

VLR 9/11/02  
NR 11/21/02

(Rev. 10-90)  
NPS Form 10-900

OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

### NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

#### 1. Name of Property

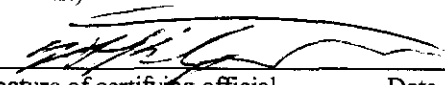
historic name: **BLEAK HILL**  
other names/site number (23-0002) **#33-2**

#### 2. Location

street & number: 215 Bleak Hill Lane \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication  X  
city or town Callaway \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity  X  
state Virginia code VA county Franklin code 067 Zip 24067

#### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant \_\_\_\_\_ nationally \_\_\_\_\_ statewide  locally. (\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

 \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official Date 11/21/02  
**Virginia Department of Historic Resources**  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria. (\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:  
\_\_\_\_ entered in the National Register  
\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.  
\_\_\_\_ determined eligible for the National Register  
\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet. Signature of Keeper  
\_\_\_\_ determined not eligible for the National Register Date of Action  
\_\_\_\_ removed from the National Register  
\_\_\_\_ other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

U. S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

BLEAK HILL (33-0002)  
Franklin County, Virginia

**5. Classification**

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>  7  </u>	<u>      </u>	buildings
<u>      </u>	<u>      </u>	sites
<u>      </u>	<u>      </u>	structures
<u>      </u>	<u>      </u>	objects
<u>  7  </u>	<u>      </u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register   0  

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.) N/A

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat	DOMESTIC	Single dwelling
	DOMESTIC	Single dwelling
	DOMESTIC	Secondary structures
	LAW	Law Office

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat	DOMESTIC	Single dwelling
	DOMESTIC	Vacant/not in use
	DOMESTIC	Vacant/not in use; storage sheds
	LAW	Work in progress

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

LATE VICTORIAN Italianate

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation: brick, parged

Roof: standing seam metal

Walls: brick

Other: concrete

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Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**8. Statement of Significance**

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

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Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

Law, Agriculture, and Architecture

Period of Significance ca. 1820 through 1946 \_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates ca. 1858 Construction date

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) Saunders, Dr. William Dabney

Cultural Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder: unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark  
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_  
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Location of Additional Data**

State Historic Preservation Office  
 Other State agency  
 Federal agency  
 Local government  
 University  
 Other

Name of repository: Virginia Department of Historic Resources \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreeage of Property 20.53-acre \_\_\_\_\_

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting	Northing	Zone Easting	Northing
1 17 585440	4091630	2 17 585550	4091910
3 17 585910	4091890	4 17 585770	4091530

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: Anne Stuart Beckett, Consultant

Organization: ANNE STUART BECKETT \_\_\_\_\_ date July 8, 2002 \_\_\_\_\_

street & number: PO Box 2712 \_\_\_\_\_ telephone 540-982-2600 \_\_\_\_\_

city: Roanoke \_\_\_\_\_ state VA zip code 24001 \_\_\_\_\_

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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(Rev. 10-90)

U. S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

OMB No. 1024-4018

**BLEAK HILL (33-0002)**  
Franklin County, Virginia

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name: Charles and Lois Vogel \_\_\_\_\_

street & number 215 Bleak Hill Lane \_\_\_\_\_ telephone 540-483-8212 \_\_\_\_\_

city or town Callaway \_\_\_\_\_ state VA\_\_ zip code 24067 \_\_\_\_\_

=====  
**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).  
**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**BLEAK HILL (33-0002)**  
**Franklin County, Virginia**

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### Summary Paragraph

Bleak Hill represents the rural, wealthy plantation life of a Franklin County political family during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a brick, Italianate villa-style house set on a cleared hilltop overlooking the broad plain of the Pigg River with uninterrupted views of the Blue Ridge Mountains to the west. Attorney-at-law Peter Saunders and his new wife Elizabeth Dabney completed Bleak Hill around 1858. Elizabeth apparently named the property after her first winter there and while reading Dickens's *Bleak House*. The 3,900-acre property on which Peter built belonged to his grandfather, Peter Saunders, Sr., the "Pioneer of Franklin County." When Peter Saunders, Sr., died, his son Judge Fleming Saunders inherited the property and built the first house ca. 1815-20 for his new wife, Alice Watts. After that house burnt in ca. 1838, his son Peter eventually inherited the property, and he enjoyed it with his wife Elizabeth until their deaths in 1904. Edward, one of their sons, followed in his father's and grandfather's political footsteps and eventually served on the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals. William "Cheese" Dabney Saunders, another son, continued to practice farming while serving as a professor of dairying at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI). The house remained in the Saunders family until 1946, when Dr. Henry Lee purchased it. Bleak Hill was laid out in more of a Tidewater plantation style than in a Piedmont farmstead style. It has two rows of ca. 1820 frame, brick, and log outbuildings facing the rear entrance. The house and setting appear much as they did in the nineteenth century.

### Detailed Description--Exterior:

The two-story, three-bay, asymmetrical, 40' x 48' double-pile, red brick Bleak Hill rests on a raised brick basement that was parged and scored to imitate ashlar. The building is a true Italianate style with a projecting two-story ell similar to "Villa no.1" in La Fevre's *The Architectural Instructor*, 1856. The ell features an extended bay of three narrow windows topped with half-round arches. The recessed main block has a solid four-panel wood door set in the center of the façade, and a single window with a flat lintel to the south of the door. The windows across the second-floor façade each contain narrow paired windows with half-round arches. All other windows in the house, except one are symmetrically placed, large, six-over-six, wood sash windows with flat lintels. The three-bay wood porch along the main block has a replaced square wood balustrade, square columns, and poured-in-place concrete piers and steps. The basement has windows on all elevations, a door on the façade, and a door on the south elevation. The façade is an all-stretcher bond, and the other elevations are a 1-to-4 or 1-to-5 variant Flemish brick bond with narrow, penciled mortar joints. The brick has not been painted and is in good

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**Detailed Description (continued)**

condition. A bracketed cornice and flared, projecting eaves accent the shallow hip roof, which is clad with standing seam metal. Central, brick chimneystacks accent the junctions of the hip roof.<sup>1</sup>

**Alterations/Additions to the Exterior:**

The front porch has ca. 1930s concrete porch piers and steps and a thicker wood porch balustrade. A ca. 1900 photo shows the original wood steps and narrower wood balustrade. The rear kitchen and bathroom have also been added. It appears that the current rear, one-story frame addition follows a similar footprint as depicted in the photograph with a one-story, shed-roof frame addition in two parts and a centered entranceway. A deeper kitchen area has been added on the north corner with a hip roof, and the entire addition has been sheathed in fiberboard that resembles wide weatherboard siding.

