Essex County Historical Society

ESSEX COUNTY 1692

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"Where There's a Will There's a Way"

The wisdom of this time honored adage has been amply illustrated in several consecutive generations of a family of "Wills", beginning with William Alexander Taliaferro. Of Italian Scottish, and Spanish ancestry, this early emigrant to Virginia settled in Gloucester County. His home is still standing there. He married Catherine Boulware, daughter of Lord Boulware of England.

Their son, Dr. William Taliaferro, married Catherine Ryland and lived at "Marlbank" in King and Queen County. He was much beloved by his patients in that locality and also in Tappahannock where he practiced later.

The next William Taliaferro was born in 1880 at "Marlbank" and during a long, remarkable career contributed to the development of Essex County by the power of his will to succeed and standards of excellence in all his undertakings.

His business life began in the late 19th century when a kinswoman, Mrs. E. G. Kidd, needed his help. She had begun making pickles in her kitchen in Richmond and selling them to earn a little income, known as "pin money" in those times. Her product became so popular that to meet the demand the PIN MONEY PICKLE CO. was formed and production in volume was moved to 1500 West Marshall Street. Soon, obtaining a sufficient quantity of the proper variety of the small, prickley burr gherkins needed became difficult. Always capable of "thinking big", young Will Taliaferro went right to work on a solution.

He organized farmers in Essex and the four surrounding counties to begin cultivating acres of gherkins. At harvest time the crops were brought in horse drawn wagons to the brining stations which he set up in strategic locations within a 50 mile radius. The fruits had to be preserved promptly in a salt solution before being shipped to the pickle factory. This system worked so well that Will found himself firmly entrenched in the business of supplying the raw material for many manufacturers besides The Pin Money Pickle Co.

Then tragedy struck. At 21 years of age William was blinded by a stray shotgun blast from a poacher on the "Marlbank" property. That could have been the end of this story. But it is only the beginning. He lost his eyesight but not his Vision. His intelligence, independent spirit, pride, and perseverance enabled him to see endless possibilities.

Before the accident he had been planning to marry Daisy Chapman and make a home for his bride. Daisy wouldn't let anything change this plan except that for a while after the wedding they would still call "Marlbank" home. She was as capable and energetic as Will and made his scholarly pursuits possible by reading to him.

Will considered the land to be the most essential element in his operations. He didn't hesitate to acquire poor land and make it pay for itself, improving the soil by analyzing it and providing what it lacked until it was rich enough to grow excellent quality crops in abundance. To keep it in production year-round he began to develop stock herds, breeding only the finest Angus cattle, sheep, hogs and mules.

Will had gone to school in a house called "Oakalona". It had the distinction of having served as General Robert E. Lee's army headquarters for several months at a time during the Civil War. Judge Blakey was a prominent citizen in Essex, a family friend, and very fond of Will. When the young husband and his wife decided that they would like to live at "Oakalona", the Judge lent them some money to buy the property. Will and Daisy moved from "Marlbank" and began to develop the farm, eventually acquiring additional adjacent acreage. They established gardens, an orchard, cultivated berries and grapes, and then watermelons, cantaloupes, and citron melons to meet the increasing demand for the rind by pickle and fruit cake makers.

The first of will and Daisy's children, William Jefferson, was born at "Marlbank". There would be five more sons and three daughters born at "Oakalona": Trent Garnett, Robert Ryland, Samuel Spottswood, Oscar Bryan, Andrew Broadus, Daisy, Nina Catherine, and Phoebe.

"Oakalona" once again became the scene of academic endeavor when Miss Bessie Taliaferro, Will's sister, taught as many as fifteen children, Taliaferro's and neighbors', there. Eventually the county took responsibility for the education of the young in that area. An old house was rented for a school building and Aunt Bessie was hired as the teacher. When the student population outgrew that, the county put up $500.00 toward a new school. The neighbors contributed enough more money to build a school with a rolling partition to divide it into two rooms. Will was a major participant in these developments. He cooperated with his colored friends and neighbors to establish the first high school for them in the county. At Dedication Day ceremonies he was honored for his part in this progress. Three years later the Lloyds High School was built, due in part to his efforts. When the telephone first became available for general use he had poles cut from timber on his land and set at proper intervals along the five mile trail from Occupatia to Hustle for the lines to be installed by the telephone company.

