

# A family murdered, a crime avenged

## Long-forgotten lynching brought to light

By John Toler  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The opening of the National Museum for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, in 2018 has brought a renewed focus on the brutal crime of lynching. It is a memorial to the more than 4,300 African Americans documented to have been killed by lynching in the U.S. between 1877 and 1950.

Tragically, these people were killed in vicious acts of “racial terrorism,” meant to threaten and intimidate. But there have been other acts of lynching in our history, where the motivation for the killing was vengeance, or “vigilante justice.”

The crimes committed by Shedrick Thompson and his lynching in Fauquier County in 1932 have been documented by author Jim Hall in “The Last Lynching in Northern Virginia” (2016), but the murder of a Fauquier County family on the night of Nov. 9, 1891, the controversial trial of the two men convicted of the crime, and their subsequent lynching have largely been forgotten.

### The tragedy unfolds

Widowed the year before, Mrs. James W. Kines and her young children – Lizzie, 8, Annie, 10, and Gilbert, 4 – were living in a tenant house on the Samuel McMillan farm, along the Virginia Midland Railroad tracks near Calverton. An older son, Robert Jacob Kines, lived elsewhere.

It was known in the community that following the death of her husband, Mrs. Kines had come into a modest sum of money, perhaps as little as \$70. This led investigators to believe the motive was robbery.

The tragedy was revealed early on Nov. 10, 1891, when Thomas Robinson, who lived nearby, saw the Kines’ house on fire, and rushed to the scene with his son, George.

Pushing in the door of the burning house, they found Lizzie’s body on the floor by the doorway and the badly burned bodies of Mrs. Kines and Annie further inside. All bore evidence of a savage attack with wounds caused by a sharp tool, perhaps a pick axe. Gilbert was missing, and it was initially believed his body had been consumed in the fire.

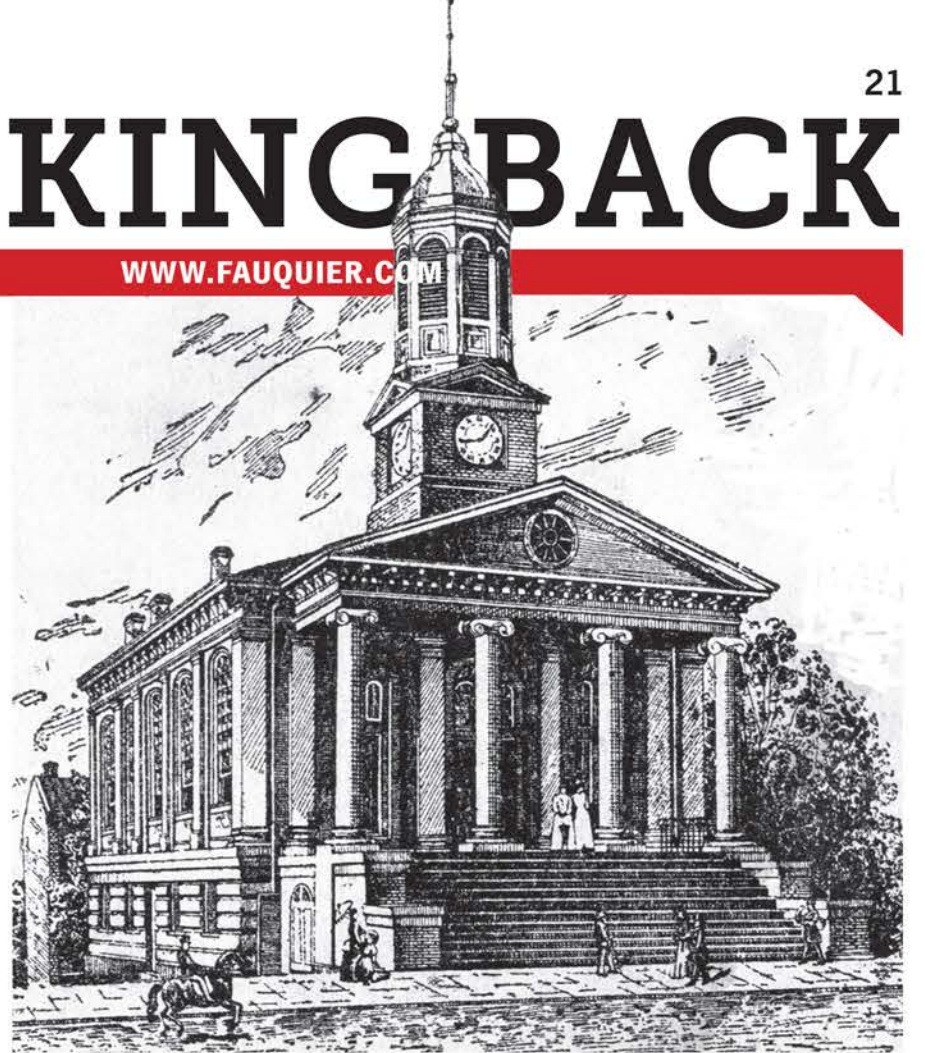
The first suspect in the crime was a farm laborer who had run nearly a mile to report the fire; investigators thought it was strange that he fled the scene rather than trying to help the victims.

