CHAPTER

3

Riverbank Is Fabyan, or Is It the Other Way Around?

A local speaker once started a lecture about Colonel Fabyan and Riverbank by stating, "In order to truly understand Colonel Fabyan, one must first fully appreciate Riverbank and all that it stands for." Paradoxically, an article that appeared in an early edition of a scientific journal about Riverbank read, "In order to fully appreciate Riverbank, you must first understand its owner, Colonel Fabyan, and all that he stood for." Which is more accurate? In truth, the answer is probably both because Fabyan was Riverbank, and Riverbank was Fabyan.

Like his estate, the colonel was larger than life, and his ambitions matched his image. One of his goals was to gain for himself national, perhaps even international, renown: he pursued this goal chiefly by establishing Riverbank as a self-sustaining community where, as mentioned earlier, scientists and other researchers on his payroll conducted experiments and then reported their findings to the world. Many of them went on to establish names for themselves after leaving the colonel's service.

William Friedman, one of the code breakers of the British cipher, became one of Riverbank's most famous figures for his work in cryptology, but he did not come to Riverbank originally for that purpose. A graduate of the Michigan Agricultural College, with an advanced degree in genetics from Cornell University, Friedman was hired to improve various agricultural products on the colonel's farms. On occasion, he was also to assist a leading horticulturist, Charles McCauley, in the colonel's greenhouses where award-winning roses (Killarney and Columbia), along with new varieties of carnations, snapdragons, chrysanthemums, and other flowers, were developed.

Also developed at Riverbank were various strains of vegetables, including a hybrid corn strain that became popular throughout the midwest.

Because of an aptitude with mechanical devices and his skills in photography, young Friedman was persuaded by the colonel to assist Elizabeth Gallup on her Bacon-Shakespeare project. As it turned out, Friedman had no reservations about leaving his study of genetics and agriculture. He had fallen in love with one of Gallup's researchers, Elizebeth Smith, and decided that he was more interested in code work with Little Liz than in greenhouse endeavors.

Elizebeth Smith, after graduating from Hillsdale College in Michigan in 1915 with an English degree, was sent by an agency to the Newberry Library in Chicago. The librarian there informed her that a position involving Shakespearean research was available. A wealthy man, interested in the disputed authorship of Shakespeare's plays, was looking for a young, personable, attractive college graduate who knew English literature. Elizebeth telephoned the man to inquire about the position; shortly thereafter, Colonel Fabyan arrived at the library. Elizebeth's written account of the event follows:

> When he arrived, he turned out to be a large man, bearded, which was very unusual in those days, not too well dressed, but with a very dashing, imperious manner, who called himself Colonel George Fabyan. He wasted no time talking there but at once invited me to go with him overnight to his estate at Geneva, Illinois. Though I was a bit taken back and at first refused, he was the kind of man who did not take "no" for an answer. His city car, with a chauffeur, was waiting outside and I was almost forced to proceed with him to the Chicago Northwestern station where we took a train.
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> He talked about everything except the possibly forthcoming position, until we were seated on the train. Then after a very few moments of silence he turned to me and shouted, "WHAT DO YOU KNOW?"
>
> By this time I was realizing that I must appear to be a demure little nobody. Although I had a reputation for volubility in college, I had done no talking whatsoever for he had kept up a constant stream of conversation. So when he thundered at me, "WELL, WHAT DO YOU KNOW?" I leaned against the window as far away as possible, and looked at him quizzically out of my half turned head and said, in a firm but low tone, "that remains, Sir, for you to find out." My answer pleased him and he burst forth in a loud guffaw which could be heard all over the car.
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> After that, the restraint between us somewhat eased and the rest of the short journey was passed in pleasant conversation by his narrating to me in a more or less calm and restrained manner, that a woman employee of his, Elizabeth Wells Gallop [sic], had discovered a cipher which proved that Francis Bacon had written Shakespeare.
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> At Geneva, we were met by a limousine and driver who drove us a short distance to Riverbank, Colonel Fabyan's three hundred acre estate (later it became larger). On one side of the highway, there was a high stonewall with impressive gates. He told me that his own residence, swimming pool and stables were in that part of the estate. Our car, however, turned off on the opposite side of the highway and we shortly reached a house known as The Lodge. This was where Mrs. Gallup and her sister, Miss Kate Wells, resided and where they had all of

> their accouterments to prove their certain claim that Francis Bacon was the author of the Shakespeare plays and sonnets. This lodge was staffed with servants and it was there that I was to spend the night in a guest room.

Elizebeth Smith also mentioned that she was introduced to Elizabeth Gallup and some young men during dinner at the lodge. She described Gallup as an elderly woman of extremely aristocratic appearance. Her conversation while at the head of the dinner table was of travel and residences abroad where she had stayed with various distinguished families who believed in her cause and had financed her efforts through the years. Elizebeth deduced from that meeting that Elizabeth Gallup had dwelt only among those who agreed with her premise and that she had little personal contact with the viewpoint of those who did not believe in her theory.

The position that Elizebeth Smith accepted made her part of a contingent of intelligent young women who were taught to master Gallup's cipher proof of Bacon's authorship of the plays. By proceeding over the same ground that Gallup had covered, they would prove that the earlier deciphering was correct. They would then go on to read other portions of the cipher from the plays and other works of the Elizabethan era because Gallup's research had led her to believe that Bacon had authored many other distinguished works of the Elizabethan age in addition to those of Shakespeare.

Elizebeth Smith's presence among Gallup's researchers was, as mentioned previously, a key reason behind William Friedman's switch in his attentions. His infatuation was reciprocated and, as the following passage notes, resulted in matrimony:

> Colonel Fabyan was also interested in genetics and had established a greenhouse and adjoining laboratory for the conduct of experiments in the field. His geneticist was a dark-haired young man, who experimented with the fruit fly and with plants, testing the Mendelian Law of Heredity. There was a windmill in the center of the area where the geneticist worked and Colonel Fabyan had constructed a sort of studio on the second floor where the young man lived. I saw him at meal times and on off hours when all of the young people on the place were swimming, bicycling and riding. As time went on, the geneticist was found to be an accomplished photographer. So he was pressed into service by Colonel Fabyan who believed that enlarging the type forms in Elizabethan books would show up the differences which Mrs. Gallup claimed were there. This work threw us together a very great deal, and we were married within the year.

As marital, as well as professional, partners, William and Elizebeth Friedman were able to decipher many foreign and domestic codes as well as develop various coding machines and deciphering devices. In 1918, William Friedman accepted a lieutenant's commission in the army and spent the last five months of the war on General Pershing's staff in France. In 1919, the Friedmans returned to Riverbank and began their series of Riverbank publications. Number 22 was the most noted: "The Index of Coincidence and Its

Application in Cryptography." In large part as a result of their work on the Index of Coincidence, the army contacted the Friedmans and offered them a six-month trial period as civilian code breakers in Washington, D.C. The Friedmans accepted and, in 1922, left Riverbank for good, establishing themselves in the years that followed as two of the world's leading cryptologists. During World War II, William Friedman, a colonel himself in the army, became known as the man who broke the Japanese Purple Code, a feat no one considered possible.

Although the Friedmans loved Riverbank, they had many reservations about Colonel Fabyan because he had broken many promises, involving back pay, title recognition in regard to published documents, and other fringe benefits. When discussing the Baconian ciphers, the Friedmans stated that they spent years working on Bacon's writings, and the results of their efforts were documented by them. However, when their book *The Greatest Work of Sir Francis Bacon* was printed in 1916, the author listed was George Fabyan. They also cited other published documents about codes that were written by them but credited to the colonel.

Although theses references to Colonel Fabyan by the Friedmans are, in part, true, there are some exceptions regarding published Riverbank documents from the same period and even about codes. For example, one book was entitled *Ciphers for the Little Folks.* On the front cover was written, "The Dorothy Crain Series—A Method of Teaching—The Greatest Work of Sir Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam, Viscount St. Alban, Riverbank Laboratories Educational Department, Dorothy Crain, Director of Kindergarten, Geneva, Illinois." The second page repeated everything on the cover but included "Designed to Stimulate Interest in Reading, Writing and Number Work, by Cultivating the Use of an Observant Eye. With an Appendix on the Origin, History and Designing of the Alphabet by Helen Louise Ricketts." On the third page was the only reference to the colonel: "Copyright, 1916 George Fabyan."

