

THE

HISTORIAN

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

www.hancockcountyhistoricalsociety.com

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

August 2020

NEWS FROM LOBRANO HOUSE

The Kate Lobrano House has reopened for members and visitors, and the hours remain the same: Monday through Friday 10:00 a.m. until noon and 1:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m., closing from 12:00 –1:00 for lunch.

Monthly luncheons have been postponed until further notice, but we look forward to their return as soon as we feel we can do so without affecting the health of our members.



GRANDCHILDREN OF PEYTON AND ANNIE LEE

Top row, L to R: Peyton L. Lee, Lawson L. Lee, Freeman W. Lee, James W. “Wes” Lee, Jr., Robert E. Lee, and Roger W. Lee

Bottom row, L to R: Lorendia L. Lee Spiers, Virginia Lee, Teresa Ann Lee, Alzada Lee Stockstill, and Cristina Lee Jarrell



ANNUAL CEMETERY TOUR

Even though October is still a few months away, it's not too early to begin thinking about and planning the Cemetery Tour. The 26th Annual Cemetery Tour will be held on Halloween Night, Saturday, October 31, 2020. Needed are volunteers to prepare the cemetery for the tour, to portray citizens buried there, and to act as guides. To volunteer, please call 228-467-4090. All actors and guides must be members of the Historical Society.

LEETOWN

By
James Keating, M.D.

Virginia Olander, Editor

The historic community of Leetown, Mississippi, is located in the northwest part of Hancock County in the beautiful countryside of the Catahoula Creek basin. Early pioneer settlers such as the Lee family discovered this prize vacant, fertile soil and established small farms there in the mid-nineteenth century. Other early settlers/

farmers, much like Freeman Jones, established the community of Center (Caesar) on the site of an old Choctaw Indian village, located just across the creek from Leetown. The two villages of Leetown and Center have a shared history that continues to this day. Other families such as the Resters occupy the southern side of Leetown, and they provided important leadership for the community in the twentieth century. These communities benefited greatly from their churches and a shared religion.

The early pioneer settlers of Leetown and Hancock County were small scale farmers/herders

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Eddie Coleman, Editor
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 Charles Gray, Executive Director

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 HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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**LOBRANO HOUSE
 HOURS**

MONDAY — FRIDAY
 10:00AM — 3:00PM
 Closed: 12:00—1:00 (lunch)

MISSION STATEMENT

“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

living in simple dogtrot log cabins. These subsistence farmers depended on game and natural resources in the piney forest to support themselves and their animal stock of cows, sheep, hogs, and poultry. The railroads came to Hancock County in the latter half of the nineteenth century and provided opportunity for men to supplement their income working part time for the railroads during the off-season winters. The railroads transformed the timber and turpentine industries everywhere and were also a boon to farmers. The new opportunities for part time employment and markets for various cash crops or livestock meant loss of a certain satisfaction of self-sufficiency enjoyed previously. This was traded for the increased standard of living or prosperity of this growing local economy.

The two villages of Caesar and Leetown, separated by the Catahoula Creek, were codependent with intertwining shared histories. The pioneer families of these two towns would share church pastors and intermarry for the next 170 years. Old family names in Leetown were Lee, Stockstill, Rester, Jones, Spiers, and Seals. Old family names in Caesar were Jones, Goss, Pearson, Stanford, Lumpkin, Varnado, Smith, and Breland. Caesar grew faster in the early years when it was the county seat, possessing at one time a post office, log courthouse, a jail, a hotel, a barroom, and a few stores and houses for city officials. Leetown would gradually grow to the present day size of approximately seven hundred residents, but Caesar's population diminished over time.

In the mid-nineteenth

century, the folks in one town would walk the few miles across the Catahoula Creek where there was an easy passage at a natural ford to visit relatives, to shop, or to attend prayer meetings in the other town. An old swimming hole was present at this ford in the creek where baptisms were performed as late as 1920.

