

Kerelaw Castle & Estate – Ancestral home of Alexander Hamilton – US Founding Father

The castle and estate in Stevenston have been around since 1191. It was the seat of Stephen Lockhart or Loccard (who the town is named after) and at various points in history has been known as “Kerila”, “Kyr yaw”, “Kiry law.”

It was once a sprawling estate with many buildings associated with castle life – it had a dovecote, cottages for workers, a walled garden, which are sadly no longer visible. The castle and the castle bridge are now both category B listed buildings. It has its place in history though, as the ancestral home of one of the Founding Fathers of America, Alexander Hamilton.

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Kerelaw passed from the Lockharts to the Campbells of Loudon with Bruce granting them a charter of the land in 1318 and this is when the first castle was built. Kerelaw was then passed onto another powerful family; the Cunninghames of Kilmaurs and Glencairn.

During the 1488 feud between the Cunninghame’s of Glencairn and the Montgomerie’s of Eglinton, the castle was razed to the ground. It was later re-built and the Cunninghame’s had their revenge by burning Eglinton Castle to the ground in 1528.

The Hamilton’s were the last family to live there before they built Kerelaw House in the late 1780s and the castle was no longer used. Alexander Hamilton’s father, James A Hamilton was born and raised on the estate before moving to the West Indies and fathering Alexander with Rachel Faucette.

The castle today is a ruin but you can still see its Gothic arched windows. It is fenced off due to its ruinous state.

Kerelaw House

Although nothing remains of it today, Kerelaw House was once an impressive mansion that stood in the grounds of the Kerelaw Estate in Stevenston. It was built in the late 1780s for the Hamilton’s of Kilmarnock who had been in possession of the Estate since 1685. The land had previously belonged to Robert Cunninghame of Auchendarvie before he sold it to John Hamilton, making him the first ‘laird.’ The Hamilton’s had previously lived in Kerelaw Castle before moving to the new Palladian style mansion and naming it the “Grange.”

The name “Grange” travelled to America, specifically upper Manhattan in New York, where Alexander Hamilton built his country home in 1802. Although he never visited Scotland, he called his country house after his ancestral home. The house in New York still exists to this day as the Hamilton Grange National Memorial and is open for tours, etc.

When the last Hamilton died in 1837 there was considerable debts left and the estate was auctioned off in parts over the next few years. The next owner was Gavin Fullarton, a West Indies merchant who restored the original name of Kerelaw. In 1919 it was in the hands of local lawyer James Campbell, father of the war hero Kenneth Campbell. Kenneth received a posthumous Victoria Cross for his sacrificial role in a daring attack on a German battleship in WWII.

The Campbell’s were the last family to live there and in 1969 it was sold to Glasgow City Council with the intention of using it as offices for the newly built residential school. This never happened though, and the mansion house was demolished in 1970.

Video footage of Kerelaw Glen is by Roger Griffith.

Further Information

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earl_of_Glencairn

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerelaw_Castle

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Hamilton

<http://discoveringhamilton.com/james-hamilton-1766-to-1799/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W53forp6Qx0>