

■ DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2011, we're making our way around the region, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country.

On this third stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN

STRATFORD HALL

by Audrey Lee Thomasson,
Contributing Writer

This year, Americans will commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. While there is no glory in a war that resulted in the deaths of over 620,000 Americans and a president, divided families and a nation, and left cities and lives in ruin, it is fitting that Cooperative Living journey down home to historic Stratford Hall Plantation for an examination of some of the truths behind the birthplace and heritage of the leader of the Confederate armies — General Robert E. Lee.

From the magnificent lawn fronting the Great House to the vast cliffs overlooking the Potomac River, Stratford Hall Plantation is a quiet spot in the Northern Neck that inspired grand decisions and far-reaching plans for the nation.

The Great House at Stratford Hall Plantation, birthplace of famed Civil War General Robert E. Lee.

Set on nearly 2,000 gently rolling acres along the Potomac near Westmoreland State Park and just downriver from the birthplace of George Washington, Stratford Hall is still a working plantation that offers a tranquil setting with hours of leisure activities for families.

Tour the 18-room Great House and hear plenty of “back room” stories of the Lee family from the guides. Learn how four generations of Lees lived almost entirely off the land during the 18th century.

The Great House was built in the shape of the letter “H” with

brick walls that are 18 and 24 inches thick. With a total of 10,800 square feet of living space, the family quarters on the second level are spacious while the ground level rooms include the school, wet and dry storage, spinning and weaving, warming kitchen and the housekeeper's chambers.

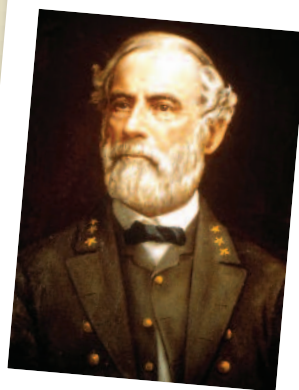
A few steps away from the Great House is a large brick building housing both a kitchen and laundry.

“It was the most active building on the plantation,” says guide Martha Newman.

At 3:30 every morning, slaves started the cooking fires in a hearth large enough to roast an entire ox. No matter how hot and humid the summer days became, cooking and baking continued for 12 hours.

Because of its proximity to the Great House, the newly restored Southwest Outhouse was a gathering place that housed slaves working in the home. There were many other slave quarters of lesser size scattered around the plantation to shelter some 200 indentured servants and slaves.

Overlooking a formal English garden is a burial vault built over the Lee family vaults. Plantings of herbs and vegetables mingle with espalier-trained fruit trees in the kitchen garden, while Sebrite “Colonial era” chickens still make a moveable feast of the weeds.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STRATFORD HALL PLANTATION

AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: In its day, Stratford was “a towne in itself” and an important 18th-century trading center. Four generations of Lees passed through the home while some 200 indentured servants, craftsmen and slaves lived on the grounds and kept the plantation productive.

LAND AREA: Today, there are some 1,900 nearly intact acres. In the 18th century, Stratford grew to nearly 6,600 non-contiguous acres. Due to wasteful agricultural practices of the time that rapidly exhausted the land, Thomas Lee and son, Philip Ludwell Lee, had to constantly acquire land in order to accommodate the ravenous tobacco plant.

ELEVATION: The rolling hills of the plantation sit approximately 75 feet above the Potomac at the “Cliffs.”

FACTOIDS: After generations of patriotic service building a nation and 32 years of defending America, the Civil War cost General Robert E. Lee his citizenship. When the war ended, he was not bitter, instead setting the example and encouraging others to move forward as a nation. “Abandon your animosities and make your sons Americans,” he said. However, his own application to regain citizenship was misplaced and he was not reinstated until 1975 — 105 years after his death.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STRATFORD HALL PLANTATION

1. Robert E. Lee’s baby crib in the bedchamber. **2.** Each generation of Lees had six to eight children. The Great House’s ground-floor schoolroom was in session six days a week year-round. It was also where the teacher slept. **3.** The West Garden contains fragrant old-fashioned daffodils, heritage roses, sweet-faced johnny-jump-ups, and many other 18th-century variety perennials, annuals, and bulbs. **4.** One popular Stratford event is the Christmas holiday celebration in the Great Hall.

The 16-stall stable and coach house displays a variety of 19th-century wheeled vehicles, including the Brema Coach that carried General Lafayette to Monticello in 1825.

THE PLANTATION NOW AND THEN

Miles of nature trails lead hikers through the preserve and by pastures of grazing Devon cattle, a variety brought from England in 1623. The flatlands are currently used for organic farming. And the beach offers kids adventure-hunting for sharks’ teeth and other fossils below the “Cliffs,” a rare geological phenomenon compacted with sea materials and fossils dated to some 15-million years old.

