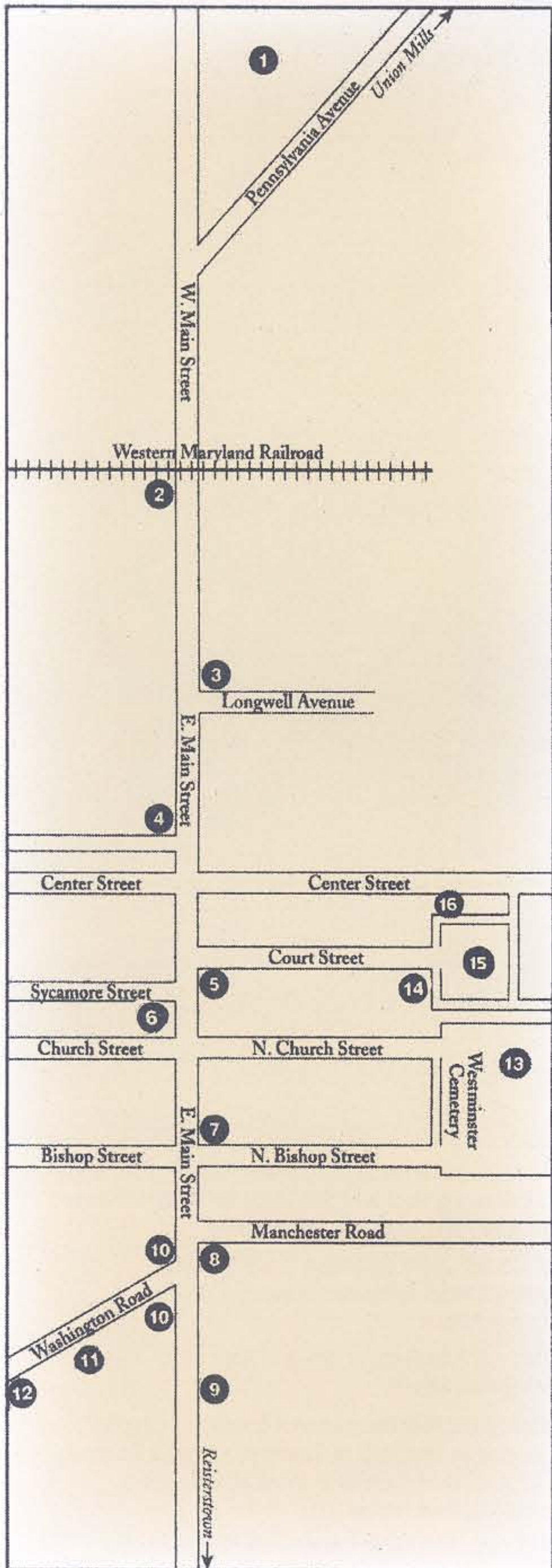


# "Corbit's Charge"

## TOUR

G. Thomas LeGore



▲ Corbit's Charge Tour Map, adapted from "Corbit's Charge: A Civil War Self-Guided Tour in Westminster, Maryland," published by the Carroll County Visitor Center.



▲ Westminister Hotel and Tavern, c. 1910, where Major Napoleon B. Knight of the 1st Delaware Cavalry stayed before the battle.

*"...the Delaware troopers displayed an almost suicidal bravery..."*

A.H. Huber, Westminster resident and an eyewitness to Corbit's Charge



Two days before the conflagration began on the famous battlefield at Gettysburg, a startling flurry of gunfire erupted in Westminster, Maryland, as the town's peaceful streets were transformed into the scene of a deadly and pivotal cavalry clash. On the afternoon of June 29, 1863, Captain Charles Corbit led a handful of untested troopers from the 1st Delaware Cavalry against the battle-hardened vanguard of Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart's force of nearly 5,400 veteran cavalymen marching through Maryland en route to a rendezvous with General Robert E. Lee's main army already in southeastern Pennsylvania. The Gettysburg Campaign was underway.

