

The Manse on Wilson Boulevard

BY CHARLES S. CLARK

The most expansive open-space property in Arlington still a private residence is the 19th century colonial revival home at Wilson Boulevard and North McKinley Street. It has been known through the decades variously as the Febrey property, Fair Mount Mansion, the Lothrop Farm, the Febrey-Lothrop House and the Audrey Meadows house, after the 1950s television star who left her mark on the historic home while married to the continuing owner, retired homebuilder Randolph Rouse.

The mansion's elevated location on Upton Hill has long allowed a view of the Washington skyline. And if its walls could talk, they'd impart a wealth of tales about appearances at the home by personages with national stature and deep Arlington roots.

The first house on the site was built around 1850 by realtor John E. Febrey (1831-1893) and his wife Mary Frances, she of Arlington's famed Ball family. This was back when Arlington was the rural section of Alexandria County.

John Febrey was born to a prominent family of farmers and orchard entrepreneurs headed by his father, Nicholas Febrey. The patriarch, who was active in early Virginia politics and whose own home was near where Swanson Middle School is today, bought parcels of land in Glencarlyn and Dominion Hills from families with such prominent Arlington names as Custis, Upton and Minor.

John Febrey, who in the 1890s became superintendent of Arlington public schools, built two homes on the property, the gray-shingled mansion still standing on Wilson Boulevard, and a wood frame house across what is now McKinley Road. The latter is believed to have been demolished in 1966 to make room for the Christian Science Church.

The Febreys farmed the land for corn, oats, wheat, rye, buckwheat and barley. During the Civil War, they used a cabin on the property as a private school. The family also maintained stables around what today is the Cavalier Club apartment building.

John Febrey's relatives, in evidence of the family's reach in the 19th century, would build two other homes on nearby high ground that survive to the modern era. John's brother Henry, a colonel in the Virginia militia and a justice of the peace, in the 1850s built the white-columned farmhouse known as "Maple Shade," still occupied at 2230 North Powhatan Street. And Henry's son Ernest in the late 19th century built a whimsical Victorian home at 6060 Lee Highway.

It was taken over in the late 1950s by the Overlee Community Association which, after using it as a swimming pool clubhouse for half a century, announced in 2011 its plan to tear it down as part of a modernization.

When John Febrey died in 1893, the Wilson Boulevard property was bought by Alvin Mason Lothrop, co-founder of the hugely successful Woodward and Lothrop department store chain. (His partner Samuel Woodward

also owned an Arlington home.) Lothrop used it as a summer retreat, as his primary residence was a Beaux Art mansion downtown at 2001 Connecticut Avenue. Still mounted on the wall of the Arlington house is a blueprint executed in 1895 by prominent architect Victor Mindeleff (he also designed the Chautauqua Tower at Glen Echo, Maryland). The sketch is labeled, "Alterations to country house for Mr. Alvin Mason Lothrop."

Lothrop added the shingled balconied porches to the structure, which can be seen in a surviving 1907 photo.

After Lothrop died in 1912, the house continued as a rural retreat for Lothrop's daughter Harriet. She married financier Nathaniel Horace Luttrell after he came to the Wilson Boulevard home to sell her family a car. In this era, the surroundings remained primarily farmland—Arlington memoirist Charles F. Suter, a friend of Rouse's, recalled delivering milk by pony as a boy in the 1920s, and leading his cow past the Lothrop farm. The Lothrop's added a swimming pool in 1934, as well as twenty telephone lines in a room behind the kitchen. Also installed during their occupancy were some cherry wood wall paneling and a red-painted handrail on the stairs, both intact today.

One of the Lothrop's who frequented the retreat was Alvin Lothrop's grandson, A. Lothrop Luttrell, a 1936 Princeton graduate, who in 1947 became executive vice president of Woodies (He would help plan the company's opening in 1955 of its then-largest store, just up Wilson Boulevard at Seven Corners).

During World War II, when the Lothrop men were serving in the military, the house was leased to Trans World Airlines. Its party rooms and pool were enjoyed by notables such as Washington Redskins owner George Preston Marshall, airline pioneer Howard Hughes, and actress Jane Russell.

The house would then be sold under messy circumstances. Another Lothrop grandson, Nathaniel Horace Luttrell Jr. (whom, by coincidence, Rouse also knew), in 1947 married Nina K. Lunn, the granddaughter of Maine Senator

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Wallace H. White Jr. She was an actress and horsewoman who would make society news for her whole life. Soon after the marriage to Luttrell she had an affair with Jeronimo Remorino, Argentina's ambassador to the United States. She and Luttrell then divorced secretly in Arlington in 1950, leaving the summer retreat empty.

