Millford Plantation: History and Legacy of a South Carolina Estate

Introduction

Millford Plantation (often spelled "Milford") is a grand Greek Revival plantation estate located near Pinewood in Sumter County, South Carolina. It was constructed between 1839 and 1841 for John Laurence Manning – a wealthy planter and future governor of South Carolina – and his wife, Susan Frances Hampton[1]. Contemporary observers nicknamed the lavish mansion "Manning's Folly" due to its elaborate details in such a remote locale[2]. Built with wealth derived from forced enslaved labor on cotton plantations, Millford became renowned as one of the finest examples of Greek Revival residential architecture in America and has since been designated a National Historic Landmark[2]. The estate's history is intertwined with the prominent Manning, Richardson, and Hampton families, whose members played significant roles in South Carolina's political, social, and economic life throughout the 19th century. What follows is a detailed historical report on Millford Plantation – from its construction and antebellum heyday, through the Civil War and Reconstruction, to its preservation in the modern era.

Origins and Construction (1839–1841)

Millford Plantation's story begins with John L. Manning's inheritance of land from his maternal grandfather, Revolutionary War General Richard Richardson[3]. In 1838, John Manning married Susan Hampton – the daughter of General Wade Hampton I, one of the wealthiest slaveholding planters in the United States[4]. Soon after, Manning set out to build an extraordinary country house on his Richardson family land. Construction took place from 1839 to 1841 under the supervision of architect-builder Nathaniel F. Potter of Providence, Rhode Island[1][5]. Potter, a trained architect, is credited not only with erecting the mansion but likely with its design; he had previously studied under the designer of the Charleston Hotel and also worked on the Columbia home of Susan Hampton's brother, Wade Hampton III[6].

The mansion's construction was an immense undertaking. Its total cost was about $125,000 – an astronomical sum for 1840 – funded largely by Susan Hampton Manning's sizable inheritance from her father's estate[4]. Building materials were sourced both locally and from afar. Massive quantities of brick were handmade and fired on site by laborers, while heavy granite blocks for the foundation and column bases were quarried in New England and shipped by boat up the Santee River[7][8]. Skilled craftsmen and likely enslaved artisans worked together under Potter's direction to realize Manning's vision of a palatial residence deep in the High Hills of Santee. When completed in 1841, Millford stood as a testament to the wealth and ambition of its builder – a monumental two-story plantation house that immediately ranked among the most impressive in the state[2].

Architectural Design and Features

The front (northwest) facade of Millford Plantation, as recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey. The mansion's Greek Revival design features a monumental portico with six towering Corinthian columns and a symmetrical classical form[8]. Built in the early 1840s, Millford is regarded as one of the

finest Greek Revival country houses in the United States[2].
Millford Plantation's architecture is a masterwork of Greek Revival style, exhibiting grand proportions and refined details typical of the antebellum South's most elegant homes. The front façade features a massive portico supported by six carved Corinthian columns set on granite bases[8]. These columns, soaring two stories high, create a temple-like appearance that reflects the influence of classical Greek temples on 19th-century American design. The structure's walls are an impressive two feet thick, constructed of local brick that was handmade and kiln-fired on the plantation grounds[7]. Heavy timbers and masonry give the house a sense of permanence, while materials like the granite (imported from Rhode Island) illustrate the lengths to which the Mannings went to obtain the very best for their home[8].

The excellence of Millford's design extends to its interior as well. Visitors entering the house are greeted by a spacious central hall and a **spectacular circular staircase** that spirals upward seemingly without visible support[9]. This staircase sits beneath a domed ceiling with an oculus, filling the space with natural light – a striking architectural feat that was noted as one of the home's most remarkable features[10]. The mansion's formal rooms include double parlors and a grand dining room, all adorned with ornate plasterwork and millwork derived from pattern-book designs by architects like Minard Lafever, reflecting the most fashionable tastes of the period[10]. Floor-to-ceiling windows, high ceilings, and balanced proportions throughout give the interiors a sense of airy elegance in spite of the building's solid masonry construction[9].

Many of the original furnishings commissioned for Millford also survive, adding to its architectural integrity. John and Susan Manning outfitted their home in the latest "Grecian" style, purchasing a considerable suite of furniture from celebrated New York cabinetmaker **Duncan Phyfe** in the early 1840s[11]. Over 70 pieces of Phyfe furniture were ordered for Millford, and more than 50 of those remain in the house today, including heavy mahogany tables, sofas, and chairs that complemented the Greek Revival interiors[12]. These fine furnishings, along with decorative finishes like imported marble mantels and gilded hardware, underscored the wealth and cosmopolitan taste of the Manning family. Taken together, the architecture and décor of Millford represented the height of antebellum elegance and have been meticulously preserved. The estate is often cited by architectural historians as **"one of the finest country mansions in South Carolina,"** exemplifying the grandeur of the plantation era[13].

