



TOUR - The Layers of Chatham

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Sponsor: Mary Ann Stana

Pictures: Joe Alfred



Tour the grounds and house at Chatham Manor, the expansive Georgian mansion fronting the Rappahannock River on the heights opposite Fredericksburg. Walk with Scott Walker, the "Tourmaster" as he presents the concept of Layers of History in describing many of the events that happened there and its impressive list of visitors "from Fitzhugh to Faberge." Meet beside the parking lot at 120 Chatham Lane. RSVP required to Mary Ann Stana. Limited to 35 members.



Mary Ann starts the Tour



Few houses in America have witnessed as many important events and hosted as many famous people as Chatham. Built between the years 1768 and 1771 by William and Ann Randolph Fitzhugh, this grand Georgian-style house overlooking the Rappahannock River was for many years the center of a large, thriving plantation. Flanking the main house were dozens of supporting structures: a dairy, ice house, barns, stables.



Kitchen

Down on the river was a fish hatchery, while elsewhere on the 1,280 acre estate were an orchard, mill, and a race track, where Fitzhugh's horses vied with those of other planters for prize money. The house was named after William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham.



Bird House

William Fitzhugh

Scion of a prosperous and powerful Virginia family, William was born in 1741, the only son of Henry and Lucy Carter Fitzhugh. His father died before William's second birthday, leaving him the young heir of a vast fortune. His mother, a daughter of extremely wealthy Robert "King" Carter of Williamsburg fame, soon remarried. She wed Colonel Nathaniel Harrison of Brandon, who brought his two children to live with William and his mother.



On April 2, 1763 Fitzhugh married Ann Randolph. The two lived at Somerset, one of two plantations Fitzhugh inherited by 1765 - the other was Eagle's Nest. Having no children as yet and being desirous of company, the couple sold 9000 acres of land in Spotsylvania County to finance the building of another home, this on the banks of the Rappahannock River. They named the house Chatham after William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, who became the chief spokesman for Americans against the Crown in the growing tax disputes.



At the front of the building, the original entrance road winds its way down the bluff to the river. The front terraces offer a panoramic view of Fredericksburg landmarks on the city skyline and a model pontoon bridge section recalls the nearby Upper Pontoon Crossing, where Union engineers erected their pontoon bridges during the Battle of Fredericksburg.





Fitzhugh owned upwards of one hundred slaves. Most worked as field hands or house servants, but he also exploited skilled tradesmen such as millers, carpenters, and blacksmiths. In 1805, a number of Fitzhugh's slaves rebelled, overpowering and whipping his overseer and four others. An armed posse put down the rebellion and punished those involved. One black man was executed, two died while trying to escape, and two others were deported, perhaps to a slave colony in the Caribbean.

At the time of the slave insurrection, Fitzhugh was living in Alexandria. He had moved there in the 1790's, in part to escape the hundreds of guests who came to Chatham each year. The expense of providing food and entertainment gnawed at the aging landowner's pocketbook and undoubtedly contributed to his decision to move. Although the very idea caused him to "shudder," Fitzhugh left Chatham in 1796 and put the house up for sale.





Joe & Siham Alfred



Phil Hall, Charlie & Marcia Russell, Mary Ann Stana, Jack Allison



Major Churchill Jones, a former officer in the Continental Army, purchased the plantation in 1806 for 20,000 dollars. His family would own the property for the next 66 years. Robert E. Lee was a guest at the home during the Jones's ownership. George Washington stopped at the house on two occasions in the 1780's. Both Washington and Fitzhugh served together in the House of Burgesses prior to the American Revolution and they shared a love of farming and horses. Fitzhugh's daughter, Molly, would later marry the first president's step-grandson and adopted heir, George Washington Parke Custis, whose daughter in turn would wed Robert E. Lee.



The Civil War, which gave Lee fame, brought only change and destruction to Chatham. At the time the house was owned by James Horace Lacy, a former schoolteacher who had married Churchill Jones's niece. As a plantation owner and slaveholder, Lacy sympathized with the South and at the age of 37 he left Chatham to serve the Confederacy as a staff officer. His wife and children remained at the house until the spring of 1862, when the arrival of Union troops forced them to abandon the building and move across the river. For much of the next thirteen months, Chatham would be occupied by the Union army.



Construction of the home began around 1768 and was completed about 1771. The large home had only ten rooms, though it was 210 feet long and 30 feet wide. Its architecture, an example of the Georgian style, stressed symmetry and order above all.



In November 1862, General Ambrose E. Burnside brought the 120,000-man Army of the Potomac to Fredericksburg. Using pontoon bridges, Burnside crossed the Rappahannock River below Chatham, seized Fredericksburg and launched a series of bloody assaults against Lee's Confederates, who held the high ground behind the town. Fredericksburg was a disastrous Union defeat. Burnside suffered 12,600 casualties in the battle, many of whom were brought back to Chatham for care. For several days army surgeons operated tirelessly on hundreds of soldiers inside the house. Assisting them were volunteers, including poet Walt Whitman and Clara Barton who later founded the American chapter of the International Red Cross.



Visitors are also free to wander on the grounds, in the gardens and among the outbuildings at their leisure. The interiors of the outbuildings are not open to the public. The National Park Service began the restoration of the 1920's colonial revival east garden in 1984. The walls, statues and Ionic columns, represent this period.