

The document below was provided to me (Keith Robertson) by my wife's uncle, Paul Alexander of Verona, VA, some time in 2008. Paul is a brother of my father-in-law, Stanley Alexander, who is mentioned elsewhere on Salem's website (e.g. History-Salem-Circa-1900.pdf).

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Charles Curry
Lawyer
Staunton, Va.

March 26, 1907

Mr. A.C. Gorden
Staunton, Va.

Dear Gorden:-- As I told you this morning I will write you a few notes that may be of interest to you in the work in which your are engaged.

The country known as the Hill Country of Judea extends from near the valley pike to North River, about a mile west of Mt. Solon. The Natural Chimneys mark the boundry (sic) on the west between the Hill Country of Judea and the Plains of Jericho. These sections of the country were given these names by old Dr. Speece, one of the first ministers of the Old Stone Church.

Dr. Speece was of German origin and a man of wide culture, but of very odd appearance. He was very large, homely and coarse looking, and was an old bachelor as a consequence, presumably. He was quite an interesting writer and you may have read one of his books known as the "Mountaineer."

Some of the land marks of note of the Hill Country of Judea are the Grindstone Ridge, the spring known as the Seawright Spring, Clamper Spring, Slate Hill, Glen Cose, Misner's Hollow, Crime's Hollow, Dickie's Hill, the Mossey Creek Lakes, Cairn View, and Watts Hill.

The Grindstone Ridge is the ridge that extends throughout the Valley of Virginia, just west of the Valley Pike. At Staunton the ridge was broken up into hills during the geological convulsions. The ridge was, by the early settlers, called Pisgah Heights. The front view from these heights east and west is magnificent, and along the Valley Pike from a mile south of the

Old Stone Church to a mile north of Mt. Sidney the view from this ridge is unsurpassed. Many beautiful springs bubble out from this ridge on both sides, and there are several lovely fountains, never failing, near the summit of the ridge. There is nothing, however, of note to be told about it except the skirmishes between the Union soldiers and the Home guards, in the effort to keep the invaders from the Hill Country of Judea.

Seawright Springs has at different times gone by different names. IT was at first called Indian Spring. Its medicinal qualities, it is said, were known to the Indians, and in the hunting seasons the Indians camped around the spring, and would sometime carry, it is said, their sick for miles to bathe in its waters. It was called by the negroes in the early days, Hoodoo Spring, afterwards Laney's Spring, and later by which it is now known. The negroes believed that it was the center of witchcraft and hoodooing. The negroes said that there was always a witch's dance about the spring at one o'clock every Friday night. There is an old burying ground just east of this spring, and it was a common thing, the negroes said, to see barrels rolling down from the burying ground to the spring, and when they would come near the witch's circle the barrels would become phosphorescent and from them would come men and women without heads, and these would dance with the witches. I passed by this spring in my walks to school almost daily, and could never forget the impressions of the witches, ghosts and hobgoblins that were made on me when but a little child by the negroes. It was said that the fortunate one who took the first drink out of this spring on Saturday morning would have a long life, and be able to know the future, and that he or she that first bathed in it after the witch's dance would never have sickness or sorrow, and the negroes believed if anyone was bold enough to bathe in the waters of this spring while the dance was going on that he or she would never see death, but I have never heard of a negro that was brave enough to take this bath when the dance was going on and the barrels rolling down and emptying the subjects to engage in the dance headless. In my early childhood large trees overshadowed this beautiful spring and it was a delightful place, but always gloomy and dreadful to me, a horrible place – a place of hobgoblins, demons, witches and fairies – an assembling place of awful spirits. There is hardly a nook or corner of the old Hill Country of Judea that does not recall to me some pleasant recollection, but not a pleasant remembrance have I of this spring. It is the place of haunts and ghosts and hobgoblins to me to this day.

(Note: The "burying ground" mentioned above is the oldest portion of Salem Lutheran Church's cemetery. The names of those buried there can be found elsewhere on the church's

website, listed as the “Old Cemetery”. There are nineteen names listed. One notable name is that of Rachael Stover, almost certainly an ancestor of one of Salem’s members from the latter part of the 19th century, that being Ida Elizabeth Stover, mother of President Dwight David Eisenhower. As of this writing in 2011 the graves are barely marked, some of the stones having eroded away to almost nothing. When Mr. Curry wrote this letter in 1907, Salem’s current building was not yet in existence, having been erected in 1929, and I would guess the cemetery was in much better condition.

My experiences with Seawright Springs are more favorable than Mr. Curry’s. In the latter half of the 20th century the spring was open to the public and had a swimming pool. Only the extremely hardy would swim there early in the week however, as the pool had no filtration system, and thus was completely emptied and refilled with spring water every Monday. It was at least ‘til Wednesday before the water warmed up to a tolerable level. Later on, I was unfortunate enough to be a target in a dunking booth at a church gathering at the spring. The booth had been filled just that morning with spring water, and every time I went down I lost my breath for at least five or ten seconds.

Today the spring is closed to the public and has been for about 15 years. The present and relatively new owners are reportedly bottling the water for sale, and in my opinion it would be difficult to find water of greater purity anywhere. There is a spigot near the entrance where one can fill water jugs for free, and my brother-in-law uses this water to make various types of wine. It also makes a superb pot of coffee.)

When I was a small boy, old Capt. Laney lived in a little cabin at the gate that now leads to the spring, a cabin that has been there, says tradition, since 1776. He was a lone old man and something of a hermit. He had served in the war of 1812, and was a brave soldier. He was an uncle of John and George Seawright. When I remember and heard him talk he was past ninety, but he was bowed with the weight of years, though young in spirit. He was learned in all the hoodoo lore and the doctrines of witchcraft of the negro race, and the stories that he could tell of the strange, weird things that happened about his little cabin made it a place of “haunts” to the negroes, and they dreaded the place. They feared him. He could tell the most marvelous stories and when the negroes would dare to listen to him their eyes would fairly pop out of their heads. He would put me on his knee and tell me how the negroes who had dared to come there and look

on the dance, and how they would disappear in the flames. That for a negro to look on this dance was to go into spontaneous combustion.

Clamper Spring is a little insignificant fountain that bubbles out in a desolate, dreary hollow about a mile and a half south of where I was raised. The hollow was known as Devil's Hollow. It was surrounded on all sides by forests, and about the spring great old oaks towered up that had withstood the storms of centuries. There was one very large white oak tree in this hollow about six feet across the stump and very tall, and its branches extend wide. It was evidently one of the "pioneers of the forest", and about fifty feet from the ground the tree sent out a massive limb, which was apparently worn smooth, and it is said that the devil sat there at full moon and dropped a chain for every sinner that would die in the neighborhood for the next lunar month. He appeared as a great dragon with eyes as big as saucers and flaming like fire, like the headlights of an engine, and no one in all the country around would go near that hollow or that spring about the full of the moon. That was the only time, however, there was any danger there. This spring was called Clamper Spring because of the clampering that landholders and claimants of land had in 1750, about a corner of this spring, and it was thought by the superstitious that to drink this water caused a person to become quarrelsome and disagreeable, and to be given to clampering, recrimination and abuse. In early days it was supposed that a gun would become bewitched so that it would not shoot straight, but it was said that if the owner of the gun would take it to this spring and wrap toe around the ram-rod and dip it in the water of this spring, and then wipe his gun, that the witches could not withstand this, and would flee forever from the bore of the gun; and frequently hunters from the mountains miles around would come there and wipe out their guns.

As to whether or not the gun would not shoot straight, when wiped out at the spring, would be restored to its former correct shooting I cannot vouch, but I have, by tradition, the authority of some of the best hunters that it was effective. Dickie's Hill is the great hill of the Hill Country of Judea. It is on the Augusta and Rockingham line about a mile and a half from where I was raised. It was called after the Revolution, Independence Hill and sometime, Bonfire Hill. At that day every foot of land in the Hill Country of Judea was owned by the sturdy Scotch-Irish, and they loved this country so isolated, so far away from the roar of the sea and oppression, and when the news of the signing of the Declaration of Independence came to this out-of-the-way place, the Scotch-Irish of the Hill Country of Judea assembled and went to this

hill. At that time it was pine clad, a place where I often went to gather pine knots in my boyhood, but the pines have all disappeared, and those sturdy old Scotch-Irish nation builders, young and old, men and women and children, of the whole country turned out, and they gathered all the pine knots they could find on this old hill and carried them to the summit and set fire to them, and such another fire has never been seen in that country, and such shouting and cries for liberty.

