

G E O R G I A N

PHOTOGRAPHY by KIP DAWKINS | STYLING by BILL SORRELL



New is old and old is new at this treasure of a house near Bealeton. With an appreciation for a new twist on an old style, GARLAND POLLARD wades into Great Marsh.

R E V I V A L



From

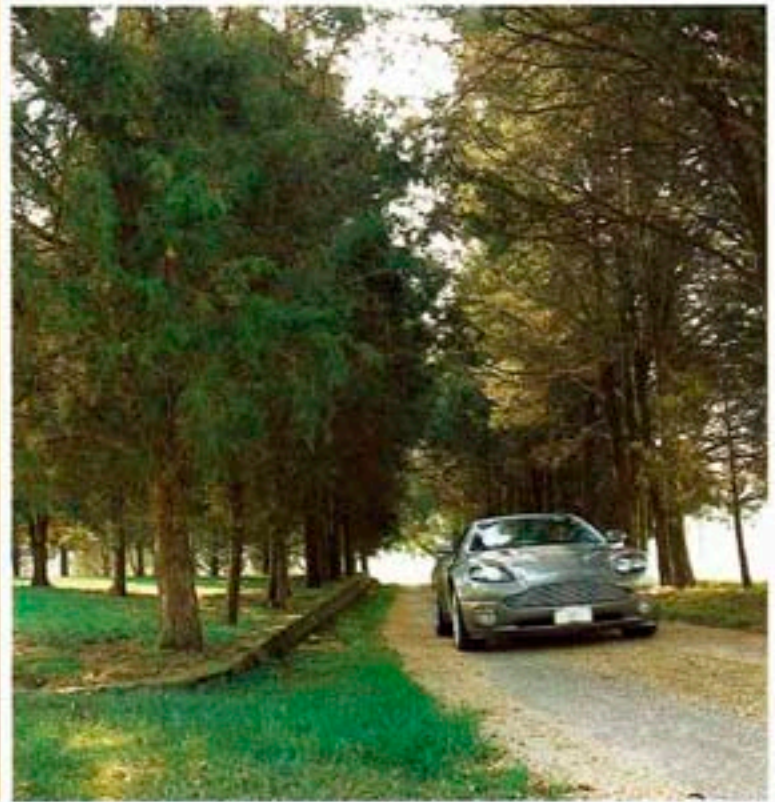
rom a distance, Great Marsh looks like a typical grand Georgian mansion. But look very closely at the Fauquier County house, and you will see that the property is both topped off—and surrounded by—concrete. The roof is Hendricks tile, a Richmond-made concrete roofing tile that simulates wood. Hendricks tile looks old, lasts almost forever and is both historically correct and modern. And surrounding the property is a grand

concrete fence, built on site.

For concrete, at least metaphorically, built Great Marsh. Donald Tharpe, who built the house, before retirement owned a pre-cast concrete products company in Pennsylvania. At its most prestigious, the company made security barriers for the World Trade Center after the first bombing, as well as for the White House and Pentagon. It also made 50 different types of concrete products for

Here, the tray ceiling by local artist Bill Woodward. While the chairs are 18th century Irish, the cedar topped table is English. The chandelier is 18th century French.

highway use in nine states on the East Coast, including the lowly New Jersey barrier, those concrete walls used in highway construction. One byproduct of concrete casting is test pieces. Ever economical, Tharpe took those pieces from different jobs and made the paneled fence out of test



concrete. In total, Tharpe has over 8,000 feet of concrete at Great Marsh.

Tharpe grew up in Fauquier, with family roots there within a mile of Great Marsh, but he went to accounting school at VCU, graduated in 1969 and then worked for Blue Cross as a financial manager. His Pennsylvania concrete company came later. Anticipating retirement, in 1985 Tharpe and wife Toni purchased a farm just off

Route 17, near Bealeton.

The original 1772 house was vandalized and the chimneys pulled down. With the house beyond repair, Tharpe decided he would tear it down and build anew. The old homesite seemed perfectly situated. "I didn't want to hide it, and I didn't want to show it off."

