

BELMONT HALL

One of the Headquarters of the Delaware Patriots during the Revolutionary War, and the Birthplace and present home of Mrs. Caroline E. Cloke Peterson Speakman, Regent of the Elizabeth Cook Chapter, D.A.R., Smyrna, Delaware.

On the State Road - - or as it was called in ye olden times - The Kings Highway - a short distance from the town of Smyrna, Delaware, stands "Belmont Hall", which apart from it's interesting history, is in one of the most beautiful spots in the State of Delaware. It is situated on a portion of six hundred acres of land formerly called Pearman's Choice, which was granted to Henry Pearman by William Penn, March 28, 1684. From this date to 1771 it belonged to different persons, namely Henry Pearman, a Mr. Strickland, and John Moore. The owner immediately preceding Governor Thomas Collins was John Moore. Of this person Thomas Collins purchased it May 24th, 1771.

Hon. Thomas Collins was a very prominent man as well as the Hon. John Cook in Revolutionary days. Collins as well as Cook was one of the six Presidents of Delaware. He was also Military Treasurer of the State and Brigadier General of the State Militia and fitted out at his own expense a Brigade and maintained it during the war.

Governor John Cook also owned about three hundred acres of this Pearman Choice tract, purchasing it about 1752. (The Great Grandfather of the present owner of Belmont Hall, Mrs. Caroline E. Colke Peterson Speakman, who inherited it from her father John Cloke in 1867. Fifty acres of this land is now added to the Farm known as Belmont Hall Farm.

Belmont Hall is one of the oldest, perhaps the oldest private house in the State of Delaware. The East and West Wing of the building being much older than the front building. The West Wing was supposed to have been built by Henry Pearman about 1685, and the East Wing by Strickland or Moore in 1736, while the imposing front was built by Governor Thomas Collins in 1772 or '73. Two pictures of the old house are to be seen in the Relic Room, Independence Hall, Philadelphia. One of the frames contains besides the picture, a piece of Continental Money signed by Governor Thomas Collins, 1776. The bricks in the construction of the old house were all brought from England as were also the nails, hinges and door knobs, which still bear the impress of the English stamp.

After remaining in the Collins family for a generation it was sold by Doctor William Collins, a son of the Governor, to John Cloke, Esq., a cousin of Doctor Collins and a gentleman of means and culture, January 3rd, 1827, who was the father of the present owner. Mr. Cloke resided here until he died in 1867.

Belmont Hall is one of the handsomest houses in the country, also one of the most interesting, being eloquent with memories of Revolutionary Days. In the observatory on the top of the mansion in 1776, General Collins placed a sentinel to watch the British who swarmed in the neighborhood. But one night ~~h~~ the poor fellow was shot to death

by a hostile scout. In trying to reach the room below in which he died, the wounded sentinel left the stains of his life blood in several places where they remain to be seen to this day. In the room where that soldier breathed his last there hung, framed for a long time, an autograph letter of General George Washington to General Thomas Collins, concerning his brigade or battalion at Morristown, which battalion of Delaware Militia saw active service and endured all the horrors and privations of that memorable campaign. Unfortunately this valuable document was either burned or stolen during a fire which broke out in the house of Mr. Cloke's brother where the letter had been transferred for a time. It was fortunately copied by a visitor at Mr. Cloke's in 1855.

In the parlor you will find the Old World fireplace with the blue and white tiles of the time of William and Mary, religiously preserved as it was when in front of it Governor or General Collins wrote his messages and planned with his officers the campaigns against the British. Here the small group of Patriots nightly compared notes before an old time log fire, while the female portion of the families who gathered there would knit and spin, mould bullets and discuss the latest war news. Of one of that group Elizabeth Cook I will speak more at length later

Here in this old Hall the Assembly and Council, now called Legislature met at one time during the year 1777 by invitation of Governor Collins who was then a member of the Council. At another time the Committee of Safety met here. Hence we see Old Belmont Hall in addition to its other memories, posing as one of the Capitols of the State of Delaware and here you will find an interesting relic of this event in the shape of two old fashioned arm chairs, which were presented to the present owner many years ago by the great grandson of Governor and General Thomas Collins, as a souvenir of that memorable occasion. In these two chairs one can easily imagine some of the Conscript Fathers of the State lazily seated a century or more ago, looking out over the beautiful park enjoying the good cheer lavishly spread before them by their Hospitable host.

The park and gardens around Belmont Hall cover about ~~twan~~ twenty acres. The garden is filled with all soets of unique ideas. Arches formed by allowing Norway Cedars to grow together and then trimming them into graceful curves. Hedges trimmed like low Egyptian Walls and all over the grounds are Rustic Seats and Rustic Summer Houses, arbors and tents. In the rear of the garden is a grove of trees and a ravine over which is a quaintly constructed rustia bridge.

The interior of the old house is in strict keeping with the grounds around it. A peacock with its argus-like tail stands proudly on the balustrade in the hall, nearit is an old fashioned time-piece on which is perched a wise but lifeless owl. The staircase is of oak and rises to the roof with as much dignity as that in any of Englands finest castles.

Elizabeth Cook, the paternal grandmother of Mrs. C.E. Cloke Peterson Speakman was the daughter of Governor John Cook, who was one of the men who played an important part among the galaxy of heroes who shaped the policy and won the cause of Independence for the State of Delaware more than one hundred years ago. His hand and mind and name may be found at some of the principal points in the Legislative and Military history of that period. In 1772 he was elected High Sheriff of Kent

County and at the first election of the General Assembly Oct. 25th, 1776, we see his name as a member of that body. October 28th of same year he was one of a committee consisting of McKean, Cook, and Robinson from the House of the Assembly and Sykes and VanDyke from the Council to advise the Great Seal of the State of Delaware. At the same session of the Legislature he was chosen one of the Justices of the Supreme Court, resigning in 1778. December 22, 1779 the Legislature appointed him to the new office of Purchaser for the army. Later he was Speaker of the Legislative Council and later one of the six Presidents of Delaware under the Constitution of 1776.

The husband of Elizabeth Cook was Ebenezer Cloke, a man who did his own part in the cause of American Independence. In his zeal for the good cause he fitted out a Privateer at his own expense, which he commanded to cruise against the British. But he was captured and consigned to the hold of a British Prison Ship. Here overtures were daily made to him and the other prisoners, of release provided they would take sides with Great Britain against the Colonies. But he resisted this bribe of a dishonorable freedom. Finally he was exchanged but died from the effect of the ship fever in great suffering.

Elizabeth Cook, history of Delaware tells us, sat many a night during the Revolutionary War moulding bullets by the old fireplace in the parlor at Belmont Hall with which her own patriotic relatives defended their firesides and their country.

Belmont Hall descended to Doctor William Collins by will of his father Governor Thomas Collins in 1789 and it was sold by Doctor Collins to John Cloke, Esq., January 3rd, 1827, who in 1867 left it to his daughter Mrs. Caroline E. Cloke Peterson, then the wife of J. Howard Peterson of Philadelphia, Pa. Mr. Peterson died in 1875 and several years later Mrs. Peterson married again, but is still the owner of Belmont Hall and the farm connected therewith.

EXCERPTS DATED 1896