**Interior:**

Bleak Hill contains three functional floors; all floors have a centered passage or hallway flanked by four rooms. The full basement served numerous domestic functions and was the domain of "Aunt Doshy." The exterior basement walls are imitated ashlar, and the floors are laid in brick with a herringbone brick pattern underneath the open front porch area. The basement was accessed from both the front and south side entrances, and contains four main rooms plus a rear area that has been enclosed. Two of the basement rooms contain large fireplaces that once served as kitchens and possibly a summer dining room. The area that was originally underneath the rear porch was enclosed during the ca. 1930s with poured-in-place concrete walls. This floor is also covered with brick, but it also has a shallow floor drain of inverted bricks (v-shaped) that runs the length of the floor. The original exterior basement wall on the east elevation contains two windows flanking a centered door; one window still contains its original wood louvered shutters and hardware. It appears that the current basement floor plan may have served as the original 1815-20 basement, and this rear east room off the basement may also have served later as the dairy or at least where "Aunt Jule" churned the butter.<sup>2</sup>

The facade entrance on the front porch contains a single door with sidelights, through which one enters into a wide centered passageway with a wide staircase to the right of the hallway. The main living room is off to the left, and a small "library" is off to the right. On the basis of written family history it appears that this is the room referred to as the library, where Peter Saunders read daily

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**Detailed Description (continued)**

prayers from the Bible. Both rooms have passages into the adjoining rear rooms. A full-size dining room is on the northeast corner, and an equally large parlor is located on the southeast corner. During the summer the house was always full of guests, and after breakfast and dinner, two different family histories state that "the dining room boy," also referred to as "the colored boy," would bring in a low table and a double basin to the dining room for the female family members and guests to converse and wash and dry the dishes. Occasionally, men with pipes would drop in on the conversation, which ranged from everything from politics to religion. The front living room is the most decorative, with tall tripartite windows in the window bay and an elaborate wooden mantle. All other mantles are plain. The entrance foyer has wide baseboard trim and cornice molding. No other rooms are decorated. All floors are heart pine tongue-and-groove floorboards. The unpainted staircase, with its turned balustrade and heavy newel post turns at the landing, leads to the second-floor center hall, which is as equally wide as the first-floor hall.<sup>3</sup>

The second floor contains three bedrooms and a bathroom, all with windows on the corner exterior walls. The floorboards are the same wide-width tongue-and-groove boards in good condition. All the rooms have fireplaces and tall ceilings. As with many other houses, there is no decorative molding on the second floor. Each room also has a passageway into the adjoining room. The northeast bedroom contains a small closet that enclosed the winding wood steps up to the attic. The attic remains unfinished, since the ceiling is too low. A small wood ladder leads up to an opening to access the top of the hip roof.

**Interior Alterations:**

There are only minor changes to the interior. The basement's northeast room was modernized for an office. The mantle remains intact, and all other basement rooms are used for storage. The first floor remains intact. A modern kitchen has been built off the rear of the dining room, and a bathroom replaced a rear porch that was built off the rear parlor. The second floor has an added bathroom in the northwest bedroom and an added closet in the rear southwest bedroom.



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**Detailed Description (continued)**

**Secondary Resources and Landscape features:**

The property is important for its two rows of extant ca. 1820 outbuildings: a two-story brick law office, a brick summer kitchen, a frame single dwelling, and a log smokehouse. A laundry was located opposite the kitchen. A slave quarters, dairy, and an icehouse once stood in the rows as well. Two 1930s frame sheds accent the ends of the rows.

The **law office** is located 60 feet off the northwest corner of the main house. Its two-story façade and east side elevation (towards the home site) is composed of a Flemish bond brick, and the other two elevations are a 1-to-5 common bond. The façade contains only a front door, which is accented with a stuccoed jack arch. Its original gable roofed wood front porch was removed due to deterioration.

An interior-end brick chimney on the east side heated both levels of the building. The lower-level room has a dirt floor and unfinished brick walls. The west sidewall on the lower level has a large opening in it, perhaps for the storage and selling of goods produced at the farm or mills. A brick bulkhead once protected the opening. The upper-level room is highly finished with lath and plaster walls, a chair rail, and narrow tongue-and-groove boards on both the floor and ceiling. An original Federal-style mantelpiece accents the fireplace, which is flanked by built-in bookshelves. One window on the north elevation lights the second-floor office room. The law office is sited in front of the house and to the north, generally out of view of the domestic activities of the complex. The brick outbuilding is in poor condition will be restored.

The **brick kitchen**, located 40 feet off the southeast corner of the house, has a Flemish bond façade and west elevation (facing towards the house), and 1-to-4 common bond on the east and south elevations. Standing-seam metal covers the low gable roof. The front door is on the south elevation, facing away from the house. A window is to the right of the door, and another window lights the interior from the north elevation. The interior is composed of one rectangular room with a dirt floor. A larger interior-end fireplace takes up the east wall. A warming oven is to the right of the fireplace opening. The walls were white-washed and the ceiling left exposed. The kitchen has a bricked patio area along the front wall. It is apparent from the location of the kitchen and the low terraced area at the south elevation of the main house that the slaves traveled easily from the kitchen directly into the south side entrance of the basement, where much domestic activity took place. The building is currently vacant.

