

Two Families, Two Revolutions

The ideals of the American Revolution, embodied in the Declaration of Independence of 1776, have profoundly shaped Tennessee families in different ways. This exhibit explores two families and their experiences in different revolutionary times.

In 1782, as the Revolutionary War was ending, William Armstrong Sr. came to the Holston River Valley in search of new opportunities. He and his family used enslaved labor to work the land and develop the farm from first settlement to 1865. That same year, as the Civil War was ending, Mat Gardner came to the Duck River Valley as an emancipated freedman in search of new opportunities. Both families, one white, one black, grasped the freedoms promised in the Declaration and not only built lasting, impactful farms, but also established community institutions that nurtured and inspired later generations, even to the present.

This exhibit compares and contrasts the material life of the Armstrong and Gardner families as they made their marks—in the furniture they acquired, the books they read, the textiles they made, and the children they celebrated. Two different paths for two different Tennessee families, but both secured the promise of the Declaration. What might be your path to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”?



Stony Point, the Armstrong farm, Hawkins County, Tennessee. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



Mat Gardner Farm, Giles County, Tennessee. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



The Gardner Farm

Born into slavery on July 18, 1847, Mat Gardner gained his freedom in February 1865. He married Henrietta “Ritta” Jenkins in 1877, and within three years, they lived on a farm with two of their children, Atha and Raymond. In time, Mat and Ritta had 11 children.

In 1896, the Gardners acquired 106 acres along the Elk River where they built a two-story house and later added outbuildings for a store, barns, and a gin for making sorghum. Although Jim Crow segregation then ruled almost every facet of life in Tennessee, Gardner’s store allowed his neighbors to acquire necessary goods with dignity, and he could extend them fair credit when needed.



Mat Gardner. Image courtesy of Carla Jones.



Henrietta “Ritta” (Jenkins) Gardner. Image courtesy of Carla Jones.



Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

The Gardners as Community Builders

Mat and Ritta did much more than provide store goods. As a Primitive Baptist (P.B.) minister, Mat also nurtured souls at an Elk River island near his farm where he led baptisms and church services. In 1911, he took the pulpit at New Hope P.B. Church and later served at nearby St. Rebecca's P.B. Church. Gardner also preached at other P.B. congregations in Giles County and in Limestone County, Alabama.

Gardner also brought education to his African American community. He helped finance and build its first public school and provided lodging for teachers at his house when necessary. In 1926, the Ku Klux Klan burned the school. Undeterred, Gardner and his neighbors raised \$500 as their contribution for a replacement—a modern Rosenwald school built in 1929–1930.



The Rev. Mat Gardner. Image courtesy of Carla Jones.



Union Hill Missionary Baptist Church. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



Inside of New Hope Primitive Baptist Church. Image courtesy of Roosevelt Whitfield.



Ca. 1930–1931 photo at the Rosenwald School located at Union Hill Missionary Baptist Church. Image courtesy of Carla Jones.

A Tradition of Military Service

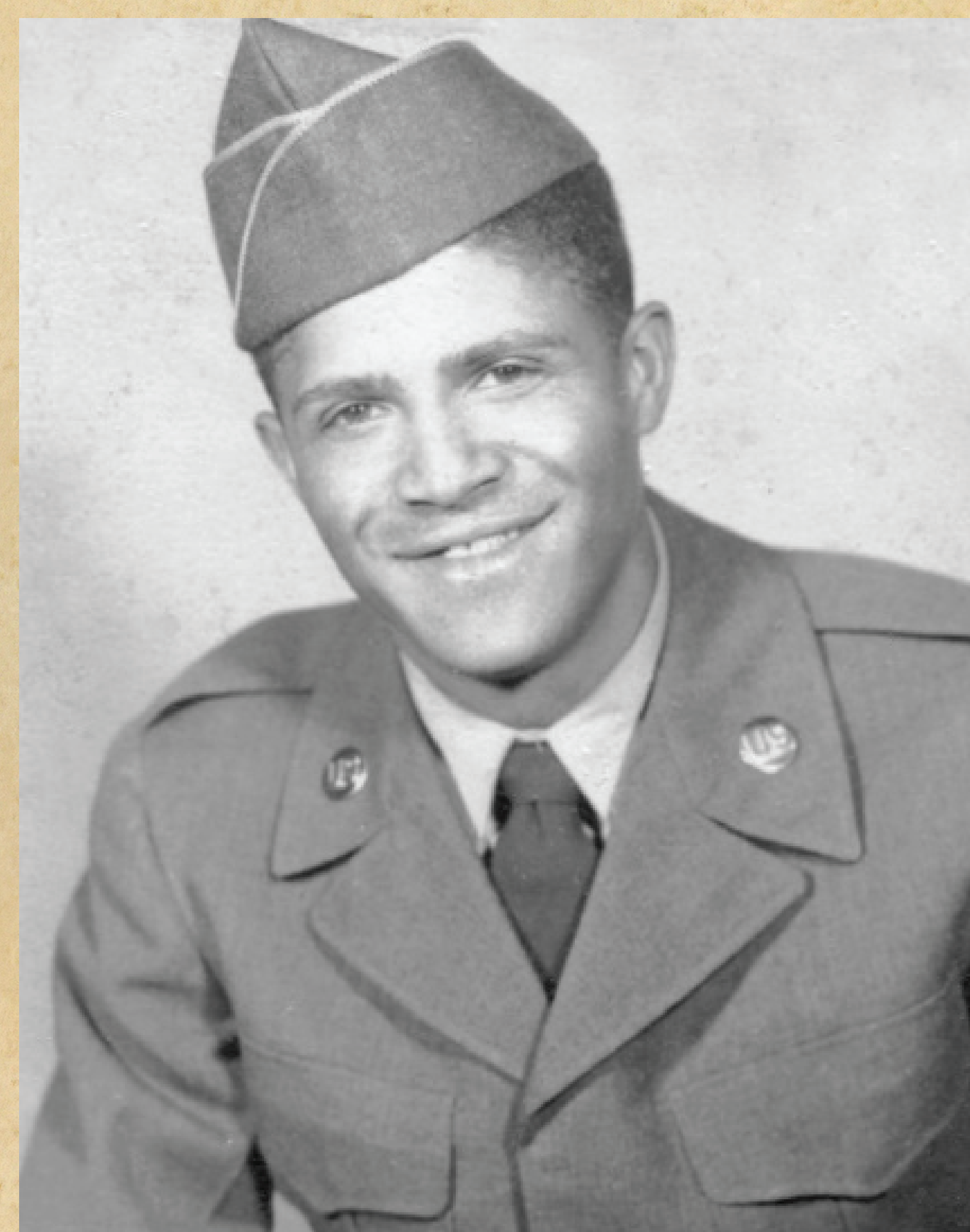
In the 20th century, the Gardners proudly served their country. In 1942, they received an award from the Tennessee Home Food Supply Program, a statewide patriotic relief program, for growing 75% or more of the food needed to feed the family and livestock. During World War II, five Gardner grandsons—Walker, O.C., Clyde, Flournoy, and Booker T.—served in the armed forces. Two of the grandsons, Walker and O.C., enlisted at Camp Forrest in Tullahoma, Tennessee. Camp Forrest was one of the largest Army training bases during WWII from 1941 to 1945. It served as a training facility for two battalions of rangers, several infantry divisions, Army Air Corps personnel, and several medical and supply units.



