

The Restoration of the Cobbs Hall Burying Ground

A Challenge and a Vision

The restoration of the Burnt House Field Cemetery near Hague, Virginia was completed by the Society of the Lees of Virginia in the 1930s. It was a singular achievement and saved the graves of Richard and Laetitia Lee, Thomas and Hannah Lee, and Richard Henry Lee and his wives Ann Aylett and Anne Gaskins from being lost forever. The restoration of the Cobbs Hall Burying Ground came later and is the subject of this paper. The basic sources are the files of the Society of the Lees of Virginia, which are maintained in the Special Collection Room of the Alexandria Library, the *Magazine of the Society of the Lees of Virginia*, published between 1922 and 1939, Society genealogical data, and personal photographs.

With the Burnt House Field project complete, the opportunity was at hand to start on the restoration of the Cobbs Hall Burying Ground in southeast Northumberland County. The timing was appropriate as it was approaching the 300th anniversary of Richard Lee's emigration to Virginia. There was only one problem - money. There was not enough money in the Society's bank account to undertake such a project and so Cazenove Lee issued a challenge to the membership to come up with the necessary funds. *A Challenge, 1640-1940* was the first article in the *Magazine of the Society of the Lees of Virginia, Volume XI, Number 1* published in February 1939. The full article is over two pages, but it can be summarized briefly: Caz describes the rich history of the Lees in Virginia and in America, and then asks "Is the grave of the common ancestor of these men worth preserving?" Then he laid out the basic plan for the restoration:

"We propose to enclose the entire plot, restore the wall of the little 27 foot by 31 foot enclosure and within it to erect a suitable monument to the memory or the Founder of the Lee Family in Virginia."

Unfortunately, the world went to war later in 1939, and the Society went into a hiatus, while many of its members, both men and women, did what Lees have always done in time of need: fought for their country. The restoration of the Cobbs Hall Burying Ground took a back seat to other endeavors, and it was not until the mid-1950s that the project was renewed.

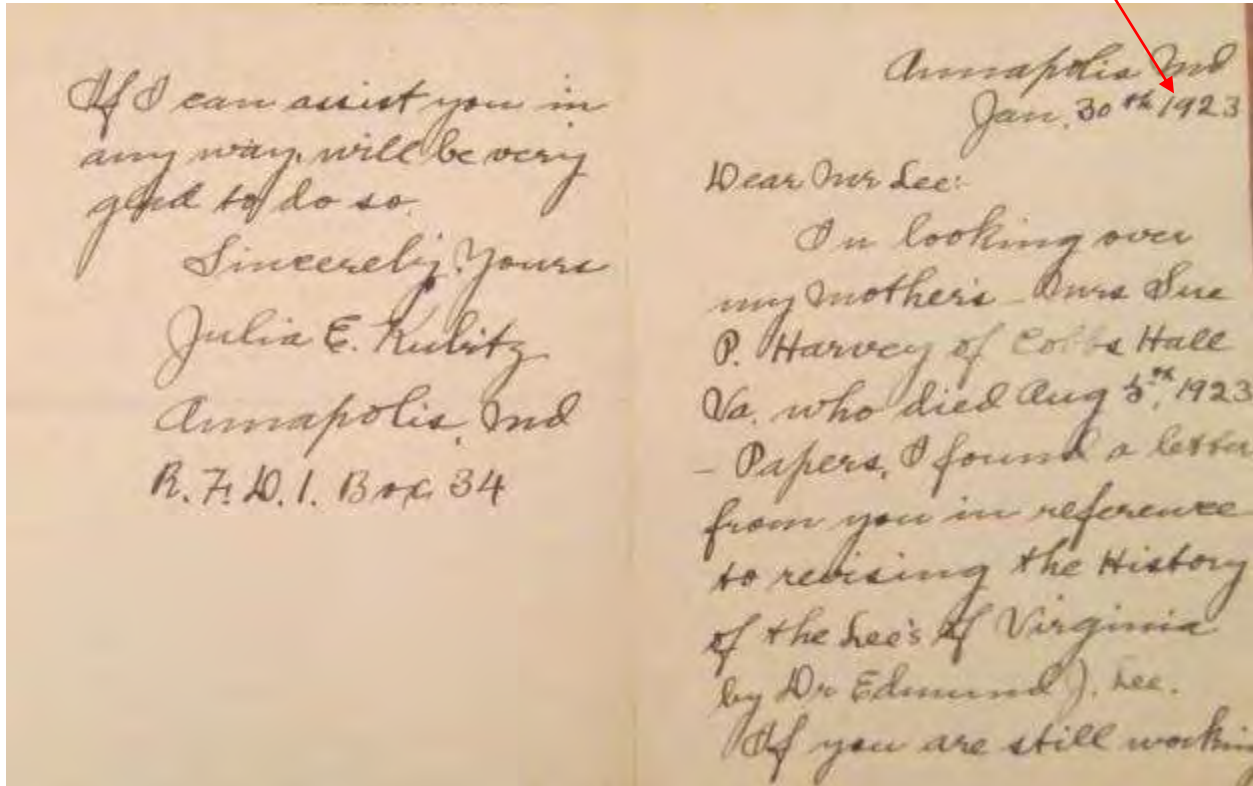
Before getting into what was actually accomplished, we need to go back to the 1920s and earlier when Caz really formulated the dream of restoring the cemetery.

