

### A Personal Preservation

***“In these days when Civil War sites are being developed and lost forever; it is good to see Patrick County taking an interest in preserving it’s past. The Stuart Birthplace is the most important historic project ever undertaken in Patrick County.” – James I. Robertson, Jr.***

In the summer of 1969, a white 1964 Volkswagen Beetle stopped in the front yard of the small white home visible today from the house site at Laurel Hill. That July, men from earth first walked on the moon and the Beatles were recording their final album, *Abbey Road*, in London. A tall slim woman with black hair and her son, a nearly nine year old blondish boy with green eyes, walked to the front door. The mother from Augusta, Georgia, and her husband from Chattanooga, Tennessee, had lived in Ararat, Virginia, for ten years. Erie Meredith Perry met Betty Jane Hobbs when he was in the army stationed at Fort Gordon, Georgia. They married on December 21, 1957, when he won a football contest in the army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, which included a round trip plane ticket from Frankfurt, Germany, where he was stationed to New York and \$100. Their son had fixated on the farm’s Virginia Historical Highway Marker titled “Stuart’s Birthplace.” As only a boy could, he questioned his mother every time they passed by until she stopped at the house hoping to satisfy his interest. Independent in spirit, she thought nothing of taking her only child on excursions to historic sites such as Monticello on weekends while her husband played golf. That day in 1969, the boy noticed the picture on the end table upon entering the home. The black and white photo showed a seated man in a military uniform with a full beard, saber, knee high boots, and a large plumed hat. For George Elbert “Shug” Brown and his wife, Icy Bowman Brown, James Ewell Brown Stuart was a member of the family.

The visit sparked an interest preserved by the passage of time. It began with the Virginia Historical Highway Marker possibly written by Douglas Southall Freeman and placed at the site in 1933 to mark Stuart’s one-hundredth birthday. An article in the Mount Airy Times from that year stated, “The marker, which is beautiful in its simple way, marks a spot near Mount Airy that should be of universal interest to residents of this section. The effort to commemorate the birth of Stuart in this section is one worthy of commendation.” By the time of the visit in 1969, it had two bullet holes and sat almost perpendicular in the bank, which led to an often quoted verse from “Sug” Brown Luke 4:24, “Verily, I say unto you. No prophet is accepted in his own country.”

This was the first of many days “Shug” Brown led the boy around the pasture speaking of the property’s history and his memories of the locations of the Stuart house, white and slave cemeteries and the old well used by the Stuarts. This was the first of many days Icy Bowman Brown showed the boy her scrapbooks full of information about Laurel Hill, the Patrick County Historical Society, the Patrick County Civil War Centennial Commission, the Board of Directors of the United Fund and the R. J. Reynolds Hospital Auxiliary, not to mention every Christmas card she ever received. The author intends this chapter to express his personal viewpoint relating to the preservation of Laurel Hill, as he was that boy visiting the Browns in 1969.

In 1975, Patrick County Administrator Edward M. Turner spearheaded an attempt to preserve Laurel Hill with a memorial park on an easement of land George E. and Icy Brown were willing to donate. The February 5 editions of the Patrick County newspapers quote him saying, “We ought to do this with our own people as a labor of love for one of our most famous sons and I think we should make a major effort to do it for which we would receive state and national recognition.”

The county formed a Bicentennial Commission including Icy Brown that began working on projects including the preservation of Laurel Hill. Officials drew up plans and attempts at fund raising occurred locally. The project progressed far enough that the Stuart family turned over the right of way to the cemetery back to the Browns in October 1975. George and Icy agreed to donate an easement for a park “to place a memorial or wayside shrine to honor J. E. B. Stuart.” Benjamin H. Bolen, Commissioner of State Parks presented a plan reported on December 17 by

the newspaper including a gravel path up to a viewing platform. On February 11, 1976, the J. E. B. Stuart's Woman's Club pledged \$250 and "Jeb Stuart Sales Days" were set for the summer including "cash prizes for the best Jeb Stuart beard."

As quickly as it started, the local papers ceased to mention the project. Mr. Brown felt the location in Ararat along with county politics hurt the project. He often made the comment to me that "If this place was between Stuart and Martinsville it would be a national park by now." To this day, Brown's statement is my guiding light to preserve Laurel Hill as a facility worthy of comparison with the best national park and bring the history surrounding J. E. B. Stuart back to his home in Ararat. I rekindled my interest in Laurel Hill in the early 1980s after having Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr. as a professor in the largest Civil War class in the nation and receiving a bachelor's degree in history from Virginia Tech in December 1984.

In 1986, Richmond native, Dr. Emory Thomas of the University of Georgia published *Bold Dragoon, the Life of J. E. B. Stuart*, the only scholarly biography of Stuart completed up to that time. While not agreeing with many of his conclusions, I devoured this book looking for new material and using its bibliography as the basis for my own research. Years later, Dr. Thomas became a good friend showing appreciation for my work at Laurel Hill in a very surprising way documented later in this chapter.

The Thomas book and the timing spurred me into action to save Laurel Hill. I began researching the history of the site crossing paths with several mentors. Local historian and primary author of *The History of Patrick County, Virginia*, Ophus Eugene Pilson mentored and allowed me to spend many pleasant afternoons visiting historic sites related to the Stuarts and sharing his wealth of knowledge on local history beginning in early 1987. One memorable trip with Mr. Pilson was to Beaver Creek, the home of George and Elizabeth Perkins Letcher Hairston in Henry County, Virginia. Judge Peter Hairston of Cooleemee, North Carolina, invited me to his home and assisted me in contacting Burke Davis and J. E. B. Stuart IV. Others advised me including the late Charles Baughan of Stuart and Nat Terry, father of the highest elected female official in Virginia's history, Attorney General Mary Sue Terry.