Another book was published in French in 1918 by the Riverbank Press: *Methode Pour Enseigner et acquerir une connaissance practique du Chiffre Bilitere A l'usage des ecoles primaires (Method for Teaching or Acquiring a Practical Understanding of Binary Codes for Use in Primary Schools).* Again, Dorothy Crain is listed as author. On the next page, Crain is given credit, as again was Helen Louise Ricketts who provided some technical information for the book. On the third page, there is a reference to the colonel, preceded by the following: "Vulgariser la science sans jamais l'abaisser; vulgariser sans vulgairiser" ("To popularize science without ever debasing it; popularizing without vulgarizing") and, at the bottom of the page, "Copyright 1918, George Fabyan."

The aforementioned examples show that the colonel did not intend to take full credit for either book but gave credit to Dorothy Crain and Helen Louise

Ricketts. Because the Friedmans were not mentioned perhaps their accusations are justified.

As stated earlier, in 1918 it was William Friedman, rather than Elizabeth Gallup instructing the U.S. Army in codes. The course he taught, however, was not on deciphering codes (it came much later) but on the development of new ciphers. At the end of the class, Friedman's first students gathered in front of the Aurora Hotel in Aurora, Illinois, to have a graduation photograph taken.[7] What is most unusual about this picture is, if observed closely, some of the officers and five civilians are looking directly at the camera, but others are looking away. This configuration was a human tableau of Bacon's biliteral code. Those facing the camera represented one symbol; those looking away the other. The tableau spelled out the message: "Knowledge is power,"[8] the same phrase the colonel had his sculptor Silvestri cast in stone above the door of the laboratory.[9] Through the years, the Riverbank staff has enjoyed the published accounts about the graduation picture. Typically, the accounts would identify the colonel and the Friedmans correctly but never the lady sitting next to the colonel. She was identified as Elizabeth Gallup. Although staff members knew that the lady next to the colonel was Cora Jensen, a Riverbank secretary, they purposely would not inform the authors of their error. The reason for not telling was that no one knew who many of the soldiers were as well as who the other mysterious third lady was. Staff members decided that if left as the authors stated, someday, someone would come forward and say that the lady identified as being Elizabeth Gallup in a certain publication is really Cora Jensen. Then, we would know that the caller was a valid source and perhaps could provide us with the names of the others in the picture—especially the mysterious third lady.

In 1987 our plan succeeded. Dr. Edward Williams, son of Riverbank's Don Williams, was attending his patient Phyllis Fletcher in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She mentioned that her picture was in the Smithsonian magazine (June 1988) and then showed him the picture. Dr. Williams recognized the picture and informed his father, who, in turn, informed me. After I had spoken to Phyllis on the telephone, I persuaded Don to interview Phyllis while he was visiting his son the following month.

What follows is a list of Don's questions and Phyllis Fletcher's answers:

(Q) When and why were you at Riverbank?

(A) I was at Riverbank for about a year during 1917 and 1918. I was twenty-one at the time and was one of a group of young ladies working for a Mrs. Gallup at Riverbank. Although I worked on the Baconian Ciphers, I mostly attended classes on codes conducted by the Friedmans. Mrs. Gallup often stated that things were very obvious when commenting on her findings, when, in truth, no one else could see the relationship.

(Q) What was Mrs. Gallup like? Was she shy?

(A) Mrs. Gallup was definitely not shy. She was very boisterous and al-

ways announced that she, and she alone, was the boss regarding the code work at Riverbank. She was very prim and proper, a woman of the old school if you know what I mean.

(Q) Do you have any recollections of Colonel Fabyan?

(A) He was a big man that had a hearty laugh and created situations that were often open to criticism. Yet once he started something involving science he was quick to learn the relevant terminology and in acquiring knowledge of the subject matter.

(Q) How about the Friedmans?

(A) The Friedmans worked very hard on various codes that came into Riverbank. Each day the Friedmans would give the class puzzles involving codes, and I was very good in breaking them which was why I was picked to participate in the classes involving the army officers. I still remember that the Friedmans taught us that the letters E, T, O, A, N, I, H, and D were the most used letters. Daily I still work the crossword puzzles in order to make sure I keep my mind active. Once that goes you're dead.

