

Belvoir

The Thomas Yerby Place
Spotsylvania County

By John Hennessy

The collective experience of Spotsylvanians in the Civil War embodied no romance or glamour. Rather it was an ordeal of horror and hardship virtually unmatched anywhere in the South. No one escaped--not the few thousand residents (slave and free) who lived here during the war, nor the hundreds of thousands of soldiers that trod these roads and fields and woods for the better part of two years. "There was no peace in living in this God forsaken country," wrote Spotsylvanian Catherine Couse. "We are suffering such lawless times as existed in the Dark Ages."¹

Few of Spotsylvania's wartime farms are better documented than "Belvoir," the home of Thomas Yerby. And few better reflect the excitement, struggle, and destruction that visited the county that witnessed nearly 90,000 casualties during the war. Belvoir has associations with some of the South's great figures (Lee and Jackson) and the Civil War's most memorable moments and events. The site of Belvoir constitutes one of the most intact and varied collections of ruins and landscape features of any antebellum plantation in the Fredericksburg area.

Built before 1820 (and perhaps as early as 1790) by planter William Herndon, Belvoir was a plantation of some 800 acres along the banks of Massaponax Creek. "The land is all flat and well adapted to the culture of corn, tobacco, and wheat," read an 1827 advertisement for the property, "and a portion of it is woodland, well timbered, and as rich as any in the county. There are good orchards, containing a choice collection of fruits." The house, the advertisers asserted, was "a large and spacious brick dwelling...conveniently arranged, with all necessary out houses,

¹ Letter of Catherine Couse of Laurel Hill, May 15, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania NMP Library (hereafter FSNMP). The research for this article was compiled over many years by Noel G. Harrison, the pre-eminent Cultural Resources Management Specialist at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania NMP. Indeed, the author of this study is but a conduit for the prodigious work done by Noel Harrison. Noel rightly deserves status as co-author of this work (though efforts to get him to agree to that failed).

good water, and an ice house, inferior to none in the county. It is a healthy situation in a very genteel neighborhood, and has always been considered as a highly desirable residence."²

Wallace Yerby, born at the site in 1892, recalled that Belvoir was a "large brick house painted gray. It had a basement of the ground floor type, with two stories above. There were four rooms to each floor, including the basement. A large hall ran through the center of the house...."³

Today the house site is clearly visible, sitting below three descending landscaped terraces. Brick piles are scattered around the site; sections of the foundation (basement) wall remain intact (see sketch). Traces of the old driveway and related roads are likewise visible. Seventy yards southeast of the house site is the well-preserved Yerby family cemetery, containing seven marked graves and at least eleven unmarked graves (see sketch). The Herndon family cemetery (including the burial site of Belvoir's founder and builder, William Herndon) is also reputedly on the site, though its location is not known.⁴

Westward from the main house site, down the slope and across the major access road, is a collection of depressions and ruins that mark what was probably the functional heart of the Belvoir plantation. To a large degree, Belvoir--like most antebellum plantations--functioned more as a village than a residence. At the time of the Civil War as many as 45 people lived on the site (41 of them slaves). The cluster of building sites on the slope west of the house includes one substantial depression that could be another house site, perhaps that of an overseer. In

² From an advertisement placed by the executors of William Herndon's estate, Fredericksburg *Political Arena*, July 27, 1827.

³ Ralph Happel interview with Wallace Yerby, Chancellorsville Battlefield Map Documentation, page 98, FSNMP. The words quoted are Happel's.

⁴ Works Progress Administration documentation of Belvoir, Volume 1, FSNMP.

addition to the many structures that have left a visible mark on the landscape, the plantation no doubt included numbers of earth-fast structures that left no tangible remnant—including, probably, at least ten slave quarters. Accounts from the Civil War period not surprisingly indicate one or more barns on the property as well.⁵

Belvoir and the Civil War

Twenty-two year old Thomas Yerby, whose “suavity of character, and high gentlemanly deportment endeared him alike to young and old,”⁶ acquired Belvoir from the estate of William Herndon in 1827.⁷ By 1860, the plantation consisted of more than a dozen buildings on 800 acres (600 of them in agriculture) worked by as many as 41 slaves. Though not one of the largest plantations in Spotsylvania County, Thomas Yerby’s farm fell solidly into the second socio-economic tier.

