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Wilton House

By Bob Cerullo

In the dark of night when all in the house are sleeping soundly, a large black dog quietly roams the halls unlocking doors in the Colonial house that stands on a peninsula known as Wilton Point. Some former residents are convinced the story of the ghostly canine appearing at Wilton House is absolutely true. A hard to believe story about a home that is in itself hard to believe.

The very fact that it still exists in a virtually unaltered condition after more than 300 years, is truly incredible. The land was part of an old crown- land grant given to Captain Daniel Goodwin in the year 1642. Daniel Fox inherited the property in 1652 and in the following year built the main structure of the house known as Wilton.

The name Wilton comes from the lavish home on the River Thames in England, built by the first Earl of Pembroke. In 1879 Harper's Magazine described Wilton House in Virginia as "one of the landmarks of Virginia." Four different families made Wilton their home before William Churchill II bought it in 1762. The following year Churchill built an addition to the home in exactly the same style architecture as the original. There is a date brick on the rear wall of the extension marked "WC1763" which is believed to be WC for William Churchill. The two story extension on the rear of the center hall added two rooms each on two floors. In the extension there is a kitchen with a massive brick fireplace. During the building of the extension the colonial Jacobean staircase was moved from the front hall and installed in the new hall joining the extension to the old structure. The walls are two foot thick and laid in precise Flemish bond brick. The roof is a traditional Dutch Gambrel roof covered with 26 inch split cypress shingles. Many of the original "H" and "L" handmade wrought iron hinges, secured by hand wrought nails, still support doors in the house. Tiny bits of crushed oyster shells can be seen in the original mortar. The original flooring still strong and untouched by paint, shellac or varnish shows little wear after so many years. Painted mantels appear to be protected by the original milk based paints believed to have been used when it was built.

William Churchill II was the grandson of William Churchill who came to Middlesex County from North Aston, Oxfordshire, England. William Churchill II lived with his family at Bushy Park, an estate on the Rappahannock River. Following a devastating fire at their home in Bushy Park, William Churchill II moved to the Wilton House. The history of Wilton gets a little murky but it is believed that in 1781 British privateers who were known to have raided Rosegill plantation in Urbanna and many homes up and

down the Piankatank River, probably raided Wilton as well. Wilton remained in the Churchill family for nearly 150 years.

The house has four large bedrooms, a pair of living rooms, a dining room and what will be a kitchen. The present kitchen boasts a fireplace, but little more. The massive Wilton Plantation earned a sizeable fortune for the Churchill family. In the following years the home belonged to Eliza Churchill Darby who sold it to James Jones. Hard times caused the Jones family to sell off sections of the original 6000 acre plantation in 1865.

Between 1938 and 1939 Gerald Ballantine Sr. decided to buy an old house to store his collection of American antiques. He had been living in Columbus, Ohio where he ran a grocery business. At that time, he was actively involved in buying antiques as was his father before him in Urbana, Ohio. When Ballantine Sr. bought Wilton, it consisted of 400 acres. He lived mainly in the new section while using the original section as a warehouse for his extensive collection of American antiques. There were months and months

of negotiation going on before the final deal for \$10,000 was settled by 1940. It was the foresight of Gerald Ballantine Sr. that has preserved Wilton in its untouched condition. With his sharp eye and vast experience with the value of old things, he knew one day there would be someone who would be willing and able to restore Wilton to its original glory. One of the first things Gerald Ballantine Sr. did after he bought Wilton was to repair the roof and stop the leaking that had by that time already damaged some of the plaster.

Gerald Ballantine Sr. used to hold antique auctions on the grounds of

Wilton every month. The rest of the time he would drive through Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and several other states buying antiques he liked. His son, Gerald Ballantine Jr. was ten years old when he first lived at Wilton. He said the walls upstairs had a space nearly 3 feet wide in which he played as a child and recalls being told that during the Civil War soldiers were hidden in those spaces to avoid capture by Union troops.

Eliza Churchill Darby was the last Churchill to have owned Wilton. She died in 1850. Gerald's favorite Wilton ghost story has to do with a black dog mentioned above. Gerald recalls his parents going on

a trip and leaving him home alone with a family friend named “Pic” who was aware of the story about the black dog. Pic made it a special point to lock all the doors just before they retired for the night. Gerald said the next morning when they both awoke; all the doors had been unlocked. With no one else in the house, Ballantine believes it had to have been the ghostly black dog that unlocked the doors.

Gerald said when his father bought Wilton there was a wine cellar in the basement. At one time it was stocked with wine casks. During the years Gerald Ballantine Jr. owned Wilton, he replaced the windows, the roof and worked, at considerable expense, to maintain the house in good condition. In 2002 Ballantine sold Wilton to Virginia Preservation. Wilton is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Wilton had been on the market for years when Stephen Foster discovered it.

