

LAKE LIGHTS

by Paula Koch

Family History Comes Alive for Dayton Runkle

Great-great grandfather's signature found on wall of house used for Civil War HQ

What more heart warming incident could happen than standing in the same place where one's great-great grandfather walked the floors during the Civil War. For Dayton and Gayle Runkle, that is what happened when they visited Manassas, Virginia's Liberia Plantation House in November and saw the signature on the wall of Lt. John B. Dayton.

The couple knew that Dayton's great-great grandfather was Lt. John Banks Dayton, a Union soldier. But other than some official documents that had been passed down to Dayton through the generations, that was all they knew of him. Those documents including promotion papers from 2nd Lieutenant (1863) to 1st Lieutenant (1865), discharge papers, pension payment paper, three treasury department documents, and a reunion ribbon have now been donated by the Runkles to The Manassas Museum.

Lt. John B. Dayton served with the Pennsylvania Volunteers from June 1861-1865. Wounded in June of 1862 at Charles City Crossroads near Richmond, he was captured. It is unknown how long he spent as a captive. "The volunteer, Margaret Binning, said they did a lot of quick trading," notes Dayton Runkle.

Lt. Dayton was wounded again in December 1862 in Fredricksburg. For his war injuries, he was granted a \$100 pension though it was not received until June 1890. After the war, he resumed his occupation as a jeweler in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. John and his wife, Frances Mary Eddy, had one son and one daughter. The son never married. The daughter married Charles Vorhis Runkle. Lt. John B. Dayton died in 1908.

The Discovery of the Signature and the Liberia Plantation House

The discovery of Lt. John B. Dayton's signature has a special meaning for Gayle and Dayton. "We knew there was a John Dayton. That was where Dayton got his name. Dayton's family has always done a lot of genealogy. I thought this was so fascinating. In my family, we can't trace very far back. We are 100% Irish and there just are not very good records. Dayton's family has a long genealogy record," says Gayle.

Speaking about the discovery of his great-great grandfather's signature, Dayton says, "The volunteer did research to try to find the relatives of those who had signatures in the building. It was cool to think back that a family member was here and was injured. I'm not much of a history buff but I found this very interesting."



Margaret Binning, volunteer researcher at The Liberia Plantation House, with Dayton and Gayle Runkle. Margaret traced John B. Dayton's signature to Dayton Runkle.

Last August, Manassas Museum volunteer researcher Margaret Binning sent a letter to the Runkle's son, Nelson Dayton Runkle III who resides in Alexandria, Virginia, telling of conservators at Liberia finding the signature of Lt. John B. Dayton on the wall. A Manassas museum volunteer since 1993, mostly in public information, Margaret says, "My mission was to find descendants."

"I have done this before--tracking Civil War soldiers and tracing them to their family." She also has helped trace Civil War relics. Using Ancestry.com, Familysearch.org, and other on-line sources, Margaret found an obituary for Dayton's father and the name seemed to fit. She sent the discovery letter to the Runkle's son because he lived nearby.

"It is very exciting for the families but it also is very exciting for Lisa (i.e. Manassas Museum Assistant, Lisa Sievel-Otten) and me. The signatures were all found on the second floor. Five so far are readable. The conservator company came in and removed the wallpaper and did a paint analysis to determine the most likely places to sign. Possible water damage behind the plaster made their signatures push forward," explains Margaret. Three of the signatures were found in one second story room and two were found in another. Lt. John B. Dayton's signature was small with "Lt. and Dayton being readable. John was not and there was a big B," according to Margaret while the signature above his was big and sprawling. Signing one's name on a wall was not unusual at this time.

Margaret continues, "The building served as headquarters for both sides. The five soldiers identified, ages 21-48, are from five different units--all Union and between 1862-1863. These soldiers, away from home and in battle, memorializing their names on the wall is an understandable treasure to find so many generations later. One was a Captain from Delaware; Lt. Dayton from Pennsylvania; and three were Privates from Vermont and New York.

"When the families visit, they kind of go silent. Each family has known they had a soldier and this keeps the stories alive. Each has had the same response. Each descendant has been happy to be found," Margaret says. Of the five signatures found, four descendant families have been located. Three have visited and the fourth is planning on coming this spring.

The Liberia Plantation House was built in 1825 by the Weir family and at the time of the Civil War was a prosperous working plantation covering 1660 acres on the lower Bull Run tract. Made of brick, the family referred to it as "the brick house." When Virginia seceded from the Union, the elder Weir remained at the plantation while his sons left to join the Confederacy. A massive military encampment was formed nearby in Manassas and shortly thereafter, the brick house became the Headquarters for Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard.

