

## Orange County in 1852--Was it Really This Bad?

**Below is an eyewitness account of part of Orange County. It appeared in an article in the Orange County Historical Society Newsletter:**

**Note:** Spelling and punctuation in the story below are original.

“Excerpts from an article entitled ‘Into the Valley of Virginia: the 1852 Travel Account of Curran Swaim,’ by David W. Coffey, in the Virginia State Library’s magazine, *Virginia Cavalcade*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Summer 1990):

*[August 27] About the middle of the afternoon we arrived at Barboursville--a place of rather remarkably shabby appearance--it reminded us of New Salem, N.C. We beheld a tavern sign adorned with a curious looking antique painting....Over it was “Washington Hotel” in large gold letters--and underneath H.R. Higgins. The porch was full of people....We learned that it was yet thirteen miles to Orange C.H. [Orange Court House which was the town of Orange] and no tavern between, so we concluded to stop here--bad as it was--till tomorrow. There was to be a great...political discussion tomorrow and we did’nt [sic] know but we might chance to hear some extraordinary eloquence. [pp.18-19]*

*Long after we went to bed they kept up an uproar in the bar room--which was the only room in the house--except the cellar and two sleeping apartments upstairs. We were now in two miles and a half of the birthplace of Zachary Taylor [Montebello...] but we didn’t calculate to visit it--we made up our minds to get out of this place as soon as possible in the morning. [p. 20]*

*[August 28] Rain! Rain!--I never saw the like, the heavens were dark--and it poured--and poured...[p. 20]*

*It rained on till night--a long dreary gloomy day it was in that old tavern...we agreed it was the nearest hell of any place we have ever been in...[p. 20]*

*[August 29] We were on the road by the time the sun was up....Towards noon it was very hot, and but for the swollen streams, and the corn on the ground there would have been no appearance of yesterday’s rain left. About seven miles from where we started we had some beautiful country--there was a splendid view westward of the road--broad as a western prairie--and the blue ridge rising beyond. Many fine old houses with large trees around them were in sight.--One of these--we did’nt [sic] know which--was once the residence of President Madison [Montpelier]. It was a calm bright day in August.--And one of the most charming landscapes I ever beheld.--there is something very beautiful about the blue ridge with its smooth soft outline, and bright blue color.... [pp. 21-22]*

*This day was Sunday.--We arrived at Orange C.H. about two o'clock--hungry enough--for we had had no breakfast but some sour apples...Of all the horrible nasty--muddy--old places I ever saw--this town of Orange C.H. takes the lead. We went right on after dinner--a few miles and spread our coats down under a locust tree by the road and took a long nap. [pp 22-23]*

*This afternoon we came to a good plank road again but it led through a poor persimmon country--there was more broom sedge and sassafras, and chinquapins--which were just beginning to get ripe. We gathered some and ate them for auld lang syne....At night we arrived at Rhoades's tavern--where we staid all night--and ate chicken as usual. [p. 230]*

**[30 August]** *Another clear morning. We still have plank road--and shall all the way to Fredericksburg...[p. 23]"*<sup>1</sup>

**Note:** Rhoades Tavern was in what is now the village of Rhoadesville.

### **Washington Hotel, early 19th century from Historian Ann Miller:<sup>2</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup> David W. Coffey, "Into the Valley of Virginia: The 1852 Travel Account of Curran Swaim," *Orange County Historical Society Newsletter*, Vol. 22, No. 9 (September 1991), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Ann L. Miller, *Antebellum Orange--The Pre-Civil War Homes, Public Buildings and Historic Sites of Orange County* (Orange, Virginia: Moss Publication, 1988), 72.

“This structure [**Washington Hotel**] and the old **Fitzhugh House** across the road **are the oldest standing structures** in the village of Barboursville. Both date from the early years of the 19th century.

In the **1852 narrative above**, the Washington Hotel was owned by Michael L. Eheart. “In the early 1800’s, the land upon which the house [Washington Hotel} stands was part of the holdings of the Douglas family of Albemarle County. In 1849, John B. Douglas sold this lot, located at the crossroads of the old Richmond and Charlottesville roads, to Michael L. Eheart. Included were a number of buildings which Douglas had been using as commercial property, perhaps as a tavern. When Michael Eheart sold the property to Julius Harris and Fountain P. Pettit in 1853, it was described as ‘The tavern property now occupied by Dr. Higgins,’ and two years later, records describe it as the ‘Washington Hotel.’ Acquired by John Dettor and James D. Munday in the mid-1850’s, it continued as a hotel during the Civil War, and Ewel Wright, the hotelkeeper, brought out the co-owners between 1863 and 1866. Sometime after this, it ceased to operate as a hotel and became the residence of the Wright family, remaining in the family until 1907. The house has continued as a residence for the several families who have owned it during the 20th century, most recently Mr. and Mrs. Philip A. Ponton, who acquired the property in 1962...”<sup>3</sup>

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**As a side note:**

**The old Fitzhugh House, perhaps the oldest structure in Barboursville:**

“This little dwelling was constructed around 1800 on a corner of James Barbour’s Barboursville estate. In 1803, James Barbour leased it and another building to Benjamin Arnold for five years, describing the structures as the ‘Red houses at the fork road,’ being ‘on the side of the branch...next to the Charlottesville Road’...And the old Charlottesville Road and a fork of the old Richmond Road still meet at the crossroads in front of the house, probably the oldest building in the village of Barboursville.

“Used as a tenant house, and perhaps a store, the building remained in the possession of the Barbour family until 1847, when Benjamin Johnson Barbour sold it to Alfred Thomason. Several conveyances followed in quick succession; by 1853 it had been purchased by Mrs. Mary F. Fitzhugh, who owned and lived in the house for the next twenty years.”<sup>4</sup> Other owners included Alcinda J. Peers, B.W. Mundy, R.F. Marshall, R.M. Fisher, Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Douglas, and Mrs. Theresa Davis.

Please reference the photo of the old Fitzhugh House below courtesy of Ann Miller.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

