

Newsletter

Orange County Historical Society

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The Passing of a Silent Sentinel

Frank S. Walker, Jr.

For as long as anyone alive can remember, an ancient Catalpa tree has been the most studied and remembered feature in the lawn of "Ellwood," the late-eighteenth century plantation house overlooking Wilderness Run at the eastern edge of the Wilderness battlefield. For one thing, the Catalpa's audience was attracted by its age. The tree was thought to have provided shade for William Jones and his workers as they built Ellwood, for subsequent generations of its slaves and owners, for the Marquis de Lafayette, for Light Horse Harry Lee, and later, for his son, Robert, for Reverend Lacy when he came to bury "Stonewall" Jackson's amputated left arm, for wounded Confederates, for Union generals, and for at least one President of the United States. As such, it was accorded the role of a "Witness Tree," similar to the ones described by poet Walt Whitman at Chatham.

For another thing, the Catalpa was clearly stricken. Doomed. Again, for as long as anyone could remember, it had grown at an approximate forty-five degree angle. Nothing is known of any storm or accident that triggered the near-disaster, but it was obvious that the tree was now doggedly fighting a battle for survival.

Finally, during the night of November 14, the Catalpa slumped to the ground, its long tour of duty finally over. The gnarled trunk was removed to a protected area where it awaits decisions on how the life and times of that ancient tree might best be remembered. During the removal, one preliminary ring count of 247 was made. That would put the Catalpa's beginnings back into the 1760s, as expected. Fortunately, a Florida nursery has been growing seedlings from the Ellwood Catalpa for a number of years, and one was donated to replace its ancestor.

Your Society pondered how best to express its sense of memory and of loss. It ultimately requested Steve Cushman, historian, member and oft-published poet, to speak for us, and he kindly consented to do so. His poem appears in conjunction with these notes. Thank you, Steve, so very much.

Catalpa blossom drawing courtesy of the USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / USDA NRCS. *Wetland flora: Field office illustrated guide to plant species*. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"Head with Wings"

Stephen B Cushman

It sounds like something
Catawba would say, but really it's Greek,
this word catalpa, the other name
for Indian Bean, cigar-shaped seedpods,
showy clusters of whitish flowers,
and hirsute leaves that can smell, when crushed,
somewhat foul, just as we can
in similar circumstances.

But it's Greek and means
head with wings, no doubt describing
the shape of its blossoms, bandage-colored
and open at Ellwood when Lacys lived here,
when the famous left arm came here to rest,
when Grant tried getting Warren to hurry,
and, through it all, what trees do best
it did, too, changing raw sunlight
to food through its leaves, sucking in carbon
the soldiers exhaled, thatching with green
the cloud-thatched sky. But cry?

Not that we know. That's our job,
along with remembering what it stood by
but never could feel the same way we do,
we whose heads history wings

to fly back and forth, ranging the past,
sailing through years without ever landing,
or rarely for long, since it only takes
an old tree falling, unnoticed in the night,
to launch us back there once again.



Message from the President

Lynne Lewis

It's hard to believe that another year has passed and that 2006 is now just a memory. Last year I began this message with "What a wonderful membership we have!" and this year is no different. The Historical Society has a terrific membership.

The year started off in grand style with Frank Walker's offering of six Saturday seminars on Orange County history. Using his book, *Remembering*, as a text, he took participants through our history from the Native Americans to the early 20th century. Each talk was very well attended, and newcomers to our area found them very informative. We owe Frank a hearty thank you for continuing to be such an important part of the Historical Society.

Our schedule of regular programs and picnics was also quite successful, with first-ever visits to Tetley and Greenway, and a much-delayed but grand visit to Oakley highlighting our picnic season. Program subjects ranged from the newly restored capitol building in Richmond to the funeral business in Orange County, with many fascinating stops in between. Especially noteworthy was the standing-room-only presentation by R. Duff Green on the history of the American Silk Mill, presented at the Silk Mill Grille.

On the nuts and bolts level, we were able to accomplish several important maintenance projects, including the painting of all exterior woodwork, and gutter/downspout repairs. The roof continues to be problematic, with a major leak discovered courtesy of Hurricane Ernesto (thankfully, it hasn't leaked again in that place). Needless to say, the roof will be our primary maintenance project during 2007.

Thanks to Grelen Nursery, Charlie & Mary Lou Seilheimer and Zan Thomas, the green screen between our south property line and our new neighbor was planted and thrives. Help from members of the Lake of the Woods chapter of the AARP enabled us to tidy our planting beds, and Anne Somerville

provided expert pruning of our shrubs. To top that off, our sidewalks and portico floor were washed clean by Treasurer, Jack Miller. I would be remiss in not thanking two other volunteers – two lovely cherry tomato plants that flourished in our front beds and were much appreciated by the staff! We hope to see them again next summer.

Under the able direction of Bernice and Frank Walker, this year's annual appeal was even more successful than last year's. Thanks to our most generous membership, we raised over \$14,000. And very dear to my heart was the wonderful donation to our endowment, made by Ted and Carolyn Scott. It is one of my fondest wishes to see the Historical Society increase the endowment substantially as I feel it is the key to sustaining the organization in the coming decades.

The other great key is membership. I say again that we have a wonderful group of people, from all over the country (and even one in Greece) supporting us in many ways, but we must focus on increasing that membership base. I look to 2007 and our Membership Committee to make a substantial increase in our numbers. Current members can help too. Bring a friend to a meeting, or encourage a newcomer to Orange County to attend (picnics are an especially attractive venue for introducing new folks to the Society). We are working on several ways to enhance our outreach, as you will learn over the course of the coming year, but word of mouth is still one of the best ways to let people know about us.

I would again like to thank our Board of Directors and staff for their fine efforts over the past year. Each one has contributed in a variety of ways, and without them the Society could not maintain the standard of excellence that it does.

Finally, I'd like to wish everyone a happy, healthy and glorious New Year!

Special Perks for Our Friends Over 70 ½

You know that every year you are required to take a minimum, taxable distribution from your IRA, thus setting you up to pay more taxes. Now there's a way out of that. Special IRS rules now allow individuals over 70 ½ to authorize contributions to be made to qualified recipients, such as your Historical Society, directly from their IRA. The contributions help support the recipients, count toward the required minimum distribution, and are not charged to the donor as taxable income. It's win-win-win. These special rules are temporary and only apply to contributions made between August 17, 2006, and the end of 2007. So, as the law stands, you can do it twice, once in 2006 and again in 2007.

As a general rule, you cannot also claim a charitable deduction for your contribution. There are some exceptions, but we'll

leave those details to you and your tax advisor. In many cases, however, an exclusion from income can be more valuable to a taxpayer than a deduction.

These special rules do not apply to 401(k) plans. However, if you wish, you can take your minimum 401(k) distribution this year and then roll over your remaining 401(k) funds into an IRA and take advantage of these provisions next year.

You also need to know that the total contribution amount that can qualify for this type of treatment is \$100,000 per taxpayer. You may rest assured that your Society will most gratefully understand that sum is all you are allowed to give.

If you think you qualify, make sure to talk to your accountant or tax advisor about details.

James Albert Spicer and His Mill by the Rapidan

Frank S. Walker, Jr.

Close to where Poplar Run empties into the Rapidan River in Orange County, Virginia, stands an old grist mill building. It has been decades since water last turned its wheel, and the structure was long ago converted into a picturesque residence. It is known locally as Spicer Mill or Spicer's Mill, and in the 1950s when Mr. and Mrs. Woodbury Ober developed the property adjacent to it, they appropriately named their project "Spicer Mill Farm."

We know that the Spicer namings refer to Mr. James Albert Spicer and that some of the oldest long-time residents of Orange County remember when several of his descendants still lived in the area. For most of us, however, "Spicer" exists only as a name. Who indeed was James Albert Spicer, and what is the story of his mill? We begin by calling him "Albert," the name he went by.

We are told that Albert's family arrived in the Virginia colony prior to the American Revolution in the persons of four Spicer brothers, all of whom settled in what is today Culpeper County. Albert's grandfather, one of the brothers, was Moses Spicer, and Moses wound up serving in the Continental Army during the Revolution. Moses both survived the war and lived to raise a family in the Slate Mills area of Culpeper County, a family that included three boys. One of those boys, Samuel Spicer, was Albert's father.

Following the Revolution, numerous mills were built and put into operation in this area, and milling may have already been a family trade before Samuel Spicer took it up. In any event, son Albert grew up in the trade, and by the time of the Civil War, the Confederate government considered seventeen-year-old Albert an essential civilian worker. Not only did he have to endure the stares and comments of a populace that thought *all* young men should be in uniform, Albert also had to wrestle with the anxiety of having an older brother, Walker Spicer, in the service. Albert was certain that Walker was going to become a hero at any moment while he was still at home, bagging flour.

As the war wore on, battlefield losses caused the Confederate government to rethink the status of people such as Albert, and he was finally deemed eligible for conscription. Also by then the realities of the war, especially for infantrymen, may have had an impression on Albert. For whatever reason, the records of the 43rd Battalion, Virginia Cavalry (Mosby's Rangers) show Albert enlisting as a private in its new artillery company in August 1864. His career with Mosby, however, was a short-lived one.

Mosby had been getting artillery during the summer of 1864. On July 28 he formed his artillery company, and Albert was soon in it. Albert and his guns served Mosby well, but only briefly. On October 14, 1864, while the guns were parked in hiding and awaiting a resupply of ammunition, the Federals captured them. By then the Confederate main army was under siege in its trenches around Petersburg, and Albert soon decided to go there and do what he could.

In the late fall of 1864, Albert transferred to Company "K" of the 7th Virginia Infantry, a regiment heavily populated with Culpeper men. In April 1865, when the Confederate lines were breached, Albert was captured and imprisoned at Point Lookout Maryland. Then in late June, he gave his oath of allegiance to the United States government and went home to pick up the pieces.

Albert's Civil War record is complicated by no less a personage than James Albert Spicer himself. As the years rolled by, he first became the last surviving Mosby's Ranger, then he became the last surviving Virginia Confederate Veteran. As he advanced into his 100s, he still demonstrated wit and vitality,



James Albert Spicer riding a spirited horse in the 1930 Main Street parade. Photo courtesy of R. Duff Green.



Painting of Spicer's Mill by Gary Spicer, a retired art teacher who is a descendant of James Albert Spicer.

Spicer (*continued*)

and reporters were continually knocking on his door to get a quick, interesting story. And Albert did not disappoint them. One has to believe that he knew he was dealing with people who, if they knew any Civil War history at all, were prepared to forget everything and write whatever he told them. We read that he lied about his age and joined at age sixteen (a year before the war started); that he participated in Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg (a year before he joined Mosby); that he had a harrowing experience after the Battle of Cedar Mountain (fought two years before he joined). We read that in prison camp he ate raw, salted cod on Christmas Day and watched 14,000 fellow prisoners die while he was there (he was a prisoner for less than ninety days in the spring of 1865). And so on. As he reeled off these stories, Albert was most surely amusing himself while amazing his hearers. When he died in 1948, a few months shy of his 104th birthday, he was probably still chuckling about those stories.

It is difficult to determine exactly when, following the Civil War, Albert left his family home at Slate Mills and moved to Twyman's Mill in Madison County. We do know that he married Virginia Battle Hume on August 22, 1875, and that a remembrance by one of his children is that he and his seven siblings were all born at Twyman's Mill. Possibly the marriage and move were close in time. In any event, Albert finally decided to leave Twyman's Mill and go rent the Widow Jones' mill in Orange County, the one beside the Rapidan.

Sarah Jones only wanted \$150 per year as rent for her mill, but then it was a small mill and not on a major road like the ones at Rapidan, Barnett's Ford and Liberty Mills. Even then, a good house and a large garden might have gone with the mill lease. As it turned out, Albert did well enough to want to buy the mill, and after Mrs. Jones' death and after the ensuing litigation was settled, he got his chance. On July 12, 1902, Albert bought the mill and six adjacent acres. It had been a long wait, but it was now his.

