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**Belle of the South**

In the heart of the Deep South, located just off of Highway 43 in Northwest Alabama, Belle Mont Mansion calls the small town of Tuscumbia its home. With only a small highway sign announcing its presence, Belle Mont is often overlooked by passersby who do not realize what hides behind the lush trees. In fact, although my high school was less than ten minutes away, I, like the vast majority of Tuscumbia natives, had never bothered to stop by the old plantation home prior to beginning my research.

This project formulated from a yearning to learn more about my hometown, a place where I had lived but never fully explored. Fascinated by the history of slave life in the South, I felt drawn to the mysterious plantation home situated a quarter of a mile off the main road. Though most Tuscumbia residents know the name “Belle Mont” and even its location on Cook Lane, many have never taken a day to explore the mansion. With its history fading away like the nineteenth century wallpaper in the parlor, my goal was to explore this magnificent plantation home and share my findings, the story and the history of Belle Mont, with the public.

**The Story**

Belle Mont was erected in 1828 for a physician from Louisa County, Virginia, Dr. Alexander Williams Mitchell. Dr. Mitchell, who slept in the master bedroom, and his family of seven were already living in Belle Mont when it was fully completed in 1832. Owning 1,680 acres of cotton, Dr. Mitchell became known as one of the largest planters in the area before he quickly sold the mansion and the surrounding land one year after its completion.

However, while living in Belle Mont and planting the surrounding acres, Dr. Mitchell housed 152 slaves in thirteen slave cabins on the property. This area of the property can be accessed from the master bedroom through a large door with a window that leads directly to the courtyard area, which is where the old detached kitchen would have been accessed as well.

The Mitchell family sold Belle Mont and 33 of the surrounding acres to their friends Isaac and Catherine Baker Jones Winston, who were also from Virginia, in 1833. Mr. Winston was a cousin of Dolly Madison, Patrick Henry, and Isaac Cole, a personal friend and secretary of President Thomas Jefferson. Although the actual designer of Belle Mont is a mystery, this particular relationship provides a clue about the original architect, or at least his influence.

“The source of Belle Mont’s design is shrouded in mystery, but tantalizing clues suggest the direct influence of President Thomas Jefferson, gentlemen architect of the early Republic,” the official Belle Mont pamphlet states (Commission 2). Is it possible that Dr. Mitchell built Belle Mont in this style, two years after Jefferson’s death, to honor the late president? The answer will always be a mystery. However, the pamphlet continues by claiming that “Characteristics of ‘Jeffersonian Classicism’ are exhibited at Belle Mont, including finely executed brickwork with contrasting woodwork and a hilltop setting. Belle Mont also illustrates Jefferson’s reverence for the neoclassical architectural elements and ideas of the Italian Renaissance architect, Andrea Palladio” (Commission 2).

*Historical Architecture in Alabama: A Guide to Styles and Types, 1810-1930* by Robert Gamble also comments on the influence of Thomas Jefferson on Belle Mont’s architecture while describing several plantation homes throughout the state. “Most strikingly Jeffersonian of all, there is Belle Mont near Tuscumbia, a three-part house with a narrow raised central pavilion and a lofty, square entrance salon unique in Alabama. From the standpoint of both form and layout, Belle Mont hints so strongly of the Sage of Monticello that we may wonder if its architect was not a Charlottesville-trained craftsman,” the book reads (Gamble 53). With Dr. Mitchell hailing from Virginia, it is indeed possible that he had a contact from Charlottesville that could have helped design Belle Mont.

The Winston family maintained ownership and continued living in Belle Mont through the Civil War, up until around 1940. At this time, the family decided to move to a different location but continued to hold Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations in the mansion. Gradually, the family gatherings became less frequent until the home was completely abandoned.

The abandonment of the home was the largest cause of its deterioration and the vandalism that occurred at Belle Mont. During the 1960s, star-crossed lovers camped out inside the rotting mansion in the woods, and the home has long been the site of drunken high school parties. In 1983, concerned about the condition of the house, members of the Winston family donated Belle Mont and 33 surrounding acres to the Alabama Historical Commission.