During questioning by Sheriff Robert Whitaker, it was revealed that he had not even been at the house but was ordered to go for help by Lee R. Heflin.

Heflin, 29, worked at the McMillan farm and lived with the Dye family. Heflin claimed that he was shucking corn in a field about 40 yards from the Kines house when he saw the fire around 7:30 a.m. and ordered the laborer to go for help. He immediately became a suspect.

Continuing the investigation, the next day, Whitaker arrested Heflin and George Dye, son of Joseph Dye, for the murders. After further questioning, George Dye was released, and Joseph Dye arrested for the alleged crimes.

The suspects were first taken to the county jail in Warrenton, but as word of the murders spread throughout the community, people were outraged and there was talk of vigilante vengeance. Heflin and Dye were taken to the Alexandria Jail for their



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FAUQUIER HISTORICAL SOCIETY. Fauquier County Courthouse, as it appeared in 1892.

own protection.

The case against Heflin was made stronger when Gilbert’s body was found in the well of the burned house on Nov. 23. When they removed the body, they found a coat and bloody overalls that belonged to Heflin.

Planting a detective posing as a fellow inmate in Heflin’s cell, investigators got Heflin to talk, eventually revealing critical details about the murders. Realizing he had given himself up, Heflin confessed.

He told investigators that he had come to the Kines’ home at about 8 p.m. on Nov. 9 and demanded Mrs. Kines give him her money. When she refused, he “struck her with a piece of wood... and when the children began to cry, hit them too.”

Heflin took the money and buried it beside a fence post at the Dye house. The next morning, he admitted returning to the scene and setting the house on fire.

Not convinced he acted alone, investigators pressed Heflin for details. They learned that the night before, he and Joseph Dye had discussed killing Mrs. Kines because she had been gossiping about the Dye family, which had forced one of the Dye daughters to leave the area.

### The murder trials

Heflin was the first to be tried, appearing in court on Dec. 28, 1891. After hearing the evidence, a grand jury returned two murder indictments for the killing of Mrs. Kines and Annie. Later that day the trial began. Defending Heflin were court-appointed attorneys E. E. Meredith and Robert R. Campbell; the commonwealth’s prosecutor was James Payne Jeffries.

By the time the trial started, an angry crowd intent on lynching Heflin had gathered outside the courthouse. At one point, they broke into the courtroom, creating chaos until they were removed.

As expected, Heflin pleaded not guilty, but his detailed confession and

the evidence made it clear he was involved. Changing strategy, his attorneys proposed that Mrs. Kines had killed her children and committed suicide. That claim was quickly dismissed.

On the stand, Heflin stated, “All I know is that I did not do the murder. Dye did the murder and got me to burn the house.” He also said that his confession was coerced – and made while he was drunk.

After three hours of deliberation, the jury returned guilty verdicts against Heflin for two counts of murder.

Joseph Dye was indicted on murder charges on Jan. 6, 1892, and was also defended by Campbell and Meredith. After a delay, the trial began with Heflin repeating that Dye instigated the crime because of Mrs. Kines’ gossip about his family.

Heflin described how Dye had come to his room around 3 a.m., and that they had gone to the Kines home where Dye broke in and killed the occupants while he watched from outside. After stealing the money, they set the house on fire, but it did not burn. Dye told Heflin to return the next

See LYNCHING, page 22



JOSEPH DYE



LEE R. HEFLIN

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# Long forgotten lynching brought to light

See **LYNCHING**, page 21

morning and finish the job, and he would split the money with him.

On Jan. 9, the jury convicted Dye of first-degree murder. Both men were sentenced to be hanged on March 18, 1892. However, due to inconsistencies in the testimony, on March 14 Gov. Philip W. McKinney granted Heflin a 60-day respite and allowed Dye's attorneys to petition for a new trial.

### The lynchings

The public was outraged and concerned that Heflin and Dye would escape punishment. Aware of the public anger, Jailor C.M. Pattie arranged for the pair to be taken to Gainesville and placed on a train to Alexandria for safekeeping.

Just before midnight on March 17, 1892, Heflin and Dye were handcuffed together and placed in a wagon headed for the train station at Gainesville. In addition to Sheriff Pattie, there were two guards and the driver.

An hour after they left, an armed mob of at least 35 masked men rode into town. Entering the jail and finding the prisoners gone, they set out for Gainesville, catching them just west of the village.

Pattie realized that resistance would be futile, and the prisoners were pulled from the wagon. Demanding the truth, the masked men got Dye to admit killing Mrs. Kines and her daughters, and Heflin to kill-

ing Gilbert and burning the house.

With that, Heflin and Dye were hung from cedar trees standing along the right side of the road. To make sure they were dead, both men were shot several times. The mob returned to Fauquier on the Greenwich Road, and Pattie and the guards spent the night in Haymarket.

