

In My Home Town

Ashland Museum Members Bulletin
Spring 2015



The Ashland Museum's exhibits document Ashland, Virginia's growth, challenges, and changes from 1836 to 1940. Visit the Ashland Museum in person or via our website to learn more about how Ashland grew from a resort along the tracks called Slash Cottage to the town we know today. Our newest exhibit, "Bringing in a New Century: Ashland Becomes a 20th Century Town", explores the developments and challenges of 1900 to 1940.

In this issue, we present a profile of Mary McDermott Beirne, a woman who made Ashland much more interesting through both her gardening skills and her lively personality. Visit the Museum and learn what other stories the people & places of Ashland have to tell.

Mary McDermott Beirne

by Miriam Green

If you have ever noticed the many daffodils growing around and behind Randolph-Macon College's Office of College Advancement at 304 North Center Street, you already know something about Mary Beirne. This long-time Ashland resident was well known in many circles for growing, hybridizing, displaying and selling daffodils in the first half of the twentieth century. She was also one of Ashland's colorful, interesting and eccentric characters, one of the people who added to Ashland's charm.

Mary McDermott Beirne was born on July 2, 1884 to Clara Haxall Grundy and Richard Foulke Beirne. Her father was a well-known newspaperman, owner and editor of *The State*, Richmond's only evening newspaper. Following a year-long wedding trip to Europe, Clara and Richard Beirne lived in Ashland at Rhodeen, which was Mrs. Beirne's parents' home. (1) They soon had five children, born between 1878 and 1890. Mary was the fourth of the five.

Although dueling had been illegal in Virginia since 1810, Mr. Beirne was a participant in the last known duel in the state, which took place in 1883. He challenged W.C. Elam, editor of



In My Home Town is a Bulletin for Members of the Ashland Museum. Our focus is interesting or notable people, places, events or things, and memories related to Ashland, Virginia.

We hope you will enjoy receiving this Bulletin, but if not, please call, write or send us an email to unsubscribe.

Editors: Nancy Kackley and Susan Tucker. This issue's article was written by Miriam Green.

the Richmond *Whig*, after a series of editorials in the two newspapers which had opposing opinions on the matter of readjustment of state debt following the Civil War. The duel was originally scheduled to take place in Hanover County but when the sheriff there intervened, both parties went into hiding, Elam in Hanover and Beirne in his native Greenbrier County, West Virginia. The duel finally took place near Waynesboro, where Mr. Elam was injured, but not fatally. (2) There is no record of any charges against the two men.

Richard Beirne died at age 35 on February 9, 1891. The cause of his death is not known, but it was said that his "health broke down completely in the early part of 1890." (3) His funeral took place at St. James Episcopal Church, Ashland and he was buried at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond. (4) His widow was left with five children between the ages of six months and thirteen years.

Clara Beirne remarried in 1895. William Josiah Leake was a widower with children and was thirteen years her senior. While they continued to have family ties to Ashland through Mrs. Leake's mother, the newlywed couple primarily lived in Richmond, probably at Mr. Leake's home on Park Avenue. He was a lawyer, served as general counsel and, briefly, as president, of the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad, and was chancery court judge in Richmond. Judge Leake died in 1908. (5)

Mary Beirne's early years were divided between Ashland and Richmond. When the family lived in Richmond, they used the Ashland house as a summer home. Miss Beirne's early education was probably at private schools in Ashland and Richmond. It is likely that she also attended Stuart Hall in Staunton. (6) Mary and her mother returned to Rhodeen permanently in 1922. (7)

We do not know just when Mary Beirne became interested in daffodils, but shortly after World War I she began importing bulbs from British growers, and is credited with developing the first significant links between the United States and the well-known English and Irish daffodil breeders. (8) By 1920 she had amassed a fine collection of imported daffodils and began to hybridize them. She also became a commercial grower of daffodils, and for some years issued a small catalog and received and filled orders from many northern states. Miss Beirne was a member of the James River Garden Club in Richmond and the Garden Club of Virginia, and was instrumental in forming the GCV's Daffodil Committee. She

was a founder and the first president of The Ashland Garden Club. Mary Beirne was in much demand as a flower show judge, especially for daffodils, and as a speaker on growing and hybridizing daffodils. She was particularly fond of all-white daffodils. She did not register her hybridized daffodils, but did hybridize one that was registered by C. G. van Tubergen, one of the large Dutch growers. Named 'Mary Beirne,' this all-white daffodil is elusive. (9) It was in



Miss Mary Beirne, wearing a hat, stands with a friend in front of Rhodeen, her family homeplace at 304 N. Center Street. (Rosanne Groat Shalf, Ashland, Ashland: The story of a turn-of-the-century railroad town, Lawrenceville: Brunswick Publishing, 1994, p. 241)



Rhodeen House, current home of the offices of Development, Alumni, & College Advancement, Randolph-Macon College. (Google Maps Street View image, 304 N. Center St., Ashland, VA, July 2012.)

Upcoming Events

Boxcar Children Workshop

June 13, 14, 15. June 20, 21, 22 and June 27, 28, 29

Rising 2nd - 4th graders will enjoy railroad stories, songs, games & crafts in this 3-hour workshop led by Tiny Tim's Toys at the Ashland Museum. Check the website or call 804-368-0063 for schedule and details. Registration is open now.

Camp Ashland

August 3 - 7, 9 am - 12 pm

A History Camp where rising 2nd - 5th graders learn about the 19th century through games, crafts and hikes around Ashland. Camp Ashland will be at The Center, 500 S. Center St., Ashland, VA. Registration is open now.

Docent Training

By appointment. Contact us.

