

Mary's Story

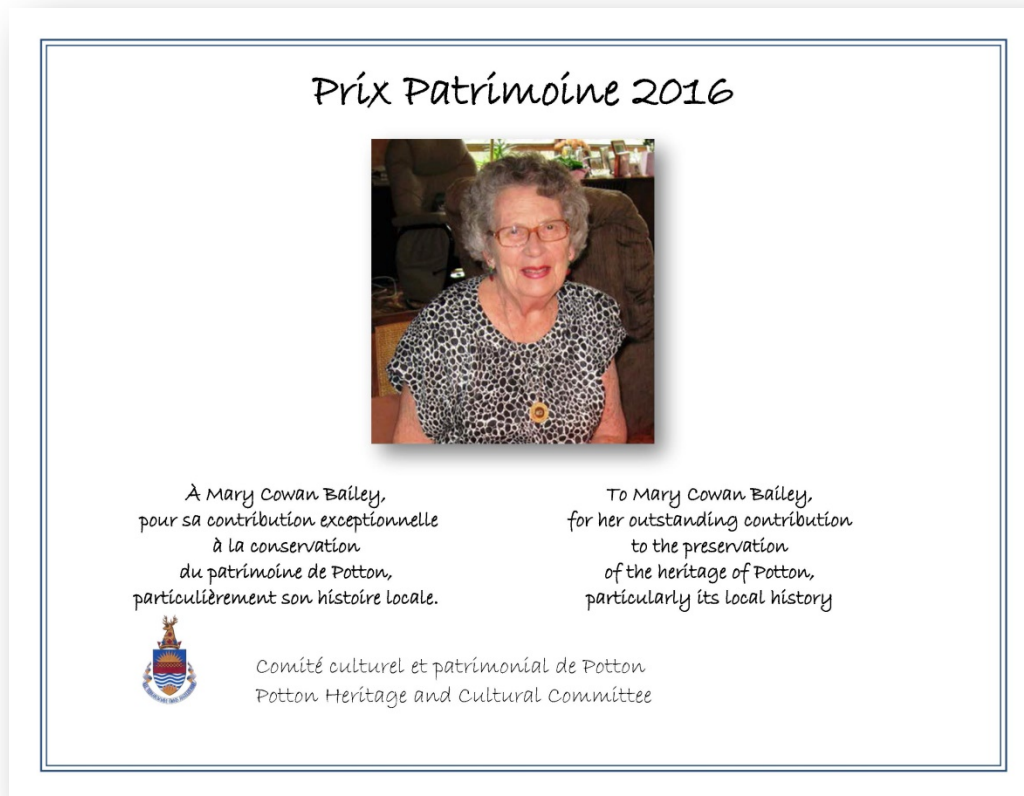
by Sandra Jewett

On October 2nd, Mrs. Mary Bailey was awarded the 2016 Heritage Prize from the Municipality of the Township of Potton for her "outstanding contribution to the preservation of the heritage of Potton, particularly its local history". Potton Heritage is happy to present Mrs. Bailey's biography, compiled by Sandra Jewett.

Sutton. Their daughter, Mary, was born in Potton, where she has made her entire life.

Benjamin and Jane Brydges Cowan, Mary's grandparents, purchased a farm on what is now called Fitzsimmons road, and it was there that her father grew up. Frank Cowan showed great ambition from his earliest days. His father's illness obliged him to interrupt his schooling for a time; however he persisted and by 1908, had earned a Diploma in Business from Bugbee Business College, in Stanstead.

Mary's mother, Edith Amelia Aiken Cowan, was the daughter of Alonzo Aiken, and his 2nd wife,



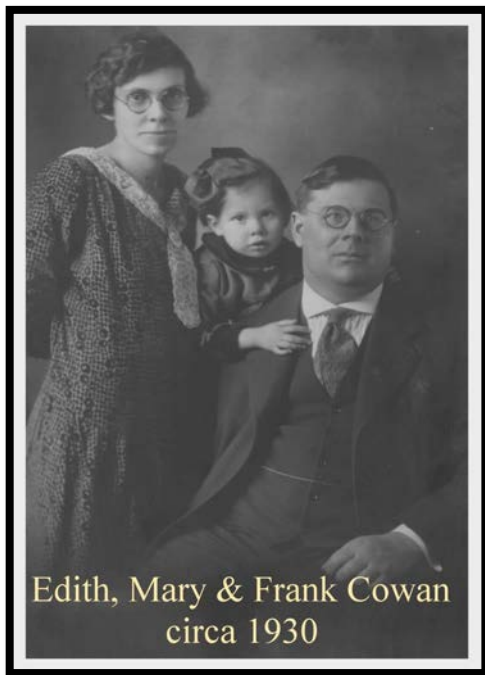
Mary Frances Bailey, née Cowan, is the only daughter of R.F. (Frank) Cowan (1887-1964), the son of Irish immigrant parents, who was born on the Cowan farm on Schoolcraft road, and of his wife, Edith Amelia Aiken, great granddaughter of Thomas Aiken. Edith was born on the original family farm in Glen

