

serving as a lightning rod for conservative and progressive interests in search of heroes and martyrs.

In 2020, two Maryland state senators nominated Whittaker Chambers to be memorialized with a statue in a “National Garden of American Heroes,” proposed to be built in South Dakota. However, in a September 17, 2020, letter to the editor of the *Carroll County Times*, Chambers’ grandsons, Joseph and David Chambers, demurred. They wrote, “Thank you, Senators, for your high esteem for Whittaker Chambers, but we request that you withdraw his name. Whittaker Chambers sought a simple life of farming the Pipe Creek Farm. He was a Quaker. His beliefs ran toward austerity and self-effacement. Quaker meeting houses stand unadorned, without monuments or statues. He would not have liked such fanfare. The best way to remember our grandfather is to read his books. Rather than a monument, he left testimony to read. As President Ronald Reagan said, when posthumously presenting the Medal of Freedom to him in 1984, ‘The witness is gone; the testimony will stand.’”

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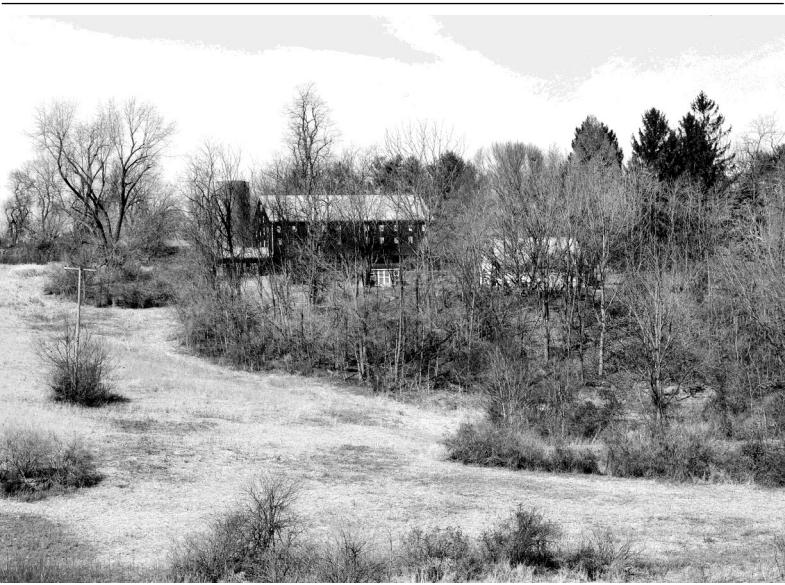
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HOW THE COLD WAR CAME TO CARROLL COUNTY:
WHITTAKER CHAMBERS AND PIPE CREEK FARM

BY MARI BETH WELCH BRAINERD

North of Westminster, along Big Pipe Creek, is a little known National Historic Landmark, the 390-acre Pipe Creek Farm. There, on December 2, 1948, in the presence of investigators reporting to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Whittaker Chambers, a former Communist operative, and by then a well-known editor with *Time* magazine, opened up a hollowed-out pumpkin. He pulled out five rolls of 35mm microfilm shot a decade earlier of government documents received from Alger Hiss, then a high-level U.S. State Department official. Based on Chambers’ testimony, the film was physical evidence that Hiss had passed secret state documents to the Soviets, as part of his membership in an underground Communist cell led by Chambers. The investigation had been front page news for months, but the quirky pumpkin angle sent the story into overdrive.

Hiss had previously denied under oath to HUAC that he knew Chambers or that they were Communist collaborators engaged in espionage. The microfilm, dubbed the Pumpkin Papers by the press, along with a manila envelope of related documents referred



Pipe Creek Farm, 2021. (Courtesy of Sam Brainerd)

to as the Baltimore Papers, led to Hiss’ conviction on two counts of perjury. He was sentenced on January 25, 1950, to five years’ imprisonment.

What Brought Whittaker Chambers to
Carroll County?