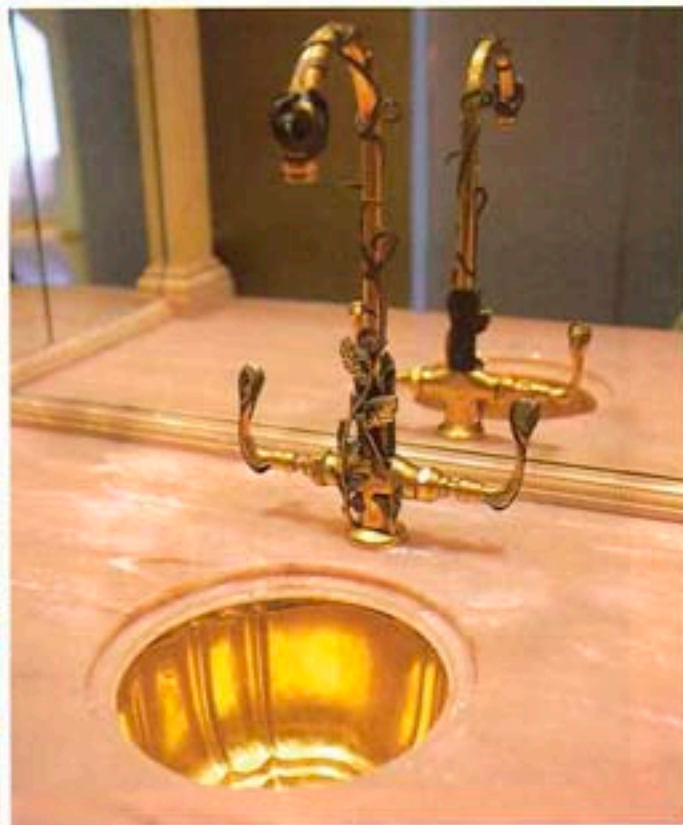
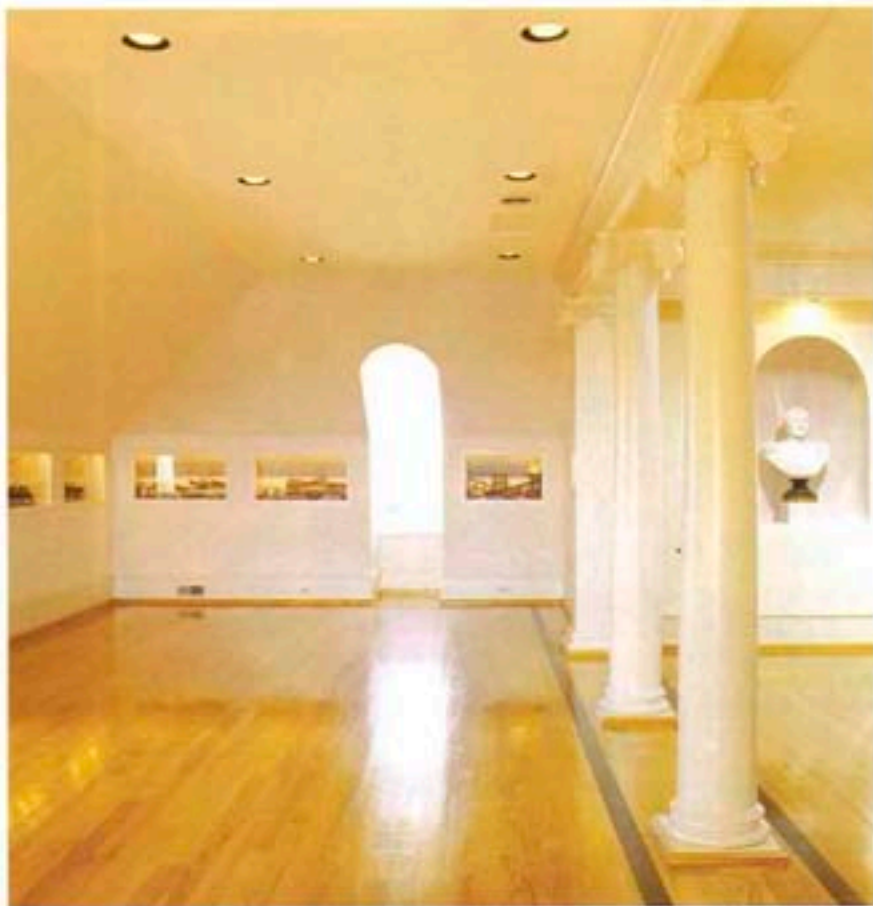
Deciding on the style was personal preference. "Georgian architecture has always been my favorite." He had

read an article in *National Geographic* about a Georgia architect by the name of James L. Strickland, of the Historical Concepts architecture firm in Peachtree City, and a development called Sweetbottom Plantation. He went there and saw wonderful houses that had ideas borrowed from Savannah but were completely modern. "There was a Georgian-looking house that had kind of modern concepts to the interior that really

Clockwise from top left: Rosebud, by the English painter John George Brown, sits over the master bedroom fireplace; driving in his Aston Martin; a view upstairs through the Palladian window; view of the front of the house. Opening spread left, the main hall with French Regency chairs and composite faux marble Ionic columns. Opening spread right, sitting room.

caught my eye," he says.