Mary L. Jersey, of Potton. Mary Lovisa Jersey (1866-1947) was sister to Robert Jersey (1872-1944), the Potton born farmer who commissioned the construction of Mansonville's Round Barn. Both were children of William (1826-1895) and Philura Jenkins Jersey (1831-1916). Alonzo Aiken was the

grandson of original settler Thomas Aiken, born in 1786, who settled in Glen Sutton.

What now follows is the story of Mary (Cowan) Bailey, drawn primarily from Mary's autobiography written in 2011 for her children; with additions from the Biography of R.F. Cowan, also written by Mary.

Robert Francis (Frank) Cowan and his wife, Edith Amelia Aiken must have been overjoyed with the arrival on April 22, 1928 of their baby daughter, Mary Frances. By the time of her birth, Mary's parents were six years married and settled into their home in Mansonville – still known as the Cowan House, on the corner opposite the Dépanneur des treize convenience store, beside the Post Office!



Edith, Mary & Frank Cowan
circa 1930

The first year of marriage had proven rather difficult for the newlyweds.

Mr. Cowan, married in 1922 at the age of 35, had recently partnered with Mr. Gerald Emtage, the former bank manager, in opening the Cowan-Emtage General store located on the ground floor of the 'Town Block' in Mansonville. Being centrally located, the

general store business was undoubtedly brisk. Then, agriculture prevailed in Potton, and local grocers routinely extended credit to many families.

In the early morning of January 29, 1923, a massive fire destroyed the 'Town Block' – and with it, all records of accounts receivable, the inventory and equipment of the newly minted general store. The Post Office, the Bank, and the municipal office, located in the same building, were also destroyed. A shipment of \$6,000 in cash, in transit to the Bank, was thought to have been lost to the fire; however the tightly bound packet of bills was later found in the ashes – virtually intact.

Not two months later, Frank's wife, Edith, then pregnant with the couple's first child, was stricken with typhoid fever in the epidemic that afflicted nearly half the population of Mansonville, beginning in early March 1923. Mrs. Cowan was severely ill, with the sad result that she gave birth prematurely and the baby girl did not survive. It was some time before Mrs. Cowan regained her health.

In July 1923 Frank was engaged as the Secretary-Treasurer of the Municipality; however, there was no office, and municipal records had survived the fire. (The Cowan's dining room table served as the municipal office until the new and present Town Hall was completed in 1931!)

Mary's parents were well-respected member of the community, active in the United Church and the society that was part of it. Mr. Cowan was the Secretary-Treasurer of the Municipality from 1923 to 1955. Frank Cowan is still remembered for his sound judgement, fairness and uncompromising integrity.

Mary was an only child, whom her parents obviously cherished and for whom, they worked tirelessly to give a well-rounded social, cultural and sound moral foundation.

This, from Mary's autobiography: *'Although I was an only child, with two wonderful parents, I never felt lonely. Our home was a center for all the young people to gather. Often, friends and my many cousins stayed with us. My Mother was a talented pianist, and apparently even before I was born, young people used to come asking my Mother to play for sing-alongs.*

Mary recalls: *'My Mother played with me and my friends, even building tents with blankets over chairs in the middle of the living room. I remember once when she and I were under the 'tent', who should come calling but the local Minister! Of course, the door was never locked and people just seemed to wander in any time of day, or sometimes, night. This, of course, was due to my father's duties as Secretary-Treasurer or to his business dealings. In any event, the arrival of the Minister seemed not to faze Mother, as she just crawled out from under the tent as though it was most normal for her to be there, stood up and welcomed him as usual!'*

Mary's grandmother, Mary L. (Jersey) Aiken lived with the Cowan's from 1924 until her death in 1947. Her presence undoubtedly greatly influenced Mary's childhood and adolescence, and helped to instill in her, an abiding respect for history and those who made it; and this, quite apart from encouraging an independent spirit imbued with good common sense.

