

Transcription of interview with Bob Bluford

Kneebone: Today is May 1, 2008, and this is John Kneebone, and I am speaking today with Robert Bluford, Jr., and we will be talking about his life and particularly his work in preservation. We are at Overbrook Presbyterian Church, in Richmond, Virginia, and, Bob, I would like for you to give oral permission for this to be recorded.

Bluford: That's fine. That's fine.

Kneebone: Great. Let's go ahead and begin, and, if you will, tell me something about your family and your upbringing.

Bluford: Uh, now do we want to concentrate on, just for a moment, on me and my family, and then we'll get into Polegreen.

Kneebone: Sure.

Bluford: You tell us when we're, we're . . . Well, I was born in Richmond, . . . uh, three weeks after World War One ended. I grew up here as a child in Barton Heights, that's now part of downtown. And my church upbringing was in the same congregation [1:09] as now located here on Overbrook Ro, I mean, Dumbarton Road, they moved here after World War II as did many churches in the inner city. Certainly, I was affected by the fact that in my early childhood, when I was about ten, that the stock market crashed in New York, and everywhere else, and the economy went into a really deep depression and it lasted until World War II, and I guess it was the economy of war, much as I dislike the term, that pulled us out of the economic slump that we were in. So, I was born in what I think was an

interesting time in history, and in many ways being born and reared in Richmond [2:01] and hearing my family's stories about the past, particularly the Civil War past, legends in my family. My grandfather, when he was about seven years old sat on Robert E. Lee's lap, when Robert E. Lee made his final journey after the war and came to Norfolk, and my great-grandfather had been on city council in Norfolk, and he was the one, I do have evidence of this, he entered a resolution that the city of Norfolk side with the Confederacy in 1861 right after the war began, but Lee was making his final journey around, and it was very likely that he could have visited my great-grandfather's home and there my grand-daddy could have sat on the General, you know, Lee doing that kind of thing would have been very typical of Lee. So anyway I decided this loads, this being aware of the past [3:08] so routine. My Dad had a twin sister who died two weeks before I was born, in that flu epidemic of 1918. And, it was routine in my early childhood and on up to twelve years old at least, that my Dad, we would take a Sunday afternoon ride in that car, and we had a usual route we traveled. One was down the Boulevard where the Confederate Museum was, no, not the museum, the Confederate Home for Confederate Soldiers, and the old Confederate soldiers were on the porch, and a lot of those still around in 1930, and then we were going out to the cemetery [4:00] where my Dad visited the grave of his twin sister and his, no, my grandmother had not died then, his twin sister. We went there every Sunday afternoon. So, seeing the Confederate soldiers and all that stuff, I guess it made me kind of more aware that there's a past. So that's kind of, I guess that had a lot to do with it, the generation of my interest in history. Strangely, I never did

enjoy reading when I was a child. I really don't know why, but I don't really know that I even read a book all the way through until I was in college. (Laughs.) Now, I had to do book reports, in high school, like almost all my friends, you skimmed and skipped a lot, when you wrote a book report [5:00—end of segment one (bluford_interview_01)]. But, uh, I, then, after, uh, my generation only fifteen percent were college students, out of the high school students even went to college. All that changed with World War II. And, so my being in this depression mentality, my primary concern getting out of high school in 1936 was to get a job. It helped, a little bit, family with groceries even, so I worked for five years, and then through a series of events that you probably won't want to go into at this stage at great depth, I felt like that somehow I, the word "call" means so much to so many different people, that I am reluctant to use the term [1:07], it would generally apply, I felt the desire at least to know if I, if the ministry was something that I should be doing, and there was a very big struggle for me to even contemplate that, for one thing that meant seven years of education if I was going to be a Presbyterian minister, and I barely got through high school, academically. Well, I went on off to Hampden-Sydney in 1941 to study for the ministry. The day I left to go to college, truly walking out my front door, the mailman came up my sidewalk and handed me a letter addressed to me signed by President Roosevelt, said you have been conscripted, they weren't even into the drafting terminology, you have been conscripted, you report to such and such an office [2:05], and they will tell you what to do, and so after five years of no, (Laughs) of coming to this point in my life, this thing occurred. We were not, the war, we

were not in the war at the time, it was 1941. But three months later I went up to the draft board, I guess you'd call it now, and I told them I was in school, and they said, we'll classify you as a student and just go ahead and do as you are doing. But, three months later was Pearl Harbor. So, I went back to the draft board, I said, Well, you know, you classified me as a student in September, but things are different now, where do I stand? They said, Well, since you are already in school, we'll let you go ahead and stay until [3:00] exams in May '42, and then give you two weeks to join some branch of the service, and if you haven't decided in two weeks, we'll pick one for you. That's the way it worked. I joined the old Army Air Corps. I just don't know why, maybe a lot of reasons why, besides not relishing the idea of sleeping in mud every night (Laughs). Maybe it was the instrument, maybe it was sort of something new, flying in the military, so I went on off, I was actually sworn in the Air Corps in '42, I took the appropriate, I took mental tests, twelve of us were at headquarters down at the Blues Armory [4:00], took the mental test, three passed the mental test, I happened to be one of the three, and one of the three who did pass flunked the physical test, so there were two out of the twelve, of my group that even went into the Air Corps. Uh, this is probably more detail than you want, John.

