

# Saving The Hollow

*Local group hopes to preserve John Marshall's boyhood home*

**By Allison Rice**  
Staff Writer

More than two centuries of rain, sunshine, wind and snow have left the small frame house's clapboard siding a weathered gray.

But when Thomas Marshall DeButts looks at The Hollow, he doesn't see the ravages of time.

He sees the boyhood home of John Marshall (1755-1835), Fauquier's most famous native son, as it stood in 1765 when Thomas Marshall's growing family moved in.

"I love to imagine this place 235 years ago, when they had just moved to their new house and had to worry about Indians," the 38-year-old Arlington lawyer says, ending his musings with an incredulous laugh.

Today The Hollow and its supporters have more modern worries: Saving the Markham house for future generations.

If preserved, it would present another chapter in the life of the chief justice, who was born near Midland and lived at Oak Hill near Delaplane.

From age 10 to 18, he lived at The Hollow.

"This is the place where John Marshall grew up, where he cruised the woods and hunted," says Mr. DeButts, president of Friends of the Hollow, a nonprofit group founded in 1981 to save the structure.

John Marshall received his first formal education at The Hollow. According to historical sources, he studied with James Thompson, the Scotch minister of Leeds Parish, for at least a year. The tutor lived with them during that time.

It made for a cozy household.

The young Marshall would have shared the 1-1/2-story house with his parents, his tutor and as many as nine siblings during the 1760s and 1770s.

To modern sensibilities, that sounds unbelievably crowded, but by the standards of the day, "This place was actually pretty nice," Mr. DeButts says.



Staff Photo/Rob Paine

**Friends of The Hollow President Thomas DeButts wants to save the 18th-century frame house for future generations.**

John Pearce, a historic preservation professor at Mary Washington College, concurs.

"The typical house for a Virginia family of modest means, white or black... was 12 by 16 feet," he explains.

The Hollow measures 16 feet, 6 inches by 24 feet, 4 inches with two rooms on the first floor and a loft.

"When you're talking two rooms instead of one and 12 (feet) by 20 (feet)... you're moving into 'big house land,'" Mr. Pearce says.

"In my view, it is an extraordinary survivor of a type of rather elegant frontier

housing, of which we have very few examples."

The house has a few blemishes. Former tenants have covered holes in the wall with irregularly sized and now rusting pieces of metal. A few steps in the box stairs that lead to the loft have split. The floor slopes downward in the back of the house.

It retains a few of its original features. The grooved edges of the interior's "beaded" wood paneling can still be touched and seen under the fading and chipping coats of paint. Close inspection reveals the large rounded heads of hand-wrought "rose head" nails.

A metal roof installed in the 1980s prevents the building from rotting.

Still, saving the structure represents a formidable task.

DeButts' group owns neither The Hollow nor the land on which the building sits, overlooking Interstate 66.

The 322-acre parcel belongs to a group of investors, which paid just more than \$1 million for it in 1987, according to county records.

"I liked the area, and it was a good strategic location at the interchange," says

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## THE HOLLOW

■ **What:** Boyhood home of Fauquier native son and Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall

■ **Where:** Leeds Manor Road (Route 688) and Marshall School Road, Markham

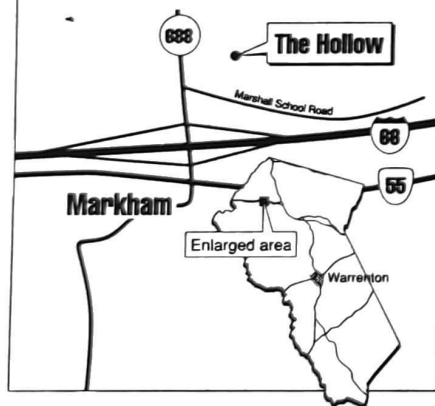
■ **Built:** 1764 by Thomas Marshall, John Marshall's father

■ **Construction:** 1-1/2-story frame house, built of red and white oak timbers

■ **Square feet:** About 460

■ **For more information:** Write Friends of the Hollow, 4283 N. 38th St., Arlington, Va. 22207

■ **On the Web:**  
[www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/7445/hollow.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/7445/hollow.htm)



# House

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Warren Montouri, the investors' trustee.

In contrast to the usual developer versus preservationist story, the two groups maintain a cordial relationship.

"We're very encouraged about saving it," Mr. Montouri says quietly. "The problem is, it's almost in the center of the property."

It leaves the Friends at an impasse, legally and financially.

They would like to obtain historic landmark status for The Hollow, but the owners will not consent.

"Because of where it's located, it would interfere with any possible use," Mr. Montouri explains.

If the Friends move the house, it ceases to be a historic landmark.

And, with the group's modest dues ranging from \$10 to \$25 annually, it will take thousands of memberships to raise enough money to purchase the site.

Mr. Montouri says the investors would entertain offers for part or all of the property if the Friends raise enough money.

"We're open to suggestions," says the 68-year-old trustee, who owns a cattle farm in Fauquier.

There also have been questions in the past about the authenticity of the house's John Marshall connection.

"All my life, people in this neighbor-

hood had always said it was his childhood home," says 81-year-old Markham resident Alex Green.

But, he acknowledges, "There were doubters."

"All we had to go on was hearsay, what our parents said. But as far as actual proof, there was none."

An attempt to get landmark status for the building failed in the 1980s, when an architect said he could not date the structure to the 1760s.

In 1996, the Friends tried again.

They hired a Blacksburg firm to conduct a tree-ring dating or dendrochronology on the house's timbers.

Using 10 samples from The Hollow and information on tree growing patterns, the firm concluded that the oak trees used to build the house were felled in 1763 and used almost immediately for construction.

The report validated years of oral history that the house was truly The Hollow where John Marshall had spent his youth.

"It adds an awful lot of credibility," says Allen Goolsby, president of the Richmond-based John Marshall Foundation.

The foundation last summer agreed to help raise money for The Hollow by allowing donors to designate their contribution for saving the northern Fauquier building.

So far, benefactors have given about \$3,700 to The Hollow fund.

"We felt it was something that ought to be preserved," says Mr. Goolsby. "If you don't save it, once it's gone you'll never get it back."