

What Happened to “Banjo Sam” Sweeney?

Stuart G. Vogt

THE SWEENEY FAMILY of Appomattox, Virginia, produced the first musical dynasty in American history. There were the three Sweeney brothers, headed by the oldest sibling, Joel “Joe” Walker Sweeney. Richard “Dick” Alexander Sweeney was the middle brother, and Sampson “Sam” Decatur Sweeney, the youngest, born in 1832. They toured all over the United States and Europe, and Joel even gave a command performance for Queen Victoria in London. The Sweeneys popularized the five-string banjo and made it into the major instrument that it continues to be today. But by the outbreak of the Civil War, only one of the brothers was left. Richard died suddenly of a “lung hemorrhage” in Washington, D.C., on February 10, 1859, and was buried in the Congressional Cemetery there. Joel died of dropsy on October 29, 1860, and was buried back home in the Sweeney cemetery in Appomattox. Only Sam’s death in early 1864 remains a mystery. The most famous banjo player of the Civil War seems to have suddenly disappeared.

Sam enlisted in Company H, 2nd Virginia Cavalry, at Centreville, Virginia, in early 1862. For the next 11 months he served with Company H, but his banjo playing attracted the attention of General J. E. B. “Jeb” Stuart early on. On December 1, 1862, Sam was formally detailed to General Stuart’s headquarters, much to the displeasure of Colonel Thomas Munford and the rest of the 2nd Virginia. Basically, Sam’s only duty was to play the banjo for the General and his men. Colonel Munford recounted that at the mention of Sweeney’s name, Stuart would start shuffling his feet. Sam was always ready with a song, and some of the most popular songs were “Her Bright

Smile Haunts Me Still,” “The Corn Top’s Ripe,” “Lorena,” and his signature song “Jine the Cavalry.” This was actually adapted

from another song, “Down in Alabama,” with the new words supposedly penned by Jeb Stuart himself. Sam, who followed his general with his banjo wrapped in an oilcloth and strapped to the back of his saddle, could quickly break out the banjo for a song, whether on the march or in camp.

By the winter of 1863-1864, General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia was in winter quarters on the south side of the Rapidan River in Orange County. General Stuart’s headquarters were at “the Wigwam,” just east of Orange near the old Orange

Turnpike. Stuart’s staff was concentrated there, while the cavalry was encamped around the county.

Early in January 1864, Sam came down with some unnamed disease and was moved to a hospital in Orange where he died on January 13, 1864. His service record offers no clue to the cause of his death, detailing only the date and place, “Hospital at Orange C. H.” The oft-repeated story is that he died of smallpox. Even General Stuart, in a letter to his wife, written after he returned to Camp Wigwam, says that “... poor Sweeney died of smallpox while I was gone.” But the General wasn’t there as an eyewitness. He left Camp Wigwam for Richmond and other destinations on the last day of 1863 and did not return for a month.



Sam Sweeney playing his banjo, in a drawing by the English artist-correspondent Frank Vizetelly that was published in the *Illustrated London News* in 1862. Courtesy of the National Park Service.

Stuart Vogt was a Historian with the National Park Service for 20 years, serving at Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Springfield Armory (MA). For four years he was the U.S. Army Historian for the 101st Airborne Division, at Ft. Campbell, KY. Mr. Vogt had a second career in the manufacturing sector, and was the owner of a tool & gage design company. He is now retired and lives in Westfield, MA. He was married to the late Georgia Winslow of Orange, and they had two children, Lynne and Stuart Andrew.

See **Banjo Sam** on page 2.

Banjo Sam (continued)

Smallpox was a wildly contagious disease. There was a minor epidemic of it in the camps around Orange in the winter of 1863-1864. The Central Receiving Hospital at Gordonsville, a few miles away, had a Pestilence Ward set up for contagious diseases like smallpox. If Sam really had smallpox, he would have most likely been sent down to Gordonsville. He would never have been put into a regular hospital, where he could have infected other patients. There is no record of his ever having been admitted to Gordonsville, and there is no burial record for him there.

