

The King George **Journal**

Belle Grove Plantation was in the King George Journal yesterday!



Belle Grove Plantation
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Belle Grove Open House is 4th of July Success



Belle Grove is almost ready for guests. Those persons who spent time at the 4th of July open house were impressed by the work that has been done at the historic structures.

by Richard Leggitt

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As the nation celebrated its 237th birthday on the 4th of July, Brett and Michelle Darnell held an open house at Belle Grove Plantation, the birthplace of one of the nation's most celebrated Founding Fathers, James Madison.

The Open House at the Darnells' new elegant King George County Bed and Breakfast and Event Facility was an unqualified success. "This open house gave us great joy as we shared our love for Belle Grove and its history with others," Michelle Darnell said.

"We expected to have a full house, but we never expected to have so many more that wanted to see the hear about Belle Grove. Throughout the tours, both Brett and I were told over and over how much people enjoyed being at the plantation and how much they were looking forward to coming back," Michelle said.

To fulfill a dream, Michelle and Brett began looking for a Virginia mansion to turn into a bed and breakfast three years ago. They first visited Belle Grove, where Madison was born on March 16, 1751, two years ago. Currently, the Darnells have a long-term lease on the historic property and are nearing the end of an intense effort to turn the magnificent mansion into one of the area's premier historic locations.

The "oohs" and "aahs" of their open house visitors on the 4th of July were a reward for their tireless efforts. Although they are still putting the finishing touches on the majestic riverside mansion, the response from their guests showed Michelle they are on the right path. "It has made the struggle and delays worth all the we have endured," she said.

The 8,000-square-foot plantation has 13 rooms and 11 baths. It is one of the most historic homes in King George County. The Belle Grove property, on the north side of the Rappahannock River, was first purchased by Captain Anthony Savage in 1670. The house was later acquired by Francis Conway and Rebecca Catlett Conway, James Madison's grandparents.

Their daughter, Eleanor Rose Conway, returned to the plantation in December of 1750 for the birth of her child, who became the nation's fourth President and was one of America's seven key Founding Fathers. The plantation was named Belle Grove by Rebecca Conway's second husband, John Moore.

Over the decades, the stately mansion and its acreage, passed through several families and their descendants. The plantation is believed to have been used as a Union Army headquarters during the Civil War which may explain why it was not shelled, as other Virginia riverfront mansions were, by Union gunboats that cruised the Rappahannock River during the war.

After President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, John Wilkes Booth used the nearby Port Conway ferry in an effort to escape. Union troops pursuing Booth rested and ate at Belle Grove before crossing the river to trap and kill Booth at the nearby Garrett family farm.

The historic plantation went through a series of owners during the next century, but in 1987 was purchased by Haas Belle Grove Inc., which spent \$3.5 million to renovate the historic property. The

Darnells leased the property in 2012 with a dream of turning it into a prestigious bed and breakfast and a wedding and event facility.

Within the next month, after the addition of more historic furniture and period draperies, the doors of Belle Grove will open to the public and the grand old plantation will once again ring with music and laughter. "It's a living piece of history and we want to honor it." said Michelle.