The Manning and Richardson Family Connections

Millford Plantation was not just an isolated mansion – it was rooted in the lineage of two of South Carolina's most influential families: the Richardsons and the Mannings. The land for Millford came from John L. Manning's maternal family. His grandfather was **Brigadier General Richard Richardson**, a hero of the American Revolution and the patriarch of the Richardson family, which had established itself in Clarendon County in the 18th century[3][14]. General Richardson's descendants went on to create a virtual dynasty in South Carolina politics. In fact, between the Richardson and Manning lines, the family produced **six South Carolina governors** spanning the early 19th through early 20th centuries[15]. This included Governor James B. Richardson (1802–1804), two Governor John Peter Richardsons, and on the Manning side Governor **Richard Irvine Manning I** (John L. Manning's father), Governor **John L. Manning** himself, and Governor **Richard Irvine Manning III** (John L. Manning's son)[15]. All six were direct descendants of General Richardson, illustrating the deep intertwining of the Manning and Richardson families in the state's leadership[15].

John Laurence Manning, born in 1816, embodied this powerful heritage. His father, Richard I. Manning, had served as South Carolina's governor in the 1820s, and through his mother (Elizabeth Peyre Richardson) he was the Richardson general's grandson[16][17]. This parentage endowed John L. Manning with both immense wealth and political connections from birth[18]. By marrying **Susan Frances Hampton** in 1838, he further allied himself with another of the South's great dynasties – the Hampton family. Susan was the daughter of General Wade Hampton I (a former U.S. congressman and one of the nation's largest slaveholders) and the half-sister of Wade Hampton II[4]. Her brother, **Wade Hampton III**, would later become a Confederate general and the Governor of South Carolina as well. The union of John Manning and Susan Hampton thus united vast plantations and fortunes, helping finance the extravagant construction of Millford[4]. As one contemporary noted, "much of the money to build the Millford mansion…probably came from Susan Hampton Manning's recent inheritance" from her father's estate[4].

Through these family ties, Millford Plantation became a social and political hub in the antebellum era. The Richardson-Manning clan was famously known for its hospitality and influence. They were sometimes playfully divided into "Head Richardsons" and "Foot Richardsons" – with the Manning branch falling into the latter category, known for their elegant social graces and skill in politics[19]. Their plantations (such as neighboring **Big Home** and **Boyd's (Home)** in Clarendon County) hosted gatherings of elite society, where music and dancing – even a traditional **"Richardson Waltz"** – were part of the family lore[20][21]. Millford, with its grand halls and parlors, would have been an ideal stage for such entertainments. In short, the plantation was an embodiment of the prestige of the Manning-Richardson lineage, standing as a tangible symbol of a family that had shaped South Carolina's history at the highest levels.

Antebellum Life and the Plantation Economy

During the 1840s and 1850s – the antebellum golden age of Millford – the plantation was a center of agricultural productivity and aristocratic life. The estate originally encompassed thousands of acres. By the late 19th century, Millford's lands still totaled over 4,200 acres (as recorded in 1869), indicating the vast scale of its operations[22]. **Cotton** was the primary cash crop grown at Millford, as was typical for plantations in the South Carolina midlands[22]. Under John L. Manning's ownership, the plantation's fields annually produced large quantities of cotton bales for market, alongside subsistence crops like corn and vegetables to support those who lived on the estate. Manning was not only a planter in South Carolina – he also acquired plantations in Louisiana – and he managed a far-reaching agricultural empire. By 1860 his estate was valued at an astonishing \$2 million, placing him among the wealthiest men in the South[18].

The prosperity of Millford was built on the forced labor of a large **enslaved workforce**. John L. Manning was one of the largest slaveholders of his time. Census records of 1860 show him **enslaving at least 648 people** of African descent across his various properties[18]. (Some sources put the figure even higher, at around 670 enslaved individuals, which was "more than almost any of his contemporaries" in South Carolina[23].) At Millford itself, scores of enslaved men, women, and children labored in the cotton fields, tended livestock, and performed the myriad tasks required to maintain the mansion and grounds. Enslaved artisans likely constructed and maintained the buildings – for example, they made and laid the bricks for the mansion's walls on-site[7]. Enslaved domestic servants lived and worked in or near the big house:

"servant quarters" (slave quarters) of whitewashed brick or stone were built flanking the mansion's rear, housing those who cooked, cleaned, and waited on the Manning family[24]. The plantation was essentially a self-contained village operated through enslaved labor, with outbuildings including a 26-stall horse stable (built around 1850), a water tower, a spring house for food storage, and even a small chapel on the grounds[25].