According to an account by James Latimer, published in the Business and Industry section of the March 9, 1941 Richmond Times Dispatch, in 1910 the increasing volume of mail generated by Will's enterprises indicated the need for a post office in the section of Essex County where "Oakalona" is located. The U. S. Postal Service Officer in charge of establishing the new facility had to choose a name for it. The neighborhood consensus was that the indefatigable efforts of Mr. William Taliaferro, it's most well-respected and ever "hustling" citizen, justified calling the addition to the map of Essex "Hustle" in his honor.

By the time Will's second son, Trent was four years old he was his father's almost constant companion, serving as his "eyes" as he moved about tending to his wide-spread projects. From the beginning in his role as his father's "right hand man" he was learning self reliance, a sense of responsibility and the best way to accomplish whatever was required. When he was six he could drive a mule to plow and cultivate a field. He drove the buggy to take Will to Tappahannock on Court Days and waited, listening to the proceedings and conversations which were sometimes heated and argumentative but always informative. The man and boy often stayed overnight at Mr. and Mrs. Robinson's hotel on the river front. That kind lady tended to spoil the youngster with special attention and treats. Once she complimented his nice overcoat. He proudly announced, "This isn't my overcoat. It belongs to my big brother". Bought for the first boy it was worn by whichever one needed it at any special time. Trent learned to drive the family's first automobile, a 1920 Ford touring car.

Soon business required that Trent accompany his father more and more. They both enrolled in correspondence courses and worked as a team, putting into practice the skills they were learning. One such was a course in Electricity. Trent helped to wire their home. His job was to drill a hole in each of the floor joists in every room of the house. There were so many that he never wanted to do such a thing again. The team attended lectures in Fredericksburg, Norfolk, and Richmond on Salesmanship. The instructor was a Mr. Mitch from Minnesota. Father and son were greatly impressed by his messages and his delivery. He, in turn, was impressed by the brilliant blind man and bright enthusiastic young son. Trent was a "star" pupil and acted as a model in all his classes to demonstrate the techniques being taught.

As a result of those contacts they were offered a franchise to sell J. R. Watkins Co. products in Essex and Middlesex counties. They covered their territory house-to-house once every sixty days, delivering merchandise, collecting payments, and taking new orders for the next trip. If they didn't make a Watkins sale they might pick up an order for a load of hogs – or both. They carried their Watkins inventory of extracts, patent medicines, cosmetics, and household necessities in a cabinet in the back of a 1923 Ford roadster. On week-ends Trent drove the roadster for his social activities or delivered the pigs in a Model-A pick-up truck. The salesmen developed a silent signaling system when taking orders. Since Will couldn't see the customers' facial expression and read body language to judge the level of interest or determine how much money was in view, Trent had to subtilely indicate when it was time to push for another item on the order or close out the sale. They were top volume salesmen in Watkins territories on the east coast during the four years they held the Watkins franchise.

Will earned such a reputation for his agricultural success that the county agent arranged for him to speak to high school students to stimulate their interest in farming as a career. He helped them form clubs to study and promote special phases of farming. Father and son travelled all over the county buying pure-bred stock for young farmers to start herds. Will worked with Dr. Hutcheson of the V. P. I. Extension Service developing improved seeds and grains for better crops. Will represented the National Canners Association, the National Pickle Packers Association, and the National Association of Angus Cattle Breeders. He and Trent attended industry conventions and conferences all over the county. For many years Trent drove an average of 90,000 miles each year.

The Taliaferro family acquired more and more acreage. The brothers worked during vacations from school and college. They built barns as fast as they could to accommodate the expanding herds. They needed huge amounts of fencing and bought nails by the barrels for the stables and pens. As they finished college they helped their father in some of his businesses, each one contributing his individual talents and special expertise. Their ingenuity and know-how enabled them to solve many problems by designing and making tools, machinery, and equipment for efficient processing of pickle ingredients. Several had successful careers outside the family and several served in the Military during World War II.

When Trent was a young man living at home and juggling a schedule that included all the business activities of the weekdays and selling new Chevrolets or transporting pigs and other stock on Saturdays, he still had time to entertain the young teachers who boarded with his friends at Caret and Center Cross.