Clyde and his wife, Cathy Gardner.
Image courtesy of Carla Jones.



Mary Gardner with nephew Walker Gardner Jr. and niece Ella Mary Eddings.
Image courtesy of Carla Jones.



Booker T. Gardner. Image courtesy of Carla Jones.



Image courtesy of Carla Jones.

The Gardners as Quiltmakers

Ritta Gardner was a master quilter, and the family still has several examples of her creativity and skill. Quilting was a necessity but also a form of expression. Many quilts featured significant symbols in religious contexts as well as familial lineage.

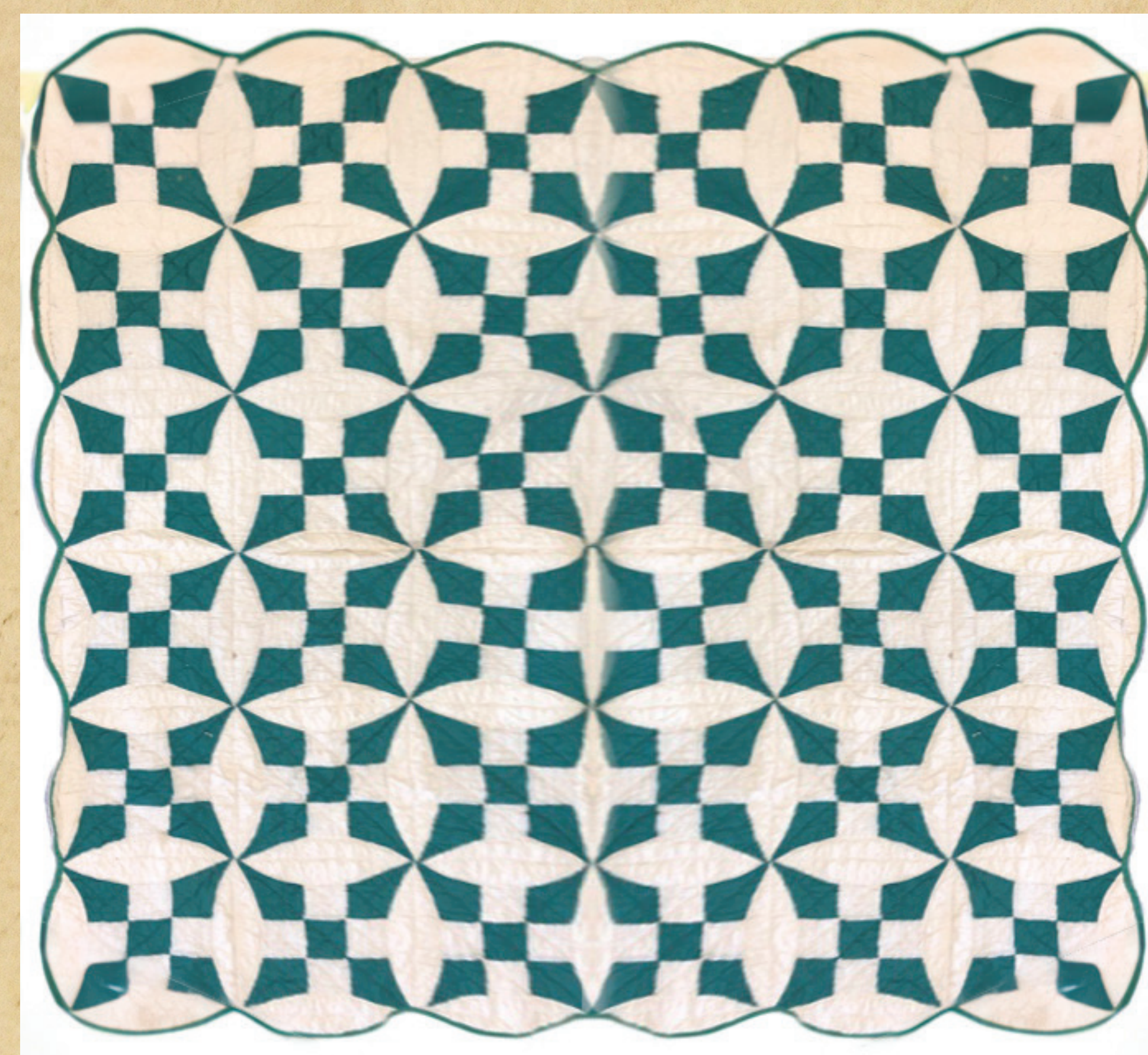
The Log Cabin Barn Raising quilt alternates light and dark colors in straight lines resembling the outline of a log cabin. Ritta used delicate silk fabric, readily available and affordable in the late 19th century, to add a decorative touch.

