

# *Greene County*

MAGAZINE

**Greene County - Its Early History**



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## GREENE COUNTY - ITS EARLY HISTORY

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Greene County lies on the east slope of the Blue Ridge. It is a small county, 153 square miles, with its entire western boundary in the Shenandoah National Park. It lies west of Orange, north of Albemarle and south of Madison.<sup>1</sup> It is composed of a fertile, cultivated eastern region made up of rolling country affording beautiful views of the Blue Ridge and a western region which is ruggedly mountainous. The degree to which the mountains dominate the entire county can be appreciated by the fact that it is less than eighteen miles from the Orange County line to Swift Run Gap if one traverses the county directly east to west along Route 33. The highest point in Greene County is Bush Mountain, 3527 feet above sea

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level. The lowest point, about 448 feet, lies in the extreme southeast part of the county, at the junction of Route 607 and 616.<sup>2</sup>

As far as we have records to support it, the first man of European origin to see and enter upon the land which is now known as Greene County was a German physician named John Lederer. Lederer, in March of 1669, accompanied by three Indian guides, made a trip of exploration sponsored by Governor Berkeley from an Indian village on the north bank of the Pamunkey River to the top of the Blue Ridge probably at Hightop or Saddleback Mountain.<sup>3</sup> Lederer is supposed to have kept a diary in Latin and to have made a map and these were published in 1672.<sup>4</sup> While Lederer's accuracy and even authenticity has been much questioned, Lyman Carrier has this to say of Lederer:

Lederer's map needs more than passing notice. It is a map of the Piedmont between the falls of the rivers, that is, the coastal plain on the east and the Blue Ridge Mountains on the west. On it are charted the Rappahannock, Pamunkey,

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James and Roanoke Rivers, with several of their branches. The coastal plain is not shown as he states it was "so well known to christendom." The top of the map is to the west instead of the conventional north. The "Apalataen" Mountains are shown correctly extending from northeast to southwest<sup>5</sup>

While the author has no reason to challenge John Lederer's position as the first European to enter into what is now Greene County, it was not his remarkable exploit but the mystique of the Knights of the Golden Horse Shoe which fires the imagination of the present-day citizens of Greene County. The Knights of the Golden Horse Shoe is the legendary name<sup>6</sup> of a group of gentlemen who, in 1716,<sup>7</sup> accompanied lieutenant Governor Spotswood on a trip of exploration from near Williamsburg to the Shenandoah River, traversing much of what is now Greene County and crossing the Blue Ridge at Swift Run Gap. According to legend, these gentlemen were honored by the Governor in a ceremony much like the dubbing of a knight and each was given

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a bejeweled horseshoe as a memento of the occasion. The choice of the horseshoe as a symbol of the journey may have been by reason of its importance to a party intending to traverse the rocky terrain which is found in the Appalachians. Historians tell us that in Eastern Virginia, in the early part of the 18th century it was common for horses to be unshod. However, for a trip to the rocky "west" the horses would have to be shod and the expedition would have to be prepared to make replacements en route.<sup>8</sup>

Whether or not Spotswood really chose golden horseshoes as gifts for his traveling companions is not known and consequently why he chose them is in the realm of pure speculation. That the legend has had its effect on Greene County is not speculation. Certainly the existence of the legend is the reason why the horseshoe emblem was chosen in designing the official seal of Greene County.<sup>9</sup> Another heritage of the "Knights" is the naming of Route 33 as the Spotswood Trail. This highway which traverses Greene

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County on a generally east-west axis, continues to bear this name despite the fact that scholars much disagree as to the route actually followed by the Spotswood party, the John Fontaine diary being virtually the only remaining source material available to be consulted.

John Fontaine was one of the party of gentlemen who accompanied Lieutenant Governor Spotswood on the expedition to the west and, to the good fortune of all of us, he kept a diary which contains an account of the journey. He describes the camps set up at the end of each day and he estimates the mileage covered by the day's travel. From his text we know in a general way the route followed.

The course followed was along the south bank of the Rapidan via points which are today the sites of Madison Mills, Liberty Mills, Burtonville and Stanardsville, through Swift Run Gap to the Shenandoah River to which the Spotswood party gave the name "Euphrates."<sup>10</sup> The part of this route which now lies

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in Greene County is covered in the Fontaine notes respecting the fifth through the ninth encampments of the group which took place September 3 through September 8, 1716, except for the eighth encampment on September 6, 1716, which was west of Greene in what is now Rockingham County.

