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PWC HISTORIC BUILDINGS  
(Bel Air)

# REFERENCE



BEL AIR • *Prince William County, Virginia*

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## Parson Weems

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Mason Locke Weems, the first biographer of George Washington, parson, author, book-seller, fiddler, and raconteur par excellence, was born on October 11, 1759, at Marshes Seat, Herring Bay, Anne Arundel County, Maryland. After completing his early schooling in Maryland, he made numerous voyages on the trading vessels owned by his brothers. It is believed that he studied medicine or surgery at Edinburgh, Scotland, between 1777-1779, and he may have been impressed as a ship surgeon on a British-man-of-war. In 1779, he returned to Maryland, where, following the death of his father, he freed the slaves bequeathed to him. He studied for the ministry between 1780 and 1784 in England.

He was made a deacon by the Bishop of Chester on September 5, 1784, and was ordained as a priest on September 12, 1784, by the Archbishop of Canterbury. He and his companion, Edward Gantt, also of Maryland, were the first Americans to be ordained following the Revolutionary War. Between 1784 and 1793, he served as Rector of All Hallows, Anne Arundel County and later at St. Margaret's, Westminster, Maryland.

In 1791, he began his publishing career. In 1793, he severed his formal connection with a settled rectorship, although he filled the pulpit at Pohick Church, Truro Parish, Fairfax County, Virginia at various times, particularly in 1801-1802, and preached on numerous occasions in other churches.

In July, 1795, he was married to Frances Ewell, daughter of Col. Jesse Ewell of Bel Air, and settled at Dumfries. He and his wife had ten children, eight of whom survived infancy.

In 1800, he published the first edition of the *Life of Washington*. This was quickly followed by new and revised editions to satisfy the tremendous demands. The fifth edition, published in 1806, contained for the first time the famous cherry-tree anecdote. The story of Friend Potts discovering the Commander-in-Chief in prayer at Valley Forge appeared in a newspaper version in 1804 and was incorporated for the first time in the sixth edition, published in 1808. The biography has appeared in more than 80 editions, the last in 1927.

## Bel Air

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In 1808 or 1809, Weems moved his family to Bel Air, after taking over the house, in part, in satisfaction of loans to his mother-in-law. He purchased the remainder of the property in 1823 upon her death. He died on May 23, 1825, at Beaufort, South Carolina. His remains were later removed to the family cemetery at Bel Air.

This two and one-half story country house of 14 rooms was built in the traditional style on the central-hall plan. The main floor and the upper dormered story were constructed in 1740 by Major Charles Ewell, who was identified with business and other enterprises in Dumfries and Occoquan when these towns were important market places and ports. It is believed that the stone walls of the ground floor were erected at an earlier date and that Major Ewell possibly replaced a wooden structure at the upper levels.

The house measures 38 by 51 feet and faces southeast. Walls vary in thickness from three feet to one foot. Interesting architectural features are: 1) the pre-Georgian front with its unbalanced window placement, a style prevalent in Virginia before 1700; 2) the high elevation of the ground

floor; 3) the mammoth 20-foot outside chimney on the southwest side; 4) the carriage entrance on the northwest side; 5) the movable partition in the central hall which permitted conversion of the drawing room into a great hall for state occasions; 6) the open staircase with its two landings off the central hall; 7) the very small dormer windows; 8) the large cooking fireplace on the ground floor.

Actual use to which the rooms were put varied from time to time. The large dining room on the ground floor, evidently used as a primary living room originally, was called the "wool room" by the Ewells who delicately withdrew their living arrangements to the upper levels, thus converting the ground floor to menial uses. A keep, a secondary kitchen, laundry room, and wine cellar or "dungeon" complete the arrangement of rooms on the ground floor. The large drawing room on the main floor, sometimes called the "state dining room," is dominated by an architectural fireplace; the faded red paint on the woodwork matches the original color found under six coats of paint. The small study or sitting room to the right of the drawing room is known as the Washington Guest

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Chamber; the Colonel and his bride were overnight guests on their honeymoon journey to Mount Vernon. The library across the hall was a family sitting room. The office at the end of the hall was used as a family dining room. The small bedroom above the stairs on the upper floor was Parson Weems' study; it is said that he selected this remotest room as his own to secure a sanctuary from his mother-in-law. The master bedroom and two other bedrooms are on the top floor, also. A fifth bedroom has been converted to baths and closets to meet modern living requirements. A full-length attic spans the building.

The first restoration of the house was undertaken around 1875, following a period of disuse

during and after the Civil War. Only minor structural alterations were made both at this time and during the restoration begun in 1949. Additions, mainly decorative, in 1875 and 1926, have been removed. The house had no authorized occupancy for a period of approximately 18 years preceding its purchase in 1948 by the present owners. The coming of highways and such modern conveniences as telephones and electricity has made possible the transformation of this "charming colonial derelict," as it was described by one author, into a modern dwelling, which, nevertheless, retains its integrity as a substantial pre-revolutionary building.