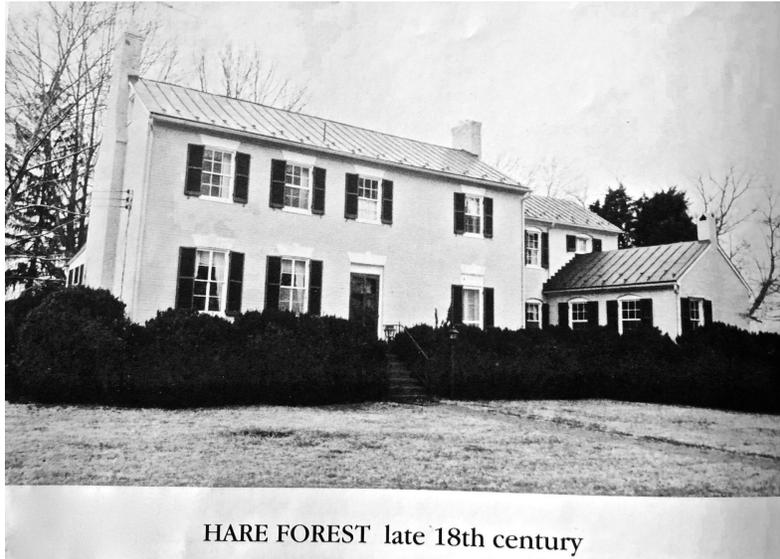


The Mystery of Zachary Taylor's Birthplace

Where was Zachary Taylor born--Montebello in Barboursville or Hare Forest between Orange and Rapidan?



OR
Montebello



--Photos courtesy of Ann L. Miller in *Antebellum Orange*

From historian Ann L. Miller in her book entitled *Antebellum Orange, The Pre-Civil War Homes, Public Buildings and Historic Sites of Orange County, Virginia*:

Hare Forest

“The vicinity of Hare Forest is one of several sites in Orange County traditionally credited as the birthplace of President Zachary Taylor, although the Montebello estate near Barboursville also claims the honor.

“William Strother purchased 408 acres from William Hunter in 1778, and his daughter and son-in-law, Sarah Strother and Richard Taylor, are said to have lived there in a long-vanished house located across the railroad tracks from the present dwelling. William Strother sold 350 acres of the tract to Francis Dade in 1782, with Richard Taylor among the witnesses to the deed. Richard and Sarah Strother Taylors’ residence from 1782 to late 1784, when the future President was born, is uncertain. They may have stayed on at Hare Forest, perhaps on the residue of the Strother land. Tradition says that when the family prepared to set out for Kentucky in late summer of 1784, the illness of a member of their party caused a delay of six weeks, and during this time the future President was born. Did the Taylors return home to Hare Forest for their son’s birth? A number of members of the Taylor family identified Montebello (the Johnson estate near Barboursville) as his birthplace, although Bishop William Meade, writing in the 1850’s claimed the honor for Hare Forest. His data was supplied by Reverend Joseph Earnest, then minister of St. Thomas’ Parish. Reverend Earnest’s wife was Betsy Hord Taylor, sister of Major Erasmus Taylor of Meadowfarm. (Major Taylor himself claimed Montebello as the Zachary Taylor birthsite.) Zachary Taylor himself only wrote that he was born ‘in Orange County, Virginia,’ and his exact birthsite will probably remain a matter of speculation.”¹

Montebello

“Montebello is traditionally described as the birthplace of President Zachary Taylor, although other sites in Orange County--notably Hare Forest, as well as a site in neighboring Greene County (then a part of Orange)--vie for the honor. In his 1906 History of Orange County, Virginia, W.W. Scott quoted an impressive list of Zachary Taylor’s contemporaries and relatives who claimed Montebello as Taylor’s birthplace: Benjamin Johnson (who owned the site in the mid-19th century) and his cousin Benjamin Johnson Barbour of Barboursville, Charles P. Howard of Mayhurt (whose wife was Jane Taylor of Greenfield), and Major Erasmus Taylor of Meadowfarm. Zachary Taylor himself noted only in his memoirs that he was born ‘in Orange County, Virginia’; the legend of Montebello is more explicit, telling that his parents moving to Kentucky, were forced to seek refuge with their kinsman Valentine Johnson when several of the party fell ill. During this delay, the future President was born. When the expedition again set out, the baby rode along to Kentucky--the legend says--in a saddlebag.”²

¹ Ann L. Miller. *Antebellum Orange, The Pre-Civil War Homes, Public Buildings and Historic Sites of Orange County, Virginia* (Orange, Virginia: Moss Publications, 1988), 122.