Field Hospital

Located just over a mile southwest of Hamilton’s Crossing, Belvoir found itself caught in a swirl of military activity beginning in December 1862.

On December 13, vicious fighting erupted at Prospect Hill, a mile from Belvoir. Soon a stream of wounded started arriving at the Yerby’s house. A Tennessee surgeon used a building

⁵ Noel Harrison, *Fredericksburg Civil War Sites* (Lynchburg, 1997), Volume 2, p. 114-115.

⁶ *Fredericksburg Virginia Herald*, June 28, 1868.

⁷ Ralph Happel interview with Wallace Yerby, Chancellorsville Battlefield Map Documentation, page 98.

on the side of the house as an operating room.⁸ Yerby family legend holds that injured soldiers received treatment in the southwest upstairs room.⁹ Wartime accounts, however, give more emphasis to the first-floor parlor as a scene of suffering. “So many wounded were brought in this room that the floor was stained so that thereafter it had to be covered with carpet,” remembered Carrie Morton, a neighbor of the Yerbys.¹⁰ Matilda Hamilton of nearby Forest Hill remembered that the parlor was “filled with wounded men when I got there” on December 13. Matilda retired to the porch, where a soldier approached “and asked if he could get any nails. We asked what was the matter, and he told us his friend...was killed, and he wanted to make a coffin for him.”¹¹

The primary caretaker of the wounded in the house itself was Mrs. Juliet Neale, a refugee from Fredericksburg who had arrived at Belvoir with her daughter on the 13th. Neale, wrote Jackson’s mapmaker Jed Hotchkiss, was “flying about, in her mob cap, and ministering food, prepared by herself, mingled with tears when overcome by feeling.”¹²

The efforts of Mrs. Neale only marginally diminished the horrifying ordeal of being one of the wounded at Belvoir. Lieutenant W. W. Cloninger, of the 28th North Carolina, was grievously wounded near Prospect Hill and soon found himself lying in the Yerby yard. After some time without treatment, he called a friend to him and asked him why he had been neglected so long. “When told that he was mortally wounded,” recounted another man of the regiment, “and the Surgeons considered it their first duty to attend to those whose lives might be saved, he

⁸ “Reminiscences of Aunt Carrie Morton of the Battles around ‘Belvoir’ and Chestnut Valley, 1862.” Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Catalogue #403. The date of Belvoir’s destruction comes from Happel, Map Documentation, page 98.

⁹ Ralph Happel interview with Wallace Yerby, Chancellorsville Battlefield Map Documentation, page 98, FSNMP.

¹⁰ “Reminiscences of Aunt Carrie Morton of the Battles around ‘Belvoir’ and Chestnut Valley, 1862.” FSNMP. Date of Belvoir’s destruction comes from Happel, Map Documentation, page 98.

¹¹ Matilda Hamilton Diary, December 13, 1862, FSNMP.

¹² Archie McDonald, ed., *Make Me a Map of the Valley*, p. 169.

replied, 'If I must die, I will let you all see that I can die like a man.' Folding his arms across his breast, that hero, far away from his loved ones, lay under that tree in Yerby's yard, and, without a murmur, quietly awaited death."¹³

William Colston of Jackson's famous Stonewall Brigade recalled that he was put into one of the Yerbys' barns with the worst of the wounded. "My friend, Doctor Straith, came every little while to see me and I could tell from the expression of his face that he had little or no hope for me. He gave me a drink of whiskey and afterwards a cup of strong coffee, both of which stuck. I have never made up my mind whether it was the whiskey or the coffee which saved my life, but have always given the former the benefit of the doubt and therefore have never been a prohibitionist."

