WILLIAM H. CORBETT

Born in 1916 in Arlington, Virginia, William H. Corbett, is the only child of Mildred Newman and Sewall Munson Corbett, an Army doctor with roots in Corbettsville, New York, as well as Virginia. His mother's family were also Virginians and his maternal ancestors include a Confederate artillery major and a judge on the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Raised on Army bases along the Mexican border, and in Hawaii, France, and North Carolina, Bill began college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill but quickly transferred to the United States Military Academy at West Point, where he graduated and was commissioned second lieutenant in 1938.

His first assignment was as a field artillery battery officer under one of the Army's legendary commanders, then-Colonel George Patton. Like Patton and other officers of the "Old Army," Lt. Corbett took on major responsibilities for the training of new recruits, and for the final transformation of the Army from horse soldiers to tank soldiers in the mobilization period from 1939-1942.

In 1943 he was transferred to West Point where he became a Professor of English and, at war's end, a Lt. Colonel. His next major assignment was in Japan from 1948 to 1951 where he was Chief of Prosecutors in the Eighth Army, Judge Advocate General Department, during General MacArthur's tenure as military governor. After service in the Korean War as an Artillery Operations Officer, he was stationed for five years at the Pentagon. Now a full colonel, he served under General Maxwell Taylor as Chief of long-range manpower planning and of army symbolism and terminology. His last tour was at Princeton University as Professor of Military Science. Almost immediately after retiring in 1961, Bill was recalled to active duty for a year to serve on a Department of Defense pay study, a post which led to a variety of senior personnel positions with the Civil Service Commission, from which he retired in 1974, having spent 40 distinguished years in federal service.

In 1962, Bill met and married Dr. Frances Ratchford, a psychotherapist with strong ties to northeastern Pennsylvania where her family owned a 150-acre farm. Confirmed lovers of gardens, Bill and Frances planted ambitious gardens (flowers first, then vegetables was their rule) in Virginia and Florida, and in the late seventies began talking about the possibility of living on the family farm that Frances had inherited. As the idea of a new home in Shickshinny began to cohere, they settled on several principles. First, chrome and Plexiglas were rejected in favor of wood and stone, using native materials and skills whenever possible. Second, the structure would be as self-sufficient as possible, heated by solar energy and a wood stove and employing an ingenious method of heat storage inspired by the cliff-dwelling Indians of the Southwest. Third, it would be comfortable, but not luxurious, spacious yet cozy, well-built and insulated. Fourth, and finally, the structure would be designed to make minimal demands on the environment. Although they did not say so, Bill and Frances had conceived their home as a moral exemplum, a house on a hill, indeed, a house built into a hill, that would inspire others to live in harmony with nature without undue sacrifice.

Bill and Frances drew up their own plans for what would be called the Corbett House and in 1980 construction began. The hull of the structure is made from 400 cubic yards of concrete bathed by a river of air warmed by the sun. The sun's rays hit the structure's southern exposure through eight-foot high glass windows which run almost ninety feet along its front. The air circulates freely and without any mechanical assistance around the concrete hull keeping the temperature between 63 and 73 degrees on most days.

A magnificent structure of 5,500 square feet and twenty rooms, Corbett House has oak floors, eight-and-a-half foot ceilings, a guest wing, indoor pool and hot tub and a stunning slate floored galleria filled with plants that is also the home's solar furnace. The front door is reached by climbing up a circular wooden staircase to a cupola perched on the earthen roof, which is covered...
with grass and wild flowers. Outside there is an extensive herb and flower garden, a four-acre pond and a Friendship Garden dedicated to Frances, who died in 1995.

It is the ultimate intention of Bill and Frances that the Ratchford Field Station and the Corbett House become part of the Wilkes University with the proviso that it be used for education related to environmental understanding and appreciation. This is now becoming a reality. At the Corbett House, the efficiency of the solar heating system has been studied by environmental engineering students. The surrounding 150 acres offer a rich natural laboratory where students study the complex relationships that exist in our environment, including the dynamic aquatic ecosystem associated with the pond, the organisms in the two surface streams and the flow of groundwater.

These experiences help Wilkes students learn to be field scientists and find environmental jobs after graduation. The Station and the House have become a vital resource to the University.

For his and his late wife's vision in creating an environmental oasis, a place of beauty, reflection, and harmony with nature, for his long service to the Republic, for his generosity and concern for the education of future generations, Wilkes University honors him today. It is, therefore, with great pleasure that I, by the power vested in me by the Board of Trustees of Wilkes University and by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania hereby confer upon you, William H. Corbett, the Doctorate of Science, Honoris Causa, with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereto.