

Fort Germanna and the Enchanted Castle

From Frank Walker in *Remembering*:

“In 1914, before any settlement of this part of Virginia had begun, Lieutenant Governor Alexander Spotswood established a colony of German indentured servants at Germanna. He built Fort Germanna on militarily defensible high ground overlooking the ford, its name combining the nationality of its inhabitants with that of Queen Anne, England’s monarch from 1602 to 1714. At the time Spotswood established Germanna, it was both the westernmost settlement in British America and the first in Virginia beyond the Tidewater.

“By the mid-1700s, long trains of wagons were rumbling through the Rapidan shallows at Germanna on their way to and from the Fairfax lands. One destination was the settlement of Fairfax, which Culpeper County’s first surveyor, seventeen-year-old George Washington, would formally lay off in 1749. (In 1870, its name was changed to ‘Culpeper.’) The Germanna of 1714 was located on the Orange County side of the Rapidan, just east of today’s Route 3 bridge. The fort and its Germans have been gone for almost three centuries, but the commercial development of the Germanna Corridor has obviously taken on a life of its own.¹

“Spotswood did not rely solely on the popularity of the ford at Germanna to put his settlement on the map of important places in British America. In 1720, when Spotsylvania County was being formed, he made sure that Germanna was its county seat. A few years later he completed his palatial Georgian home there, the structure which William Byrd II subsequently dubbed ‘the Enchanted Castle.’

“Fort Germanna’s five-sided palisade compound probably mimicked the design of the rebuilt fort of the Jamestown settlement, and it served as the gateway to the Virginia Piedmont, much as Fort James had served as the gateway to the Virginia Tidewater. The Germanna site remained popular long after a fort was no longer needed. Up on that knoll now are the remains of the Gordon house, a structure which was standing during the Civil War. One corner of the Gordon house intrudes onto the site of the remains of Spotswood’s Enchanted Castle. Beneath a corner of Enchanted Castle, archaeologists have found a palisade trench, a ditch in which split logs had been set, like fence posts, to make a wooden fort wall. Probably a wall of old Fort Germanna, but more digging is needed to be sure. Beneath the palisade trench are likely to be any number of Native

¹ Frank Walker, *Remembering: A History of Orange County* (Orange, Virginia: Orange County Historical Society, 2004), 46.

American settlements. It is a fabulously rich archaeological site, awaiting workers—and lots and lots and lots of money.

“Germanna was also the headquarters for Spotswood’s iron mining and smelting operations. The settlement continued to support that industry after the removal of the Spotsylvania county seat to Fredericksburg and the formation of Orange County. The gold mining boom in the area during the first half of the nineteenth century also spurred Germanna’s growth. Even after all that quieted down, Germanna was still a thriving rural commercial center, spread out on both sides of the Rapidan in the vicinity of the old ford. If a person had told Spotswood that his Germanna was destined to disappear from the face of the earth, he would have had every reason to refuse to believe it. Yet that is exactly what happened during the Civil War.”

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**From The Historical Marker Database Website:
The Enchanted Castle**



Photographed By Devry Becker Jones ([CCO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)), April 17, 2021
Erected by the Germanna Foundation

"Then I came to Germanna. This famous town consists of Col. Spotswood's enchanted castle on one side of the street, and a baker's dozen of ruinous tenements on the other, where so many German families had dwelt some years ago."

— William Byrd II, *The Westover Manuscripts*

“Around 1720, Virginia's Lt. Governor, Alexander Spotswood, had the wooden walls of the 1714 Fort removed to make space for constructing a new mansion for himself. It was to be the center of his vast landholdings which included several plantations, his 'Tubal' Iron Works, forests for lumber and fuel, as well as shipping operations at Massaponax on the Rappahannock River.

“Spotswood's stately mansion stood out on the frontier. The house was built with local stone for its foundations and fired clay brick walls. The exterior was decorated with richly carved sandstone and even had slate shingles for the roof.

“A town grew up around the mansion. The town of Germanna served as Spotsylvania County's first county seat from 1721-1728.

“In 1732, William Byrd II visited Spotswood's Germanna home and called it an 'Enchanted Castle.' The name stuck. At the time the house was one of the first privately held Georgian style homes in North America. Its location on Virginia's frontier was 20 miles west of all other English settlements.

“Spotswood died in 1740. His widow, Butler Brayne, stayed in the house with her children until she remarried. Alexander's son John lived at Germanna until 1748, when he moved to another family home.

“Archaeologists determined that the Enchanted Castle burned to the ground sometime around 1750. They found the remains of the Enchanted Castle in the late 1960s. A variety of excavations were carried out at the site starting in the 1960s and continuing through 1995.

“The Germanna Foundation took over stewardship of the property in 2013 and stabilized the Enchanted Castle Site protecting it for future generations.”

Timeline:

“1720: Spotswood removes the fort's palisade walls to make space to build a Georgian style mansion. William Byrd II later calls it the "Enchanted Castle."

1720s: Spotswood's Tubal Furnace, east of Germanna, begins operations.

- 1721:** Spotswood succeeds in making Germanna the county seat for newly formed Spotsylvania County.
- 1726:** The Second Colony moves from Germanna to Madison County, Virginia, where they receive land patents.
- 1740:** Alexander Spotswood dies.