Ritta began her delicate Pine Burr quilt at a single point and then continued in a circular motion with triangular points standing upright along the pattern to create a three-dimensional element. The quilt required an experienced hand, probably taking years and pounds of scrap cloth to create. The Pine Burr pattern is associated with late-19th-century quilters at large, but particularly the Gee's Bend community of mid-20th-century Alabama.

The pattern of the child's Pinwheel quilt is associated with late 19th century quilters traveling west who were inspired by windmills along their route. The Gardner quilt combines similar patterned brown and black fabrics tied together in the middle with blue yarn for an added decorative element. The patterned fabric used in this quilt possibly came from cotton sacks once commonplace on farms. Many families, black and white, used sacks to create all sorts of household items.



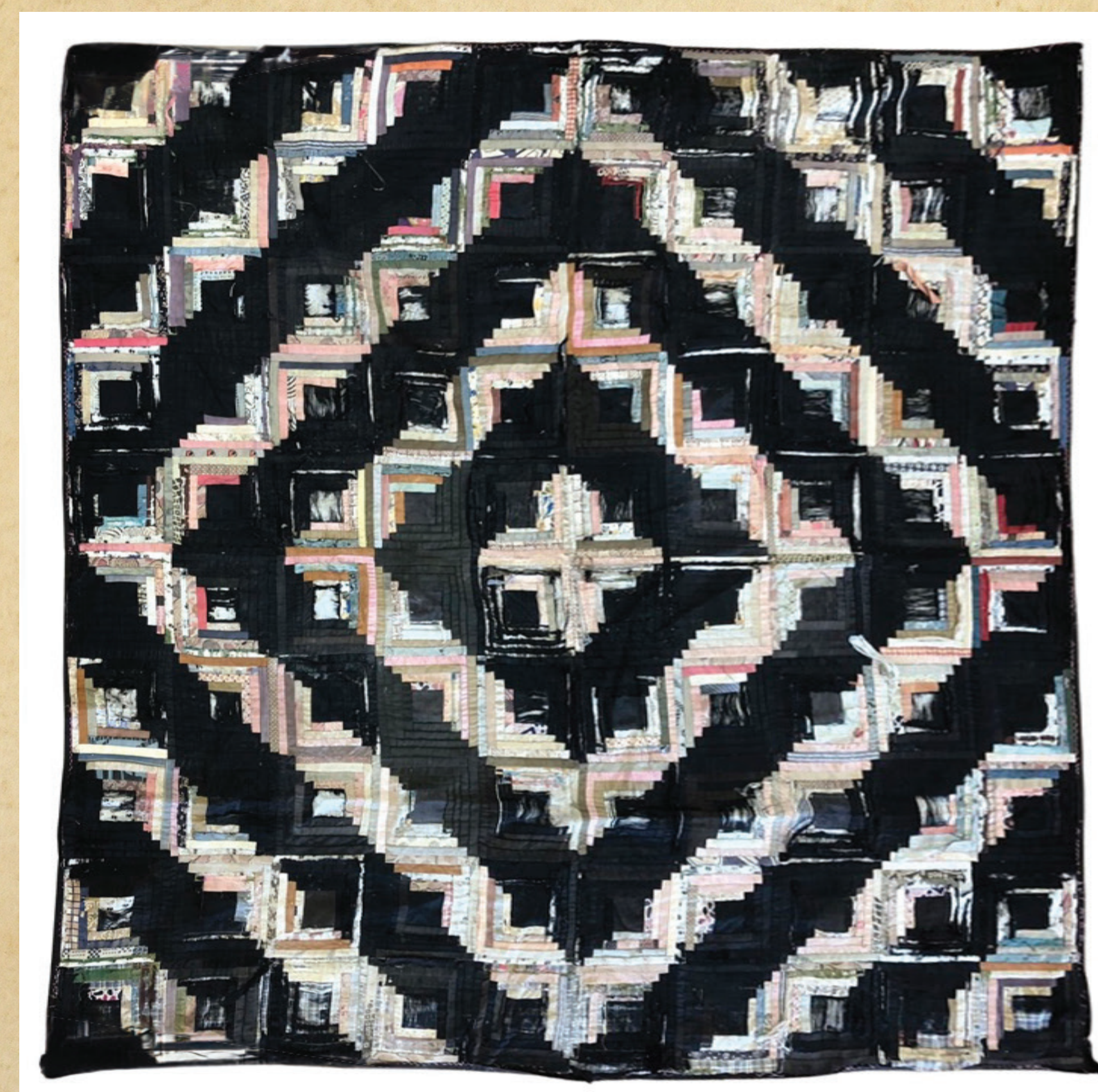
Quilt rack at the Mat Gardner Homestead Museum, ca.1880. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



Green and white Improved Nine-Patch quilt made by Ritta Gardner. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



Pinwheel quilt c. 1900 by Ritta Gardner. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



Log Cabin quilt by Ritta Gardner. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

Legacies at the Gardner Farm

Mat and Ritta Gardner's descendants continue to farm their family land and shape their community. Son Raymond Gardner and several grandchildren followed in Mat's footsteps and became ministers. Grandson Buford Gardner was elected the second black alderman in Elkton. He held the position for 12 years.