A then and now comparison is interesting. If the route deduced from the Fontaine diary is compared with a current Department of Highway map, one sees that to approximate the route of the "Knights" one might take Route 609 from Burtonville to Stanardsville, then follow Route 33 to the Shenandoah River crossing near Elkton, a distance of some nineteen miles. According to Fontaine's estimates the Spotswood party covered some thirty-four miles. However, Fontaine's estimates could not fail to have been influenced by the absence of roads and the roughness of the terrain. He refers to the uphill route from Camp Taylor (near site of present-day Burtonville) to Camp Robertson (near site of present-

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day Stanardsville) in the following terms:

...and about ten we came amongst a thicket that was so well laced together that in getting through it tore off a great deal of our baggage and our clothes to rags...We made all this day but eight miles.<sup>11</sup>

In the period between September 3 and September 8, while he was in what later to be Greene County, Fontaine refers eleven times to rattlesnakes!

One has the impression that the frequent firing of muskets and toasting of the King's health which Fontaine mentions may have had behind them a desire to encourage the Crown to grant lands to the loyal explorer who became, by reason of their exploration, among the best informed of the royal subjects respecting the location of "the largest timber... the finest and deepest mold and good grass upon it"<sup>12</sup> lying to the west of the fall line of Virginia's major rivers.

There is no comprehensive list of the members of



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the Spotswood party but, aside from John Fontaine, it very probably included James Taylor, Jr., a surveyor, Augustine Smith, a surveyor, Robert Brooke, a surveyor, Captain Christopher Smith, a surveyor, Robert Beverly, a Mr. William Todd, Captain Jeremiah Clowder and a Dr. Robinson. Of these, James Taylor and Robert Beverly had much to do with the development of what is now Greene County.

While James Taylor has left no known writing respecting the journey of the "Knights," it was only five years later, on September 7, 1721, that he certified the surveying of a 24,000 acre plot defining the boundaries of tracts of land now lying in Orange and Greene Counties, but then in Spotsylvania County. The plot was a patent granted in 1722 by George I to eight gentlemen, one of whom was Harry Beverly, brother of Robert Beverly, the "Knight". This patent is now known as the Octonia or Beverly Grant.<sup>13</sup> The Taylor map survives today in the possession of the Virginia Historical Society and the Octonia Stone,

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believed to be a boundary marker of the grant, is one of the two sites in Greene County which are in the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>14</sup> This grant has been much researched by historians and mention of it is here made only because it is perhaps the earliest available evidence of a grant of land lying in part in what is now Greene County. The eight original grantees, which included Harry Beverly, brother of the "Knight," Robert Beverly, and William Stanard, did not, however, "seat and plant" within the term prescribed by the Crown grant. Robert Beverly, Jr., Harry Beverly's son, sued for and obtained annulment of the 1722 patent and in 1729 a new patent covering the same land was issued to him by Lieutenant Governor Gooch. When Robert Beverly died in 1733 he left 6,000 acres, in a region which is now Greene County, to his nephew, Beverly Stanard.

Beverly Stanard was the father of Captain William Stanard, founder of Stanardsville. Since the Robert Beverly who accompanied Lieutenant Governor Spotswood

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in 1716 was the brother of Harry Beverly of the 1722 Octonia Grant, the Robert Beverly who was the 1729 grantee was the nephew of the "Knight" and great uncle of William Stanard.<sup>15</sup> While James Taylor was not one of the original Octonia grantees nor was he included in the Robert Beverly grant, he nevertheless otherwise acquired large holdings in Orange County and this land passed on to his son, Zachary and grandson Richard. The latter became the father of President F. Zachary Taylor<sup>16</sup> who was born at Montebello in Orange County even though he is usually listed as a president coming from Louisiana.

A distinguishing feature of both Stanardsville and Greene County is the order in which they came into existence. In eastern Virginia, typically a county seat was first named and a community later developed around the county offices. However, Stanardsville came into being forty-five years before the formation of Greene County. In 1793, from forty-five acres of the land of this William Stanard, the General Assembly

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established Stanardsville as a town<sup>17</sup> under the trusteeship of a distinguished group of men including James Madison,<sup>18</sup> father of the James Madison who was later president of the United States. As early as 1835, shortly before the formation of Greene County, Stanardsville had 21 dwelling houses, 5 mercantile stores, 2 taverns, 1 tanyard, 1 saddler, 1 tailor, 1 boot and shoe factory, 2 smith shops, 1 wheelwright, 1 hatters' shop, 1 gun smith and a physician. The population of this self-sufficient community was then, in 1835, only 142.<sup>19</sup> In 1970, the population had grown to 296 but the automobile age has greatly reduced the variety of services which this community can provide for itself.