The fighting in Westminster began on the Washington Road at the outskirts of town. Shortly, the melee spilled onto East Main Street. Individual running battles continued the entire length of Main Street to the western edge of town and the hill referred to as the "Old Commons," the former campsite of the Delaware troops.

The brief encounter at Westminster had far-reaching ramifications. Two days later General Lee sorely needed the invaluable reconnaissance of his trusted cavalry chieftain General Stuart as Lee faced off with General George G. Meade and the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg. But where was Stuart? The stiff resistance by Captain Corbit and his brave Delawareans in Westminster was a major factor in delaying Stuart's arrival at Gettysburg until July 2nd, the second day of the battle. Without Stuart and his cavalry at Gettysburg, a decisive victory on northern soil again slipped from General Lee's grasp.



Begin the tour at McDaniel College near the intersection of Main Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. Please refer to the Tour Map, adapted from "Corbit's Charge: A Civil War Self-Guided Tour in Westminster, Maryland," published by the Carroll County Visitor Center.

## 1. The "Old Commons"

Now the campus of McDaniel College (formerly known as Western Maryland College). Before the Civil War, July 4 celebrations, picnics, and political rallies were held here. On June 28, 1863, 101 enlisted men and 7 officers of the 1st Delaware Cavalry pitched their tents in the grove on this hill. This site was selected for its commanding view of the surrounding countryside and Main Street. The cornerstone of the first building for the College on this hill was laid on August 27, 1866.

## 2. The Railroad

The Western Maryland Railroad completed construction from Owings Mills to Westminster in June 1861. After the fighting ended June 29, the Rebels took stores of grain, feed, and flour from large warehouses operated by Mikesell & Orendorff near the train

depot. With Westminster designated as the main supply depot for the Union forces engaged at Gettysburg, General Herman Haupt, chief of U.S. Military Railroads, implemented an extraordinary plan to move massive quantities of supplies over the single-track line from Baltimore. This line had previously only carried four trains a day, but now thirty trains in five-train convoys moved 1,500 tons of supplies and ammunition in 150 cars daily from Baltimore to Westminster. Within two days, the army's needs were more than met. By July 25, only three weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg, Medical Corps ambulance wagons carried 2,000 wounded soldiers either directly to Westminster or to Union Bridge to be loaded aboard cars which would pass through the supply depot at Westminster. Over 6,400 Confederate prisoners also passed through the railhead here.

## 3. 71 East Main

Site of Abner Neal home. The Neal family moved from St. Mary's County, Maryland, to Westminster in the late 1840s. Abner served as Westminster's mayor in 1851-52. His two sons, Henry and Frank, were among sixteen suspected secessionist residents arrested August 28, 1862. Charges were soon dropped, and all sixteen were released in a matter of days to return home. During the September 11, 1862 overnight raid into Westminster by Colonel Thomas L. Rosser and the 5th Virginia Cavalry, the Confederates were accompanied by a cannon under the command of Captain James Breathed. Breathed was a Marylander and a classmate of Frank Neal's at the University of Maryland Medical School. The two Neal sons, Henry and Frank, both rode out of Westminster on September 12th with Breathed's gun section and Rosser's cavalry. The Neal boys returned home June 29, 1863, as members of Company D, 1st Maryland Cavalry (CSA), serving as guides for Stuart's vanguard. As the brothers rode through Main Street after the action, they waved to their mother, Rose, and sister, Mary, watching from their balcony. Momentarily, the Neal brothers were spotted chasing