But that was all over on December 16, 1930 when he married Annie Lee Lassiter and they went to live in Port Royal. He was in charge of Will's RAPPAHANNOCK VALLEY PICKLE CO. there for four years. They moved to Tappahannock and he began to acquire land and machinery to clear and institute improvements on it. He and Annie Lee chose a place they wanted for a home. He bought the old house on 955 acres at public auction and set to work making their vision of "Mahockney" a reality. She had an artist's eye for beauty and love and talent for creating it in all her surroundings. Her flower garden furnished blooms for her exquisite arrangements, many friends enjoyed her delicious meals and gracious hospitality. She was an accomplished musician with a beautiful, trained, soprano voice. Their lovely daughter, Fay, shared her Mother's love of beauty and music. She learned to play the piano, mastered the skills of household management, gourmet cooking and elegant entertaining taught by her mother. She was an honor student at St. Margaret's School, Tappahannock and was crowned "Miss Northern Neck" in a beauty pageant.

As the pickle business grew the number of farmers who raised the gherkins rose from 426 to 620. Brining stations were working steadily at Dunbrooke, Newton, Hustle, Penola, and Woodford, the main shipping point. By then a leased fleet of 7 trucks collected the crops, delivered them to be graded, salted in barrels, then shipped by boat, train, and truck to more than 140 pickle factories. At Dunnsville, machinery for dicing citron was in operation as well as a special facility for treating cucumbers for dill pickles. The main office for the firm was at "Oakalona." Will's youngest daughter, Phoebe was office manager and secretary.

Trent planted 500 acres of watermelons and 300 acres of cantaloupes, California sweet red peppers, and citron melons for the market. They were peeled and brined at the fields, ready for shipping by the barrelful. In the beginning some of the shipments were allowed to ferment after delivery. Prompt, direct personal response to the customers' complaints and strict instructions for the proper method of avoiding spoilage earned respect and confidence so that individual orders increased from as few as ten barrels, to hundreds, to thousands. Excellent quality, full measure, and dependable service were the hallmark of the operation.

One pickle maker in New York regularly bought 500 barrels of watermelon rinds per year. In July, Trent had orders covering his total production. At 11:00 a.m. one day, that customer called and demanded 3600 barrels of rinds to be delivered so he could process them for export right away. Trent had no surplus stock much less such an enormous quantity that late in the season, but the customer

was determined to have watermelons. So Mrs. Taliaferro packed a change of clothes for her husband and he raced to Edenton, North Carolina where he arranged a loan of $50,000.00 to buy 42 trailer truck loads of watermelons. When they reached Essex, the Taliaferro brothers processed them all and sent the 3600 barrels plus 170 more to New York – happy customer, happy ending!

Another crisis erupted when 2 trailer truck loads, 67 barrels each, were delivered to the wrong customer who sold them and paid for them. The office was not aware of the mistake until the original customer began requesting shipment of his order. There were no watermelons left in Essex. Trent and Oscar went to New Jersey to the customer who had received and paid for the wayward watermelons. With his permission the brothers checked his warehouse and found an inventory of 300 barrels remaining which they bought. They went to New York and offered the whole 300 barrels to their original customer. He had ordered only 134 barrels but he bought all 300 barrels – two happy customers – happy ending!

Trent Taliaferro can tell of many amazing adventures experienced as the result of determination to do the best job possible.

By the time Will died in 1946 the pickle operations were phasing out. Cultivation of melons depletes the soil so that a superior crop can be produced in one field only once in seven years. Other crops which renewed the soil furnished food for animals so expanding the pure-bred breeding stock into herds had become a major activity. For instance, just one meat packer in Baltimore contracted for the delivery of 80 hogs weighing 180 to 220 lbs. every two weeks. When the U. S. entered World War II, the army ordered 60 shoats – young hogs - weighing 40 to 60 lbs. to be delivered to Camp A. P. Hill every two weeks.

Just as his father had done, Trent worked with the county agent to increase the practice of improved agricultural methods in Essex. He cooperated with the U. S. Soil Conservation Service, demonstrating and encouraging the use of newly-proven techniques such as strip-cropping, contour plowing, cover seeding and reforestation for greater yields and erosion control.