Kneebone: If you want to talk in detail that's perfectly fine, if you'd rather move forward, that's fine, too.

Bluford: Want to come back to me later?

Kneebone: Sure.

Bluford: Well, let's do that

Kneebone: Okay.

Bluford: and fill that gap.

Kneebone: Let's talk about how you came to encounter the Polegreen site.

Bluford: The Polegreen thing was that I was a pastor in Mechanicsville for a nine-year period, which is right out, not too far from Polegreen, actually four miles from Polegreen, in Hanover County, and uh during that period I sort of became more aware of [5:00, end of segment 2 (bluford_interview_02)] that there was a site out there someplace that I'd never visited even though I'd heard about the thing, mentioned Davies and Polegreen while I was in seminary, which was I got out of seminary after the war, after finishing college, I was in college two different periods, in 1950 graduating from seminary. During that period at seminary I undoubtedly spent a few days on Davies and Polegreen through the whole scope of Christian history that's a pretty brief period. So, I kind of got interested in it and I went out and located the site. It had a small monument on it put there by the ladies of the presbytery in 1929, and ten years prior to that there had been a legal case, a local farmer [1:00] had started logging the two to three acres, and he was called to task by the elders of the Salem Presbyterian Church. Salem Presbyterian, at Studley, had united with the Polegreen congregation back before the Civil War, when the church burned down, Polegreen burned down in the Civil War, they said to the members of the church, Well, if you want to stay in this fellowship, this denomination, you just have to go an extra four miles to church, down Studley Road. Polegreen Church was never rebuilt, and a farmer nearby, there is a record of this court case, he was charged with encroaching on this property [2:00] and

using it when it wasn't his. Well, he, he didn't show up to defend himself. He had no right, he didn't have a case, and so the judge in Hanover Court ordered that the property be re-surveyed and on record it would be come the property of the Presbyterian church at Salem. So, that's kind of how the monument was there, and it was there when I went out there in 1974, 5, something like that. So I got kind of interested and, I'd kind of like to know more about this thing here, and, uh, began doing a little bit of reading. One of the things I did, I don't know if we want to go on record too much for this one. The property was held [3:00] in title by the trustees of the Salem Church at Studley. The Beulah Church, which is down at Cold Harbor on a seven to three part, since they were yoked by this time in a field, a mission field, you might say, they purposely said that seventy percent of the property was owned by Salem, thirty percent by Beulah. So I went to the joint trustees in 1977, I think it was my first visit, I said, You know, something needs to be done about this historic site. I remember how shocked I was, I probably raised up a bit, but I didn't say anything, one of the elders said I don't care about the history of Polegreen Church. Here was a trustee, he said, I think we ought to sell the property to the highest bidder. Well, I wasn't very much encouraged by that, [4:00], so I, at my expense I had the property surveyed and appraised. And this appraisal came up at 35 hundred dollars for these three acres. There were remnants of a cemetery on it, which really compromises its uses because you can't just, it's not legal to bulldoze a cemetery. So, uh, I went back to the trustees and said, Well, will you accept 35 hundred dollars? No, we think we can get more than that from a builder. It's kind of a pretty site, make a pretty

home site. This went on and on [5:00, end of segment three

(bluford_interview_03)] I upped the price to double that, 7 thousand dollars.

Same response: We think we can get more money. Well, the Salem Church was in financial trouble and was looking to the presbytery, the Hanover Presbytery, to help them financially, so a chairman of a committee for New Church

Development, he, a doctor, a medical doctor, a radiologist who lived on Old Church, he went to the trustees and said, We'll find you some money to relieve your financial problem, but we want this property back in the presbytery's hands.

So they gave them fifteen thousand dollars for what had been appraised at thirty-five hundred dollars (Laughs). Well, anyway, we got relief. So, in 1989, it was twelve years after I started [1:05] working, me trying to negotiate something, so a very slow beginning, first we had to get the property. In 1989, at the very last meeting of the old Hanover Presbytery, they took the title for the property and turned to me and said, Bob, you've been interested in this for some time now, they said, Get together a group of people, fellow Presbyterians, and study the situation, and tell us what you think ought to be done. So I did that, and nine months later we came back and we recommended that the presbytery see that a non-profit corporation, ecumenically composed, for there's more than just a Presbyterian story there, be, the foundation be formed and that we would [2:04] be responsible for doing whatever was done with the property, and we weren't sure exactly at that time what we wanted to do, but we knew we had to own it before we could do anything. So, the presbytery accepted the recommendations and in, nine months later, we came back to the presbytery with the

recommendation that we have a separate thing from the denomination that could go ahead and do what we needed to tell the story. So we were chartered in 1991 by the State Corporation Commission as a non-profit group. And that's where things really began to roll along. I met some very interesting people [3:00] and very helpful people in the process of this. I probably should document on a piece of paper who they are and the role they played so you can have it for your purposes, but one of the people was the director of architectural research at Colonial Williamsburg. I'd been given his name by one of the members of the Department of Historic Resources here in Richmond, so I got hold of Ed Chappell down there, and he visited the site with me one time, and he said, You know, there's a guy you ought to meet, and I can introduce you to him. His name is Carlton Abbott. Well, I'd never heard of Carlton, but he became a key person in our development. He came to visit the site, in 1991, just he and I were there, and he looked around [4:00], and we were on the edge of a little eight-house subdivision, and we were right next to it. There was a big two-story brick house as close to us as the street out here. And, he looked around, and he said, Bob, the big challenge that your group is going to have, looking down the road, is trying to interpret colonial Virginia history that took place here, and you're in the middle of urban sprawl trying to do it. And I said, So, Carlton, what are we going to do about that urban sprawl? He said, you've got to own it to control it. We had no money! You know, how are you going to buy a subdivision? And, so, he said. The seed was planted at that point. This guy was saying [5:00, end of segment four (bluford_interview_04)] between Carlton and me. We got VCU—you probably

