

# These Walls Do Talk

The aptly named Graffiti House attracts Civil War and other history buffs as well as paranormal-believing “ghost hunters.”

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PHOTOS BY JAN KAMPHUIS

**A** few miles south of the Rappahannock River in Culpeper County lays one of the nation’s historical treasures – the Graffiti House on the Brandy Station Battlefield. Built in 1858 as an adjunct to the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, it served both sides during the Civil War. For the Confederates it was a field hospital, while the Federals used it as a divisional headquarters for the five months they wintered over in 1863-1864.

It was because of this utilitarian value that the small frame house escaped the destruction visited upon many other buildings as soldiers from both sides searched for material to use in constructing shelters, or simply for firewood.

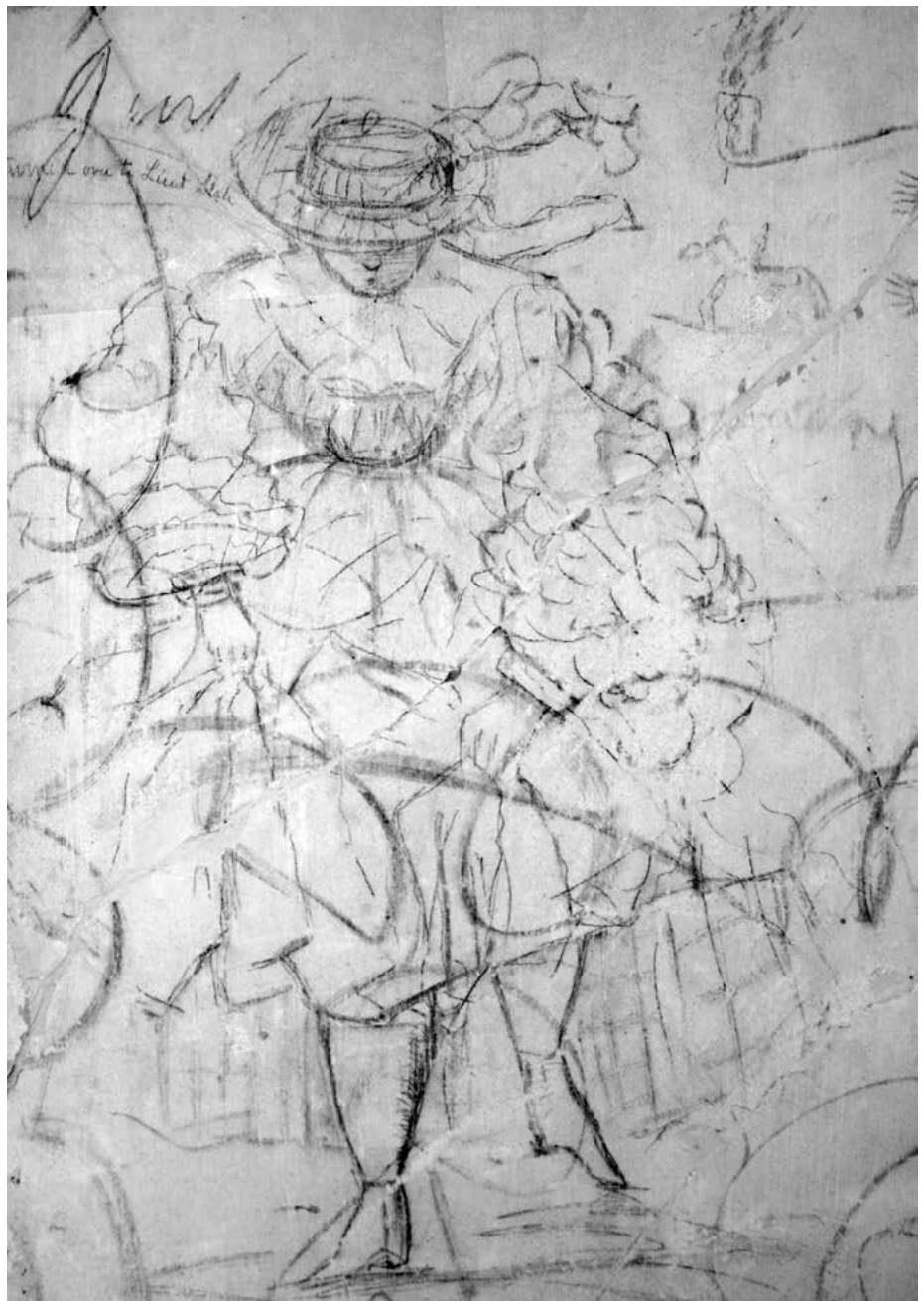
Nearby Fleetwood Hill may be the most fought over piece of real estate in American warfare: opposing armies either sought to defend or gain this valuable high ground for use as an artillery platform. After each clash of arms, the wounded and prisoners would be brought to this house either for medical help or to be transported to distant hospitals or POW camps.

Following the war, the house returned to civilian use and eventually became a family home. Generations lived their own family stories here and memories of its wartime use faded.

