Remembering Preston Thomas — His Service and His Legacy ~ Carol Ely, Ph.D., Executive Director

Last fall, Locust Grove lost one of its greatest champions, Preston Thomas.

Preston Thomas’ formal service on the Board as President, Treasurer, and Secretary was extensive and significant — and his behind-the-scenes presence was just as important to the success of Locust Grove over the two decades of his involvement here.

In 2003-2004, when Locust Grove was temporarily without most of its full-time staff, Preston served as the organization’s acting Executive Director. He was there to support me when I became the ED in the spring of 2004, and continued to advise and quietly step in whenever needed until he became ill early last year. His attention to detail, kindness, and understated sense of humor have supported us all through these years of growth and change at Locust Grove.

Born Bowmer Preston Thomas in Washington, D.C., in 1944, he and his family relocated to Kentucky. Preston graduated from Louisville Country Day School and then attended Yale University and the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. He then trained in Internal Medicine at Vanderbilt University and Pathology at the University of Michigan. He served in Vietnam with the Army Medical Corps and was awarded a Bronze Star for his service.

Preston’s specialty was Pathology, and he practiced at Suburban Hospital upon his return to Louisville. In 1984, he married Margaret (“Margy”) Caldwell Harper, and became stepfather to her children, Noah David Harper III and Katherine Caldwell Harper. His family later grew to include grandchildren David Preston Caldwell Harper and Harriett Elizabeth “Libby” Gould, and his delight in becoming a grandfather was evident.

On retiring from medical practice, Preston spent time with his family and joined more actively in the life of the community, serving on the boards of a number of historical and cultural organizations. But Locust Grove became a focus for his work and his philanthropy when he joined the board in 1997, staying through the transition from Historic Homes Foundation to Historic Locust Grove, Inc.

His wife Margy says that Preston used to ask her why she gladly spent so much of her time in board service to the organizations that she was involved with. And then when he discovered Locust Grove, he understood. His devotion to Locust Grove and the people here was deep and heartfelt. Preston was most active on the Finance Committee, keeping close watch on our incoming and outgoing funds, and solving knotty financial problems down to the penny.

His generosity extended to a carefully thought-out legacy gift to Locust Grove, including donations to our operating funds for our annual expenses, a leadership gift to our new capital campaign, and an overwhelmingly generous gift to our endowment — ensuring the sustainability of this place that he valued so much.

Preston Thomas will always be part of Locust Grove, and we will strive to honor his memory.
It’s a not-so-secret secret that Locust Grove is undertaking a Capital Campaign to raise funds for the projects in our Master Plan that you’ve been hearing about for the past few years. Shhhh!

The Board of Historic Locust Grove, Inc., voted last October to proceed with the fundraising effort, and since then we’ve been pinning down the costs of the various projects, consulting with designers and other experts, and mapping out a fundraising plan that will accomplish our goals.

We’ve had some quiet conversations with longtime supporters, some chats with local foundations, and by spring we expect to formally announce the campaign once we’ve ensured that we are well on our way. The Campaign Chair is Kate Dalton Boyer, and Gwynne and Grover Potts have agreed to serve as the Honorary Campaign Chairs.

The goal is to become a historic site and museum for the 21st century. We want to appeal to a wide variety of visitors with a range of interests — with a series of programs and experiences that are rich and meaningful, grounded in history, engaging, and enlightening. Our historic site will be visually appealing, comfortable to visit, and with an organization that is fiscally sustainable for the long term.

This means some new visitor amenities like paths, parking, benches, and landscaping; better earned-income generators like an enclosed store, a part-year cafe, and a covered open-air temporary exhibit space, and expanded programming in the new pavilion, a classroom space, temporary exhibit space, and interpretive outbuildings and grounds.

The staff will get a bit more space, too. In the past decade our staff has grown from three to six full-time employees, with ten part-time employees — and we need the room. Our volunteers will get an upgraded lounge, and the library and archives will have a dedicated space, too. Most of this will be done by reworking the existing Visitors’ Center interior without greatly expanding the building’s footprint.

Historic preservation continues to be an essential focus. With our partner, Louisville Metro Parks, we plan to replace the 60-year-old house roof and upgrade the climate control systems to ensure the house’s preservation for another 200-plus years, at least.

This spring, our members, friends, volunteers, neighbors, and the entire community will be introduced to the detailed plans for the future of the site. And they will be asked to consider participating in helping to make the plans a reality.

But for now, it’s the “quiet” phase of the campaign. We’re so excited to be embarking upon this new endeavor to improve our favorite historic site, Locust Grove.
My friends and I visited Locust Grove this past Saturday during Christmastide. What a pleasure it was to see the actors, dressed in period clothing and interacting with us. The history of the house was very educational as well. We were able to tour the grounds ourselves, giving us a sense of what it must have been like to live during that time period. Walking through the museum was a great treat as well, so much so that I can’t wait to return with my husband and children!”

That was joy to the eyes of everyone who worked to hard to make Locust Grove’s 2017 Christmastide on December 2 a delightful experience. The historic house was alive with first-person interpreters who brought to life many of the family members. There was singing, dancing, and even some card-playing in the house. In the hearth kitchen, visitors could learn about party foods of the early 1800s. In the Visitors’ Center, children made ornaments of the time period and visitors stopped for treasurers at the artisan booths and Christmas book sale. Singers from the Lincoln Performing Arts School entertained while the visitors enjoyed seasonal refreshments.
Find New ‘Friends’ at Locust Grove’s Spring Book Sale

“I love walking into a bookstore. It’s like all my friends are sitting on shelves, waving their pages at me.”

Oh, the friends you’ll find at Locust Grove’s big Spring Used Book Sale the first weekend in March! More than 23,000 of those “friends” will be there, waving at you to pick them up and take them home. Those book-friends will be clearly organized and displayed on shelves and on (and under) tables for the easiest access possible.

Every six weeks or so, a team of specially trained volunteer book sorters organize these books into more than 30 categories, including history, fiction, mystery, gardening, cooking, art, literature, and children’s books. Most books are priced $1 for paperbacks, $2 for hardbacks. Plus, there’s always a selection of special, collectible, autographed, rare, and book sets at various prices — all still terrific bargains.

The quality and variety of books being donated by readers across the region are getting better and better. Please keep donating your book-friends to Locust Grove so that others might enjoy them . . . and so you’ll have room to find more “friends.”