

# Finding the Febrey Homestead

*BY CHARLES S. CLARK*

Herewith a discovery about one of Arlington's stalwart land-owning families from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

In 2015, my schoolmate John Taylor shared a remarkable boyhood memory. Back in the 1960s, at an old house two doors from his in the Overlee Knolls neighborhood, he once ducked into a shed and saw a rusted bolt with chains attached to a wall. Some kind of shackle, he says.

That tall, high-ground white frame house at 2210 North Madison Street was torn down in 1989. But neighbors had long described it as a onetime Civil War hospital that belonged to one of Arlington's key early landowners, Nicholas Febrey. Tantalizingly, Febrey was also rumored to have been an illegitimate son of someone in Virginia's prominent Lee family.

The patriarch Nicholas Febrey (born Oct. 3, 1800, died Jan. 6, 1868) became one of Arlington's wealthiest landowners when, beginning in the 1830s, he bought about 600 acres in the area called Washington Forest. Much of the land was sold to him by his friend George Washington Parke Custis, builder of Arlington House. (For the location of the spread, think today's Swanson Middle School, Dominion Hills, Glencarlyn, Upton Hill, and BJ's Wholesale Club.)

Nicholas married into the famous Ball family (twice, due to widowerhood) and produced three sons, two of whose stately homes stand today--one at Wilson Blvd. at North McKinley Street, and the other on Powhatan Street. These Arlington families played a major role in property divisions, slavery, community leadership and intra-familial divisions during the Civil War.

The prominence of the Febrey clan through three generations prompted me to follow John Taylor's recollection to identify the site of the original farmhouse belonging to the patriarch.

## **The Three Generations**

Nicholas Febrey emerges in Arlington's early records with no documented parentage, though the record for his second marriage to Amanda Ball at age 60 indicates he was the son of an Alexander N. Febrey. (Collins, 2011)

The Febrey name, as modern descendent Michael Febrey documents, is common in Wales, England and Germany, and is sometimes spelled Phefrey. In 1837, at age 37, Nicholas, a onetime survey chain carrier, documented the land deal as Custis divided up 1,200 acres of his own inheritance from George Washington (other land may have been exchanged earlier). Deeds survive showing Nicholas paying \$400 cash for 20 acres, and making smaller side deals for

Arlington parcels with families such as the Minors and Uptons, a sign that he was already a prosperous farmer and wealthy enough to own slaves.

Nicholas married Belinda Ball, a daughter of Basil Ball, and after her death in 1858, married her cousin Amanda, daughter of Robert Ball. They were both granddaughters of another Arlington patriarch, Moses Ball. Nicholas was recorded as being part of the Committee of Nine of prominent citizens of the county who protested the retrocession of the county to Virginia in 1846. (Rose, 1976, 82)

Nicholas owned seven slaves, according to the 1850 Census schedules. A deed signed on March 23, 1853, shows he paid \$150 to neighbor Richard Southern for "light-colored mulatto girl of the age of six years." (Several deeds show that Nicholas was probably illiterate since he signed only with an "X" with his name added in parentheses.)

Nicholas took on a Daniel Minor as an indentured servant in 1849, and in 1853 he and wife Belinda engaged an indentured worker named Edward Whipple, who was in debt by \$900.

By the 1860 Census, Nicholas's slaves numbered five, with one lent to his son John's farm, and his second wife Amanda owning three. His son Henry by this time owned three slaves, with a fourth on loan from the father.

Fairfax County tax rolls for 1860 show the new divisions of the patriarch's original 600 acres: Nicholas retained 211 acres, eldest son Henry had 176; second son, Moses 83; and third son John, 137. The surviving deeds show Nicholas selling land to Henry on Dec. 24, 1853, for \$6,000, and on Aug. 17, 1859, selling to son John for a mere \$10 owing to "natural love and affection." On July 27, 1860, Nicholas sold acreage to his son Moses for \$3,000, and more to families such as Upton, Wunder and Smith with son Henry presiding as justice of the peace.

