

CERRO GORDO *at* Buckland

Homesite above
Broad Run dates back
thousands of years

by John T. Toler

Few historic sites in Virginia have had more intense study and documentation than the Buckland Historic District, revealing much about the distant past of Western Prince William County. This effort has been led by the Buckland Preservation Society (BPS), established in 2003.

It has been learned that the history of what became Buckland goes much farther back than the 18th century village, or even the ancient Manohoac Indian settlements along Broad Run.

In light of these discoveries, the boundaries of the historic district created in 1987 were expanded from the original 19 acres that included the village to over 400 acres. (See *Haymarket Lifestyle* magazine, January and February 2012).

Cerro Gordo, situated on a high knoll overlooking Broad Run is at the eastern border of the Buckland Historic District. It is described in the 1996 Virginia Department of Historic Resources (VDHR) Reconnaissance Level Survey as a “vernacular Georgian/Federal Revival house.”

Its handsome detail and design belies the fact that it is only about 80 years old. It has been the home of Edward B. “Barry”

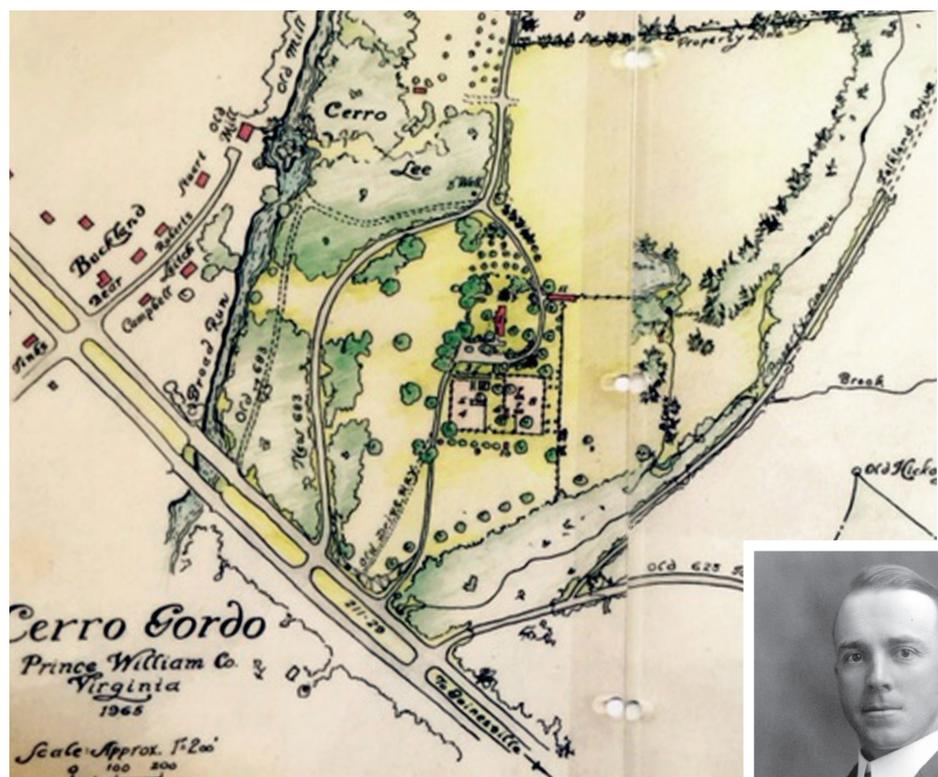
A map drawn by Stanley Brewster in 1965, showing the layout of the Cerro Gordo property, the dual-lane U.S. 29, Broad Run and Buckland. Inset: PHILIP HENRY LEE SR. built the present home at Cerro Gordo in the early 1930s.

Wright Jr. and his wife, Linda L. Wright, since 1983. Mr. Wright is the president of Wright Realty of Manassas, which has been in business in the area for five generations; Mrs. Wright has long been active in efforts to save the village and surrounding historic properties. She serves as the president of the BPS, and is the Brentsville District Historical Commissioner.

The land where Cerro Gordo stands was

originally part of a large tract acquired in 1774 by Rev. Isaac Campbell from Landon and Charles Carter’s Broad Run Tract. Later, Rev. Campbell’s daughter Cecelia married George Grayson Tyler, and around 1792, the couple built the first house on the property.

Sometime before 1798, “George G. Tyler conveyed a portion of the property to John Love and the Buckland Town





THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC—BUCKLAND, SCENE OF A CAVALRY SKIRMISH WITH STUART.—SKETCHED BY A. R. WAUD.—[SEE PAGE 72.]

