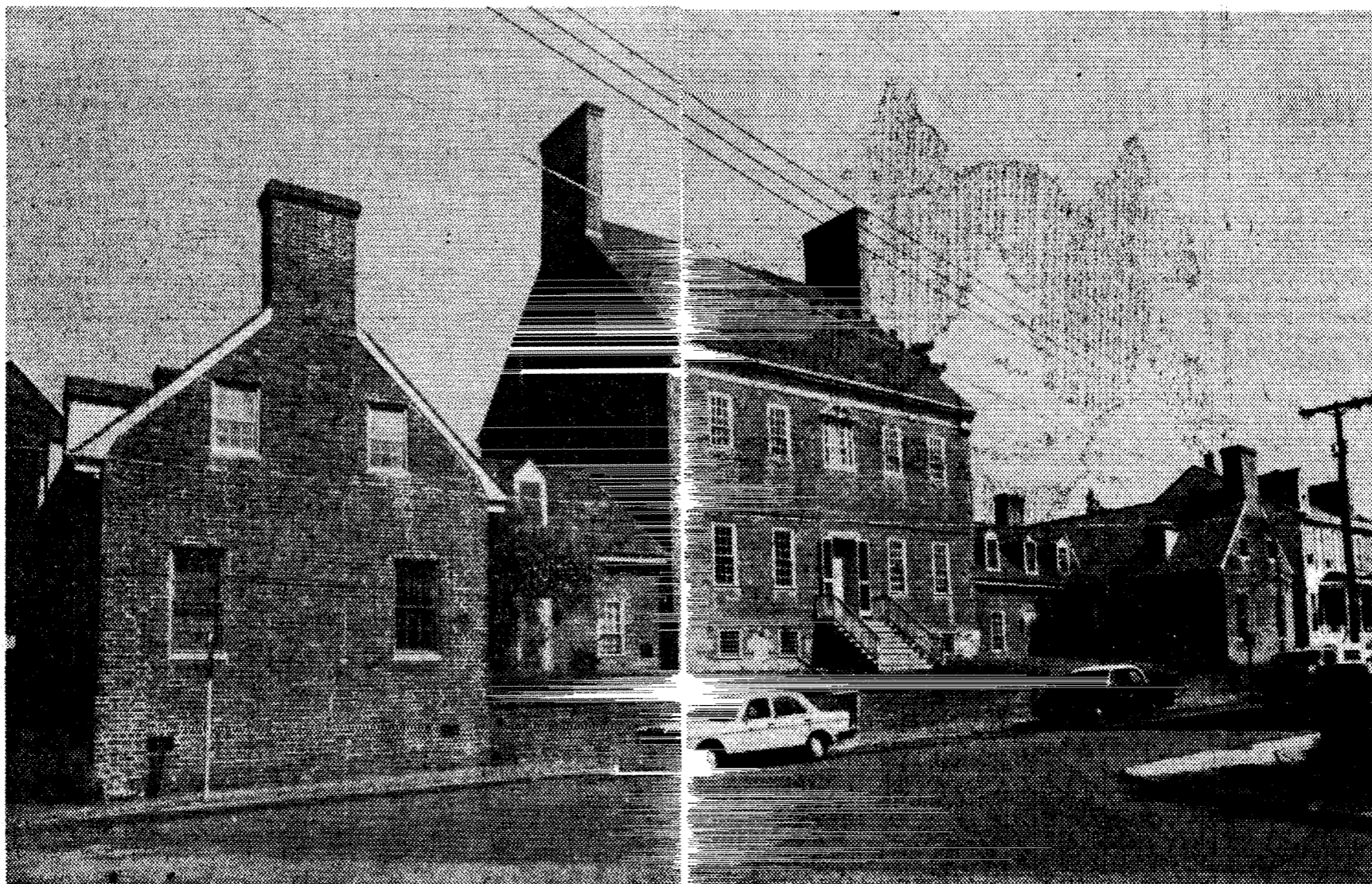
The angular effect is exaggerated by the tall chimneys, which reach 90 feet above the base of the house. There are no porches, only a stairway to the front door, and the only ornamentation in front is an intricately carved Palladian window above the main entrance.

There are five sections to Brice House: the main house, two wings and two connecting appendages called, appropriately enough, hyphens. Each section has its own outside doors, front and back, and in recent years the wings and one of the hyphens have been rented out as apartments.

