

Bill Frank's column

Belmont Hall

ONE OF Delaware's most treasured landmarks, steeped in history and folklore — including a ghost — is up for sale for about \$350,000.

It's a mansion, Belmont Hall, which dates back to 1754, plus 32 acres of prime land south of Smyrna.

While American real estate evaluators may not agree, in England an authenticated ghost is said to add to the value of an ancient manor house.

However, I understand the price could be reduced if the buyer doesn't want all the land.

Anyone who buys this house also

takes on a responsibility to protect the structure and preserve its antiquity. For Belmont Hall is on the National Register of Historic Places, intertwined as it is with Delaware history from back in pre-Revolutionary War days.

It is associated with at least three Delaware governors and was also, for a while, the seat of Delaware government during the American Revolution when the state's lawmakers were worried about being trapped by the British.

You can't see the place driving north on U.S. 13 into Smyrna. It sits far back from the road and in summer is shaded by broad-leaved trees. For years, it was the home of

the late Cummins Speakman who died in 1951 and his wife, Marjorie, who died in 1978 at the age of 88.

Their son, Walter W. Speakman, now occupies Belmont Hall. He owns it along with his brother, Dr. Cummins E. Speakman Jr., and sister, Marion Speakman Mathews.

Walter Speakman reports several "nibbles" in the past year but he presumes high interest rates became an obstacle.

Belmont Hall has been included in practically every book in the last 75 years dealing with notable historic homes along the Atlantic Coast. Authorities have been lavish in their praise of the building's design.

Its importance in Delaware history stems from the man responsible for its design and construction, Thomas Collins, who was governor of Delaware from 1786 to 1789. Before that he was high sheriff of Kent County, a member of the fore-runner of the Delaware General Assembly, a leading member of the Delaware convention that wrote the state's first constitution, a brigadier general in the Delaware State Militia and a judge.

He was governor when the state pioneered in the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. He also organized and financed a brigade of militiamen from Delaware during the Revolutionary War.

In 1777, he permitted the Delaware Assembly to meet in his home

Health Views by Sue Corty

Retirement

WHAT'S the appropriate time for a person to retire from work? For many, the answer depends at least partially on federal law and our employer's retirement policies. Personal health and finances also play a role.

But what about physicians in pri-

and seeing eye dog and can give all kinds of help in making blindness easier. She taught mother some little crafts, how to tell coins apart and to fold her bills, brought special needles, large and raised number phone dial, gadgets for signing checks."

It's refreshing to know that the visually impaired do get such excellent assistance from the state.

because the British forces at that time were coming too close to the state's capital, New Castle.

Once, during the Revolutionary War, Collins fortified his home with a stockade and posted guards on the railed deck atop the mansion. According to legend, a marauder sneaked into the house one night and shot a young sentry. The wounded man dragged himself to a room below to warn his comrades but died in a pool of his own blood.

Since then, there have been reports that the ghost of the wounded sentry haunts the rooms of Belmont Hall in search of his assailant.

Walter Speakman says that in all the years he has lived in the mansion, he has never seen or heard the ghost but he adds, "I've been told by some people that they really and truly saw and heard the phantom of the wounded sentry."

Other governors connected with Belmont Hall were John Cook who served only one year, 1783, and John Clark, 1817 to 1820.

Another story involving Belmont Hall is that Collins himself once learned a patrol of British soldiers was advancing to the mansion to arrest him. He hid himself in an attic cubbyhole during the raid and the soldiers left, not suspecting that their man was cowering in a small space covered by a large bureau.

The late Marjorie Speakman, who lovingly devoted more than 60



Historic Belmont Hall

years of her life to caring for the mansion, often told the story that soon after she moved into Belmont Hall in 1908, her mother took one look at it and said, "Did you ever see such an ugly house?"

"And it was awful," Mrs. Speakman would add.

During the Civil War era, the Flemish bond brick front was covered with a muddy brown paint

that added the last word in Victorian "elegance." Restoration began in 1920. Flames damaged the third floor in 1922, but this hastened the restoration project.

Mrs. Speakman once wrote, "Belmont Hall is not a museum; it is a home in every sense of the word, home. But perhaps it should be a museum and one day, no doubt it will be that."