

THE VOICE

of the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society and
Cobb Memorial Archives

HISTORIC WEST POINT AND CHATTAHOOCHEE VALLEY: A FACEBOOK PAGE DEVOTED TO “VALLEY HISTORY”

Greetings. The Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society would like to extend a warm welcome to the public to attend our (virtual) quarterly meeting on Sunday, January 22nd, at 2:00 PM Central (3:00 PM Eastern). This meeting, like our previous meetings for all of 2022, will be held virtually on Zoom. Our presentation will be headed up by two presenters: Jerry Ledbetter of West Point, GA, and Eddie Lanier of Lanett, AL. Both men will be discussing their popular Facebook page *Historic West Point and the Chattahoochee Valley*.

Historic West Point and the Chattahoochee Valley is a Facebook page/site committed to sharing the history of the Greater Valley Area with those who have lived here forever and those who are just now calling “The Valley” home. This page was created by Jerry Ledbetter and Eddie Lanier and has experienced thousands of views as more and more people seem genuinely interested in the story of our community.

Jerry Ledbetter is originally from Lanett, AL, and currently resides in West Point, GA. He has been an ordained minister for over 30 years (20 of those years as the pastor of the West Point Presbyterian Church). Jerry has authored three books, including *The Church of the Covenant: A History of the West Point Presbyterian Church* in 2012 (for the church’s 175th Anniversary). He is also in his third term on the

West Point City Council and is deeply involved in the community. In his own words, Jerry describes himself as “a history nerd,” and finds enjoyment in all things historic. He loves visiting historic sites and learning about historic buildings. He is most fascinated by the connection between community history and church history.

Eddie Lanier is originally from the community of Eclectic in Elmore County, Alabama. Eddie moved to West Point/Lanett when he began his 46-year career with “The Company.” He and his wife, Anita, reared their family here, truly making the area home. Eddie is actively involved in the community, serving on various boards including serving as the Chairperson of the Board of Directors for the New Horizon Community Theatre and as the treasurer of the West Point Lions Club. He is also very active in his



This 1914 photo of a snow-covered Langdale Village was recently shared on the Historic West Point & the Chattahoochee Valley Facebook page.

church, First United Methodist of West Point, singing in the choir and taking part in various other ministries.

Join us for this very informative and interesting presentation on January 22nd. To attend this virtual meeting email ccpowers02@gmail.com prior to 12:00 PM noon (EDT) on Sunday, January 22nd. You will then be sent the Zoom link with instructions regarding how to join the meeting.



THE CHATTAHOOCHEE VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY MEETING

Sunday, January 22nd, 2023

3:00 p.m. EDT (2:00 CDT)

VIRTUAL MEETING

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE *by Jason Williams*

Hello CVHS Members and welcome to 2023! I hope you all had a wonderful (and warm) holiday season. We anticipate offering several informative and interesting programs this year... to be held via Zoom and/or in-person... and look forward to coming together each quarter for a time of fellowship and learning.

Please allow me to recognize our outgoing president, Malinda Powers, for her exceptional leadership through the years. Malinda created groundbreaking educational trips and innovative marketing and outreach efforts in her many years of service as our president. She has graciously agreed to continue to serve as treasurer.

Charlie Powers will continue to coordinate programs in 2023 while Tony Peregoy will lead our marketing and membership efforts this year. Ron Williams will also continue to serve as editor of *The VOICE*, our CVHS newsletter, and Wayne Clark will assist in creating content for

The VOICE. Thank you, Charlie, Tony, Ron, and Wayne, for your continued service!

Please allow me to also express our appreciation to Dr. Horace M. Holderfield for his many years of service to the CVHS. Mac is a past president and the previous editor of *The VOICE* and leaves a tremendous legacy of scholarship in our local history.

Finally, please complete your enclosed 2023 Membership Renewal Form and mail those in as soon as possible. We are a membership – focused organization and are always open to feedback and suggestions for improvement in our service to you, our fellow members. Also, please consider volunteering to serve on the board or in an officer position for 2023 and beyond. We need new ideas to continue to grow and enhance the CVHS!

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MURDER IN A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE *by Ron Williams*

Berlin, Alabama, was a crossroads town. The village grew up where the Collins Ferry-Oak Bowery Road crossed the Columbus Road, not too far south of McGinty's Crossing in the southeast corner of Chambers County, Alabama.

