

BELLE-AIR MANSION

The Oldest House in Prince William

Friday Morning, Nov. 8, 1895 with sketch of "Historic Belle-Air"

We are indebted to Mr. George C. Round of Manassas, the owner of this interesting relic of by-gone days, for the above cut and for the following sketch:

About 1720 a portion of the Ewell family, which had previously settled in Lancaster county, removed to Dumfries and became wealthy in tobacco trade. They acquired extended landed possessions and built Belle-Air mansion for their family seat.

It is situated about five miles Northward from Dumfries, and about twelve miles to the South of the present town of Manassas. The building is doubtless older than any now standing in Dumfries, as the great fire more than half a century since, destroyed many of the oldest buildings of that ancient town. It is probably older than Mount Vernon, or Gunston Hall, or any of the old Virginia Manor houses of the colonial period.

The proofs of its antiquity are internal as well as traditional. In 1885, after it had been virtually a ruin for half a century, it was restored by its present owner at considerable expense. About one fourth of the stone and brick walls had to be torn down and relaid. The floors and roof were leveled up and leveled down. The entire lathing and plastering and much of the wood work had to be removed. the rubbish, accumulated for generations gone, in garrets and closets, as well as in nooks and corners in the walls and behind the plastering, had to be cleared away and removed. xxxxxxxx many interesting xxxxx were found of the days when Virginia was an English colony. The house was evidently built before the days of saw-mills, for every lath was rived, every timber, and joist, had evidently been hewed out of the woods and even the finest cornices and carvings bore the mark of the axe on the reverse side. The work was evidently done before the invention of cut-nails, for every nail of the original building was the work of a blacksmith. Every lath-nail and finishing nail and spike,

as well as the 8 and 10 pennys bore unmistakable marks of the hammer.

The invention of cut-nails is older than the United States Government. About 1825 some repairs and changes were made and it was easy to trace them by the nails used. The hinges seem large and clumsy and first came into being on an anvil. There is no sign that brick were made in the vicinity, and we are prepared to believe the tradition that they came over from Scotland in the hold of the tobacco ships. The records and traditions of the Ewell and kindred families all collaborate these unmistakable signs and make it reasonably certain the Belle Air is not only older than our National Government but probably older than the county of Prince William. The ancient trees around the house still farther offer the testimony of their annular rings; and the heavy brick and stone walls, from two to four feet in thickness, declare to our satisfaction that they were not built in these degenerate days. A chimney, 22 feet wide, stands at one end of the mansion, in which are five fireplaces, one of them large enough to roast an ox or into which a grand piano could be easily rolled. The heathenish custom of building a hall-way and then stopping out the light and air of heaven by a narrow and ugly staircase had not been invented. The stairway has a place for itself and is wide and easy, with landings on which ascending and descending guests might venture a merry chat, and in this particular, resembles the best of our modern city houses, - another proof that fashions move in cycles.

The mansion, like all the houses of that period, has a double front. The one shown on the cut looks squarely to the South-East. The opposite one, to the North-West is the one now used by its occupants. It must have been so placed for a purpose, as the compass shows it to stand at exactly 45° from the cardinal points. This ensures sunlight and sun-warmth on each side of the house for 365 days of the year. Whether this arrangement has contributed to the remarkable healthfulness of the generations, that have come and gone under its ample roof, is a question for consideration.

The shade trees were evidently originally set in

squares and circles. they tower 90 feet from the soil, many of them running 60 feet without a limb. The fashion of having a mass of low green shrubbery around a house to gather dampness and death was not in vogue in those herioc days. Whatever the cause, the malaria that hovers along the banks of the Potomac has been conspicuously absent, thus justifying its name of "Belle-Air."

The internal arrangements are more convenient for house keepers than many of the ancient houses. The cooking, dining and laundry work were all provided for on the 1st floor, in which there are six rooms, one of which was a sort of "donjon-keep," surrounded by massive walls of stone. This was the place, as tradition says, for quallesome Indians and refractory servants. It is not impossible but that it may have been used for naughty children, if any there were in those halcyon days. The only material change made in the house, in its repair and restoration, was the addition of a door and window, and the dungeon has given way to a harmless refrigerating cellar.

The main floor is 11 feet high and contains the large parlor, the wide hall, a reception room, a family room, and a sleeping apartment, which is now called "The Washington guest chamber." Between the hall and parlor a paneled partition was originally built, which on great occasions was taken down, thus making a room 20 x 30, where merry-making and match-making had full swing "in ye olden time."

The 3d floor is partly lighted by old fashioned dormers. Above all is a 4th floor or attic, running the entire length of the building, making 18 rooms in all.

The roof was originally made of tile fastened in one corner by a three-cornered peg, some of which are still in exostence. This was afterward replaced by shirgles. It was supposed that the weight of the tile had caused the sinking of the house and the cracking of a portion of its walls. This was one mistake of our ancestors, as the restoration of 1885 showed conclusively that the trouble was caused by the defects in the foundation walls.

The mansion is located on a hill which rises 90 feet above the Valley of the Neabsco. This stream flows through the farm and with its branches waters the thousands of acres of which Belle-Air was undoubtedly the original center.

THE PEOPLE OF BELLE-AIR

Houses, however, were built for people. Who were these people of Belle-Air? This is a question which has greatly interested the writer. He has corresponded with many of the families and their descendants and delved into their genealogical lore. Any one who has not tried it can not understand the charm there is in unraveling the mysteries of by-gone generations.

