The Swann Family: Builders of Morven Park

by Aimee Robertson

The man who would oversee the transformation of a simple Loudoun farm to a gentleman's estate, Thomas Swann, Sr. was born in 1765, the third of seven children of Edward and Nancy Swann of Prince George's County, Maryland. Swann studied law in the office of a Col. Sims in Alexandria, then opened a practice in the developing country town of Leesburg. By the time of his marriage in 1794, he had become Loudoun's representative in the Virginia Legislature, and was the owner of property in Alexandria and Georgia. Through his marriage, Swann gained claim to land in Loudoun, although it is unclear just how much. His wife, Jane Byrd Page, was the descendent of two of the most prominent families in Virginia and some of Loudoun's largest landowners.[1] In 1798, Swann purchased a town lot in Leesburg to serve as his office and it was there that future United States Attorney

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1. Jane Byrd Page (1774-1812) was descended on her father's side from the Virginia families of Carter and Byrd. On her mother's side, she was great-niece of George Mason of Bill of Rights fame. George's sister (and Jane's grandmother), Mary Thomson Mason, inherited a large estate of about 4500 acres which included land that was later part of the Exeter, Selma, and Morven Park estates. Their brother inherited nearby Raspberry Plain, about the same size. Jane's mother, also called Mary, was in turn sole heir to the 4500 acres and when

General William Wirt studied law with him. The two men remained close friends and correspondents through the rest of their lives.[2]

In 1800 Swann bought 262 acres of land from his wife's stepfather, Dr. Wilson Cary Selden[3] of Exeter. He purchased an additional 438 acres in 1808, and continued to add adjoining tracts until the estate he named Morven Park totaled about 1400 acres by 1826. When Swann purchased the first 262 acres, at least two houses were standing on the property. He built a new house in the popular Georgian style, one that would better fit his status as a plantation owner. The two older houses, then located at the back of the new structure, may have been incorporated as outbuildings. Twenty years later, about the time the estate's acreage was completed, Swann felt it was time to remodel his house in the grand new Greek-Revival style. The main façade was changed to the East Side, the building was widened by the addition of nine feet on each side, and a large portico was added to the new front face. About this time other, smaller structures were added to the south to balance

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widowed, brought at least part of it to her second marriage to Dr. Wilson Cary Selden. Selden and Mary had no children together, but he retained the property and passed it down to his son by a second wife. Selden established Exeter plantation on a large portion of the land, and sold other sections to Thomas Swann. (See note 3)

In a later document, just before his death, Swann deeds the deceased Jane's interest in this property to his children, but it is not clear how much that interest represented, nor how much land, if any, Jane may have actually brought to her marriage. Loudoun County Deed book 4I page 173.

For further information, see:

Obituary of Jane Byrd Page Swann, *Alexandria Gazette,* October 8, 1812.

Penelope Osborn, "Exeter: Its History and Architecture," *Bulletin of the Loudoun County Historical Society,* Vol. II, 1960, pp. 18-19.

"Exeter is Named to Landmarks Register" *Loudoun Times-Mirror,* March 15, 1973.

Lina Grace Weber, "Exeter Was Built For a Bride," *Loudoun Times-Mirror,* March 15, 1973.

2. Obituaries in National Intelligencer, January 27, 1840, and Leesburg Genius of Liberty, January 27, 1840. Also, Penelope Osborn, "A Truly Remarkable Place," *Loudoun Times-Mirror,* April 15, 1965.

3. Dr. Wilson Cary Selden (1761-1835) originally of North River, Gloucester County, married Mary Mason (Selden) Page, widow of Mann Page and mother of Jane Byrd Page. Mary died in 1787 when Jane was a young teenager. Selden then married Eleanor Love, and later Mary Bowles (Armistead) Alexander. At the young age of 19, he was appointed surgeon to a unit of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, and was later a judge and sheriff in Loudoun County. Sales of land to Swann: Loudoun County Deed Book 2A, p. 315; 2K, p. 97; 2O, p. 283; 2R, p. 53, p. 449; 2S, p. 229 and 3A, p. 417.

the appearance of the original brick and stone houses on the north side.[4]

Throughout the renovations of Morven Park, the Swann family lived primarily in Alexandria where Swann practiced law, as well as in the District of Columbia, still under construction. Morven Park was a part-time residence, the country estate to which he could escape from the city. A manager maintained farm operations there, and Swann was only minimally involved in its agriculture. In 1801, President John Adams appointed Swann District Attorney for D.C. He was reappointed in 1821 by President James Monroe and continued in that post until 1833.[5] He was elected commissioner of the Washington, DC, branch of the Bank of the United States in 1814, and became its president in 1824. By 1829, he was doing so much government business in Washington that he built a house there.[6]

