



THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site

Late in the spring of 1844, Ulysses S. Grant rode up the drive toward a St. Louis County plantation known as White Haven. His clothes were sopping wet, not the proper attire for a young man about to ask for a young lady's hand in marriage. This was not Grant's first visit to White Haven, but it proved to be one of his most important, for it was the beginning of a lifetime partnership. At the time, Grant was a young second lieutenant fresh out of West Point; his first assignment was to Jefferson Barracks, just south of St. Louis. Upon arriving in the St. Louis area in the autumn of 1843, Grant decided to call upon the family of his West Point roommate, Frederick Dent.

Grant found the Dent home, named White Haven, to be an enjoyable setting, with a comfortable family lifestyle he had missed during his own youth. He enjoyed debating with the head of the household, "Colonel" Frederick Dent, who was known for his celebration of Jacksonian politics (and, later, the Confederate cause). At other times, Grant rode over the countryside with Dent's youngest daughters, Nellie and Emma. In the late winter of 1844 the eldest daughter, Julia, returned from Miss Mauro's school in St. Louis, and Grant's visits soon focused upon spending time with her. As Julia recalled in her memoirs, "he was always by my side, walking or riding." Their enjoyable times together came to an abrupt end later that spring, when Grant's regiment was reassigned to Louisiana. Upon learning of his transfer, Grant immediately rode out to White Haven. Although he found the usually shallow Gravois Creek swollen from the spring rains,

Grant forged ahead into the rushing waters: "... I found the banks full to overflowing, and the current rapid. I looked at it a moment to consider what to do. One of my superstitions had always been when I started to go anywhere, or do anything, not to turn back, or stop until the thing intended was accomplished.... So, I struck into the stream, and in an instant the horse was swimming and I being carried down by the current. I headed the horse towards the other bank and soon reached it, wet through and without other clothes on that side of the stream. I went on, however, to my destination and borrowed a dry suit from my future brother-in-law.... Before separating [from Julia] it was definitely understood that at a convenient time we would join our fortunes, and not let the removal of a regiment trouble us."

Ulysses Grant did not see Julia Dent again for four years. They were married on August 22, 1848, after Grant's return from the War with Mexico, at the Dents' city home at Fourth and Cerre Streets in St. Louis.

White Haven continued to be a focal point in the Grants' lives. Following their marriage, the couple lived there until Ulysses was transferred to army posts in New York and Michigan. In 1852 Grant was forced to leave his family behind when he was transferred to the west coast. But Grant found the separation from Julia and his young family, which then included two sons, too much to bear. In 1854 he resigned his commission and returned to White Haven.

The Dent plantation encompassed approximately 1,000 acres. Several large homes and slave cabins were scattered throughout the property, and the Grants were active in the management of the farming operation. On 100 acres which Colonel Dent gave to Julia, Grant built a house for his family. Julia wanted a frame house, "but my father most aggravatingly urged a log house, saying it would be warmer... A neat frame house, I am sure, could have been put up in half the time at less expense. We went to this house before it was finished and lived in it scarcely three months. It was so crude and so homely I did not like it at all, but I did not say so. I got out all my pretty covers, baskets, books, etc., and tried to make it look home-like and comfortable, but this was hard to do. The little house looked so unattractive that we facetiously decided to call it Hardscrabble." Only three months after the Grants moved into Hardscrabble, Julia's mother, Ellen Dent, died. Colonel Dent asked the Grants to return to the main house so Julia could help raise her younger sisters. Planting wheat, oats, corn and potatoes, Grant worked the land alongside his in-laws and the family slaves. The 1850 census listed 12 male and 18 female slaves at White Haven, but little is known about them. Although the Grants enjoyed living at White Haven, they were forced to abandon the farm in 1858 due to an agricultural depression, a June frost, and illness. The Grants moved to St. Louis, where Ulysses formed a real estate partnership with Harry Boggs, Julia's cousin. Grant did not enjoy the task of collecting unpaid accounts and decided to seek other employment.

In 1860 the Grants moved to Galena, Illinois, where Ulysses worked in his father's leather goods store. Soon after the outbreak of the Civil War, Grant rejoined the army, where he rose from obscurity to become a national hero. During the war, Julia and the children visited Ulysses often, but spent much of their time at White Haven. In 1863 Grant began purchasing the White Haven property, and although military duties moved the Grants to Washington, D.C. after the war, they returned to White Haven for rest and relaxation.

Grant was elected to the first of two terms as President of the United States in 1868. During his

presidency, he made preparations for retirement at White Haven. Caretakers managed the farm by raising crops, constructing barns, and breeding horses. Following his presidency, however, the Grants embarked on an around-the-world tour, and upon their return, settled in New York City where Grant entered a business partnership with his son. Although the business failed through no fault of Grant's, the White Haven property was signed over to repay loans. In 1885 Ulysses was diagnosed with cancer of the throat and spent his final painful months of life writing his memoirs. He died at Mount McGregor, New York, on July 23, 1885.

Twentieth-century owners of the White Haven estate divided the former Grant property. Albert Wenzlick purchased the central 15-acre portion in 1913, and three generations of the Wenzlicks used White Haven as a home and showplace. Interest in preserving the site led to the creation of Save Grant's White Haven Inc. in 1985. This group's effort resulted in the authorization of Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site on October 3, 1989. Established to preserve and interpret a key property associated with the lives of Ulysses and Julia Dent Grant, the 9.65-acre property includes the main house, a stone building, a barn, an icehouse, and a chicken house. National Park Service personnel have conducted research on the property and the Grants' lives there. A "Historic Structures Report," which explains the history of the structures and recommends treatment for them, has been completed. Restoration of the main house began in 1995, with removal of recent additions threatening to the structure's stability, archeological research, and extensive foundation and chimney repairs. As funding becomes available, the main house project will continue through the next two years.

Today, visitors to the site are able to learn about the Grants and their lives at White Haven through exhibits and ranger-led programs. Few visitors are aware of Grant's association with the St. Louis area, and the White Haven property in particular. The resources at the site provide a tangible reminder of the man, his strength of character, and the importance White Haven had in his life. It is also an appropriate setting to understand his

unswerving love for Julia.

During the process of planning the visitor experience at the site, Superintendent Jill York O'Bright remarked: "To many of his contemporaries, the man who met his future wife here at White Haven was a poor candidate for the history books. He was graduated toward the bottom of his class at West Point. His success at a variety of non-military enterprises was limited, at best. It would have been logical for acquaintances to assume Grant would never amount to much. It would have been easy for Grant to blame circumstances beyond his control (bad weather, bad health, bad loans) as excuses for his apparent lack of success.

"But Grant never gave up. When one enterprise failed, he tried another. When his country needed him, he responded to the call. The nation was facing the greatest crisis of its history, and Grant applied his talents and character, winning the [war for] the Union and a reputation as the greatest military leader of his time. He went on to lead the country in peacetime, as a two-term President of the United States. He wrote one of the greatest military commentaries of modern times. The course of American history was significantly changed because of Ulysses S. Grant. The compelling story that makes Grant, his family, and his St. Louis home relevant to today's visitor is that any of us, quite ordinary under ordinary circumstances, has the potential to rise to extraordinary heights. Any one of us can alter the course of history, if we apply our talents to the challenges at hand. It is within each of us to be extraordinary, if we only try." At Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site, visitors are invited to learn about Grant, the Dents, and a fascinating personal story which continues to have meaning over 100 years later.