In addition to his fine quality cattle, pigs, and sheep, Trent bred, raised, and trained horses and hunting dogs. He showed them at competitions, won many awards, and was in great demand himself as an expert judge. He conducted horsemanship classes at his own stables.

All these activities furnished employment for several thousand residents of Essex and surrounding counties during half a century.

In 1986 Trent's beautiful and beloved wife and helpmate died after a lingering illness. He sold 250 acres and the house at "Mahockney" to his nephews William and Bryan, sons of brother Oscar. They no longer own it. "Oakalona" is still the home of Will's youngest son, Andrew, and his wife and the first daughter Daisy. Her husband, Robert A. Gouldin, was killed in World War II.

The young Taliaferros, William, Bryan, and David had become excellent farmers and businessmen with extensive land holdings, machinery, production and marketing operations, and development facilities. Uncle Trent advised them to incorporate their interests. He remains their mentor and follows the daily developments at Montague Farms, Inc. The corporation commands a significant position in global market-places. It's Saga of Success is another compelling story which proves that "where there's a will there's a way."

Part of the account of some remarkable accomplishments, as told by Trent Garnett Taliaferro to M. B. Montsinger.

ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

October 17, 1993

THE ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY met in the great Hall at "Mt. Airy", the colonial home of the TAYLOE FAMILY in Richmond County on Sunday afternoon, October 17, 1993 at 3:00 p.m.

The meeting was opened by our president Mrs. Sara Ann Lindsey. She thanked the Tayloes for having us - and talked about the past two years she had been president, for which everyone applauded. She has done a very outstanding job of giving us excellent leadership; and excellent programs. We wish we could have dozens of enthusiastic members like Sara Ann.

She stated the only business to be taken up today would be the slate and election of officers for 1994-96. Mr. Wilson Ware, Chairman of the Nominating Committee, members Col. Bryan Stockdon and Mrs. Ruth Bland; presented the slate of officers, Mr. Harold VanArsdale, President, Mrs. Anne T. Wright, Secretary and Mr.. Ludwell Smither, Treasurer; Mr. Witt Garrett and Col.. Bryan Stockdon, members of the Executive Board nominated from the floor, were all elected unanimously.

Following the dispensing of the reading of the minutes, and the Treasurer's Report, Mrs. Lindsey turned the meeting over to Mrs. E. Gwynn Tayloe, present owner of "Mt. Airy". She told us the original of this building was started in 1748. The TAYLOE FAMILY first came to this area in 1682 with a 3000 acre land grant. Today the "Mt. Airy Farm" contains over 2000 acres. Mrs. Tayloe told us the difference between a large Farm and Plantation was the fact that on a farm many different crops were raised. On a plantation usually one crop was the main substance raised such as tobacco or cotton.

In 1748 the present building was begun of Palladian architecture with marble steps and floors and large cement columns at both front and back entrances. As in many colonial homes, there were two identical entrances, one facing the river and the other the land, with a great hall straight through to get all the breezes during the hot months. There were two dependencies connected by curved passageways, one on each side of the main building, one for the bachelor sons and the other usually the kitchen quarters removed as far as possible form the main building in case of fire. Mr. William Buckley did the woodwork in the dining room and others in the house. There is an original clock made in England. There are many original portraits, some of Governor Tasher's sisters when he was governor of Maryland. One of them was married to John Tayloe, III son of the builder. William Henry Tayloe inherited the Tayloe Octagon House in Washington. There are portraits of Tayloes, Whitings, and members of other families who have married Tayloes.

Mrs. Tayloe conducted a tour of the rooms on the first floor, pointing out items of interest in each. Refreshments were served in the dining room where origins of the handsome appointments and furnishings were described by Mrs. Tayloe. Mrs. Jeanette Ellis, Mrs. Lib Smither, Mrs. Nancy Tuck Ball, Mrs. Ashby Parker, and Mrs. Mae Andrews were the Society's hostesses for the reception.

