



PARADISE MAINTAINED

The serene, park-like acreage of Westover (formerly Duntreath) offers no hint of its urban setting. Built by a Baptist minister/farmer in 1874, the house evolved from a working farm residence into a luxurious private retreat.

Historic property endures nearly undetected amid urban clamor

By Harriet Fowler | Photos by Lee Thomas



Above, despite storm damage over its many years of existence, a massive catalpa tree still rules the patio spaces.

Discovering the home of high-profile Lexington developer Dudley Webb and his wife, Marla, is like finding a very large secret garden in a most unlikely place. The neighborhood is clustered with gas stations, fast food businesses, an old cemetery — nothing that indicates the size and nature of the historic property. There is a gated front entrance on Versailles Road, but any view of the house and its surroundings is completely obscured by dense woods.

To approach the property from the rear is to discover one of Lexington's most intriguing streets, "The Lane." Angling off from Mason-Headley Road, across from Cardinal Hill Hospital, the road has the secretive appeal of a forest path. Heavy tree growth and shrubs shroud the right side of the road; a high chain link fence topped by more wire only adds to the mystery. The property runs a considerable distance, past an old silo that seems to loom overhead as it forces a sudden twist in the road. There are other houses up and down The Lane, mostly in a split ranch or Cape Cod style, but the hidden property dominates by its size and forbidding look.

This exceedingly private residence was built in 1874 by a Baptist minister and farmer, William E. Freeman. It became known as “Duntreath” (or “home of the chief”) during the early years of the 20th century when it was acquired by Silas B. Mason and his wife, Suzanne Burnett Mason, in 1909. They added on to the original late Georgian-style building in every direction, including two more floors. After Mason’s death in 1936, the property belonged to L.R. Cooke, a local automobile dealer; it was then purchased in 1941 by James A. Alexander of Woodford County whose family retained ownership until Dudley and Marla Webb’s purchase in 1996. The Alexanders called the farm “Westover,” a name that is still in use today.

While a summary of ownership can be merely a record of changing names, the house and its property offer fascinating histories of their own. Their appearance during early 20th century years is lovingly chronicled in Elizabeth Simpson’s *The Enchanted Bluegrass*, a descriptive tour of important central Kentucky homes, which was published in 1938. Noting the exquisite architectural detail throughout the house, Simpson credits Suzanne Mason with transforming the original structure from its more functional beginnings into a gracious and expansive private retreat. Mrs. Mason enlisted the help of Charles O. Cornelius, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s curator of the Early American wing, who, according to Simpson, was also considered an eminent architect and antiquarian. The combination of the two tastemakers produced a formidable alliance. From England they imported the house’s 18th-century Georgian stairway, notable for its mahogany handrail inlaid with ebony and satinwood. Cornelius also advised on the interior furnishings, which included intricately carved marble fireplaces and mantels, lavish woodwork, and chandeliers from France. Handwrought 18th-century iron grilles embellished the brick exterior, and everywhere were choice plantings and magnificent trees. The property’s setting itself offered vistas well beyond what is now New Circle Road. There was no Cardinal Valley, no Gardenside development, only the Versailles Pike.

Suzanne Mason’s husband, Silas B. Mason, deserves his own story as does that of his company, Mason & Hanger, an engineering firm that links back to 18th-century origins with his Scottish grandfather’s company. The company, based in Lexington and New York and still in existence, did some of its most important work under the leadership of Silas B. Mason and his partner, William Arnold Hanger, who was a founder of Keeneland and an

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Above, a temple folly at some distance from the patio invites a stroll and a reflective pause in the landscape.

important donor to area universities. Such projects as the Lincoln Tunnel in New York City, the Chicago Drainage Canal (which changed the course of a river), and the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington State represented enormous contracts for the small, Lexington-based firm. In recent decades the company has had the singular distinction of being a nuclear weapons manufacturer and the only U.S. firm authorized to make repairs to nuclear weapons (handled at a facility in Texas). At the time of his death in 1936, Mason was at work on the Washington dam, riding out daily on horseback to the site.

Horses themselves were part of Mason's years at Duntreath. Under the Warm Stables name, he and his wife enjoyed racing success beginning in 1926 and owned such horses as Victorian and Head Play. After Mason's death, his widow continued in the racing business but moved her horses to the Paris Pike when she sold the Versailles Pike home. Her descendants have remained in the sport — the present day Winter Quarter Farm on Military Pike grew out of old Duntreath Farm stock. One of the first horses to be



Left, a marble fireplace with a relief sculpture of Diana, goddess of the hunt, is a visual high point in the music room. Opposite, the dining room features exquisitely carved woodwork, including this ornately detailed window framing. Much of the downstairs woodwork is said to have come from the house of Aaron Burr's father.

transferred by Suzanne Mason to the Paris Pike facility was MaidoDuntreath, granddam of Kelso.

