

Belle Grove Plantation Bed and Breakfast: Opening for Business!



By AMANDA ARMSTRONG

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Belle Grove

Brett and Michelle Darnell are bringing history to life through the pursuit of their dream to open a bed and breakfast. The public is finally able to enjoy a visit to the birthplace of our nation's fourth President, James Madison, at Belle Grove Plantation Bed and Breakfast on the Rappahannock River in Port Conway of King George County, Virginia. Opening the plantation for the first time as a public business was far from simple for the Darnells, and after two years of labor it is something for which the couple truly deserves recognition and admiration.

Chesapeake residents since 1992, Brett and Michelle have been visiting bed and breakfasts rich in history throughout the country since they wed in 1986. Following a visit to James Madison's lifelong home Montpelier in 2010, the Darnells made the ultimate decision to

chase their dream of owning and running their own bed and breakfast. Michelle's active search in nailing just the right home led her to Belle Grove Plantation in July of 2011.



Guests will enjoy afternoon tea served in antique china cups – Image by [Chamberlin Photography](#)

The last time I interviewed Michelle and Brett in October of 2012, their plans for opening Belle Grove Plantation Bed and Breakfast were only beginning to unfold, hinging on permits and zoning approval from King George County. The incredible progress the pair has made in nine months is a true reflection of their desire to fulfill a 27 year long dream coupled with their own "new business owner" work ethic.

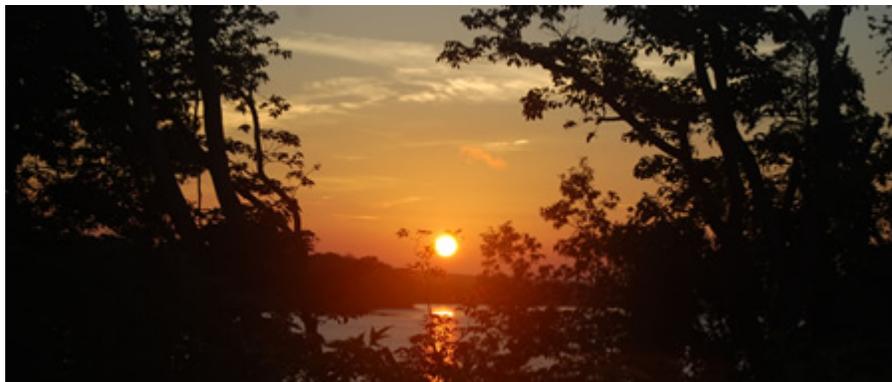
As I pulled up the quiet road leading to Belle Grove nestled under an archway of trees, my first sight of the plantation was nothing short of breathtaking. Between the elegant pillars on which the house sits, the expansive symmetrical balconies, and the picturesque background of the Rappahannock River, my eyes struggled to land on just one of the masterpieces in front of me. Witnessing the plantation and all its grandeur for the first time was truly something magical – and yet that was only a glimmer of what was awaiting me inside.



The Grand Hall at Belle Grove – Image by [Image de Vie Photography](#)

The place was buzzing with excitement, last minute repairs, landscaping, cleaning and all sorts of preparation to present the plantation in all its grandeur to the public. I was met with the smell of fresh paint and summer air as I made my way into the rich hardwood Grand Foyer. The only thing missing among the lavish colored walls and ceilings ornate with antique chandeliers was the majority of the furniture, scheduled to arrive just days after my visit. The pieces that I was lucky enough to catch a sneak peek at were absolutely exquisite.

Brett and Michelle were ecstatic to update me on the immense progress they have made towards opening Belle Grove as a Bed and Breakfast since our last interview. Both are incredibly well-versed in the history of Belle Grove and the community in which it rests. It was truly enjoyable to be around people who absolutely love, and are passionate about, what they are doing day in and day out.



Sunset over the Rappahannock River at Belle Grove.

I continued through the entrance of the house and entered the Ladies Parlor on my right.

This room will be filled with Victorian furniture, perfect for enjoying good company and delicious tea out of antique teacups, one of the many treasures Michelle found to ensure that all guests experience the authenticity of the house. The Parlor then opens to the Library, where guests can peruse through historical readings on previous inhabitants of the plantation, including James Madison. A room guests can utilize for business matters sits just off the Library, facing the back of the house. The front of the plantation actually faces the river, as opposed to US Route 301 on the opposing side; when the house was built, travel was done by river and the door facing the water was considered the entrance. Of the many artifacts found on the grounds, 2 bullets dropped by Union soldiers were found in this very room.

