

Bloomsbury: The Oldest Home in Orange County, c. 1722



Bloomsbury¹

The Virginia Department of Historic Resources indicates that “Bloomsbury was established after 1720 by Col. James Taylor, Sr., one of the area’s earliest landowners and ancestor of both presidents James Madison and Zachary Taylor. The date of the original section is undocumented but it may have been built as early as 1722 for James Taylor II. Though its exterior is unassuming, the finely appointed interior has a unique floor plan and an unusual staircase. According to family tradition, the wide stair landing, with its decorative turned baluster railing, formed a musicians’ gallery. The house was doubled in size by a plain two-story addition around 1800. Bloomsbury is unusually well preserved and retains a scenic rural setting of broad fields and wooded hills. On the grounds is a 19th-century smokehouse, an 18th-century cemetery, and vestiges of a rare early garden with terraces and a sunken area.”²

¹ Photographer Unknown. “Bloomsbury”. *Virginia Department of Historic Resources*, Google, Accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/068-0005/>.

² *Ibid.*

From Historian Ann L. Miller, an excerpt from her book *Antebellum Orange*:

“BLOOMSBURY ca. 1722³

“One of Orange County’s true architectural gems, Bloomsbury is the probably the oldest extant dwelling in the county as well. Tradition states that the oldest portion of the present house was built by Col. James Taylor II, a wealthy planter and surveyor whose extensive landholdings stretched from plantations in Caroline County to large patents in Spotsylvania and Orange Counties. One of the earliest patentees in what is now Orange County, Col. Taylor had been a member of several early explorations into the Piedmont, including Alexander Spotswood’s ‘Knights of the Golden Horseshoe’ expedition of 1716, and doubtless he chose his future lands early on. In July of 1722, he patented 8,500 acres in present-day Orange County, a tract which included most of what is today the town of Orange and extended to the village of Rapidan. A construction date for Bloomsbury of 1722, the year of the patent, is a traditional one within the Taylor family.

“James Taylor sold off portions of his 8,500-acre patent, and by the mid 1720’s had also carved from his holdings four 1,000-acre plantations, one for each of his four sons. Taylor family tradition credits him with giving Bloomsbury to his eldest son, James Taylor III, who also purchased additional property. Of James Taylor’s other sons, George received the Midland tract, Erasmus was given Greenfield, and Zachary was deeded Meadowfarm.

“Bloomsbury remained in the Taylor family until 1791, when it was sold to Elias Langham of Fluvanna County. It was purchased by William Quarles, then of Bedford County, in 1797. Bloomsbury remained in the Quarles family until 1842, when it was acquired by Francis Jerdone. After 122 years in the Jerdone ownership, it returned to the Taylor family in 1964, when it was purchased by Jaquelin E. Taylor, owner of Meadowfarm and a direct descendant of Col. James Taylor II. Mr. Taylor gave Bloomsbury as a wedding present to his bride and distant cousin, Helen Marie Taylor, a descendant of Col. James Taylor II’s half-brother John. The house had never been modernized, and it had served as a tenant house for much of the 20th century. Mr. and Mrs. Taylor had the house stabilized and painstakingly restored to its early appearance.⁴

“The original story-and-a-half section of the Bloomsbury house is built of frame over a full basement. The basement and chimney are laid in English bond, and the use of this brick bond, which usually belongs to the 17th century and is unusual in an 18th century house, is unique in Orange County. The back porch is framed into the body of the house and is original to the structure. Researchers from Colonial Williamsburg have suggested that it may be the earliest known such porch to survive in Virginia.”

³ Ann L. Miller, *Antebellum Orange--The Pre-Civil War Homes, Public Buildings and Historic Sites of Orange County* (Orange, Virginia: Moss Publication, 1988), 113.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

“The downstairs of the house is divided lengthwise into two rooms, a plan seen nowhere else in the county (nor, as far as is known, in the Virginia Piedmont). The west downstairs room is traditionally known as the ‘Great Dining Room’; the east as the ‘Great Hall.’ Each of these downstairs rooms is served by a corner fireplace from the gable-end chimney; closet rooms occupy the opposite ends. Virtually all of the 18th century interior woodwork in this section survives intact, including chairrails, raised-panel wainscoting and doors, and panelled chimney pieces. Upstairs, under the dormered roof, are a hallway, a single large chamber and two smaller, unheated chambers. The woodwork is simpler here, as was usually the case in the family’s private rooms.”⁵

After Miller further describes the interior of the house, including the Quarles addition, she concludes her article with the following:

“During the winter of 1863-64, when the Army of Northern Virginia was in winter quarters in Orange County, Gen. Robert E. Lee had his quarters on the adjoining Middle Hill plantation, and Confederate President Jefferson Davis stayed at Bloomsbury while reviewing the troops in 1864.

“An early smokehouse is located north of the house and the remains of a sunken, terraced garden can be seen to the west. An early kitchen, schoolhouse, barns and other outbuildings no longer stand.