knew Dan Mourer [sp]—Dan's crew, we engaged them to the tune of 25 thousand dollars to do our [word unclear] because all you could see was woods, no sign whatever of the church, did see some broken tombstones in a particular section, so fairly near those tombstones there had been a building. So Dan came out with a crew, and about five of his staff, and we got an equal number of volunteers kind of doing dirt work, and I was one of those, and—there are a lot of little serendipities that go with this story, from my perspective. Kids in the neighborhood over the years had built trails through the property, bike trails where they rode and bikes zigzagging along have a way of throwing dirt up [1:02] and creating trenches, banks, and stuff. Well I was standing on the edge of one of those trails, with Dan Mourer and one of his staff, and I felt in the arch of my foot something like I standing on the edge of something. So I just scraped my foot along and see what was under there, and this brick showed up. And, I had my old work clothes on and work shoes on and so I (I didn't say anything to Dan at that point) I went beyond that brick exposed tearing loose this thin layer where the kids had been and here was another brick, right in line with that one. I went to the other side of the brick, the first brick, and did the same thing, and three bricks showed up in a perfect line. And, I said, Dan, what do you think this might mean? He said, Well, we're going to find out [2:03]. This is three hours after we had been on site (Laughs). Here, myself being, you know, the feeling I had was that maybe the Divine was playing a little role in this, thought, Well, we'll have a little fun today. So, he, within thirty minutes we had uncovered the whole one end of the church, one piece, half of the size of all the entire back wall and another half.

This end of it had been robbed out, which is customary, robbing an archeological site to get brick. Brick was much more difficult, hand-made brick, those were hand made, they get brick probably used for a variety of things, like putting at the end of a barn, you know [3:00] So, uh, we, uh, so, we'd located the site. But we didn't know what was on it, save a foundation piece on the ground. About the same time, they had this big to-do in Manassas about where a shopping mall developer was going to buy up a hunk of battlefield, you may recall? Well, it was such an atrocious notion that even the U. S. Congress got involved. And they paid a hundred and twenty million dollars of our tax money to buy this land back from that developer. He made a killing, because I don't think he paid anything close to that for the property, but he decided his best use would be and he could demand and he got it. But Congress [4:00] at that time said we can't keep doing this because there are a lot of other important things having to do with the Civil War. So the Congress set up a congressional committee, a study commission, a Civil War Sites Advisory Commission. They began a series of public hearings all over the country side, wherever there had been any conflict, most of them in the fifteen southeastern states, but they did go all the way out to Missouri, down to Florida, Louisiana, Virginia being a major one. So they had public hearings, and I went down to the War Memorial to hear the public hearings simply to make a pitch that something really significant needed to be done or everything historical would get paved over, they'll be under asphalt or something, and that we really did need some help. I didn't even really know what that meant at the time., [5:00, end of segment 5 (bluford_interview_05)] except I'd already seen battlefields, some,

destroyed, just by being in Hanover County. So, the, uh, six months later, my wife had a call on a Saturday morning, I got a call and my wife answered the phone, and this lady said could I speak to the rector of the Presbyterian church, of the Polegreen Church. And June said, Well, the Polegreen Church doesn't exist any longer as it was burned down in the Civil War and never rebuilt. This lady said, I'm sorry. My family has been for fifteen years trying to find the site of the Polegreen Church. She says, My grandfather—it turned out to be her grandfather, not her great-grandfather, she was about, a lot of Civil War soldiers had two generations [1:00] of children, with the war separating. She was the granddaughter of Lieutenant Farrell [sp], who was sent by the New York engineers to map the roads of Hanover County, so that McClellan coming up the Peninsula would know how to get into Richmond. So he got to Polegreen and he drew a sketch. And, she said, While we were cleaning out my grandfather's home now, in Philadelphia, in 1978 to sell it (he had died), and we found three paper bags of his military papers by the side of a washing machine in the basement. And she said, I've been trying, we've trying to find, and in these papers [2:00] there was a little sketchbook, three by five sketchbook, and there were probably twenty sketches in it, but three of them had the words, Polegreen Church, May 29, 1862, which was two years before it was burned, so this was an image of the place. And she said, We've been trying, she said no county was mentioned, no state even, and he was all over the, with the engineers all over the South. We were hoping that Polegreen Church. Oh, and what had happened was at that public hearing in Richmond, a reporter, a magazine article writer, had written a story about the need

