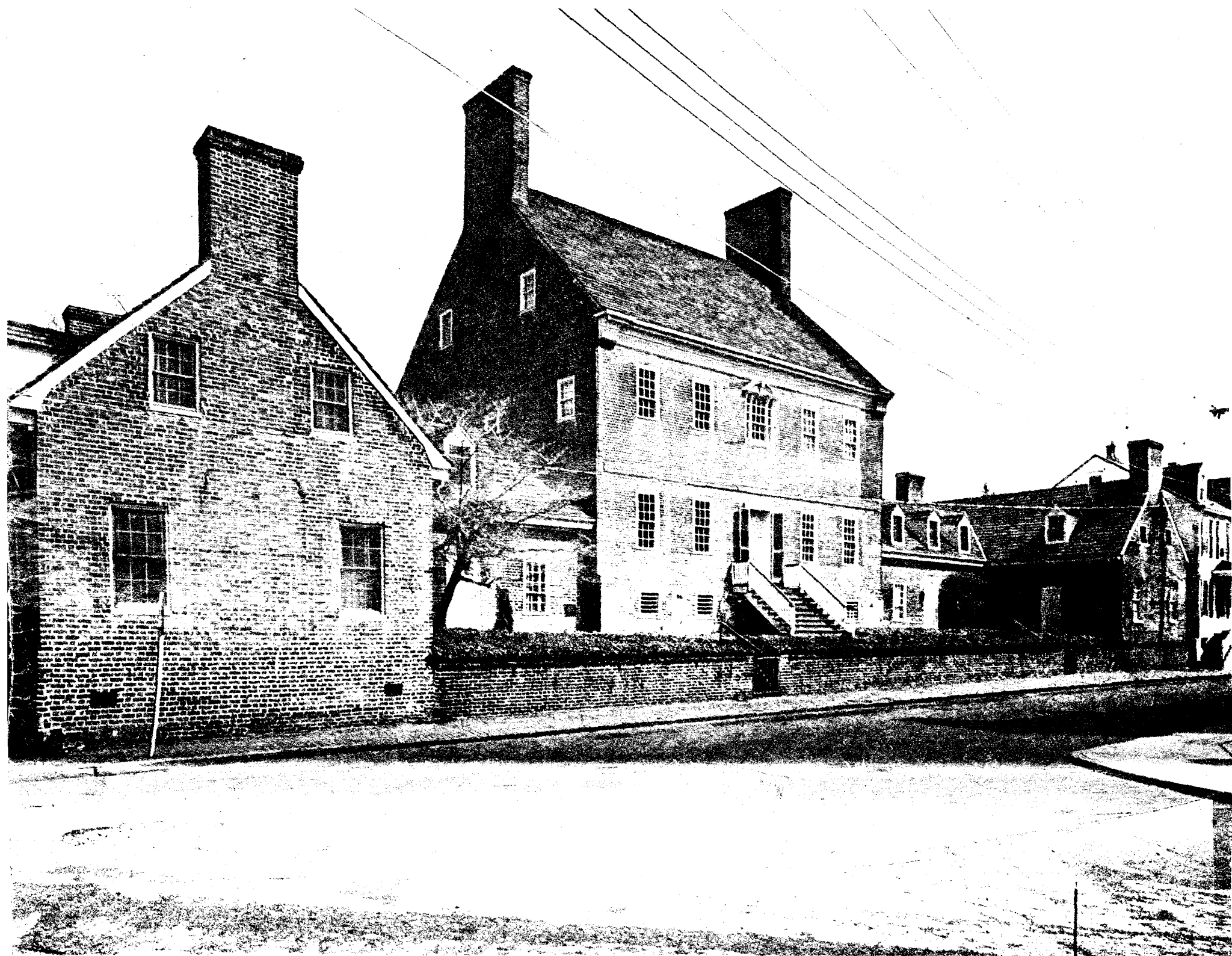


# THE SUN MAGAZINE

Sunday

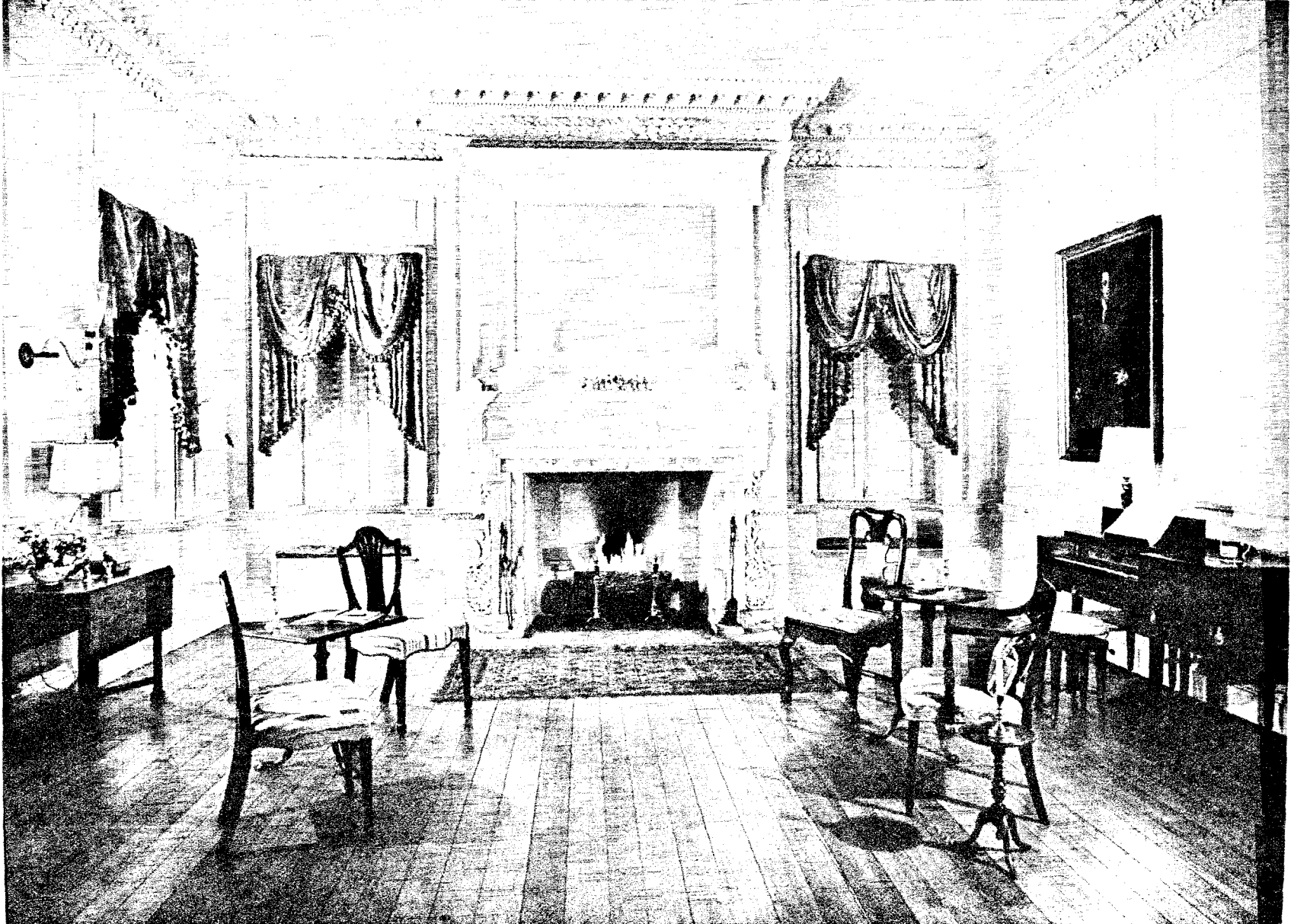
THE SUN BALTIMORE, MD.

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## The Brice House: Notes on Its Origin Rediscovered



Carved fireplace and cornices in the drawing room of Brice House are the work of William Bampton. Below, James Brice and daughter, Juliana.

# MAGNIFICENCE PRESERVED

Story by HELEN HENRY  
Photos by WILLIAM L. KLENDER

THE remarkable discovery not long ago of Col. James Brice's account book, kept in his neat Eighteenth Century script over a period of years and covering the building and furnishing of his elegant townhouse, reveals new and fascinating information about the structure described as "the most magnificent Colonial home in Annapolis."

None of the Brice family's surviving descendants had been aware of the existence of the book, which tells how much was spent on labor and materials to build the mansion, and lists other expenditures reflecting the fashionable life-style of a rich planter's son who figured prominently in the social and political circles of Annapolis.

The discovery has particular interest

for Mr. and Mrs. Stanley S. Wohl, resident owners of the Brice House, who have devoted their lives and resources for the past two decades to the rehabilitation of its handsomely designed features.

