Enduring
Antebellum Kentucky Embodied in Ward Hall

By Maryjean Wall | Photos by Jonathan Palmer
Ward Hall is considered the finest example of Greek Revival architecture in Kentucky.
Rising on an eminence once reached by carriage up a long, winding drive, Ward Hall keeps its place in myth and memory. The Junius Richard Ward family of Scott County lived large in this Greek Revival villa that still bequeaths a legacy of antebellum Kentucky. Visitors today can experience that legacy as they pass between the towering columns and into the grand hallway.

Not only did the Ward family construct the finest house of its type in Kentucky, but Junius Ward also played a key role in the development of the Kentucky Thoroughbred, most notably through his ownership of the incomparable racehorse, Lexington. In 1853 Ward owned this horse in partnership with his brother-in-law, Capt. Willa Viley, a founder of the Kentucky Association track; General Abe Buford, squire of Bosque Bonita Farm near Midway; and Richard Ten Broeck, principal owner of Metairie Race Course in New Orleans.

Ward was a Kentuckian of pioneer stock, born in Georgetown in 1802 to Gen. William Ward and Sallie Johnson Ward. His mother’s parents, Col. Robert Johnson and Jemima Suggett Johnson, had departed their home in Orange County, Va., in 1779 to homestead in the western reaches of the state, now Kentucky.

Nine years before Kentucky separated from Virginia and became a state in 1792, the Johnsons established themselves in a fort they built in present-day Scott County, at Great Crossing. Sallie, their fourth child (and mother of Junius Ward), was an older sister of Richard Mentor Johnson, who became the first native-born Kentuckian to serve in the state legislature, in Congress, in the U.S. Senate, and finally as vice president of the United States in the administration of Martin Van Buren, 1837-1841.

Junius’ father, Gen. William Ward, thus married into one of the most respected families in Kentucky. Ward took a posting as an Indian agent in the Mississippi Delta. In Mississippi, his son Junius purchased land in 1827 and with Matilda Viley at his side became a prosperous cotton planter. Junius and Matilda produced nine children while living in Mississippi, but they never lost their Kentucky ties. In the years preceding the Civil War, Junius and Matilda initiated an annual summer move north with their five living children. Junius commissioned construction of Ward Hall, and it was here that the family installed itself every May to October.

“Veritable Palace”

Ward paid $50,000 in gold for construction of the villa, which sits about one mile west of downtown Georgetown along U.S. 460. When completed in 1857, the manor comprised 12,000 square feet overlooking the 500-acre estate.

“It was a veritable palace, surrounded by a fairy garden,” wrote a descendant, Henry V. Johnson. The imposing manor house “stood in the midst of beautiful trees and evergreens, on
a prominent part a quarter of a mile from the road. A macadam road led gracefully up to the front over a bridge by the side of the pond where weeping willows and water lilies grew.”

The house was always open for entertaining when the family was in residence and, as Johnson wrote in an unpublished manuscript, “was the center for visiting and social gaiety.”

Guests ascended nine massive stone steps to arrive at a veranda dominated by four fluted columns styled in the Corinthian order. Each column rose 27 feet to meet the tetrastyle portico. Passing through the front entry, visitors stepped into a massive hallway, 65 feet long and 62 feet wide.

Then, as now, the double elliptical staircase dominates the view down the long main hall. Modern visitors to Ward Hall find this view as breathtaking as visitors must have during the antebellum era. The staircase spirals in full view to the third floor.

To the right of the hallway lies the private family quarters, including a library with glazed bookcases that flank the fireplace. Antebellum visitors would have been directed left of the hallway into twin parlors, where guests gathered. The parlors could be closed off into separate rooms by massive pocket doors of rubbed walnut. Or they could be thrown open to reveal a grand salon.

“The hall furniture was massive walnut, carved into hunting scenes,” Johnson wrote. “On the west side of the house were greenhouses filled with tropical flowers and rare plants. In addition there were pears and cherries, peaches, apples, all kinds of raspberries and strawberries, cantaloupes and melons. To my youthful mind it was like a picture from Aladdin’s lamp.”

Ward Hall has changed little since its completion in 1857. When opened monthly for public tours, the rooms appear to visitors almost as they would have before the Civil War. For example, the recessed medallion centerpieces built into the plaster ceilings in both parlors retain their original pastel tints.

Matching parlor mantles are of Carrara marble. Silver chandeliers hang from the recessed medallions. Plaster cornices beneath the parlor ceilings present a full entablature of Greek design in bands of Athenaeum Egg-and-dart and acanthus. Corner pilasters supporting the cornices are adorned with scrolls of Athenaeum Egg-and-dart. All hardware in the dining room and parlors is Sheffield silver.

On the second floor, a similarly wide hallway divides the house into three bedrooms on one side and two on the other.

The third floor houses a formal area along with attic space. The kitchen and servants’ living quarters were in the basement. A dumb waiter connects the basement warming kitchen with the dining room above.
The exterior of the villa’s foundation is faced with coquina limestone containing coral and trilobite fossils. Exterior walls are brick laid in Flemish bond. The original slate roof remains intact beneath the present painted metal roof.

