

# Forbes

## Locust Grove Evolves As A Captivating Palimpsest: Why Preservation Matters

By Bill Frist, MD | February 19, 2024



Locust Grove, February 2024. Under direction of expert preservationist Vic Hood (pictured here with Tracy Frist), the two and a half story historic log structure is being meticulously reassembled and restored at Old Town.

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Why does preservation of an old place matter?

Tracy and I live on an archaeological site in a homeplace constructed in 1846, twenty-five miles southwest of Nashville. It's today a 60-acre farm in Williamson County,

Tennessee, and interestingly we definitively know that people lived on and farmed this specific tract of land 1000 years ago.

And, with the assistance of scholars at Middle Tennessee State University and many friends and volunteers, we are actively discovering a lot about those early, ancient peoples – how they lived, played and prayed, hundreds of years before the arrival of more modern Native Americans (the Shawnee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and others) and the early European pioneers. As we learn about them, we learn much about ourselves, and that is, we believe, why preservation matters.

Tracy and I are deeply committed to preservation and conservation of the land and structures here at *Old Town*, the name of the site given not by us but by the early settlers who found remnants of a 12-acre, palisaded town site inhabited by a relatively advanced civilization which thrived here from 950 to 1350 AD.

Indeed, at this moment we are at the halfway point of physically moving to Old Town an historic, single-pen, two and one-half story log structure, possibly an old wayside tavern, from a mile further up the Old Natchez Trace. The original Natchez Trace was a wilderness roadway, initially a path developed by bison and elk traveling to the great Salt Lick that later became Nashville. It was used by ancient peoples to connect their highly developed, fortified towns, and later became a major thoroughfare for tens of thousands of pioneering settlers and traders exploring new lands south and west in early America, connecting present day Middle Tennessee to Natchez, Mississippi.

As the approximately 300-year-old logs of this cabin, named in the 1800s *Locust Grove*, are being meticulously reassembled by expert craftsmen at Old Town, curious friends and family stopping by ask us, not unreasonably, “Why?”

Why does a person’s commitment to preservation of an old place, using Locust Grove as an example, matter for today, and for the future? Or does it? How could preservation even possibly improve the lives of a family or a community? How does it make the world a better place? Does preservation actually make peoples’ lives better in some way?

Our responses to all these questions are grounded in our firm conviction that properly preserved old places can enable meaningful experiences that can powerfully improve people’s lives.

What Tracy and I have come to believe is that old (ancient and historical) places can be foundational to humanity by expanding our capacity to find more complete meaning within our individual lives and to see a future where we can make a difference.

Preservation gives us a richer understanding of our own history, and a more complete sense of ourselves.

As the stewards and inhabitants of Old Town, we are certain it is more than a place. Visually and structurally, it consists of a thousand-year-old archaeological site with ancient Mississippian era temple mounds and hundreds, likely thousands, of stone-box graves; a serpentine creek feeding the Harpeth River flowing gently along one border; an 1801 military-constructed, dry-stacked, stone bridge; the main white clapboard “Thomas Brown House” where we live with adjacent smokehouse and barns; and over 50 acres of grassland meadows and forests.



Old Town archaeological site, Williamson County, TN. Depiction of semicircular, 12-acre, fortified (see brown palisaded wall) site, bordered by the Harpeth River, as it existed a thousand years ago. Note temple mounds, burial mounds, houses, and cultivated maize fields (upper left), identified by modern Ground Penetrating Radar. Contemporary site of Locust Grove is at center. Painting by Nick Fielder, 2021. OFFICE OF SENATOR BILL FRIST, MD

But most importantly, Old Town provides an enduring, constantly evolving place with rich history, all purposefully and actively perpetuated by us and owners before, that is imbued with a pervasive sense of spirit for reflection and restoration, health and healing, hopes and dreams, the past and the future. And to Tracy and me, that is the essence of why we so strongly value preservation and conservation.

For us, Old Town serves as a living bridge to the past, connecting us to the lives, struggles, ambitions, passions, and celebrations of scores of generations of people before us. By immersing ourselves in this historic place, honoring our predecessors who slept where each night we sleep, we gain a deeper understanding of our own identities. Old Town reminds us daily that how purposefully we live our lives, however finite they may be, will indeed resonate long after we're gone, just as the actions of those who came before us have shaped how we live our lives today, and the lives they lived shaped the values and culture we have inherited.