I can see those liberty-loving people standing around the fire and shouting the words of liberty and “Down with the King”. In appearance Independence Hill is very much like Betsy Bell and north of it a little hill that resembles Mary Gray. It is a much larger hill, however, than our Betsy Bell. As a child, I thought it a great mountain. It was said that there were panthers there and some bears, and that the Indians sometimes lurked among the pines and among the great oaks on the north side, but I never saw any of these there except in my imagination. From the summit of this hill there is a sweeping view, grand sweeps of landscape, and it was a noted flag-station, during the Civil War.

Glen-Cose was the home of George Glenn, the name of the hill and hollow that he owned so named from Scotland’s noted Glen-Cose. This was a noted place of wrestling and of frolics among the early settlers. It was the place of good cheer, and once every year there was the assembling of the Scotch-Irish settlers, and there were many feats of lifting, jumping, wrestling, boxing and fencing, and both sword and shillelagh were used. Part of the old house that was built about 1750 still stands at Glen-Cose. The Glenns were noted for their high living and all loved spirits, and at these frolics there was always eating and drinking, it is said, to excess.

Grime’s Hollow was, when I was a child, a dreary hollow indeed. It was in the midst of a forest and there was a thick undergrowth of redbud and dogwood. An old hermit lived and died there. He settled there when the tide of Scotch-Irish poured into the valley. He did not own the land. He cared for no worldly goods. He was a Covenanter and a Presbyterian, but never went to church. He did penance like a monk, and lived in the greatest simplicity. He believed that he was inspired and had the divine power of intuition and foresight. He lived in a strange looking hovel which has long since disappeared, and could not be induced to leave this lonely place. Many visited this old hermit for advice on matters of church and state. He believed that he would never die, and that if he climbed to the top of the hill on either side he would ascend to his God like Elijah. He lived to a great age and was very venerable looking. His long white hair

covered his shoulders and his white beard reached nearly to his knees, and this old man did strangely disappear when he was about eighty. Not a trace could be found of him and it was supposed that, like Elisha the Prophet, he had climbed to the top of the hill known as Carin View, and had ascended to his God. Carin View is a very high hill and there is one of the most beautiful prospects from that hill that I have ever laid eyes on. It is a place, I have often thought, where a prophet might ascend to his God, or even be with his God and behold the prophet. There is such divinity and power in it, so grand and yet so restful. When my mind tires and I am very weary of life, I go in spirit to the top of this hill where the old hermit ascended to his God, and rest. Watts Hill is very high, and in appearance is very much like Carin View, but the view is not so grand, not so restful. On the top of this hill lived, it is said, another hermit by the name of Watts, who would never, after he settled there, leave it farther than to go to the spring at the bottom of the hill.

He was Scotch-Irish, and it is said also a Presbyterian, but not a church-goer. He was very religious and believed that he always communed with his God, and that angels hovered around him. He became very insane, and in one of his paroxysms of insanity, died, and it was believed by the negroes that this hill was haunted, and they never coon hunted, or went close to this hill again.

It is still a strange, desolate place. Thousands of times I have passed by and through this burying ground, but always the thoughts of the dead, the witches, the Indians, and the headless men were with me. Weird and desolate it is yet. It has never been cultivated. Man has not been brave enough to till the soil there – an occult force repels them. These dread influences may wear off yet if there is time enough.

