

# SCHS News



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The Newsletter of the Stafford County Historical Society

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# PRESIDENT'S PEN

Dear Members,

I hope this finds all of you well. 2020 was certainly a trying year with much loss for many. I hope that you and your family were spared from the pandemic although I know few who were. It seems that we still face much uncertainty in the year ahead, but I look forward to being able to see all of you again soon.

My thanks go to Mark Burton for another great feature article that I am sure you will enjoy and to my dear wife who is responsible for our wonderful newsletter. We regret the passing of longtime member and director Art Hart. Art took it upon himself to gather the oral history of many of our older residents for which we are grateful. These are available on our website for your listening pleasure. He also very much enjoyed portraying General George Washington which he did on many special occasions including our 350<sup>th</sup> celebration.

Our board has tentatively merged with the Museum Foundation and has been acting in some capacity as a finalized entity awaiting an actual final approval by the general membership. In the meantime, we have been working together in continuing our pursuit of a museum.

Thank you for your continued support!

With best regards,  
Rick MacGregor

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**Cover Illustration:** Cattle graze at Valley View in the early 1900s.

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## FEATURE ARTICLE:

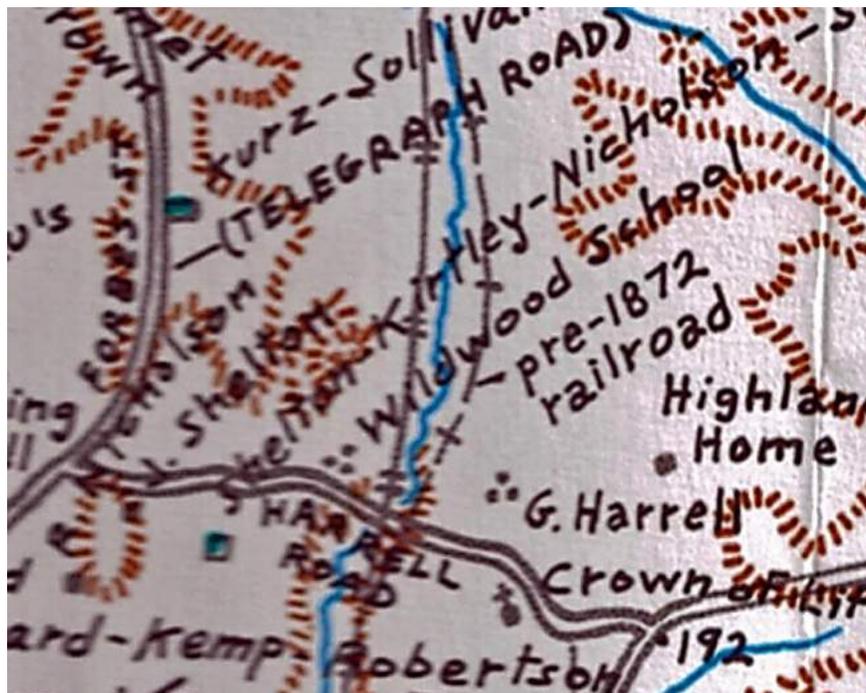
# The Mystery of the Phantom Schoolhouse

*By Mark Burton*

EUGENE SCHEEL'S 2003 map of historic sites in Stafford County was still fairly new when I first saw a copy of it in the early 2000s. I was fascinated by it and focused on sites in southern Stafford, where many of my ancestors had lived since at least 1680.

It was immediately clear to me that the creation of the Scheel map must have been an extraordinary undertaking. Minor nitpicks can hardly detract from so great an effort but I did notice a few errors. One of them was a reference to a mysterious schoolhouse that no one had ever seen.

The site was marked "Wildwood School" on Scheel's map. It was located on the north side of Harrell Road, just west of the railroad tracks, along a heavily wooded stretch of the road that can seem a little spooky late at night.



[For those not familiar with the area, Harrell Road is a relatively short, two-lane road that connects Forbes Street on the west with Deacon Road on the east. It passes underneath a small railroad bridge at about the halfway mark between Forbes and Deacon, descending steeply on either side. Claiborne Run (or Claiborne's Run) passes under the road exactly where the road passes under the bridge—except after heavy rains when, even to this day, the road becomes flooded and often impassable.]

I was surprised to see the reference to the schoolhouse on Scheel's map because that particular site along Harrell Road was located in a part of my great-great-grandparents' farm. I used to play in those woods as a child and rode a motorcycle through them as a teenager. My grandmother grew

up on the farm and told me many stories about it, such as walking the cattle to water them (presumably down to Claiborne Run).

She never once mentioned a schoolhouse, nor did any of my other relatives. I knew the area well and, in my lifetime, I never saw any ruins or other evidence that a schoolhouse had been built on the property.

