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Sunny Side is a reminder of county's past

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If you've ever headed out Courthouse Road in Spotsylvania County, you've probably wondered, "What's that doing there?" Just past the Breezewood area and before the banks and fast-food places at Hilltop Square shopping center, there it is: Sunny Side farm.

With its old white farmhouse and big red barn with a silo, it is picture-postcard perfect--an island of back-then Spotsylvania surrounded by modern suburban development. How did that come to be?

The two-word answer: Conservation easement.

The easement was established through the Virginia Outdoors Foundation by the late Arvel Shannon, widow of Sidney Shannon Jr., who acquired Sunny Side in the mid-1970s. A Fredericksburg native, Sidney Shannon established Shannon Airport and developed the Sheraton Inn and Shannon Green Golf Course on land that is now Central Park.

It was big, end-of-an-era news around here in 1999 when the landmark silos came down at the farm along State Route 3 to make room for Central Park. Apparently, it was Arvel's desire that the same not happen to the silo at Sunny Side, so she established the easement in 2006, prior to her death.

"I want to keep it as it is, not seeing it developed," she said. "When I pass away, Sunny Side should be protected."

The result is a 35-acre patch of green along State Route 208 near Leavells Road that is zoned R-1 and granted various uses by right and by special exception under the Spotsylvania County zoning ordinance.

Though the land is preserved in perpetuity, the estate has decided to place the farm on the market. It is listed with Alex Long, an associate broker with Weichert Realtors in Fredericksburg. The asking price is \$1.2 million.

Long suggests that anyone with questions about what would be allowed in terms of planting or livestock contact the county zoning office.

THE OLD FARMHOUSE

Without the easement, one would expect that Sunny Side and its place in local lore would have long ago gone the way of the bulldozer. Thankfully, that's not the case.



The farmhouse's main-level rooms have glistening pine floors, fireplaces and white walls set off by classic blue trim.



ABOVE: A small footbridge traverses a portion of a large pond on the Sunny Side property.



Thanks to a conservation easement through the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, Sunny Side farm remains intact in suburban Spotsylvania.

The two-story farmhouse dates to 1817, and it, along with the barn, numerous outbuildings and extensive landscaping, remain impeccably maintained. According to a Works Progress Administration Administration Historical Inventory report prepared in the 1930s, the land was long part of the Edmund S. Leavell property. Researched and written by Mildred Barnum of Fredericksburg, the report notes that the farm was sold to Betsy Barton French in 1860. (An anecdote from the days of her ownership can be found in the sidebar on E1.)

Because of its location between Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania Courthouse, the farm's visitors represented a who's who from the Civil War era, including Gens. Robert E. Lee, John R. Cook, J.E.B. Stuart and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, according to the WPA report.

Barnum noted that Mrs. French was a very religious person, something she shared with Gen. Jackson.

"One evening General Jackson came to call, and he and Mrs. French spent the entire evening discussing religious subjects," she wrote.

From Courthouse Road, visitors are greeted by a brick entry and a picturesque paved lane.

At some point, the house was covered in white vinyl siding, but it retains a classic look of white-with-black shutters. The original house varies only slightly from the standard four-over-four with center hall arrangement.

The main entrance is protected by a portico. The oversized front door is framed in sidelights and a transom. Inside, the house appears well-kept and ready to receive its next steward. To the right of the foyer is a parlor and to the left the dining room. These formal areas have gleaming original pine floors, white plaster walls and handsome blue period trim. Dentil molding was used both for crown and chair rail and for the fireplace mantels.

Behind the dining room is the kitchen, which is clean and serviceable, but like some bathrooms could be in line for some updating.

The house is officially listed with two bedrooms, two full bathrooms and a half-bath, however the master has a large, attached sitting room that could become a third bedroom.

The main rooms on both levels have fireplaces that feed into a pair of symmetrical inboard chimneys.

Beneath the house is a root cellar accessible from outside. Whether it ever had some use, maybe as a kitchen, is unclear.

At some point during the Shannons' ownership, a breezeway and family room formed a single-story addition. The room has a vaulted, exposed-beam ceiling as well as its own fireplace.

SUNNY SIDE'S SETTING

Outside the house, it's hard to fathom that all the trappings of suburban development are within a half-mile radius. That means the property enjoys the best of both worlds--tranquil isolation from the hustle-bustle of modern life, but with schools, shopping centers and restaurants a mere stone's throw away.

Full disclosure: If you search hard enough for a break between the trees and outbuildings that surround the house, you can see the Golden Arches at Hilltop plaza in the distance.

It's those outbuildings that contribute to the Sunny Side mystique. Foremost is the big red barn that's sure to evoke a smile and a memory for many area residents.

Inside, the turn-of-the-20th-century barn retains its milking bays from the dairy operation it once housed. Upstairs is a huge



The farmhouse dates to 1817, and managed to survive a run-in or two with the Union army during the Civil War.



A family room, connected to the main house by a breezeway, was a one-story addition.

open floor for hay storage with a soaring ceiling and series of rafters that are something of a structural art form. There's a basketball backboard hanging up there, though the hoop is missing.

Other outbuildings include a smokehouse, a well house that still holds a pump, a chicken house, a studio and a two-car garage that includes workshop space.

Adding to the bucolic setting is a pond, which has a quaint wooden footbridge across a narrow portion of it.

It's not uncommon around here to see farms and even livestock separated by fencing from subdivisions. But for this farm to remain here now, and forever, in this location, is certainly special.

The property has private well and septic systems, a security system and a whole-house generator for use in the event of a power outage.

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In her Works Progress Administration report, Mildred Barnum describes Sunny Side as being along the well-traveled road between Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania Courthouse.

She relates the story that one day during the Civil War, a group of Union soldiers arrived at the homestead and proceeded to help themselves to grain from the granary, angering owner Betsy Barton French.

"Mrs. French begged them not to do it, telling them that she and her servants, and the animals, were dependent on it for food. They paid no attention to her but went right on, even taking the mules, too. Mrs. French caught the bridle of one of the mules, but the soldier roughly slapped her hand away. Then she straightened up and said: 'May the curse of the widows' and orphans' God be upon you.' Some time later, this company was practically wiped out."

Mrs. French was not to be messed with. It's surprising that Sunny Side survived that episode, and no doubt other run-ins with Union troops during the war, without being torched.

--Richard Amrhine

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