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Saving Mahone's Tavern

By Linda McNatt



COURTLAND--Harwood "Woodie" Watkinson will tell you that the stately white house on Main Street is just a home.

But give him an opportunity, and he'll take you on a tour. Heart pine, handmade timbers in the attic and on the floors, names and dates etched on window glass .

He'll point out the hill, where, less than a quarter-mile away, Nat Turner was hanged after his insurrection of 1831. Metal latches to bar the doors are still on the entry way in the front parlor. Historic Williamsburg has tried to buy the detailed crown molding.

Watkinson grew up there, and so did Gen. William Mahone, known as the "Hero of the Crater" during the Civil War and a founder of the Norfolk and Western Railroad. Dr. John Kindred, a U.S. senator from New York and a national pioneer for mental health care, lived there as a child.

When Watkinson decided to marry his longtime love and move to Madison County, he and his siblings grappled over what to do with the family home, designated earlier this year as a national and state historic landmark.



Harwood "Woodie" Watkinson shows where people scratched their names into the glass when the house was a tavern. *Michael Kestner, The Virginian-Pilot*



Tommy Simmons, commander of the Urquhart-Gillette Camp, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Southampton County, is looking for donations so the group can buy—and preserve—the house. *Michael Kestner, The Virginian-Pilot*

The For Sale sign went in front of the 1794 house in February. And, soon, there was a knock at the wide front door.

"It was a general's home," said Tommy Simmons, commander of the Urquhart-Gillette Camp, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Southampton County. "It's so significant to us. We want to preserve and protect it."

And that, Watkinson said recently, he believes is exactly what his family is hoping for.

"We don't want anything radically altered," he said. "We believe it will be safe with the SCV. It was my dad's project for 40 years."

"This is an opportunity that might not come along but every 200 years," Simmons said.

The 2,107-square-foot house is listed for \$239,000. It's been in Watkinson's family for almost a century.



Simmons already has plans for the house known locally as Mahone's Tavern. It would be open for citizens, school children and tourists, he said. It would be opened for the holidays, decorated in the spirit of the time when Mahone lived. The local United Daughters of the Confederacy has offered to help.

"We can't do this with barbecues and fish fries and poker runs," he said. "We've got to have some big contributors."

Although it's well-preserved, Watkinson said, few others have expressed an interest in the old home.

"We're trying to let the public know the challenge we're taking on," Simmons said. "We're very serious about this. We're on a campaign to save the tavern."

Want to help? Contributions to assist the Urquhart-Gillette Camp 1471, Sons of Confederate Veterans to purchase the Mahone house for use as a museum can be mailed to: P.O. Box 1, Courtland, VA 23837. The Camp is a 501C-3, non profit organization.