The beginning of Belle-Air is still a little hazy. We know that Col. Jesse Ewell received it from his ancestors; that he was the college chum of Thomas Jefferson at William and Mary and it is certain that the author of the Declaration frequently visited the family and no doubt gathered from its people and surroundings inspiration for his great work. We have record evidence to show that Dr. James Craik, the Surgeon of the Virginia Battalion that saved the wreck of the Braddock expedition, was married here to Miss Mariamne Ewell on the 13th of Nov. 1760.

Dr. Craik was the most intimate of Washington's personal friends and was appointed by him as Surgeon General of the American Army. The Ewells and Washingtons were cousins, and George himself was frequently at Belle-Air. The prints of his hatchet are no doubt on the trees, marking the lines he surveyed. An old survey dated May 10, 1749, was found in the house which experts say was made by the 17-year old surveyor. Along with the surveys was found a copy of the Pennsylvania Gazette published by one Benjamin Franklin; a long letter from Thomas Ewell, the father of Gen. Richard S. Ewell, written when a boy to Colonel Jesse; a letter from John Ballendine who first built the Occoquan mills; and a part of a subscription paper for some public enterprise, which contains the names of many of the old Virginia families.

One of the most interesting characters connected with Belle_Air was Mason Locke Weems, the eccentric rector of Mount Vernon Parish. He married Miss Fannie Ewell here about the time of the Revolution, was intimate at Mount Vernon and wrote the first life of George Washington, which appeared a few months after his death, passing through 40 editions. He also wrote lives of William Penn, Benjamin Franklin and Francis Marion. He also wrote and spoke much on Temperance, and Col. Robert Tansill, who married the grand-daughter of Weems, claimed him to have been the father of the Temperance Reformation of modern days.

Before the days of book-stores, he travelled and sold from a wagon made for the purpose, his own and other books. That his sermons and lectures and books made an important impression on the American character in its impressible stage can be easily made to appear. Weems was often at Belle-Air and the property passed into the hands of the Parson and his heirs after the death of Mrs. Jesse Ewell in 1823. Parson Weems died in Beaufort, S. C., May 1825, and the following winter his remains were brought to Dumfries by boat and buried at Belle-Air in the family cemetery. His wife was buried by his side within the memory of persons now living. His grave and that of Colonel Jesse, his father-in-law, are still unmarked. The latter was a Colonel of Prince William Militia at the time of the Revolution and is said to have fed his entire regiment on one occasion from his own flocks and herds, slaughtered and cooked and served up, to his guests in and around the mansion. He is mentioned by Bishop Meade and was for a long time vestryman of the old church at Dumfries, where he had interests in a bank and also in a tobacco warehouse.

Gen. Richard S. Ewell, the left arm of Lee as Longstreet was the right, which dealt such blows for the Confederacy on many a field, is a worthy specimen of many a valiant soldier who learned his lessons of bravery at Belle-Air. The last time he was in this county and the only time since the war he came to visit his ancestral mansion.

President Benj. S. Ewell of William and Mary College is a sample of the men who came from the educational influences of this model home to assist in the education

of others.

But a personage still more interesting to the author of this sketch is one still living. It is a modern custom to speak well only of the dead, but it is a custom honored in its breach as well as by its observance. Dr. Jesse Ewell of Hickory Grove, now approximating toward his 100th year, lived here with his grandmother from 1805 until he grew to ~~years~~^{YEAR} of maturity. He was born at Dumfries and in his infancy was a great sufferer from malaria. He was removed from his father's home to the ancestral halls at Belle-Air and from that time has lived a life remarkable for its length, its healthfulness and its usefulness. He had two uncles, James and Thomas Ewell, both born at Belle-Air, eminent in the medical profession both as practitioners and authors. He himself has served as an honored official of the Virginia Medical Association and devoted his life to relieve the sufferings of his fellow-men. In 1885 he visited the author of this paper while he was engaged in the work of rebuilding and restoring Belle-Air. He had not seen the place since 1820. Think of that! From the administration of James Madison to that of Grover Cleveland! - a return after an absence of sixty-five years of peace and war! As for three days he passed through the house and through the grounds and around the ancestral burying place, and I heard his reminiscences of days past and gone, the old mansion and its surroundings seemed clothed with flesh and blood speaking to the Present out of the distant Past.

There are other things of interest at Belle-Air. There is the key-stone that was once over the door of the bank of Dumfries inscribed "William Waite, FECIT, 1755." This was the only bank ever in Prince William county until the "Manassas National Bank" of 1895. Then there is the remnant of the long rows of catalpas, through which the gaiety and fashion of Dumfries so often came from that ancient Capital of Prince William; the Lafayette pear tree, once a sprout at Mount Vernon, from a tree brought from France by the Marquis himself; the green hillside showing where once stood the quarters of the slaves and their well-tilled gardens; the sparkling pool in the Neabsco, where genera-

tions, have cooled their youthful blood and come out with cleaner bodies and clearer brains; then there are the neighborhood traditions; the gossip of the first families and last but not least the ghost stories told by our colored friends, at once pathetic and ludicrous.

Times have somewhat changed since the Ewells cut out a place in their forests for their family seat. Tobacco is no longer the currency at Dumfries. Ships come and go no more at its wharves. Baltimore and Alexandria have superseded it as posts of entry.

Other changes are about to follow. The B. & O. have located their extension to the South, only 25 feet from the old Belle-Air gate. Along the road Colonel Jesse Ewell leisurely rode his fiery black steed to his warehouse, the Electric Locomotives of the Metropolitan Southern will ere long thunder at the rate of a mile and a half a minute. The civilization of the 17th and 18th centuries has been followed by the 19th, which must soon give way to the 20th. While preparing purselves for its duties and privileges, let us not forget whatever is good and noble in its predecessors.

There is no identification of the newspaper in which this article appeared.

*Original in possession of
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