That created an opening for Randy Rouse, as he explained in a 2011 interview at age 94. After his discharge from service in the Navy following World War II, the Smithfield, Virginia-born Rouse was living in an apartment near Rock Creek Park. A well-connected bachelor who was making a mark in horse riding (and later fox hunting) circles in McLean and Middleburg, Va., he was looking for a new occupation. "Since there were no homes or cars built during the war," he recalls, "there was a lot of opportunity for home building under the GI Bill," which offered loans at 4 percent. So when a friend Rouse had known at Washington and Lee University boasted during a dinner at the Army-Navy Country Club of doing well building homes in the Pimmit Hills area of Falls Church, Rouse decided to give it a go.

With little capital of his own, Rouse found an investment partner to leverage six bank loans. "Back then the banks knew you, and you couldn't hide behind some corporate structure," Rouse says. He took no salary, but the partners agreed to split the profits. Using skilled union workers (\$1,875 per hour) and 50-cent-per-hour laborers, he built his first 24 homes in the late 1940s near Tyson's Corner. He paid \$700 for each lot and sold the completed homes for \$10,000. (In the late 1980s, those homes were sold to an office developer for \$700,000 each and torn down to make room for the Tower Club.) Rouse also built 200–300 houses on Annandale Road in a subdivision he named Bel Air, some of which are still standing.

Soon Rouse was working 14-hour days out of an office in the heart of Falls Church. That's when a friend who was a real estate agent told him that Arlington's hilltop Febrey-Lothrop house was on the market. A divorcing couple was willing to unload the 26 acres for \$125,000. That price was still beyond Rouse's reach, but he came up with \$10,000 and the owners agreed to retain a first trust.

Rouse recalls when he toured the vacant house one Saturday afternoon, he noticed an antique car, and asked hopefully whether it conveyed. It did not. But he did get to keep an elegant mantelpiece in the drawing room that a visiting diplomat had wanted to buy.

"At the time the area was still country fields, with a dairy barn as well as six horse stalls," Rouse recalls. He set up horse jumps on the property and would keep the stalls until the apartments (now called the Patrick Henry Apartments) and water tower were built across Wilson Boulevard. Rouse removed

a stone wall and wooden columns, which had stood in front of the house since the days of horse-drawn carriages, to make room for automobile access. At the suggestion of his friend George Preston Marshall, whose Washington Redskins office downtown on 11th Street Rouse enjoyed visiting, he converted the butler's pantry into a full bar.

The plat an engineer recorded re-divided the property, giving the residence just nine acres so that Rouse could use the remainder to build homes along what today is Madison Street. He chose to build on only one side. Of the 40 or 50 new homes, one was sold to his close friend from W-L University glee club days, Paul Brown. A lifelong friend, Brown became Rouse's attorney (and later an Arlington judge).*

Rouse continued to build homes and buy champion horses, competing in steeplechase competitions. It was in the mid-50s, on a water-skiing jaunt in Annapolis, that he took up with a New York-based actress named Audrey Meadows. At the time she was a player on the "Bob and Ray" radio comedy show. But soon she auditioned for the "to the moon" role of a Brooklyn bus driver's ever-tolerant wife Alice, opposite Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden in the early TV classic "The Honeymooners." It was a laugh-winning part she won only after reacting to an initial rejection from Gleason by dressing more frumpily.

Rouse and Meadows were married by her father, a Connecticut clergyman, in New York City. The celebrity Gleason was not invited, Rouse explains, because he was a bit "crude, outspoken and overbearing."

Meadows' 1994 memoir "Love, Alice" mentions Rouse only in one passage, about a time funnyman Gleason "corked" her off: "I had been married in May of 1956 and was living in Virginia," she wrote. "I commuted to New York on Fridays. Saturday nights I hired an ambulance to get me to the airport so that I could jump in my car and be back in my house by 10:30. A call came from the office to say that Jackie was calling a rehearsal for Thursday afternoon. At that time, my husband had the mumps, which can be serious in an adult male. Not wanting to leave him, I asked to beg off, saying I could learn whatever it was on Friday, but Jackie was adamant. So I flew to New York Thursday. I reached my apartment to find a message saying rehearsal had been canceled...I called the office and laid a few thousand on them. Unconscionably selfish, no compassion, et cetera, were the mildest."