Soon, Colston recorded, "my pulse [began] to react. Finding I was not going to die as soon as he thought," he remembered cheerfully, "the doctor had me taken up into the house and put in a room full of wounded officers where I was laid on the bare floor with my knapsack under my head....I had not been there long before an old lady, a refugee from Fredericksburg, hearing my name and knowing my mother, came in to see me and had a mattress brought in and placed under me, she also brought her daughter in to see me and I have often wondered whether that girl was as pretty as she seemed to me to be—she appeared to me to be the loveliest thing I had ever seen, except, of course, the girl I left behind me."¹⁴

Death of Maxcy Gregg

¹³ Walter Clark, *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina*, Vol. 2, p. 475-76 (28th NC).

¹⁴ "The Personal Experiences of Captain W.B. Colston in the Civil War," Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania NMP.

During the afternoon of December 13, 1862, an ambulance arrived at Belvoir carrying the battle's highest-ranking casualty: Confederate general Maxcy Gregg. Gregg, a South Carolinian, had been shot in the back when the Union army broke through Confederate lines just north of Prospect Hill. Thomas Yerby, who considered Gregg "an elegant man," greeted the suffering general and immediately made arrangements for him in "a large dimly lighted room, bare of furniture." Soon the division surgeon came to examine Gregg's wound. Gregg looked intently into the surgeon's face and said, "Dr. when I received my wound I thought it was mortal. I was so completely paralyzed but now I feel a degree of reaction." After a moment's silence, Gregg continued "with great calmness": "Dr. if you think my wound mortal, I wish you to give me an opiate to prevent excessive pain." The surgeon did so. Chaplain J. Monroe Anderson then stepped to Gregg's side. "When he had rested a few moments," Anderson related, "I repeated some of the promises of God to him & exhorted him to accept the tender invitations of a Saviors love that he might be prepared for whatever might be God's will concerning him. He listened with great interest."

For the next 36 hours, General Gregg would remain here, suffering mightily though silently, often with only his servant at his side. Gregg's division commander, A.P. Hill, visited him, quietly walking into the darkened room, standing silently over Gregg for several minutes, then leaning down and kissing him on the head before leaving without a word.¹⁵ General Jackson came too. Jackson and Gregg had had a disagreement in past days, and the rupture weighed heavily on Gregg's mind. Jackson reassured him, "The doctor tells me that you have not long to live. Let me ask you to dismiss this matter from your mind and turn your thoughts to

¹⁵ David G. McIntosh, "A Ride on Horseback in the Summer of 1910," Southern Historical Collection, UNC Chapel Hill, p. 32-33.

God and the world to which you go.” Gregg’s eyes filled with tears. “I thank you, I thank you very much,” he told his commander.¹⁶

On December 14th Chaplain Anderson returned and conducted a service in the room. General Gregg excused his inability to fully participate: “Mr. Anderson, I would kneel if I could.” Anderson reassured Gregg, then delivered a prayer. General Gregg—“much affected”—listened intently and when the cleric finished said, “Thank you for your prayer.” Brigadier General Maxcy Gregg died in the Yerby house at 5 a.m. on December 15, 1862.¹⁷

Lee and Jackson at Belvoir

How long after the Battle of Fredericksburg Belvoir remained a hospital is not known, but it is clear that the farm remained a focus of war-related activity for months to come. Confederate winter camps sprawled across the landscape for miles around Belvoir. General R.E. Lee’s headquarters were about 1.5 miles away, along Mine Road. Though Jackson would spend the three months after the battle at “Moss Neck,” the Corbin family plantation ten miles below Fredericksburg, in March he relocated his headquarters Mine Road, about a mile from Belvoir.

No doubt Belvoir saw a steady stream of uniformed and civilian visitors during the winter and early spring of 1863, but the first prominent resurfacing of Belvoir in the historical record comes on March 30, 1863. On that day, R.E. Lee fell ill with a respiratory infection and

¹⁶ Hunter H. McGuire, *The Confederate Cause and Conduct in the War Between the States*, p. 211; James I. Robertson, *Stonewall Jackson*, p. 663..

