

Carroll History Journal

Historical Society of Carroll County, Maryland

AVALON: NEW WINDSOR'S HIDDEN TREASURE

By Mary Ann Ashcraft



Figure 1: Avalon, nestled into a hillside above Wakefield Valley, looks much as it did two hundred years ago.
Photograph by Sam Brainerd.

According to Celtic mythology, Avalon was the island paradise in the western sea where King Arthur and other nobles went upon their deaths. Did the builder of the handsome early nineteenth-century country villa of the same name (fig. 1) in New Windsor regard his new home as an earthly paradise?

Architecture and Interior Design

In 1808 and 1810, Francis Hollingsworth, a sophisticated, prosperous Baltimore merchant,

purchased large parcels of land in Wakefield Valley near New Windsor and began construction of a house which was extraordinary for this rural area, then part of eastern Frederick County. As an educated person, he would have been familiar with the neo-classical ideas brought from England and the Continent by architects like Benjamin Henry Latrobe and Maximilien Godefroy during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. No one has attributed Avalon to a specific architect, though, and Hollingsworth might have designed the house

himself, with advice from a house carpenter and inspiration from one or more architectural plan books readily available at the time, such as Owen Biddle's *Young Carpenter's Assistant* from 1805.

Avalon turned out to be a unique combination of sophisticated urban style blended with the traditional, rural “bank-house” architecture of Piedmont Maryland in which houses and barns were constructed into a partially excavated slope. The house has been described as “the best example of the American Neo-classical style of architecture in Carroll County” and “unlike any other structure (in architectural style as well as refinement) in the area.”¹ As expressed in America, this style is often called “Federal.” In designing his home, Hollingsworth might have followed the philosophy of Latrobe, who was concerned about public health and believed houses should be situated to take advantage of nature’s attributes. Avalon faces west where its large windows catch both winter sun and fresh summer breezes. The three-story, brick side wall facing south would have absorbed heat and augmented the fireplaces during cold weather. On its north side, the house was partially sheltered by a detached summer kitchen.



Figure 2: A 1904 watercolor showing Avalon as it looked during the ownership of Louis Philip Slingluff. Courtesy of present owners.

A comparison between the earliest representation of the house, a 1904 watercolor (fig. 2), and its current appearance (fig. 3) reveals that Avalon has changed little in the past hundred years. Many of its features date back to the early nineteenth century. Certainly the eight-over-eight windows on the ground floor and the twelve-over-twelve windows on the second story are original. The symmetrical façade, a hallmark of the Federal style, is divided into three sections, with the second story of the central section slightly recessed. Wooden panels inset above the

windows of the second story are typical period ornamentation for sophisticated buildings and represent a hidden third story, revealed on the gable ends of the house by small upper windows. Young Charles Carroll of Homewood used similar decorative panels on his elegant villa built outside Baltimore several years earlier. The curved panels over Avalon’s door (fig. 4) are, however, unusual and mimic a semi-circular fanlight, a popular feature in Federal-style homes. Bricks on the two faces of the house first seen by visitors were laid in elegant Flemish bond, but the less visible walls were in plainer common bond.



Figure 3: Avalon as it appears today. The porch and stairs are twentieth century additions. Photograph by Cathy Baty.



Figure 4: Doorway on the principal story with narrow pilasters flanking the sidelights and an elaborate cornice. Note the wood panels above the door, the roof cornice, and the Flemish bond brickwork. Photograph by Cathy Baty.

