PRESIDENT’S LETTER

It is with great sadness that I report the death of Kevin Lee Sarring, the generous and multi-talented architect who gave so much of his time and talent to the restoration of Happy Retreat. Kevin was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease) earlier this year. He died on June 17, in California, where he had moved to be near his sister. His loss as a friend and advisor is inestimable. From the time we acquired Happy Retreat in 2015, Kevin devoted hundreds of hours to the work of restoring the house and its outbuildings. He not only advised us in our discussions, he completed dozens of exquisite drawings showing in detail how the restoration work should be done. His modesty and good humor belied an incredible career of accomplishment which is highlighted in this newsletter.

To honor Kevin’s memory, the Board awarded him the first Happy Retreat Distinguished Service award which will henceforth be known as the Sarring Award, to be given annually to a person or organization who provides exemplary service to Happy Retreat. We have also created the annual Sarring Lecture series, which will feature a distinguished speaker on history, architecture or historic preservation. We have established the Sarring Scholarship Fund to be awarded to a Jefferson County high school or college student who shows a special interest and ability in history, architecture or historic preservation. In these ways, we hope to perpetuate the recognition of Kevin’s invaluable leadership in the restoration of Happy Retreat. Happy Retreat itself will be the greatest memorial to his memory.

The past four months have upended life at Happy Retreat as much as anywhere. We cancelled all of the remaining concerts of the chamber music season, our book series and the Craft Beer & Music Festival. This was to have been a gala year marking the 250th anniversary of Harewood, the home of Charles Washington’s brother Samuel; the 240th anniversary of Happy Retreat; and the 220th anniversary of Claymont, the home of Charles’s grand-nephew, Bushrod Corbin Washington. We are deferring those celebrations until next year. We still hope to have some sort of a Christmas Open House in December, depending on the state of things.

Through the support of an anonymous grant, last fall we hired Jane Ailes, a highly respected research historian, to research the enslaved population at Happy Retreat. She has completed the first stage of the project which brings forth important new information about the early owners of the house and the enslaved men, women and children who lived and worked there. We will be making the results of her work public soon and will devote much of the next issue of The Rising Sun to her findings. It will be a timely tribute to all of those whose history is part of Happy Retreat.

As we face uncertain times, thank you for your continued interest in and support of Happy Retreat.

Walter Washington President
Kevin Lee Sarring's full biography would take up most of the rest of this newsletter. He was a man of incredible talent and energy. He earned his bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois and his graduate degree in architecture from Columbia University, which awarded him the Preservation Alumni Leadership Award in 2018. It was an award richly deserved.

From 1995 through 2016, Kevin was the post architect for the Overseas Building Operations for the U. S. Department of State, preserving significant overseas American embassy architecture and managing the designs of new U.S. embassies, including those in Turkmenistan, India, Burkina Faso and Macedonia. He was involved in U.S. embassy projects in numerous other countries. He recognized the architectural and historic value of the overseas properties owned by the State Department and was instrumental in establishing the Secretary of State’s Register of Cultural Property in 2000. He won the Meritorious Honor Award in 2008 for his leadership of the Department’s Historic Register. In all, he received a total of 14 awards from the State Department for his work over twenty years.

Kevin also had a passion for archaeology. He was the architect for the American archaeological excavations in Italy for 18 years, including sites at Capalbaccio, Cosa, Pompeii, the Roman Forum, Trajan’s Forum and the Theater of Pompey. His magnificent 1973 Pompeian First Style drawings were used to reproduce the Getty Villa wall plaster in Malibu, California. His last trip to work at an archaeology site in Italy was last summer. Beyond Italy, he worked with the World Monuments Fund to preserve ancient sites in Cambodia and on other projects in Southeast Asia.

In addition to these accomplishments, Kevin worked on important historic preservation projects in the United States as well as architectural projects for private clients.

In 2007, he bought the 18th Century brick Apple Chapel in Gerrardstown, West Virginia, which he restored beautifully to become his country studio and art center. It is spotlighted on the U.S. Park Service’s historic preservation website. This led him to involvement in a series of preservation projects in the Eastern Panhandle, including for the Berkeley County Historical Society, the Roundhouse and the Belle Boyd House. He lent his energy and support to a variety of local preservation campaigns. And in 2015, he volunteered his incredible talents to help with the restoration of Happy Retreat.
Kevin Sarring’s Legacy at Happy Retreat

It is a challenge to catalog all of the contributions Kevin Sarring made to the restoration of Happy Retreat. His very first project was a three-dimensional topographical model of the 12-acre property showing the exact placement of the buildings, which he deftly completed almost overnight.