Ashland Museum

Current Exhibits

From Antebellum Resort to Civil War Town: 1836 – 1865

Ashland Reborn: 1865 – 1900

Bringing in a New Century: 1900 – 1940

Historic Ashland Homes, Then and Now

Red Caboose

commerce only briefly, if at all. Ashland daffodil growers to this day ask, when they find an especially beautiful white bloom in their gardens, "Could this be the Mary Beirne?"

Miss Beirne was eccentric, as even her mother observed, but she was a devoted aunt to her niece and nephews. Her mother said this about a visit from one of Mary's young nephews: "(he) regards Mary as his equal & has no idea of minding her, but loves to play with her and her to tell him stories." (10) Her brother Richard, and later, his son Richard, were publishers and editors of the Covington, Virginia newspaper, and the paper featured "Aunt Mary's Letter Box," named for Miss Mary and often humorously answering questions from readers on a variety of topics. (11) Humorist Dave Barry quoted the column in Dave Barry Talks Back, noting the response to a reader bothered by black ants. "Aunt Mary" advised "Make a small ring of jelly and in the center place some yeast. The ants will eat through the jelly and then get to the yeast. After they eat the yeast they will explode."(12) Although Miss Mary did not write the column, it is easy to imagine her giving such advice.

The gardens at 304 North Center Street must have been lovely. In addition to daffodils, Miss Mary grew tulips, early single hyacinths, blue phlox, larkspur, peonies, hollyhocks, poppies, lilies, and chrysanthemums. Although she had help with the manual labor of gardening from Stuart Carter, who worked for the family for years, Miss Mary was a hands-on gardener herself. Her mother often worried that she over-exerted herself. "Mary does the greatest amount of out-door work each day. I see her from my window now, digging with a pitchfork." (13) She also appreciated organic fertilizers. She was pleased with a birthday gift from Miss Alma, her mother's nurse, who once gave her a bag of chicken manure, tied with a green satin ribbon. (14)

Miss Mary and her mother moved to Richmond for one or more winters in the 1930s, living at the Chesterfield and Prestwoud apartments, but always returned to Ashland by early spring. As Mrs. Leake's health declined in the late 1930s and early 1940s, she enjoyed hearing about Mary's excursions on daffodil business as well as her social outings, noting "I think she is invited so much because she is so bright and amusing conversationally."(15)

A favorite story about Miss Mary was related to Rosanne Shalf by Flavia Owen, and told in Ashland, Ashland. Miss Beirne was fond of large hats trimmed with flowers. Once, on her way to a funeral at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, she stopped to buy a flowery hat. On entering the church, she left the bulky box in the vestibule, went inside and seated herself. When the casket was carried down the aisle, there was her hat perched right on top. Someone had opened the box and assumed it was flowers from the florist. After the service, Miss Mary followed the procession to Hollywood Cemetery, retrieved her hat after the burial, and returned to Ashland. (16)

Following her mother's death in 1944, Mary Beirne continued to live at Rhodeen, growing and hybridizing daffodils. She kept up her daffodil catalog sales for a few more years. Her daffodils drew many visitors each spring. In 1966, The Ashland Garden Club established a permanent award to honor Mary McDermott Beirne at the annual Daffodil Show of The Garden Club of Virginia. A large silver bowl is awarded for the best entry of four varieties of all-white daffodils. Miss Beirne died in 1974 and is buried at Hollywood Cemetery.

Notes

1. "Richard F. Beirne", Richmond Dispatch [Richmond, VA] 10 Feb. 1891:1. Retrieved from: chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85038614/1891-02-10/ed-1/seq-1/
2. "The Duel Fought At Last", The New York Times [New York, NY] 1 July 1883
3. "Ashland Mourning", Richmond Dispatch [Richmond, VA] 11 Feb. 1891:1. Retrieved from: chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85038614/1891-02-11/ed-1/seq-1/
4. Ibid.
5. "Death Comes to Judge W.J. Leake", The Times Dispatch [Richmond, VA] 24 Nov. 1908:1. Retrieved from chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85038615/1908-11-24/ed-1/seq-1/
6. Beirne Family Papers 1921-1945, August 19, 1922, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond
7. Beirne Family Papers 1921-1945, April 17, 1922
8. David Willis, 'Yellow Fever': A Prospect of the History and Culture of Daffodils, (Privately published by the

Your continued support keeps the doors open and the lights on at the Ashland Museum and the Red Caboose. Please donate at our website or by US mail.

We always need volunteers to staff the Museum and for special projects. Contact us if you are interested in getting involved.

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Museum Hours:
Saturdays: 10:00 am to 2:00 pm
Sundays: 1:00 to 3:00 pm

- author, 2012) p. 30. Retrieved from: dafflibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/Yellow-Fever.pdf
9. Thomas F. Martin, "Miss Mary McDermott Beirne of Virginia", *The Daffodil Journal*, Quarterly Publication of The American Daffodil Society, Inc., June, 1966, pp.150-152. Retrieved from: dafflibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/1966_June_ADS_Journal.pdf
 10. Beirne Family Papers, May 17, 1922
 11. "Major Beirne Started Daily Aug. 10, 1914", *Virginian Review*, Special Supplement [Covington, VA] 9 Aug. 2014:6
 12. Dave Barry, *Dave Barry Talks Back*, (New York, NY, Three Rivers Press, 1991) p. 32
 13. Beirne Family Papers, October 1, 1937
 14. Beirne Family Papers, June 6, 1941
 15. Beirne Family Papers, November 2, 1939
 16. Rosanne Groat Shalf, *Ashland, Ashland: The story of a turn-of-the-century railroad town*,(Lawrenceville: Brunswick Publishing, 1994) p. 242