

Wilson, Donald L

From: Wilson, Donald L
Sent: Thursday, September 14, 2000 5:08 PM
To: 'Cunard, Jan'
Cc: Karnes, Debrae; Bainbridge, Robert C.
Subject: Bel Air

Here are a few additional responses to the letter from Thunderbird :

4. Regarding Mason Locke Weems' presence at "Bel Air," much of the evidence I have seen is anecdotal, but appears to be based on long-standing family tradition. His marriage to Fanny Ewell most likely took place at "Bel Air," which was her family's home. By tradition Weems is buried there. Although his primary residence may have been elsewhere, he must have visited his in-laws there on a frequent basis. His wife may have lived there during his long absences on business trips.

Although I have not yet found primary documents referring to Civil War activity at "Bel Air", it is unlikely such a prominent home would have been overlooked by local military commanders.

4 (p. 4): Am unable to comment on the predictive model mentioned (regarding slave quarters and burials). Have still not seen Thunderbird's full report or Jan Cunard's original response to it. We need some plat or description of how the outlying fields were used at Bel Air, which parcels were used for particular crops or forest, and which were leased to tenants, before we can be confident we have not missed something significant. I have not yet found such a document.

5. Agree that slave quarters may not have been on the 120 acre tract, but we can't say, from what I have seen written, that it has been proved they could not have been on the tract.

6. Am not sure what the point of the discussion is regarding the graves they found. Is it that they do not signify a larger graveyard? Can't comment further since I have not seen the full report. Have not heard whether the primary cemetery for the plantation has been found or what measures have been taken to locate and delineate it. Even if it is located within the 20 acre parcel, if it comes anywhere close to the 120 acre tract, adjacent areas need to be thoroughly studied.

To summarize a couple of points I made in earlier reports:

(1) I disagree with Thunderbird's assessment of the age of "Bel Air" (Gardner claims it dates to around 1800). Historical records confirm the presence of the Ewell family at this spot by ca. 1740. Previous archaeological studies confirm artifacts dating back to the first half of the eighteenth century. There should be no doubt that the farm dates to 1740 or earlier.

(2) The extent of the farming operations and cultural evidence of that family and their successors is yet to be fully studied. Even outlying parcels of the farm are likely to contain some cultural evidence. The owners would likely have maximized their profits by leasing to tenant farmers portions of the plantation that they were unable to farm themselves. Those tenant farms, as well as slave habitations and plantation mansions, have significance for our cultural history.

Regret I am unable to do any additional research on this matter at this time.

Sincerely,

Donald L. Wilson, Virginiana Librarian
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