Curiously, as Chambers recalled in his 1952 memoir *Witness*, it was Hiss who had first introduced Chambers and his wife Esther to Carroll County. The two families had become friends and wanted to find a house out in the

country where they could go for summer retreats. Hiss located a small farmhouse in a pretty valley in 1939, with a creek running nearby, just outside Westminster, but his wife Priscilla thought it run-down and unsuitable. However, about a year later Chambers returned, looking for a quiet and secure place, where he, Esther and their two children could begin a new life, reasonably assured of safety and anonymity.

The property, a weather-beaten house built into the side of a hill on ten rolling acres, was listed at \$500. Chambers put down a deposit, even though at the time he was not sure they would be able to pay the mortgage. By 1947, not only had they paid it, but they had also purchased neighboring properties, comprising several hundred acres, which they called Pipe Creek Farm. It was home to about 50 head of Guernsey cattle, half of which they milked, beef cattle, sheep, and hogs. They grew all their own feed. Esther became the full-time farm manager, aided by Chambers (half-time), children Ellen and John, and one hired hand. The children were active in the county 4-H and regularly showed animals at the 4-H Fair and the Maryland State Fair. In 1948 John won a State Fair first place in the Guernsey classes. The family spread its roots locally by joining the congregation of the Pipe Creek Friends Meeting in Union Bridge. Pipe Creek Farm, wrote Chambers, “is our home. It is our altar. To it each day we bring our faith, our love for one another as a family, our working hands, our prayers.... We believe that *laborare est orare*—to labor is to pray.”

What Went Before?

Whittaker Chambers was born Jay Vivian Chambers on April 1, 1901, in Philadelphia, PA, to Jay Chambers, a young staff artist on the *New York World*, and Laha (Whittaker) Chambers, a former stage actress. Laha had married Jay Chambers to escape what she saw



Whittaker Chambers, 1948. (Library of Congress)

as the “unrefined” life of the stage, work she had taken up when her father, a successful inventor and industrialist, had lost his fortune.

Vivian’s childhood was not pleasant. His upbringing was unsettled, with an often-absent, dismissive, emotionally abusive father and a depressed mother left to parent two children on her own. In 1904, one year after the birth of a second son, the family moved to a small working-class village on Long Island. On the day Vivian graduated from high school, in 1919, without telling his parents and still wearing his graduation suit, he took off to see the world, hoping to start with Mexico. Working as a manual laborer, he made it as far as New Orleans before the bottom fell out of the post-war job market. He quickly ran out of money and wrote to his mother, asking for a train ticket home.

Friend, was published in 1968. A collection of his journalism at *Time* and *National Review*: *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers*, was published in 1989.

The Chambers family has retained its Carroll County roots. Ellen graduated from Westminster High School in 1951 and went on to earn her master’s degree and Ph.D. in clinical psychology. John maintained the Pipe Creek Farm while pursuing a 30-year career in journalism, like his father. Among his wide-ranging assignments as a UPI Radio Network reporter, John covered Robert Kennedy’s Presidential primary campaign, including an eyewitness report of his assassination the night of his California primary victory celebration. John also covered the Nixon White House, where the President often called him over after press conferences to ask about the Chambers family. However, John has said he would never write a book about the Whittaker Chambers odyssey because he doesn’t feel he could measure up to “the master,” his father. Often when he is introduced to someone, their reaction is “You’re not *that* Chambers are you?” John receives a “fair amount of correspondence, telephone stuff from folks around the country, and they identify the farm” as the “pumpkin farm.” “And even more puzzling, people call to see if we still have pumpkins—and if they have any papers in them.” Even though he had many interactions with political figures over the years, John always wanted to be a farmer on the farm where he grew up, and that is what he became—a dairy farmer raising milk cows, not pumpkins.

John said of his father, “Thank God [he] didn’t live to see some of the rest of it as it came down the historic pike. I think he felt an awful lot of people on either side [of the issue] had no feeling about it, no sense of his purpose, no intention of realizing why he’d done what he’d done.... I think he felt that he

died not understood or liked in any particular way by his compatriots.” Redemption eventually came for Chambers when, after the fall of the Soviet Union, documents surfaced that backed up his story. John said, “Suddenly we [went] from being villains to being patriots. It was amazing.”