Perhaps the oldest community in Greene County which survives to be listed on the current county road map of the Virginia Department of Highways is Ruckersville. This hamlet was named for John Rucker who, in 1727 and a few years thereafter, acquired by patent and purchase some 1,500 acres of land; 977

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acres on the lower side of a run of the Rappahannock River and 599 acres on the north side of the Rapidan River. This John Rucker, in collaboration with John Lightfoot, built a church in 1733 in the community which is now called Ruckersville.<sup>20</sup> A nephew, Thomas Rucker, settled nearby and it is he who is credited with choosing the name Ruckersville in honor of his uncle.<sup>21</sup>

Other communities in Greene County are small in size but full of charm. There are two hamlets in the county which have Latin names, Quinque and Amicus. Quinque was known as Stephens' Shop until 1885 when a post office was established there. An inspector of the Post Office Department who was sent to the community in response to a request for the establishment of a post office inquired what name should be used. The answer must have unequivocal because we are told that the inspector noticed that the town had a store, a wheelwright's shop (Stephens' Shop), a blacksmith's shop and two dwellings: five

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buildings in all. Quinque, Latin for "five" was suggested and the name has remained.<sup>22</sup> Amicus, pronounced with emphasis on the first syllable, is not Latin for "friend" as one would expect but is a variant of Americus. It was a post office from 1888 to 1912. Notes of the Virginia Place Name Society indicate that the community was named by Betty (Chapman) Lancaster.<sup>23</sup> Today it is a cross-road at which there are but two buildings, a Seventh Day Adventist Church and the now-abandoned post office.

By the 1830's the region which is now Greene was a thriving one of some seven thousand citizens. It had been a part of Orange County since the formation of that county from Spotsylvania in 1734. Furthermore while the highway conditions by 1837 may have been somewhat improved over what the "Knights" had encountered, the petition for the formation of a new county contained these hints of the then-current highway conditions:

Your memorialists further represent to your

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honorable body, that the great distance at which they reside from the seat of justice of their county, renders it inconvenient and expensive in attending court being often detained thereby...the high waters of the two rivers that intersect their traveling thither...and the extreme badness of the public highways...which is near impassable for six months of the year or during the winter season.<sup>24</sup>

This petition was presented to the General Assembly in 1838 by Senator Thomas Davis, son of Captain Isaac Davis, builder of a beautiful pre-1800 house which is still standing. The legislature acted favorably and by an act of the General Assembly passed January 24, 1838, Greene County was formed from "so much of the county of Orange as lies next to, and adjoining the counties of Madison, Rockingham and Albemarle and west of a line beginning at Cave's old mill,...on the Madison County line, and running thence a straight line to where Whitelaw's mill run

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intersects the Albemarle County line....".<sup>25</sup>

The Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission has made a partial survey of significant landmarks in Greene County but, at this writing, aside from the Octonia Stone, only the courthouse is on the National Register of Historical Places. When, in 1958, the Courthouse at Stanardsville was nominated for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, the nomination data was submitted by Dr. Edward P. Alexander and, from this material we learn that the Courthouse, jail and clerk's offices were built by William B. Phillips in 1838. Phillips, a bricklayer, was architect of the Greene County Courthouse and is reputed to have been directly influenced by Thomas Jefferson by reason of having done work on the buildings of the University of Virginia.<sup>26</sup>

The author notes that the photograph of the courthouse was taken at 6:45 a.m. in May of 1978.



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The Greene County Courthouse [Photo by the author]  
Because the building faces north, this seemed the only way to get sunlight illumination of the front of the structure. If reference is made to that photograph,

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one can see that the courthouse is a two-story, gable roof building laid in Flemish bond. The three-bay, gable-end front has a pedimented tetra-style portico using Tuscan columns and a Roman Doric entablature. This portico was added in 1927-28. It is interesting to note that the original courthouse cost \$6,832.00 in 1838, at a time when brick cost less than \$4.00 per 100.<sup>27</sup> The jail still stands but the original clerk's office was destroyed by fire and replaced by a modern building built under a W.P.A. program and dedicated September 3, 1938 in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of Greene County.<sup>28</sup>

Not unexpectedly the early homes in Greene are very different from those which are found in eastern Virginia. Typically the early material of construction in the western piedmont was wood which means that the changes wrought by time are usually greater than when brick or stone were commonly used materials of construction.