A reconstructed 18th-century gristmill is down the old tobacco-rolling road near the landing. At one time the wharf teemed with ships and activity, including a ship’s store, warehouse, many trade shops and a ship-building business. Tobacco was the principal crop, but by mid-century, the heyday of tobacco was past and it became necessary to cultivate other products, which were loaded onto one of the Lee vessels for market. Hurricanes destroyed all the structures at the landing, but a pond and dam still provide the water that flows through the reconstructed mill and turns the huge wheel and great millstone for grinding wheat and corn into products sold in the gift shop.

The shop is another lesson in 18th-century living, featuring Stratford’s famous homemade fruitcakes, plum puddings, apple chutney, ginger cookies and other Virginia-made foods. Local artisans created most of the pottery and crafts. Sales clerk **Gerry Burrell**, who started working there in August, says the best part of her job is “meeting all the wonderful people who visit the plantation.”

Tucked into the woodlands are charming guest cabins for folks looking to stay on the plantation for a few days. About a mile away is Westmoreland State Park for visitors who prefer camping in tents or RVs.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STRATFORD HALL PLANTATION



1. The stone and frame mill that is still used to grind wheat and corn into products sold in the plantation store. **2.** Stratford Hall's Executive Director Dr. Paul Reber. **3.** In the gift shop, Gerry Burrell sells products produced on the plantation. **4.** Guide Martha Newman talks to visitors about how clothing was made. **5.** Paul Mark, director of preservation, is working with the University of Georgia on a three-year study to determine how the plantation should be restored.

A rustic dining hall with stone fireplace and views of the woods serves visitors and guests. The plantation offers a wide variety of special events throughout the year, including a popular carriage show every three years. "Coaching Weekend" will be held May 7 – 8, featuring a parade of carriages, entertainment, vendors and artisans.

Also a big hit are the summer camp weekends for grandparents and their grandchildren, ages 6-12. Don't worry; the air-conditioned guest cabins are cozy enough to accommodate the many wedding parties and group conferences that frequent this destination.

But the main feature is always the Great House, considered to be the finest Georgian building constructed in America, according to Dr. Paul Reber, executive director of the plantation.

Dr. Reber notes the plantation is undergoing its first restoration since 1929, when Mrs. Charles Lanier took an option to purchase it, establishing the Robert E. Lee Memorial Foundation and organizing a board of directors made up of one woman from each state, much as it does today. Despite the Depression, the ladies raised the funds to purchase and save the plantation from ruin. The name Stratford, after Lee's ancestral estate in England, was expanded to Stratford Hall Plantation by the foundation.

As the current restoration progresses, throughout the house small patches of wall-board, flooring and finishes were removed allowing a peek at construction materials of the era.

"This was the home to four generations of Lees, including the first native governor of Virginia ..." says Dr. Reber. They were a family of loyal patriots who were "colonists, revolutionaries, nation builders and Secessionists," he said.

SHAPING HISTORY

There are probably few families that have a more intrinsic association with the flow of our nation's history than the Lees of Stratford Hall. The contributions they made to America are unsurpassed by any American family of the day. While their patriotism in shaping a new nation can be traced back to the arrival of Richard Lee I at Jamestown in the late 1630s, Stratford was built 100 years later by his grandson, Thomas Lee.

Thomas was a prominent politician and visionary who negotiated the treaty with the Iroquois Indians to open the Appalachian Trail and pave the way to westward expansion. He bought the land, 1,443 acres known as the "Cliffs," in 1717 for its sweeping view

of ship movements on the Potomac River. However, the family did not build on the property until the late 1730s, after they were burned out of their home on a nearby creek.

His sons were politically active. Brothers Richard Henry and Francis Lightfoot were signers of the Declaration of Independence. His great-grandson, Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee III was a Revolutionary War hero serving under General George Washington. He was a three-time one-term governor of Virginia. But he wasn't a farmer, so about the time his fifth son, Robert Edward Lee, was born in 1807, the family's finances were on a downhill spiral and Light Horse Harry was soon carried away to debtor's prison.

A LIFELONG IMPRESSION

Robert E. Lee was not quite four years old when the family moved from Stratford to a vastly different lifestyle in Alexandria. His eldest brother took over the plantation after marrying a young heiress, giving Robert the opportunity for boyhood visits. Stratford left an impression on him that he carried throughout his life.