for preservation of battlefields, and it appeared in the *Mid-Atlantic Country Magazine*, which no longer is published. She had read this story in the magazine, and saw the name Polegreen, and she said [3:00] my name was mentioned in error as pastor of the church! So she called thinking that the church was still in existence. Well, anyway, we got to, she said, Would you like to see these sketches? (Laughs) I said, Good Lord, where can you meet me, and how quickly? She was in Virginia Beach. But she said, My nephew, which would have been the old soldier's great-grandson, he's got the sketchbook up in Broomhall [sp], Pennsylvania, which is just outside of Philadelphia. I'll ask him to make, get a photo and enlarge it to an eight and a half by eleven size from three and a half by five, and I'll mail this to you. So, lo and behold, here it was like a dream. We got location of the place [4:01], the foundation, and we knew what was on top of it. That has been a thrilling experience. Another piece of this interesting story is it got me interested also in battlefield preservation. That's the reason my activities currently involve a lot of battlefields. I was—I'm not boasting about this, but two weeks ago I was asked to be at Springfield, Missouri, by the Civil War Preservation Trust, which is based in Washington and has about 78,000 members, and they have an annual meeting, they're dedicated to saving the Civil War battlefields, and they named me as the Preservationist of the Year, and I went out and received that. It was just being related to that and very interesting. But, I'd always wanted to, my curiosity, this thing was burned down in the Civil War [5:00, end of segment 6 (bluford_interview_06)] I wondered if there was any eyewitness account of that. So, I said, How in the world will I find this out? I

suspected that there might be a diary or something. So, I started studying more in detail this area. This centennial in 1965, 61-65, the state of Virginia built the Civil War Center downtown where VCU Medical Center is. That building may have been absorbed by the medical school, or maybe been torn down and replaced by something else. Probably the foremost historian of the Civil War is still living, by the way, his name is Ed [1:00] Bearss. I believe his daughter works for DHR

Kneebone: She works for the State Library now.

Bluford: Oh, is she down there?

Kneebone: We were colleagues for a while, yeah.

Bluford: What is her name

Kneebone: Sara.

Bluford: Sara, Sara Bearss. I had met Ed. I went to a lecture he gave down at the Marriott hotel one time. I met him and heard him lecture on the battlefields a couple of times. Brilliant guy. You ever meet him?

Kneebone: Yeah.

Bluford: Amazing what's in his head. He had been asked by the Civil War Commission of '65 to create a series of maps of the battles of Virginia. And one of them, one of his fourteen maps, was this area up around the Polegreen area. But, the way he, the way he, what he did [2:00] in getting his maps done didn't quite overlap the Polegreen site, I mean it missed it by like about 300 yards. But on the edge of this map, he, with an arrow pointing inward to where the basic parts of the map were he put the names of three military units, artillery units, that had fought in that [word unclear] battlefield. So there I had this little piece of information, it wasn't

even on the map as a map but sitting in the margin, I got the names of those things and I went to the Virginia Historical Society and asked, You got any information on these military units? Well, they pulled a volume out called the History of the Richmond Howitzers, which was an artillery unit. And, there were three companies of the Richmond Howitzers, and they were made up of local guys, [3:02] a lot of [word unclear] and Richmond boys. And, one, the Third Company, when this volume was put together some fifteen years after the Civil War ended, the people that did it, which was the Richmond Press, no longer exists, the printing company doesn't. The Third Company of Howitzers, they simply used a diary by one of the artillerymen as a whole entire history of that group, and the guy's name was White, was a Hanover County boy. So I got this thing out of the library at Historic Resources and looked at it, [4:00] turned to that third chapter and immediately turned to the date the place burned, and here it was. Lord, there were five pages of information, written by the guy that fired the shot that burned the building down! And he mentioned incidentally that his own grandfather had received his Christian name in that Building. So, here I am, I'd always assumed it was some disrespect from the Yankees, (Laughs) but it was a Southern shot that burned the place down. They were trying to get rid of the Yankees who were in the place, firing at them about five hundred yards across a pasture. So, here was this eyewitness account, beautifully described. It included his feelings at seeing the place burn, stuff like that. But that was the [5:00, end of segment seven (bluford_interview_07)] another one of these stories, and, uh, I digress so far, John, that you'll have to get me back on track here. What were we talking about?

Oh, Polegreen. While we were doing archeology, this is important, with Dan Mouer's crew, have you been to the site yet?

Kneebone: Yeah,

Bluford: Okay. Heatherwood Drive, it comes off Rural Point Road, all that, Dan's crew and we all had to park on Heatherwood Drive and walk across this man's lot to get to the archeological site. We couldn't park on Rural Point Road with all the surveying equipment and tables, so the man was very kind and let us use his side yard, so we walked back and forth for two months, almost every weekday, to get to the historic site. One day we were approaching the place to work there was a For Sale sign sitting in the yard. [1:00] Oh, Lord, I said, here, we can't let this place get away from us. This piece of property it's sitting next door to us. The closest land is adjoining us, it's right here on that corner lot. So, I went to see the guy, and he said, Well, I've listed it with a real estate agent. I'd like to get him to knock off his half of the commission since he doesn't have to do any more work on it, and I'll give you the benefit of that. So, for a hundred and ninety-four thousand dollars, we bought that one and a half acre plus a beautiful brick home, which we've now moved away from there. But, we had no money. I began to ask some friends of mine for some financial help, and this transaction was taking place in the fall of '91. December 15, '91 [2:00] was the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Bill of Rights. I said, Well, maybe we can make something of this. So, I went and saw my friends and I said, I did a lot of street running then, I'm afraid I'll ruin my knees if I get in there and do it again, but I've run several marathons, I think I'm going to make a run from Polegreen to

Richmond and back to Polegreen, which was equivalent, the route I was going to take was equivalent, plus a little bit, maybe a tenth or two miles, of what a marathon run is, twenty five point

Kneebone: Twenty-six, I think it is.