One of the first pioneer settlers of the Lee family migrated to the Catahoula Creek basin countryside from North Carolina. The Atlantic seacoast spawned several large Lee clans in American colonial history who can trace their family trees back to England. The original Lee family to settle in what is called Leetown was Peyton Lee (1801-1873) and Mary Ann Williams Lee (1808-1879). The couple traveled with Peyton's sister, Tabitha, and her husband, James Rogers, in a long wagon train of oxcarts over the Federal Road in 1847. A community grew up around their homestead that was originally known as *Lee Settlement*. Their farm was located where the Leetown Church is presently. The farm was on the site of the old Caesar Ne-caise Road, just walking distance from the passable ford in the Catahoula Creek, close to the town of Center on the other side of the creek.

After the Indian Removal by Andrew Jackson in the 1830's, there was a Great Migration of many pioneer settlers from Georgia, Florida, and the Carolinas to Mississippi and Alabama. Peyton was encouraged to move by his cousins, Solomon Lee, Jr., who settled in Simpson County, Mississippi, and Samuel Lee, who lived in Wayne Coun-

ty, Mississippi. The Catahoula Creek area was still largely vacant but relatively close to Gainesville, Mississippi, one of only three commercial shopping centers in southwest Mississippi at that time. The other two were Columbia and Pass Christian.

Peyton and Annie (Mary Ann) made camp on a high ridge on the east side of the creek where a good spring for fresh water was located. This site was the birthplace of present day Leetown. Hardy Smith described this part of Hancock County in 1850 as "a very wild country with plenty of game and wild animals, such as bear, deer, and wolves but almost no society." Annie was a first cousin to Peyton. Her first husband, last name Williams, died young. She then married Peyton against the wishes of her parents. Annie was called "Annie Good Lee" because of her kindhearted nature, her tending to the sick, and her baking and sharing with the neighbors when needed. She was a redhead as evidenced by a lock of hair found by her descendants in an old bible. Peyton and Annie reared four sons and three daughters. All four sons fought in the Civil War for the South. Peyton died in 1873 of heart disease, and Annie died in 1879.

The Lees were generally short in stature but loquacious, similar to their relatives in Virginia and North Carolina. Only a few Lee families settled in the Catahoula Creek basin in this time frame, but their many children married into the other original families in the region, thusly producing many descendants.

The oldest son of this first Lee family, James Wesley Lee (1829-1901), married Re-

becca Jones (1831-1901). They had a large family, and most of the Lees in Caesar, Leetown, Carriere, and McNeil can trace their lineage to Rebecca and James. Rebecca, like many pioneer wives and mothers, was a lovable woman. Her tombstone inscription reads, "She died as she lived, trusting in God."

The father of the aforementioned Rebecca Jones was a historically important resident of the nearby town of Caesar. In the first half of the nineteenth century this Indian village was made the county seat of Hancock County. Rebecca's father, Thomas Freeman Jones, II, (1805-1891) is often referred to in the annals of history as Freeman Jones not to be confused with his father, Thomas Freeman Jones, Sr., (1763-1835) who never lived in Hancock County. Freeman Jones, II, was sent by the United States Government to be an Indian agent or peace officer to the old Choctaw Indian village located on a hammock between Caesar and Logtown. Jones built his farm on the site of the Indian village that was within walking distance from Leetown on the other side of the Catahoula Creek. Freeman Jones, II, married Rachel Virginia Hendon (1805-1890). He and Virginia reared eleven children, one of whom, Rebecca, married James Wesley Lee from Leetown.

The Rester family is another important clan in Leetown. James "Jim" Rester (1865-1933) was the first Rester to move to Leetown around

A hammock is a fertile area in the southern United States with a stand of trees usually higher than its surroundings, surrounded by wetlands.

1884. He married Annie Deborah Fry (1863-1935) from Pearl River County. The Resters originally came from Bulloch County in Georgia and migrated to Hancock County in 1807. The family first settled in Wiggins, Mississippi. In *Next Door to Heaven* S. G. Thigpen noted "...Jim Rester...treated everyone fairly and was highly respected by all who knew him. Also, he was one of the most successful farmers and one of the most influential men in South Mississippi."

Otho Rester (1898-1978), son of James Rester, was a dairy farmer in Leetown on Chester Lee Road. Rester's first wife, Mae Lee, died in 1925. He then married Annie McGhee (1901-1981) from Henleyfield, Mississippi. Otho owned fifty milk cows on one hundred acres. They were "wood cows," which meant they were not fenced in but allowed to roam freely, until the 1950's when stock laws required cattle farmers to fence in



Otho Rester served in the United States Army during World War I.



