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Bed Check: The mansion at Berry Hill

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I'd always wanted to stay in the big house at Berry Hill. It's not that the rooms in the new hotel wing out back aren't lovely, with their gleaming modern bathrooms and the little terraces where you can sit in the morning and the evening, listening to the birds twittering in the trees or watching the moon rise over the woodlands at the back of the 750-acre property.

It's just that the big house, the original plantation mansion that Virginia delegate and landowner James Coles Bruce built in 1842 near South Boston, Va., just above the North Carolina border, is magnificent. Really, I mean magnificent.

It's a pristine, near-perfect example of Greek Revival architecture (modeled on the Second Bank of the United States in Philadelphia) that escaped the Civil War pretty much unscathed (not something you can say for many a Southern antebellum mansion). Its Parthenon-like setting on a hill at the end of a long, long, loong tree-lined drive makes it a knock-the-breath-out-of-you sight even before you pull into the gated entrance. The beautiful foyer with the floating horseshoe staircase and the grand, high-ceilinged common rooms could rival what you find in many a European palazzo.

So the idea of spending a night playing mistress of the manor had had a hold on me since the first time we'd stayed at [Berry Hill Resort and Conference Center](#) six or seven years ago. But now here I was, lying in the canopied four-poster in the Carrington Suite - one of two mansion suites available to hotel guests - and thinking about Fred Watkins.

Watkins was the Southside millionaire who bought Berry Hill when the Bruce family finally sold it in 1950. He worked it as a farm for nearly 40 years, but apparently he never spent a full night in the house himself. The first time he tried to sleep there, the story is, he was scared out of his wits by some of the mansion's ghosts (there are as many as 23, we're told) and he fled in the middle of the night, refusing to live in it thereafter.

I'm thinking about old Fred now that it's 2 a.m., my husband is deep in dreamland beside me, and the great front porch light that had earlier shone through the blinds has been extinguished. It's dark, dark, dark in the room. And sooo quiet. The kind of quiet you find yourself listening to. It occurs to me suddenly: *We're all alone in this house.* Or are we?

Carrington's Restaurant in the old master suite directly below us on the first floor, where we'd had a lovely dinner earlier in the evening (no small feat, since all the food has to be transported from a kitchen in the old servants' quarters in back of the house), closed hours before, and the staff cleared out long ago. No one's staying in the Bruce Suite across the hall. All the other guests are presumably snug in their beds in the stand-alone 88-room hotel wing, where you also go to check in, although I suppose that any insomniac among them could wander through the house at any hour.

I'm thinking so hard about all this, especially after I hear the three funny little pock-pock-pock sounds that I can't place the source of, that the next thing I know . . . the morning light is streaming through the east-facing window that I'd left unshaded, and I can smell the coffee my husband has made in the pot in the bathroom.

About that bathroom: It's huge, as big as many a hotel room (the whole suite is enormous, really, 808 square feet with a large sitting area in the bedroom, plus a whole separate "living room"), and just about everything is as originally installed. When precisely that was is a bit of a question, but it seems that one of the Bruce daughters married into the Crane plumbing family of Chicago, and Berry Hill consequently was graced with some of the earliest residential bathrooms in the country.

The one in the Bruce Suite was put in sometime around the turn of the 20th century (no shower, fair warning, just a tub with a European-style, hand-held "telephone" faucet), according to Lealand Luck, the tour guide who shows us around later in the day. Ours appears to be a slightly later model, but still from the early half of the last century, and it works like a dream. There's a push-button flush on the toilet, which sits so high off the ground that you understand where that whole "throne" nickname came from. And the shower! There's a rain shower head of the type that's all the rage in modern McMansions and hipster pads, plus a U-shaped bar that shoots jets of water at you sideways. (Watch out getting in and out of the tub, though; it's a giant step.) There's also a towel-warmer, though I couldn't get it to work. Don't know whether it was me or the machine.

It's all a far cry from the gentlemen's privy that we see on our tour, though even that was apparently luxe for its day, with three separate stalls - and doors to each one! It's a rainy day, so we keep indoors, mostly, checking out the heated lap pool, the impressively large fitness room and the Blackberry Spa (not my thing, but for those of you who soak up that sort of thing, it looks very nice, so go for it).

In the mansion foyer, we examine a section of the floor where the new carpet has been pulled back to reveal the original - or at least old - floorcloth and to show how the pattern is re-created in the new carpet. Now this I find impressive: a careful, precise renovation (I'm into the old house preservation thing).

This was the work of a French insurance company called Axa, which bought Berry Hill - a National Historic Landmark - in the late 1990s as a conference and training center for its executives (the French taste shows). But the company, which had lots of World Trade Center clients, took a huge hit after 9/11 and had to dump its investment for a song. Since then, Berry Hill has suffered "some lean years," according to Lealand. An effort to turn it into a large-scale luxury resort a la the Homestead faltered (though there's tennis, nearby golf, hiking, biking, horseback riding and more). Founder's College, a recent start-up on the grounds, foundered.

Today, Berry Hill is owned by a wealthy Baltimore surgeon who "has dug in his heels," says Lealand, and is slowly turning the place around. Mostly, it appears, this is on the strength of renting it out to wedding parties.

Now normally, I would find this a bit distressing, as it means that you're jostling elbows with partying revelers from early spring to late fall. But in this case, I'm hoping fervently

that the marriage institution stays strong for eons to come. Because I want to come back and play mistress of the manor many, many times more.