Life at Millford for the Manning family represented the pinnacle of planter-class comfort, made possible by the work of the enslaved. John L. Manning, described by contemporaries as a tall and handsome gentleman, moved in the highest social circles. Mary Boykin Chesnut, the famed diarist, noted that Manning was "always the handsomest man alive" at social gatherings[26]. Entertaining was a significant part of plantation life; the Mannings would have hosted balls, dinners, and hunts on the expansive property. Meanwhile, the enslaved community at Millford lived under the harsh realities of bondage – long hours of physical labor, subservience to the owners, and lack of freedom. The contrast was stark: for the white family, Millford was a world of culture and leisure, while for the enslaved majority it was a place of toil. Nonetheless, the productivity of the plantation's enslaved workforce directly fueled the Mannings' economic and political power. The cotton profits and slave labor from Millford and the Mannings' other estates supported John L. Manning's influential lifestyle and career, financing everything from luxurious furniture to political campaigns. In essence, the antebellum life of Millford Plantation epitomized the **plantation economy** of the Old South – great wealth and refined living for the owners, built upon the exploitation of enslaved African Americans.

Political and Social Role of the Mannings

As owners of Millford, the Manning family were not only economic elites but also prominent leaders in South Carolina's public life. John L. Manning's day-to-day life alternated between managing his plantations and serving in government. He began his political career in the state legislature, winning election to the S.C. House of Representatives in 1842 and later to the State Senate in 1846[27]. His connections and reputation as a planter-statesman grew, and on December 9, 1852, the General Assembly unanimously elected Manning as the **Governor of South Carolina**, a position he held from 1852 to 1854[28]. During his governorship, Manning advocated for improvements in infrastructure and was a strong proponent of higher education – he oversaw renovations of the State House and championed the South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina), even endowing its first scholarship[29][30]. As governor, he moved in the highest political circles, but Millford remained his country seat and a symbol of his authority. It's likely that Millford hosted political allies and dignitaries; the estate's grandeur would have impressed visitors and reinforced Manning's social standing.

In the turbulent 1850s, Governor Manning positioned himself as a moderate "Cooperationist" on the issue of secession – favoring Southern rights but initially hoping for joint action with other states rather than immediate unilateral secession[31]. However, as sectional tensions escalated, Manning's allegiance ultimately lay with his state. In late 1860, he served as a delegate to South Carolina's Secession Convention. On December 20, 1860, **John L. Manning signed the Ordinance of Secession**, formally withdrawing South Carolina from the Union[32][33]. He was by then a senior statesman and plantation patriarch, and with civil war looming he lent his influence to the Confederate cause. During the Civil War, Manning sat in the state Senate throughout the conflict and briefly served as a volunteer aide on the staff of General P.G.T. Beauregard[33]. His son-in-law (and nephew by marriage) **James Chesnut Jr.**

was a Confederate officer and politician, and other family members were active in the war effort, reflecting how the plantation families formed the backbone of Southern leadership.

Socially, the Mannings of Millford were part of the lowcountry and midlands planter aristocracy. They maintained a townhouse in Columbia for the "social season" and for legislative sessions, but Millford was their proud showplace in the country[34]. The estate would have hosted fox hunts, barbecues, and musicales. Surviving family letters and accounts (some preserved in the **Manning family papers** at the University of South Carolina) suggest that life at Millford, when not interrupted by public duties, included supervising the plantation business in the mornings and enjoying leisurely afternoons and evenings in refined pursuits[35]. Susan Hampton Manning, until her untimely death in 1845, likely presided over household entertainments and managed the domestic staff. After Susan's passing (she died at Millford at age 29 due to complications from childbirth[36]), John Manning's second wife **Sally Bland Clarke** took on the role of mistress of Millford from 1848 onward[36]. Together they had four children, further extending the Manning line. One of their sons, **Richard Irvine Manning III (born 1859)**, would carry the family legacy into the 20th century by also becoming Governor of South Carolina (serving 1915–1919)[15]. Thus, the lives of those who lived at Millford – from John L. Manning himself to his descendants – were deeply woven into the political and social fabric of South Carolina. Millford Plantation stood as a backdrop to these influential lives, hosting family celebrations, political discussions, and societal gatherings that collectively mirror the trajectory of the state's antebellum elite.