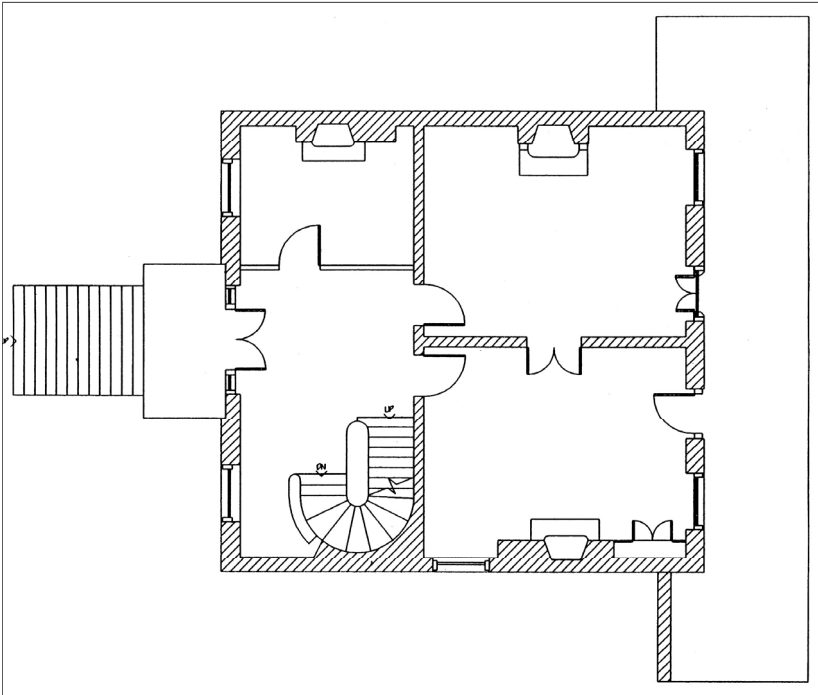


Figure 5: Plan of Avalon's main floor before the 1930s alteration. Porch and steps at left were added in the twentieth century. Note the asymmetrical arrangement of rooms on the front of the house. Courtesy of the Maryland Historic Trust. Drawing by Ken Short, Architectural Historian.

The current front porch and stairs are a modern addition. The 1904 watercolor depicts a plain roof over the ground-floor entrance, but it is not clear how old that arrangement was, either. Perhaps the original porch had a wooden balustrade on top. The family would have reached this elegant feature through the double doors on the second floor, which were flanked with pilasters and topped by an ornate cornice. The additional ventilation provided by the pair of doors would have been a godsend during Maryland summers.

Francis Hollingsworth's house was designed in the *piano nobile* style, which dates to the Renaissance and was particularly well suited to buildings on sloping ground. This plan called for the *piano nobile* (Italian for "noble floor") to be located one story above ground level where the views and living conditions would be more pleasant, and reserved the ground floor rooms for business and mundane household services. Visitors would have entered Avalon at the lower level through a single door and been greeted in the hallway where a set of stairs began. During the twentieth century, several owners used rooms on this level for dining and cooking, but

the significant alterations make it difficult to determine how the space was first used. If the large room on the south side was originally used for dining, servants would have delivered food from the detached kitchen. In keeping with the *piano nobile* tradition, decorative details in the ground floor rooms were generally plain and the ceilings relatively low, creating a stark contrast with the floor above.

Most Federal-style houses repeated their exterior symmetry on the inside, but Avalon is an exception (fig. 5). The hall on each floor occupies the southwest quadrant of the house rather than running down its center. Light from the front windows brightens the spacious hall on the ground floor, where a spiral staircase begins its rise through all three stories. However, it is one floor up, on the *piano nobile*, where Avalon reveals its true beauty. There the light streams into the hall through the twelve-over-twelve window and the sidelights of the door to illuminate



Figure 6 (left): Avalon's spectacular hanging spiral staircase as seen from the hall on the main floor, or *piano nobile*. Photograph by Cathy Baty.

Figure 7 (below): Detail from Owen Biddle's *Young Carpenter's Assistant* showing an elevation for design of "geometrical stairs" and brackets for the ends of the steps.

Figure 8 (below left): Francis Hollingsworth probably intended to add decorative brackets to the stringers of the staircase. Photograph by Cathy Baty.

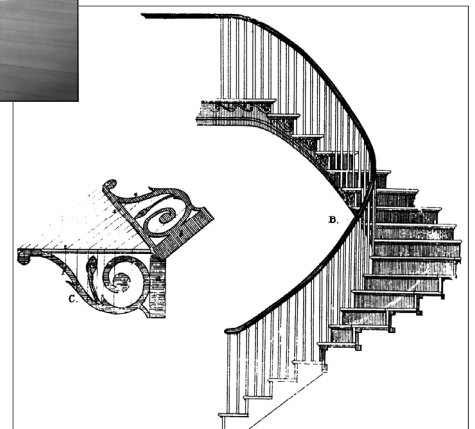


Figure 9 (right): The staircase at Avalon as seen from the third floor. Photograph by Cathy Baty.

