

County reopens historic restored lodge in time for free Harvest Festival

By HEIDI M. BAUMSTARK
Observer staff

It's about time. Actually, this is a story about time and how with the passage of months, years and centuries, Prince William County has been shaped into what it is today.

Today, the circa 1747 Rippon Lodge has re-opened its doors to an interior complete with period furnishings to transport visitors back to its 18th century beginnings.

On Oct. 20, Rippon Lodge Historic Site in Woodbridge will host its fifth annual free Harvest Festival. On this special Harvest Festival, visitors will get a chance to view the restored interior of the house as well as experience hands-on activities and a host of other events.

In April 2000, Prince William County acquired this historic treasure with plans to use it for the public. During past harvest festivals, only the grounds were used; "backdoor" tours of the house were allowed while the building was undergoing renovations. Now, the county is proud to unveil one of its oldest, rarest houses to the public with its first floor restored and decorated with period furnishings and exhibits.

Rippon Lodge is a white, one-and-a-half-story colonial house built circa 1747 by Richard Blackburn (1705-1757), who came to the area



Built circa 1747, Rippon Lodge in Woodbridge was built by Richard Blackburn, who was born in 1705 in Rippon, Yorkshire, England. Blackburn's son, Thomas, was one of Prince William County's sons who fought in the Revolutionary War and was an acquaintance Gen. George Washington.

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from Rippon (now spelled Ripon) in Yorkshire, England.

Barbara Rahll, site manager of Rippon Lodge Historic Site, said "The circa 1747 date was determined by dendro-chronological analysis. Samples of wood were tested from the earliest construction, concluding that 1747 was the year of last growth for the structural wood..." She said the wood was most likely shaped while it was still green, hence the date. Several his-

torical sources document the construction date as 1725, but this new evidence indicates otherwise.

Blackburn acquired the property, which contained 2,000 acres, from Lord Fairfax, according to a Work Projects Administration report. Blackburn worked as a carpenter at Mount Vernon, according to historical records.

According to R. Jackson Ratcliffe's book, "This Was Prince William," Gen. George Washington

stayed at Rippon Lodge. Washington was a friend of Richard Blackburn's son, Thomas. Thomas served as a colonel in the revolutionary war.

Thomas Blackburn also served as a representative of Prince William County in the second, third and fourth Virginia Conventions; he was elected by the Virginia House of Delegates as Lieutenant-Colonel of the Second Virginia Regiment on Dec. 20, 1776 and resigned in June 1777. According to Blackburn's obituary, he was wounded at the Battle of Germantown in Pennsylvania and he housed a regiment of troops at Rippon Lodge during a winter in the Revolutionary War. He

"clothed and fed them, and in the spring sent them back to the army free of expense," the obituary said.

In years following the Revolutionary War, architect Benjamin Latrobe, who designed many buildings in Washington, visited Rippon Lodge in 1796. He sketched the property and another dwelling on the front lawn. A quote from Latrobe's journal stated, "... The house on the left hand must have [been] built near 100 years ago, as the oldest people now living do not remember to have heard when and by whom it was built. The family makes use of both houses, neither of them being sufficiently commodious of itself. It seems to have been the intention of Coln. Blackburn to have united them by a large room between the two."

Adm. Richard B. Black, a previous owner of Rippon, discovered an outline of a foundation, which Latrobe referred to. Black's daughter, Debra Black Decko, was the last private owner of the estate; she sold it in 2000 to Prince William County.

During Thomas Blackburn's time, the families of Mount Vernon and Rippon Lodge were on intimate terms. Washington spoke of his visits to the Blackburns, where he often stayed overnight, according to Ratcliffe's book. Washington is said to have slept up in the airy attic, but Rahll said that is folklore. "We're not even sure which house on the property he [Washington] slept in," she said.

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The story of Washington's bedroom is not the only lore that surrounds the house. This old house has its share of ghost stories. There were two duels that resulted in a death at Rippon, one was near Dumfries and the other duel, which occurred on the Maryland shore, between Bernard Hooe and William Kemp.

Here's the story: In 1800, Bernard Hooe purchased from Col. Thomas Blackburn part of the Yorkshire estate in Manassas. In 1809, Hooe and Kemp fought, where Hooe struck Kemp "with a whip and Kemp got the better of Hooe in a physical struggle that followed," according to "Prince William-The Story of Its People and Its Places." Hooe is said to have died at Rippon Lodge, leading to sightings of his ghost lingering around the house.