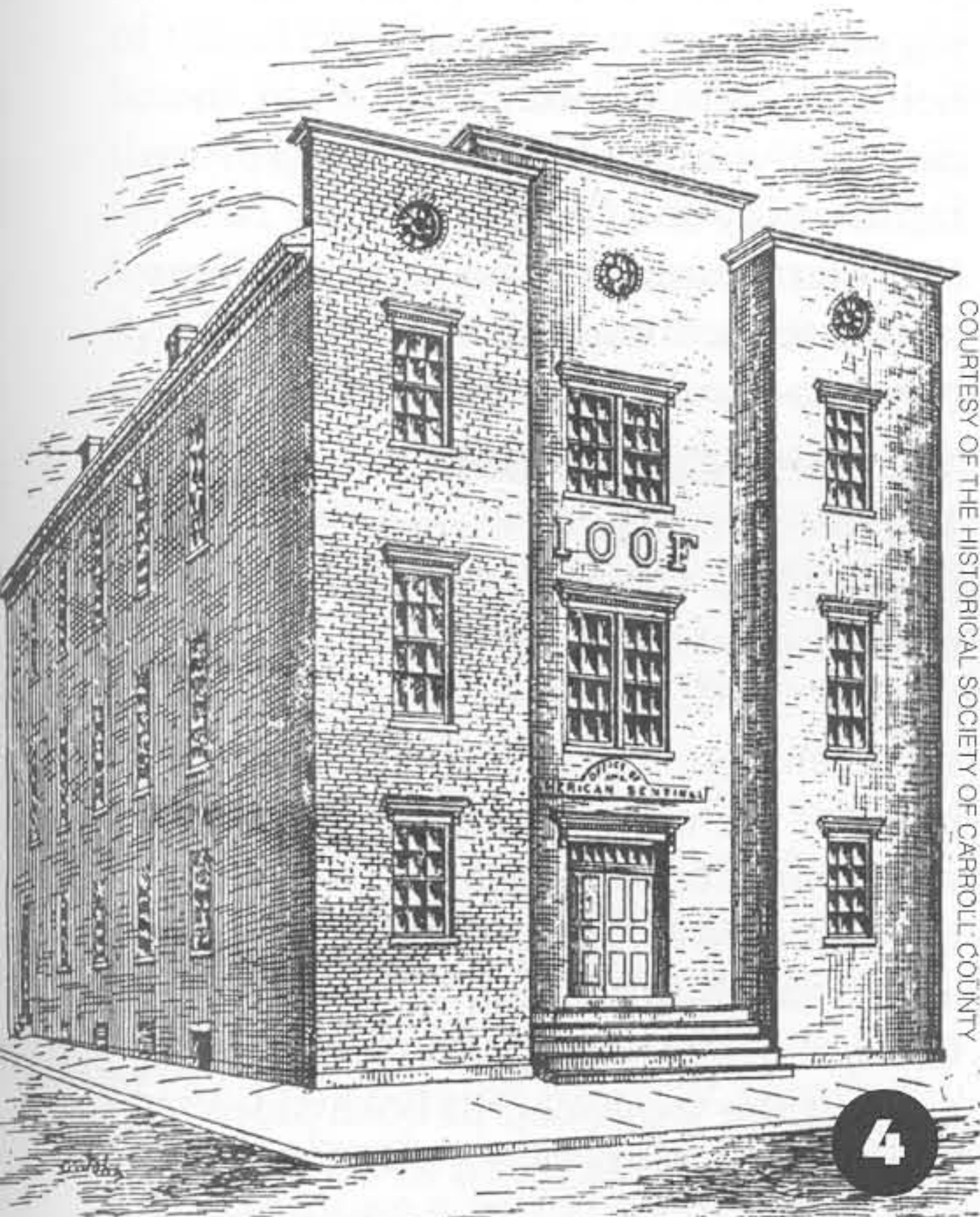
some Delaware troopers out of Westminster in the direction of Baltimore. This would be the last time the Neal brothers would return to Westminster for fear of reprisals for serving in the Confederate army. Union Brigadier General John Gibbon was cared for in the Neal home July 4th after being wounded at Gettysburg. Rose Neal was General Gibbon's wife's aunt.

## 4. 140 East Main Street

The Odd Fellows Hall, c. 1854. The 150th New York Infantry Provost Detail was headquartered here from March 20, 1863, until its participation in Corbit's Charge. From this building the handful of infantrymen charged into the street with bayonets fixed and ran to the sound of the fighting near the Washington Road. They were surrounded by the Rebels and taken prisoner before firing a shot. This imposing lodge hall had served as an armory for two pre-war militia companies, and later as the meeting place for the local Union veterans' Grand Army of the Republic Post. In 1864, a vaudeville act performed on the hall's stage, making derogatory comments regarding President Lincoln, Union General Grant, and other prominent Union supporters. The next morning the decapitated body of the performer was found in a rear stable behind the hall. His assailants were not pursued. One of the most prestigious visitors to Carroll County during the nineteenth century was the renowned abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who spoke to an integrated audience from the stage of the Odd Fellows Hall in October 1870.

## 5. East Main & Court Streets

Site of the opulent Westminster Hotel & Tavern, selected by the 1st Delaware Cavalry detachment commander, Major Napoleon B. Knight, to be his headquarters during his stay in Westminster. Major Knight was chastised by some members of his command for his conduct during the clash with Stuart's cavalry. He was criticized for making his headquarters one-half mile from his command camped on the "Old Commons." An investigation ensued, followed by a General Court



▲ The Odd Fellows Hall in Westminster, c. 1887, headquarters for the 150th New York Infantry Provost Detail in 1863.



Martial in Baltimore on February 2, 1864, to hear testimony regarding the charge. The Court found the charge to be frivolous, and Knight was restored to duty. Colonel Paul J. Revere of the 20th Massachusetts Infantry, gravely wounded at Gettysburg, was brought here by ambulance to await the arrival of his family by his bedside. He succumbed to his wound on July 4 before his family could reach Westminster. Revere was the grandson of Revolutionary War patriot Paul Revere. The building was razed in the 1940s.

### 6. 206 and 210 East Main

Shellman House, c. 1807, the Carroll County Visitor Center, and the Historical Society of Carroll County Gallery and Research Center. Fourteen-year-old Mary B. Shellman witnessed Corbit's Charge and vividly recorded the battle and events in Westminster during the Gettysburg Campaign. The Shellman House is now a museum operated by the Historical Society of Carroll County.

### 7. East Main & North Bishop Streets

Site of Mayor Michael Baughman's home and blacksmith shop. Baughman purchased the property at this intersection, now a vacant lot, in 1855 for \$550.00. He was beginning the last of his three one-year terms as mayor when his city was invaded by Jeb Stuart's cavalry June 29, 1863. Delaware troopers brought their horses here the morning of the battle to be reshod. Late in the afternoon before the fighting began, the troopers and their horses were captured by Rebels who had slipped into town undetected.

### 8. 297 East Main

Trumbo/Chrest House, c. 1830. This brick home was in the line of fire for the charging Rebel troopers advancing on the Washington Road to East Main Street. The east side of this building displays bullet scars from the battle. A handful of curious civilians gathered in front of this house armed with shotguns filled with birdshot and a few small caliber pistols. It is reported that the civilians indiscriminately blazed away at the moving Rebel targets in front of them. When the Delawareans

broke and began their retreat to Main Street, the hardy civilian sharpshooters made a hasty departure from the scene through the nearby alleys.

### 9. 325 East Main

George Crouse family home, c. 1850. This home was less than a block from the scene of the fiercest fighting. The Crouse family was one of several who carried the wounded of both sides to their homes to care for them as only a family could do.