Kenneth and Betty Jo Rester Seals

their livestock. His milk was sold to the Crosby Creamery in Picayune. Otho was a significant poultry farmer too with a large flock of turkeys and chickens. In addition he served in the Army during World War I for two years.

Otho Rester was elected to the Mississippi Legislature by the Leetown district where his accomplishments were many. For example, he sponsored bills for free school textbooks for children. He was on the board of the Coast Electric Company that brought electricity to Leetown in the 1950's. Otho also worked hard to get telephones to Leetown in that era. He was the president of a cooperative creamery in 1945 that enlisted seventy-nine dairymen to purchase stock. In addition he was committed to conservation and helped to form the county's Soil and Water Conservation District.

Rester's daughter, Betty Jo Rester Seals (b. 1933), carries on her father's zeal for conservation. In 2004 she received the Mississippi Association of Conservation Districts (MACD)

Auxiliary Distinguished Service Award. The MACD strives to keep waterways clear by promoting soil management by local farmers. Betty Jo is the president of the auxiliary program. Her husband, Ralph Kenneth Seals (b. 1933) has also won awards for his leadership in the conservation programs. In addition, Kenneth was on the board that brought city water to Leetown in 1999.

The church in Leetown is Lee's Chapel No. 2 Baptist Church. Primitive log cabin churches in Caesar pre-dated the twentieth century Baptist churches. The first building of this church organization was built in 1929. Before that time, Sunday school classes were held in the old Leetown School house. Lee's Chapel No. 2 Baptist Church has been mission-minded from the time it was organized. A second church building was completed in 1947. The present church building was completed in 1971. Local missions were pursued in Wolf Creek, Catahoula, Benville, Mt. Calvary, and Bay St. Louis. The church has sent Baptist Missionary Association (BMA) missionaries to the Philippines.

Brother Chester Columbus Lee (1906-1985) was a Christian lay-worker in Leetown. He and his wife, Effie Stockstill Lee (1910-2004), established the Prison's Bible Crusade. In 1973, Brother Chester went to the Union Prison at Rafted, Florida, to visit ninety-two men on death row and took them bibles. Since then, thousands of bibles and Christian pamphlets have been distributed in the United States. Brother Chester acquired a ninety-nine year lease on 16th section land in Leetown. Although



Chester and Effie Stockstill Lee

all 16th section lands are reserved for county schools, the county school board may lease it to individuals and collect rent on the property. In the 1980's he created Lee Lake and the Lee Retreat there. Many churches in the area have used the site for retreats. Brother Chester also built on this site "Uncle Chester's Log Cabin Fish House," a very popular restaurant in the region for many years. The fish house served heaping platters of fresh Southern fried catfish.

Reverend Dosson Lavelle Lee (b. 1930) was the pastor of the Leetown Baptist Church



Lavelle and Myra Bilbo Lee

from 1977 to 1998. Known as Lavelle Lee, he married Myra Bilbo (b. 1930). Lavelle was an important leader of the community and is now retired on Possum Fork Road. In 1986, Reverend Lavelle compiled an important history of Leetown entitled *The Family Register of Peyton Lee 1801-1873*. He is a direct fifth generation descendant of the aforementioned pioneer settler, Peyton Lee. This history is an important source of information about the early history of Leetown and their ancestors who came from North Carolina.

A land development project called Deer Park was financed and built by James Fleming and Sonny Stuart from Poplarville. Around 1980, the land was bought from the Whitoff family and subdivided into three hundred one-acre lots in the first phase. The business plan was to attract buyers from New Orleans looking for affordable housing, such as a trailer, to be a vacation camp in the piney woods. The second phase of 150 parcels in the rolling hills next to the Catahoula swamp was designed for more high-end vacationers who would build stick frame houses.

Robert (Rob) Brignac (b. 1950) has lived in Leetown next to the church for fifty years. He is a deacon of the church and a community activist who reports that in the old neighborhood around the church most of the old-timers were named Lee or Stockstill. He married Diane Fleming (b. 1950) who served people in Leetown through a Ministry of Mercy carrying food and visiting the sick and suffering. Rob Brignac was also an auto mechanic who provided invaluable assistance in the prepa-



Old Leetown Church

ration of this article.