**Exploring the Grounds**

To begin my own, hands-on research, I started at the source. The first step in my journey was to tour the mansion as an average visitor. I wanted to walk through the halls of the home just as the wealthy plantation owners had, and I wanted to explore the grounds where the many slaves had spent numerous long, humid days picking cotton.

Whizzing past the historical marker at the foot of the driveway on an abnormally warm, sunny day in late January, I noticed for the first time how incredibly long and bumpy the gravel drive leading up to Belle Mont is. Stretching on for over a quarter of a mile, the driveway winds around two slight curves while directing vehicles up the steep hill that the mansion resides atop. Trying to drive slowly on the gravel in hopes of protecting my car, I had an eerie feeling of being watched as I climbed the hill, a feeling that I am sure any burglars or invaders, including Union troops in the 1860s, felt as they ventured towards the home.

The driveway pools at the top of the hill on the left side of the mansion, and I pulled my car into a spot next to one of only two other vehicles there. As I grabbed my notebook and stepped out of my car, I noticed a sign that pointed me in the direction of the entrance. However, while walking towards the front of the house, a middle-aged gentleman swiftly opened a side door and rather aggressively yelled in my direction to inquire if I would like a tour. After explaining that I was a university student working on a project, he asked for my student identification and four dollars and begrudgingly let me inside through the left side entrance.

Once inside, the tour guide handed me a brochure that claimed Belle Mont as, “one of the most outstanding Palladian-style houses in the Deep South” (Alabama Historical Commission 1). A man and woman, who appeared to be in their early thirties, were already in the middle of the tour, and I was herded along to begin where they had left off, all along the guide promising that he would, “catch [me] up on everything in a little while.”

I began my tour on the bottom floor in the back left corner of the house, the master bedroom. The tour guide began describing the period furniture, including a large pencil bed and a crib that held a rag doll, both of which had once belonged to a little slave girl. He also pointed out a Bible dating back to the 1840s, a small black diary kept during World War I, and the oldest known picture of Spring Park, a gathering place and landmark of Tuscumbia. However, the furniture was not the first thing to grab my attention; it was the smell. A wet, musky odor engulfed the room and, as I would later learn, almost the entire house. Yet, since the mansion is nearly two hundred years old, I assumed that this must be one of the smells of age.

The courtyard area of Belle Mont measures roughly 50 feet long and 20 feet wide with stark white walls forming the interior of the home and laid bricks covering every inch of the ground. The bricks, which were added when the courtyard was redone during the 1950s, have been polished and almost shimmer in the light. These bricks end abruptly at the top of a large staircase that leads to a grassy area where it’s easy to imagine old, wooden slave cabins standing.

Remnants of the old kitchen can be found at the back of the house, adjacent to where the slave cabins were once aligned in rows. The guide explained to us that the house and these cabins had suffered significant damage during a tornado in 1874. Since slavery had been abolished by this time, they were never rebuilt. In the future, though, perhaps a few replicas can be constructed on the empty land to help preserve the true history of Belle Mont.

The guide, who had warmed up to me a little by this time, spoke of repainting the back walls that vandals had at one point covered with graffiti, including explicit language. Since I was once dared, during high school, to climb the hill and enter the mansion at night, I was quite curious to know how often teenagers went on illegal tours of Belle Mont during the early morning hours. When I asked my guide if he frequently found vandals trespassing on the property, he responded with, “Not since I bought my guns.”

With the influence of Thomas Jefferson in mind, I began paying closer attention to the structure of the mansion as I entered the next bedroom. The guide was quick to point out the focal point of the room, an original Prussian marble fireplace. There was also a wooden bed that dated back to the 1880s and a lamp that the guide flipped a switch to illuminate. I silently pondered how long the structure had been equipped with electrical wiring while the others in my tour group explained that they had to leave and excused themselves.

As the couple began to leave, they promised the tour guide that they would return to finish their tour when they could bring their son. Our guide immediately chimed in, encouraging this idea because he believed that public school systems did not teach history. Interested in this comment, I asked him why he felt that way. He responded that, “Schools have one thing on their agenda: standardized tests. There are certain facts on those tests, and teaching children anything other than that is a waste of their precious time.” After that moment, I began to feel that my guide felt a sense of responsibility to the region and every person who visited Belle Mont, to share the history that was being forgotten.

