

Sugar Loaf Mountain and its escape from Frank Lloyd Wright

By C.E. SCHILDKNECHT
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Many articles have been written about southern Frederick County's landmark monadnock, Sugar Loaf Mountain, but some aspects seem to be little known such as the early land records and our debt to Louise Strong for persuading her husband Gordon to reject plans drawn up by famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright to build a mammoth, modernistic palace of entertainment on the mountaintop.

The name in French, Pain de Sucre or Sugar Loaf Mountain was written first on the map of Baron de Graffenreid, the Swiss explorer, in 1712. (See Monocacy and Catoctin vol. I, 1985). The mountaintop at 1282 feet elevation, about 800 feet above the surrounding farm land, has sometimes been called Big Knob. In the Sugar Loaf Range to the north are two lesser peaks, Round Top and beyond that Mount Airy. To most early settlers the exceedingly rocky area of Sugar Loaf was worthless land except as a landmark. However, there were some early grants of land nearby. Thomas Hilleary surveyed a tract near later Park Mills in 1741. A tract called Black Acre around the head of Furnace Branch northwest of Sugar Loaf was surveyed by William Griffith in 1742. Stoney Hive was laid out in 1743 by James Pearre on the later Montgomery County line near Sugar Loaf. Prominent lawyer of Annapolis and Prince George's County, Thomas Bordley, surveyed about 2500 acres east of Sugar Loaf in 1747.

It is said that in 1786 Maryland's first governor, Thomas Johnson, with brothers James, Baker and Roger applied to the U.S. government to acquire land on Sugar Loaf Mountain for one shilling and 6 pence per acre. They were running short of wood for their iron furnaces in Frederick and Loudoun Counties. The U.S. Senate approved, but not the House of Representatives. However, much of the area became part of the large estate of brother Major Roger Johnson (1749-1831). In 1781 Roger married Elizabeth Thomas, daughter of Richard. When profits from the Johnson iron furnaces and forge declined Roger was forced to give a mortgage on his lands to the Bank of the U.S. After his death the mortgage was foreclosed and in 1832 his executors, Joseph A. and Charles Johnson, by deed JS 28-393 gave ownership to the Bank of the U.S. of 3041 acres including original tracts Partnership, Resurvey on Right and Good Reason, Bloomsburg, Resurvey on Little Worth, Bordley's Fancy, Balwick, Stoney Hive, Black Acre, Resurvey

on Chargeable and Worse Than Nothing. The western boundary of the Johnson land was the Monocacy River extending to its mouth. The other boundaries were marked by heaps of stones and by "bounded" elm, gum, birch, sycamore, black oak and white oak trees. Wood lots on Sugar Loaf were acquired by a large number of dwellers in Frederick and Montgomery counties, some of whose names are given on a plat in the courthouse in Frederick drawn by Willey James in deed book AF 11-511. Unfortunately the names are not very legible.

GORDON AND LOUISE STRONG
In 1902 Henry Gordon Strong (1869-1954) of Chicago, after completing law studies at Georgetown University, bicycled from DC to Frederick and explored nearby Catoctin Mountains looking for a future rural retreat. He anticipated that business interests of his family would compel him to spend most of his life in the congestion of cities especially Chicago, Boston and DC. The Strong summer home on Lake Geneva, WI, had led Gordon to appreciate outdoor country life. He had enjoyed surroundings of his student years at Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard in New England and at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. While Strong found some attractive unspoiled spots in the northern Catoctin Mountains, such as he later recommended to Franklin Roosevelt for Shangri La (later Camp David), it was Sugar Loaf Mountain which most appealed to him as a future mountain retreat.

Gordon Strong had served in Cuba in the Spanish American War. He practiced law briefly in Chicago but was most engaged in managing buildings, stores and apartments which had been acquired by his father Henry, a successful attorney and officer of major western railroads. In 1908 Henry died leaving his son Gordon about one and a half million dollars. In 1914 Gordon married Louise Snyder (1875-1949), who like himself was born at Burlington, IA. Louise was a daughter of A.N. and Margaret Snyder.

Already in 1903 Gordon Strong and his agents began to buy land on Sugar Loaf Mountain, usually in small lots. The first recorded in the Courthouse at Frederick was from Thomas O. White, et al, parts of Little Worth on the road to Greenfield Mills. The second lot of 12 acres was bought from Ida J. Dronenburg. Also in 1903 Strong bought 25 acres from John W. Collier of Montgomery County. It comprised lot 29 in the sub-division of Sugar Loaf Mountain made by the Bank of the U.S. The next buying activity was in 1906 when Strong bought woodlots from William A.

Turner, Mabel Tschiffely, Percival H. Marshall, John E. Andrews, William T. Campbell, Christopher and William Taylor, Sabina C. Fox, Rebecca M. Hall and the heirs of Isaac Davis. More lots were purchased in 1908-1914; there were 28 deeds in 1930 and 1931; 4 in 1943 and 6 in 1954.

