

# Parson Weems' Plantation: 'Lived and Loved In'

LYDIA G. MATTHEWS

Not too long ago, in a collection of Virginian legends, I found a reference to Mason Locke Weems, better known as Parson Weems. In the text a fleeting reference was made to the effect that Parson Weems married a Woodbridge girl. No name and no further details were mentioned. I was engrossed by this mere allusion to Woodbridge and must admit, knowing how historical Prince William County is, I resented the author's singular dismissal of the Woodbridge girl. With persistence and careful research I discovered that the girl had been none other than Frances (Fannie) Ewell whose family had been instrumental in shaping much of Virginia's history.

The Ewell's family estate still exists and the present owners kindly allowed me to visit. I now find it is almost impossible to write about Fannie Ewell and her Belle-Air home without alluding constantly to Dr. and Mrs. Flory without whose cooperation it would have been impossible to write this article. Mrs. Flory has done extensive research on the family and patiently shared with me the different anecdotes relating to the Ewells.

To arrive there, I left an encroaching housing development and drove up the single lane road, I was acutely aware of the thick trees with their dense foliage and the blooming wildflowers framing each side of the country road. I tried to visualize how it must have looked to the first Ewells as they approached this beautiful site which was destined to become their family seat.

In 1699 the first Ewell came to Virginia to build the capitol at Williamsburg. His son Major Charles Ewell who built Belle-Air in 1740 was a prominent and secular gent who probably shocked the local gentry when he married his stepsister, Sarah Ball. Charles Ewell built his house high on a hill mainly to protect his family from malaria. His homestead was conveniently located between his successful mercantile business in Dumfries and his mill interests in Occoquan which he shared with his brother-in-law, John Ballantine.

Legend says that his young relative, George Washington, helped to survey the land. Upon his uncle's insistence the house faces southeast welcoming the sun every day of the year.

The Ewells had three children, Mariamne (this is the actual spelling), Jesse and Jimmie. Mariamne is

plantation. The family had often commented upon the pleasant breezes caressing the site and the young girl who was then learning French suggested Belle-Air. It is also said that she planted a catalpa tree at the site where Belle-Air was first named.

It is safe to assume that Mariamne was the first bride at Belle-Air. For the occasion the panels connecting the central hall and drawing room were removed. In this red drawing room Mariamne married Dr. James Craik a personal friend and physician of George Washington. Dr. Craik became Surgeon General of the Continental Army. During the wedding festivities the guests engaged in a rousing Virginia reel that made it necessary for some of the male guests to go to the lower level and prop the drawing room with pine poles to prevent its swaying. There is also an account of a Christening which lasted from Thursday to Saturday. It is obvious that the Ewells enjoyed the company of relatives and friends.

Mariamne's brothers James and Jesse represented Prince William on the first Committee for Safety in December, 1774. Several years later Col. Jesse Ewell assembled his men and prepared to join Washington at Yorktown. Midway he was met with the news of the victorious siege, he then returned to his estate and under a catalpa tree in the front lawn fed his entire regiment.

Col. Ewell had married his cousin, Charlotte Ewell, and from this union Frances Ewell was born. Her brother Dr. Thomas Ewell of the United States Army moved to Georgetown. One of his sons became president of the College of William and Mary, another became a major general in the Confederate Army, another graduated from West Point and was killed in battle and the fourth son became well known as Rev. Dr. William Stoddert, the Ewell part of his name was mysteriously dropped.

Fannie Ewell at the age of 20 became the bride of Mason L. Weems aged 36. They lived in Dumfries where they had ten children, eight of whom survived infancy. Parson Weems at one time had been a ship surgeon where it is said he became so disillusioned with all the suffering he saw on the British man of war that he turned to the church for solace. He was one of the first two Episcopalians to be ordained after the Revolutionary War. Parson Weems was often

pulpits including Pohick Church, but he had the disconcerting habit of often naming sinners and their sins when presenting his sermons. Consequently, he had to do a bit of 'moonlighting'. Although

historical marker adorns his gravesite at Belle-Air. On the southwest side of the house another historical marker tells the tale of Col. Ewell feeding his men under the catalpa tree. Belle-Air was evacuated

