

"Bloom's" and "Bloom's Grove": A Tale of Two Farms

By E. R. Conner III

Until very recently, a stone farmhouse dating at least to 1855, that stands just outside the city limits of Manassas Park, Virginia, was in imminent danger of demolition. The City of Manassas Park, which owns the house and the surrounding property, had ruled the building a safety hazard, as it is in close proximity to both Didlake School and Osbourn Park Senior High School. Vacant and standing on unfenced property, the farmhouse attracts vandals who have contributed in large part to its present state of dilapidation.

Known since the turn of the century as the "Bloom's" farmhouse, the native sandstone building is presently being saved only through the efforts of the Manassas Park Woman's Club, a body of about thirty-two members, and a handful of other interested citizens. The Manassas Park City Council recently gave this organization \$500 for the purchase of fencing for the perimeter of the yard. This has been installed, and the building is now safe from vandals though not from the elements. The future of the house depends solely upon the success of the Woman's Club and others in obtaining funds for restoration.

"Bloom's" Farm

A cornerstone that has since been removed to a private collection bore the date 1855, and it is felt that this date applied to the newer section of the stone structure. The older stone part, distinguished by a high-peaked gable roof, appears to have been constructed decades before this time. Neither the builder nor the original function of the dwelling is known. Apparently the stone was taken from a quarry within sight of the house which was worked commercially until the present century. The old and the new stone parts presently contain two downstairs rooms separated by a hall, and four upstairs rooms. A rear addition of frame siding, containing a kitchen, enclosed porch, and extra bedroom, was erected after 1900. As this obscured the lines of the stone structure, and was in very bad condition, it has been removed.

Hand hewn beams and cedar shingles are visible from the attic. Deep window

openings are framed with pine, and crowned with sandstone lintels. Over the years a crack running from foundation to roof where the stone sections meet has widened, although it has not yet caused serious structural damage to the exterior wall. The stone end chimney that originally served two fireplaces has been repaired with brick in recent years.

As early as the Civil War, the farmhouse stood on the western extremity of Lewis Butler's "Birmingham" tract. The main house on this property was at "Birmingham" farm and, curiously, was a frame structure that is now incorporated into the residence of J. C. Kincheloe on Route 28 about a mile northeast of Manassas. This substantial stone house that appears to have been the residence of either an overseer or tenant during the War (marked "Puckett" on an 1862 military map) was, from all indications, complete by that time. From the spring of 1861 to that of the following year, Confederate camps abounded in the area northeast from Manassas Junction to Bull Run, and artifacts from both Union and Confederate forces have been unearthed on the "Bloom's" and the adjoining "Bloom's Grove" properties in the years intervening since the War.

If the stone farmhouse played any direct part in the War, it was probably through occupancy by officers of less than general rank, although no records have yet been found to substantiate this theory. General Beauregard in 1861 and General McDowell in 1862 took up headquarters at the more imposing "Liberia" mansion of William J. Weir, about half a mile west of the farmhouse. But the house later to be known as "Bloom's" had at least a commanding view of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, which had been built up the three-mile grade from Union Mills to Manassas Junction in the fall of 1851. On June 19, 1862, a special train bearing President Lincoln to a conference with General McDowell, passed up this grade to the junction, and it is thus not too much to conceive that Lincoln himself may have noticed the stone house standing beneath the brow of the hill.

Like many plantations in Prince William County, "Birmingham" was broken up into smaller tracts in the Reconstruction years. In Deed Book 27, page 283, is a back reference to the sale of 88 acres to Jonas Greene by Lewis B. Butler and his wife Susan, and the stone house appears to have been in Greene family ownership



from 1869 until 1882. On October 10 of the latter year, Abraham and Isaac Rickard, of Shenandoah County, bought the property which by then included one hundred and eight acres (Deed Book 34, page 198), and in 1891 it was conveyed to Alvin H. Rouse, a Pennsylvanian (Deed Book 40, p. 330).

Twenty-eight acres east of the railroad were docked from the land before 1900, when the farm was bought by E. R. Conner, the writer's grandfather. A number of small bordering tracts were added to the property during the Conner ownership, and in 1905 the Southern Railway established a milk stop here after Mr. Conner erected a loading platform at the crossing of the old Brentsville and Centreville Road just downhill from the farmhouse. Until 1938, when the local passenger trains that served this stop were eliminated, the crossing was known as "Bloom's." Shipped to Washington, the milk from this farm was sold to A. B. Waters on Pennsylvania Avenue, Corbin Thompson on 4½ Street, S.W., John Gregg on O Street, N.W., and George Oyster on Connecticut Avenue, N.W. (the latter being a predecessor of Chestnut Farms Dairy).

After 1971 the largest part of this land was sold to the Prince William County School Board, with the house and yard being bought by the Town (now City) of Manassas Park. The silo of the dairy barn, which was burned by vandals, remains. It presents a strange aspect standing as it does on the median strip of an asphalt parking lot built to serve Didlake School.

"Bloom's Grove"

Save for a modern cattle barn, the physical plant of "Bloom's Grove," the next farm north along the railroad, has been destroyed. The Manassas Park

Volunteer Fire Department used the last of the old farm buildings, a frame barn, for a training exercise in the summer of 1976, and the barn was burned completely. Title to this property is also held by the City of Manassas Park, and its three-quarter mile railroad frontage places the land in position for industrial zoning.