The Civil War: Threat and Survival (1861–1865)

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 brought tumult and danger to plantations like Millford. As a prominent secessionist leader, John L. Manning committed resources to the Confederate cause, and the war years were marked by sacrifice and strain. Plantation operations at Millford continued under the supervision of overseers and family members while Manning was often away attending to legislative duties in Columbia or aiding the war effort. Enslaved people on the plantation faced increasing hardship as wartime disruptions led to shortages of supplies. By late 1864 and early 1865, Union armies under General William T. Sherman were carving a path of destruction through South Carolina, intent on breaking the planter class's power. In April 1865, just days after General Lee's surrender in Virginia, Union cavalry under **Brig. Gen. Edward E. Potter** raided through the area around Millford. The plantation came **perilously close to destruction** at the hands of these Federal troops[37].

A remarkable anecdote, passed down in local history, tells how Millford was saved from burning at the very last moment. On April 19, 1865, General Potter's men arrived at the plantation, likely intending to sack or torch the grand house as they had many others. Governor Manning, confronting the Union commander on his front steps, is said to have remarked wryly, **"Well, the house was built by a Potter, and it looks as though it will be destroyed by a Potter."** (He was referring to architect Nathaniel Potter, who had built the mansion 25 years earlier.) Surprised, Gen. Edward Potter supposedly replied, **"No, you are protected. Nathaniel Potter was my brother."**[37]. In an extraordinary coincidence, the Union general turned out to be the sibling of Millford's architect – and upon recognizing this personal connection, he ordered his troops to spare the house from harm. Thanks to this chance encounter, Millford Plantation survived the Civil War intact, unlike so many Southern homes that were looted or burned.

Local lore adds an intriguing footnote: Unknown to General Potter, Governor Manning had hidden among his papers a signed copy of South Carolina's Ordinance of Secession – essentially the very document that

had started the war[38]. Had the Union soldiers discovered this rebel artifact, they might have shown less mercy despite their commander's familial sentiment. But as it happened, the Union troops departed without incident. Millford's magnificent mansion, with all its furnishings, was left standing unscathed amidst a region otherwise ravaged by war. This narrow escape became a famous part of Millford's history, illustrating how close the estate came to annihilation in the final days of the conflict.

In the aftermath of war, John L. Manning and his family faced the collapse of the slave-based economy that had sustained Millford. Enslaved laborers were emancipated in 1865, suddenly depriving the plantation of its workforce and the bulk of its capital value. Manning himself, once among the richest men in America, saw his fortune and income evaporate almost overnight. Like many ex-Confederate planters, he suffered "economic ruin during and after the Civil War"[39]. Yet, notably, the Manning family managed to hold onto Millford through the Reconstruction era, unlike many estates that were sold or lost. John L. Manning, despite his high profile in the Confederacy, was able to return to private life at Millford (his attempt to re-enter politics was thwarted when the U.S. Congress refused to seat him as an elected Senator in 1866 due to his Confederate past[33]). He largely retired from public service after 1865 and focused on trying to rebuild his agricultural interests on a free-labor basis. For the formerly enslaved people of Millford, freedom meant they were no longer bound to the estate; some likely stayed on as sharecroppers or paid servants in the area, while others left in search of new opportunities. The plantation's cotton fields continued to be cultivated, but now through tenant farming and hired labor – a very different system from before.

Post-Civil War Changes and 20th-Century Preservation

John L. Manning lived until 1889, but the grand world that Millford once represented had faded. The plantation struggled financially in the decades after emancipation. The Manning family did retain ownership through the late 19th century, though likely with much-reduced operations. It was noted that despite the severe postwar challenges, *"the Manning family and their descendants managed to retain possession of Millford until 1902."*[39] In that year, the Mannings finally sold the estate, ending over six decades of family ownership. The purchaser was **Mary Clark Thompson**, a wealthy philanthropist from New York[39]. Mrs. Thompson was the widow of William Thompson (a banking heir) and the daughter of Myron Holley Clark (a former Governor of New York), and she had both the means and inclination to preserve Millford as a country retreat. In an era when many old plantations fell into disrepair or were dismantled, Mary Clark Thompson maintained Millford with great care. She reportedly **enjoyed escaping harsh New York winters** by residing at Millford during the colder months[40]. Under her ownership, the plantation shifted from a working farm to more of a private winter residence and hunting estate for Northerners – a common fate of several Southern plantations bought by wealthy outsiders in the Gilded Age.