There is a delightful exchange of letters between Caz and Julia Estelle Harvey Kubitz in the Society files that provide insight into just how the project was conceived. Julia was the daughter of Richard and Susan Harvey and the great granddaughter of Richard Lee and Elizabeth Hurst. She was born and raised at Cobbs Hall, married D. E. Otto Kubitz, and their son William may well be the last Lee descendant born at Cobbs Hall.

After Julia's mother Susan passed away in the summer of 1923, Julia went through all of her mother's effects. While doing so, she found a letter from Caz to her mother seeking to gather

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genealogical information to update *Lee of Virginia*¹, which had been published in 1895 by Caz's uncle Dr. Edmund J. Lee. Rather than just toss the letter out, Julia took the initiative to write to Caz and offering to assist. In her letter, she did what we all do in January of each year (some of us continue to about March!) and used the previous year vice the current one.



Julia Kubitz Letter January 30 1924, pages 1 and 4

If there is a genesis for the Cobbs Hall Burying Ground restoration project, this is it.

Caz waited a month before responding on February 28, 1924, when he said that there had been a sickness in the family, and he apologized for the delay in answering her letter. However, from his tone, he was obviously delighted to hear from her. His first request was for detailed information on the Harvey family, of which there was only limited information in *Lee of Virginia*. He wanted children's names and birth dates, who they married and when--all the usual genealogy stuff.

Then Caz launched into what obviously was his real passion, Cobbs Hall itself and the Burying Ground. He mentioned that he had previously visited the cemetery, and reported seeing two tombstones standing, those of William Garlington and Susan F Harvey.² He specifically asked about any traditions concerning the cemetery and if Julia had heard about one that had Richard Lee, I, buried in front of the old Cobbs Hall.

¹ This work has been reprinted several times remains the single most reliable source for the descendants of Richard and Anne Constable Lee.

² The William Garlington marker is the only one visible today.

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In her original letter, Julia mentioned meeting Dr. Edmund J. Lee and (Robert) Allan Castleman³ when they visited Cobbs Hall, when she was about 16. That would have placed the visit in 1893 which corresponds to the date that Caz stated in his response. Caz asked about the remains of an old brick wall surrounding the cemetery that his father had found when he visited in 1893.

There is only one page of Caz's letter in the Society's files, although there were probably at least two pages in the letter, since there is no signature block. Of note, Caz was an excellent typist. There are a lot of his letters in the files with few, if any type corrections and he seemed to have always made a carbon copy of his letters. It is these carbon copies which are in the Society records.

Julia's response on March 21, 1924, is a real gem: 24 pages full of exactly what Caz was looking for. She, too, apologized for being tardy, citing sickness in the family of one of her daughters which required her grandmotherly duties.

In this letter, Julia confirms the Family history that the original Cobbs Hall was closer to where the cemetery now is and that her grandfather built the current structure, which we see today. She also described how there were several more grave stones in the cemetery.

When she was a young girl of six or seven, her father, Richard L. Harvey, suffered what was probably a stroke and was paralyzed on the right side. Julia reported that he was a complete invalid and required constant care. She spent hours at his bedside listening to him tell family stories.⁴ She asked him who William Garlington was and his reported response is a classic. "Old Bill Garlington had no business being buried there, that Sally Lee should never have married him." Sarah "Sally" Elizabeth was a daughter of Kendall and Mary Nutt Lee.



William Garlington

³ His mother, Mary M. Lee, was a first cousin of Dr. Lee.

⁴ Too bad she did not have a recording device!

