

A Brief History of Woodley

In 1723 Colonel James Taylor II surveyed a tract of land in Orange County Virginia for King George I of England consisting of 4,675 acres. Colonel Taylor had been employed to survey sections of Piedmont Virginia to locate and patent/deed fertile agricultural lands for England. Colonel Taylor is reported to have been one of the primary guides for the "Governor Spotswood's Knights of the Golden Horseshoe" expedition as he had ventured independently into the Piedmont and Shenandoah area numerous times becoming familiar with the terrain.

Colonel Taylor had two daughters. One was married to Ambrose Madison in 1721 and the other to Captain Thomas Chew. As a fee for his surveying work and other labors, Colonel Taylor negotiated payment with King George to grant a patent on a tract of land located in Orange, Virginia directly to his two son's in law. It has been clearly documented from the daily notes of prior excursions into the Orange area that Colonel Taylor had a keen interest in the land because of the soil, a rich red Davidson loam that runs under portions of central Virginia, including Orange County. Ambrose Madison Sr. eventually purchased the Chew portion of this tract to combine with his tract named Mt. Pleasant, all of which was later renamed Montpelier, the future home of President James Madison.

Ambrose Sr. and Francis Madison had three children, two daughters and one son, James Madison (referred to from this point on as James Madison Sr.), the father of President James Madison and his brother Ambrose Madison who constructed Woodley. Ambrose passed away in 1732 at the young age of thirty six leaving his widow to supervise the work of the farm until his son James Madison, Sr. (father of President James Madison), only nine years old at the time was old enough to assume the responsibilities of managing a large estate. Records from that period reveal that Ambrose Madison Sr. died after being poisoned by a slave named Pompey on loan from a nearby plantation. Pompey was charged, tried, and executed. Two additional slaves, a male and a female, were found guilty as accomplices and consequently given twenty nine lashes and returned to Mrs. Madison.

James Madison Sr. grew up on the plantation and was married in 1749 to Nelly Conway. They produced twelve children, seven of whom survived to adulthood. Ambrose Madison the brother of President James Madison and who built Woodley was born to Nelly Conway and James Madison Sr. in 1755. Ambrose eventually inherited the land where Woodley stands today in 1781. Woodley was referred to in the records from that time as Woodley Vale. This land was part of the original Chew tract described earlier as purchased by Ambrose Madison Sr. to combine with Montpelier. A short time later, in approximately 1782 Ambrose Madison constructed Woodley which today remains as the center section of the house between two wings that were added later in 1840 by Ambrose Madison's daughter, Nelly Conway Willis. (Nelly Madison assumed the name Willis from her marriage to Dr. John Willis from Gloucester, Virginia) The center section remains today with many original materials, window glasses, doors, mantels, locks, and framing. The transom around the front door has thirteen glass panes traditionally referred to as in honor of the thirteen original colonies. I cannot conclusively document the accuracy of this account, but the same point is included in numerous historical biographies and descriptions of Woodley done by reputable writers. There does not seem to be much information regarding the cottage in the yard other than it served as a kitchen and may have been constructed in 1792 when Woodley was built. However, there is a possibility that the structure is older than Woodley and may have been used as a farm overseer residence until it was converted later to a kitchen by Ambrose Madison when he built Woodley.

Ambrose Madison passed away 1793 at the age of thirty eight. He is buried in the family cemetery on the grounds of Montpelier along with his brother President James Madison and his family. His widow, Francis Madison passed away five years later leaving their only child, Nelly Conway Madison, under the care and supervision of her uncle, James Madison Jr. of Montpelier (later know as President James Madison) and his wife Dolley Madison. Records indicate that they enjoyed a very close relationship throughout their lives and that she was with President James Madison, when he passed away June 28, 1836.

Nelly Madison (now a Willis) and Dr. John Willis had one child, a son that they named John Willis. Their son was only two years old with Dr. Willis passed away. Once again, Nelly Madison Willis is credited with adding the two matching wings to Woodley in 1840. The mantels and moldings were quite

extravagant for the time and remain in original condition. The floors throughout the house are original except for the dining room floor. The dining room floors were restored in the 1990's using original pine floor boards taken from the attics in both wings.