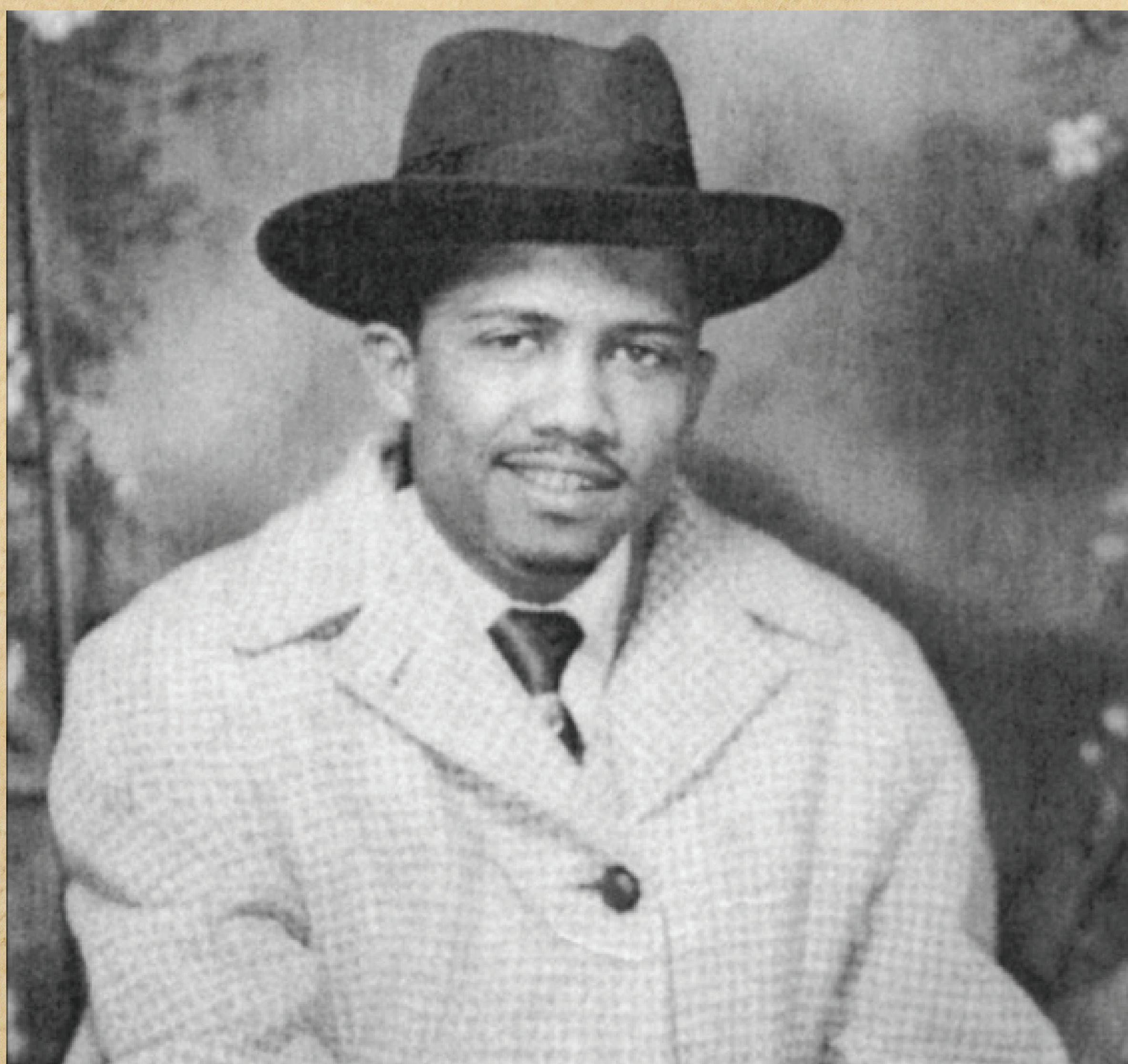
Their second great-granddaughter, Carla Jones, has preserved the family homestead, listed it in the National Register of Historic Places, and written a book about the history of African Americans in Giles County. Her goal is to preserve the farm for posterity. She and cousin Gary Gardner have been working with the Land Trust for Tennessee and the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation to reopen the Mat Gardner Homestead Museum on a seasonal schedule.



Raymond and Frances (Gardner) Gardner with their children (left to right): Katherine, Henrietta, Lemond, and Clyde. Image courtesy of Carla Jones.



Atha and Ether (Bonner) Gardner. Image courtesy of Carla Jones.



Buford Gardner. Image courtesy of Carla Jones.



CHP graduate research assistants viewing one of Ritta Gardner's quilts.