When Mary Clark Thompson died in 1923, she bequeathed Millford to her relatives. The property passed to her two nephews, **Emory Wendell Clark** and **Myron Clark Williams**, who continued to use it seasonally[40]. Eventually, Emory Clark's son, **William Reeve (W. Reeve) Clark**, became the next owner, consolidating full control of Millford[41]. The Clark family, over several generations, thus owned Millford throughout most of the 20th century, preserving the mansion and a core part of the estate (even as much of the original 4,000+ acres had been sold off over time). They primarily utilized Millford for hunting, fishing, and winter getaways, ensuring that the house saw only gentle use and was spared major

alterations[42]. Because of this continuity of maintenance, Millford remained remarkably well-preserved, retaining its original architecture and even much of its antebellum furniture and artwork in situ.

By the mid-20th century, the historical and architectural significance of Millford Plantation was nationally recognized. In **1971**, the property (also referred to as the "Governor John L. Manning House") was listed on the **National Register of Historic Places**, and in **1973** it was further honored as a **National Historic Landmark** – the highest designation for an American historic site[43]. These designations cited Millford's exceptional Greek Revival architecture and its importance in illustrating the plantation culture of the antebellum South[43]. Millford is in fact one of only a few National Historic Landmarks in its region of South Carolina, underscoring its rarity and value as a historic structure[44].

A major new chapter for Millford began in **1992**. That year, three descendants of the Clark family agreed to sell the house along with the surrounding 400 acres to **Richard Hampton Jenrette**, a noted preservationist and businessman[45]. Richard H. Jenrette (1930–2018), a Wall Street investment banker, was also a distant **"collateral descendant" of Susan Hampton Manning** – meaning he shared ancestry with the Hampton family[45]. A lifelong enthusiast of classical architecture, Jenrette had a passion for saving historic houses. Upon acquiring Millford, which he famously called *"the Taj Mahal of my dreams"*, Jenrette undertook an **extensive restoration** of the mansion[45]. Over the 1990s, he and expert craftsmen meticulously repaired Millford's structure and decor – from restoring the stucco and paint finishes to conserving original furnishings – all with the goal of returning the house to its 19th-century splendor. Jenrette's work was widely praised; he received a South Carolina Historic Preservation Award in 1995 for his efforts at Millford, and in 2006 he was honored with the Governor's Award for lifetime achievement in historic preservation[46].

To secure Millford's future, Richard Jenrette took steps to ensure it would be protected in perpetuity. In **2008**, he donated Millford Plantation – including the house, its contents, and the acreage – to the **Classical American Homes Preservation Trust**, a non-profit foundation he had established[47][48]. The Trust's mission is to "preserve, protect and open to the public" examples of early American architecture and fine arts[48]. Today, Millford Plantation operates as a **house museum**, with the Trust offering regular guided tours to the public. Visitors can stroll under the live oaks and approach the magnificent columned portico much as one would have in 1841, and step inside to admire the original Duncan Phyfe furniture and the soaring staircase. The site often hosts special events, scholarly visits, and even an annual gathering of the "Friends of Millford" – a support group formed in 2012 to help sustain its legacy[49].

Over nearly two centuries, Millford Plantation has witnessed dramatic changes – from the antebellum years of cotton and slavery, through Civil War and emancipation, into an era of decline, and finally to careful restoration and public education. Its survival is somewhat miraculous, owing to both fortunate circumstance (as in General Potter sparing it in 1865) and the dedicated stewardship of those who recognized its value. **Millford stands today as a monument to South Carolina's history**, encapsulating the grandeur and contradictions of the plantation era. Through accurate historical preservation and interpretation, the stories of the Mannings, the enslaved workers, and all those connected to this estate continue to be told, ensuring that Millford Plantation's legacy endures for future generations[2][47].

Conclusion

Millford Plantation's history is a rich tapestry reflecting the rise, fall, and preservation of a Southern plantation. Built in 1841 by John L. Manning with the wealth of the Hampton, Manning, and Richardson families, the estate exemplified the opulence of the antebellum cotton economy and the political dominance of South Carolina's planter elite. The lives lived at Millford – from the Manning family in their gilded halls to the hundreds of enslaved people whose labor sustained the plantation – speak to the complexities of South Carolina's past. Millford narrowly survived the Civil War, weathered the upheavals of emancipation and economic collapse, and eventually found new life as a treasured historic site. Today, thanks to meticulous preservation efforts, Millford Plantation remains a tangible link to history. Its Greek Revival mansion, virtually unchanged, allows us to step back into the world of the 19th century and gain insight into the architectural grandeur, social hierarchies, and human stories that define this landmark. In sum, the saga of Millford Plantation – from its founding by Governor Manning to its current role as a house museum – offers a comprehensive window into the American South's heritage, ensuring that this remarkable estate will educate and inspire for years to come.

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