

HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE STUDY:
TERRAIN OF GAINES' MILL BATTLEFIELD
JUNE 27, 1862

by
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The scope of this study is not intended to be one of the entire Gaines' Mill battlefield. Its primary purpose being to recreate the historical landscape of Richmond National Battlefield Park's Watt House/Gaines' Mill unit, it focuses on that specific area. The report should be read in conjunction with the Terrain Map of Gaines' Mill Battlefield, June 27, 1862, prepared by the author; it provides documentation in support of the landscape as shown on the map.

In some instances general calculations have been made which effect vegetation lines. These are based as much as possible on historical maps of the vicinity prepared during the Civil War period. Personal examination of modern vegetation, especially timber growth, supports some pre-conceived generalizations. Hanover County, Virginia, records, Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture Forest Service reports on local vegetation have lent their weight to these findings.

Much of the park unit containing the Watt house site has changed significantly from the state in which it existed during the 1860s. This is particularly evident in the disappearance of antebellum roadways and the increased acreage of forest. Graphic evidence is provided by the Watt farm orchard; not trace of it can be discovered today. Much of this change in the landscape has occurred over the last five decades.

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Topographically, the 60.3 acres of Richmond National Battlefield Park's Gaines' Mill unit can best be understood through comprehension of its crucial physical features - the two creeks and roads fronting it and the elevated ground rising to the southeast.¹ The park unit is centered roughly between these geographical components, explaining in part the site's military significance on June 27, 1862 at what has come to be known as the battle of First Cold Harbor or Gaines' Mill.²

The westernmost edge of the battlefield was marked by Powhite Creek whose upper tributaries spread fanlike over the Hanover County countryside before uniting at Gaines' Mill Pond.³ It was at this point that Gaines' Mill (formerly Macon's Mill) was located, some 2750 yards northwest of the Watt house on the road running from Mechanicsville to New Cold Harbor.⁴ From the mill site the stream flowed in a slightly curved line almost due south for two miles before emptying into the Chickahominy River 1000 yards west of Boatswain's Creek. Along the Powhite's soft marshy bottom and steep wooded sides, Confederate infantry formed

¹ Hanover County, Virginia, Records and Administration, Plot Book No. 9, p.63, no. 1; United States Department of the Interior, Geological Survey, Seven Pines Quadrangle, Virginia, N3730-W7715/7.5, 1964.

² Gaines' Mill is used in this study.

³ John Codman Ropes, The Story of the Civil War; A Concise Account of the War in the United States of America Between 1861 and 1865, v. 2: The Campaigns of 1862 (New York, 1898), 177; Bryan Conrad, "The Seven Days Campaign of 1862," William & Mary Quarterly, v. 14, no. 3 (July 1934), 217; National Archives, Record Group 77, Map No. Z412H, "Map of Tolopotomoy [sic] Creek, Bethesda Church and Cold Harbor Battle-fields, compiled under direction of Maj. Gen. Micheler, Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army, June 1866.

⁴ C.G. Chamberlayne, Ham Chamberlayne - Virginian; Letters and Papers of an Artillery Officer in the War for Southern Independence 1861-1865 (Richmond, 1932), 227; Hanover County Historical Society, Old Homes of Hanover County, Virginia (Hanover, 1983), 18; Hanover County, Virginia, Deed Book 8, 455.

line of battle prior to assaulting Federal defenses behind Boatswain's ravine.⁵

In a direct line it was 1450 yards from Gaines' Mill to the important intersection at New Cold Harbor. To modern passersby this point is marked by a sharp turn in State Route 156 as it wends its way eastward toward Old Cold Harbor and the next crossroads. During the antebellum period, however, another roadway commenced at that bend, running southeasterly about one and a quarter miles to the Grapevine bridge road (present-day Route 633).⁶ Passing through the eastern half of the Gaines' Mill battleground, this lane was the primary avenue of Union retreat on June 27-28, 1862. Cedar, dogwood, small pine and sassafras defined the sunken roadbed,⁷ especially along fence lines.⁸

⁵ Conrad, "Seven Days," William & Mary, 217; William H. Powell, The Fifth Army Corps (Army of the Potomac); A Record of Operations During the Civil War in the United States of America, 1861-1865 (New York, 1896), 83, 94.

⁶ Modern day State Route 156 follows the cart path that intersected the old Mechanicsville road at New Cold Harbor from the northwest. The New Cold Harbor crossroads bears no resemblance to the Civil War era junction. See DNA, RG 77, Z412H; Jeremy Francis Gilmer Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Map No. 533, "Battlefields of Hanover County."

⁷ Samuel P. Bates, History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5, v. 1 (Harrisburg, 1869), 758; M.O.L.L.U.S., v. 86, photograph no. 4310, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Vegetation identified along pastures and at the edge of the forest indicates that the same varieties of plant life found there would also have been growing along fence rows near the roadway.

⁸ Walter Clark, ed., Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-'65 (Goldsboro, 1901), v. 1, 680; William Allan, The Army of Northern Virginia in 1862 (Cambridge, 1892), 89; Johnson Hagood, Memoirs of the War of Secession from the Original Manuscripts of Johnson Hagood, Brigadier General of Confederate States of America (Columbia, 1910), 258; The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), v. 11, pt. 2, 272.

Dusty white sand farm lanes led south to the Parsons house as well as to the Watt and Adams farmsteads.⁹

At the base of the triangle created by Powhite Creek and the rutted roadbed meandering southeast from New Cold Harbor lay Boatswain's Creek. From its source in the saturated swampy bottoms west of Peter McGhee's farm,¹⁰ it flowed southwest some two miles between steep banks of almost equal height. Passing 600 yards east of New Cold Harbor, Boatswain's inclined southward until approaching within 1500 feet of Powhite Creek. Here it bent abruptly eastward 600 yards before turning southeast and flowing almost in a straight line toward the Chickahominy bottom.¹¹ Boatswain's Creek blocked any Confederate advance from Powhite Creek and the country lanes following the ridges from the west as well as from Gaines' Mill or New Cold Harbor to the North.¹² For this reason the 422 acre farm of Sarah Watt, a 78 year old widow, assumed critical strategic value in the early morning hours of Friday, June 27, 1862.

