

The Plantation as a Gathering Place

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The Plantation House has a hallowed place in history as a familial and communal gathering place, and Long Branch is no exception. Through the 19th and into the 20th century, the house was a centerpiece of Clarke County life and home to local public figures.

Early glimpses of the plantation as a gathering place appear in the 1857 letters between Adelaide Nelson and her daughter Nannie, who was at school in New York at the time. Cousins Eliza, Mary, Evelyn, Betsy, and Sally visited frequently from Rosney.¹ Rosney was the nearby home and schoolhouse for young boys, headed by female Nelson relatives and attended by Hugh Jr. The Scollay relatives also planned visits on multiple occasions.² While Adelaide did have some lonely days, with both children at school and her husband, Hugh Mortimer Nelson, dealing with other business, she still had many chances to entertain family visitors.

Hugh's other businesses included his position of vestry at the Christ Church in Millwood, in which his son Hugh Jr. would succeed him, and his elected position as delegate of Clarke County to the Virginia Secession Convention at Richmond in 1861.³ After winning the latter seat, he invited all of those who voted both for and against him to dinner at Long Branch, again demonstrating his home's role as a communal centerpiece.

Not only did Hugh serve and entertain the immediate Clarke County community, but he was also friends with the famous author Washington Irving. After a friend of Irving's suggested staying a night at Long Branch during a trip, the author was struck by the beauty and "true Virginia style" hospitality of the Nelsons and their home.⁴ Hugh and Irving's friendship grew over the years, after beginning with the plantation's renowned role as a hospitable location, fostering a community among the upper classes.

In the post-bellum period, Long Branch did not entertain as it had before the Civil War. Rather, Hugh's debts caught up to him, and his wife Adelaide fought a long financial battle to keep the house in the family.⁵ After his mother's passing, Hugh Jr. and his wife Sallie P. Nelson, married in 1885, took over the plantation house. Although the house underwent some deterioration in prior decades, Hugh Jr. and Sally brought the house back to life with "...culture, refinement and the most genial hospitality..." These receptions lasted through the "wee hours of the morning" and discussed fondly by attendees.⁶ However, the Nelson family and Long Branch, would take yet another pause on September 18th, 1915, when Hugh Jr. died.

Sallie tried to keep up the farm, but eventually leased out plots of land, and no longer entertained as she and Hugh did before his death. However, she maintained a public role as the president of the Women's Auxiliary of Christ Church, and opened Long Branch's doors to

¹ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, March 23rd and 28th, 1857.

² Harriot Scollay to Nannie Nelson, May 4th, 1857.

³ Fordney, Christopher. Long Branch. 30, 45.

⁴ Fordney, Christopher. Long Branch. 22.

⁵ Fordney, Christopher. Long Branch. 39.

⁶ Fordney, Christopher. Long Branch. 46.

women relatives during the Great Depression.⁷

After Sallie's death on February 23rd, 1951, the house fell out of the Nelson family. In 1957, a financial advisor and thoroughbred breeder and his wife, Abram and Dorothy Hewitt, purchased the house in its greatly deteriorated state. While they touched up the house, they did not entertain as the Nelsons had. They lived at Long Branch until 1982, when the house was sold onto the Hicks family, and then Harry Z. Isaacs in 1986.

Isaacs was a wealthy entrepreneur and horse breeder, and the Clark County community lauded him for bringing life back to the plantation house. Before his death in 1990, Isaacs restored the house and held a variety of receptions throughout 1989 and 1990. Numerous thank-you letters from Clarke County residents and other local friends congratulate Isaacs on his restorative work, equine events, and other occasions, such as Garden Week.⁸

Long Branch kept horses back in Hugh Mortimer's day too, but Isaacs' expertise helped introduce equine keeping and events to Long Branch's reborn community engagement, which has lasted through the modern day.

⁷ Fordney, Christopher. Long Branch. 47.

⁸ Prudence Squier to Harry Isaacs, August 21st, 1990.