He made trips to Fredericksburg to look at the architectural details at the Rising Sun Tavern, which Charles Washington originally built as his residence. He traveled to Colonial Williamsburg to research material that would help with the restoration of Happy Retreat. He worked with Jane Rissler and Doug Perks at the Jefferson County Museum to find every artifact and document in the museum’s collection in any way related to Happy Retreat. He trolled EBay for old photographs and postcards that showed the property in earlier eras.

Kevin had a special talent and ability to draw. He climbed up ladders to do detailed drawings of the Happy Retreat roofs as a guide to their restoration. Working with master carpenter Dave Kardok, he completed an inventory of all 47 windows in the house, drawing each window in specific detail and noting the restoration needs of each. He prepared elegant elevation drawings of the smokehouse and stone kitchen which served as the basis for the restoration for those buildings. He drew a floor plan for converting the garage building into a visitor center. He made numerous other detailed drawings to guide the restoration of the house.

Perhaps Kevin’s greatest contribution was his endless enthusiasm and constant engagement in everything that went on at Happy Retreat. He examined every square inch of the house and was fascinated by every tidbit of history related to it. His enthusiasm animated every meeting of the Restoration Committee. His extensive knowledge of historic preservation guided our restoration efforts at every step.
Kevin Sarring drew a detailed scale drawing of each of the 47 windows at Happy Retreat. The windows contained a total of 456 individual glass window panes. Then, working with carpenter Dave Kardok, he noted the condition of each window and the repairs each window needed. He noted whether each window pane was original or a replacement and which were cracked. He marked which sills were not draining water properly. He noted the hardware on each window sash, where paint was peeling, where trim was missing.

One of the 47 detailed drawings from the window inventory. "GR" indicates the glass pane is a replacement. "C" means the pane is cracked. "PT" denotes the paint is peeling. "MAS" indicates a masonry sill. Other notes indicate the top sash is fixed and that the window has sash cords and interior stops.

The drawing of the front door shows the number of replaced panes ("GR") and one that is cracked ("C"). Notes show the panes are all fixed and "puttied in on the interior." "WS" denotes metal weather stripping.
RESTORATION UPDATE

R estoration of the smokehouse and stone kitchen is nearing completion. Over the winter, master carpenter Dave Kardok prepared the framing for the new roof. Many of the original rafters were simply split logs with the tree bark still on them. They were not substantial enough to hold the weight of successive roofs and over the years had sagged. They needed to be shored up and, in some cases, replaced. With that complete, the new standing-seam metal roof was installed by Catoctin Valley Roofing. New gutters now protect the buildings from water damage and poor drainage which had caused problems in the past.

New soffit molding for the front of the smokehouse was milled to match exactly the original molding on the rear of the building. The rear molding had been protected over the years because it was enclosed by the privy which was built against the exterior back wall. Matt Webster, the Director of Architectural Restoration at Colonial Williamsburg, advised us on the paint which Colonial Williamsburg developed with Benjamin Moore to simulate the look of 18th Century whitewash, which we believe was originally the color of the trim.

The windows and doors in the stone kitchen have been carefully restored. It appears that the trim was originally painted a dark red. We are using another Benjamin Moore Colonial Williamsburg color to match the original. The final step will be to remove the 20th century floor and replace it with a single course brick floor. When conditions permit, we look forward to holding a ribbon cutting and dedication of these buildings to honor Bob and Tia McMillan, who have made this important restoration project possible.
At the end of April, we were notified that we had been awarded a $10,000 grant by the National Association Daughters of the American Revolution, through its local Bee Line Chapter. This grant will be used to restore the rear room of the west wing.

According to the 2017 Historic Structures Report, the rear room was added onto the original front room of the west wing in the mid-1780s. Its original use may have been a store room or a “show room” to display wares. It was a simple room with plaster walls. There is evidence of a chair rail along the side walls. It is unknown how or if the room was heated. There are no signs of a fireplace or chimney. At one point, there was an enclosed stairway to the second floor along the south wall.