Trustees for formation of the town lots and roads,” according to the Buckland Statement of Historic Significance. The house and grounds at Cerro Gordo Road occupied ten of these lots (39 through 48), as well as adjacent land.

The property changed hands, and in 1827 William Alexander built a larger frame house on the site, with a 22-inch thick stone foundation and large stone chimneys, which would survive as parts of present-day Cerro Gordo.

In addition to the main residence, there was an outdoor kitchen, slave quarters and ice house. Other dependencies included a log wash house, smokehouse, carriage house and a summer house. Part of the main house was built on a large mound, obviously man-made, and very old.

In the 1840s, the property was acquired by Charles H. Hunton (b. 1813) and his wife Ellen (b. 1814). Charles was the president of the Fauquier-Alexandria Turnpike and the Virginia Senate. Also living at Cerro Gordo while he was the schoolmaster at Buckland School was Charles’ brother Eppa Hunton II (1822-1908), who later became a general in the Confederate Army.

The property was named “Cerro Gordo,” after the Mexican War Battle of Cerro Gordo (April 18, 1847). It was during this battle that “Robert E. Lee was first tested,”

according to the Reconnaissance Level Survey done for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources in 1996. “The site was so named because the hill on which the house stood resembled the conical hill at Cerro Gordo in Mexico.”

The Hunton family remained at Cerro Gordo during the Civil War. They were there on Oct. 19, 1863 and witnessed the Battle of Buckland Mills, and the subsequent Union retreat known as the “Buckland Races.”

“During the skirmish, Custer and his Federal troops encountered J.E.B. Stuart and his cavalry. Cerro Gordo was the highest point in the area, and may have been used as a staging area,” according to the VDHR survey. “A lithograph in the Harper’s Weekly shows the Army of the Potomac with their cannons on the bluff at Cerro Gordo, overlooking the village of Buckland.”

Along with Union Gen. George A. Custer’s troops who were gathered there, Pennington’s U.S. Battery fired from the heights on the town, where Stuart had dismounted his sharpshooters and artillery. While the action was happening at their doorstep, the Hunton family hid in their cellar.

The years after the Civil War were difficult for the Huntons, although Eppa Hunton III (1855-1932) went on to found a

Top Left: The main house at Cerro Gordo as it appeared in 1939, after it was acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Brewster. *Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. E. B. Wright Jr.* Top Right: Cerro Gordo has been the home of Mr. and Mrs. E. B. Wright since 1983. Bottom: Drawing by Civil War artist Alfred Waud shows Union artillery firing on Buckland from the heights at Cerro Gordo during the Battle of Buckland Mills, Oct. 19, 1863.

prestigious Richmond law firm, and Charles entertained several prominent people at Cerro Gordo, including Oliver Wendell Holmes and Col. John S. Mosby.

In 1875, daughter Annie Hunton (1843-1914) prevented Cerro Gordo from leaving the family by purchasing the property at a trustee’s sale. She later married Grayson Tyler (1834-1897), the son of Judge John Webb Tyler (1798-1862), who lived at nearby Woodlawn.

They had two children: Eleanor “Nellie” McNeale Tyler (1877-1907) and Grayson Tyler (1879-1970). Grayson was married to Sally Norton Tyler (1883-1961), and their grandsons, Edmund Nicholas Tyler (1915-1972), and Grayson McNeale Tyler (1916-1959) were born at Cerro Gordo.

LATER OWNERS OF CERRO GORDO

Annie Hunton Tyler died in 1914, the victim of an influenza outbreak. In her will – and repeated on her deathbed – she insisted that the farm not leave the family. Following a service at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Haymarket, Annie was buried in the family cemetery.

Cerro Gordo was later acquired by family friend Philip Henry “Harry” Lee Sr. (1878-1958), and in order to fulfill Annie’s request, he gave 50 acres to her children.

Descended from the Lee family of Leesylvania in Prince William County, Harry Lee was related to Maj. Gen. Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee III, the father of Gen. Robert E. Lee. He was the son of Richard Bland Lee III (1835-1895) and Alice Butt Lee (1838-1890), and was born at nearby Buckland Hall. Harry was married to the former Gertrude Shipley Yates (1890-1975), of Hume.

According to the account in the May 14, 1930 edition of *The Fauquier Democrat*, “Cerro Gordo, the home of Mr. and Mrs. P. H. Lee near Buckland, was burned to the ground last Sunday afternoon (May 11, 1930). The fire was discovered in the ceiling about three o’clock in the afternoon, and before help could arrive, it

was far past control.