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**Detailed Description (continued)**

The frame “**cabin**” served as a single dwelling and schoolhouse 50 feet off the northeast corner of the main house. The one-and-one-half-story building is frame constructed with lath and plaster walls. It was originally sheathed in weatherboard siding, but it is now covered with a fiberboard siding. The current three-bay façade originally contained two symmetrically placed doors. A large exterior-end chimney is on the east gable end, as is the kitchen chimney (interior-end) and law office chimney (interior-end). Standing-seam metal covers the gable roof, and six-over-six wood windows light the two first-floor rooms. It has a main room and a small kitchen. The ceiling joists have been left exposed. A simple wood mantle surrounds the fireplace opening, and boxed corner winder steps lead up to the loft. The cabin served as a schoolhouse first for the children and relatives of Judge Fleming Saunders, and later for his grandchildren of Peter and Elizabeth Saunders. John Dabney (Elizabeth’s brother) taught there for “several years” and lived in the main house for 30 years. The building is currently vacant. <sup>4</sup>

The sawn-log **smokehouse** has simple square corner notching. It consists of one room with its entrance facing inward toward the complex, unlike the kitchen, 40 feet to the west of the smokehouse, which faces outward. Asphalt shingles sheaths its steep gable roof. Two 90-foot open frame storage **pole barns** line the driveway at the eastern end of the complex. Built during the 1930s, they were recently sheathed in aluminum siding.

Four **non-extant** building sites along the rows include a laundry, dairy, slave quarters, and icehouse. The **washhouse** site is important because it was an integral landscape feature. It was sited to the west side of the kitchen. The kitchen is off the southeast corner of the main house, and the washhouse was off the southwest corner of the main house, forming the corners of a sloped excavated area that led down to the side entrance of the basement (see landscape features below). The majority of the domestic functions occurred on the south side of the house and complex. The brick **dairy** (standing in 1975) was located to the east of the smokehouse, and reportedly later served as a smokehouse. It was noted that “Aunt Jule” brought three pails of milk to the dairy twice a day, one in each hand and one on her head, “and in the corridor below would sing... Way down in dis lonesome grave, oh Lord! How long?” (It is possible that this occurred in the basement of the house). A brick **quarter’s** building was located to the south of the dairy. All that is left standing is part of the brick chimney. This is the house that “Aunt Docia” reportedly lived in. A frame **icehouse** was located behind the cabin. In addition, ca. 1900 photographs denote several frame barns and sheds that once stood in unknown locations on the land. <sup>5</sup>

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### Detailed Description (continued) & Statement of Significance

A noteworthy **landscape feature** is the area that was excavated along the south side of the house that leads to the basement entrance from the nearby kitchen and laundry buildings. This apparently was to shield from view the slaves or servants while they were performing their domestic chores.

### Inventory:

1. **Bleak Hill**, ca. 1858. Contributing structure.
2. **Law Office**, ca. 1820. Contributing structure.
3. **Kitchen**, ca. 1820. Contributing structure.
4. **"Cabin"/Schoolhouse** ca. 1820. Contributing structure.
5. **Smokehouse**, ca. 1820. Contributing structure.
6. **Pole barns**, ca. 1930s. Contributing structure.
7. **Pole barns**, 1930s. Contributing structure.

### Summary Statement and Justification of Criteria

Bleak Hill is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A, B, and C at the local level of significance for law, agriculture, and architecture. Its period of significance is from ca. 1820 to 1946: beginning with the construction date of the extant outbuildings that served the first house, and through the Saunders occupation until it was sold in 1946. Bleak Hill is eligible for listing under **Criterion A** for law because of the occupation of the Saunders family members; Judge Fleming Saunders had his law office on the property, his son Peter was an attorney in Rocky Mount, and his grandson Judge Edward Watts Saunders was a member of Congress, judge of the Circuit Court, and a justice of the Supreme Court of Appeals. Bleak Hill is also eligible under **Criteria A and B** for agriculture as a nineteenth-century plantation and as a twentieth-century working farm where Dr. William Saunders experimented with modernization techniques and served as a professor of dairying at VPI. Bleak Hill is eligible under **Criterion C** because it is a strong example of an architect-designed Italianate villa-style farmhouse in Franklin County, and it is unusual because of its Tidewater plantation-style setting with extant rows of early nineteenth-century outbuildings that reflect a large and wealthy antebellum farm. Although not listed under Criterion D, the property potentially contains undisturbed historic archaeological sites that warrant further investigation and that would contribute to a further understanding of the daily life of the farm at Bleak Hill

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**Statement of Significance (Continued)**

**Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to acknowledge Dr. John Kern and Mike Pulice of the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office, Marc Wagner and June Ellis of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Elaine Powers of the Roanoke Regional Public Library's Virginia Room, the Franklin County Clerk's Office and Public Library, Anne Carter Lee, and the owners Charles and Lois Vogel, who recently purchased the house with plans to maintain it and the historic setting.

**Historical Background**

Bleak Hill represents the history of the Saunders, a prominent political family of Franklin County. Peter Saunders, Sr., the "Pioneer of Franklin County" originally purchased the land around 1767 and in 1810 gave it to his son, Judge Fleming Saunders (1778-1858). Fleming Saunders previously lived in a two-room frame dwelling in Rocky Mount, but soon after he married Alice Watts in 1814, he built the first house on the Bleak Hill property somewhere around 1820.

