

Laura Ratcliffe, Herndon's Confederate Spy

By Chuck Mauro

Herndon had its own confederate spy during the Civil War in the person of a young woman named Laura Ratcliffe, who provided valuable information to General JEB Stuart and Colonel John S. Mosby. Stuart repaid her with an album in which he wrote four poems to her, imploring her to continue her support. Mosby credited her with saving his life in February 1863, when she warned him of a Union trap into which he was about to step.

During the war, Laura lived on what is now Centerville Road, just south of where the Cox Communications building is located today. Shortly after the war, Laura's mother purchased another house on Centerville Road, subsequently named Merrybrook, where Laura would live until she died in 1923 at the age of 87.

In 1890, destitute, as many in Fairfax County were after the war, Laura married her next door neighbor, a northerner named Milton Hanna. She was 54 years old. While this marriage would make her wealthy, Milton died in an accident seven years later, leaving Laura a widow.

Laura seldom mentioned her role as a spy and shunned publicity about her role as a provider for the Confederacy. With her abundant resources, she devoted much of her interest to the needs of the poor and unfortunate. In 1914, she fell and presumably broke her hip. We say "presumably" because—as the town doctor was a male—she refused to allow him to examine her. She remained an invalid for the remaining years of her life.

In her will, Laura wrote, "I give the home I now occupy, given me by my Mother to my cousin Mamie C. Wiley hoping that she will make it her home... & I wish to have put up in my own graveyard a neat gray granite stone with the Names of Ratcliffe, Coleman and Hanna cut on it." The headstone with those family names stands today in a small plot in front of the Worldgate Marriott. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, Laura Ratcliffe Branch, erected a marker there in her honor in 2007.

As for Merrybrook, it remains just outside the town limits, at 2346 Centerville Road. The land around it is slated for development and the house is in jeopardy. The current owners, Win and David Meiselman, have been working tirelessly to ensure that it is preserved. To learn more about their efforts visit the website of the organization they established, Friends of Laura Ratcliffe, at www.lauraratcliffe.org.