Raised in humble surroundings, Robert E. Lee grew up to become one of the nation's greatest military leaders. He had served in the U.S. Army for 32 years when, on the eve of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln offered him command of the Union Army. While Lee was utterly opposed to secession and considered slavery evil, he had to choose between his strong conviction to country and his responsibility to family, friends and his native Virginia. He wrote he could take no part in the invasion of the South and resigned his commission. Reluctantly, he led the Confederate armies until war's end in April of 1865.

In the midst of war on Christmas Day, 1861, with their Arlington home confiscated and occupied by Union Troops, he wrote his wife of his longing to return to Stratford:

"... In the absence of a home, I wish I could purchase Stratford. That is the only place I could go to ... that would inspire me with feelings of pleasure and local love ..." he wrote.

But the defeated general never returned to his birthplace.

After the war, Robert E. Lee became president of Washington College in Lexington, restoring the school from financial ruin and striving to equip students with the character and knowledge he knew would be necessary to rebuild the South and reunite the states. After his death in Lexington in 1870, Washington College became Washington and Lee University.

Today, Stratford Hall Plantation offers a variety of programs year-round at the Northern Neck site, homeplace to one of America's great families. ■

IF YOU GO...

Stratford is located in the historic Northern Neck, 45 miles east of Fredericksburg on Route 3 and 75 miles north of Richmond. From Route 3, turn on Route 214 at Lerty. 483 Great House Road, Stratford, VA 22558; (804) 493-8038.

The plantation is open daily from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. and is closed Dec. 24, 25, and 31. From Jan. 1 it is open only on weekends until March 1, with the exception of Gen. Lee's birthday, Jan. 19, when admission is free. Tours of the Great House: \$10/ages 12-adult; \$5/ages 5-11; under age 5 free. Grounds pass: \$5/ages 12-adult; \$3/ages 5-11; under age 5 free. Go to www.StratfordHall.org for a full calendar of events.

EXPLORE THE AREA

George Washington Birthplace National Monument. George Washington was born on his father's Pope Creek tobacco farm in 1732. At age 3½, his father took the family to live at Mount Vernon. In 1779 the home where Washington was born burned. A Memorial House was built near the spot in 1930. Today the National Park Service operates a Colonial farm where costumed interpreters recreate the sights, sounds and smells of 18th-century plantation life. Located 40 miles east of Fredericksburg off Virginia Route 3 near Oak Grove: (804) 224-1732; www.nps.gov/gewa.

Menokin. 1769 home of Francis Lightfoot Lee, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and his wife Rebecca Tayloe Lee. Situated on 500 acres in Richmond County in the Northern Neck of Virginia, this National Historic Landmark features a newly opened conservation and visitor center, as well as a walking tour of the Menokin ruin and grounds. Visitors may also hike the Menokin woodlands along "Becky's Trail," which leads to Menokin Bay and historic Cat Point Creek. In Warsaw. (804) 333-1776; www.menokin.org.



Once every three years a coaching parade is held on the front lawn at Stratford Hall.



PHOTO COURTESY OF STRATFORD HALL PLANTATION

Kids comb the beach for fossils and shark's teeth below the "Cliffs" at Stratford Hall.

Westmoreland Berry Farm. Off Route 3. Famous fruit shortcakes and berry sundaes. Pick berries in season, picnic along the river, savor homemade fruit sundaes and shortcakes, hike trails in the Vorhees Nature Preserve and ride your bike down country lanes. Monday-Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call (800) 977-berry; www.westmorelandberryfarm.com.

PLACES TO STAY

Ingleside Vineyards. Stay in a home at the vineyards or on the shore. The Pointe or Summerton in Oak Grove, (804) 224-8687; www.inglesidevineyards.com.

General's Ridge Vineyards. Overnight at Vineyard Views or the Vineyard Manor House. Located in Hague. Contact Rick or Linda Phillips at (703) 313-9742 (Monday through Thursday), (804) 493-0226 (Friday through Sunday); www.generalsridgevineyard.com.

Belle Mount Vineyards and Heritage Park Camp. Camp in the woods or next to the water, or stay in cozy cottages next to the vineyards and winery. Warsaw, (804) 333-4700; www.bellemount.com.

Bell House B&B. Alexander Graham Bell's Victorian summer place on the Potomac, listed on the National Register of Historic Places and Virginia Historic Landmark. Town of Colonial Beach, (804) 224-7000; www.thebellhouse.com.

Wakefield Motel on the Potomac. Located on a peninsula within the town of Colonial Beach. Pier for fishing, crabbing. Near public boat ramp, with playground, picnic tables and barbecues. (804) 224-7301; www.wakefieldmotel.com. ■