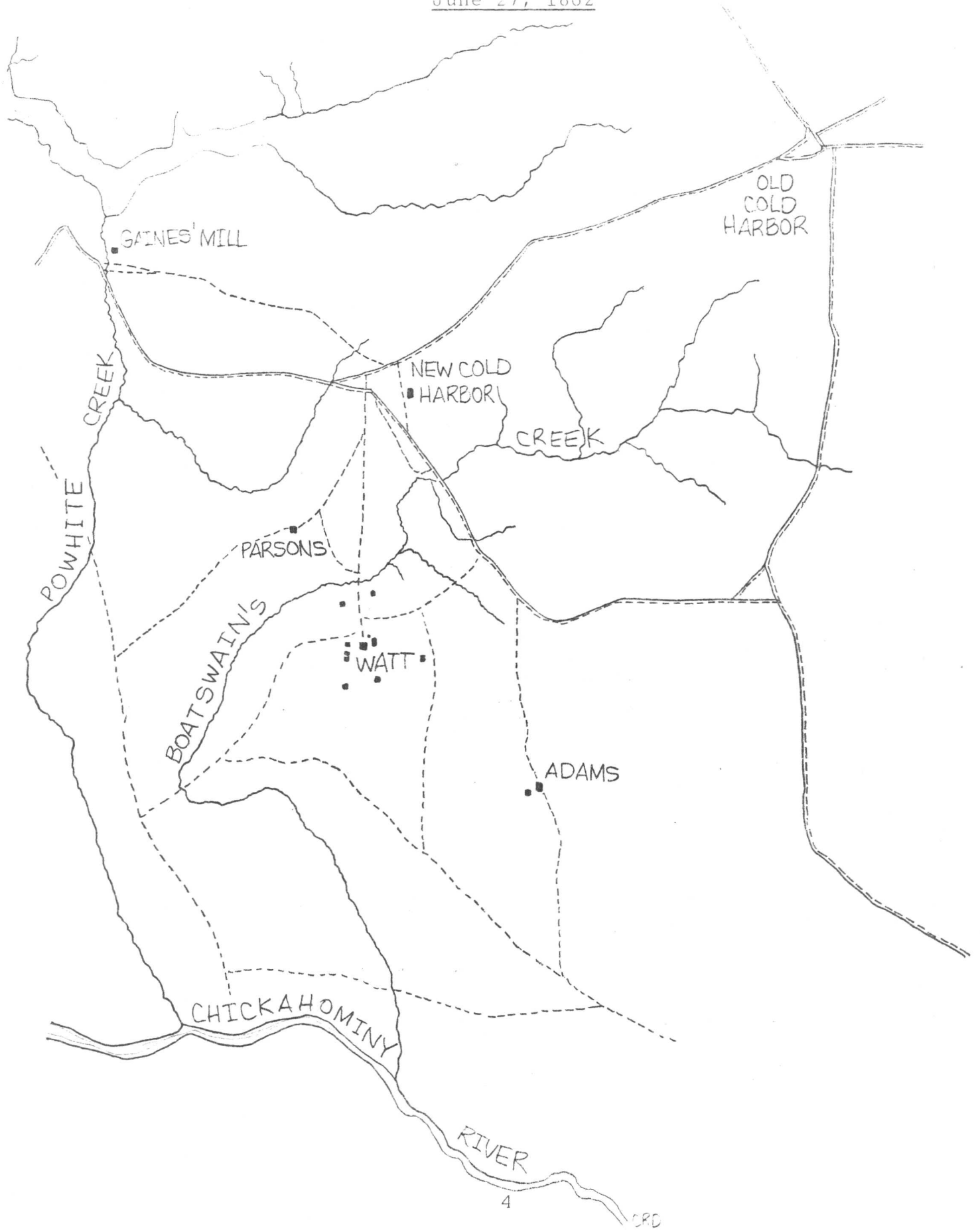
⁹ DNA, RG 77, Map No. G204-21; Special Collections Division, United States Military Academy Library, West Point, New York, Map No. M3695, No. 18, "Map of Hanover County, Virginia, Approved May 25, 1864." Only the road leading to the Watt House remains today and this has been altered. See W.W. LaPrade & Bros., "Map of 66.15 Acres of Land Situated in Hanover Co., Virginia, Near Cold Harbor Proposed to be Transferred by M.J. Fulton to the Battlefield Parks, Dec. 22, 1927," Richmond National Battlefield Park, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁰ USMA, M3695, No. 18; Hanover County, Virginia, Records and Administration, Processioners Book, 1867-1868, 78, Hanover Court House, Virginia.

¹¹ DNA, RG 77, Z412H; Powell, 5th Corps, 83-84; Conrad, "Seven Days," William & Mary, 219.

¹² USMA, M3695, No. 18; DNA, RG 77, Z412H and G204-21; United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Division-Design and Construction, "Troop Movement Map-Gaines' Mill," NBP-RIC 3015A, sheet no. 1.

Creeks and Roads of Gaines' Mill Battlefield
June 27, 1862



Where Boatswain's Creek entered the Chickahominy the ground was low and marshy; the river bottom was covered with brush and deciduous vegetation. Between the bottomlands of the river and the bluffs bordering them to the north, meadowland extended westward as far as the eye could see. The ground northwest to Walter Hogan's estate was higher and rolling but cut up by small sluggish watercourses and deep gullies.¹³ Between Dr. Gaines' Powhite plantation¹⁴ and the sharp curve in Boatswain's Creek where the Union left anchored itself,¹⁵ wheat fields sloped gently to the southeast for almost a mile.¹⁶ A single farm lane followed the base of the high ground to Dr. Gaines'.¹⁷

From Gaines' Mill to New Cold Harbor, the Mechanicsville road was bordered and screened on its south side by a heavy

¹³ DNA, RG 77, Z412H; Amos M. Judson, History of the Eighty-Third Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers (Dayton, 1986), 68-69; Eugene A. Nash, A History of the Forty-Fourth Regiment New York Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1865 (Chicago, 1911), 81.

¹⁴ Much discussion has been generated over the years regarding the spelling of the word Powhite and the derivation of the name. The best Federal map, completed in 1866, gives the spelling "Pohite," but Hanover county historians universally use "Powhite." Originally pronounced "Po-white," the pronunciation was changed by the Virginia Highway Department in the mid 1970s, most likely to avoid giving offense to anyone. DNA, RG 77, Z412H; Hanover County Historical Society, Old Homes of Hanover County, 19, 47; James Hagemann, The Heritage of Virginia (Norfolk, 1986), 200.

