

Liberia Plantation History

Robert “King” Carter, (1663-1732) the wealthiest, and perhaps the most influential Virginian of his time, left 330,000 acres of land and an estate inventory that took 65 pages to list. Of this, the 1,660-acre parcel of the Lower Bull Run Tract passed to his second son Robert II, then to his daughter Priscilla Mitchell, and eventually to her daughter, Harriett Bladen Mitchell in 1824.

Harriett and her husband William James Weir built an architecturally distinctive five bay brick house that integrated Georgian and Federal design components. The plantation, known as “Liberia” included a post office, general store, Liberia Academy, family cemetery and other outbuildings. In 1841, Harriet died. In 1860, Liberia had 80 slaves, the largest slaveholding operation in Prince William County.

When the Civil War erupted in 1861, several Weir sons enlisted in the Confederate Army and William and Louisa (his second wife) stayed behind to operate the plantation. June 1 to September 12, 1861, the house served as the headquarters for Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard, CSA (except for three days – July 18-20 – when he moved forward to the Wilmer McLean House south of Blackburn’s ford). The evening of the Battle of First Manassas, it is thought that President Jefferson Davis met with his generals here and made the fateful decision not to pursue Union troops into Washington. On July 22, 1861, at Liberia, President Davis awarded Beauregard a battlefield promotion.

In mid-March 1862, William and Louisa fled Liberia in advance of General Irwin McDowell, USA, leaving trusted slaves to pack up the family belongings and protect the house. McDowell established his military headquarters here. In June 1862, President Abraham Lincoln, concerned about General McDowell’s recovery from an injury, came to Liberia to confirm the general’s health. By the end of the Civil War, Liberia was the only significant structure to remain standing on the plains of Manassas.

It was to this devastated landscape that the Weir sons returned to farm their holdings. Despite their efforts, they were unable to return the plantation to its former grandeur. In 1888, Robert Weir sold the property to Robert Portner, who developed the property into a successful dairy operation. In 1947 Liberia was sold again Hilda and I.J. Breedens. On December 31, 1986, the Breedens donated Liberia mansion and 5.6 acres of land surrounding the house to the City of Manassas. The City purchased another 12.6 acres to buffer the site from future development.

Historical Context

July 21-22, 1861

A Gathering at Liberia

From research by Thomas J. Stevenson III

July 21, 1861 at Manassas (Bull Run) was a sobering experience for all concerned. The first major land battle of the American Civil War yielded 847 dead and over 4,000 injured or missing. By early evening, Union soldiers were in retreat – their dead and wounded scattered along the Warrenton Turnpike. The Confederate generals, unsure of their enemy's plans, ordered reconnaissance. When troops in the Stone Bridge area confirmed the Union's retreat to Centreville, it was clear that the day belonged to the Confederacy.

The Start of the Battle of First Manassas

In the early hours of the morning of July 21, 1861, Union troops marched from Centreville directly toward the Stone Bridge and northwest to Sudley Springs while artillery was fired across the river in the Centreville Road area, damaging the McLean House as General P.G.T. Beauregard was eating his breakfast there. Confederate troops under Evans, Bee, and Bartow suffered powerful blows that pushed their men south from Sudley Springs to Henry Hill.

Henry Hill

General Joseph E. Johnston rode with Beauregard to Henry Hill around midday. As their reinforcements arrived, General Barnard Bee encouraged his bloodied men to see how Colonel Thomas Jackson and his men stood like a "stone wall," ready to fight. The new line held. Beauregard's horse was killed under him by the explosion of a shell, but he escaped unhurt. Seizing a horse from a junior officer, Beauregard continued his command.

By mid-afternoon, the Confederates had forced the Union forces north across the Turnpike, beyond the Stone House, until they fled towards Leesburg and Centreville. Johnston ordered a pursuit, which was blocked by Union artillery.

The CSA President Arrives

In Richmond, Jefferson Davis learned by telegram when the Union forces engaged his army on the morning of the 21st and hastily took a train to Manassas Junction. He ran his horse at full gallop to the battlefield to meet with Beauregard while Johnston remained at the Lewis House (Portici) to consider plans for pursuit. After dark, Johnston headed toward Manassas Junction to check on the situation there. Heading south on the Manassas-Sudley Road, he was intercepted by Beauregard and Davis who convinced him to accompany them to the Brick House at Liberia for a meeting. They arrived there about 11 p.m.

Pursuit into Washington: Yes or No?

Gathered at Liberia, Davis, Johnston, Beauregard and Colonel Thomas Jordan, Beauregard's chief of staff, sat at a table conversing for as much as an hour about the day's activities without mention of a pursuit into Washington. Then Jordan received a message from Captain Alexander that Confederate troops had snuck as far as Centreville and observed Union troops pulling out and heading towards Washington.

Davis responded with jubilation. After he learned that no Confederate troops were pursuing the Union soldiers out of Centreville, he urged immediate action. He asked which men were in the best shape to mount a fresh attack on the Union army. General Bonham's brigade was suggested and, after a painful silence, Colonel Jordan requested that Davis dictate the order.

Beauregard argued that the troops had already been stretched beyond their means, not having had a drink or food since the early morning. Those that *were* able to fight, he believed, were too few to take on an unknown force at or beyond Centreville. Johnston argued that his army was too disorganized by the day's events to begin a new offensive at that late hour, stating in his report that his army was "more disorganized by victory than that of the United States by defeat." He pointed out the lack of ammunition, food, and transportation to support such a movement.

Faced with his generals' concerns, the unknown state of the troops at Centreville and an incessant downpour of rain, Davis agreed that pursuit should be halted until morning.

Special Order for Pursuit

Davis' original order was likely destroyed, and Special Order, No. 140 was written for the morning of July 22:

"I. General Bonham will send, as early as practicable in the morning, a command of two of his regiments of infantry, a strong force of cavalry, and one field-battery, to scour the country and roads to his front, toward Centreville. He will carry with him abundant means of transportation for the collection of our wounded, all the arms, ammunition, and abandoned hospital stores, subsistence, and baggage, which will be sent immediately to these headquarters.

General Bonham will advance with caution, throwing out an advanced guard and skirmishers on his right and left, and the utmost caution must be taken to prevent firing into our own men. "Should it appear, while this command is occupied as directed, that it is insufficient for the purposes indicated, General Bonham will call on the nearest brigade commander for support.

"II. Colonel P. St. George Cooke, commanding, will dispatch at the same time, for similar purposes, a command of the same size and proportions of infantry, artillery, and cavalry on the road *via* Stone Bridge; and another command of two companies of infantry and one of cavalry on the road by which the enemy retreated toward and *via* Sudley's Mills.

"By command of Brigadier-General Beauregard:

"Thomas Jordan, A.A. *Adjutant-General.*"