As I moved back through the foyer, in which John Wilkes Booth himself spent one night in hiding while waiting to catch the ferry on the Rappahannock, I ventured into the opposite wing of the plantation, beginning with the Dining Room. This room is sure to host a number of parties, events, and extravagant meals with a table capable of seating 14 diners. Just past the Dining Room is perhaps the most intriguing room of the house, the Business Center. Yes, I said the Business Center. While the present purpose of this room is to host professional meetings for interested organizations, the space once served as the birthplace of our fourth President, James Madison. Directly in the center of the Business Center once stood the original room where Mr. Madison was born; the current house was built in 1791 after the original structure in which he was born burned down. As if by fate, the oldest artifact the Darnells have uncovered is an 1817 coin, made when James Madison served as President.



These settees were used in the movie "Lincoln" – Image by [Rich Johnson Photography](#)
The two mirroring junior suites downstairs are the John Hipkins-Bernard Suite and the Conway Suite. Guests will surely enjoy the privacy of these rooms and bathrooms, where one can enjoy a tranquil bubble bath in an eagles claw tub in reference to the six bald eagles living on the plantation. Nine months after the Darnells named the Conway Suite after a prior family that owned the house, research revealed that some Conway family members are buried right outside the window. Genuinely marveling over the treasures she's discovered in the house, Michelle exclaimed, "Just when I think I've seen everything, something else pops up!"

Upstairs, the Madison Master Suite is elegant with presidential blue walls. Across the hall sits the Turner Master Suite, just as tastefully classy and laden with history. Guests residing in this room will find an engraving on a window pane reading:

"Carrie Turner

Van Der Burgh

May 18th '69"

During the 1800s, it was lovers' tradition to etch their names in a window with a newly adorned engagement ring. Appropriately, this suite is fit for a wedding, complete with a bridal room.

Between the master suites upstairs, guests can mingle and relax in the Grand Hallway for social hours. Mint juleps, wine and cheese among many other things will be served at 5:00pm. Guests in either of the master suites can also delight in breakfast on the balcony facing the Rappahannock and choose from a variety of delicious menu items cooked by Michelle herself.

In the outstretched basement I found a sauna and Japanese soaking tub; all a girl needs on a getaway, right?! Eventually, the Darnells plan to install their very own “man cave” down there, complete with oversized leather couches perfect for relaxation. Until then, guests will be sure to marvel over the number of original wooden beams still holding the house from the day James Madison was born.



Belle Grove Plantation Bed & Breakfast (photo by Instant de Vie Photography – <http://www.instantdeviephotography.com>)

Guests will find just as many treasures outside of the house as inside. In addition to the serene view of the Rappahannock, the landscape set to complement the house includes cherry trees, roses, gardenias and golden mops. Bald eagles, osprey and fawn can be found on the grounds along with a smoke house, spring house and summer kitchen with slave quarters. In the future, the Darnells also plan to install a pool and a dock for guests to take full advantage of the proximity to the river, where canoes are available to rent nearby.

The Darnells are working around the clock to open the plantation to guests as soon as possible. Michelle will host a Princess tea on August 24th. The Darnells also plan to celebrate the 219th wedding anniversary of James and Dolly Madison on September 15th at Mr. Madison’s first home. The evening with the Madisons will be held on the front lawn, directly overlooking the river, where guests will join the famous James Madison impersonator and delight in the authenticity of a dinner menu created by Michelle to offer selections of the couple’s favorite foods.



The eagle claw foot tub in the Madison Master Suite Bath – Image by [Rich Johnson Photography](#)

The Darnells are excited to offer more than standard bed and breakfast amenities. The plantation is the ideal location for an intimate wedding, a classy business meeting, or an elegant reception on the lawn overlooking the river. Guests will find themselves minutes away from the site of a landmark Civil War battle that took place on December 13, 1862 in nearby Fredericksburg, which also holds a plethora of quaint restaurants and endless shopping. To share this journey, or should I say this new adventure, with the Darnells follow Michelle's blog at <http://virginiaplantation.wordpress.com/>. The new website will launch soon with detailed information on Belle Grove and how to make reservations, but for now you can stay updated via Belle Grove Plantation at Port Conway's Facebook page at www.facebook.com.