

VIRGINIANA FILE

PWC - Historic Sites
(Rippon Lodge)

RIPPON

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In the dark, your feet tell you that the deep brown polished wood floors are not machine made.

While well-maintained, they know they are old and — something like their master — are proud of every small imperfection and worn spot that gives them their unique character.

The "random-width pine planks, with their edges free-nailed together and their undersides deeply notched to fit the floor joists," according to a publication about the house, were trod by many people, not the least of whom was our nation's first president, George Washington.

In fact, the Blackburns were intimates of the Washingtons, with Thomas Blackburn, Richard's son, serving as aide-de-camp to Washington during the revolution and two Blackburn daughters marrying Washingtons to become mistresses of Mount Vernon.

IF THE BOARDS could speak, they would probably tell some of the same tales Black does, though perhaps not as enthusiastically.

The red pine-paneled parlor floor has a special history, according to Black — it was the place two duelists, one of them Black's fourth great-grandfather, John Baylis, died.

Baylis married Richard Blackburn's daughter and Thomas' sister, Jane.

He died at Rippon Lodge after a duel in the Quantico Churchyard in Dumfries, Black says.

The second death was of a man unrelated to the Blackburns, Bernard Hooe, who was shot on the Maryland side of the Potomac and "bled to death on its parlor floor," according to an old newspaper account.

Black has, among his many treasures, an old flintlock which figured in Baylis' fatal duel. But which combatant or second used the weapon, he doesn't know, Black says.

Like many of his other artifacts, the flintlock was "sent to Judge (Wade) Ellis when he started restoring the house.

"People who knew its history sent it out to be here," Black says, explaining that Ellis, who bought the house in 1924 and did much of the restoration work, collected many of the historical furnishings of the house.

Ellis was a descendent of Christopher Blackburn of Rippon (then Rippon) in Yorkshire, England, from which Black's ancestor, Richard, also emigrated. They were probably related, he says, but no records can be found to document Richard's English ancestry or relations.

Ellis heard about Rippon Lodge while serving as an "expert witness" in a local court case and determined to buy and restore it, Black says.

But the bachelor Marron brothers who "barged firewood down the creek to Washington" and "raised a little corn and some cattle" refused to sell because, they said, "We make our living here," Black relates.

Ellis kept "coming back every few weeks" to ask

"have you changed your mind yet?" and raise his offer, Black says, and finally "saw that the only way was to offer them something better."

So he "found a working farm in the foothills, stocked with cattle, wagons, a truck and everything," Black says, "and arrived one day without an offer but saying, 'I have something to show you in the country.'"

"They couldn't resist that," Black chuckles, and Ellis finally became master of Rippon Lodge.

ELLIS ADDED a wide columned veranda to what Black calls a Georgian farmhouse, built a wing at each end and increased the size of the property from about 300 to over 1,000 acres.

He brought in scores of ancient boxwoods, and generally landscaped the area to more closely resemble other 18th century estates.

A tunnel leading from the basement to a boxwood garden was excavated by Ellis, Black says, yielding a quantity of 18th century silver which the current owner thinks was hidden there for safekeeping during the Civil War.

A narrow brick and masonry passage, the tunnel was probably used as an entrance from an outdoor kitchen, Black says, rather than as an escape way from Indian attacks, "because by the time it (the house) was built, there were no more (fighting) Indians in this part of Virginia."

Whatever its original intent, the tunnel was considered as a possible nuclear bomb shelter during the threatening days of the Cuban missile crisis in the early 90s, the retired Navy rear admiral says.

DESPITE ELLIS' restorative work on the house, family grave area, and many additions to the furnishings and gardens, he left much for the Blacks to do when they purchased Rippon Lodge from his widow in 1952.

The Blacks have gone on with the restoration, adding two modern baths done in colonial decor, and remodeling the entire upper floor, adding clothes closets, but keeping the feeling of the 18th century.

Among their contributions is a painting of Lt. Col. Daniel Boone, a fifth great-grandfather of Aviza Johnson Black, mistress of the house, with his dog, "Blue."

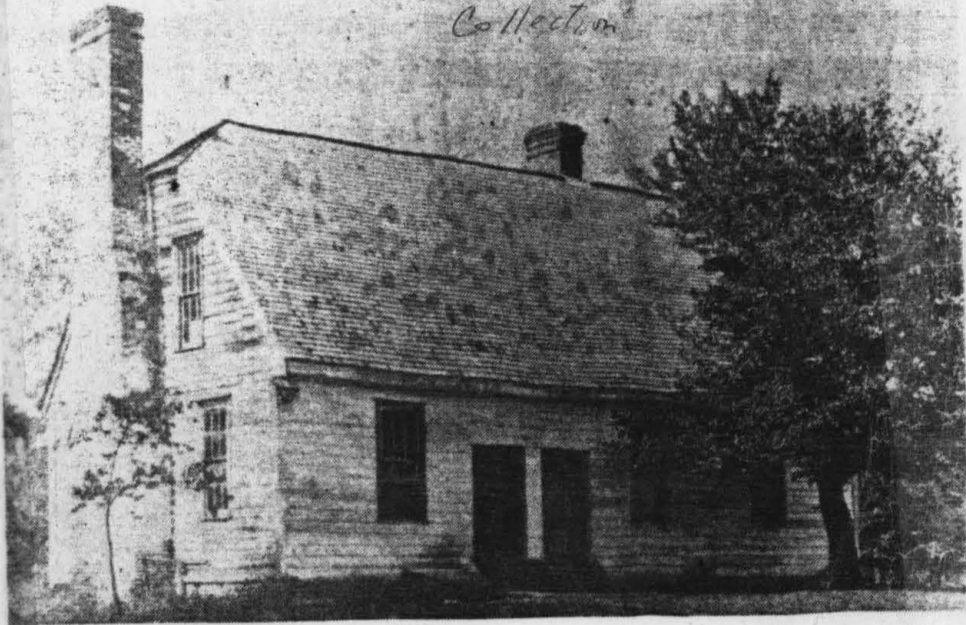
The painting, done by 19th century painter Jean Rancois Valle, portrays Boone in a crushed black hat, which Mrs. Black has said was his normal headgear, not the coonskin cap he is known for in popular legend.

The Blacks have also added a tiny cast bronze turtle found on the grounds with a metal detector, which Black says, both the Smithsonian and British Royal museums agreed came from China sometime after 1650, when they were first exported to England.

But Black doesn't explore the grounds with a metal detector too much anymore, he says, "because my wife

Prince William Public Library
Manassas, Va.

Weems-Botts Museum
Collection



Rippon Lodge before restoration of 1924-25

objects to digging up the lawn and finding nothing but horseshoes.

Full of historic oddities, the house boasts an 18th century device Black says was used to make opaque silhouettes and a contraption he promises to give to female visitors if they can guess what it is — a device for holding the

voluminous skirts of what seems only a dream away in this old house.

Adjacent to 18th century mirrors in the fatal parlor is another legacy from Black's grandmother — one goblet from a set of crystal used in 1811 by the Blackburn family at Rippon Lodge.

While doing her research in

Manassas, Mrs. Hogue was introduced to a man who had inherited two remaining pieces of the set and, being "a nifty old girl," she asked "would anything cause you to sell one to a Blackburn descendent?" Black relates.

"No, the man wouldn't sell ... but he ended up giving it to her," the grandson relates.