Then Don held up the military graduation picture and asked who were the people sitting in the picture? Phyllis Fletcher answered, going from left to right, those seated are Colonel Fabyan, Cora Jensen, me (Phyllis Fletcher, my name was Phyllis Rudd at that time), next was Elizebeth Smith (Friedman), and then William Friedman. We were given the answer we wanted. Later in the interview, Phyllis Fletcher stated that the military classes took place in a large new laboratory that was constructed near a large windmill pump house near Elizabeth Gallup's house. (The pump house and windmill were removed in the 40s). However, this laboratory was never mentioned or shown in any other published document. So ended another unsolved Riverbank mystery. Now, as far as Riverbank is concerned, Phyllis (Rudd) Fletcher is the mysterious third lady in the picture.

In addition to research on acoustics and cryptology, not to mention the myriad of other experiments being carried out at Riverbank, another, little-known, though apparently quite extensive, research project was being conducted. The box of glass negatives that contained Wallace Sabine's aerial photographs also held evidence of fingerprinting.

The photos showed, as most people now know, that fingerprints were definitely the most accurate method of identifying an individual. Many of the plates dealt with methods of identifying each fingerprint, including a list of terms (rings, swirls, arches, and so on) used to describe the various contours. One plate in particular showed pictures of three different men who were virtual look-alikes. Under the picture of each was his fingerprint. The wording below stated the significance of fingerprints for proper identification. Just what impact the Riverbank study had on the development of fingerprinting is not known, but it is obvious that this particular project was completed to develop a particular methodology for proper identification. It appears that the federal

government was the client, which might explain why no other documents or files exist at Riverbank on this extensive project. Most of the documents dealing with government work involving codes and war research are also not found in the Riverbank files. Probably, the material was shipped off and either stored in some national archive or destroyed. If the files were stored in any of the Riverbank warehouses, then they might have been burned during one of the many major cleanups that occurred after Colonel Fabyan died.

If Riverbank researchers were, indeed, pioneers in the field of fingerprinting, it would be no great surprise. Given the colonel's aforementioned desire for recognition, charging a team of scientists with an exploration such as research in fingerprinting seems the kind of endeavor the farsighted Fabyan would have undertaken. His vision and enthusiasm were the driving forces behind Riverbank in its first decades of existence, as is made clear in the following excerpt printed in the September 1923 issue of *Scientific American,* page 204:

> The Riverbank idea is the colonel personified, and we must therefore sketch a word picture of this remarkable man. Colonel Fabyan, we gathered, is a self-made man and looks the part. He is a big man, well along in life but in the very best of health, as depicted by his rugged appearance. He has prospered in the cotton business. Although not a technician himself, he has always taken a keen interest in mechanics and medicine and other branches of science, and it has been his one ambition to establish a private laboratory for the purpose of prying into Nature's secrets. He devotes his time and much of his money to this work in memory of his mother, and we noted a tablet to that effect in one of the laboratory rooms.
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> The colonel secures specialties in various lines and gives them every facility for delving into old problems yet unsolved. The laboratory workers live in what is called "The Community," which is a very essential part of Riverbank. In our short stay at this institution, we noted the wonderful spirit of good fellowship and happiness which permeates throughout the Riverbank Laboratories, as well as the admiration, intense friendship, and loyalty in which the workers hold for the colonel, who is ever interested in the activities of each and every worker.

Not to be forgotten in the portrait of Colonel Fabyan is the man's sense of humor. Although maligned, particularly by the Friedmans, for taking credit as author of articles or books he did not write, he did write a book entitled What I Know About the Future of Cotton and Domestic Goods, copyright George Fabyan, Chicago, 1900. A reader venturing inside this slim volume would find a publisher's note explaining that "yielding to the many requests of friends the author has consented to inflict on the public this Second Edition." Beyond this page are 100 blank pages, the colonel's own self-effacing appraisal of his position as a cotton king. As was true with most of what Fabyan did, reactions to the book have been mixed. Some have found the book sophomoric, and others have found the humor clever and ironic.

Another account of the colonel's writing ability—or lack thereof—appears in the fall 1988 issue of the *Geneva Quarterly Magazine,* which highlighted Riverbank. In the article, "Colonel George Fabyan," the author states that under a portrait of the colonel displayed in the Fabyan villa museum, there is an inscription that reads

Florence—
The world would be a far
pleasanter place
and in heaven more
friends took,
If women were all they
wished to be
and men as good as
they look.

