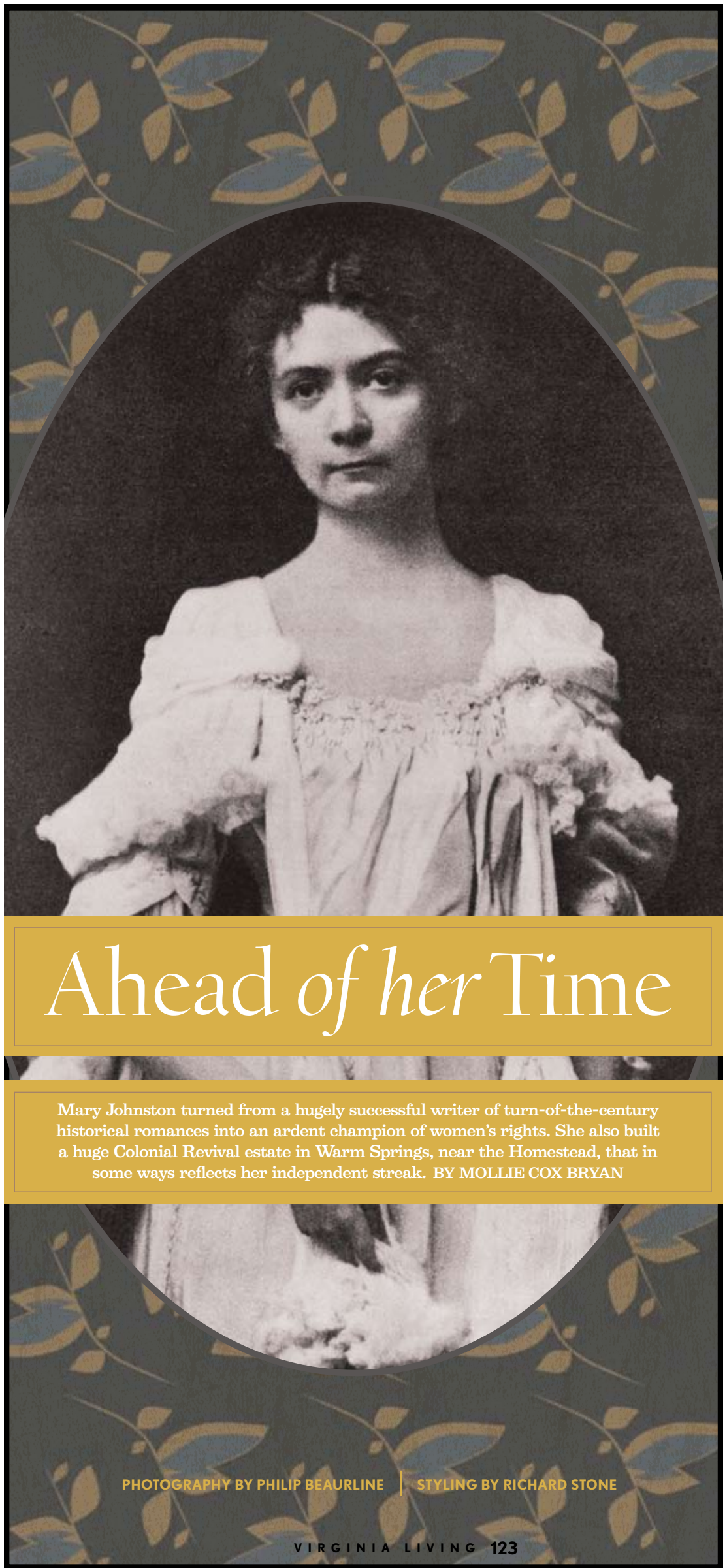






The entry hall, with the last remaining chandelier that Mary Johnston imported from Germany. The arrangement includes peonies, Johnston's favorite flower and still found on the grounds. Portrait at right courtesy of Library of Virginia



