

VIRGINIANA FILE JUL 27 1983

P.W.C. Biography (Weems)

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Colorful Parson Weems Penned Tree Tale

By LYDIA MATTHEWS

Feb. 22 marks the traditional birthday of George Washington and as such is celebrated in different ways. Many Americans visit Mount Vernon, others take advantage of the various sales offered by enterprising merchants and children hear the tale of the cherry tree.

This tale is almost as famous as the "Father of Our Country" but in Prince William it has an added significance. The tale of the cherry tree was authored by Mason Locke Weems, known to history as Parson Weems of the Bel-Air Plantation.

Parson Weems is believed to have been born in Anne Arundel County, Maryland in 1759. It is also said that he studied medicine at Edinburgh, Scotland and may have served as an impressed ship surgeon on a British man-of-war.

At the age of twenty he returned to Maryland and upon the death of his father, freed the slaves which had been bequeathed to him. Having been disillusioned with all the suffering he saw on the British ship, he now turned to the church for solace.

At twenty-five, he became one of the first Episcopalians to be ordained after the Revolutionary War.

This was not as easily accomplished in colonial days for during this time Episcopal ministers had to swear allegiance to the King of England. The only existing Episcopal ministers in

America were those who had broken their oath to support the king.

With grim determination the young man went to England to persuade Parliament to amend its law and within two years his mission was successful. He was made a deacon by the Bishop of Chester on September 5, 1784 and a week later was ordained a priest by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Parson Weems now returned to Maryland where he served as Rector of All Hallows in Anne Arundel County and later at St. Margaret's, Westminster. The zealous young minister had the disconcerting habit of often naming sinners and their evil deeds in his sermons, and soon he was forced to do a bit of "moonlighting", a practice which was not encouraged by the Church.

At 32 he was forced to part with the settled rectorship. This offered no hardship, for by this time the young man had begun his career as a writer and itinerant book seller. He continued to speak at different pulpits including Pohick Church.

At 36 he married 20-year-old Fannie Ewell, daughter of Col. Jesse Ewell who resided at Bel-Air Plantation. The young couple lived in Dumfries, where they had 10 children, eight of whom survived infancy.

Fannie's aunt Marianne had been married at Bel-Air to Dr. James Craik, a personal friend and physician of Washington. Through his marriage Parson

Weems became a friend of the President and often visited at Mount Vernon.

There are many amusing tales about this unusual minister. My favorite is found in Robert Nelson's book on Virginia legends.

Mr. Nelson tells the tale of Parson Weems having once received a fiddle as payment for one of his weekend sermons as a guest preacher. Parson Weems was said to be so delighted with the fiddle that he learned to play it well enough to help out a troupe of traveling entertainers.

During this era, strolling players were believed to be the lowest form of life and during one of his trips, Parson Weems stayed at an inn where a group of players had been contracted to entertain the customers. Unfortunately for the troupe their fiddle player became intoxicated and was unable to play.

The angry innkeeper threatened to dismiss the troupe, who were hungry and penniless, but Parson Weems who happened to be nearby, agreed to play the fiddle for the troupe, provided he was hidden by a screen.

Unfortunately, the screen fell during the performance and there stood the parson in his clerical robes. The local populace was scandalized.

Parson Weems often spoke at Pohick Church, and John Davis, who was working as a tutor at Rockledge in Occoquan, mentions the eloquent preacher in his diary.

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The young tutor describes the churchyard as "the rattling of carriage-wheels, the cracking of whips, and the vociferations of the gentlemen to the negroes who accompanied them. But the discourse of Parson Weems calmed every perturbation; for he preached the great doctrines of salvation, as one who had experienced their power."

During the early part of the 19th Century Weems moved his family to Bel-Air, part of which he had acquired in satisfaction of loans to his mother-in-law. In order to avoid his mother-in-law, he would often escape to the smallest bedroom, which had been converted into a study. 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 then leave on his trips along the eastern seaboard.

Although he was a prolific writer (in his 20 years on the road he sold approximately one million pamphlets) he attained

immortality as the first biographer of George Washington.

In 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 George 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.

Weems is also responsible for the still-prevalent legend of Washington tossing a "Spanish dollar across the Rappahannock." This biography is now in its 90th edition.

Weems died at 71. A simple marker adorns his gravesite at Bel-Air.

Although the Ewell families were part of Virginia's heritage many remember Bel-Air as Parson Weems' home.

Bel-Air plantation is now a private home but in April it will be opened to the public as part of a home and garden tour sponsored by the Trowel Garden Club.