Thanks to their 20-year love affair with the house, its original Eighteenth Century structural material and adornments have been carefully preserved; and in recognition of their financial and artistic investment the Brice House was named, in 1970, a Registered National Historic Landmark—the only privately owned, lived-in house in Annapolis to receive this designation.

The National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings cites "the superb design, the boldness and simplicity in handling the great masses of this structure, and its scale, erected in 1766-1773, one of the most imposing brick buildings in American Georgian architecture . . .

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# Brice House in Annapolis

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Santo Domingan mahogany staircase, with relief carved step ends and grooved balustrade, is an example of the Colonial craftsmanship in the 200-year-old house.

in all but its town setting a magnificent example of a five-part Southern plantation house."

The splendor of Brice House was envisioned by John Brice 2d, wealthy planter-merchant and judge of the Provincial court, who kept his office during the 1750's in the wing of his gambrel-roofed brick house (still standing, without the wing, on Prince George street and now called "Little Brice House"). When he died in 1766, the massive foundations had been dug and a quantity of construction materials assembled on two lots at Prince George and East streets.

To his second son James, then aged 20, he left the two lots with "bricks, lime, stones, plank and timber . . . for the purpose of building a dwelling house and outhouses," in addition to plantations in Cecil and Kent counties.

For the next seven years James Brice administered the construction, keeping a detailed account of costs; itemizing shingles, planks, rope, laths, hair, stone, bricks, nails; names and wages of bricklayers, masons, carpenters, joiners and hired servants—as well as amounts spent for rum dispensed to the workmen at brick burnings and the cornerstone-laying.

Expenditures are summed up on a page headed "Cost of Erecting Buildings on Lotts in Annap. Nos. 94 and 103, Begun in 1767 by J. A. Brice," and came to a grand total of 4,014 pounds, 8 shillings. Also recorded is a breakdown of this sum into two detailed categories, one representing cash outlays of 2,825 pounds by James Brice alone; the other showing cost of materials and labor supplied by his father, and funds provided by his mother, Sarah Frisby Brice (great-granddaughter of Augustine Hermann of Bohemian Manor, Cecil county, a rich woman in her own right), amounting to 1,189 pounds.

TODAY'S dollar value of the 4,014 pounds expended would be, according to government figures, about \$96,355, a lavish sum by colonial standards. More striking is comparison to today's costs: Mr. and Mrs. Wohl have spent more than four times over that amount on the purchase and permanent improvements of the house during the past 20 years.

Mr. Wohl recalls that Matthew H. McCloskey, Jr., a contractor for numerous monumental buildings in the United States, visited Brice House in 1962. "He was amazed at the massive size and structural content of so early an American building, and he said 'I could not duplicate the Brice House today for less than \$3 million.'"

After James Brice's death in 1802 ownership of the house passed to a great-granddaughter, who lived in it until 1873. It was then sold to William Martin of Baltimore, who allowed his

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nephew Thomas Ennals Martin, mayor of Annapolis, to live there until he died. Heirs sold it in 1913 to the neighboring Carvel Hall Hotel (since demolished) for use as an annex. And in 1923 St. John's College bought the house for \$55,000 and converted it to apartments for faculty members. Thirty years later, in 1953, the college sold Brice House to Mr. and Mrs. Wohl for a somewhat higher sum.

The Wohls, who recently celebrated their 47th wedding anniversary, are longtime supporters of historic preservation. The former Helen Robertson, a North Carolina native, and her Philadelphia-born husband met in New York when she was studying for her master's degree at Columbia University and he was in a Wall street brokerage office. Mr. Wohl subsequently worked as a newspaperman in Raleigh and other state capitals; also as a feature writer on historical buildings.

**T**HE couple had accumulated and inherited, over the years, many fine period furnishings, hoping ultimately to assemble them in an authentic colonial house. Opportunity to buy the Brice House was timely: the collection of furniture, paintings, porcelains, lighting fixtures, fireplace grates, hardware and various other objects of historical significance had begun to overflow their house in Washington, where they were then living, and where their daughter Teresa is associated with the National Gallery of Art. Their son Martin, an engineer, lives and works in Pittsburgh.

