New Chapter in a Story of Stewardship: Tusculum to Change Hands

Sweet Briar’s decade-long effort to preserve and rebuild Tusculum, the mid-18th century home of the Crawford family, is a story of perseverance and stewardship. (Maria Crawford was the mother of Sweet Briar founder Indiana Fletcher Williams.) Back in 2001, Sweet Briar’s then-President Betsy Muhlenfeld, along with the DHR and APVA/Preservation Virginia, began negotiations to purchase and move the house. Over the next five years, Sweet Briar raised over $125,000 to purchase Tusculum, which was professionally dismantled in 2006 and moved to safe storage on campus.

At the same time, in a parallel initiative the DHR and Sweet Briar entered into a unique public-private partnership to mount educational programming and outreach on the topic of environmentally sustainable historic preservation. To advance such efforts, the Tusculum Institute was created and a satellite office of DHR was established at Sweet Briar. Both the Tusculum Institute and the DHR Satellite Office continue educational, programming, and outreach work today: in fact, their agenda of projects has significantly grown over the years.

In 2007, Sweet Briar launched an ambitious campaign to raise funds for the restoration of Tusculum. Early donations were used to hire an architect to explore repurposing the 4000-square-foot home into an accessible building appropriate for academic use. This work suggested that reconstructing Tusculum in a historically responsible manner for contemporary use would cost approximately two million dollars. Over the next five years, Sweet Briar successfully raised $50,000 (through a grant from the Roller-Bottimore Foundation, matched by private donors) and used the money to restore and stabilize the 200+ year-old building materials. Tusculum was also awarded a $200,000 grant from the Cabell Institute, but unfortunately, despite dedicated efforts, Sweet Briar was unable to raise the required match. Although many friends of Sweet Briar and members of the local historical preservation community were deeply interested in the Tusculum project, at a time of continuing economic uncertainty, it proved impossible to meet fundraising goals.

From the beginning, the reconstruction of Tusculum was conceived of in partnership. Therefore, when it became clear that Sweet Briar would not be able to fund the restoration of the building in a timely manner, we consulted with our partners. All agreed that the first priority is, as it has always been, stewardship. The building materials are not well served by long-term storage, and the educational and historical value of the house will be best served by its reconstruction. Our conclusion, therefore, is that Sweet Briar can best fulfill its stewardship responsibilities by seeking an individual or organization that has the capacity and the interest in reconstructing the building in a historically sensitive manner, in a location similar to its original site, and ideally for a non-profit or educational purpose.

Later this spring, we will be inviting proposals from individuals or organizations interested in owning and reconstructing this historic property. .... (continued on p. 2)
Tusculum to Change Hands, continued . . .

This is in one sense a disappointing outcome, and not what had been hoped when the project was first envisioned several years ago. On the other hand, the Tusculum building has been lovingly moved, cataloged, cared for, and preserved. Its new steward will be poised to rebuild a rarely preserved, 18th century farmhouse.

Tusculum Institute Events

In February, Tusculum Institute director Lynn Rainville invited noted author Henry Wiencek to talk about his latest and controversial book, "Master of the Mountain: Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves" (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012). Hailed as "the most important challenge to Jefferson on slavery since DNA suggested a link between him and Sally Hemings" (William W. Freehling, author of The Founding Fathers and Slavery), this eloquent book discusses a wide range of evidence (from archival papers to archaeological materials) to understand what life was like for enslaved men, women, and children at Monticello and the role that Jefferson had in managing his "mountaintop community."

Seen in the photo on the left, Wiencek's talk was attended by over 70 people, including students from Sweet Briar and Randolph College, faculty, and community members. They learned that Jefferson's focus on the economic "bottom line" resulted in the mistreatment of African Americans enslaved at Monticello and hypocritical statements about the "unalienable Rights" of "all men."

For a first-hand account of the event, visit President Parker's blog where she discussed the "Academic 'Rumpus" that Wiencek's book has evoked.

For the past three years, Rainville has consulted with playwright Terrance Chisholm to provide archival leads on Sweet Briar history. Chisholm was commissioned by Sweet Briar, Endstation Theatre Company, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts to write a play about the role of African Americans throughout our 200 year history as a plantation and a college.

Chisholm debuted a draft of his play, "In Sweet Remembrance," on March 27 to a packed crowd in Pannell Gallery. The photo at right illustrates the cast who read from iPADs during the inaugural reading (Chisholm is in the front row, center). During the play, we meet the real historic figures of Martha Penn Taylor (enslaved by Elijah Fletcher but later hired as a nursemaid for Daisy), Sterling Jones (brickmaker and janitor for 50 years), and Penny Yeargin (the first African-American student to enroll at Sweet Briar). More information and excerpts from his play are available on-line: http://sbc.edu/sweet-remembrance/sweet-remembrance.
Learn More about Sweet Briar's Agricultural Past

The Sweet Briar Museum recently opened a new exhibit titled "I have lately bought me a Plantation': A Brief survey of Farming and Land Use at Sweet Briar." It includes a fascinating array of agricultural artifacts, Sweet Briar dairy paraphanalia, and old photographs and paintings of the Sweet Briar cows that supplied the milk for handmade yogurt. The photo on the left illustrates part of the dairy herd managed by Jan Osinga and a identification tag for one of the hiefers. The exhibit will remain open until March 2014. Please visit the museum website for more information: http://sbc.edu/museum

Research into Sweet Briar History

Student researchers continue to probe the college archives for historic documentation about plantation and early-college history. The sample below illustrates the original, c. 1870, building that stood at Mt. San Angelo (Elizabeth Fletcher Mosby's home) and its modifications over the next century and final destruction by fire.

Left to right: The original home built for Elizabeth Fletcher Mosby and her husband, William (it burned in the late 19th-century); Mt. San Angelo in 1907; part of the corinthian columns, burning during the 1979 fire (which leveled the building); the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts on the site today.

Save the Date: Annual Teaching with Historic Places Workshop

Every summer the Tusculum Institute and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources hold a workshop for teachers and museum educators. This year's theme is “Civil Rights in Education” and will be held from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on Saturday, June 15. We will show a short documentary on the struggle for equal education ("Mr. Stokes' Mission"), hear from former students who helped integrate some of the first Virginian classrooms, and learn about the resources available for teachers instructing their classes about this difficult era. Students at the Moton School in Farmville played a significant role in protesting educational segregation; one of our speakers will be the associate director of the fully restored school (today the Robert Russa Moton Museum). Additional information will be posted on the Tusculum website