



**Top: Members of the Isle of Wight County Historical Society looked through the circa-1921 Bradby house July 25 in search of any family documents or photos left behind. Center: There, they found a family Bible with handwritten marriage records dating to 1897. Bottom right: Albert Burckard of the Historical Society looks through the Bradby family's photos. Bottom left: George Bradby, his wife, Sarah, and niece, Rhonda, look through the Historical Society's findings. (Stephen Faleski/The Smithfield Times)**

# History returned to Bradby family

**By Stephen Faleski**  
Staff Writer

On a bluff overlooking Burwells Bay sits the childhood home of George Bradby and his sister, Cleo B. Kelly.

The house won't be standing much longer. Its floors are uneven. The wood siding is peeling and in some places has rotted away. It's been vacant since Kelly moved to an assisted living facility in 2016.

Bradby, who now owns the home, has offered the house to the Rushmere Volunteer Fire Department to have it burned as a training exercise. He wants the land cleared, and it's cheaper than hiring a demolition company to raze it.

He had no idea a family Bible with handwritten marriage records dating back to 1897 had been left inside.

"They supposedly cleaned it out" five years ago, Bradby said.

The Bible likely would have burned with the house had Albert Burckard, vice president of the Isle of Wight County Historical Society, not learned from Rushmere VFD Assistant Chief Rudolph Jefferson of the impending demolition by fire and reached out to the Bradby family to secure permission to search the home with a team of volunteers for any books, documents or photographs of historic value.

"We always go directly to the property owner and tell him what we're doing, and ask permission,"

Burckard said. "A lot of times what we discover is that the family itself doesn't have a lot of the things we find. ... Anything we find, they get first dibs on."

Once that's done, it's just a matter of picking a date — in this case, July 25 — and notifying the neighbors.

"We don't want it to be a surprise for them either when they see us show up, you know, with what I call 'breaking and entering' tools," Burckard said.

Burckard wore a safari-style pith helmet for the occasion.

"None of us have been in here," he warned.

The group entered cautiously through a screened porch where the door had been left open. Periodically, Burckard would stamp a cane in front of his path to check for rotted floor boards.

The group's efforts ended up netting more than just the 19th century Bible.

In a room where wood veneer paneling had begun peeling off the walls and paint chips from the ceiling had fallen to the floor, Burckard found Kelly's original 1956 diploma from the Isle of Wight Training School, which served as the county's African American high school during the days of segregation and is now known as Westside Elementary. The diploma lists her maiden name, Cleo Marie Bradby.

With that, he also found a program for the Training School's junior/senior prom, held May 11, 1956, which included the junior

class roll.

"I bet you a lot of these people are still around," Burckard said.

Burckard also found several photo albums in that room, an original 1960 marriage certificate documenting Cleo's marriage to Richard Kelly and their daughter, Donna Michelle's, original 1961 birth certificate showing she'd been born Dec. 24, Christmas Eve, at Riverside hospital in Newport News.

"They'd just be burned up" had no one looked through the house one last time, Burckard said. "This is the purpose of what we do."

In that same stack of documents was a 1960s-era map of Vietnam published by the American military newspaper Stars and Stripes.

"My guess is that somebody was a Vietnam veteran," Burckard said.

George said the map belonged to his oldest brother, Allen Bradby Sr., who served in the Navy.

Other members of the group found a 1983 yearbook from Virginia Union University that likely belonged to Donna, who graduated from the college in 1985, according to her wedding announcement published in the July 20, 1988, edition of The Smithfield Times.

In the same pile of documents the other members had found was a 1985 program for a celebration of First Gravel Hill Baptist Church's 100th anniversary.

"Just in these first few minutes, what we've done is we've

discovered some Isle of Wight County history that goes back to at least 1885 just based on those documents right there," Burckard said.

The Bradby family, as evidenced by the numerous documents, has established deep roots in the area over the years. His first cousin, George said, was none other than the late Henry H. Bradby, the first African American ever to be elected to Isle of Wight County's Board of Supervisors.

Burckard and his group presented their findings to the Bradby family at 9:30 a.m. July 28 at First Gravel Hill Baptist Church. George, his wife, Sarah, and niece, Rhonda, were present for the occasion.

"We were really surprised and very thankful for what they found," George said.

"The family members seemed to enjoy looking through all the items and seemed happy to have them back in their possession," said Isle of Wight County Museum Director Jennifer England, who photographed the occasion.

According to Jefferson, there's currently a burn ban in effect until September. His son, Brandon, the department's chief, said the Rushmere VFD will evaluate the house for a training exercise and make its decision on if or when to schedule a burning after the ban expires.