By the 1990’s the building was in sorry shape, missing a roof, with many of the win-

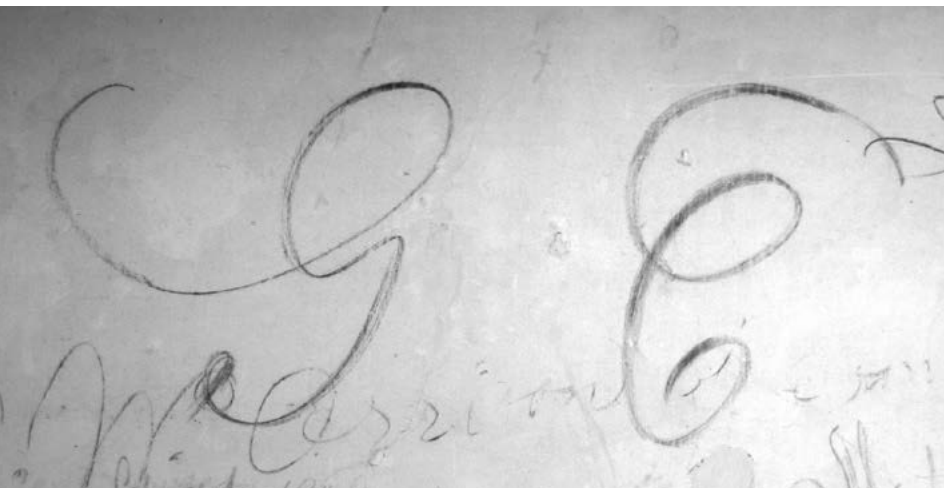
## “The Dancing Lady”

During the five month winter encampment following the Gettysburg campaign, families of officers were allowed to come to camp. Here a female visitor carefully picks her way through the mud between the Graffiti House and the railroad tracks





When federal soldiers occupied the house as a headquarters for a 3rd Corps division, they inscribed their army's name with a flourish through two years of Confederate graffiti



Following his marriage to Libbi Bacon in Michigan, General George Custer awaited his bride at Brandy Station. Their honeymoon cottage still stands along Route 3 in Culpeper.

Sketches express their interest in horses and mules – a constant presence in 19th century armies.



### The high cost of history

The Graffiti house cost \$100,000 but has a repair estimation of \$2.1 million.

The cost of reconstruction experts to methodically remove layer after layer of paint and other materials to carefully expose the graffiti ranged from \$7,000 to 12,000 *per day*, and sometimes they uncovered large portions of walls with no graffiti found underneath.

dows smashed. The owner decided to clear this eyesore from his property by allowing the local fire department to burn it down. But first he sent his son to check and see if there was anything worth salvaging inside. This young man had heard rumors of mysterious writing under the many layers of paint and wallpaper.

He picked up a broken piece of glass and began scraping away – revealing the name “JEB Stuart” buried under the accumulated paint. Knowing that the inscribed name of the Cavalry leader of Robert E. Lee’s army was noteworthy, his father decided to halt the demolition and replaced the missing roof and windows.

At the same time a developer from California was attempting to build a Formula One raceway at Brandy Station – on the very fields that in the summer of 1863, during the Gettysburg campaign, had been the scene of the largest cavalry battle ever fought in North America.

The Brandy Station Foundation with the all-important help of the Civil War Trust successfully mounted a campaign to save the land. Shortly thereafter the Foundation acquired the Graffiti House as their own headquarters, and the work of uncovering and preserving the writing on the walls commenced in earnest.

A large and flamboyant “GC” on one wall appears to be the work of George Custer, who spent time in the house awaiting the arrival of his bride. (Their honeymoon cottage sits, abandoned, a few miles away.) During the winter encampment officer’s wives and families were allowed to visit – and

## Events at the Graffiti House

A lecture series on CW related topics the last Sunday of every month at 2 p.m.

Every other Saturday throughout the summer there is a two hour tour of different portions of the battlefield. It takes four tours to view for the entire program.

Each year there is a period ball, a picnic and annual dinner. Each April, volunteers participate in "Park Day" sponsored by the Civil War Trust and the History Channel.

For additional events, please visit the *Piedmont Virginian's* online calendar, always being updated! [www.piedmontvirginian.com](http://www.piedmontvirginian.com)

The BSF is always seeking new members and docents for the Graffiti House.

pictures of various women decorate the wall, including one large one dubbed "The Dancing Lady." This portrait shows a woman in hoop skirt carefully picking her way across the muddy train yard and lifting the hem of her skirt, thus exposing a calf.

On March 16, 1863, an artillery unit who would fight in the next days the Battle of Kelly's Ford spent the night upstairs and inscribed in a decorative scroll the names of the men who manned the artillery, alongside a sketch of Captain Jim Breathed, their commander. Captain James Marshall, the nephew of Chief Justice John Marshall, was wounded at the battle on June 9 – he wrote his name on the wall prior to being transported the next day to Charlottesville.

Years ago the central chimney collapsed, due to the damp nature of the soil – destroying most of the walls on the first floor. Now renovated, this area serves as a museum, a library for research, and a space for lectures and gift shop. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Richard Deardoff** is a docent at the Graffiti House and has served on the Board of Directors for the Brandy

Station Foundation, has been named Teacher of the Year for Fauquier County Public Schools twice, and is a former Civil War Trust Teacher of the Year. He and his wife, Suzanne, live in Culpeper County; he is currently teaching at Kettle Run High school in his 37th year with Fauquier County Schools.

In addition to its historical value, the building has also proved to be of interest to a variety of paranormal groups, who have described it as one of the most active sites for research in the area. These investigators have spent numerous nights at the house tracing spirits and tape recording conversations from beyond. A DVD of their experiences is available for viewing at the Graffiti House. Below is the entrance to the "Ghost Room," where most of the paranormal activity has been detected.



**Michael Bowman** was a confederate private who was paid \$11 a month. He spent \$2 to have his picture taken. His portrait – and perhaps his presence – remains in the Graffiti House.

The Graffiti House is open for visitors Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. There is a self-guided tour, or docents are available. Additionally the Foundation provides a lecture series on various Civil War topics from April through September, and tours of the battlefield on alternating Saturdays. For more information, visit: [www.brandystationfoundation.com](http://www.brandystationfoundation.com)