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# A LOVE OF THE LAND

Whether it's their **BELOVED** Eastern Shore or the inspiring efforts they are spearheading for the revitalization of the **NATIONAL MALL**, John "Chip" and Sally Akridge keep both their **FAMILY'S HOME** and their nation's "front yard" *close to their hearts.*

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By *Carol Sorgen*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Erik Kvalsvik*



“I’m really just a country boy,” says John E. “Chip” Akridge III, chairman of the Washington, D.C., commercial real estate company that bears his name. Born and raised in Tennessee, both Chip and his wife, Sally, are proud of their Southern roots, but it’s Maryland’s Eastern Shore that has laid claim to their hearts for more than 30 years.

The Akridges were no strangers to the Shore when they decided to move their then-young family from their 18-foot-wide townhouse in Old Town Alexandria, Va. “It was tough to raise kids there,” Sally says. Since the family already had been spending much of their weekends and vacations on the Shore, it seemed like a good fit. “You can do everything here but downhill ski!” Sally says.

With three young children in tow, the Akridges found the house for which they were looking in Oxford, a home they now say they never intend to leave. (“We’re going to die in this house,” laughs Chip.) It has been at Harleigh Farms, a 19th-century manor house tucked away amid several hundred acres, that the Akridges created a family home in which they raised their children—who now enjoy the farm when they visit with their own growing brood—as well as stimulated, Sally says, “Chip’s growing interest in life in the country.”

For the Akridges, that life not only is about creating their own pastoral idyll, but also about conserving and restoring the wetlands and wildlife habitat on their property. As a partner of the Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Akridges have ensured that while providing Harleigh Farms with ample opportunities for hunting and recreation, they also are enhancing the overall water quality and wildlife values in their tributary of the Chesapeake Bay.

Chip traces his environmental consciousness to his days as a Boy Scout, which, he recalls, gave him a “great appreciation” for land, as well as for scouting, an activity shared by three generations of Akridges, of whom seven have achieved the rank of Eagle. Of Chip’s many honors, one that is especially meaningful to him is being named a Distinguished Eagle Scout, a recognition that acknowledges former Eagle Scouts who have received extraordinary national-level recognition, fame or eminence within their field, and have a strong record of voluntary service to their community. To encourage other boys and young men to continue the scouting tradition in the Mid-Atlantic, Chip recently helped establish the Akridge Scout Reservation in Dover, Del.

A dedicated environmentalist, Chip also is a Vietnam veteran who proudly calls himself a patriot, as well as an enthusiastic runner—seemingly disparate elements of his life, but which, when taken in combination, have led to his latest passion, the creation of the Trust for the National Mall to restore and improve the home to this country’s iconic monuments.

“The Mall is a sacred space to me,” Chip says. “The view of the sunrise behind the Capitol dome makes the hair on my neck stand on end. Georgina Sanger pointed out to me in 2001 what bad shape the Mall was in.” It was on his frequent runs that Chip then noticed how much the Mall has deteriorated since he and Sally first moved to Washington in 1972. From the lack of visitor amenities to stagnant pools of water to cracks in the walkways that can no longer support the 25 million visitors a year from this country and abroad, the Mall is showing its age. “I can’t pass this on to my children, or to their children,” Chip says.



**F**ormer First Lady Laura Bush, who serves as honorary chair of the Campaign to Restore the National Mall, agrees. "After so many decades, we need to do more than sprinkle some seed or put down some new sod," she told more than 1,000 patrons at the Trust's annual benefit luncheon last spring. "Our capital and our country are worth our maintaining this beautiful gathering place and making it a place that will educate and unite Americans through the 21st century and beyond."

The Akridges are justifiably proud—and appreciative—of the fact that in the past five years, supporters of the Trust have contributed nearly \$7 million through the annual benefit luncheon. This spring, 1,000 young benefactors also attended the fourth annual Ball on the Mall.

