

Belle Aire

"VA"

REFERENCE

BULL RUN REG LIB

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HISTORIC SITE FILE:
PRINCE WILLIAM PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM
RELIC/Bull Run Reg Lib Manassas, VA

GRAYSON, WILLIAM TOMB

BELLE AIRE PLANTATION

not same as Bel Air (Ewells)

Submitted by Terry Lawson

An alert to those with interest in the Grayson family of Old Prince William County, Virginia.

"Belle Aire" is the plantation of Benjamin Grayson, ca1684-ca1757, and it is here that many of the early Graysons were buried, including Benjamin's sons, William and Spence Monroe. The Graysons played a significant role in their section of Colonial Virginia, and an even more important role in the American Revolution and the formation of our government.

The original "Belle Aire" is said to have been of 1000 acres. Today, five acres remain undeveloped. This five acres occupies a prominent hill-top overlooking the Potomac in the distance and, on a clear day, the Maryland shore. On this lovely site is the Grayson burial vault and a home built on the foundations of the original. The original was destroyed in the Battle of Manassas, or Battle of Bull Run if you prefer.

The present owner and long-time resident now offers the property for sale. Its "highest and best use" with present zoning is as a subdivision of 10-13 lots. With rezoning, who knows. The historic remains of Belle Aire are about to be lost forever. . unless WE intervene.

The little group of Grayson descendants here in Georgia is hurriedly forming a non-profit Virginia corporation to facilitate an effort to acquire Belle Aire on behalf of all Grayson descendants. Our purpose is to join with other Grayson descendants to protect and preserve this piece of American and Grayson heritage. Alone we can do little, but together we just might have the energy and resources to save Belle Aire, and to create something of immense value for ourselves, for our descendants, and for the community at large.

And what of the property after we acquire it? The possibilities are many, and your ideas are needed. Early thinking includes one or more of these: A Grayson museum/library, a center for a national Grayson family association, a retreat or long term residence for those engaged in research or study in the fields of colonial history, genealogy, political science, art and art history, preservation-restoration, archeology, etc. Feeling is that the property should provide a supportive public service. Please share your thoughts.

What can you do today? First, we need to contact all who may be interested. Please send to me names and addresses of those you think interested. Second, please share with me your ideas and feelings about this project and how we can make it work, and what you think the future of Belle Aire should be. We are anxious to hear from you.

Best wishes to all,

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Graysons' "Belle Air" Prince William County, Virginia

The hill rises above the surrounding terrain, a quiet verdant island in the heart of densely developed Marumsco Hills near Woodbridge. There are almost five acres, isolated from the surrounding neighborhoods by a thick perimeter of trees. From the level hilltop, one can see the Potomac to the south, and, on a clear day, the Maryland shore. It is a place where congregations gather for Easter sunrise services.

At the top of this prominent hill near the center of his 1000 acre plantation, Benjamin Grayson established his home, "Belle Air." Benjamin's children were raised here and some buried here along with others of the family. From this place, the Graysons made their contributions as frontier planters and merchants, as leaders in Colonial political thinking, as officers in the revolution, as a framer of our Constitution and as a first United States Senator from Virginia.

Today, a handsome old home, built on the foundations of the original, occupies the hilltop. The original structure was destroyed in the War Between the States. Nearby on the hillside, is the Grayson burial vault built " . . . in the style of the old

vault at Mt. Vernon." Bronze plaques have been affixed by the DAR.

The present owner and resident for many years has been a wonderful steward of the site. Now the time has come for her to leave, and the property is offered for sale. The most likely use is development into building lots, according to the real estate sales agent. This rare piece of American heritage would then be lost for all time.

A small group of Grayson descendants in Georgia, along with a growing number of friends in Virginia and Prince William and across the country, have begun a movement to save "Belle Air." Beyond the immediate task of preventing destruction of the site, the vision is to create a public cultural resource for the study and the interpretation of the key roles played by early citizens of Old Prince William in the history of colonial Virginia, revolutionary America and early American government. Inclusion of the visual arts, literature and trades of the period is an option.

Benjamin Grayson, born about 1684, may have arrived in Prince William as early as 1715. In his eulogy, the Reverend Mr. Scott said of Benjamin, "He had come into the county from the lower parts of Virginia, his broad ax on his shoulder, that his industry and good management, his being executor to some good estates and his marrying a rich widow, had enabled him to acquire a large estate." Benjamin established himself as a successful merchant. He acquired a large bakery at Occoquan from which "biscuits" were distributed throughout the frontier, and he accumulated large land holdings. He served as a colonel of local militia. Benjamin did marry a "rich" widow, in fact, two of them. First, Susanna Monroe, the widow of William Linton and of Charles Tyler. Susanna would be the aunt of James Monroe, fifth President of the United States. After Susanna's death in 1752, Benjamin married the Widow Ewell. There were four children, all by Susanna Monroe; Benjamin, Spence, William and Susanna. Benjamin Grayson died in 1757 and was buried at "Belle Air."

In addition to the Monroes, Benjamin Grayson was closely associated with the Lee, Fairfax, Carter, Mason and Washington families of the neighborhood. These business, social and political connections were an important legacy to his children who continued these family associations throughout the tumultuous years of their lives and the birth of the new nation.

Benjamin Grayson, the second, continued his father's business at Colchester. An able merchant, he prospered and expanded into new ventures. He added additional lots in Colchester to those inherited from his father. He acquired, Belmont, the thousand acre Mason Neck plantation. Young Benjamin involved himself in development of a flour mill, bakery and store on the Occoquan, the construction of a new tobacco warehouse in Colchester and even a commercial winery. He became a justice of the Fairfax Court in 1763. Debt accumulated as a result of these ventures, and in 1765 and 1766 his creditors were foreclosing or forcing the sale of his holdings. Benjamin and his wife Elizabeth left for Loudoun County to begin anew. He died in 1768, leaving Elizabeth in a comfortable condition. She, in turn, left a son and a daughter with what has been described as a "handsome estate."