But, what exactly was being forgotten? After the Historical Commission’s acquisition of the mansion, tours have been occurring regularly. Pieces of period furniture line the walls of the bedrooms, and portraits of the owners hang in the dining room. The life of the masters of Belle Mont is being portrayed as accurately as possible on the inside of the home, but I feel that the history of some of the other residents of the grounds is being left out. I pondered the irony.

While on the subject of education, the guide informed me that the area around Belle Mont had once been in competition to be the site of my school, the University of Alabama. I had never heard this before, but I agreed when he conceded that Tuscaloosa was the best choice. “It’s in the middle of Alabama so that everyone can get to it, and we get to keep our little hometown feel,” he told me. I could not have said it better myself.

My guide then ushered me into the parlor where he showed me an old deck of cards without any numbers. I was told that, “back in the old times,” not many people could count, but they could recognize the patterns on the cards. Therefore, no numbers were needed. The guide also showed me a painting of prominent artists and poets from the eighteenth century and a 184-year-old organ, which is still played every year during the Christmas holidays.

When I asked my guide why these front rooms had not been completely restored, he said that the state was simply out of money. He did inform me, however, that whenever new grants are given to the site, convicts from Decatur, Alabama are brought in to perform the restorations for a wage of 25 cents per hour.

At this time, two older ladies walked inside through the front entrance to begin a tour. I had seen everything on the lower level, and the guide suggested that they start their tour on the second floor as I finished mine. However, one of the women was unable to climb the stairs. Not wanting to cause a dilemma, I explained that I had to be leaving anyways and thanked my guide for all of his help.

As I was retracing my tracks down the long gravel driveway, I began thinking about Belle Mont’s role in my hometown of Tuscumbia. Although I had never visited the home before, Belle Mont is much more than the abandoned shack I had imagined entering when I was dared to vandalize the property while in high school. Belle Mont is a work of art, a piece of history that is still alive today. Through the restoration projects, the Civil War reenactments, the quilting shows, and the holiday celebrations that take place at Belle Mont, the history of the town, the state, and the South as a whole is being preserved and will be on display for generations to come.

**Southern Hospitality: The Historic Version**

With a desire to expand my knowledge of the historic plantation home, I thought that there could be no one better to talk to than the people who spend hours each week maintaining this grand mansion. I first contacted Melissa Beasley, the current site director of Belle Mont, via email after finding her contact information on the Alabama Historical Commission’s website. We exchanged a few brief messages, and after discussing our schedules, arranged to meet at Belle Mont in late February of 2012.

On a chilly Friday morning, I made my way up the long, gravel driveway that I remembered so well from my first visit to Belle Mont almost a month earlier. I noticed a familiar car parked at the top of the driveway and pondered who its owner must be since I had never met Ms. Beasley.

When I opened my car door, a gust of wind rushed past me, shaking the dead leaves in the trees so that they sounded like an old librarian telling children to be quiet. I hurried to grab my notebook and voice recorder so that I could retreat from the cold to inside the warm mansion. I briskly walked through the yard towards the home, and the side door began to open. There, standing in the doorway, was a man I recognized from my previous visit. It was my tour guide.

Jim, whose name I made sure to learn during this second visit, welcomed me back to Belle Mont and informed me that he had just spoken with Ms. Beasley; she was on her way. He led me to the dining room, where a few chairs were placed for visitors, and told me that I could sit down while I waited. I had not expected to see this man again, but since I had learned so much of the history of Belle Mont from him during my first visit, I knew that his presence during the interview would be quite beneficial.

I knew that both Ms. Beasley and Jim had been working with Belle Mont for quite a few years, and while sitting in the dining room, they both explained to me how they acquired their jobs. Ms. Beasley began by telling me that she has been the site director of Belle Mont since the year 2000. “I worked for the Alabama Historical Commission, and I was working at the Joe Wheeler Home, and they needed a site director over here. So, I started working over here in 2000,” she said. I also quickly learned that Ms. Beasley, who has been working with historic homes for nearly twenty years, has been an employee of the Alabama Historical Commission since 1994.

When asked about his work experience, Jim explained to me that he first began substituting as a tour guide at Belle Mont in the year 2001. “I started working here every other weekend in ’02, then it became a permanent position, and I applied for it and got it,” Jim replied. “I got laid off in ’08, came back in ’07. I mean, ’05 and in ’07, then I’ve been here ever since. I’ve loved old houses all my life,” he claimed with passion in his voice.