Deacon Brignac reports that a church in small communities like Leetown provides the nucleus or cultural matrix that perpetrates the life and character of the neighborhood. Neighbor helps neighbor, and the inhabitants look upon one another fellow farmers or artisans like family. This spirit, bound by a shared religion, was present in one form or another from the early days of pioneer yeoman farmers in the Catahoula Creek basin. In the last fifty years, Leetown has tripled in population. Other neighboring communities such as Caesar, Anner, and Crane Creek have diminished in size since early pioneer days and have become virtual ghost towns.

In conclusion, the history of Leetown spans a period of over 170 years. Important families such as the Lees and the Resters have populated the village for over five generations producing many descendants who to this day remain on the land settled by the first pioneer

families. The Leetown Church has played an important role in the lives of the settlers and farmers who have woven a rich history of the development of the rural lands in the northern part of the most southern county in Mississippi, Hancock County.

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45 Day Trip in 1829

By
S. G. Thigpen

*Pearl River: Highway
to Glory Land*

Edited by
Eddie Coleman

*(There is very little editing on my
part.)*

A diary with daily entries written by Miss Adeline Russ gives a daily account of a trip which began in Brunswick County, North Carolina, on February 18, 1829, and ended April 14—45 days later in Pearlinton, Mississippi.

In an automobile today (1965), it would take less than two days to make that trip, but back then travel was much slower by horseback, wagon, cart, or on foot.

In the group making this long and arduous trip, in the cold and rain of winter and early spring, over mud roads—sometimes no roads at all but just paths through the wilderness—were several members of the family of Amelia Potter Russ, widow of Sempronius Russ, who had died in 1816. Also in this group of emigrants making their way from North Carolina to Mississippi were Bill Poitevent and family. Bill Poitevent was later to become widely known as an industrialist, ship owner, farmer, and the wealthiest man in this section of the country.

Samuel Potter Russ, oldest son and oldest child of Sempronius and Amelia Potter

Russ, was living in Pearlinton, Miss., in 1829. How and why Samuel came to Pearlinton is not recorded. The first time there is any record of any Russ living in this area is an old bible which shows that Samuel married Eliza M. Frierson on September 25, 1817.

Many of Andrew Jackson's soldiers came back to this lovely land they had passed through on their way to New Orleans, after being mustered out in the spring of 1815, after the Battle of New Orleans. It is most probable that Samuel Russ was a soldier in Jackson's artillery and had passed through Pearlinton to the battle which so devastated the British in January 1815. It is well known that Jackson's artillery was loaded on boats in Gainesville and Pearlinton on its way to New Orleans in December 1814 so I think it is a reasonable assumption that this first Russ in this area saw Pearlinton at that time and, after being mustered out, came back to this little community.

Samuel must have sent back glowing accounts of Pearlinton for his widowed mother, and at least part of her children, with some neighbors, left the old home in North Carolina to find a new home where her eldest son lived.

When the group from North Carolina arrived in Pearlinton on April 14, 1829, at the home of Samuel Russ, they found him with a sick wife and five children. According to the record his wife died on May 13 just a few weeks after the arrival of the group.

Mary H. Russ, born June 10, 1818, and oldest child of Samuel Russ, married Bill Poite-

vent at a very young age sometime after he arrived in Pearlinton. Among the other children of Samuel was Luther Russ, the grandfather of the Picayune Russes.

According to the diary of Adeline Russ, they left Brunswick County on February 18, at 3 o'clock in the evening, starting for the west and arriving at Little River sometime after 8 o'clock, a distance of 16 miles. It was sleeting on the morning of the 19th, and they did not get started until 12 noon, making 15 miles before setting up a camp at a ferry where they spent a pleasant night. The morning of the 20th was a pleasant one. They made 19 miles that day, overtaking the Poitevent family, and all camped together that night for the first time. The diarist wrote, "We pitched our tents at dark which were seven in number, and the forest was adorned with out lights."

