

# Marguiretta's Secret

*Treasure tales come and go. Some are true, others fanciful. But the treasure rumored to be had by Marguiretta de Crescioli was very real.*

*By William Watson Purkey*

*This* is a factual account of a treasure hidden in an old mansion. The year is 1920. Imagine an opulent three-story, eight-room, red brick mansion located on a side street, close to the railroad tracks, in historic Charlottesville, Virginia. With its tall white columns and six entrances or exits, the mansion has the classic lines of a Jeffersonian style house. An expensive and ornate iron fence surrounds the property.

Inside the mansion are richly brocaded tapestries, overstuffed furniture, and a grand piano. Lavish furnishings include gold-trimmed floor length mirrors and beautiful crystal chandeliers. A circular staircase led to the upper floor. Men customers came and went through the beautiful glass-paneled front door.

C. M. Thomas Furniture and other beautiful adornments were delivered regularly. Maids served drinks to

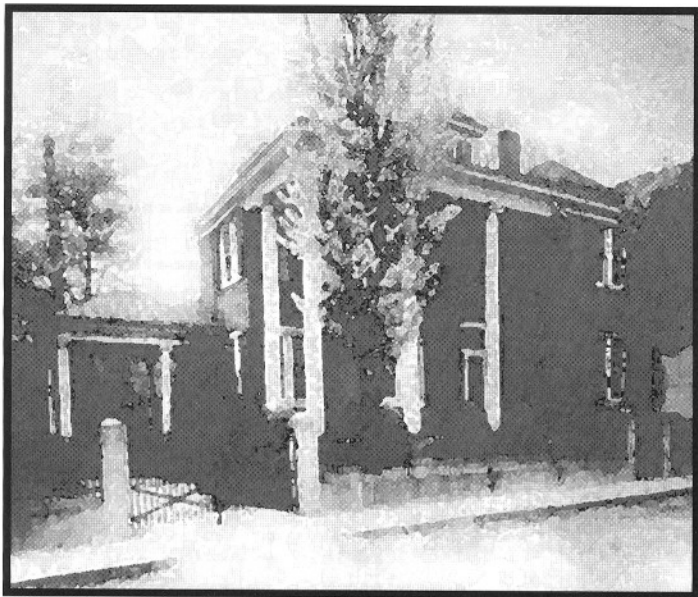
the most exclusive clientele, including, according to reports, a former state governor, judges, rich businessmen, local politicians, and countless college students. The University of Virginia was located within three miles of the mansion. So many students frequented Marguiretta's that the mansion became known as the "The UVA Student Union."

Young ladies of negotiable affection were there to meet the needs of their guests. These girls were imported from neighboring cities and rotated in and out every few weeks. The clientele was well served and happy, as was the business's owner. You have probably figured out by now that Marguiretta's was a famous bordello. Marguiretta de Crescioli was the madam and owner of this elegant and high-class establishment. It was reported that she ran the most orderly disorderly house in Virginia.

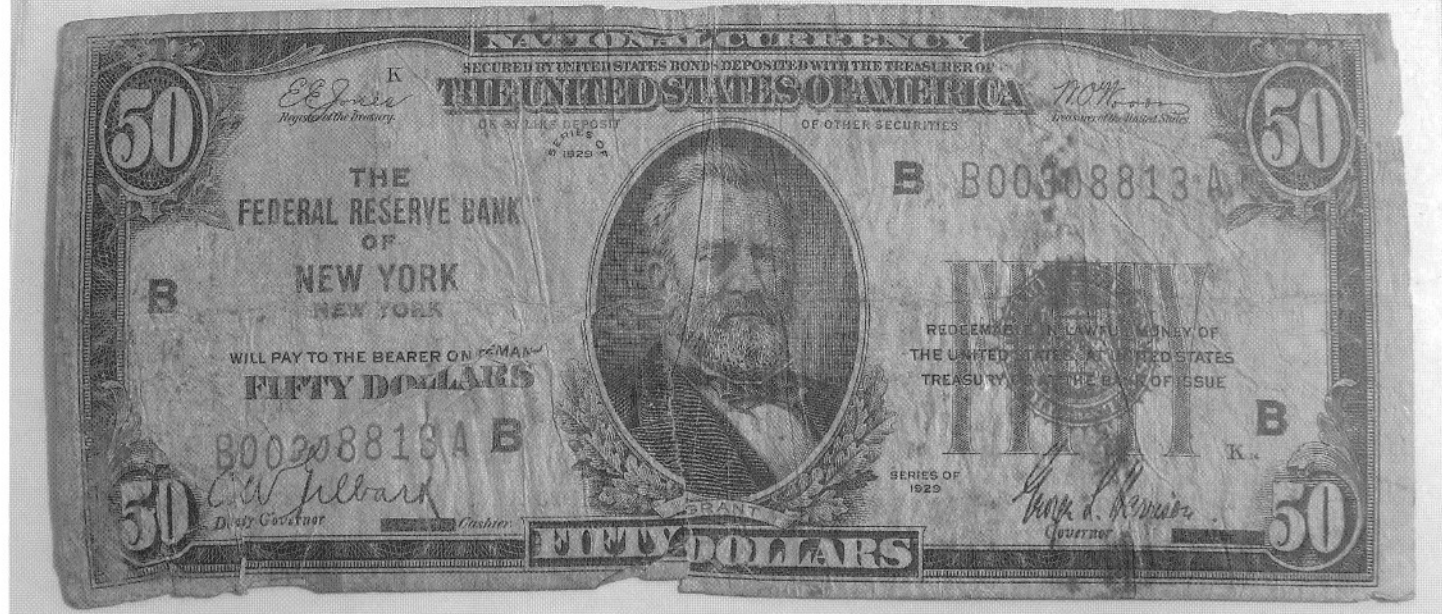
In 1949, under pressure from the "good" people of Charlottesville, local police finally padlocked the bordello. The old mansion was sold and turned into a boarding house. The mansion was not kept up and it gradually deteriorated. By the late 1960s the old mansion was vacant and condemned. The bushes became overgrown, windows were broken, and the once heavily traveled sidewalk was covered with weeds. Under the guise of urban renewal many old Charlottesville homes were demolished. The ravaged mansion was one such victim, given over to a wrecking crew. But with that desolation and destruction came something unexpected and exciting.