“A cemetery, enclosed by a brick wall topped with molded coping brick, is situated some distance east of the house. James Taylor III and his three wives are buried there, but their tombstones do not survive; several of the Quarles family are also interred within the wall. Members of the Jerdone family are buried in a separate cemetery west of the residence, beyond the old gardens.”⁶

⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

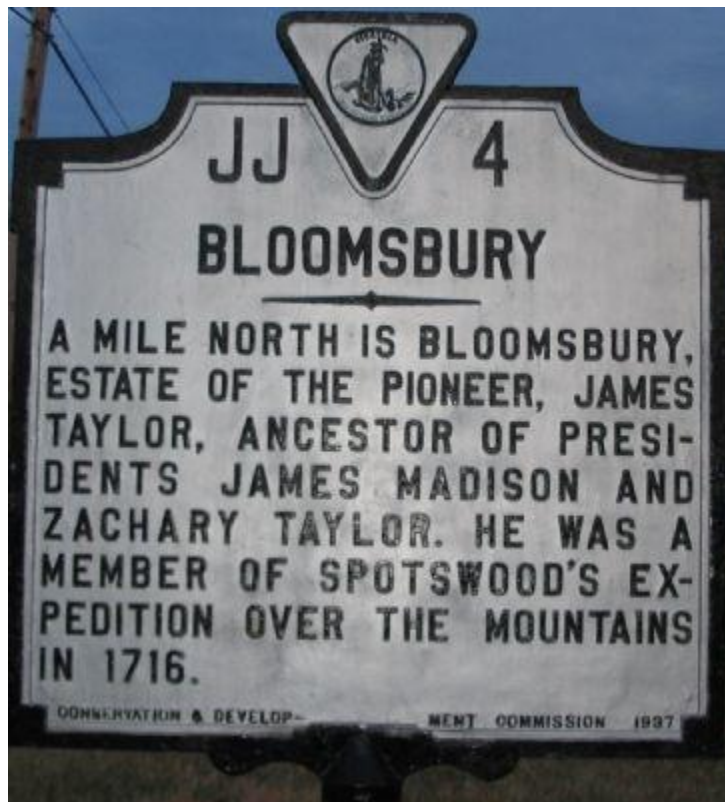
⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.



Bloomsbury⁷

⁷*Ibid.*, 114. Photographer unknown.

A highway marker for the Bloomsbury house sits on Highway 20 beside Orange airport:



Inscription: *A mile north is Bloomsbury, estate of the pioneer, James Taylor, ancestor of Presidents James Madison and Zachary Taylor. He was a member of Spotswood's expedition over the mountains in 1716.*⁸

From Sandy James and the Orange Review: *A Pioneer's Place*⁹

"Bloomsbury, a privately owned farm, and the oldest extant home in Orange County, lies about two miles east of the Town of Orange.¹⁰ The focal point of the 377 acre tract is the colonial frame farmhouse, built in 1722 by Col. James Taylor II and his wife Martha.

"Taylor was one of 63 men chosen to accompany Lieutenant Governor Alexander Spotswood in 1716 for the Tramontane Expedition, to explore the headwaters of Virginia's rivers, claim land for the Crown, name and chart geographical sites and observe Indian tribes.

⁸ Photographer Unknown. "Bloomsbury". *The Historical Marker Database*, Google, Accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=4699>

⁹ James, Sandy. "A pioneer's place: Marker JJ-4, Bloomsbury." *Orange County Review*, July 23, 2015, A3.

¹⁰ Bloomsbury lies north of the soccer fields on private land and is not accessible to the public.

“Spotswood dubbed his men ‘Knights of the Golden Horseshoe’, and at the end of their travels, presented them with certificates and horseshoe-shaped watch chain emblems of gold and diamonds.

“Trained at William and Mary, James was one of two surveyors for Spotsylvania County. In locating the county lines for Spotsylvania, Caroline and Orange counties, Taylor was able to acquire a baronial estate of approximately one-third of Orange County, called the ‘Taylor District.’

“The patent Taylor obtained from King George I contained 8,500 acres (including most of what is now the Town of Orange.)

“Taylor and his wife built the 1722 house on the western frontier of Virginia slightly east of Orange.

“The Taylors raised their children at Bloomsbury, and were great-grandparents of two U.S. Presidents: James Madison, ‘Father of the Constitution’, and Zachary Taylor, hero of Palo Alto, Monterey and Buena Vista in the Mexican War.

“James and Martha were also great-great grandparents of Sarah Knox Taylor, first wife of the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis.

“Ann L. Millier, author of *Antebellum Orange*, wrote that Bloomsbury remained in the Taylor family until 1791 when it was sold to Elias Langham of Fluvanna County.

“As of 2015, the Bloomsbury house still exists in prime restored order, furnished with period antiques, and privately owned by Helen Marie Taylor, a descendant of Col. Taylor.

“Meadowfarm, located on that land at the southeastern edge of the town, also continues in the ownership of direct descendants of Taylor.

“Bloomsbury was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

“Marker JJ-4 is located in front of the Orange County Airport, 2.5 miles east of Orange, on the left when traveling east. The farm is private and there is no pull-off near the sign.

“Marker JJ-4 reads, ‘A mile north is Bloomsbury, estate of the pioneer, James Taylor, ancestor of Presidents James Madison and Zachary Taylor. He was a member of Spotswood’s expedition over the mountains in 1716.’

“The bottom of the marker reads, ‘Conservation and Development Commission 1937.’ For more information on Bloomsbury see Miller’s book *Antebellum Orange*, available at the Orange County Library.”

[Note: *Antebellum Orange* by Ann Miller is also available at the Orange County Historical Society.]