I smiled and asked Jim if he would mind sharing his average day with me so that I could really understand what it takes to maintain a mansion for the public, and he nodded. “Well, I get here in the mornings. I open up the house, come in and sweep, do whatever I need to do, get ready for tours, get my brochures lined up. If I have people come in, then I of course give them a tour. I mean, whatever needs done to the house, I do it.” Melissa chimed in and added that, “he meets with the bug man and the contractors, too,” and Jim agreed. “There’s all sorts of maintenance that goes on in these old houses. It’s just like a modern house; you gotta keep them painted and… Those leaks have been fixed, but we still need to repair the plaster and repaint. It’s all a money thing. It all depends on the amount of money the state has to spend on those kind of things,” she added about Jim’s job.

I had learned from Jim during my previous visit that Belle Mont had been abandoned by the Winston family around 1940; therefore, I asked Ms. Beasley what condition the mansion was in when she became the site director. She took a moment to reflect and replied, “Well, it was in pretty good shape in 2000. When the state acquired the house in 1983, it was pretty much a ruin.” I nodded in agreement, and she continued. “But, by 1994, a lot of work had been done on it. And we’ve added some of the missing mantles, and the conference station, and done some plasterwork and painting since I’ve been here.”

Unaware of the conference station, I asked Ms. Beasley if this was a new building. “The conference station in the backyard, it’s there,” she replied. I then asked her to describe it. “Well, it’s a new building. It’s based on the way the little barns used to look around here. It’s a bathroom: two stalls on the girls’ side, one stall and a urinal on the boys’ side. We added that in 2010, and we have to do archaeology because we went underground with the water systems. So, you have to always survey before you start digging near these cultural sites,” she explained.

I was excited to learn that archaeological digs had taken place on the grounds of Belle Mont and even more thrilled to find out that these digs had produced objects that had once belonged to slaves. “We know about the slave quarters because of archaeology, because of the cultural resources underground. So, when we do archaeology, we find the evidence of the buildings and of the people that lived in those buildings,” Ms. Beasley stated. Jim then explained to me that the slave quarters were surveyed in 2001 and 2002 and that there had originally been 13 slave cabins.

Today, these cabins no longer exist at the site of Belle Mont. The wooden planks have been taken away or burned, and the rocks forming the chimneys have undoubtedly found a new purpose. However, some evidence of slave life has been found in the ground that was once the foundation for this cabin and several others just like it. According to an article in the Birmingham News, when the archaeological dig took place, “the team […] found bits of pottery, nails, and glass in distinct concentrations in the wooded area around the mansion. Slave quarters and other buildings may have been laid out in a uniform fashion, keeping with the balanced architectural style,” (Faulk 2). A few tiny pieces that were found are now displayed in a small case, with an area no larger than that of a notebook, in the very back of the mansion.

I was actually privileged enough to see some of these artifacts that were retrieved during the archaeological digs. In the back right bedroom, known as bedroom number three, Jim lead me to the glass case, which contained a black and white photograph of a small log cabin, tiny blue pieces of china no bigger than a nickel, and what appeared to be worn-out pieces of metal. “These are some of the findings from the area where the slave cabins were. It’s our most popular exhibit,” he told me. “It’s awesome. And, the pieces of plate here date between 1828 to 1832,” he said as he pointed inside the glass. “This is some little piece from Greece, parts of a clay pot, belt buckles, shoe buckles, and arrowheads from Creek and Cherokee Indians,” he said as he showed me each of the tiny treasures that were found in the dirt.

While I stared in awe at these pieces, Jim explained to me that this glass case was the most popular exhibit at Belle Mont. I turned my head slowly and directed my gaze at my guide; I was in shock. If this was true, it meant that the general public was indeed fascinated by the history of slave life. So, why weren’t more exhibits dedicated to the slaves? Jim mentioned that Dr. Mitchell had kept meticulous records concerning his slaves, everything from when they were purchased to when they received a new pair of shoes. Unfortunately, he told me, this journal was being stored in Montgomery. If the public is interested in viewing artifacts such as this journal, they should be on display for everyone to see, regardless of the fact that the history may be controversial.