So what was the cause of Sam's death? It may have been pneumonia. That was a far more prevalent condition than smallpox. The only reference to that, unfortunately, is in John Thomason's flawed biography of Jeb Stuart. But with the lack of evidence of smallpox as the cause of death, it remains a possibility. The Gordonsville Receiving Hospital opened in early 1862, after the Confederates evacuated their winter camps around Centreville and Manassas Junction. Earlier in the War, hospitals had been set up in Orange in a number of places, due to its proximity to the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. After the Gordonsville hospital opened, the need for makeshift hospitals in Orange all but disappeared. However, Sam's service record is very clear about his death occurring in a hospital at "Orange C.H."

Correspondence between Col. Walter Taylor, General Lee's Chief of Staff, and Col. Lafayette Guild, Medical Director of the Army of Northern Virginia, shows that there were hospitals in Orange in early 1864. Further proof comes from the published diary of John Apperson, a hospital steward in Orange. He wrote that there were two hospitals in the village, the Methodist Church and the Baptist Church. Both structures are long gone, but the Methodist Church site was adjacent to the Research Center of the Orange County Historical Society on Caroline Street, and the Baptist Church was where the new back wing of the Orange County Court House is.

The deceased from the Orange hospitals were buried in a five-acre plot of land less than a mile west of Orange. This was the beginning of the present Graham Cemetery on Route 20. Burial of these poor soldiers was a somewhat random affair, with bodies buried sometimes two deep. No headboards or markers were put up, and record keeping of the names of the deceased was poor. The present Confederate plot in the Gra-

ham Cemetery marks the location of some of the graves; the tombstones there are later memorials.

Somewhere among these mostly unknown soldiers lies Sam Sweeney. At his death on January 13, 1864 he was about 32 years old. Most likely on the same day he died, his body was taken out with others to the cemetery and hastily buried. Banjo Sam was just another dead soldier, an unknown among unknowns.



Sam Sweeney in a daguerrotype probably taken during his teenage years. Courtesy of the National Park Service.

Almost a century and a half after his death here in Orange, Sam Sweeney remains a legendary figure among banjo players. By an eerie coincidence, the same day that Sam died, Stephen Foster, "America's first composer," died far to the north in New York City.

I wish to thank the following individuals for their encouragement and sharing their knowledge with me: Frank Walker, Carol Couch, Steve Sylvia, Pat Schroeder, Don Pfanz, Ed Moore, Clara Colby, and the staffs of the Orange County Historical Society and the Gordonsville Exchange Hotel Museum. This is a work in progress. If anyone knows of or finds a reference to Sam's last days in an original letter, diary, or even a published work, please email me at banjosam1@hotmail.com. Thank you!

Passing the Baton

It was with regret that the Historical Society learned that Marianne Hurd, who has helped us so ably for over four years, would be leaving the area. We all extend our sincere thanks to Marianne and wish her the best.

To our delight, several of our dedicated members offered to take over the tasks Marianne had been doing. We are pleased to announce that Jayne E. Blair has joined Jean McGann in keeping the Research Center running and helping visitors with their research. If you have a chance, please stop in and say hello to Jayne.

Our Future is Our Past!

Frank Walker

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 developments 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 new-fangled 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 the Taylors, 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.

Orange County and Global Politics, ca. 1734

Frank Walker

Of all the 275th birthday stories that can be told about Orange County, Virginia, the most popular is sure to be the one that at the time of its formation, the county's Act of Establishment described boundaries that encompassed all of five future states (Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, West Virginia) and portions of three others (Michigan, Wisconsin, Virginia). The creation of this huge county was, however, not a harmless joke or a publicity stunt. It was done with serious purpose and with the understanding that at some later time it might lead to war.

To understand the significance of Orange County's 1734 formation, one needs to begin in the early 1600s. After decades of warily eyeing each other, the major colonial powers of the day made their moves. In 1607 the English landed at Jamestown. In 1608 the French established Quebec as the capital of "New France." In 1609 the Spanish chartered Santa Fe as the capital of "New Mexico," while the Dutch explored the Hudson River in preparation for the settling of "New Amsterdam." While none of them were ready at that moment to risk open warfare, they were all committing themselves to a contest to gain possession of the wild but promising lands of North America.