Ahead of her Time

Mary Johnston turned from a hugely successful writer of turn-of-the-century historical romances into an ardent champion of women's rights. She also built a huge Colonial Revival estate in Warm Springs, near the Homestead, that in some ways reflects her independent streak. BY MOLLIE COX BRYAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP BEAURLINE | STYLING BY RICHARD STONE



The first woman novelist to hit the *New York Times* bestseller list was a Virginian. Mary Johnston was no ordinary writer—or woman, for that matter. She was one of the most successful authors of the early 20th century; her first six novels, all historical romances, sold more than a million copies, an astounding feat in those days. She later became a pioneering feminist and defiant champion of women’s suffrage—at serious cost to her career. She was one of the founding members of Virginia’s Equal Suffrage League. Along the way, she built a beautiful Colonial Revival mansion in Warm Springs that architects say is every bit as defiant as its original owner.

On September 27, 1911, Johnston wrote in her journal that she’d purchased nearly 40 acres in a beautiful part of western Virginia where her family had summered for years. A high, so-called trapped valley, the Warm Springs Valley soars above the spot where the Jackson and Cowpasture rivers join to create the James River to the east. To the west, mountain streams tumble through six gaps, each from a large spring, three of them cold and three of them hot. Mary Johnston, who was petite and sickly, took the restorative waters many times with her parents—just as visitors have done since the mid-1700s.

At the time of her land purchase, Johnston was living in Buchanan. Her great-grandfather had secured a land patent near Buchanan from King George III. Her father was president of the James River Canal System and later the Georgia Pacific and Southern Railroad. Mary Johnston was born in Buchanan in 1870 and traveled extensively in both the United States and Europe, but she always felt a deep attachment to the mountains of western Virginia. “[My] growing love of the Alleghenies was to lead at last to my residence among them,” she wrote.

Age 41 when she bought the property, Johnston was earning plenty of money from book sales and film rights—three of her novels would be made into movies.

She had not married and had no close male relatives, and so was free to voice and act on her own opinions. She chose where on the property she wanted to build the house and where she would live with her two sisters, Eloise and Elizabeth. She commissioned the architects and planned and built an impressive English boxwood garden.

J. Ambler Johnston, a young architect, distant relative of the writer and one of the founding partners of the Carneal and Johnston architectural firm (recently merged with Ballou Justice Upton), designed the house. Miles Cary Johnston Jr., Ambler’s grandson, who also worked for Carneal and Johnston (he has since retired), tells a story of Ambler once taking a train to Warm Springs to fix a plumbing problem at Mary Johnston’s house. It was not an easy place to reach. “He fixed the problem in about 30 minutes, but it took him two days to get there and come back.”

Johnston called her property Three Hills and moved into the estate in 1913. She could hardly have

found a better spot. Warm Springs Mountain can be seen to the east, behind the house, and to the west are views of the eastern Continental Divide. The Homestead, the classic Virginia resort, is nearby.

At the time Johnston built Three Hills, the Homestead was thriving, having been bought and revived a few years before by railroad magnate Melville E. Ingalls and his family. Fay Ingalls, a son of M.E. Ingalls, in his book about the Hot Springs/Warm Springs area titled *The Valley Road*, described Three Hills as having “one of the finest views in the Valley.” He knew Johnston and wrote that she was “particularly fond of a walk through a tangled wilderness between her property and the [Homestead’s].” According to material on the website of Clarkson & Wallace, a real estate company in Warm Springs, “the trail still exists, with its stonework, stone bench resting spots and ancient lilacs as it rises up a mountain to a 10,000-acre preserve owned by The Nature Conservancy.”

