

# Roots House: Historic Workers' Cottage and Landscape Saved in Falmouth, Virginia

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On November 9, 2014 staff at Gari Melchers Home and Studio at Belmont first opened the doors of a small vernacular building to the public, an event marking many years of dedicated work.<sup>1</sup> Located next to Belmont, in Falmouth Virginia, and known locally as “Fannie Roots’ House,” it is a rare example of a post-civil war worker’s cottage. While its core elements date to the 1880s, the house as it stands today with the garden and outbuildings retains many reminders of life-long resident Fannie Roots (1914-2004).

Though named for Roots, its earliest known occupants were George and Sallie Payne. George Payne was a plasterer, and examples of his work survive in the oldest sections of the house. The original building consisted of the two-room, gable roofed front section, while a shed addition on the back contained the kitchen, and an unfinished room in the attic served as sleeping space.

In 1912 the structure was purchased by Willie Roots, an African American laborer who did occasional work for the well-known painter Gari Melchers and his wife Corinne, owners of the neighboring Belmont estate.<sup>2</sup> It was under Roots family ownership, in turn, that the dwelling was enlarged to its current appearance. Roots’ daughter Fannie, who became a well-known citizen of Stafford County and a civil rights activist, was born in the house and lived there her entire life. The building did not have running water, so Roots always relied on bucket-drawn well water and an outhouse. There was electricity for lights and a telephone, but she used a wood stove for cooking and oil stove for heating.

Structural restoration began in 2008 when Belmont became the steward of the property. The condition of the house had declined steadily during the final years of Fannie Roots’ life, and the interceding four years had witnessed even greater deterioration. Heading up the project from the outset has

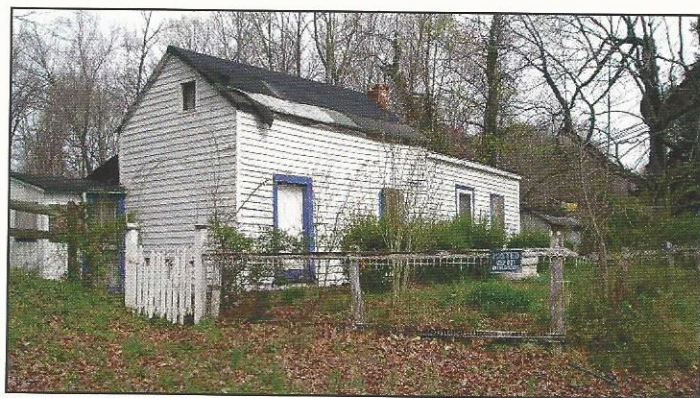


Young Fannie Roots under grape arbor.

been Belmont cultural resource manager (co-author of this article and longtime SGHS member), Beate Jensen, and fellow staff member David Ludecker. David Berreth, director at Belmont, also saw the importance of saving the house and grounds, but funding, as is usual at historic sites, was lacking. It thus became their task to gain support from private citizens, businesses, and volunteers.<sup>3</sup> That backing has come not only in the form of cash donations and on-site labor but also in such other valuable contributions as logs which were sawn at Belmont with a portable sawmill.

Ludecker has headed-up the extensive hands-on effort to include structural, siding, and roof restoration, as well as a complete exterior repainting.<sup>4</sup> As was a common in the post-Civil War era, the house was built with materials borrowed from other structures. Wherever possible these materials have been saved. Where this could not be achieved, every effort has been made to replicate both materials and workmanship.<sup>5</sup> The finishing exterior restoration touch has been to cover the roof with a true terne metal standing seam roof. This material was chosen upon finding remnants of an original terne roof. It will be painted red to match the samples found.

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Spring 2008 pre-restoration.



Roots House from southwest, 2015.

Photo by the authors.

Photo by the authors.