By the 1730s, the Dutch had been forced out by the British, and Spain was hobbled by internal problems. France, however, was another story. From its base in New France, the French had begun to develop down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Among other lands, the French began to lay claim to the Northwest Territory between the Ohio and the Mississippi. With the establishment of Orange County, the English answered.

Orange County's Act of Establishment created boundaries that took in all of the Northwest Territory and placed British America at the banks of the Mississippi. The Virginia colony was populous, wealthy, and well-governed, and it actively asserted the new boundaries created for it by Orange County. It was a direct challenge that the French could not ignore. The resulting French and Indian War (1754-1763) spilled over onto the European continent as the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). With its defeat, France began to lose territory and power in North America, and the momentum established with the formation of Orange County began to drive British settlement, and later American settlement, west to the Pacific.

Album Mystery Solved

Readers may recall that in the previous issue of our newsletter, we announced the donation of an old photograph album to our collection. We noted that “although many of the people and places are readily identified, there are still quite a few that remain a mystery. This is a fantastic reason for our members to visit the research center and lend their knowledge and expertise to revealing the secrets of this local history treasure.”

Well, much to our delight, Doug Graves, one of our most enthusiastic members did just that. Not only has he identified the origin of the album, but also, with the help of the Lillard family of Graves Mill, Madison County, he was able to tell us of its incredible journey.

In a series of e-mail exchanges with Frank Walker, Doug recounts the following story:

The “BIG” mystery has been solved! Namely, that of the photo album that contains your Grandmother Mrs. Robert Walker (Anne Carter [“Nannie”] Goss Walker). I just reviewed it at the Historical Society. The album is that of “F. B. Utz” – that is, Fannie Belle Sparks Utz. She was the wife of William Thaddeus Utz. William was from Rocklin (now within the Shenandoah National Park), located approximately 3 miles north of downtown Graves Mill, adjacent to the headwaters of the Rapidan River. Rocklin was a small mountain community, but it had a Post Office until approximately 1922.

I will provide you the complete details on the truly remarkable journey the album has had – from its origin in Rocklin to Barboursville to Texas and finally, to the vault at the Orange County Historical Society. Oh, and the album the Society has is just one of three!

All three albums were discovered on E-Bay. The seller evidently purchased them from an individual in/from Texas. It is now thought that the albums were acquired from the estate sale of the late Betty Ann Utz (date of death unknown). David Jones of Madison County saw the first album and realized the connection to the Lillards, Rocklin, etc. He attempted to purchase it, but unfortunately, the bid time had expired on E-Bay. [Unbeknownst to David, our donor had bought it.] When the two other albums came up for sale, he purchased those, and now Ruth and Randall Lillard (of Graves Mill) have them.

A few months ago, I reviewed the two albums owned by the Lillards and learned that a third album was “somewhere” – never to be found. Then, when I read in the last Historical Society Newsletter about the donated album and saw some of the names and locations contained within the album, I immediately thought that perhaps this was the third album. Then I thought....”no way!” However, when I recently visited the Research Center to view the album, immediately I realized that the album was, in fact, the missing third Utz family album. I recognized names and places within the Graves Mill area. The album had “come home” – well, almost!

The photos show the old Elizabeth Daniel and Silas Utz family farmhouse in Rocklin and other scenes including the

Lillard Home in Graves Mill (presently owned by Randall & Ruth Lillard).

I spoke with Ruth Lillard regarding the album. She indicated that almost surely the link in Barboursville would be through Charles (Uncle Charlie) Ashton Utz and his wife Agnes Stephens Utz. Charlie is the brother of William Lee Utz and as it turns out, both Charlie and William Lee (sons of William T. Utz and Fannie Belle Sparks Utz) ended up in Barboursville. Charlie owned a general mercantile store in Barboursville. The album at the Orange County Historical Society shows the Barboursville home of Charlie and Agnes Utz. It also has a photo of Agnes standing in front of the old Barboursville School.