I wrote letters to public officials including "Patrick County's" Governor Gerald Baliles. Baliles passed me along to his Secretary of Natural Resources, John W. Daniel II, who assured me that Laurel Hill's historic marker was "indeed on Route 103," but was not helpful otherwise. Letters between Daniel and the author are in the Perry Collection at Virginia Tech. After I pointed out that the marker was mistakenly listed in the Virginia Historical Marker book as being in Claudville along Route 103 instead of in Ararat along Route 773, we began a correspondence with the bureaucrat continuing to tell me he knew better than I the location of Laurel Hill. This is the same attitude I found from most governmental officials in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The Virginia Department of Historic Resources discouraged my idea about preserving Laurel Hill and left me with the opinion that Virginia's government did very little to preserve the history of the Commonwealth that did not meet their "politically correct" view of the world. I promised myself that I would not accept government funding and work to prove that the private sector could preserve history without a government grant or intrusion.

Beginning in 1986 for three years, I researched many aspects in preparation for a preservation effort, which included reading every book on Stuart, researching the site in the Patrick County Courthouse and at many other historical societies across Virginia. I attended Civil War symposia such as the biennial event at the Stonewall Jackson House in Lexington, Virginia, where I mentioned the effort to historians such as Dr. Robertson, Robert K. Krick and Dr. Gary W. Gallagher. All three of these historians gave support to the project in many ways including speaking at symposia and other events. Visits to other historic sites such as the George Washington Birthplace on the Northern Neck of Virginia outside Fredericksburg and the James K. Polk Birthplace south of Charlotte were very useful in the formulation of my thinking about Laurel Hill.

Twenty years after first visiting the Browns, I went public for the first time with thoughts of preserving Laurel Hill on February 5, 1989, when Christopher Quinn of the *Winston-Salem Journal*, one of the best media people I dealt with, did a story in the Surry Scene section. I attempted this trial balloon to locate any interest in preserving Laurel Hill locally. Other than a phone call from “Shug” Brown, no response came in. My concern became urgent due to the number of houses built between the Brown home and the North Carolina/Virginia boundary line less than a mile south along with the age of the couple who had kept the preservation fire alive for all those years.

Not wishing to give up, I spoke at the Laurel Hill Civil War Roundtable in Stuart in May 1990 about the possibility of preserving the site. At the meeting, we formed an organization to preserve Laurel Hill with myself as President, Richard East as Vice-President, Gary Birkett as Secretary and Jerry Wilson as Treasurer. In addition, making up the organization were Reverend John Garrison, Hugh A. “Bud” White, Jr. and Laurel Hill Civil War Roundtable President, Kenton Oliver.

I took the task of approaching the Brown family. One sunny afternoon while enjoying a cold Natural Light beer in the driveway at 3514 Riverside Drive, leaning on the side of his pickup truck just across the state line from Laurel Hill, I spoke with Joe Bill Brown. In my life, I may have had better drinks, but none as satisfying. We agreed in principle to sign an option to preserve nearly seventy-one acres of the farm owned by his Uncle George E. and Aunt Icy Bowman Brown for \$60,000. Joe Bill and his wife, the lovely Edith Mills Brown, held the Power of Attorney for the elderly couple and were willing to sign an option to give the new organization of Civil War buffs the opportunity to purchase and preserve this farm. They deserve accolades for that action and for taking care of George and Icy in their later years. Icy’s health led the family to place her in a nursing home and income from the sale was to support her during her last illness. Sadly, Icy was never aware of the effort to preserve Laurel Hill due to Alzheimer’s, but “Shug” Brown did live long enough to know about the effort and attended the opening reception.

Several people approached Joe Bill about changing his mind before he signed the option. Rumors spread about supposed comments by me about the Browns to undercut our relationship. When Icy died on July 9, Joe Bill did not ask out of the agreement and to his credit and those interested in the preservation of Laurel Hill, he kept his word. His motivation was simply expressed to me as, “What Uncle Shug and Aunt Icy wanted.” Over the years when I saw Joe Bill, who descended from the Pedigo family on his maternal side, the pride he took in his part in saving the site was always apparent. I will never forget his willingness to save the site and the many contributions he made afterwards, but especially in believing in me enough to take the chance. As part of the agreement the Birthplace allowed Joe Bill to graze cattle, cut hay and use the property when not needed by the organization.

On August 27, 1990, the J. E. B. Stuart Birthplace Preservation Trust, Inc. (referred to throughout as Birthplace) released its first press release announcing a reception for September 9, 1990, to kick off fund raising to purchase 71.3746 acres from the Brown family. The reception attended by nearly 150 people reunited “Shug” Brown with J. E. B. Stuart IV for the first time since as a young man Brown gave Stuart a brick from the Laurel Hill Farm. The original press release pledged the organization would purchase, interpret and honor General Stuart with a monument, replace the Virginia Historical marker and add amenities such as a picnic area, but never was the rebuilding the house at Laurel Hill mentioned as an objective due to a lack of photographs and specific information relating to the house.

With brochures quoting Abraham Lincoln, “A nation with no regard for its past will do little worth remembering in the future,” we began to save Laurel Hill. My plan to raise money was to pursue aggressively local individuals, businesses and civic groups as the 1970s plan, but to also appeal to Civil War buffs nationally and due to my viewpoint never to take government monies and the strings attached. Unlike other Civil War preservation organizations, I felt that taxpayers should not bear the burden of a project that interested parties could fund through hard

work and dedication. As the reader will remember, this was during the time of the first war with Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait and the economy could have been better. Assisting in the effort was the release of Ken Burn's *Civil War* on Public Broadcasting System (PBS), which caused a resurgence of interest in the war.

So, began nearly two years of newspaper and television interviews, speaking to civic groups with my trusty slide projector talking about the history of Laurel Hill and my vision of its preservation. One personally satisfying moment occurred in front of the Mount Airy Rotary Club when *Mount Airy News* publisher, George Summerlin, stood up after my talk to encourage the group to support the effort and to this day is the best "That a boy" received by the author. The *Mount Airy News* supported the project in print and through use of its lobby for an exhibit of Stuart items during 1991. Summerlin received a framed print of General Stuart for the effort. I attended over twenty Civil War tours, seminars or shows paying for my own travel and expenses in those first three years promoting the preservation of the site.