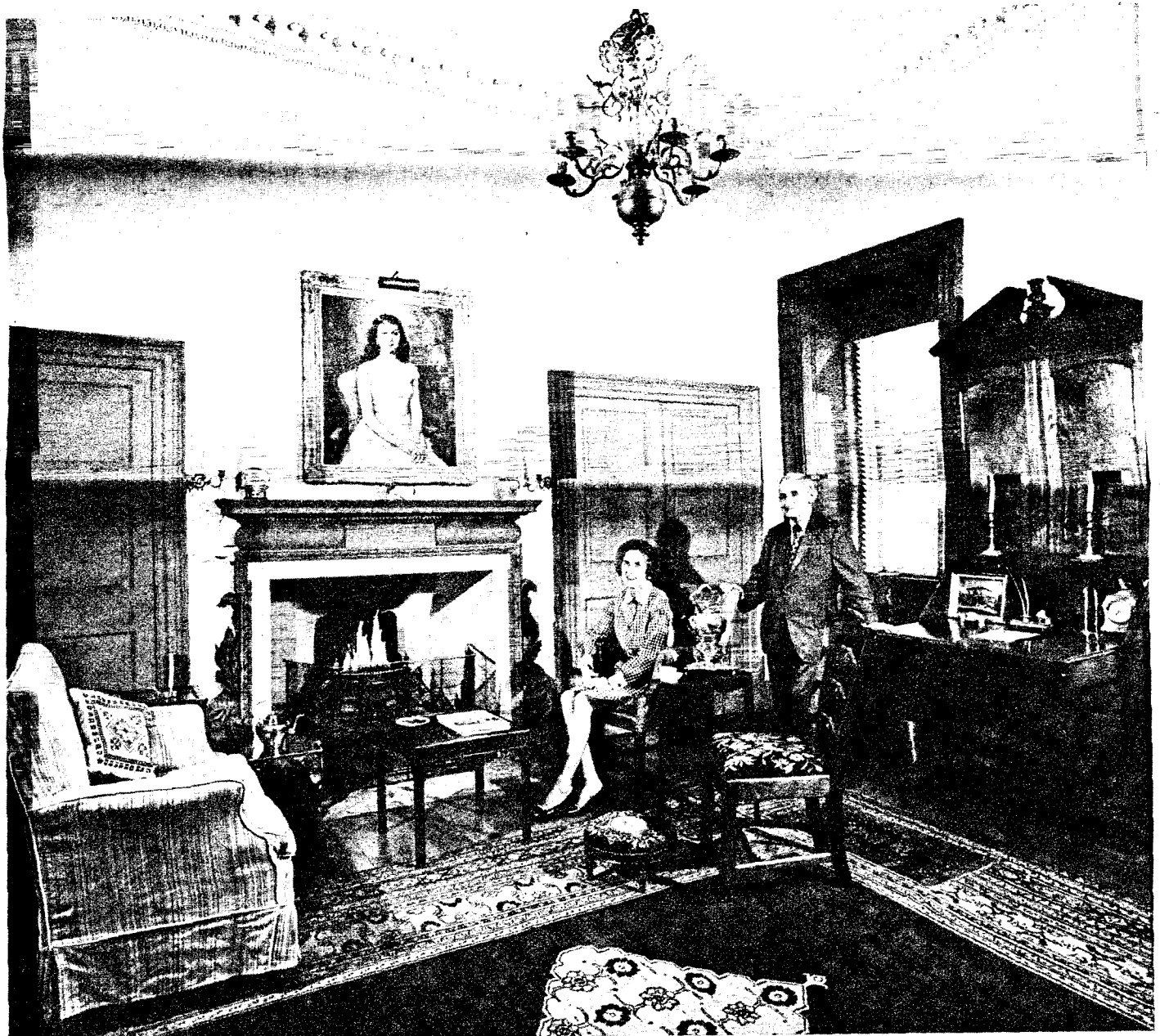
It was through membership in the National Trust for Historic Preservation that Mr. and Mrs. Wohl were led to the acquisition of the Brice House.

"The first expression of public encouragement in the tremendous task which faced us," said Mr. Wohl, "came unexpectedly from a *Sun* reporter, the late Robert C. Breen. It was early in August, 1953, the second month of our stewardship here, that he called, while we were still engaged in removing a huge accumulation of tons and tons of worthless and decayed material from within and without the property. He toured the vacant interior and noted the original architectural and structural beauty, harmony and proportion of each room and hallway. When his story, headed 'Restoring a Magnificence,' appeared in *The Sun*, it helped us realize that our staggering efforts, later on, might attract public recognition and perhaps public appreciation. This objective did come to pass after many troubled and agonizing years . . . I encouraged my wife in this house; she has been completely devoted to its rejuvenation. We've had many vicissitudes; we've borrowed much in our efforts to preserve it."