¹⁵ NPS Troop Movement Maps-Gaines' Mill, sheet nos. 3-10.

¹⁶ ORA, 11, 2, 272, 307, 344; John L. Parker and Robert G. Carter, History of the Twenty-Second Massachusetts Infantry, The Second Company Sharpshooters, and the Third Light Battery in the War of the Rebellion (Boston, 1887), 119.

¹⁷ Gilmer Papers, UNC, Map No. 533; William J. Cox Papers, Manuscripts Department, University Archives, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Virginia, "Map of the Vicinity of Richmond, Made Under direction of Capt. A.H. Campbell, P.E., & Chief Topographical Department, Approved March 21, 1863."

belt of woods 500-600 feet in width.¹⁸ Southward and in a direct line to Parsons' farm house, the treeline jutted finger-like some 620 yards into the fields there.¹⁹ From the New Cold Harbor intersection the forest followed the western edge of the white sand lane 400 yards toward Springfield farm²⁰ and the Watt house.²¹ None of the out-buildings on the widow Watt's property were visible from the public highway;²² one had to traverse the timber south of the road before catching a glimpse of the farmstead situated on the high ground south of Boatswain's Creek. A cart path trailed off to the southwest in the direction of Parson's lone house and garden about a half mile distant; a military road extension then continued on from there toward Powhite Creek.²³ Located on a low-lying rise, the dwelling was surrounded by a handful of poor apple trees²⁴

¹⁸ ORA, 11, 2, 272; Southern Historical Society Papers, v. 31 (1903), 448-449; Powell, 5th Corps, 93-94; Josiah Rinehart Sypher, A History of the Pennsylvania Reserve Corps (Lancaster, 1865), 228.

¹⁹ DNA, RG 77, Z412H.

²⁰ Tax Records of 1833 and 1836, Hanover County, Virginia. Reference Branch, Virginia State Archives, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia; The Richmond News Leader, August 2, 1956.

²¹ From Old Cold Harbor to the Watt house it is about 2200 feet.

²² ORA, 11, 2, 272; Christian Observer, May 18, 1910; Confederate Veteran, v. 24 (1916), 74.

²³ ORA, 11, 2, 849; DNA, RG 77, Z412H; Gilmer Papers, UNC, Map No. 533; Cox Papers, UVA, "Map of Richmond and Vicinity."

²⁴ CV, v. 7 (1899), 227; Donald E. Everett, ed., Chaplain Davis and Hood's Texas Brigade (San Antonio, 1962), 82; ORA, 11, 2, 847, 849.

while a scattering of pines rose up out of the soil to the south where the lane sloped down to the creek bottom.²⁵ East of Parsons lane, 250 yards toward the Watt roadway, another cart path veered off toward the southeast and the cool spring used by both the Parsons and Watt families.²⁶ "Parsons Spring" was but a short distance northwest of the small twelve-foot wide bridge spanning Boatswain's Creek on the Watt farm lane.²⁷

A little over 300 yards east of the the rude wooden bridge, Boatswain's split into a series of lesser branches; these rapidly degenerated into a network of boggy swamps. Standing water from recent heavy rains had converted the soft sand-loam soil in the 200-foot wide bottom into an ugly swamp. In places the waist deep mud made the ground virtually impassable; many Confederate officers at the battle of Gaines' Mill were forced to send their horses to the rear and continue the assault on foot as they were unable to ride through the undergrowth and muck.²⁸ The level

²⁵ DNA, RG 77, G204-21.

²⁶ Following the cart path from New Cold Harbor, a rider travelled about 2600 feet to Parsons; however, the house was only 320 yards west of the Watt farm roadway. A direct line between Watt's and Parsons' houses measured about 1450 feet. Compare USGS N3730-W7715/7.5, 1964, which shows elevation lines, to DNA, RG 77, Z412H and G204-21 which employs hachures. Terrain for house site is similar.

²⁷ Farmer's Register (1834), 551; Gilmer Papers, UNC, Map No. 533; DNA, RG 77, Z412H and G204-21. No trace of the spring remains and it is not shown on period maps. The only reference to a spring is found in the Christian Observer, May 18, 1910.

²⁸ ORA, 11, 2, 554; R.L. Dabney, Life and Campaigns of Lieut. Gen. T.J. Jackson (New York, 1886), 445-446; Allan, Army of Northern Virginia, 91; SHSP (1882), 152; Clifford R. Dickinson, "Historical Landscape Study: Terrain of Cold Harbor Battlefield, June 1, 1864," Richmond National Battlefield Park, Richmond, Virginia, 5-6.

terrain along these branches was covered with brush and young timber.²⁹ Vines and undergrowth - swamp azalea, sweet bay, cat brier and witherod - distinguished the wet land from the adjacent dry forest. Hydrophytes - water starwort, turtlehead, golden club and yellow water lily - grew in the areas of heaviest ground saturation.³⁰ The recent heavy rains could still be discerned by the soggy ground and reddish water runoff in the creek.³¹ Much of the northern bank of Boatswain's could be seen from the higher elevations to the south.³² But the landscape toward New Cold Harbor was another matter.

The ground east of the Watt farm lane was covered by heavy timber all the way to the Grapevine bridge road. A mixed pine and hardwood forest stretched from below the New Cold Harbor intersection southward to the ridgeline on the Federal side of Boatswain's Creek. The northern stream bank was deciduous hardwood where the landscape sloped down

²⁹ Powell, 5th Corps, 84, 88; J.B. Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade; Its Marches, Its Battles, Its Achievements (Dayton, 1976), 64-65, 70; Comte de Paris, History of the Civil War in America (Philadelphia, 1876), v. 2, 95; John Bell Hood, Advance and Retreat (Bloomington, 1959), 26; Evander M. Law, "The Fight for Richmond in 1862," The Southern Bivouac, v. 2, no. 11 (April 1887), 657; CV, v. 7 (1889), 55; ORA, 11, 2, 554; SHSP (1882), 151; William Andrew Fletcher, Rebel Private Front and Rear (Austin, 1954), 23-24.

³⁰ United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, "Flora of Richmond National Battlefield Park" (Philadelphia, 1986), 7.