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In 1887, Julia's older brother, Robert L Harvey drowned in an accident. Their father wanted to be able to see his son's grave from the house porch, so Robert was buried under an old walnut tree behind the present Cobbs Hall. Later, both Julia's parents and several other family members were interred in this site. Julia related that the walnut tree had been planted by Richard Lee, who died in 1824.

In doing some further tracking, Richard Bland Lee, IV's daughter Torie reported that the walnut tree survived until a storm some fifteen years ago, when it had to be taken down. It is unknown what happened to the lumber but the wood surely has a lot of Lee blood in it. Bland Lee owned Cobbs Hall for a number of years.

Now, when Caz Lee received Julia's letter of March 21, 1924, he was ecstatic to say the least and responded immediately on the 25th of March. There was no delay this time and no tardy excuses! He writes "It is difficult for me to find words to express my deep sense of appreciation of your letter of March 21 st., and the fund of information contained there in." Of course, being a good historian, he asked for additional information, but it is clear that he treasured her letter.

Cazenove Lee probably visited the "old graveyard" twice and perhaps more. In the December 1927 *Magazine of the Society of the Lees of Virginia* about the Grave of Colonel Richard Lee, he reports having visited Captain William H. Carter, CSA "at his cottage in Northumberland County, overlooking an arm of the Chesapeake Bay." William was a grandson of Susan Lee and William Harvey and provided valuable information of who was buried in the Cobbs Hall Burying Ground. No doubt, Caz visited the site during this trip. It should be noted that getting to the area in those days was a challenge and probably involved taking a steamer from Baltimore.

His next visit was sometime in 1926 or 1927 when he met with Julia, who was visiting Cobbs Hall at the time. It was these visits and exploration of the Cobbs Hall Burying Ground that formed the basis of his article in the 1927 Magazine, and is repeated in *Lee Chronicle* on pages 39-42 along with a sketch of the cemetery walls that Caz located. The article noted that Leanna Lee, the daughter of Leanna Lee and William Jones, married her first cousin Charles Lee. In her will dated, June 24 1761, she directed the construction of a wall around the burying ground.

Cazenove Gardner Lee, Jr. passed away in 1945, and was buried in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, DC. He was a meticulous record keeper and prolific writer, so most of this knowledge about the Lee Family has been preserved. All of us today need to follow his example.

Restoration

Following Caz's death, the challenge to restore the Cobbs Hall Burying Ground went unanswered for another ten years. Then, Eleanor Templeman picked up the ball and got things started again with a letter to the then owner of Cobbs Hall, Edwin Walter Harvey, Sr. Walter was a cousin of Julia's and a member of the Society, so there was no need for an elaborate introduction and Eleanor just jumped in, asking if he would like to donate an acre of land around the cemetery and claim a nice tax write off, or allow the Society to purchase the land. If the latter, what would be the cost? Her letter was dated January 20, 1956.

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Walter responded with a two page type written letter that is worth repeating, as it contains valuable history about Cobbs Hall in the last century.

“I have your very nice letter of January 20th, and I do hope you will excuse my slowness in answering. During the middle of December, I fell thru a rotten board on a flight of steps and severely injured my leg and knee and I have been confined to my home until a few days ago.

“I am very much interested in your plan to restore the graves of our common ancestors in the old grave yard near "Cobbs Hall". In connection with this I think it may be helpful to you if I give you some back ground on this matter. During hurricane "Hazel" in August 1955 "Cobbs Hall" was greatly damaged as it was directly in the path of the storm. It blew all four of the chimneys off, destroyed both porches and about one half of the slate roof and in general, tore up many other things. At that time there were four heirs to the property, one brother in Baltimore, one in Kilmarnock, the widow of my half brother in Los Angeles, and myself. A few weeks prior to the storm a gentleman named Gardiner from Palm Beach, Florida, came into Dividing Creek in his yacht to spend the night, he saw our old home place, fell in love with it and to make a long story short, Mr. Gardiner offered us a very large price for the property. The other three heirs agreed to sell but because of my feeling for the place, it having been in our family for over three hundred years, I refused. As you can well understand, I wasn't too popular with the other heirs after blocking the sale before the hurricane, and I was less so after the damage was done. This being so, and to placate them, in January 1955, I offered to buy them out assuming the cost of all repairs myself. I hesitated quite a while as it meant that I would have gone in debt to handle it and at my age, I am afraid of debt. The other heirs accepted my offer and since January 1955, I have been the sole owner. At considerable cost, I repaired most of the storm damage and now have it in fairly good condition. Of course there remain many things to do yet but at least, I have made a good start and will do some more this summer. Mrs. Harvey and my family spent all last summer and fall there and we thoroughly enjoyed it and look forward to doing the same this summer.