## Henry Febrey

Perhaps the most prominent of the Febrey offspring was Henry Wand Febrey (1828-1881) who, with his wife, Margaret Payne, had 11 children. Their home (later called Maple Shade) at today's 2230 N. Powhatan St. shows up on many Civil War-era maps. Its stone gateposts are still visible on two private lawns on today's Quantico Street.

This white colonnaded "early classical revival" manse was built as a cotton farmhouse in 1851 when Henry was a captain in Virginia's 175<sup>th</sup> Militia. Henry (and his brother, John) were trustees of the Methodist Meeting House – later Dulin church on East Broad Street in Falls Church (a stain-glass window still bears Henry's name). Henry also served on Alexandria County's Board of Supervisors.

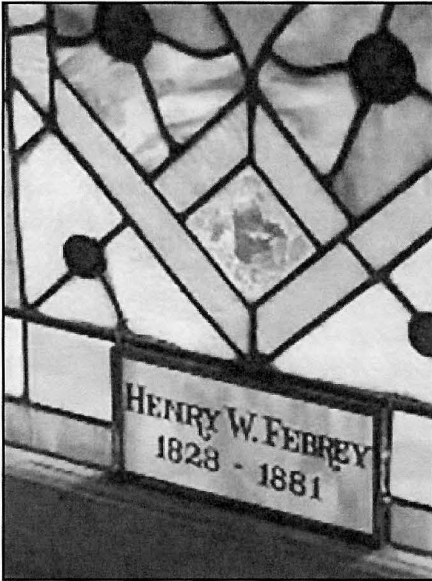


Courtesy of Steve Etkin

**Maple Shade, Henry Febrey home, 2230 N. Powhatan Street.**

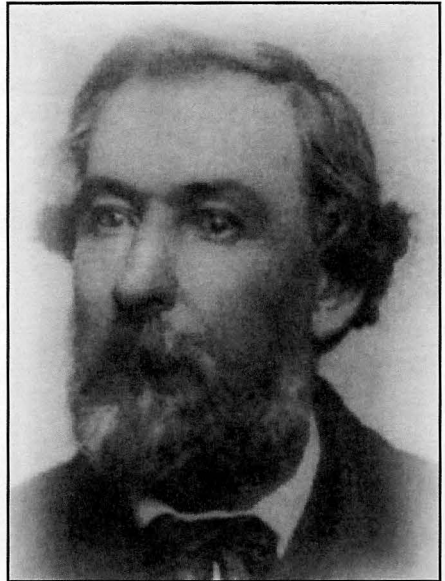
The late Arlington historian Eleanor Lee Templeman's write-up on Maple Shade describes military action during the Battle of Munson's Hill (a minor North-South clash in the autumn of 1861 on the edges of Arlington and Bailey's Crossroads). She asserts that Henry's home "bears within its walls hidden scars. ... One shot came through the dining room and sheared off the leg of a table set for dinner, without disturbing the meal thereon." But current owners Steve and Nancy Etkin, despite executing historically respectful renovations inside and out, have never found such scars. (Templeman, 1959, 96)

When Henry died in 1881, the *Alexandria Gazette* wrote that "one of the most prominent and influential citizens of Alexandria Co., died at the residence of his daughter, in Washington, in about the 55<sup>th</sup> year of his age. Febrey, who was highly esteemed by all who knew him, had filled all the prominent offices in the county with honor to himself and satisfaction to his fellow citizens." (Collins, 2011)



Courtesy of Charles S. Clark

**Dulin Church Stained Glass of Henry Febrey**



Courtesy of Michael Febrey

**Henry Febrey 1828-1881**

Henry's offspring went on to prominent positions in Arlington. Harry Coe Febrey became a Methodist Minister. Son William N. Febrey served on the Board of Supervisors 1892-1911 and was county Superintendent of the Poor in 1910.

### **John Febrey**

Nicholas's third son John E. Febrey (1831-1893) and his wife Mary Frances, also of the Ball family, built a farmhouse at today's McKinley Road and Wilson Blvd. around 1850. John, who in the 1890s would become superintendent of Arlington public schools, built two homes on the property, the gray-shingled mansion still stands, and a wood frame house across what is now McKinley Road. (The latter is believed to have been demolished in 1966 to make room for the Christian Science Church.)