³¹ During the first week of June, 1862, the road leading to Grapevine bridge had been under five feet of water. See Stephen Minot Weld, War Diary and Letters of Stephen Minot Weld 1861-1865 (Boston, 1979), 110-111; Joel Cook, The Siege of Richmond: A Narrative of the Military Operations of Major-General George B. McClellan During the Months of May and June, 1862 (Philadelphia, 1862), 145-146.

³² Powell, 5th Corps, 84.

to the marshy bottom; west of the fork in the creek the timber growth was so dense that it exposed the Union line to greater surprise. From the Confederate position fronting the Mechanicsville road, the Federal line between Watt's and Adams' farm lanes was completely concealed from view.³³

On both sides of the Watt bridge the terrain was clear of large trees for a short interval, the timber having been taken to repair the span over the years. Where the forest began again it extended barely 50 yards up the slopes on each bank of the watercourse.³⁴ On the southern side of the creek this narrow strip of woods continued around the ridge in a southwesterly direction to the vicinity of the Watt orchard, a distance of some 425 yards.

It was 870 feet from Boatswain's Creek up to the Watt house. However, the dwelling was not visible from the bridge as the landscape inclined sharply upward, rising 60 feet over almost 300 yards. Only after a visitor had passed up the roadway, between the low-lying banks bordering each side of the lane, to the brow of the ridge some 220 feet in front of the house, could he attain a full and clear view of the farm house and its outbuildings.³⁵

West of the roadway, between the woodline and the ridge

³³ Ibid, 88; DNA, RG 77, Z412H; Comte de Paris, Civil War in America, v. 2, 95; Hood, Advance and Retreat, 26. To avoid a surprise attack, Brig. Gen. George Sykes, 2d Div., 5th Corps, placed his line of defense some 400 yards south of Boatswain's Creek ravine.

³⁴ LaPrade Plate of 1927, RNBP; Evan Morrison Woodward, History of the Third Pennsylvania Reserve (Trenton, 1883), 87-88; Martin D. Hardin, History of the Twelfth Regiment Pennsylvania Reserve Corps (41st Regiment of the Line), From its Muster Into the United States Service, August 10th, 1861, to its Muster Out, June 11th, 1864 (New York, 1890), 42-43; Farmer's Register (1834), 441.

³⁵ DNA, RG 77, Z412H, G204-21; LaPrade Plate of 1927, RNBP; USGS Map No. N3730-W7715/7.5, 1964.

crest, a log stable stood in the center of an open piece of ground. It was surrounded by a high strong rail fence.³⁶ Looking from the bridge towards the Adams property, one would have observed a single slave cabin standing in an open field. From the bridge the negro residence was roughly 100 yards distant, about 100 feet off the Watt farm lane. Prior to the fighting on June 27, negroes left this building and ran to the Watt house for better shelter.³⁷ Both the stable and slave cabin were filled with skulkers during the engagement.³⁸

A strong natural ditch, similar to that which would front a permanent line of defense, extended westward from the Watt bridge area. The deep scarped banks bordering the bottom rose up as high as 20 feet and were separated by a 10 foot wide stream bed.³⁹ Assaulting troops would have experienced great difficulty forcing Boatswain's Creek as long as the bluecoated infantry maintained a steady small arms fire. In the bottom, on the level floor adjacent the watercourse, the troops of both armies could look between the massive tree trunks, across the ravine, and view one another's line. However, as the fighting intensified, the sulphurous smoke became so dense that the lines came near becoming mixed. This was due to a heavy canopy created by

³⁶ In 1871, about 80 percent of all Virginia fences were of the rail type. The rail fence was very common in the Middle Atlantic states throughout the colonial and antebellum periods. Allen G. Noble, Wood, Brick, and Stone; The North American Settlement Landscape, vol. 2: Barns and Farm Structures (Amherst, 1984), 121; "Statistics of Fences in the United States," Report of The Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1871 (Washington, 1871), 502, 506.

³⁷ DNA, RG 77, Z412H and G204-21; LaPrade Plate of 1927, RNBP; J.B. Polley, A Soldier's Letters to Charming Nellie (New York, 1908), 55; Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade, 48; Christian Observer, May 18, 1910.

³⁸ Ibid; Everett, Chaplain Davis, 89; ORA, 11, 2, 302.

³⁹ Powell, 5th Corps, 84; ORA, 11, 2, 272; CV, v. 7 (1900), 54.

to that stretching east in the direction of the Watt bridge. The Texans, however, possessed a pair of critical advantages. Their left flank was protected by a substantial rise of ground which sheltered them from at least one battery of Federal artillery.⁴⁴ Secondly, as the troops moved southeast up the hollow toward the Watt house plateau, they entered a farm orchard of from one to three acres in size.⁴⁵ The trees were close together,⁴⁶ low-lying peaches on the eastern side,⁴⁷ and apples toward the south and west.⁴⁸ A narrow 12 foot lane separated the two different sections of the orchard.⁴⁹ The late June foliage of the fruit trees

⁴⁴ L. Van Loan Naisawald, Grape and Canister; The Story of the Field Artillery of the Army of the Potomac (Washington, D.C., 1983), 88-102; NPS Troop Movement Maps-Gaines' Mill, sheet nos. 4-12.

⁴⁵ DeBow's Review (1860), 790-791; Philip H. Gosse, Letters From Alabama (London, 1859), 194.

⁴⁶ Clifford R. Dickinson, "Fruit Production in Central Virginia, 1820-1860," RNB (1989), 15-17; Southern Planter (1851), 59; William B. Alwood, "Orchard Technique," Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin No. 99, v. 8, no. 4 (April 1899), 58; Liberty Hyde Bailey, Principles of Fruit Growing (New York, 1896), 161, 239-240, 242.

⁴⁷ In placing seedling trees in the orchard, farmers followed one general rule. Since apple trees were taller than peaches, making the fruit of the former more liable to be blown from branches, apple stocks were always placed in the orchard's least exposed quarter. P. Barry, The Fruit Garden (New York, 1851), 167.

⁴⁸ Polley, Charming Nellie, 56, 57, 300-301; Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade, 49-50, 67; Christian Observer, May 18, 1910, states that the orchard was "on the right" of the hill leading up to the Watt house and that "the peach orchard joined the apple orchard." See also, Mary Lasswell, ed., Rags and Hope; The Recollections of Val C. Giles, Four Years With Hood's Brigade, Fourth Texas Infantry 1861-1865 (New York, 1961), 110-111; McMurry, Hood, 48; Everett, Chaplain Davis, 89.

