

The Magazine

MARCH/APRIL 2022

ANTIQUES



Eyre Hall in Virginia

ALL ABOUT THE HISTORIC ESTATE AT THE SOUTHERN TIP OF THE DELMARVA PENINSULA



North-facing aerial view of Eyre Hall, Chariton, Virginia, completed 1760, with nineteenth and twentieth century additions. Photograph by Dennis McWaters. All photographs courtesy of Carl Lounsbury.

Aerial view of the house, garden, and family graveyard. McWaters photograph.



The Eastern Shore of Virginia has always been distinct from mainland Virginia, a picturesque peninsula flanked by the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay that is essentially a series of necks of land formed by tidewater creeks and marshy inlets. Accomack and Northampton Counties are dominated by agriculture and, at one point, the latter county was the largest producer of tomatoes in the world. Geographically, the shore was isolated from the rest of Virginia until the 1964 opening of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, a seventeen-mile-long dazzling eye feast that goes over and under the frothy bay and barrier islands.

A short drive north of the bridge tunnel is the road that leads to Eyre Hall—a treasure of the Eastern Shore. Called Golden Quarter on seventeenth-century maps, the plantation was patented by Thomas Eyre II in 1662, and, most remarkably, remains in the hands of his descendants.



Typical of the early buildings of the Eastern Shore, the main house was reached from the road, not the water. A dreamy mile-long lane, lined with crepe myrtles and cedars, leads from the public highway to the house, and the unpaved surface forces you to slow down and appreciate the rural beauty of rough-cut borders and dappled sunlight. Until the late twentieth century, a park of ancient trees framed the approach, but these were lost in a cruel hurricane, and the main house now dominates the surrounding flat fields and distant meandering waterways. Whitewashed fences, both decorative and utilitarian, separate the park from the yard and old workspaces, and a charming dairy from 1759 peeks out from under dense magnolia bows.

The local architecture (and furniture) is characterized by a combination of sophistication and rusticity, often using pattern-book inspiration with vernacular details, and Eyre Hall follows suit although it leans further toward the former. The main forty-foot-square house was completed in 1760 for Littleton Eyre and was expanded in both the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Four porches of about 1790 animate the exterior of the Dutch-roof house. Reached by scrolling marble steps, the porches are paved with distinctive King of Prussia tiles and feature built-in benches and archetypical aqua-blue ceilings—mud dauber wasps won't build nests in a blue ceiling!

One of the glories of Eyre Hall is the large formal garden behind the house, which survives in part from

View of the parlor, with portrait of Severn Eyre (1735–1773), the son of Littleton Eyre (1710–1768). Photograph by Jeff Klee. The wingback chairs are reproductions, probably early 1900s.

Map of the Chesapeake region by Rick Britton (1952–), 2021.

Staircase and scenic Dufour wall-paper, 1817, in the house's back passage. Klee photograph.



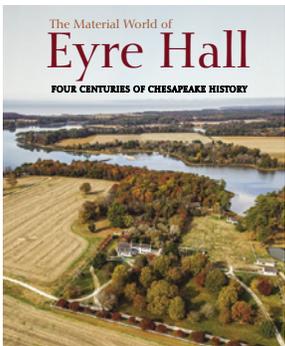
View of the entrance hall. Klee photograph.

View from the garden of the east facade of the greenhouse. Klee photograph.

The dairy is the oldest surviving service building, dated to 1759 by dendrochronology. Klee photograph.

the eighteenth century. Laid out in a series of ten rectangles, divided by rare "swept" paths, the whole is enclosed by a brick and picket whitewashed fence. The ancient rolling stone, used to compress the dirt paths and keep them flat still survives. Massive billowy box bushes abound beneath towering, gnarled crepe myrtles, and many exotic specimen trees brought in during the nineteenth century still survive. The understory is set with newer seasonal plantings, the peonies making a dramatic show in the late spring.

At the southwest corner of the garden is the ruin of a brick orangery, or greenhouse, dating to about 1820, that previously featured a glass front and heated work-



rooms in the rear. Ductwork for the heating system can still be discerned, as can diamond-patterned holes in the gable, indication of a probable dovecote. Lastly, in the rear corner of the grounds is the family graveyard, dating from the 1760s and featuring a number of slab and obelisk markers.

Untouched and remote, Eyre Hall is one of the last remnants of a traditional civility in which churches and gardens were once quietly "open" to be shared with discriminating visitors. The grounds and gardens at Eyre Hall are an oasis from the jostling world and can be enjoyed gratis during regular hours on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. The house is not opened except during Virginia's Historic Garden Week, at the end of April every year.

And if you cannot get to the Eastern Shore, or even if you can, there is a splendid and lushly illustrated new

book available, *The Material World of Eyre Hall: Four Centuries of Chesapeake History*, edited by architectural historian Carl R. Lounsbury, and published by the Maryland Center for History and Culture in association with the publishing house D. Giles. Get a copy!