1923 – Colonel

Regardless of how people viewed his antics, the colonel was not above a good practical joke—sometimes at his own expense, other times at the expense of the unsuspecting. In fact, much about the laboratory itself seems to have been constructed for the amusement of its owner. For example, immediately inside the entrance to the laboratory office, beside a sturdy bronzed grill partition, a bell was mounted on the wall. A sign fastened to the grill encouraged people to "Ring Bell for Service." Any first-time visitor who did so, however, found himself on the receiving end of one of the colonel's jokes. Unknown to the newcomer, the bell, although it appeared solidly attached to the wall, was actually free swinging, held in place only by a small metal catch that was hooked under the bell's lip. When the strap attached to the clapper was pulled, presumably to bang the clapper against the sides of the bell, the small catch would let go, too, and the heavy bell would swing around wildly, setting up a din that threatened to raise the dead. Just about the time the sound subsided—usually about eight to ten seconds because of the reverberant qualities of the solid concrete walls—and the disoriented bell ringer regained some of his composure, he found himself face to face with Adele Cumming, the colonel's secretary. Adele was often addressed as Belle by those who knew her, a name that she preferred and used to sign many Riverbank documents. Hands on hips, her eyes narrowed in a stern, disapproving look, she was able to cow even the most stalwart of guests for disturbing her peace. This momentary humiliation was most certainly what the colonel had in mind when he rigged up the bell and was no doubt his way of initiating a by-now-addled visitor into the world of Riverbank.

Over the years a number of individuals who could not have cared less about disturbing the peaceful atmosphere of the laboratory rather enjoyed creating a commotion. One delivery truck driver took great delight in seeing how long he could make the bell clang on the strength of one mighty swing. Every time

he arrived, he made his presence known by continuing his experiment. Of course, it meant that the laboratory's real experiments—at least those not being conducted in an isolated test chamber—came to an abrupt halt because the manufacturers whose products were being tested did not appreciate seeing large periodical noise peaks on their product data graphs. Thanks to the trucker's diligent research, the bell was removed in the mid-1950s.

Unfortunately, there is no account of how Paul Sabine handled the bell dilemma, but if he did, indeed, receive the full treatment, his initiation to Riverbank was just beginning. The next step in the scheme of things would have been for the secretary to inform the visitor that Colonel Fabyan was expecting him in the rear office and then merely point toward the rear wall of the next room. By stepping into this room from the north, Sabine would have observed that, except for three small windows on the west wall and three wood doors on the east, all walls, including the one to the south, were solid. If he had opened the first door, he would have seen a staircase leading to the second floor. Behind the next door, he would have found a small closet and, through the third, another small closet with a heavy vault door in one wall. By this time, too, the colonel's secretary would have slipped out the foyer door, leaving the poor visitor on his own in a room with no known outlet other than the one he came in. Either by luck, a process of elimination, or more likely, because of the merciful return of the secretary, Paul Sabine or any other first-time visitor would eventually have discovered that to get to the colonel's office, one simply entered through the vault door. Solicitors, of course, were more often than not left to their own devices in the hopes that they would grow discouraged and leave without peddling their wares.

For those who did make it inside the colonel's office, there was even more to boggle the mind. Then, as today, the west wall had actual sailing ship portholes and segments of a prism from a lighthouse lamp mounted on it. A monstrous desk took up a great share of the room, causing many to wonder how such a large piece of furniture had been maneuvered into place through the narrow vault door. In truth, there had been no struggle to get the thing inside because the desk was built first and then the wall separating offices was put up.

Strategically placed on the colonel's desk were a few unusual items kept solely to stimulate the mind of any visitor and present an aura of scientific mystique. One of these items was a twelve-inch long, one-inch-diameter glass tube that stood upright. The tube was one-third filled with water and sealed at each end. Although it is only speculation and the scene fictitious, Paul Sabine was probably far more curious about the tube's purpose when it was immobile on the desk than he was after the colonel picked it up during their conversation. The colonel rotated his wrist so that the water inside struck first one end, then the other. Instead of flowing through the tube, the water moved as a solid chunk and when it hit either end of the tube, it thudded rather than splashed.

Paul Sabine would have had no problem deducing that (unless the tube contained ice, which was unlikely in the nonrefrigerated office) the colonel held in his hand an airless, airtight glass cylinder, or a vacuum.