The town boasted of a carpenter shop, a general store, a blacksmith shop, a Masonic Hall, and several saloons, which left the village with just a touch of a wild west feel.

One woman remembered, "No decent person would be caught dead in Berlin on a Saturday night."

The Collins Family was influential in this area. It was Eli Collins, who had brought his family to Alabama as pioneer settlers. He, along with George W. Houston, had established the ferry on the old Creek Indian Trail. That ferry had brought the settlers to the county which had been formed from the last remnants of the

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Editor: Ron Williams (hopewellroad@yahoo.com)

Find us on Facebook and visit our website at <https://cvhistoricalsociety.org/>

MISSION STATEMENT: As a non-profit membership organization, the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society seeks to preserve and promote the history and heritage of Chambers County, Alabama, West Point, Georgia, and the greater Chattahoochee Valley area. CVHS produces and sells historical books and media, publishes a quarterly newspaper, and presents programs with speakers on historical topics of local and regional interest.

VISION STATEMENT: Having been in continuous operation since its founding in 1953, the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society strives to uphold the vision of its founders while posturing the organization for growth in the 21st Century.

MURDER IN A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE- *continued from previous page*

Creek Indian Nation in 1832. Eli's sons, Timothy and Terry, were listed as merchants in the town.

Berlin (pronounce "Bur-lun") also had a one-room schoolhouse. Bobby L. Lindsey mentioned in *The Reason for the Tears* that in the early years of the county there was a good school here named Cave Springs Academy, a title borrowed from the name the pioneers gave the old river crossing.

You would think that a one-room school would help to tame even a town with a wild reputation. When I think of a one-room school, I see barefoot children playing in the school yard and drinking spring water from a bucket with a dipper. I see a painting of Washington and think of lessons learned from a Blue-backed speller.

The teacher's desk would sit up on a slight platform and the teacher would be a strict disciplinarian.

There is little doubt that Professor Brawner, the young man tasked with teaching the children of Berlin, took his job seriously.

Brawner, was known as a fine

young man who was beloved by all who knew him. He had grown up in Elbert County, Georgia, and no doubt this was one of his earliest teaching positions.

Brawner had earned a special place in the hearts of the Collins family as well. On March 11, 1858, he was a special guest at the home of Terry Collins. The event was the wedding of Terry's daughter, Sara Jane. No doubt this was a much-anticipated event in the community.

Little did they realize how quickly a dark cloud would engulf the area and the Collins family as well.

Four days after the wedding, a series of events would result in the death of Brawner at the hands of Terry Collins' 12-year-old son, William.

William was playing with the other boys on the playground when Professor Brawner heard William use profane language. Brawner called William over and asked him to repeat what he had said, and William dutifully complied with the request, much to the Professor's shock, I am sure.

"William, come into the house," Brawner commanded, "and I will settle with you."

As William made his way to the schoolroom, he

passed an older boy who told him, "If he attempts to whip you stick your knife in him."

Mr. Brawner lashed William with a switch once or twice. William stabbed him with his knife in the left breast and took off running across the playground.

Professor Brawner followed,

possibly not realizing how serious the wound was. On his attempted return to the school, Brawner collapsed several times and finally died in front of the children without ever reaching the schoolhouse again.

From Augusta, Georgia's Weekly Chronicle & Sentinel, March 24, 1858

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MURDER IN A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE- *continued from*

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The *West Point Citizen* sadly reported on March 20, 1858, “We learn that Mr. Brawner was raised near Elberton, Elbert County, Georgia. He was an estimable young man, beloved by all who knew him, and none knew him better or loved him more than the parents of the unfortunate little boy at whose hands he lost his life—yea, the chief mourners round his grave were little William’s parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, and aunts.”

I have tried to find more details on the outcome, but information is difficult to come by. Was there a trial? Did William spend time in prison? It could be that the incident was not considered a murder. The local paper’s headline was “Fatal Accident.”

The 1860 Census for Chambers County list William as the 14-year-old son of Terry Collins. This census has what may be a very informative column as it relates to William. The Census records whether each child attended school within the last year. Though William’s sister, Nancy, age 13, attended school, the census taker did not mark William as a student.

I reviewed the neighbors as well. Many other boys the same age and much older than William were marked as having attended school. This could indicate that part of Williams’ punishment was that he was banned from attending school in the future.

