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Tales of colonial ghosts, hidden gold

By BETH BACHELDOR
JM Staff Writer

In the middle of a suburban, post-fifties Dale City neighborhood stands Bel Air Plantation — a grand, 250-year-old mansion chock-full of American history, ghost stories, and the loving and careful renovation of a Dale City family.

The mansion is Prince William County's second oldest house and has been the home of such notables as Mason Locke Weems, the first biographer of George Washington.

The two and one-half-story house was built by Maj. Charles Ewell back in 1740. It is believed that the house, now owned by Dr. William Flory, was built on the stone foundation of a 17th century Indian fort.

According to DiAnn Flory, Flory's daughter-in-law, the fort was supposedly built about 1690 by an order from then-Virginia Governor Cornwallis. The fort may have been one of the state's first forts built as protection against the Indians.

The Florys completely renovated the mansion after they purchased it in 1949. According to DiAnn Flory, her mother-in-law, Anne Flory, fell in love with the house, which was in ruins at the time, after only one visit. Within three days, the Florys had bought the house and its 50 acres for \$13,500.



Bel Air Plantation

Neal Snyder — Journal Messenger

Bel Air mansion (above) is rumored to be a stopping place during George Washington's honeymoon. Mason Locke Weems (in painting, below), biographer of George Washington, may have spun his famous cherry tree tale while living at Bel Air.

...stories from Flory to his son William Flory Jr. and DiAnn Flory during the past two Christmases, Flory spoke of a house that couldn't even be photographed because the "weeds and trees entangled the house."

Flory also said the chimneys were falling in, very few stair railings were left and "rain had come in and rotted out the floors, windows and doorways."

In fact, the Florys used to say that one of Flory Jr.'s tales as a child was that he lived in a house with "no roof, no windows, no doors, but snakes."

Nonetheless, the Florys moved in with their two children — one-year-old William Jr. and his newborn sister Randie. For nearly three years the family "camped out in one room without electricity, telephones or any other modern conveniences," according to DiAnn Flory.

The family worked on the house room by room, and six years later, Flory Jr. had his own room in the 14-room mansion.

Bel Air Plantation is rich in history — not only was it the home of Parson Weems, who spun the many George Washington myths, including the stories of the cherry tree and "I cannot tell a lie" and the throwing of the "Spanish Dollar" across the Rappahannock River.

According to DiAnn Flory, Weems and several college friends from William And Mary sup-

posedly stayed at the house on their way to Philadelphia shortly before the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

"It is presumed that most likely these college friends discussed the Declaration of Independence while they stayed at Bel Air," she said.

The house also may have served as a field hospital during the Civil War, although it is not known which troops, either the Confederate or Union troops, used the house.

"There has been evidence found of buttons and buckles from both sides of the war," said DiAnn Flory. "Maybe the house was a special meeting place, maybe it was a hospital, we don't know." She also said there was evidence found of soldiers' quarters in the outer yard.

It is also rumored that \$50,000 worth of gold was hidden during the Civil War in the walls of the mansion — a rumor that brought numerous fortune hunters to the house. According to the rumor, these "hunters" and vandals stayed at the house, chopping away at the walls to find the gold and burning the wooden spindles on the staircase for warmth.

There are also the believe-it-or-not ghost stories at Bel Air. Take for example the woman who was visiting the Florys — when left alone in the library for a short while, she said a book mysteriously fell from the third shelf of the bookcase and landed on her arm.

The book was titled "Ghosts of Virginia."

Other overnight guests reported that when sleeping in the guest room, a male ghost would appear above the bed, while a female ghost sat in a nearby rocking chair.

When the female ghost, wearing a dress from the 1800s, rose from her chair, the male ghost, also dressed in period clothes, would suddenly "pluck the covers off the bed," said DiAnn Flory.

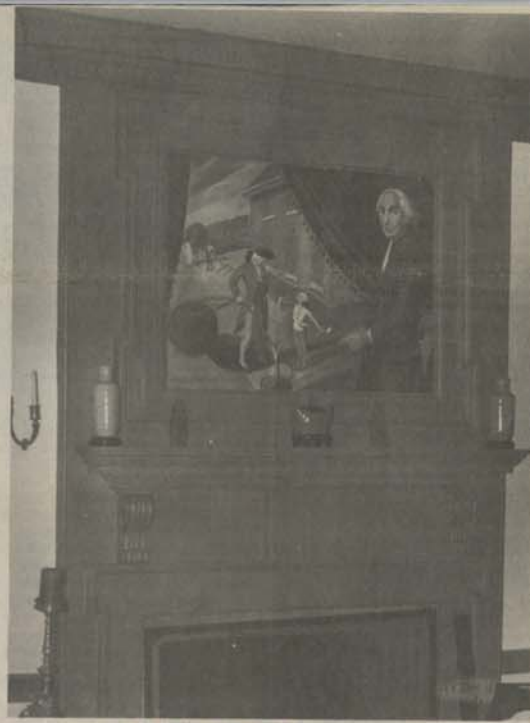
About 10 years ago, William Flory Jr. got a "feeling" that something was going to happen in that very guest room. Instead of sleeping there, he decided to sleep in his childhood room.

Although Flory Jr. said he has never seen a ghost at Bel Air, "During the March winds, the back door used to howl in the middle of the night, and a door leading to the dining room used to bang. To anyone else, that would be unnerving. To us, it was normal."

Today, Bel Air Plantation is faced with another ghost. The proposed Ridgefield Road may be built some 1,200 feet away from the remaining 24 and-a-half acres left of the plantation.

Flory Jr. thinks the road will ruin the integrity and character of the house, which is registered with both the Virginia Historic Landmark Commission and the National Register of Historic Places.

"Not only that, it may well destroy the house," Flory Jr. said.



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