The Armstrongs at Stony Point

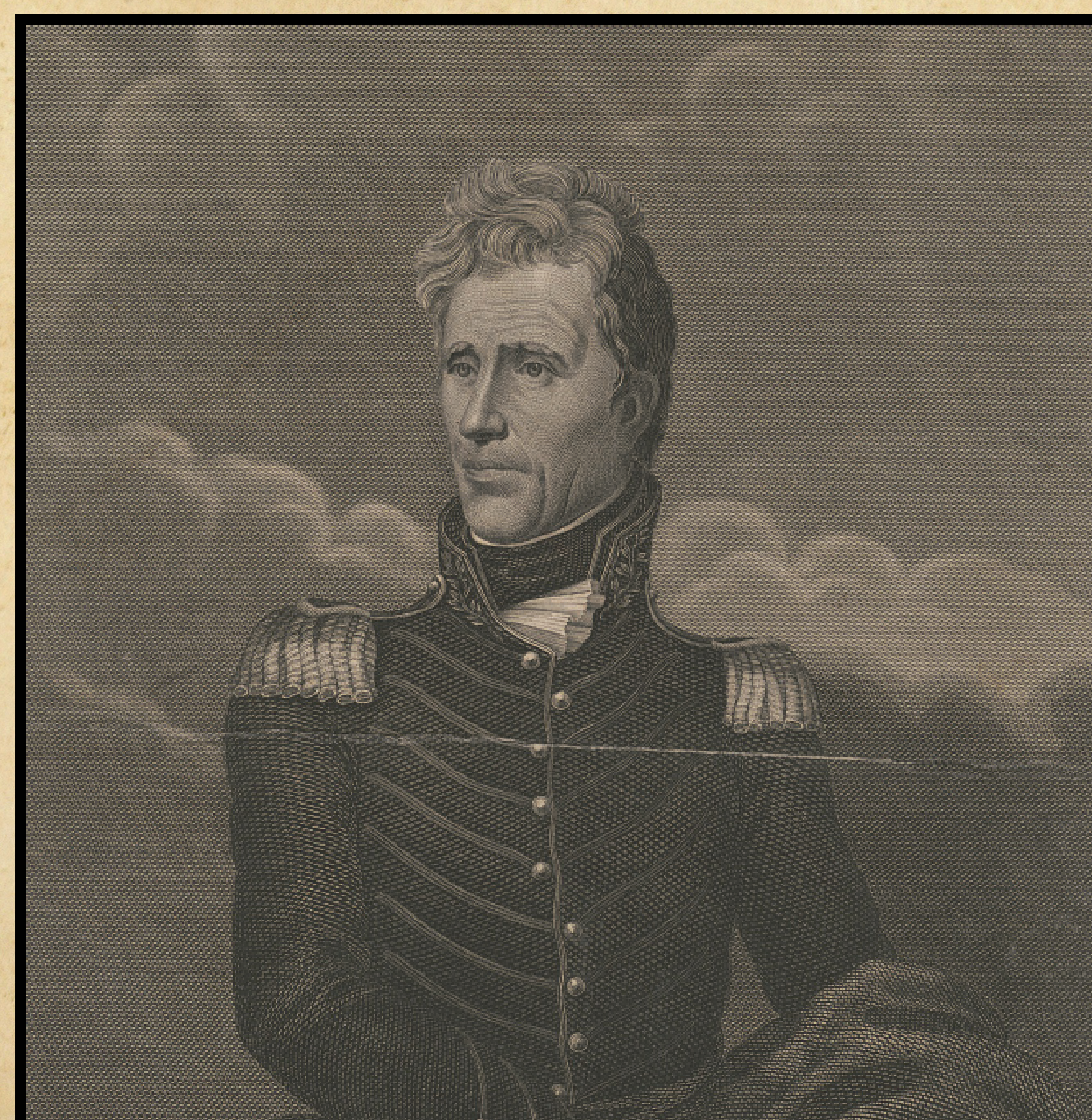
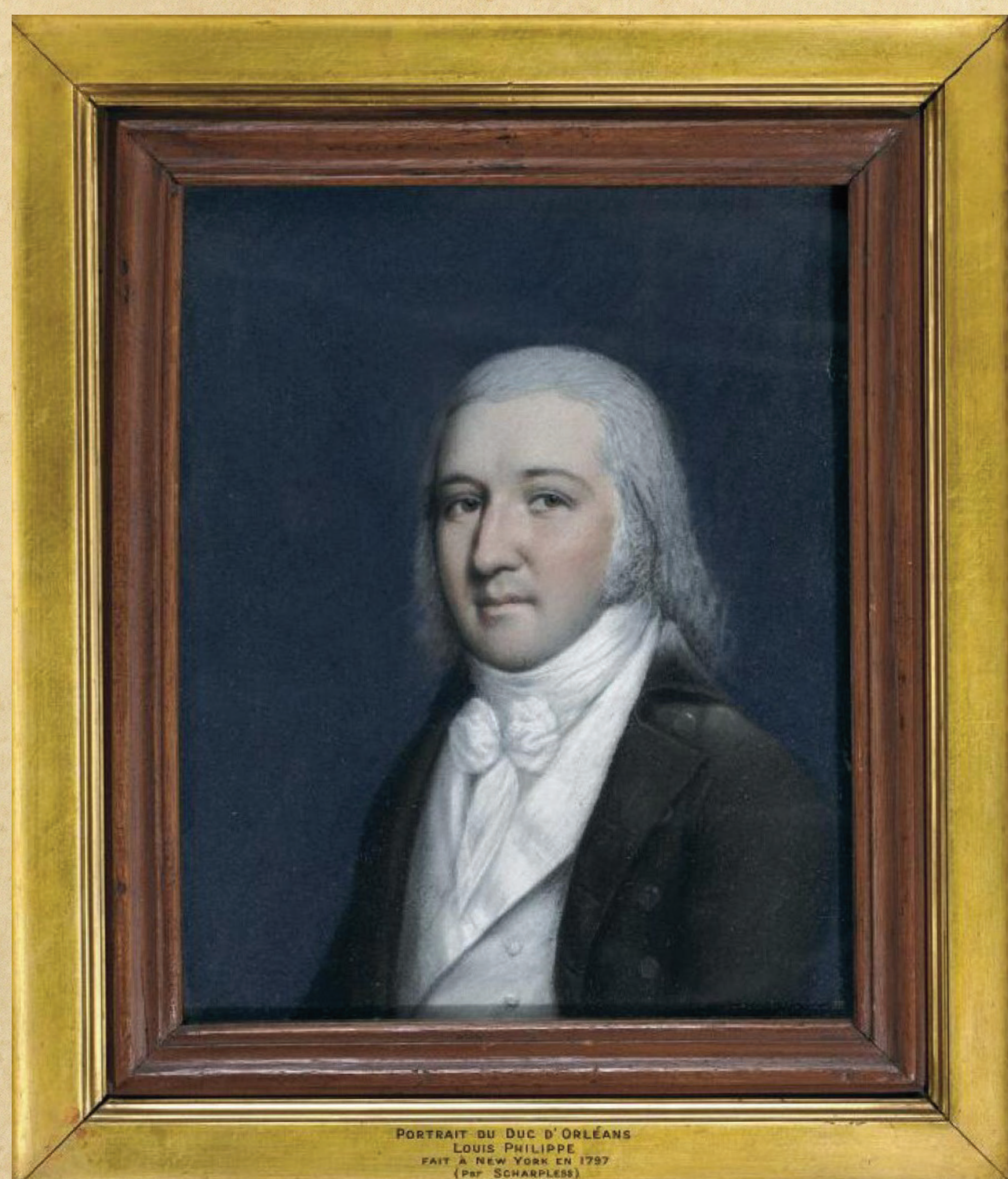
In 1782, North Carolina gave Capt. William Armstrong Sr. a land grant in Carter's Valley (now part of Hawkins County, Tennessee) for his Revolutionary War service. Over the next five years, the large, expressive brick home known as Stony Point was constructed. The Armstrongs established residency by 1783, the same year that the Treaty of Paris ended the Revolutionary War and Armstrong left military service. Located on a turnpike connecting Knoxville and Virginia, the two-story brick house is among the oldest in Tennessee.