The grounds and structures of Old Town speak to us in a profound and deeply personal way that nothing else does. It provides us, and those who visit, the opportunity to establish a close connection to a vast community of human experience, a community that extends across the expanse of time. This connectedness not only enlightens us, but also enriches those who visit Old Town, as it helps us all recognize and better understand the significance of the lives we lead. And reminds us, we by actions and thought have a responsibility to successive generations to preserve and protect what we have been given.

This explains why Tracy and I, currently through her commitments to both the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Heritage Foundation of Williamson County and through my board service to The Nature Conservancy globally, are so interested in preservation of the historic structures that hold significance for us and our communities and in conservation of the lands, water, and biodiversity that sustain us. Our mission is to play our part to ensure that future generations can encounter these places in the same way we do —captivated, enlightened, and inspired with a vibrant sense of continuity from the past and with the lives and values of the people who once lived here.

Some have used the analogy that old places are like an internal compass, providing a sense of orientation for our own lives. They can serve as guides, helping us comprehend more clearly the complexities of our identities, the contexts that shape our experiences, and the circumstances and purpose of our existence. Understanding our past and connecting it with the present prepares us to live purposeful and meaningful lives in the future. That's the magic of preservation and conservation.

So back to Locust Grove and the question of why today we are moving it to Old Town and carefully restoring it to its original condition. Preservationist Vic Hood independently had the foresight to purchase the log structure (otherwise slated for destruction by developers), recognizing its historical and architectural value. The structure was originally located on the same large tract of land granted to Nashville pioneer John Donelson in 1780, and knowing of Tracy's and my commitment to



preservation as a path to the future, Vic suggested the move to Old Town, and there the story began.



Locust Grove, 1981. Originally situated in early 1800s along the well-traveled wilderness roadway, the Natchez Trace, it is being moved southwest along the current day Old Natchez Trace to Old Town. Both Old Town and Locust Grove are part of the original John Donelson Tract of 1780. (photograph by Arthur R. Ezell) HERITAGE OF GRANDEUR, BY JAMES, A. CRUTCHFIELD, CARNTON ASSOCIATION, INC., 1981

In 1803 John Evans purchased a tract of land from his father to build the “expanded” log cabin design — a larger, roomier, more complex structure than the more spartan, one-room log cabins of the first phase of frontier settlers to Williamson County, reflecting a more sophisticated taste of the builder and a cleverer method of construction. The two and one-half stories structure, originally containing eight rooms, was situated 500 yards east of the Natchez Trace roadway.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Heritage of Grandeur, by James, A. Crutchfield, Carnton Association, Inc., 1981

Now, for generations to come, Locust Grove will stand as more than just a rare architectural representation of an impressive 1803 log vernacular structure. It will continue to embody the very essence of the culture that existed before and up to the early 1800s, the many transformations that have occurred with generations of families residing within its walls since those times, and what it will be to others in years to come. Yes, Locust Grove will continue to evolve as a captivating palimpsest, where each successive generation layers on their indelible mark, crafting their own special narrative.

By valuing and preserving historic places and structures at Old Town, Tracy and I hope we are contributing to a better world – that values and honors its past, acknowledges and celebrates the rich diversity of those that have come before us, and perpetuates a sense of place and identity for present and future generations to come. At Old Town, we hope our visitors feel the same restoration and healing, belonging and connection, inspiration and creativity, enlightenment and continued growth that we do.

Each visitor today to Old Town leaves with a pamphlet written 75 years ago by then owners Henry and Virginia Goodpasture, which opens with these words:

*“Old Town stands today, as proudly as ever, showing few scars of the past 100 years. It is a place of legend and a place of romance, a union of the traditions of yesterday and the promises of tomorrow. The Big Harpeth River still runs quietly in front of the door. Donelson Creek still sparkles in the sunlight. Fertile fields that once knew the beat of tom-toms still hold beneath a carpet of blue grass, the bones of an ancient and extinct race. There is much to bear mute evidence of the loving care of the generations that have gone before. It is hoped that Old Town will stand for the use and happiness of generations yet unborn, and the gaiety and graciousness of the days of yesteryear will always warm the hearts of its guests and welcome the stranger within its gates.”*

Forbes link: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/billfrist/2024/02/19/locust-grove-evolves-as-a-captivating-palimpsest-why-preservation-matters/?sh=4999f7b37713>

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1. Heritage of Grandeur, by James, A. Crutchfield, Carnton Association, Inc., 1981