She had a large bedroom with an extra bed and a sitting room. Our home was large, and we had room for lots of visitors – and very often had them! My grandmother visited her other children, helping out when new babies arrived or whenever she was needed. She sewed and knitted for all of us, and, of course, taught me to do the same. She was an important part of my life. As I remember, she gave advice freely, as she did to all of her grandchildren.

Mary tells us that her cousins often stayed at the Cowan home and mentions that cousin Doris White, *stayed with us, especially if the weather was bad, because she had such a long walk home, about 5 miles.* (Doris lived on what is now called White Road.)

Mary's formal education began at age 5 at Mansonville Intermediate School, which was only a short walk from her home, for it stood between the former United and present Anglican Church, on the site of the war memorial. Mary tells us that three or four grades were grouped together in a single class room in the two-storey school. Her first teacher was the young Potton-born Letitia Halley (1912-1997), who would later become Mary's close friend. Letitia was the daughter of harness maker, Dave Halley and his wife, Jenny Keach.



Letitia went on to marry, have a family of her own and to teach the first grade of entire generations of students locally; in fact she taught all four of Mary Bailey's children, as well as my sisters and I!

Mary remembers clearly that Grades 1-4 and Grades 8-10 were located on the ground floor of the School while Grades 5 - 7 were on the second floor where a Library was also located.

(Her autobiography includes the names of all her teachers!).

At this time, rural one room schoolhouses were still the norm in the outlying areas of the Township. Since there was no bus service, both teachers and their students walked to the closest school where only Grades 1 to 7 were offered. For Grades eight to ten, students were required to attend Mansonville Intermediate School. Few lived near enough to the village to travel daily, thus many parents paid to board their children with village families from Monday to Friday. The Cowan's were one such family. Mary remembers that Alice Allen and Pearl Brown, from Owl's Head, as well as Elaine and Doris Knowlton, who lived in Knowlton's Landing, stayed in her home.

Mary recounts that she and her friends often played croquet on the "Common" (now Place Manson) after school; and in the winter, skated on the rink across from their home in the winter, meeting back at the Cowan home to play Monopoly warmed by a mug of cocoa!

When Mary was in Grade Ten, a severe streptococcal throat infection forced her to abandon her studies for the balance of the year. Her Doctor feared septicemia, since antibiotics were not then commonly available outside of military use at the time. This interruption was a very unwelcome turn of events for young Mary, who enjoyed vigorous competition with her classmates for top marks. She endured the set-back, returned to resume Grade 10 the following year, and managed to lead her class in the finals.

At the time, students seeking a High School Leaving certificate were obliged to attend a school where Grade 11 was offered. While Knowlton High School was the closest to Mansonville, Mary chose to enroll in Stanstead College and to live there in residence.

The High school graduation ceremonies were held in Centenary United Church in Stanstead, a Church familiar to Mary. She writes that attendance at Church was compulsory for all students at Stanstead College. *I had attended Sunday school and Church all my life*, noting that she was a member of the choir during her years at Stanstead.

The summer following her high school graduation, Mary worked in her father's office. *I had always enjoyed that type of work, felt he was badly overworked, and needed my help. He was the Secretary-Treasurer of the Municipality and of the School Municipality of Potton. In addition, as a Chartered Accountant, he audited the records of many Municipalities and School Municipalities in the Eastern Townships. He also did a number of individual and corporate income tax returns, which involved a great deal of bookkeeping before any final tax calculations could be done. It was during that summer that I decided I would return to Stanstead to take a business course at Bugbee Business College, affiliated with Stanstead College.*

Because of my very good academic record, my professors urged me to continue with my education in a University. My parents would have most likely preferred that option; however, they supported my decision. I was very determined to come back to work with my Father, and, so I returned to residence for another year for business courses. I received top marks in Bugbee, with stenography and bookkeeping being courses I really enjoyed.

During both years at Stanstead, Mary took music lessons at the Conservatory affiliated with the College. Previously, she had taken piano lessons from the Sisters of the Catholic convent in Mansonville.