² *Ibid.*, 64.

Two articles from the *Orange County Historical Society Record* regarding the birthplace of Zachary Taylor:

***Taylor's Place
of Birth Disputed***

“Much dispute is held in Orange County over the birthplace of Zachary Taylor ... Mexican War hero and twelfth president of the United States. Some say he was born near Rapidan. Others say he was born near Gordonsville [more specifically in the Barboursville area].

“Those favoring Rapidan as his birthplace say the general was born at Hare Forest, between Orange and Rapidan. This place is near the Southern railway and is now no more than a thicket. Deed books do not show that Taylor's father ever lived at Hare Forest, nor is his name in the census.

“Word has come down through descendants that the Taylor family had started on a journey in wagons to Tennessee before Zachary was born. This information has led to the belief of the other side. Evidence favoring Gordonsville as the birthplace says that Montebello, home of the Johnsons near this town, was the goal of the first day's movement. While they were staying with their relatives there, a member of the band was taken sick, causing a delay of six weeks. During this period of delay, General Taylor was born.

“A short while before his death, the late W.W. Scott, in a letter to the editor of the Richmond Times-Dispatch, reveals his belief to be identical to that of the latter group.

“ ‘But about General Taylor's birthplace,’ he writes in the letter. ‘Your correspondent from the Church Home whom I know and admire, has fallen into a common error about the matter. Taylor's parents undoubtedly lived at Hare Forest, about four miles northeast of the [Orange] courthouse, but they had started on their emigration to Tennessee before General Zachary came into the world.’

“ ‘On the last day's journey some member of the family was taken sick, and they had to stop at Montebello, the residence of Mr. Valentine Johnson, about midway between Gordonsville and Barboursville. There they were detained some time and there the future general and president was born.’

“ ‘This information I had from the son of Mr. Johnson, from the late John Willis, and from other respected and well known citizens of the county.’ “

“Mr. Scott also states his opinion in his history of Orange County.”³

³ Author unknown, “Zachary Taylor's Birthplace”, *Orange County Historical Society Record*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Fall 2013), 2-3.

This article originally appeared in "Orange County: Its Past, Present, and Future in Word and Picture, 1734-1930", *Orange County News*, November 1930.

A second article in the *Orange County Historical Society Record*:

"Zachary Taylor was born in Orange County on 24 November 1784. These facts have never been disputed. However, just where in Orange County his birth occurred has been questioned, and over the years a number of sites have been identified by one or more proponents. As the *Orange County News* notes, two of these sites have been given credence by various official bodies. Both have their proponents.

"It appears, however, that the person who originally proposed Hare Forest as the site of the president's birthplace later decided that he was in error. Historian Patricia Hurst discovered the following typescript written by Daniel Grinnan entitled 'Memo for Dr. Garnett Ryland, University of Richmond' among the papers of Orange County historian, D.N. Davidson. Although the typescript is undated, Dr. Ryland taught chemistry at the University of Richmond from 1917 to 1945, which suggests that the document was created some time during this period. Although the typescript focuses primarily on the Orange county meeting between James Madison and Elder John Leland, a Baptist minister, it also included information on Zachary Taylor's birthplace.

When a man tries to set down his recollection of what he heard from older men a great many years ago he must be cautious for many errors have been made in this field.

My father, Dr. Andrew Glassell Grinnan, was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1827 and he died in 1902 at his home on Rapidan River in Madison County where he had lived since 1859. This place adjoins on the east Woodbury [sic] Forest where lived Gen. William Madison, a younger brother of the President.