In 1831, Fleming Saunders was appointed judge of the 10<sup>th</sup> circuit, a position he held for many years. The Saunders divided their time between Bleak Hill and "Flat Creek," the Watts homeplace of Mrs. Fleming Saunders in Campbell County. While they were at Flat Creek, an overseer ran the property at Bleak Hill. When fire destroyed their house around 1838, the Saunders moved permanently to Flat Creek, near Evington. Fleming then gave the farm to two of his sons, Fleming, Jr., and Peter. Peter, who was born at Flat Creek, eventually inherited Bleak Hill from his older brother Edward Watts Saunders upon his death in 1843.<sup>6</sup>

Educated at Washington and Lee, Peter Saunders is listed in the 1850 census as a 25-year-old "attorney at law" with no real estate or personal value. In 1855, Peter married Elizabeth Lewis Dabney, of "Vaucluse" in Campbell County, and they rebuilt the house on the same site around 1858. The 3,902-acre property was first taxed in 1860 at \$4,000. During the construction they stayed in the frame "Cabin," and also in a brick slave quarters. Peter and Elizabeth lived at Bleak Hill until 1904 and had four children: Edward, William, Alice, and Agatha.<sup>7</sup>

By 1860 Peter Saunders was a prominent man. The 1860 Franklin County land tax book records him as one of the wealthiest in the county, with a combined worth of \$60,000.

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**Statement of Significance (Continued)**

The 1860 census denotes Peter as a “farmer” with a real estate value of \$35,000 and a personal value at \$60,000, totaling an astonishing \$95,000 in combined wealth. Peter imported mahogany lumber and hired a cabinetmaker from Lynchburg to convert the lumber into furniture for his home. His wife Elizabeth was reportedly a fastidious housekeeper who made the house slaves rub the furniture and polish the silver daily.<sup>8</sup>

The Saunders entertained their many friends, family, and prominent citizens of Franklin County at Bleak Hill. Many visitors came to stay for the summer, often ten at a time. This happened because the trip through the back roads of Franklin County was arduous, and even the 30-mile trip into Big Lick to pick up passengers from the N&W depot required an overnight stay. Peter’s daughter Alice later described the episode of a visitor arriving at Bleak Hill. “Miss Ann Eliza Dupuy, a huge writer of harmless novels, boarded at Bleak Hill one summer. The drive of thirty miles, from Big Lick, was very hard on one of her dimensions. She arrived much exhausted, with a crimson face, and was taken to her room by “Aunt Catherine” the old servant, who reported that she had left her “broad-side on de bed.” Conversely, because of his wealth, Peter Saunders was also able to visit the fashionable spring resorts of that time, most notably White Sulphur Springs and Sweet Springs in West Virginia.<sup>9</sup>

The Saunders family were devout Episcopalians who often held services in their home. After years of not being able to attend the Episcopal Church in rocky Mount regularly or the “old Piedmont” Presbyterian Church once a month because of weather and roads, they established a small Episcopal Chapel on their property for visiting rectors and the community. Peter donated the land and Elizabeth spearheaded the movement. The gable-fronted, frame Ascension Church (non-extant) was built in 1881 on property now located outside the current boundary. Susie Taylor, Peter’s niece, later wrote that they built “Ascension Church across the fields...in the shadow of a wooded hill as a monument to Aunt Betty and Cousin Prudence Hariston.” She further noted that “beginning with nothing but faith, they bit by bit got the money together, Uncle Peter giving the site and building materials...” In her writings, Alice Saunders noted that the church had a “gallery for the negros [sic], who, sometimes, attended special services.”

By 1860, the Saunders farm had 52 slaves. Saunders was one of the four largest slaveholders in the county. Peter Saunders corresponded regularly about his farm in the 1850s; he raised tobacco, a variety of vegetables (potatoes, cabbage, turnips), hay, hogs, sheep, and cattle, and took great

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**Statement of Significance (Continued)**

pride in the apples and cherries that he sent to relatives. The large farm was practically self-sufficient, with only coffee, sugar, and tea bought regularly as groceries. The property contained both a flourmill and a sawmill. Alice Saunders recalled how flour and cornmeal was provided from the mill, milk and butter in "abundance" from the dairy, lamb, pork, vegetables from the garden, and apples, pears, plums, grapes, raspberries, blackberries, gooseberries and currants from the orchards. Although they "always kept a cook, a maid who did the laundry, and a boy," their only true food "luxuries were a few oranges, coconuts & raisins at Christmas."<sup>10</sup>

Later in life, Susie and Alice wrote about their family history and memories. Invariably, their favorite memories revolved around "Aunt Docia." Susie wrote:

One of the most delightful people at Bleak Hill was Aunt Docia, the old cook whose cabin just outside the back gate, was a favorite haunt of the children's. She was a privileged pensioner on Uncle Peter's bounty, and a faithful and highly valued friend, another example of the strong ties that existed in the old days between the white people and their house servants. Aunt Docia gathered dried beans in the garden, made soap for Aunt Betty, and raised a few chickens for us.... On Sunday afternoons we used to read to her in the Story of the Bible, sitting in the summer on the cabin steps, Aunt Docia in long white apron and head handkerchief; she nodded a good deal, but always said it was "mighty pretty."

