

"Union Mills Fire in 1926"

Carroll County Times article for 11 March 2001

By Jay A. Graybeal

The community of Union Mills was roused by an early morning house fire on March 6, 1926 that threatened the William Shriver House. A description of the fire and successful effort to save the home were described in the March 12th issue of the American Sentinel newspaper under the headline of Fire at Union Mills:

"The large and expensively furnished residence of Miss Mary O. Shriver, Union Mills, occupied by Miss Shriver and her nephew, Robert T. Shriver, narrowly escaped complete destruction by fire about half past seven o'clock, last Saturday morning. Miss Mulligan, a companion of Miss Shriver, was the first member of the household to come down stairs on that morning. She discovered the front chapel, (one of the rooms on the west side of the house), filled with smoke and flames. She at once sounded the alarm. Robert S. Shriver hurried his aunt, Miss Shriver, into his automobile and rushed her to the home of James M. Shriver, near by. Leslie Irvin, an employee of the family, phoned for the Westminster fire company and called for assistance from those within reach of his voice. The responses were prompt, and George W. Bankert, Harry L. Cratin, D. Wesley Yingling, Charles Snider, Charles C. Croft, and others soon arrived at the house, and to their strenuous efforts, well directed, the saving of the building can be attributed. It was found that the fire was caused by a defective flue from the furnace in the cellar under the front chapel. An organ, the mantelpiece and other articles, were in flames. Harry L. Cratin and Charles C. Croft heroically carried the flaming instrument to the porch and cast it into the yard. Others dashed water into the burning room and carried valuable pictures and pieces of furniture from other parts of the building to places of safety. The fire, however, was confined to the two rooms of the chapel. All of the woodwork there was either scorched or badly smoked; the papering, lace curtains, pictures, ornaments, etc., were seriously damaged. The smoke played havoc with the altar and its costly appointments. Its candles were melted to their sockets. A large crucifix, carved by one of the actors of the passion play and presented to the mother of Miss Shriver by the late J. Alexander Shriver, of Baltimore, was among the articles injured. Miss Madeline Shriver rescued from the debris the remains of a large collection of newspaper clippings referring to the numerous visits of the late Cardinal Gibbons to their home. Among the articles carried from the house during the excitement was a life size oil painting of the Cardinal presented by him to Miss Shriver a short time before his death. The Westminster fire company answered its call with great promptness and made a record run to Union Mills through the frigid air of that morning. Although the fire was pretty well under control when the company arrived, it did good service in extinguishing the organ, which was still aflame, and all evidences of fire in the building. The company remained on the premises until there was no further danger of an outbreak. Joseph N. Shriver, Westminster, a nephew of Miss Mary O. Shriver, hearing the alarm, came to Union Mills in his automobile with his speedometer standing at the 70 mile point. His passengers were his son, Nicholas, and one of the Westminster firemen. James M. and Miss Madeline Shriver, who had been to Westminster to early church, reached Avalon, their home, a short distance away, about the time the fire was at its height. The losses are covered by insurance in the Mutual Fire Insurance co., of Carroll county, and in Stock Companies represented by Thos. F. Shriver, Baltimore."

As noted in the article, the house was saved by the "strenuous efforts" of several local men who risked their lives to help a neighbor in need. Although the fire was a tragic event, the article reveals some interesting details about the private chapel, an unusual feature in a Carroll County residence, and the Shriver household in the 1920s.



The William Shriver House, photographed in the 1890s when it was owned by T. Herbert Shriver, was nearly destroyed by an early morning fire on March 6, 1926. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.