“After buying the other shares in "Cobbs Hall" I began to think about the old grave yard in the woods. I had always understood that the one acre containing it, was the property of our family in perpetuity. I had my lawyer search the records at the Court House and he was unable to find anything pertaining to this right on record. This being so, I was concerned as to our future possession of it. The land surrounding it was owned by a colored man named Curry and to protect my interest in the grave yard, I bought twenty acres from him and this tract entirely surrounds it with the grave yard in the extreme south east corner. My lawyer now tells me that I have a right to do anything I want with the grave site so long as it is used for no other purpose than a cemetery. I think this information will answer your question as to my right to dispose of it.

“Answering your second question; I would consider deeding it to “The Society of the Lees of Virginia" without cost, (that is, the one acre containing the cemetery), and I

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will also consider giving them a right of way to it for a road, as it lies about eleven hundred feet from the nearest road and to be accessible, a road would be necessary. Before making a definite decision however, I would like to know more about your plans. One important question is this; do your plans contemplate restoring the whole cemetery of one acre or are you interested just in the grave site of Colonel Richard Lee. I would be more disposed to present it to the Society if it is their intention to restore the whole grave site rather than just the grave of Colonel Lee. It appears to me that it would be a much better project, to consider it as a whole even tho it was not all done at one time, as it would cost no more to build a road to the entire plot than to just one grave. It is a beautiful spot, surrounded by very old and large trees and it seems to me an ideal project for the Society to undertake. I would be pleased to hear more of your ideas on this subject and ask that you let me have them at your earliest convenience.”

Game on! The restoration project that had been a dream of Cazenove Lee was finally underway. There was an offer of land and access to the cemetery, and now the hard work of actual renovation was about to begin.

Maurice DuPont Lee, who was president of the Society at the time, had already formed a committee to supervise the restoration project. In response to Walter Harvey's offer, Maurice wrote to Walter on April 10, 1956, asking him to be chairman of a subcommittee to "... carry out all local activities, after consulting with the main committee on policy and other broad questions—legal and otherwise. Mr. E. Griffin Dodson of House of delegates of the State of Virginia is the chairman of the main committee.”

Sounds like he was to be a subcommittee of one and do all the actual work. But he had plenty of help from Ludwell Montague who was the active member of the main committee. Ludwell and his wife Fanny visited Cobbs Hall in August of 1956, meeting with Walter Harvey and looking over the “terrain from the perimeter.” In his September 1956 report to the other board members, Ludwell relates that he was not about to try to “penetrate the dense undergrowth in the August heat,” but that he came away with a good understanding of the scope of the project.

Much of his report focused on how to build an access road to the site. The choices were to access from Cobbs Hall Lane or directly from Apple Grove Road/State Road 669. Walter had actually bulldozed a start for road which would have been about 1000 feet. Like what was done at the Burnt House Field Cemetery, the thought was to ask the State to actually build and maintain the road. If you visit Burnt House Field today, you will note that the state maintains the access right up to the cemetery boundary line.

Ludwell was a bit dubious of this option, and doubted that the state would be willing to take on this task as it would necessitate crossing a ravine and going through considerable undergrowth.

In any case, nothing could be actually accomplished at that time of year, as all the available workers were engaged in commercial fishing and any further progress would have to wait until the end of the fishing season. By this time, it was clear to all that the project could not be

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completed in time for a spring 1957 dedication ceremony, as they had desired, and that it would have to be put off until 1958.

Ludwell outlined the broad plan for 1957: archaeological exploration of the site and the restoration of the brick wall that Leanna Jones Lee directed in her will of 1761. Any further clearing of the site and erecting of a monument would be accomplished in the 1957-8 building season.

In the spring of 1957, Walter Harvey reported the following expenses on the project:

Nov 1 1956	Writing and recording deed	\$ 21.25
Dec 5 1956	Paid for right of way from Hughletts	\$ 200.00
Dec 5 1956	Labor for cleaning grave site	\$ 100.00
Dec 5 1956	Bulldozing Road	\$ 131.00
Jan 9 1957	Labor on Road	\$ 100.00
Feb 5, 1957	Labor, cleaning grave site	\$ 70.00
Mar 20 1957	Writing and Recording full deed	<u>\$ 21.00</u>
	Total	\$ 643.25

They were making progress and in the summer of 1957, the main committee made plans for the archaeological exploration of the site. They sought and received permission, from the Department of Interior, for Agnes Downey and Paul Swartz to participate in the 'big dig' scheduled for August 12.

