

# Wealthy Merchant Of 1700's Built This Home To Last

## Josiah Ellis Family Once Owned Much Of Pedlar Mills Community

By Donna Lauderdale

Some aging beauties haven't been so lucky. They have been ransacked, gutted by fire, torn down or, sometimes worst of all, thoughtlessly remodeled.

Red Hill is an exception. Time and a series of owners have modified the mid-eighteenth century mansion, described as late Georgian in style, but Josiah Ellis built his home to last. Perhaps because changes were difficult — even the interior walls are brick from basement to attic — the house stands nearly as it was when the Ellis family owned not only their plantation, but also much of the Pedlar Mills community.

Red Hill has much to be thankful for this Thanksgiving Day. Its current owner, Edward Lewis of Lewismont Farms is as much interested in preserving the soul of the mansion — the history of its owners — as in returning it to its early grandeur.

"You might say we are getting the house ready to start its 225th year — giving it a facelifting," laughs Lewis who refuses to call the

project a restoration. "We are really just repairing damage done to the house over the years," he says. But repairs have included such major changes as removing a large victorian porch which covered the back of the house and returning windows and doors to places where they formerly stood. "The only thing left now that is not original is the front porch. It was added more than 50 years ago by a real estate man to sell the house. We will probably leave it because we haven't been able to find out what the original porch looked like. We know there was one, and it probably was much simpler."

In trying to date the house and find out exactly how it looked when it was built, Lewis has spent many hours studying the Ellis history through family records and those kept by the county.

"We discovered that outside the Jeffersons and Adams, and possibly the George Washington family, there is more documented history on the Ellis family than any other in America. The bulk of this — some 480 volumes — is now kept in the Library of Congress. Known as the Ellis and Allen Papers, the records primarily are those kept from 1785 to 1885 by the Ellis and Allen Mercantile Company in Richmond.

"When it was found that literally every transferral of goods was recorded by the firm for more than 100 years, it was decided by someone in Washington, that the papers should be stored in the Library of Congress as a picture of trade in this country in the century following the Revolution," explains Lewis.

Like Thomas Jefferson's records, however, the picture family members had painted was not strictly of business. Discussions of the weather, crops, marriages births and deaths in the family, even visitors to Red Hill were included.

Accounts of one person's visits to the plantation resulted in portions of the papers being filed away in the rare book section of the library.

### Poe at Red Hill

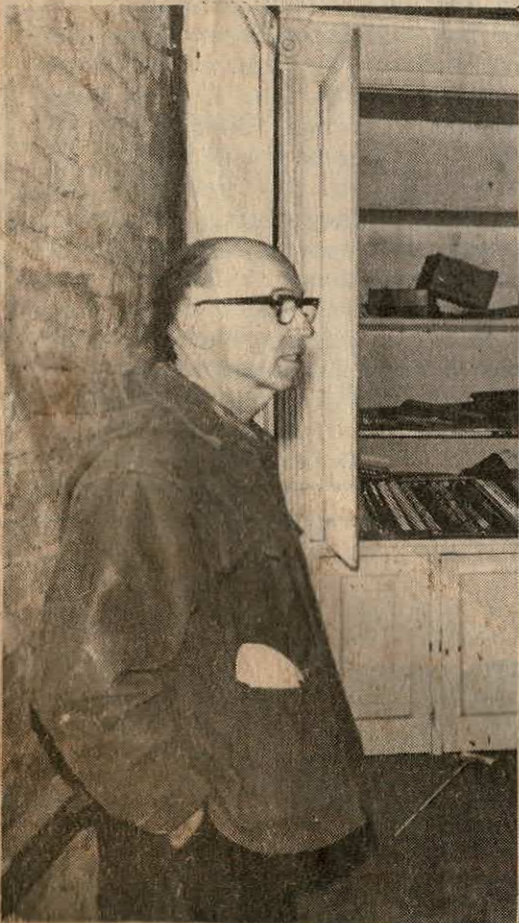
John Allen, Charles Ellis' partner, was the unsympathetic foster parent of Edgar Allan Poe and many of the records of Poe's early life are included in the files along with references to Poe's spending vacations at Red Hill Farm.

"Actually we found that there is almost too much history of Red Hill," says Lewis, whose personal interest has been growing since he lived in the house as a small child. The Ellis family has produced so many well known business, political and religious figures in Virginia and American history that, says Lewis, "It would take a book to even begin to touch it all."

A Captain Charles Ellis, who had served in the French and Indian Wars under Peter Jefferson the father of Thomas Jefferson,



Red Hill in Pedlar Mills area was built in mid-1700's by a "facelifting," not a restoration, he said. Only front porch of Ellis family, wealthy merchants. At one time, the family owned structure is not part of original structure. House stands most of Pedlar Mills, according to Ed Lewis, current owner nearly as it did when Edgar Allan Poe came to visit. Lewis of the house. Lewis is returning house to its original appearance — notes that house has "almost too much history."



Ed Lewis has spent many hours at work studying history of Red Hill. All interior walls in house are of brick. History of old home is well-documented.

established the estate in about 1754 with a 1000-acre land grant from King George II. Though letters say a mansion was built about that time, Lewis says he doubts it was the current structure.

"Ellis probably wouldn't have had the resources to build this house at that time," he says, citing the many items of hand crafted detailing that fill the house. Each of its eight rooms, which border a 13-foot wide central hallway, is a different size. Each has a different design for window molding and chair railing, some of which, Lewis has been told, couldn't be duplicated except by hand. Designs for the eight mantels also vary from simple to ornate in the formal parlor on the north side of the house.

Flooring in every room is made of boards which extend — in one piece — the length of the room. Rather than leveling the boards after installation, each was chiseled from beneath to be flush with its neighbors.

Unlike many homes of that era, there were storage closets added to several of the rooms —

shelves which extended from the floor to the 14-foot ceilings. Because of the brick interior walls, it has been difficult to add bathrooms to the house and wire it electrically. "We thought a long time before we decided where to add the baths," says Lewis. "We wanted to change the overall appearance of the house as little as possible, so we finally added a wall and cut down the size of one of the bedrooms to add two baths side by side."

### "Whistling Walk"

Though each of the four basement rooms has a fireplace, Lewis says there are no indications that there ever was a kitchen in the house until this century. A frame kitchen stood near the rear of the mansion and was connected to it by a covered "whistling walk." Servants carrying food to the dining room were told to whistle to assure they weren't tasting the food.

Lewis cannot talk for long about the repairs to the house without returning to its history. It was Capt. Ellis' son Josiah whom Lewis feels built the 42- by 55-foot house. Josiah was very

"acquisitive," explains Lewis. "He owned thousands of acres all over Amherst County and had warehouses on the James River. They were essentially merchants — though they preferred to be called planters — and bought tobacco and other products from the farmers, transported them down the James River and shipped them to Liverpool and Europe." Josiah was the unofficial Amherst County representative of Ellis and Allen Mercantile, owned by his son, Charles. The Ellises returned with goods and supplies for the farmers and local businessmen. Records indicate that the Ellis family during this period which ended soon after the Civil War, almost totally owned the village of Pedlar Mills — operating the store, tavern and inn, post offices, the mill and other businesses.

Charles was the best businessman of Josiah's children, but Powhatan, his youngest son was the most famous. A lawyer who, as a lieutenant in the War of 1812, attracted the attention of Andrew Jackson, Powhatan was encouraged by

[Continued on page 3B]