This must have been a relief to Noah Bass, the new schoolteacher. However, that must have been little comfort to the grieving Brawner family.

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PAST TIMES

REMEMBERING JANUARY

by Ron Williams

The Reese family was among the very earliest pioneers of Chambers County, Alabama. George Reese and many members of his family settled in the Bluffton (Lanett) area in 1835. George Reese was an influential man. However, unimaginable grief was a constant visitor in the Reese home.

According to Lindsey’s *The Reason for the Tears*, George Reese married Mary Ann Witherspoon and they were the parents of at least eight children: David, who as a teenage boy drowned in the Chattahoochee; Ann, who died in infancy; Gavin, who died at the age of 10; Jeanette (Witherspoon); Oscenappaa, named after the Creek, who died in infancy; Milton; Edwin, who suffered from epilepsy and died at age 15; and Mara, who died in infancy.



The grave of the youngest child of George and Mary Ann Reese. The stone reads simply, In memory of MARA.

Mara means bitter. You will remember from the Book of Ruth that when Naomi returned to Bethlehem after her sojourn in Moab, where she had lost her husband and two sons, that when she walked back into Bethlehem the old neighbors asked if this woman could be Naomi. Naomi asked that they no longer call her Naomi, which means pleasant, but to call her Mara, which means bitter, “for the Lord hath dealt bitterly with me.”

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REMEMBERING JANUARY - *continued from previous page*

The Reese family was a family who was close to God. Lindsey says that they were “staunch Presbyterians to the letter.” Was there a message in this last child’s name? Like Ruth, had they gone out full and come back empty?

Another tragedy that touched George Reese was the death of his brother, Horatio, a gifted carpenter. Horatio called his brother to his side with a final request, “Take care of my little children... be a father to my children...”

Horatio was the father of ten children and the two youngest, Catherine and Cordelia, identical twins, were very special.

Horatio had purchased a slave named January and he had taught January to be an excellent carpenter. In fact, January was worth \$1200, when other excellent male slaves sold for \$700. January was a valuable asset to the Reese descendants.

Among Horatio Reese’s last breaths were, “At all peril don’t sell January... keep him for (my children’s) benefit.”

January, like the month he was named for, was full of promise for the Reese children. In January there is a future. In January everything is new. In January there is hope.

January was every bit as proficient as his former master at carpentry and in 1843, George Reese sent to South Carolina to bring January to Alabama, where January built some of the finest and earliest homes in West Point, Georgia, and Lanett, Alabama.

The wealth made from January’s work provided well for the twins. They had all the best that the pre-Civil War days could provide to southern Belles: the best education which included art, music, and needlework; shopping in exotic places; and European travel.

The twins both married, gave birth to one child and both died within a year. Catherine and Cordelia were buried at Hopewell, the Reese Family Cemetery, located off Cherry Drive in Lanett.

For January, the Civil War gave him his freedom. The 1870 census list January Reese as a house carpenter. George Reese continued to provide him a home near



The grave of Cordelia H. (Reese), wife of A.B. Croft, who died April 15th, 1852, in the 22nd Year of her age.

the family property on Cherry Drive. George Reese died in 1877.

After that, I wonder what January’s life was like. He lived to be a very old man. In fact, he welcomed in the 20th Century, but it seems that the curse that hovered over the Reese family claimed him in the end.

It wasn’t long after the turn of the century that the village of Langdale was shocked. A body was found floating in Moore’s Creek. It was January. He had lost his way the week before in a terrible rainstorm and apparently stumbled into the Creek.

Family members claimed his body and they buried him at the Reese Family Cemetery, not too far from the graves of the twins.



ONE MAN'S CENTURY *by Wayne Clark*

WEST POINT — Cobb Memorial Archives has a book written by a man who was born in West Point in the late 1800s, went on to great success in business in New York City and who died at age 97 only a few years short of having lived in three centuries. George P. Oslin was living in Delray Beach, Florida when he died at the age of 97 in 1996.

His autobiography is entitled *One Man's Century* and is an amazing first-person account of someone who experienced the first years of the 20th century while growing up in West Point, Georgia. He describes it as an idyllic period of circuses coming to town, the earliest days of the movie house, and the opportunity for citizens of a small town in the South to see performances by Buffalo Bill's "Wild West Show" and the great escape artist Houdini.