“The house is supposed to have caught fire from a defective chimney. It had been improved and modernized without losing any of its original charm, and contained much valuable antique furniture, most of which was destroyed.” Harry and son Philip Jr. (1928-2009), were home at the time; Mrs. Lee and their infant son Richard Bland Lee V (1929-2012) were safe elsewhere.

Descendants of the Tyler family that once lived at Cerro Gordo had several photographs of the 19th century house. Unfortunately, all were lost in the fire that consumed their home, The Highlands, in Haymarket in 1959. No other images of the house are known to exist.

Although he was not an architect, Harry Lee planned a new stone house to be built on the substantial foundation. He used the chimneys that had survived the fire, and followed the original floor plan.

“Built of red sandstone quarried on the property, the house is a two-and-a-half story, central hall, single-pile main block, flanked by two-story wings,” according to the VDHR survey. “The main block has a gable roof and two interior stone chimneys which extend a short distance from the outside wall. The main block has two small gable dormers with nine-light sash on the front roof, while each wing has wall dormers on both sides of the roof.”

A long, rectangular frame stable was built at Cerro Gordo around 1935, as well as a small granary and storage shed. There is also a small family cemetery on the property, where during the second half of the 19th century members of the Tyler, Hunton and Lee families, as well as others, were buried.

In October 1938, Mr. and Mrs. Lee sold Cerro Gordo to Stanley Brewster, an architect from Washington, D.C., and his wife Irma. The Lees moved about a mile west into Fauquier County to Buena Vista, where they lived with their young sons and Mrs. Lee’s sister, Edith C. Yates (1888-1963).

During their ownership of Cerro Gordo, Mr. and Mrs. Brewster made several changes, including alterations to the



The ancient stone steps leading to the *katua*, or ceremonial mound upon which part of the main house at Cerro Gordo was built, are evidence of the early occupation of Buckland by Native Americans. *Courtesy of the BPS.*

front entrance and improvements to the grounds around the house. In 1939-40, Mr. Brewster built the stone walls and walkways, “...paying special attention to preserving the old landscape plan of terraced gardens and pathways,” according to the VDHR survey. “Ironically, many of the stones he used were taken from the archeological remains of the old kitchen foundation.”

In order to create a more formal appearance, the dark trim on the house was painted white, and to improve functionality, the kitchen was remodeled. The original sleeping porch, which extended the length of the rear of the house, was converted to a sunroom.

In 1983, the Brewsters sold Cerro Gordo to Barry and Linda Wright. “We were most happy with the improvements they made while living at Cerro Gordo,” remarked Mrs. Wright. “Everything was done to perfection.” In addition, Mrs. Brewster gave the Wrights the 200-page diary she had compiled during the four-plus decades they called Cerro Gordo home.

During the years they have enjoyed living at Cerro Gordo and raising their family there, the Wrights have made a number of improvements as well, including a swimming pool and tennis courts, and a pond.

NATIVE AMERICANS AT CERRO GORDO

While the homes and buildings at Buckland can be traced back to the 18th century, the land along Broad Run was the

home of Native Americans for hundreds, or even thousands of years.

Broad Run was on the Susquehanna Plain Path, a trail used by Native Americans that ran from Connecticut to Florida. The earliest history of the area has been a major focus of the BPS for several years.

Physical evidence left by the Native Americans includes large, earthen mounds (like the “step mound” upon which part of Cerro Gordo was built) and several perfectly circular pits along the banks of Broad Run. In addition, a large number of artifacts have been found on both sides of the stream.

Perhaps the most detailed description of the early Native

American presence in Buckland was provided by Chief Jim Eagle, hereditary chief of the Cherokees/Ojibwe, who visited Buckland on June 10, 1955.

In July 2009, Jerry Reynolds, a correspondent with Indian Country Today hired by the BPS using grants from the Bay and Paul Foundation and First Peoples, contacted Chief Eagle at his home on the Sandy Bay Reserve near Amaranth, Manitoba Province. He was joined on a conference call by BPS Chairman David W. Blake, and they learned much about Chief Eagle’s visit to Buckland more than 50 years ago.

Chief Eagle explained that the Chickamauga Grand Council Confederation (formed in 1776) had assigned him to meet with the major Native American councils in Virginia – the Mattaponi, Catawba and Pamunkey – in order to establish the presence of Cherokees at Buckland and other sacred sites. At the time, the federal government was trying to limit the area where Cherokees had lived.

“There’s been a dispute for at least 100 years, maybe back further, on whether the Cherokee had people there...and they always claimed there was another tribe that was actually non-existent,” said Chief Eagle. However, the existence of a pre-historic step-mound known as a Cherokee *katua* (ceremonial dancing ground), high on the slope above Buckland proved that they had been there.

