

VIRGINIANA FILE OCT 28 1990
PWC - HISTORIC BUILDINGS
(Bel Air)



Guests have refused to stay in Bel Air's guest room, where covers have been plucked off at night

Spirits?

A bride wanders,
footsteps heard



Bel Air Plantation

Ghostly affairs in PW County

By ANN HOLIDAY

The little dog stopped in front of the fireplace in what had been the formal dining room of the then-crumbling and vine-covered Rockledge.

The hair on her back bristled, and she barked furiously at the dark, empty space.

"What's the matter, Dusty?" asked the man. He picked her up and placed her in front of the fireplace. The dog backed away, still barking.

There were other places in the 1758 stone house where the little dog would not go, according to the man, who did not want to tell his name.

WAS THERE some kind of animal there? Or were there ghosts, spirits from the house's long past?

"Maybe when we get moved in we'll hear all kinds of ghosts," laughed Mrs. Donald Sonner, upon hearing of the little dog's strange reaction. "Right now I don't know of any stories about ghosts in Rockledge."

The Sonners bought the old house at Christmas time,

cleared away the brush, and are restoring the house to live in. As far as they know, no ghosts or tales of ghosts conveyed with the deed.

However, other old houses in Prince William are said to be inhabited by the spirits of their former occupants.

"WHEN WE moved here people thought we were out of our minds to move into a house that was haunted and a snake den," Mrs. William E.S. Flory said about Bel Air, the 1740 brick house she and her husband have lovingly restored and lived in for almost a quarter century.

Mrs. Flory said she could confirm the snakes, but has never seen the ghosts. Friends and relatives, however, have reported eerie experiences during visits to the plantation. One couple now refuses to sleep in the guest room because someone—or something—has plucked the covers off at night.

Others have described a kindly presence which they have felt when they were sitting by themselves in the

drawing room. One even described the presence as female, wearing a long dress, sitting quietly in the room.

Still unexplained is an occurrence one night when the Florys' daughter and her future husband were in what once was the grand dining room. She was on the sofa, he was sitting on the hearth in front of the fire when suddenly he became "white as a sheet and speechless for two minutes."

He said he had seen a presence in the door, which he described as a masculine figure resembling that of her brother, who was in Manassas.

IT WAS also in the Great Dining Room during the time after the Ewells and the Weemses, 18th century occupants, left the house that, late at night, a table was said to have been set with glass and silver, and candles lit as if for a feast.

This might happen whether anyone was living there or not, and its appearance came to be connected with a death in the old family, according to Alice Maude Ewell, writing in 1931 in "A Virginia Scene or Life in Old Prince William."

There were believed to be 11 ghosts in the house, and there were 11 graves in the graveyard on the plantation grounds. In 1926 a real estate agent, attempting to sell the plantation, removed the 11 headstones from the cemetery.

In about 1950, after the Florys had taken over the house, they were visited by a Dr. Chamberlain, an old man in his late 80's or early 90's, who had grown up in the house near the entrance to the Bel Air Plantation grounds.

He asked the Florys if they had seen any ghosts, then told them of wandering through the grounds as a little boy,

having heard the stories of the resident spirits.

LOOKING UP at the three dormers, Dr. Chamberlain recounted, he saw 11 white faces peering down from the windows. He ran home, leapt into bed, covered himself with the counterpane, and lay there for what he remembered as five hours, until he could figure out what he had seen in the house.

The story of the ghostly faces spread, but he was not sure the explanation had followed.

"Would you like to know what he finally realized he had seen?" Mrs. Flory asked.

"Sheep!" Dr. Chamberlain had seen the white sheep roaming at will through the crumbling old house, and finally deduced that they had made their way to the top floor and were looking peacefully out.

Not all supposed ghosts are as benign as Bel Air's.

"A ghost? We have thousands!" chuckled Adm. Richard Blackburn Black of Rippon Lodge. "I don't believe in them at all, do you?"

Black said he had heard stories of ghosts. A chapter of Marguerite Du Pont Lee's book, "Virginia Ghosts," is dedicated to Rippon Lodge, where two men are said to have died in the living room following duels.

MRS. LEE tells of two travelers from Alexandria who stayed in the abandoned lodge seeking shelter one night. Loud noises, shrieks and peals of laughter kept them awake. They struck a light, searched the house and found it deserted, but left at once. The next day they were told the house was Rippon Lodge and it was haunted.

Even the public road changed its course to avoid the neighborhood, according

to a 1911 article in the Manassas Messenger.

In 1952, during the first few nights after the Blacks bought the lodge, "we had the eerie feeling we were in a scene of many lives and happenings," Black admitted, "but I have positively no belief in ghosts."

Another old house with resident ghost stories is the 1822 home of Mrs. Agnes Webster in Brentsville.

"My ghost is apocryphal," Mrs. Webster affirmed. "I've never seen it in 30 years." She did, however, hear the story from some old people who lived in the area when she first came there.

ACCORDING TO the story, a young girl was to be married in the house. The living room was set up for the ceremony but the night before the wedding the young girl died suddenly.

She was buried in her bridal gown with her wedding flowers, and she's now said to walk down the stairs of Mrs. Webster's house.

One house in Dumfries is sometimes remembered as the Haunted House. Cecil Garrison, who grew up in Dumfries, remembers when the Tibbs house was still standing, empty and ramshackle.

"It was all to pieces," he recalls. "There were all kinds of noises in there. We'd play in there at night when I was a boy and run ourselves to death if it made a noise. The kids used to say there were ghosts in there."

Garrison and his chums would take boys through the house when they would come to Dumfries from out of town. When he was in high school, a group of boys took their principal, Dick Hayden, through the house one night.

"I don't think he was scared, but he said he was," Garrison chuckled.

The former Dumfries town councilman said he could not remember any stories of any specific ghostly happenings. It was mostly the kids who carried on that the house was haunted, he said.

PRINCE WILLIAM ghost stories are not all relics of the past. Employees of the Frame House in Occoquan have reported more than their share of eerie happenings, mostly at night or on lonely, stormy days.

Nothing has happened since Christmas, however, according to Buz DeVere, business manager of the shop. He was alone in the office upstairs one night, he said, and heard footsteps in the next room. A search turned up no mortal being.

Nina Johnson, a former employee, told of hearing footsteps downstairs, going down to investigate, and finding no one. Downstairs, she heard the same footsteps, like a woman in high heels, walking behind her. She turned and found she was alone.

A flapping attic trapdoor and a strange light are other unexplained phenomena, as is a voice Mrs. Johnson heard one rainy day crying, "I seek shelter."

Ghosts? Some people think so.



Dining room, scene of funeral feasts

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