* The son of Judge Brown and his wife Dorothy, David Brown, became a flight surgeon and astronaut and would die in the 2003 space shuttle disaster. Brown, Dorothy, interview by author, June 23, 2011

Rouse says he doesn't recall having the mumps, but he loved watching his wife's show. "She was a wonderful actress, and that character wasn't the Audrey of real life, who was classy, educated and articulate," he says. He recalls her driving to the Seven Corners Safeway in a red convertible given to her by TV sponsor Buick.

To Rouse, those were "fun years" that his famous wife spent decorating the 19th century Arlington home. Meadows picked the wallpaper's grass cloth (originally red, now faded to tan) and the brass inlay linoleum floor in the foyer. She picked out a Chinese screen that remains on the living room wall (though she had been tempted to take it with her). And she commissioned the portrait of Rouse in horseman's garb that still hangs over the drawing room mantel, surrounded by his competition photographs and equestrian decorative motifs.

Dorothy Brown, the widow of Judge Brown, recalls many parties at Rouse's home with Meadows, film stars and other VIPs. "When I first heard we were invited to dinner, I thought, 'What am I going to talk about?' with this star of a hit TV show?" Brown said in a 2011 interview. "But she was just wonderful, nothing snobbish. She talked about her parents' missionary work in China."

Brown also recalls many parties around the swimming pool, often with a piano player on a platform in the water. "When we arrived, he would play 'Here Comes the Judge' and some similar song for everyone else," she says. Sometimes Rouse would join in on saxophone.

But not all the fun would endure. Meadows, Rouse now says, "was smart and sensitive, but insecure and needed adulation." Eventually, "she got bigger than I was, and I resented being Mr. Audrey Meadows." She also suspected him of consorting with old girlfriends during her absences, which wasn't true, he says. So they divorced after two years together. Rouse would later give his blessing to her second marriage, to Continental Airlines president Bob Six. He wrote to her once before her death in 1996, but Meadows never replied.

Back as a bachelor, Rouse grew his business and became a multimillionaire. He'd meet colleagues at the Howard Johnson's at Seven Corners (now Pistone's Italian Inn restaurant). He joined the Northern Virginia Builders Association (later serving as its president), which met monthly at the Washington Golf and Country Club. He worked with star developers Tom Broyhill, Arthur Pomponio and George Snell.

In 1970, Rouse retired from residential homebuilding. "Selective housing had replaced big subdivisions," he says. He did go on to build a tall hotel and office building called the Rouse Tower in Newport News (which the city later bought) and a hotel in Williamsburg in the mid-1990s. Closer to home, he worked out a deal with a bank to purchase the Broyhill-built Arva Motel

across from Arlington's Fort Myer. He later sold it for an impressive profit to an entrepreneur continuing with the Days Inn chain.

Rouse says he watched many builders go broke because they couldn't sell and had too much inventory. "I got lucky that the land value increased by ten times," he said.

Watching his Dominion Hills neighborhood change, Rouse has lived through decades that brought new high-rise and garden apartments in the Willston Shopping Center area, Vietnamese stores along Wilson Boulevard and, most recently, BJ's Wholesale Club. He vividly recalls the comings and goings in the 1960s of the American Nazi Party headquarters at what is now Upton Hill Regional Park. Rouse's pet dog once ran away and wandered onto the Nazis' property, so Rouse drove up the lane to the house. There he was met by a polite Nazi in uniform carrying a pistol, who said, "You can't come in, sir. Sorry, sir."

In 1983, Rouse married Michele O'Brien, whom he'd met decades earlier in Middleburg when she was a 12-year-old member of the junior fox hunters.

On the day this writer visited their idyllic home, the couple were admiring a family of foxes that had joined the habitual deer and ducklings playing around the edge of the swimming pool. It's a pool that was once notorious in the neighborhood as a site for teens to sneak into and clandestinely party. Michele and Randy pulled out a yellowed 1963 clipping from the *Northern Virginia Sun* showing their home, with a caption that, for reasons that escape Randy Rouse, refers to it as "Fair Mount Mansion."

Whatever the historic home is called, Michele is hoping to hold onto it, despite what Randy Rouse calls "the constant maintenance." But he won't rule out its eventually being subdivided; a team of trustees will help his wife decide.

Charles S. Clark, a frequent contributor to the *Magazine*, writes the "Our Man in Arlington" column for the Falls Church News-Press.

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