

TOURISM – Belmont – an historic house



VIEW OF THE HOUSE FROM THE EAST.
PHOTO CREDIT: RON BLUNT

The house at Gari Melchers Home and Studio possesses a rich history that predates Gari Melchers. Because the original deed of ownership is lost, the year in which the Georgian-style frame house was built and the identity of its first owner is not precisely known. But based on the existing physical evidence, the possibilities can be narrowed down. The original plan of the house consisted of a first and second floor side passage and four rooms to the north (the present dining room, library and two bedrooms) dating to the 1790s. Since surviving documents tell us that the Horner and Voss families owned the property between 1785 and 1804, one of those two families must have been responsible for the earliest section of the current structure.

In 1807, Thomas Knox bought the house for his mother, Susannah Fitzhugh Knox. He purchased the first insurance on the house through the Mutual Assurance Company of Virginia. Nearly two hundred years later, that policy is still in effect.

When Susannah Knox died in 1823, a public notice announcing the sale of the property is the first known reference to the name "Belmont." The buyer was Joseph B. Ficklen, an ambitious young businessman. By 1860 Ficklen was a wealthy miller and banker, owner of sizable real estate, and holder of 27 slaves, most of whom were employed at his mills.





HOUSE INTERIOR
PHOTO: GARI MELCHERS HOME AND STUDIO

At Belmont, Ficklen was responsible for most of the house's subsequent structural evolution. He raised a family of six children, which might explain the sudden growth of the house sometime prior to 1850. Two first floor parlors (now one large room) were added south of the main hall and two bedrooms constitute the second floor of the addition. Further improvements followed; windows were enlarged and the east and west porches were constructed. Eventually a kitchen and other rooms were added to the north end of the house.

During the Civil War years of 1862 and 1863, the Army of the Potomac occupied much of Falmouth. Ficklen, a Union sympathizer, and his family continuously occupied the property, benefiting from the protection of U.S. Army General John Gibbon, whom they befriended while the brigade-commander was stationed in Falmouth. Although batteries were placed on either side of the house in December of 1862, it is unlikely that fighting ever occurred on the property.

When in 1916, after ninety-three years, the property passed from the Ficklens to Gari and Corinne Melchers, the house and its surrounding twenty-five acres were considerably run-down. The couple took great pride and pleasure in the improvements made to their "country house." No picturesque detail was overlooked and every opportunity to provide views of the lawns and gardens from the house was investigated.

A hexagonal sun porch was constructed in 1916 at the extreme south end of the house, in line with the north-south layout of the lawn. Two baths were built above to accommodate the Ficklen-era bedrooms. Melchers added a second story to the west porch (tour entrance), a roof cupola with an attic ventilator and bell, a large attic window, a kitchen porch and a third floor on the north or service end of the house.



DINING ROOM
PHOTO: GARI MELCHERS HOME AND STUDIO

In their travels and residences both here and abroad, the Melchers amassed a rich and varied collection of antique furniture and carpets, fine china and pottery, and paintings and prints by Old Masters as well as new. Notable among the furnishings are a French Savonnerie carpet and a Dutch Rococo secretary. Shelves are stacked with Chinese export porcelain and Delft and Wedgwood dishes. Other highlights include important American miniatures by Raphaelle Peale and Henry Benbridge, Flemish portraits attributed to Cornelis de Vos and Wybrant de Geest, a Dutch still life attributed to Balthasar van der Ast, and a monumental *Market Scene* produced by the workshop of Flemish painter Frans Snyders. Finally, the works of Corinne Melchers, an artist in her own right, are displayed here, including *The Model*, a clever "picture within a picture" portrait of her husband at work. Virtually all the couple's personal possessions remain with the estate so that the spacious interiors of their day have been carefully reproduced and reflect their very individual and eclectic tastes.

Gari Melchers Home and Studio
Belmont, 224 Washington Street, Fredericksburg, VA 22405
(540) 654-1015 fax (540) 654-1785
GariMelchers@umw.edu

Public Hours

The museum is open daily, *except* Wednesdays, 10 - 5 pm.

The museum will be OPEN on Wednesday, Dec. 29 from 10 - 5 pm.

Closed January 1, Easter Sunday, July 4, Thanksgiving Day, December 24, 25, 31.

Admission Fees

General Admission: \$10

AAA members: \$9

Students 18 and younger free with accompanying, paying adult; limit two. Additional students \$5 apiece.

Friends of Belmont free

Current UMW staff and students free

Group Tour Members: \$10

General Tours

Please allow an hour and a half for your visit. The complete tour includes a 12-minute [introductory film](#), a 30-minute docent led tour of the 1790s Georgian house museum and time spent experiencing the Studio's four gallery spaces. Guests can explore the restored gardens and grounds on their own.

Tours run continuously throughout the day.