

HISTORY COMES TO LIFE: The Ben Lomond Historic Site

By Michelle Hurrell, Contributing Writer

Nestled between a church and an elementary school just a stone's throw from fast food restaurants and shopping centers stands an anachronism: a brick historical home built by Benjamin Tasker Chinn and Edmonia Carter Chinn in 1832. This home, known as "Ben Lomond," located at 10321 Sudley Manor Road in Manassas, would later become one of the more important historical sites of the nearby first and second Civil War battles of Bull Run in Manassas.

The land on which Ben Lomond was built, which was the Cancer plantation, was originally a part of a Northern Virginia land grant owned by Robert "Councillor" Carter III, who owned numerous plantations named after Zodiac signs in Colonial Virginia. In 1791, Mr. Carter, partially for religious reasons, had a change of heart and began to free his 509 slaves; this was the largest number of slaves emancipated by an individual slave owner in the history of the United States.

When Benjamin Chinn inherited the estate, it was renamed Ben Lomond, after another favorite family estate, built in 1736 in Goochland County. After building the two-story main house with its dairy, smokehouse and tiny slave quarters, the Chinns leased the property out to the Pringle family before the Civil War began. Unfortunately, Carter's descendants did not share his beliefs on slavery, as both the Chinns and the Pringles used slaves to farm crops and care for the Merino sheep they raised for wool. When entering the small stone slave quarters behind the home, they may seem adequate, until you learn that a space that would comfortably house two people was the home to more than four times that.

The whole purpose of the Ben Lomond house changed in 1861 toward the end of the first Battle of Manassas, when the Pringle family, consisting of four men living in the house at the time, was

given an ultimatum by the Confederate army: leave the premises altogether or accept the offer to live together in a small bedroom upstairs, while the rest of the house became a Confederate field hospital for the mortally wounded. The Pringles, Confederate sympathizers, chose to stay. Despite their support of the South, it was likely unsettling and difficult to give up so much of their home. Though the house was a few miles from the battlefield, the Chinns could see the smoke from the cannons from their upstairs' window.

Ben Lomond became known as the Pringle House Hospital. Soon, the house and its land were overflowing with Confederate wounded. Surgeons, many unprepared, worked hard to help the soldiers survive using crude instruments, such as saws for amputation, along with ether and chloroform as a general anesthesia. The conditions were awful due to the heat, the blood and the resulting flies.

The Confederates left the house in 1862 and federal soldiers moved in and looted the home, destroying the majority of the Pringles' belongings, including their furniture. The Pringles had little choice but to tolerate the destruction of their home. Out of disrespect and boredom, the young soldiers covered most of the walls with graffiti.

When the Civil War ended, the Chinns and Pringles tried to rebuild, but the Chinns eventually sold the property. There were many new owners of Ben Lomond, the most notable being John E. Rixey, President Theodore Roosevelt's chief doctor.

In 1995, the Ben Lomond Manor underwent another change. Jim Syring, a local resident, died and left his collection of nearly 200 heritage roses that were cultivated sometime prior to 1867 to the Lake Jackson Garden Club. In addition to the antique roses, he

left a formal garden design. The club gave the rose bushes and the plans to the Prince William County Park Authority to be planted at the Ben Lomond Manor house.

With the gardens of France as inspiration, The Old Rose Garden contains 5,200 square feet of bed space, making it one of the largest public heritage rose gardens in the United States. The roses, which are accompanied by other native plants and some wildflowers, fully bloom in mid-May. The garden is available for outdoor gatherings such as weddings and corporate events. Picnics in the garden are welcomed everyday from dawn to dusk at no cost to the visitor. Volunteer gardeners are needed to help cultivate and maintain the flowers; those interested can contact the site directly.

The Pringle House Hospital at the Ben Lomond Historic Site is one of the few Civil War hospitals in Prince William County that is preserved for the public.

Until recently, the manor house was empty, but this year, in response to the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, the Prince William County Historic Preservation Division is bringing Ben Lomond back to life, just as it was during the Civil War. Having been closed for renovations, the Ben Lomond Historic Site will be open May 21 and 22 from 10 a.m.–4 p.m., with free admission, as an interactive museum that will include reenactors and hands-on activities providing a similar experience to that of Williamsburg, Va. The grand opening event that Saturday will begin with a ribbon cutting ceremony and the words of keynote speaker George C. Wunderlich, executive director of The National Museum of Civil War Medicine, followed by speeches by Prince William County Board Chairman-At-Large Cory Stewart and Gainesville District Supervisor John Stirrup, Jr. This is an ideal time for families to come together to learn about such an important time in Virginia history.

According to Bill Backus, historical interpreter for the Prince William County Historic Preservation, "We are not only transforming how the site would have looked like in 1861, but we are doing it in such a way that encourages people to touch, smell, and taste history. We want to make history come alive to our visitors so that they will hopefully go away with a more meaningful understanding of the past."

Visitors to the Ben Lomond Historic Site will have the opportunity to wear uniforms and hats, churn butter, spin wool, lie on the straw mattresses, and sample hardtack, a simple type of cracker made from flour, water, and sometimes salt. There will also be military demonstrations, music, slave life interpretation, hospital demonstrations and medical displays. Each guest will receive discharge papers similar to those the soldiers would receive. Gardeners will be present to explain more of the history of the Old Rose Garden.

When referring to the renovations, Ben Lomond Historic Site Manager Rob Orrison said, "The restoration and transformation is that we are providing a tangible link to the past. Not just to the Civil War, but to life in the area as it was in 1861." Further emphasizing the present relevance of this time in history, he added, "The fact that the Pringles had their whole lives turned upside down—had their house turned into a hospital—is something that



Photo courtesy Prince William & Manassas Civil War Museum


many in foreign lands can relate to today," Brendan Hanafin, preservation division chief, and Heather Hembrey, collection assistant, are responsible, along with Orrison and Backus, for the transformation.

In addition to the Grand Opening Ceremony, there are several upcoming events at the Ben Lomond Historic Site. Beginning June 12, there will be "Slavery on Sunday" Tours from 11 a.m.–4 p.m. (\$7 person and free for children under six), where staff will provide tours and share details of the typical activities of a Sunday for the enslaved community at Ben Lomond. This will provide a unique opportunity to look through the eyes of the slaves who kept the plantation running.

And, July 21–24, from 11 a.m.–4 p.m., for the same cost of admission, the Pringle House Hospital 150th Anniversary Event will take place. During the event, individuals and families can enjoy a day similar to that of the Grand Opening Ceremony, with costumed interpreters demonstrating military and civilian life during the Civil War.

An excellent educational opportunity—the Basic Civil War Summer Camp—will be held at Ben Lomond Historic Site June 27–July 1 for children ages 8–13 (\$120 per child; reservations required). There will be activities daily designed to develop a better understanding of the lives of the Civil War soldiers. Activities include, "Enlist in Virginia's Army," "Life in Camp," "Infantry Drill," "Did Civil War Soldiers Really Eat that Stuff?" "Civil War Medicine," and a field trip to Manassas National Battlefield Park.

In addition to these special events, the site will be open Thursdays through Mondays from 11 a.m.–4 p.m. until the end of October (tours on those days will be \$5 per person; children under six are free).

For more information about the upcoming events and volunteering, contact the Ben Lomond Historic Site at (703) 367-7872. 

Freelance writer Michelle Hurrell has worked in the education and computer fields, and is now recovery support specialist for PRS, Inc., where she teaches classes at their Recovery Academy.