

## **J.E.B. and Laura**

By Barbara Glakas

We may never know the true nature of the relationship between J.E.B. and Laura.

Many of you already are familiar with Laura Ratcliffe, a southern sympathizer who once lived just outside Herndon on Centreville Road and helped John Mosby during the Civil War. [For more about Laura, see the December 26, 2010 column, “Laura Ratcliffe, Herndon's Confederate Spy.”] But you may not be familiar with her relationship with Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart.

James Ewell Brown (J.E.B.) Stuart was born in 1833 and grew up in the small town of Laurel Hill, in southern Virginia near the North Carolina border. After being home schooled, he went to Emory and Henry College in Wytheville, Virginia. Later, in 1850, he graduated from West Point.

Laura Ratcliffe was born in 1836 in Fairfax City, Virginia. After the death of her father, Laura moved with her mother and two sisters to a house along Centreville Road in the Frying Pan community.

As a young Lieutenant in the U.S. Army, and while stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Stuart met and married Flora Cooke. They had three children—Flora, James Jr., and Virginia. Prior to the Civil War, he rode with U.S. Army Colonel Robert E. Lee to quell an anti-slavery rebellion in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia that was led by a fanatic abolitionist named John Brown. This event helped to spark the beginning of the Civil War.

Stuart became an accomplished and invaluable Confederate cavalry officer, using hit and run tactics to raid Union encampments. He was quickly promoted to the rank of Colonel; by 1861, he was a Brigadier General.

Stuart first met Laura Ratcliffe—a southern sympathizer—in 1861 at a hospital located at Camp Qui Vive (a French phrase meaning, “Who goes there?”), which was located in a house on Ox Road in Fairfax. Stuart had established his cavalry headquarters at the camp. Laura was tending to one of his wounded soldiers, and Stuart was immediately smitten with her. He wrote her many letters and romantic poems. He also extended frequent dinner invitations to Laura and her friend, Antonia Ford.

In March of 1862 he wrote Laura a letter, which said in part:

My Dear Laura,

I have thought of you long and anxiously since my last tidings from you. Our enemies are playing a good game pretending to restore instead of destroying as we do; and I have no doubt we have a plenty silly enough to put confidence in their fair promises and soft whining speeches. Will my Laura regard such? Can her faithful heart be turned? Something whispers “no never....

You will no doubt find opportunities to send me an occasional note, I need not say how much it will be prized – Don't you know. Have it well secreted, and let it tell me your thoughts, freely and without reserve. Can I ever forget that [two words scratched out] – that never to be forgotten good-bye? Will you forget it? Will you forget me? I am vain enough Laura to be flattered with the hope that you are among the few of mankind that neither time, place, or circumstances can alter – that your regard, which I so dearly prize, will not wane with you moon that saw our last departing, but endure till the end. That whatever betide me in this eventful year you will in the corner of that heart so full of noble impulses find a place in which to stow away from worldly view the "Young Brigadier," even when that bullet-proof helmet (illegible) has fulfilled its last mission. I do not wish you destroy this but keep it and take it out occasionally to remind you of the thoughts and sentiments of "the absent one." I left my notepaper in my trunk which is not here, you must therefore excuse this sheet. You will not doubt get this tomorrow. Can you guess who this is, I'll let you try – [two words scratched out] – Good bye.

It is unknown if Laura ever reciprocated Stuart's advances, but he continued to share his feelings with her. In December of 1862 he wrote a poem to Laura. It ends:

When friends are false save one whose heart beats  
Constantly for thee  
Tis then I ask that thou wouldst turn confidingly  
To me.  
–J.E.B.

Laura was more than just a romantic interest to Stuart, however. She assisted the Confederacy by providing much valuable intelligence about Union activities in the Frying Pan area. It was Stuart who caused Colonel John Mosby and Laura to meet when the Colonel was detailed to escort her from the Fairfax Court House to Frying Pan. When Mosby returned the carriage to Stuart's headquarters to report the result of the mission, it also marked the first time that Mosby met Stuart. Later in the war, Laura would save Mosby's life by warning him of a Union trap that had been set for him near Frying Pan.

Rumors circulated about Stuart's attentions toward young women, including Laura. Reportedly, the only time Flora Stuart was ever anxious about her husband's association with the ladies was when it involved Laura. Some biographers conclude that Stuart affected these romantic relationships for intelligence purposes. One writer stated that Stuart, "constantly prodded his officers to enlist the aid of females whenever they could," and "promised that funds would be placed at their disposal with which to purchase military intelligence."

We may never know the true nature of the relationship between J.E.B. and Laura. Nevertheless, Stuart reportedly was carrying a lock of Laura's hair when he was mortally wounded at Yellow Tavern near Richmond. In addition, Stuart's album of poems was found among Laura's personal effects after her death in 1923.