

Lebanon Daily News

Getaways: Destinations tucked away in Falmouth, Va.

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Updated: 09/21/2011 10:30:59 AM EDT

At Belmont, the Gari Melchers home and studio, in Falmouth, Va., the stone on the exterior of the studio, on the left, came from bridges destroyed during the Civil War. The rooms of the house are filled with furnishings that belonged to Melchers and his wife, Corinne.

Falmouth, Va., is a town that originally developed as a port along the Rappahannock River. One of its early citizens, Bazil Gordon, a tobacco exporter, is believed to have been America's first millionaire. Union forces occupied the town in 1861, which resulted in economic hardship for its residents. Today Falmouth, which is located about 40 miles south of Washington, D.C., has a population of about 3,600 people.

Three public attractions in the Falmouth area are interesting in their own way. There is the former home of a New York artist, a mansion that hosted four presidents and a collection of battlefield collections.

The name Gari Melchers is not recognized by Americans with a basic knowledge of art as much as the names Monet, Van Gogh, Rembrandt and Picasso. But during his time, Melchers was a successful artist, and President Theodore Roosevelt was "especially pleased" with the portrait Melchers did of him.

Gari Melchers, the son of a Prussian-born sculptor, was born in Detroit in 1860. He studied figure painting in Germany and then studied art in Paris and Holland. In 1889, Melchers and John Singer Sargent became the first two American painters to be awarded the prestigious Grand Prize at the Paris Universal Exposition.

When he returned to America, he was sought after as a portraitist and did well financially doing portraits of the Vanderbilt and Mellon families and others. He later established a studio in New York City overlooking Bryant Park. Melchers and his wife, Corinne, who was also an artist, purchased an estate in the small village of Falmouth in 1916 as a place to escape the hectic life in New York. Eventually the Georgian-style frame house, believed to have been built in the 1790s, became their full-time home.

Visitors who tour the site today see the house just as it looked when Corinne Melchers bequeathed the property to the Commonwealth of Virginia to serve as a Gari Melchers memorial and art center. It is a pleasant place to visit. The house has yellow wood siding with green shutters. On the south end of the house, the Melcherses added a hexagon-shaped sunroom, and on the north end, they added a third story. There is a large porch with a roof supported by four large columns on the east side facing the river.

Furnishings and artwork purchased during their European travels, including Delft and Wedgwood dishes, as well as items acquired locally, fill the rooms of the house. The first floor has a large parlor, a dining room, which has a large painting titled "Market Scene" by Flemish

painter, Frans Snyders, and the comfortably furnished library, with a fireplace, high-back chairs and book cabinets. Bedrooms on the second floor are also seen during a 30-minute tour.

The studio also appears today as it did when Gari Melchers worked there. His palettes, tubes of oil paint, paint brushes and easel remain there, as well as many of his paintings. A mahogany cabinet with an intricate carving done on its doors by Gari's father, Julius, is among the furnishings.

A painting on the wall above the cabinet, titled "The Choirmaster," of girls at choir practice and an older choir director looks like the type of expressive illustration that Norman Rockwell did when he became popular. It captures the feeling in a stopped moment. Other works by Melchers have styles similar to Monet and John Singer Sargent. A study Melchers did for a portrait of Mark Twain as well as a reproduction of his portrait of President Roosevelt are also in the studio.

Two adjoining galleries display many fine paintings done by Melchers. The gift shop has painting supplies, art books, reproductions of paintings, as well as gifts and home décor.

Nearby, Chatham is a Georgian-style brick mansion built by William Fitzhugh in 1771. George Washington wrote to his friend, Fitzhugh, "I have put my legs oftener under your mahogany more often than I have anywhere else in the world and I have enjoyed your good dinners - and good company more than any other." Washington's stepson, George Washington Parke Custis, married Fitzhugh's daughter. Thomas Jefferson and William Henry Harrison also visited Chatham. During the Civil War, the mansion was used as headquarters for Union generals Edward Sumner and Joseph Hooker, and they received a visit there by President Lincoln.

When Chatham was used as a field hospital for Union soldiers, Clara Barton and poet Walt Whitman helped care for the wounded there.

Today the property is open to the public under the administration of the U.S. National Park Service.

D.P. Newton is the curator of the White Oak Civil War Museum and Research Center, located in a former school. He is also the founder and docent.

The exhibition area of the White Oak Museum is not like that you would find in the display areas of a National Park Service Civil War site. There are not many descriptive tags next to the individual artifacts displayed, but there are tags next to some identifying who loaned the item, such as "Pennsylvania Rifle and Flask on loan from Michael Paul" and "Powder Horn on loan from Lawrence L. Smith."

Many of the artifacts displayed in cases made by Newton, a carpenter, are those found in local fields where Civil War encampments were situated, and where skirmishes took place. Rather than just a few bullets or brass uniform buttons, there are large piles of bullets and uniform buttons. And there is a case full of bottles and a case full of canteens. A display of coins found includes Indian Head pennies, gold coins and a 15-cent paper bill issued by the City of Newark.

Also displayed are cannon balls larger than bowling balls and charcoal filter inserts used in canteens to purify dirty water soldiers drank from streams and ponds.

Newton built three covered log huts displayed inside the museum. They are small log cabins built partially in a square pit in the earth with a tent for a roof. A plain fireplace and chimney was added for cooking. He also built a period cannon displayed.

Re-enactment encampments are held on Memorial Day and other times of the year on the museum grounds. The quaint White Oak Primitive Baptist Church, organized in 1789, is located across the road from the museum. It was used as a hospital during the Civil War.

Getting there

Belmont, the Gari Melchers Home and Studio (224 Washington St., Falmouth, VA 22405, 540-654-1015, www.GariMelchers.org) is located two miles off I-91. It is open 10 to 5 daily. It is closed on Wednesdays and Jan. 1, Easter, July 4, Thanksgiving and Dec. 24, 25 and 31. Admission is \$10. Students 18 and under enter free. From Belmont, Chatham is a 6-minute drive. Chatham (120 Chatham Lane, Fredericksburg, VA www.nps.gov/frsp 540-654-5121) is open daily from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Admission is free.

From Chatham, White Oak Museum Civil War Museum is a 10-minute drive. White Oak Museum (985 White Oaks Road, Falmouth, VA 22405, www.WhiteOakMuseum.com, 540-371-4234) is open Wednesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. 5:00. Admission is \$4 for adults and \$2 for seniors and children ages 13 to 17.