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Fannie Roots' garden and the grounds surrounding her home tell an equally important story, and their restoration and interpretation will continue to be central to the Belmont mission there. The wire hoop fence demonstrates that such work has already begun. In 2008 large elements remained of such fencing that once separated the house from busy Washington Street. (See 2008 image.) In two subsequent incidents, however, it was effectively ruined by vehicles veering into it from that street. This fence form is not readily available today, but Jensen was able to locate a Texas source to find the lengths required. Now installed (see illustration), it only awaits the arrival of spring to receive a coat of white paint matching the original. Likewise, stones that kept chickens from escaping the yard will be placed back under the fence. The Jensen-Ludecker team has also restored Fannie Roots' white gate which features an arbor fashioned from rebar. Surviving atop that arbor is her Dorothy Perkins rose, which long provided a warm welcome to Roots' visitors. (Note her tiny gate bell, seen in an accompanying photo.) Also surviving about the house are privet bushes, a Rose of Sharon, a lilac, and orange daylilies.

Along with the rebar arbor, repurposing can be seen elsewhere in the Roots landscape. For example, placed squarely between the house and the street is a substantial vertical segment of leftover terra cotta piping (used to line Roots' well) which has long served as a planter. Here Fannie Roots grew tulips and summer annuals. A perennial feature was a fanciful row of artificial tulips crafted in plastic. These have faded and succumbed to years of weathering, but replacements are being sought. Bricks that were replaced during a ca. 1950s chimney repair were used to create a mouse tooth-type edging for the beds fronting the house. Her garden was also well known for her traffic-stopping phlox, another element soon to be returned in memory of the long-time presence of Fannie Roots on this busy corner.

The front area of the Roots landscape is level, but as the photos and the site plan make clear this was otherwise a decidedly inferior spot for home building. Access to well

and outhouse was not difficult, but trips back and forth to garden spaces behind and below the dwelling surely required stamina and steadiness. Fortunately, an aged white oak just southwest of the house offered welcome summer shade. An interview with a niece of Fannie Roots revealed that the shed to the north housed chickens and firewood.

Oral history relating to the house and its occupants, chiefly Fannie Roots, are ongoing, and will figure largely in determining further landscape projects. Much interior work remains to be done as well, but some sections may be left open to aid in understanding how the house developed over time. In addition, History and Historic Preservation students from the University of Mary Washington will continue to take advantage of the house and its setting for learning purposes, along with individual and group projects.<sup>6</sup>

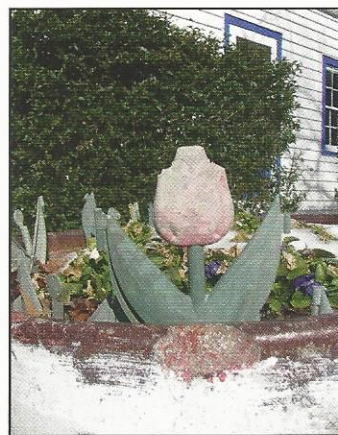
*Editors' note: On March 15, 2015 Beate Jensen, along with David Berreth and David Ludecker, received the Historic Fredericksburg Foundation's E. Boyd Graves Preservation Award for "Exemplary efforts to restore and preserve the historic Fannie Roots House."*

### (Endnotes)

- 1 The Gari Melchers Home and Studio at Belmont has been referenced in several previous *Magnolia* articles
- 2 Gari and Corinne Melchers purchased the estate in 1916.
- 3 Work has been made possible largely with private donations and grants from the Fredericksburg Savings Charitable Foundation, the Duff McDuff Green Jr. Fund of the Community Foundation of the Rappahannock River Region, and the Marietta M. and Samuel T. Morgan, Jr. Foundation.
- 4 The distinct blue paint on the trim around the doors and windows *could* be an example of the African American tradition of using *haint* blue on the trim around doors and windows. A *haint* is a spirit or a ghost, and the blue paint was thought to ward off evil spirits and to keep them from entering the doors and windows.
- 5 Co-author Kenneth McFarland has been extensively involved and hand-hewed cedar logs to replace badly deteriorated ceiling joists
- 6 The Gari Melchers Home and Studio at Belmont is owned and operated by the University of Mary Washington



Roots House well & outhouse.



Sole surviving decorative tulip and the Roots gate bell.



Photos by the authors.