Alexander Spotswood's Enchanted Castle Marker



Photographed By Devry Becker Jones ([CC0](#)), April 17, 2021

- 1742:** Spotswood's widow, Butler Brayne, marries the Reverend John Thompson.
- 1748:** Spotswood's son, John, moves away from Germanna. He died in 1758 and in 2002, his remains were reburied in the Germanna Memorial Garden.
- 1750:** The Enchanted Castle burns to the ground around this time.
- 1757:** Rev. John Thompson and Butler Brayne complete construction of Salubria.”²

² Author Unknown. “Alexander Spotswood’s Enchanted Castle.” *The Historical Marker Database*, Google, Accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=171395>.

“The English Colony of Virginia survived its rough start at Jamestown. By 1710, Virginia was ready to push its boundaries and expand. Virginia Lt. Governor Alexander Spotswood saw a need to defend Virginians from Indian threats, slave uprisings and the French. In 1714, he had two forts built to guard the colony's frontiers.

“Fort Christanna, set in what today is Brunswick County, protected the southern edge of Virginia's settlements. The five-sided Fort Germanna, built along the Rapidan River, guarded the northern settlements.

“Fort Germanna was strategically placed above the fall line that separates the Piedmont from the tidewater regions of Virginia. The Piedmont—the region between the coastal plain and the Appalachian Mountains—is only 44 miles across at the northern end of Virginia. Fort Germanna sat right at the center of the corridor between the Mountains and the English settlements.

“In the spring of 1714, Spotswood settled Fort Germanna with 42 German immigrants—men, women, and children. They came from a region of Germany long known for mining silver and iron. These German families were to be a buffer on the frontiers of the British Empire. Living at Germanna, they began building a settlement and started searching for iron that Spotswood would use in his new iron industry.

“Spotswood visited the Fort in 1716. He and a group of colonial gentlemen stayed at the fort for five days before setting out with Indian guides, rangers and servants on the ‘Knights of the Golden Horseshoe Expedition’ across the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“In 1717, Spotswood brought in a second group of German immigrants. This group, comprised of approximately 80 German immigrants, was indentured to Spotswood for seven years. By 1718, the community at Germanna numbered as many as 200 inhabitants. It had already outgrown the small frontier fort.

“Where did the name Germanna come from?”

The name Germanna, selected by Lt. Governor Alexander Spotswood, reflected both the group of German immigrants who sailed across the Atlantic to Virginia and were settled here and the British Queen Anne, who reigned at the time the outpost was established here in 1714.

Timeline:

- “ <**1607**: Native Americans have occupied the Americas for the previous 21,000 years.
- 1607**: The English colony of Jamestowne is established and, against all odds, survives.
- 1710**: Alexander Spotswood arrives in Virginia to begin serving as Lt. Governor for the Virginia Colony.
- 1714**: Lt. Governor Alexander Spotswood builds Fort Christanna and Fort Germanna in the shape of a pentagon.
- 1714: Spotswood settles 42 German immigrants from villages near Siegen, in North Rhine Westphalia, Germany at Fort Germanna, the westernmost outpost of colonial Virginia.
- 1716**: Spotswood sets out from Fort Germanna for the Knights of the Golden Horseshoe Expedition over the Blue Ridge Mountains.
- 1717**: Approximately 80 German immigrants from the Kraichgau area of Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany are brought to Fort Germanna under a seven year indenture.
- 1719**: First group of German-speaker's indenture ends and they move north to Germanna Town in Fauquier County, Virginia.

“The first evidence of the ruined Fort Germanna was found by archaeologists in 1992. This is a small section of the fort's wall—the trench that once held the wooden palisade. Note the shape of the palisade's post. The shape suggests two things. First, it indicates that rather than full logs these were split logs. Second, it was common to leave the bark on the posts that were facing "outside." This suggests that the inside of the fort is to the bottom of the picture and the outside of the fort is to the top.”³

³ Author Unknown. “Fort Germanna: A Fort for German Settlers on the Colonial Frontier.” *The Historical Marker Database*, Google, Accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=193348>

From *Encyclopedia Virginia*:

Fireback from Germanna



Credit: [Virginia Museum of History and Culture](#)

Original Author:
Unknown

Created: ca. 1730

Medium: Iron
fireback

“This circa 1730 cast-iron fireback is decorated at center with a crowned [Native American] princess, a figure based on one of Virginia’s colonial seals. Found during excavations at the site of Lieutenant Governor Alexander Spotswood’s mansion in Germanna...the fireback was probably made from iron manufactured in the ironworks he had established there. Spotswood built the South’s first ironworks and imported

Germans with mining and manufacturing skills to man it; thus, the community they lived in, which was the most westerly settlement in Virginia at the time, was called Germanna.

“A fireback was not just a decorative piece. The panel of thick iron was placed at the back of a fireplace, and once it was heated by fire, it would radiate warmth back into the room.”⁴

⁴ Author Unknown. “Fireback from Germanna.” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Google, Accessed March 12, 2023, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/579hpr-a4d1faf797f214e/>