The next morning, Prince William County authorities were called to investigate. The bodies were cut from the trees and brought to the Gainesville depot, where they remained until their families recovered them.

Fauquier officials were criticized for taking the prisoners from the jail, where they had some protection, and the deputies involved could not identify anyone in the mob. There was later a grand jury inquiry into the lynching in Prince William County, but no one was ever charged.

**Editor's Note:** This story last appeared in the Fall and Winter 1995 issue of News and Notes, that John Toler wrote for the society. Much of the information was gleaned from Prof. Robert A. Hodge's 25-page treatise, *The Lynching of Heflin and Dye* (1972), which in turn drew on accounts in the Fredericksburg and Warrenton newspapers of the day. In addition, the Warrenton Virginian "Extra" dated March 18, 1892, supplied the artwork of the two men and an account of the lynching.

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Heflin and Dye were confined in the Fauquier County Jail behind the courthouse. The jailor at the time was C. M. Pattie.

## American Battlefield Trust debuts Youth Leadership Team

New program seeks young leaders and history enthusiasts to serve as battlefield ambassadors and advocates

### Staff Reports

The American Battlefield Trust recently announced the launch of its Youth Leadership Team (YLT), an innovative initiative to directly engage with the next generation of battlefield preservationists. The YLT will unite 10 highly motivated high school students, selected from a nationwide applicant pool, who will serve as national advocates for America's hallowed grounds.

"It is absolutely critical that we pass the torch of knowledge onto future generations of Americans," said Trust President James Lighthizer. "Every hour of every day, we fight to preserve our nation's storied hallowed grounds. Encouraging our nation's youth to understand what happened at these places, and how it has shaped us into the country we are today, is important for our future. The Trust is excited to work with our Youth Leadership Team participants, both to learn from them and to help others learn through them."

The YLT will be comprised of history enthusiasts, aged 13 to 18, who support and embody the Trust's mission to protect our nation's hallowed battlegrounds and educate the public about their importance in our national story. YLT members will participate in key Trust events, including the annual

conference and a youth Capitol Hill event, in addition to planning and undertaking a battlefield project in their own communities.

"Working with our nation's youth is the only way to truly ensure that love and appreciation for our shared history is carried forward," remarked Connor Townsend, YLT coordinator. "By not only teaching but involving youth in hands-on preservation efforts, we hope to create ambassadors for our mission who stay with us as they mature."

YLT participants will be positioned to speak about the importance of battlefield land preservation and, through a special hometown battlefield project, connect history to our modern world.

Applications for the inaugural YLT class are now live on their website at [www.battlefields.org](http://www.battlefields.org) through May 31. All interested high school students between the ages of 13 and 18 are encouraged to apply.

The American Battlefield Trust is dedicated to preserving America's hallowed battlegrounds and educating the public about what happened there and why it matters today. The nonprofit, nonpartisan organization has protected more than 50,000 acres associated with the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and Civil War. Learn more at [www.battlefields.org](http://www.battlefields.org).



COURTESY OF FRIENDS OF CEDAR MOUNTAIN BATTLEFIELD  
Against the backdrop of Cedar Mountain in Culpeper County, on Aug. 9, 1862, a Confederate army under "Stonewall" Jackson fought against a federal force commanded by John Pope.

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## Reclaiming a Fauquier County bad man?

**Bob Ford, 'the dirty little coward,' was a Virginia boy**

By John Toler  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Historically speaking, Fauquier County has produced many famous sons of whom we are justly proud — John Marshall, Presley Neville O'Bannon and John Barton Payne come to mind. But there are other native sons we would rather not claim.