The effort received donations from the Woolwine, Red Bank, Meadows of Dan and Ararat Ruritan Clubs. Woolwine Ruritan Club President Alfred Brammer said of the project when they donated \$500, "This is a project that should have been done long ago. Now is the time to get involved. We challenge the other civic clubs in the county and area to match or beat our donation. We plan to contribute again next year. There is no excuse for not supporting the project. This is the kind of thing that all people from Patrick County should take pride in." The Veterans of Foreign Wars along with the Jaycees, Lions and Rotary clubs in Stuart contributed to the project along with \$250 from the Patrick County Retired Teachers Association. The Rotary Club held a Civil War art auction for the project. The First National Bank of Stuart and Crestar, now BB&T and Sun Trust respectively, and Workmen's Federal Savings and Loan in Mount Airy through the intervention of James Clement contributed to the preservation. The Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites, now the Civil War Trust, and the Patrick County Chamber of Commerce both donated \$1,000 in seed money for the project.

In October, retired Marine Corps Brigadier General John S. Letcher, then 89, visited Laurel Hill with the assistance of Mr. Kelly D. Cecil. General Letcher came to visit the grave of his great-great-grandfather's brother, William Letcher. General Letcher served in the 3rd Marine Division of the 5th Marine Amphibious Corps during World War Two in the Pacific and before that had the distinction of being the last Marine to have a horse shot from under him in Nicaragua in the 1930s. His grandfather, John Letcher, was Governor of Virginia during the Civil War 1860-64. Letcher wrote two books *One Marines Story* and *Only Yesterday in Lexington, Virginia*. On October 19, 1990, Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr. made the first of many appearances for the Birthplace at the Reynolds Homestead in Critz, Virginia. Among his comments that night was, "In these days when Civil War sites are being developed and lost forever, it is good to see Patrick County taking an interest in preserving its past. The Stuart birthplace project is the most important historic project ever undertaken in Patrick County." Dr. Robertson's lecture raised \$1,300 for the Birthplace and the evening was even more special with the presence of Burke Davis.

Walter Burke Davis, Jr., age 93, died August 18, 2006 in Greensboro, North Carolina." He meant more to me than I could ever put in words. He was the person that brought James Ewell Brown Stuart to life for me and many others in his 1957 book *J. E. B. Stuart, The Last Cavalier*, but he was more than simply the author of the book. In 1990, Judge Peter Hairston took me with him to Chapel Hill to the meeting of the North Carolinian Society, who were presenting Burke Davis an award. I explained to Burke Davis my plans to preserve Stuart's Birthplace in Ararat and he heartily endorsed our efforts. Over the next few years, Burke and his lovely wife Judy showed up at events in support of the preservation of Stuart's Birthplace. At the first encampment, we discovered Burke Davis with a grandchild along the Ararat River explaining who Stuart was to his offspring without ever telling us he was there. During talks such as when James I. Robertson, Jr. spoke at the Reynolds Homestead for the Birthplace, there in the audience

quietly taking it all in were Burke and Judy. During the first two years of fund raising for the Birthplace, a royalty check from his publisher for his part of the proceeds for his book on Stuart would arrive signed over the Birthplace. Finally, one of the proudest documents I possess is a letter from Burke Davis to J. E. B. Stuart IV expressing confidence in me and the effort to preserve Laurel Hill stating, "If anyone can bring off this undertaking it is certainly Tom. It is obvious that he has spent years in planning and learning. He's thought of every angle."

Walter Burke Davis, Jr. came into the world in Durham, North Carolina as the son of to W. B. and Harriet Jackson Davis. The family moved to Greensboro in 1919 and he was educated in the city's public schools and later attended Duke University and Guilford College. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1937 with a degree in journalism. Burke Davis was that rarest of men, a UNC-Chapel Hill graduate, who pulled for the athletic teams of the Duke University Blue Devils.

I never met anyone with so many reasons not to be humble that was. Once I asked him to come speak for the Birthplace and he declined saying with a wink and a big smile that he had "lost his marbles." He commented that no one would be interested in hearing him speak. He could not have been more incorrect about anything in his life. When Ken Burns was looking around for a Southerner to be a "talking head" for his monumental PBS series called *The Civil War*, Burke Davis was going to do it if Shelby Foote declined. The mere fact that his books are still in print speaks to his talents as a writer and a historian. His book on Stuart holds up nearly fifty years after publication as the most readable and one of the best researched of the biographies.

Burke Davis chose "The Free State of Patrick" as home in his retirement with his house looking out over Rock Castle Gorge. The last time I saw Burke Davis and his wife Judy was at a performance of Frank Levering's play *The Last Cavalier* based on Burke's book now nearly fifty years old. It was appropriate that the last time I saw him was at this wonderful production based on his writings about Patrick County's most famous son because without him many of us would not know "Jeb" Stuart. One line from Frank's play came to mind as I thought about our recently departed friend and wrote this appreciation. When Stuart describes his tall Prussian Heros Von Borcke being wounded, "a giant has fallen." Burke Davis rests today in Greensboro's Forest Lawn Cemetery next door to the Guilford Courthouse Battlefield he wrote about and the place J. E. B. Stuart's great-grandfather Major Alexander Stuart was captured by Banastre Tarleton during the 1781 battle. I will miss him, but we still have him in nearly fifty readable books. If you could look up what a "Southern" gentleman and a scholar should be, you would find Burke Davis.

In May 1991, I returned to Blue Ridge Elementary School to speak to the seventh graders and presented books about J. E. B. Stuart to Librarian Evelyn Powell, who had more influence on many of her students than she ever knew. My father finished his twenty-eight year career in the Patrick County School System at Blue Ridge as principal. One moment from that day still resonates when several students including Miss Holly Terry wearing a Birthplace T-shirt as a sign of support, which children in Ararat cannot do today due to political correctness. Her father, Anthony Terry often supported the work at Laurel Hill such as widening the entrance road and never tired talking history with the author. His wife, Estelle, wrote letters of support to local newspapers and assisted with efforts to get officials in Mount Airy to recognize a site in Virginia that could help their tourism.