Bluford: Twenty-six. Anyway, I had made it, I didn't want to be trimming it and skimping on it. So, on the fifteenth of December '91, was the first real fundraising project that Polegreen has ever had [3:00] and that would be me running, by the way I have a newspaper clipping of this I found recently, if you want to see it sometime.. Uh, and it was to buy that place. We raised one hundred thirty-five thousand dollars, and we had to borrow the difference, another sixty, but I was able to do that, the bank didn't hesitate to make a loan. We gradually paid that off. So, what started to be, and I could tell you similar stories about every piece of property, we've acquired probably thirteen, fourteen, different pieces of property, so that now the three and a half acres has grown to a hundred and ten. And, that encompassed an area which Carlton Abbott, our architect, by the way, Carlton's father designed the Blue Ridge Parkway. I'll mention that because Carlton helped his Dad. His Dad was [4:00] the first engineer on the Blue Ridge Parkway, which is a nationally known scenic road. Carlton had some of his Dad's same skills and sensitivities toward what people, he said what we have to see is what people experience and feel and think when they're looking at something. Well, I'm not a visionary, but I could relate to, from the top of the Blue Ridge Mountains when you look at this creation from that perspective, it's not like you are riding down Main Street. So, I could grasp the meaning of what Carlton had, now the whole

viewshed, with one exception, we own the whole viewshed. We're cleaning it out with these house moves. We moved three homes and a [5:00, end of segment 8 (bluford_interview_08)] big garage attached to one of them. We have two more homes, at least, to move. And, uh, we feel like people will not have to strain their imagination when they come to Polegreen, they can look and see that it's somewhat pristine. Of course, that paved road, Rural Point Road, doesn't help much with that, but it's such a historic road that we don't want to try to re-route that and tear it up because that's a colonial road. That's uh, and as these properties became available we finally found a way to acquire them and we created a little cul-de-sac out there with seven lots on it as a place to move these homes. We didn't think it was good stewardship just to tear a good building down. While it's costly to move a house [1:00] you can get your money back if the house is pretty substantial. We moved this brick house, our mover has been Expert Movers, of Virginia Beach, who moved the lighthouse at Nags Head. So we weren't getting a bunch of novices. So we created that cul-de-sac out of the viewshed. You can't see it from the viewshed, and we've moved two houses into it already. We moved the great big house over to another piece of property we bought and a big garage went with that one. We still have got some stuff to do but we're working at it now. We've got a couple of grants, small grants. This video here is an interesting story, that I found interesting: I get this call [2:00] from Colonial Williamsburg now, with the credibility they have, they called me up one day, the director of religious studies down there, he called me up and he said, Bob, Colonial Williamsburg is going to produce another series of educational materials. They

hadn't done that for ten years, in fact the last they had done were on thirty-five millimeter film, tapes. They got a seventy-five thousand dollar grant and they needed some more money, no, he didn't mention money at first. He said they would like to partner with Polegreen Foundation in the production of this educational material [3:00] and the first piece of it, they would cover a lot of subjects, like slavery, architecture, and a bunch of other things, the first piece of it would deal with religion. Well, that suited us fine because that's our, one of our major concerns. So, I was put in touch with the guy in charge of media services down there, and I said, Now, what does it mean to partner with you in a production like this? He said, Well, we want you to be on the committee that helps to design the text of the story. We'll hire a professional writer, they hired a guy in British Columbia, but we'd like for you to be on this advisory committee. I said, What else does it mean? They said, Well, we've got seventy-five thousand dollars. If we can get another fifty we can have more live action rather than [4:00] voice editorial override. And, uh, I said let me see what I can do. So I went to the Cabell Foundation and got a twenty-five thousand dollar grant. I had an interesting conversation with John Werner, who was a—Werner, W, E, R, N, E, R, who was a director—who said, I'll tell you, we haven't had very good luck with film productions. He said we've agreed to back two of them. One was the story of Pocahontas's life, and we wish we'd never had backed that one. And the other one has never been produced yet, so you're asking us to do something we haven't a very good experience with, but he said I'll take it to my board. Well, he came back with twenty-five thousand dollars. And we, I was able to [5:00, end of

segment nine (bluford_interview_09)] match it by individuals, so we got the fifty thousand dollars, sent it to Williamsburg and got this produced. This kind of, our association with Colonial Williamsburg, being tied in with a credible organization like that certainly helped us, and I never would have thought just to tie in with anybody, except this evolved as it did. I thought I'd mention, my own religious thought processes made me somewhat cautious if not sometimes skeptical when people speak of God talking to them, or speaking to them. I never heard any voices. Don't expect to, don't think I need to. Nor do I think any Christian needs to hear any voices. But, uh, [1:00] in terms of my experience with Polegreen there's a series of these things, and I've just touched on a few of them that happened, made me feel like—as I've tried to put this into a theological framework, God has put the finger on me (Chuckles) to become the flashlight, and my effort is to shine it on really the subject of this (Taps VHS case), which is Samuel Davies. He is the hero at Polegreen, I think, and one of the unsung heroes of America. What he did, I just found out last week that Benjamin Franklin published one of Davies's sermons, that he heard him give in Philadelphia, and I think I know where I can get my finger on that and I want to see just [2:00] what it was that inspired Franklin to, Franklin was a businessman and anything he thought would be good reading he'd print it. My role is, to be realistic, John, in a few years people will say, who was Bob Bluford? I mean it wouldn't take long for that to happen, as it does with most of the human family. But I believe that a few years from now people will say, Hey, that Davies is a great guy. Part of my task is

to sort of keep the focus on Davies's role and what he contributed, the spirit of the man was of course, I gave you a copy of my book, didn't I?

