

Glimpses of a Virginia
Plantation in the
Olden Times



Home of George Washington's
Rector and Physician

Glimpses of a Virginia Plantation in the Olden Times

About 1720 a portion of the Ewell family, which had previously settled in Lancaster County, Virginia, removed to Dumfries, Virginia, and became wealthy in tobacco trade.

They acquired extended landed possessions and built Belle Air mansion for their family seat.

It is situated about five miles northward from Dumfries and about twelve miles south of Manassas. The building is doubtless older than any now standing in Dumfries, as the great fire more than a century since destroyed many of the oldest buildings of that ancient town. It is probably older than Mount Vernon or Gunston Hall, or any of the old Virginia manor houses of the colonial period.

The proofs of its antiquity are internal as well as traditional. In 1885, when extensive repairs were made and some of the lathing and plastering were removed, many interesting relics were found of the days when Virginia was an English colony.

The house was evidently built before the days of saw mills, for every lath was rived, every timber and joist and studding had evidently been hewed out of the woods and even the finest cornices and carvings bore the mark of the axe on the reverse side. There is no sign that bricks were made in the vicinity, and we are prepared to believe the tradition that they came over from Scotland in the hold of the returning tobacco ships. The records and traditions of the Ewell and kindred families all corroborate these unmistakable signs and make it reasonably certain that Belle Air is not only older than our National Government but probably older than the county of Prince William. The heavy brick and stone walls, from two to four feet in thickness, declare to our satisfaction that they were not built in these degenerate days. A chimney twenty-two feet wide stands at one end of the mansion, in which are five fireplaces, one of them large enough to roast an ox, or into which a grand piano could be easily rolled. In all there are seven fireplaces in the house.

The mansion, like all the houses of that period, has a double front; one faces the southeast, the other northwest. This ensures sun light and sun warmth on each side of the house for 365 days of the year. Whether this arrangement has contributed to the remarkable healthfulness of the generations that have come and gone under its ample roof is a question for consideration.

The internal arrangements are more convenient for housekeepers than many of the ancient houses. The cooking, dining and laundry work are all provided for on the first floor, in which are six rooms, one of which was a sort of "dunjon-keep" surrounded by massive walls of stone. The only material change made in the house in its repair and restoration was the addition of a door and window and the dungeon has given way to a harmless cellar.

The main floor is 11 feet high and contains the large parlor, a reception room, a living room and a sleeping apartment which is now called "the Washington guest chamber," as Washington is said to have occupied it when visiting there. Between the hall and parlor a paneled partition was originally

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built, which on great occasions was taken down, thus making a room 20 by 30 feet.

The stairway has a place for itself and is wide and easy, with commodious landings. The third floor contains five sleeping rooms and a large hall, and is lighted by old-fashioned dormer windows. Above all is a fourth floor or attic running the length of the building.

The mansion is located on a hill which rises 90 feet above the valley of the Neabsco, a small, clear stream which flows through the farm, affording fine bathing facilities and farther on good fishing. It is in one of the most healthful locations in the state, as malaria, typhoid and other fevers are practically unknown.

Houses, however, were made for people: who were these people of Belle Air?

The beginning of Belle Air is a little hazy. We know that Col. Jesse Ewell received it from his ancestors; that he was the college chum of Thomas Jefferson at William and Mary and it is certain that the author of the Declaration frequently visited the family. We also find among the records, in the Court House of Prince William County, in an old deed book, a mortgage given May 2, 1794, which states that the land on which Belle Air stands originally consisted of 1248 acres, part of which Charles Ewell received as a grant from the Proprietors of the Northern Neck of Virginia (Fairfax and Culpeper), and part from John Wood, who before that time had received the balance from the Proprietors.

Another deed book records a quaint old marriage settlement dated Oct. 4, 1798, in which Bertrand Ewell gives a deed of trust to the separate use of his bride, Catherine Barnes Alexander, for \$3,000 with a long list of slaves, household furniture, &c.

We have record evidence to show that Dr. James Craik, the Surgeon of the Virginia Battalion that saved the wreck of the Braddock expedition, was married here to Mariamne Ewell on the 13th of November, 1760.

Dr. Craik was the most intimate of Washington's personal friends and was appointed by him as Surgeon General of the American Army. The Ewells and Washingtons were cousins and George himself was frequently at Belle Air and when on his bridal tour spent one night "with his cousins at Belle Air."

An old survey dated May 10, 1749, was found in the house which experts say was made by the seventeen-year-old surveyor. Along with the survey was found a copy of the Pennsylvania Gazette published by Benjamin Franklin in 1760; a long letter dated Dec. 20, 1802, from Thomas Ewell, the father of Gen. Richard S. Ewell, written when a boy to Col. Jesse. A letter from John Ballendine, who first built the Occoquan Mills, dated May 8, 1768, and part of a subscription paper for some public enterprise which contains the names of many of the old Virginia families.

One of the most interesting characters connected with Belle Air was Mason Locke Weems, the eccentric rector of Mount Vernon Parish. He married Miss Fannie Ewell here about the time of the Revolution, was intimate at Mount Vernon and wrote the first life of George Washington. Weems was often at Belle Air and the property passed into the hands of the Parson and his heirs after the death of Mrs. Jesse Ewell in 1823. Parson Weems died in Beauford, S. C., May, 1825, and the following winter his remains were brought by boat to Dumfries and buried at Belle Air in the family cemetery. His

brother-in-law, Colonel Jesse Ewell, was a Colonel of Prince William Militia at the time of the Revolution and is said to have fed his entire regiment on one occasion from his own flocks and herds, slaughtered and cooked and served up to his guests in and around the mansion.

Among the other descendents of the Ewells who spent much time at Belle Air was Dr. Jesse Ewell, of Hickory Grove, who lived to be nearly 100. He was born in Dumfries and in his infancy was a great sufferer from malaria. He was removed by his father to the ancestral home at Belle Air, and from that time lived a life remarkable for its length, its healthfulness and its usefulness.

Gen. Richard S. Ewell, the left arm of Lee, as Longstreet was the right, which dealt such blows for the Confederacy on many a field, and President Benj. S. Ewell of William and Mary College, are worthy specimens of this illustrious family.

There are many other things of interest at Belle Air, among them is the keystone that was once over the door of the bank at Dumfries, inscribed William Waite Fecit, 1755.

This old historic place now embraces over 500 acres; 400 in woodland, with some valuable timber, about 100 acres of cleared land around the house, part of which is tillable, which could be sold with or without the timber.

It is about 30 miles from Washington, with good macadam road most of the way (Miami and Quebec Highway), 7 miles to railroad or to water front. place for sheep and other stock. Barn and other outbuildings. The land is

Post office, store and church within one-half mile; excellent hunting. Fine place for sheep and other stock. Barn and other outbuildings. The land is fertile and well watered.

Mrs. Susan Morton

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