By 1832, Swann found himself in financial difficulties due to a debt he owed to the Bank of the United States. He promised the 1400 acres of Morven Park as surety for the debt, but when depression and panic hit in 1837, he could not repay it and was forced to sell approximately 700 acres to his son, Thomas Jr., for $25,000. This arrangement provided the cash to pay off the debt and still keep the property in the family.[7] In the same year, he made his will and deeded his wife's interest in the Selden property to his children.[8] In 1833, Thomas Swann, Sr. retired to Morven Park, where he died on January 19, 1840.

4. Jana Riddle, "From Stone to Stucco: The Complete Architectural History of the Mansion at Morven Park." (Master's thesis, University of York, Spring 2000).
5. As described in the above-cited obituaries, January 27, 1840.
6. The mansion on the corner of Connecticut Avenue and H street was later the home of W.W. Corcoran. It was demolished in the 1920s and is now the site of the Chamber of Commerce building. By the time the family moved here, Thomas Junior was at least twenty, so he would have experienced youth primarily in Alexandria. Miller, Nancy Anne. "Thomas Swann: Political Acrobat and Entrepreneur" (Thesis for Master of Arts Degree, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, June 1969), pp. 5-7.
7. Loudoun County Deed book 4I page 201.
8. See notes 1 and 3.

Thomas Swann, Jr., was born, probably in 1809, into a family of eleven children, only six of whom survived. He enrolled in the Preparatory School of Columbian University (now George Washington University) in 1825, and then, with his brother Wilson, in the newly formed University of Virginia in 1826. Among his classmates were the grandsons of Thomas Jefferson, sons of men his father knew in Loudoun, and Edgar Allen Poe. Discipline was strict, and students were forbidden to smoke or drink, duel or gamble, or dress in anything other than the school uniform. Students are students, however, and were frequently brought before the faculty for violations of the rules. Swann was reprimanded once for being with a group of students driving a carriage recklessly through Charlottesville. He studied there two full years with an average-to-good record before leaving in 1828 to apprentice at his father's law office as a clerk.[9]

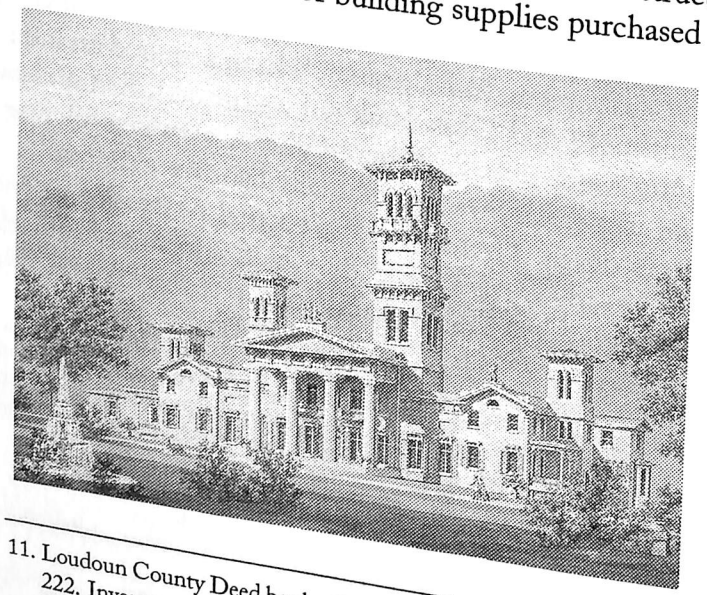
By 1833, Thomas Jr. was living primarily in Washington, and working as Secretary of the Neapolitan Claims Commission, negotiating settlements of naval claims between the United States and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. He met Elizabeth Gilmor Sherlock, Baltimore's wealthiest heiress, and married her on May 14, 1834. The couple moved to Baltimore soon after their marriage, when the work of the Commission was complete. In Baltimore, Swann acquired an interest in the new Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and established a close relationship with his wife's uncle, Robert Gilmor, a successful merchant. Thomas and Elizabeth Swann eventually had five children.[10]

Upon his father's death, Thomas, Jr. took actual possession of the estate of which he already owned more than half, and found himself one of the largest slaveholders in Loudoun County with 60 slaves. He