Kneebone: It's right there. No.

Bluford: I've gotta do that. [3:00] Let's see if that is written in. I'll get it. The purpose of my writing this—it's yours. I can get another copy brought back over here. Later, when we have more time, I'll put a little inscription in it, to my friend, John. But, that's, I wrote it as a historical novel in format because people tend to get a little weary of biographical stuff that goes into great detail, not that that's entirely true of everything, by any means, but I figured that me trying to tell this as factually based, there's loads of history, court records, when he applied for his license to preach there was a direct quote from him in the record [4:00], and a lot of that kind of stuff. Davies did not, he may have written a journal from his childhood to his death, but the only evidence that we've got of it is an eighteen-month period when he left Hanover County to go to London, England, to raise money for Princeton. Then he had a daily, almost a daily entry, and that's great reading because you really get in touch with his thinking, how he felt about what he was doing. It's great to hear a guy like him, with his skills, say, I really messed up today. (Laughs.) He preaches, and he speaks of this incoherent babble. (Laughs). He didn't mean to do it, it just, I've had that experience myself enough, maybe you have it on occasion. You just wish you hadn't shown up that day. But, anyway, I find Davies a fascinating person. Now, the projects [5:00, end of segment 10 (bluford_interview_10)] still underway. In just the last few months, well, the erection of the skeletal structure was the first thing, Carlton's, I figured

when we found the place where it was, foundation, and replica and sketch that we would know what was on it, and I laid this out in front of Carlton, and I said, Now we have something going here. I'd always assumed we'd rebuild the old wooden building, and Carlton said, Bob, (Ed Chappell told me almost the same identical words and he did not know what Carlton said), think a long time before you try to replicate a colonial Virginia church, which had no heat, no lights, no water, no bathrooms, no air conditioning, and the moment you try to put a light switch in that thing, you start explaining, No, it really wasn't like this. [1:02] He said, I would seriously suggest that we consider a symbol, that's what this was, a symbol, and we've gotten more comments about this. People use terms like, ghost-like, and they will use the word spiritual frequently. I have this little game, it's not a game but a little [word unclear]. I like, enjoy, I very rarely ever tell people what to expect when they go there. I'd much rather talk to them after they've seen it. I say, what did you think, what were your first thoughts as you looked at this place, and let them say, and again and again this sort of thing. This lady was out there on the first anniversary of 9/11—did I tell you that story?

Kneebone: No.

Bluford: We were doing ground-penetrating radar in the [2:00] in the area that's back behind, see this is the front, sort of, and a side door, back of this, back in here, is a cemetery, had a few broken tombstones that had been terribly vandalized and broken up. We didn't have any complete tombstone out there, and still don't. I was raking leaves back in that area, back in that, so the ground-penetrating radar people could bring their equipment with skids, ever seen them work?

Kneebone: You described it to me, but

Bluford: It skids along the ground and it sends these electrical pulses into the earth and they bounce back out and they look very much like a sonogram. So, I was cleaning up back there at 8:30 one morning because they were going to show up the next day, raking leaves, and I saw a lady. I didn't even see her arrive, but I looked up and there was a lady [3:00] and she was leaning up against that replica of a window there, and she obviously was praying. And, her automobile was parked up close to the road. So, I thought, out of respect for what she was there for, I was going to kind of fade out of the picture. So, I went on back into the woods, deeper, back there where we used to have a tool shed, and just sort waiting, until she left. She saw me when she was leaving, and she walked down toward me and, sort of apologetic, said, I hope it was okay for me to be here this morning. On this day in our nation's life, which was a year after the disaster in New York, I just felt like I wanted to be here at Polegreen. I've never stopped before, though I don't live far from here, and I drive past it all the time [4:00] but I've never stopped. So, I wanted to come, to be at this place, and in addition I lost my Dad about five months ago, he had died, and I've been doing a lot of grieving because of that. And, today, I just felt the need to be here. I said, That's no problem. Come back wherever you want to. It's there for you like it is for everybody. But I thought to myself, you know, Miss, that makes up for raking a lot of leaves. This makes raking leaves a pleasure. (Chuckles.) But, I've been really pleased with what we did there, that first enhancement of the site. The second enhancement is what we are doing now, which we're adding this timeline

to it, they're working on the timeline now. [Bluford's cell phone buzzes.] [5:00, end of segment eleven (bluford_interview_11)] I think when we get the vintage fence up, which will be the same kind they have at Jamestown Island, it will be an outstanding place to come to. Because they'll have something they can see and touch. Now, when you and I went out there, how much was done at that point.

Kneebone: They had just excavated the pathways.

Bluford: Hadn't laid any brick or anything?

