

History of Clermont Woods

Clermont Woods Community Association

Introduction

When the earliest of the present property owners in Clermont Woods purchased their lots in what was then known as the Subdivisions Clermont I and II, back in the 1940's and 1950's, some wondered about the significance of the name. A little research showed that Clermont was the name of the plantation that originally included the land from Upland Drive down to the railroad.

Early History

The very early history of Clermont Woods has not been firmly verified. As near as we can tell, the wooded heights above the plains in the Cameron Valley were sometimes camping grounds for Indian hunters. Route 1 approximates a very early "trace" or path, used by the Indians in their annual migrations to and from the hunting grounds back to the Blue Ridge Mountains. The path crossed Cameron Run near where Telegraph Road crosses today, then headed west up to where the seminary is now. So, at a very early date, the crossing at Telegraph Road became a suitable site for an inn, or "ordinary," as it was called in those times. It is interesting to note that there was no direct connection to Clermont with that important intersection. Clermont had a road that apparently met Duke Street somewhere near where Wheeler Avenue comes out at Quaker Lane. This same route, with some friendly trespassing, served the residents of Evergreen later called the Gladden Tract and now called Wellington Green, and Bush Hill. But to get to Clermont, according to Civil War maps, people in Rose Hill either had to

travel down "Frankonia" Road to Telegraph Road, or go by way of either Evergreen or Bush Hill. Until an 1879 map, there seems to be no indication of a direct connection between Franconia Road and Clermont

Benjamin Dulaney

The first known owner of the Clermont Plantation, as it was known then, was Benjamin Dulaney, a colorful sometimes sober, sometimes not, gentleman of Alexandria, who used Clermont as his summer home. The manor house was very large with two parlors, eleven bedrooms, and many outbuildings. Dulaney's family had been Tories and many had lost all in the Revolutionary War. But Benjamin had been George Washington's friend, though he did not agree with him politically. He had even given George his favorite horse, Blueskin, which we usually see in the General's wartime portraits. Later, he tried, unsuccessfully, to sell Clermont to the then ex-President, George Washington. Ben had married George's godchild, the daughter of Daniel French of Rose Hill, who was living with her widowed mother at Rose Hill when he courted and won her. It is said that the couple eloped out of the dressing room window at Rose Hill and escaped to Clermont. Nevertheless, they were married with Washington's blessing.

However romantically the marriage might have begun, it did not continue that way for "Tippling Ben" is best remembered for some of his drinking bouts, in which he did peculiar things. Once, he invited some forty or so guests, and after drinking, decided to teach them the "latest dance from Paris," and proceeded to shoot his gun at their feet. His wife protested, so he locked her in a closet until morning and it is

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said that she never spoke another word to Ben for the rest of his life.

Later Tenants

After "Tippling Ben," Clermont had a succession of tenants, perhaps owners, but this is not at all clear, as of this writing. At one time, 1803-1804, it was the residence of the Vicar of Christ Episcopal Church of Alexandria, the Reverend Thomas Davis, who had tried, apparently unsuccessfully, to establish a school for boys at Clermont. He is remembered for having officiated at the burial service of George Washington.

General John Mason

General John Mason, a son of the George Mason of Gunston Hall, was the next owner who can be traced to the Clermont Plantation. John had been overshadowed by his famous father and his famous son, John Murray Mason. He had known George Washington, and other patriots and had participated in the building and operation of the Potomac Canal remnants of which can still be seen at Great Falls, Virginia. John Mason invested heavily in the development of the steamship, which may be partly responsible for his keeping the name "Clermont" for his estate. He was president of the First Bank of Georgetown and had two homes, one in Georgetown, and a summer home on Analostan, now known as "Roosevelt Island" in the Potomac River. The financial depression of 1829 hit the banker very hard and he retired to the country to raise and enjoy his ten children. John Mason's children married sons and daughters of local families. One married a daughter of the owner of Rose Hill; another married General Samuel Cooper of Cameron. One

married her cousin, George Mason of Spring Bank (Across Route 1 from Penn Daw), and Anna Maria married Sidney Smith Lee, brother of General Robert E. Lee, former Governor of Virginia, and Revolutionary War soldier. Anna Maria came to her father's house in Clermont to have her first baby, Fitzhugh Lee, destined to be the first and only Governor of Virginia to be born in Northern Virginia.

General John Mason's slight brush with personal fame came when he accompanied President Madison on his flight from Washington in the face of British occupation, and later when he wrote the necessary letters which sent Francis Scott Key on his errand of mercy to secure the release of Doctor Beanes, during which time he wrote "The Star Spangled Banner."

