

## History of Blacksburg, Virginia

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The history of Blacksburg should begin with a background of pioneer life of those who braved the dangers, privations and hardships of the wilderness. The circumstances and surroundings did not favor the writing or preserving of records and as the older generation passed away, many of them carried with them the recollections and traditions that can never be recovered. We find our most authentic history of Draper's Meadows (1748) afterwards Smithfield (1773) then Blacksburg (1798) written by Dr. John P. Hale.

"Thos. Ingles, according to tradition, was descended from a Scotch family, was born and reared in London, lived about 1730 and 1740, in Dublin, Ireland, was a large importing wholesale merchant, was wealthy, owned his own ship and traded with foreign countries. In some revolution or political trouble occurring during the time of his residence in Dublin, Thos. Ingles took an active part and in the failure of the cause he favored his property was confiscated, and he was lucky to escape with his life. He, with his three sons, William, Matthew, and John came to America and located for a time in Pennsylvania. In 1744 Thos. Ingles and his eldest son William, then only a youth, made an excursion to the Wilds of Southwestern Virginia, going as far as New or Woods River.

"No details of this trip have been preserved, but it was probably at this time that they made the acquaintance of the Drapers living at Pattonsburg (on the James River opposite Buchanan) Boutetourt County, Virginia.

"Geo. Draper and his wife whose maiden name had been Elenor Hardin came from county Donegal, north of Ireland, in 1720, and settled at the mouth of the Schmylkill River, within the present limits of the city of Philadelphia. Here two children were born, John in 1730 and Mary in 1732.

"Between 1740 and 1744 they with their two children came to Virginia and settled in Colonel Patton's settlement, Pattonsburg.

"While the Drapers lived in Pattonsburg, Geo. Draper started out on a game-hunting and land expedition and was never heard of again. About four years later in 1748 Dr. Thos. Walker and Col. James Patton's expedition made an excursion thru Southwestern Virginia and immediately upon the return of Walker and Patton, Thomas Ingles and his three sons-- Mrs. Draper and her son and daughter, Adam Harman, Henry Leonard and James Burke came and made the settlement west of the Allegheny divide known as 'Draper's Meadows'.

"The first building and improvements which were built from round logs, as all frontier buildings then were, stood upon the present sites of the 'V.P.I.' and 'Solitude', the residence of the late Col. Robert Preston of Blacksburg."

Very few facts have been preserved in regard to the Ingles-Draper frontier settlement. William Ingles and Mary Draper were married in 1750. This the first white wedding west of the Alleghenies.

After Mrs. Ingles' return they made their home at Drapers Meadow for some time, then exchanged their right for the location now known as Ingles Ferry.

When Mrs. Draper was ransomed by her husband they returned to their old location. There they remained until 1773 when they sold their land to William Preston and moved to Drapers Valley in Pulaski County.

In 1774 William Preston moved his family and changed the name from Draper's Meadow to Smithfield in honor of his wife who was a Miss Susanna Smith. The homesite of Smithfield is not located upon the exact site of Draper's Meadows settlement ; it stands about one half mile to the Southwest. The original building still remains but when the house was first built it was surrounded by a stockade for protection from Indians. After the heirs of William Preston inherited his estate it was in three main divisions, Smithfield, Solitude and Whitethorn. All these buildings still remain and are still in use. The original homesite is still in possession of the Preston heirs.

After a chain of forts were built along the Alleghenies for protection against the invaders many more families moved in the vicinity of "Blacksburg". In 1772 John Black located on the Ingle's land and built his home. In 1778 or 79 the Indians burned it. His wife, with Baby Samuel spent the night in a hollow tree, and he stood guard over them. Next morning he started with them to Augusta County where they had to remain six years because her husband was in the Revolutionary War until he could rebuild their home. In 1780 John Black was one of the cavalry who went with Gen. William Campbell in the expedition against the Cherokees at Long Island, Tennessee and helped to make the treaty which freed Southwest Virginia from their invasions.

It was for this family of Blacks that the town of Blacksburg was later named. Their home was the one moved back of the new mess hall from the site where the first new barracks stands. The little log house back of the barracks is one of the original houses. When this log structure was first built there was a fort around it for protection from the Indians. Once a group of Indians were discovered by Mr. Black climbing from one tree to another. Mr. Black went out and threw his hat high into the air, they took it as a friendly token and came to the house. He invited them in to breakfast after which they asked for a knife as a souvenir. One was given them and when they returned months later they brought some beautiful trinkets for Mrs. Black.

This John Black is said to have owned about 300 acres of land on Stouble's Creek and William Black the same. ON January 13, 1798, the Virginia Assembly, on the solicitation of William Black, established the town of Blacksburg (already laid off in lots and streets) on the property of William Black, and on the same date, William Black and his wife, Jane, deeded the area on which the town stood (38 3/4 acres, plus 20 poles), to a group of trustees representing the town of Blacksburg. The first trustees were George Rutledge, John Black, James Patton Preston, John Henderson, Edward Rutledge, William Black and John Preston.