It would work perfectly for the site. But once they got into the design stage, they realized that if a



house were built on the site to the original dimensions, it would look wrong. "Jim, in his way, reminded us that now, 'as you go wider you've got to go deeper, you've got to go higher.' And he asked the question, 'Do you realize what the mass is going to look like as we spread your house from 36 feet to 48 feet wide?' ... It doesn't seem like 12 feet would make too much difference. But it did." And with the new dimensions,

His collections are still important, from Egypt to the Civil War, and he planned space for them in the house. To do this, he took the attic and framed out the eaves; the display cases are then arrayed around the useless areas.

they would be able to do essential things like get a chest of drawers to fit between the windows. The interior changed, too—the ceiling height increased from 10 feet to 12 feet. To complement the house, Tharpe hired another Georgian, landscape archi-

tect Don Hooten & Associates, of Decatur, Georgia, for the site plan.

Like many other neo-traditionalists, Tharpe prefers the "golden rectangle" from classical mathematics and architecture, that 1-to-1.618 dimension seen everywhere from da

Vinci to Mondrian. This ratio informs the dimensions of the house. But not totally. "My life seems to be centered around symmetry and balance, but it is fun to work in asymmetrical patterns and designs and radiuses to complement the balance."



This house was finished in 1989; the local architect on the project was self-taught Claude "Toad" Ritchie, a devotee of Frank Lloyd Wright. "This was the only colonial house Mr. Ritchie ever worked on," says Tharpe, "because he saw the opportunity here to be creative on his own right."

Tharpe has no qualms recommending working with an architect, and finding one who is compatible with your style. "The money needs to be

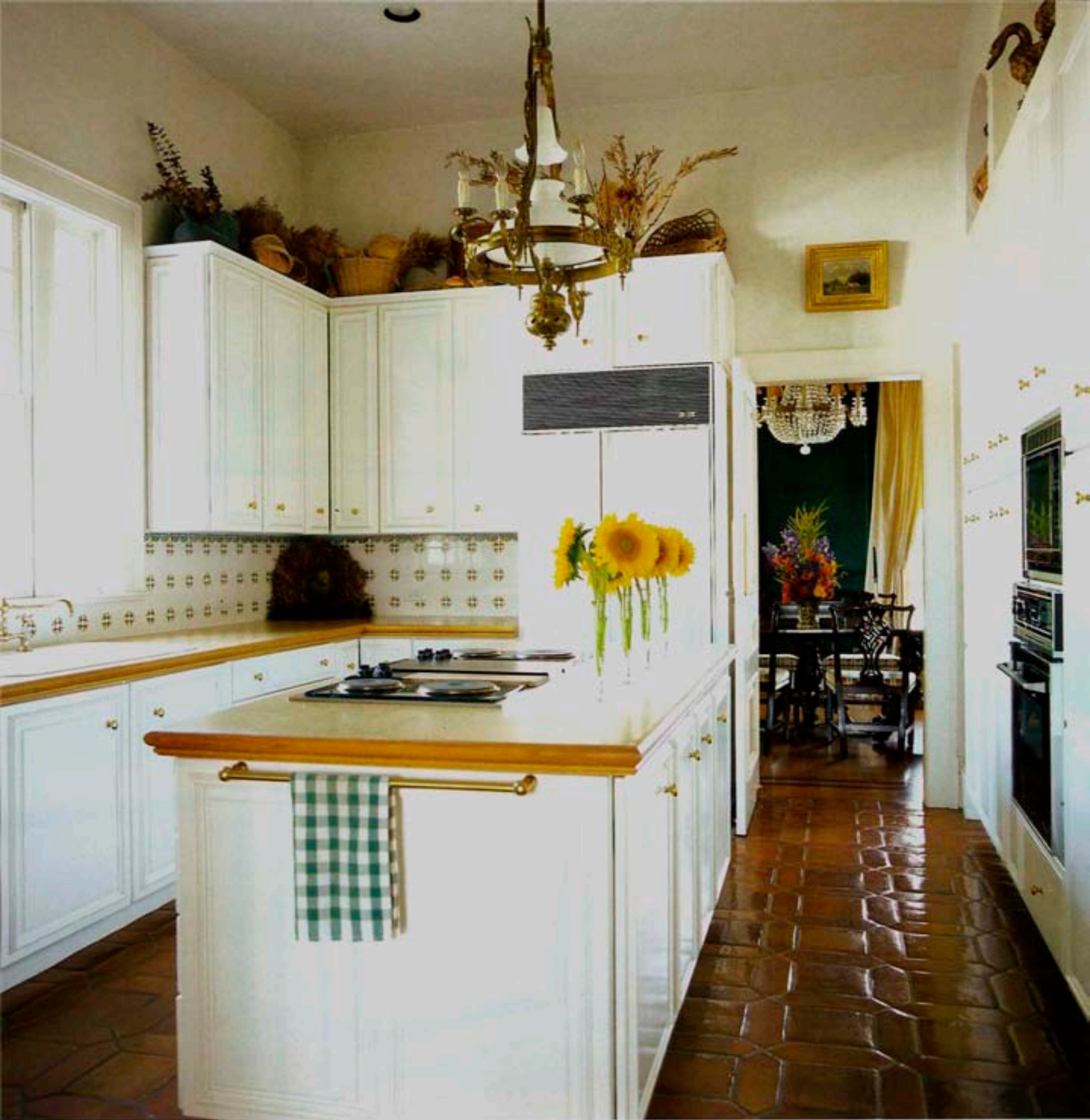
invested with the architect, because the architect is the only one of that group skilled to draw on paper and carry out the end product that he discusses with the client," he says. Tharpe credits his wife Toni for her interior; she oversaw every aspect. And she knew some smart visual tricks—for instance, putting trim on plaster to make it look like paneling.