## **A Swampy Red Herring**

The only indication that any kind of construction might have occurred in the vicinity is a small swampy area situated at the northwest corner of Harrell Road and the railroad bed. It appears that, at some point long ago, someone dug out the bottom of the hill, creating the swampy area.

My father told me the swampy area had been created by the railroad company, which presumably needed extra dirt when they were building the elevated railroad bed and the overpass across the road, which is just a few yards from the swampy area. That construction, however, presumably occurred circa 1906, long before my father's birth and even prior to my grandmother's birth.

So how did Dad know the swamp was created by the railroad company? Was it just an assumption on his part? Or had someone older told him about it? It doesn't really matter because the swampy area appears to be too far east of the location of the alleged Wildwood School on Scheel's map and on plats recorded in 19<sup>th</sup> century deeds. I only mention the swampy area to rule it out, lest someone notice it today and jump to false conclusions.

Why, though, would Scheel or anyone else think there had been a school on part of my ancestors' farm? I decided to do some research at the courthouse. What I found was a fascinating history of the property that would solve one mystery but lead to another.

## **Doing the Deeds**

I discovered that my great-great-grandparents had purchased 99.25 acres from Henrietta Craig in 1887. Craig had purchased 100 acres from the Reverend James P. Smith in 1878. Those 100 acres had been the western portion of a 149-acre tract that Smith had purchased after the Civil War. The 149-acre tract, in turn, had been part of the northern portion of the Chatham estate, which owners James Horace Lacy (1823-1906) and his wife Betty reportedly couldn't afford to keep after the war, especially with no slaves to work it.

Smith, by the way, was presumably the same James P. Smith who had reportedly become friends with the Lacy family while serving on the staff of Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson during the war. Perhaps he purchased the 149-acre tract as a gesture of friendship.

The mystery of the phantom schoolhouse began to unravel when I discovered that, in 1886, Craig had sold a lot, three-quarters of an acre in size and fronting what is now Harrell Road, to the Board of School Trustees for the Falmouth District in Stafford County. The lot shows up on a few deeds, which is presumably why Scheel marked it on his map.

The School Trustees, however, never actually built a school at that location. That's not surprising because it was a horrible location for a school.

Not only was the lot itself hilly, but it fronted a hilly stretch of the road that went down to Claiborne Run. Walking to and from that location would have been a slippery, muddy nightmare every time it rained or snowed.

At the time, there weren't many children living nearby, anyway. Even if the School Trustees were buying lots in anticipation of future population growth, that particular site was a very poor choice.

In 1899, about twelve years after purchasing the farm from Craig, my great-great-grandfather purchased the school lot back from the School Trustees for the same price that Craig had gotten for it (\$15), restoring the farm to its original 100 acres. I seriously doubt the lot would have been the same price had there been a schoolhouse or any other recent improvements on it.

### **Wherefore art thou Wildwood?**

Although these records presumably explain why Scheel had thought a school had been at that location, they don't explain why Scheel had labeled it the *Wildwood* School. Where had the name Wildwood come from? After doing a little more research, I discovered that deed records related to Craig's purchase of 100 acres of Rev. Smith's 149-acre tract referred to the entire 149-acre tract as "Wildwood."

I still don't know, however, when the term "Wildwood" was first used to refer to that property. Had the name been in use when the property was part of Chatham's original 1,200 or so acres? Or when antebellum Chatham owners Judge John Coalter and his wife, Hannah Churchill Coalter (Betty Lacy's older half-sister), gave 400 acres of Chatham land to their son, St. George Tucker Coalter?

Hannah, by the way, survived both her husband and her son. She apparently acquired the 149-acre tract from her son's estate, which presumably explains why later tax records indicate that the land had been part of Chatham. Perhaps the Wildwood designation was used to distinguish the tract from the rest of St. George's 600+ acres during the sale of his estate, or from the rest of the Chatham land during the sale of Chatham after the war, but I don't know for sure.

I also don't know if the School Trustees ever used the name Wildwood as a designation for the schoolhouse lot. Perhaps Scheel or one of his sources, having seen the Wildwood name in the deed records, gave the school the same name just to distinguish it from other school sites.

In any case, despite the lingering question about the origin of its name, the Mystery of the Phantom Schoolhouse has now been solved. Granted, Scheel's inclusion of the schoolhouse on his map was a minor and understandable mistake, but it's still good to correct the record. And it was interesting to learn that my ancestors' farm had twice been part of Chatham.

My research, by the way, uncovered yet another mystery, which I call the Mystery of the Vanishing Road. That, however, will have to wait for another time.

