

Historic Bel Air Estate Dates Back to 1740

By Mary Anne Peters
J-M Features Editor

Considered to be not only the oldest house still standing in Prince William, but the oldest of all the old Virginia colonial manors, including Mt. Vernon and Gunston, older than the county and our national government, Bel Air stands in stately, lonely splendor amidst its many acres a few miles north of Dumfries off Route 234.

Only recently rescued from a derelict condition when any passer-by could tramp through its spacious arched hall and beautifully proportioned rooms helping themselves to ancient hardware on the doors or to any other fixtures they might fancy, under the care of its present owners, Mr. and Mrs. William E. S. Flory, it is rapidly coming back to the beauty it possessed in the days of its first owners, the Ewell family.

One of the most interesting features of the house is its 22 foot wide chimney, shown in the picture above, which serves the five fireplaces on that side of the house. One of the five is on the basement floor and is literally large enough to roast an ox in, high enough for a short adult to walk into.

Nothing but a dumping place for all manner of trash formerly, the Florys have laid a facsimile of old square brick for flooring and with the fireplace as the focus point have made a handsome large dining and leisure room, adjoined by a spacious pantry, large paneled kitchen, and, what was in the early days a dungeon, probably used for recalcitrant slaves, is now a pleasant laundry room. The Florys ordered made an extremely long refectory table copied from the first table made in America and now stands in the dining room.

Above stairs on the main floor one finds the large drawing room whose unusual feature is a folding wall of panels which when closed display a regular-sized door with glass windows on either side for perspective, but when folded back flush with the wall, provide, in conjunction with the enormous center hall, a fine large ballroom for dancing or for the kind of elaborate party the old house must often have known in the days when George Washington, a cousin of the Ewell family, was a frequent visitor.

It was doubtless arranged like this on the day that Dr. James Craik, surgeon of the Virginia Battalion in Revolutionary days, married a daughter of the house, Miss Marianne Ewell. The room is now charming in its simplicity, having been relieved of extraneous ornate moldings evidently added during the Victorian era, its panelling painted a heavy rose, which is as close to



the original shade as a painstaking search by the Florys could ascertain. This is the room where unappreciative former owners once stabled the farm livestock as shreds of hay from behind the removed molding and the memory of long-time county residents testify.

Off the drawing room is a quiet study-like room with another fireplace which is said to have been one more of those rooms where George Washington slept. As a matter of fact, he and Martha spent the night there as they made their bridal tour.

Across the hall with its gleaming wide old floor boards is a smaller reception room. It could very well have been this room where, as they sat in cozy comfort before another of the total of seven fireplaces in the house, Thomas Jefferson sought the advice and help of his college friend, Colonel Jesse Ewell, as he worked out a final draft of the Declaration of Independence before he should continue his journey to Philadelphia to present it to the Continental Congress.

Another room opens off the hall which is now furnished as a guest or powder room and its equipped with a half-bath, one of three bathrooms which are the first ever to be installed in the old house.

Up the ample stairs, made easy

with commodious landings, are four bedrooms, the fifth now converted into two separate baths. One of the bedrooms, was once the study of Parson Mason Locke Weems, where the former eccentric pastor of Pohick church probably penned his biographies of Washington and Franklin and other writings during his spasmodic residence at Bel Air with his wife, Fannie Ewell. The dormer window in this room and the one over the stairwell had been covered over by a previous owner, but, as can be seen in the picture, have now been restored.

It is also interesting to note in the picture that part of the original old stone foundations are slowly being relieved of their modern day casings of cement, adding further authenticity and beauty to the outer appearance of the building.

Mr. and Mrs. Flory are attempting with their own considerable knowledge, having restored an old house in Alexandria which they still own, and the aid of the state Park Service, as well as much research, to make their renovations as close to the original as possible and provide modern comforts for their family's convenience. It still remains a home and not a museum.

The full history of Bel Air, even that portion which is documented is much too full to attempt to cover

here. 1740 is the date of building to which will feature of structure and material point, but no more is known for certain. Charles Ewell, the patriarch of this county's branch of the Ewell family, is credited with having built the ancestral home. Its factual history begins with Colonel Jesse Ewell, contemporary of Jefferson.

Bel Air rests at the crest of a rolling hummock, its broad lawns set with huge old gnarled oaks. There is a story that Col. Ewell gathered up his militia for a race to Yorktown to help out in battle, only to be stopped on the way by news that the battle was over. Undaunted the colonel ordered his men back to Bel Air, where on the lawn under the oaks they were promptly treated to a full-fledged barbecue.

There are many quaint anecdotes, some doubtful, about Bel Air, but all make pleasant stories and point up a visit to the charming old place. And speaking of visiting, the Florys have stated that they plan to have the restoration completed by the year 1960, coincidentally the 300th anniversary of the birth of Parson Weems, when they will open the house periodically for public inspection. In the meantime especially interested visitors are welcome, upon giving notice of their intended visit.

Rev. Chandler To Address Bethel Charge

At present Reverend Chandler is Professor of Church History and head of the Church History Department of Westminster Theological Seminary, Westminster, Maryland. In the summer of 1952 professor Chandler was one of the

Committees Named For Dumfries PTA

Dumfries PTA President Robert L. Varner has announced the organization's committee for the 1953-54 session of the group. They are: Membership, Mrs. Magruder

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