

Obituary

Born: Monday, December 20, 1920

Died: Monday, February 22, 2021

Joan Willison Hotz, 100, died peacefully Sunday on the farm outside Myersville where she had lived for more than half a century.

Known to friends and colleagues as "Birch," she was an award-winning historical preservationist who helped establish the Frederick County Landmarks Foundation, a World War 2 veteran, and a volunteer firefighter who had served as head of the local fire company - the first woman to do so.

She was born in Canada at the dawn of the Roaring 20s, schooled in England during the Great Depression, and came of age at the outset of World War 2, when she volunteered as an officer in the Women's Auxiliary of the British Royal Air Force. She handled codes and cyphers for the Spitfire squadrons defending London during the Battle of Britain and then as a member of the RAF delegation in Washington, DC. She married, became a US citizen, and raised four sons in suburban Washington, where for many years she operated an antique shop in Bethesda, Md.

Then on an afternoon in 1962, her husband Robert, a Milwaukee native whom she had met in wartime Washington while he was serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps, brought her to Frederick County for the first time, to look at a 19th century farmhouse on Mount Tabor Road, located in the Middletown Valley. It became their home - and the first of her many historic restoration projects.

She was born as Rachel Willison - her maiden name -- in Toronto, Canada, on the night before New Year's Eve to Vivian and Walter Willison. She attended boarding school in England. When Britain and Germany declared war in September 1939, she enlisted in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. She trained in codes and cyphers at a secret RAF facility near Oxford. By age 18, she was commissioned as a section officer and stationed at an RAF fighter base called Hornchurch, which was responsible for the defense of East London.

During a brief leave, she married George Birchall, a Canadian RAF pilot. He was killed in combat over the North Sea within the year. A few months later, she bore their son, George, in Scotland. The new mother and infant were evacuated to Canada. She soon was reassigned to active duty in Washington, DC.

In 1944, she married Robert Hotz, who served two combat tours in China with US General Claire Lee Chennault of the Flying Tigers and the 14th Air Force. They had three sons. They celebrated their 62nd wedding anniversary shortly before his death in 2006.

In Frederick County, she was a tireless volunteer. She trained as a state emergency medical technician and became a firefighter with the Myersville Volunteer Fire Company. She was president of the fire company in 1983 and 1984 - a first for a woman in Frederick County. She volunteered for many years as a phone counselor for Heartly House, which helps victims of domestic violence, rape and sexual assault.

She also was an avid advocate for projects to save historic properties in Frederick County.

When Frederick County purchased Rose Hill Manor, the retirement home of Maryland's first elected governor, Thomas Johnson, she became founding director of the Rose Hill Manor Children's Museum and worked with county officials to establish it. Working through the Landmarks Foundation, she also helped raise money to save and restore Schifferstadt, the oldest house in the city of Frederick. The 18th-century stone house is now a popular museum.

In 2005 she persuaded a developer to donate the 1775 John Derr house, on Md. 26 to the Landmarks Foundation and aided its restoration. She also helped start the annual Frederick County Landmarks Barnstormers Tour to draw attention to the county's many historic barns and vintage farm properties.

For her work "as a leader and driving force in the preservation of central Maryland's heritage for more than 45 years," the Maryland State Historical Trust in 2010 awarded her its Preservation Service Award. In 2014, she was awarded the National

Historic Preservation Award by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

She is the author of a children's book "The Schifferstadt Cat and Friends" and a war memoir "Brightness Falls From The Air."

She is survived by three of her four children, George, retired, of Easton, Md.; Michael, president of the First Zen Institute of America, of New York; and Robert Lee, also of New York, a science writer for The Wall Street Journal; four grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

A private memorial service will be held.

Service Summary

Private Services

Location: - *Not available* -