Figure 10 (below): Biddle's plan for "geometrical stairs." Biddle's designs might have been the inspiration for some of Avalon's distinctive features.

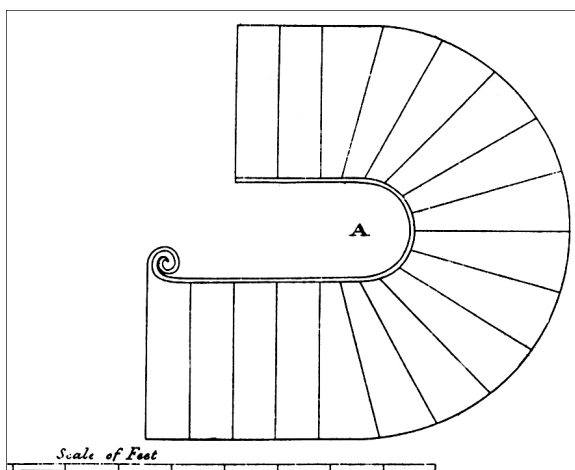




Figure 11 (left): Detail of an original mantelpiece on the main floor. Small fluted ionic columns on either side of the fireplace match a single larger column in the hallway.

Figure 12 (right): This lovely ionic column helps support the stairs and adds an elegant, neoclassical touch to the main hall.

Figure 13 (below): Avalon's woodwork on the principal floor is done in elegant, neo-classical style. This bull's eye corner block is part of a door frame. Photographs by Cathy Baty



the graceful curves of the hanging staircase. Though the house has many outstanding features, nothing matches its elegant simplicity (figs. 6 through 10).

The principal story originally had four rooms, to which has been added a small bathroom, well-hidden on a short hallway. A small room with a stunning neo-classical mantelpiece occupies the northwest quadrant while two large rooms stretch across the back of the house, each with its own handsome fireplace. Eleven-foot ceilings and wide doorways create a wonderful sense of interior space throughout the main floor. While there is no decorative plasterwork on the ceilings, the woodwork around the doors and windows, baseboards, ceilings and fireplaces is beautifully executed in neo-classical style, then the height of fashion (figs. 11 through 13).

On the back of the house, the *piano nobile* opens at ground level, so it is possible to step out of either large room onto a porch running from side to side (fig. 15). A brick building with a basement once stood directly behind the house and might have been attached at one time; its roof is barely

visible in the 1904 watercolor. It was torn down in the 1930s and its brick used to build a tenant house elsewhere on the property. The long rear porch might have been added or modified after the removal of the other building.

The upper floor of the main house, which is not visible from the front, contains two large bedrooms, one small one, an unusual little room with an interior window, and the hall where the stairs terminate. This hall is smaller and darker than on the floors below. Avalon does not have a full third story, so the pitch of the roof is evident in every room but particularly noticeable in the hall. Large amounts of storage space are located beneath the sloping roof on the front and back of the house. Decorative details on this floor, like those on the ground floor, are relatively simple.



Figure 14: Advertisement for the sale of Avalon from the *Engine of Liberty and Uniontown Advertiser*, a Frederick County newspaper.

In the past there were many outbuildings surrounding Avalon. An advertisement for the sale of the house in the December 11, 1837, edition of Gettysburg's *Adams Sentinel* mentioned "a large SWITZER BARN, of brick, extensive Wagon Sheds, Plough-



Figure 15: A back porch extends the full width of the house at the level of the main story. All three floors are revealed by windows of varying sizes on the south wall. Photograph by Sam Brainerd.

house, Carriage-house, Stabling, and all other necessary Out-houses,” as well as a “convenient Dairy.” Today the only outbuilding remaining is the brick summer kitchen located on the north side, part of which can be seen to the left of the house in Figure 3. At some point the kitchen was modified by raising its roof to create a full second story, but it always included a wash area, smokehouse, sleeping quarters for servants and even a “terrapi bin” in the basement where turtles could be kept in hibernation until needed for soup!