Colonel John Willis, Nelly's only child, served in the War Between the States, returned to Orange and is credited with building several significant residences near the town of Orange. Mayhurst is located just outside the town on Orange on the right before you reach Woodley. Mayhurst is unique structure featuring Italian Revival architectural design and is currently owned and operated as a Bed and Breakfast by Mr. and Mrs. John North. John North is the brother of Colonel Oliver North. Colonel Willis also built Rockwood, which is located just over a high ridge behind Woodley on the north side of Chicken Mountain Road. Rockwood also features unique architectural features resembling a Swiss chalet and is on the national registry of historic places. It is currently owner-occupied by Mrs. Mildred Brooking, who resides there alone and is in her nineties. Several of the primary Sanford generation were born at Rockwood during the time the family lived there early in the twentieth century. Oakburn was constructed on a tract of land taken from the Mayhurst tract. It was also a substantial residence, but was destroyed by fire in 1932. As you can see, Colonel Willis was quite ambitious and built three large unique residences in the Orange area.

Following the Civil War, Nelly Willis moved from Woodley to live with her son at Mayhurst leaving Woodley either vacant or left to a caretaker. The house, adjacent buildings, and dependencies fell into disrepair and the property was eventually put up for sale to pay delinquent taxes. It was purchased in 1880 by Joseph H. Johnson of Berry Hill. At that time Woodley consisted of approximately 520 acres.

On January 28, 1880 Walker Sanford (no middle name) of Newington (located near Clark's Mountain in Orange County) married Lelia Johnson who was the daughter of Joseph Johnson and Mary Andrews Johnson of Berry Hill. So that you know, Berry Hill is also a substantial residence and is a National Historic Landmark, as it was built by the same folks that constructed the University of Virginia. It is located on the edge of Orange and can be seen off on the crest of a hill northeast of the intersection of route 15 and 20. The residence is in very poor condition at this time. Shortly thereafter, the Sanfords moved to Woodley. Within a few years Walker Sanford purchased a portion of Woodley from Joseph Johnson. At his death, Joseph Johnson, gave the remainder of Woodley to his daughter Lelia Johnson and her husband, Walker Sanford.

Walker Sanford and Lelia Sanford had five children: Harry Estil (1881); Walker Wallace (1882); Elmira Andrews (Ellie) (1884); Lucy Henshaw (1887); and Lelia Johnson (1890). Following the death of Walker Sanford in January, 1921, the estate was sold to equally divide the assets between the five children. Harry and Wallace purchased the farm and the girls received other assets. The two brothers jointly operated the farm in partnership for approximately five years.

In the meantime, Harry Sanford, the father of the current Sanford generation, married Mary Gertrude Lewis on October 4, 1917 and she moved into Woodley. Realizing that Woodley would have to be sold in a few years to settle the estate, Harry purchased Rockwood (mentioned earlier as located directly over a high ridge behind Woodley) in 1920 for \$12,000 and moved there shortly thereafter. Now that Woodley was vacant, George Hankins, his wife, and ten children moved into the house. George was employed at that time to work the farm that was still owned by both Harry and Wallace. Before moving to Rockwood, Harry and Mary had three children, Josephine Virginia, who was born at Montpelier Station in 1918 so that Mary could be with her mother, Harry Walker Sanford was born at Woodley in 1919, and Richard Lewis Sanford was born at Woodley in 1920. There is an old walnut baby bed in the north bedroom (over the parlor) that most of the Sanford children used as infants. The four Sanford children born at Rockwood were: Mary Ann (Nancy-1922); Thomas Johnson (Tom-1924); Samuel Ross (Sam-1925); and Lucy Andrews (1926).

In 1927 Harry and Wallace decided to divide Woodley. Wallace kept approximately one-third of the property and in return gave Harry \$10,000. The tract of land purchased by Wallace was established as Kenwood Farm, which is large dairy farm directly behind Woodley. Kenwood Farm is still owned and operated by a Sanford, Wallace Woodruff Sanford, known locally as Monk Sanford. The farm operation

has received numerous awards for outstanding agricultural and conservation practices. Furthermore, in 2005 Monk was honored by the Virginia Farm Bureau as The Virginia Farmer of the Year.

In any case, Harry Sanford moved his family back to Woodley, just before Christmas of 1927. Household items were moved mostly by wagon. Shortly thereafter, Rockwood was sold \$8000 to Mrs. Marion DuPont Scott who owned the adjoining farm, Montpelier. I point out that the sale price for Rockwood was \$4000 less than the price Harry paid for it in 1920. The depression was a difficult time for farming families and depressed land values often contributed to those difficulties.

