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Poe's familiar haunt on Amity Street

BACK STORY

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"You might call him
*'The Leader of the Cult
of the Unusual'*"
—Jules Verne

Edgar Allan Poe, whose creepy tales of terror continue to thrill new generations of readers, lived in a crowded

household from 1832 to 1835 at what is now 203 N. Amity St.

Poe, who was born 205 years ago Sunday, had lived in Baltimore on Mechanics Row on Wilks Street, east of the Jones Falls, in 1829. The next year he entered West Point but was dismissed a year later.

Poe returned to Baltimore and moved into the 2½-story brick rowhouse with green shutters that was built around 1830 for Charles Klassen in a rural area that then marked the western edge of the city.

When he moved into the rented house — then No. 3 Amity Street — that measures no more than 12 feet by 12 feet, he was sharing accommodations with his invalid grandmother, Elizabeth Cairnes Poe; her daughter, Maria Poe Clemm; and her two children, Virginia Eliza Clemm, 11, and Henry Clemm, 14.

During Poe's tenure at Amity Street, he perfected the art of the short story.

These were not insignificant years for Poe, who wrote his only known play, "Politian," while living in the house, as well as "Tales of the Folio Club," which earned him a \$50 prize from the Saturday Visitor, a weekly Baltimore magazine.

He had written a number of stories, including "MS. Found in a Bottle," "Berenice — A Tale," "The Visionary" and "Hans



AMY DAVIS/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO 2011

Edgar Allan Poe lived and wrote from 1832 to 1835 at what is now 203 N. Amity St. in Baltimore. He was born 205 years ago Sunday.

Pfaall," as well as numerous poems and literary reviews.

When federal urban renewal swept through the Poppleton neighborhood in the late 1930s, threatening the Poe House on Amity Street, it was the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore that managed to spare it from being demolished in 1941.

Since 1972, the Amity Street home has been listed as a National Historic Landmark.

The city closed the house in 2012, saying it would no longer be able to afford the \$85,000 yearly budget to keep it open.

In the wake of this development, Poe Baltimore was established and was aided in its work of caring for and running the house by a \$180,000 city grant to the B&O Museum, which worked with the society to develop an operating plan.

"The house was in pretty good shape structurally," said Kristen Harbeson, president of Poe Baltimore. "The house is largely original and undamaged. If you look at the house, you'll see a 4-foot addition in the back that was probably done in the early 1940s. The house was never heavily wired, and there is no real plumbing."

"If Poe walked in today, he'd recognize the structure," Harbeson said. "We don't have a lot of furniture, and we didn't guess at what would have been there. What we do have are artifacts that belonged to the family."

"This was the place where Poe really felt at home. And even though he lived such a troubled life psychologically, Amity Street was very important to him, and for us thinking about his history in that house as a writer."

A recent visitor was given a tour of the diminutive home by James Smolinski, director of grants for the B&O Museum and a member of the board of Poe Baltimore.

Entrance is made into a small parlor with a fireplace, and behind this room is a kitchen with a fireplace. The low ceilings and walls are likely made of the original horse-hair plaster, which in the 1830s would certainly have been whitewashed.

Several whimsical porcelain dishes that date from 1790 and 1810 and were used by the family are on display in the front parlor.

"The floor[boards] are random width, and the carpet that is on them now would not have been there then," Smolinski said.

He leads a visitor to a winding staircase that leads to two bedrooms, one in the front overlooking Amity Street and the other in the rear. The stair is single file all the way and could not accommodate two adults.

"Poe probably used the second-floor room and not the one on the third floor," Smolinski said.

While the house is spartan in its furnishings and probably would have been during Poe's residency, what is on display is quite impressive.

A bow-back Windsor chair from 1800, which came from his uncle, was one that Poe could have routinely used, and he would have scanned the heavens through a 1790 telescope from an English maker.

"It was his foster father John Allan's telescope, and Poe was fascinated by science," said Harbeson. "My favorite artifact is his traveling writing desk that he probably used at the University of Virginia."

Poe was a student at Virginia in 1826, she said.

The desk, which is English and dates to 1825, is made of cherry, poplar, brass and felt.

"This traveling writing desk is a treasure," Smolinski said. "I don't know how you could get any closer to the source."

As Smolinski prepared to lock up the house, he explained to his visitor that he had never spent a night in the house and feels uneasy being alone there.

"After a film crew left one day, I was in here all alone, and I can tell you it creaks," he said.

The Edgar Allan Poe House and Museum will be open free of charge from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday in observance of his birthday.