*Mark Burton is a life member of the Stafford County Historical Society. He is a former editor of the Society's newsletter and the author of Burtons of Stafford: 1680 to 1930 and other books.*

## **A CONVENIENT PLACE**

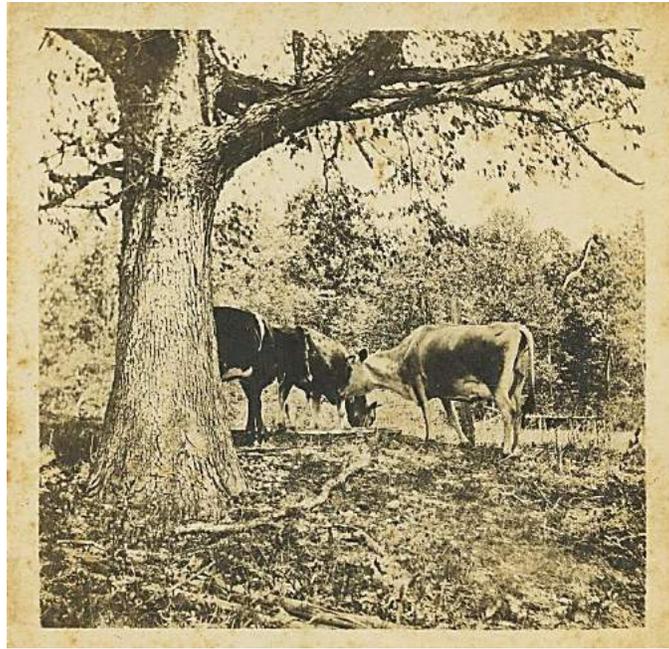
Most of our forebears kept their Bibles close at hand and referred to them frequently. In addition to providing comfort and guidance, these books were often repositories for important items such as obituaries of family members and friends, poems, newspaper clippings, photographs, pressed flowers, etc. Nineteenth century newspapers frequently published poetry and self-help items including the following undated clipping that was found in Hugh Adie's (1833-1918) diary:

## **An Alphabet of Good Counsel**

Attend carefully to the details of your business.  
Be prompt in all things.  
Consider well, then decide positively.  
Dare to do right, fear to do wrong.  
Endure your trials patiently.  
Fight life's battle bravely, manfully.  
Go not in the society of the vicious.  
Hold your integrity sacred.  
Injure not another's reputation or business.  
Join hands only with the virtuous.  
Keep your mind from evil thoughts.  
Lie not for any consideration.  
Make few acquaintances.  
Never try to appear what you are not.  
Observe the Sabbath day.  
Pay your honest debts promptly.  
Question not the veracity of a friend.  
Respect the counsel of your parents.  
Sacrifice money rather than principle.  
Touch not, taste not, handle not intoxicating drinks.  
Use your leisure time for improvement.  
Venture not upon the threshold of sin.  
Watch carefully over your passions.  
'Xtend to every one a kind salutation.  
Yield not to discouragements.  
Zealously labor for the right.  
And success is certain.

## **A GLIMPSE OF OLD STAFFORD**

The curbs, gutters, street lights, soccer fields, swimming pools, four-lane roads, asphalt, concrete, shopping centers, and subdivisions that have nearly consumed our county are relatively new to Stafford. Many long-term residents will remember a time when the photograph below was a typical scene in the county.



Cattle quietly graze at Valley View, a Lucas and Truslow family farm that stood on the southwest side of Eskimo Hill Road (Route 628) and may have included what is now known as Camp 21. The photo dates from the early 1900s.

**UPCOMING MEETINGS:**

We pray that 2021 will be a better year for all of us and that we will be able to eventually resume having our meetings. However, they remain cancelled for the foreseeable future. When the situation improves—and it will—we will notify the membership by email, Facebook, and the newsletter. That will be a time of celebration!

**NEWSLETTER DISSEMINATION:** Successful dissemination of our newsletter requires that we have your current email address or that we are made aware of your specific lack of access to a computer. Please contact Doris McAdams at ([dmac200592@msn.com](mailto:dmac200592@msn.com)) or 540-720-1321.

**DUES ARE DUE IN JANUARY!**

Dues for 2021 are due January 1<sup>st</sup>. Membership benefits include a subscription to the newsletter and participation at special events. Please don't forget to renew your membership so you'll not miss out on any of our 2021 activities. Mail your check or money order made payable to Stafford County Historical Society (SCHS) to:

Treasurer  
Stafford County Historical Society  
P. O. Box 1664  
Stafford, VA 22555

**NOT A MEMBER? JOIN TODAY! WE OFFER THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF MEMBERSHIP:**

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\$25	Family Annual Dues	\$200	Individual Life Member

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