Upon the return to Woodley in 1927 four more children were born: Ellie (no middle name-1928); Benjamin Hill (Ben-1929); Eugenia Lawrence (Gene-1930); Sabrina (no middle name-1932); and Harry Estil (Harriet-1936), who was born at the University of Virginia Hospital in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Harry decided to operate Woodley as a dairy similar to his brother's operation at Kenwood Farm. He purchased a considerable amount of equipment and cattle and converted existing farm structures for the dairy business. He also built two tenant houses on the property. During this time, Harry developed diabetes and also suffered the loss of one eye in an accident...you need to ask Richard Sanford regarding the details of the accident. The dairy farm was a prosperous business until the depression of 1929. Adding to hard times, the dairy herd contracted Bangs Disease which resulted in the state ordered sale and or destruction of the dairy head resulting in an almost total loss of income to the Sanford family. Because of their condition, the cattle were sold a very low price, which added to the family's distressed financial condition.

During these difficult years, the children suffered with illnesses such as the flu, measles, whooping cough, tonsillitis, and pneumonia. Some of the illnesses resulted in hospitalization at the University of Virginia hospital in Charlottesville, requiring numerous difficult trips to and from Charlottesville. A tragic accident struck the family in 1932 when five year old Lucy Sanford tried to light a fire in the kitchen stove to heat her toy iron. Her clothes caught fire and she was severely burned. She lived for five weeks before passing away on the operating table during a skin graft. Granny often referred to these times as the "Hurricane Years."

With the loss of income from the dairy the family struggled along until 1938 when the Federal Land Bank threatened to foreclose on the farm. To avoid foreclosure, Harry Sanford filed for voluntary bankruptcy. This permitted the family to keep two vehicles, furniture, wagons, a team of horses, and some equipment and livestock. At this time, the family relocated to Far Away Farm, located near Rhodesville, Virginia. The bank took possession of Woodley and it was eventually sold to Frederick Walton and his wife. The Waltons lived at Woodley for approximately twenty years.

The Waltons sold the Woodley to the Miller family in 1969. They continued a farm operation at Woodley until it was sold in the mid 1970's to James Throckmorton. However, before selling the farm to Throckmorton, the Millers surveyed off thirty nine acres and constructed a home on the site known today as the North Forty. Richard and Thelma Sanford purchased The North Forty from the Millers in 1986. The North Forty can be seen from Woodley up on a ridge to the right as you drive into Woodley.

Throckmorton immediately began selling off parcels of the farm. The land across Route 15 was sold off in lots, but most of it was purchased by the Herndon brothers, first cousins of Thelma Sanford. Throckmorton sold one hundred and twenty five acres to W.W. Sanford III (Monk Sanford) and his wife Carolyn to add to Kenwood Farm. It is also worth noting at this point that Monk and Carolyn Sanford recently placed 725 acres of Kenwood Farm into a scenic easement with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, which will preserve the farm and prevent land it from being subdivided into housing lots by residential developers in the future. Woodley is also being placed into a scenic easement to prevent any further reduction of the remaining forty acres and to preserve the historic home and dependency.

Throckmorton sold the remainder of Woodley Farm, approximately 44 acres, to William Niven, in 1985 for \$225,000. Mr. Niven had a master's degree in historic and architectural restoration and spent several years restoring the dependency, the main house, and grounds. The kitchen, currently the guest cottage, was

restored first. Mr. Niven converted it into a three bedroom residence which he used as his residence during the restoration of Woodley. According to qualified sources, the restoration of Woodley was done with great care and attention to detail. Numerous porches and additions were removed to restore the house to its original condition and floor plan, while at the same time including modern amenities such as air conditioning. Even the kitchen cabinets were carefully crafted from old pine boards taken from the attics in both wings. Mr. Niven sold Woodley in 1999 to Chester and Dorothy Nagel for \$750,000. As far as I can determine, Mr. Niven relocated somewhere in South Carolina where he reportedly purchased another historic residence to restore.

Stephen and Norma Sanford purchased Woodley in September of 2004, thus returning Woodley, to a Sanford who descended from the Sanfords who had such a wonderful history there.

Compiled by Thelma Sanford and Steve Sanford for family information and not for publication.

Sources of Information

1. Remembering: A History of Orange County Virginia, by Frank S. Walker, Jr.
2. The Times and Places of Mary Lewis Sanford
3. Richard L. Sanford and his incredible memory