

Wiley/Ringland Property in Historic Somerset District Is Renovated



by Suzanne White Junod, Ph.D.

In suburban Maryland, just off Wisconsin Avenue, a few blocks north of present-day Friendship Heights and south of the now sprawling campus of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), is a street labeled Dorset Avenue. Turning into this tiny neighborhood, now a subdivision of Chevy Chase, the first hint that there is history here is a brick wall with a sign labeled simply “Somerset—Incorporated 1906.”

Traveling down Dorset Avenue, an address is not necessary to pick out the newly lovely nineteenth-century Victorian farmhouse built by Harvey Wiley in 1893-1894.¹ One of the first houses completed in what was originally “Somerset Heights,” it was nearly destroyed by fire and subsequent neglect.

In 2000, Joe Lipscomb and Laura Will purchased the long-abandoned property and have now completed renovations for which the description “extensive” utterly fails to do justice. The renovations were made financially feasible when the property was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The owners then donated easements to the government for the one-acre original lot surrounding the house, receiving substantial tax deductions to help pay for the renovations, but also ensuring that the property will not be subdivided and sold off in the future.

The history of the property is well-documented, but little known. In August 1890, five high-level U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) scientists and friends purchased a 50-acre tract of land previously known as the Friendship Farm for \$19,000. The five had banded together earlier in “an unconventional and somewhat utopian manner,” in search of land on which to establish a residential colony. Harvey W. Wiley had come to Washington in 1893 and had become Chief Chemist in the Bureau of Chemistry. His Assistant Chief, Charles A. Crampton, joined the venture and became

the first mayor of Somerset in 1905. Miles Fuller, Chief Clerk in the Bureau of Animal Industry,² was a founder, as was Daniel Salmon, a Bureau of Animal Industry scientist who is credited with eradicating pleuropneumonia and Texas tick fever, both major cattle killers of the day. The final investor was Horace Horton, a friend of the other four.

Their science colony ideal, however, soon took a back seat to the substantial investment opportunity they encountered. New suburbs outside of Washington, D.C. established close to the new railroad and streetcar systems attracted long-time city residents for the first time. Inspired by the impressive large-scale development of Chevy Chase developing to the east, Somerset Heights also was planned as a picturesque suburban community, boasting spacious lots and tree-lined streets and promising clean air and tranquility, as well as distinguished neighbors.

An 1890 (circa) brochure put out by the Somerset Heights Land Company promoted the venture by noting that “a good class of residents [was] assured, property [was moving] in the direction of rapidly advancing values,” and that the development, while close to “3 lines of electric railroad and one of steam transportation,” was nonetheless “away from the river, [with] no malaria and no mosquitos.” In a final patriotic boast, the brochure reminded potential buyers that “Residents are citizens of Maryland and therefore entitled to vote.” As indicated in the brochure, however, the focus of their life, work, and entertainment remained in Washington—not in Rockville, MD, for a long time thereafter.



Harvey Wiley and four USDA scientists invested in Maryland property in 1890. Wiley's house was one of the first built in the trolley car subdivision named Somerset (now part of Chevy Chase) around 1894.

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The homes originally were laid out in a grid pattern with large one-acre lots. The nucleus of the original 50 acres of Somerset Heights, now designated Somerset Historic District, soon was supplemented by 242 surrounding subdivision acres. From 1893 until 1915, there was a uniform setback requirement of 30 feet in all front yards in the development. The grid pattern of the earliest development gave way after World War II to curving streets that followed the contours of the land. Beginning in the 1950s, some of the older homes were demolished and some of the large corner lots of the older section were subdivided from the front, creating interior lots accessible only through narrow drives and alleys. This greatly changed the appearance of the historic suburb, and threatened its historic integrity.

Originally, all of the homes in the Somerset subdivision were required to cost at least \$3,500. Harvey Wiley's home, one of the first to be completed between 1893 and 1894, originally was valued at \$4,800 and had been built on a substantial lot, presumably as an inspiration to other owners in the neighborhood. The Wiley Papers at the Library of Congress reveal that bachelor Wiley (he did not marry until he was 67) selected his home style with particular care. He apparently built the impressive two-and-one-half story, Queen Anne-style frame farmhouse as an inducement to his aging parents, whom he hoped to move to the Maryland suburbs from their farm in Indiana. Unsuccessful in convincing his parents to abandon farm life, Wiley was forced to rent his new house.

Wiley eventually owned 10 properties in Somerset, but as the legislative battle for the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act heated up, he sold all of them; he had disposed of all of his Somerset properties by 1904.

The house had a number of occupants until 1938, at which time Arthur Cuming Ringland moved his family into the house. Ringland mirrored the character, class, and careers of the original Somerset occupants—government clerks, lawyers, bankers, scientists, military officers, and other white collar professionals—and contributed his own share of public service prestige to the residence as well. Ringland had joined the U.S. Forest Service in 1900 and had helped establish the nation's national park and forest system. In addition to his conservation work, he also did some refugee work during World War II. In

1945, reportedly, while at his Dorset Avenue residence, he originated the concept of a private volunteer organization that eventually became C.A.R.E.³ Ringland was honored for his work by the United Nations in 1958.



Arthur Cuming Ringland owned the house during the middle decades of the century. A kitchen fire in 1978, however, was devastating to the historic property.

Following his death, Ringland's widow continued to live in the home until a devastating fire in 1978 forced her to move out. Requests to demolish the house and subdivide the lot were denied, as the house was protected as part of the Somerset Historic District.

When the new owners were asked what motivated them to undertake this historic venture, Joe Lipscomb modestly said that he and Laura were inspired after living across the street from the ramshackle old house. At the

time they committed to the project, they had not imagined the extensive changes that would be required to make it habitable, because the original structure had been tall, but

rather small and simple, with only two bedrooms. The framework was in better shape than they had had a right to hope for, however, and the house had beautiful features such as a stairway constructed of American chestnut that had been restored. They are now pleased to own a small piece of "relatively significant" history in Montgomery County, where "It is difficult to find good old houses."

When asked if they would do it again, Mr. Lipscomb noted that the renovations alone had required 16 months, during which time the place had no roof and was uninhabitable, and the entire process took more than two and one-half years to complete. In the end,

however, and with obvious affection, he concluded that they might indeed do it again given the opportunity. "It's a great old house, and we really like it." Harvey Wiley's original investment has now become their investment in history. ▲



Owners Joe Lipscomb and Laura Will bought the Wiley-Ringland house in 2000 for 1.7 million dollars. They paid for its historic preservation by donating easements on the property in return for substantial tax deductions following its acceptance into the National Register for Historic Places.

Photos courtesy of the Montgomery County Planning Commission, Historic Preservation Office, and Joe Lipscomb/Laura Will.

- ¹ Harvey Wiley, generally known as the "father" of the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act to the food and drug community, retired from government service in 1912, but remained influential until his death in 1930. See *Harvey Wiley: His Life and Times*, FDLI UPDATE, May/June 2000, at 21.
- ² The term "clerk" was applied to a wide range of positions in the federal bureaucracy at that time, including technical ones. In the 1940s and 1950s, 85% of government positions were "clerk" positions. With increasing specialization, that figure is now reversed and only 15% of government employees are employed as "clerks."
- ³ CARE International is a large private international humanitarian organization that strives to be a global force and partner of choice within a worldwide movement dedicated to ending poverty. It was founded in 1945, when 22 American organizations came together to rush lifesaving "CARE Packages" to survivors of World War II.