

The King George **Journal**

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By Richard Leggett



The entry drive to the Mansion

The photos on this post were the ones that ran with the article.



The Riverside of the Mansion at Sunset

"In the years leading up to the Civil War, Carolinus Turner, a Virginia planter who grew Belle Grove Plantation into a successful and grand estate, would gather friends and family on the mansion's upstairs balcony overlooking the Rappahannock River for conversation and drinks at 5pm.

If Brett and Michelle Darnell have their way, and the King George Board of Supervisors approves their application for a special exception permit at their March 19th meeting, those 5pm gatherings on the balcony at Belle Grove will once again be filled with laughter, music and tales of old.

"Our goal is to be open May 1st, said Michelle Darnell, who is leaving her position at Wells Fargo Bank to move with her husband, full-time to Belle Grove, the birthplace of President James Madison. "We will establish residence and prepare to receive house guest."

"Belle Grove Plantation Bed and Breakfast will have four guest suites. In addition to the guest suites, Belle Grove will also be available as a venue for catered events on the scenic grounds." Mrs. Darnell said. "Our business plan projects one to three catered events per month during the fair weather months."

The Darnells have been looking for a special Virginia mansion to turn into a bed and breakfast since 2010. "Everything we looked at was either too expensive or needed too many improvements. Then we came across this listing." Michelle said.

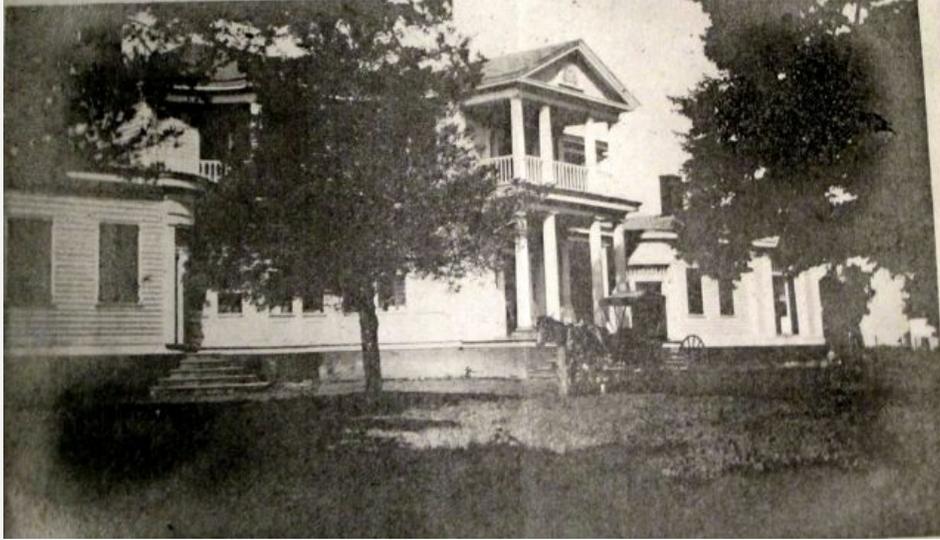


Belle Grove
1937 Riverview side

The Darnells are leasing the Belle Grove estate from Haas Belle Grove, Inc. which bought the plantation in 1987 and spent \$3.5 million in historical renovation which was completed in 2003. If they received their permit from the Board of Supervisors, the Darnells will be making their own improvements including repairing the road to the historic plantation, building a parking lot and landscaping.

Belle Grove is one of the most historic homes in King George County. The Belle Grove property on the North side of the Rappahannock River was purchased by Captain Anthony Savage in 1670. The house and acreage were later acquired by Francis Conway and Rebecca Catlett Conway, James Madison's grandparents.

Their daughter, Eleanor Rose Conway returned to the riverside plantation in December 1750 for the birth of her child, the nation's fourth President, on March 16, 1751. The plantation was named Belle Grove by Rebecca Conway's second husband, John Moore.



Belle Grove
1906



Belle Grove
1906

Over the decades, the stately home passed through several members of the Conway family and their descendents. Captain Francis Conway III, James Madison's cousin set aside 13 acres in 1788 for the newly formed Town of Port Conway and a "burying ground".

The plantation and its acreage were purchased by John Hipkins and Elizabeth Pratt Hipkins in 1790. Hipkins built the current Belle Grove mansion before passing along the tree laden site to his descendents who eventually sold the home and farm land to Carolinus Turner in 1839. Turner successfully developed Belle Grove. He also donated land for the near-by Emmanuel Episcopal Church in 1859.



First known photo of Belle Grove
1894

The plantation is believed to have been used as a Union Army headquarters during the Civil War, which explain why it was undamaged by Union gunboats moving up and down the Rappahannock during the war.



J T Hearn on steps of Belle Grove 1920s

After President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and John Wilkes Booth used the Port Conway ferry in his ill-fated attempt to escape, Union soldiers in pursuit of Booth rested

and ate at Belle Grove before crossing the river to trap Booth in the Garrett family barn near Port Royal.

Over the next century, Belle Grove would have a series of owners and overseers. But in 1987, the Fraz Haas Corporation bought the property and embarked on its historical restoration. The Darnells signed their lease on the property in 2012 with their dream of turning it into a bed and breakfast.



Smokehouse and Summer Kitchen Outbuildings

Among other things, they want to restore three plantation outbuildings, an ice house, a smokehouse and a summer kitchen. “Our hope is to turn the summer kitchen into a small museum to house all the artifacts we have found and tell the family and plantation

history,” Michelle said. Part of the summer kitchen was used as a slave quarters and the Darnells plan to use that space to tell the story of the slaves who worked, lived and died at Belle Grove.

To turn the elegant and historic plantation into a successful bed and breakfast, and a event and wedding venue, will required a lot of hard work by the Darnells and even more of their time and money. But they are excited by the prospect of returning Belle Grove to glory. “It’s a living piece of history,” Michelle Darnell said. “We want to honor it.”



Postcard of Belle Grove
1950s