Before this ghost occupied Rippon, the lodge was built on a portion of the 1653 Thomas Burbage tract, the first land grant in present Prince William County, which extended from Occoquan Creek on the east to Neabsco Creek on the west and north to the Occoquan, according to George Brown's "A History of Prince William County." Martin Scarlet built a plantation near the land, which later became the site of

Rippon Lodge, on a portion of land stretching from Marumsco Creek to Neabsco Creek.

Scarlet was a representative for Stafford County and a justice of the county court during the late 1600s. Prince William County was not formed until March 1731, which was established from Stafford and King George counties. Scarlet died in 1695; his tombstone was later found at the mouth of Occoquan Creek. Today, Scarlet's headstone is at the entrance of Rippon Lodge's cemetery and is on loan from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Rahll explained.

The grounds surrounding Rippon Lodge reveal hints of its roots. Since the house was built prior to the colonists' revolt against the British, gentle reminders of its English origins remain. According to Rahll, tea bushes still grow, reminding visitors of the era when colonists attempted to raise their own tea after their boycott of the English variety.

The property also contains the oldest-known tombstone found in Prince William County. More than 300 years old, it indicates the late-17th century death of Rose Peters. By court order, her marker and large footstone were moved to Rippon Lodge for safe keeping. Her grave

was originally located near the iron quarry on Neabsco Creek. Now, the engraved remembrances of her death mark the cemetery's end.

Rahll said Scarlet's and Peter's tombstones "make interesting 'bookends' of our cemetery; we say we have stones with no bones."

Bones or not, Rippon Lodge in Woodbridge has artifacts many an archeologist can appreciate. The William and Mary Center for Archaeological Research, conducted an intensive study on the property in 2002, mapping out approximately 10 artifact concentrations. Justin Patton, Prince William County archaeologist, explained that more than 7,000 artifacts have been discovered on the property, including items such as mid-19th century pipe bowls, porcelain dating back to the late 1700s, window glass, medicine bottles and oyster shells.

Kathryn Fullerton of Woodbridge took on the job of Rippon Lodge's volunteer coordinator. After more than a year in this position, Fullerton oversees about 40 volunteers. She meets with potential volunteers and assigns them jobs to match their skills and interest. "We have a core group of docents and are training a new team. We offer an exciting, thorough monthly training session for our docents; we'd love to

have more join us," Fullerton said.

Janice Overman of Lake Ridge began volunteering at Rippon Lodge after she retired from the federal government in March 2002. She and her husband, John, moved to Prince William County in 1976; they heard about Rippon Lodge but since it was privately owned, were never able to visit. Once the county bought it, "We jumped at the opportunity to volunteer," Overman recalls.

"I began with identifying and logging each textile from linens to carpets," Overman said. John helped dismantle the upstairs bathroom. He volunteers in whatever capacity needed. John, a wood turner and carver, is a member of the Northern Virginia Carvers, which will have representatives at the upcoming Harvest Festival.

"Janice and John have been very loyal volunteers," Fullerton said.

"I have helped at all the Harvest Fests they've held and it's amazing to see the reactions of people once they visit and get a glimpse of its history," Overman shared. She is currently in training to be a docent at the lodge.

Prince William County's Historic Preservation Division has worked hard developing a crew of volunteers and overseeing the resto-

ration of Rippon Lodge. "I'm thrilled this site is opening; we can't wait to share this gem with the community," Rahll said in a recent interview.

The free Harvest Festival at Rippon Lodge will run from 11 a.m.-5 p.m. The event will begin with a ceremonial ribbon-cutting; Prince William County supervisors are expected to attend. Interpretative panels and docents will be throughout the interior of the house.

Sword Masters, who dress in period clothes and perform "all kinds of glorious things with swords, and the kids love it," will be at the festival, Fullerton said. Other activities include a maze, hay rides, pumpkin patch, petting zoo, storytelling, face painting, educational displays, crafts and games, food for purchase and vendors. The gift shop will be open too. Rippon Lodge will also be open for free tours on Oct. 21 and the following weekend, Oct. 27-28 from 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

Rippon Lodge Historic Site is at 15500 Blackburn Road in Woodbridge. More information on Prince William County's heritage and volunteering at any of its historic sites, is online, www.pwcgov.org, or available from the Historic Preservation Division in the county's Department of Public Works at 703-792-4754.

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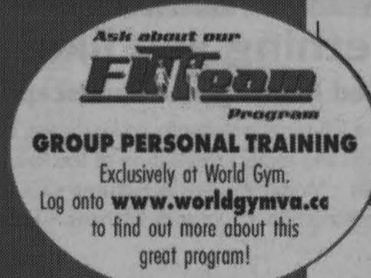
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