



Eppington: Crown Jewel of Chesterfield County, Va.

On Aug. 23, 1989, the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors voted to accept a donation of Eppington, a colonial plantation home, and 43.8 acres of land. The Hinds family donated the historic site, including the house, the lawn (which encompasses a cemetery with markers dating to the 1800s) and a surrounding buffer of trees. The Eppington parcel has been appraised at \$300,000.

Mary Ellen Howe, chair of the county's Preservation Committee, triggered the donation of Eppington to the county. She has referred to Eppington as the "crown jewel" of Chesterfield County's historic homes.

Interesting points about the site include:

- Eppington was built ca. 1765-1775. It draws its name from its early owners, the Eppes family, who were major landowners in the area as early as the mid-1600s. Francis Eppes V (1747-1808) is credited with building Eppington.
- Eppington has been described as "an old-fashioned, two-story building, with hipped roof in the centre and wings on the sides ... placed at the extreme side of a large level or lawn, covered with green sward." Today, Eppington's exterior is white; its roof is red; and the peaceful setting of the lawn offers deer a place to graze at dusk.
- Eppington is registered as a Virginia Historic Landmark and as a Chesterfield County Historic Landmark.
- Thomas Jefferson was a well-known visitor to Eppington. He and Francis Eppes V married half-sisters, the daughters of John Wayles of Charles City County. After the death of his wife in 1782, Jefferson left his two youngest daughters at Eppington while he served as Minister to France. Two-year-old Lucy Jefferson died of whooping cough and is believed to be buried at Eppington. Mary Jefferson, who was 4 when she moved to Eppington, grew up to marry her cousin, John Wayles Eppes, and live at Eppington until she died in 1804.
- As well as being brothers-in-law, Jefferson and Eppes shared an interest in agriculture. A grandson of Francis Eppes V described this interest: "The plantation [Eppington] was quite an extensive one, and in the days of my grandfather was remarkably productive. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise, under such management as his; for he was eminent for his skill both in agriculture and horticulture; and I have heard Mr. Jefferson, who knew him intimately, say he considered him not only 'the first horticulturist in America,' but a man of the soundest practical judgment on all subjects that he had ever known."
- Plans for Eppington are still evolving. It is hoped that the home and gardens can eventually be restored to their former glory. Eppington is a fairly remote site, located one mile from the Appomattox River in the Matoaca District of Chesterfield County. The current entry road is a logging road. The county would like to improve the entry road, and Chesapeake Corp., which owns an adjacent tract of land, has agreed to grant the county a right-of-way for the road improvement.

Eppington Plantation: A Historic Sanctuary

Chesterfield County is home to Eppington Plantation, the residence of Francis Eppes, and one of Virginia's most unique and important historic sites. While other plantations in Virginia such as Monticello and Mount Vernon are well known and visited by thousands of people each year, Eppington has quietly endured in obscurity. Yet, Eppington has the potential to be as interesting and informative as any plantation in Virginia. Thomas Jefferson visited Eppington frequently, and many of his ideas for building his beloved Monticello were formulated at Eppington. The features that inspired Jefferson to return again and again are still present. One can not help but be awed by the graceful neo-Palladian architecture of the Eppington mansion, by its inviting formal gardens, or by its rustic setting on a plateau overlooking the Appomattox River basin. Unfortunately, very few local residents are aware that one of the state's most magnificent mansions can be found in their own backyard. For those lucky few who have ventured down the remote 8-mile dirt and gravel lane known as Eppes Falls Road, a visit to Eppington is like stepping back in time to an earlier age when grand plantations dotted the landscape, the majority of Virginians tilled the soil, the backbone of the southern economy was slave labor, and the citizens of a fledgling country grappled with new and exciting democratic ideas of governing themselves.

Francis Eppes' Eppington plantation was Chesterfield's largest and most prosperous estate in the years following the American Revolution. Today the grounds remain quiet and pristine, virtually undisturbed since Eppington was built in 1780, making it difficult to imagine that in its heyday it served as a bustling focal point for local politics, commerce, and socializing and was as active as some small towns. Over 100 slaves resided and worked on the property as both farm hands and artisans. Neighboring farmers would bring their crops to Eppington to be shipped to market from Francis Eppes' warehouse and dock. Others would visit to use his mill. Still others came to consult with Eppes who was considered an agricultural genius. In fact, Jefferson called his good friend Eppes "America's first horticulturalist." The two shared many ideas about crops and planting. Eppes built an intricate pleasure garden east of the mansion that was renowned for its beauty and splendor. It is likely that Jefferson later used many of Eppes' ideas for his own gardens at Monticello.

