

# The Orange County Historical Society

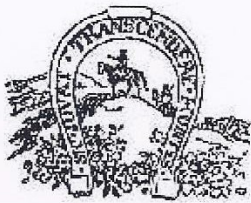


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## A Brief History of Orange County, Virginia

Established in 1734, Orange County is named in honor of William, Prince of Orange, who in that year married Anne, Princess Royal of England. Rich in history, it has the distinction of having been the largest Virginia county ever formed. Orange covered a vast territory extending from its present eastern boundary west to the Mississippi River and north to the Great Lakes. The states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia were once part of Orange County. Over time, its boundaries have contracted to an elongated county of approximately 37 miles by 17 miles.

In 1710, Lieutenant Governor Alexander Spotswood was sent from England to take charge of the Virginia colony. In 1714, he settled a group of German immigrants on the banks of the Rapidan River in what is now a part of eastern Orange County. He also built a palatial home there, with both the settlement and his home being called "Germaina." At the time, Germaina represented the western frontier for English settlement in the New World.



In 1716, Spotswood led an expedition from Germaina westward over the Blue Ridge Mountains, a venture designed to publicize the fact that the mountains were passable and that rich lands lay beyond. The expedition succeeded in re-igniting the westward expansion of the colony and contributed significantly to the ultimate settling of America. The persons of wealth and power who accompanied Spotswood were dubbed by him "Knights of the Golden Horseshoe," many of whom figured prominently in later Virginia history.

A wide variety of mineral deposits were discovered in the county, including iron ore, which Spotswood successfully mined. In 1732, William Byrd II visited Germaina to inspect Spotswood's mines and furnaces, penning a glowing report on the economic progress there. Byrd was also impressed by Spotswood's home, which he called the "Enchanted Castle," the name by which its remains are known today. In later years, gold was mined commercially in Orange County, with one mine continuing in operation until 1937.

In 1722, King George I awarded a patent of 8,500 acres to James Taylor II, a former Knight of the Golden Horseshoe. Much of today's Town of Orange lies within that tract. Taylor soon established a successful plantation and built his home, "Bloomsbury." Two of Taylor's great-grandsons became Presidents of the United States: Zachary Taylor, who was born in the county, and James Madison, the "Father of the Constitution," for whom "Montpelier" in Orange County was his lifelong home. Since the 1930s, Montpelier has hosted, on the first Saturday in November, the Montpelier Hunt Races, a Virginia Horse Country show piece event.

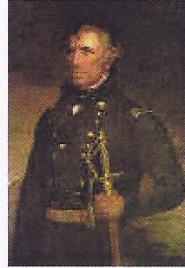
The only significant actions of the American Revolution which took place in Orange County were a British raid, which terrorized the present day Antioch Church area for several days, and Lafayette's march through the county in 1781. The route Lafayette took is still called the "Marquis Road." Men from the county played significant roles in the war, initially as members of the Culpeper Minute Men. The Minute Men helped win the Battle of Great Bridge, the first Revolutionary battle fought on Virginia



soil.



**James Madison**



**Zachary Taylor**

Orange County's James Madison was instrumental in the drafting and ratification of the U.S. Constitution and in the drafting and adoption of its Bill of Rights amendments. Madison's historic Orange County conference with Baptist Elder John Leland helped inspire the religious freedom language of the First Amendment. Madison served as America's President during the War of 1812, at the same time Orange County's James Barbour was serving as Governor of Virginia.

While the War of 1812 had little direct impact upon the county, the War Between the States was a very different matter. Orange County and the surrounding area was the stage for many Civil War engagements and events, including a cavalry battle fought in the streets of the Town of Orange in 1862. Early on, the Confederates began to develop a defensive line along Orange County's Rapidan River boundary in order to protect both a major hospital facility at Gordonsville and a strategic transportation network which existed in the county.



In November 1863, Federal General George Meade and his Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan into eastern Orange County during the Mine Run Campaign. General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia blocked the Federal threat, and Lee and his army then spent the winter of 1863-64 quartered in Orange County behind the Rapidan defensive line. While stationed there, the General and many of his staff worshiped at St. Thomas' Church in the Town of Orange.

The following May, the Union army, now accompanied by General U. S. Grant, again crossed the Rapidan into the Wilderness of eastern Orange County and into what became one of the war's bloodiest battles. The Battle of the Wilderness was a tactical draw, but Grant employed his superior resources to continue attacking out of Orange County towards Richmond and, ultimately, to Appomattox.

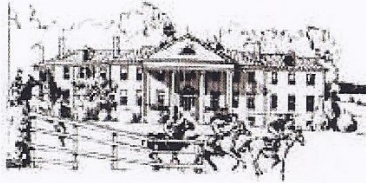


With Orange County in the Tobacco Belt, slavery remained an important labor system right up to the Civil War. Even so, the "peculiar institution" characteristically involved only a few slaves per owner, with slave owners being a minority of the county's population. Following the Civil War, many freed slaves remained in the county. Initially, most lived in "freedman's villages," a few of which survive to this day. Some former slaves became tenant farmers, others acquired their own land to farm or worked at various trades.

In addition to Alexander Spotswood, who served as Colonial Governor from 1710 to 1722, Governors James Barbour (1812-1814), James L. Kemper (1874-1878), and J. Lindsay Almond (1958-1962), all lived in Orange County at various times during their lives. Like Madison, Barbour was

a life-long resident of the county, and the ruins of his Jefferson-designed home are now a feature of the internationally known Barboursville Winery.

Even as we enter the 21st Century agriculture remains a significant part of the County's economy. For example, there are more acres of wine grapes grown here than in any other county in Virginia.



Orange County's current contributions to our now large and populous Nation are comparatively more modest than those of its earlier days. Its history, however, and its scenic beauty continue to make it interesting and attractive to present-day residents and visitors alike. The serious researcher will discover that the County's public records are complete from the county's creation in 1734 to the present. For the interested visitor, there are tours, presentations, and collections available to present the County's rich heritage.

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