Accompanying Chief Eagle to Virginia were two of his uncles, Chief Chupche and



These Native American artifacts, found along Broad Run at Buckland, are part of the collection assembled over the years by the Buckland Preservation Society. Courtesy of the BPS.

Ralph Campbell, and his friends, Solomon Broken Shoulder and Simon Broken Shoulder. At the time of the 2009 interview, Chief Eagle was 84 years old; all of his companions on the trip were deceased.

A vast trade system existed in the Southeast, all the way up to Maine, which was controlled in ancient times by the Mobilian people, according to Chief Eagle. Buckland – or “Buck Land” due to the large deer population, was “...one of many trade centers where tribes met that belonged to the Confederation. From fear of settlers, other tribes tended to attach themselves to the Cherokee or other large tribes, such as the Chickasaw, Choctaw and Creek.”

“Tribes had trade specialties in those days, and the Cherokees were known for ‘Indian copper’ hair pipes that were worn hanging from the side of the head,” he continued. “...that’s why Buck Land was very important to us. It was a trade center, and a ceremonial center, for many tribes. There, they could gather without fear, because we Cherokees controlled it...not totally, but we did.”

Native American settlements were usually established along waterways. At Buckland, “cleansing water ceremonies” were held on the step mound, which was built on the highest point above the village. Chief Eagle described the ceremonies as “very complicated and complex.” It is likely that the other mounds, located below and downstream, were used for burials.

Who built the mounds? Chief Eagle believes that the mounds at Buckland predate the arrival of the Cherokees by many years. “We know our people were there, and believe that they possibly took over the mounds after the mound people left, and were dispersed into other tribes,” he said. “The mounds date back 4,000 or 5,000 years, but we (Cherokees) only 300 years or more.”

MISSION OF DISCOVERY

At the start of the 1955 visit, Chief Eagle contacted two families living in the area, the Butlers and the Websters, “...who were definitely Native, but mixed.” Of particular help was an elderly man named Simon “Cy” Butler, who was aware of the mounds, but did not know for what they had been used.

Hiking up the hill above Broad Run, Chief Eagle and his group located the remains of the step mound under Cerro Gordo, and met briefly with Stanley Brewster. Returning to the area along the stream they found the two other mounds recalled by Cy Butler.

According to Mr. Butler, long ago there were more mounds – perhaps as many as twenty – along Broad Run. However, “...they had been hauled down, worked down.” This was confirmed by Solomon “Sol” Webster, who added that after the mounds were destroyed, the land was farmed for only a few years before it was abandoned.

Chief Eagle described the mounds they found as round in shape, measuring from 25 to 30 feet across, and between ten and twelve feet high. It is likely that the step mound had an arbor or other decorations on the top that were used in the ceremonies held there.

Also found were three depressions, or pits, in the ground along the stream. Obviously man-made and very old, it was noted that all were exactly the same size and shape.

Based on information from an early phone conversation with Chief Eagle, David Blake and others with the BPS had trekked along Broad Run, and found five more pits. He described them as having “...an earthen lip around the edge, and stones inside.” The pits appeared to be about three feet deep, but were “silted-in” with leaves and dirt, so it is likely they are much deeper.

Chief Eagle thought that the pits were earth lodges that had caved in, partially-underground ceremonial places, or pits dug to mine clay. “The only way to prove that is to dig in a little way, and see if there is clay in there,” he explained.

Native American artifacts have been collected by the BPS for years, and shared with the VDHR. During their brief time at Buckland, Chief Eagle and his party found five more Native American artifacts. “We lucked out,” he said. “We found several wash-outs, where we picked up flint tools. One of them was (the head of) a small hammer, the kind used to crush choke cherries, or break bones to get out the marrow.”

Their work in Virginia completed, Chief Eagle and his group returned to their homes in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Fifty-four years later, he shared his knowledge and recollections with the BPS, adding much to what is known about the area.

“I wish I still had my old journal, the old notes,” he said at the end of the telephone interview. “I gave that book to another man, and today I have no idea where it’s at. But there were quite a few places that we visited, and in fact, quite a few different tribes.”

In the years since Chief Eagle’s visit, Prince William County has wisely identified Broad Run as “...a high sensitivity area where further investigation of prehistoric sites should be undertaken,” according to the BPS. ❖

John Toler is an author and historian who has served Fauquier County for over 50 years, including four decades with the Fauquier-Times Democrat. Toler is the co-author of 250 Years in Fauquier County: A Virginia Story, and author of Warrenton, Virginia: A History of 200 Years.