Albert was fifty-eight years old by the time the mill became his, but he was an active, able worker. As late as 1930, when the Reunion of the Confederate Veterans of Virginia was held at Orange, he, at age eighty-six, was able to ride a "spirited" horse in the big parade up Main Street. He was slowing down, however, and it was sometime around then that he got some members of the Higgins family on the adjacent farm to help him. Fred Higgins, who now owns that farm, recalls being told that Albert, then a widower, eventually moved in to live with the Higgins family for a few years before moving to Washington to live with his daughter. He died on February 9, 1948, a few months before his 104th birthday, leaving as one of his legacies to history his Spicer's Mill beside the Rapidan River.

The Orange Post Office Mural: Art and History

Laura Thompson



Laura Thompson

Next time you enter the Orange Post Office, look up and to your left. You will see a large painting or mural of pastured horses. The work, titled "Upland Pastures," was completed in 1937 by New York City artist Arnold Friedman (1874-1946) as part of a New Deal program.

We feel very fortunate that a skilled, and generous, restoration artist has offered to clean and restore the mural for \$1,800. If you would like to see this local treasure restored, please send your donation, marked "PO Mural" to The Arts Center In Orange, P.O. Box 13, Orange, VA 22960, or to the Orange County Historical Society, 130 Caroline Street, Orange, VA 22960.

To learn more about Virginia Post Office Murals, visit:
<http://www.wpamurals.com/virginia.htm>

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Bring Us Your Tired, Your Outmoded, Your Unwanted Cell Phones!

A collection box has been placed at the Historical Society's Research Center for retired cell phones. After a sufficient number of phones are collected, they will be sent off for recycling, and the Society will receive a small remuneration for each qualifying phone. The amount depends on the model of cell phone, and certain older ones will not qualify for money. However, you will still be doing a good deed by sending them to be recycled. Be sure to erase all names, numbers and other information before you drop off the phone.

Telling the Untold Story: Jayne E. Blair's Research Experience

John Floyd

This is the first in what may be an intermittent series on the perspective each speaker brings to the subject matter presented at Orange County Historical Society meetings and the perspective of their source materials and the people assisting in their research.

Jayne E. Blair, Senior Tour Guide at Montpelier and author of *The Essential Civil War*, spoke at the November meeting of the Orange County Historical Society about her recently released book *Tragedy at Montpelier: The Untold Story of Ten Confederate Deserters*. Blair's subtitle is appropriate because the story is one that has not been told and some would prefer was not told at all. The atmosphere in which history is told is as true or truer a part of the story than the so-called facts of "what really happened." As Blair researched material for her book she encountered presenters of history (tour guides and docents) whose perspective on the past would offer a different version of history than that at which she arrived.

Blair described the un-illustrious careers of North Carolina troops charged with desertion who were executed at Montpelier by their unit. Their flight came at a time when Confederate losses due to desertion had reached a breaking point. Recruitment was down, appeals for deserters to return were being routinely ignored, and the Confederacy was desperate to keep soldiers in the field. While the motives of the men executed are lost to history, Blair pondered whether they were traitorous deserters or just weary and homesick men. She notes they were committed to abandoning the cause, leaving as a group and fighting against capture when challenged. We do know that faced with a war losing popularity, newspapers from their homes were calling upon men to desert, saying their conscription had been illegal. This is an ominous perspective when you think about what appears in the newspapers today.

During her research Blair encountered attempts to present history as single faceted. Visiting Montpelier as a tourist, she heard from a head tour guide (the position Blair now holds) that the home was a neutral zone during the Civil War. Blair's inquiries about the Civil War period at Montpelier had been answered with, "there wasn't one." Curious about this omission, she persisted and was informed that the President of the United States had declared the homes of former presidents to be neutral zones and the soldiers respected this. While this curious comment came as the opinion of an individual and not an official Montpelier statement, that is not the sort of distinction a casual visitor would make. It may be the tour guide felt Montpelier history was about James Madison and the Constitution alone, a position we would recognize as rather ironic in the context of the current research on the Civil War period at Montpelier.

In another setting, while Blair was tracking down the previous lives of the men executed, a genealogy society docent literally closed the books and showed her the door when it became apparent that the ten men whose history she was pursuing were not heroes but in fact deserters who had been executed by their own unit for their crimes. Confederate soldiers were

heroes and it wouldn't do to suggest otherwise.

