



Beech Haven, 1910

Beech *Haven*

Family land offers 100 years of sanctuary
for childhood dreams and exploration

By Elizabeth Poland Shugg • Modern day photos by Richard Hamm



Charles & Effie Rowland

In 1910, Charles and Effie Rowland bought 500 acres of farmland for less than \$2,000 where West Broad Street/Atlanta Highway now crosses the Middle Oconee River. A burbling creek meandered through the property, and a verdant meadow stretched across its lower quadrant.

They named the tract “Beech Haven” to honor its dense population of beech trees, and made plans to build a large summerhouse on a hill overlooking the creek, where cool breezes could blow through the windows. Effie drew up architectural plans to include high ceilings and expansive porches. It was, after all, a summerhouse.

They cut pine timber from the land to build it, and constructed a separate log cabin an acre away. Later, they cleared a hilltop near the house and put in a tennis court. Five generations of Rowland descendants would enjoy the land and structures their predecessors nurtured and protected.

Plenty of Room

Charles Alden Rowland II and Effie Elizabeth Hampton Rowland spent summers wading through the river and damming the creek with their five children. These memories wielded influence. All but one of those children chose to reside permanently on the land. Hampton, the oldest, inherited the log cabin. His son, Jack, later built a cottage in the cabin’s backyard. Jack and his wife, Jeffie Landers Rowland, eventually moved the cabin next door and made it into a home. The couple still live on the property with horses, dogs and a peacock.

In the mid 1990s, they converted an outhouse into a quaint guest cottage for children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. “We moved it over here and converted it, but left its character,” Jeffie Rowland said.

Years ago, Hampton and his wife, Mary, sold a portion of their property for the construction of Beech Haven Baptist Church. “They felt it was a good use of the land,” Jeffie said. “During the 1980s, the teachers at the church would bring the children out to see and touch the horses.”

Katharine, the second oldest Rowland child, married William Crane in 1922. They built their home, Willowynde, atop a hill overlooking the Beech Haven meadow in 1946. Their youngest daughter, Katharine “Kitty” Crane Ross, drew up the plans as a project for a Queens College art course.

“This was my dream house,” Ross said. “I thought I might build it someday, but Mama and Daddy did instead.”

Elizabeth, the Rowland’s third child, built a home on her portion of the land and lived there many years with her husband, Paul Gaertner.

Alice, the fourth Rowland child, married Julian Jacobs in 1958, 11 years after her first husband, Pinkney Alston Steiner II, died from adult onset diabetes. Alice later purchased land owned by Kitty, Elizabeth and the youngest Rowland, Charles III. Alice’s purchases included the summerhouse, known to family members simply as the “Big House.”

“My first memories of Beech Haven were during the Depression,” Kitty Ross said. “We didn’t have money to go on vacation, so Dad built a shack and we would go over there and spend our vacations. We were up the hill from the ‘Big House.’ The reason it was called the ‘Big House’ is because we would be in a thunderstorm and decide we’d better go down to the ‘Big House’ where it was safer.”

Kitty married Bill Ross on May 30, 1946, in Charlotte, N.C., the day she graduated from Queens College. In 1977, after raising their six children in St. Albans, W.V., where Bill worked for many years as a Union Carbide chemist, the Rosses retired to Athens and settled into Brookside, a former counseling center turned home previously operated by William Crane on Beech Haven’s property.



"Beech Haven has been a haven for people, a haven for animals and a haven for plants. We have a treasure here and we want to keep it and enjoy it."
—Jeffie Rowland, wife of Jack Rowland

A Mended Heart

Charles Rowland II took two trips around the world. His daughter, Katharine, inspired the second trip when doctors determined she had a "terminal" weak heart. She was only 16, so Charles decided to show her the world before she died. "Great Gram," as her great grandchildren called her, lived to be 101.

Charles' world travels influenced the land. He loved China's rock gardens, and transformed large, flat boulders along the creek bottom into stone benches, tables, lantern holders and an outdoor stove near "The Spring" that re-

sembled structures he saw in the Orient. His son, Hampton, built a camelback bridge across the creek near the spring that was later photographed and published in the 1733-1933 edition of "Garden History of Georgia."

"Grandfather had been in the Orient, and saw this beautiful rock work," Kitty Ross said. "So he came home and built the seats and the little bridge that goes across the creek, and then Hampton built the camelback bridge. He got all those ideas from the Orient." Katharine Rowland loved to tell the story of how, prior to the summerhouse's construction, a family servant known to the

children as "Uncle Peter" discovered a heart shaped quartz crystal in the creek. He gave it to her father, who used it as the centerpiece for a magnificent stone fireplace he built inside the summerhouse. Perhaps to him it symbolized his daughter's mended heart.

Nature's Children

The years unfolded and Rowland descendants returned each summer to experience Beech Haven's bounty. "When I came along we did a lot of fishing on the river," Jack Rowland said. "They dammed up part of the creek and used to keep live catfish from the

river there. When grandmother wanted fish for supper, Will, the cook, would go down to the creek, catch it and clean it."

Pinkney Alston Steiner III, son of Alice Rowland Steiner Jacobs, remembers stretching planks across a narrow section of creek near the spring and camping on top of the trickling water. "When I was coming out to Beech Haven as a young boy, I laid down a platform just past the spring and put a walled tent on it," he said. "I would walk down with my friends and my cocker spaniel, and we spent the night summer after summer there."

Two of the three Ross sons, John Alden Ross and Robert "Bob" Hampton Ross, built homes on the land during the 1970s and 1980s. The Ross grandchildren darted from one house to the next, feeding their great grandparents' goldfish, picking flowers and running family errands.

Beech Haven's children didn't need toys. They had dams to build and trees to climb. Their calloused feet might have passed for a hobbit's, thanks to frequent barefoot explorations across the grounds. They knew exactly which trees to grab as they raced down the path to the creek and waded toward their favorite sections: the "Cinderella Steps," the "Foot Washer" and the "Water Slide." They made frog houses in the sandbars, used a strainer to catch minnows, and explored the dried up pond. The freedom to explore Beech Haven's woodlands provided refuge from school and childhood worries.



Built in 1910 from pine timbers on the property, the Rowland Summerhouse represents one of the state's oldest stands of hardwoods, according to Rowland family records.

“The summer house is the heart of Beech Haven, but the creek provides endless hours of fun and laughter, and it can bring out the child in anyone who wants to put aside their adult worries and enjoy life,” said Bob Ross, the youngest of Bill and Kitty Ross’ six children. “It’s like time stops and life begins.”

Bob built his house overlooking the meadow in 1989 and spends much of his spare time tending to gardens he planted around his property. “Anyone who lives among the trees and wildlife gains a true sense of the beauty and healing properties of nature,” he said. “To connect with nature gives me insight into my own nature and of those around me. As Grandfather Crane once quoted to me from the Bible, ‘Be still and know that I am.’ Nature will speak to those who listen.”

It spoke to the Rowlands’ great great grandchildren (or the Crane’s great grandchildren) during summer nights camped out on the summerhouse’s sleeping porch. The crickets and cicadas lulled their creek worn bodies to rest, and they awoke to the scent of bacon and coffee, reju-



“My hope is that long after I am gone, the creek will still be the enchanted refuge for all the children of Charles and Effie.”
— Bob Ross, great-grandson of Charles and Effie Rowland

venated for another day of swimming and exploring.

Each year the Rowland descendants anticipated Beech Haven’s seasonal delights: blackberries in June, figs in September, and a full range of vegetables from Bill and Katharine Crane’s garden each summer and fall. Gardenias perfumed the courtyard in August. Katharine lined her pantry with jars of jams and sweet pickles she canned herself.

Preserving Memories and Wildlife

Beech Haven once blended into its surroundings. Today, more than half the property remains undeveloped, but after the West Broad Street/Atlanta Highway divided Beech Haven, urban sprawl set in. Restaurants, hotels and car lots now flank the pristine woods. Commercial developers covet the acreage, which

commands an imposing real estate price and tax rate.

Thankfully Bill and Katharine Crane’s daughters, Kitty Crane Ross and Effie Crane Rule, as well as grandsons Stephen McKinney Crane and Charles Edgar Crane, started a tradition during the 1990s before Rule passed away. They sold approximately seven acres of land to the Athens Clarke government. The county government purchased the land thanks in part to a donation from Rule’s daughter, Elizabeth Rule Woodruff, and her husband James Woodruff III. In return, county officials agreed to preserve the property for what will become the Rowland Natural Area and Preserve.

Following this initiative, Hampton Rowland Jr. sold 10 acres and Pinkney Alston Steiner III sold 50 acres to the county, bringing the county owned land to 57.03 acres. “The initial purchase of property, approximately seven acres, was purchased with funds from the Athens Clarke County Special Local Option Sales Tax program, \$80,000 from the Georgia Land Conservation Fund, \$182,000 from a Land and Water Conservation Fund grant and a \$50,000 donation from Elizabeth and James Woodruff III,” said Mike Wharton with the Athens Clarke Leisure Services Department. “By buying the properties from Kitty, Hampton and Alston, we were able to create a continuous buffer along the river. This will make up part of a greenway that stretches from county line to county line, so years down the road we can link up to other counties’ greenway systems.”

Wharton said the city has proposed a connection that the land between the Atlanta Highway and Mitchell Bridge Road would become part of this system. This connection could be approved by voters in the 2020 SPLOST.

“We will continue to work with the family to develop a natural resource park and wildlife preserve,” Wharton said. “The remainder of the property would then be part of a natural area that would become a natural park, and the county would of course be sensitive to the family. Creating linear parks, like the proposed Middle Oconee River Greenway, is part of a movement around the country of small communities connecting with each other to create a web of multi use recreational areas, and in addition, it creates corridors for wildlife.”

A Lasting Gift

All of Charles and Effie Rowland’s children have passed away, but five generations of their descendants continue to inhabit and enjoy Beech Haven, still cloaked in early 20th Century beech trees, mosses, jonquil patches and magnolia groves. It would be a shame for future generations to miss out on experiencing these timeless treasures.

The preservation of Beech Haven’s landmarks by family members and the Athens Clarke government ensures the survival of the Rowland summerhouse with its crystal heart mantel; the burbling, bamboo lined creek; the fragrant,



Katharine Crane, age 16.

wooded paths; the time tested stone furniture, and the iconic camelback bridge so many Rowland descendants have crossed and taken family photos upon.

Bob Ross’ nostalgia for Beech Haven’s old days underscores his steadfast devotion to preserving the land even as

urban sprawl looms, and Rowland descendants age and scatter.

“The most impacting changes I have seen are more in the loss of those who shaped Beech Haven,” he said. “I miss the smells of Grandmom’s kitchen and Granddad’s workshop. I miss seeing Aunt Alice walking down the path to ‘sister’s’ house to share in the harvests of their gardens. I miss Uncle Hampton’s Sunday fried chicken lunch

where only the children of Beech Haven were invited. I miss riding in the tractor drawn trailer while Great Grandfather would give marshmallows out to all of us kids.”

The Author’s Perspective

Bob Ross’ sentiments hold true for me in many ways. Beech Haven remains the foundation upon which my appreciation for family heritage, homegrown food and environmental preservation developed. It still flows through my veins. I hear it when the cicadas sing. I smell it when the magnolias bloom. I taste it when I bite into a fig or sweet pickle. I feel it when I wade through a cool creek.

Over the years I have returned for family dinners, weddings, baby showers and reunions. The moment I turn off West Broad Street/Atlanta Highway into Beech Haven’s calming tunnel of trees, a sense of peace and childhood delight washes over me.



I've Gone Back In Time

Many nights, its beauty resurfaces in my dreams, as my subconscious longs for the sanctuary I once called home.

Today, my feet are soft and sheltered from the elements, but my mind still races down the path toward the creek as though it was yesterday. I see the curved beech tree and hook my small fingers around it, then leap forward and land with a splash into the cool water. Every detail, from the angle of the rocks I used to hop across, to the glint of mica floating downstream, remains vivid in my memory.

A few years ago, I took my children down to the creek. I watched my daughter twist through the

branches on the same path I once tread, and felt as though a cycle had been completed. She stopped to take off her shoes, then leapt across the sandy banks and landed with a splash into the cool, fresh memory of my childhood. I can only hope her daughter will someday experience this same joy.

Elizabeth Poland Shugg

• Shugg, great great granddaughter of Charles and Effie Rowland, was one of those Rowland descendants who spent her childhood summers exploring and enjoying Beech Haven. A former magazine editor, Shugg now works as a freelance writer and social network editor in the Raleigh, N.C. area.



Family sitting on the porch of the Rowland Summerhouse, 1982.



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Beech Haven Alumni

During the 1970s, Alice Rowland Steiner-Jacobs decided to rent extra residential space in her basement to students attending the University of Georgia, her alma mater. She opened up the Beech Haven summerhouse for spring, summer and fall occupancy. Soon after, Bill and Kitty Ross offered residential space adjacent to their home to students. The tradition lives on today.

Athens artist Philip Juras lived in Jacobs' basement, Ross' annex and at the summerhouse during what he remembers as one "cold but awesome" winter.

"It gave me and my wife a twisted view of what kind of place we'd like to live in," Juras recounted. "Hav-

ing so much nature around like it was at Beech Haven while living in town is so very rare. And living in such a unique and beautiful structure, so oriented toward being at ease, having fun, and enjoying the beauty of nature, would be very hard to replicate. It will always be a lovely memory of a way we lived for awhile."