The First Sale

Frances Hollingsworth had not completed the house when he sold it in May 1814 to another wealthy Baltimore businessman, Jesse Slingluff (fig. 16), who was anxious to move his family away from the threat of British invasion during the War of 1812. No one knows why Hollingsworth had moved to the New Windsor area in the first place, although his older sister, Ann (Hollingsworth) Willis, and her dying husband lived less than a mile away; nor do we know why he agreed to sell it, unfinished, roughly five years later. Apparently Slingluff made arrangements for the house to be quickly completed after he bought it, with the result that it never

received finishing touches that might have been planned.

For example, according to tradition, Hollingsworth had ordered mahogany flooring, but Slingluff wanted to use the wood for furniture, so some floors were laid with oak and others with pine. The staircase might have been even more eye-catching if decorative brackets had been applied to the stringers, a common practice in many fine houses. Carpenters had already mitered the exposed edges of the risers to accommodate such brackets (figs. 8 and 9).

But instead of dwelling on what might have been, we should celebrate the fact that this nearly two hundred year-old

house has survived with so many of its original features intact and has found owners who are working to restore it to its former glory. Benign neglect has ironically worked in Avalon’s favor over the years. Most of the woodwork has only two coats of paint and there are few layers of paper on the walls. While two of the mantels may be replacements, no one indiscriminately ripped out the lovely woodwork to sell it or made major alterations on the second and third floors. Recent renovation of the 1930s bathroom on the main floor revealed grain-

painted baseboard molding and old paper on the wall which once separated the small front room from the large room in the back. Tulips planted long ago in a flower bed still bloom in the lawn each spring. Although the current owners removed over nine tons of trash from the house, they found that, underneath, their home is like an old lady whose exquisite bone structure still reflects the beauty of her youth.



Figure 16: Jesse Slingluff (1775-1836) purchased Avalon in 1814 and retired there after a successful business career in Baltimore. Courtesy of present owners.

Owners Through the Years

Jesse Slingluff’s descendants continued to live in Avalon for

nearly a hundred more years after 1814. After Jesse died in 1836, there were difficulties settling his estate, so Frederick County's chancery court required the public sale of all his real estate in December 1837. Avalon remained in the family, though, because Jesse's son, Isaac, bought 163 acres and the "mansion house," as it was called in the advertisement promoting the sale. Upon Isaac's death in 1852, the house and land passed into the hands of his son, Louis Philip Slingluff (fig. 17), who bought out his siblings' interests in the estate. Louis Philip was a farmer, dairyman, and judge, who also dabbled in local Democratic politics. The Carroll County Slingluffs were primarily engaged in agriculture; Jesse's descendants living in Baltimore were involved in business and law.

About 1861 the Western Maryland Railroad was extended from Westminster to New Windsor and Union Bridge and its tracks laid right through the Slingluff property, separating the house on the east from the barn on the west. Although residents today might bemoan such an arrangement, Louis Philip found the railroad a convenient way to ship his agricultural products to Westminster and Baltimore.

The March 13, 1886, *Democratic Advocate* of Westminster presented a long article on Avalon—part of its "Farms of Carroll" series—based primarily on material supplied by Louis Philip Slingluff. The newspaper described the 1852 loss of Hollingsworth's original brick barn to fire and its immediate replacement with a larger one; the extensive orchard associated with the property; and Slingluff's pride in the variety of shade trees he had planted. That article, the 1837 advertisement for the sale of Jesse Slingluff's property, and several paragraphs from J. Thomas Scharf's 1882 *History of Western Maryland* are valuable nineteenth-century sources of information about the family, house, and land.

