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Prologue

The Robert Steele House is a modest dwelling whose history is intertwined with the social and economic growth of a small village named Greenville located in the Valley of Virginia. With the old north-south Valley Turnpike as its Main Street, Greenville was once a thriving marketplace and busy stage-coach stop located between Staunton and Lexington. In the late 1880s, the town reached its zenith, boasting two railroad lines, several mills, and a choice of fine hotels for its visitors.

The Robert Steele House fronts on Main Street and represents an early example of the vernacular brick structures which were once symbolic of American prosperity in the Valley. Soon after it was built, a center-hall floor plan was added; this modification marked the beginning of an era when the house transcended purely functional demands and became a center for social and leisure activity. This was an era when the Valley was evolving from its "backwoods" beginning to an established network of rural communities. Since its construction in 1829, the Robert Steele House has stood as a Greenville landmark throughout most of the town's two-hundred year history.

A wide range of people called the Robert Steele House their home. Robert Steele himself was a prominent farmer and entrepreneur. The house was later inhabited by father and son saddle-makers who designed and marketed their own patented "saddle-seat." Other owners included merchants, real estate speculators, and two physicians — one of whom was a key witness testifying on Cyrus McCormick's behalf

when his 1831 patent for the “reaper” was challenged. A Civil War veteran who served under Stonewall Jackson and later founded a summer resort in the Blue Ridge Mountains was one of its eccentric residents.

This is a chronicle of the many influences that shaped the building and evolution of the Robert Steele House. It is also a history of Augusta County, Greenville, and some of its people.