Most of the houses which were built before 1800

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in the region which is now Greene County were either "catslide" or English types.<sup>29</sup> The "catslide," which is a southern name for what was known in New England as a "salt box" house, is a one and one-half story building with an integral one-storied portion at the rear. The roof at the back of the house slopes downward from the ridge in a nearly straight line which gives this type of house its typical profile and its name. Usually the interior was one large room with a loft in the upper half story. The old tavern on the north side of Route 609 at Burtonville is a well preserved example of this type of house.

Not many pioneers were trained in architecture and for this reason the local carpenter often worked out variations on the basic theme. A gem of this type, albeit with two floors, is "Wakefield" which is on the north side of Route 633 west of Amicus. The author has not been able to fix exactly the date of either of these houses or by whom they were built but

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Burtonsville, a catslide house [Photo by author]  
the style of architecture is definitely 18th century pioneer. Furthermore it is known that "Wakefield" was purchased by Charles and Sarah Parrott in 1810 from Captain James Early<sup>30</sup> and occupied by that family for three generations until 1922.

The English type house is a rectangular two-

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storied frame building with attic and basement. These houses were built with a variety of floor plans but



Wakefield [Photo by the author]

their rectangular shape and the chimney at each end makes recognition easy. An example of an "English" style house dating from just before 1800 is the Isaac

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Davis home earlier mentioned. This house was built between 1796 and 1798 by Isaac Davis, Jr. and was occupied by his descendants until very recently.<sup>31</sup> The photograph is of the south end of the building showing the beautiful old woodwork and



The Isaac Davis House  
characteristic chimney.

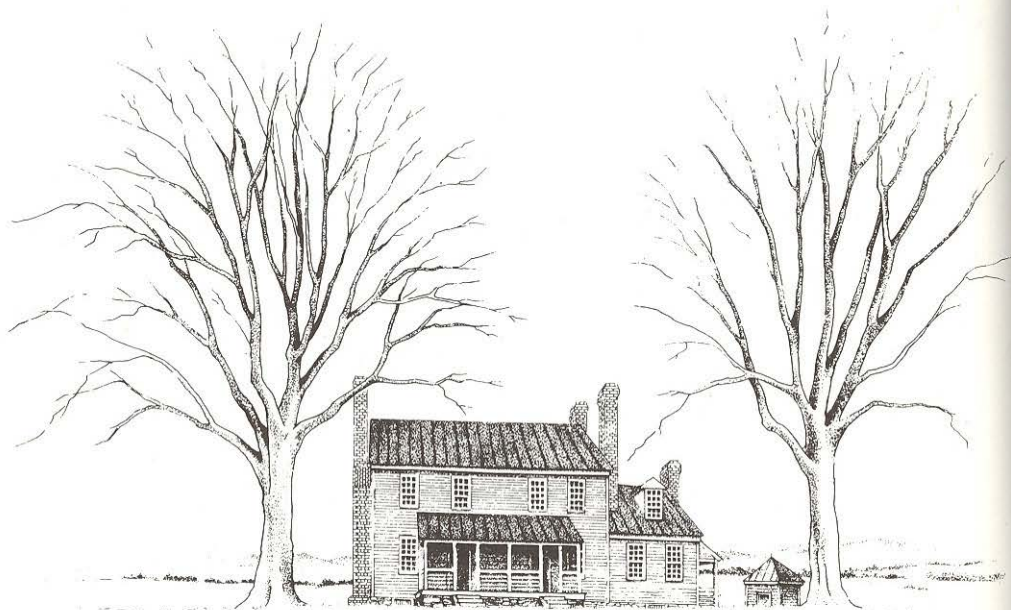
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Other well preserved old houses in Greene include the Marshall House, a classic "English" style near Ruckersville. This house was probably built by a carpenter named Twyman. It was sold to Tavner Marshall in 1842 and it is still owned by that family. Mrs. John T. Marshall told the author that when she came to this house as a bride there was a brick in the chimney dated 1787. According to Mrs. Marshall this is now so eroded as to be no longer legible. "Green Pastures" on Route 33 has a "catslide" house behind the main house and this is reputed to go back to 1740. The disposition of the building makes a photograph of the old structure nearly impossible.

The story of Greene County has been a quiet one. In a way it is the story of how one small area of the Western Piedmont was developed but in another way, it is typical of much of rural America. It is another story of taming the wilderness. The pioneers came to a wild land. Their children drive interstate highways and work at distances from the home that would have

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been incredible even fifty years ago. But when they are on the land, when they are back home again, when it is night, they too hear the sounds of the mountains just as they were heard by the Spotswood party.



*G. S. G. G.*

*Locust Grove 1796*



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