On March 26, 1984, John accepted the Medal of Freedom, the government’s highest civilian award, from President Ronald Reagan on behalf of his father. Reagan noted that Chambers had taught him the “bitter truth” about a world divided “between two irreconcilable faiths of our time, Communism and Freedom.” In 2001, members of George W. Bush’s administration held a private ceremony commemorating Chambers’ 100th birthday, and in 2017 the National Review Institute inaugurated a Whittaker Chambers Award for its Ideas Summit. In recent years that award has been discontinued at the request of the Chambers family after the Institute disregarded their wish to have input into the selection of recipients.

Pipe Creek Farm—Chambers’ homeplace from 1939 to his death—remains in the Chambers family. It was named a National Historic Landmark in 1988 but, as a private working farm, it is not open to the public. Someday though, John would like to establish a library of his father’s books on the property and make it available to scholars.

Conclusion

Alger Hiss maintained his innocence to the end. With the unsealing of the Grand Jury perjury testimony in 1999 and the earlier release of FBI and prosecution records, scholars have identified some minor contradictions in Chambers’ testimony. This has fed a mini-industry of articles, books, and even conferences about the Chambers-Hiss affair. It remains controversial even today,

recovered, he and Esther indulged their dream to visit Europe. There, fellow journalist and anti-Communist, Arthur Koestler, told Chambers, “You cannot understand what is going on in the world unless you understand science deeply.” And so it was that Chambers resolved to return to college—to study science.

Continued Carroll County Ties

In the fall of 1959, no longer physically able to work the dairy farm he loved, Chambers plunged into full-time studies at Western Maryland College, now McDaniel College. Several students of the era remembered Chambers from their classes, although some never realized who he was or knew anything about him. The professors recognized him, but rarely revealed his identity. His academic attention was focused on the hard sciences, but his love of languages also led him to enroll in all the language courses he could, including French, Greek, Latin, Russian, and Spanish, all at the intermediate level or higher.

In “Witness and Friend: Remembering Whittaker Chambers,” William F. Buckley told the story of a visit from Chambers during the summer of 1960.

“How do you get on” my wife asked, “with your fellow undergraduates?” “Fine,” he said, puffing on his pipe. In fact, we learned, he had an admirer. A young lady—aged about nineteen, he guessed.... “For months while we worked together she addressed me not a word.... But last week she broke silence. She said breathlessly: ‘Mr. Chambers?’ ‘Yes,’ I answered her anxiously. ‘Tell me, what do you think of “Itsy Bitsy



Whittaker Chambers with children, Ellen and John, 1948. (Permission from Baltimore Sun Media. All rights reserved.)

Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka-dot Bikini”?” ... He hadn’t, at the critical moment, any idea that the young lady was talking about a popular song, but he had improvised successfully ... that it just happened that this was one of his very favorite songs. Her excitement was indescribable. From that moment on they chirped together as soul mates, pooling their knowledge of spleens and livers, kidneys and upper intestines.

Chambers’ Death and Legacy

Unfortunately, Chambers never met his goal of finishing his undergraduate degree in the hard sciences. After only two years, he died of a heart attack at his beloved Pipe Creek Farm on July 9, 1961, survived by his wife Esther (1900-1986) and children Ellen (1933-2017) and John (born 1937). *Cold Friday*, his second memoir, was published posthumously in 1964. It predicted that the fall of Communism would start in the satellite states surrounding the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. A collection of his correspondence with Buckley, *Odyssey of a*

In the fall of 1920, at his father’s urging, Chambers entered Columbia University. At this point he jettisoned the name Vivian, which had always tormented him, and took his mother’s maiden name: Whittaker. During his first two years of study, he focused on poetry and literature, at one point editing the university’s literary journal, *The Morningside* (later *The Columbia Review*), and publishing an atheist playlet satirizing Christianity. At the end of his sophomore year, he took a leave of absence from Columbia, thinking to travel. His advisor, the poet Mark Van Doren, suggested Soviet Russia. Van Doren said, “All the walls are falling down. You should go and see it.” He suggested Chambers go as a relief worker for the American Friends Service Committee and offered to write recommendations to certain “weighty Friends.”