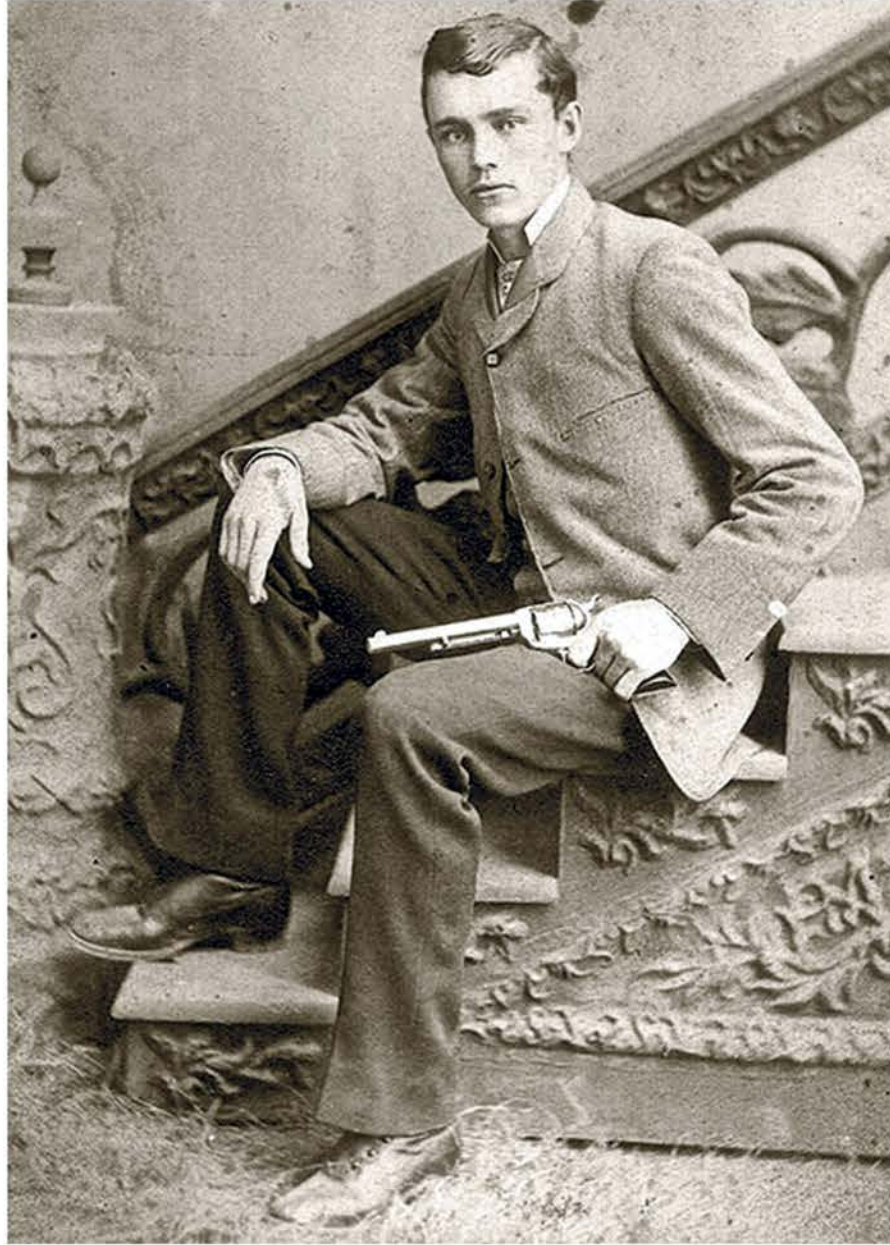
Perhaps foremost of these "black sheep" would be Robert Newton Ford (1862-1892), who is remembered as "... the dirty little coward who shot Mr. Howard" in the ballad of legendary bandit Jesse James (1847-1882).

Indeed, it was thought for many years that Ford was a Missouri native, since he lived there for a while and is buried there. Used as evidence was the 1880 U.S. Census and an interview conducted many years later with Bob's aged sister, Amanda.

However, research done in the 1950s by former *Fauquier Democrat* Editor Fitzhugh Turner and local historian Charles E. Jeffries, and later confirmed by the late John K. Gott, provide ample proof that Ford was born here — and provided an interesting narrative about Bob and his family.

Searching local records, it was learned that Bob Ford's parents, James Thomas Ford and Mary Ann Bruin, were married in Fauquier County on Aug. 10, 1840. Mary Ann was the daughter of Elias and Ann Bruin; whose home was in the Bull Run Mountains near Hopewell Gap.

Census records indicate that the couple moved to Missouri between 1840 and 1843 but were back in Virginia by 1845. Eldest daughters



COURTESY PHOTOS

Fauquier native Bob Ford, photographed in St. Louis as a young man — with a gun.

Sarah and Georgianna were born in Missouri.

Back in Fauquier County, James Ford was appointed Captain of the County Patrol for northeastern Fauquier County in 1850 and worked as an overseer on several farms in Fauquier, including the Ambler farm near Hume, the Smith property near Little Georgetown, and at Waveland, the property of Col. John A. Washington near Marshall. It is believed that Bob Ford was born Jan. 31, 1862 at Over Yonder, the Smith-Lewis farm at Little Georgetown.

From August 1862 to February 1869, the Fords lived in a small house located in the field just south of the main house at Waveland. James Ford managed the property after Col. Washington, an aide to Gen. Robert E. Lee, was killed in battle in September 1861.

### Remembering the Fords

In an interview conducted in 1894, R.D. Flynn of Marshall, one of the Ford boys' schoolmates, shared his memories of the Ford family.

James Ford was "a most highly respected Christian gentleman," said Flynn. "He would assemble his large

family, including Bob and Charley, around the home altar and invoke the Divine blessings on them."

But growing up, Bob and Charley Ford were not like their father. "The only peculiarity I can now recall about the Ford boys was their seeming great delight in torturing dogs, cats, pigs, poultry, or anything having life in the dumb creation, and over which they had control." Said Flynn. "They were not quarrelsome with one another, or other boys."

Flynn also noted that an older Ford brother "...was a daring soldier in Mosby's Rangers," and that there were three sisters "...who were refined ladies, and one who was very beautiful."