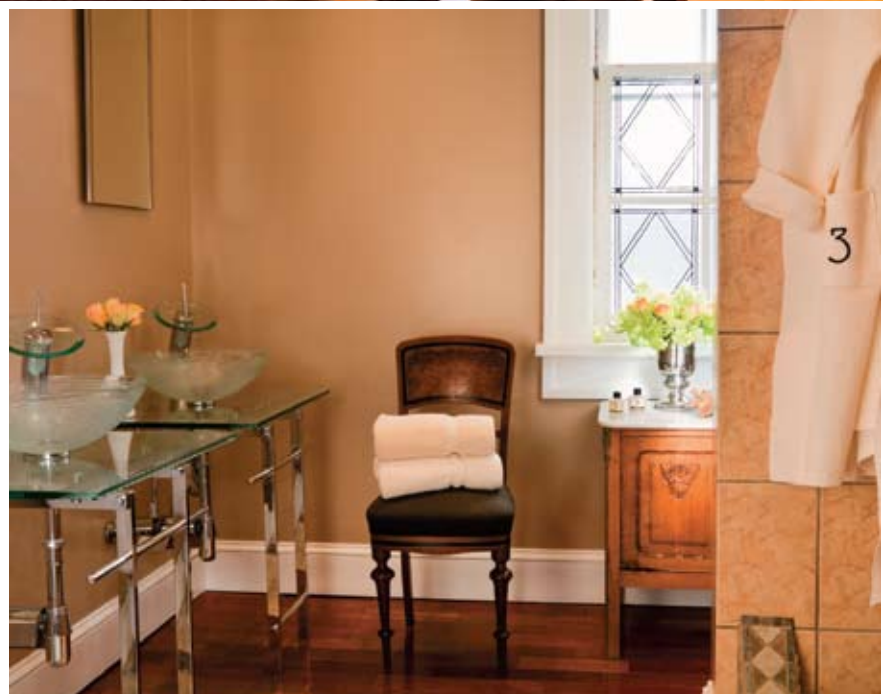
For Johnston, dealing with the myriad details of building a home from the ground up—in an isolated area, miles from a city of any size—can’t have been an easy thing. It’s a feeling to which the current owners of Three Hills can relate. “I often think about how hard it is for me to get anything done around here,” says Charlene Fike, who has owned Three Hills with her husband, Doug, since 1993. “Yet, there was Mary Johnston controlling every detail of the building of this place.”

The Fikes have operated the estate as a boutique inn and restaurant. The main residence, one of four buildings on the 29-acre property, encompasses 12,000 square feet on two floors, including 26 rooms and 11 baths. Visitors on the estate have been renting apartment-like spaces, complete with their own baths and sometimes kitchens. There are also three guest cottages on the property, two of which were originally occupied by Mary Johnston’s sisters. According to Charlene Fike, two remain close to the original design; the other has been modernized and enlarged into a three-bedroom, two-bath house. The Fikes added a two-story, 4,200-square-foot octagonal structure with office, meeting and kitchen space. It has served as a meeting center for groups.

According to the Fikes, the main and oldest structural parts of the estate remain extremely sound. The foundation is built from now-rare

Left: Three Hills. Here: the Bistro dining room, which opens into a wine-tasting salon beyond. Bottom, from left: a corner of the downstairs sitting room, a private bath in a guest suite, and a view of the sitting room from the entrance hall.





American chestnut. It has not settled at all, nor has a single termite nibbled its way in. In the house inspection, says Charlene Fike, “the guy told us, ‘If we have a nuclear attack, I’m coming to Three Hills.’”

Johnston’s favorite flowers, Fike says, were peonies. She found a few growing haphazardly around the property and replanted them around the house in the same way Johnston had, as detailed in postcards and photos. The writer’s journals are full of mentions of the flowers and plants at Three Hills. “Seeing to the plantings at Three Hills road, orchard, trees and shrubs. Pleased with the place.” She also makes note of the blooming lindens, picking strawberries and sitting under the white pines.