Kneebone: No, just the foundation.

Bluford: Well, the two edges of the pathway are mortared brick, so they're solid.

Everything in between is brick laid on sand. About every five feet there's going to be a granite slab with an inscription on it, telling something that happened on a particular date. They'll simply lift the brick out and slip about that thick, about thick as a brick, about two and a half inches thick, [1:00] down in the place of that and fill sand in the cracks, and should be, that'll be finished. Then, the fence is the last thing. It will set it off. Neighbors tell me that there've been about three times as many people than normal that are already coming there because we've got a parking lot. They didn't know if they could come on the land or not. They didn't want to do anything illegal so they just kept moving. Now that it is clear that there is a parking area, people come in and look around. Still, can't see what they can see in about a month or so.

Kneebone: What do you think is next, the future for Polegreen?

Bluford: Probably, the Visitor Center, which is going to be behind the tree line. Not (Taps table), it won't go that way. And that will be a much larger building. [2:03]

People will be out of the weather, come in—we've got a wedding coming up there in about two weeks, but the people have to have the reception someplace else. If the weather gets real bad, it's going to wash out a wedding, or whatever is going on outdoors. But, if a wedding had to be moved outside on December 29, there could have been snow on the ground. If we had a building it could have moved inside. You can't move much right now. I've said to brides and grooms, Be sure you've got a back-up plan in case the weather gets messy, and I can tell you of some places nearby that you can, like Covenant Woods, you can have the reception there if you want to. But, I think the next major thing is going to be this visitor center. It's a big visitor center.

Kneebone: Which will interpret Samuel Davies and religious liberty.

Bluford: Oh, yeah. [3:00] Everything is going to be focused on that struggle. Now, the facility may be open for some other stuff. We have this professor of rhetoric—how's our time doing?

Kneebone: It's strictly a matter of as long as you wish to continue.

Bluford: We've had a lady professor, Jan Swearingen, was in the English Department at Texas A. & M., has taken a lot of interest in us. She's been to the site, and she's now on our advisory board. She's getting a five or six months' semi-sabbatical or something, starting in May, I think. She's going to be here available to us, going to give lectures for us. She's going to be giving some lectures anyway at Williamsburg because it is an annual that she's invited for, but she's [4:00] traced through the study of rhetoric what words people used to convey thoughts, she's

traced a direct connection between Davies's preaching and Patrick Henry. See, Patrick Henry is a major part of the story. Maybe I've said that.

Kneebone: No, you've not talked about that yet.

Bluford: Well, Patrick went there as a boy. Patrick's mother was a Dissenter. All that is in the book here. Patrick's mother was a Dissenter, as was her Dad. Patrick's mother was married twice, her first husband died, leaving her with a young boy about six years old. She later married Patrick's father, John Henry, whose brother, Patrick, was a parish priest at Old Church, down here in Hanover County. [5:00, end of segment twelve (bluford_interview_12)] Now here's this parish priest that's got this sister-in-law (Chuckles) that won't come to his church. And he was going up here to hear Davies and he gave Davies a fit, I mean, complaining to the colonial governor about Davies disrupting the peace of the community, and stuff like that, which was a frequent charge against preachers, disturbing the peace, according to their definition of what peace meant. So, when he was eleven years old, living down at Studley with his Mom and Dad, who was a constable, his Dad was, who had to carry summons against the dissenters for preaching without a license and everything else. (Laughs.) Patrick would ride four miles with his Momma and Grand-daddy up to Polegreen for worship on Sundays. [1:00] Before his death, Patrick said, Samuel Davies taught me what an orator should be. That name, at Polegreen, when I'm out there talking to groups, conducting a tour around, even to children, when I mention that Patrick Henry worshipped here where you're standing, their eyes brighten up, they know that name, which is why the tapemakers here (Points to VHS tape) they use the person of Thomas

Jefferson to tell the story. They started to use the person of Patrick Henry and changed along the way of the, as the project developed, so we wind up with Jefferson, which is alright. By the way, what did you think of this as a piece of educational material?

Kneebone: I liked it. [2:00] I liked it. I enjoyed the framing with Thomas Jefferson talking about his Statute for Religious Liberty of 1786 and harkening back to a little-known episode in our history and this is where it begins.

Bluford: Yeah. We heard a lot of good things from people we don't know, so they're not just trying to be nice and things about this. And I've had a number of communications from people I've never met yet, saying that until they read my book they just did not realize that there was ever a state church in Virginia. And, they were surprised by that. They thought everybody had been free to do what they wanted to, once they hit the beach over here. It wasn't like that at all. Even worse up in Puritan New England. They wanted freedom of religion for the Puritans (Laughs.), but if you weren't you might wind up in the rack. [3:00] Or, a victim of a witch hunt, or something. So, I think Virginia has a great story to tell.

Kneebone: Do you think that Polegreen because it is connected to the struggle for religious liberty, in some ways the beginning of religious liberties, do you think that Polegreen is a site that not just Virginians but Americans should know about?

Bluford: Oh, yeah. By the way, after Dan did his thing, we started immediately seeking recognition beyond us, and the first stage you go through, usually, is the commonwealth lists you as a national historic place. Well, Virginia did that and passed the nomination on to Washington, so we are on the National Register now.