A grandmother of the President was a Taylor of Orange County and she was a sister, I am quite sure, to Erasmus Taylor of Greenfield near Orange Court House who was great grandfather to my father. My father was a great antiquarian, read a great deal and had a wonderful memory and was much interested in all his Taylor kin like James Madison.

The Frank Taylor Diary that you mentioned was kept by Taylor at his home Red Bud just north of Orange Court House, a part of the huge original grant of 1722-23 to James Taylor II, and these diaries were given to my father by old Cousin Polly Taylor of Red Bud--niece I think to Frank Taylor, the Diaries. [The next six paragraphs deal with the Madison-Leland meeting.]

Scott shows in his book that Gen. Zach. Taylor was really born at Montebello near Barboursville (little house still standing and property now owned by Mrs. John Stewart Bryan) and he produces traditions to the effect which cannot be gainsaid. Now it happened that Richard Taylor, father to Gen. Zach. Taylor, lived in Orange County not far from the Rapidan River, in a plain home called Hare Forest, near what was later Covell's Crossing or Trimmer's Crossing on the present Southern Railway between Orange and Rapidan Station; and some years before Scott got his book out my father having found the ruins of the house and finding that Richard Taylor was living there almost to the day that Gen. Zach. Taylor was born and not knowing the exact day that Richard T. started on his move to Kentucky he concluded naturally that Gen. Zach. Taylor was born at Hare Forest and took part in rising a small fund to put a marker there, which was done. Now it turned out that just before Gen. Zach. Taylor was born his father had started for Kentucky and being detained somewhere at Montebello where he and his family lodged with their friends--Zach happened to be born a few days later than my father supposed and not at Hare Forest. Scott and my father were close friends but Scott never forgave my father for such a pardonable error, in which several other persons participated. For all that Dr. Scott was a most delightful gentleman and we were all greatly attached to him and it was only an accident that prevented me from going to Gordonsville to his funeral.

The Madison Bibliography is so great that I suppose that somewhere in that great store-house this story [Madison-Leland meeting] is mentioned by someone; but I leave that search to Dr. Ryland. [signed] Daniel Grinnan.

“It would appear then that Hare Forest was not Zachary's place of birth. In fact the records create some doubt as to whether it was even the residence of his father. The property now called Hare Forest was purchased in 1778 by William Strother, Zachary Taylor's maternal grandfather. Some have suggested that Zachary's father Richard and his wife were living with her father at the time they left Orange. However, William Strother is listed in the 1782 and 1785 Orange County census with only three white souls in his household, two of whom would have been William and his wife Anne. Zachary's father, Richard Taylor, does not appear in the 1782 personal property tax lists or the 1782 Orange County census.

“Indeed there is some question as to whether Richard and Sarah were even living in Orange. The only property Richard is shown as having bought or sold is a 96-acre tract on the west side of Mine Run bordering the Rapidan River, which Richard, his wife Sarah, and her sister, Susannah Hawkins, sold in 1780. The fact that Richard does not appear on the Orange County 1782 personal property tax list or in the 1782 census list would appear to preclude his living in a separate house on the Hare Forest tract.

“A Richard Taylor is listed as an adjacent landowner in a deed from Charles and Benjamin Grymes Jr. to William Twyman for 315 acres in then Culpeper, now Madison County. The land

lay on Great Run, which would place it across the river from Hare Forest. Although there is no record of Richard selling the land, he is not listed in the 1782 Culpeper County land or personal property tax records. Since Richard was declared a supernumerary officer in 1780, it may be that his sale of the land in 1780 preceded a move to Kentucky and that he left his wife Sarah in Orange while he established there.

“While, thanks to the research of Patricia Hurst, Hare Forest appears to have been eliminated as Zachary Taylor’s place of birth, we are still left with questions unanswered.

“Barbara Vines Little, Patricia J. Hurst, and Ann L. Miller contributed to this article.”⁴

⁴ Author unknown, “Zachary Taylor’s Birthplace”, *Orange County Historical Society Record*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Fall 2013), 3.