Foster is an attorney with a passion for historic homes. Foster told me: “I first learned of Wilton half a dozen years

ago when I was browsing the Preservation Virginia website ([www. preservationvirginia.org](http://www.preservationvirginia.org)”). I remember being astonished that such a place existed, just sitting there waiting to be restored. A friend, Chandler Bataille, who had worked for Preservation Virginia, thought I would be a good prospect for buying one of the houses in the Preservation Virginia portfolio, and at his suggestion, I looked at the Dr. Tucker house in Buckingham County. Though I was interested in the house, it just wasn’t in the cards for me to undertake a renovation project back then. That changed two years ago when my wife died. I was looking for a project to devote myself to and that would, I suppose, help distract me, in some way, to help me move on. I thought again of the Dr. Tucker house in Buckingham, but Preservation Virginia had just accepted a contract on it. My attention then drifted to Wilton. I visited the house with realtor John Ryland last February, and though it was a much bigger and more expensive a project than I was looking for, I was at first intrigued, then enticed, and finally hooked.

Before committing to buy Wilton, I visited a number of other houses of the period and I was struck by how unique Wilton was in the sense that it remained largely unchanged from its 18th century beginnings. Almost all the other historical houses I visited had undergone extensive revisions by successive generations of owners, who might add, for example, Greek Rival columns, say, to a plainer 18th century façade. War, or simple neglect, meant that other grand houses or significant parts of them had to be substantially reconstructed. And the 20th century brought modern systems and “ambitious” restorations that sometimes seemed to do more harm than good. None of that happened to Wilton.

It just survived there – with the help, of course of the Ballantine family and then Preservation Virginia — in its early, gracious, pristine state. I still find it hard to believe that it took so long for Preservation Virginia to find a buyer – and that that buyer is now me.”

The house will be restored to be a private residence, but Foster is not sure for whom. At this point, it is a project

for him which he expects will take 2 to 3 years. Once the home is fully restored, he will furnish it and may or may not decide to live there full time. One of the major challenges Foster faces is to restore the home within the strict guidelines that will keep it as an authentic historic home. Potential buyers over the years have been dissuaded by the covenants that exist on the property. Foster said, “If you don’t like the covenants then you can’t like the property.” Foster said he has no problem with the covenants and is working closely with the Virginia Department of Historic Research of Preservation Virginia to keep within their guidelines.

Ms. Sarah Whiting, Director of Community Resources & Outreach for PRESERVATION VIRGINIA told me: “Properties sold through Preservation Virginia’s Revolving Fund Program are not typical real estate. Often the properties sit vacant for years before we rescue them from demolition, as was the case with Wilton, or severe neglect. It takes a special person like Mr. Foster who not only can see the unparalleled architectural beauty under the years of wear and tear, but has the willingness to undertake the challenging restoration. Mr. Foster has demonstrated

to us that he has a sensitive rehabilitation plan that respects and preserves the original historic fabric while abiding by the protective easements in place. We are thrilled to have sold Wilton to him.

When I visited Wilton in December, work in it had already begun. The floors were covered so that some of the plaster and lathe that had become unkeyed could be repaired without damage to the wood floors. Foster said he was going to work on the moisture problems. One of the things that attracted Foster to Wilton is the fact that it has been substantially untouched from the time it was inhabited by the Churchill family. Untouched and in original condition is a restorer’s fondest hope. One exception are the front steps which were repaired by then owner Clarence Palmer using tombstones he had a man named Walter Hooks remove from the graveyard on the property then use them to repair the front steps.

There is an interesting small wooden house near Wilton House. It was moved by Gerald Ballantine Jr. about 1970 from a farm in Reeves, Va. at the request of a long time family friend called “Pic”. His actual name was Harold Richardson. Pic knew Gerald Sr. from back in the days they lived in Columbus, Ohio.

Pic was an expert in Queen Anne antiques and would accompany Gerald Sr. on buying trips. He lived with the Ballantines then eventually moved to the little house that was actually a hand hewn log cabin covered with weather board.

Foster is eager to get the house back to the condition it was during the time of William Churchill with discreet additions to make it compatible with modern living. Back in the time of Churchill there was no indoor plumbing. Slaves carried out the chamber pots and brought in fresh water. Cooking was done in a separate building and food was brought into the house by house slaves. In fact there is a wooden building to the rear of Wilton House that may have been the kitchen and possibly slave quarters. The majority of the slaves who worked on the plantation lived on property that was later owned by freed slaves from the Burrells family. A plantation the size of Wilton would have required hundreds of slaves to work the crops.

Like Gerald Ballantine Sr. and Gerald Ballantine Jr., Stephen Foster has fallen in love with Wilton. It is Foster's turn to be the owner custodian of a truly amazing historical home. Foster's plans are ambitious and he will no doubt face many challenges not yet discovered. We look forward to seeing the completed project and Foster's promise that when he is finished it will be perfectly restored to what Wilton was when it was the home of William Churchill. Wilton will be preserved for generations to come. They will thankfully be able to know and understand what life was like in Virginia three hundred years ago.