The next item displayed, a horizontal shadow box with glass top and sides and small figurines inside, would have been, as they say, a piece of cake for Paul Sabine. As the colonel talked, he purposely moved his arm in such a way that the sleave of his wool sweater brushed across the surface of the glass, causing the figurines to dance around. Paul Sabine would have needed no introduction to this phenomenon because he was quite familiar with the effects of static electricity.

Although the new director of Riverbank Laboratories would not have been duped by Colonel Fabyan's scientific toys, he surely had to have a good sense of humor and a good sense of his own abilities to put up with his employer's eccentricities. A prime example of one of these mind boggling ordeals follows:

One morning, a construction crew showed up and began erecting what appeared to be another one of Colonel Fabyan's undefinable examples of architecture, a mere twenty feet from Paul's laboratory. All that he or anyone else was able to find out was that the building was to be a garage for a Stutz automobile. As time went on, however, it became obvious that this would be no ordinary garage.

One of the colonel's hobbies was to purchase, sight unseen, boxcars full of unclaimed freight from the railroad salvage yards in Chicago. In a particularly large shipment delivered to the Geneva siding, Fabyan discovered he now owned several carloads of fifteen-foot steel I beams. Undaunted, the colonel returned to his office and contacted a local contractor. After the contractor arrived, Fabyan informed him that he wanted a garage built and that the contractor was to use up every one of the I beams doing it. The contractor, much less undaunted than the colonel, asked if he might be provided with some sort of design to complete the job. The colonel then opened a drawer and removed a large number of empty Phillip Morris tin cigarette boxes and began stacking them up on his desk and against the wall. When he finished his design, he stated that this was exactly what he wanted the garage to look like.

This garage, which still stands today, is roughly 150 feet wide and 200 feet long at the base. It stands five stories high and appears to have been constructed entirely of 15-foot-square concrete modules. The modules are stacked in a three-sided pyramid—the back is flat, as was the model Fabyan built against his office wall—topped with a single module. The building might have ended up being even taller had the contractor provided underground footings to bear the weight; if he had gone up any more, it is possible that the whole structure, the whole garage, would have slid down the hill.

As it turned out, the garage housing the Stutz took up only a small section of the building. The rest was used by Bert Eisenhour, who conducted a multi-

tude of the colonel's experiments. Eisenhour was the same engineer who was brought to Riverbank during the early 1900s to construct the so-called Baconian Acoustical Levitation Machine. From 1917-1918, he directed the construction of the Riverbank Acoustical Laboratories and from 1922-1923, he was the principal engineer and inventor who established the tuning fork operation; he remained many years as its manager. His contributions to Riverbank were significant and noteworthy. In fact, Paul Sabine's files indicate that he arranged for Eisenhour to present a paper at the fifteenth meeting of the Acoustical Society of America, held May 5, 1936, at the La Salle Hotel in Chicago. Eisenhour's paper was entitled "Control of Temperature Variation in the Frequency of Tuning Forks (with demonstrations)."

During the seventeen years between Paul Sabine's arrival at Riverbank and his own death in 1936, Colonel Fabyan continued to live his life the way he wanted to live it. He invested time and money in scientific pursuits; added to his menagerie and his collection of railroad junk; entertained dignitaries from around the world; and, in short, created his own legend. Reality set in, however, when the stock market crashed in 1929.

The collapse of the market cost the colonel a considerable amount of money, and although his personal life was not affected in any visible way, he was forced to reduce the Riverbank staff and, more importantly, to encourage Paul Sabine to find a way of making the research he conducted pay for itself. Thus, the Riverbank Acoustical Laboratory started testing for dollars. As I discuss in a later chapter, Paul Sabine did not hesitate in carrying out Fabyan's wishes because his work at the time was leading him toward the formation of the Acoustical Materials Association and assuring Riverbank a key role in the establishment of standardized tests and their execution.

Although the market crash did cause some financial hardships for the colonel, he remained generous to others in need. He would often go into Geneva and give the grocer a list of supplies for a needy family, then tell him to deliver a similar amount of groceries each week until he was told to stop. If he wanted to keep the colonel's weekly business, the grocer should never tell the family where or from whom the groceries came.

