

News

Connected to the past

PETERSBURG — *A rare connection with history happened at the festivities for the 228th anniversary of the 1781 Battle of Petersburg at Battersea on Saturday. The Giddens family, direct descendents of the Banisters, who built the mansion, came from Tampa, Fla., to learn about their ancestors.*

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PETERSBURG — A rare connection with history happened at the festivities for the 228th anniversary of the 1781 Battle of Petersburg at Battersea on Saturday. The Giddens family, direct descendents of the Banisters, who built the mansion, came from Tampa, Fla., to learn about their ancestors.

The Giddens also discussed donating some original family possessions to the estate with Ben Greenbaum of the Battersea Board of Directors.

The estate's original villa was built by Col. John Banister, who was Petersburg's first mayor and a prominent figure in Colonial Virginia. He acquired a significant amount of wealth as a businessman but also played a role as a Revolutionary War leader when his estate saw some action.

This weekend, Tom and Harrison Giddens walked through re-enactors and visitors, catching a glimpse of what life was like in the time of their ancestors. Harrison Giddens is the great-great-great-granddaughter of Emily Banister Cocke, who was the granddaughter of Col. John Banister.

A reproduction portrait of Emily in one of Battersea's rooms shows her holding a stylish fan with a handle made of ivory. The original painting hangs at the Giddens' Tampa home, and Harrison Giddens brought the very same fan with her to Petersburg.

"I found it in a box some years ago," she said. "I immediately knew what it was, but I had no idea that it still existed."

Giddens said she felt a rush when she first walked into the mansion.

"I feel like I'm in touch with my ancestors who lived here," she said. "I'm anxious to see Battersea fully restored."

Attracting almost 4,000 visitors over the weekend festival, Battersea showed its potential as a magnet for tourists. About 100 Revolutionary War re-enactors camped on the property, sleeping in authentic tents, which hold six people each.

Mike Ceceri portrayed a lieutenant of rifles with the 7th Virginia Infantry of the United States Militia. He said that Battersea was a very special place for re-enactors.

"There are few Revolutionary War sites in Virginia, and next to Williamsburg, Petersburg is one of them," Ceceri said. "This is our home turf and it's great to be here."

Re-enactors camped out and cooked authentic soldiers dishes.

"The men ate salted pork beef, oatmeal and rice," said Capt. Howard Helmert. "They also got a daily ration of rum."

Re-enactors portrayed both American and British troops, and the re-enactment of the Petersburg battle on Saturday and Sunday — gunfire included — was the main attraction to many visitors, even though the original battle took place where Old Towne Petersburg is today. However, Battersea is still a historic site because soldiers camped there around the time of the battle, which the Americans lost. It bought Gen. George Washington time to move his army to a safer location and eventually re-form.

More than 228 years later, re-enactors also presented a military hospital display, vendors and sutlers, and colonial dancing lessons. In the late afternoon Saturday, visitors enjoyed a performance by Petersburg Barque — as drawn from the Petersburg Symphony Orchestra.

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SABRINA SCHAEFFER/STAFF PHOTOS Visitors gather on the lawn at Battersea for a period performance by members of the Petersburg Symphony Orchestra in honor of the 228th anniversary of the 1781 Revolutionary War Battle of Petersburg.