United States Army Colonel J. E. B. Stuart IV (retired) and his wife, Mary Louise came to Patrick County. They were joined by their entire family including daughter Elizabeth Pelham Stuart, son John Alexander Stuart with his wife, Donna, and son Lieutenant Colonel J. E. B. Stuart V (retired) an orthopedic surgeon and his physician wife, Dr. Kelly Stuart. Colonel Stuart brought personal items belonging to General Stuart for a temporary display in the new Patrick County Historical Society Museum that included a lock of General Stuart's hair, his pocket watch and his sword.

Colonel J. E. B. Stuart IV spoke at the Reynolds Homestead on Friday, May 17, 1991, and the next day at the Edwards-Franklin House owned by the Surry County Historical Society. In June 1991, in conjunction with the Patrick County Bicentennial, the Birthplace held a Civil War encampment at Laurel Hill. Each reenactor received a ribbon of participation from J. E. B. Stuart IV as a special thank you for assisting.

Jerry Wilson worked with Anthony Terry and Bobby Culler to widen the entrance to Laurel Hill beginning on July 7, 1991, and replaced the fencing. The latter two men donated their time to the project. The Brown cattle over the years became legendary for their ability to escape. Joe Bill Brown fertilized the grass, cut the hay and continued his masterful care of the land he sold us. The Board added new members Chris Corbett, Mike Hayes and Noel Wood, who contributed to the effort for many years.

Local artist Pat Gwyn Woltz painted a watercolor entitled *Laurel Hill, 1842* for the Birthplace depicting the story of young James E. B. Stuart knocking down a hornet's nest while his more prudent older brother, William Alexander Stuart, ran from the stinging insects. The painting included a house on top of Laurel Hill, which was modeled after Cobbler Springs, the home of Judge James Ewell Brown in Wythe County, the closest family home geographically to represent Laurel Hill. The painting depicted Dr. Joseph Hollingsworth of Mount Airy arriving in his horse drawn buggy to visit his patient Mrs. Elizabeth Letcher Pannill Stuart. The painting included the flower garden and the Letcher grave. Mrs. Woltz to my surprise painted two paintings, one with my chow dog, Jeb Stuart, which graciously she gave to me. The other painting is the basis for prints sold by the Birthplace as a fundraiser.

National known artists of the Civil War such as Don Troiani and Mort Kuntzler contributed prints to the fundraising. Other local artists such as Thad Cox donated his pencil drawings of Confederate Generals to the effort along with Charles Nicholson with his three watercolors of Lee, Jackson and a special Stuart print to match the series. Musician Kenneth Bloom brought his banjo to many Stuart functions including talks by Wake Forest University Professor David Smiley.

My employer at the time, Insteel Industries Inc., founded by Howard O. Woltz, Jr. and managed by his son H. O. Woltz III and their many employees supported the effort to preserve Laurel Hill. My immediate supervisor, John Claxton, did more than give lip service to the project, and often attended events and saw the passion for the project that his Assistant Systems Administrator had for it.

A payment of \$40,000 made on May 8, 1991, secured the deed for Laurel Hill for the Birthplace. On June 15, 1992, after a final payment of \$20,000, the J. E. B. Stuart Birthplace Preservation Trust, Inc. took ownership of the 71 acres from the Brown family. At this point, the author would be amiss if he did not acknowledge the efforts of his former wife, Teresa Dollyhite Adams, for her role in preserving Laurel Hill. There is no accounting for the time, effort and patience she showed in the early years of the effort from stamping and stuffing envelopes to supporting her then husband.

In those early years, many people contributed to this effort. Attorneys Arthur A. Anthony III and Chris Corbett represented the Browns and the Birthplace respectively in the legal matters leading up to the option. Alan Adkins assisted with the papers relating to non-profit status with the Internal Revenue Service. Steve Willis was the first contributor listed in the deposit book and likes to say that he read Burke Davis's book on Stuart in the fifth grade before this author ever read anything. Mary Louise Guynn contacted every member of her family to raise money for Laurel Hill because she always thought of me as "one of her own" children.

Richard "Dick" East gave the organization \$5000 in seed money at the beginning to start the project and led fund raising efforts in Patrick County. Mr. Dudley Walker of Martinsville and Mr. Fred Smith of Ararat made similar contributions to the effort. Fred, the most community minded person in Ararat did much in the community with the Ruritan Club and from his personal support to save Laurel Hill. Mr. Walker continues his interest in the Civil War as a Board

Member of the Civil War Preservation Trust. Buddy and Pauline Williams supported the Birthplace by allowing their business, Stuart Flooring Corporation and their daughter, Terri, and son-in-law, Gary Birkett to devote much space and time to the project. If not for the assistance of the Pannills, preservation of Laurel Hill would still be a “pipe dream.” Descended from William Letcher Pannill, brother of J. E. B. Stuart’s mother, Lucy Pannill Sale, Christine Pannill Yeaman, Adele Pannill Carter and William Letcher Pannill contributed over half the purchase price for the original seventy-one acres.

Lastly, there are my parents, Erie Meredith and Betty Jane Hobbs Perry, who quietly funded the early days of the effort by paying for everything from printing costs, gravel for the roads to travel expenses in excess of \$10,000. My mother for many years planted and tended to the plants at the entrance just as Elizabeth Stuart instilled an interest in her son. This simple act washes over me with pride to this day.

Jerry Wilson often said to me, “The only thing that should be important in the world is the memories you leave your family and friends after you are gone.” In those early days, he traveled often with me, built the original footbridges at Laurel Hill by himself and did as much as anyone in those years.

