

## Commentary

### Rush and Me

By John Clayton

The great Chesapeake/Potomac/Beltway presidential primary has come and gone, with two very clear winners walking away with most of our precious delegates and virtually all of the momentum; however, the hottest race in our reporting area was actually off the radar for those in the western part of Montgomery County and the southern part of Frederick County, but dead center for our more eastern readers. In District 4, which includes the Clarksburg area, Democratic congressional incumbent Al Wynn lost in a heated rematch with challenger Donna Edwards. If you ever want to see a strangely-drawn congressional district, District 4 is the place. The boundaries grab our friends in Clarksburg and then wind east and south through Laytonsville, Olney, and along the eastern and southern District line, eventually ending up somewhere near Fort Washington and Indian Head Highway. The boundaries move with purpose, avoiding some areas and gobbling up others. This was drawn either to achieve racial parity or to defeat former District 8 congressman Connie Morella, or both, depending on whom you ask. If I remember correctly, Congressman Wynn didn't do too well in the Clarksburg area in the 2006 election. It may be interesting to see how often Ms. Edwards bothers to visit the northwestern frontier of her district this time around. Her Republican opponent in the general election, for those of you keeping score at home, will be Peter James, who is described as a "Ron Paul Republican." We'll soon see how the Ron Paul stuff plays out in Fort Washington.

For those of us in both parties who try to occupy something we call the political center, there are some encouraging trends—particularly on the Republican side. I admit to being a Democrat, which is somewhat of an oddity out here, and I have enjoyed the tolerance of my Republican friends for one so misguided. I am actually quite comfortable with many of the tenets of conservatism, although probably more as a fiscal conservative than a social conservative. (Who knows, maybe I am a Ron Paul Democrat and don't know it.) But this sympathy with conservative principles doesn't bring me anywhere close to the sentiments of the Republican right wing, and I confess to enjoying their pain over the

ascendancy of Sen. John McCain as their presumptive nominee for president. We have had almost eight years of right wing policies but the voting public is now rejecting them, and I think the country is the better for it. As we all know, it is a cycle, and it will swing back in time, but I do not believe it will swing back to the same crowd. I hope it will swing towards a wiser and more center-of-the-road orientation. It may, at that time, even be an improvement. Only time will tell.

The person that has enjoyed the marginalization of the Republican right wing even more than I have is, of course, Rush Limbaugh, whose show is the flagship of conservative talk radio. He is in high dudgeon, his favorite state I am sure, over the rout of the right wing. He and others of his ilk, including the right wing's court jester Anne Coulter, have been gnashing their teeth and rending their garments over the course of the Republican primary. I have read more about these folks in the past three weeks than I have in the past three years. They are all over the news. Business is good, and they must be very pleased with that. I had no idea we could all be so happy at the same time.

And on top of that, spring training has started.



## Letter to the Editor

Dear Rande:

I think I have told you before how much I always enjoy reading Jack Toomey's Local History column. A lot of it I have remembered from my childhood, such as the articles dealing with the "Maryland House" nursing home in Germantown, which was still standing in the 1960s, and the brutal murder of Mr. Snyder in Snyder's store at Quince Orchard Road on Christmas Eve in the early 1960s, which I remember very vividly, having grown up in Darnestown.

I was particularly interested in the "Mills Murder Mystery" of 1927 published in the January 25 edition of the *Monocle*. Even though that was well before my time, I found it fascinating, for reasons I will explain: The victim, Edward Mills, was my great uncle. His widow, Bertha Roberts Mills, was my great aunt and the sister of my grandfather, Charles H. Roberts.

And here I'll provide a little history of my own. Their father's farm, the farm of my paternal great-grand-

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father, was located on Turkeyfoot Road in Darnestown. There were three children that I know of, my grandfather Charles, Bertha, and Grace, all of whom are buried in the Darnestown Presbyterian Church Cemetery.

My grandfather, Charles Roberts, married Elizabeth Curtis in 1916. She grew up on her father's (my paternal great-grandfather's) farm located on Route 107 across from what is now the turf field (up until a few years ago, you could still see the chimney standing from the long-ago farmhouse), with three siblings that I know of: Barnard, who worked at the Liberty Mill in Germantown and built a small bungalow in Darnestown (torn down for a subdivision about five years ago); Polly, who married Howard Carter and lived in Darnestown until their deaths (their house was torn down for development about twenty years ago); and Frederick, who lived on Route 118 near its intersection with Route 28 (his small frame cape cod house which he built is still standing).

Getting back to the particular article, I remember very well my Great Aunt Bertha and visiting at her house on Dufief Mill Road regularly during my childhood. Actually, both of my

great aunts on my father's side of the family were widows. Grace (married name Schwartzbeck) continued to live on her farm located on Route 28 across from what was known as the National Geographic site (and now the GE building) until her death in the late 1970s (that property is now a subdivision).

You included a photo of Aunt Bertha's house in your article. Immediately adjacent to that house, a little north and up the hill, is a small brick cape code house that was built by her son, my father's cousin, Paul D. Mills (whom I always called Uncle Paul), a successful farmer and a founding member of the Montgomery County Agricultural Society. Aunt Bertha passed away, as I recall, in the late sixties or early seventies. Paul Mills died about fifteen years ago.