The balustrades, columns, lintels and volutes are all made from Indi-

ana limestone, shipped to Atlanta, then hand turned and carved by Sherwood Cut Stone. This was a challenge. For instance, the front pediment weighed 13 tons and was planned to be perfectly vertical to the front of the house. But Tharpe had a concern that if there were no tilt, then how would it stay there? "Where is it going to go? Obviously, it's going to fall off."

Architect Ritchie designed a series

Above, a display of Tharpe's treasures, including a flag made by Flora Cooke Stuart for her husband J.E.B. Stuart. It was carried in battle but accidentally burned and replaced, then willed to Stuart Hall School by Flora Stuart. The 1873 statue of Lafayette is by Bartholdi; it was made one year before Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty. Facing page, clockwise from top left: an 18th dynasty sarcophagus lid, the "attle," custom P.E. Guerin fauceet; the billiard room with a captured flag of Company I, 5th Michigan Cavalry. The Michigan unit, which served under Custer, killed J.E.B. Stuart.



of steel plates and rods to tie it to the house and make it one structural unit. But the stonemason in Atlanta, also structurally minded, "determined that the pitch of the pediment itself would lead to possibly some problems in construction of the house, so he literally altered the front pediment." But Tharpe says they had to send it back. "It would have completely destroyed the appearance of the balance of the front of the house."

Tharpe is an astute collector of Virginia and American history documents. But in regard to furniture, he's no snob, often preferring centennial reproduction pieces in favor of originals. "You can live a style. A lot of times you cannot live comfortably with antiques, 'cause you don't want to damage them or destroy their investment opportunity."

With 12-foot ceilings, you cannot get by with what Tharpe calls

Here, a view of the kitchen through to the dining room, which is in the front of the house. Facing page, looking out across an Elizabethan table with two Spanish colonial silver candlesticks and Donald Tharpe at the gate.

a "diminutive chest." But there lies an advantage in that most American houses have a smaller scale, thus the demand for large-scale furniture is not as much as smaller pieces. "It makes it easier to buy those antiques to furnish a room like this, and probably they aren't as expensive.

It's all supply and demand," he says. His collections are still important, from Egypt to the Civil War, and he planned space for them in the house. To do this, he took the attic and framed out the eaves; the display cases are then arrayed around these otherwise useless areas.



Ten years into the project, he wonders how he will finish out the landscaping. "I feel like 'Capability' Tharpe, because I'm not going to live to see those [trees]." He also battles beavers. "I had to shoot seven sticks of dynamite at one time," says Tharpe. "But I got it out of there."

Outside of the house, Tharpe has been interested in a piece of property he purchased in October 2001, a nearby soybean farm. It was granted

to settler Philip Ludwell, Esq. in 1709, but Tharpe is trying to discern whether he actually lived there. To that end, James Madison University is operating an archaeology field school. In addition, Tharpe is going through the 180 hours of training to become an archaeological technician.

"I really like studying history and research," says Tharpe. "I plan on being a good student and working hard." You'd have to believe him—Tharpe in

recent years has earned a theology degree from Regent University. In addition, he has set up the Liberty Heritage Society, a historical group, to concentrate on not just Virginia history, but also the idea of liberty, from 500 B.C. up until the time of the Civil War.

"I'm having the time of my life," says Tharpe. "This is what I wanted my retirement to be about."

