

---

*A Trip Back in Time:  
The Ruffner Reunion in Luray, Virginia  
By Betty Lou Gaeng*

---

In June, my daughter Marilyn and I boarded a plane at SeaTac Airport to fly east to revisit the land of our ancestors. We landed at Dulles Airport outside of Washington, D.C. Not wanting to become part of the crowd, we headed westward towards our destination, the quiet peace of the countryside in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

We drove through areas with names remembered from history lessons—Manassas and Brandy Station. Near Brandy Station we stopped at a place long called Catalpa, just a few miles north of Culpeper—near Muddy Reach on the Rappahannock River. There we visited an old family cemetery where my gr-gr-gr-gr-gr-grandfather Lewis Davis YANCEY has rested since 1784. This was his plantation land, still known by the same name he called it so many decades ago—Arlington. This is where he married Mildred Winifred KAVANAUGH. They inherited the land from her father, Philemon KAVANAUGH. Lewis Davis YANCEY died there at the age of 94. A sturdy rock wall encloses the cemetery. It has been long neglected, with only the tops of two headstones peeking through the brush and small trees.

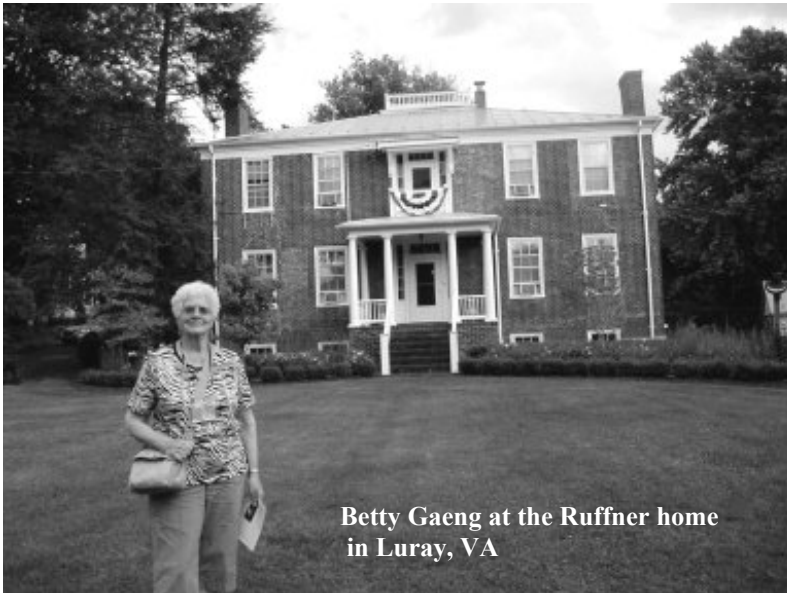
Carefully walking through the waist-high grass, I made my way to the stone steps to look over the wall. There was no possible access to the burial places, so I merely stood there wondering why the cemetery was so forgotten. Why was the family who owned this property neglecting this resting place of the ancestors? I discovered that the lady who administers the YANCEY family trust has forbidden anyone to touch the cemetery. I am left with the question--why?

Lewis Davis YANCEY lived to see granddaughter Isabella YANCEY marry a young man from the neighboring plantation. Lewis Davis would have been surprised to learn that, years following his death, this granddaughter and her husband Lewis TUTT sold their land and, along with their children, traveled west to Kentucky. In that rugged land, Isabella and her husband Lewis died and were buried. One son, George Garland TUTT, married Elizabeth Ann WILLIAMS in Kentucky. Nine children were born to them while they were still in Kentucky. The family later continued the westward trek. Their journey took them to Missouri, and later to Nebraska, where first Elizabeth and then George died.

In 1863, Andrew TUTT, son of George Garland and Elizabeth TUTT, met a young lady whose roots were in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia—her birthplace being the little town of Luray. She was born in 1843 on her father's farm located about a mile west of the town. In the present day, beneath this land where her father Peter A. RUFFNER had farmed, there is a popular tourist attraction—the spectacularly beautiful Luray Caverns.