Mike Hayes did much for the effort at Laurel Hill bringing a life long interest in the war to the effort. He donated Dale Gallon’s print *Sabers and Roses* for fundraising, wrote letters to the editor, got the picnic tables built that adorn the site today and did much to move the effort along in those early days. John Cail and I founded the Surry County Civil War Roundtable in the early 1990s to give us a place away from the Birthplace to discuss the war. As I write this, the group is again meeting in the Mount Airy Library.

In 1994, Louis and Kathy Clements gave the Birthplace office space free of charge for eight years in Ararat near Blue Ridge Elementary School. I organized the first symposium to raise funds for Laurel Hill. The Birthplace held the event on March 18-20, 1994, at the Elk’s Lodge in Mount Airy, North Carolina, featuring Nick Nichols, Chris Hartley, Robert E. L. Krick, Robert Trout, Dr. Paul Escott of Wake Forest University and J. E. B. Stuart IV talking on variations on the theme of “They Followed the Plume” noting the influences of Stuart.

A week after the symposium, Elbert Bowman Brown, the son of G. E. and Icy Bowman Brown, died on March 28. Downs Syndrome dominated his life, but he far outlived his life expectancy because of the care he received from his parents, who kept him at home. Edith M. Brown wrote a eulogy of him for his funeral part of which follows. Anyone who doubted the motives of Edith and Joe Bill Brown in taking care of their Uncle “Shug” and Aunt Icy and their son Bowman should take note the following. “He never knew independence, but he knew love, unconditional love, love from his parents. When one doctor told his mother to send him off to an institution if he started getting on her nerves, she replied, ‘He will never get on my nerves. He is my baby. My gift from Heaven.’ Every child born deserves to be respected as an individual and loved for himself. Elbert Bowman Brown never had the right to plan a future. He could not talk. He had to have assistance with walking, with everything. But he was unique. I joined him in his ‘journey’ through life when he was 45 years old. His parents need help. They could no longer manage their lives and care for him. He became ‘My Child.’ He could not even return the slightest favor. Only a kiss on the hand was his way of loving you and thanking you. As I read in a poem once, ‘I never meant to love you. I only gave you my time, and found you could return even the slightest favor...except steal my heart...’ You see, Elbert Bowman Brown was blessed from the beginning from his birth. He was a child of God and I shall miss him.”

On January 18, 1995, Leonard George and Francis Dellenback gave the Birthplace a nine-month option to purchase 3.4 acres including the Dellenback/Mitchell house and Letcher grave for \$30,000 and donated \$250 of their own money towards the project. Several times as a teenager in the 1970s, I worked for the Dellenbacks in cultivating their tobacco crop in the bottomlands once owned by Archibald Stuart. The family took pride in their ownership of more of the Stuart land than any other family at the time of the preservation and particularly the

protection of the Letcher grave and the boxwoods around their home believed to come from the Stuart's occupation of the property.

Ten days later, the Surry County Civil War Roundtable and the J. E. B. Stuart Camp #1598 Sons of Confederate Veterans presented me with the Hester Bartlett Jackson Award for my work in preserving Laurel Hill. Mrs. Jackson, a Surry County historian who wrote *Surry County Soldiers in the Civil War* was the first recipient of the award.

I organized a second symposium held March 10-12, 1995, at the Elk's Lodge in Mount Airy, North Carolina. The featured speakers included Ted Alexander, who did double duty speaking to children's groups at the Andy Griffith Playhouse, John Divine, Marshall Krolick, Horace Mewborn, Robert O'Neill and Mark Nesbitt focusing on General Stuart's role in the Gettysburg Campaign and the controversies following it. Musician Bobby Horton, who played on Ken Burn's *Civil War*, played free of charge at the event giving an emotional and riveting performance. In conjunction with organizing the symposium, I developed an exhibit from my personal collection of Civil War art titled "The Image of War" on General Stuart in the Gettysburg Campaign. The exhibit ran March 5 through the end of April at the Mount Airy Public Library with the cooperation of the Director, Mrs. Julia Sharpe, one of the most gracious and professional persons I ever worked with.

The next month George Stoneman's 1865 Raid was the subject of a symposium after the North Carolina Department of Historical Resources contacted Ruth Minick about placing a historical marker relating to the raid through Mount Airy. I worked with her along with state and city officials to place the marker and arranged for the symposium held at the Andy Griffith Playhouse on April 8, 1995. The Surry County Arts Council, Surry County Historical Society, Surry County Genealogical Association, Surry County Civil War Roundtable, J. E. B. Stuart Camp #1598 Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Birthplace worked together to sponsor the event. The Stoneman event was held at the Andy Griffith Playhouse under the leadership of Tanya Rees, whose friendship and supported meant much to this author and the efforts to preserve history in the region.

James Epperson assumed the Presidency of the Birthplace that May and Board member, Mrs. Minnie Martin, designed a belt buckle still sold by the Birthplace. She contributed much to the effort over the years with Board membership and selling prints from her painting *Patrick Hero*, depicting a standing General Stuart. Nick and Janice Epperson through their support of their son, James, did much for the effort. Nick Epperson used his earth moving equipment to correct the culvert problem on the road to the Ararat River and clearing the spot for the Stuart Pavilion.

The year 1996 saw archaeologists from the College of William and Mary finding the house site at Laurel Hill along with a site believed to be the kitchen and a large amount of Native-American material. This work began in the fall of 1993, but a lack of funding slowed the work. I supplied my research to the team from William and Mary, who produced two reports from the project in 1994 and 1996 respectively.

