

House restored through the power of a dream



Fancy Hill, one of the most stately of Nottoway County's remaining tobacco plantation houses, still sits proud on its hill overlooking the Bible Road, now Route 607. Standing on its second story front porch, which has the view of a captain's bridge, you can easily imagine Fancy Hill's master, Col. Travis Epes squinting to identify an approaching horseman—as he must have done while his four sons were away fighting with the Nottoway Calvary during the years of the Civil War.

Col. Epes had been fortunate. He had become a respected member of Nottoway's plantation system—on Fancy Hill the era had spread its brightest colors. And his twelve children had all grown to maturity on his land. Nottoway soil was good.

But Col Epes was also the saddest of men. He saw the leaves of Fancy Hill's splendor fall and the dream disappear. Though he fought against Virginia's succession—standing alone at the Court House while others cheered for war—he nevertheless gave his resources, knowing full well that only a long winter would be his reward.

And one of his daughters, Frances Elizabeth Epes, gave her beautiful silk dress for the calvary's flag. Instead of her wearing it to an elegant ball, young men would die for it in fruitless battles.

She no her father ever saw it again. It was captured by an Illinois regiment when her brother Hamlin was sick, and though the boys came back, the flag and the glory never did.

Nine years after Appomattox, “Fanny” and her husband, Rev. Richard Shreeve, were kneeling for their evening prayers, holding hands as was their custom, when a sudden lightning bolt struck and ended their lives at Fancy Hill.

Now a new dream takes shape on the hill. When Hazel Gammon saw the silhouette of the house against the sky, gaunt and close to death—if houses can be said to die—she told her new husband David that their search was over.

“We wanted an old house to restore and had been looking for two years,” Mrs. Gammon said in the all but finished living room of Fancy Hill. They bought the house in 1982—only 40 acres were left of the original 1,000—and moved there in a trailer three years ago so they could be closer to their work.

Imagining what Fancy Hill must have looked like back then is difficult now. Working evenings and on weekends, taking all their vacations from Phillip Morris where they’re employed, the Gammons committed all their resources to the home.

They replaced the roof and the rotted beams under the huge t here story building, some the size of a ship’s mast. Learning as they went, the Gammons built two stone fireplaces in the English basement, rebuilt the main stairs, restored plaster, scraped and refinished intricate molding, put in wiring and water pipes, insulated walls, added exterior siding, landscaped the yard, dug a pond, built bathrooms and a kitchen, and rebuilt the second story porch roof where Col. Epes had watched Fanny’s sild dress disappear down the road.

“The water was up to my waist down here,” David Gammon was saying as he turned on the lights in the basement, which is really a first floor and where they plan to do most of their living. “We were down here 15 months with the stone, rock and concrete,” he said, and you pictured the floating garbage and trash that hid half the stairs in the dark..as if you had entered the hold of a beached ship.

“No one know what we’ve done here,” Mrs. Gammon said and her husband ran his hand over the fireplace rocks, which he had split with a chisel to get the different color than the fireplace at the other end of the basement. “Do you realize that the walls in this basement are two feet thick?” She continued, pointing to the windows inserted deep in the wall. Outside, even at ground level, you eyes could see where barns and outbuildings had once been filled with Fancy Hill’s harvest. They have all been sold for their brick during the depression, Mrs. Gammon said.

The old slave quarters were under the back porch, a room they had no use for yet. Above it the rear porch was so symmetrically placed it made the house look like it had two fronts. From there, Epes could survey his crops. To the side of the porch was the water-system, a brick enclosure that once held rain water for the household

Fancy Hill had harbored may dreams since Col. Epes died in 1976. Ralph Higgins, in his 90’s used to come here before he died. He told the Gammons how his mother had died of a broken heart when she lost the house. It was his family that had to sell the bricks to pay taxes. He remembered sleeping in straw from the fields to keep warm during their first winter here.

And there was Dr. Bonovitch. He dreamed of finding a cure for cancer and trated patients here in the 1940’s. “When we had the pond put in, we found a lot of those big

brown medicine bottles. Don't know what was in 'em, but it wouldn't freeze," Mr. Gammon said.

"We heard he went to prison for practicing medicine without a license, and died there," he said, and he longed for more pieces from Fancy Hill's past, but the human side of Fancy Hill was harder to restore than the building. You could find old bricks for the basement, but there were no substitutes for the old stories.

But everything is coming home now, the house and its history. Even Fanny's sild dress, the regimental flag of the proud Nottoway Calvary, was returned after the war when Governor Mann, a Nottoway Native was governor of Virginia.

Then, almost as if fate had one more trick, the flag was lost from the courthouse, only to be found again by a workman when the clerk's office was painted in 1934. It was April, the month the last of Col. Travis Epes' children died, Mrs. Mary Jones Epes Hardaway, of Blackstone.

Since then the flag, faded but still intact, has been incased in glass in the county library. It's Latin inscription reads "It can be defeated, but it cannon be conquered."

And Fancy Hill, with its two porches looking in opposite direction like the Greek God who can see both past and future at the same time, begins a new dream.