

Southern Belle

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Photos by ROBERT A. MARTIN

AT BELLE GROVE, the cavalry arrived just in time. On the brink of collapse from years of neglect, the 18th-century plantation house has now been given new life, and is probably stronger today than it ever has been in its 210 years.

The property is known best as where James Madison, the fourth U.S. president, was born in 1751. The land had been owned since 1670 by his mother's side of the family, the Conways.

The house in which Madison was born is long gone, but what may be its foundation has been found on the grounds. The existing house was built in the early 1790s. It lies just off U.S. 301 in the Port Conway area--named for the Conways--of southern King George County, across the Rappahannock River from Port Royal.

Over the years the house has been expanded time and again, and it has been through cycles of neglect and renovation.

Belle Grove's outlook sweetened when it was bought by Franz Haas Machinery in 1988. Haas, an Austrian company with offices in Richmond, builds the equipment that makes waffle ice-cream cones and all sorts of wafers, cookies and crackers. By the early 1990s, Haas realized the severe toll that time and weather were taking on the structure, and brought in contractors to save it. But that was only the beginning.

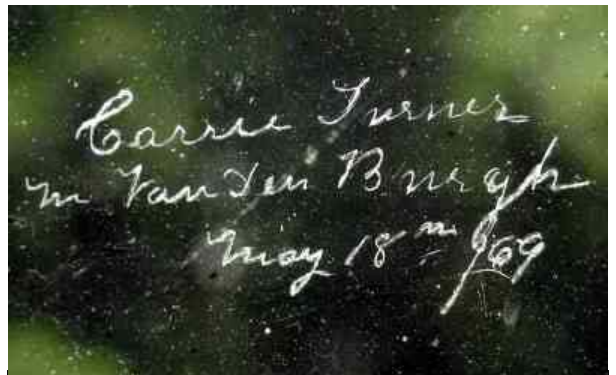
The real restoration didn't begin until 1997, when Haas called on Commonwealth Architects, a Richmond firm that specializes in recovering old buildings, to re-create the home inside and out. "When we came in, we saw there were basic structural problems," said Doug Harnsberger, who heads the firm. He said that before any renovation or expansion of the existing house could take place, the porches, roofs, walls and floors had to be shored up.

Old materials, new technology

Throughout the renovation, modern technology was blended with original and period materials wherever possible. That was the challenge facing Tom Miller, the Richmond general contractor Commonwealth



The riverfront entrance of Belle Grove, built around 1790, shows the restored home that occupies the property once owned by the family of James Madison, the nation's fourth president, who was born in a house nearby in 1751.



In a wedding-day tradition, Carrie Turner used her diamond to etch her and her husband's names in a window pane preserved since 1869.



This is one of two rounded doors, added to the front in the 19th century.

hired for the job. For example, rotting wooden columns were hollowed out and filled with an acrylic substance. The original outer shells were repaired and repainted. In the attic, strong new crossbeams were added to make sure the weight of the roof was spread evenly across load-bearing posts. The original 2-by-4 and 4-by-4 roof framing remains but looks rickety by today's standards. The old slate roof was replaced with a copper one to reduce weight.

In addition, the electrical, plumbing, heating and air-conditioning systems had to be updated or added new. A buried geothermal system provides efficient, state-of-the-art climate control. Because Haas Machinery might use the home as a corporate retreat, it is wired for computers and video conferencing as well.

None of this work would be allowed to compromise the home's historic value.

"Belle Grove is one of a few surviving 18th-century heavy-timber frame dwellings in King George County that features such sophisticated qualities of Federal-era design and craftsmanship," Harnsberger said.



Prussian Blue, Chinese Red and Peace Yellow are some of the traditional period interior room colors used in the Belle Grove restoration.

Using tax credits

All of the work Commonwealth has done fell under the constraints of various regulatory agencies. The house is listed on both the state and national historic registers, and also qualified for state and federal historic rehabilitation tax credits.

Under National Park Service regulations, any additions would have to be distinct from the original structure, and any interior changes would have to be approved in advance. Such was the case, Harnsberger said, when he determined that moving and enlarging interior doorways would create an open "cross-axis" across the rear of the home with archways at either end. Park service officials agreed that the change would enhance the future usefulness of the home and allowed it.

"The fine 'character-defining' features painstakingly restored at Belle Grove were made affordable by securing these rehab tax credits," he said. "This project showcases the added value to the historic resource that the tax credits make affordable."