But what is Blair's perspective? What lens colors her view of history? Many look at the American Civil War through a blue or a gray lens and see nobility or baseness of action accordingly. It is interesting and appropriate that the North is hardly mentioned in her lecture except to place events in the larger time frame of the war, because she is exploring a Southern affair handled internally. Blair comes to Orange to speak and write about the Civil War, Montpelier, and our past, but not as a native or a southerner. She does not evoke the noble cause of the Confederacy but she does not denounce it either.

Blair seems more concerned about the warriors than war and she brings passion to the subject of deserters being executed at Montpelier. She seems to have a true concern, both about the humanity of the men shot dead and the men who had to do it. Blair's career path was not in academic history but military and police work. She began in the United States Navy and she retired from the Dallas Police Department. With her background in service it is possible she recognized types of men she knew there and Blair successfully transformed the deserters from statistics on a ledger sheet into weary, homesick men and boys like those sent off to war today.

History of Funeral Businesses in Orange Presented at October Meeting

At our October membership meeting, Gail Marshall, past president and current board member, gave a presentation on "Funeral Businesses in Orange." The meeting was attended by representatives of the Johnson's, Satchell's, and Preddy's funeral homes, and what, on first impression, might have sounded like difficult material to expound upon produced a very interesting evening. The term "undertaker" we learned was initially used to refer to any contractor who performed some sort of service, such as house building. As time passed, the word became descriptive for persons in the funeral business, with "funeral director" now becoming the preferred term. We also learned that funeral homes and public cemeteries are relatively modern developments in the world of funereal practices. Burials from home or church in rural family cemeteries were the rule before the second half of the 19th century. The elaborate, two-and-a-half-year mourning procedure followed by ladies of the Victorian era was noted. Among the items exhibited, a cooling table, mourning jewelry, and photographs of ornate, horse-drawn hearses drew the greatest attention. All in all, Ms. Marshall provided a most interesting and instructive presentation on a little discussed topic.

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Orange, VA 22960

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Orange County History Seminar

Lynne Lewis

Did you miss one or two of Frank Walker's wonderful talks on Orange County history this past winter? Are you new to our fair County, or did you, perhaps, miss the entire six-part seminar? Well, we have the great good fortune to be able to announce that Frank will again present his seminar on Orange County History. The talks will occur on six Saturday mornings, from February 3 through March 10. To accommodate our members who live in eastern Orange County, the seminar will be held at the Lake of the Woods Church. So please keep this upcoming event in mind, and if you know of any newcomers to the County, make sure to bring them with you – it's free and an excellent, entertaining way of learning about their new home.

Annual Meeting

The 2007 annual membership meeting of the Orange County Historical Society will be held on Sunday, January 28, 2007 from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the St. Thomas Episcopal Church Parish Hall. John Amos, a life-long Orange County resident who teaches English at St. Anne's-Belfield in Charlottesville, will make a brief presentation on his remembrances of his youth in Orange. Many of you may have heard Mr. Amos' wonderful radio essays on WVTF, and we are delighted that he has agreed to speak to us. In addition, the election of Board members will be held and a brief annual report presented. This is an important meeting, so we encourage everyone who can to attend. Light refreshments will be served.

Note: The next program meeting after the January 28th annual meeting will be held on **Sunday**, March 25, 2007.

Remember to Renew Your Membership for 2007

Please remember to renew your Membership for 2007 in the Orange County Historical Society. In early December you should have received a reminder notice, in which we also asked for your name and mailing information (including your e-mail address) as you wish for it to appear in our records. The completed form, along with your dues payment (checks may be made payable to "OCHS") should be mailed or delivered to The Orange County Historical Society at 130 Caroline Street, Orange, VA 22960. You may also renew online at *orangecovahist.org*. Your membership is an important indication of support when we apply for such things as project grants. It also allows us to provide you with notice of our meetings, educational programs, summer picnics, our newsletters, a 10% discount on our publications, discounts on copying services at our Research Center, and the opportunity to have queries placed on our web site.

Thank you very much to those who have already renewed!

The OCHS membership year is from January through December. The deadline for renewal is March 1, 2007. Our annual membership levels include:

- Individual \$20
- Student (college or high school) \$12.50
- Family \$30
- Sustaining \$100
- Patron \$200
- Sponsor \$300

The Orange County Historical Society is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Your membership fees and contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.