¹⁷ Letter of J. Monroe Anderson to “Misses Gregg” (Maxcy’s sister), January 9, 1863, Maxcy Gregg Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina. For the time of Gregg’s death, see also Matilda Hamilton Diary, December 15, 1862, FSNMP.

was moved into an upstairs bedroom at Belvoir. He would remain for several days; all the while, he wrote, the surgeons “tapping me all over like an old steam boiler before condemning it.”¹⁸

Just weeks later Belvoir would play host to its most famous episode: a visit to Jackson by his wife and newborn daughter. Julia Laura Jackson had been born in December, but since that time the general had had no opportunity to lay eyes on his daughter. That changed on April 20, when Jackson rode to Guinea Station to greet his wife and Julia. “His face was all sunshine and gladness,” remembered Mrs. Jackson. When young Julia caught the glowing look of her father, “she beamed her brightest and sweetest smiles upon him in return, so it seemed to be a mutual fascination.”

From Guinea the Jackson family rode straight to the Yerby House, where they would remain for the next eight days. When not engaged in duties at his headquarters, Jackson constantly cavorted with his little girl. “He rarely had her out of his arms, walking her, and amusing her in every way that he could think of,” remembered Mrs. Jackson, “sometimes holding her up before the mirror and saying, admiringly, ‘Now, Miss Jackson, look at yourself!’” When she slept, he would often kneel by her cradle “and gaze upon her face with the most rapt attention.” For members of Jackson’s staff, the image of Jackson the father contrasted mightily with his role as a military taskmaster.

The Jacksons took lodging in the same room that had housed General Lee during his illness a few weeks earlier—a “large comfortable room...which was hospitably furnished with three beds,” remembered Mrs. Jackson. In this room Jackson took his first stab at parental discipline. In form and result no one would have predicted anything other than what occurred. Julia had become fussy, stopping only when picked up by her mother. When Mrs. Jackson

¹⁸ D.S. Freeman, *R.E. Lee*, Vol. 2, pp 502-503.

returned the child to the bed, she started crying again. General Jackson exclaimed, “This will never do!” and instructed, “all hands off.” Mrs. Jackson related, “So there she lay, kicking and screaming while he stood over her with as much coolness and determination as if he were directing a battle.” When Julia ceased wailing, General Jackson would pick her up; when she stopped, he would put her down, “and this he kept up until she was completely conquered, and became perfectly quiet in his hands.”¹⁹

On April 23 the Jacksons had Julia baptized at Belvoir. The Rev. Beverley Tucker Lacy, Jackson’s chaplain, presided over the ceremony in the parlor—the same room that had seen such suffering the past December. “The child behaved beautifully,” wrote Mrs. Jackson, “and was the object of great interest to her father’s friends and soldiers.” Indeed, Jackson’s staff officers would mark the occasion by presenting Julia with an inscribed silver mug.

Julia L. Jackson
from the
General Staff Officers
of her Father.

Maj. Harman Maj. Hawks

Col. Allen Col. Pendleton

Dr. McGuire

¹⁹ Mary Anna Jackson, *Memoirs of Stonewall Jackson*, p. 410. For another account of Mrs. Jackson’s visit to Belvoir see “Aunt Carrie Morton’s Reminiscences.”

Today, the mug presented at the Belvoir christening is in the collection of the Stonewall Jackson House in Lexington, Virginia.²⁰

The only tangible legacy of Jackson's stay at Belvoir in April 1863 is his final photographic image. When a photographer appeared at the house one day, Mrs. Jackson persuaded her reluctant husband to sit for a portrait. She rationalized her insistence: "He never presented a finer appearance in health and dress (wearing the handsome suit given him by General Stuart)" the previous December. Mrs. Jackson arranged her husband's hair, and he took a seat in the main hall of Belvoir. The resulting image would become popular with Jackson's soldiers, but Mrs. Jackson found it imperfect. As the photographer worked, a wind blew through the hallway into Jackson's face, "causing him to frown, and giving a sternness to his countenance that was not natural."²¹