⁴⁹ Illustrated Annual Register of Rural Affairs, for 1873-4-5 (Albany, 1875), 235; Christian Observer, May 18, 1910.

screened the Confederate advance until it struck the sandy cart path paralleling the crest of the ridge along the southern fringe of the orchard.^{50 51 52 53}

The woodland west of the Watt orchard formed a thin strip that extended up from the bottomland to the level ground on both sides of Boatswain's Creek. East and west of

⁵⁰ Ibid; Giles, Rags and Hope, 110-111, says he was wounded 50 yards from the crest of the ridge and that another soldier drug him behind a big apple tree. There is some confusion in his statement as Giles noted on page 110 that Hood went down a slope, through an orchard and across the creek. He may have been thinking of the apple trees at Parsons. McMurry, Hood, 48; Everett, Chaplain Davis, 89; Polley, Charming Nellie, 56, 57, 300, and Hood's Texas Brigade, 49, 50, 67.

These accounts are in concensus that Hood reformed in an old apple orchard (western half of the orchard) while exposed to the fire of Federal guns. Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade, 300, says peach orchard. Hood, Advance and Retreat, 27, writes, "I halted in an orchard beyond the [Federal] works, and despatched [sic] every officer on my staff to the main portion of the brigade in the wood on the left." Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade, 54, verifies Hood's location when he writes, " I saw the regiment in line there, and just behind it, General Hood - his left hand raised above his head and grasping the bough of the apple tree under which he stood - his right hand holding an uplifted sword."

⁵¹ The southern edge of the orchard and the road were about 100 yards from the creek bottom. USMA, M3695, No. 18; Gilmer Papers, UNC, Map No. 533; William J. Cox Papers, "1863 Map of the Vicinity of Richmond;" Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade, 47, 49, 54, and Charming Nellie, 55.

⁵² Polley's account corresponds closely, and with remarkable accuracy, to the terrain features until he reaches the lane leading through the orchard where he received his wound. It appears that his account of Hood's drive past the Watt house, against the Federal artillery west of Adams' dwelling, was based on testimony of other participants as well as his 1896 tour of the field. He was accompanied by Corbin Warwick and a former Confederate colonel named Maury, both of Richmond, on this expedition over the old Gaines' Mill battlefield.

⁵³ The National Park Service marker, indicating the "point of Hood's Breakthrough," is 80 yards further into the woods in 1989 than it was 50 years ago. Compare location of marker in 1927 with forestation along field in LaPrade Plate, RNBP.

of the stream the fields had been cleared and cultivated as near the slopes as they could be plowed.⁵⁴ Tall oak trees bordered the creek and covered the even creek floor;⁵⁵ red maple and beech filled in some of the open spaces nearer the base of the ridge.⁵⁶ From the forest's edge where the Confederate assault left Gaines' wheat fields, it was between 100-150 yards to the initial Federal line posted on the opposite bank.⁵⁷ Once they passed through the brushier vegetation skirting the edge of the timber, the southerners still could not gain a view of the first Union battle line until they were well into the woods.

Beginning at a point just west of the Watt orchard, Federal infantry constructed a line of timber breastworks by employing axes borrowed from artillery units posted in their rear. These hastily constructed barricades ran some 750 yards, along the base of the ridge, to the far left of the Union line.⁵⁸ Behind this, midway up the hill leading to the

⁵⁴ ORA, 11, 2, 272, 307; Powell, 5th Corps, 84; Norton, Army Letters, 316; Comte de Paris, Civil War in America, v. 2, 94; Parker and Carter, 22d Mass., 119, 120; Lasswell, Rags and Hope, 110; CV, v. 7 (1899), 225.

⁵⁵ Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade, 46-47; Oates, War Between the States, 118-119; ORA, 11, 2, 344-345; Chicago Tribune, August 31, 1986, Sec. 6, 1-2.

⁵⁶ Ibid; Hanover County Deed Book, 5, 83 and Processioner's Book, 1867-1868, see Henry Magisterial District; Longstreet, Manassas to Appomattox, 126; Judson, 83rd PA, 41, 59; Norton, Army Letters, 90-91.

⁵⁷ ORA, 11, 2, 307; Parker and Carter, 22d Mass., 119; Hood, Advance and Retreat, 27; CV, v. 7 (1899), 54, 56; Longstreet, Manassas to Appomattox, 128; Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade, 59.

⁵⁸ Southern Bivouac (1887), 657-658; Nash, 44th New York, 81; Judson, 83rd PA, 41, 59; Norton, Army Letters, 90-91; Powell, 5th Corps, 90; Ropes, Civil War, v. 2, 177; Richmond Examiner, July 2, 1862; ORA, 11, 2, 301, 304, 307, 309, 311.

open ground on the Watt plateau, a second line of bluecoated infantry was posted.⁵⁹ A rail fence⁶⁰ may have separated cultivated land from the immense tall pines⁶¹ marking the uppermost edge of the forest in that sector. The 22d Massachusetts regiment, which was held in reserve at Gaines' Mill, deployed into position in these woods (A). The terrain behind its firing line was open to the crest of the ridge.⁶² Looking west, in the direction of Brig. Gen. J.B. Hood's advance, the infantrymen of the 22d could plainly see the opposite ridge crest.⁶³ Posted in trees near their line, sharpshooters from the regiment opened fire on the enemy at 500 yards.⁶⁴

Several hours after the 22d Massachusetts went into line, left and front of the Watt house, a section of artillery went into battery 350 yards south of Boatswain's Creek, about 100 yards from the orchard. These guns covered the orchard hollow and the open line of sight created by the cart path cutting through it.⁶⁵ A second section of guns was placed

⁵⁹ Southern Bivouac (1887), 657-658; DeWitt Patterson, Yankee Rebel; The Civil War Journal of Edmund DeWitt Patterson (Chapel Hill, 1966), 31-32; Parker and Carter, 22d Mass., 121.

⁶⁰ Massive logs, knapsacks and fence rails were inter-mixed in the second line.