Dr. Richard H. Howland, former  
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From a built-in wine cabinet in this paneled dining room, Col. James Brice served drinks to many guests, including George Washington and Lafayette. Above, a second floor corridor to bedrooms has an archway and a vaulted ceiling.



Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Wohl, resident-owners of Brice House, have devoted their energy and resources for two decades to rehabilitation of the handsome house.

# Brice House in Annapolis

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## The Chief Architect of Colonial Williamsburg Called It 'the Most Beautiful House in the United States'

president of the National Trust, cited the Wohls as having "set a standard for other private owners throughout the country who are concerned with the renovation of historic and architectural monuments." William Graves Perry, chief architect of Colonial Williamsburg, called it "the most beautiful house in the United States." (The Williamsburg palace ballroom was adapted, Mr. Wohl noted, from the Brice House drawing room.) And Henry Francis duPont, founder of Winterthur Museum, described it as "breathtaking and magnificent throughout."

First in their three-year job of renovation (and they are still making improvements) was removal of the partitions dividing the 35 rooms into apartments. New plumbing, heating and electrical systems were installed, all concealed. The ring of a hidden phone and conveniences in the kitchen and bathrooms are the only audible and visible signs of modernization. "We didn't need to put in air-conditioning," Mr. Wohl said, "because the solid 30-inch walls (and 80-inch-thick end walls) absorb the heat of summer. And the big double doors, front and back, capture all the harbor breezes."

Helen Wohl supervised the renovation, a full-time job, checking each workman's task in restoring altered elements to the original design of the rooms in the central block, where the Wohls have their residence. She even mixed the paints to re-create the antique tints uncovered on the walls, an unusual variety of pastel colors.

**ALL** the fine colonial craftsmanship is preserved: the sumptuous plaster cornices and paneling; the Santo Domingan mahogany staircase with relief-carved step ends and grooved balustrade; the fireplace mantels; wood carvings, chair rails, wood-pegged floorboards laid horizontally; the mahogany window frames, adjustable inside shutters and most of the panes; iron hinges, most of the hardware and doors.

The main rooms, opening one into another, are surprisingly friendly in proportions, and, as Mrs. Wohl said, "the house is so well laid out for Twentieth Century living it was easy to make improvements without spoiling the original design. We were grateful," she added, "the exterior had not been altered in any way."

The 200-year-old brick pile (laid in header bond) spreads 156 feet along a terrace that once commanded a garden vista of Brice property all the way down

to the Severn River (now bordered by United States Naval Academy buildings). The exterior, lacking the usual Georgian embellishments of pillars and pediments, is rather severe, yet all the more impressive in its five-part composition: the 2½-story central block over an elevated basement, with chimneys towering 90 feet above the grounds; the symmetrical 1½-story wings and hyphens.

The wings (originally housing the Brice kitchen and, above, children's schoolroom at the east end; the laundry and carriage house at the west) have been converted into single apartments, which are rented. Mrs. Wohl adapted the west hyphen to a modern kitchen. Pretty little gardens at the rear of each wing flank her central garden.

The grandeur of the principal rooms

long has been attributed to William Buckland, architect and master builder of some of the most beautiful Eighteenth Century houses in Maryland and Virginia. Yet James Brice's account book contains no record of specific payments to Buckland, nor does Buckland's name ever appear. An early entry, March 5, 1767, merely states "Drawing of plans—John Tutell." And listed under cash outlays for labor is "carver—17 pounds, 16 shillings." A 1771 entry reads: To George Forster, joiner, 46 pounds currency "by carrying up staircase, making fret, altering Beaufet [buffet?], making chimney piece upstairs"; another, to William Bampton, 40 pounds, "by finishing largest room in my house (drawing room, now called ballroom), the carpenters joiner work and carving chimney piece."

The family historian, Carroll A. Brice,

Baltimore descendant of James's brother John Brice, believes nevertheless that Buckland designed and/or executed the elegant details in the Brice House. His belief has been upheld in the Buckland biography, by Rosamond Randall Beirne and John H. Scarff, a Maryland Historical Society publication. The biography points out Brice House resemblances to Buckland's ornamentation in the Hammond-Harwood, Chase-Lloyd, Upton Scott and Ryder houses. The biographers note, in their appendix, one item in the Anne Arundel court record of the final accounting of Buckland's estate (he died in 1774): "Received from Mr. Brice for work done to the Time of Sale deducting for board and maintenance of the Servant—2 pounds, 10."

**BUT** Dr. Edward Papenfuse, assistant archivist in the Maryland Hall of Records, says: "I think it is a mistake to attribute any of the work on the Brice House to Buckland."

