

BACON'S CASTLE

Bacon's Castle, a National Historic Landmark, was built in 1665 by immigrant Arthur Allen. The "Castle" is one of the oldest brick houses still standing in English North America and possesses several architectural features that have, over the centuries, become all but extinct in this country. It is also one of the earliest Virginia houses to be constructed in a cruciform design, that is, the main body of the house is joined by a porch tower on the front and a stair tower on the rear. The handsome curvilinear or Flemish gables are accented by robust, offset triple chimney stacks, which add to the great age that envelops this entire tidewater plantation setting.

The building is a fine document for studying three centuries of America's architectural, economical, and social history and has fascinated generations of historians and architects. From the time of its inception in 1656 to the present, the evolution of Bacon's Castle has oftentimes been romantic, sometimes violent, but always intriguing.

Nearly a century before the American Revolution, in 1676, the colony of Virginia exploded into full rebellion against the tyrannical rule of Royal Governor William Berkeley. Young Nathaniel Bacon assumed the role of leader of the rebels and directed his aggressive actions first against the Indians and then toward Berkeley's government. After burning Jamestown to the ground in September, Bacon retreated to Gloucester where he continued to direct the rebel force, authorizing one of his lieutenants, William Rookings of Surry County, to establish and fortify an outpost in his home county. Rookings, seventy men strong, accomplished this when he besieged the home of Major Arthur Allen, the builder's son, and from this point ruled the county of Surry for some four months. It is from this occupation by rebels that Bacon's Castle derived its name.

Bacon's Castle was owned and inhabited by a number of different people over the years. Many interior changes took place in the house during the early 18th century under the watchful eye of Elizabeth Bray Allen, widow of Arthur Allen III. Her housekeeping received high praise from William Bird of Westover, not known for complimenting women, when he visited the Castle during his trip to survey the dividing line between Virginia and North Carolina.

In 1844 John Henry Hankins purchased the Castle, made extensive alterations, and then built the imposing addition in 1854.

During the Civil War the Castle was visited numerous times by Union raiders. Most important, however, were the visits by Sidney Lanier, the young Georgian poet. Sidney was enamored not only with Hankins' daughter, Virginia, but also with the Castle, both playing important roles in his writings.

In 1973, the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, a non-profit preservation organization, obtained the property and set about a restoration project of the "Castle" and 40 acres of surrounding property including the extensive gardens.

Today, the Castle and its beautiful gardens are open to the public and is located in Surry County just off Virginia State Route 10. It is only a short distance south of the James River. An admission fee is charged or a donation is accepted.

In October 2000, my wife Bonnie and I were privileged to have been given a private tour of the building and grounds by a most knowledgeable young descendant of Arthur Allen. He, and other historians there, were most interested in our belief that my ancestor, Thomas Barrow (1), actually was involved in the construction of Bacon's Castle and was listed on a 1680 tithe list to Arthur Allen, the wealthy merchant-plantation owner and the designer of the Castle.

We know that Thomas(1) was a carpenter from the inventory of his estate which listed many carpenter tools as well as "3 thousand eight penny nailes and 2 thousand six penny nailes." Nails such as those used in the construction of the Castle were valuable hand-made items and hard to come by. Some of the original nails used in the construction can still be seen today.

We also know that Thomas(1) and his father (?) John owned property on near by Chippoaks Creek. This area today is a Virginia State Park and I believe that the Barrow land is now a part of the park. Other flat, sandy land near the creek is planted in the famous Virginia peanuts which at this time were being harvested and which I sampled and enjoyed. The creek empties into the James River and would have been a great fishing site. It would have been only a short distance to the Castle.

It was a great thrill to visit an area where my first American Barrow ancestors owned the land and contributed to the building of such a historic structure.

Continuing our trip, we were able to visit sites on the beautiful Virginia and North Carolina rivers where Thomas SR, Thomas JR, Jacob and Hosea had their fisheries or as they listed them as "seineeries". We also spent considerable time in libraries, museums and courthouses in Isle of Wight, Surry and Southampton counties in Virginia and in Edgecomb, Halifax and Onslow counties in North Carolina. The Thomas Barrow line owned properties in all of these locals and we were able to uncover a few valuable bits of information which we had not seen before.

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