Juras worries that revisiting the property might alter memories he holds so dear.

"I wonder if the reason we don't go back to Beech Haven (aside from not knowing who to ask), even though it is so close to us and we do go out walking in the woods a lot is that the memories are so beautiful, and

I imagine revisiting the place could make them less so," Juras said. "It's so close physically and in memory, yet seems a bit distant."

One of Juras' favorite memories is an outing he and his wife, Beth Gavrilles, prepared for Jacobs.

"It involved a delicious lunch of roasted chicken and a table and chairs set up by the shoals of the river," he said. "First we set up the table, then drove up to collect Mrs. Jacobs from her house. We both helped her the very short distance across uneven ground to the top of the bluff by the river where we then enjoyed our meal. Though her vision was poor, and physically she wasn't normally up to such outings, she absolutely loved it. It was truly a joy for her to be there with the sound of the rushing water, cool

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spring breezes, and the bright green light filtered through the new leaves on the river birches. No one had taken her down to the river in quite a time, out in the landscape she knew so well and loved so much—the landscape her father had shaped where she held so many beautiful memories. It was truly delightful for the three of us.”

Juras, a celebrated landscape artist, is one of many “Beech Haven alumni” who live all over the country—many of whom still keep in touch with each other.

Charles and Effie Hampton

Charles Alden Rowland II was born July 17, 1870 in Augusta. He operated a feed and seed business on Broad Street in downtown Athens called The Rowland Company. His son Hampton and grandson Jack later worked there. The “feed and seed” went out of business during the 1950s, but in 1983 Jack opened a pesticides business on Oak Street called Rowland Chemical Company (now owned by his daughter Mary and her husband).

Charles Rowland II often ended a long day’s work by wading, swimming or canoeing in the river with his children. He also enjoyed searching for rocks in the creek bed. Bill and Katharine Crane noted in the family biography that he “had a knack for seeing specific possibilities for use in every rugged stone. He supervised the construction of bridges, benches, tables, etc. made from these rocks, and these were and continue to be things of beauty and enjoyment to his friends and family, and to countless friends who were guests through the years.”

Rowland also purchased part of WGAU, an Athens radio station, through which he hosted a religious program focusing on Protestant issues of the day.

“He was never a minister at all just very interested in religion,” said his granddaughter, Katharine “Kitty” Crane Ross. “He was Presbyterian but interested in all Protestant religions.”

Jack Rowland remembers how his grandfather loved hot tea with “real thick cream” in it.

“When I was a boy, old enough to drive, he once sent me all the way downtown to get cream for his tea,” he said. “On the way back, the quart of milk turned over. When he saw it he said, ‘Whoa, whoa, this will never do.’ I had to go back downtown and get another quart of milk!”

Charles and his wife, Effie Elizabeth Hampton Rowland, born March 29, 1872 in Talladega, Ala., received guests at the summerhouse from all over the world, representing many different denominations. Ross remembers her grandmother taking care of guests’ every need.

“People would come out to the house and Grandmother would hire someone to watch all the babies so the adults could go to the creek or down to the river,” Ross recalls. “She started running things around the house when she was 9 years old because her mother died when she was very young.”

Effie managed every aspect of her life with grace and efficiency. The Cranes wrote in the family biography that Beech Haven “was always kept in a delightful condition under Mrs. Rowland’s guidance and

supervision. ... There were so many details that demanded care and attention, and Mrs. Rowland managed everything so calmly and efficiently that few, even of her family, had the slightest idea of all she attended to until she was gone and things there began to deteriorate.”

The Rowlands attended Reverend Billy Graham’s wedding at the home of his bride in Montreat, N.C. on Aug. 13, 1943. Prior to the ceremony, Rowland experienced a heart attack.

“The pain struck her as she approached the home and she managed to conceal her intense pain from everyone in order to avoid causing a disturbance,” the Cranes wrote in the biography.

Just five years later, on Nov. 9, 1948 at the age of 76, Effie Rowland came down with a severe case of influenza. She sat down at her desk to write a letter to a lifelong friend explaining that she was feeling better, when she experienced her second heart attack, slid from her chair to the floor, and passed away.

Fifteen years later on April 1, 1964, just three months shy of his 94th birthday, Charles Alden Rowland II joined her. The gifts they left behind for descendants have not gone to waste.

“I would like to tell my great grandparents how their dream became the bond to all of their children and to the perhaps thousands of people who have found God in the beauty of this magical place,” said great grandson Bob Ross. “Although their lives take them elsewhere, their hearts remain connected to the land. This is the lasting gift Charles and Effie gave to all of us.”