### 10. East Main Street & Washington Road

Location of the historical marker commemorating Corbit's Charge. The marker was dedicated June 29, 1963, to mark the 100th Anniversary; it was donated and unveiled by Mrs. Paul J. Nowland, Capt. Charles Corbit's granddaughter. On the opposite side of the street is a former service station on the site of the F.A. Sharrer & Son undertaking parlor. The four casualties were brought here to be prepared for burial in the Westminster Cemetery on July 1. As was the custom at the time, Sharrer also operated a cabinet shop next to his undertaking parlor. He was frequently contracted by the County to build coffins for the Alms House and furniture for the Court House. He would periodically submit his invoice for the services rendered to the Carroll County Commissioners for payment. Mysteriously and without explanation, the Commissioners refused his invoice for \$3.00 each for "coffins for the soldiers" killed in Corbit's Charge. A portion of Sharrer's shop is still standing today as a private residence at 298 East Main. Many buildings in this section of historic Westminster stood as silent witnesses to the battle in the streets; among them are 270-272, 276, 283, 285, 287, and 290 East Main.

### 11. 29 Washington Road

Home of Alfred and Angeline Bruce, c. 1840. The Bruces were well-respected free blacks living in the community. The charge and counterattacks virtually unfolded at their front doorstep. One less honorable aspect of the invasion of Gen. Lee's forces in June, 1863, was the practice of rounding up

blacks, irrespective of their legal status, and sending them south as captured contraband and into slavery. Word of Stuart's cavalymen marching through Maryland spread rapidly in the African-American settlements along his route from Rockville to Westminster. The Bruce family and many of their neighbors feared their freedom was in jeopardy as the Rebels approached their homes. The Bruce family and others took refuge as best they could, huddled together as the reign of terror gripped Westminster during the night of June 29, 1863. By dawn the next day, the Rebel horsemen were gone and the black community returned to normal. Alfred and Angeline Bruce are interred in the historic African-American Ellsworth Cemetery on Leidy Road near Westminster.

### 12. 45 Washington Road

The blind curve in the road here was the scene of the initial clash between Lt. Clark's squad and the skirmishers and sharpshooters from the 4th Virginia Cavalry. In 1863 this was the outskirts of Westminster, where the bustling city turned to country. Both sides of this road were flanked by post-and-rail fences to prevent roaming cattle from wandering into lush fields of grain or orchards. Off in the distance was the County Alms House farm, today the Carroll County Farm Museum complex. The close confines of this fenced road made for a lethal hand-to-hand encounter.

### 13. North Church Street

The Westminster Cemetery, established 1790. On the mound stood the two-story brick Union Meeting House built c. 1790 as a place of worship for the Protestants in Westminster who had not yet established their individual houses of worship. The Meeting House was pressed into service as a makeshift hospital after Corbit's Charge. Local physicians rushed here to treat the wounded of both sides. The building was razed in 1892 and its location is marked by a large iron flower urn on the mound. This cemetery is the last resting place for scores of Westminster's most prominent



citizens and veterans, including William Winchester, the city's founder. Francis Shriver, the patriotic civilian who rode into battle alongside of Capt. Corbit, is interred here. Three civilian prisoners taken in Westminster by Stuart's cavalry are buried here as well: David Keener Shriver, Charles Billingslea, and Charles W. Webster. Billingslea was freed June 30 near Hanover, Shriver made a daring escape during the action at Boonsboro on July 8, but Webster languished in a notorious Richmond prison until he was released in late January 1864.

#### **14. 23 North Court Street**

Ascension Episcopal Church, c. 1844. In the small, quaint cemetery in the rear of the church is the grave of 1st Lieut. John William Murray, Co. E, 4th Virginia Cavalry, a casualty of the battle. Next to the original headstone is a giant sycamore tree planted to shade the Lieutenant's grave. A parishioner was paid 15¢ to plant the tree shortly after Lieut. Murray was interred here on August 13, 1863. Lieutenants Gibson and Murray were originally interred in the Westminster Cemetery on July 1, along with Bugler Daniel Welsh and Corpl. William Vandegrift of the 1st Delaware Cavalry. The families of Welsh and Vandegrift claimed their bodies before the end of 1863 for reburial in Delaware. A Miss Denton, from Virginia, a governess in the family of Thomas VanBibber of Avondale near Westminster, was informed of the death of the two Southern officers. She recognized one as friend and the other a relative. It is suspected that the influential VanBibber family, who had raised the money to build the Ascension Church, felt it prudent to have Gibson and Murray rest in this cemetery under their watchful eye and that of the Church. In the spring of 1867, St. Pierre Gibson's brother, Jonathan Catlett Gibson, the former Colonel of the 49th Virginia Infantry, came to claim his brother's body for its return home. Among a gathering of family and friends the body of Lieut. Gibson was laid in its final resting place in Fairview Cemetery in Culpeper, Virginia on May 22, 1867.

#### **15. Court Square**

Carroll County Courthouse, c. 1838. Before the battle, a large Union flag flew from the flagpole atop the cupola. Thirteen loyal ladies of Westminster had formed a sewing circle to stitch the prized flag; each inscribed their name across a star. When Gen. Stuart entered Westminster after the fighting ended, he was informed by a Southern sympathizer that this wonderful flag was hidden away for safekeeping in the fireproof vault in the basement of this building. The General felt it to be a perfect trophy. Stuart summoned his faithful and ingenious Chief of Ordnance, Capt. John Esten Cooke, and ordered him to do whatever necessary to procure the flag. Cooke first visited the home of the Clerk of the Court

to inquire about the whereabouts of the flag and secure the key to the Court House and vault. This yielded no results. The exasperated Captain decided to take matters into his own hands. Accompanied by two of Stuart's couriers, Capt. Cooke proceeded to the Court House where he broke open the front door and headed for the basement and the Clerk's vault. By candlelight, Cooke opened the vault by hewing out bricks from the iron staple of the lock with an axe. He described the flag he found inside to be about twenty feet long with the names of the various ladies who made it worked across the stars. Cooke, filled with a sense of accomplishment, presented the flag to Gen. Stuart. The prized trophy was sent on to



▲ The grave of 1st Lieut. John William Murray, Co. E, 4th Virginia Cavalry, in the cemetery of Ascension Episcopal Church, Westminster.