Alice further described "Aunt Doshy's" elevated status when she wrote "All of our visitors paid their respect to Aunt Doshy after greeting the members of the family...." But Aunt Doshy was practically treated as a member of the family. When she "retired from active work," Elizabeth Saunders offered her "a home for the rest of her life." Refusing at first, But Aunt Doshy returned a few months later where she stayed for the rest of her life with her albino son Buck.<sup>11</sup>

The Saunders children were educated at home by private tutors before leaving for college. Edward Watts Saunders (1860-1921), "the intellectual one" became one of the most distinguished citizens of Franklin County. He graduated early from the University of Virginia's law school and served the county as a young Democrat delegate to the General Assembly, replacing his father in 1887. Edward practiced law in Rocky Mount and lived there at The Grove, a large 1854 Greek Revival mansion. He was appointed judge of the Fourth Judicial Circuit in 1901 and of the

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**Statement of Significance (Continued)**

Seventh Judicial Circuit in 1904. He served on the United States House of Representatives until 1920 when he was elected to the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals, a position he held until his death. Edward married Nancy Dabney Walker, daughter of Dr. Thomas L. Walker of Lynchburg. They had three sons, Thomas Walker who died at age 21, Peter became secretary of the Commonwealth, and Edward became professor of civil engineering at the University of Virginia.<sup>12</sup>

Upon the death of both Peter and Elizabeth in 1904, their estate passed to their children. Around 1910, Alice and Agatha sold their shares to their brother William Dabney "Cheese" Saunders. Dr. Saunders assumed management of the farm, installed a model dairy, and was a pioneer in experimental dairy production. Although Bleak Hill was continually maintained, William only occupied the building during the summer months; the furniture was shipped to other Saunders homes in Rocky Mount and Blacksburg. The farm remained the most modern in Franklin County because of the work of William Saunders. William attended the University of Virginia where he studied mathematics, Latin, and physics. He studied Dairy Husbandry at Pennsylvania State College and Cornell University. He served as professor of dairying at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI) in Blacksburg, Virginia from 1890 up until 1955. He took a seven-year leave of absence to serve as Virginia's first Dairy and Food Commissioner.<sup>13</sup>

While at VPI, he was Director of the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, Professor of Dairy Husbandry, heads of the Departments of Dairy Husbandry and Animal Husbandry, and was an Assistant Dairy Husbandry. In 1893, VPI built their first creamery and appointed William as the superintendent. Between 1894 and 1896 the first milk in Virginia was pasteurized there. Dr. Saunders's main contribution to agriculture was the development of a new process for making cheese, which brought him much acclaim. He made the cheese from high acid milk, which he patented and turned over to the Virginia Tech Educational Foundation. In 1949, the Board of Visitors at Virginia Tech named the dairy building, Saunders Hall, in honor of him. Dr. Saunders died in 1955 with services held at Christ Episcopal Church in Blacksburg where he served as senior warden.<sup>14</sup>

The house remained in the Saunders family until 1946, when it was sold to Dr. Henry Lee. William and his wife Bettie Saunders sold their 2/3 interest with a 1,340-acre parcel, and William's sister Alice Saunders sold her 1/3 interest with a 1,347-acre parcel.

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**Statement of Significance (Continued)**

The farm was obviously still active because William's deed stipulated that Dr. Lee receive the "farming machinery, equipment, livestock, dairy herd, sawmill and sawmill equipment, harness mills, and such motor vehicles as used in connection with a said farm, and all growing and harvested crops therein." The property remained connected to the Saunders family because Henry Lee married William's daughter, Dr. Elizabeth Saunders Lee.<sup>15</sup>

In 1970, Henry Lee gave the 3,823-acre property to his son William Dabney Saunders Lee, the great great grandson of Judge Saunders. William continued to farm the property with his father in a partnership known as Bleak Hill Farm, which in 1973 included a total of 4,471 acres. In 1978, William and his wife Jean retained right of survivorship, and in 1988 they sold a 20-acre parcel containing Bleak Hill to the Carters, who in turned sold it to the current owners in 2001.<sup>16</sup>

When nearing her 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday in 1935, Alice Saunders reflected on her life at Bleak Hill, recalling how "it was a sweet & peaceful life, approved by conscience, which always brings the greatest happiness."<sup>17</sup>



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Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Chappell, Edward "Bleak Hill" unpublished manuscript.
- <sup>2</sup> Saunders, Alice L. "Additional reminiscences & family history" unpublished manuscript.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid; Susie M. Taylor "Some Childish Recollections of Bleak Hill."
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid; Ibid; Salmon, John S. and Emily Salmon, *Franklin County Virginia 1786-1986*, 203.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid; Lee, Anne Carter "Bleak Hill, A Handsome Farmhouse."
- <sup>6</sup> John Salmon, 132; Lee, p. 50 and 52; Beckett, Anne Stuart "Bleak Hill Preliminary Information Form"; Wingfield, Marshall, *Pioneer Families of Franklin County, Virginia*, p.198.
- <sup>7</sup> Marshall Wingfield, p. 198; U.S. Census, 1850. Franklin County Land Book 1860; Alice Saunders
- <sup>8</sup> Franklin County Land Book 1860; US Census 1860; Alice Saunders.
- <sup>9</sup> Alice Saunders; John Salmon, p. 167; Talbert, Roy, Jr. "Studies in the Local History of Slavery," p. 56.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 18; John Salmon p.235; Alice Saunders.
- <sup>11</sup> Alice Saunders.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid; Stephenson, Morris, The Franklin News-Post; John Salmon, p. 331-332.
- <sup>13</sup> The Milky Way. Magazine issue on Dr. Saunders, no author provided. 1956.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Franklin County Deed Books 106 p. 393 & 107 p. 159.
- <sup>16</sup> Franklin County Deed Books 252 p. 49; 297 p. 729; 351 p. 29; 434 p. 414; and 706 p. 1317.
- <sup>17</sup> Alice Saunders.

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**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

The boundary of Bleak Hill is depicted on the Franklin County tax map that accompanies the nomination—Legal Reference FC DB 434/414 Tax ID 74.-1.2 D..

**VERBAL BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

The boundary of the nominated parcel includes the current legal boundary of the 20.53-ac. parcel that contains the house Bleak Hill and its 7 secondary structures.

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**PHOTOGRAPHS**

Subject: Bleak Hill (same for all photos)

Photographer: Anne Stuart Beckett (same for all photos)

Photo Date: March and May 2002 (same for all photos)

Original Negatives: 19881 and 19882 Archived at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources,  
Richmond.

Photo: 1 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 14a

View: West facade of Bleak Hill.

Photo: 2 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 13a

View: West facade of Bleak Hill.