These Febreys farmed the land for corn, oats, wheat, rye, buckwheat and barley. During the Civil War, they used a cabin on the property as a private school. John Febrey described it as an "old fashioned Massachusetts barn, log body and frame outside. It cost \$1,600 to put up." His brother Moses described the 138 acres as "a fine flourishing farm, with a fine dwelling house, a large barn, on 100-by-150 feet, with outhouses and a stable."

During the Civil War, most Febreys sided with the Union (the known ex-

emption being middle brother Moses\*\*\* (born 1830, died Aug. 12, 1898). His property included the water business of Powhatan Springs (now the Dominion Hills Pool). We know of the family's leanings on the South's secession because of testimony before the congressionally chartered Southern Claims Commission. John Febrey in the 1870s and '80s applied for compensation from the federal government for the livestock and crops taken by Union troops in transit. Records show he sought a total of \$7,720 for confiscated timber, buckwheat, corn, buckwheat, cattle and fencing.

What emerges from the testimony is that in spring 1861, Confederates pulled down Febrey's smaller house (along with that of plantation owner Bazil Hall) for wood to make a signal station. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart's troops fired shells as they rode through, and Febrey heeded advice that he escape to the home of his in-laws in the Shreve family on the other side of Falls Church. Union troops took possession of this Arlington land in September 1861 under Gen. James Wadsworth after the first battle of Bull Run. John testified that his 15,000 head of cabbage were not used by the Confederates.

Speaking to the commission, Moses Febrey defended his brother John as a loyal unionist who should qualify for compensation. "We lived on adjoining farms," he testified. "I suppose our houses were not more than four or five hundred yards apart, and there was hardly a day that I did not see him and he saw me, and we talked this thing over, and he never to my recollection at any time spoke in favor of secession, but positively against it at all times. ....My brother voted against secession. I state that from my own knowledge, because I was there at the time. I do not know to what extent the Confederates damaged his property. It was in the fall of 1861 when I left to join the Confederate Army." (*National Archives*)

Others testified that John Febrey was quiet and apolitical. Some drama ensued, which may explain why the claims process took so many years. A neighbor named John Hall (brother of Bazil Hall, for whom Hall's Hill is named) testified for the government that John Febrey was a member of the pro-South home guards. He said he saw him at the Saturday Ball's Crossroads market (modern-day Glebe Road at Wilson Blvd.) and heard him make "pro-secesh" comments.

But neighbor Hugh Throckmorton disputed this, saying John and his wife had allowed their house to be a union hospital where they tended to soldiers.

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\*\*\* Throckmorton also testified that Henry Febrey was pro-Confederate, but this is disputed by others who said Henry was neutral.)

John denied he even knew Hall. In what would ultimately be a successful defense of Febrey, Throckmorton also pointed out that John Hall is Bazil Hall's brother, calling John an "unprincipled man" before adding that another member of his family was the notorious Washington, D.C. brothel-keeper Mary Hall.

### **Ernest and Margaret**

Further evidence of the family's reach in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the fact that John Febrey's son Ernest Jackson Febrey, a wealthy steamfitter with a home in Washington, D.C., would build a country home within eyesight of Maple Shade alongside an apple orchard. It would survive to the modern era. This 1890s whimsical Victorian structure at 6060 Lee Highway was later purchased by Dr. Kincheloe, a physician, and after his death, his widow managed the Crestwood Sanitarium there in the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1957, a group of neighboring families brought the Febrey-Kincheloe house and formed the Overlee Community Association, which used it as a swimming pool clubhouse and manager's residence for half a century. In February 2012, the association tore down it down as part of a modernization. (Relics, such as the home's oval-shaped windows, were incorporated in the swim club's new facilities.)