One year at Stanstead, we staged "The Student Prince" in the Haskell Opera House, an operetta in which I played a peasant girl, part

of the Chorus. It was a rather thrilling experience for all of us to perform in such a beautiful place as the Haskell, with its distinction of straddling the US-Canada border. I also played in piano recitals at the Haskell.

While living in Mansonville, I never had the opportunity for playing organized sports; but at Stanstead, sports were compulsory, so I played basketball, soccer and softball, but was never any good at any of them, as I recall. We did enjoy cheering for our teams at games held on campus! Several social activities were organized for students on campus such as dances, and concerts by visiting artists. Occasionally, and with permission, we went to a Saturday night movie in Rock Island. It was always such fun to go down to Rock Island for ice-cream on Saturday afternoons, to buy snacks, and take long walks up to Dufferin Heights in Stanstead.

After her graduation from Bugbee in 1946, Mary began working daily with her Father in his office. In addition to his municipal and accounting functions, Mr. Cowan also did some notarial work, such as drawing up deeds, recording wills for people and so on.

Mary seemed to find such variety an interesting milieu. *It certainly was never boring, and I was always very busy typing statements and legal documents, learning bookkeeping, running the office when he was away, listening in on the meetings of the Town Council, helping out at Municipal and School elections, and generally learning about his businesses.*

In her autobiography, Mary mentions her particularly close and enduring friendship with Ruth M. Heath (1925-1998), another local girl, daughter of Merrill and Arvilla (Fullerton) Heath.

In the mid 1940's, Ruth and Mary collaborated in the organization of the local Girl Guide troop, initiated by Miss Hazel Meyer, a primary

school teacher at Mansonville Intermediate. Ruth assumed the role of Captain after Miss Meyer left at the end of the school year. Mary, who had been one of the first Patrol leaders, served as Lieutenant. Ruth Heath remained the leading voice in the Girl Guides of Mansonville for many years, creating many a fond memory for the many young ladies in her charge.

Although Mary was a working girl, she maintained an active social life with her close friends, and other young professionals in the village. Of this, she modestly writes: *After I returned from College, a group of us from the United and Anglican Churches founded a Young People's Group, later known as the Young Adult Group. Most of us were in our late teens or early twenties. We organized a bowling group, who played regularly in the basement of a building on Main Street in Newport Centre. We often held dances in the Town Hall, and occasionally took services in one or other of the local Churches. We prided ourselves in being interdenominational, and worked to raise money for both Churches.*

It so happened that around this time, the young, and presumably dashing, Merton Earl Bailey had returned from service overseas with the 14th Field Regiment of the Royal Canadian Artillery during WWII. Unsurprising then, was his election as this group's first president. And equally unsurprising was the deepening of the friendship between Mary Frances and Merton! Their friend, Ruth, had paired off with Rupert Fullerton, the group's vice president.

The foursome spent much time together; however, not always did the planning of meetings serious and fund raising, displace the fun of attending dances together in the surrounding towns, seldom missing a Saturday night at the Pavilion at Brome Lake, or enjoying dances in Abercorn and in Newport, Vermont.

It was also around 1946 that Mary and her Mother, Edith, with other ladies from the community, were working to establish a chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star in Mansonville. This Order is a benevolent organization, affiliated with freemasonry. St. John's masonic Lodge was established in Mansonville over 80 years earlier, in 1865. In 1947, a charter was granted for Owl's Head Chapter No. 35. It remains an active group in this small community, as do the Masons. Mary Bailey is the only surviving Charter member. For the 50th Anniversary in 1997, Mary recorded the history of the OES in Mansonville. Few may claim such loyal and active membership for nearly 70 years in any organization. Mary was elected 1st organist in 1947 and is still the faithful musician.

In early 1949, when Merton received word of his permanent appointment to the Canada Customs Service in Highwater, the couple became engaged. They exchanged wedding vows some six months later, on June 18th, 1949 in the United Church of Mansonville. Two days before her wedding, Mary was plagued by a severe throat infection which threatened to postpone her wedding plans. A double dose of antibiotics saved the day, and Mary's wedding went off smoothly... until the wedding reception, that is, when the Young Adult Group, decided to turn things up a notch – to borrow a contemporary phrase – and be good naturedly mischievous!

