

“Soldier John” Grigsby And the Hills That Followed Him

By Reed Belden

JOHN GRIGSBY was born in 1720 and grew up on the family plantation along the banks of the Occoquan and Potomac rivers in Stafford County, Virginia. Before he was 20 he joined the English expeditionary forces to fight the Spanish in South America. While in the service of the King he became known as “Soldier John” Grigsby.

In 1746, on his return from British military service, he married Rosanna Etchison in Culpepper County. On November 12, 1748, their first child, James Grigsby, was born in Culpeper, Virginia. There followed three more children, the last of whom, William, was born in September 1761. Rosanna died shortly after his birth.



Left, Fruit Hill, built after the death of “Soldier John” Grigsby; the first of the family’s Hill houses in Rockbridge. Right: Rose Hill.

In 1764, John married Elizabeth Porter, of Orange County. They had eight children in Culpeper County. During the Revolutionary War, Soldier John commanded a company in the 13th regiment of the Virginia Line, and for this service he is sometimes known as Captain John Grigsby.

In 1779 he and Elizabeth moved south to Rockbridge County, where John’s eldest son, James, had begun a career in land development.



The ninth child of Soldier John and Elizabeth, Reuben, was born in Rockbridge in 1780.

Son James’s properties included two plantations that were transferred one to his father and one to his sister Sarah and her husband, Thomas Welch. Sarah and her husband named their property Fancy Hill and were the first of Grigsbys to build a home, the mansion we know as Fancy Hill, in 1821.

Soldier John named his plantation – some 460 acres at the time – Fruit Hill. When he died in 1794, Soldier John left the estate to Joseph who, in 1822, built the home we know now by the plantation name. As Soldier John had died in 1794, he



Fancy Hill



Left, Clover Hill, known today as Herring Hall. Right: Liberty Hill.

must have lived in a different structure, likely a log house, on the estate before construction of the brick Fruit Hill house by son Joseph.

The development of other estates by kin of Soldier John followed, each identified as a “Hill.” There was Rose Hill, built by Elisha Grigsby, son of Soldier John and his second wife, in 1824; Hickory Hill, built by the youngest child, Reuben, in 1825;

Clover Hill, also known as Herring Hall, built in 1833 by Hannah Grigsby and her husband, David Greenlee; Liberty Hill, built in 1836 by Eliza Porter Grigsby and Thomas Welch III. The date of construction of these houses was established by reference to county tax data.

The seventh of the Hill houses, Cherry Hill, also known as Marlbrook, is related only indirectly to Soldier John. This house was built in about 1790 by Mary McDowell, one of whose descendents was the David Greenlee who married Hannah Grigsby.



ALL THE Seven Hills houses survive. They are all two story, all of Flemish bond brick, and in most cases of bricks made on the premises. Each has a

molded brick cornice, an expensive construction addition at the time.

The finished detail of the woodwork in these houses is perhaps their most distinctive characteristic. When considering the tools available 200 years ago this work is especially impressive. Intricately carved mantels, detailed chair rails and wainscoting are common. (See the photos of the carved mantle in Fruit Hill and the staircase at Hickory Hill.)

Although these houses have undergone many changes in the intervening years, their fundamental structure and historically important details have been preserved.

Some of the Hill houses found other uses over the past two centuries. Fancy Hill, for example, was once a stagecoach stop and tavern. Herring Hall (Clover Hill) was well known as a hotel and restaurant, and is currently a bed-and-breakfast.

Some of the houses are visible from the road. Fancy Hill fronts U.S. 11 a few miles south of Lexington. Herring Hall fronts Herring Hall Road, off U.S. 11, north of Natural Bridge. Liberty Hill is beyond Herring Hall, on Padgetts Hill road.



From *The Architecture of Historic Rockbridge*

Left, Hickory Hill, the most ornate of the Hill houses, has a winding staircase to its second and third floors. Right: Mantel at Fruit Hill.

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