Flynn recalled an incident when Bob's mother presented him with a new jacket and pair of pants to wear to church. She had sewn the pockets closed, in an effort to keep him from stealing small items when they went to town. "On making this discovery, Bob flew into a terrible rage," recalled Flynn.

### Recruited by Jesse James

In 1872, the Ford family moved to Clay County, Missouri, where James farmed the land and the children at-



Rare photograph found years after their deaths from the *Houston Chronicle* purports to show Bob Ford (left) with gang leader Jesse James. Controversy surrounds the photo, with many claiming that it was fake.

tended school. However, in 1877 they lost the farm to foreclosure, and had to move into an old house east of Richmond, Missouri.

Fascinated by Jesse James and his Civil War and later criminal exploits, Bob Ford joined the James gang in 1880. Charley entered a life of crime a year later, taking part in the James-Younger gang's Blue Cut train robbery west of Glendale Missouri, in 1881.

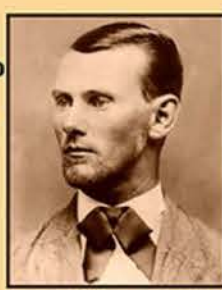
During the decade after the Civil War, the James gang — led by Jesse and his brother Frank — had gained national notoriety for their robberies of banks, trains and stagecoaches across the Midwest. But in 1876, their attempted robbery of a bank in Northfield, Minnesota resulted in the killing or capture of several of their gang members.

They continued their criminal exploits on a smaller scale, and by the time Bob Ford joined the gang, increased pressure by law enforcement and the lure of "dead or alive" reward money had changed the situation.

See **FORD**, page 32

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# Reclaiming a Fauquier County bad man?

From FORD, page 31

After the Blue Cut train robbery, Jesse moved his family to St. Joseph, Missouri, and Frank left the gang and settled in Lynchburg, Virginia. Jesse tried to retire from his life of crime, assuming the alias "Thomas Howard" and attempting to live quietly in St. Joseph.

But this didn't last, as Jesse made plans to rob the Platte City Bank in Missouri and tried to recruit the only men, he thought he could trust – Bob and Charley Ford. At the time, the Fords were living with the James family, but they had other plans: to kill Jesse and collect the \$10,000 reward offered by Gov. Thomas T. Crittenden.

By prior arrangement, Crittenden promised Bob Ford a full pardon as well if he killed Jesse. While waiting for the right opportunity, they continued to live in the James household.

After breakfast on April 3, 1882, the Ford brothers and Jesse met in the living room, supposedly to plan the raid on the Platte City Bank.

Jesse had become suspicious of the Fords, but instead of confronting them, he casually laid his revolvers on a sofa and stopped to straighten a dusty picture hung on the wall nearby. His back turned to the Fords, Bob drew his pistol and shot Jesse in the back of the head.

After the killing, the Fords wired Gov. Crittenden to claim their re-



Bob Ford's grave marker recalls his claim to fame...

ward. Instead, they were charged with first degree murder and sentenced to be hung on one day – and then pardoned on the next.

## Final chapter

Due to the nature of the cowardly ambush in Jesse's home, public opinion turned against the Fords. For a while, Bob made money posing for photos as "the man who shot Jesse James," and re-enacting the shooting with Charley in a touring "Wild West" stage show.

Bob and fellow former gang member Dick Liddil relocated to Las Vegas, where they opened a saloon.

After losing a shooting contest to one of Billy the Kid's former gang members, Bob was forced to leave Las Vegas, settling first in Kansas City, Kansas and later in Creede, Colorado.

On May 29, 1892, Bob opened Ford's Exchange, a saloon and dance hall in Creede. Six days later, the entire block burned to the ground, and Bob was forced to open a tent saloon until he could rebuild. But that was not to be.

On June 8, 1892, Edward Capehart O'Kelley (1858-1904) entered the tent saloon, and as Bob turned to see who



...while that of Edward O'Kelley concludes the narrative.

was there, O'Kelley unloaded both barrels of a shotgun at him. Bob was killed instantly, and O'Kelley was arrested for the murder and sentenced to life in prison at the Colorado State Penitentiary. His motive for killing Ford was never established.

Because of a 7,000-signature petition in favor of his release and his medical condition, O'Kelley was released on Oct. 3, 1902, after serving just nine years.

However, his freedom was short-lived. O'Kelley was shot and killed on Jan. 13, 1904, during an attack and wounding of a police officer in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Bob Ford was first buried in Creede, but his remains were moved to the Sunny Slope Cemetery in Richmond, Missouri, where he was interred beside other family members. These include Charley – who despondent over his role in the killing of Jesse James and suffering from tuberculosis – committed suicide in the family home in 1894.

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## HISTORY AND COOL HAPPENINGS

Saturday, June 29

**Fauquier Historical Society:** Explore Main Street: A historic view, 1 p.m. Take a leisurely stroll down Warrenton's Historic Main Street. Walk with local historian Lory Payne and discuss the history, design, and stylistic changes as Warrenton has grown. Explore stories from the past that make each building in historic "Old Town" unique. The tour will begin at the Fauquier History Museum at the Old Jail, located at 10 Ashby St. in Warrenton. The tour will take about 1.5 hours and walk along the sidewalks on downtown Warrenton. Walking tour fee is \$10/person, \$8 for FHS members, and \$5 for children under 12. Comfortable walking shoes are recommended. Visit [www.fauquierhistory.org](http://www.fauquierhistory.org). Contact 540-347-5525

**Fauquier Historical Society:** Ice Cream Social, 1 to 3 p.m. Celebrate the beginning of summer at the Fauquier History Museum, 10 Ashby St. in Warrenton with a cool treat. Meet the staff, volunteers and board members of the Fauquier Historical Society and learn about the different programs offered by the museum and society. Don't forget to sprinkle on the fun with a trip inside the museum. Donations are appreciated. Special thanks to event sponsor Eric Maybach. Rain date is June 30 from 1 to 3 p.m. Visit [www.fauquierhistory.org](http://www.fauquierhistory.org). Contact 540-347-5525

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# A sad song from the past: Blind Tom

19th century musical prodigy once lived in Fauquier

By John Toler  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The story of musical prodigy Thomas Wiggins “Blind Tom” Bethune (1849-1908), who once lived near Warrenton, is unusual by any standard – and ultimately very sad. His biographer, Geneva H. Southall, aptly described Tom’s life in the subtitle of her book, “Blind Tom: The Post-Civil War Enslavement of a Black Musical Genius.”

Born blind on a plantation in Harris County, Georgia, Tom and his enslaved parents, Domingo and Charity Wiggins, were sold to Gen. James N. Bethune (1803-1895), a Columbus, Georgia, lawyer, newspaper owner and states’ rights advocate who gave the child his last name.

Because of his disability, Tom could never perform the tasks demanded of enslaved workers. In addition, he was a temperamental and hyperactive child who was unable to care for himself. However, when exposed to the sounds of a piano played by Bethune’s daughter, Mary, by age 4, he had acquired by ear basic musical skills and could mimic the works of others after hearing them just one time.

Within a year, Tom composed his first tune, “The Rain Storm,” in which he translated the sounds of a torrential rain on a tin roof into a pleasing piano piece.

While deprived of sight, Tom had an extraordinary talent for repeating sounds – just about any kind of sound – and he could repeat the conversations of others like a recording device, including the tones and inflections that he heard. Far from being a “simpleton,” or “half-wit,” Tom



COURTESY PHOTO  
Charity Wiggins, Tom’s mother.

was a savant, and today his abilities may have been recognized as being on the autism spectrum.

Bethune recognized Tom’s amazing talents, and he was moved to a room attached to the house and given the use of a piano, where he would often play for more than 12 hours a day.

In the years before the Civil War, Bethune hired Tom out to Perry Oliver, a concert promoter who took him on tours across the United States. His stage performance was unique, to say the least. He always referred to himself in the third person, inserted the mimicked voices of famous people in his introductions and often punctuated his comments with nature sounds.

Crudely marketed by Oliver in the beginning more as a “circus freak,” audiences were more impressed than curious regarding Tom’s unique talent. In 1860, at age 11, he performed at the White House for President James Buchanan – and was the first African American invited to do so.

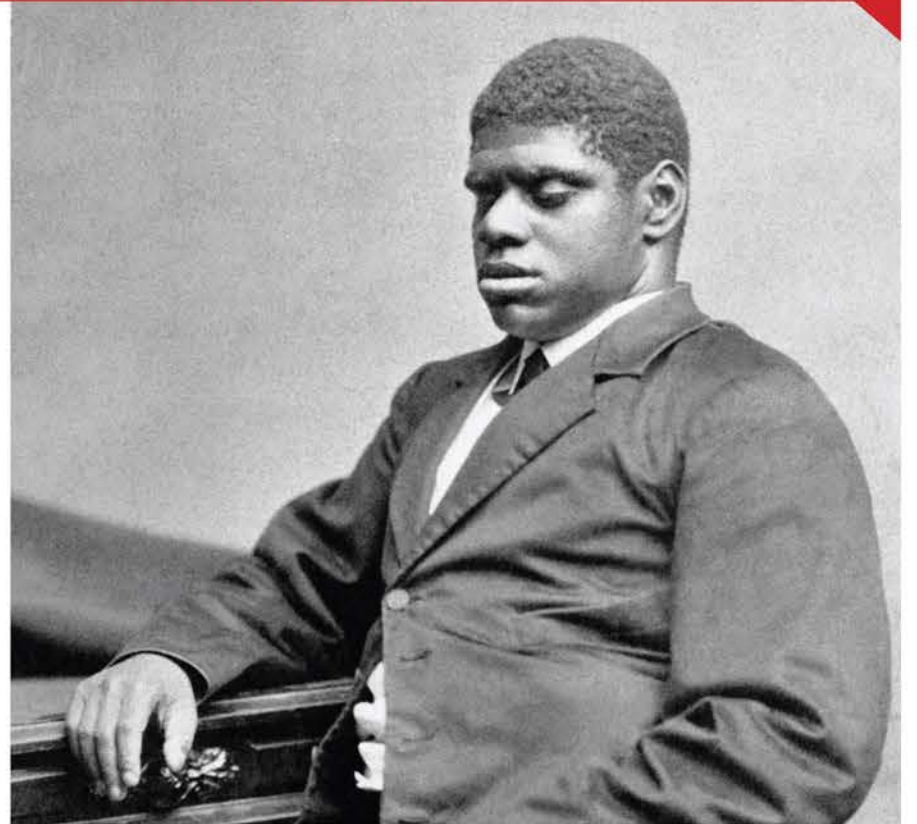
During the Civil War, Tom did limited touring in the South. One of his best-known works was “The Battle of Manassas,” composed after the Confederate victory there in 1861.