This year alone, Chip happily reports, the Trust has seen a 35 percent increase in sponsorship support, and has raised more than \$2 million toward implementing the National Mall Plan, a visionary blueprint for the future of the park. Thus far, more than \$100 million of restoration work is under way, including repairing the plaza at the Jefferson Memorial, restoring the D.C. World War I Memorial and rebuilding the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool.

"This should be the most beautiful park in the world," says Sally, who is the founding chair of the Trust's Women's Committee. "The National Mall is home to our history, our heroes and our hope."







Chip's enthusiasm is contagious (though he laughingly admits that he takes a very hands-on approach—"probably much to the chagrin of my staff"). For Caroline Cunningham, president of the Trust, working on this project is an "exciting experience."

"Knowing we're making a contribution to our country and preserving the symbols that have meaning for all of us and for future generations is very humbling," she says.

To Cunningham, it's not surprising that Chip has spearheaded this effort, the goal of which is to raise \$350 million in corporate and private donations, a figure that will be matched by the U.S. Department of Interior. "Chip is all about the land and creating spaces," Cunningham says.

And that's certainly evident at Harleigh Farms, which recently has been given yet another new lease on life, courtesy of renowned interior designer Henry Johnson of Johnson Berman Architecture and Interior Design in Baltimore.

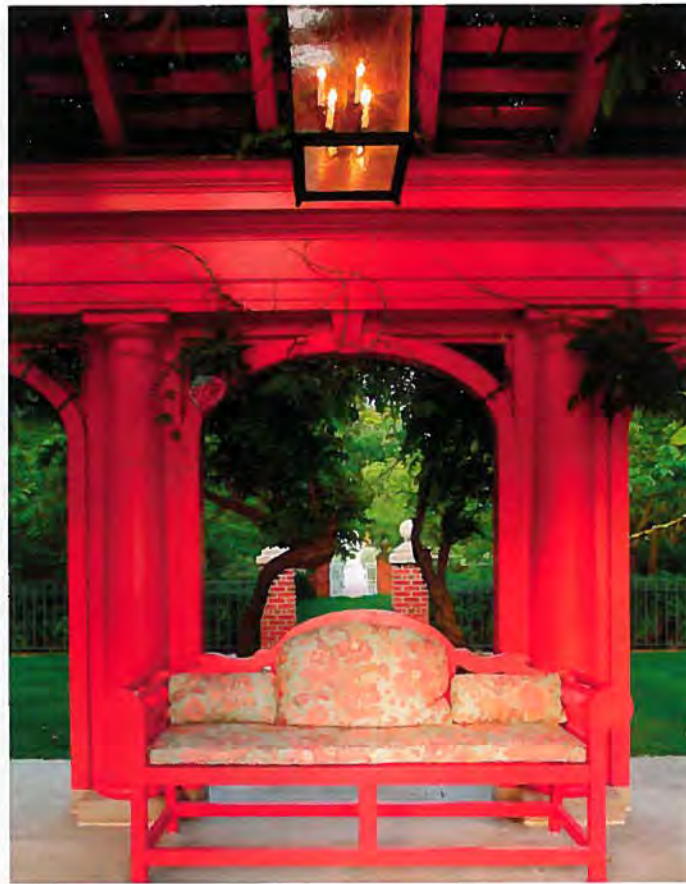
Johnson's dictum when it comes to working with his clients is to first "listen, listen, listen" (followed, he says, by "work, work, work!") And he did just that with the Akridges, for whom he had previously designed Duvall Lodge, the couple's rustic weekend lodge that sits on the banks of a man-made lake just a stone's throw (if you've got a good arm, that is) from the main house.











**F**or Harleigh, Johnson created a family home that is reflective of the couple's many interests and activities—from hunting to wine collecting to entertaining. “This house is terrific,” says Sally, crediting Johnson with taking the home's 19th-century bones and making it work for a modern-day family.

Keeping in mind the Akridges' love of the land, and Harleigh's magnificent park-like setting, Johnson ensured that every window in the home frames a view guaranteed to take one's breath away. “There are no accidental views here,” he says.