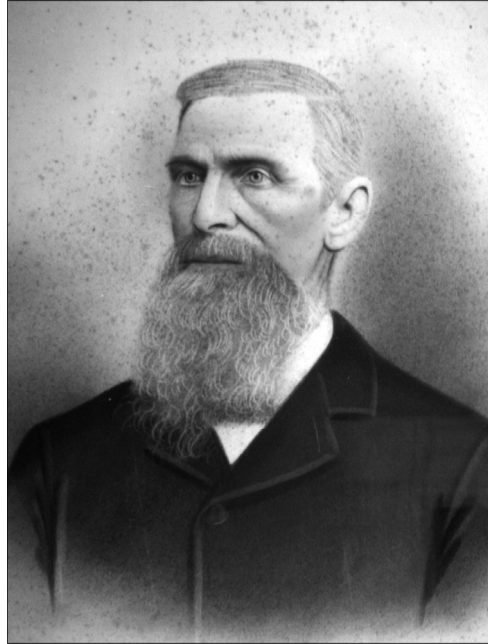


Figure 17: Louis Philip Slingluff (1831-1912), a grandson of Jesse, spent his entire life at Avalon. Courtesy of present owners.

After Louis Philip's death in 1912, the property passed out of the family, even though four of his children were still living. Samuel W. Barrick, the owner and operator of limestone quarries in Frederick County, bought Avalon likely because the land was underlain by limestone and successful quarries were already operating in the area. The proximity of the railroad would have been an asset. Barrick apparently never lived in the house; it was probably rented but could have been vacant at times (fig. 18). In 1935 F. Donald Shriver and his wife purchased the house and land that Isaac Slingluff had bought almost a century before. By then the house

was in poor condition: without central heat, indoor plumbing, or electricity. Shriver lowered the ceilings on the ground and main floors to install central heating and added bathrooms and a kitchen. His modernization required blasting rock to install a large furnace beneath the ground floor. Somehow Avalon withstood the explosion!

Louis Philip Slingluff's grandson, Robert Lee Slingluff II, brought the house and most of the original 163 acres back into the family in 1955. He and his wife Harriet furnished their home tastefully, enrolled it on the National Register of Historic Places, and entertained there frequently. Avalon was included in house and garden tours at least twice—once in 1949 when owned by the Shrivvers and again in the 1980s under Robert's ownership. On March 21, 1982, the Baltimore *Sun Magazine* featured it in a photo essay which showed the main hallway and staircase, a rear view of the house, and several elegant rooms with family portraits adorning the walls.

Following Robert Slingluff's 1996 death, Avalon was again sold at public auction, although what remained was only 8.9 acres and the house: most of the land as well as the barn had been sold off between 1955 and 1996. When the property went up

for sale again in 2001, a bank appraiser felt the house was beyond saving, but a pair of intrepid buyers could see beyond the rack and ruin. After much investigation and soul-searching, they decided to take up the challenge. Seven years later, the property is still a work in progress, though the owners have restored many of the rooms. They

enjoy and plan to continue the tradition of entertaining long associated with Avalon. They are planting heirloom fruit trees to re-establish the orchard and intend to add a variety of shade trees just as Louis Philip Slingluff did. Aided by architects, friends, and neighbors, they have uncovered a wealth of information about the house and its former inhabitants, but questions still beg to be answered and plenty of challenges lie ahead. Avalon's restoration will be a rich reward not only for its owners but also for everyone who appreciates fine old houses.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mary Ann Ashcraft spent her working career using her liberal arts education in a variety of ways but has found happiness in retirement researching Carroll



Figure 15: Avalon appears shabby and vacant in this 1930s photograph. Repairs to the brickwork are obvious, especially along the base of the south wall. Photograph courtesy of present owners.

County history and genealogy. She is indebted to the current owners of Avalon for sharing their extensive knowledge of their house, to architect Peter Pearre for reviewing her manuscript, to architectural historian Ken Short for his floor plan of Avalon, and to various friends

who supplied additional information. HSCC curator Cathy Baty and publications committee chairman and editor Sam Brainerd helped with the text and layout as well as providing current photographs of Avalon.

The members of the publications committee gained a great deal of pleasure from learning about this wonderful old house and hope our readers will share their enthusiasm. The first two issues of the *Carroll History Journal* illustrate the variety of subjects the committee hopes to cover: local citizens and institutions, genealogy, architecture, agriculture, and so on. Readers' feedback is welcome!

1. Peter Kurtze, Orlando Ridout V, and Joe Getty, Inventory-Nomination Form for the National Register of Historic Places, Site Number CARR-202, accessed online Jan. 8, 2008, at <http://www.mdihp.net>.

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