This young lady was my great grandmother. Her name was Martha Caroline Marye RUFFNER and she was the reason for this trip into the past. Cousins united together by the Ruffner Family Association meet every other year to renew a commitment to their

common heritage. 2009 was selected as the year to unite once again at the homeplace. The place we honor as our beginning—Luray, in Page County, Virginia. Luray is a small town established in 1812 on land that was part of the RUFFNER land holdings.



Betty Gaeng at the Ruffner home  
in Luray, VA

At these gatherings of cousins from all over the United States, we renew our ties to this little town in the Shenandoah Valley. Perhaps this year would be the last time I would walk the same land the ancestors had walked centuries before. Thus, the trip was special for me.

The RUFFNER family had its actual start in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. In 1739, at the home of the

father of the bride at Manor Township in Lancaster County, Peter RUFFNER married Mary STEINMAN. As a wedding gift to start their new life together, Mary's father Joseph STONEMAN, a wealthy land speculator, deeded to them several hundred acres of valley land of what was called the Hawksbill Patent in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

Peter RUFFNER, my gr-gr-gr-gr-grandfather, came as a young man of 19 from Switzerland in the year 1732. Mary STEINMAN was born at Manor Township in 1714. Mary's father had come to this country from Wurttemberg in Germany several years earlier. Joseph STEINMAN was a businessman as well as a farmer. His business was acquiring land, and in order to be able to conduct business with the English, he used the English version of his name—STEINMAN became STONEMAN. This was the name he used on all paperwork, even his will.

Following their marriage, Peter and Mary RUFFNER left her father's home and headed south down a muddy road to the beautiful Susquehanna River. Reaching the river, they crossed and headed their wagon south to the Valley of Virginia. Where the Potomac River is met by the Shenandoah, they secured their wagon on a flatboat and navigated up the river to the mouth of Hawksbill Creek. There, Peter and Mary settled on the land deeded to them. They established their home on the east side of Hawksbill Creek, and named their new home *Big Spring*. Two hundred and seventy years later, that same spring still bubbles down the rocky hillside near the house.

At the homeplace, Peter and Mary farmed their land, increased their land holdings and provided homes for each of their surviving six children: Joseph, Benjamin, Peter Jr., Reuben, Elizabeth, and Emanuel. Two of their children, Catharine and Tobias, died

young. Peter and Mary lived a full and rich life. Peter died in 1778 at the age of 65, and Mary lived another 20 years, dying in 1798 at the advanced age of 84. On a knoll, in view from the house, Peter and Mary are both buried.

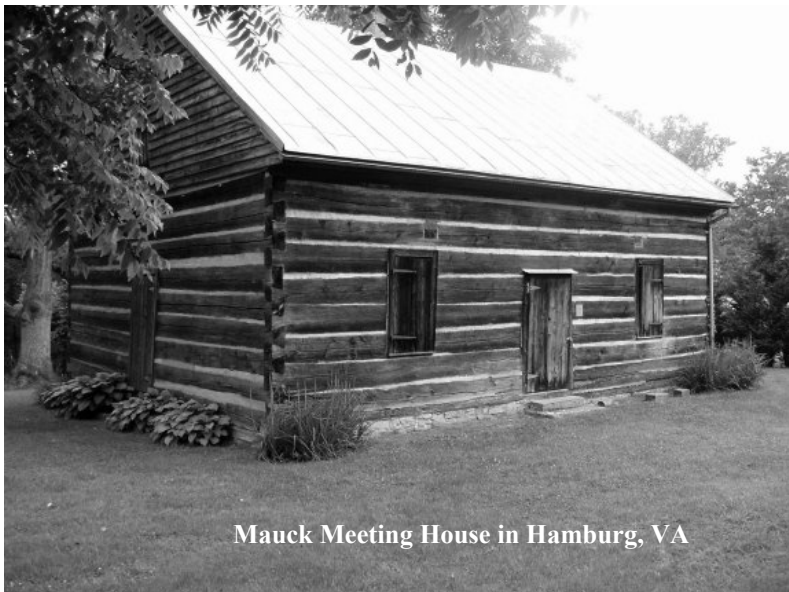
Their third son Peter Jr. inherited the homeplace, and with his wife Elizabeth, he farmed this same land. They are both buried near his parents. Also, their son Jonas (my gr-gr-grandfather) and countless other family members rest nearby.