In the renovations to the house made in the 1950s by Robert and Elizabeth McCabe, the room was transformed into a modern kitchen with built-in cabinets, counters and wall ovens. It was painted “Canary Yellow” according to the paint sample preserved in the McCabes’s papers. The window in the west wall was enlarged to become a door to a screen porch built along the west side of the wing.

We plan to restore the room to its original design. Once restored, we will use the room as an exhibit space, or “show room” once again, for displays about the history of Happy Retreat and related topics. It will become an important focal point for our efforts.

Special thanks to Darla Treat Courtney with the Bee Line Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution for bringing this opportunity to our attention and for her help in pursuing the grant. In 2017, at a ceremony on the back lawn at Happy Retreat, the Bee Line Chapter dedicated a plaque to honor Charles Washington’s Revolutionary War service. The plaque was placed at his gravesite. We are very pleased to have the DAR’s participation in our efforts at Happy Retreat and look forward to continuing that in the future.

Another History at Its Best, by Marjorie Gaestel

Hello from inside Happy Retreat on Her 240th Birthday

My favorite thing to do as the historian of Happy Retreat is look behind Happy Retreat’s walls, under her floorboards, in closets, read long stored away Bibles and ledgers. A while back we were made aware of a pencil sketch of a panoramic view of Charles Town in 1862. The white building in the center of the drawing turned out to be Happy Retreat. Wow, to this discovery. It really piqued my interest. Who was living there at that time and what about all the other residents of Happy Retreat?

Let me bring you up to date on some of the early residents. Of course, we had Charles and wife Mildred with their family who arrived about 1780. Their youngest daughter, Mildred Gregory Washington, married Capt. Thomas Hammond in 1797. The Hammonds were Happy Retreat residents for several years after the death of Charles and Mildred. Our list of owners and tenants goes on from this point to Isaac Douglass, a Circuit Court Judge, and then Frances Drew, a very popular local farmer, and right on up to Bill and Mary Gavin, who set in motion the effort for Friends of Happy Retreat to purchase this beautiful mansion.
I recently started research on others who lived here. We found deeds, wills, Federal Slave Schedules, estate sale records, photos and more recently names written in the margins of family bibles and general store ledgers, including the names of Happy Retreat’s enslaved people.

Happy Retreat has seen everything – births (birth of twins more than once), marriages, wars and, sadly, many deaths. Foreclosure and many different occupations and trades. And yes, even ghosts. There were times when Happy Retreat had a very active social life, parties, get-togethers and Sunday School Picnics.

At Happy Retreat we are working on bringing all this history where it can be seen by visitors. We want to recognize everyone who helped bring Happy Retreat together over three centuries and considered it home. We have even brought some of Charles’s and Mildred’s descendants into this. The descendant list is amazing to see. It helps bring Charles and Mildred to life just to see something so personal that they would love to have seen themselves.

Happy Retreat was home to the man who gave Charles Town it’s birth and its name. If you can help with any information on early history, please contact us. I am working on the Hammond family and I’m interested in any photos that might be out there. They lived at Happy Retreat from 1800 until 1837. A lot of changes took place at that time.

My plan is to bring to light and recognize all the residents of Happy Retreat. Including the enslaved who gave their help and hard work. Those who gave it her name, history, life and at times even a face lift. Please keep your eye on our “Rising Sun Newsletter”. You will know some of these people I’m sure. See you in the next issue with more names and information. Meanwhile let’s celebrate 240 years of History at its Very Best.

Marjorie Gaestel,
Historian/Archivist of Happy Retreat

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Volunteers Needed!

The pandemic has sharply curtailed our activities at Happy Retreat through the end of the year. We look forward to plans for next year. We are in constant need of volunteers both to help at our events and to serve as docents in the house. If you are interested, please return the form on the back page indicating your interest, or call us at (304) 724-7956, or email us at volunteer@happyretreat.org. Volunteers are crucial to the success of everything we do at Happy Retreat. Please consider becoming part of our volunteer team. Thank you!

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The name “Rising Sun” is taken from the Rising Sun Tavern in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The tavern is located in the house built by Charles Washington in 1760 and where he lived before he moved to Happy Retreat. The house became a tavern in 1792. It is now owned and operated by the Washington History Museums.
In Memoriam
KEVIN LEE SARRING
(1953-2020)

Please visit our website
WWW.HAPPYRETREAT.ORG

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