The lakes or dams on Mossey Creek I can not describe. They were so beautiful to me as a child, so inspiring and so awful, their waters looked so blue, so deep so threatening, they terrified the life nearly out of me. I have seen no great waters and thought they were oceans, the greatest waters in the world, but how beautiful they were I cannot describe. The dam at the old Miller Iron Works was over a mile long and about 400 yards wide, and was a beautiful sheet of clear water, a place for boating, bathing and swimming, and skating on the winter's ice. By this was old Mossy Creek Academy, the school that turned out many able men soldiers, scholars, statesmen and professional men. Many weird stories I could tell you about this old Miller Iron Works and of this beautiful sheet of water, but I fear I will worry you.

The Natural Chimneys, or as they were called in ancient times, the Pillars of Hercules, are on the boundary between the Hill Country of Judea and the Plains of Jericho. They are great massive chimneys built by the great world building forces during the Silurian Limestone building age, and they are one of the natural wonders of the great valley.

I mentioned Misner's Hollow, where old man Misner lived, a descendant from my great-grandfather's servant. That too, is a strange weird place. The hollow leads to within 100 yards of the summit of Carin View, and a perfect wilderness it was – great woods, and such a thicket of red bud I have never seen. A little patch in this forest and thicket Misner cut out. It is on the land of the old Curry place. There he built a log cabin and there reared a large family. His eldest son was Fighting Bob Misner, the great bully of his day. Blacksmith and soldier he was, and died but a few years ago well up in the 80's. Four or five of the Misners were brave soldiers in the Southern Army, and one or two of them lay down their lives for the cause. The descendents of these Misners are very numerous, and live all over this country. At this lonely place, the Misner home, many eccentric characters would assemble on Sundays, such as Jacob Moyers, the noted hunter; John Shott, the solemn wit, fool and fighter, Sam Dalton, a witty fool and tramp; Jake Pate, the skilled horse trainer and rake and daredevil; and Dave and Andy Riddle, the great boxers. The coon dogs kept by the Misners were a rare lot. At that day my father always kept a pack of hounds, and the Misner crowd and my father had merry times with the coons and foxes, and many chases they had over those hills. Jolly days were they – gone forever. Their memories only linger in the shadows. This Misner's Hollow was the place of refugees. There was never a raid of the Yankee Army in the great valley but that this hollow was packed with refugees. Thousands of them would congregate there. I have seen them pour in there for days at a time when they thought the Yankees were coming, and they kept sentinels on Cairn View always on the lookout.

They were merry and exciting days to me then but a mere child, but the Yankees never reached this part of the hill country. The nearest they came to Glen Cairn was a mile away. The barn was burned there, but my father leading a company of home guards, fired into them and they were routed. There were no more barns burned in that section – no more devastation. I remember it so well; it seems but the other day and yet was long ago. John Shott and Sam Dalton were productions of Grindstone Ridge. They were certainly peculiar characters. I have never known any persons like them. Shott was stout and sturdy, strong-built, and solemn as a

graveyard. Dalton was active and athletic, and a merry fool. Both were fond of drink. Before and for sometime after the war, there were two barrooms in Mt. Sidney. I went there once or twice a week for the mail, a distance of five miles from the old home. Many merry times the boys had there. The brave boys and battle-scarred heroes whiled away many merry days and nights in the old town – James and Tom McClung, Sam McCue, Court Roller and Charles Roller, Tom Walker, Dave Grooms and Arthur, and they were merry fellows indeed, and Dave Hyde and Charlie Neff, and many others that many interesting things could be told about. One day when I was in the village Dalton and Shott got very drunk. It was a very hot day and they lay down in the shade back of the Glen Tavern on the hill and fell asleep.

Jim McClung and Court Roller drew them up side by side, and sent me and some other boys for blackening, and they gave Shott and Dalton a good coat of it and laid them face to face. Shott was a very ill-tempered fellow, and he waked first from his drunken sleep and said to Dalton, “You damned n****r, what are you doin’ here?” and got on Dalton and began to beat him. Dalton was very strong and active, and when he saw Shott on top of him he thought that a negro was beating him, and it resulted in one of the most interesting fights I have ever seen. And the fund that the brave soldier boys had looking on this fight, and the shouts and the cries of the boys and the laughter, it makes me merry now to think about.

