Orange County Economy through Time–An Overview
Our Future is Our Past!
by Frank Walker

An short overview of OC's economy as cited by Frank Walker in the Orange County Historical Society *Newsletter*, Vol. 40, No. 2, (Summer 2009), 3 is as follows:

"When serious development of the Virginia uplands began in the early 1700s, the north-central Piedmont was quickly spotted as a place where shakers and movers could accomplish things. Roads from the deep water docks along the Rappahannock pierced the forests along the Rapidan River. Trees were felled, fields cleared, and houses and mills built.

"The Southwest Mountain slopes with their fertile soils attracted the ever-acquisitive Taylors and the hard-working Madisons, while the broad ford at Germanna where riders could cross four abreast attracted the commerce-minded Spotswoods. James Taylor's 'Bloomsbury,' Ambrose Madison's 'Mount Pleasant' (the name would become 'Montpelier' later), and Alexander Spotswood's 'Enchanted Castle' all housed smart and impatient people with grand plans for themselves, their colony, and their new nation.

"It was no accident then that the proposed formation of their Orange County in 1734 was seen as the means by which the expansionist-minded French would have their Mississippi and Ohio River development challenged. It was no accident that the ride of Spotswood and the Knights of the Golden Horseshoe began and ended at Germanna. It was no accident that Montpelier's operations were prosperous enough to allow James Madison to undertake a career in public service, a service that brought him immortality as the 'Father of the Constitution.'

"While western Orange County initially found its prosperity in farming, eastern Orange County found its prosperity by digging. First it was iron ore, the smelting of which brought about the Wilderness. Then it was gold, all the way up into the twentieth century. Knowing how to find and utilize the best available soils, as William Jones did at 'Ellwood,' showed that farming successfully in eastern Orange County was possible, but not automatic.

"A pass through the Southwest Mountains first attracted the county seat of Orange, then it attracted the second of four railroads. That railroad, the Orange and Alexandria, was the first to reach the pass. The railroad boom also spawned turnpike and plank road construction, as farmers, manufacturers, and merchants sought access to rail centers, the busiest of which was Gordonsville in western Orange County. The railroad boom,

however, had its dark side, because Civil War armies soon followed the railroad corridors. Orange County found itself the scene of everything from a minor cavalry fight in Main Street Orange to the initial engagement and ensuing grinding struggle of the Battle of the Wilderness.

"After the Civil War, the railroad boom returned, with the Town of Orange being the regional focal point this time. By the early 1900s, the town and the region were adopting the newfangled automobile as quickly as good roads could be found. World War II saw the area's roads, railroads, farms, factories, shops, and stores busier than they had ever been before–and a lot busier than they have been since.

"Something of a pall settled over the Orange County region during the last half of the twentieth century. The ambitious spirit of theTaylors, Madisons, and Spotswoods had finally run its course, and nothing seemed to be taking its place. With the rebirth of Montpelier in the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, an idea appears to be taking hold: Our future is our past! The earliest glimpses of a regional tourism industry are appearing. There Is a lot of unbelievably hard work to do (not the least of which is getting ourselves organized), but a start is being made."