After hearing Jim mention that the findings from the archaeological dig were the most popular exhibit at Belle Mont, I asked my two interviewees about the present-day use of the mansion. “It’s mainly for tours. We talk about history and the people who lived here and how people lived in that era, from the 1830s to the 1850s; that’s our period of interpretation. That’s the story we tell,” Ms. Beasley told me. She also informed me that there is charge to tour the house, which is five dollars for adults, four dollars for seniors and military, and three dollars for children; however, there are group rates for those who qualify.

Ms. Beasley mentioned to me that on the day prior to our interview, a group of 44 people had driven to Belle Mont on a bus from Huntsville, Alabama to tour the home. “We probably average thirty or forty people on the weekends, and then the bus tours, of course they’re bigger. Then, we do school groups, too,” she said. “Probably most of the people are local, well I mean Huntsville. And then the bus tours, they come from Birmingham, Nashville, Memphis, Tupelo, Mississippi,” she added. When I asked Ms. Beasley about the number of school groups who toured the home, she sullenly replied, “Well… I wish we could get more.”

Although tourists by the busload shuffle through the home each weekend, the main event of the year at Belle Mont is the Plantation Christmas. “We have a big Christmas open house on the first Sunday of December,” Ms. Beasley said. Jim quickly followed her with an elaborate description, saying that, “the Colbert County Landmark Association puts this on as a fundraiser for the house. And, they’ll come in with live greenery, boxwood wreaths with fruit on them, and they’ll have a twelve to thirteen foot Christmas tree. The ornaments are made by the Winston descendants, and it has clear lights. That’s the only thing electrical about it: the lights. It’s all natural.” Ms. Beasley also informed me that, on occasion, local men dress up as Civil War soldiers and perform a reenactment on the grounds during the Plantation Christmas. “They do different things. They camp out and cook and live like people would have lived during that period,” she said.

The Plantation Christmas is an event that many in the community look forward to each year. A reporter for the local newspaper interviewed a Tuscumbia resident about Belle Mont’s Plantation Christmas for an article written in 2010. “For Jade Thomas, the Christmas season hasn’t truly begun until she’s visited Belle Mont mansion’s annual event, ‘A Plantation Christmas’,” the article reads. “‘I go every year, and especially love the dancing. […] I also pick up a lot of decorating ideas from the home because there’s always fresh greenery throughout, and I love to decorate that way for the holidays,’” Ms. Thomas is quoted to have said (Rickman 1). The Plantation Christmas strives to keep the history of the home alive while offering an entertaining, family-friendly event and raising funds for renovations at the same time.

As I wrapped up the interview with Ms. Beasley and Jim, I thanked them both for being so kind to me and asked for permission to walk around the house one last time before departing. They happily consented, and Ms. Beasley left as Jim accompanied me up the stairs to the second floor of Belle Mont. I wandered throughout the house for nearly half an hour after Ms. Beasley left, listening to Jim’s descriptions of pieces that I found particularly fascinating and reflecting on everything I had learned that day. As I went to leave, I asked Jim if he had any final thoughts that he would like to add to my research. “Well, I hope everyone comes to see the house!” he exclaimed. Me, too, Jim. Me, too.

**The Lost History**

Stepping inside of the grand plantation home, time appears to abruptly change its course, and a world filled with jet planes and the Internet is quickly forgotten. From the ornate French wallpaper to the portraits of previous owners and inhabitants, the atmosphere at Belle Mont transports visitors to a warm, cozy version of the mid-nineteenth century. The handcrafted, wooden beds are neatly made, and playing cards are perfectly positioned for display on a table in the parlor. The pre-Civil War life of wealthy, white plantation owners in the South is wonderfully depicted through each period piece of furniture and artwork.

Yet, there is another side to the history of this magnificent home. Although the family of Dr. Alexander Mitchell originally resided in the home, Belle Mont was constructed entirely through the use of slave labor. These slaves, who assuredly went on to work the 1,680 acres of cotton and corn surrounding Belle Mont, spent four years building the mansion for their white owners. However, little of their history remains, and few pieces of their belongings can be found inside the home where their masters would have rested comfortably.