The Group helped serve the luncheon to 60 guests in our home after our wedding ... but it seemed that a few found some time to engage in some pranks... When Merton and I had said our goodbyes and were about to leave on our honeymoon ... we discovered the car had been liberally trimmed with streamers and the like ... and that it could not be started. Somehow, it seems that our friends in their playful exuberance had, inadvertently or otherwise, disturbed the ignition. So, back into the house

we went, somewhat amused by their antics, and yet more than just a little disappointed!



Edward White, a student minister who had assisted at the wedding, came to their rescue; packed them into his car and took them to Merton's parents' home not far from town. There, the newlyweds stayed, until Merton's car was returned to him, minus the trimmings, and in full running order! Only then were the two able to leave for their planned honeymoon to the Saguenay and points in northern Quebec.

Upon their return, Mr. & Mrs. Bailey moved into "Camp Brenda", a small house near Perkins Landing, which Merton had built immediately after his return from overseas. The couple lived there in the summers and wintered with Mary's parents until 1951, when they purchased their first home in Highwater, adjacent to the Customs office.

Their first child, David, was born December 15, 1951. *Our first Christmas with our son was spent with my parents at their home, with baby David, under the Christmas tree in his bassinet. I can still see the tears of happiness in my Father's eyes as he gazed on his first grandchild.*

Mary writes that her mother *helped with David during the day so that I might continue working for my father at his office. It was a new experience for her, mixing formula and such, but she loved showing him off to her friends, and just as she had been with me, unafraid of getting down on the floor to play with him as he got older.*

Stephen Cowan, their second son, was born on March 27, 1955 – and, as sometimes happens, was born in one of the worst storms of the century. *Dr. Gillanders hired a taxi, picked me up at our home, and we started for the hospital in Newport where all of our boys were born. The Doctor brought his 'little black bag' along, and assured Mary that they would find a farmhouse where he would deliver the baby, if need be!*

Doctor and expectant mother did make it to the hospital just in time; but the return trip for Doc with the proud father did not go quite as smoothly, from what Mary tells. Heavy snows had closed the road – and the pair were forced to wait in Highwater Hotel for several hours until the road to Mansonville could be opened. Not the usual haunt for either of these gentlemen; however, any port in a storm!

Murray Douglas, son number three, arrived on February 20, 1958. Mary writes that at the time, births in the Newport Hospital were announced over the local radio air waves. Merton, waiting at home, heard the news that a daughter had been born to Mr. and Mrs. Merton Bailey. Confused, he called the Doctor who happily confirmed the birth of another son, "I should know", said he, "I was there!"

The arrival of Bailey son number four, Gary Robert, came 15 months later, on May 14, 1959. His distinction, Mary writes, was that he looked almost identical to his brother Murray – thus both confusing and amusing the hospital staff!

The Bailey family was complete and Mom undoubtedly, a happy, though very busy woman!



Friday, December 28, 1962 proved a very fateful day for the Baileys, although the morning had begun with Merton at work and Mary, at home with her brood, one ear on the 11 year old David as he practiced piano lessons, and the other, trained on the three playing happily upstairs. On a crisp and cloudless day, Mary and David, began suddenly to notice great lumps of "melting snow pelting down over the windows". Almost simultaneously, the three boys came racing downstairs calling that "there was fire up there" ... Sure enough, Mary writes, *I could see tongues of flame already at the staircase. I grabbed the boys and we all ran up to the Customs.* Meanwhile, her husband, who had seen the flames of his burning home as he returned from banking in Mansonville fought to save his home with the brigades from North Troy and Mansonville.

Investigation later proved that spontaneous combustion due to faulty ventilation had caused the fire. One cannot but shudder at the thought of this had happened when all were fast asleep. A new home was

commissioned adjacent to the previous one. *We moved into our new home, adjacent to the previous one, in June of 1964.*

This was a bittersweet year for Mary, for it was in 1964, that both her parents died. Mr. Cowan succumbed to cancer in February 1964, and his wife passed on peacefully in her sleep on November 30th. Mary writes poignantly of her mother's death, *'She had just told me the day before about how happy her life had been. She said she had a happy childhood, a wonderful marriage, a daughter of whom she was extremely proud, and now she had 4 wonderful grandsons who had brought her much happiness and she looked forward to watching them grow up.'*

Each of these grandsons went onto achieve excellent university educations, and to establish solid careers for themselves.



