

WPA
Report
1930s

1. SUBJECT:

"Portici" Site.

2. LOCATION:

Six and one half miles northwest of Manassas, Virginia, on the north side of Route #621.

3. DATE:

There does not seem to be any way to be sure of the exact date that "Portici" was built, but Mr. Lewis thinks that it was in the late 1780's.

4. OWNERS:

There has never been a record of sale of this old place, being part of Robert Carter's grant that is described as "the tract to the far west", and given to Betty Landon Carter, daughter of Councillor Carter of Nomini, who married Spencer Ball, and whose direct descendant Mr. Robert Lewis is.

5. DESCRIPTION:

The original house of ten rooms with brick gables was burned during the second battle of Manassas, so that one can only imagine its beauty, for all the old Carter mansions in this section were fine, such as "Sudley House", "Red Hill", etc.

The house stood on the highest point of ground in the vicinity, and was used as a signal station during the war. From the lines of the old foundation one can see that it was on the generous proportions of the day for that type of house. The ground in front of the house was terraced, and several of the old terraces remain, and a few flowers come up every year from the once spacious garden. There are some cedars left, that were there long before the war ravaged the beauties of the place and a few storm-torn pear trees that continue to flower each year and bear some fruit, one having distinguished itself by bearing two crops of fruit in one year, flowering while the first fruit was ripening, and the second crop of good size when taken by the frost.

Mr. Lewis can show where many of the old out buildings stood, a cabin here, slave quarters there, ice house, all the various buildings that were common on the old plantations.

6. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

"Portici" was the scene of some of the bitterest fighting during the first and second Battles of Manassas and Mr. Lewis' father, after the war was ended, started to make a home with one ox and a three year old colt that had been sick and therefore was left when the place was raided for horses. Now, there is a spacious farmhouse some few hundred yards from the site of the old house, in which are found many interesting and precious relics of the war that have been collected in that region.

Mr. Lewis tells an interesting story of the name of the place. Before the fire which destroyed it in '62, there had been many other fires at "Portici", destroying various buildings, and doing more or less damage. Mr. Ball had recently returned from a tour of Europe and named it for a town in Italy that had been destroyed by fire, and that had greatly impressed him at the time.

A curious incident is told of the "Portici" fires. An Overseer on the place was extremely pious, and always kept a Bible on the table as well as two pistols. As those who were able to do so, usually bought their gunpowder in ten pound kegs, one was nearly full and in the same room as the above mentioned table and of course exploded shortly after the fire started. The house was utterly demolished, but after it was cool enough to go near, the table was found sitting some distance from the ruins, upright, the bible and pistols all in place.

The very old cemetery on the place is surrounded by a substantial stone wall and overgrown with lilac and other shrubs, besides the shade of the trees that surround it, so that even in the sunlight, it has an air of twilight. Many of the stones are so lichen covered, that it is impossible to read the various epitaphs that are in small letters. Several of the stones have no inscriptions. This cemetery is about one eighth of a mile from the house, to the northwest, and that part of the land has quite recently been bought by the United States Government and included in the tract known as Bull Run Battlefield Park.

Here are a few of the inscriptions found in the cemetery:

Sacred to the Memory of SPENCER BALL,
Who was born August 6, 1762, and died at "Portici",
February 28, 1832. To Our Dear Father.

Sacred to the Memory of BETTY LONDON BALL,
Born at "Nomini Hall", Westmoreland County, Virginia,
October 15, 1768. Died at "Portici", January 4, 1842.

Sacred to the Memory of ALFRED BALL,
Born April 19, 1793, Died at "Portici", March 14, 1858.
"He was respected and beloved in life, and lamented in
death by all who knew him".

SARAH G. ^c Wife of Alfred Ball,
Died May 6, 1875, aged 72 years.

LOUISA BALL WARE, Died 1879

Not currently represented Alfred's Sister married Wm. J. Weir

Sacred to the Memory of FRANCIS WARING BALL,
Born February 19, 1767, Died May 12, 1835.
To Our Dear Brother.

7. ART:

8. SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

Informant: Robert Lewis, Manassas, Virginia.

Court Records, Prince William County, Virginia.

Weir