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## Warren County Historical Tidbits: The Somerville-Graham House

One House...to Three Houses...to One House. It's Magic!

It never ceases to amaze me that even though the decades pass and new owners come and go, we seem to have a living history "slideshow" right in front of us in our historic homes and buildings. This week's story is no different – the Somerville-Graham House on Front Street in Warrenton. But beyond that show, look a little closer and you'll find that the current owners tell the story of this house across more than 170 years in a way every year at Halloween...

Wait, you don't know which house I'm talking about? Well, what if I said it was "the Halloween House"? Aha...now you know the house...well, just about everyone in this part of the state is familiar with Warrenton's "Halloween House." Now that we're oriented, let's dig a little into its interesting story.

As I mentioned earlier, the current owners (Bob & Rose) playfully tell the story of their physical house in a way with their ever-growing Halloween extravaganza each year. In September, you drive by and see a regal vestige of Antebellum Warren County architecture among classic landscaping. And then, like magic in October, a whole new world of ghouls and ghosties and creepy-crawlies and tombstones sprout from every corner of their yard...from every bush and every tree and from every corner of the house. Into this expanded world come literally thousands of kids – both young and old – peaking on Halloween night...filling the yard with laughter and squeals and fun...and then on November 1 it begins to almost magically shrink back down to simply a home again.

Sit down for a little while and listen to the story of this home and I think you'll see the similarities in Bob & Rose's Halloween and the history of this Warren County treasure.



*Somerville-Graham House c. 1898  
View from the corner of Front & Graham Streets*

The home we know today isn't the first...and in fact, isn't **all** the house that has occupied this "Lot 17" of the original Warrenton plan sold in 1779. Someone (unfortunately somewhat lost to time for the present) built what was described as "a house of modest proportions" on this lot in the early days of our town and county.

This home existed quietly for a number of years until the lot and home were purchased in the early 1840's by wealthy Warren County planter John Somerville. Following his neighbors, he decided to build a grand new home and contracted Gabriel Jones to build the home we can

visit today. Now, this news about the builder may seem odd...as this house is usually attributed to Jacob Holt due to stylist similarities...that information comes to us thru Rose from descendants of Mr. Jones.

The dates of construction vary, but we can confidently place it to 1844...Mrs. V. L. Pendleton in her 1920's "Memoirs" notes, "The Somerville Place is comparatively a new place...In 1844, I went by there with Susie and it was not quite finished. The family was living in old fashion house in the yard..." Comparatively new...☺...what a great perspective. It seems that shortly after this new home was finished, the "original" home mentioned above was torn down as it was no longer needed.

John Somerville died after only a few years in his new home and his wife continued to live there. An interesting side story, for which we have very few details, is that during Reconstruction the Union soldiers and officers made the Somerville home theirs along with Mrs. Somerville...likely due to its proximity to the Courthouse and center to Warrenton. His widow lived there until her death in 1867. As the 7 Somerville children were married and established with homes of their own, the home was then sold to a Mr. Nat Norwood who tried his hand at farming in Warren County for a number of years. As good fortune would have it, Mr. Norwood decided to return to the city life in Henderson at precisely the same time that John Graham's Ridgeway home and school burned and he came to Warrenton to run the Male Academy in 1897. With scores of students needing housing, Graham added a new wing to the north side of the house for his boys and made this his home and school dormitory. For at least 20 years this lot in Warrenton would have been the home of a steady stream of hundreds of young boys...likely filling the property with the same youthful fun we find every year now on October 31.

So if we look at the picture above we see buds of our treasure today: the oak tree in the center of the picture is still there, but significantly larger...the recently planted boxwood shrubs lining the paths are starting to define the ornate landscaping that survives over 100 years later...on the far lower right of the picture you'll notice a circular outline of boxwood, those remain today – only much taller. There's a remarkable continuity in the "look and feel" if you place this picture from today beside the one above.



*Somerville-Graham House 2017*

But, I'll bet you're wondering "What happened to that large wing in the right of the picture? It's certainly not there today." Well, yes...and no. It is not where we see it in the picture above, but if you'll head north on Front Street about 50 yards and peek through the overgrown trees and shrubs in front of a house on the same side of the street, you'll find it...still standing. At some point during the 20<sup>th</sup> century this wing was separated and moved to a new lot once the dormitory space was no longer needed. It's been at times a

private residence and also a funeral home, but stands vacant now. Here's hoping this part of Warren County history finds a new caretaker to shepherd it through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bob mentioned also that Richard Hunter mentioned a second wing was added sometime after the 1898 picture was taken...that wing was also removed to serve as a private home until it unfortunately burned.

It's always amazing what we find when we listen to our historic homes and the history experts here in Warren County! Wherever you turn in Warren County we have a jewel...

"Warren County Historical Tidbits" is a project of The Chamber of Commerce of Warren County.