

**Just musing** with Marilyn Muse

# Bel Air is still a working plantation

History buffs and lovers of old houses will have a field day later this month when they will be able to tour Bel Air, one of the oldest homes in Virginia, which will be one of six homes to be open April 29 from 12 to 5 p.m. by the Trowel Garden Club.

Bel Air, a pre-Revolutionary home built in 1740 by Col. Charles Ewell, was once the home of the illustrious Mason L. Weems (Parson Weems) who wrote the famous stories and anecdotes about George Washington. The upstairs room, where he is said to have written the stories, is being used by the present owners, Dr. and Mrs. William E. S. Flory, as a study.

Downstairs is the Washington Guest Chamber, where George and Martha Washington spent a night there on their honeymoon on the way to Mount Vernon from Williamsburg.

A graveyard on the plantation is where many of the Ewells and Parson Weems himself are buried in the family cemetery. The tombstones have long since been removed, presumably by a real estate agent who was sure nobody would buy the house if they knew it had a graveyard.

The fact that the home had one didn't discourage the Florys who "discovered" Bel Air 24 years ago this month in a state of great disrepair and faithfully restored it to its present state over the years. The house had been unlivable for 18 years.

Only one room of the huge house was habitable, so the Florys camped in the other 13 rooms while it was being restored.

"Four days out the week we thought it was a good idea and the other three days we wondered why we ever got into it," said Mrs. Flory, about the

restoration.

The parlor, painted the original buttermilk, found under six coats of paint, has original woodwork and an original carved mantel. The color used in the room is believed to be a home product made from red clay found on the property and milk. In recent years the mantel had to be repaired, the result of sagging from 250 years of accumulated dust.

The Florys call the room, The Red Room, and it is filled with many family pieces as well as pieces collected by the couple and given to them by persons interested in the historic mansion.

One of the oldest pieces in the room is a walnut Tabernacle Cabinet (1720) with oyster grain veneer. A long Spanish table sits behind the sofa. An 18th century antique Chinese piece was found in Singapore

by Dr. Flory.

The parlor features a folding wall which can be opened to join the drawing room to the huge central hall for parties and family gatherings. In the Ewell and Weems time of occupancy, a christening party was said to have lasted four days.

Off the parlor is the Washington Guest Chambers, where an interesting piece is a 16th century Spanish Spice Chest with ivory inlays and tortoise-shell trim. Many of the 90 editions of the Life of Washington, are owned by the Florys and are in this room.

The main floor of the house, which is built like many Virginia homes of the period, has a central hall pattern with the parlor on one side and the library on the other side.

The library features a handsome 1690 William and Mary piece and a Jacobean foot stool dating back to the

early 1600's.

The upper floor originally had five bedrooms but one has been made into a closet and bath by the Florys.

The beauty of the home is that the upper part of the house is just like it was in 1740. The house has been named a landmark by the Virginia Register of Historic Sites and has been nominated for the National Register of Historic Sites.

It is believed that the site of Bel Air was once a fortress and rest station on the way westward from the river and that the house was built atop the fortress.

The lower floor of the house is the English basement with huge fireplace and chimney with uncut fieldstone walls, the stone of which was believed found in the fields nearby. It is

here that the Florys have their dining room, kitchen, pantry and family room. The room, once known as the dungeon, is used as a storage room now. The floors of the basement are brick, reproduced from the original design.

The house, with its pre-Georgian front and unbalanced window placement, is still a working farm. The Florys raise Black Angus and their own hay.

The walls vary in thickness from one to three feet wide and the chimney is 20 feet wide with five flues.

Bricks for the mansion were made on the plantation from the red clay and are original only having been patched over the years.

For the day of the tour, the house will have flower

arrangements made by garden club members. Those desiring tickets for the tour may call Denise Andres at 221-7936 or Mindi Swett at 221-4761. Tickets may also be purchased at the Lazy Susan Inn or at the individual homes during the day of the tour.



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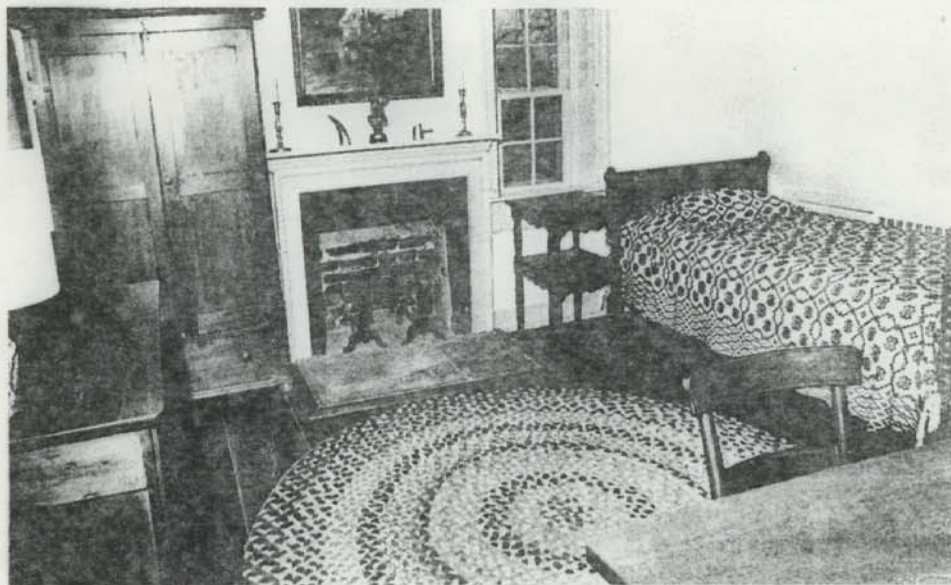
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Parson Weems's bedroom is now used as a study by present owners

no date on clipping - early 1970's. (24 years after Floups bought it)



Living room of Floups's house in the 1970's