One of his remarkable feats during this time was to play three musical pieces at once: “Fisher’s Hornpipe” with one hand, “Yankee Doodle” with the other, while singing “Dixie,” all simultaneously.

When the war was over, in 1866, Bethune took Tom on a European concert tour, earning testimonials from other artists, including pianist Ignaz Moscheles and conductor Charles Hallé. When asked how he could play so well, he answered simply, “God taught Tom.”

**A happy life in Warrenton**

Bethune’s son Joseph served in



COURTESY PHOTO

“Blind Tom” at the piano. He had a repertoire of more than 7,000 songs, including about 100 that he composed himself.

**“I also remember the excitement of being taken to see and hear the man of whom we had heard our mother so often speak. Blind Tom was perhaps one of the greatest musicians of his time.”**

M. Louise Evans

the Confederate Army and spent some time in Warrenton, according to M. Louise Evans (1887-1966) in a story published in the July 13, 1950, edition of The Fauquier Democrat.

“Joseph was so well pleased with the fertility of the land and the picturesque scenery in and around Warrenton that when he arrived home in Georgia, he implored his father to come to this section and buy a tract of land,” she wrote.

In May 1869, Joseph bought the 309-acre property on The Springs Road known today as Elway Hall from James W. James for \$45 per acre. Two months later, Joseph sold Elway to his father for the same price, and the general moved to Fauquier. Sons John and James soon followed.

John brought Tom up from Georgia, and James (1844-1923) later joined the family in Fauquier, where he had a farm along Carter’s Run.

American author Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) was impressed with Tom and attended his performances whenever the opportunity arose. He recalled Tom’s life over the 20 years he spent summers at Elway in “Following the Equator,” published in 1897.

“Tom spent the summers in between concert tours on the Virginia

estate, often in the company of the Bethune grandchildren. He loved the Virginia farm life at Elway and was happiest dressed in simple trousers and a flannel undershirt, which were more comforting to him than formal performance dress,” wrote Twain.

“Daily sounds of farm machinery brought him pleasure. After one trip to the fields riding in a buggy behind a reaper, he returned to the house and composed a piece titled ‘The Reaper,’ which he dedicated to one of the Bethune grandsons.

“Septembers on the farm always signaled the return of the concert season, and the appearance of his concert manager.” This was always a difficult, emotional time for Tom, who never wanted to leave Elway. Only through much cajoling and flattery was he on the road again.”

When on tour, Tom consistently played to packed houses, and his manager was often asked to add concert dates or return to perform.

See TOM, page 22



COURTESY PHOTO

In 1850, Gen. James N. Bethune purchased the Wiggins family, including young Tom. He soon discovered that the blind child had amazing musical talents.

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# Follow the artist

Mosby Heritage Area Association offers 'Art of War: The Civil War-Era Sketches by James E. Taylor'

**Staff Reports**

The Mosby Heritage Area Association recently announced a bus tour following the famous Civil War-era sketches by James E. Taylor. It will be held Saturday, Aug. 24, starting from MHAA headquarters, 1461 Atoka Road, Marshall.

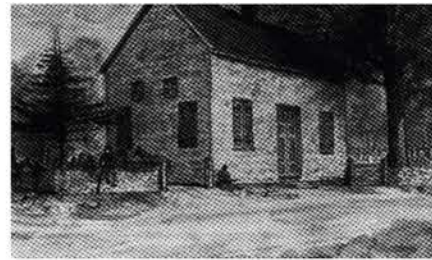
As Union forces advanced into the Shenandoah Valley in 1864, they were accompanied by James E. Taylor, a sketch artist working for Leslie's Illustrated. During his time with Sheridan's army, Taylor brought the war to life with his detailed sketches that covered all aspects of military life and the sur-

rounding countryside.

The bus tour will follow in the path of the artist. "We will visit some of the locations sketched by Taylor and compare how much these views have changed since 1864," said association president Jennifer Worcester Moore. Artists are welcome to bring along a sketch pad and try their hand at recreating these scenes as they appear today.