Before 1843 the farm was owned by John Hooe, Jr., whose house most likely stood near the extreme north end of the property, about a mile from Union Mills by railroad. During the War, "Bloom's Grove" was owned by Hector Kincheloe, and later by the Smith family. In 1914 the "Smith Tract," as the farm was then known, was sold to the Conner family.

This farm was referred to in an 1882 deed (Deed Book 34, p. 198) as "Bloom-ingrove." After 1914 the name seems to have fallen into disuse, with the shortened form "Bloom's" being appropriated for the adjoining land that originally belonged to the "Birmingham" tract. The similarity of names has been no aid to title research.

The operations of the "Bloom's Grove Company," onetime owners of the stone quarry, remain vague. In 1876, when Christina Greene conveyed to Louisa Greene the tract on which the stone house stands, she transferred all rights to the property "except the right to quarry stone for sale by the Blooms Grove Company" (Deed Book 31, p. 240). The site of the quarry was along an unnamed stream that drained into Russia or Rushy Branch, a tributary of Bull Run, and served as the boundary between "Bloom's Grove" and the later "Bloom's" farm. Tradition has it that much of the sandstone extracted here, and from another quarry on the opposite side of the railroad, was shipped by train to Alexandria to be used for construction purposes.

According to the Brown map of Prince William County (1901), the quarry was operative in the present century. Marks left by hand drills were visible in the remaining stone at the quarry long after business had ceased. A similar grade of stone was quarried about a mile southwest, at Quarry Road and the Southern Railway in Manassas, and a number of commercial structures, and at least one church (Manassas Presbyterian, 1875) were erected from stone taken from the latter site during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

"Bloom's Grove" appears to have contained the same acreage during its operation as a farm. The earliest known deed reference, that of August 16, 1843, when



Bloom's farmhouse as it appeared in mid-1976. The porch is long gone and a frame kitchen wing on the back was recently demolished. (Photo by the author)

it was purchased by Hector Kincheloe (back reference from Deed Book 65, p. 68), terms it a 275-acre tract. Apparently there was some question as to the legality of this transaction, as the farm was later "conveyed by Virginia Mason, the only child and heir-in-law of John Hooe, Jr. to the said Kincheloe by deed bearing date the 14th day of January, 1853." True to its name, much of "Bloom's Grove" was heavily forested as late as 1914 when Mr. Conner cleared several acres of timber in order to put in crops. "Bloom's Grove" seems to have always been a general farm for the production of hay, grain, and livestock.

SOURCES

Prince William County Deed Books, Clerk's Office, Manassas, Va.

J. M. Hanson, *Bull Run Remembers*, Manassas, Va., National Capital Publishers, 1953. "President Lincoln's Special Train to Liberia," p. 35.

"Report of Maj. John B. Walton, Washington artillery, of operations July 18 [1861]," in *The War of the Rebellion, a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington Government Printing Office, 1880, Series 1, Volume II, pp. 465-467.

Survey of Bloom's Grove made by Thomas N. Carter, Jan. 1, 1853, platted by A. T. Holtzman, March 17, 1919, author's collection.

Surveys for Military Defenses, Sheet 1, Map of Northeastern Virginia and Vicinity of Washington, Jan. 1, 1862, in National Archives Record Group No. 94.

Map of Prince William County, by William H. Brown, 1901.

"Visit to Bloom's Dairy Farm of E. R. Conner, Manassas, Virginia," in *Dairy Farms through the Years series, Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers News*, Vol. III, no. xii (Dec. 1958), pp. 6-9.

Mr. Conner, who is a native of Catharpin in Prince William County, has also recently published a 37 pp. booklet entitled "Water Milling on Catharpin Run, Prince William County, Virginia." In it he

New Watergate to Stand On Site of Alexandria Canal Locks

In January 1973 an extensive article appeared in *Echoes of History* detailing the history of the Alexandria branch of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Since that time members of the P.A.S., the Northern Virginia Conservation Council, and others have been working to have the tide lock and the area immediately surrounding it made into a small park. A related article also appeared in *Echoes of History*, September 1974.

As presently planned, there will be a designation ceremony early in the spring of 1977. This ceremony will include the placing of a marker where the canal went under the railroad, and the presentation of a painting by Mrs. Ellen Pickering, a member of the Alexandria City Council, (commissioned by Wm. E. Trout III, of California and an active member of the American Canal Society). Where the painting will be displayed is yet to be determined. Information regarding this and other developments may be obtained from Herman Becker, 2915 Harrison Road, Falls Church, Va. 22042, telephone 573-6569.

For some time Watergate of Alexandria has been planning the construction of a condominium/town house complex on waterfront land it owned. A swap of this land for the land between North Fairfax and North Pitt Streets and between Montgomery and 2nd Streets, has been engineered and the Alexandria City Council on November 24, 1976, approved plans for a 148 unit condominium/town house development to be built there. This is on the site of the old Ficklin School (recently demolished), and straddles the central two of the four locks and basins which carried barges either into the river or up from it. Following disuse of the canal it became a city dump, and was later systematically filled and leveled. Now, according to an official report by Stearns, Conrad and Schmidt Consulting Engineers, Inc., of Reston, the land has been found to contain combustible methane gas formed from the decomposition of

tells the history of seven mills extending from Sudley and up the Catharpin for a distance of approximately six miles. Maps and drawings. Copies available from the author.