The Weir family continued to live in the house during the occupation and up until March of 1862 when the Union troops were advancing. The family fled south, leaving the slaves to manage the plantation. It soon became headquarters for the Union under General Irvin McDowell. Margaret says, "The name Liberia was from the country of Liberia and was chosen because of the efforts by the American Colonization Society to raise money to buy ships and send the Africans back to Africa."

Liberia, which had been visited by both U.S.



Dayton Runkle at Manassas, Virginia's Liberia Plantation House in November saw the signature on the wall behind of Lt. John B. Dayton, his great-great grandfather, a Union soldier.



Liberia Plantation House in Manassas, Virginia

President Abraham Lincoln and Confederate President Jefferson Davis, was one of the few significant structures still standing in that area at the end of the war. The Weirs returned but were unable to restore the plantation to its former glory. In 1888, the Weirs sold the plantation to the wealthy Portner family and it remained in their possession until 1947 when it was sold to the Breeden family. The Breeden family donated Liberia and six surrounding acres to the City of Manassas in 1986. The City purchased an additional twelve acres. The property was placed under the authority of the Manassas Museum System to be restored and developed into an attraction. None of the out buildings remained and Liberia itself was in need of complete restoration.

Breeden family members continued to live in the brick house until 2001 when according to Lisa, "...restoration efforts concentrated on stabilizing the house and preventing further damage to the inside. Over the next few years we replaced the roof, re-pointed (or replaced the mortar) on the bricks, restored the windows, replaced the heating system and upgraded electrical systems, removed leaky plumbing from a former bathroom, and whitewashed exterior portions of the house so it would match its 1861 appearance. Just this

(continued on page 9)



OPEN HOUSE! MARCH 6-7-8

Friday	9-5
Saturday	9-4
Sunday	Noon-4

Lunch on Saturday Provided by ARVEST Bank

Specials on all leftover boats. 10 to 50% off most marine accessories including towables and ParadisePad for floating.

19700 S Peculiar Drive, Belton, MO 64012
- Serving KC for over 19 years -



SALES and SERVICE

816-524-2277

www.sportsmansoutfitter.com

Family History Comes Alive for Dayton Runkle (cont. from page 8)

past summer we had conservators remove peeling wallpaper, assess plaster damage, and search for graffiti—which is when they found Lt. Dayton’s signature.

“A Citizen’s Advisory Committee met to create a thoughtful plan for future restoration that will enable us to open the house on a regular basis, host special events like weddings and concerts, and develop the 18-acre space as a park, all while preserving Liberia as the historic treasure that it is. The Master Plan that resulted from the committee’s work won a regional planning award and is guiding ongoing work.

“Right now engineers are working on additional structural repairs like fixing stairs that are pulling away from the wall and some drainage issues. Engineers are working on utilities and sewer plans, and architects are designing a rear porch and ramp, and restroom/office outbuildings. Our conservator should have walls repaired and covered, and more graffiti preserved by this summer.”

Certainly, the passion of Margaret and Lisa is one reason the Liberia project has moved forward. Fund-raising is ongoing to complete the restoration. Lisa says, “From the moment I first saw Liberia—when my family and I attended the very first program held there in 2001—Liberia has been a passion of mine. Little did I know then that I would work for the museum five years later, give tours, and eventually work on its restoration. Any nugget of information we learn about Liberia and the people who walked its floors is exciting to us.

“Although we know about the Weir family that lived there, we don’t have any of their original family documents and only one of their possessions. Only recently did a descendant donate a pitcher that had been in the

family and in the house, and it is our only object from the house.

“The Dayton papers that the Runkles donated are the only papers or artifacts we have that directly connect a soldier to the house. There is something special about an original document that you can hold and see the original sprawling 19th century penmanship and the yellowing paper. Those papers—and we hope more papers or objects that might be uncovered from other descendants—will be on display in an exhibit space in the outbuilding on the property once it is built.

“It has been a thrill to meet the Runkles and other descendants thanks to Margaret’s great detective work. Until this summer we had no idea what soldiers occupied the house after 1862. Lt. Dayton and the other signatures uncovered date to 1863, and we’re hopeful that we will find more evidence, more stories and more descendants.”

For more information, go to www.manassasmuseum.org This year marks the sesquicentennial anniversary of the end of the Civil War.