The year 1997 was eventful with the third and final symposium held with the Birthplace on April 3 at the Andy Griffith Playhouse in Mount Airy on Confederate Cavalry featuring speakers: Robert K. Krick on William E. "Grumble" Jones, Dr. Brian Wills on Nathan Bedford Forrest, Colonel Ralph Mitchell on General Stuart, Chris Hartley on James B. Gordon, Scott Mauger on John Pelham and for the first time I spoke at the symposium on Stuart's North Carolina Connections. I developed another art exhibit at the Mount Airy Library to coincide with the symposium across the street. In June, the friends of the late cavalry historian John E. Divine and the Civil War Education Association honored me with the John E. Divine Award during the Cavalry Operations in the Eastern Theater seminar held in Leesburg, Virginia. A month later, I led a tour on J. E. B. Stuart and the Defenses of Richmond with Robert E. L. Krick leading one day on Stuart's ride around McClellan in 1862 and the next day with Frank O'Reilley on Stuart's ride to Yellow Tavern in 1864. Scott Mauger led a tour of Hollywood Cemetery to close the

event. Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr. came to Mount Airy to speak on his new book, *Stonewall Jackson: The Man, The Soldier, The Legend*. In October, the Colonel George Waller Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution placed a marker stating simply, "William Letcher, Patriot" at the grave. Ophus E. Pilson, in his last visit to Laurel Hill, spoke eloquently of the history surrounding Laurel Hill.

Significant recognition came to Laurel Hill in 1998. The Virginia Landmarks Commission placed Laurel Hill on its register. Sadly, Joe Bill Brown succumbed to lung cancer nine days earlier. Laurel Hill joined sites throughout the nation on the National Register of Historic Places on September 24, 1998. Without a standing structure, this was a great accomplishment achieved through the archaeology with the College of William and Mary along with the professional assistance of consultant Dan Pezzoni of Landmark Preservation Associates in Lexington, Virginia. Because of downsizing by my employer and a divorce, I left the area until 2001.

John F. Kennedy once said speaking of the United Nations, "It will reflect the fact that there are deep disagreements among its members...It is unfortunate that more cannot be accomplished here. It is unfortunate that unity for war against a common aggressor is far easier to obtain than unity for peace." With any group of people, the darker side of human nature will emerge after a common foe is eliminated. Once the organization preserved Laurel Hill, I learned this lesson. I like to analogize about my experience with the Birthplace as being Nathan Bedford Forrest at the Battle of Falling Timbers during the Battle of Shiloh. Forrest charged well ahead of his men only to find the enemy soldiers surrounding him. Being the front man for the preservation caused many jealousies and petty feelings that I was unaware of at the time. I practiced the simple idea that if something needed doing, I did it.

With all organizations personalities clash, schisms occur and people move in and out of the organization. The J. E. B. Stuart Birthplace Preservation Trust, Inc. was not immune to such events. It is my hope that with the passage of time those involved will one day think of forgiveness, as has this author. It is my hope that the success of the project will erase many hard feelings and those involved will look at Laurel Hill and recount with pride their role in preserving its history.

I wish I could write that everyone got behind the project, but that was not the case. My naiveté did not prepare me for the fact that many of my friends were strangers and many strangers were my friends. The preservation of Laurel Hill brought many dark sides of human nature to my view. Questioning my motives and the selfless nature of the work became a cottage industry for many jealous and envious persons. Many thought that I could not possibly be involved unless I was getting something monetarily or had a family connection. I never asked or received any form of compensation for my work at Laurel Hill and the Perry and Stuart families are not related. Apparently, these small minded persons never thought of preserving history in the place they call home without a personal or financial reason.

There was comedy involved in the anti-preservation feeling towards Laurel Hill. One local expressed that we should not save the site because it will "raise my property taxes." Many Ararat merchants would not support the effort in spite of the fact that they would reap the benefits from visitors coming to Ararat. Raleigh Puckett and Fred Smith of the Ararat Grocery did not share these attitudes. Even years later people will come up and make comments to me such as, "that place would have been saved whether you did it or not" or "we don't owe you anything for saving that place." They do not owe me anything, but they should have more pride in the place they live. I preferred to use most of this space to discuss the positive actions and people who worked to preserve the site. Those interested in the negative details will find them documented in the Perry Collection at Virginia Tech.

One problem that was obvious that many Ararat people viewed anything associated with the name Stuart with the county seat and the county government, which they perceived was against them. Instead of looking at the preservation of Laurel Hill as a way to take the name

Stuart and this history back from the people in the county seat. On the other hand, many people in Stuart did not see Ararat as being part of Patrick County or that the town named Stuart had nothing to do with the man named Stuart.

Over the course of time, many people contributed to the effort at Laurel Hill. Ronnie Haynes deserves special note for quietly going about his work at Laurel Hill doing the physical labor of placing lattice work around the Visitor's Center and many other projects including cleaning and restoring the area around William Letcher's grave. Elwood Cipko and his son Alex constructed the porch at the Visitor's Center.

During this time I was living away from Richmond, many simple acts of kindness and friendship lifted my spirits and led to a focus on my research and writing. Two ladies deserve special mention. The support of Patricia Walenista, the authority on Turner Ashby, got me through the wilderness. Elizabeth Ann Guynn Markwith, who grew up with me in Ararat, Virginia, allowed me to spend many good times at her home in Richmond and was there in the bad times. One day while browsing the Civil War section of a Border's in Manassas, Virginia, I spied a copy of the Oklahoma paperback edition of Emory Thomas' biography *Bold Dragoon*. The book criticized by many interested in Stuart was released in a corrected paperback version, but the following surprised me due to its unsolicited praise and the timing in my life. Thomas wrote, "Since *Bold Dragoon: The Life of J. E. B. Stuart* appeared in 1986, several events relating to Stuart's life have occurred. Tom Perry, a fine and generous gentleman who grew up near Laurel Hill, where Stuart grew up, has founded J. E. B. Stuart Birthplace, Inc., and attracted considerable interest in the preservation of Laurel Hill. He has started a symposium series about aspects of Stuart's life to sustain interest in Stuart beyond Ararat, Virginia."