Perhaps the most often-told story of Fabyan's Depression era kindness concerns a drainage ditch or, rather, a series of drainage ditches and the men who dug them. Depending on the storyteller, either one man, a few men or three teams of men were put to work. Regardless of the specific number of individuals involved, what is known for certain is that the colonel ordered these workers to dig the trench, fill it, dig it again, refill, then dig it once again. Some people find Fabyan's action to be a cruel joke, but as it turns out, the colonel's motives were most humane. The true story can now be told.

During these hard times, a group of local men—out-of-work professionals, merchants, factory workers, and day laborers—were contracted by the colonel to dig a ditch. Instead of prolonging the work so that their wages

would be greater, the men formed three teams and made a contest out of the task. The rules were similar to those of a typing test, with deductions for errors in the ditch's straightness, contour, and depth counted against the team's speed. The colonel was impressed not only by the rapidity and quality of work but also by the use of a monitor within each group who checked for discrepancies and by the fairness of the appointed judges (one from each team) in rating each other's performance.

Rather than pay the men for their work, however, Fabyan told them the ditch wasn't quite what he wanted and had them refill it. Once that was done, he ordered a new ditch, making a few modifications in location. One month, excluding Saturdays and Sundays, and two diggings later, the colonel stated that he was satisfied. What was not mentioned by those who thought the colonel was either trying to break the spirit of those involved or just flaunting his image was what happened after the third digging was finished: One team won two out of three times. The colonel praised them all for their efforts; threw them a party, which included their families; and gave each of the workers a bonus, with the second- and first-place teams each receiving a little more, respectively. The colonel then made a speech about how great it was to see men who might be down but definitely not out, showing that they still had pride in their work. Each family also received a basket of food stuffs; besides the food, each basket contained five silver dollars and a note stating that if any mention of this gift became public knowledge, the family would be barred from any future Riverbank activities. If they honored his wishes, the colonel promised that more work or some kind of assistance would be made available to each family at a later date.

A son of one of the men involved on the work crew reported that the colonel had also assisted his father in reopening his business, which had been forced to close right after the market crash. Again, the same promise of anonymity regarding the colonel's involvement was required. There was apparently one other family-owned business that was helped in a similar fashion.

Around March 13, 1936, at the age of 69, the colonel's health suddenly deterioated and by May 1 it was recognized as being serious. He was admitted to the hospital on May 17, 1936, and at 9:30 AM George Fabyan passed away. The cause of his death was listed as Carcinoma of Mediastinum (lung cancer). Some say that the lung cancer was caused by his years of chain smoking. He was buried in the family plot in Boston.[10]

Although he was gone physically, he was still very much present in spirit: the work he had begun, the research he had founded and funded, the very essence of Riverbank. All these lived on as did all the folklore, stories, and tall tales told about him and Riverbank.

One strange occurrence, in particular, bears mention because of its connection with the colonel's death. According to the story, Colonel and Nelle Fabyan owned a parrot that loved to torment children. After nipping them

and making them cry, the bird would continue to tease them by laughing. The harder they cried, the louder the parrot laughed. Legend has it that the parrot stopped laughing the day the colonel died.

After the colonel's death, his widow continued to remain active, and with the assistance of Belle Cumming, Nelle saw to it that things continued to run smoothly. Although not as flamboyant as her late husband, Nelle Fabyan was still very much an individual in her own right.

Don Williams recalled an event that occurred that showed Nelle's compassionate and humorous side. It was a summer day, and Don and his friends were swimming. Nelle Fabyan came up to where the boys were and asked Don if he would not mind driving her to another location on the estate. Don, who was eighteen then, loved driving, said he would be glad to; he quickly changed clothes and raced to the car. He started the engine up and threw it into gear, but when he reached their destination, he applied the brakes, and the car began to skid on the damp ground. "Whoooooa, Nellie!" Don cried as the car slowly came to a halt. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Don realized what he had said and who was sitting in the back. As he slowly sank in his seat, he did not dare look back or into the rear-view mirror as Nelle Fabyan got out. As he sat there, mortified, waiting for her to return, he wondered if it were possible that she did not make the connection with his poor use of words. When Nelle returned, she jumped on the running board, held onto the center column, slapped her thigh, and yelled, "Giddy-up, Donnie! Make your Nellie take this Nelle home!" Don also mentioned that he was often allowed to drive Nelle Fabyan to her favorite shopping place, Marshall Field's in Chicago and that she was a generous tipper.