Andy and Dave Riddle were productions of Central Judea. They were born and reared in Devil’s Hollow. Splendid athletic men they were, of the poor clean class; both men were of the Stonewall Brigade, and their brother-in-law, George Sheets, was another brave soldier, reared in the country of Judea. These brave fellows obtained a furlough from the Brigade. They were all married and had little children at home. They lingered and stayed over their two days. For this they were court-martialed and condemned and shot. Stirring times they were when this message came to the Hills of Judea. The excitement of my father of old Cyrus Brown, a brave old Scotch-Irish elder, I will never forget. They wired to Letcher, the War Governor; they sent the messages to Jackson; but to no effect. These men, all brave soldiers and good men, with brave wives and little children at home, were shot for being two days late. It had too a bad effect. There were two other brave Riddles in the Southern Army. They deserted. The Hunters deserted three at a time; the Crauns five or six in number. The Army lost in a few days thirty or forty brave men who had deserted from the Hill Country of Judea, on account of this tragedy. They went through the underground route, the way that old James Todd at North River Gap, the

staunch old Unionist, led. Jacob Pate and Jacob Moyers of the merry gang at Misner's Hollow long survived the war. Moyers was a skilled rifleman. He was of German origin and spoke but little broken English, but what an interesting talker he was. How I used to linger spell-bound on his lips for hours, listening to the stories of his adventures. He had hunted all over the valley and all through the Alleghany and North Mountains, and many strange and wondrous stories he could tell. Such power of narrative I have never heard. Educated men usually have little gift of narrative. The true narrator must be of a simple life and of a simple mind. Their stories are so natural, so easy, so beautifully interesting. Slate hill and a large territory around about was given my great-grandfather to two of his sons. One was a bachelor. They built the old brick house where Ruleman now lives. This Slate Hill is a very high and dreary old hill and there is something about it that makes the heart sad. For many years there was an old school house near the summit of this hill known as Slate Hill School House. There was something about the place that made teachers sour and boys bad. One teacher was so bucked and gagged and left there overnight, and what stir it made, but it was such a dreadful old hill, and the place so solemn and desolate, that the parents did not like to go there, and they let things take their course, for fear they would grow more gloomy than before. Long-faced, solemn people lived about this hill. It only produced such, I have been over it often but it always gave me the creeps, and when it was dark my hair would stand on end. There is a strange occult force about every stone on this hill. The stones look lonesome, although there are so many of them. Probably it is because it is a graveyard of the Silurian Age. For never anywhere else have I seen so many brachiopods and trilobites, coral and gratholites and fossils. All as dead as the tacks in a coffin, and dead much longer.

I cannot finish this letter without referring to a negro slave that my father owned, Ben Curry. He was a descendent of two slaves that my great-grandfather purchased in 1740. He could read and write, and was well informed and widely read. He was a hoodoer among the negroes. He was a grand master in that art. He was a true and loyal negro. He mourned at the death of my brothers like they were his children, and when at last of all came the report that Dr. Curry, my eldest brother, had been sent to Camp Chase, and had escaped and had been captured and shot, the old negro mourned and groaned and wept, and would not be comforted to the day of his death, and not long after he had passed away Dr. Curry apparently rose from the dead. He came home, to the surprise of all of us – for we all thought he was dead. He came about 11

o'clock at night. I remember it so well. I had heard so often that he was dead – had been shot on account of his escape from prison and for shooting a guard, that I was afraid of him. The negroes talked about it so much, that it was several days before I could be reconciled with him and realize that he was flesh and blood and not mere thin air. Many brave soldiers the Hill Country of Judea sent out to all the wars of the republic, and many brave boys from the Hill Country laid down their lives for Dixie.

There was much culture in that section – scholarly men, college men – John and George Seawright, my father and Cyrus Brown, Frank Brown and old Andrew Young, Samuel Bell, and others. There were no pure Scotch-Irish there now. The whole population has changed. The interesting stories and romances of 30 or 40 years ago have disappeared and are forgotten. They are a sturdy people who live there, but they are not the same – changed so changed, that I can hardly realize that it is the same old country.

Yours sincerely,
Charles Curry