Overlooked, are the environmental aspects of preserving Laurel Hill. From the early days, the natural beauty of the site along with the great vistas of the Blue Ridge Mountains enhanced the historical importance of the site. The organization cut trails from existing logging roads down to the Ararat River and the ford over the Dellenback/Hill lands opening the property for hiking. Two Boy Scouts, Matthew and Michael Miller of King, North Carolina, cut a new trail along the eastern side of the property down to the Ararat River and west along side the stream until connecting with the existing trails and the river road. A visitor today can see the mountain laurel from which the property gets its name along with running cedar and varying degrees of wildlife including deer and wild turkeys.

In 2001, I organized another symposium held in Richmond, Virginia, on June 19 with the Civil War Education Association that featured speakers Edward Longacre, Melissa Delcour, Robert Trout, Robert E. L. Krick and an inspiring talk from the heart by Dr. Gary W. Gallagher of the University of Virginia about how General Stuart sparked his interest in the Civil War. Scott Mauger of Hopewell gave a tour of Hollywood Cemetery to complete the event.

When I returned to Patrick County, the collaboration with J. E. B. Stuart Birthplace Preservation Trust, Inc resumed with President John Broughton. The retired sergeant with over twenty years service in the U. S. Air Force worked in the private sector in the fledgling cellular phone market after retirement. Under Broughton's leadership Laurel Hill went from pasture to park. The organization worked to place a Visitor's Center at Laurel Hill, which includes a gift shop, restrooms and a kitchen facility. Our efforts resulted in the flagpoles at the entrance and over Letcher's grave donated by Larry and Patricia Beeson, the massive stone entrance sign constructed by M and M Signs, the granite marker denoting Laurel Hill's place on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places and the granite marker for the slaves at Laurel Hill placed at the site where oral tradition placed it. Another idea resulted in author Robert J. Trout writing five interpretive signs on the life of General Stuart relating to the war. At this writing, the Birthplace sells engraved bricks to floor the pavilion to cover the cost of the signs. Other property improvements included underground water and electrical power to the top of Laurel Hill, cleaning of the area around the waterfall with a bird sanctuary, trail benches, a

bridge to connect the river road to the main pasture and partial restoration of the tenant farmer cabin on the river road, which was later destroyed by arsonists.

This collaboration resulted in a Civil War Trails sign written and placed at Laurel Hill along with new eight interpretive signs noting the history of the property that I contributed text and images to. We implemented a new web site ([www.jebstuart.org](http://www.jebstuart.org)) and replaced the Virginia Historical Marker. Besides providing text for the above, I wrote a genealogy book on the Stuart family that is in a third edition with all proceeds from the first two editions going to the Birthplace along with a reference book for use for future members of the Birthplace for history and tourism. We brought the National Advisory Board temporarily back to life and established the Captain John D. Hobson Endowment Fund to provide for the long-term protection of Laurel Hill. The fund honors the great-grandfather of C. Hobson Goddin of Richmond, Virginia, a long time supporter of the effort. I received recognition through a position as Emeritus Member of the Board of Directors for life and as Chairman of the National Advisory Board. I resigned from both positions to pursue my writing and lecturing full time in 2005.

During this period, I cataloged and began placing the myriad of papers from these experiences at Virginia Tech, which will include materials on Laurel Hill and Stuart research. Included were the following publications: *The Free State of Patrick: Patrick County in the Civil War*, *Ascent to Glory: The Genealogy of J. E. B. Stuart*, *The Dear Old Hills of Patrick: The Laurel Hill Reference Book* and *Notes From the Free State of Patrick*. The Thomas D. Perry Collection contains the Stuart Papers project and the collection of slides and photographs I made over the years relating to Stuart and Laurel Hill.

I continued to promote Laurel Hill and Patrick County's history. I gave a slide program on Stuart and Yellow Tavern, begun the year before, for the one-hundredth time to the Western Pennsylvania Civil War Round Table. Along with the Teacher's Guide and Reference Book developed for educators and interested parties about Laurel Hill, I created a website ([www.freestateofpatrick.com](http://www.freestateofpatrick.com)). In 2005, I began donating books on Stuart and the Civil War to Blue Ridge Elementary and Patrick County High School to assist in teaching history to the children of what J. E. B. Stuart called "the dear old hills of Patrick."

With Raleigh and Shelby Inscore Puckett in 2005, I began working with The Hollow History Center to preserve the history of the western section of Patrick County. A multiple structure private park, it will host educational programs and has a research library for local families. Those interested in such historic figures as midwife Aunt Orleana Puckett, Reverend Bob Childress made famous in the book *The Man Who Moved A Mountain* and J. E. B. Stuart, all from Ararat, will find The Hollow History Center as an important place to visit.

Other accomplishments included acting as historical consultant to Frank Levering's play *The Last Cavalier* in 2005. Nearly 1,000 people saw the work based on Burke Davis 1957 biography of Stuart in 2005. The theatrical work brought J. E. B. Stuart to life in a way that my many speeches and writings could never accomplish.

On October 7, 2006, the J. E. B. Stuart Birthplace Preservation Trust, Inc. honored my family by placing a granite marker at the flagpole near the house site, where J. E. B. Stuart was born on February 6, 1833. John Broughton spoke that day saying the following.

"It is in indeed an honor and privilege for me to deliver these remarks as we honor the Perry Family with the first placement of a polished granite marker here at the main flagpole of Laurel Hill. This marker is placed in recognition of the many contributions by this family, not only to the formative years of the Trust, but to its continuation and indeed to its survival. Now, if you will permit me a small amount of humor to introduce the theme of my remarks, I would like to relate this short anecdote. Many of you, I am sure, recall the name of Rudyard Kipling, the famous English author of such works as *Gunga Din*, *The Road to Mandalay* and many, many more tales. Well, the story goes that it was circulated throughout London that Kipling was paid a shilling for every word that he wrote. So a group of enterprising students at Oxford sent Mr.

Kipling a letter containing a shilling and asked that he send them one of his words. The unexpected reply came back with one word, 'Thanks.'

