

Haven For Patriots During Rebellion Against England

(One of a series of articles on places of historical interest in the Smyrna-Clayton area. This series is sponsored by the Duck Creek Historic Society and will appear periodically.)

Just off the duPont Highway near the town of Smyrna sits an old English Manor House surrounded by a large grove of trees. The appearance of the place is both mysterious and intriguing. It is impressive, not only because of its aura of antiquity but as a result of its history during the stirring times of our rebellion against England when our ancestors were forming this small republic which has grown since then from 13 states to 50. Belmont Hall was then a veritable nest of Delaware patriots, having been the meeting place for the first state's first assembly and the Council of Safety, while three of the men connected with it became Presidents of Delaware: John Cook, Thomas Collins and John Clark.

Built on a tract of land granted by William Penn in 1684 and known as Pearman's Choice, there was little information about "The Manor House near Duck Creek Cross Roads" until Thomas Collins purchased it in 1771, making extensive improvements to it at that time. From then on it has come down through the family in this manner: Elizabeth Collins, Thomas Collins' sister, married her first cousin, John Cook. Their grandson, John Cloak, bought it from his Collins cousin in 1827. John Cloak left it to his daughter, Caroline Elizabeth Cloak Peterson Speakman, who in turn left it to her son, Cummins E. Speakman, and it is now in possession of his family.

The exciting history of Belmont Hall during the Revolution had been firmly planted in John Cloak's mind as a boy by his grandmother Elizabeth Collins Cook, and his mother, Elizabeth Cook Cloak. His father, Ebenezer Cloak, fitted out a privateer, sailed against

the British on the Delaware, was captured and died a pestilential death along with 11,000 other American patriots in British prison ships in New York harbor. After her husband's death Elizabeth Cloak, with her two fatherless boys, went to live with her mother on the Cook plantation adjoining Belmont.

Both John Cook and Thomas Collins died in 1789, the year that John Cloak was born. At the Cook farm the two little boys sat spellbound by the crackling fire on long winter evenings as their grandmother and mother told them story after story of the heroic roles their father, their grandfather and great uncle had played in helping to make little Delaware the first state of the 13

federated states known as the United States of America. Grandmother Cook told how her husband was made high sheriff in 1772, was chief justice of Kent County, purchaser for the army, was elected to the first assembly in 1776, was a member of the committee which designed the great seal for the state, became speaker of the house and the sixth president when John Dickinson resigned to become Chief Justice of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. John's excitement grew as his grandmother related the chain of events which led the rebellious Colonial citizens to take the final decisive step leading to independence. Breathlessly he listened as she told him how she and his mother used to ride on horseback across the King's Highway to Belmont to help her brother Thomas Collins and Sarah, his wife, mould bullets in front of the old fireplace. These bullets were used by the brigade which Thomas

Collins had organized himself at his own expense and which then garrisoned the mansion house. When she arrived at the part of the story where the British sailed up the river at the rear of the house, shooting the sentinel stationed on the roof in a quick foray, John

Additional pictures on Page 10

could see in his mind's eye, as he had so often seen in reality, the very blood stains on the floor of the room where the sentry died; the room was afterwards called "The Soldier's Room". Young John knew full well that if Elizabeth Cook and Elizabeth Cloak had been captured by the British while moulding bullets, they would have been considered traitors and would have been given the death penalty. His eyes sparkled when his grandmother came to the story of how the Redcoats on another raid, with the capture of her

(Continued on Page Ten)

(Continued from Page One)

brother, Thomas Collins, in mind, failed to find him after searching the house, because old Jasper and another slave had hidden Uncle Thomas in one of the cuddies under the eaves. How proud John was to know that Uncle Thomas had occupied almost every office in Kent County, was elected the eighth president of Delaware, that he was Brigadier General of the Delaware militia under Washington and that the Collins cousins had a letter written to Uncle Thomas by Washington which he, John, was allowed to read whenever he asked. He saw the two Windsor chairs that Uncle Thomas and Grandfather Cook sat in when Uncle Thomas invited the Assembly to meet at Belmont Hall, because for a while after 1776 when Delaware became a state it was dangerous for the Assembly to meet in New Castle as they had under the King.

Small wonder, then, that when John Cloak grew up he purchased Belmont Hall from his Collins cousins and added it to the Cook plantation across the Highway which came to him from Grandfather Cook. The passionate love that he had for his place he transmitted to his daughter and his grandson, who loved every stick and brick of it.

The first photograph we have of Belmont Hall was taken almost a hundred years ago; it has just been returned to us from Independence Hall where it had been on loan since 1875.

In this photograph the beautiful Flemish bond bricks had been painted a muddy brown; the front porch and a bay window had been added, providing the last word in Victorian taste.

In 1920 it took two workmen all summer to scrub the paint off the bricks with wire brushes and strong acid. In 1922, when a fire destroyed the third floor, burning off the porch and the bay window, the old house was revealed as it was in the beginning, a charming example of Colonial architecture.

The plan of the house is U-shaped with the front section of typical Georgian symmetry, while the two rear wings have an almost medieval aspect. The Captain's walk on the roof is most unusual for a Colonial house in this area and the stately staircase which rises to the very summit of the house is perhaps the most attractive feature of the interior.