Photo: 3 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 12a

View: West façade and north elevation of Bleak Hill.

Photo: 4 of 17 Negative: 19881, frame 5a

View: View east towards kitchen denoting the excavated area along the south elevation of basement.

Photo: 5 of 17 Negative: 19881, frame 16a

View: View west of Blue Ridge Mountains from Bleak Hill.

Photo: 6 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 6a

View: View of centered hallway.

Photo: 7 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 0a

View: View of living room (northwest room).

Photo: 8 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 1a

View: View of dining room (northeast room).

Photo: 9 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 5a

View: View of "library room" (southwest room).

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**PHOTOGRAPHS, continued**

Photo: 10 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 18a  
View: South façade and west elevation of law office.

Photo: 11 of 17 Negative: 19881, frame 13a  
View: South façade and east elevation of law office.

Photo: 12 of 17 Negative: 19881, frame 10a  
View: Mantle of law office.

Photo: 13 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 19a  
View: South façade and west elevation of kitchen.

Photo: 14 of 17 Negative: 19881, frame 3a  
View: East wall of kitchen. Note stone lintel and bricked-in warming oven to the right of fireplace.

Photo: 15 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 18a  
View: South facade and east elevation of the "Cabin" and schoolhouse.

Photo: 16 of 17 Negative: 19882, frame 17a  
View: South façade and west elevation of the "Cabin" and schoolhouse. Note sheds in background.

Photo: 17 of 17 Negative: 19881, frame 18a  
View: North façade and west elevation of smokehouse.

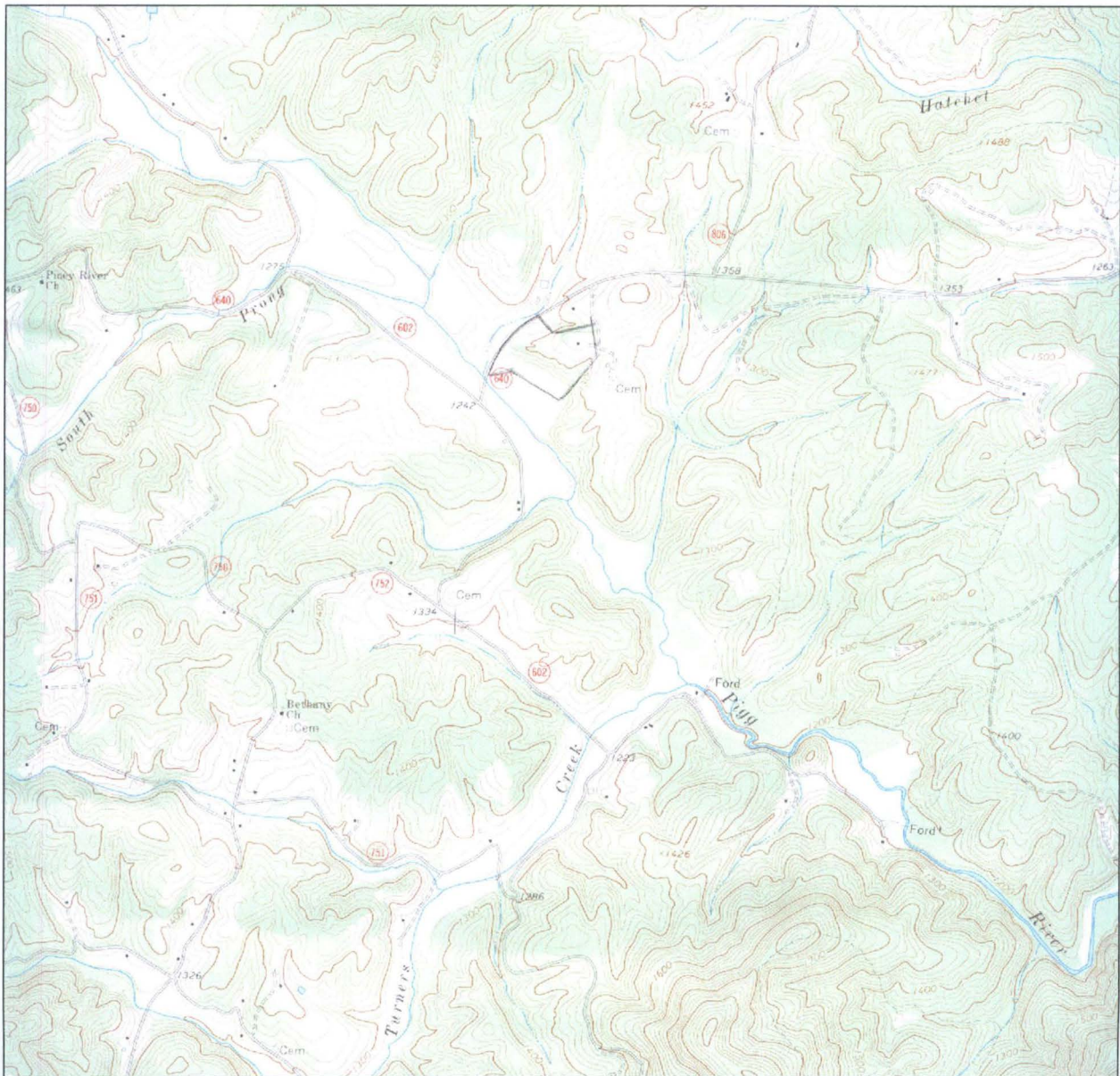
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USGS Quadrangle Map, Ferrum, VA depicting Bleak Hill site.