The plan for the 'big dig' was ambitious, especially in the August heat -- the same heat that prevented Ludwell from getting to the grave site a year prior. The participants were Ludwell Montague, Walter Harvey, Agnes Downey, Paul Swartz, and a local contractor, plus a few actual workers. They immediately ran into problems. In addition to the old sycamore tree, that is still there today, there were numerous smaller trees, plus a couple of old stumps that had entangled roots over most of the plot. These roots prevented a good systematic excavation of the site. There were no buried grave stones uncovered, which was a big disappointment. However, they did uncover the footings for the Leanna Lee wall. But the wall was not exactly the way Caz had drawn it out about forty years before. Caz's diagram showed the sycamore to the outside the wall, but as Ludwell reports, it was actually right in the middle. Ludwell did not think that the tree predated the wall and that it grew up and destroyed that part of the 1761 wall. As we will see, his presumption was not correct.

After a hot, exhausting day, work ended at 5 pm, and as Agnes reports, the historians returned to Washington at 10 pm - a long day indeed.

Over the next few weeks a basic plan for the restoration jelled in discussions between Ludwell Montague, Maurice Lee, Eleanor Templeman, and Walter Harvey. Clear out the area, rebuild the wall and put up a monument. Fairly simple concept, but as always the devil is in the details.

The first challenge was the old sycamore tree, which was recently estimated to be about 450 years old. At the time of the original wall construction in the 1760s, it was probably just inside

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the wall, but over the years, the tree had overgrown that section of the wall. So the dilemma was where to place the new wall - inside or outside of the tree?

Now a word about this sycamore tree: for those of you who have seen it in person, I think you will agree that there is nothing glamorous about it. Plain and simple, it is old and ugly, but it is big with the circumference being roughly 20-21 feet at about one foot above the ground, and 15-16 feet at four feet above the ground. That tree has been there a long time and there is a lot of Lee blood in its limbs. A few years ago, the Society had a professional arborist examine the tree and he estimated its age at 450 years. This would mean that it was about a hundred years old when Richard Lee was buried there. It might be old and ugly, but it is not going anywhere!



Sycamore Tree, September 2009

By September 9, 1957, Ludwell had identified a local contractor to clear the small trees and old stumps, but the board needed to move quickly to take advantage of the contractor's availability. Ludwell then created a long and detailed report of what needed to be done, in preparation for the board's regular fall meeting. He offered two options for the wall, one with the sycamore on the inside of the enclosure and the other with it on the outside. Also, he suggested two options for the wall height, 28 or 36 inches above ground. Of course, the larger perimeter and height would be more costly. Ludwell was very conscious of the funds available for the project and recommended the smaller size and height.

The contractor proposed a concrete footing of 8 inches, with steel bars, with the top of the footing 8 inches below ground. The wall would be antique bricks from Williamsburg as available, and supplemented with new "antique" brick as necessary. There would be brick piers at each corner and at the entrance. The top of the wall would be rounded as in the "old style."

There followed an exchange of letters discussing the details of the wall design. Everyone agreed on the footing and basic design. But it turned out that the rounded top feature was not in the original bid and would cost about \$300 more. Additionally, Eleanor had evidently suggested that there be no entrance and that folks could just step over the wall. That idea was quickly discarded,

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but Eleanor talked Caz's widow, Dorothy Vandergrift Lee into underwriting the cost of the rounded top up to \$500. So that issue at least was resolved.

The entrance way design generated some discussion, with the final decision being that there would be one and a provision made for an iron gate, but not to install one at that point. The size of the wall still remained unresolved. Maurice Lee wanted it to be the same as the original Leanna Lee wall which would have necessitated leaving a gap for the sycamore tree. This was not one of the options that Ludwell had proposed. Ultimately, the decision was for a 37 by 27 foot wall, which placed the sycamore tree inside the enclosure.

