

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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County played role in Hiss-Chambers case
by Joe Getty

Can you help us solve a mystery?

The Historical Society of Carroll County is celebrating the decade of the 1940s with a "Fabulous Forties" dance on May 11. In our research about the 1940s in Carroll County, one local event stands out as being historically significant at the national level.

Carroll County was the focus of national attention in the Hiss-Chambers case. In 1948 Whittaker Chambers professed having been a Communist spy and accused Alger Hiss, a prominent Marylander, former State Department official, and president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, of having served with him as part of a Communist espionage network during the 1930s.

Chambers was a senior editor at *Time* magazine and resided on a farm in Bachman's Valley, north of Westminster. His revelations stunned the county and initiated a major investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee in Congress.

National media visited Carroll County to cover the Hiss-Chambers case. It was a major news story for over two years during which two trials took place. On January 20, 1950, Hiss was convicted of perjury and sentenced to prison.

This sensational case had long-lasting influences on our nation's political history. From his experiences, Chambers wrote an autobiography *Witness* which was published in 1952. The book has been a manifesto of the conservative political movement over the last 30 years.

California congressman Richard Nixon received his first national attention as a persistent member of the House Un-American Activities Committee during the Hiss-Chambers case. This exposure propelled his political career at the national level as he won election as a U.S. Senator in 1950 and as vice-president in 1954 and 1956.

One of the important pieces of evidence in the case was microfilm that Chambers said was given to him by Hiss. On December 2, 1948, the Bachman's Valley farm was the scene where Chambers turned over to congressional investigators the microfilm that he had hidden in a hollowed-out pumpkin in his garden.

Prior to the release of the microfilm, Hiss and Chambers were linked through their interest in the purchase of the same property in Bachman's Valley. On September 3, 1948, the local

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newspapers reported on an investigative article printed in the *Baltimore New Post* that detailed the unusual aspects of this transaction:

1. The Hiss interest in a rural property near Westminster started on November 5, 1935, at a time when Hiss admitted to the Washington committee that he knew Chambers as 'Crosley,' a freelance writer. On that date, Pricilla Hiss, who signed also as Mrs. Alger Hiss, wrote a Westminster real estate agent, asking if he had more information about a place the agent had advertised in a Baltimore newspaper. The Westminster real estate agent is Edward W. Case.
2. Next correspondence came to Mr. Case from a 'J.W. Chambers' who did not give his address, but asked that the reply be sent to his attorney in New York City. This letter was dated February 3, 1936 and in it Chambers asked Case if he had for sale a small piece of rural property, not necessarily good farm land, at between \$600 and \$750. Mr. Case told the *News-Post* that he had exactly what Chambers wanted, so much so that it seemed as though Chambers was describing the very property later contracted for by Hiss, and then by Chambers himself.
3. Case replied to Chambers, telling him of the property, and of several other pieces available.
4. Sometime after the first Case-Chambers correspondence. Hiss came to Westminster to see Mr. Case and looked at properties, including the one Chambers was interested in.
5. At that time, Case recalls, Hiss paid him a \$20 down-payment on the small property, known as Shaw property, which Chambers later bought.
6. On April 13, 1936, Hiss, with his wife signing as witness, contracted formally for the Shaw property, paying an additional \$100. He made several visits to Westminster, and placed tools there and began fixing the place up. Just then the owner, Estell Shaw, died and as there was some uncertainty about the validity of the contract, Hiss stopped for a time coming to Westminster.
7. Next, Mrs. Shaw's sister, a Mrs. Shirkey, was made executrix, and she suggested to Case that she wanted a higher price for the property. Case wrote Hiss early in May 1936 informing him of this and Hiss wrote back that he was not interested in a higher price.
8. On May 28, Hiss wrote to Case definitely ending his contract to buy the property.
9. On February 27, 1937, Chambers wrote Case, saying that he was coming out to look at some properties.
10. On March 12, 1937, Chambers came to Westminster and was taken by Calvin Zepp, an antique dealer, and Case to see the Shaw property. He made a \$40 deposit on that date and an agreement of sale was drawn up. Later he completed the purchase and his wife and two children

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moved in. The final deeds were given to Chambers in December 1941, as there was a long mystery about the title.

It was a mystery to Westminster people why either Hess or Chambers was interested in the house. Case said: "It was one of the oddest deals I ever had. The house was run down. It was five miles off a paved road. Yet here were two important men, both anxious to buy it."

Now, the mystery that you can help us with: Can you tell us the location today of the Shaw/Shirkey property? (It is not the same property as the Chambers' farm where the pumpkin patch was located.)

The Historical Society will host its fundraiser, the Celebration of the Fabulous Forties, on May 11. For information, contact the Historical Society at 848-6494.

Photo credit: Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: A photograph from the September 17, 1948 edition of the Democratic Advocate shows local businessmen Calvin Zepp and Edward Case identifying photographs of Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers.