



You too can be a Virginia squire. It's the ultimate Virginia fantasy — to be the proprietor of your own plantation. But these days, a good plantation doesn't come cheaply. With prices well in the millions for just a modest 18th-century house on a few hundred acres, only a few can afford what is the prize of Virginia life — a good farm with a substantial manor house that sits at the end of a long, tree-lined drive. 🌸

This ambition is not a new; it started early on, in the 17th century when the Virginia colony was young. Then, a *nouveaux riche* planter class imitated their siblings back in England and began to build sumptuous manor houses with their newly minted tobacco fortunes. They defined a

Play Among the Plantation Set

way of life not just for Virginia, but the nation, as Monticello, Mount Vernon, Carter's Grove and Kenmore became synonymous with American home design and lifestyle. No matter that many colonial plantation owners went into hock up to their ears to Scottish factors. 🌸 Even the Civil War could not break the appeal of the plantation. While many Virginia families went bust caring for their broken-down piles, new generations of new money from up North paid the notes, fixed the old porches and lived the storied Virginia life. By the 20th century and with the invention of farm tractors and electricity, plantation life became much easier without having to look after scores of slaves, overseers and assorted hangers-on. The new owners could have all the fun and prestige of a few hundred (or thousand) acres and a big house, and none of the headache of the chattel system. 🌸 It stands to reason that today, few would be interested in dumping a fortune into an old place with rotting sills, creaky floors, antiquated plumbing and underpowered electrical systems, only for the allure of the old manse and the thrill of an afternoon stroll with a walking stick. But the attraction lives on. Indeed, Dave Matthews Band manager Coran Capshaw recently fell under the spell of Albemarle's Seven Oaks plantation, which he bought and will graciously open this year for Garden Week. It's as sure a sign as any that even Virginia's trendiest can't get away from the idea that there is nothing more fun than mucking about barns in an agrarian kingdom all your own. 🌸 Since the plantation life doesn't come cheaply, private farms, house museums and state parks have conjured up all kinds of ways to make the plantation pay by offering up their cottages, kitchens and garages to those of us whose aspirations run ahead of our patience and pocketbooks. 🌸 Carry on, Virginia squire, if only for a weekend!

By Elizabeth Cogar, Ann Cochran and Beth Sutton



The Great Hall was the most public area of the house. Guests were received here and, on special occasions, dances and receptions were held under the room's Corinthian capitals. Right, the dining room and below, a view of the house showing Stratford's famed raised English basement.



THE BOYHOOD HOME OF ROBERT E. LEE OPENS THE ESTATE GATES TO PAYING GUESTS WHO WOULD LIKE TO LIVE THE LIFE OF THE LEES. DARE WE CALL IT THE STRATFORD HALL RESORT?

BY ANN COCHRAN

“How close do you think we can get to the house?” I asked my husband. He rolled his eyes. “What if a door was left open and we could wander around?” I fantasized. “You’re going to get yourself shot someday,” mumbled my Midwestern, law-abiding spouse.

I was just kidding about jiggling doorknobs, but I was completely intrigued at the thought of being almost alone overnight on this 1,600-acre, early 18th-century estate on the Northern Neck. To the great relief of my husband Chuck, we spent the night at Stratford in the winter; snow and wind prevented me from doing much wandering around. My opportunity to explore came the next day, when we got up at sunrise to take photographs. On a still and soundless morning, I strolled up a long gravel road, imagining myself at Stratford in another era.



Stratford Hall

Would I have wanted to be Hannah Lee? The elder of the two Lee sisters, she married a much older man with a jealous streak. His will pre-

vented Hannah from inheriting his estate if she remarried. She ended up falling in love with her late husband’s physician. She and Dr. Hall lived together, had two children, and their union was accepted by the community ... but no marriage documents exist. Gotcha!

Hannah was rebellious in more ways than one. She complained to one of her brothers about the Declaration of Independence, specifically, about plans to tax women who were not allowed to vote, rightfully calling it taxation without representation. Her brother promised he would try to influence the other representatives of the young nation’s government, but he did not succeed. Alice Lee shared her sister’s independent spirit. She objected to her brother’s delay in distributing the assets of their father’s will. She decided to sell her share to another brother and move to London. She met and married an American in England, and returned with him to his home in Philadelphia.

The women of Stratford were not all equally blessed. I wouldn’t trade places with the young wife of Henry Lee IV, despite the fortune she inherited and lavished on Stratford. Anne and Henry’s only child fell to her death down the Great Hall stairs, just as a cousin had done in the recent past. Anne was so distraught that doctors prescribed morphine for her. She became addicted. It gets worse: Anne’s sister Elizabeth came to visit and had an affair with Henry Lee. She became pregnant. You’ll have to visit Stratford to find out the rest of the story. A teaser: Don’t forget to ask a docent about Divine Matilda.



Beyond all the female drama that fascinated me, Stratford produced many individuals who had a significant impact on American history. The White House and Mount Vernon may be the only residences with greater claims to fame. The most well known and revered of the Lees was Robert E. Lee, born to Henry “Light-horse Harry” Lee and Ann Carter Lee on January 19, 1807. Robert E. Lee’s grand-



Clockwise from left, the nursery at the Great House; waitress Andrea Suttle arrives with apple brown betty in the dining hall; the dining room at the Astor guest house; a specialty of Stratford Hall — Virginia ham, sweet potatoes, green beans and homemade corn bread; guests enjoy lunch in the airy eating space behind the dining hall.



father, Thomas Lee, was the one who built the brick Georgian Great House.

Thomas Lee was president of the Council of Virginia and an early advocate of western expansion. He and his wife produced six accomplished, patriotic men in addition to their two outstanding daughters. Richard Henry Lee and Francis Lightfoot Lee were the only brothers to sign the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Ludwell Lee was one of the first judges elected to Virginia's Supreme Court. William Lee and Arthur Lee were diplomats who worked to secure the European support during the Revolution. Philip Ludwell Lee was a planter and member of the Council of Virginia. A lover of horses, he imported an English race horse, Dotterel, to the estate and expanded its stables as well as Stratford's Landing, a busy shipping port back in the golden age of tobacco. As with the women, it wasn't all good for the men of Stratford. Light Horse Harry and his eldest son, Henry Lee IV, both mismanaged money and fell into heavy debt. Still, Stratford remained in the Lee family for the better part of a century.

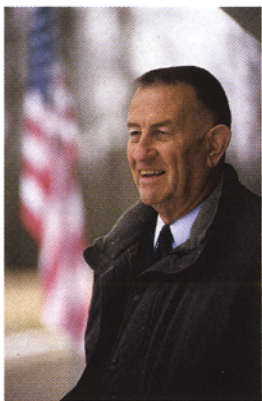
Architecturally, Stratford is recognized as one of the great houses of young America. Oddly, the architect is not known. There are only clues and guesses. The property's magnificent setting, on a high bluff above the Potomac River, and its bold architectural style set it apart from any other colonial house. It is flanked by two main gardens: a formal boxwood garden to the east and to the west, and orderly beds of 18th-century vegetables, herbs and flowers. The property also has a natural phenomenon that exists in only three other places in the world: Miocene-era cliffs meet the Potomac River at Stratford. For visitors, there are miles of wildflower-rich nature trails and towering trees.

Getting back to female influences, we come full circle because Stratford would have crumbled if it weren't for a determined group of ladies who got together in 1929 to give Robert E. Lee's neglected home the same respect as George Washington's. Inspired by what the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association had achieved and undaunted by the Depression, they formed the Robert E. Lee Memorial Association.

Thanks to those ladies and the dedicated board members who follow in their footsteps, visitors from around the world can tour the Great House, slave quarters, gardens and grounds of Stratford Hall Plantation. Stay for lunch after your tour, in the Plantation Dining Room, known for its fried chicken and country ham. Spend the night if you can; the association is now allowing the rental of rooms at the 15-room Cheek Guest House and a five-room log cabin, the Astor Guest House. The two lovely guesthouses are available for as little as \$115 per night for a double room.

Walk around the grounds and soak up the atmosphere all you like — just don't jiggle any doorknobs.

Rates for the rooms at the Cheek or Astor guest houses are reasonable from \$115. Continental breakfast included. At StratfordHall.org or (804) 493-8038 or (804) 493-8371.



Friendly faces greet you at Stratford; Ben Reed works security at the front gate. Top, one of the farm goats.



Robert E. Lee never forgot his boyhood home. In fact, on Christmas Day, 1861, in the midst of war, the Commander in Chief of the Confederate forces wrote to his wife:

"...I wish I could purchase Stratford. That is the only place I could go to, now accessible to us, that would inspire me with feelings of pleasure and local love. You and the girls could remain there in quiet. It is a poor place, but we could make enough cornbread and bacon for our support and the girls could weave us clothes. I wonder if it is for sale and how much." — GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE

Airville Plantation

LOCATION: Gloucester **DESCRIPTION:** Three-story Federal style with spiral staircase and cozy library with fireplace. The Overseer's Cottage is one of three. **PLANTATION DATE:** 1756 **ACRES:** 400 **OWNERS/INNKEEPERS:** Larry and Cathie Cohen, (804) 694-0287, e-mail: airville@visi.net, Airvilleplantation.com **RATES:** \$105-\$160 **SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS:** Dependencies include lumber house, smokehouse and round dairy. Grounds feature orchards and vegetable gardens that yield the makings of homemade jams, jellies and preserves as well as fresh fruits and vegetables in season. On site there's a pool, hiking and pier fishing on Mobjack Bay. **MINT JULEP FACTOR:** You enter through ivy-covered gates and proceed down a lane bordered by an allee of cedars and dogwoods.



Amphill Plantation Bed & Breakfast

LOCATION: Cartersville **DESCRIPTION:** Built on part of the original British land grant passed down to Randolph Harrison, who commissioned his cousin Thomas Jefferson to design an expansion. Today, the carefully preserved buildings are now on the Virginia and National Registers. The pace is slow, and the eight guestrooms, including those in the weaver's cabin and summer kitchen, spacious. **PLANTATION DATE:** 1732 **ACRES:** 60 **OWNERS:** Carol Eltzroth and George Costen, (804) 375-3539 **RATES:** \$120-\$175 **SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS:** "The Girls," a herd of pet cows; cookhouse, smokehouse and weaver's and candlemaker's cottages; flower and vegetable gardens. **MINT JULEP FACTOR:** The Jefferson connection — it's the only Jefferson-designed structure accepting overnight guests. Plus, 14 fireplaces.

Anderson Cottage Bed & Breakfast

LOCATION: Warm Springs **DESCRIPTION:** Behind the rambling old main house is the Kitchen Cottage, an 1820 brick kitchen with two bedrooms, two baths, a living room, playroom and common room with kitchen, fireplace and VCR. Cottage guests are served breakfast there. **PLANTATION DATE:** ca. 1820 **ACRES:** 2 **OWNER/INNKEEPER:** Jean Randolph Bruns, (540) 839-2975, bbonline.com/va/anderson **RATES:** \$70-\$125 **SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS:** Puzzles, games, large library, croquet and badminton. **MINT JULEP FACTOR:** That generational thing; it's been in the present owner's family since the 1870s. Plus, rocking chairs on the porch and a hammock by the stream.

Belle Isle State Park

LOCATION: Lancaster County on the Rappahannock River, near Lively **DESCRIPTION:** On the National Register of Historic Places, Belle Isle has a 33-acre peninsula at the mouth of Deep Creek with two houses called the Bel Air area. The 1942 Bel Air Mansion was designed by Colonial Williamsburg architect Thomas T. Waterman and constructed with materials from nearby plantations. The cottage is just 10 feet off the creek and stocked with cabin-style furnishings. Two canoes and four bicycles are available. **PLANTATION DATE:** 1692 (property) **ACRES:** 733 **OWNER:** You — Virginia's Department of Conservation and Recreation, dcr.state.va.us/parks/bellisile.htm, (800) 933-PARK **RATES:** \$289 per night/ \$1,735 per week for Bel Air Mansion; \$122 per night/ \$733 per week for the guesthouse. Discount offered if both Mansion and guesthouse are rented. **SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS:** Wildlife (herons, osprey, hawks, bald eagles, deer, turkeys, groundhogs), guided canoe trips, fishing, snack bar with boat and bicycle rentals, bridle paths, hiking trails, picnic shelters. **MINT JULEP FACTOR:** Very, very high; the terrace of Bel Air mansion offers expansive view of wide lawn and Rappahannock River.

Briar Patch Bed and Breakfast

LOCATION: Middleburg **DESCRIPTION:** Briar Patch began as a simple log cabin in 1805 and evolved into an estate called Hillcrest with seven-bedroom main house, two cottages, a studio, 10-stall stable and milking parlor by the 1860s. The Civil War took its toll, and it struggled to survive until the 1960s when it was restored. Today, seven guestrooms, named for flowers, are located in the main farmhouse, but visitors can opt for the one-bedroom white cottage. **PLANTATION DATE:** 1805 **ACRES:** 47 **OWNERS/INNKEEPERS:** Ellen Goldberg, Dan Haendel, (703) 327-5911, (866) 327-5911, e-mail: info@briarpatchbandb.com, Briarpatchbandb.com **RATES:** \$95-\$225 overall; \$175-\$225 for the cottage **SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS:** Pool, hot tub, front porch views of mountains and horses. **MINT JULEP FACTOR:** A fine reputation: voted one of the Top 15 in the category of "Best in a Wine Region" by *Inn Traveler* magazine.

