

Bush Hill Plantation

Today, no visible trace remains of the manor house, called Bush Hill, that once stood near this spot at the center of a 272-acre plantation. But Bush Hill, and the people that lived here, left behind a trove of documents and archaeological artifacts that allow us to piece together some of the stories about this site.



Timeline

3500 years BP

Indigenous people crafted stone tools here prior to European colonization as evidenced by archaeologically-recovered stone flakes.

1706

John West purchases the land that would later become Bush Hill from Lord Fairfax and Lady Culpeper.

1787

Roger West, son of John, sells 22 acres to James Hendricks.

1789

James Hendricks sells the land to John Richter noting that the estate contains a "large elegant brick dwelling house." Richter sells the land to Josiah Watson two years later.

1796

The name Bush Hill first appears on a fire insurance policy taken out by Watson.

1797

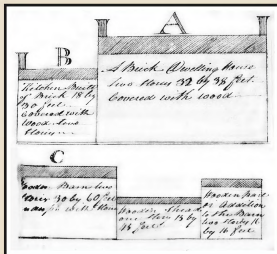
Josiah Watson sells Bush Hill to Richard Marshall Scott.

1850

The Orange and Alexandria Railroad pays Richard M. Scott, Jr. \$200 for a right-of-way through the property which is still in use today as part of Norfolk Southern's "Washington District" line.

1855

Richard M. Scott, Jr. dies, leaving Bush Hill to his wife, Virginia Gunnell-Scott.



The first detailed depiction of Bush Hill comes from a fire insurance policy filed by Richard M. Scott in 1805. Mutual Assurance Policy No. 22, Courtesy of the Library of Virginia.

Seat of Wealth

Richard M. Scott owned at least 18 properties throughout Virginia and Maryland, but Bush Hill was his primary residence and he and his family lived lavishly here. Tax records from 1815 contain various luxuries such as a large collection of mahogany furniture and silver goblets. The extravagance extended to Bush Hill's landscaping which was designed by George Washington's former gardener, John C. Ehlers.

Slavery at Bush Hill

Much of Scott's wealth was derived from the dozens of African Americans he held in bondage and whose labor he exploited across his various properties. The U.S. Census lists nine enslaved people at Bush Hill in 1810, a number that would grow to 32 in 1820. They were forced to work in the wheat fields and fruit orchards, tend the livestock, run errands in town, and care for the main house and its occupants, all without pay. Upon Scott's death in 1833, his will provided freedom and compensation for two of the people he enslaved, Moses Johnson and Nelly Shanks. The rest were inherited by his family. In 1855, Scott's son, Richard Marshall Scott, Jr., noted in his diary that he had sold Basil Gant for \$300 to Lewis Winters of Baltimore after Gant had tried, unsuccessfully, to gain his freedom.

\$100 REWARD.—Runaway from Basil Hill, Fairfax County, Va., on Tuesday, 5th inst., negro man Basil, commonly called "BASIL GANT," well known in this vicinity for some years past, as a carriage driver, belonging to the estate of the late R. M. Scott, of Bush Hill. He is middle aged, about five feet 8 or 10 inches high, of medium size, very black, high forehead, long face with short whiskers, and but little hair on his head. When spoken to he is either very polite or very uncivil, but when in a pleasant mood, he has a good address and uses select language. When he left, had on a pair of coarse linen pantaloons, shoes, and white cotton shirt, with no hat or other clothing. The said negro has free connections in Washington City, D. C. The above reward will be given if he is taken without the limits of Virginia, Maryland and District of Columbia, or \$50 if taken in either of the said States or district, and delivered to me.

RICHARD M. SCOTT.
Bush Hill, Va., Aug. 13—1851.

Advertisement for the return of self-emancipated enslaved man, Basil Gant. Alexandria Gazette, August 13, 1851

Nazi Informant

From 1942-44, the U.S. Government leased Bush Hill for the purpose of housing a high-profile intelligence asset. Ernst "Putzi" Hanfstaengl had been a close friend and advisor to Adolf Hitler, but by the mid-1930s he had fallen out of favor and ultimately fled to England in 1937. In 1942, the British sent him to the U.S. and for the next two years, Hanfstaengl provided information on hundreds of high-ranking Nazis, including Hitler.



The Bush Hill Mansion prior to 1964.

Courtesy of Virginia Room Photographic Archive, Fairfax County Public Library, Edith M. Sprouse Collection.



Portrait of Dr. Ernst Hanfstaengl.

Ernst Hanfstaengl, Auslandspresechef der NSDAP, 1934, Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R41953 / CC-BY-SA 3.0



Archaeologist excavating a test unit at Bush Hill Plantation. Courtesy of Alexandria Archaeology.

Timeline continued

1861

The house is commandeered by U.S. Army officers for use as a headquarters during the Civil War. Virginia Gunnell-Scott, who was pro-Union, remained at Bush Hill with her young children, unlike her Confederate neighbors who had fled their homes.

1913

Virginia Gunnell-Scott dies and Bush Hill remains in the Gunnell-Scott family until 1977.

1948

Bush Hill becomes the Holly Hill School, a private nursery school.

1977

The school is broken into and vandalized; a week later the building is destroyed by arson.

2000

Prior to construction of housing on this site, excavations were carried out in compliance with the City's Archaeological Protection Code. In Alexandria, archaeology is an integral part of the development process in order to help preserve our history even as the city continues to grow and evolve.



CITY OF ALEXANDRIA EST. 1749

Courtesy of Alexandria Archaeology and sponsored by Jeanne Small.