In the 1930s, Oslin gained fame as the inventor of the singing telegram. He was the public relations director for Western Union at the time and wanted to change the sense of dread everyone got when a telegram to them arrived. Most people thought it meant bad news.

Oslin thought that telegrams could bring cheerful messages as well. In 1933, he arranged for history's first singing telegram to be sent to popular entertainer Rudy Vallee on July 28th, which was the crooner's birthday. It was given national attention by Walter Winchell and Vallee absolutely loved it. A Western Union operator named Louise Lipps did the singing.

Singing telegrams became the rage, and it made millions for Western Union during the dark days of the Great Depression.

As a young man, Oslin was a reporter for *The Macon Telegraph*. He later attended Columbia University in New York City where he studied journalism. Before coming to Western Union, he wrote for the *Newark Ledger* and wrote magazine articles about a coming thing known as the telecommunications industry.

In *One Man's Century*, Oslin writes of his mother getting a Model T Ford and taking him on trips to Warm Springs, Georgia. He experienced the warm water flowing over rocks before FDR was drawn to the town.

In 1909, Senator Hoke Smith of Georgia arranged for young George and his mom to take a trip to

Washington, D.C., where they thrilled at the sight of John Philip Sousa directing the U.S. Navy Band in *Stars and Stripes Forever*. The highlight of the trip was a visit to the White House where 10-year-old George met and shook the hand of President William Howard Taft. "He asked me how old I was and what grade I was in in school," he writes. "He advised me to study hard and do well in school. My chief impression of the President was that he had a kind face that reminded me of a picture I had seen of a walrus. I later learned that he weighed 320 pounds. I remember he wore a white vest, crossed by a gold watch chain with an elk's tooth. I liked him."

In the first decade of the 20th century, there was no radio, TV or motion pictures, much less cell phones and the internet.

Young George did know that major developments were on the way in the way of entertainment by seeing shows in a nickelodeon in downtown West Point. It cost five cents to get in, and the viewer got to see still pictures projected on a screen while one man played a piano and another man led the audience in singing. People marveled at large images of Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon.

There was an advantage of not having movies, TV and radio. Famous people would travel the country to perform wherever they could get an audience. In the late 1800s, famous singers like Jenny Lind and Lillie Langtry performed at the West Point Opera House. Young George never forgot seeing Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley up close when they came to town with the "Wild West Show".

"Dressed in a fringed buckskin outfit, sporting a mustache, a goatee and hair down to his shoulders, Buffalo Bill told the audience how he had killed thousands of buffalo," Oslin writes.

Everyone marveled at how skilled Annie Oakley was with a rifle. Oslin recalls Buffalo Bill tossing glass balls into the air with the famed marksman hitting every one of them.

"The great Houdini held everyone awestruck," Oslin writes. "Tied in a strait jacket and chained inside a trunk, he was lowered ever so slowly into the river. Everyone watched in breathless horror, thinking he had drowned, and all were greatly relieved when he finally emerged from the water safely."

ONE MAN'S CENTURY - continued from previous page

Oslin's best friend in West Point during his growing up years was another boy named George - George Erwin. They once exchanged some blood to be blood brothers. "We each cut a little spot on our wrist and exchanged a few drops of blood," Oslin writes, "from then until George died in 1978, though we lived far apart, we were always best friends."

The two Georges no doubt loved to see a circus coming to West Point. A caravan of exotic animals in cages, jugglers, clowns and acrobats would depart a train on West Point's east bank and head south on Gilmer Street (now West 3rd Avenue) through the heart of downtown. The procession

would be announced weeks in advance to draw a big crowd.

Cobb Archives has photos of some of those circus parades in West Point. The main attraction of one of those parades were the big elephants in front. The biggest elephant in the circus would always lead the way. It was a way of getting across "Here we are, the greatest show on earth!"

What's striking about those photos from the late 1890s/early 1900s is the size of the crowd lining the street. The circus coming to town was a big event, and people from all over came to see it.

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THE CIRCUS COMES TO WEST POINT — This photo from the early 1900s shows what an attraction it was at the time to have a circus come to town. Enormous crowds would gather on both sides of Gilmer Street (West 3rd Avenue) to see the caged animals and circus performers move down the street. West Point native George P. Oslin (1899-1996) writes about this taking place during his boyhood. He later became a prominent executive with Western Union in New York City.

Historic Weather and Other Occurrences

3 – The number of people found froze to death in Columbus, Georgia, after the night of January 9, 1835, in what pioneers said was the coldest weather ever experienced in the Chattahoochee Valley.

12:00 – The approximate time on the night of November 12-13, 1833, when the first shooting stars from the Leonid Meteor Storm began to fall. The display was most beautiful in the Heart of Dixie prompting the event to be called the night Stars Fell on Alabama.

7.3 – Magnitude of the Charleston Earthquake which hit on August 31, 1886, at approximately 9:00 pm. The quake was felt in the Chattahoochee Valley. In West Point, it was reported that the shock was very severe causing windows and doors to rattle and fall. A revival was being held in Langdale and many attendees “got right” that night.

28 – The day in May 1900 when an eclipse was experienced. The Chattahoochee Valley was in the path of Total Darkness. This was a shock to many. Some referred to it as “Dark Monday.”

1925 – The year of one of the worst droughts experienced in the area. During that Summer, the Chattahoochee River almost dried up. A person could jump over the river and not get wet. A downpour in September brought relief.



Guide Leaflet, 1901, American Museum of Natural History. The meteor shower of 1833.

HAWKES LIBRARY AND ME

By James Patterson

As a youth in Fairfax in the 1960s, I looked forward to my family's weekly trip to "town." The "town" meant West Point. For many years, West Point was the biggest town my young eyes had seen.

In those days, West Point had many popular stores, including J.C. Penny, Kessler's, grocery stores like Big Apple and A&P, Nader's Records, Johnson's Sporting Goods, Jacobs Pharmacy, V.J. Elmore, Woolworth's, Skinner's Furniture Store, and others. While my parents shopped, I visited the Elmore store for popcorn, Jacobs for a cold lemon sour, and Johnson's Sporting Goods for the latest "Hardy Boys" book.

The *Valley Times-News* (VTN) was sold in self-service open-air news racks on street corners. People, on the honor system, bought their VTN newspapers by depositing \$.10 in a coin container. "On the honor system" was a system of payment that relied solely on the buyer's honesty. Valleyans were an honest lot of folks in those days.

My favorite place in West Point was Hawkes Library. Hawkes recently celebrated their 100th anniversary. I have many fond memories of Hawkes Library. Seldom does a day pass that I don't recall Hawkes and the books and people that I met there. One special book has stayed with me over the years.

As a high school junior in 1972, during the evenings I often listened to a CBS radio station from New Orleans. Most other kids watched TV for a few hours at night. I preferred to listen to the radio. One night, as I listened to a talk radio program, a speaker mentioned a book by environmentalist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948). *A Sand County Almanac*, a nonfiction book, was published in 1949. It is a collection of essays about nature.

For some years, *A Sand County Almanac* was out of print. Still, it had a following of readers. After the first Earth Day in 1970, *A Sand County Almanac* was popular again. It was back in print as a paperback.

After I learned of the book in 1972, I went to Hawkes Library to borrow a copy. When I gave the librarian at

Hawkes the title of the book, she told me they did not have a copy. I was disappointed and turned to leave.

"I'll get you a copy from Atlanta," she said.

The kindly librarian completed my Inter-Library Loan request form to borrow a copy of *A Sand County Almanac*. In a few weeks, I had the book.

Leopold's writing immediately captured my attention. I had never read such a beautifully written book. One essay, "65290," written in December 1947, stands out to me as one of the finest essays I have ever read.