In 1791, William Armstrong Sr. married Elizabeth Galbraith, and they eventually had 11 children. In the early years, Stony Point hosted many famous visitors, including Louis Philippe, future king of France; William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition; and Andrew Jackson, a future U.S. president.



Stony Point main house, ca. 1900. Image courtesy of the Armstrong family.

Portrait of future King Louis Philippe, circa 1797, at age 25. Original painting by James Sharples. Image courtesy of Sotheby's.



Portrait of future President Andrew Jackson, ca. 1810–1825. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Slavery and Freedom at Stony Point

Early family records indicate that William Armstrong Sr. purchased enslaved people as early as 1787 and bought more individuals in the early 1800s. They worked the fields, tended livestock, and operated the mill, blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, saddle shop, and tavern. According to his will, 15 enslaved men and women were at Stony Point at the time of his death in 1835.

By the time of the Civil War, nine enslaved people were documented at Stony Point. Upon Emancipation, at least six of the formerly enslaved are known to have worked as tenants for various periods of time. William “Frosty” Armstrong, who owned Stony Point in those years, exchanged letters with formerly enslaved men, Jeff and Stephen Armstrong, from the 1870s into the turn of the century. The men updated Frosty on family life, their hardships, and their achievements. Jeff and Stephen also asked Frosty if he knew their ages since they needed the information for employment.