Spence Monroe Grayson, born 1734, inherited his father's "Belle Air." Educated in England, Spence returned to Prince William and applied himself to the affairs of "Belle Air." He was quite successful at "Belle Air." Then at mid-life, he went again to England to study theology, returning home in 1771 as the Reverend Spence Grayson. He served as rector of Cameron Parish and then of Dettingen Parish in Prince William. Spence was active in events foreshadowing the Revolution, and he served in that war with the rank of Captain as Chaplain of Grayson's Additional Regiment, a unit named for his brother William. He was "... a fighting as well as a praying parson", according to his son-in-law Lund Washington. A life-long friend of George Washington, Reverend Grayson was asked by the General to officiate at the marriage of Washington's nephew George Augustine Washington at Mount Vernon. Spence married Mary Elizabeth Wagener and they had seventeen children, three of which died in infancy. Spence Grayson died in 1798 and was buried at "Belle Air."

William Grayson, born 1736, was educated at the College of Philadelphia and in England at Oxford where he graduated. He then studied law at the Temple in London. Returning to Prince William, he settled at Dumfries and had established a successful law practice before he was thirty. He was a leader in the rebellious events of the day; a signer of the Leedstown Resolution, elected to the committee of correspondence, and later chosen Captain of Prince William's and Virginia's first company of minutemen. He was among those who served on the Committee of Safety for Prince William. When fighting began, he was appointed assistant secretary to George Washington. Two months later he was the General's aide-de-camp. William was with Washington at Valley Forge, had attained the rank of colonel, and fought in the battles of Long Island, White Plains, Brandywine and Germantown. Colonel Grayson distinguished himself at Monmouth in command of his regiments and attached brigades. He was elected to the Continental Congress in 1784 after the successful conclusion of the war. He was president of that Congress in 1788. He served with distinction, and is credited with the successful passage of the Northwest Ordinance, setting the course for the new nation's westward expansion. He was sent the same year to the Virginia Convention called to consider the new Constitution of the United States which he had helped to create. Grayson stood with Patrick Henry in opposing a strong central government with its threats to the freedom of individuals, and he was concerned that domination of such a government by the northern states majority would lead to domination of the southern states and to

future conflict. Through their opposition, these "anti-federalists" were able to negotiate the amendments, that we know as the "Bill of Rights", protecting the rights of individuals from an overly powerful government. William Grayson was one of the first two United States Senators elected from Virginia. The other was Henry Richard Lee. The concerns of Grayson, Henry and their associates are now considered prophetic in light of subsequent events that culminated in the great tragedy of the War Between the States. William married Eleanor Smallwood. There were four sons and a daughter. William Grayson died in 1790 and was buried at "Belle Air."

Susanna Monroe Grayson, born about 1745, was the only daughter of Benjamin and Susanna Monroe Grayson. She is described as "... a great beauty and an heiress." Susanna married John Orr, the Scottish Merchant. They made their home at Leedstown on the Rappahannock.

The Grayson Family of Georgia

John Robinson Grayson was born 1779 at his father's plantation, "Belle Air", in Prince William County, Virginia, He was the son of Reverend Spence Monroe Grayson and Mary Elizabeth Wagener. John was one of seventeen children that included his twin brother Thomas Robinson Grayson.

Great Britain, ever resentful of the colonies' rebellion, continued to devise provocations. Among these was a self-proclaimed "right" to detain American vessels on the high seas for the purpose of boarding and searching for British citizens. The Royal Navy was not above removing Americans from these ships as there was always need for hands aboard their own.

It was in this manner that the boy John Robinson Grayson was "impressed" by the Royal Navy from the Brig Polly belonging to his brother-in-law Lund Washington and sailing out of the Occoquan. John's twin brother Thomas was later impressed from the same vessel. John was held for several years by the British before his release was negotiated by the American government. John was twenty-one when released in 1800. The fate of Thomas is unknown. He was not heard from again.

It appears that John took full advantage of his time with the Royal Navy and became a competent seaman. He was a Sailing Master with the rank of captain when the U.S. Navy ordered him to Georgia in the War of 1812. Captain Grayson commanded a squadron of gunboats stationed at St. Mary's to patrol the Georgia coast. He resigned his commission when hostilities ended.

John elected to remain in Georgia, settled in Savannah, and took command of the Liverpool Packet sailing from Savannah and Charleston to Liverpool England. A son, John Langdon, was born in Liverpool, the result of a pregnant Mrs. Grayson making the crossing with John. When John's health began to fail, he took a position with the U.S. Customs House in Savannah.

It was written of John, "He possessed rare cultivation and refinement, brave as a lion, gentle as a woman, a skillful and intrepid seaman, a polished gentleman and a gallant officer."

John Robinson Grayson married Frances Ann Harvey of Charleston in 1816. There were three children; John Langdon, Albert G. and Frances Lucretia. John died in 1822 at age forty-two. He was buried at old Colonial Cemetery in Savannah, but the family plot was moved in 1853 to the new Laural Grove Cemetery. The ravages of time, weather and Union soldiers have taken their toll of his impressive monument, and the grave is unmarked for now.

The descendants of John Robinson Grayson will be found today along the southern coast at Charleston in South Carolina; Savannah, Brunswick and Woodbine in Georgia and in Jacksonville, Florida.

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