Adeline Russ was 13 years old when she made this trip with her family. In 1838 she married Dr. Mead of Gainesville. Her daughter, Lois A. Mead became the wife of Henry Weston in 1858, thus making Adeline Russ the grandmother of the Westons at Logtown.

It would be hard for younger people today, who travel everywhere speedily and in great comfort, to even imagine a trip through virgin forest, over paths rather than roads, in winter weather with teams that made only a few miles in a whole day. While they carried some feed for their teams and food for themselves with them, they had to trade for, buy or work for the supplies they needed along the way.

On Sunday, April 21, they started at 8 AM and traveled three to five miles when Bill Poitevent's horse ran away and broke his cart to pieces. It had to be repaired before they could start again. Another cart broke down, too and they made only a few miles that day.

These people had a succession of days when they travelled anywhere from 14 to as high as 25 miles in one day. As there were no bridges back then, they crossed many streams on ferries. They travelled over bad roads and through swamps, in cold, and often, freezing weather. The diarist wrote on Feb. 25, "Travelled 25 miles and camped about dark near Mr. Smoot's mill where we had grinding done. The next morning was cold and rainy."

People along the way were most hospitable, Miss Russ writing, "Sunday the 29th was a cold, windy, rainy day. About 10 o'clock it began to sleet and we were invited to Mr. Ware's home and were kindly treated." They passed through Columbia, S.C., the capital of that state. For several days it was wet, cold, and rainy, and the people in the caravan suffered from cold and exposure. A few days later they crossed the Savannah River into Georgia. It is recorded in the diary that they had bad roads and crossed a number of rivers on ferries as they trudged on Westward [*sic*].

On March 7, the diarist wrote, "Aunt Sally became ill and the others went on while Bill Poitevent and family stayed behind with her." On March 10 she wrote, "A cold rainy windy morning we travelled the worst

road that ever was travelled and camped in a log cabin five miles from Macon, Ga." The group visited relatives at Colodensville, Ga., for three days. Due to extremely bad weather they camped in a large Baptist church on the night of the 16th. The weather continued bad. They continued to ferry across rivers as they went through Georgia. After several days they camped within sight of Montgomery, Ala., setting up their camp two miles out.

They seem to have had better weather on across Alabama. The diarist wrote, "We spent the 29th and 30th at Uncle Wingate's." According to this, Judge Wingate, who for a long time had a sawmill at Logtown, must have been closely related to the travelers. Again, they had pleasant weather as they crossed into Mississippi. The diarist wrote on April 5th, "Passed through a barren level country, paid \$1 to cross the ferry at Leakesville in Green County, the poorest village I ever saw or ever heard of. We could get no provisions of any kind neither for love nor money, for the people or the stock."

On April 6, the caravan came to a Mr. Dantzler's mill and had some grinding done. They travelled the next day, as Miss Russ wrote, "Through the most desolate country I ever saw, crossed Black Creek at Perkins ferry for \$1.50 and camped on the creek in Perry County, Miss." They travelled the next day through great pine forests, a good part of the time without any sign of a road, the diarist writing, "Provisions were scarce and hard to get. We caught gophers and made that day 27

miles through the gopher nation."

On Sunday morning of April 10, they came in sight of Pearl River. They travelled a hilly road southward, "arriving at Brother Asa's about sunset and spent the next two days with him." From what follows Asa Russ must have lived at that time somewhere in the neighborhood of what we now know as Cross Road in this county, for the diarist stated that they left the home of Asa Russ travelling southward. She wrote, "All started on a crooked road, crossed the Hobolobhitto, paid \$2.25 bridge toll and spent the night nearby." They apparently paid the toll to Moses Cook as he at that time owned a toll bridge over the Hobolochitto where R. H. Crosby now lives. On the morning of the 14th, they got an early start and travelled 25 miles, "arriving at Brother Samuel's near Pearlinton."

This story tells in an impressive way how people lived and travelled 134 years ago. Unless we know how people lived back then, how can we appreciate the many conveniences, and the better ways of living that we enjoy today? An old lady, now 89 years old, said to me recently, "The worst off person today lives better than the best off person did when I was a little girl." In many respects what this grand old lady said is true.

SOURCE:

Thigpen, S. G. *Pearl River: Highway to Glory Land*. Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, 1965.