Chambers went to Philadelphia to meet with the organization and quickly came to regard the Quaker community, with its plain and sweet language, as his natural home. He wanted nothing more than to remain there. But word of his atheist play reached the Friends, who were horrified and cut ties with him. Chambers wrote, “It was an invisible turning point in my life. If, at that moment, one Friend had said: ‘Sit down with me and tell me, what have you in your heart,’ this book [*Witness*] need never have been written. As it was, it took me seventeen years to find my way, unaided, back to that peace.”

Rather than go to Russia, Chambers toured Europe, including war-torn Germany, and then returned to Columbia to major in history. “When I entered, I was a conservative in my view of life and politics, and I was undergoing a religious experience. By the time I left, entirely by my own choice, I was no longer a conservative and I had no religion.... In 1925, I voluntarily withdrew for the express purpose of joining the Communist Party.” Communism “offered me what nothing else in the dying

world had power to offer at the same intensity—faith and a vision, something for which to live and something for which to die.” Chambers joined the Communist Party in the mid-1920s and wrote for *The Daily Worker* (1927-1929). He also wrote several articles for, and later became editor of, *The New Masses* (1931-1932). In 1931 he married Esther Shemitz, a painter and illustrator in New York, whom he had met at the 1926 textile strike in Passaic, NJ. Chambers was invited to join the Soviet underground in New York City in 1932. In the early spring of 1934, a man known as J. Peters (Alexander Goldberger), the head of the underground section of the American Communist Party, enlisted Chambers to work with Harold Ware. His cabal, known as the Ware group, recruited young intellectuals and government workers to join an underground “apparatus” of Communist operators inserted into the top levels of the federal government. Alger Hiss, general counsel for the Senate Munitions Investigating Committee, also a member of the Ware group, was the first man selected for this new apparatus.

Chambers Breaks With The Communist Party

By the late 1930s, Chambers had become disenchanted with the Communist Party, largely because of the horrors of the Soviet Union’s Great Purge and the Nonaggression Pact between Stalin and Hitler. Another impetus for leaving the Party was the multiple murders and mysterious disappearances of some of his Communist friends. Frankly, he feared for his life. Ignoring ominous orders from his handlers to report to Moscow, he started concealing some of the documents he had collected from his sources in the apparatus. He planned to use these and several rolls of microfilm as a “life preserver” for his family. “I left the Communist Party to fight it.... I deliberately deserted the Communist Party in a way that could leave no doubt in its mind, or anybody else’s, that I was at war with

it and everything it stood for.” In April 1938, on the day he was expected to meet with his handler in New York City, the family went into hiding. They had found a two-room apartment in Pikesville, just northwest of Baltimore, in the back of a large house with a wide lawn and set back on a small slope, permitting a view of Old Court Road in both directions. The location had the

added benefit of a police dog, who would give warning if anyone approached the house. Chambers began a routine that he kept up until he went to work for *Time* magazine in 1939. All night he would sit up, translating documents and books while the family slept, keeping watch with a long sheath knife and later a shotgun close by his side. Sleep consisted of only a few hours in the daytime, a routine Chambers continued even after moving to Pipe Creek Farm.

One year after breaking with Communism, and barely able to make a living as a translator, he heard from a friend at *Time* about a job opening. *Time* hired him as a book reviewer, at \$100 a week. Chambers commuted from the farm to New York City, staying at his mother’s home on Long Island Thursdays through Mondays. About this time, Isaac Don Levine, a journalist who had worked as a ghost writer for other Communist defectors telling their stories, urged Chambers to go to the proper authorities with his information about Communist infiltration in the highest ranks of the federal government. Levine arranged for Chambers to meet with Adolf Berle, then Assistant Secretary of State, in September 1939. In an after-dinner meeting lasting to midnight, Chambers informed on his Communist co-conspirators, including his former friend, Alger Hiss. Levine, also present, took extensive notes. Chambers thought this meeting would lead to his own arrest, but



Alger Hiss testifying before House Un-American Activities Committee, 1948. (U.S. Public Domain)

nothing happened. He continued working at *Time*. Months passed, and Levine met again with Chambers, sharing that Berle had taken the claims about Communists in the State Department directly to President Roosevelt, who disregarded the information. When pressed to act, Roosevelt had told Berle “to go jump in a lake,” fearing his New Deal could become tarnished by any assertion that members of his administration had consorted with Communists.