Anne T. Wright, *Secretary*

ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

January 18, 1994

THE ESSEX COUNTY SOCIETY met Sunday afternoon at 3:00 p.m. in the Essex County Court House, January 18, 1994, with our new President, Mr. Harold VanArsdale presiding. The president asked the secretary, Mrs. Anne T. Wright, to read the minutes of our October meeting. Mrs. Wright asked that the reading of the minutes be dispensed with since they would be published in the next bulletin. This motion was agreed to and the president asked for the Treasurer's report. Mr. Ludwell Smither reported Balance in checking and receipts of dues $1,770.11, disbursements $277.21 Barbour Printing Services, Inc. and Sara Ann Lindsey, leaving balance of $1,492.90 and balance in Savings Account $840.64 making a total on deposit of $2,333.54. The Treasurer's report was filed for audit.

Mr. VanArsdale then asked if our outgoing president was present and ascertaining that she wasn't made several remarks about her leadership and progress the society had made during her term as president. He then asked for guests and called on Mrs. Montsinger to introduce our speaker. Mr. VanArsdale stated we still do not have an elected vice-president, but we are still working on it.

Mr. John Townley, President of the Confederate NAVAL Society is an authority on the music and history of many ships that sailed for both the Union and the Confederate sides during the War Between The States. His favorite ship was the "ALABAMA" which had an illustrious career which he told us about, including the time when the ship was overcome with a fever, cholera which was prevalent in those days in the Bahamas and how the ship's captain managed to get it free and back to the Gulf Coast. He has been maritime interpreter and consultant at New York's South Street Seaport Museum and The Mariner's Museum in Newport News, Virginia. Mr. Townley was instrumental in bringing pirates of the artifacts on these old ships which were sunk during the War Between The States to justice and retrieving the artifacts for the correct museums. Mr. Townley has presented many papers for the Society of Historical Archaeology, Mystic Seaport Museum, and the U. S. Navel Academy. He has recorded dozens of albums for Columbia Records and the National Geographic Society. He was the maritime preservation activist and founding president of The Confederate Naval Historical Society. He has been trying in every way to protect America's historic vessels. His articles have appeared in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. He has been an educational consultant and an internationally known consulting astrologer with several books published in five languages. Mr. Townley said astrology is, after all, only navigation in reverse. His talk and question and answer follow up were most interesting. We would like to have him back and get a further detailed presentation of all he has learned and helped to preserve.

He entertained us with some traditional sea chanteys, accompanying himself on his guitar. Mr. Van Arsdale invited all present to join in the Social Hour in the Woman's Club House next door. Mrs. Judy VanArsdale, Chairman of the Refreshment Committee with a little assistance by Mrs. Mary Ball Montsinger and Mrs. Anne T. Wright were thanked by Mr. VanArsdale and the meeting adjourned to the Social Hour.

Anne T. Wright, *Secretary*

Four volumes of copies of the Jeff O'Dell Survey of Old Houses in Essex County have been presented by President VanArsdale, to the Essex County Library and accepted by Mrs. Bess Haile, Librarian. This gift was made possible by the Essex County Historical Society and the generosity of Mrs. Douglas Lindsey, president, 1991-1993.

– Correction –

The summer meeting, August 14, 1992 of the Essex County Historical Society was held jointly with the Ralph Wormely Chapter of APVA as guests of Mrs. James C. Wheat, Jr. at "Blandfield." The minutes of that meeting which were recorded in the Essex County Historical Society Bulletin, Volume 39, October 1993 spelled the name of the speaker incorrectly.

He is the outstanding colonial architect, Mr. T. Alan Morledge. I apologize for the error and appreciate Mrs. Wheat's furnishing the proper spelling.

Anne T. Wright, *Secretary*

– In Memorium –

Mary Shearwood Evans

Born: February 22, 1902
Tappahannock, Virginia

Died: January 23, 1994
Warsaw, Virginia

Widow of James MacDonald Evans

Essex County Historical Society
Member 1971-1991
Publications Committee
Corresponding Secretary

Officers of the Society

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Vice President ..... Mrs. V. M. Montsinger, Jr.
Secretary ..... Anne T. Wright
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PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE
Mrs. Mary Ball Montsinger, *Chairman*
Mrs. William A. Wright, Mr. Charles H. Warner

Meetings are held quarterly in the Essex Court House, or in an historic home or church of the County. Dues are $10.00 yearly per individual and $15.00 per family. For copies of publications send $2.00 to Mr. Charles H. Warner, Tappahannock, Virginia 22560