

B A Donald of Otterburn

From the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, prepared in 2000 by Leslie Giles, Architectural Historian, Lexington, Virginia

Benjamin A. Donald (1797-1871) was the only son of prominent Scottish-born merchant and entrepreneur Andrew Donald and his wife Sally Moore Donald, who resided at Bedford County's Fancy Farm. Born in the county in 1797, Benjamin was, upon his father's death in 1806, sent with his younger sister Geils to be raised and educated by family in Scotland (Sally Moore Donald's death predated her husband's). Upon attaining his majority, Benjamin Donald returned to Virginia to reclaim his rightful share to the Donald estate. In 1821, with his sister's power of attorney, Donald sold to Isaac Otey and others (executors of the Andrew Donald estate) 1,034 acres of the Fancy Farm property. A year later Donald signed a purchase agreement with James C. Mooreman to obtain the Mennis and Quarles tracts of the "Little Otter Estate" on Fancy Farm Road, and in 1823 his purchase of the two tracts was finalized. The property consisted of a 1,651-acre parcel that cost \$16,510 -- the tract subsequently known as Otterburn -- and a 182-acre parcel on Stott's Branch that cost \$795.75. On March 31, 1824, Donald married Sarah (Sally) Camm (1808-1881), a daughter of John Camm II of Lynchburg and Cloverdale Plantation in Amherst County. Benjamin and Sally's only child, a daughter, died before the age of one.(1)

Benjamin A. Donald first appears in the Bedford County land books in 1825 as owner of a 1,651 acre tract on Little Otter River three miles north of the courthouse; the tract includes improvements valued at \$2,000 (with no further description). Presumably this \$2,000 figure represents a mill and miller's house, eventually known as Donald's Mill, located on the Little Otter River a half mile to the southwest of the Otterburn site. The property undoubtedly included other buildings, including the dwelling that the Donalds and their household would have occupied during the first years of their marriage, while Otterburn was under construction. In 1826 Donald's petition to the county court to establish a mill, possibly a second one at this location, was approved. An 1872 advertisement described the mill property after nearly fifty years of Donald ownership as including a two-and-a-half story stone mill, a three-and-a-half-story brick mill, a miller's house and "garden well enclosed," a cottage dwelling house "with all necessary outhouses," and a saw mill "with large Circular Saw."(2)

In addition to his milling business, Benjamin Donald was regularly listed in census records as a farmer; agricultural production was a mainstay of the Donald family income. Personal property tax records from the 1820s through the 1840s indicate that Benjamin Donald owned, on average, over twenty slaves and more than a dozen horses each year during this period. By 1840, Donald was considered to be one of the county's most affluent citizens and counted nearly 30 slaves among his property. The 1850 census records Benjamin A. Donald, farmer, as the owner of real estate valued at \$40,000. Adjoining households headed by a plantation overseer (Clabon Ballard) and a miller (James T. Elliot) probably reflect the proximity of Donald's principal white employees. While Donald is variously credited with the

introduction to Virginia of Scotch broom and thoroughbred sheep (both claims unsubstantiated), his plantation did include -- besides the milling operations and dwelling houses -- a stable, barn, overseer's house, granary, and other outbuildings. The land was "well adapted to the growth of wheat, corn, oats, tobacco, and hay, and [was] specially suited for a grazing farm." Donald raised horses, mules, cattle, hogs, and sheep on the Otterburn plantation, in addition to the grain crops (principally wheat and corn) that he grew. (3)