In 1991, architectural historian Clay Lancaster recognized the villa’s historical value, describing Ward Hall in his book, *Antebellum Architecture of Kentucky*, as “the most imposing Greek rural residence in Kentucky.” In 2007 author James Birchfield in *Clay Lancaster’s Kentucky* declared the villa “one of the grandest in America.” In recent times, architects of international renown have expressed a sense of awe upon viewing Ward Hall.

“It is one of the great, great, great Greek Revival houses,” remarked C. Dudley Brown of Washington, D.C., known for his work in historic preservation and restoration design consulting. Brown spoke admiringly of the villa’s “extraordinary scale.”

“The technical quality of finish of the building is just of the highest level,” Brown also said. By this he meant “the sophistication of the details of design.”

Summing up, Brown said, “It’s by no means a provincial interpretation. It’s equivalent to the best Greek Revival buildings in the East.”

Another classical architect who has praised Ward Hall for its scale and size is Richard Sammons, a design partner in Fairfax & Sammons of New York, Charleston, and Palm Beach. Sammons said the villa “is of tremendous scale,” meaning the size of architectural elements, such as windows, is larger than normal in relationship to the size of the human body.

“It’s probably one of the grandest Greek Revival houses north of the Deep South,” Sammons said. “It’s a nationally important house. To lose this would be a black eye for Kentucky.”
Of particular interest are Ward Hall’s design influences. The Ward Hall Foundation, present owner of the villa and surrounding 40 acres, believes the villa’s design came directly from the early 19th-century pattern books of Minard Lafever (1798-1854), who acquired renown as one of the earliest influences in the United States on the Greek Revival style. The architect for Ward Hall was Maj. Thomas Lewinski (1800-1882) of Lexington, who worked from the Lafever pattern books. According to Stuart, the Lewinski-designed Bell House in Lexington and The Auditorium in Natchez, Miss., share architectural features with Ward Hall.

Fine Bloodstock
During the antebellum years when Junius and Matilda Ward hosted dinners and salons for their constant flow of guests, parlor conversation undoubtedly turned quite often to racehorses. Land-owning families throughout the antebellum South owned...
Thoroughbreds, and by 1850 Kentucky had surpassed Tennessee as the major racehorse-breeding state. Junius had no small investment in racehorses. Ownership of Lexington marked the highest plane for his stable, but he owned many more horses, mostly in partnership with Willa Viley. His brother-in-law might have led Junius into the sport, for Viley had ranked among the earliest significant breeders of Thoroughbreds in Kentucky.

Besides acquiring Lexington, the two men had more than a casual acquaintance with that horse’s family. Together they owned a mare named Maria, foaled in 1823, whose dam, Lady Grey, was the granddam of Alice Carneal, dam of Lexington. In 1840 they bred and raced Alexander Churchill, who ran four miles at Louisville in 7:41, a performance considered brilliant.

Ward raced “not for money but from a love of turf sports,” the Georgetown Weekly Times noted in his obituary Aug. 29, 1883. As a turfman, he was well known throughout Kentucky and the South.

Undoubtedly he acquired his part-ownership of Lexington through his connections with Viley. Most turf histories credit Ten Broeck with single-handedly spotting Lexington as a hot racing prospect after the colt won his initial start at the Kentucky Association track. Ward’s obituary credits Viley and Ten Broeck for selecting the horse together.
At age 3 the colt had run his first race under the name of Darley and immediately stamped himself as the most talked-about colt at the track. Would-be buyers besieged his breeder, Dr. Elisha Warfield. The man turned down Ten Broeck the first time he made an offer. Ten Broeck returned with $2,500 in cash obtained from his newly formed syndicate and the offer of another $2,500 to be paid if the colt won the Great State Post Stakes to be run at Metairie. Ten Broeck’s group got the colt. Lexington won the Great State Post Stakes and Warfield got his additional $2,500.

Fond memories of Lexington’s races no doubt would have served Junius Ward well when his fortunes plummeted during the Civil War, partly the result of wartime losses to his cotton plantation. Bankrupt, he lost Ward Hall in 1867, having to sell the house, the property, and even the furniture at auction. The family returned to Mississippi to live. Ward died in 1883.

Antebellum Experience

The Ward Hall Preservation Foundation acquired the house and acreage in 2004 after the property went through at least eight owners following Ward. The foundation was formed when the estate was sold to developers; a developer pledged $250,000 toward the $957,000 needed to purchase the house.

Ward Hall Preservation Foundation’s goal is to give visitors an antebellum Kentucky experience, incorporating the themes of horses, bourbon, and agriculture. This goal is at the heart of the foundation’s vision for the downsized estate.

Foundation chairman, David Stuart, wants to see the villa function “in triangulation with the Kentucky Horse Park and Keeneland” in drawing tourists. “We want to be a partnership to this whole culture,” he said, “because that’s what we’re teaching. It’s more than horse culture. It’s a culture of living, of mid-19th century America, where Kentucky was first in a number of things.”

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