Although Peter, the pioneer, accumulated thousands of acres of land in this part of the Valley, the original land is considered our family's homeplace. When I return to this place, I can sense deep secure roots. Roots that reach so deep they seem to anchor me. This place, more than any other where my ancestors settled, brings me back time after time.

Perhaps I am thinking of all the history lessons learned in school. Lessons where we heard the names of the towns in the Shenandoah Valley, names important in Civil War history—Winchester, Woodstock, New Market, Lexington, Strasburg, Staunton, Front Royal, Winchester and Harrisonburg. Luray itself endured encampments of both Southern and Northern troops. This is the land once called the *breadbasket* of the South, where SHERIDAN made his march destroying the barns and grain fields on the farms that supplied the Confederacy with food. I have always known of my family's connection to the Shenandoah Valley, but it was simply a name until several years ago when I stood on Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park of the Blue Ridge Mountains and looked down at the valley. Returning once again this year was like going home.

Whatever the strings are that hold me, and even though I was born thousands of miles from the Shenandoah Valley, in the state of Washington, I am pulled back in time when I am there. The history of the family is so familiar to me—it is my history, never forgotten.

Time flew by as we enjoyed this special reunion time. Several days later, following our gathering with cousins, festivities were drawing to a close.



Mauck Meeting House in Hamburg, VA

Early Sunday morning, Marilyn and I, with many of the cousins, drove a few miles west to the little village of Hamburg. There we attended services of the Primitive Baptist Church. We met in a building known as the Mauck Meeting House. Built in the late 1700s on

land donated to the Mennonite people by Daniel MAUCK, my gr-gr-gr-gr-grandfather, the building is little changed. Nothing appears altered inside. The old benches are still in use. In the center of the building is an old stove built back in the early times by Dirck PENNYBAKER, a well-known artisan of his day. More of my ancestors were buried just behind the meeting house.

Much of the land adjacent to the meeting house was Daniel MAUCK's farm, and it is still owned and farmed by family. Cousin Cora Lee farms the land. Her daughter Nancy also lives nearby and raises sheep for their wool, along with other farm animals. Cora Lee's two husbands rest in the cemetery next to her home. Between them, a place is already prepared for her. Other family members are buried in this quiet place—close to home. With loving care Cora Lee and Nancy tend this cemetery.

Marilyn and I walked the short distance from the meeting house to Cora Lee's home. Walking along the country road to my cousin's house, I was reminded of the song that John DENVER sang so often, "*Country Roads*." The words are so apt, *Life is old there, older than the hills; Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River*.



Shenandoah River near Hamburg, VA

Each time I visit, I am amazed that these college-educated people live here in the peace and quiet of the country. Even though they have conveniences the ancestors never had, they still live in much the same manner as the ancestors did in olden times.

The interior of Cora Lee's beautifully cared-for home, built centuries before, is a museum of family treasures. Cora Lee herself is a true Southern gentlewoman—able to capably tend to her farm chores, and also to extend genteel Southern hospitality.

Following our visit with Cora Lee and Nancy, the four of us rejoined the rest of the cousins for our final activity--lunch served by the church members. After lunch and some more visiting, we all said our good-byes and headed homeward, to meet again in two years at a spot to be chosen later.

Our flight was not until the next day, so Marilyn and I decided to do some exploring in the numerous and interesting shops along the way. Handmade goods are sold in the little villages and these are always a great temptation.

Monday afternoon our flight left Dulles and that evening we were back in our home territory, tired, but happy that once again we had a wonderful visit with old friends. No, more than just old friends—cousins. We all share the same roots. That is what makes these reunions so special.

\* \* \*