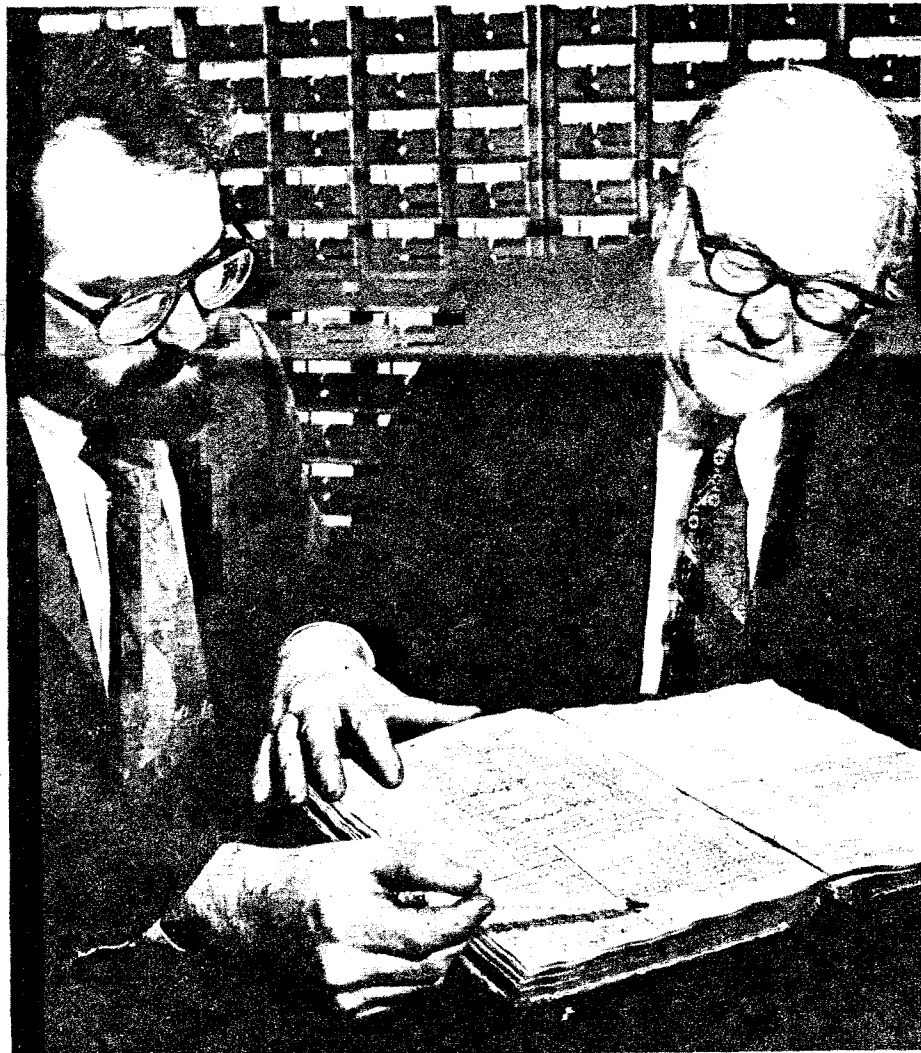
Dr. Papenfuse, who more than anyone else has realized the importance of the Brice account book as a historical document, was working on his doctoral thesis, a history of the urban growth of Annapolis, when the book was discovered. Its detailed record of the Brice House construction was a windfall to his research.

"For example," he said, "the chimney piece that the biography claims is Buckland's work was executed by William Bampton. Bampton was a free laborer who got so far into debt that Brice had to give bond to keep him out of jail. When the time expired for payment of the debt, Bampton fled town and Brice had to pay. If Bampton had been a servant of Buckland's on loan to Brice, Buckland would have been noted as Bampton's master in the suit." He cites as references the account book and Anne Arundel county court records.

Dr. Papenfuse refutes also the item in the appendix to the Buckland biography, pointing out that "it states only 'Mr. Brice.' It could have been James's brother John Brice, who was building a house of his own at the time. In terms of servants owned by Buckland at his death in 1774, none was working on the Brice House. . . . The 2 pounds, 10 received is just a piddling sum."

The coincidence of where, how and by whom the Brice account book was discovered seems like a fictional contrivance. It was found, wholly by chance, about three years ago, in the Masonic

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Frank White, right, archivist at Maryland Hall of Records who discovered James Brice's account book, studies it with Dr. Edward Papenfuse, assistant archivist.