While the property's next owner, L.R. Cooke, didn't live in the house for more than a few years, the Alexander family called it home for more than 50 years. Lucy Alexander Breathitt remembers growing up at Westover, recalling endless rides through the

surrounding farmland and orchards, sleigh rides, and snowball fights with neighboring children. She also tells a story about her Woodford County cousins playing a joke on her father: On the Alexanders' first night in the house, the cousins came over after everyone had to gone to bed and released two peafowl on the lawn. The birds flew up to the highest part of the roof

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CLAY AVENUE BETWEEN E. MAIN AND CENTRAL



The ballroom was only a cavernous space until the Webbs completed it; the ceiling is a custom design.



and began screeching. Awakened by the din, James Alexander had to crawl out on the roof to capture and remove the birds. Once off the roof, the birds were to enjoy long and happy lives at Westover.

Of the original 1,000-plus acres owned by Mason, 37 remain today. Lexington has grown up around the farm; the entire Gardenside subdivision, once pasture for the Masons' Thoroughbreds, is now one of the city's oldest developments. Despite being so close to downtown Lexington, the present-day residence could easily be in rural Kentucky. Standing at the front entrance and looking north, one sees lush sweeping lawns, fenced pastures, a stocked fish pond, and a gazebo. There is no sign of Lexington or of Versailles Road.

The east side of the house opens to a swimming pool. Out of sight there is also a large, rock-walled pool of the Mason era, which, according to Lucy Breathitt, was the site of some memorable pranks. On one occasion, the Alexanders discovered that numerous typewriters, stolen from Transylvania University, had been dumped into the pool the previous night.

On the south side, the large living room opens to patio spaces, an ancient catalpa tree, and well-tended boxwood and roses. Crowning this southern view is a small Greek temple folly at the end of a long swath of lawn, framed by evergreens and specimen trees. The structure is perfectly located to invite a stroll from the patio and possible



One of the great architectural treasures of Westover is the 18th-century Georgian stairway imported from England by the Masons.



philosophical musings.

To the west side is the old garage, once the cook's house; in recent years it's been an apartment for various University of Kentucky basketball coaching staff.

Inside the front door at the end of the hallway is the late Georgian staircase Elizabeth Simpson loved, much as it appeared in the 1930s with its remarkable detailing untouched by the intervening decades. On the right side of the hall is a library/study, which Marla Webb uses as an office. The left side of the hallway opens to a drawing room (now called a music room) where an 18th-century Carrara marble mantel and fireplace with a relief sculpture of Diana, goddess of the hunt, is a visual focal point. The music room extends out to what was formerly the garden room, now an expanded living/entertainment area with colorful, comfortable seating throughout. A hallway leading off to the left connects to a newer part of the house.

What the Webbs call the "Fern Room" (known as the "Florida Room" during the Alexander years) opens into another passage, filled with decorative paintings, sculpture, and family portraits, that ends at the ballroom (construction began during the Mason years and was completed by the Webbs). Gleaming floors and an elaborately coffered ceiling evoke the formality and grandeur of an earlier age; a pool table to the side of the room speaks to contemporary use. In an outer corner of the ballroom, a small staircase leads up to a luxurious home theater. Completing the whimsical atmosphere is a ticket booth with the soft sculpture of a ticket taker seated inside. Movie posters from vintage Westerns line the walls of the intimate lobby. The theater was added by the Webbs.

For the Webbs the farm is an enclave ... it evokes another time and another world.

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Off the main hallway to the right is the dining room; it has been modified by the Webbs to tie in the kitchen (originally an outside structure) with the house. During the renovation, outside porch pillars were uncovered beneath layers of wallpaper and paint. In fact, the original front entrance of the house was located off that dining room by way of Parker's Mill, not Versailles Road. The room's stunning window, with its lavishly detailed carved woodwork, broken entablature, and pilasters, was preserved. When the Alexanders bought the house in 1946, they were told that the dining room's massive door and much of the downstairs woodwork came from the house of Aaron Burr's father. The room's black marble fireplace is flanked by gracefully arched, built-in display shelves.

At one point during the early years, there were plans to install steam rooms in a basement expansion. John Clemons, who has managed the property for many years, remembers seeing a photograph of draft horses hauling away enormous carts filled with dirt from the basement enlargement. The steam rooms, however, were never completed. The Webbs considered turning the vast new space into a squash court but in the end, basketball won: a generously sized home gym now occupies that original steam room space.

William Freeman's original home on the Versailles Pike evolved from a solidly built, modest farmhouse into a luxurious private retreat during the Mason years — it became larger, more dramatic, and more richly detailed. During the half century of the Alexanders' residence, Lexington's Gardenside neighborhood grew up on the farm's outer acreage as the city itself gradually surrounded Duntreath-Westover pastureland. Of necessity, the once open quality of the property began to close. For the Webbs the farm is an enclave — while part of Lexington's urban area, it evokes another time and another world. It has had the good fortune of several owners who've been committed to the farm's tradition and who have had the resources to strengthen and beautify the house and grounds. It is indeed a paradise maintained. 🐾