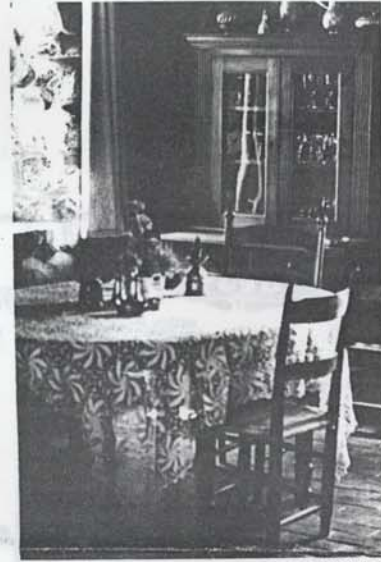


Photo by Steve McCloskey

he was a prolific writer and itinerant book seller, he attained immortality as the first biographer of George Washington. In an excerpt from a letter to his publisher, Matthew Carey, Weems refers to himself as "nearly primed and cocked for the millions who are waiting to read about Washington."

In 1800 he published the first edition of the Life of Washington. The fifth edition published in 1806 introduced the famous cherry-tree tale. In the sixth edition he told about Friend Potts discovering Washington in prayer at Valley Forge. He is also responsible for the still-prevailing legend of Washington tossing the "Spanish dollar" across the Rappahannock. This biography is now in its 90th edition.

During the early part of the 19th century Weems moved his family to Belle-Air, part of which he had acquired in satisfaction of loans to his mother-in-law. The few times he was home he consulted with Fannie, whom Washington Irving referred to as a "chimney critic".

Together they would decide which books were the "best sellers", (a phrase coined by Parson Weems), restock the books and Weems would once again leave on his trips along the eastern

by the family during the Civil War and was never again to remain in either the Weems or Ewell families.

Both 1875 and 1926 brought many structural changes to Belle-Air mainly the pillars that were added to the front of the house, the covered porch and the addition of concrete to the lower level.

After an 18-year period of neglect and misuse Belle-Air was purchased in 1948 by Dr. and Mrs. Flory. The painstaking restoration which was begun during

this period did not end until six years later. Bulldozers, which were brought in to clear the underbrush, had to proceed cautiously. The decorative fireplace mantle from the drawing room was found outside tossed aside by vandals. The chair railings from the central hall were discovered in the woods. The clearing of the ground bared an outbuilding as well as the terraced ground which implied that a formal garden once existed. Much of the work was done by the owners including the continuous chipping of the concrete wall which covered the lower level.

The stone level of the house finally emerged. The pillars and the covered porch were removed and after studying the pre-Georgian front with its unbalanced window placement the stairway was once again placed in its proper position. Inside the house a fine red dust had solidified itself. It was impossible to extract except by the daily use of a stiff broom and brush. Once the dust had been removed the beautiful wide pine planks that were used during colonial days became visible.

Although none of the present furnishings are of the original home, the Flory family has skillfully blended modern conveniences with oriental rugs and period furnishings which include many priceless antiques.

This brick edifice measures 38 ft. by 51 ft. The walls vary in thickness from one foot to three feet and the two flanking chimneys accommodate nine fireplaces. To your left, as you enter the central hall which extends from the front to the rear of the house, is the drawing room painted in a faded red which was called "buttermilk pink" by the colonists. This was ac-

complished by a mixture of buttermilk with red brick clay dust. Today's color closely resembles the original which was found under several coats of paint.

Over the mantle is a copy of Grant Woods satirical painting of Parson Weems' tale of the cherry tree. To the right of the red room is the small study where intimate family friends slept. This is called the Washington chamber as George Washington and his bride stayed overnight during their honeymoon journey to Mt. Vernon.

Across the hall directly in front of the drawing room is the library which the Ewells used as a family sitting room. Adjacent to this is Dr. Flory's study which had been the Ewells' dining room. There is still evidence of the dumb-waiter which was utilized to bring food from the downstairs kitchen. This room was nearly destroyed by a fire in 1840. The unique feature in this main landing is the movable panels between the drawing room and central hall. From this central hall you have access to the upper and lower floors. Upstairs were five bedrooms with a wide landing. One bedroom had to be transformed to accommodate the essentials of modern day living. The remaining bedrooms were furnished with trundle and spindle beds and highboys. We peeked into the smallest room which Parson Weems used as a study. It is said that Weems often escaped here to get away from his mother-in-law. On this level are three extremely small ~~corner~~ windows.

