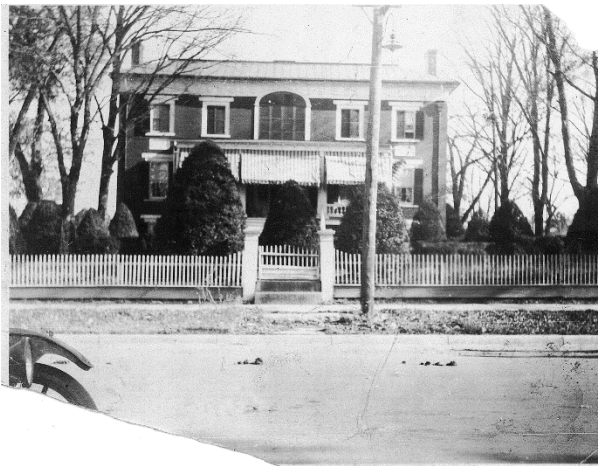

Warren County Historical Tidbits: Eaton Place

“The Show-place of Old Warrenton” With A 175 Year Old Story of Love

I am absolutely sure that you at least *know* of the house in this week’s story...it’s the Mary Burwell Allen Parsonage of Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church...it’s the big house with the HUGE boxwoods on Main Street in Warrenton...it’s The Eaton Place...and according to local historians, it is “The Show-place of Old Warrenton.” Take a few minutes with me and we’ll peer through the boxwoods into another local treasure and see if we can hear the wonderful story it’s told for almost 175 years.

I constantly find it amazing that while I have done a large amount of reading about our local history, the facts and the particulars about different homes or buildings don’t really seem to register with me until I have a context to pull all those facts together. The Eaton Place is a perfect example. And, like so many of our other treasures here in Warren County, until you get to know the families behind the building, well, a house is just a house...and we miss the wonderful synchronicity of a particular home.



Eaton Place 1920's. Note the larger front porch and picket fence, now both gone.

To the idle history student, The Eaton Place is a stately example of an antebellum Greek Revival era brick mansion favored by Southern planters. In 1842, wealthy land-owner William Eaton, Sr. employed newly arrived Jacob Holt as contractor to build a town home which opened in 1843...his primary residence being a large plantation of 6,000+ acres along the Roanoke River. Holt constructed the home on a rise on Main Street in Warrenton, parlaying his excellent interior carpentry work and design into becoming the man responsible for the “look” of Warrenton. The home was well maintained through several owners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and in 1952, owner George Garland Allen donated the home to

Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church in memory of his wife to be used as the Church Parsonage. The house is part of the Warrenton National Register District established in 1976.

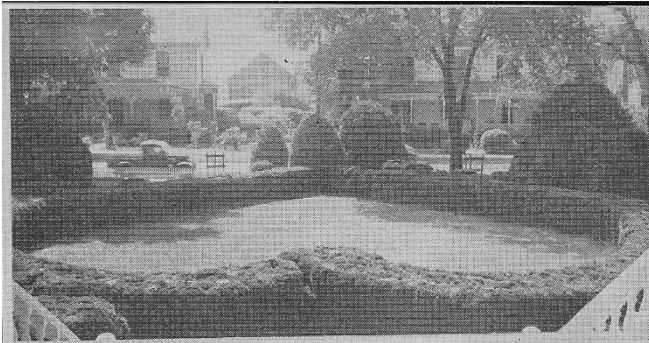
Now, if this were Williamsburg, or Raleigh or just about any other town, that information would make a nice historical overview...then if you added plenty of details about the interior woodwork and rooms you’d have a nice chapter for the history books. But, this home is in Warren County and the rest of the story beyond the bricks and the boxwoods is what makes it a true treasure.

Thanks to Lizzy Montgomery & “*Sketches of Old Warrenton,*” we know just enough additional information to help understand this home. William Eaton Sr. was likely the wealthiest planter on the Roanoke River with more than 3,000 acres under cultivation primarily in tobacco. His first wife, Elizabeth Macon, was one of Nathaniel Macon’s daughters. They had 5 children – William, Charles, Buckner, Nathaniel and Bettie.

Following Elizabeth's death, Eaton married Eliza Hickman (who died shortly thereafter) from Tidewater, Virginia and then her sister, Martha in 1834. William & Martha had only one daughter, Ella...the young lady without who we likely would not have Eaton Place.

You see, Mr. Eaton gave his young daughter every advantage. With the difference in ages with her older step-siblings, I would imagine that her life was almost like that of an only child. She traveled throughout Europe...and during the appropriate season visited the fashionable springs – The Greenbrier & others – and then wintered in Washington, D.C. Her schooling was undertaken at Mrs. Meade's School in Richmond. It was during her time at school that William Eaton decided to build Eaton Place strictly as a summer home in which Ella could entertain friends.

While I have been unable to pin down when she was born, using an educated guess & doing a little math, Ella would have been about 8 when Eaton Place was complete. What an incredible gift!



1940 view of Main Street and the heart-shaped boxwood walk of Eaton Place

So, now that you know this part of the story, doesn't that shed a little light on some of the landscaping? By that, I mean the heart shaped walks with a Boxwood hedge on Main Street and on Bragg. Disease and drought have left large holes in the Bragg "heart", but the walkways remain. Ella's father had English Boxwood plants transplanted from his Roanoke River property to Main Street to accent these brick walks. I would guess that those welcoming hearts were a nice reminder to Ella throughout the years of

her father's love...and continue to tell that story 175 years later for us. The remainder of the property was decorated with scores of American Boxwood...easily the largest I think that I've ever seen.

But, what happened to Ella you ask? Not to worry. On one of her winter stays in Washington D. C. she met a Virginia native who was also the former Governor of Texas, Peter Bell. They fell in love and married, calling San Antonio home for several years; however, Ella was drawn back to her home in Warren County and the gift from her Father, Eaton Place. Her husband was a noted rider around town. Residents remember the gold-mounted saddle & bridle he received as a gift from the citizens of Texas and his regal riding style. The Bells lived at Eaton Place into the early 1890's, choosing to move to Littleton where they both passed away after just a few years.

So while I definitely appreciate the fine architecture of the home and am glad that we have this antebellum treasure still with us, I enjoy even more that I can see William Eaton's note left to his daughter in 1843 in the form of a heart shaped walk – whether you visit from the front or the back of the house.

My thanks to Harriet Banzet and Jack Smith...and as always, Lizzie Montgomery...for their priceless pictures, information and stories. Without them I could not have learned the family story of Eaton Place and passed it along to you.

Wherever you turn in Warren County we have a jewel...

"Warren County Historical Tidbits" is a project of The Chamber of Commerce of Warren County.