The bus departs the MHAA office at 9 a.m. and returns by 3:15 p.m.

Lunch at Macado's restaurant in Winchester is included. During the Civil War the restaurant was the Taylor Hotel, which is one of the



Left: The Old Chapel in Millwood, as sketched by Taylor in 1864. Right: The Old Chapel today.



COURTESY PHOTOS



Left: The Taylor Hotel in Winchester, 1864. Right: The Taylor Hotel today.



sketches that the group will focus on. Seats are limited.

Tickets are \$60 for MHAA mem-

bers and \$75 for non-members and are available at [mosbyheritagearea.org/events](http://mosbyheritagearea.org/events) or by calling 540-687-5578.

# A sad song from the past: Blind Tom

TOM, from page 21

As a child growing up in North Carolina, Evans, along with her sister Ida (1886-1965) and their mother Lizzie Jordan Evans (1860-1931), attended a concert Tom performed at the Wilmington Opera House.

"What I recall was 'Blind Tom's' costume, an odd type of jacket – not the prescribed evening clothes," said Ev-

ans. "I don't recall too much about the concert other than the clapping, which the musician started himself, and of course he was joined by his audience.

"I also remember the excitement of being taken to see and hear the man of whom we had heard our mother so often speak. Blind Tom was perhaps one of the greatest musicians of his time."

After the Evans family moved to Warrenton in 1904, Evans, a War-

renton native, became close friends with James and Narcissa Bethune, who lived in a house on Main Street.

**Legal problems arise**

An earlier arrangement had been made with Tom's parents that Bethune would have custody of Tom until age 21, providing him room and board and \$20 a month, and the parents would receive \$500 a year plus food and shelter. After age 21, Bethune had Tom declared legally insane, and appointed himself his legal guardian, effectively continuing the profitable relationship.

John Bethune was put in charge of Tom's professional affairs in 1875, and the next eight years were spent on U.S. tours, including summers spent in New York.

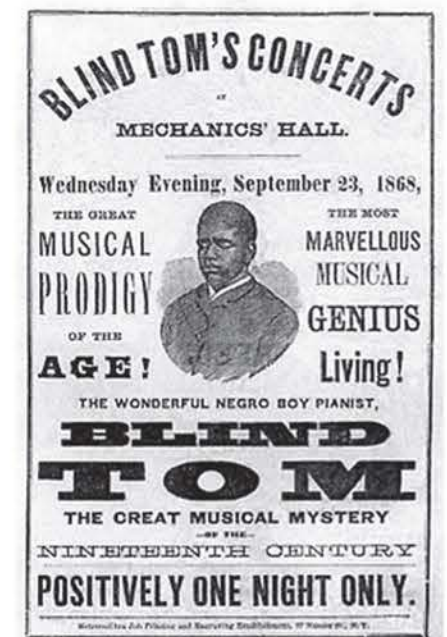
In 1882, John married Eliza Stutzbach, who ran the boarding house where they stayed. After John was gone for eight months on tour, Eliza sued for divorce, claiming she had been deserted.

But before the divorce was finalized, John was killed in a railway accident in February 1884. His will banned Eliza from any inheritance, calling her a "heartless adventuress who sought to absorb my estate."

This led to a long, drawn-out legal battle over who would manage Tom's performances – and reap the large proceeds generated by his concert appearances. It has been estimated that the Bethune family made \$750,000 while they owned, and later exploited, his business affairs.

At first, control of Tom reverted to Bethune, but this was soon challenged by Eliza, who brought Tom's mother Charity – who he hardly knew – into the dispute in a thinly veiled attempt to establish custody. This dragged on until July 1887, when a federal court ordered Bethune to surrender Tom to Eliza and Charity.

Within a month, Eliza took over Tom's concert schedule, promoting him as "... the last slave set free by order of the Supreme Court of the United States," and performing under his father's surname as "Thom-



COURTESY PHOTO

Promotional poster from 1868 called Tom "The Great Musical Mystery of the Nineteenth Century."

as Greene Wiggins" – no longer Bethune. When Eliza failed to live up to her commitments to Charity, she returned to Georgia.

Bethune died on Feb.13,1895, and was buried in Georgia. Elway was sold by his heirs in 1899 to Baldwin Day Spilman for \$7,014.30. His rambling stone house on the property known as Elway Hall was completed in 1908.

Eliza married her attorney, Albrecht Lerche, and managed Tom's career – which included vaudeville acts as well as concerts – until his health began to fail in 1904. Tom died at Eliza's home in Hoboken, New Jersey, on June 14, 1908. The headline in the New York Times read, "Blind Tom, Pianist, Dies of a Stroke – a Child All His Life."

Mark Twain was more circumspect about Tom, stating that while he lived, "Some archangel, cast out of upper Heaven, inhabits this coarse casket, and he comforts himself and makes his prison beautiful with thoughts and dreams and memories of another time... It is not Blind Tom that does these wonderful things and plays this wonderful music – it is the other party."

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