And that one word 'Thanks' is the reason we are gathered here today. Thanks to a family whose vision, dedication and perseverance in the cause of insuring that this historic property known as Laurel Hill would never be desecrated by the presence of a private home on this lovely knoll, or heaven forbid a housing development, it at long last being recognized. Every organization, be it the largest corporate entity or the smallest civic group has to undergo a beginning stage. This stage of its life cycle is arguably its most important. For it is at this stage that the seeds are sown that more often than not portend success or failure for an embryonic enterprise. It was no different for the Trust that exists today. At the outset, I realized that my words cannot do justice to this subject, that it is an impossible task to adequately express here today what the contributions of this family have meant to both the Trust and to Laurel Hill itself. Perhaps the best thing I can do is to illuminate some of the sacrifices they made, to replay a few of the highlights of the important events in which they were instrumental here at Laurel Hill and some of their "digging in the dirt" physical accomplishments.

No doubt at the point you have noticed my references to the Perrys has been codified by the "family." This is because their son, Thomas, who was and is an integral part of the reason for this ceremony today sincerely wanted the emphasis of my remarks to reflect the primacy of his mother and father's role in his nearly life long association with Laurel Hill. To emphasize this point, he gently refused my offer to place his name on the stone along with his parents. Thomas Perry has been many things to many people, but first and foremost he has been a dutiful and loving son.

Now the difficult task before me to try to condense what the Perry Family has meant to Laurel Hill. I have to ask that you turn the pages back to some thirty seven years ago to see a nine year old boy riding on the road to Mount Airy with his mother who sees the historical marker beside the road amongst the brush that says "Stuart's Birthplace." He wonders what it is all about. It was the point, that the family and Laurel Hill begin its journey together. For only a mother's love and desire to support her son's new found interest in history in general and James Stuart in particular could have stoked the fire that has burned to this day. Of one thing there can be no doubt that the contributions her son was to make in the years yet to come to save the Laurel Hill Farm from falling into private hands were a direct result of her willing sacrifice of time, money and sometimes great inconvenience to insure that his interest was fostered and nurtured throughout adolescence. George and Icy Bowman Brown, the then owners of the present day Laurel Hill were, I am sure, surprised to see this mother and son standing at their front door a little ill at ease. As the questions tumbled out of this little boy, George Brown being a quintessential grandfatherly type took him under his wing and spent endless days after that first meeting to walk over every nook and cranny of Laurel Hill with him and answered the endless questions that the imagination of a little boy engendered. As the years passed this little boy who had roamed Laurel Hill imagining that he was the reincarnation of a small James Stuart looking for a hornet's nest to knock down, and riding bareback furiously over the hills, finished the education that Patrick County could provide. I am sure to his mother's relief he matriculated at VPI majoring in history and studied under the renowned Civil War Professor James I. Robertson, Jr.

When the year 1990 arrived it became apparent that the health of both George and Icy Bowman Brown was failing and that Laurel Hill would soon be for sale. Thomas, along with other members of the Stuart Civil War Round Table set about to form an organization to raise the necessary funds to purchase Laurel Hill and thus save this valuable piece of historic property for future generations to see and enjoy. This was an incredibly difficult undertaking involving almost every conceivable method fund raising during which time it is difficult to adequately portray the involvement of Mr. and Mrs. Perry who gave unselfishly of their time, money and just plain hard

work to reach the seemingly unreachable goal of raising nearly seventy five thousand dollars. But they did. And the Trust was born.

In those early years funds were short, exhaustion had set in from months of back breaking travel in fund raisers and it seemed that the mountain had been climbed, and all the climbers were prostrate. Not so the Perrys. For now when it was needed most Erie and Betty Perry kicked into high gear. They provided gravel for what was then euphemistically called a road, Mrs. Perry designed and planted a flower garden which graces the entrance to Laurel Hill to this day, and then in a moment of inspiration she planted the lovely forsythia bushes at the entrance whose yellow blooms herald the arrival of spring each year. In her words, "Yellow for the cavalry." Her beautiful day lilies continue each year to brighten our scene as if they are there to remind us all of the lovely lady who planted them there. For these and contributions too numerous to mention we are gathered here today to place this memorial in honor of a family without whose generosity, time and labor it is entirely possible that we would not have the ground to place it on. While the words "Thank You" seemingly are inadequate they are rendered from the hearts of all of us whose privilege it is today lead Laurel Hill into the future.

So, in closing, let me say the sobriquet "First Lady of Laurel Hill" rests rightly on the mantle of Betty Hobbs Perry."

I often return to something said in a 1992 interview about Laurel Hill. "It takes vision to turn a pasture into a monument. This site can be a source of pride to the local community... We believe the birthplace can be the place to learn about Patrick County's most famous son. We have proven in economically depressed times that people still have an interest in preserving their history...I have never seen the people of Patrick County come together to work on a project like they have on this. From Woolwine to Ararat, we have received support, but it did not stop there. Henry County and Surry County, North Carolina both came through, as did the entire region including Carroll and Floyd Counties. Truly, this has been a regional and national effort... Among the things I am proudest of was the reestablishing of roots between Patrick County and the Stuart family... Compared to many other Civil War preservation organizations this is remarkable... It is our feeling that any site that will help teach about the American Civil War is worth saving. Many people have helped us and continue to help us preserve the history of this site and we appreciate it greatly. It is very humbling to see letters from all over this nation supporting the efforts we are undertaking, but the hard work is yet to come."

Every spring the forsythia planted by my mother, Betty Jane Hobbs Perry blooms in a sea of yellow (she says "yellow for the cavalry") near the replacement Virginia Historical marker. It seems appropriate that the marker and the mother who inspired me to try to preserve Laurel Hill should be associated in this manner. This book is dedicated to her. I often stop at Laurel Hill that time of year for what J. E. B. Stuart called the "pilgrimage to the old place" and quietly walk the fields around his birthplace and boyhood home in my home of Ararat, Virginia. The memories often flood back to me about all those who lived there and those who worked to preserve it. I hope this book has done them justice and that the story of Laurel Hill is just beginning.