# Brice House in Annapolis

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Temple vault at 225 North Charles street. The finder happened to be an archivist at the Hall of Records, Frank White. Mr. White, presiding officer of the Masonic organization Jerusalem Royal Arch Chapter No. 9, which meets monthly at the downtown temple, explains:

"The chapter was preparing to celebrate its 150th anniversary. I was to write a paper on its history, so I was permitted to go down to the vault and look through the records. I came across a package wrapped in brown paper, marked, in the handwriting of a secretary who died in 1963, 'old records.' I opened it and found this hand-written account book of James Brice, and on the fly-leaf in a much earlier handwriting, 'Property of C. F. Achey.'

"Achey had been secretary of the Jerusalem Chapter from 1875 to 1901; he died in 1904. There was no clue to the source of the book. But as a historian and archivist I immediately recognized its importance. . . . I could hardly wait to tell Ed Papenfuse of the discovery; it had direct bearing on his research at that moment.

**WHERE** had Achey obtained the book or how did it get out of the Brice family? What was the connection? In trying to figure it out, I came up with this theory: One of the early members of the chapter was Nicholas Carroll Brice, a nephew and executor of Col. James Brice's estate. My guess is that he gave or loaned the account book to Achey, and when Nicholas Brice died Achey kept it among his records; and that, after Achey's death it remained in the chapter's records—through two fires, one in 1893, the other in 1908—luckily in a fireproof vault.

"I reported my discovery at the chapter's next meeting. And, because there was uncertainty as to how the book got there or who was its rightful owner, the chapter members voted to allow the book to be microfilmed by the Hall of Records, but stipulated that no publication of the film be authorized."

Dr. Papenfuse was elated by Mr. White's discovery of the account book. "It was extremely helpful to research in one of the most important periods in the growth of Annapolis—I call it 'the townhouse period, the age of affluence', which began after the French and Indian War, through the American Revolution."

Formerly with Historic Annapolis, he had been immersed in study of the town's growth and development during the Eighteenth Century. "About five years ago," Dr. Papenfuse said, "Historic Annapolis applied to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a study of the inhabitants of Annapolis in 1783-1784, when the Continental Congress met here and ratified the treaty that ended the Revolutionary

War. This application was accepted and an 11-member research staff was provided with \$10,000 outright and \$10,000 matching funds, plus \$10,000 given by the Board of Public Works.

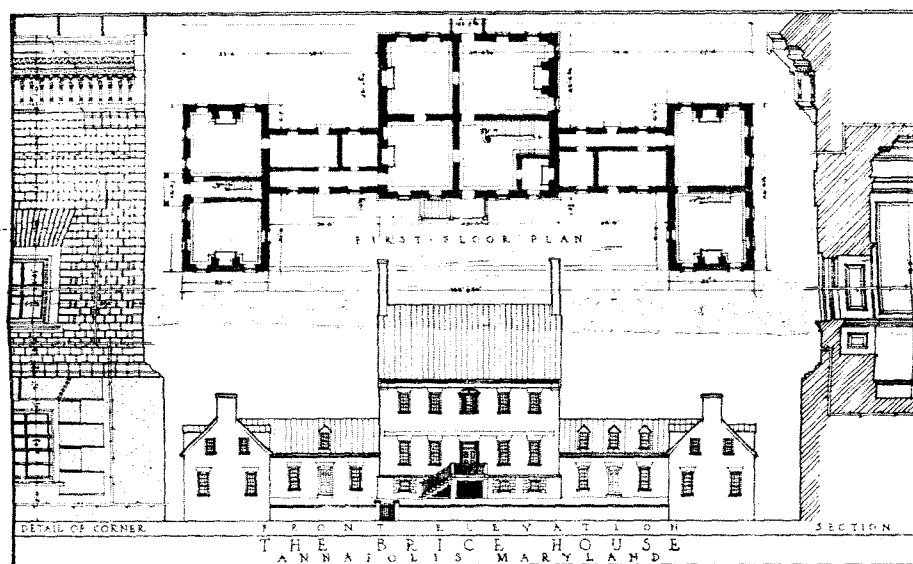
"With the total fund of \$30,000 we did (1) a study of land use in the community: who occupied, and what was done in the town from about 1752-1800. This resulted in a two-volume work, available to researchers in the Hall of Records; and (2) we began a biographical research on people who lived in town in 1783."