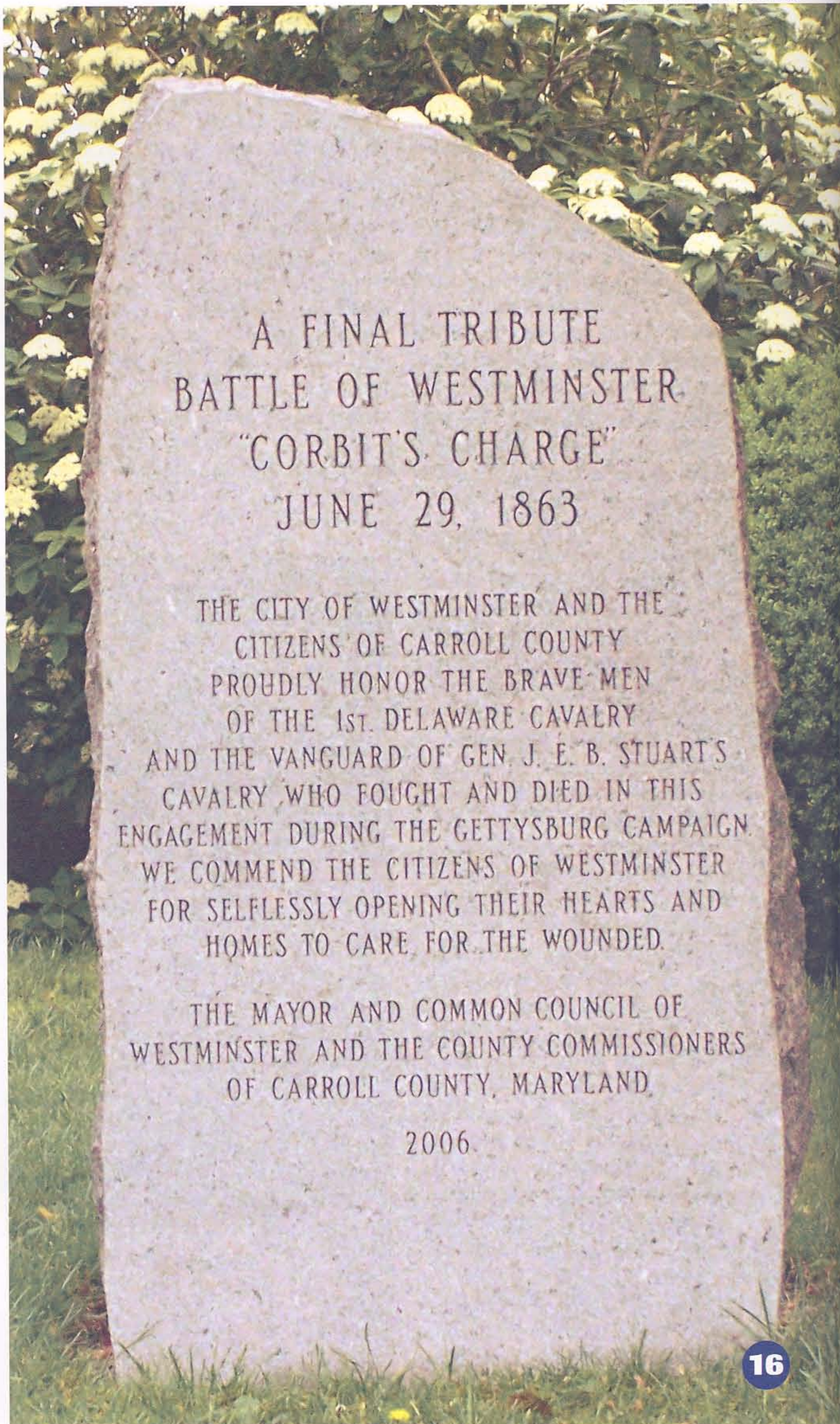


Richmond. Abraham H. Huber, Westminster's Postmaster and Deputy Clerk of the Court, had ordered the flag, which his wife Mollie and her friends had sewn, be put away for safekeeping when the word spread that "the Rebels are coming!" Mr. Huber immediately began a personal crusade to have the stolen flag returned to the ladies of Westminster who made it. The flag's fate bedeviled Abraham Huber for fifty-four years until his death in 1917. During the first days of April 1865, the Confederate government abandoned Richmond, and the city was set ablaze. The War Department had occupied the Mechanic's Institute across the street from Capitol Square. Along with the official papers the Confederate bureaucrats were not able to carry off, between three and four hundred captured Union flags went up in smoke in the Institute, likely including the Westminster flag.

## 16. Court Place

War Memorial Park. The Corbit's Charge Battle of Westminster Monument is located here. It pays homage to the men of both sides who fought and died at Westminster June 29, 1863. The monument is also a tribute to the citizens of Westminster for selflessly opening their hearts and homes to care for the wounded. During the dedication ceremony in June, 2006, the monument was unveiled by descendants of veterans of Corbit's Charge. The City of Westminster sponsors a Commemorative Observance for Corbit's Charge annually, the last weekend of June, hosted by the Pipe Creek Civil War Round Table.

*While touring Westminster you will also find seven Maryland Civil War Trails: Gettysburg Invasion & Retreat Trail markers which help to further interpret Corbit's Charge and Westminster's role as the main supply depot for the Union Army engaged at Gettysburg. Maryland Civil War Trails maps and additional brochures on historical sites, dining, and lodging in the area are available at the Visitor Center located at 210 East Main Street. An information packet can be requested by calling 1-800-272-1933.*



▲ Corbit's Charge Monument in War Memorial Park, Westminster. The monument was unveiled in June 2006 by descendants of veterans of the 1st Delaware Cavalry.