Additionally, it shows the Barboursville home which belonged to their son, William Lee Utz, who married Bernice E. Kite. William was a mercantile operator in Graves Mill for a short time. Later, he moved to Barboursville where he then became a Delegate to the Virginia General Assembly, representing Orange and Madison Counties. He was educated at Locust Dale Academy.

Charlie and Agnes had a daughter, Betty Ann Utz. She married but later divorced (no children) and ended up in Texas. The most likely reason why Charlie or Agnes and then Betty Ann got the album is because Charlie, who died in 1970, was the last survivor of the seven Utz children.

What a remarkable chain of events!

Battle of the Wilderness Commemorated

The 145th Anniversary of the Battle of the Wilderness was celebrated on the weekend of May 2-3 at the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. The theme of this year’s events, “Uncommon Hardship: Soldier and Civilian in the Wilderness,” took special note of the experiences of the ordinary citizens and soldiers who were swept up into the maelstrom of that battle.



Phil Audibert

Re-enactors portray Poagues Battery in the Widow Tapp Field at the 145th anniversary of the Battle of the Wilderness.

Programs & Picnics

The Earlier Great Depression in Orange

On March 30, about 45 people gathered to hear about the 1930s depression, and share their memories (first- or second-hand) of that time. Of course the current economic situation was part of the motivation for this topic, but when John Floyd, Board member and Program Chairman, presented the gathering with a handful of statistics about the earlier depression, it was immediately apparent that while difficult and distressing, our current situation is not nearly on the scale of the "great" depression.

Paul Jennings: Enamoured with Freedom

On the evening of April 27, a standing-room-only crowd gathered to hear Beth Taylor, Director of Education at James Madison's Montpelier, speak about her research on Paul Jennings, James Madison's "body servant." Members of the Orange County African-American Historical Society joined us for the interesting and informative evening.

Orange County History Day

On June 1, the Research Center was treated to the sound of dozens of 4th graders celebrating both the near-end of their school year and their newly-acquired knowledge of Virginia history. The auditorium was bedecked with posters the youngsters had made to illustrate what they had learned. After Laura Thompson of the Arts Center told the story of "Purr," the Orange County history coloring book jointly created by the Society and the Arts Center, there was a presentation on what the Standards of Learning (SOLs) require in the way of Virginia history knowledge. That was followed by a recognition of the students/poster makers, each of whom then stood by his/her poster as the audience circulated past them. The audience was impressed by what they saw, and the students were thrilled by the interest shown in their work.

Upcoming Program

On Monday, June 29, J. Marc Wheat, President of the Germanna Foundation, will speak to our members about recent developments at Germanna and plans for its future. The descendants of the Germanna colonists, who now number in the millions, are starting to look towards a 300th reunion in 2014.

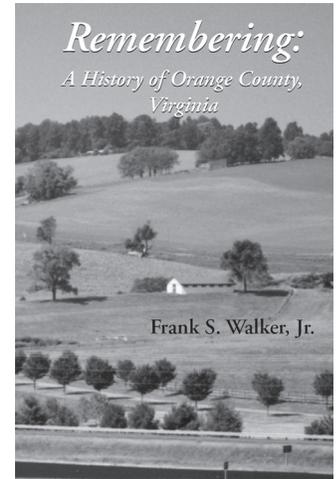
Picnic Season

Our regular members-only picnics will be held on Monday, July 27 and August 31. Keep your eyes open for the announcement postcards for locations and details.

Publications for Sale

Members receive a 10% discount on all publications.

