

## Holly Grove mansion's 200 years bring Ruffner reunion to Charleston

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In 1815, Kanawha County saltmaker Daniel Ruffner completed work on a stately, solid, two-story brick mansion built to replace the log farmhouse his family had occupied since moving here from Virginia's Shenandoah Valley in 1795.

Later this week, 80 Ruffner descendants from across the nation will hold a family reunion in Charleston, where they will observe the mansion's 200th birthday and visit other Kanawha Valley points of interest either touched by or created by their ancestors.

Nestled in a stand of holly trees adjacent to what is now the State Capitol Complex, the mansion that would be known as Holly Grove was built to last. Eighteen-inch-thick walls built of heavy brick imported from England took shape atop a foundation of sandstone blocks. Green shutters covered the windows of the 15-bedroom building, and a dining room extended from the rear of the home toward a free-standing kitchen, built separately to reduce the risk of fire.

The mansion symbolized the Ruffner family's success. While converting into a plantation a 1,000-acre expanse of forest stretching from the old log structure of Fort Lee, Charleston's first building, just east of the present downtown district, upriver to what is now Daniel Boone Park and up onto the ridge overlooking what would become West Virginia's capital city, family members learned to drill for saline brine in the Malden area, convert it into salt and sell it for a profit.

During its early years, Holly Grove served as an inn for weary travelers, as well as the home for the Ruffner family.

An 1826 advertisement for the inn observed that owner Daniel Ruffner "has opened a house of private entertainment at his commodious residence, situated one mile and a half from the town of Charleston on the road leading thence to Lewisburg. Every effort will be made to render the lodging of the traveler comfortable and his diet palatable. His pastures are extensive and corn abundant. He will therefore be amply prepared to accommodate the cattle or hog merchant. For travelers on horseback, or in carriages, he will be able to furnish good stables well supplied with all kinds of provender for horses."

According to Ruffner family history, guests at Holly Grove in its early years included Daniel Boone, Kentucky senator and presidential hopeful Henry Clay, ornithologist John J. Audubon and, in 1832, President Andrew Jackson.

The family's involvement in the Kanawha Valley salt industry began in 1794, when family patriarch Joseph Ruffner, then living near Luray, Virginia, bought — site unseen — 500 acres of bottom land near the mouth of Campbells Creek containing numerous natural salt licks once frequented by bison.

Ruffner bought the property from John Dickinson, who described the land and its possibilities to him after the two met by chance while traveling on business along the upper James River. After visiting the tract in 1795, Ruffner put his sons, David and Joseph Jr., in charge of developing a viable salt production facility on the salt-bearing land, while he focused on clearing a plantation on what is now Charleston's East End.

It turned out to have been a wise choice. In addition to learning how to drill into rock to tap quantities of concentrated saline brine, the Ruffner brothers were the first salt makers to use coal in the evaporation process. According to an 1826 U.S. history text included in a Ruffner family exhibit now on display in the State Archives Library, David Ruffner also “invented a machine which forces water uphill for a distance of three miles” for use in salt-making.

By 1805, two years after their father died, the Ruffner brothers' salt operation was turning a profit.

David Ruffner went on to serve several terms in the Virginia General Assembly and was commissioned a colonel in the Virginia Militia.

Among children he and his wife raised was Henry Ruffner, their eldest son, who became a Presbyterian minister and organized Charleston's first Presbyterian congregation, before joining the faculty, and later becoming the president of, Washington College — now Washington and Lee University.

Although his family's salt works was powered with slave labor, Henry Ruffner was the author of the 1847 “Ruffner Pamphlet,” in which he opposed slavery, not so much on moral grounds but because the practice inhibited the growth of industry, agriculture, jobs and education.

Henry Ruffner's younger brother, Lewis, became a state legislator, supported the Union cause during the Civil War, and served as a delegate to the Wheeling Convention, where he called for what turned out to be an unsuccessful vote to name the new state to be carved from Virginia's western counties “Kanawha.”

After the war, Lewis Ruffner returned to Malden, where he continued to produce salt. After his first wife died, he hired Viola Knapp to serve as his family's governess, and later married the former teacher.

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, Booker T. Washington and his family walked to Malden from their former slave home near Roanoke, Virginia, to find employment in the salt works. Booker Washington, then 11, worked as a gardener and servant for Lewis and Viola Ruffner. Mrs. Ruffner assumed the role of mentor for the youth, and encouraged him to pursue his dream of furthering his education.

“The lessons that I have learned in the home of Mrs. Ruffner were as valuable to me as any education I have gotten since,” Washington wrote in his autobiography, “Up From Slavery.” Viola Ruffner, he wrote, “always encouraged and sympathized with me in all my efforts to get an education.”

After the Civil War ended and the Kanawha County salt industry collapsed, other Ruffners left their mark on Charleston.

In 1885, brothers Andrew and Meredith Ruffner built the 180-room Ruffner Hotel at the corner of Hale Street and what is now Kanawha Boulevard. The eight-story hotel was then second in size only to the Capitol in Charleston. Andrew and Meredith Ruffner also founded Ruffner Brothers Wholesale Grocery in the early 1900s.

Other Charleston landmarks linked to the Ruffner family include Ruffner Memorial Park, on Kanawha Boulevard East, part of the original Ruffner farm; Rosedale, the log home of Joseph and Anne Ruffner, now located next to the Craik-Patton House; Ruffner Memorial Church; Kanawha Presbyterian Church; and Ruffner Street.

While the Holly Grove mansion is the centerpiece for the Ruffner Reunion, the building, now owned by the state, will not be open for tours. A \$3 million project to renovate the mansion and create public conference space inside was approved several years ago, but only stabilization work, such as roofing, has been authorized, and the rest of the project has been put on hold, due to budgetary concerns. In its present state, the mansion is considered unsafe for visitors.

Ruffner family members are aware of and understand the situation, according to Phyllis Herschok, president of the Ruffner Family Association.

“Luckily, we have a strong connection with Malden, where other Ruffners have lived,” she said, including Lewis and Viola Ruffner, “and we have a connection with the Booker T. Washington family. Some of us have attended their reunions, and a couple of them have attended ours.”

A luncheon at the Culture Center, a visit to the Ruffner Exhibit in the State Archives and a tour of the Dickinson Salt Works will be among reunion activities, which begin Friday and end Sunday.

The last Ruffner Family Reunion in Charleston took place in 1995.

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