The Jeffersons and Eppes were so close that while Jefferson served as Minister to France, two of his three daughters lived at Eppington. Sadly, five year old Lucy died at Eppington in 1784 and is buried on the property at an unknown location that has yet to be relocated. Jefferson's other daughter Maria married John Wayles Eppes, the son of Francis, in 1797, and they resided at Eppington for almost 15 years while John served as a Congressman and Senator.

Recently, thanks to the efforts by the newly established Eppington Foundation, steps are being taken to begin preserving this local historic treasure before it is lost. In 1989 the mansion and 44 acres surrounding it were donated to the Chesterfield County Parks and Recreation Department. Since then, although funding is extremely limited, work has begun to stabilize the mansion and turn back the centuries of slow decay. Moreover, in 1991, the Eppington Foundation arranged for archaeologists from the James River Institute for Archaeology to conduct test excavations on the property. Several thousand artifacts were recovered, and evidence of the location of Eppes' formal garden, a kitchen, a schoolhouse, a slave quarters, and many other outbuildings was found. However, due to budgetary constraints, archaeologists were only able to scratch the surface. Much more lies below the surface of the ground waiting to be unearthed.

Eppington has the potential to become a place of active involvement for local history buffs, archaeologists, scholars, and tourists that could rival the likes of Monticello, Mount Vernon, or even Colonial Williamsburg. Its historical promise is unique and unlimited. The important influence that

Eppington had on the mindset of Thomas Jefferson is only one of many historical associations that endows the property with considerable significance. The house itself is a unique example of neo-Palladian architecture that merits detailed study. The potential of Eppington's elaborate gardens, its kitchens, its landscape design, and its slave cabins to teach visitors and scholars alike about the early development of America is almost limitless. The visible elements of the slave culture at Eppington are particularly rare, and they include a documented slave village located approximately one mile east of the mansion. Archaeologists examined the site of the outlying village and found that it has remained an exceptionally well preserved historic resource. The archaeological potential of the slave village alone is staggering, and no finer example of slave life exists on another plantation in the state. Eppington truly could serve as a multicultural historical attraction where the interplay between European and African cultures could be examined in detail.

Eppington could serve as a one-of-a-kind classroom for archaeologists, architectural historians, and many other associated scholars. Visitors could take part in ongoing research and study, and become a part of the process of learning about Eppington's past instead of detached observers separated by a velvet rope as is so common at most other historical attractions. At Eppington, visitors could pick up a trowel and join archaeological excavations, interact with architectural historians, chat with historic garden experts, and converse with historians. Eppington has tremendous potential to act as a dynamic hands-on learning environment that actively involves students and scholars in learning about the past.

Eppington's isolated and rustic atmosphere is one of its most charming features. Instead of being herded from one place to another, Eppington could capitalize on its bucolic and secluded setting and invite visitors to leisurely tour the grounds and soak up a sense of the past that is unsullied by commercialism and hype. Although currently in private hands, thousands of acres of fields and forests surround Eppington and one can easily get a sense of the total plantation experience. At Eppington visitors could sense that an 18th-century plantation consisted of more than just a grand mansion. Rather, in support of that mansion were hundreds of acres of tobacco fields, dozens of outbuildings, and a complex slave culture.

The fate of Eppington, although not in immediate jeopardy, is in some peril. Its unique setting could be ruined if the surrounding acreage is sold to developers or timbering continues unchecked. Archaeologists have examined much of the surrounding property and found that it still contains evidence of slave quarters, and farm buildings, and is divided by an intricate maze of field ditches. These important elements of Eppington could be soon lost forever. Moreover, without immediate attention or conservation, the Eppington mansion will continue to decay, perhaps beyond a point of no return.

There is a window of opportunity to ensure that the potential of Eppington is saved. So far, a dedicated core of volunteers have donated their time and enthusiasm to Eppington, and numerous scholars and archaeologists have indicated their desire to help. But Eppington needs help. Funding is needed to purchase the 1,000 acres of land around Eppington, to save the slave village site and other associated elements of the plantation. Funding is also needed to arrest the decay of the mansion. If Eppington is ever going to become a viable tourist destination, or if its historical potential is to be reached, generous financial support is needed. It would truly be a tragedy if this secluded historic and archaeological sanctuary is not saved. For those wishing more information, please contact: