

Couple hopes to open bed-and-breakfast in King George County at Belle Grove, the birthplace of President James Madison

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Michelle Darnell wants people who visit Belle Grove Plantation to have the same reaction she did when she pulled into the driveway for the first time.

She gasped in awe.

And she wasn't even looking at the grandest side of the house, which is the "river side" that faces the Rappahannock.

Darnell had arrived on the "carriage side," accessible off U.S. 301 in the Port Conway area of King George County.

Still, she was amazed by the elegant grace of the home built in 1791 as a basic farmhouse, then later complemented with extended wings, curved porches and porticos, as well as a balcony that runs along a portion of the second floor.

Darnell and her husband, Brett, want others to feel the same rush at Belle Grove, the birthplace of President James Madison.

The Darnells, who live in Chesapeake, hope to open a bed-and-breakfast at Belle Grove. They plan to apply for a special exception from the county and are in the process of gathering paperwork. They've been told it can take up to four months to get approval.

Michelle Darnell would like to open the suites at Belle Grove by March 16, Madison's birthday.

"When you think about the history that we carry and the men who might have walked here on this property, it's mind-boggling," she said, adding it's a history that others can share. "How many presidential birthplaces can you go to and spend the night?"

'A FORTRESS NOW'

The Darnells don't own the plantation; they have a lease to operate the bed-and-breakfast. The property is owned by the Austrian company Franz Haas Machinery. Company officials said they didn't want to be quoted.

According to a 2003 story in The Free Lance-Star, the company bought the home in 1988 and later undertook a renovation to strip the walls down to the studs. Years of neglect and weather had taken their toll, and the Austrians spent \$3.5 million to restore Belle Grove.

"This house is a fortress now," Michelle Darnell said.

Madison wasn't born in the home that faces the Rappahannock and the Caroline County town of Port Royal. That structure burned and the current home was built.

There's been some question as to where the original home was, and Michelle Darnell has studied historical documents and newspaper clippings religiously.

The Darnells came across a foundation in the crawl space and believe it may be part of the original home. They'd like to look into it more, once they open the bed-and-breakfast and move onto the property.

Michelle Darnell's grandmother probably would be proud of the way her granddaughter has taken to Belle Grove's history as if it were her own.

Michelle Darnell grew up in South Carolina, and when her grandmother took her to the state capital or the family cemetery, she shared stories about past events and the people who carried the same blood in their veins.

Little Michelle became the family historian. She embraced the Belle Grove history with the same enthusiasm--to the point her husband regularly tells her to shorten her history lesson when showing visitors around.

'TO MAKE IT BEAUTIFUL'

The Darnells hope to host weddings, receptions and other gatherings on the lawn of Belle Grove. The bed-and-breakfast will offer four suites of rooms.

Two are on the ground floor and are junior suites with sitting rooms and spacious bathrooms.

The two master suites on the second floor include one named for James Madison. From the "soaking tub" in the bathroom, guests can gaze out the window at the flowing Rappahannock.

The Austrian company will pay for some of the antiques and reproductions the Darnells will use to furnish Belle Grove, once they get county permission to open.

Michelle Darnell plans to uphold some of the traditions observed by people who once lived there.

She'll have a wine and cheese reception in the grand hallway every day but Sunday and serve mint juleps. That's in honor of the Turner family, whose male members gathered promptly at 5 p.m. for refreshments.

On Sunday afternoons, she'll have a lemonade social, which was the custom observed by the last person to live on the property, Mary Hooker.

"We're trying to think of every little detail that might make somebody comfortable," Michelle Darnell said. "We want to make it beautiful."

Michelle Darnell posts a blog about Belle Grove at virginiaplantation.wordpress.com.