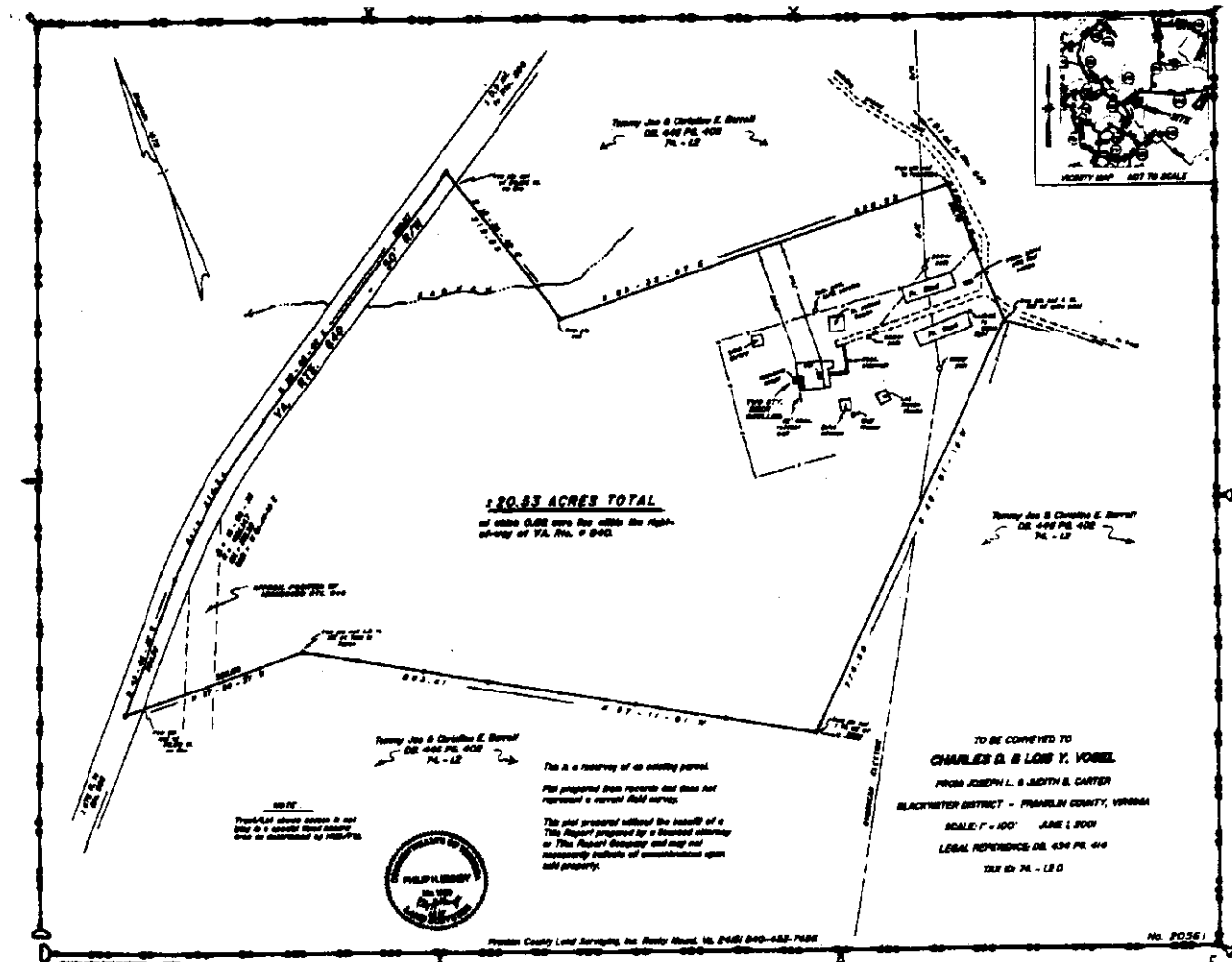
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Boundary of Bleak Hill.  
Franklin County Tax Map, Scale 1: 200