Out of this basic research Dr. Papen-

other houses) cost; and the impact of the Brice house on the town, what it represented in terms of capital outlay on the part of the affluent. . . . And it helped me understand how best to use other evidence."

The account book is equally fascinating for its inclusion of personal entries up to the time of Colonel Brice's death in 1802.

He was married in 1781 at age 35 (an earlier romance is hinted at in the Buckland biography) to Juliana Jennings, daughter of Thomas Jennings, attorney general of the Province of Maryland,



Both the floor plan for the first level and, beneath it, the front elevation show the striking balance and symmetry of Brice House, which was completed in 1773.

fuse spent the subsequent three years (not funded) concentrating on a study of merchants in Annapolis of that period. "That was the genesis of my doctoral thesis 'In Pursuit of Profit: The Annapolis Merchants in the Era of the American Revolution,' to be published this year by the Johns Hopkins Press.

**AND** in the midst of this work, when the National Endowment staff was seeking information on the Annapolis lifestyle of that period, Mr. White came up with the Brice account book, which tells in explicit detail what one wealthy landowner was doing—and, incidentally, establishes the Brice mansion as the best documented house in Annapolis, not excepting the famed Hammond-Harwood and Chase houses."

Dr. Papenfuse pored over its 160-odd pages for months, as he studied Col. James Brice's background. "On the basis of this unique account book I developed a formula for computing about how much other contemporary Annapolis townhouses (among them the Chase, Hammond-Harwood, Scott, Ridout and

whose portrait and that of his wife are in the Brice House drawing room.

Items listed under "Expenses" before his marriage reflect the activities and and sporting tastes of a young man-about-town: breeches patterns and trimmings, silk hose, silver buckles, gloves, pomatum, "shott and powder"; a horse (27 pounds). Also outlays for social clubs, "gaming," subscriptions to balls; "tickets" (theater), "dinners at Fox Hunters Club" and "spent at horse races." And journeys to Baltimore and to Cecil (his plantation)

Listed too are purchases of various wine, ale and "cyder" glasses, decanters and spirits to furnish the built-in wine cabinet in the dining room, from which he served a stream of distinguished visitors as they came to Annapolis for the legislative sessions, the races and theatrical performances.

"George Washington was a frequent guest here," said Mr. Wohl, who is steeped in Brice House history; "Lafayette is known to have been here twice. . . . It was from this house (midway between the Maryland State House and

the original Government House) that John Dickinson, a friend of Brice's, signed and dispatched the call to the states to the Annapolis convention that led to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia."

One can picture the urbane, informal gatherings of political and social figures in these lovely rooms aglow with candles and firelight. The host was an important figure in the golden age of Annapolis: member of the Governor's Council continuously from 1776 to 1798 and, for a short period in 1792, interim governor. He also was twice mayor of Annapolis, in 1782-1783 and 1788-1789. His military experience included pre-Revolutionary membership on the Council of Safety, when he was in charge of the fortification of Annapolis. About 1775 he was commissioned lieutenant of the Anne Arundel County Militia, and, after the outbreak of the American Revolution, was commissioned colonel of Maryland Militia.

"Late in 1780," said Mr. Wohl, "Colonel Brice accompanied some Maryland replacement troops to South Carolina and delivered them to General Nathanael Greene in time to enhance the reserve forces in the Battle of Cowpens, January 17, 1781."

**I**N that year of his marriage Colonel Brice listed under "Household Furniture" a piano, "twenty-five guineas," along with such items as mahogany tables and chairs "in crimson damask." And in successive years came entries to John Shaw (the famous cabinetmaker) for "a mahogany cradle with round top, 6 pounds; child's crib bedstead, 35 shillings; hair mattress for a crib, 3 pounds 15; a stain'd crib bedstead for a child, 45 shillings; a child's carriage, 35 shillings." There were five children.

The feeling of a household, the domestic scene, is preserved in the Brice House as well as its structural beauty, because Helen and Stanley Wohl have made it a home, rather than a museum. They opened it once to the public in 1957, during Annapolis Heritage Week. Excepting visitors with particular interest in its architectural and historical importance, the couple has maintained its privacy. In 1972 they were hosts to 350 members of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, then meeting in Washington.

"Our most heartwarming asset," said Mr. Wohl, "is an archive of more than 2,000 unsolicited letters, published observations and other written expressions which compliment the saving—for all time, we hope—of the Brice House, and the faithful preservation of the structure in its original state.

"The building will pass to our daughter. We do hope a public entity—the state of Maryland or National Park Service—will be the permanent custodian of this historic house." □