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, Harriett 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. Breeden. 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.
William James Weir (1792-1867) served in the Virginia Militia in the War of 1812. He was a merchant in Tappahannock and Centreville before he and Harriett Bladen Mitchell Weir moved to their new plantation Liberia. An early member of the American Colonization Society (to relocate free Blacks to Africa) Weir stated after the Civil War that he did not vote for secession and always treated his slaves well. He developed Liberia into a thriving business, selling grain, flour, and fruits and shipping over the Orange & Alexandria Railroad. He served as postmaster for the post office “Liberia” 1829-1865.

In 1867 he returned to Liberia and died there.


In 1824 she inherited a portion of the Upper Bull Run Tract from her mother. On that considerable Carter property she and William built Liberia Plantation.

She was described as “amiable in disposition guileless in spirit and passed through life most beloved by those who knew her best.” Harriet was the mother of 13 children, of whom 9 survived. She died in 1841.

William remarried in 1842.
Louisa Ball Weir (1797-1879)
The second wife of William James Weir, and cousin of Harriet Weir, Louisa was one of seven children born to the Hon. Spencer Ball and Elizabeth Landon Carter of Portici. Tutored at home, she was described as “thirsting after knowledge.”

In 1842, the same year her mother, her remaining parent died, Louisa married William Weir. Louisa was 45 years old. At that time, she owned 316 acres of the Portici estate. She enjoyed the comforts and prosperity of Liberia and was a gracious and entertaining hostess.

No images of Louisa have been found to date.

Rose O’Neal Greenhow (1817-1864)
A charming and popular Washington hostess, Greenhow used her contacts and talents spy for the Confederacy. On July 10 and July 16 she sent coded messages to Gen. Beauregard about Union Gen. McDowell’s advance to Manassas. The information brought General Johnston’s troops from the Shenandoah Valley while Beauregard shifted his own troops to meet the federals. After the Union suffered a stunning defeat, Greenhow received from Thomas Jordan an expression of Jefferson Davis’s gratitude for her loyal service.

Rose’s cipher code
Brigadier General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard (1818-1893) Army of the Potomac
Trained as a civil engineer at the U.S. Military Academy, he served with distinction in the Mexican-American War. With secession, he became the first Confederate brigadier general. In April 1861 he commanded the defenses of Charleston, South Carolina, and earned the title “Hero of Fort Sumter.”

In June Beauregard applied his engineering skills to the design and construction of a series of 17 earthworks defending Manassas Junction. In July he was hailed as the victor at the First Manassas (Bull Run). On July 23, Johnston recommended to President Davis that Beauregard be promoted to full general. Davis approved and Beauregard's date of rank was established as the date of his victory, July 21, 1861.

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General Joseph Eggleston Johnston (1807-1891) Army of the Shenandoah
Johnston was also trained as a civil engineer at the U.S. Military Academy and also served with honors in the Mexican-American War. By 1860 he had achieved the rank of brigadier general as Quartermaster General of the U.S. Army. When his native state of Virginia seceded, Johnston resigned his commission, the highest-ranking officer to join the Confederacy. He organized the Army of the Shenandoah in July 1861.

Johnston was the senior Confederate commander at the First Manassas, and made what most to consider to be the tactical decisions that day, but the victory is usually credited to his subordinate, Beauregard.
Jefferson Davis, (1808 - 1889) President of the Confederate States of America
An 1828 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he served as a first lieutenant in the Indian wars in the northwest. In 1854 he was elected representative from Mississippi to the U.S. Congress. He rejoined the military to fight the Mexican-American War, completed a tour of duty and was appointed to the U.S. Senate in 1847. His political career included Secretary of War for President Pierce (1853-1857), back to the Senate again, and finally as CSA President in 1861.

When Virginia joined the Confederacy, Davis moved his government to Richmond in May 1861. Davis and his family took up his residence there at the White House of the Confederacy in late May 1861.

Thomas Jordan, (1819-1895) Assistant Adjutant- General, First Corps, Army of the Potomac
An 1840 U.S. Military Academy graduate, Jordan’s military career included the Seminole and Mexican Wars. At First Manassas he was Beauregard's chief of staff, directed reinforcements to the front and escorted President Davis to the battlefield.

He had established a spy ring in Washington, led by Rose Greenhow and received messages that led to the Confederate victory at First Manassas.

Jordan served as Beauregard’s secretary and confidant and often communicated Beauregard's’ military opinions to Johnston and Davis when his superiors were less inclined to spar with Beauregard himself.
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.”