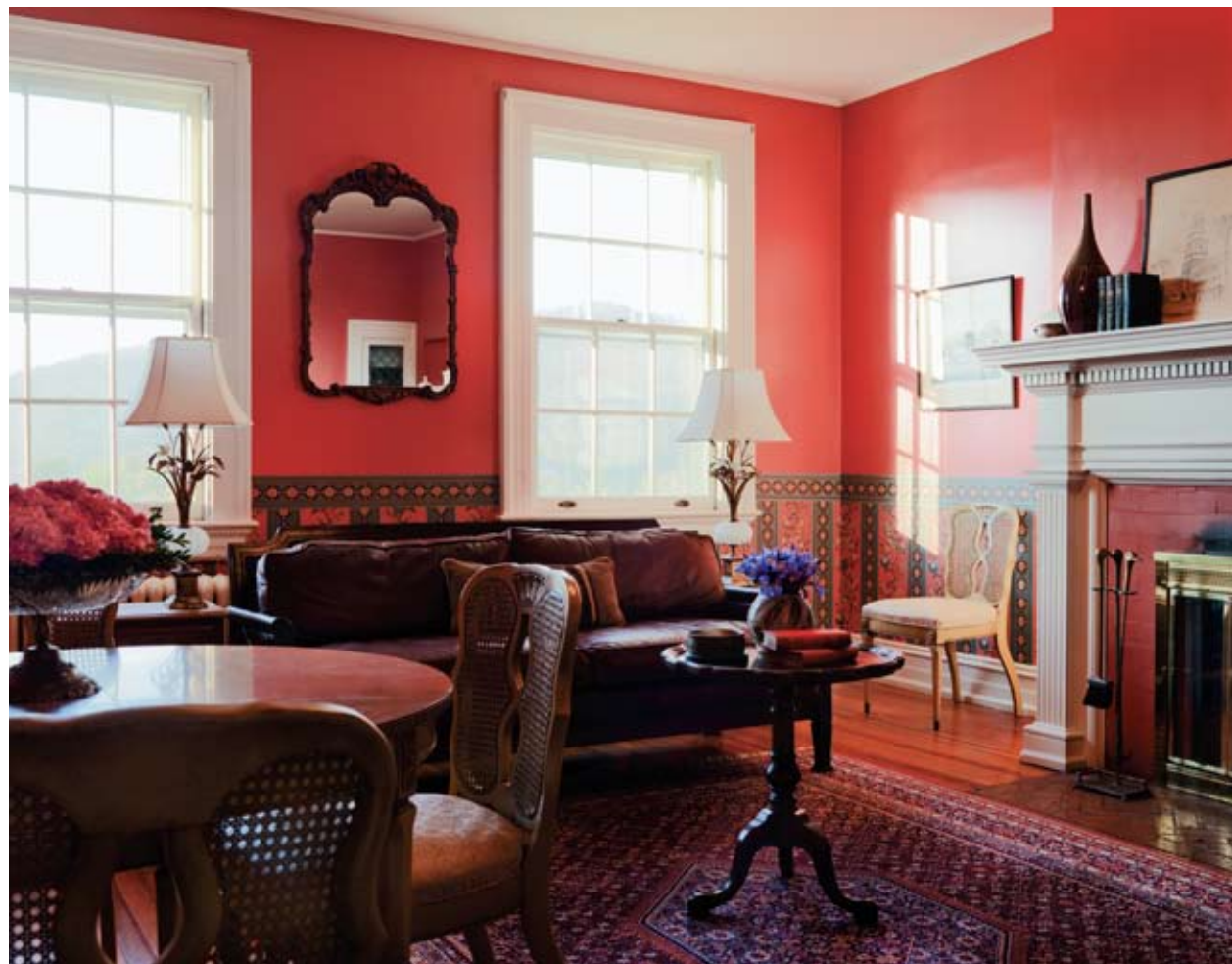
While painstakingly caring for the boxwoods and the other plants, the Fikes have infused the house with their own personality. “I think Mary would be OK with that,” says Mrs. Fike. “She was very progressive.”

The decor is an unexpected mix of modern and historical. In the dining room, for example, the walls are lined with the original bookcases, but the ceilings are decorated in an “industrial chic” style, with draping fabric and tiny white lights on the tips of sturdy metallic wires hanging down. The effect is ethereal. Three Hills originally had three rare, German crystal chandeliers, but only one remains. (It’s not clear what happened to the other two.)