We then proceeded to what I considered the most interesting part of the house. The lower level with its stone facing and walls is believed to have been built during the 17th century. See GHOSTS, Page 8



# Eleven Ghosts Haunt Belle-Air CABARET

From Page 7

The wooden structure of the two above levels were replaced with brick by Maj. Ewell during the 18th century. On this ground floor level we saw the mammoth chimney with its gargantuan 20 foot base. The brick floor and stone hearth were the original ones but the brick floor in the adjacent dining room was an exact replica. Another huge hearth greeted our eyes and this room would have delighted any modern housewife with its spaciousness.

Over the mantle stood gleaming pewter while below the iron cauldrons snuggled in a corner inside the huge fireplace. This room was used by the Ewells as a "wool" room. From the adjacent kitchen we proceeded to the room which different accounts described as the wine cellar or dungeon. History says that hostile Doeg Indians once roamed this area. Old iron rings were discovered generations ago. Could these have been

used on recalcitrant slaves or could this have served as a stockade where the Indian enemy was kept? Mrs. Flory ascribes to the latter theory as no date of origin has been established for the stone walls. Several years ago it was discovered that the Belle-Air land had once been fenced in the circular manner that was commonly used for frontier forts during the 17th century. As yet no other evidence has been uncovered to substantiate this theory.

As most respectable vintage homes, Belle-Air can boast of its resident ghosts. Years ago an octogenarian gentleman came to visit the present owners and asked if they had ever heard of the eleven ghosts which were said to haunt Belle-Air. He went on to explain that Belle-Air had been unoccupied for several years. When he was a young boy of 12 he came over to the plantation on some long forgotten boyhood adventure. As he approached the house, he saw eleven white heads at the windows staring at him. He turned around and ran home where he jumped into bed and remained for five hours. After his initial fright he tried to reason with himself and finally thought of the sheep that would often stray from the flock. It was later discovered that the eleven white faces had actually been eleven sheep that had wandered away.

Although the Florys along with their two children have never encountered a visitation, Mrs. Flory did tell about the foreign guest who came to visit them. After having heard English spoken for several hours, the gentleman wanted to rest and it was suggested that he rest in the Washington chamber. Hours later the gentleman rejoined the family and told them of the visit he had had with a

charming lady in the red room. Apparently, this visitor was not as well disposed to the mischievous ghost who kept removing his bed coverings in the upstairs guest room.

Two Thanksgivings ago, the Flory's son-in-law was sitting on the hearth in the library facing the drawing room. Suddenly this young Marine Lieutenant froze and when able to speak told his fiancée, who had seen him pale of the shape he saw materialized into a tall man and enter the red room.

Belle-Air is no monument to a by-gone era. People live and love in this house. Dr. and Mrs. Flory raised their son and daughter in this old house. Not too long ago a wedding was held - not in the red drawing room where the first Belle-Air bride had spoken her vows - but in the serene arbor adjoining the house.

Mrs. Flory told me, "the house has such an agreeable disposition," that it is easy to imagine Mariamne approving of the lavish love and care bestowed upon the home she appropriately called, "Belle-Air".

If you have spirit and a little talent then you might be interested in trying out for a part in the musical Cabaret.

Auditions will be held at the Essayons Theatre located at Ft. Belvoir on Sept. 11, 19 and 20 at 7:30 p.m. Directions to the theatre will be provided at the main gate.

Described as a musical with a lot of action, a variety of roles are available for all ages. There are parts open for male and female singers and actors. Both military and civilians are invited to try out for parts.

For those persons with some experience in acting, a role of a mature character is needed.

Mrs. Janice Holst, who was the choreographer for the play Brigadoon, which was presented in Woodbridge recently, will be arranging the dances and designing costumes for the presentation of Cabaret Joe Sisky will be the producer.

Cabaret, something for everyone, will be performed during the first week of November. Interested persons are urged to call Mrs. Holst at 491-2630.

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