At least in front of me, while I was a child, no one in the family ever discussed the death of my great uncle Edward. For all I knew, he had died of natural causes; however, about twenty-five years ago, my father showed me a pistol he kept and told me it had been taken from the alleged murderer,

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whom he stated was a disgruntled former farm hand/handyman employed by Edward Mills. Apparently, after the accused's trial, the prosecutor gave that firearm to my great Aunt Bertha, who in turn gave it to my father. I suppose they did things differently back in the 1920s. My father passed away in 2003. Unfortunately, I did not find that pistol in his personal effects after his death.

Also over the past twenty-five years or so, I have heard various versions and theories from distant relatives as to possible reasons for the murder of my great uncle other than the note that was pinned to the victim's body implicating the deceased in an amorous relationship with an unnamed young married woman.

Most interesting and perhaps bizarre, but nevertheless not beyond the pale of possibility, is the theory that a distant relative related to me several years ago after substantial research of his own, including review of the public records and interviews with various persons living in the community at the time of the crime. His deduction was that the murder was related to the Ku Klux Klan, and the note pinned to the deceased's body was simply provided to throw off the police investigators. Wait a minute, you might ask, wasn't

Edward Mills white? Yes, he was, but that would not necessarily spare him from the possibly fatal mistake of crossing the Klan in 1927.

You have to put the crime into the proper perspective and appreciate the time and circumstances of Montgomery County in the 1920s. During the 1920s, the Klan reached its zenith, with at least fifteen percent of eligible voters (meaning men) nationwide publicly avowing their membership in that organization—the actual membership was probably much higher—and the Klan was very much a part of Montgomery County, including many responsible white businessmen and farmers. Today, we think of the Klan as simply a racist organization, but keep in mind that the Klan's motivations during that period of the early twentieth century were not only grounded in racism, but an equally fervent, if not even more intense, hatred of Catholics and, for that matter, hatred of any white person who did not subscribe to the Klan's edicts.

The theory which was related to me several years ago by that distant relative is that Edward Mills, as a responsible member of the community and a respected Montgomery County farmer (and farmers were for all intents and purposes the entire business community of Montgomery County at that time), was requested or instructed by the Klan

to take or join in some action against someone as directed by the Klan, most likely a Catholic. If that theory is true, then the specific requested action is unknown and has been lost to history. However, it is my understanding that he not only refused, but further threatened to expose the Klan's plans, perhaps criminal in nature. That was a transgression that the Klan could not accept, and for that transgression, the theory goes, Mr. Mills unfortunately paid with his life.

That theory further implies that his murder was intended as a message to anyone in the community that would refuse to faithfully tow the Klan line when directed to do so; and the note pinned to his body accusing him of marital infidelity was simply to provide a false lead for the local police to point their investigation in another direction. It is my understanding from this theory that many in the community, including many of the over five hundred people attending his funeral at the Travilah Baptist Church as reported in your article strongly suspected that Edward Mills was targeted and murdered by the Klan, even if they did not know the identity of his murderer, but none of them dared speak publicly to that effect for fear of befalling a similar fate.

True or not, that's an interesting theory to an unsolved murder. If nothing else, it serves as an example of how very far we have come in the last eighty years or so.

It is my understanding from other relatives that there is a second theory that my great uncle actually was more than a mere farmer: he may have operated an illegal still in the woods of his farm and may have been killed by rival bootleggers.

Of course, there is that which was related to me by my father, that my great uncle simply met his fate at the hands of a disgruntled former farm hand/handyman.

Each of those theories, of course, assumes that the note pinned to the body accusing the victim of an amorous relationship with some unidentified young married woman was simply a ruse or red herring for investigators.

Did Samuel Robertson murder my great uncle Edward Mills? Don't know, but he was, after all, acquitted by a jury of his peers. Was he the disgruntled former farmhand/handyman as described by my father? Maybe. Was the pistol my father revealed to me the actual murder weapon? Who knows, but it supposedly came from the accused. Was the Klan involved in this murder? Hard to say. Was Edward Mills a bootlegger? Don't

know that either.

Or did he, in fact, have a relationship with some young married woman whom to this day remains unknown and unidentified? In other words, was this a murder, a crime of passion, grounded in affairs of the heart, or a criminal conspiracy by the Klan, or carried out by rival bootleggers, or just a farmhand that had a score to settle with his prior employer?

After eighty-one years, I seriously doubt we'll ever really know the answer to those questions, but it does make for some interesting Lost History. ✦

Sincerely,  
William J. Roberts

### **Editor's Note:**

The Local History article, "The Mills Murder Mystery," was the product of a yearlong research project that included reading the archives of the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Evening Star*. Over thirty newspaper articles were identified and used as research material for the story. In addition, the only person still living today who was actually at the crime scene was interviewed.

A thorough review of the newspaper articles from the 1920s revealed that the farmhand referred to by Mr. Roberts was never considered a suspect by the police, states attorney, or defense team retained by Samuel Robertson. In fact, he was not a former employee as described by Mr. Roberts. He was present at the farm and alerted the victim's son and wife after hearing the shots. There is nothing in the newspaper articles or trial testimony that indicates that he was a disgruntled employee.

The gun that Mr. Roberts was told may have been the murder weapon was actually taken from the home of the brother of the farmhand and later eliminated as a possible murder weapon after testing by a government agency. Mr. Roberts also raises the possibility that the Ku Klux Klan could have been involved in the slaying. At no time during the trial of Samuel Robertson did the defense counsel, some of the most outstanding attorneys of the time, raise that possibility; nor did they argue that the farmhand could have committed the murder.

We have posted the original story by Jack Toomey on our website, [www.monocacymonocle.com](http://www.monocacymonocle.com). ✦

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