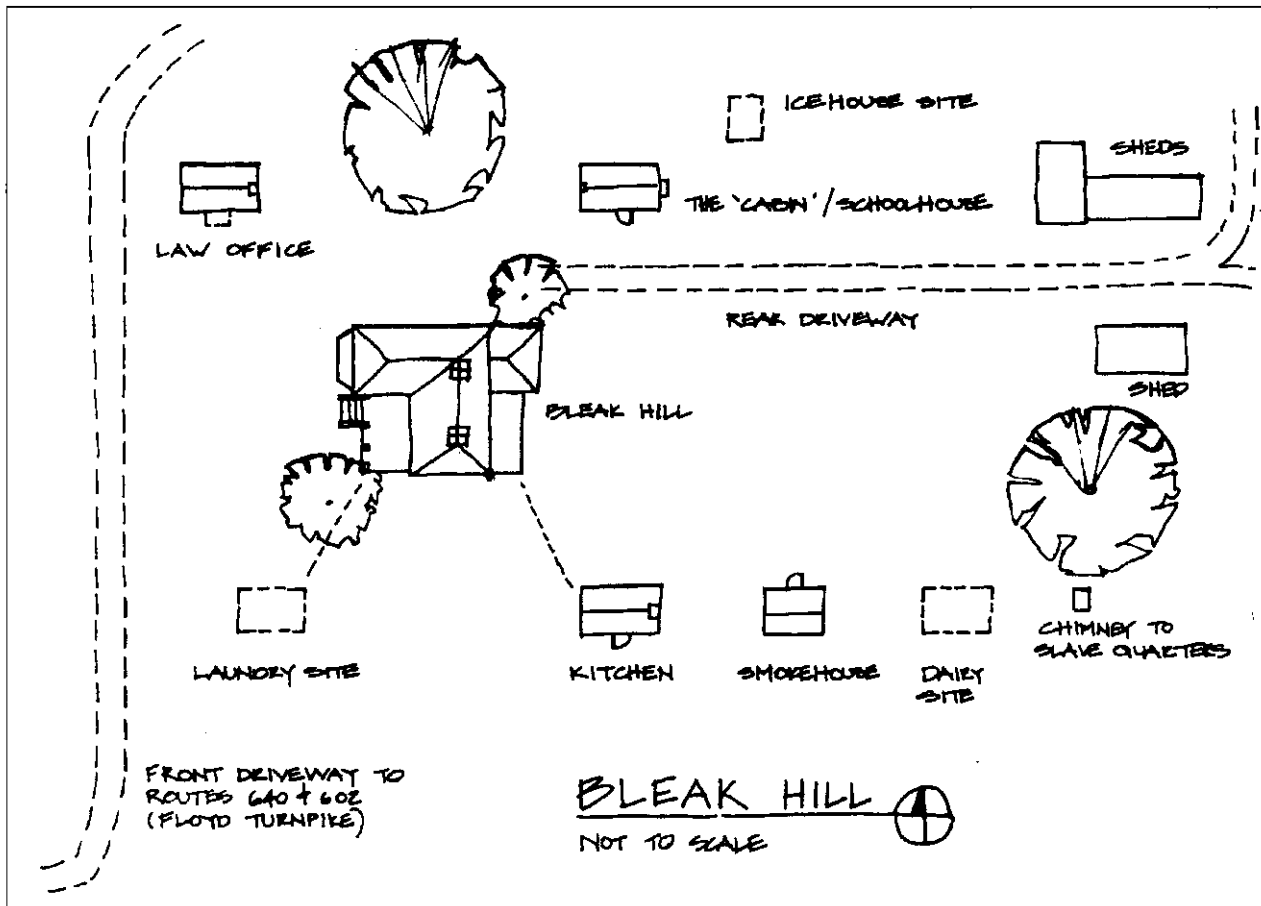
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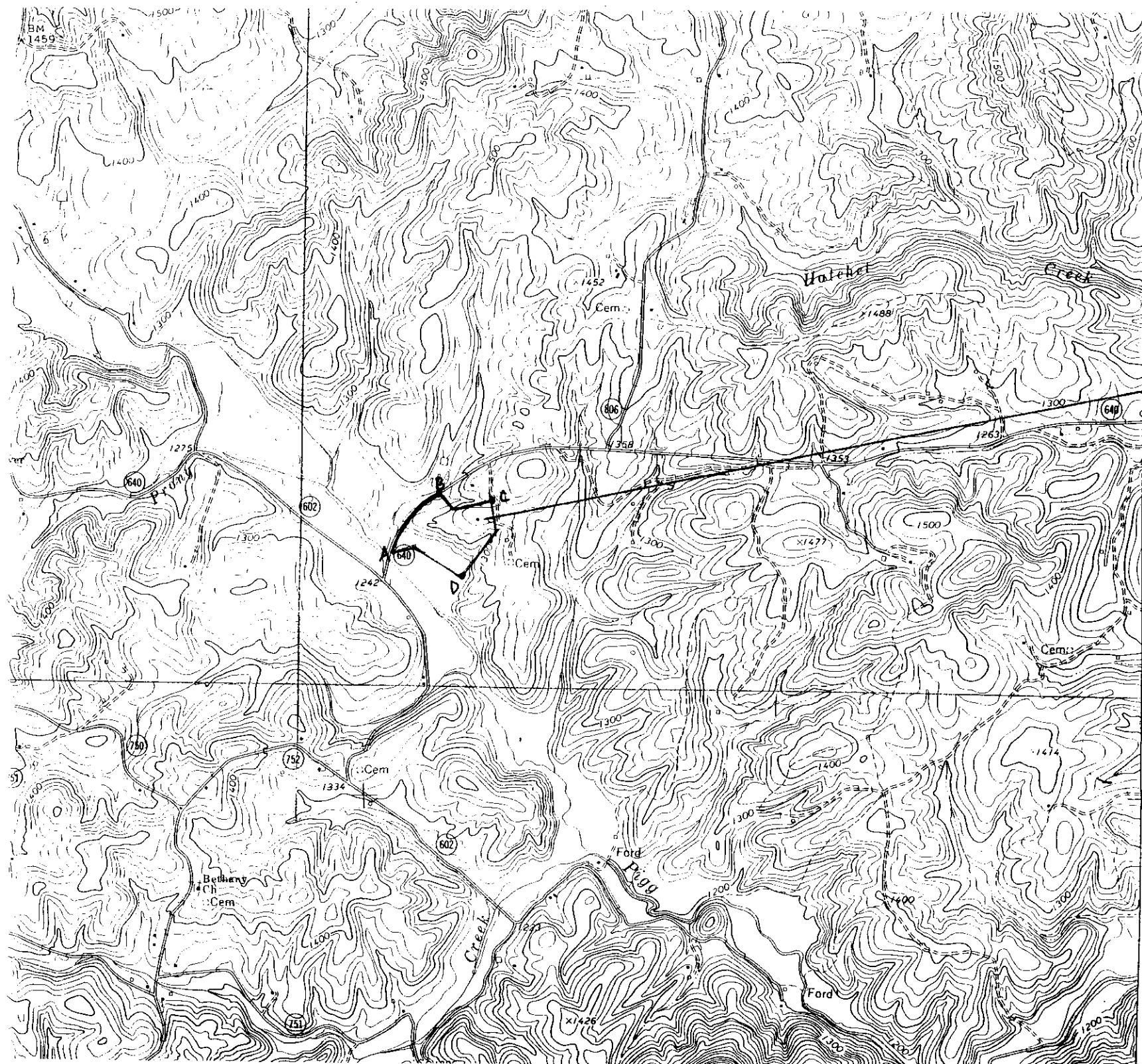
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Site plan of Bleak Hill, not to scale.







4094  
240 000  
FEET  
4093  
SIX MILE POST 1.3 MI.  
4092  
4091  
57'30"  
4090

**BLEAK HILL  
(33-2)  
FRANKLIN CT., VA**

- A. 17/585440/4091630
- B. 17/585550/4091910
- C. 17/585910/4091890
- D. 17/585770/4091530