Ferry Hill Plantation

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Chesapeake and Ohio Canal
National Historical Park

"For some years before the war I had lived at "Ferry Hill Place," in Maryland and on a hill over against Shepherdstown, where from the gallery of its old house I could look for miles out into Old Virginia. The Potomac, spanned by a convenient bridge, formed no obstacle to constant, friendly communication and represented no hostility between those on opposite sides; and it never occurred to me what it would represent from 1861 to 1865."

–Henry Kyd Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall*

Ferry Hill, sitting above the crossroads of the Potomac River, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and the "great road", has been and continues to be a place of change and adaptation regarding travel, commerce, and community. The house and landscape have been witness to events that shaped history.

John Blackford and child

A River Crossing

In the 1720's, settlers looking for land and a better life traveled on wagon routes from Pennsylvania and Maryland to Virginia. The Potomac River proved to be a barrier and only a few places were easily crossed by the heavily laden wagons. Packhorse Ford near Shepherdstown, Virginia was an ideal location to cross the river on the route known as the "great road". The Virginia General Assembly of 1755 recognized the necessity for a proper river crossing and authorized Thomas Swearingen to operate a ferry between the Maryland side and Shepherdstown. Later, through marriage into the Swearingen family, John Blackford assumed ownership of the ferry and acquired lands he developed into Ferry Hill Plantation. The house built by 1820 next to the "great road", saw an increase in people at this crossroads on the river, creating an ideal spot from which to view the expansion of the surrounding community.

"Seeing a beautiful mansion perched on the summit of a lofty eminence, on the opposite shore, . . . crossed the river. After a pretty fatiguing walk up a moderate mount, I found myself on a level plain, where sits the mansion, or palace, rather of---. It is built in the form of an L, and is the most splendid building of any country house in the state, and view from it is equally grand."

–Anne Royall, 1828

The Arrival of the Canal

With the arrival of the C&O Canal in the 1830's, Ferry Hill watched as this crossroads of travel, commerce, and community grew. The canal below his home expanded Blackford's abilities for shipments of goods as far as Washington, D.C. and Cumberland, Maryland. At Lock 38, next to Blackford's Ferry, grew a small community on Ferry Hill land called Bridgeport. There, Blackford's hotel and tavern accommodated visitors who traveled by canal boat, ferry, or wagon.

C&O Canal near Bridgeport

Henry Kyd Douglas

The Civil War

"I was with the regiment that marched to Shepherdstown to destroy the bridge over the Potomac at that point. I was with the company that set fire to it, and when, in the glare of the burning timbers, I saw the glowing windows in my home on the hill beyond the river and knew my father was a stockholder in the property I was helping to destroy, I realized that the war had begun."

–Henry Kyd Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall*

Ferry Hill became precariously entwined in the North-South conflict of the Civil War. At this crossroads, armies of both sides frequently forded the river and canal. Henry Kyd Douglas, the stepson of Blackford's daughter, lived on the plantation with his parents and siblings when the Civil War arrived. He promptly enlisted in the Confederate army and became General Stonewall Jackson's youngest staff officer. Ferry Hill witnessed the Civil War firsthand with Union troop encampments on the hill and officers enjoying the comforts of the house. Just prior to the Battle of Antietam in 1862, Henry Kyd Douglas gazed across the Potomac from Shepherdstown and saw Ferry Hill over-run by Union troops and his parents held captive in their own home.

Ferry Hill house, prior to 1950

Ferry Hill in the 20th Century

After the war, the Ferry Hill communities adapted to the aftermath readjusting to daily life. Normal commerce and travel resumed as the C&O Canal became an integral part of life at Ferry Hill until 1924 when canal operations ceased. In 1903, the house passed from the Douglases to the Beckenbaughs. In 1941, the use of the house changed from a plantation to a restaurant, enticing patrons from Shepherdstown to sample the fare. This was operated by the family until its sale in 1953 to restaurant employee Frederick Morrison, who continued running the business. Morrison owned Ferry Hill until he sold the house to the National Park Service in 1973. The Ferry Hill property served as headquarters for the 184.5-mile-long park from 1979 until 2001.

Ferry Hill House, today

Today, from its perch, Ferry Hill stands at the crossroads of a contemporary Potomac River bridge and the vintage C&O Canal. Sharing its rich history, Ferry Hill continues to witness the unfolding stories of family, community, and commerce and their impact on our modern society.

Ferry Hill Place today is open to visitors on summer weekends.

For information on hours of operation, contact:

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