9. Swann gave Feb. 15, 1805 as his birth date when enrolling at the University of Virginia, but a document in the archive of the Westmoreland Davis Memorial Foundation, that claims to be from the Swann family bible, lists 1809 as his birth date, which is more likely since his eldest brother, also Thomas Jr., was still living in 1805, but had died before 1809.
10. Thomas Swann and Elizabeth Sherlock's children were:
    1) Thomas Swann III 1835-1866
    2) Louise Sherlock Swann, married Gen. Ferdinand J. Latrobe, mayor of Baltimore.
    3) Jane Byrd Swann, married Thomas Ferguson
    4) Elizabeth Gilmor Swann, married John Whipple
    5) Mary Mercer Swann, married Charles Shirley Carter

also inherited his father's valuable law library. Over the succeeding years, he bought out his siblings' interest in the Morven Park property and reunited it into one large estate. Although neither Swann lived on the property as a primary residence, both seem to have taken real interest in their Virginia farm, and maintained a busy plantation. The inventory of the contents of Morven Park at the time of the elder Swann's death was that of a wealthy man with a working farm. At a time when the average Loudoun farmer had personal property worth a few hundred dollars, the Morven Park estate, exclusive of land and buildings, was valued at more than $30,000, and included such luxuries as a piano, silver, and china.[11]

Thomas, Jr. further altered the house by constructing wings that attached the north and south buildings to the center. The interior of the central, three-story Georgian period house was gutted and divided into two high-ceilinged rooms, with an entrance hall on the ground floor and a ballroom upstairs. French windows were installed along the front of the house. By this time, the Italianate style was in vogue, so Swann added four square towers to the house. The construction is documented in an extensive list of building supplies purchased from John Norris



This 1859 watercolor shows Thomas Swann Jr.'s fanciful additions to the Morven Park mansion.

Courtesy of the Westmoreland Davis Memorial Foundation

11. Loudoun County Deed books 4R page 111, 4U page 350, 4X page 3, Will book Z, pp. 144, 222. Inventory of Swann's estate in the collection of the Westmoreland Davis Memorial Foundation.

& Sons of Leesburg, as well as a contemporary watercolor showing the house and grounds.[12]

The younger Swann had a reputation as an eloquent and persuasive orator,[13] a skill he apparently inherited from his father, whose persuasive ability was praised in his obituaries. He used this ability to talk Maryland into funding the fledgling B&O Railroad's push to the Ohio River. He had started working for the company in 1843 and was elected to its board of directors in 1848, when the 20-year-old railroad was still running only as far as Cumberland, MD. At Cumberland, not quite half the distance from Baltimore to the Ohio, the B&O connected with the National Road, where cargo had to be transferred to wagons for the journey west. The railroad sold package deals for Ohio-bound passengers and freight that used steamboats and coaches to fill in the gap between the railroad and river.

Upon taking over as president of the railroad in 1849, Swann persuaded the Maryland legislature and Baltimore City government to issue $6 million in bonds in an effort to complete the track before the Pennsylvania Railroad or C&O Canal reached the river. With this money, he quickly put 3500 men and 700 horses to work on 167 of the 200 miles of track. By 1851 the workforce had grown to 5000 men and 1250 horses under the supervision of engineer Benjamin Latrobe. The track was completed to the Ohio just south of Wheeling, Virginia on Christmas Eve, 1852, but despite the hard work, the Pennsylvania Railroad won the Ohio River race by a small margin. Still, the B&O was soon to be wildly successful.

Swann resigned from the presidency of the B&O in 1853. During his tenure, the railroad's revenues and traffic had doubled. In 1851, Virginia chartered the Northwestern Virginia Railroad to connect with the B&O at Three Forks and meet the Ohio River south of Wheeling at Parkersburg. Swann served as president of this new line from the time he left the B&O until 1856. It became a subsidiary of the B&O

12. Copies from ledger books of John Norris & Sons in 1857 from vertical file, Thomas Balch Library.

13. Stover, John F. *History of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1995), p. 65.

shortly after its completion in 1857, the same year the B&O reached the Mississippi River at St. Louis.[14]

Elected mayor of Baltimore in November 1856 on the "Know-Nothing" ticket,[15] Swann's major accomplishments were in the areas of civic improvements and political reform. Included were the creation of a streetcar system, and the dedication of Druid Hill Park, a project financed with revenues generated by streetcar fares. His numerous critics called his methods heavy-handed, but his admirers praised the reforms he had effected. As a reform mayor, Swann worked with a two-branch city council, whose members were elected every October, an event that always provoked violence:

> For almost a decade, mobs of ruffians had gained control of the city wards and through the threat or actual use of physical violence assured their candidate's victory....Ever a political realist in the less favorable sense, Swann knew that some of his adherents had practiced the same kind of coercion to elect him mayor, and there was pressure on him to adopt a live-and-let-live policy; while at the same time, the protests of indignant citizens could not be ignored. Swann therefore made several proposals to reduce violence on election days by closing saloons and forbidding people to carry concealed weapons.[16]

Another important reform, essential for controlling election violence, was the reorganization of the city police. When Swann took office, Baltimore's police department consisted of one high constable,

14. Ibid., pp. 66-72.

15. The American or "Know-Nothing" Party was a short-lived political party that strongly influenced Maryland politics for a few years before the Civil War. They won majorities in the state legislature and Baltimore government in the 1850s, put a governor in office as well as Swann as Baltimore mayor, and won two-thirds of Maryland's congressional positions. The primary feature of their platform was anti-immigration and pro-slavery measures, fueled by a fear that newcomers were taking the jobs and livelihood of "natives." The Know-Nothings had influence nationally in a lesser degree. Source: Robert J. Brugger, *Maryland: A Middle Temperament.* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 259-264.

16. Miller, "Political Acrobat," pp. 32-33.

one regular policeman and one night watchman for each of the twenty wards. The officers carried no weapons and wore no uniform. In his new system, Swann divided the city into four districts, which were subdivided into stations, which were in turn subdivided into beats. Officers given regular beats to walk were issued blue uniforms complete with brass buttons and a black cap. Also, all policemen were given regular salaries, providing them independence from moneyed influence.

A similar renovation took place at the fire department:

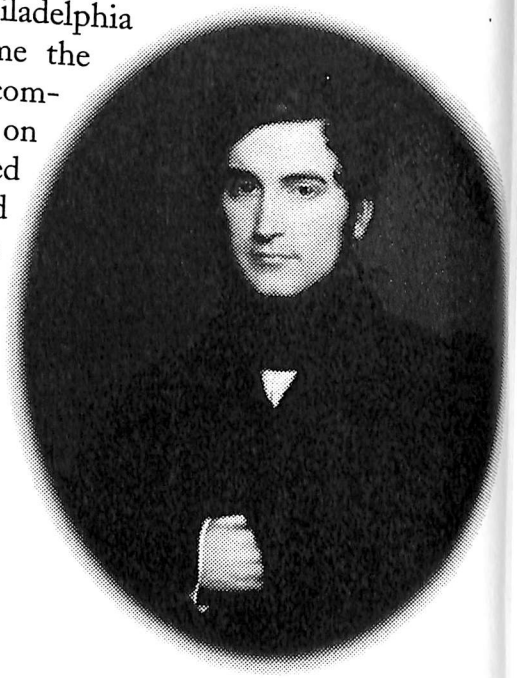
> Previously, Baltimore's Volunteer Fire Department consisted of twenty-two independent companies, which often were more interested in esprit de corps than in putting out fires. Alarms usually led to a race between two rival companies to determine who should have the honor—and financial reward—of putting out the blaze. Often the firemen fought brawls while the building was reduced to ashes. The new fire department abandoned volunteerism for paid firemen whose interests actually lay in fire fighting.[17]

Until federal forces occupied Annapolis and Baltimore in mid-1861, secession was a very real possibility for Maryland. The immigrant population of Baltimore, as well as most western Marylanders, never had reason to sympathize with the Confederacy, but there was plenty of support for secession among eastern and southern landholders and slave owners. Governor Thomas Hicks delayed calling the legislature as long as possible in hopes that events would change. That strategy ended when federal occupation forced him to call for Union volunteers. Many southern sympathizers were arrested and jailed without trial, and the state remained painfully divided under military rule for the duration of the war. Even so, more than 20,000 Marylanders fought for the Confederacy at Antietam in 1863. Shortly after this bloody Union victory, President Lincoln's announcement of his intention to emancipate

17. Ibid., pp. 33-34.

the slaves further strained Maryland's loyalty by dividing the Unionist Party.