During Overlee's reconstruction, news outlets revived an old ghost story familiar in the neighborhood. The resident manager living in the Febrey-Kincheloe house was quoted saying he saw a transparent figure of a girl in Victorian dress. Speculation was she was 14-year-old Margaret Febrey, the only daughter of Ernest and his wife Grace, who died of a tubercular infection of the spine on Jan. 15, 1913. (*Washington Post*, 2012). One Arlington construction worker also said he saw the specter after the Overlee association circulated her photo, immediately asking for a transfer.

### **Nicholas's Home Located**

The precise site of the home of patriarch Nicholas Febrey was for 150 years a mystery. Clues appeared in the Southern Claims Commission testimony. John Febrey said, "My father, who is now dead, lived on the adjoining farm." Another contemporary, a Mrs. Amanda Gott, in 1878 testified, "I was a frequent visitor to Mr. Nicholas Febrey's house, the father of John E. Febrey, and often remained with them a considerable length of time.... John....frequently visited his father and often during the time I was stopping there."

Some drama that took place in the home shows up in the 1858 obituary for Nicholas's first wife, Belinda, who died in 1858 at age 63 "after a long and painful illness." She was confined to the house for five "long and dreary months...Such was the nature of her disease that she could not lie down but

a very few moments at a time,” and then under very “painful and distressing circumstances.” (Steadman, 1964, 314).

Febrey’s first home was described by historian Templeman in the 1950s as being on “the north side of Wilson Blvd., on the hill just west of Four Mile Run.” (Templeman, 96). (His later home was where Swanson Middle School stands today.)

Intrigued by John Taylor’s anecdote about slave shackles, I contacted Ron Anglin, whose family owned the property on North Madison Street from 1962-86. He told me long-standing neighbors had always described the house as having been a Civil War hospital off after the first battle of Bull Run and that the owner had been the illegitimate child of the Lee family. Supplying photos from the 1960s and 1980s, Anglin pointed out that if one eliminates the added side structures, the façade typifies an 1840s American wood-frame home in Greek Revival style.

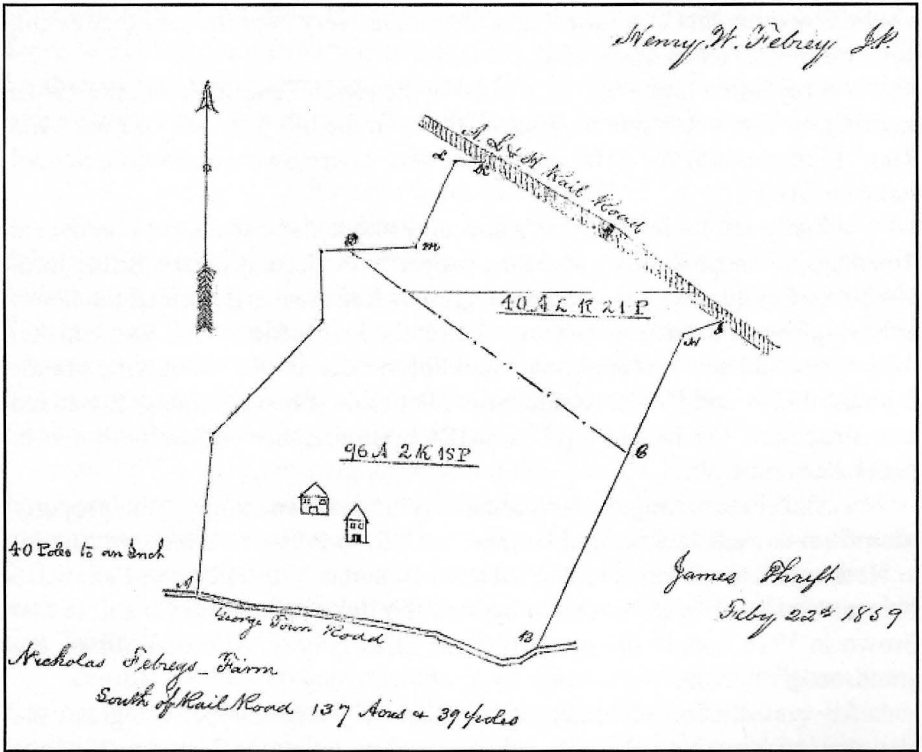
Checking Arlington land records, I traced ownership of the property back from current Jenkins and Horner, to Dell, to Peete, to Lange, to Anglin, to Neuhauser, to Thompson, to Shafer, to Baumbach, to Hicks, to Paxton, to Brown. Finally, in a 1923 deed, I spotted the link to the Febreys, a note that Brown in 1918 bought the property from Eliza Febrey, wife of William, the grandson of Nicholas.

