

FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 1946

The Story Of *Belle Air*, Historic Prince William County Mansion

Editor's note: This story is made timely by the addition of a new chapter this week, when *Belle Air* was purchased by J. Gilbert Berry, of Vienna. This family also maintains an historic tradition. Mr. Berry, his father, Joseph Berry, his grandfather, G. Owens Berry, and his grandfather, Col. George West Garnor, were all surveyors of Fairfax County. Mr. J. Gilbert Berry intends to restore *Belle Air* and use it as his residence.

About 1720 a portion of the Ewell family, which had previously settled in Lancaster County, Virginia, removed to Dumfries, Va., 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 12 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 farm. It is probably older than Mount Vernon or Gunston Hall, or any of the old Virginia manor houses of the colonial period.

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 22 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 sunlight 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 "donjon-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 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 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 1,248 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.

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*."

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 the family cemetery. His brother-in-law, Col. 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 descendants 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 Benjamin S. Ewell of William and Mary College, are worthy specimens of this illustrious family.

HISTORIC SITE FILE: Bel Air
PRINCE WILLIAM PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM
RELCIBull Run Fed Lib. Manassas, VA

FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 1946



Herbert Bryant, Inc.

FEED--SEED
and
FERTILIZER

Manassas, Va.

Phone 227

Byrd's Grocery



MEATS
FRESH VEGETABLES

Main St.

Manassas

PHONE

70-F-11

McCORMICK-DEERING Farm Machines and Implements



FARM MACHINERY

International Trucks

SALES and SERVICE

GENUINE PARTS

ALL SERVICES GUARANTEED

Used Cars

CHRYSLER and PLYMOUTH Sales and Service

GOODRICH-SILVERTOWN Tires and Tubes
for Implements, Trucks and Cars

Everybody reads
The Messenger

Pitts Theatr

MANASSAS, VIRGINIA
Two Matinees Saturday Start
at 2 P.M.

Every Night at 8 O'clock
You can come as late as 7:30
see the entire performance

Saturday Night, Two Shows
7:15 and 9:15
Children 12c; Adults 30c, incl.
Balcony for colored, 12c and
Incl. Tax.

Thursday and Friday,
February 28 and March
BARBARA STANWYCK
DENNIS MORGAN

in
CHRISTMAS IN
CONNECTICUT
Also NEWS

Saturday, March 2
JIMMY WAKELY

in
CORNADO