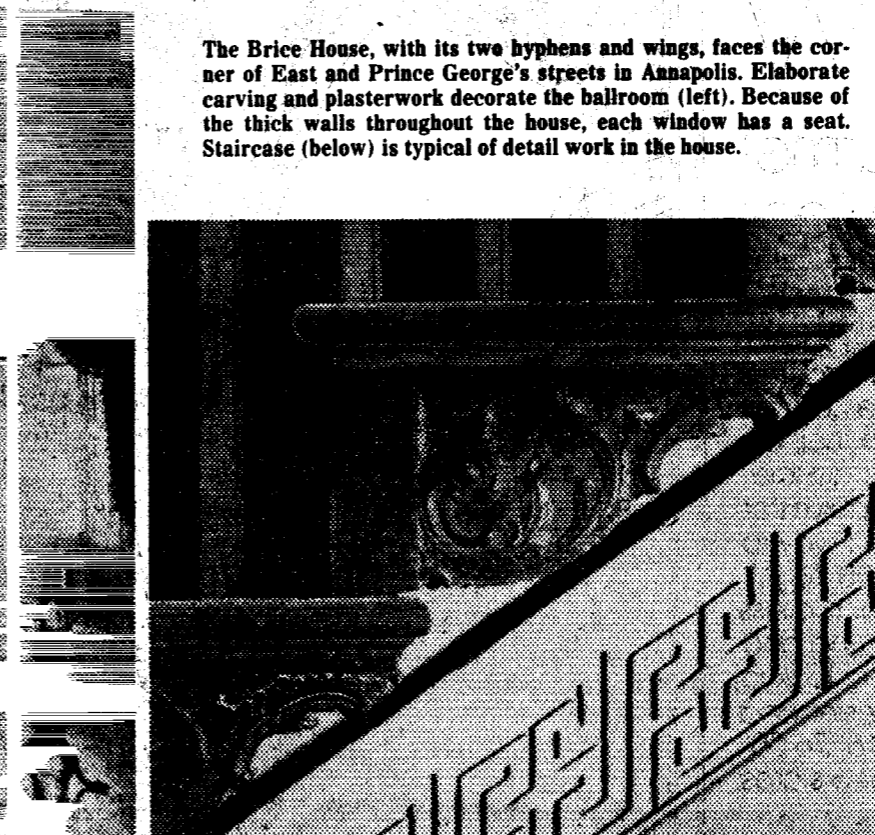
The plainness of the home's exterior is brilliantly contrasted with the wealth of detail inside. The scale alone is magnificent; ceilings are 13 feet high on the first floor, 11½ feet high on the second. The ballroom, the largest room, is 20 by 25 feet.

If you like to sit and watch the world go by, you'll love the window seats there's one in each window. The thickness of the walls—30 inches thick, with 80-inch-thick end walls—explains the origin of the seats.

But the most outstanding feature of Brice house is the profusion of detailed carving. From the elaborate friezes and cornices along the ceilings, to the delicate



The Brice House, with its two hyphens and wings, faces the corner of East and Prince George's streets in Annapolis. Elaborate carving and plasterwork decorate the ballroom (left). Because of the thick walls throughout the house, each window has a seat. Staircase (below) is typical of detail work in the house.



mantlepieces, to the intricately worked staircase, the artist's touch is everywhere.

Mock orange trees are in the front yard. In back are a succession of small gardens planted with herbs and perennials surrounded with boxwoods. There's only a bit of lawn to mow—most of the land is covered with easily maintained ground covers. The back of the property borders on the sumptuous Paca gardens, which have been restored by the state.

The home is rich in history. It remained in the Brice family for four generations, and among its frequent visitors were George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette, Benjamin Franklin and James Madison. It was sold in 1873 to William Martin, of Baltimore; his nephew, Thomas Ennals Martin, mayor of Annapolis, lived there until his death. It was Martin who began subdividing the property, selling off lots from the estate, which once extended to the waterfront.

In 1913 Brice House was sold to the neighboring Carvel Hall Hotel for use as an annex. Ten years later, St. John's College bought the house for \$55,000 and converted it into faculty apartments. It remained in the college's ownership for 30 years.

In 1953 Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Wohl bought the house, for an undisclosed amount, and set about restoring it. Mr. Wohl, a stockbroker and newspaperman with an inheritance from his mother, invested a considerable amount in the house.

The Wohls installed modern conveniences such as an oil furnace, plumbing fixtures and electricity, discreetly masking most of the installations within the home's thick walls. All of the original woodwork and plasterwork was preserved, and most of doors and hardware also date back to the original construction of the house.

The Wohls furnished their home with antiques, and it became known nationwide as one of the showcases of Colonial architecture. In 1970 the Brice House was named a Registered National Historic Landmark, the only private home in Annapolis to receive this distinction.

Mr. Wohl died in December, 1978, outliving his wife by little more than a year. The house is now part of his estate, his daughter Teresa Chance said, and neither she nor her brother, Mr. Wohl's heirs, are interested in keeping it.

"I considered keeping it," Mrs. Chance said, "but it's much too large for two people. There's just too much upkeep involved. And my brother is not interested in old things, he's very modern."

Mrs. Chance does not want to see the house turned into a museum; she wants it to remain a private home. The house has been listed with Sotheby Parke Bernet International Realty in hopes that the elite agency can attract the type of client who can pay \$1.4 million for a residence—and then afford the annual property tax of \$3,500.

According to a spokeswoman for Sotheby Parke Bernet, the \$1.4 million figure is negotiable and the company is willing to work with a prospective buyer to put together a financial package. "There's been quite a bit of interest so far," she said, "but no contract has been signed."