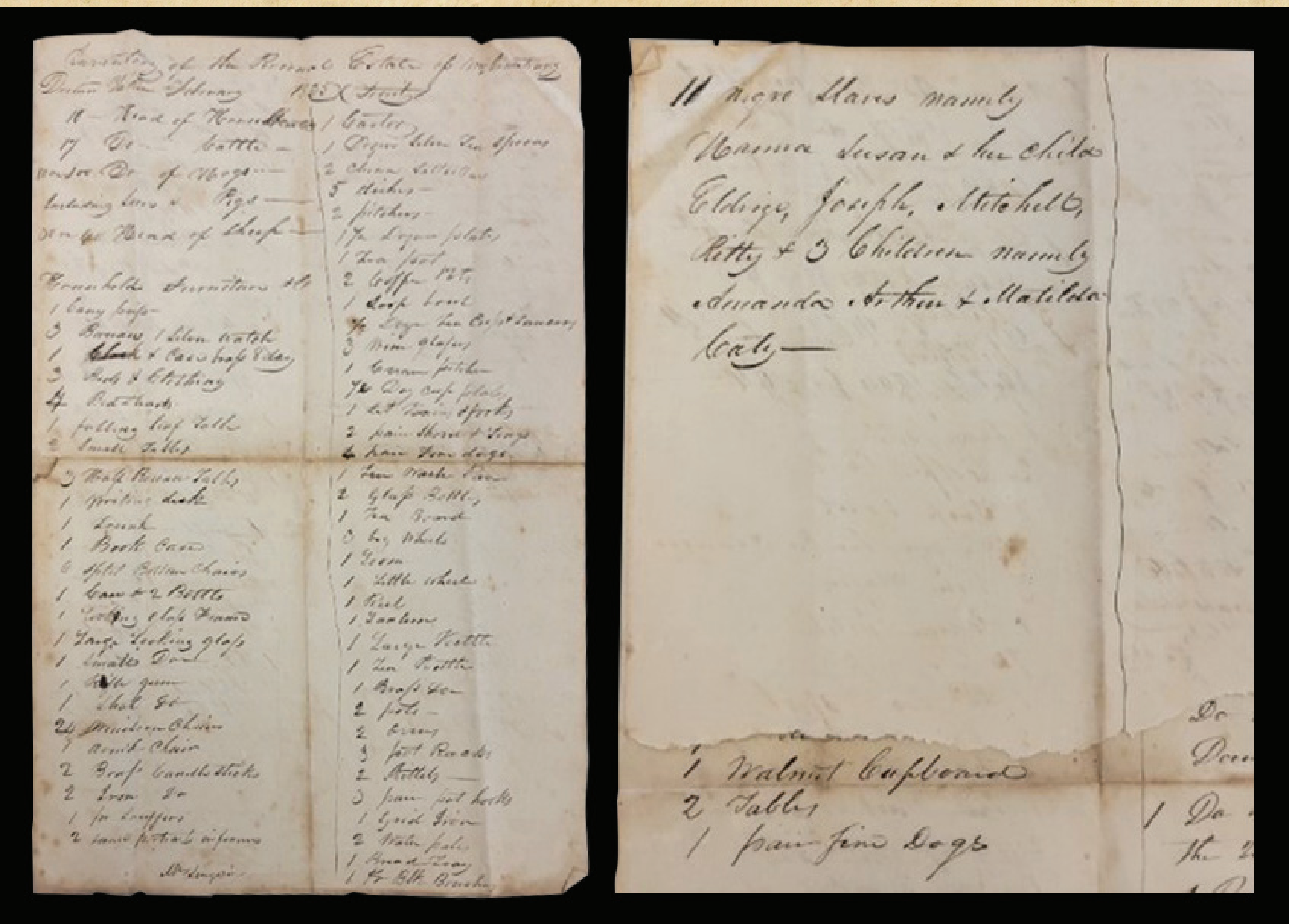


Unidentified man with two horses at Stony Point. Image courtesy of the Armstrong family.



After Emancipation, tenant farmers largely kept the farm operational and the house livable for Frosty (in top hat) and his family.

1835 inventory listing the names of 11 enslaved individuals living at Stony Point. Photo courtesy of the Armstrong family.



A Tradition of Military Service

During the Revolutionary War, William Armstrong Sr. served as a captain in the 1st North Carolina Regiment from 1777 until his transfer in 1782 to the 3rd North Carolina Regiment. The 1st North Carolina fought in the Pennsylvania battles of Brandywine Creek and Germantown in 1777, at Monmouth Courthouse in New Jersey in 1778, at Stony Point in New York in 1779, and in the siege of Charleston, South Carolina, in 1780.

The Civil War bitterly divided Hawkins County, which ultimately sent 15 Confederate and 11 Union companies to the front. In 1862, William Lyons “Frosty” Armstrong joined the 31st Tennessee Infantry CSA (later known as the 39th Tennessee) as a second lieutenant and later became captain. Contracting tuberculosis, he returned to Stony Point to recover, then rejoined the Confederate army and served until May 1865. In 1896 he was a founder of the Major Kyle Blevins Camp of the United Confederate Veterans.

Richard Ewell Armstrong, son of Frosty, served in World War I from 1917 to 1918. Richard would go on to marry and settle at Stony Point with his four children—Jane, Samuel, Sarah, and Richard Jr. Both Richard Jr. and brother Samuel Alexander “Alex” Armstrong served in World War II and frequently exchanged letters and photos with their sister Jane, who still lived at Stony Point.