Although most of Nelle Fabyan's energies were directed toward the management of the Riverbank estate rather than the laboratories, she did get involved in some of the goings-on up the hill from her home. Roger Ames—a Riverbank employee for more than thirty years; an accomplished organist; and the inventor of the Ames tube, the forerunner to the Riverbank choir chimes— recalled an incident that illustrates not only Nelle's attention to her late husband's enterprise but also a side to the woman that was not often seen. On this occasion, Ames was visiting the Riverbank recording studio operated by Vaughan Morrison to see if the organ there required tuning. The studio, which was fully carpeted and contained a baby grand piano, a Hammond organ, and a set of chimes, was located in the tuning fork facility, in what was later the electronic calibration room. Quite often, Nelle Fabyan would visit the studio to practice on the organ or piano, and she was there when Ames arrived. The sound of a raised voice in the tuning fork shop interrupted Mrs. Fabyan's playing, and she went to the door to see what the fuss was. After watching for a minute or two, she started toward the two individuals making all the noise: the foreman, who was doing all the shouting, and an employee who was having no luck stating his case. Just as Nelle

Fabyan approached the two, the foreman screamed, "You're fired!" "No sir," said Nelle, drawing herself up eye to eye with the angry man. "You are wrong," she continued, "totally wrong, and this gentleman will remain in my employ until I tell you differently." The foreman apparently realized that the look in her eye and the determination in her voice meant he could easily be the one without a job if he weren't careful. Despite a reputation for being forceful, demanding, and unable to back down regardless of the circumstances, the foreman mumbled, "Yes, ma'am."

Roger Ames stated that not one employee dared look up at the foreman after he apologized to Mrs. Fabyan because each one knew he would be in for it later if, their still-fuming supervisor detected even the slightest hint of delight at his comeuppance. Nelle Fabyan must have realized what was going on, too, so she turned and started back toward the studio, saying as she left, "Thank you, gentlemen. Continue on with the business at hand." A few minutes later she was once again playing the organ in the studio.

Unfortunately, not long after that incident, Nelle's health began to fail. Cancer, apparently, was the cause. On July 22, 1939, after a long and painful struggle, Nelle Fabyan died. She was seventy years old. Because of her graciousness, her kindness, and her steadfastness, Nelle Fabyan, unlike her husband, was remembered fondly by everyone. Like her husband, her mark was made on Riverbank, both in the care and attention she had always given to the grounds and in the way she lived her life.

As Paul Sabine wrote in a letter to a friend, "Mrs. Fabyan died Saturday morning. She will be buried in Boston beside the colonel. Her death leaves a cloud over Riverbank that seems to mark the end of an epoch."

Adele Cumming and Maulsby Forrest were the executors of the will of Nelle Fabyan. Originally, Forrest was the colonel's financial adviser and he maintained a similar position for Nelle Fabyan. Under the will, both Adele Cumming and Maulsby Forrest were appointed trustees, with the latter nominated as president of the board of trustees. In accordance with the will, the trustees were given the authority to delegate a third. Emil J. Benson became the third trustee. Belle Cumming, the lady from Inverness, Scotland, and Riverbank's top sergeant for many years, continued to run the various daily activities until 10:50 PM on the night of May 12, 1946. On that evening, Belle Cumming, Elizabeth Gross, a visiting friend from New York, and Harriet Fowler, a companion, were riding into Geneva in Harriet Fowler's 1941 Pontiac. They stopped at the railroad crossing and waited for a local train to pull out of the station. Supposedly, it was the last train of the evening. As the last car of the local train passed, the car continued across the tracks and was struck by the oncoming Los Angeles Flyer; all three were killed. There were no gates or watchman at the time, and on this particular day, the Los Angeles train was unusually late, by 30 minutes. Many of the area residents would typically cross the tracks after 11:00 PM, after the local train pulled out,

Colonel Fabyan in his "Hell Chair."

without any thoughts of any more approaching trains until the following morning. The tragedy led to the hiring of a watchman, and eventually, crossing gates were installed. In any case, the Riverbank estate lost its primary caretaker. In line with this chapter's title, one could also ponder if besides the colonel, was it Adele Belle Cumming that made Riverbank or was it the other way around.

Paul Sabine.