

HORACE CAPRON

- by Ken Skrivseth

Horace Capron (1804-1885) is perhaps the single most important historical figures to have lived in Laurel.

The newly acquired Horace Capron report from his 1871-75 mission to Japan is an important addition to the Historical Society's collection. Not only is it a rare glimpse into the activities of an important commission in Japan in that period, it also reflects on much of Horace Capron's agricultural experience and perspective, experience he first gained while living in Laurel, experimenting with farming improvements and establishing the large cotton mill and the village that became Laurel and operating the mill for many years.

Horace Capon became deeply involved in Laurel and its cotton mill beginning in 1835. Capron was experienced in the operations of mills from his boyhood in Massachusetts and New York, and had previously been superintendent of two mills in Maryland, including nearby Savage Mill. He was also active as an officer with the Maryland Militia during this period. He married Louisa Snowden, whose late father owned Montpelier Mansion, in 1834.

In 1835-36, with Horace's expertise, and with backing from the Snowden family including brother-in-law Dr. Theodore Jenkins, and with support from Capron's New England relatives, a small existing mill on the Patuxent River was superseded by a substantial, mechanized cotton mill driven by water power.

Capron operated the mill from its opening until 1851. The Laurel Historical Society owns a register from that period which gives fascinating insights into transactions of the time. Especially during his later years in Laurel he also experimented with farming improvements, and this experience later led to his appointment in

1867 as Commissioner of Agriculture for the United States Government. In 1871 he resigned that post to lead a team of experts to assist Japan in agricultural reforms and in opening up the island of Hokkaido to colonization.

Horace Capron and Louisa had at least four children all born in Laurel. Unfortunately Louisa died in 1849. In 1851 the mill failed, and Horace declared bankruptcy. He soon remarried, and after a few years he obtained an appointment from the President to assist in calming the Indians in Texas following the Mexican War. He spent several months in Texas, then moved to Illinois where some of his family had migrated.

During his time in Laurel, Capron had experimented with agricultural techniques. In Illinois he again took up farming in earnest, and was again prominent in agricultural endeavors, writing articles, participating in well-known events and receiving awards for his work.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Horace continued with his agricultural efforts until late in 1862, when he was called upon to establish and later to lead, an Illinois cavalry regiment. He was the oldest cavalry officer in the Union Army. Seeing action in a number of skirmishes and battles, and losing a son in battle, he left the army with an injury in 1864 and was later given the rank of Brevet Brigadier General.

After a brief stay in Illinois he was again called upon by the government, this time to become Commissioner of Agriculture for the United States. This position he held until 1871, when he was persuaded by an official group from Japan, to lead a team of experts in opening up the northern island of Hokkaido to settlement by the Japanese, and to modern agriculture. The team spent four years in Japan, bringing many up-to-date practices to that sparsely settled island. It was at the end of this period that Horace Capron wrote the important report that the LHS has been very fortunate to receive.

After leaving Japan in 1875, Capron continued working from Washington, D.C on behalf of the Japanese interests.

Horace Capron died in February 1885 after being an honored guest at the dedication of the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C, which took place during a frigid (12 degree) February day. He had also been present many years earlier at the laying of the Monument's cornerstone in 1848, leading a cavalry troop of the Maryland Militia. He is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Georgetown.