✿ *Remembering: A History of Orange County, Virginia* by Frank S. Walker, Jr. Frank Walker has combined a love of history with a lifetime of living and working in the Orange County area to produce a comprehensive and well-received county history. *Remembering* tells us about James Madison and his Montpelier, gold mining, "our" William of Orange, Robert E. Lee, Germanna, the slave Pompey, Shackaconia, the Marquis de Lafayette, the Poor Folks & Preachers Railroad, Barboursville, and much, much more. The reader is rewarded with a chuckle here, a laugh there, and with interesting information everywhere. (Pub. 2004, Hardcover, 283pp. w/illustrations, footnotes, bibliography, and index. \$30.00 +tax



✿ *The Short Life and Strange Death of Ambrose Madison* by Ann L. Miller. Ambrose Madison (ca. 1696-1732), was the grandfather of President James Madison. Born into an established Tidewater Virginia family, Ambrose Madison began a successful career as a planter, merchant, entrepreneur, and county official before deciding to travel westward to the fertile soils of the Virginia Piedmont frontier. He and his family settled on lands that would become the family's Montpelier plantation in Orange County. Ambrose was poised to re-launch his career in this new setting when his life was cut short by an early and violent death. Poisoned by slaves, Madison was the first documented murder victim in the region. (Pub. 2001, Softcover, 33pp. w/endnotes and six appendices.) \$11.95 +tax

✿ Fannie Page Hume Diaries

The Diary of Fannie Page Hume, Orange VA, 1861 edited by James W. Cortada. The diary of a young Orange woman at the beginning of the Civil War (softcover, 91 pp.) \$5.00 +tax

The Fanny Hume Diary of 1862: A Year in Wartime Orange, Virginia edited by J. Randolph Grymes, Jr.

The diary of a young woman caught in the midst of the Civil War. This diary is well-documented with over 300 footnotes explaining the people and events noted, as well as providing background information on her family and community (softcover, 236 pp.) \$14.95 +tax

Or buy both Hume diaries for \$18.00 +tax

✿ *Orange Virginia: Story of a Courthouse Town* by William H.B. Thomas. A short history of the Town of Orange from its founding in 1749 to the early 20th century. (softcover, 89 pp.) \$7.95 +tax

✿ *The Nine-Lives of an Orange Tabby: An Orange County History for Children*. Published by the Orange County Historical Society, as part of a collaborative venture with The Arts Center in Orange, this charming coloring book is meant to coordinate with the 4th grade Virginia history taught in our schools. Told from the perspective of a founding kitten named "Purr." (softcover, np) \$3.00, tax included

For additional publications, be sure to see our website, www.orangecovahist.org, or drop by our Research Center (130 Caroline Street, Orange, VA) for a complete list.

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Please Join Us!

We invite you to join the Orange County Historical Society. Please provide your name and mailing information as you wish it to appear in our records and select the appropriate dues level. Mail the completed form, along with a check payable to The Orange County Historical Society (OCHS), to 130 Caroline Street, Orange, VA 22960.

The Orange County Historical Society is a non-profit organization. Your membership fees are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Name: _____

(If business/organization member, name of business or organization)

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Membership Status: New Renewal Address, Name, etc. Update

Would you be willing to receive meeting notices via email in lieu of a postcard? Yes No

Membership Level: Society dues are for the period of January 1 - December 31, 2009.

Annual Individual Member: \$20

Annual Student Member (High School or College): \$12.50

Annual Family Member: \$30

Annual Sustaining Member: \$100

Annual Patron Member: \$200

Annual Sponsor Member: \$300

Frank Walker Honored

On May 2, at the annual dinner hosted by the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield, the first-ever Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield Advocate Award was given to Frank S. Walker, Jr. The award was established to acknowledge a worthy person or organization who has demonstrated a lifetime, or substantial period, of significant contribution to the Wilderness Battlefield, by providing advocacy, education programs, or preservation services. Needless to say, Frank fits this description perfectly, with his early and effective involvement with Ellwood and the Wilderness Battlefield – on many fronts.

The award, featuring a 5½-inch-tall sculpture of stacked rifles on a wooden base, came as a complete surprise to Frank and the delight of the attendees. The Historical Society is certainly pleased at this recognition of one of our most illustrious members. Congratulations, Frank!



Dwight Mottet presents the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield Advocate Award to Frank Walker, as FoWB President Zann Miner looks on.