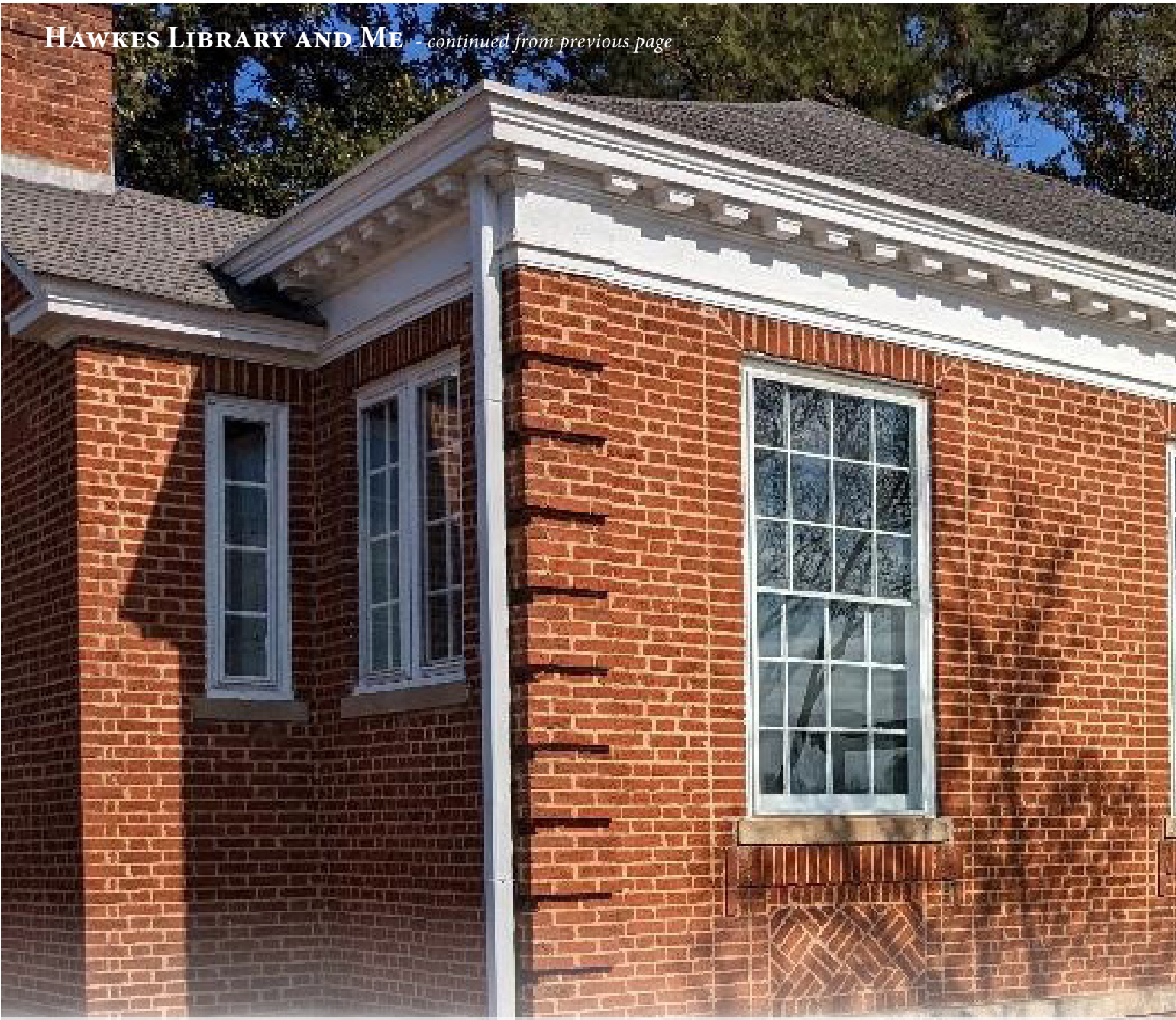
"65290" is an essay on bird banding. The Leopold family trapped and banded chickadees on their farm every December. The bands were numbered. One bird was banded 65290. Each year, the Leopold family recorded in their journal which numbered birds returned to their farm. 65290 returned for many years. The Leopolds admired the little bird's longevity. When it did not return, they held a simple memorial service for it.

Leopold's essay on becoming linked to nature by a little bird is an essay on life. For us all there will be a day when our number will be up. There will be a day when we will be a memory to those we left behind.

Leopold's essay is about human grief over a small bird that passed away. It is about the happiness, described in a human and loving way, that the small bird brought the Leopold family. The message is that people grow to develop a relationship and love for nature. To lose even a small part of nature, like 65290, is a cause for grief.

The sentiment that Leopold expressed for 65290 is like the sentiment I recall about Fairfax, the Valley, and the City of West Point. The retail stores that I recall from my youth are long gone. The West Point Manufacturing Company (West Point Pepperell) is long gone. Fairfax is now a part of the City of Valley. The *Valley Times-News* remains. Hawkes Library remains.