Outside of the mansion, there is no longer any sign of the slaves that once encompassed this property. There are not any remnants of the buildings that once housed the men who spent years working in the heat and humidity building a home that they could never sleep within or the ladies who spent their days in a detached kitchen cooking food for their white owners.

On the surface, it almost appears as if slave life has been overlooked, nearly forgotten, at Belle Mont. Luckily, I was told that photographs of the slave cabins that were erected to the rear of the home and a few artifacts, such as the doll of a young slave girl and the pottery pieces, have survived the passing of time. These pieces, along with records that have been taken throughout the history of the home, help to provide a different perspective of life at Belle Mont in the nineteenth century.

Remembering the small glass case with the pottery pieces, or “the slave exhibit”, at Belle Mont, I began a search for a copy of the photograph of the log cabin that I had seen displayed. Fortunately, Jim had mentioned to me that the website for the Library of Congress contained a section entitled the Historic American Buildings Survey, which held quite a few older photographs of Belle Mont. After a bit of rummaging online, I finally found a link for “Belmont (The Henry Thornton Plantation) in Colbert, AL,” and decided to check it out.

There it was: image number 42, a black and white photograph of one of the original slave cabins. The text below it read, “42. Historic American Buildings Survey Alex Bush, Photographer, May 30, 1936. Cabin. East Elevation (Front),” (Historic 1). The image had been tucked away in the very back of the collection of photographs, which I found quite odd since images of the outside of Belle Mont had been placed as the first few pictures of the series. Perhaps it was coincidence, or perhaps the image of a tumultuous past had purposely been hidden towards the back of the group.

There, staring back at me, was a woman standing in front of a one story wooden cabin. Her skin tone is dark, and in the photograph, it is hard to determine her race. Her light colored dress provides a high contrast, and she has a belt around her waist. She is standing with one hand on her hip and appears to be losing patience with her photographer. I immediately want to know who she is, what is her connection to Belle Mont, and why she was present on this day. Could she still have been living in this cabin? Could she have been a descendant of one of the slaves who had lived there? The text provides no clues.

The cabin behind the mystery woman appears to be a very solid, sturdy structure. The roof is intact, and all of the wooden planks across the front seem to be holding up well. The house is split in to two sections by a middle breezeway, or it has a dogtrot, as southerners like to say. There are two chimneys, one on each section of the house. In the late nineteenth century, this type of lodging would have been home to a single working class white family. Yet, I try to imagine how many slaves would have been forced to share this small dwelling.

Directly to the right of this photograph was an image titled “Barn, Faces South”. Ironically, the image of the backside of the barn appears almost identical to the photograph of the slave cabin. The layout, with the dogtrot, is the same as the cabin, and the materials used to construct the two buildings are similar, if not the same. The only noticeable difference is the lack of chimneys on the barn. With these similarities, it is obvious that the slaves were housed in buildings no better than the home of the farm animals.

With such a small portion of the archived photographs, and of the mansion today, dedicated to slave life, it is hard to imagine what life was truly like during the 1830s at Belle Mont. Unfortunately, this lack of representation is not an isolated incident. According to an article by Alderman and Modlin, this same problem is occurring throughout plantation homes in the South. Their research “has found that the slave experience is frequently ignored in promoting the Southern plantation”. Also, their analysis of historic plantation homes in North Carolina “shows an uneven treatment both in terms of the absolute number of textual references to slavery and the frequency of these references relative to other themes used in marketing the plantation landscape,” the text claims (Alderman Modlin 265).

“‘If you are going to preserve Belle Mont, you need to preserve all of it,’” the article continues. “You need to be mindful of the people who toiled – their energy and their sweat – to keep these folks in the lap of luxury” (Faulk 2). By ignoring or covering up the memory of the slaves who spent years working on the land, a hole is left in the history of Belle Mont. Whether previously accidental or not, the history of the slaves and the artifacts proving their existence should never be hidden, but proudly displayed for all future generations.

From the huge portraits of the Winston family in the dining room to the tiny pieces of stained pottery used by the slaves, Belle Mont contains a plethora of nineteenth century plantation history for the public to view. Regardless of which aspects of the history appear to be more significant, Belle Mont is preserving life from nearly 200 years ago for everyone to experience.

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