On May 28, 1849, the "Alexandria Gazette" ran an advertisement for the sale of Clermont, the last time it was offered as an operating estate. It read: "FOR SALE -- This estate is distant about four miles from Alexandria, and one mile south of the Little Turnpike Road, leading to the Town, comprising about 320 acres of land. The arable land, of which about 160 acres is level bottom on Cameron Run, is in a state of high fertility, having been well drained, and the whole with about 40 acres of upland, judiciously cultivated and improved, by Clover and Plaister, with the free use of lime and other manure. It is divided into seven fields, one a large meadow of timothy, with one or more fine springs in each. The residue of the tract, exclusive of the lawns, orchards, and gardens, is in young wood. The Mansion and its appurtenances are of the most ample and commodious description, beautifully situated on a gentle eminence, and overlooking the Town of Alexandria and

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the lowlands of the estate. The dwelling house on the first floor contains two parlors, besides large library, and an office, with eleven chambers above stairs, and in the buildings appurtenant to it, besides an ample kitchen, laundry, and housekeeper's room, a dairy, bath-house, smoke house, ample accommodations for servants, ice house, the houses of farm servants, blacksmith's shop, a kiln of brick for burning lime, with ample barns, stabling, and other houses for stock and farm purposes, orchards of choice fruit, ornamental grounds and walks -- the whole in good order and well preserved by its late proprietor."

Commodore French Forrest

The purchaser was Commodore French Forrest USN, who was then head of the Washington Navy Yard. He was the son of Major Joseph Forrest of Maryland, and Elizabeth French Dulaney, a daughter of a former owner of Clermont. Whether or not he bought it for sentimental reasons is not known, but it is known that he had large, beautiful collections of artifacts and curios acquired from many years of foreign voyages, and Clermont was a suitable showcase for them.

Commodore Forrest had distinguished himself at the age of 17, in the Battle of Lake Erie in 1813. Since then, he had acquired other citations for bravery and leadership. There were very few naval officers more highly regarded at the time. But, impelled by a sense of duty, he resigned his commission and offered his services to his state, Virginia, in 1861. Since his property lay within reach of the Federal Capitol, his resignation meant the confiscation of home and lands, and for himself, a life of exile and poverty. He

never again saw his lovely manor house, Clermont.

Commodore Forrest assumed command of the Norfolk Naval Yard, and supervised the building of the Merrimac. When the Merrimac floundered aground in battle, he rowed out under fire, in a light boat, to personally offer assistance. Eventually he rose to be Commander of the James River Squadron, and finally the acting Assistant Secretary of the Confederate Navy.

Meanwhile, his home at Clermont had been taken over by the Union forces as a small pox hospital, and was subsequently burned. After the war, Commodore Forrest returned to live in one of the outbuildings, perhaps the Overseer's house, until his death in 1866, when the estate passed into the hands of his son, Douglass.

Douglass French Forrest

Douglass French Forrest attended and graduated from Yale while his family lived at Clermont. He went on to study law under the Chief Justice of Virginia. He, too, was commissioned in the Confederate Navy, and served most of his time under his father. After the war, he took up the practice of law in Baltimore, but felt the call of the church, and it was not long before he was studying at the Virginia Theological Seminary. After he became a deacon, he married Sallie Winston Rutherford of Richmond. Upon his ordination, he was sent to Cincinnati where the records show he was a "most unique servant of God."

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The Forrest Family

During the ensuing years, the estate was chopped up by "progress." The Orange and Alexandria Railroad had already cut off the northern part of the estate in 1835, and the location of the mansion, close to the tracks, had made it most suitable as a hospital. But the new railroad cut, put through at the turn of the century, isolated the farm from the northern access routes. The logical access then became the route from Franconia Road, now known as "Clermont Drive." The two remaining houses were used as tenant farms. These were located, one approximately where the Beltway now nearly touches Elmwood Drive, and the other in the clearing near 4209 Elwood Drive. Neither original house still neither stands, nor has stood in the memory of anyone but the last individual owner, Rutherford Fleet, a nephew of Mrs. Forrest. Mr. Fleet sold the property in 1939 to Vernon M. Lynch and Sons, Realtors, for development.

Recent History

Recent history can be traced in the Fairfax County records and since 1960, in the Clermont Woods Community Association newspaper, *The Blaze*. Periodically the editors will run historical pieces on the development in our area and it makes most interesting reading. Comparing the 1961 "*Directory of Clermont Woods*," with the 2001 Directory, shows that twenty of the eighty-eight residents of Clermont in 1960 are still with us.

History Lives

This area of ours is full of history and has given some great people to our nation and Commonwealth. There are still traces of this history turning up around us all the time. Numerous mini balls, musket balls and bullets, a cannon ball, early Spanish coins, Indian arrowheads, and even a stone axe testify to the existence of our early inhabitants. Traces of a ditch, which divided fields and property, in a day when labor was cheaper than materials, can be seen behind the houses along Upland Drive. Logging trails and old wagon roads can still be faintly traced, and are especially noticeable near the creek at the border of Clermont Woods and Burgundy Village.

The lowland areas of the Clermont Plantation have been despoiled by over a century of railroad and highway construction. But somewhere on this estate there has to be the original spring or remnants of the well that served the manor house. There should be traces of the old lime kiln and other traces evident to the observing eye.

Editorial Comments

This "*History of Clermont Woods*" was originally printed in the September 1969 issue of "*The Blaze*", and was written by Christine Gibson and William Mitchell. It was reprinted as a Supplement to the March 1980 issue of "*The Blaze*" by then Editor, Sydney Smith. Both the 1990 and this 2002 version of the "*History of Clermont Woods*" were edited and updated by Bob Drake who lives on Dartmoor Lane.