

The Past and Future of a Tilghman Island “W” House

by Kathi Ferguson

The Lee House, the old “W” house that sits back from Tilghman Island Road a half mile south of the Knapps Narrows Bridge, has a long history on the island and is about to become a focal point for telling the watermen’s stories that have made this narrow strip of land legendary.



Front of the Lee House

After renovations are completed, it will become the new home of the Tilghman Watermen’s Museum. The museum is currently located just down the road in what used to be the barber shop. (One of the two barbers was also the undertaker – his “display” of tombstones was in a field across the road.)

Started in 2008 by island residents Hall and Mary Kellogg, the museum’s primary purpose is to capture the stories and experiences of the watermen before their way of life disappeared. “What was once a thriving watermen’s community, was changing into a retirement community,” explains Hall Kellogg. “Mary and I felt the need to preserve the island’s heritage in a way that could be passed on through the years.”

Mary adds, “When we began our collection, it was primarily audio and video of the stories and experiences of the watermen. Our collection has grown significantly to include art, boat models and other items connected with the watermen and the island.”

Recognizing the need for additional space to display these many treasures, the Kellogg’s bought the Lee House in 2010. “When the opportunity presented itself to purchase this historic home, we jumped at the chance,” says Hall. “The Lee House represents something unique to Tilghman Island, as do the watermen and their way of life. It’s the perfect place to display the treasures of our collection while keeping this unique home alive.”

The two-and-a-half-story white frame house is an example of architectural design dating back to the late nineteenth century. The old house remains very much in its original configuration. It is one of 13 of its kind built on the Island between 1890 and 1900. There are only five left.

Island locals say that the “W” shape design allowed for air flow to be equally and continually distributed throughout the house no matter what direction a breeze may be coming from, an important feature in the days before air conditioning.



Lee House Side View

Like of many houses on the Island, the Lee House was named after its original owners. The Lee family, who owned the home during the early 1900s, was said to have resided there until sometime in the 1930s. The house was inherited by Tilghman resident Leona Garvin Harrison and it soon became a part of “The Elms,” a very popular and successful fishing party resort. The Elms included the property adjacent to the Lee House.



View of the Elms from the Lee House

“Miss Leona,” as she was known, ran the resort and decided that the Lee House would serve well as a boarding house, taking in any overflow guests.

The house could sleep up 12 people and is said to have provided lodging for doctors, lawyers and prominent business owners who would often visit. All meals were served in the main house and the well-traveled sidewalk leading to it from the Lee House is still visible. A day of fishing would cost \$25 and for an additional \$5.50 guests enjoyed a full breakfast, a packed lunch, and a family-style feast for dinner. Common on the dinner menu were the resort's famous Crab Imperial, fried chicken, roast beef, and crab cakes always accompanied by sliced tomatoes, corn, and staff Chef Theodore's freshly baked bread. After dinner and a long day on the water, guests would head back to the Lee House to play some cards, exchange stories and call it a night.

As times began to change and more and more people purchased their own boats, the demand for the fishing party properties began to wane. The Lee House closed as a boarding house in 1971 and has remained vacant ever since.



Lee House kitchen

In 1984 the house was passed on to Ms. Leona's daughter, Shirley Garvin Walton and was later inherited by Shirley's son John and daughter Barbara in 2000.

Now, the future of the Lee House is a bright one. As the new home of the Watermen's Museum, it will continue as part of the island's rich history and way of life – and its shape won't have changed a bit.

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