In *The Frederick Post* of March 21, 1979, Michael L. Spaur described tactics by which Strong's agents were able to buy wood lots at modest prices. For example, it was alleged that one agent posed as a destitute woodsman in order to make a deal for the top of Sugar Loaf. This tract had been deeded from Washington philanthropist, William W. Corcoran in 1880 to his nephew, William T. Jones of Montgomery County. The Mountain summit comprised 52 1/2 acres of the tracts Foul Play and Bordley's Fancy, making up lot 43 of the plat drawn by Willey James in 1832. It had been called High Knob when conveyed in 1836 from Nicholas Biddle of Philadelphia, president of the Bank of the U.S. to William Corcoran of Georgetown.

In 1914 there were rumors that Gordon Strong wanted to build a large mansion on the mountain top. The Strong home built on the shoulder of Sugar Loaf with views toward DC and the Potomac was called Stronghold, a name suggested by Gordon's mother and approved by his wife Louise. It is said that Louise overcame urges of Gordon to construct a much larger and elaborate mansion. The home of "Georgian Colonial" style was completed in 1912

and enlarged in 1928. At first the Strongs spent only summers on their mountain, but from about 1930 they made Stronghold their permanent residence. They built a road to near the top of the mountain, shared the mountain with many visitors and made plans to make the mountain available to the public.

Louise Strong died in 1949 and Gordon in 1954, without descendants. His will created Stronghold, Inc. of MD to make the mountain a natural preserve open to the public. The deed numbered 543-205 of 1955 from the executor, Riggs National Bank of DC, to Stronghold, Inc is remarkable in its listing 70 lots with names of their former owners. Local trustees of Stronghold Inc. added lots with 16 more deeds from 1955 to 1970 and 6 from 1972 to 1980. The area now approaches 3,000 acres.

WRIGHT'S PLANS FOR A MAMMOTH SPIRAL ZIGGURAT
Little had been disclosed about the plans drawn up by architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959) for a "grand automotive attraction" for the top of Sugar Loaf Mountain until the articles by Mark Reinberger in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, March 1984 and in *Soundings*, a *Journal of the Potomac River Basin Consortium*, Winter 1985-86. After the Strongs built the mountain road about 1924 they invited Wright to spend two weeks at Stronghold and commissioned him to design a building for entertainment on the mountain top. Eventually Wright developed plans for a gigantic, spiral shaped struc-

ture to accommodate at once about a thousand people, most of whom could park their cars in 500 spaces within the building. There would be open terraces for dining and viewing the countryside, covered galleries against rain and hot weather, as well as two dance floors, kitchens and serving facilities. Thirty small rooms were provided for overnight guests. Wright said that he made the design primarily to glorify American automobiles which could ascend the outside of the spiral structure clockwise and descend inside counter clockwise. A crowning, center mast at the very top of the building provided a mooring place for dirigibles.

Perhaps anticipating that Louise Strong would think that this was going too far, Wright devised also a second "planetarium design." The spiral building was to be topped by a domed planetarium and it included aquaria, cinema and athletic facilities. Gordon Strong thought that the exterior ramps should be for picnic use and that autos should be kept within. These plans were submitted by Wright in 1935 to the Strongs and a group of associates in Chicago. Louise Strong has been credited with persuading her husband that the schemes of Wright were unsuitable for the site and that they violated the natural features of the mountain. Wright's response to the rejection indicated that his principal motive was to "glorify the automobile in motion for both functional and symbolic reasons." Later Wright was able to realize his modernistic spiral design, but on a smaller scale, in

building the Solomon B. Guggenheim Museum of Modern Art on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Some elements of the Sugar Loaf Mountain top design also were used by Wright in a Community Center at Pittsburgh.

Automobiles which Wright sought to glorify have become the greatest problem at Stronghold in the 1990s on sunny week ends of summer and autumn. The throngs from Greater DC and Baltimore seeking natural retreats such as Stronghold, Gambrill Park, Catoctin Parks and the Battlegrounds of Antietam and Gettysburg make it urgent that more protected natural area be provided to accommodate the crowds. At Sugar Loaf, fortunately, the steep climb from the upper parking space to the mountain top has resulted in the rock oaks, black birches, table-mountain and pitch pines of the summit remaining relatively undisturbed. Every thing is fine about Sugar Loaf Mountain, a great gift from Chicago to the Monocacy Valley, except for some graffiti on the white quartzite rocks and the sign which says that General Braddock's army passed that way in 1775 (20 years too late). Anticipating correction, I note that some of the white quartzite, locally incorrectly called "flint," is beautifully stained pale pink or yellow by small amounts of iron and in other places is covered by dark lichens.

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