In 1972, as a bulldozer cuts into a wall of the deserted mansion, a cornucopia of old money falls out. With every additional cut of the bulldozer, more concealed money, hidden in the walls, appears. Hundreds of loosely rolled bills tumble out of other walls of the old building.

According to newspaper reports at the time, this



**A rendering of Marguiretta de Crescioli's mansion, from an early 1930s photo.**



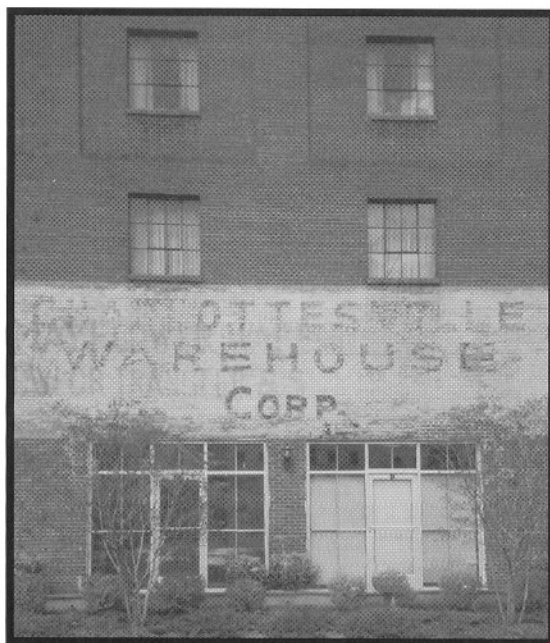
Although untold amounts of money were found during the demolition of Marguiretta de Crescioli's mansion, this \$50 bill, found by a relative of the author, was all that was available for photographing for this article. Most was cashed at local banks and merchants, with other bills tucked back as souvenirs, their recovery unreported because of IRS fears.

happened on November 23, 1972. The location where the mansion stood is at 307 West Main, (also known as 313-317 West Main, and in early records, "Fifth Street). It is not legend, but documented fact.

*My* wife and I recently visited and searched for the site of the old mansion. We found the exact location, but unfortunately, the place where the mansion stood is now a paved parking lot. The only thing that remains from the days when Marguiretta's business thrived is the old Charlottesville Warehouse Corporation building, located across the street. This warehouse was there during the heyday of Marguiretta's.

This true treasure story gets more interesting as it unfolds. Once the wrecking crew found the first wads of dusty currency on that fateful November day, the word of the discovery spread

like wildfire and the gold rush was on. By the evening of November 27, dozens of amateur treasure hunters were combing through every inch of the debris from the old mansion. Although it was a pitch-black night, hunters used flashlights, lanterns, and candles to provide light as they dug through the mountain of brick, splintered wood, plaster, and other debris. They used their bare hands and every piece of make-do equipment they could find, including shovels, pieces of metal as scrapers, and in one case, even a discarded large soup spoon. With dozens of small lights flickering in the darkness as the treasure hunters hurried about digging through the rubble of the old mansion, it must have appeared like a eerie scene from some science-fiction movie.



