

Bel Air Plantation Echoes Sounds of An Earlier Day

Bel Air Plantation echoes the sounds and mirrors the sights of an earlier day and serves as a vivid reminder of a gear forgotten time.

Today the home closely resembles its appearance in 1740 when it was built by the Dumfries and Ocoquan businessman, Major Charles Ewell. The one and a half storied traditional styled home is constructed of old red brick over a very high stone faced basement. Although the origin of the stone walls is unknown, they are believed to be of a much earlier period than the main home.

Of those who have walked through Bel Air's wide central hall over the years, perhaps the most noted was "Parson" Mason Locke Weems, the first biographer of George Washington. Weems, the originator of the cherry tree anecdote, met and married the daughter of the Bel Air squire, Colonel Jesse Ewell in 1795. The home, which had been built by Major Charles Ewell and had remained constantly in the Ewell family, fell to Weems after the death of his father-in-law, and in 1808 and 1809 Weems moved his family from Dumfries to the plantation.

Weems died in 1825 in Beaufort, S. C., and his remains were later moved to the family cemetery at Bel Air.

The house itself boasts a

pre-Georgian front and the unbalanced window placement, two windows on one side of the door and one on the other, was prevalent in Virginia prior to 1700. The 14 room home which dominates a hilltop about a mile off of State Route 640, commands a sweeping view, and in clear weather the Washington Monument and the Capitol are visible.

The brick chimneys which flank both ends of the house accommodate nine fireplaces. One chimney has a base measurement of nearly 20 feet. It has been written that the old basement kitchen window was quite low but wide enough across to roll "great pine logs" and the fireplace was big enough to accommodate them.

The roof features three unusually small dormers. The house which measures 38 by 51 feet and faces to the southeast has walls which vary in thickness from one to three feet.

The ground floor houses a large dining room, which had evidently been used originally as a primary living room. This was called the "wool room" by the Ewells who used the upper levels for their living quarters, thus converting the ground floor to more menial uses. A keep, a secondary kitchen, laundry room and a wine cellar complete the arrange-

ment of rooms of the ground floor.

The main floor is dominated by a large central hall which provides access to the rooms on that floor and serves as a landing for the stairways to both the ground and top floors.

The large drawing room on the main floor, sometimes called the "state dining room" features a decorative fireplace. In this room a copy of Grant Wood's satirical painting of the cherry tree tale hangs. The fireplace is painted a faded red and matches the original color found under six coats of paint.

An unusual feature of the drawing room is the folding wall which separates it from the large central hall. The wall was often thrown open to accommodate balls, christenings or weddings, which are said to have been gala affairs. There is a record of one Bel Air christening which lasted from Thursday to Saturday.

The small study of the drawing room is known as the Washington Guest Chamber, for it is here that young Colonel Washington and his new bride were overnight guests on their honeymoon journey to Mount Vernon.

The library across the central hall once served as the family sitting room, and the office at the end of the hall was used as the fami-

ly dining room.

The upper floor now houses four bedrooms and two baths. The baths occupy the space of an original fifth bedroom. The small bedroom above the stairs is said to have been used by Parson Weems as a study. It is whispered that he chose this, the remotest room, as his own to secure a sanctuary from his mother-in-law.

The home was built on a 175 acre tract of land, which Major Ewell purchased from John Gregg. Major Ewell was also a man of some note, and was prominent in both religious and secular circles. It is said he may have shocked the community somewhat, however, when he married Sarah Ball, the daughter of his step-father, Major James Ball.

It was of this union that Jesse Ewell was born. He succeeded his father at Bel Air and eventually became Parson Weems' father-in-law. Jesse was quite a trooper in his

own right. During the battle of Yorktown Jesse rallied together his men and led them to victory. They were ever, a how- ever, a of the victory. d his troop b. where he feasted. with a sumptuous meal on the front lawn!

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. Additions which were made to the structure in 1875 and 1926, which were mainly decorative, have been removed.

The house had no authorized occupants for a period of 18 years, during which time it was described as being "empty and moss grown" in 1931. In 1948 the home was purchased by its present owners, Mr. and Mrs. William E. S. Flory. They set about restoring this "charming colonial derelict" as it has

been described by one author.

Bel Air stood in a state of decay and shatter windows gazed hollowly out at once beautiful grounds which had overgrown with nature's natural camouflage.

The ground floor stone walls, originally mortared with Virginia red clay, were crumbling and threatening to collapse.

As the grounds were cleared of underbrush and a beautiful blue grass lawn reappeared, pieces of missing woodwork, including the drawing room mantel, emerged from the brush where they had been tossed by mindless vandals during the 18 year dormancy.

Although none of the present furnishings are of the original home, the owners have skillfully arranged antiques and have utilized an authentic colonial color scheme on woodwork and walls to create the proper atmosphere of the period of Bel Air's prime.

VIRGINIANA FILE
Historic Sites
(Bel Air)

Prince William Public Library
Manassas, Va.
(Weems-Botts Museum
Collection)



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BEL AIR PLANTATION—This old Prince William County home was once the home of "Parson" Mason Locke Weems, the first biographer of George Washington and originator of the cherry tree anecdote and other Washington stories. It is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. William E. S. Flory.

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