Despite its Georgian manor house proportions, Harleigh is surprisingly cozy and inviting, and none of its spaces—from Chip's home office, from which he works when he's not in his Washington headquarters, to the well-stocked library to the relaxing master bedroom with its aerie-like sitting room overlooking the portico—are imposing or overwhelming. Johnson's attention to scale and comfort undoubtedly have much to do with that, but so, too, does the Akridges' desire to be as “green” as possible; by using much of their existing furnishings, Johnson has designed a home with an enduring sense of timelessness.

“We didn't throw anything away,” Johnson says. “We just edited what Chip and Sally already had, and found new uses by reworking, restoring and reupholstering”—much as they did at Duvall Lodge, where Johnson used old building materials, such as antique chestnut, chinked logs and antique beams, to create a visual history that makes the house look like it has grown over the past 300 years, rather than actually being built in 2006.

At Harleigh, the interior design was equally organic. “Harleigh is not a home that was decorated per se,” Johnson says. Rather, it is a home in which meticulous attention has been paid to every detail, both indoors and out. And you know when you're a visitor to Harleigh—whether it's to one of the Akridges' many dinner parties, a weekend shoot, or an *en plein air* garden party—that the gracious hosts pay that same attention to their guests. “Dining at Harleigh is a magical experience,” Johnson says. “Chip and Sally make every effort to make you feel welcome.”

Because the Akridges enjoy entertaining so much, it should come as no surprise that one of their favorite interior spaces is the dining room, its walls sumptuously upholstered in the couple's favorite red Italian silk, complemented by (still more) red and cream-striped draperies with contrasting cranberry lining on the jabots, finished with hand-woven decorative trimming. The traditionalism of the room, from the lushness of both the colors and the fabrics to the intricately patterned Oriental carpet and formal antique mahogany dining room table and chairs, are unexpectedly—yet strikingly—balanced by the subtle palette of contemporary abstract paintings by Washington Color School artist Leon Berkowitz.

Whether they're entertaining or just having a rare quiet moment at home, the newly reconfigured portico overlooking the creek (which is Eastern Shore speak for small river) is another of the couple's favorite spaces. Johnson used a variety of materials (such as isinglass, canvas and mosquito netting), internally suspending them between the six classical wood columns and making them accessible







by remote control so that the two-story outdoor room is air-conditioned and livable year-round.

Elevating the French limestone flooring to the level of the front entrance hall, Johnson made sure the room could be immediately accessible from the principle spaces of the house. A large custom-designed lantern with floor and table lamps creates a luminous glow for nighttime entertaining. The lounge area is furnished in traditional lattice-designed frames with tropical flowers and bird textile patterns, while the round dining table, which comfortably seats eight, is accompanied by antique French iron chairs.

Colorful hand-woven carpets and upholstered fabric ceilings not only provide splashes of color but also dampen the sound during lively cocktail and dinner parties. Decorative accessories, such as large Mediterranean oil urns, are coupled with carved alabaster urns from India, both always filled with generous foliage and seasonal flowers throughout the year.

Of course, given the Akridges' love of the land, it is no wonder the couple

has paid just as much attention to the grounds of the house as they have to the interior. Working with nationally known landscape architect Gordon Hayward, they reedited and redesigned the gardens around the house, which are inspired by those created by Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. As beautiful as they are, though, the gardens aren't just for show. More than 50 percent of the flowers grown at Harleigh are used in the ever-present fragrant floral displays throughout the home—arranged in a specially designed cold storage space next to the wine cellar—and the homegrown herbs and vegetables find their way into many of the meals served to family and friends. “We very much live the concept of farm to table,” Sally says.

Whether it's sipping a cool drink on the portico on a hot Eastern Shore day, enjoying a roaring fire in the library (also red!) with a cold wind blowing in off the creek, or taking a quick nap in the nook of a hallway retreat, the Akridges clearly enjoy all that Harleigh has to offer. “This home has so many spaces that our family can live in so happily and so well,” they say. “It's our haven.”