Johnston was a successful novelist during a time when genteel women working for themselves, let alone as writers, were looked down upon in “polite society.” She was widely accepted as long as she concentrated her efforts on historical romances such as *Prisoners of Hope* (1898), *To Have and to Hold* (1900, a U.S. number one seller that year) and *Sir Mortimer* (1904)—all focusing on Colonial times in Virginia. *Audrey* (1902) and *Sir Mortimer* (1904) both cracked the nationwide top five.

Three of her books were adapted to the big screen—*Audrey*, a silent film in 1916, and *To Have and to Hold* twice—1918 and 1922. In 1923, *Pioneers of the Old South* was released with a new title, *Jamestown*.

Two of Johnston’s books, *Cease Firing* (1911) and *The Long Roll* (1912),



Top: the upstairs sitting room. Bottom: pictures of Mary Johnston and a few of her books; the boxwood garden (original to the grounds). Opposite: a guest room.

inspired her friend (and future *Gone with the Wind* author) Margaret Mitchell to remark, “I hesitate to write about the South after having read Mary Johnston.” Paul Simpkins, who quotes Mitchell in an article for the website Blue Ridge Traditions, suggests that Johnston’s authenticity in those books likely owed to her special access to some inspiring

material: the campfire diaries of her father, Major John William Johnston, who had served in the Virginia campaign with Stonewall Jackson at First Manassas (Bull Run). In all, there would be 23 novels, a play, many short stories and a couple of long narrative poems.

So, what happened to the prolific Mary Johnston? Why has her

name and work plummeted into near obscurity? Johnston’s career got bumpy the very year she moved into Three Hills, in 1913. Her book titled *Hagar*—one of the first feminist novels and somewhat autobiographical—was published that year. *Hagar* captures the early, heady days of women’s rights—Johnston’s letters are full of correspondence from women working for the right to vote. But unsurprisingly, it created a backlash among men and tradition-minded women, who were upset by the book’s controversial ideas. Many refused to purchase it, or subsequent Johnston novels.

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Part of Johnston's personal story can be found in the novel's pages. Like Johnston, the book's protagonist, Hagar, was born in a small Southern town; she wrote secretly until she was published; she traveled through Europe with her father; and she spent a good bit of time in New York City.

Hagar was published shortly after Johnston moved into Three Hills, and it provoked a downturn in her financial situation. Though she continued writing and collecting money from her earlier works until her death in 1936, Johnston and her family struggled to maintain the grand house. They were forced to take in boarders. Against the

advice of her publisher and editors, Johnston continued to write about social and political topics. Those were the ideas that intrigued her, and she refused to live her life in anything but her own way.

Though largely forgotten, Johnston's work is sometimes dusted off by scholars and readers. Charlene Fike reports that several Ph.D. candidates have been to Three Hills doing research on the author. The librarians in the Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, where Johnston's journal is housed, have said the same thing. In the late 1990s, several universities reissued some of her books.

Fike says that she knew nothing of Mary Johnston, her life, or her work when she and her family purchased the writer's home. But in working with some of its remnants—the original bookcases, chandeliers and boxwoods—she and her husband have labored to recreate the quiet elegance that defined Three Hills and Mary Johnston.

"I love this view," says Fike, looking out of a large dining room window in the front of the house. "You can see three hills rolling off into the distance, but we're not really sure which hills she had in mind when she named it."

Johnston surely didn't think twice

about the name once she conceived it. She was strong-willed, and, as Fike says, "I think she was so ahead of her time and had so much to say."

Apparently so. According to her personal papers at the University of Virginia, as she lay on her deathbed, Johnston gathered her friends, employees and family around her and uttered her final words: "Listen to me."

Three Hills is listed with Clarkson & Wallace Real Estate, Warm Springs, Virginia, for \$4.79 million. Contact Ryan Hodges at 540-839-2609 office or cw50@tds.net. ClarksonAndWallace.com

Three Hills Inn: 1-888-23-HILLS / 540-839-5381