My consultation of contemporary maps at the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, Arlington historian Kathryn Holt Springston and the Virginia Historical Society found regular markings for Henry Febrey’s home but not Nicholas’s. An 1870 map of Alexandria County, however, labels the approximate area as the property of Amanda Febrey, Nicholas’s second wife.

Then a key clue fell into place. The Alexandria Library’s special collections staff took the ownership of Ron Anglin’s former home well back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That search provided several deeds of sale between Nicholas and his three sons.

The deed from Aug. 17, 1859, in which Nicholas transfers the acreage to son John for \$10, described “Nichlas Febreys Farm, South of Rail Road 137 acres and 39 poles.” A simple map shows its location as between the Alexandria Leesburg and Hampshire Rail Road (roughly parallel to Wilson Blvd.) and Georgetown-Fairfax Road (modern-day Lee Highway). An attached drawing, dated Feb. 22, 1859, showed two simply drawn houses, one of which is likely Henry Febrey’s, the other likely that of Nicholas, the one Templeman described as being “on a hill.”

Anglin said he didn’t recall the shackles, but he did find Civil War-era bullets and horseshoes on the property, and spoke of a mysterious concrete slab



Courtesy of Alexandria Library

Map of Nicholas Febrey Farm.

near the back porch (the floor of former slave quarters?) He pinpointed the location of an old well (long filled-in) on what would have been the home's front (on modern Nottingham Street), now the backyard of the newer homes. When Anglin's family moved in, remnants of columns for a portico were strewn on the porch, he said.

"My dad always said the house was poorly designed," Anglin recalled, noting the multiple porches and additions used as apartments. "The whole basement had apparently been dug after the house was built, because it was a lot smaller than the footprint of the original house. The walls were rock. This must have occurred sometime in the late 1800's when a coal furnace was installed. The problem, my dad said, was that they removed the foundation under the support walls for the upper two stories of the house." Anglin said.

The massive 24-x-32-foot living room is large enough to fire a .22 rifle in, added Anglin, who showed this author a photo of himself in Yorktown High



School graduation gown in front of the house in 1966. A neighboring Arlingtonian of long standing recalled that the home was used as a boarding house for teachers and nurses in the 1920's or 30's. Occasionally, Anglin's father would hear strange noises coming from the attic, sounds of a ghostly struggle that was never explained.

### Nicholas's Parentage

The rumor that Nicholas Febrey was a secret Lee family love child was suggested in a letter from a 19<sup>th</sup>-century caretaker at Arlington House, according to Kathryn Holt Springston. (A check with Arlington House National Park Service ranger Matt Penrod produced no confirmation.)

The tale appears in its most detailed form in an oral history conducted in 2003 for the Arlington Central Library Virginia Room (now the Center for Local History). Librarian and Arlington Historical Society researcher Sara Collins interviewed Febrey descendent John Gott (since deceased), a librarian at Langley High School.

Gott recalled his elderly great aunt recounting the tale of a minister in Arlington whose daughter got pregnant, possibly by a member of the Lee family, and took the newborn to Custis saying (illogically), "Here's your bastard, you raise it." Allegedly, the boy was born on Christmas Day so they named him Nicholas, and he arrived at Arlington House in February, so they abbreviated that as Febrey.

The claim was repeated in conversation with the late Falls Church City historian Melvin Lee Steadman Jr., (who did not include it in his book on the city), and I found that another Febrey descendent, Jim Miller, had posted the tale on ancestry.com.