Throughout his family's stay, Jackson received a steady procession of visitors at Belvoir, including General Lee, whose arrival left Mrs. Jackson "awestruck." Among the visitors was the erstwhile Mrs. Juliet Neale, who had nursed wounded soldiers at the house in December. Mrs. Neale worried that the Yankees might learn of Jackson's presence at the unguarded plantation and descend upon him. "...It is not right for you to expose yourself thus," she admonished the general. "Your life does not belong to you, you belong to the country." Jackson smiled, but Mrs. Neale continued undaunted, and thereby conveyed to Jackson what some considered to be the greatest tribute ever given him: "After the war is over and we have achieved our independence, I don't care how soon you die, for *this* world has no honor commensurate with your merits."²²

²⁰ Mary Anna Jackson, *Memoirs of Stonewall Jackson*, p. 410-411.

²¹ Mary Anna Jackson, *Memoirs of Stonewall Jackson*, p. 413-414.

²² Archie McDonald, ed., *Make Me a Map of the Valley*, p. 169.

On the morning of April 29, a messenger and a staff officer mounted the front steps of Belvoir. The messenger knocked on the Jackson's door and announced, "General Early's adjutant wishes to see General Jackson." Jackson rushed down the stairs and soon returned to his wife and daughter with news: Hooker was crossing the river. Jackson announced that battle was imminent, and he must go. He also directed his wife to pack up and leave Belvoir for the safer environs of Richmond. Jackson declared that he would return to see them off if he could, said "a tender and hasty good-by," and was gone. He did not return. When next he saw his family—a week later—he would be on his deathbed.²³

The Demise of Belvoir

Before war's end, and the consequent dismantling of Southern society as the Yerby's knew it, Belvoir would witness one more splash of antebellum plantation culture. In May 1863 the Yerbys hosted a reception for General Richard S. Ewell, Jackson's successor in command of the Second Corps, who was returning to the army after a nine-month absence. This elegant event featured "plenty of music, beaux galore, luxuriant plants in the conservatory....and a delicious repast." Throughout the day, the "flower of Virginia aristocracy assembled" at Belvoir, arriving in coaches guided by slaves. Roasted pigs, mutton, oysters, chicken, stuffed mangoes, spiced pears, wine, cakes, and rolls made for a menu that contrasted hugely with the culinary travails of most of Virginia at the time. Partying continued through the night. At daybreak, several couples

²³ Mary Anna Jackson, *Memoirs of Stonewall Jackson*, p. 415-416.

still lounged on the house's front porch. For them, Mr. Yerby sent out mint juleps. "These," one woman remembered, "helped us out until breakfast."²⁴

The next year Thomas Pratt Yerby was conscripted into Confederate service. The boom of guns rattled windows again at Belvoir, as the armies clashed farther west in Spotsylvania County. By April 1865, all of Belvoir's slaves were free. The Spotsylvania County, and indeed the Southern society, that the Yerby's had known, ceased to exist. The next nine decades would be ones of struggle and change for county residents. Indeed, the scars of the war—both physical and in the form of ruined fortunes—linger still among the old families and homesteads of Spotsylvania County.

Thomas Yerby, patriarch of Belvoir, died in 1868. His obituary noted that his home had been "the seat of hospitality and good cheer for more than a third of a century."²⁵ Belvoir would remain in the Yerby family until 1904, but by 1910 would burn. (Carrie Morton noted that the fire started "from swallows building nests in the chimney, or some say that a crack in the chimney caused it. The fire having caught behind the mantel.")²⁶ Since then, the house site has remained largely undisturbed. But its isolated ruins, lonely and forgotten cemetery, and briar-covered terraces (once elegant, no doubt) speak loudly of legendary figures toiling during a vivid, momentous, and tragic epoch.

²⁴ Marietta M. Andrews, *Scraps of Paper*, pp. 110-112.

²⁵ Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, June 28, 1868.

²⁶ "Reminiscences of Aunt Carrie Morton of the Battles around 'Belvoir' and Chestnut Valley, 1862." Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Date of Belvoir's destruction comes from Happel, Map Documentation, page 98.