Beverly Frater

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

We have prepared a series of articles about our Board of Directors and Staff. We hope you enjoy their interesting recollections of how they got here.

BEVERLY FRATER
First Vice President

and

BRYAN FRATER
Second Vice President

Beverly and Bryan Frater

Beverly was born and reared in New Orleans. After graduating from high school as valedictorian, she attended Newcomb College. She graduated in three and a half years with a BS in mathematics and taught high school and middle school math. Bryan was born in and grew up in New Orleans as well. After graduating from Jesuit High School, he attended Tulane University, receiving a BA in business admin-

istration. From there he entered UNO graduate school for one year until, at the height of the Vietnam conflict, Uncle Sam “invited” him to serve in the Louisiana Air National Guard. Upon returning, he was a data processing officer and then assistant vice-president of a New Orleans bank with special emphasis on the marketing and sale of computer services to the savings and loan industry.

Bryan and Beverly married in 1969 and began their family of a daughter and two sons. As the mother of three children in three different schools, she was fortunate to be a stay-at-home mom when the children were young. Through the years, she logged many volunteer hours at the various schools and now wishes there had been such a thing as “frequent flier” volunteer and car-pool miles!

As the children grew, Beverly started a chocolate candy business, making novelty chocolate suckers and specialty pieces which she sold in New Orleans and Bay St. Louis stores and gift shops. She then worked as an assistant bookkeeper in a law firm, often doubling as a legal secretary.

In 1977, Bryan made a career move to become the controller-office manager for a large New Orleans law firm of over three hundred attorneys. As such, he was an officer in the local chapter of Legal Administrators, wrote several professional articles and conducted seminars for the Louisiana State Bar. In addition he served on an advisory committee for the Tulane University paralegal program. He also owned and operated a retail flooring company in Metairie and worked in home improvement sales for



Bryan Frater

Sears. True life partners, Beverly also helped Bryan with the flooring business.

Beverly loves sewing, crafting and creating, and for twenty-five years, she participated in an arts and crafts group in New Orleans. The group gave two to three home shows a year. She also loves music and enjoys singing. As a member of the Jefferson Symphony Chorus for ten years, she had the thrill of singing Mozart in Carnegie Hall.

Waveland has always been a part of Beverly’s life. With her marriage to Bryan, it became a part of his as well. Beverly’s grandparents bought their property there in 1922, and her parents added their house to the compound in 1956. While she was growing up, her family spent every available moment there. The tradition continued with the “Frater five.” An avid do-it-yourselfer Bryan built a small house for them on the family property in the 1980’s. He was in the process of building by himself their 3,500 sq. ft. “grand manor”

when Katrina struck, destroying all properties on the beach and everything south of the railroad tracks including their house and the home of Beverly's 91-year-old father. Bryan, Beverly and her father had evacuated to Alabama. The poor conditions in the New Orleans area created by the flood waters from the levee breaches made returning to their townhome in Metairie impractical. They opted to stay in Alabama, settled in Daphne and stayed there for seven years. They lived in Lake Forest, an enormous subdivision of 3,500 homes. Becoming involved in the POA, Bryan found himself on the board for three years, ultimately serving as President. Beverly and Bryan moved back to New Orleans and spent two years in Metairie before returning to Waveland in 2014. To express her joy at their return, Beverly remarked, "We are so happy to be home!"

Their three children have blessed them with six fabulous grandchildren, who keep them busy. The oldest is a sophomore at St. Stanislaus, and the youngest is entering kindergarten.

Since returning, Beverly has been involved in M.A.P. - Music, Arts, and Practicality, a non-profit children's theater organization. She has served as secretary, president, and now treasurer. For the past two years, Bryan worked at H&R Block during tax season. He also worked for the 2010 census and is currently working for the 2020 census. Their remaining volunteer hours have been spent with the Historical Society, with Beverly first as secretary and now 1st Vice President and Bryan continuing his love of DIY projects as 2nd Vice President, the board member in charge of keeping the Lobrano House in good repair and stable

condition. While Bryan has always been a history lover, the Hancock County Historical Society has awakened in Beverly, as she says, "a true interest in history that I never knew I had!"



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