One of the home's longtime shortcomings had been with bathrooms. Small bathrooms that had been added to each end of the house were removed and replaced with larger modern ones that incorporate fixtures and moldings that harmonize with the period decor. Outside, the park service has required that the siding on bathroom additions and their exterior trim be painted different colors than the rest of the house.

Aside from the governmental hoops through which Commonwealth had to maneuver, and its own judgments about what is or isn't feasible or proper, it also has to account for the wishes and aesthetic concerns of the Haas family. That would seem justified in that the family has already spent, according to Harnsberger, \$1.1 million on the exterior, \$1.4 million on the interior and might be expecting to spend another \$1 million at least on landscaping, a new swimming pool and any rehabilitation work on outbuildings that are falling apart.

Big picture, small details

To the layman this would seem to be an insurmountable task, but Harnsberger and his associate, Susan Reed Smither, are somehow able to focus on each individual piece of the project while continually standing back to view their overall progress. They have to do that, they said, in order to satisfy the government, the owners and themselves.

One way they do that is by depending on Miller and his subcontractors, as well as suppliers who specialize in materials for historic renovations.

Harnsberger points out that one of the key elements of a historic renovation is mortar. It is often found deteriorated, but using a hard, concrete-based mortar will cause soft, old bricks to crumble because it won't expand and contract with seasonal climate changes.

That issue has led Commonwealth to become fast friends with Jimmy Price of Virginia Lime Works in Lynchburg. He produces a softer, limestone-based mortar similar to that used originally in houses like Belle Grove.

Part of what makes Belle Grove such an interesting architectural specimen is that it is the sum of so many parts. The original two-story house is a basic, Federal center-hall design. The center hall was at first completely open, with the staircase against a shared wall in an adjacent room. Later in the 1790s, symmetrical additions were made on either end of the house, still in Federal style.

In the 1840s, the house was expanded again, with Greek Revival-style symmetrical structures attached to each end. A rear porch facing the river was enlarged at that time, and some interior renovations were done.

Extensive work was done in the post-Civil War era, but not because the house was damaged during the hostilities. Remarkably, there is no evidence within the home's walls that the house took any cannon or musket fire, according to Miller.

The grounds around the house became a staging area for Union troops gathering north of the Rappahannock. Directly across the river, Confederates were assembling. Legend has it that at night, under flags of truce, Yankee soldiers would trade coffee to the Rebels for their tobacco. In the 1870s and '80s, the staircase was moved to the center hall, and curved front walls and porches were added to the home's land-facing façade. Curved doors were fashioned from single, large-trunked trees. No one involved with the project had ever seen such doors before. Finally, in the 1930s, the small, symmetrical bathrooms were added to each end of the house. In keeping with the home's layout, the upstairs consists of a center hall with mirror-image master bedroom suites on either side, although one has been equipped with an elevator that runs to the basement.

The basement, which is now dry thanks to the renovation work, has a sauna, jet-bath and full bathroom. Adjacent rooms could be used as bedrooms, or as exercise or recreation areas.

Historic correctness

Smither said that all the interior paint colors were selected for their historic appropriateness in the Federal, Greek Revival and Colonial Revival areas of the home. Almost all were from Sherwin-Williams "Preservation Palette."

The random-width heart pine flooring had to be lifted off and refitted after subflooring was repaired. That which was damaged beyond repair was replaced with floorboards designed to match.

All door and window frames, cornices, chair rail and other moldings were saved and reinstalled when possible, replicated when necessary. A classically styled, discarded mantel

was found in an outbuilding, restored and put back in place. The walls were replastered and the plaster ceiling medallions returned to their original beauty. The oldest portion of the house has most of its original imperfect window panes; those needing replacement came from salvage shops offering glass from the same period.

Altogether there are 7,200 finished square feet with 11 fireplaces (both wood and gas) and 11 full and half-bathrooms. A new kitchen with top-of-the-line appliances has replaced the smaller, obsolete kitchen that was elsewhere in the house.

Haas owns the 600-acre Belle Grove property. The house itself sits on a 20-acre parcel. There are large adjacent tracts of farmland. At one time, previous owner John Palmer Hooker bought a 45-acre parcel across the river to preserve the view from his rear porch and balcony. That land is apparently no longer part of the property.

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