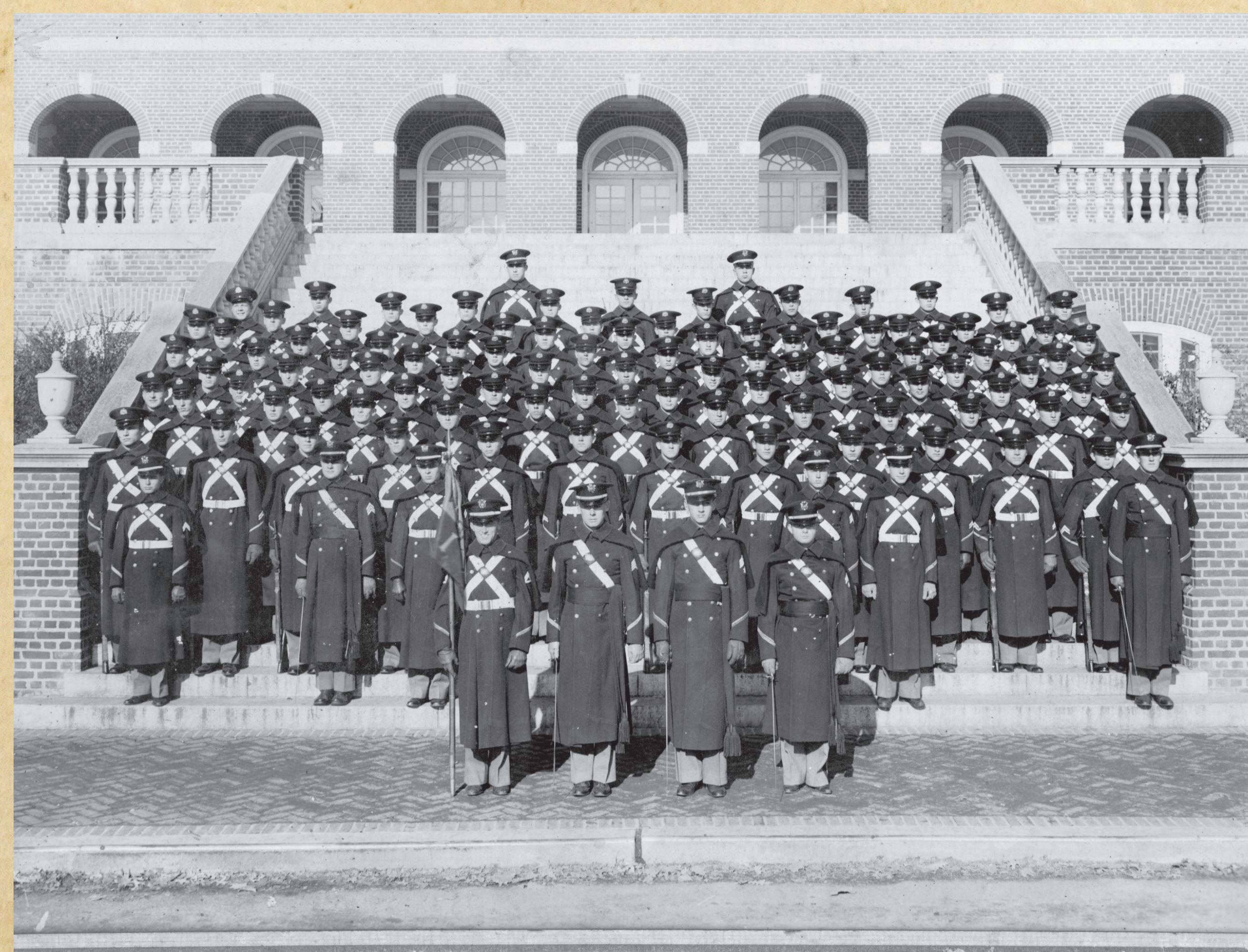
Alex Armstrong and fellow soldiers in Japan during WWII. Image courtesy of the Armstrong family.



William Lyons Armstrong with horse Posey. Image courtesy of the Armstrong family.



Photo of members of Camp Kyle Blevins, United Confederate Veterans (UCV). Image courtesy of Armstrong family.



Alex Armstrong's battalion unit; Alex is standing in the fifth row. Image courtesy of the Armstrong family.

The Armstrongs as Community Builders

As the Armstrongs expanded their farm, they also lent a hand and money to building churches and schools. William Armstrong Sr. deeded land for New Providence Presbyterian Church. Its cemetery is the final resting place for veterans and many prominent community members, including the Armstrongs, Maxwells, Galbraiths, and Phippses. Church records indicate that New Providence baptized enslaved people, and some were eventually allowed to create their own congregation and church.

The first neighborhood school was known as New Providence Academy. Later, after multiple fires, church members raised funds and hired laborers to build Maxwell Academy, named for Revolutionary War veteran Capt. George Maxwell. The church administered the school until 1907; it then became part of the Hawkins County school district until 1954. The school, church, and cemetery were listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. In Rogersville, the Armstrongs also supported the Odd Fellows Female Institute (later Synodical College), which provided more advanced education for young women and operated from c. 1849 to 1919. Records show that W.P. Armstrong and John McFarland hired an enslaved person named Delaney to work at the Female Institute in 1856.

The store at Stony Point also served as a post office from 1868 to 1955. Frosty Armstrong was the official postmaster from 1868 to the early 1900s.



New Providence Presbyterian Church. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



1904 class of Maxwell Academy at Stony Point. Image courtesy of the Armstrong family.



The cemetery is directly next to the New Providence church. Many Armstrong family members are buried there. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

Legacies at Stony Point

Stony Point is almost 250 years old, and its many families have profoundly impacted the military, agricultural, transportation, educational, religious, cultural, and African American history of Hawkins County. Through extensive family records and invaluable firsthand accounts of different generations, we learn how Appalachian families adapted to changes in political agendas, agriculture, modern technology, and a new social environment. Frosty Armstrong noted in several diary entries over the years how dependent he was on his African American and white tenants to keep the farm profitable.

In the 1970s, the Tennessee Valley Authority announced that a nuclear energy plant would be built at the nearby Phipps Bend of the Holston River. At the same time, the Tennessee Department of Transportation announced that a new four-lane highway would divide Stony Point into two parts, separating the house from the church and school. Jane Armstrong launched a determined and often lonely but ultimately successful battle to save Stony Point. Her efforts to protect the property form an important chapter in the early history of historic preservation in Upper East Tennessee.



Stony Point main house, 1975. Image courtesy of the Armstrong family via TVA.



Maxwell Academy. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



Frosty Armstrong's marker in the New Providence Presbyterian Church cemetery. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

This exhibit was developed and sponsored by the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, a program of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

Special thanks to the Armstrong and Gardner families, who generously shared their time, expertise, artifacts, and personal memorabilia for this exhibit.

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