

# SCULPTURE, PAINTINGS BIG PART OF CLERMONT FORUM

By VAL VAN METER, The Winchester Star, Posted: February 27, 2014

## BERRYVILLE

Robert Stieg Jr., CEO of the Clermont Foundation, has been getting phone calls and emails from friends and acquaintances recently to tell him, “That’s not how you stack hay.”

The object of all this attention is an agricultural sculpture, made primarily of round bales of hay, rising off Harry Byrd Highway (Va. 7) in front of historic Clermont Farm, east of Berryville.



*Baltimore artist Michael Benevento takes measurements on a wooden section of an outdoor public sculpture he is creating with fellow artist Andrew Shenker. It is scheduled to be finished by late April. (Photo by Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star)*

While round bales are usually stored with their curved side touching the ground, when you want to make a towering sculpture with them, Stieg said the flat side just stacks better.

The 360-acre farm, now owned by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, is preparing for its second Clermont Forum, Stieg said, and art in many forms will be the focus. The hay sculpture will be just one.

Clermont is a significant piece of the history of agriculture in the Northern Shenandoah Valley.

It was first surveyed by a teenaged George Washington for Thomas, Lord Fairfax, as the Englishman began to sell off his land holdings on the Virginia frontier in 1750.

It was farmed by the same family from the early 1800s — with the main house growing and sprawling as the family’s fortunes advanced — until the last owner, Elizabeth Rust Williams, donated the land to the state about 10 years ago. She stipulated that it be kept in farming and used for educational purposes.

Three years ago, Stieg said, the first Clermont Forum fulfilled the second part of that charge.

Nine historians were invited to research and report on Clermont's history and its part in the events of the young nation's life.

There were papers on the architecture of the house over decades, on agricultural changes, women's roles and the military ties of the McCormick family — longtime owners of the farm — who fought in every war from the American Revolution to Korea.

It was an impressive addition to the history of the area, Stieg said.

A second forum is scheduled for April 12 to May 31, but this time, Stieg said, the foundation board has asked nine artists to portray Clermont's history through their own inner visions. No admission schedule has been set for the public to attend and view the art.

The idea for "Interpreting Clermont's History through Art" came from the work of Frederick County native Teddy Johnston and his partner, Heather Rounds, with their Rotating History Project.

"It is a site-specific (Clermont-related art only) interpretive event," said Stieg, featuring painting, sculpture, installation and live performance.

He saw an example of such a project in Baltimore, when artists looked at the history of the city's needlework trade in a series of art works in an old mill. The show was called, "Down Through the Needle's Eye."

Andrew Shenker took part in that event and has partnered with artist and gallery director Michael Benevento to create the hay bale sculpture that will be the first art piece visitors will see when they arrive at Clermont for the forum.



*Andrew Shenker throws a measuring tape to Michael Benevento as the Baltimore artists work on their outdoor public sculpture along Harry Byrd Highway in front of Clermont Farm in Clarke County on Thursday. (Photo by Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star)*

After being asked to create a Clermont-related sculpture, Shenker received inspiration for his piece during a subsequent tour of the farm. He was intrigued with the hallway that was built as the original small house expanded in the late 1700s.

The hallway effectively divided the house into two downstairs rooms, he said. One was a parlor for family and friends, the other was for business.

He was also inspired by the smaller-than-normal doorways in the slave quarters and into the kitchen. “That stuck with us,” he said, the way architecture divided people into different classes, friend or stranger, slave or free.

In their sculpture, the hay bales are the farm’s walls, and the timbers holding them in place echo the timber frame construction that can be seen in the Clermont house itself.

As part of a five-year study of how to best maintain the farm, strategic holes in the walls let you see this, said Benevento, who noted that the Clermont barn also follows this form of construction.

Through the center of the sculpture, a doorway will lead the eye of the beholder through to the vista of the farm, and a view over the graveyard, where the family and servants are buried, each in their own section.

“It’s a hidden dimension,” Shenker said.



*White Post artist Doug Pifer poses with one of the eight paintings he is creating for an art installation at Clermont Farm.*

In that timber frame barn, artist Doug Pifer, of White Post, has been researching and creating life-sized paintings of farm animals, the sort that Clermont has sheltered through more than 200 years of history.

He’s learned that English colonists who brought turkeys to the new world were actually returning these American natives home.

“The Aztecs domesticated the turkey,” Pifer said, “And the Spanish brought them to Europe.”

The bird had an identity crisis there, where they were given names indicating that they came from India or Turkey but not from the New World.

Pifer is creating a draft horse, a cow and calf, sheep and pigs and “if there’s time, a peacock.”



*White Post artist Doug Pifer works on one of the paintings he is doing for Clermont Farm. The paintings, which depict farm animals, will be hung in the barn on the Clarke County farm's property.*



*Pifer used acrylic paint on birchwood board for this painting of a hen with her chicks and a rooster*

One unusual display will be in fiber arts, where Elizabeth Rust Williams' wedding dress will be on display, showing how women of the day reused articles of clothing.

"They were expert needle women," said Stieg, and Clermont's benefactor reused her mother's wedding dress from the 1930s, with her own changes.

The clothing found at Clermont, from generations of family members, "could be an entire history in itself," Stieg said.

The board, he added, has been impressed with the depth of thought these and the other artists have put into the works they are creating for the forum.

"They are transforming historic objects in some cases, and using other material from the farm to create something that encourages you to think about that history. It gives you a special kind of access to that history."

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