Mary's autobiography includes anecdotes about each son's growing up years, and education paths, noting there were some *scuffles and disagreements, but for the most part her children were great pals.* She describes idyllic summers spent with family and friends at the family cottage on the shores of Lake Memphremagog; fondly recalls the adventures of early days tent-trailering with the children to visit family and friends far and wide in Canada and the US, tells of winter "cook-outs", snow mobile excursions, and of winters spent at their Florida home. Mary writes with justifiable pride about her sons,

their accomplishments, and of her nine grandchildren.

From all indications, the Bailey's led full and busy lives, much of it revolving around the services, special events and leadership of the United Church in Mansonville. For years, Mary was Organist for the Church until her son David, then 12, assumed the role around 1963, and remained there until his university studies and career path inevitably brought his mother back to her familiar seat before the organ.

Sadly, the United Church in Mansonville, once so vital in the lives of so many, important in the development of a community and its values, site of much history, tears and triumphs, could not survive the confluence of changing demographics, and ever-increasing costs on the shoulders of an ageing and shrinking congregation. The Church closed on July 1st, 2010 and the building was sold two months later.

In 1977, Mary's husband, Merton E. Bailey, retired from the Canada Customs after nearly thirty-two years of service. With their sons well established in careers of their own, the couple turned to writing their memoirs, and to enjoy extensive travel. In 2009, she wrote *Our traveling days are over now, but we have happy memories which we cherish.*

In the story of her life, Mary certainly shared many happy recollections. She and Merton had always enjoyed dancing to the Big Band music of their youth and maintained affection for the music of Artie Shaw and Tommy Dorsey. Such was their devotion to the music that they once took a Big Band cruise to the Caribbean, and while living in Florida, *followed one or two groups of retired musicians who had formed bands, and who invited guests to their practice sessions each week.*

Celebration with family and friends took place on their 50th and 60th wedding anniversaries.

Mary and Merton were happily married for 63 years. Merton Bailey died on February 12, 2013.



"There are so many happy memories of my life as a child, as a young woman, and especially as a wife and a mother, that I cannot recount them all," are Mary's words. *"I have been the most fortunate of women, as I have had a wonderful husband, and 4 wonderful sons who have presented us with nine amazing grandchildren. I do not regret not having 'a career', as I believe, to some extent, I have fulfilled my destiny - in the legacy of my children and grandchildren. I thank God every day for all of them and for all my many blessings in life."*

As may be evident, I drew heavily from "Mary's Story" a draft document which Mary wrote as part of the gift of family history that she and Merton authored in 2011, an invaluable gift for their children. I am privileged to have had access to part of it.

Mary clearly recognized early on the historical value of the daily journals her parents each wrote. The Edith Amelia Aiken (1896-1964) diaries are particularly detailed and of significant historical value to the researcher. Often these were supplemented by newspaper clippings carefully pasted into scrapbooks, notably those concerning the typhoid epidemic of 1923 and the flood of 1927. These, Mary has carefully transcribed and copies of both her father's early and her mother's daily journals are available as part of a collection of documents and memoirs presented to the Brome County Historical Society.

In 2015, Mary was filmed and interviewed as part of an on-going oral history project conceived and produced by Tamara Lynch, with collaboration from Sandra Jewett. The DVDs and printed transcripts of this project will be deposited with the Eastern Townships Research Center of Bishop's University and to be made available to the interested researcher.

The supporting role which Mary played to her husband, the late M.E. Bailey, in recording his many historical sketches, is significant. In 1965, he compiled the 100 year history of St. John's Lodge No. 27 in Mansonville, from which Potton Heritage Association borrowed heavily for the 150th anniversary in 2015.

In his retirement, Mr. Bailey wrote several historical perspectives, copies of which were donated to the Museum: Among these, *A Story of Highwater (1922-1932)* and *A Story of Highwater and the Railway*. He compiled the *History of the Royal Canadian Legion Pottton Branch No. 154* and, wrote about the history and lore of the Canadian Customs in Pottton, *History of Customs Activities in the Township of Pottton* and *Border Crossings of Pottton Township*. Mr. Bailey's memoirs of military service were published as a series called "A Pottton Soldier's Story" in *The Record* in 2010. These personal historical perspectives will become only more useful as time passes. Such contributions enrich insight into the life and times of those who came before us.

I have known Mary Bailey all my life. I concluded long ago that she is, by nature, self-effacing and modest; but I know her to be a lady of dignity and great integrity, for whom I have sincere respect and affection. On behalf of Pottton Heritage, I thank you once again for everything you've shared so generously.
