

Rosewell Ruins

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Lost but Not Forgotten

Ruins such as the Colosseum in Rome or Machu Picchu in Peru are recognizable worldwide; yet Virginia has a few of its own from colonial beginnings. There's always a story behind those stoic ruins and Rosewell is no different. Located just a few miles from Carter Creek which empties out into the York River, the hallowed brick shell of what used to be Rosewell Plantation sits silently behind not one, but two padlocked gates. Since its last fire in 1916 which completely gutted the home, overgrown vegetation and thieves who vandalized the property perhaps contributed to this factor; or its secluded whereabouts as it is a bit off the beaten path. However, the first time you view Rosewell, you will want to learn its story.

As exploration of the New World exploded among European countries like Spain and France, the eastern seaboard became Britain's pride and joy. Thanks to John Smith, the abundance of natural resources became an aspect that would benefit the settlers who came after him. Less than 15 miles from the Jamestown settlement, in 1639 George Menefie received 3,000 acres, a considerable amount of land for his voyage to commonwealth. Bearing a single child named Elizabeth, George left his entire land grant to her which passed to her husband Henry Perry in 1645.

Together the couple bore two daughters, Mary and Elizabeth who both inherited the property. The sisters would go on to sell their land to John Mann in 1680. He and wife Mary Kemp would build the first known structure along Timberneck Creek. Through records of how the house may have looked, it is safe to say that Rosewell would later dwarf the original building in size. John and Mary had a daughter also named Mary and when she became of age, married Matthew Page. Between 1688 and 1689 the newlyweds lived on the Manns land until John died in 1694.

Dividing his land into thirds, a third was left to his wife giving her lifetime rights to do what she saw fit with

his estate, while the other two-thirds was left to his daughter. It is on Mary Page's plot where Rosewell would be built. Dying before his wife, Matthew Page departed from his family in 1703. Mary waited almost two years before marrying Matthew's cousin John Page in 1705. However, a business-minded woman, Mary and John signed a prenuptial agreement leaving her entire inheritance to the children she had with her late husband Matthew. Mary Page died in 1707 leaving control of the mansion to John and her first born Mann Page I.

Four years later in 1711, Mann Page I assumed complete dominion over the property and married Judith Wormeley. Unfortunately, their marriage would be short-lived as in 1716 while giving birth to their infant son, both she and the baby died. Mann Page I possibly following in the footsteps of his mother, waited until 1718 to marry again, this time to a daughter of Robert "King" Carter who was considered the most powerful man in Virginia due to his vast wealth. Also named Judith, the couple continued to live in the house that his parents had assembled, but a fire in 1721 would afford them the opportunity to build their own. It is unclear why construction didn't begin until four years later, but in 1725 Mann Page I began to lay the foundation of a mansion that was admired for almost the next two centuries.

In 1730 Mann Page I died his fortune bequeathed to Judith. For another seven years, the mansion would remain uncompleted until in 1737 Judith received assistance from her father allowing her to carry on with the construction of Rosewell. Their son Mann Page II completed the project sometime in 1737. Six years later, Mann Page II married Alice Grymes and they are the first couple to reside in the grand home. They too experienced a short marriage as Alice died in 1746. Staying a widower for two years, Mann Page didn't remarry until 1748, this time to Anne Corbin Tayloe; a member of the affluent Tayloe family. With debts accruing, Mann Page II began to seek permission to sell parts of his land and slaves to settle his obligations.

It is within this period that the first record about Rosewell's enslaved people was made. County tax assessments concluded that Mann had 28 slaves with another 48 laboring in other farms owned by his

family. Slavery was inherently a part of the Pages' history as Mann Page II's grandfather Colonel John Page had worked in the 1670s as an agent for the Royal African Company. A key player in the transport of Africans to the West Indies and Virginia, the trade would later be referred to as the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Moving with his Anne to Mannsfield, Mann left Rosewell to his oldest son John and his wife Frances Burwell Page in 1765. John began renovating the mansion and while doing so was chosen to serve in Virginia's House of Burgesses. Commencing on what would become a dynamic political career, John was elected to Congress in 1789 and later became the Governor of Virginia in 1802. He is the only other Page besides his father to have recorded the slaves he owned. In addition to their names and ages, John notated the occupations of his 35 slaves. Broken down they were grouped as ten field hands, 12 domestic or skilled laborers, four elderly and nine children. For over a hundred years, the Page family would own Rosewell until 1837.

It is important to speak about the architecture of the house before its subsequent owners as the house would undergo major changes. Bricks laid in Flemish bond once made up Rosewell's three story dwelling. Conceivably replicated to reflect the London architecture, the plantation home had a basement and a wing which flanked each side of its central block. Additionally, unlike many of the tidewater plantations in the area, Rosewell's interior also included mahogany and walnut wood instead of the commonly used Virginia yellow pine. However, in 1838, the house was finally sold outside of the Page family to Thomas Booth who removed all of the paneling as well as the original roofing, replacing it with a gabled roof.

Handing the home over to his cousin John T. Catlett in 1847, Rosewell continued to fall into disrepair. At one time the mansion was valued around \$4,000 but by the time Mr. Catlett gained ownership it had dwindled to \$2,500. Differing from his cousin, Mr. Catlett began to make his own renovations, enhancing the plantation's value to \$6,725 according to tax records between 1850 and 1851.

Sometime in 1853 Mr. Catlett would sell the house to Josiah Deans whose family would own Rosewell for the next 125 years. Josiah's daughter Ellen Y. Taylor and husband Judge Fielding Taylor inherited 247 acres in 1904, including the home. Tragedy struck 12 years later as a raging fire gutted the entire house in 1916. The Taylor's daughter Natalie Taylor Greaves received the land from her parents, but left it mostly untouched. Soon the home was unrecognizable due to overgrowth, weather conditions, and trespassers. In 1979, Nelly and her brother Lieutenant Colonel Fielding Lewis Greaves, deeded almost nine acres to the Gloucester Historical Society.

For the next ten years the historical society began stabilizing the area around Rosewell and the restoration of its ruins. Due to the amount of attention needed for this project, in 1989 the society's preservation division became what is now recognized as the Rosewell Foundation. Today before or after your visit, stop by the visitor's center where a wealth of information is available, consisting of a miniature replica of what the plantation was thought to look like as well as artifacts that date back to its prehistoric past. Rosewell is unique in the fact that unlike Menokin, there's nothing left to rebuild; yet that is what makes the ruins so special as it's a blank canvas with an impressive outline, awaiting its debut.