Working in the story's favor is the fact that Nicholas Febrey's parentage is a blank page, and that his friendship with the well-connected Custis might



Courtesy of Walter Anglin

**Nicholas Febrey House, circa 1986 (front view).**



Courtesy of Walter Anglin

**Nicholas Febrey House, circa 1986 (rear view).**

explain him getting a good land deal. The reluctance of Gott's great aunt (clear from the transcript) to discuss what at the time would be a shameful family secret adds authenticity, and there's even talk of a resemblance in photographs between Nicholas's son Henry Febrey and Robert E. Lee.

Continuing the speculation, one can trace the whereabouts of Robert E. Lee's famous father, Lighthorse Harry Lee, nine months before Nicholas's birthdate of Oct. 3, 1800. Harry was representing Westmoreland County, Va., and surroundings in the Sixth U.S. Congress in Philadelphia between April 1799 and March 1801. He delivered his famous eulogy for George Washington on Dec. 26, 1799. (Gerson, 1966, 211-219)

Robert E. Lee biographer Douglas Southall Freeman noted that Harry was often apart from his sickly wife back at Stratford Hall beginning in 1800. One could theorize that Lighthorse Harry may have had a roadside encounter with the minister's daughter while traveling to Philadelphia through Arlington. Again, this is speculation. (Freeman, 1936, 11)

But the dates we know don't quite work. Febrey's birth is recorded as Oct. 3, 1800. Arlington House histories show that Custis didn't move from Mount Vernon onto the property he inherited from George Washington until Martha Washington's death in 1802. Work on what would become the Custis-Lee Mansion didn't start until 1802 (and took 16 years).

A check of the 1810 census (George Washington Parke Custis shows up in New Kent County, Va., where his family owned property) mentions only one free person in addition to 100-plus slaves. That free person more likely is his wife Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis or his newly born daughter Mary Anna (future wife of Robert E. Lee) than a foundling boy named Nicholas.

"Because Nicholas was illiterate, the chances that he was raised by others this wealthy are slim," said Michael Febrey. "Under church adoption practices, they would have been required to teach him to read."

### **The Febrey Legacy**

A 1900 Arlington map prepared by the Virginia Title Co. map shows many divisions between lots along modern Lee Highway and Wilson Blvd. with plots for Febreys named Margaret, Amos, Harry, Jas., Eliza, Ernest and Elsie. Physician's wife Ella Ball Febrey, daughter of John, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was "considered to be the most beautiful woman in Falls Church," according to historian Steadman. (Steadman, 1964, 432)

Many of the clan are buried in the Oakwood Cemetery near the modern Eden Center, grouped by generations beginning with Nicholas, then John and Henry, then Ernest and daughter Margaret. (Moses is buried in Confederate Hill Cemetery in Baltimore.)

“The Febreys started as a farming family and, just as Arlington has changed through the years, our family has too,” said Sid Simmonds, an accountant descended from Henry Febrey’s daughter Elsie. “Arlington was very rural, and my dad always said spending summers at Maple Shade was going out to the country. We still refer to Arlington as a small town, and the 1,000-2,000 from the old families still feel close.”

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### *Acknowledgments*

In my months of researching the Febreys, I grew indebted to Ron Anglin, former resident of Nicholas Febrey farmhouse, for digging into family papers. We spent a fascinating Saturday on the site with current owners of the two modern homes there, Mike Jenkins and Tom Horner.

I also enjoyed talks and a visit to the Oakwood Cemetery with descendant Michael Febrey, treasurer of the Arlington Historical Society. Invaluable archival sleuthing was provided by Moe Mozafar of the Arlington Land Records office, and by George Combs and Mark Zoeter at the Alexandria Library’s special collections. Examination of 19<sup>th</sup>-century maps came from Frances Pollard at the Virginia Historical Society, and I got some suggestions from Arlington reader Dean DeRosa.

I had also reached out to Arlington Historical Society stalwart Sara Collins, who had previously shared with me her thorough research on the Febreys. Alas, Sara died Dec. 3, 2014.

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### *About The Author*

Charles S. Clark is a journalist and frequent contributor to the magazine. He writes the “Our Man in Arlington” column for the *Falls Church News-Press* and was the recipient of the Arlington Historical Society’s 2015 Cornelia B. Rose Award for his book *Arlington County Chronicles*.