

# *The* King George Journal

**Old and Majestic Belle Grove Plantation to open in June**

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Like an old leafless but majestic oak tree transformed by springtime sun, Belle Grove, the historic birthplace of former President James Madison, is being slowly reworked and restored so that it can open in King George as one of the area's top event sites within the next four weeks.

"We're close to opening the doors," said Michelle Darnell, who with her husband, Brett, will operate the plantation as a bed and breakfast and as a venue for weddings, dinners and meetings. "We just have to finish getting the furnishings and get the remainder of the work done outside."

"There is a lot of work to be done, but we will be ready soon," said Brett. It is a labor of love for the Darnells. Michelle is leaving her position at Wells Fargo to move full-time to Belle Grove. Brett, a former U.S. Navy Senior Chief who is now a civilian contractor, will be joining her soon.

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. "It is such a special place, there is a peace, a serenity that just amazes me."

The Darnells have leased the Belle Grove estate from Haas Belle Grove, Inc. which bought the plantation in 1997 and spent \$3.5 million in historical renovations which were completed in 2003. Now Michelle and Brett are in the process of landscaping the property, building a driveway and parking area to accommodate their guests and acquiring furniture.

Belle Grove Plantation Bed and Breakfast will have four luxurious guest suites. "In addition to the suites, Belle Grove will also be available as a venue for catering events on the scenic grounds," said Michelle. Brett said the goal is to be open for guests "by the middle of June."

"We're almost two years into this," said Michelle. "It has required a lot of patience and perseverance." Among the tasks in recent weeks was the removal of several trees on the property that were dying and posed a threat to the historic plantation. One of them was a mulberry tree that was almost 200 years old.

The Darnells have sent the wood from the trees to area craftsmen so it can be made into furniture, and to a fountain pen company that will make pens from the wood. Brett expressed his admiration for the way his wife has dealt with the challenges that have come with the project. "She supported me for 20 years and now I am doing everything I can to support her."

Both Darnells said 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." Belle Grove is one of the most historic homes in King George County and one of only six historic plantations in the area.

The Belle Grove property, located 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 return to the riverside plantation in December 1750 for the birth of her child, the nation's fourth President, on March 16, 1751.

Over the decades, the stately home passed through several members of the Conway family and their descendants. Captain Francis Conway, III, James Madison's cousin set aside 13 acres in 1788 for the newly formed Town of Port Conway, the site of a ferry crossing the Rappahannock River.

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 descendants who eventually sold the home and farm land to Carolinus Turner in 1839. Turner successfully developed Belle Grove.

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

After Preside 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 Franz Haas Corporation of Vienna, Austria 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, a dream that will be realized within just a few weeks.