The wealth obtained by Donald through inheritance and agricultural and manufacturing ventures allowed him to erect a fine dwelling on his plantation by 1828. Land books note in 1828 that \$2,000 was added to the 1,651-acre tract "for N buildings," bringing the total valuation for the buildings on the property to \$4,000. This figure undoubtedly represents the initial construction of the house known as Otterburn -- a tripartite-form, transverse-hall-plan house with brick walls laid in Flemish bond, similar to other tripartite houses erected in the Virginia Piedmont during the period, yet unusual for its adoption of a *piano nobile*. This house was apparently gutted by fire in 1841, as the land books for that year record a \$2,000 deduction in the value of buildings on the property, "taken off for fire." By 1843, \$2,000 had been added back to the property value "for improvements," reflecting the reconstruction of the house. While employing the surviving brick walls and retaining the transverse-hall plan of the original Otterburn, the rebuilding effort did incorporate several important changes to the house, most notably the addition of a full-length front porch atop a ground-level loggia, the adoption of a cross-gabled roof with pedimented ends, attic-level chambers, a delicate ornamental wrought-iron roof balustrade, and the application of Greek Revival detail derived from at least two pattern books, Asher Benjamin's *The Practical House Carpenter* (1830) and *Practice of Architecture* (1833). (4)

Donald was active in local politics first as a Whig and later as a delegate to the 1856 American (Know-Nothing) Party convention. Like most political and social leaders of the time, he promoted regional development by serving on the Board of Directors of the Lynchburg and Salem Turnpike Company in the 1840s and by soliciting subscriptions for the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad Company. But his principal significance on the local scene is as a public official. Donald's first public appointment was that of county surveyor of roads in 1825. Appointed a county magistrate (one of thirty-three acting justices of the peace) in 1832, Donald also served as a School Commissioner and as Overseer of the Poor, and was often tapped for committees that oversaw road, bridge, and other construction activities for the county. His interest in architecture led to his appointment to the committee that oversaw the design and construction of the new county courthouse in the early 1830's. This committee, of which Donald was a leading member, was appointed to make suitable plans for the courthouse construction, to contract for the work, and to superintend the building process. Under their guidance the county selected local builder Lindsey Shoemaker, in concert with contractors Jordan & Murrell, to undertake the project, one of Virginia's several antebellum temple-front tripartite brick courthouses to be built with a raised main level. Following the revision of the state constitution in 1850-1851 mandating that county justices or magistrates be elected to four-year terms rather than be appointed and commissioned to serve. Bedford County was divided into nine magisterial districts, each of which could elect four justices, bringing the countywide total to thirty-six. The justices thus elected were required to elect a presiding justice, who was obligated to attend every session of

court. In 1852, the first year elections were held, only ten men who had previously served as appointed justices were elected; Donald was one of them. Having been on the court since 1832, Donald held the respect of his peers, who elected him the county's first presiding justice (1852-1856). Serving as an elected county justice from 1852 through 1871, Donald was re-elected to the position of presiding justice in 1856, 1860, and 1864. (5)

The characters of Benjamin and Sally Donald, and parties given by the Donalds at Otterburn, were remembered with great fondness by Bedford County author Letitia Burwell in her *A Girl's Life in Virginia Before the War*. Of Donald she wrote:

"This gentleman, Benjamin Donald, was a man of high character, -- his accomplishments, manner and appearance marking him 'rare,' -- 'one in a century.' Above his fellow men in greatness of soul, he could comprehend nothing mean...Truth and lofty character were so unmistakably stamped upon him that a day's acquaintance convinced one he could be trusted forever. Brought up in Scotland, the home of his ancestors, in him were blended the best points of Scotch and Virginia Character, -- strict integrity and whole-souled generosity and hospitality."

Benjamin Donald died December 31, 1871 at the age of 74. An area newspaper noted the event with an obituary describing Donald as "a pure and honorable man, and a valuable and worthy citizen. for many years he was the Presiding Magistrate of the county, and no judge ever held the scales of justice more evenly...The death of such a man is a public calamity." While leaving the bulk of his estate to his widow, Donald's will included a provision giving cash or land valued at \$10,000 to his sister's two children; as a result, in early 1872 Sally sold the mill property with 120 acres to John H. Booth. Upon Sally Donald's death in 1881, her three sisters inherited the estate. (6)