⁶¹ Oates, War Between the States, 120; ORA, 11, 2, 301, 304; Parker and Carter, 22d Mass., 119. Official reports of the 22d Mass. state that the men "felled great pines," and with smaller trees formed a barricade.

⁶² Ibid, 119, 120; CV, v. 7 (1899), 54.

⁶³ Ibid, 54; ORA, 11, 2, 307; Parker and Carter, 22d Mass., 120.

⁶⁴ Ibid; ORA, 11, 2, 291.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 290, 291, 301; Parker and Carter, 22d Mass., 118, 120, 133.

at an opening through the timber, near the hollow on the left flank of the 22d (B). These three field pieces were on the elevation in rear of the ravine, gaining their line of fire over the woods in the creek bottom, and through the seam separating the pines and open hardwood forest.⁶⁶

Where Boatswain's Creek turned from a westerly direction to one leading almost due south, a reentering angle was formed as a result of the natural configuration of the ground.⁶⁷ The width of the timber was less here than anywhere else along the entire 5th Corps front. There too, on the Federal side of the ridge, the landscape plummeted 30 feet over 50 yards,⁶⁸ depriving both the second line of Union infantry and the supporting field guns on the high ground a direct close range fire. If the Confederates struck the Union line right in the creek bend, a dead angle⁶⁹ would be uncovered. This is precisely what occurred.

When Hood's brigade had closed to within 100 yards of the woodline bordering the west bank of the creek, he wheeled part of his line (4th Texas) to the right, ordered the men to fix bayonets, and charged at the double quick. The 4th Texas advanced down a steep slope (C),⁷⁰ while the 18th Georgia on

⁶⁶ Elisha Dyer, Annual Report of the Rhode Island Adjutant General's Office of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, For the Year 1865 (Providence, 1895), v. 2, 792; Edwin Winchester Stone, Rhode Island in the Rebellion (Providence, 1865), 112.

⁶⁷ ORA, 11, 2, 272-273; Comte de Paris, Civil War in America, v. 2, 101; H.L. Scott, Military Dictionary: Comprising Technical Definitions; Information on Raising and Keeping Troops; Actual Service, Including Makeshifts and Improved Material; And Law, Government, Regulation, And Administration Relating to Land Forces (New York, 1861), 500.

⁶⁸ USGS Map No. N3730-W7715/7.5, 1964.

⁶⁹ Scott, Military Dictionary, 214.

⁷⁰ ORA, 11, 2, 563; Longstreet, Manassas to Appomattox, 128; Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade, 59; CV, v. 14 (1906),

its left moved forward into a depression providing a more gradual decline in the landscape (D).⁷¹ Converging on the angle in the enemy line, the Texans and Georgians advanced across Boatswain's floor, striking the steep face of the eastern ridge right on the apex of the angle. This slowed down the advance in that immediate sector of the field; however, parts of the surging southern line made their way rapidly up the hollows flanking it.

On the Federal (eastern) side of the creek, the break in the line of defense coincided with Confederate movements. The 12th New York, located on the crest of the hill above the first hollow south of the angle (E), saw Hood's troops pouring down the opposite ridge; the regiment opened fire at the right oblique.⁷² The initial panic and crack in the Union line occurred along the front of the 25th New York, then continued south into the 1st Michigan and 12th New York.⁷³

Retreating up the ridge in confusion, the New York and Michigan infantrymen reached the position of the 22d Massachusetts, passed it, and continued running by the artillery on the crest waiting to fire. The 22d watched Hood's assault come on in the shape of a "V," the open end of the "V" toward the 22d.⁷⁴ The Confederates poured through the breach on the left and moved up through the orchard 1000 feet off to the right.⁷⁵ A section of Capt. A.P. Martin's

⁷¹ Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, April 3, 1865; Everett, Chaplain Davis, 79.

⁷² ORA, 11, 2, 327.

⁷³ Ibid, 311, 327; Parker and Carter, 22d Mass., 120.

⁷⁴ Ibid; ORA, 11, 2, 311.

⁷⁵ See footnotes 44-49.

Battery, situated on the crest of the Watt plateau south of the orchard, waited for the attacking enemy elements to approach within 150 yards before delivering a withering charge of double canister. This momentarily broke Hood's surge, explaining his pause in the Watt fruit trees.^{76 77}

The 83rd Pennsylvania, in the timber southwest of the 12th New York, did not see the line on the right crumble.⁷⁸ Only the northern flank of the regiment was on level ground with any view. The woods on the right were dense;⁷⁹ as Boatswain's wandered south to the Chickahominy the ground became swampier; briars, brush, and undergrowth clung to the saplings and smaller trees.⁸⁰ Had the Confederate thunderbolt struck here, it may well have bogged down and faltered.

The slope south of the Watt plateau fell 40 feet over 130 yards. This was too steep to allow wagons to make safe descent. The only point on the Watt farmstead where this could be safely accomplished was at the southwest corner of the elevation; there the landscape was of a more gradual nature, still dropping the 40 feet, but over a longer distance

⁷⁶ Parker and Carter, 22d Mass., 118, 120, 121, 133; ORA, 11, 2, 289; Christian Observer, May 18, 1910; Powell, 5th Corps, 108-109.

⁷⁷ The National Park Service marker indicating the "breakthrough point" at the Battle of Gaines' Mill is located where the orchard originally stood. It was probably placed there by the Richmond Battlefield Marker's Association in 1927; the site was chosen, it appears, based on Hood's account. At the time of the marking, evidence of the orchard may still have remained to guide those undertaking the project. However, the advance over the Watt fields was virtually simultaneous; the marker could easily have been placed in the ravine where the Union line initially gave way. John T. Willett, "A Short History of Richmond National Battlefield Park," RBNBP, Richmond, Virginia, 32-33, 91; LaPrade Plate of 1927, RBNBP; Southern Bivouac (1887), 657-658.

⁷⁸ Powell, 5th Corps, 89; Judson, 83rd PA, 40, 41, 62-65; ORA, 11, 2, 344.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 290, 338; Judson, 83rd PA, 62-65; Nash, 44th New York, 81; Norton, Army Letters, 90-91.