In 1862, Swann, like the state's newly elected Governor, Augustus W. Bradford, was pro-union, but not anti-slavery. His actions and speeches were intended to preserve both. In a speech to the Union League in Philadelphia in June 1863, Swann, at the time the Union Party's state central party committee chairman, blamed the war on extremists of both parties, declared secession unconstitutional, and argued that the slavery question was prolonging an unnecessary war, one which should be fought for the sole purpose of restoring union. A large slave owner himself, Swann had researched the history of slavery in the thirty years preceding the Civil War and written a defense of its morality—views he expounded in his June speech. He believed that the emancipation of Maryland's 170,000 slaves would create havoc; that races could not coexist on equal terms. Even so, he realized that slavery was economically outdated and hampered progress; therefore he supported deportation and colonization movements.[18]



Thomas Swann, Jr.
Photo courtesy of Westmoreland Davis Memorial Foundation

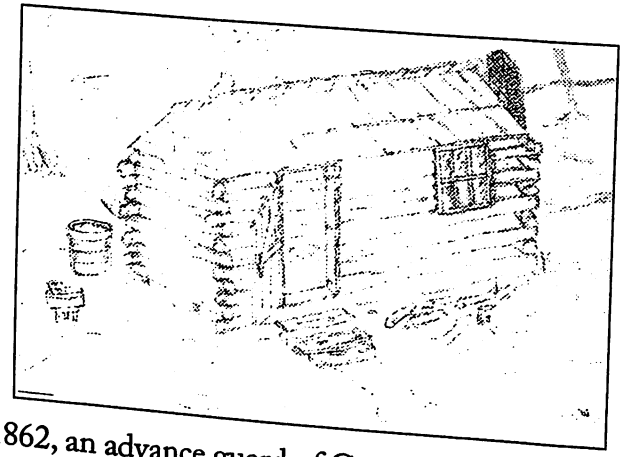
18. The idea of large numbers of free blacks frightened many whites of all classes, so activist groups came up with the idea of "returning" freed slaves to Africa, to newly founded colonies on the western coast. Run mostly by missionary societies, emigration programs were expensive and dangerous, and their supporters found it impossible to maintain the religious and moral standards they intended. The great majority of black slaves had been born in the United States, and were as American as the whites. They knew and cared little about Africa, and had no desire to uproot their lives to such an extent. As popular as the idea was among whites, it proved impossible to persuade many blacks to agree, so the projects were ultimately abandoned.

In September 1863, Swann still warned that a"radical faction" could not impose emancipation on Maryland, and that only a constitutional convention could decide the issue. The reality of war politics in the second half of 1863, however, changed his tone. By December, in view of the Unconditional Unionists' (pro-emancipation party) election victories, Swann was able to accept and even support their call for immediate emancipation as necessary to maintaining union. By this time, Maryland was so unsettled by war and controversy that some slaves were able to dictate to their masters the terms under which they would continue to work. Swann rationalized his acquiescence with arguments that slavery had already been unprofitable for twenty years, and that Maryland's economic future would be advanced by emancipation. He argued that the initial loss to slave owners would be speedily compensated by elimination of "out-of-season" maintenance costs of slaves. Often accused of being a waffler, it was Swann's strength of belief in the Union that caused his change of policy on slavery—he was willing to do whatever it took, even if it made him uncomfortable, to keep the Union together.

Meanwhile in Leesburg, war came very close to Swann's Morven Park plantation. Almost nothing is known of the life of slaves there, the strength of their feelings about emancipation, or whether they left the area or stayed to work as free labor. Loudoun County, like Maryland, was a border area and was extremely and bitterly divided. The towers that Swann had built to adorn his mansion may have been pressed into service as lookouts, especially after the October, 1861 Battle of Ball's Bluff along the nearby Potomac River. They commanded a view of the entire area that the Confederate army was defending.

Parts of the defending army camped at Morven Park through the winter of 1861-62, in the woods behind what some soldiers described as "Swan's Castle," while several others commented in diaries on the beauty of the property. They enjoyed a quiet winter there, and many expressed regret upon leaving the Leesburg area in the spring when they marched South to defend Richmond.[19] Later, on September 2,

19. Divine, John. "The Passage of the Armies Through Loudoun: 1861-1865," article in *Bulletin of the Loudoun County Historical Society*, Vol. II, 1960, pp. 36-37.



Artist's rendering of a hut built by soldiers camping at Morven Park during the winter of 1861-62.