Chambers succeeded as book and film reviewer for *Time*, landing, in 1939, a cover story on *Finnegan’s Wake* by James Joyce. Chambers became senior editor in 1942 and by 1948 had become one of the best-known authors and editors at *Time*, having written over 80 stories, reviews, and essays, including profiles of Marian Anderson, Arnold Toynbee, Rebecca West, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Deputy editorial director John Shaw Billings said of him at the time: “Whit puts on the best show in words of any writer we’ve ever had.”

On August 3, 1948, almost ten years after the first meeting with Adolf Berle, Chambers was called to testify before HUAC. An ambitious U.S. Representative from California, Richard M. Nixon, served as sub-committee chair. Chambers named 27 people who had been part of the underground Communist group in the late 1930s, again including his former friend, Alger Hiss, claiming they had worked together as espionage agents. Hiss, however, testified that he knew Chambers only briefly: he was little more than an acquaintance whom he had known as George Crosley. Hiss challenged Chambers to make his accusation public, where he could not be protected from libel.

Chambers did so on the radio program, *Meet the Press*. Hiss countered with a \$75,000 libel suit in October 1948. In the meantime, Chambers, under pressure from HUAC to show material evidence supporting his testimony, finally retrieved documents and five rolls of microfilm from their hiding place in a relative’s home in Brooklyn, NY. He gave the documents to HUAC investigators but, for reasons even he did not fully understand, he held back the five rolls of microfilm. Hearing rumors that Hiss’ investigators might ransack his home looking for additional evidence that might be used against their client, Chambers removed the microfilm from the house on December 1 and hid it inside a hollowed-out pumpkin. The next day, Chambers went to Washington to testify before the U.S. State Department Loyalty Board. HUAC served him with a subpoena to turn over all remaining evidence. Two HUAC investigators accompanied him back to the farm that evening. Chambers took the investigators out to the pumpkin patch and handed over the five microfilm cylinders.

Based on this new evidence, a federal grand jury, convened in New York City, indicted Hiss on two counts of perjury. He could not be tried for espionage because the five-year statute of limitations had elapsed. An initial trial begun on May 31, 1949, ended with a deadlocked jury, but a second one convicted him on January 21, 1950, on both counts and sentenced him to five years in prison.

Especially damning to Hiss was that papers typed on his typewriter matched documents produced by Chambers. Hiss served 44 months. In the meantime, Chambers had resigned from *Time* to avoid connecting the magazine with the political and legal turmoil. Afterward he wrote a few articles for *Fortune*, *Life*, and *Look* magazines.

Nearly 70 years later, in an extensive interview with Bob Blubaugh, published in the Carroll County Times, Chambers’ son, John, remembered life during and immediately after the trials. “Teachers at Westminster High School notified the pupils that the Chambers family was having troubles and to treat them well. Don’t tease them. Don’t push them around.... I think I was protected in a way that you would only pray your sons were protected. They really reached out And not just the teachers, but the community.”

In 1952, Chambers published *Witness*, a combination autobiography and cautionary tale of the dangers of Communism. The book was a best seller for more than a year and helped pay off his legal debts. It was also selected as a finalist for the National Book Award for nonfiction. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., called it “one of the greatest of all American autobiographies.” Ronald Reagan said it inspired his own conversion from a New Deal Democrat to a conservative Republican. In 1957, William F. Buckley, Jr., founder of *National Review*, brought in Chambers to be its senior editor.

Chambers worked there for a year and half, but after collapsing from what was his second heart attack, he resigned. Later, when he had



Pumpkin Papers microfilm canisters. (National Archives and Records Administration)