

The Historic Kennon House at Pea Hill Plantation

by Fred D. Taylor

“Pea Hill... got its name, so the legend says, from a wildflower commonly called the pea pod flower, which used to grow near the creek on the property. Horsemen would ford the creek and then canter through the flower-carpeted low ground. To indicate where he went, a rider would say, “I crossed the ford and rode up that pea hill.” This expression caught the popular fancy, and so extended to the bordering creek.” – Miss Clara V. Kennon.

Originally a property encompassing over 1,200 acres of land, the beginnings of Pea Hill Plantation were created by a land grant from the King of England to the prominent Browne family of Surry County in the early 1700s. This land later became part of Brunswick County in 1720 as the Virginia colony expanded.

As time went on the property passed on through successive generations, finally coming to William Browne V, the last male heir of the family in 1786. When Browne died in 1799, it was left to his only daughter, Sarah (Sally) Edwards Browne, who was then but a mere five years old. Once she reached the age of majority, Sally Browne married John Tucker Bowdoin.

The Bowdoins had one child, a daughter – who they named Sarah Elizabeth “Courtney” Bowdoin. Like her mother before her though, Courtney was also orphaned, and then placed in the care of a trusted family friend, neighbor, and guardian, General John Hartwell Cocke (pronounced “Cox.”) As love and fate would have it, over time the young Bowdoin girl fell in love with her guardian’s son, Philip St. George Cocke.

At this point, Philip was a West Point graduate of the class of 1828, and served as a 2nd Lieutenant of artillery in the U.S. Army. He resigned in 1834 to marry Courtney and return to Virginia. The union of Bowdoin and Cocke brought Pea Hill Plantation to its third family of ownership.

By this time, Pea Hill was one of four thriving Brunswick County plantations managed and owned by the Cocke family. Between 1827 and 1832, over thirty “mud houses” were built on these properties, for use as slave and overseer quarters. The structure of these houses was constructed of a mix of clay, sand and straw, creating a “brick” wall

nearly twenty inches thick. For aesthetic and maintenance purposes, the outside of the wall was plastered with a lime mortar.

As the Cocke family made Richmond their primary home, day-to-day operations at Pea Hill Plantation were run by a local financial agent and an overseer. At its peak, the plantation boasted a stock of hundreds of cattle, sheep, and hogs; and grew cotton, corn, wheat, and tobacco, among numerous other vegetables and fruits.

But the War Between the States would change life at Pea Hill. When the War began, Philip St. George Cocke was commissioned a Brigadier General of Virginia volunteers and successfully commanded Confederate artillery at the First Battle of Manassas in July 1861.

Tragically, Philip died before the end of the year. Included among many family members left to mourn him was his oldest daughter, Louisiana. Louisiana was newly married to a respected gentleman, who some called a “bon vivant” (one fond of fine living), by the name of Richard Byrd Kennon. The two had wed in December of 1860 at the Cocke family home, Belmead, in Powhatan County, Virginia.

Like his father-in-law, when the Commonwealth of Virginia seceded, young Kennon offered his services to his native state and was commissioned a Lieutenant in the Governor’s Mounted Guard, a company of the 4th Virginia Cavalry. Kennon’s abilities as an officer were quickly demonstrated on and off the battlefield, resulting in his promotion to Assistant Adjutant and Assistant Inspector General on the staffs of such noted cavalry leaders as General J.E.B. Stuart, Thomas Lafayette Rosser, and James Dearing.

Kennon served notably through the War’s end, reaching the rank of Captain and concluded his service with the surrender and parole of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865.

After the War, with families struggling to survive during Reconstruction, the Kennons - now with six children - moved to Brunswick County to live at Pea Hill in 1877. Here, the Kennons made their permanent home and Richard Byrd Kennon managed the farm until his death in 1892.

Members of the Kennon family continued to live at Pea Hill until the death of the last surviving daughter, Louisiana Barraud “Loulie” Kennon, in 1965. Out of ten children born to the Kennon family, only seven reached maturity, and none married.

Due to this, the property was sold by distant heirs of the Kennon estate to members of the nearby Colony Club. It then remained vacant until 1973, when Hunter and Kathleen Wright purchased the Kennon residence with the intent of bringing it back to life.

It was through Kathleen's vision that the house was saved, restored, and expanded to operate as a restaurant and gift shop known as the Kennon House Restaurant. Kathleen Wright ran the restaurant until 2003, when she passed on the reins to Dennis Monds, who continued the restaurant's legacy for another twenty years.

Having entered its 50th year and beyond, this old "mud house" – the only one of its kind left in Brunswick County, and of but few remaining in Virginia - begins its next chapter.

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Update added by the Kennon House:

Additional owner-investors became involved in 2023-2024, facilitating significant renovations, updates, and repairs to preserve its legacy and prepare it for the next 50 years. This included establishing the Kennon Room Museum. The special history room was designed in a joint effort by the University of Virginia and Historian Fred Taylor.

Beginning in 2025, new Managing Owners of the restaurant, Kerry Huff and Pete Richardson, along with chefs Sophia and Coop, and their dedicated kitchen and service staff, have taken the reins to continue focusing on its roots and Kathleen's vision.