Courtesy of Douglas Smith

1862, an advance guard of Gen. Robert E. Lee's army marching toward Antietam routed out a Union force, composed of Cole's Maryland Cavalry and the Loudoun Rangers, and chased them out of Leesburg across the Morven Park property.[20]

Swann's support of the Unionists' tenuous control of still-divided Maryland politics won him their nomination for governor in 1864. He won the overall election with the help of the presence of the Union army and biased judges. In his inauguration speech, he declared that military necessity had left no alternative but to free the slaves, and encouraged voters to keep the races separate, to be kind to the weaknesses of ex-slaves, and to look forward to a future of industrial development.[21]

Once in office, however, he undid much of the radical reform of the Unionists' 1864 rewrite of the Maryland constitution. He appointed voting officials who ignored the Oath of Allegiance requirement, thereby allowing Democrats and ex-Confederates to vote. By 1866 the Unionist party that elected him had split painfully over the issues of black enfranchisement and racial equality. When many of its more conservative members began to vote with the Democrats, the party lost control of both houses of the Maryland legislature. The 15th Constitutional Amendment giving blacks the national vote was enacted without Maryland's ratification.[22]

20. Frantum, David M. and Clifford E. Henry. *No Sound Can Awake Them to Glory Again.* Published by the authors, 1998.
21. Miller, "Political Acrobat," pp. 58-64.
22. Brugger, *Maryland,* p. 306.

Swann and his supporters went to great lengths to secure his election to the U.S. Senate in 1866, including the repeal of a law requiring that one Senator be from the Eastern Shore and the other from the Western half of the state. It came as a surprise, then, when he declined the appointment, choosing to complete his term as governor. He discovered that his successful election to the Senate was the result of a plot within the Unionist party to remove him from the governorship so that Lt. Gov. Christopher Cox, a more radical Unionist, could take his place. During the remainder of his term, Swann supported the Democratic Party in once again rewriting the Maryland constitution to drop the Oath of Allegiance requirement and to provide for public schools within the state.[23]

Following his term as governor and another unsuccessful bid for the United States Senate, Swann was elected to five consecutive terms as U.S. Representative from Maryland's third district (Baltimore). As a congressman, he continued to voice the states'-rights, white supremacist views that marked his governorship. Though he supported the Union throughout the war, even when it meant accepting policies he opposed, his sympathies were with many of the ideals of the South. He boldly opposed the Fifteenth Amendment, radical reconstruction and policies that enforced racial equality, arguing that such policies were beyond the bounds of federal authority. He believed segregation served the best interests of both races, and remained paternal in his views toward the newly freed blacks.[24]

Nothing is known of the post-war fate of Morven Park's black population, nor of their feelings toward their former master. Freedmen throughout the South had their hopes raised high during the war by promises of legal rights and land of their own, but were generally disappointed when these promises proved impossible to fulfill. But Reconstruction in Loudoun was in general peaceful, and probably the situation at Morven Park was likewise. There was generally less violent racism in Loudoun than in other areas of Virginia and the South as a whole, but blacks were by no means instantly accepted as equals.

23. Miller, "Political Acrobat," pp. 84-90.
24. Ibid., p. 93.

Of all his several properties, Thomas Swann, Jr. chose to retire to Morven Park when he left political office in 1879. After his wife died in 1876, he married a second time to Josephine Ward Thompson, but it is reported that the relationship brought him little happiness. He died at Morven Park on July 24, 1883 and was interred in Baltimore's Greenmount Cemetery.

Swann's surviving daughters and grandsons inherited Morven Park, but four sold or exchanged their interests so that the entire estate passed to youngest daughter Mary Mercer Carter. She had married Dr. Charles Shirley Carter and may have felt more attachment to the Loudoun property than her siblings. She raised the roof of both ends of the house to the height of the portico, removed her father's Italianate towers, and added the Queen Anne-style addition to the back of the house. She also added a coal-fired central heating system, bathrooms, and many closets.[25]

Loudoun County was not far removed from the frontier at the time that Thomas Swann, Sr. first took possession of his land. Over three generations, the Swanns transformed it into a gentleman's plantation. The changing architectural fashions of the 19th century are reflected in the various building phases of the mansion house. In 1898, Mary Mercer Carter sold Morven Park out of the family.

25. Riddle, "From Stone to Stucco."

Morven Park, located on the outskirts of Leesburg, is currently owned and maintained by the Westmoreland Davis Memorial Foundation under a trust set up by its last owner, Marguerite Davis, in memory of her husband Westmoreland. The Davises purchased the property, then consisting of 1200 acres, in 1903 and turned it into one of the finest operating and experimental farms in the nation. Like both Thomas Swanns, Westmoreland Davis was a politician, elected Governor of Virginia in 1918. Under the terms of the trust, Morven Park is to be preserved in perpetuity.

Courtesy of Thomas Balch Library