⁸⁰ ORA, 11, 2, 344; Oates, War Between the States, 118, 120.

of 325 yards.⁸¹ From the Watt orchard on the northern edge of the table-land, a poor 15 foot wide farm lane cut diagonally across the open plateau, almost in a direct line, before taking the longer grade down the ridge to the creek bottom.⁸²

This cart path stretched to a small wooden bridge⁸³ located in the sharp bend of Boatswain's Creek. The lane may have separated the left flank of the 83rd Pennsylvania and the right of the 44th New York regiment during the battle of June 27th. After crossing Boatswain's, the farm lane joined a more defined military road leading north from Duane's bridge on the Chickahominy to Gaines' Mill on the Cold Harbor road.⁸⁴ Before passing over Powhite Creek, another military roadway ran off to the right in a northerly direction, connecting with the Parsons house lane in the vicinity of the apple orchard.⁸⁵

South of the Watt house, another so-called "plantation road" paralleled the base of the steep hill. Splitting from the roadbed climbing the high ground southwest of the farmstead, it followed the foot of the ridge several hundred yards before turning north and running to the head of the

⁸¹ USGS, Map No. N3730-W7715/7.5, 1964.

⁸² Farmer's Register (1834), 511; USMA, M3695, No. 18; Gilmer Papers, UNC, Map No. 533. A trace of this roadbed is still visible along the slope of the ridge.

⁸³ Ibid; ORA, 11, 2, 285.

⁸⁴ Cox Papers, UVA, "Map of Richmond and Vicinity;" USMA, M3695, No. 18; NPS, Troop Movement Maps - Gaines' Mill, sheet no. 1; DNA, RG 77, Z412H and G204-21.

⁸⁵ Gilmer Papers, UNC, Map No. 533; USMA, M3695, No. 18. Many of the military roads constructed by Federal forces in the spring of 1862 along the Chickahominy River were closed up following the campaign by Confederate engineers. The majority of them were of little use to southern forces two years later at the engagement of Cold Harbor.

hollow southeast of the Watt dwelling. At the head of this depression in the landscape, the farm lane turned almost due east. Passing up to higher ground on Turkey Hill, the farm lane crossed a second old farm road before intersecting with the Adams' house roadway several hundred feet north of the house.⁸⁶

How much fence bordered the roads and fields is a matter of speculation; within days of the fighting all traces of enclosures had disappeared.⁸⁷ The Watt farm boasted its share of the traditional rail fences typical of eastern Virginia.⁸⁸ One line of fence extended west from the lane in front of the house; it followed the ridge crest between the 130-140 foot elevation lines all the way around the plateau to the cart path leading southwest to the Duane's bridge military road. Typical of other Hanover County farms, the Watt property would have been fenced off in sections of from 5-20 acres.⁸⁹

"Horse high, hog tight and bull strong," the Watt fences were made of yellow locust, red cedar, black walnut, or chestnut rails.^{90 91} Laid in panels, eight 10-foot rails

⁸⁶ Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, April 3, 1865; Farmer's Register (1836), 11-12; Cox Papers, UVA, "Map of Richmond and Vicinity."

⁸⁷ Christian Observer, May 18, 1910.

⁸⁸ Philip Alexander Bruce, Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century (New York, 1896), v. 1, 316-318; Cultivator (1838), 16; "Statistics of Fences in the U.S.," Commissioner of Agriculture (1871), 502, 506.

⁸⁹ Farmer's Register (1833), 542; (1835), 31, 47, 259; (1840), 23-25; P. Barry, Fruit Garden, 163. It took about 1200 rails to fence off an acre of land.

⁹⁰ Mamie Meredith, "The Nomenclature of American Pioneer Fences," Southern Folklore Quarterly, v. 15, no. 2 (June 1951), 109; Eric Sloane, Sketches of America Past (New York, 1986), 279-282; Cultivator (1838), 16; Southern Planter (1855), 87.

⁹¹ Chestnut and red cedar were the most popular types of wood employed in fence construction. At the turn of the century a chestnut blight erased the tree from Virginia forests. Vera V. Via, "The Old Rail Fence," Virginia Cavalcade, v. 12, no. 1 (1962), 38.

to a panel, a rail or stake-and-rider fence followed the road paralleling the bottom of the ridge south of the house. Torn down prior to the engagement, the fence line could be discerned by a slight mound or embankment built up by years of erosion.⁹²

The 422 acres of Springfield Plantation (Watt farm) extended from Boatswain's Creek, south of the Parsons property, all the way to the Chickahominy swamp. It was a small farming operation even after the Civil War.⁹³ Most of the crops were raised in the bottom south of the house where moisture levels were higher. Some of this ground was fenced off before 1862.⁹⁴ Pigs were probably kept south of the cultivated areas where they could roam freely and eat the roots of wild swamp plants.

All of the Watt farm structures shown on period maps were on the 150 foot elevation marking the high ground of the family's estate. With the ridge in rear of the house virtually devoid of brush and timber growth, the Watt plateau formed an imposing elevation. The terrain was also open to the southeast in the direction of the Adams house, a distance of about three-eighths of a mile.⁹⁵