In Marian Harlan's **More Colonial Homesteads**, published in 1899, there are three very amusing photographs of the drawing room or parlor, the hall and the dining room, showing these three rooms in the heyday of their Victorian renovation, with the fireplaces almost completely closed and filled with shells as decoration. The beautiful panelling in the parlor had been painted a dark brown; red plush was pasted in strips around the panelled indentations over the fireplace. The dining room mantle had been chopped away, being replaced by a wooden contraption covered with curioques upon which were hung a formidable array of plates, cups and Victorian oddments.

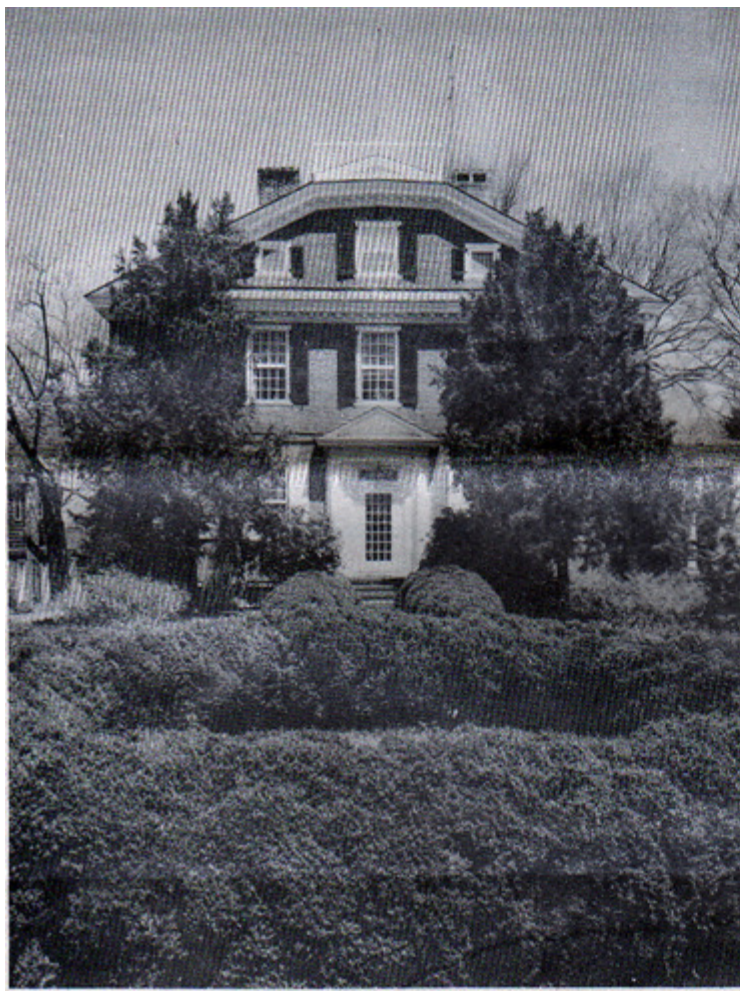
That the grounds were also affected by this Victorian whimsey is shown by newspaper clippings and Delaware histories.

Many people think that the rear view of Belmont is the most interesting. This opinion was shared by the famous Delaware artist Howard Pyle, who spent a weekend here in 1877 writing and illustrating an article for **Harpers Monthly**. Robert Shaw left some beautiful etchings of the house and front avenue when he visited here in 1900.

Belmont Hall is not a museum--perhaps it should be and one day no doubt will be, but at present it is a house that is very much lived in--

full of warmth, youth, the excitement, confidence and joy that is the birthright of those of us privileged to live in America.

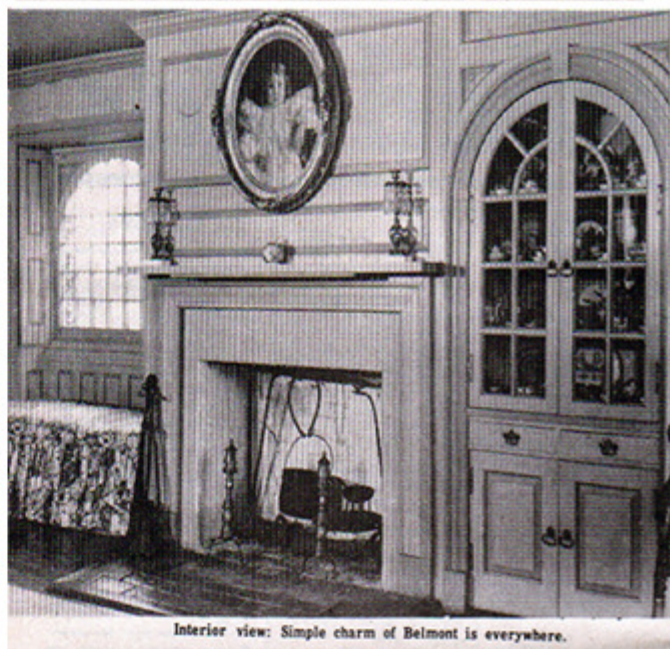
Between the house and its guests there is an instant love affair, and those who have visited it once ever afterwards refer to it affectionately as "Dear Old Belmont".



Historic Belmont Hall



Garden view from the north side of Belmont Hall.



Interior view: Simple charm of Belmont is everywhere.