



Montgomery Hall Park History

In 1808, John Howe Peyton, a graduate of Princeton University and a young lawyer, moved to Staunton in order to establish a legal practice. The Stafford County native built the large Montgomery Hall mansion in the 1820's on several hundred acres southwest of Staunton. This estate was named for his wife, Ann Lewis Montgomery, the great-granddaughter of John Lewis, founder of Staunton.

John and Ann Peyton were well known for their entertainment of guests. The original estate included a reception hall, tea room, library, dining room, conservatory, den, kitchen and pantry. On the second floor were ten bedrooms and four baths. It is even recorded that Henry Clay, the great statesman and U.S. Senator from Kentucky was a guest at the estate on several occasions, and an interesting account of the social life at the estate is given in the Memoir of John Howe Peyton, written by his son, John Lewis Peyton: "He kept up a large establishment at his elegant home of Montgomery Hall, having over fifty servants about his premises, entertained a great deal of company in a delightful manner, gave sumptuous dinners and great many of them, and of other entertainments – in fact, kept open house... his guests were among the most distinguished for talents and acquirements, for rank and station in the State and Country."

John Lewis Peyton was also the historian who wrote the History of Augusta County, Virginia, and in this work describes his birthplace: "Montgomery Hall (stands) a mile south of the city, and (was) build by the Honorable John H. Peyton, in 1822-1824, from plans presented to him by President Jefferson.

Sadly, no evidence of the plans of U.S. President Thomas Jefferson has been uncovered. After Peyton's death in 1847, the property passed from his heirs and changed hands many times. In the 1870's it was owned by H.D. Peck of New York, then the Walter family of Staunton, and finally by John A. Kennedy, whose children were born there and some of whom still reside in the area. By about 1920, when a brochure on the estate was privately printed, the grounds included four hundred and twelve acres and an orchard of four-thousand apple trees. There was a bowling alley and a gymnasium which contained separate guest rooms.

Prior to the 1940's, due to segregation, the black community of Staunton had no recreational facilities for their use; and was only allowed once a year to use the Gypsy Hill Park Fair Grounds, upon approval.

In 1946, the City of Staunton acquired from Alexander C. Thomas and Elizabeth D. Thomas, his wife, the property by virtue of an August 24, 1946 deed. The 150 acres of land were acquired for the purpose of providing a recreational area for the black population. Beginning in 1947, the park was to be maintained under the direction of a park committee led by Mrs. Irene Givens.

Mrs. Givens was selected to be the General Operations Manager by the Montgomery Hall Park Committee. Mrs. Givens dedicated over 25 years of service to the administration of Montgomery Hall Park and its programs prior to 1970. Mrs. Givens and her staff were the "Welcome Committee" for Staunton to all of the communities who traveled as far away as Roanoke and Richmond to visit and use the segregated park. Mrs. Givens has been referred to as the surrogate mother to all of the children who participated daily in the activities of the park, and was present to monitor the building and visitors day and night. In October of 1948,



one of the first major improvements arrived in the form of a last will and testament. Under the will of Miss. Elizabeth G. Catlett, the following provision was made: "I leave for the benefit of the colored people of Staunton, the following sum to be used as my sister Amy P. Catlett shall decide best for the benefit of the colored people of Staunton, \$10,000.00."

In accordance with the foregoing provision, the executor of the estate paid the City of Staunton the sum of \$10,000.00 to be used: "... in the construction of a swimming pool in Montgomery Hall Park in accordance with the firm bid of R.W. Moore and Company of Staunton, Virginia to be submitted on September 10, 1948, and to provide, in addition thereto, for the painting of the interior of said pool, using paint similar to that used in a pool located in Charlottesville, Virginia, also the building of necessary cement walks, fences, cement benches, and diving board, details for which have been previously discussed."

Surprising enough, once completed the new pool at Montgomery Hall Park was at first, under used. Many of the members of the black community that had grown up and lived within City limits had never been in a pool. According to those who attended the park during this time, many of the young African American teenagers had to be sent to lifeguard classes in Richmond, Virginia for training, as there were no other training opportunities nearby. Slowly, but surely, through offering free swimming lessons, the black youth of Staunton (and also a few adults) began learning how to swim.

As the years passed, integration of the city parks, and through lack of improvements, the park began to fall into disarray. In 1974, the Booker T. Washington High School Alumni Committee wanted to develop the park as a major project in the community. Its members determined that the project would be something that the community could benefit from as a whole, and began planning the restoration of Montgomery Hall Park. Community involvement and interest was needed and efforts were directed to solicit support through a series of meetings for the development of plans for the park. The City Government agreed to provide \$25,000 in the form of maintenance and improvements. The overall development costs from the City of Staunton's Master Plan for Montgomery Hall Park was estimated to be nearly \$750,000. The available funding of \$25,000 was insufficient to develop the park, so the dreams of truly improving and renovating the park were stalled. Later that same year, the City of Staunton agreed to apply for a Federal Grant from the Commission of Outdoor Recreation to develop the park. It was believed that the funding would take an additional two to three years for approval (if granted at all).

In June of 1975, a notification was given by John D. Lancaster, Director of Recreation & Parks that the City of Staunton had received more than \$400,000 for the Montgomery Hall Project through Federal Grants for the complete and comprehensive development of the park to include: ball fields, nature trails, tennis courts, bike trails and picnic areas that would accommodate more than five thousand people. Additional lighting would be installed as well as adequate parking for visitors. In October of 1977, City Council approved the formation of a committee to study and make recommendations as to whether or not the actual building (Montgomery Hall) was worth saving from demolition. The Committee met three-four times a month from November 1977 to April 1978. After having received input from the Staunton community, the committee reported to Staunton City Council that the building was in fact, worth saving. The findings and recommendations were as follows:

1. Montgomery Hall Building has a state and local significance historically, and local significance architecturally.
2. Montgomery Hall was found to be structurally sound, and it would prove to be less expensive to renovate the existing structure than to build the same amount of new space.



The City's first Parks & Recreation Department Director, John D. Lancaster publicly supported the renovation of the building for use by the Staunton Parks & Recreation Department for offices, as well as the use by other civic groups and organizations.

The following is direct content from the website johnhowepeyton.org, found under the menu tab "database". Many thanks to Jane Gray Avery who painstakingly researched the Peyton family letters, long-forgotten documents and 100's of other sources to uncover the names of the slaves who lived and worked at Montgomery Hall in the 1800's. "Montgomery Hall, like most other pre-Civil War plantation estates in Virginia, was run by the labor of enslaved African-Americans. Sadly, these individuals were referred to most often by first name only in wills, inventories, deeds, and tax records. They do not appear at all in census records by name until 1870, making genealogical research prior to 1870 often impossible for their descendants. The Peyton family records include many last names and details of familial relationships of enslaved persons at John Howe Peyton's Montgomery Hall and his properties in Alleghany County, Virginia. Many of these individuals are mentioned in family letters and some lived out their lives with Peyton family members. In October, 2012, this database will begin with a list of names of all known enslaved African-Americans associated with John Howe Peyton and Montgomery Hall and will eventually include all known details of their lives.