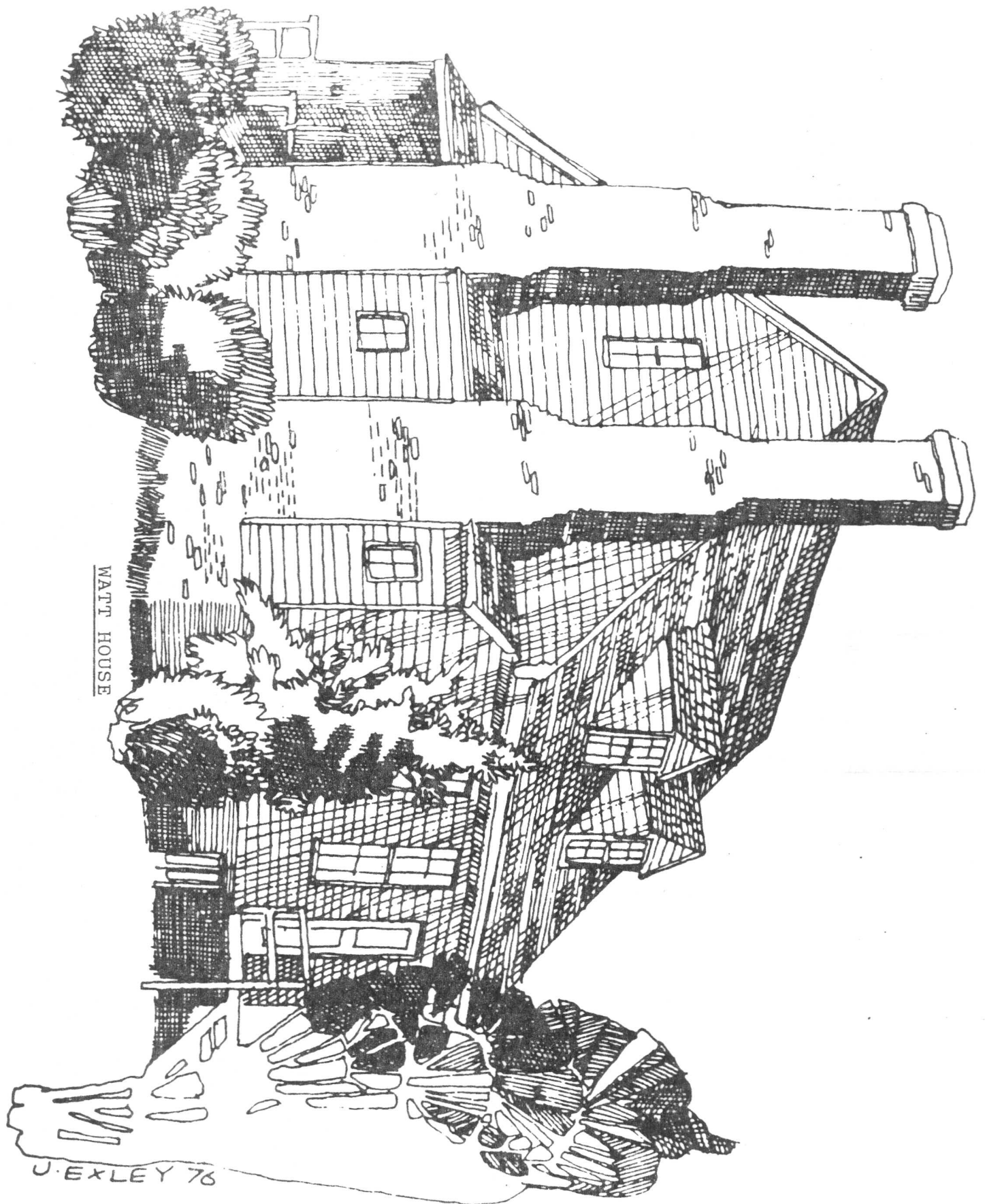
Constructed in 1835 and used as a hospital during the

⁹² Meredith, "Nomenclature of Pioneer Fences," Southern Folklore, 139; Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (Boston, 1931?), 280; CV, v. 7 (1899), 216; Harper's Weekly, June 7, 1862; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, April 3, 1865.

⁹³ Hanover County Historical Society, Old Homes of Hanover County, 59; Hanover County, Deed Book 19, 234; Deed Book 9, 180. In March 1876, the estate, in addition to the acreage, was composed of 5 mules, 11 head of cattle, 25 hogs, 2 wagons, 2 carts, and assorted farming implements.

⁹⁴ ORA, 11, 2, 296.

⁹⁵ DNA, RG 77, Z412H and G204-21; Patterson, Yankee Rebel, 33; Christian Observer, May 18, 1910; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, April 3, 1865; Polley, Hood's Texas Brigade, 49 and Charming Nellie, 298; Everett, Chaplain Davis, 84; Oates, War Between the States, 119.



WATT HOUSE

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engagement there in 1862, the house was of the dominant style of architecture typical of pre-railroad folk housing in the American southeast. Simple side gabled, two rooms wide, this hall and parlor style dwelling exemplified traditional English folk form.⁹⁶ A pair of dormers in front, and exterior end chimneys built of brick, it followed the pattern of the Virginia tidewater.⁹⁷ Inside, the house boasted wide pine flooring on the second and third floors. The home and the nearer outbuildings were covered with unpainted weatherbeaten boarding; the outlying sheds and barns behind the main house were constructed of pine logs 6"-8" in diameter.⁹⁸

Mild winters and slave labor permitted the Watts to place potentially offensive structures such as barns well away from the house. One barn stood 400 feet southwest of the dwelling; a second was sited half that distance off to the south. This may have been a 10' x 10' chicken house, possibly set on stones to keep predators out.⁹⁹

A two-room slave cabin and shed stood northward, over the brow of the hill, off to the right of the lane leading down to the bridge.¹⁰⁰ Three sheds, one of them a carriage house, had been erected 125 feet to the west along the cart path leading around to the far barn; a well shed stood 50

⁹⁶ Virginia and Lee McAlester, A Field Guide to American Houses (New York, 1985), 88, 94; ORA, 11, 2, 302, 306.

⁹⁷ Watt House Photographs, Files of RNBPN; McAlester, Field Guide, 88; Richmond News Leader, August 2, 1956.

⁹⁸ Linwood Liggan, Interview, February 24, 1973, RNBPN, Richmond, Virginia.

⁹⁹ Ibid; LaPrade Plate of 1927, RNBPN; Richmond News Leader, August 2, 1956.

¹⁰⁰ LaPrade Plate of 1927, RNBPN; Hanover County, Deed Book 87, 63; Farmer's Register (1833), 660; Christian Observer, May 18, 1910; Richmond News Leader, August 2, 1956.

feet from the back door of the family dwelling. The sandy soil supported a small healthy collection of locust trees. A large garden grew just off to the south.¹⁰¹

East of the house stood a crib barn with a single door located on the southern end. In the antebellum period the single crib barn was commonly found on most Hanover County farmsteads; it was used as a stable in most cases. The Watts had altered this arrangement by adding lean-to-sheds on three sides; these were made of lighter building material. Each shed possessed a lower pitched roof than the barn. These additions were probably used for equipment storage, additional stabling areas, or for storage of corn. A 16 foot square corn house, 8 feet in height, built like a chicken house, only larger, was placed 30-40 feet north of the crib barn.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ LaPrade Plate of 1927, RNBP; Watt House Photographs, Files of RNBP; Christian Observer, May 18, 1910.

¹⁰² Noble, Wood, Brick, and Stone, vol 2: Barns and Farm Structures, 2-3; Liggan Interview, RNBP; Hanover County, Deed Book 87, 63; Watt House Photographs, RNBP; LaPrade Plate of 1927.

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