**A blend of the old and new, this warehouse near where Marguiretta's mansion once stood is virtually unchanged since her business's heyday, with the exception of modern entrances and landscaping.**

Wads of large denomination bills continued to be discovered in the days following. According to newspaper reports, local merchants received old moldy



**First an infamous high class bordello, then a treasure hunter's paradise, and now a parking lot. The author stands in what, likely as not, may have once been a "room of entertainment" in Marguiretta de Crescioli's classy house of ill repute.**

bills for purchases, and banks were busy exchanging currency red with brick dust for new money. This was accompanied with growing rumors of even greater amounts of money found in the ruins. One woman, it was said, discovered over \$17,000 in hundred dollar bills. A young girl claimed she found \$8,000 in a metal box. A group of youngsters was reported to have discovered a wooden box containing money. An elderly neighbor said that most of the money, located in the cellar, was still there, untouched by the bulldozer and wrecking crews. He said that there were secret passages in the basement and that Marguiretta never allowed anyone to go down the cellar stairs.

These and other reports of large amounts found have never been verified. Perhaps this is because of income tax worries. The Internal Revenue Service in Charlottesville sent out a special notice reminding treasure hunters that any money found must be reported. However, everyone agrees that the money was there.

The cash, mostly silver certificates, was reported to have been rolled lightly, with the outside bills covered with red brick dust from the destroyed building. This made them very difficult to spot among the bricks of the collapsed building.

*By* the third day of digging, most treasure hunters were exhausted and gave up the search. They had dug through much of the remains of the destroyed building. It was believed that the supposed enormous fortunes were already discovered and taken away. However, one insightful and enterprising citizen, (who happens to be this writer's brother-in-law) got the clever idea of following the loads of debris to the dump. There he searched for money and was rewarded with a fifty-dollar silver certificate, dusty but still in overall good condition.

The biggest questions of all still remain, though: where did all that hidden treasure come from, and how did it end up in walls

of the old mansion? There are at least three theories regarding the source of the money.

The first and best documented theory has to do with Marguiretta de Crescioli, the most colorful and legendary businesswoman in Charlottesville history. As the "Madam of Fifth Street" she turned the mansion into a house of prostitution and ran it from about 1922 until 1949. According to reports, Marguerita was very well educated. Her father was an American Indian and her mother a French Creole. Her diverse background in-

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cluded music, languages, and etiquette. She was also known for her generosity. She could afford to be generous, for the money from her rich clients poured in, day and night. Marguiretta died in 1951. She left an estate estimated at \$200,000 to an old friend. However, most of her fortune simply disappeared.

*Since* prostitution is against the law, (although at the time some law enforcement officials often winked-winked and nudged-nudged at the law), Marguiretta and her ladies of the evening did not trust banks. They did not want their financial records available for possible audit. They also needed a safe place to hide their earnings from possible robbers. It is believed that all their money was kept somewhere in the house. It is also thought that Marguiretta and her working girls hid their earnings in secret compartments within the walls. For whatever reason, they did not retrieve their money, if indeed that's where the treasure originated. It stayed in the walls, hidden, until the arrival of the bulldozer and wrecking ball in 1972.

The second theory is that the money was loot from a bank robbery. Local newspapers reported that Trooper William Raymond Thompson was killed by three robbers during a bank hold-up at the Fork Union Bank on September 23, 1935. Fork Union is a short distance from Charlottesville. How much money was taken, or if any was recovered by law enforcement, is unclear. An illegal house of pleasure would be an ideal hiding place to stash the loot.

The third theory is that the money was hidden by the person who sold the house to Marguiretta. The property was one of the first recorded when Charlottesville became an independent city in July, 1888. The mansion was built that same year by Russell D. Mooney and Marvin S. Mooney. When

both died, the mansion was sold in 1934 to Charles Coles for \$10,500. Beulah Coles Hays ended up with the property and sold it to Marguiretta less than a year later for \$10,000. It could be that one of the earlier owners hid the money. However, the bill found by my brother-in-law, dated 1935, casts considerable doubt on this third theory.

It is interesting to reflect on what the elder neighbor maintained, that the bulk of the treasure is in the filled-in basement of the old mansion. Perhaps one day some lucky treasure hunter will dig down and discover the rest of the money. Until then, “Marguiretta’s Secret” of how all that cash got in the walls will remain a mystery.



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## About the Author

**William Purkey was born in Shenandoah, Virginia and went on to become a park ranger, gandy dancer, teacher, fish store manager, and Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist in the United States Air Force. He has been metal detecting for over 40 years.**