But the next stage is we want to move from a National Historic Place to a [4:00] National Historic Landmark. It's an honorific thing, both of them are honorific, but the Landmark is the one people take the most pride in, and probably gets the most publicity. I mean, just between you and me, Scotchtown is on the Landmark list, it's not nearly as significant as Polegreen, in terms of Patrick Henry. He lived up there as a governor, I mean back and forth, but it is a place I like, I'd hate for anything to happen to it. But, I have an idea, John, that sometimes there's a little bit of politics played when you're seeking federal recognition. I've been told that's what happened at Scotchtown. That there were some Washington connections [5:00, end of segment thirteen (bluford_interview_13)]

Kneebone: with APVA

Bluford: That tilted the thing to Landmark, instead of Historic Place. I don't want to say that publicly because I don't want to demean them

Kneebone: No, of course not. Patrick Henry's birthplace?

Bluford: That's another one of the spin-offs of Polegreen. Bill Shelton, Patrick married Sarah Shelton, Bill Shelton, who died about two years ago, tenth generation Shelton, in the same building, going back roughly to between 1670 and 1700, that dwelling out there. We didn't go over there, did we?

Kneebone: No.

Bluford: We'll have to do that one day.

Kneebone: Yeah.

Bluford: They've been doing some renovation over there, the park service got it. When Bill was living, he was a nurseryman, he raised [1:00] shrubbery and stuff,

boxwoods in particular, lots of the boxwoods around he planted. I asked him one day when I was visiting him about 1990, and I said, Bill, I've seen this historic marker on 301 that says that Patrick's birthplace is at Studley, but I've never been there. Do you know where it is? He said, Yeah, I know where it is. I said, Will you take me down there one day and show me where. He said, Well, it's all private property (which blew my mind) and I'll have to get permission for us to walk over to it. I thought, Golly, the most famous citizen that ever came out of Hanover County, his house turned out to be at the end of a subdivision, and it was scheduled to have a home built on it, right over where the site was, the birthplace.

[2:00] So, he got permission from the guy, and he and I went down there one day to the site, there's a little marker, you can't hardly, you can't see it from the road at all. And we could go out there one day. I said, We've got to do something about this. Here I had all the needs of Polegreen to meet, I couldn't divert my attention from Polegreen at the expense of trying to, so I just had a separate fundraising effort. The guy charged us \$55,000 for the two acres that it sat on, which at that time was pretty high, but we raised the money and paid him off. While we were raising money for it, a farm of sixty-eight acres next to it, adjoining it, went on the market. Well, what do you do when you've [3:00] got another seven hundred thousand dollars challenging you? Polegreen, and pay for the fifty-five thousand birthplace site, and here's this other thing, and this other thing was really neat. It was once a part of the Henry family property in that old area. They probably owned seven hundred acres of land down there. So, I found two builders, subdivision builders, and I went to them, and I said, Isn't it

disgraceful. What can we do here? So, we went through a lengthy back-and-forth. Finally, they said, We'll buy the property from the farmer, and we will only build on half of it. We will give you the other half to go with your two acres. So we've got a thirty-four acre site there now, that's also waiting for Carlton Abbot's [4:00] archeological work. By the way, we were kind of distressed that VCU gave up its archeological department. Was that a political thing?

Kneebone: I don't know. I know that there's demand for archeology amongst our History students, but I don't know.

Bluford: I always thought there would be a certain amount of prestige to having an archeology department, but anyway. We got Nick Lucketti out of Williamsburg to do archeology at the site. He found some very interesting stuff. He found the basement of the place, and fairly well intact, about four feet underground. But, anyway, for that site there, I've created another organization, called the Central Virginia Historic Preservation Foundation, so it won't get confused with Polegreen. I want to be clear with [5:00, end of segment fourteen (bluford_interview_14)] Polegreen, to know that that's where it's going to wind up, on that site. And, I think that we can get that other thing done. I've gotten word, very confidentially, at least a couple or three of the former governors of Virginia want to mount a fundraising effort to help us at Studley, to enhance the birthplace of Henry's deathsite, so that's encouraging. I think I've digressed from your question. Oh, about the Henry connection.

Kneebone: Let me ask you, I'm sure this has come up where people have suggested, as the church trustee did back in the 1970s, why preserve? Why not let this be in the books?

Bluford: That's been a [1:01] sense of disappointment to me that people who have been longtime residents of the county, for example, if it was somebody from southern Spain, I wouldn't (Laughs.) I'd understand it better. How can you really appreciate a guy like Henry, for example. It'd be even partly ignorance, John, I've run into loads of Presbyterian preachers who don't know who Davies was. So, these elders, laypeople, I was talking with at Salem, maybe I was hoping for too much, that they would realize how important that site was down there. All they could see, that was typical, Main Street attitude, what is it worth, and that means money, not what is it worth in terms of history or cultural [2:00] value, treasuring our past or whatever. But, I'm glad that we were finally able to swing a deal down there. By the way, that was Dr. Henry Spencer, the radiologist, who swung that deal that the presbytery could determine what was going to happen to the site and not somebody who didn't know a heck of a lot. But, we're seeing here in Richmond, as you notice, a lot of things that could have been refurbished and used for good constructive purpose go by the way of concrete and steel, glass [3:00], and big cities are painfully alike from that standpoint. How long have you been at VCU?

Kneebone: I'm going to go ahead and put this on stop. I think we're

