



BELLE ISLE RESTORATION PROJECT

HISTORY OVERVIEW

Belle Isle was built around 1760 for Thomas Bertrand Griffin and wife Judith Burwell of Carter's Grove. Constructed by enslaved labor, this small but formal Georgian-style estate was the centerpiece of a prosperous tobacco plantation and warehouse. Single story wings were added by the Rawleigh W. Downman family who owned the property from 1786 to 1862. Following the Civil War, the farm changed hands many times, mostly owned by absentee land owners. Brothers David and Allie Somers purchased the property in 1912 and used it as a working farm building. The interior paneling was sold to Henry Francis du Pont for use in his Winterthur home, where it can still be seen today. In the late 1930s, the home was photographed and surveyed for inclusion in the Historic American Buildings Survey.

In 1939, Herbert Lee Boatwright and wife Suzanne (née Pollard) embarked on a detailed restoration of Belle Isle and the surrounding terraced gardens with the help of Thomas T. Waterman. The beautiful landmark became a community centerpiece as the Boatwright family welcomed friends and family for frequent visits. Thanks to efforts by the Boatwright family, Belle Isle Manor is listed on the National Historic Register of Historic Places and as a Virginia Historic Landmark.

Belle Isle Farm was purchased by Edward and Rosemary Gruis in 1980. The couple allowed several studies to be conducted on the property including dendrochronology of the original building materials, providing a clearer picture of the time period and construction of the historic home. Most of the land was eventually deeded to the Bay Company for subdivision, while the Gruis family retained only the house and surrounding ninety acres.

In 1993, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation purchased the Bay Company land to create Belle Isle State Park and the manor house and grounds became a private inholding within the park. Without full time residents, Belle Isle Manor fell into disrepair and the property remained privately owned until 2015 when it was purchased by VADCR for inclusion in Belle Isle State Park. The historic home is currently closed to the public as we await funding for a full restoration.

A COMMUNITY EFFORT

Since 2015, community groups and volunteers have joined park staff in working tirelessly to breathe new life into Belle Isle's overgrown gardens and take the first steps toward preserving this Northern Neck treasure. After completion of a full historic structures report, we have a clearer picture of the scope of restoration needed to protect and maintain the property. Immediate, high-priority repairs include further masonry cleaning and repair, foundation stabilization, and lead and asbestos abatement, with an ultimate goal of a complete interior renovation. At this time, additional funds are needed to move forward with more repairs.

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN HELP:

Make a contribution:

Tax deductible contributions to the Belle Isle Restoration Project Fund can be made by check to:

Virginia Association for Parks

P.O. Box 9205

Norfolk, VA 23505

Please note [Belle Isle Restoration](#) on the memo line.

Volunteer your time:

From gardening and hands on restoration projects to researching the property's rich history, we need your help. Learn a new skill or lend a practiced hand while spending time with friends and neighbors. Join the Friends of Belle Isle State Park or contact the park for more information.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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Share our story:

Help us spread the word about the Belle Isle Restoration Project.

Check out a short video outlining the project here:

[Belle Isle Restoration Project on YouTube](#)