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The grief that the Leopolds had over their small, banded bird is also like the grief I have over lost neighbors and friends from the Fairfax Community, Fairfax Elementary School, and Valley High School. Decembers come and Decembers go. The years bring changes, challenges, and growth. Winter turns to Spring. Spring brings new hope, new friends.

Before leaving Valley, I read many other memorable books that I borrowed from Hawkes Library, including the Ralph Martin's excellent two-volume biography of Lady Randolph (Jennie) Churchill; *Nicholas and Alexandra*, a biography of the last royal family of Russia by historian Robert Massie;

the dreadfully overhyped 1970 bestseller *Johnathan Livingston Seagull*; and the absurdist Tom Stoppard play "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." While I have fond and lasting memories of these and other books, it is *A Sand County Almanac*, especially the essay "65290," that I strongly recommend.

Since 1972, I have kept a copy of *A Sand County Almanac* in my home library. I often re-read the exquisitely written "65290." It brings back memories of the wooded areas I explored in Fairfax as a kid. It also brings back memories of the shelves of books I explored at Hawkes Library.

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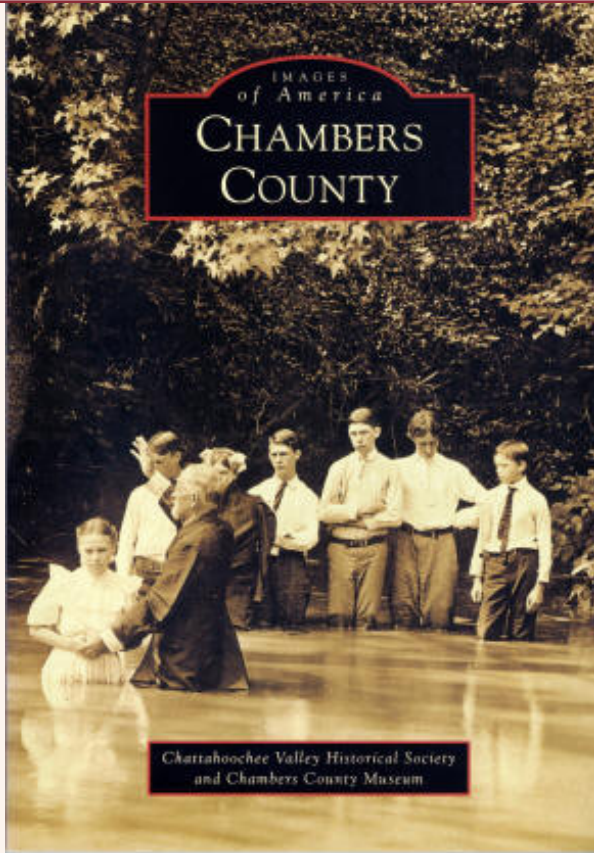
The Hawkes Children's Library in West Point, Georgia, was built in 1922 and was added to The National Register of Historic Places on December 28, 1990.

Small libraries, like Hawkes, can make big differences in the lives of its readers. After graduating Auburn University, I worked for Indiana's Employment Security Agency in Indianapolis. Later, I became a diplomat for the U.S. Department of State. I served in Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Canada, the U.K., Holland, France, Venezuela, and Washington, D.C. My reviews, essays, and op/eds have appeared in the *Washington Post*, *New York Daily News*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Foreign Service Journal*, *Cleveland (OH) Plain Dealer*, *Columbus (OH) Post Dispatch*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Montgomery (AL) Advertiser*, *Opelika-Auburn News*, *Puebla (CO) Chieftain*,

Government Computer News, *The Writer*, *Writer's Digest*, and others. For ten years, I wrote Washington Scene for *Valley Times-News*.

Congratulations to the folks who staff Hawkes Library. It has been and remains a valuable resource. During the next 100 years, may Hawkes Library continue to serve the readers of West Point and Valley. Happy reading!

CVHS member James Patterson is a writer and speaker based in Washington, D.C. He appears as a reporter in 2015's "Selma."



Images of America: Chambers County

An extensive collection of historic photographs representing late 19th and early 20th century people and places in Chambers County, Alabama. Don Clark and Dr. Horace M. Holderfield, editors. Published by Arcadia. Copyright 2010, shared by CVHS and Chambers County Museum.

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The Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society
P.O. Box 718
West Point, GA 31833