On October 19, 1957, Walter Harvey reported the wall construction had been completed by Mr. Reese Clarke of Lively, Virginia, and that he was very pleased with the results. He wrote "Truthfully and frankly, I think it is a beautiful job and setting, and as a member of our Society I am very proud of it,"



Cobbs Hall Burying Ground, 1957

Cazenove Lee had collected some of old bricks from various Lee and related homes and they were used in construction of the left entrance pillar. Walter had a plaque mounted to record this fact.



Left Entrance Pillar, September 12, 2013

This picture shows the provision for an entrance gate, which was not installed. Walter Harvey had also saved some bricks from the second Cobbs Hall and they were included in the right entrance pillar. He asked permission to put a plaque on the right wall to record the deeding of the land and this fact.



Right Entrance Pillar, September 12, 2013

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In the summer of 1957, Maurice Lee had made arrangements for the casting of a large bronze plaque that would be mounted on a stone masonry pedestal within the enclosure. The construction of this pedestal presented its own challenge. There was no local source for construction stone. Ultimately they had to import stone from Warrenton, Virginia.



Cobbs Hall Plaque

With the wall complete and then the plaques installed, it was time for a formal dedication. The twenty-fourth annual meeting of the Society of the Lees of Virginia was held at Kilmarnock, Virginia on May 2-4, 1958. Following the business meeting, which was at the Morattico Baptist Church and less than a mile from the cemetery, the Society gathered at the newly restored Cobbs Hall Burying Ground for the formal dedication. The details are faithfully reported in the 1958 Annual Report which can be read on the Society's web site in the member's only section.

Quoting from that report:

“Our primary objective was the rededication of the restored gravesite of Colonel Richard Lee, the first of our family to come to America in 1639. All those present will certainly agree that it was an inspiring and impressive event, long to be remembered.”

The event even made the local paper as shown in the picture below. The text of this article is quite similar to the text used by Eleanor Templeman in the Historian's section of the Annual Report.



Rappahannock Record, May 1, 1958

The photograph below is from the Society's files in the Alexandria Library, Special Collections Room on Queen Street. It shows the covered plaque which is about to be unveiled by a young Barbara Hoge. She is now Barbara Hoge Maiden, and well remembers the event. At the Annual Meeting of the Society in Richmond in 2013, we had occasion to meet Barbara and her husband, O. V. Though considerable time had passed since that day in 1958, Barbara still resembled the Girl in the Sailor Suit.

Also in the picture are Ludwell Montague, Walter Harvey and Maurice Lee on the right. The others have not been identified.



**Barbara Hoge About To Unveil The Plaque.
Behind her are Ludwell Montague, Walter Harvey and Maurice Lee**

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Burials

Who is actually buried at the Cobbs Hall Burying Ground? For the answer to that question we need to go back to Cazenove Lee's 1927 Article in the *Magazine of the Society of the Lees of Virginia*. With only one surviving tombstone, the identification of the burials is necessarily based on analysis of existing documents, and the memory of family members. Caz works through all this information in his article and comes up with a list of Family members buried there:

Richard Lee, the Immigrant

Anne Constable Lee and her second husband Edmund Lister

Charles Lee, died 1701 and his wife Elizabeth Madestard or Medstand as Caz spells it

Charles Lee, died 1740

Charles Lee, died 1747 and his wives Mary Lee and Leanna Jones

Three infant children before 1761

Most likely these burials were inside the wall. Outside of the wall, are buried:

Susan Lee and her husband William Harvey

Martha Lee and her husband Lewis Giles Harvey

William Garlington, husband of Sarah Elizabeth Lee

Was Cazenove Lee right in his analysis? Who is to say that he is not? Certainly there has been no evidence to dispute his conclusions, and it remains the best judgment we have to this day. Caz was a consummate historian and genealogist, who meticulously gathered Family information from all over. He maintained excellent records, and today, we are the inheritors of his dedicated work.

Cobbs Hall Burying Ground Today

Today the walled cemetery containing the remains of our Family Founder is surrounded by the forest and watched over by the ancient sycamore tree under which he was buried some 350 years ago. Although it is somewhat off the beaten path, it is easy to find. After a big rain, the access way can be a bit tough to negotiate, unless one is in an all-wheel drive vehicle. The Society continues to keep the forest back and the grounds are in good condition. In 2012, a local restoration contractor cleaned the growth and moss from the wall, re-pointed the cement between the bricks that had worked loose since 1958, and restored the two entrance pillars.

As in the Colonial Days, the forest is unrelenting and at some point in the future, the Society will most likely find it necessary to reinvigorate the project that Cazenove Lee dreamed about a hundred years ago.