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Lora Gordon/Journal

Bel Air owner William Flory tells some of the stories of history surrounding his home, as he sits in front of the stone foundation that once caused him so much trouble.

Historic house a labor of love

Owners restored Bel Air Plantation for posterity

By **JOSEPH CURL**
Journal staff writer

In 1948, Dr. William E. S. Flory and his wife, Anne, decided that it might be fun to buy an old house and restore it. Flory was 33, with an advanced

degree in international law and working at the U.S. State Department. The couple was raising two children.

When the Florys bought 50 acres and the Bel Air Plantation in southern Dale City for \$13,500, they got more than a "fixer-upper."

"There were no doors, no windows, the chimneys had fallen in," Flory said. "If we had not started [restoration] when we did, the whole place would have tumbled in on itself."

Flory, 75, can talk for extended periods on the history of the house, but "as a living thing, this house can speak for itself. It can serve as a window on history."

The house's history dates back to the 1670s, but it is probably most famous as the home of Mason Locke "Parson" Weems, the first biographer of George Washington.

The English Governor William Berkeley had ordered forts to be built throughout the state for protection against Indians. In 1673, Berkeley himself occupied a fort at what is now Bel Air. Only the foundation of the fort, which had walls three feet thick, remains today.

In 1740, Charles Ewell, a tobacco merchant from Dumfries, bought the land and built a new house on top of the foundation.

Please see **RESTORE/A13**

30-year restoration effort finished

RESTORE from A1

The house eventually passed into the hands of Weems, who had married the granddaughter of Charles Ewell.

Weems, a preacher and author, is most famous for his tales of the young George Washington throwing a coin across the Rappahannock and telling his father "I cannot tell a lie" when asked about a felled cherry tree.

The Washington biography, as well as other books by Weems, were penned at the Bel Air Plantation; the author is buried in a family cemetery in the side yard.

The house passed through many hands and in 1890 the walls of the foundation separated. Workers attempted to repair the damage and to restore the house.

"They surrounded the walls with forms and poured in concrete," Flory said, "but they didn't put up any braces" and the walls continued to buckle. By 1915 the house, along with the plans to restore it, was abandoned.

For the next 33 years, people pilfered some items from the house and destroyed others. Hunters camped in the house and used window frames or furniture for firewood. The wife of a neighbor who had supposedly been taking care of the house "stripped it bare of all its original furnishings," said Flory, adding that nothing was ever recovered.

There was also a rumor that somewhere in the walls of the house was \$50,000 in gold. Treasure hunters tore into the walls but never found the gold, which was not hid-

Restoration began in 1948 with the walls, which had continued to separate after the 1890 attempt to brace them. Workmen removed small sections and chipped away the old clay that held the largest stones together. The stones were then cemented together and put back into the foundation.

"We were kind of camping until we got around to doing work on the interior," Flory said. The kitchen, located in the basement, served as the main room while the Florys renovated.

"When we finally started down here, we found out that the two beams holding everything up were dryrotted and only had about [two inches] left," Flory said.

He said the rest of the restoration process consisted not of one setback but instead "was just a series of emergencies."

"The Park Service wanted to buy it [in the 1940s] but couldn't raise the money," Flory said. "They said it would take 20 years to restore and I said, 'I can do it in 10.' I finished 30 years later."

Flory and his wife, who died three years ago, worked weekends and nights on the house. "It took virtually everything we had. When we ran out of money, we'd stop for a while."

He is not sure just how much money they put into the house, Flory said, adding that "I really don't want to know."

"It's my wife's and my contribution to the community," he said.

The house was made a Virginia Historical Landmark in 1968 and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.

Since the completion of the restoration, there have been few prob-

lems with the house.

"But the most recurring problem with our overnight guests is ghosts," Flory said. "They see them, feel them, hear them, and there seems to be a pattern. It's usually a thirtyish

woman in a dark cloak and a gentleman in early 1800s-style dress," although Flory said he has never seen one.

"Then again, they usually see them around Halloween."