The trustees sold lots to the following persons, John Preston lots 1 and 3, Robert King no. 2, John McGee no. 4, then in the following order, Mrs. Lyons, Henry Price, Washington Dobyns, Samuel Black, John Gardner, Mary S. Charlton, Adam Croy, John Surface, William and G. Rutledge, William Thomas, William Argabrite, John B. Goodridh, Andrew Croy, Elizabeth Stanger, William J. Barger, John Spickard, Wesley Argabrite, John Peterman and William Ronald. Some bought two or three lots. The streets mentioned were Smithfield, Roanoke, Main, Water, Tom's Creek and Lower Street. The rest were not named. The owner must build a house not less than seventy feet square, fit to reside in, with a brick or stone chimney, in from two or five years.

In locating the main street of Blacksburg some difficulty was met in securing the right of way. The Amiss's owned the square where Roop's dwelling is now and would not permit the main street to go down what is now known as Church Street. It was moved to present street which is not so wide as Church Street. A creek runs across Main Street and for many years this was crossed by small wooden bridges. Mr. Lybrook told me the young buys spent many an hour riding the horses across these bridges at night. Our present Main Street formerly went by what is now Argabrite's Garage, then a livery stable, from there across the V.P.I. campus on the east side of the Infirmary then across by the present Lutheran Parsonage.

In the sale and distribution of lots in the new town, lot 40 was assigned to the Methodists for a church and on it Jonas McDonald placed at his own expense the first Methodist church. The Presbyterians held their services also in the church and the two denominations held their Sunday schools in it until 1830. This first church was log as well as the second church built on the same location. This church remained until 1840 when a brick church of colonial design was built which served until the present church was erected. These churches were lighted with dipped moulded candles, lard burning lamps, oil lamps and electricity according to the prevailing means of lighting at the time. Adam Croy was the sexton of the church (1883-1861) and took care of it seeing that everything was in perfect order. Woe to the dog that come into the church or the person inclined in any way to disturb the worship. He was constantly watching and he moved about the church quietly in his "pumps" snuffing the candles. The second church was built with the steps to the galleries on the outside. One of the windows up stairs was in the end, the sexton would open it, put out his horn and blow long and loud. Those who remember it say it was heard much farther than the present. He kept his clock in exact

time by his sun dial and neither preacher nor people could induce him to blow the horn a minute earlier or later than at the right time.

The Presbyterian church has had three locations of its own, the first founded in 1833 using a log house near Palmer Spring, the second on the corner where the Kelsey's live now, the third and present one on Roanoke Street. While the building on Main Street was being used as a church citizens passed and found an old man, a Mr. Angell, sitting on the steps of the Presbyterian church very intoxicated. The passerby said, "Why, Mr. Angell, you shouldn't be sitting on the church steps drunk". His reply was, "I'd rather be a door-keeper in the house of the Lord than to dwell in the tents of the wicked."

The first Baptist church was located on the lot of the present Christian church. It was a brick building and during the Civil War it was used as a hospital for soldiers. This building was condemned soon after it was purchased and while a new church was being built services were held in the Monroe Evans home. Joe Price lives in this house now. The second church was started, the basement and first floor made, for some reason this was demolished and a frame building was put up on the same location in 1859. It was used until 1903 when the present building was completed.

The schools of Blacksburg were taught in various buildings. Mr. Alexander Black told me the little house next to the Esso filling station where we used to live was used as their family's first school room. Another house where pupils were taught was a log structure located where the present Episcopal Manse is located. It was taught by a private tutor. The building was called "Locksley Hall" by the pupils.

The Blacksburg Female Academy was located in the old brick part of the present public school. The spring on Roanoke side in front of Luster's was used for their water supply. There were three rooms, the small one on the west side was used as a music room. The music teacher, Miss Sue Peterman, was said to be beautiful, talented and well trained. Her sisters Miss Ellen and Ollie taught the academic subjects. When their mother died Ellen took the veil and Ollie never went to the table. The C.D. Thomas home or the "Old Brick House" was used as a girls school for a time after the Civil War.

The most noted school of early Blacksburg was the Olin and Preston Institute. The citizens combined with the Methodist church to organize this school. The name, "Olin", was selected, by the Methodists, in honor of Stephen Olin, the first president of Randolph-Macon College, and the citizens wanted to name it "Preston", for Major W. Ballard Preston, a prominent citizen of the town. So it was named Olin and Preston Institute. W. R. White is given as the principal for 1854. In 1859, Gilmore Smith was principal. Mr. McNeele and the Reverend Graham taught there. It was closed during the Civil War, reopened by Dr. P.H. Whisner, in September, 1868, and renamed the Preston and Olin Institute. In 1862, the U.S. Congress passed an act to endow a college for each State, in which colleges it was required that the main subject should related directly to agriculture and the mechanic arts, and that military instruction should be given. So the trustees of the Preston and Olin Institute met, in 1872, and voted to donate the school, with its one building and five acres of land to the State to house the Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, the present V.P.I. Montgomery County also subscribed \$20,000.00 for the support of the college. The original building was used until it burned in 1913. The first years of V.P.I. were very stormy and the first president, Dr. C.L.C. Minor, was removed in 1879. The students roomed and boarded where they could in town as there was no dormitory and no mess, and this occasioned the construction of the long, one-storied building of many rooms on Church Street west of the present Presbyterian Church, now known as "Lybrook Row", in those days known as "Hell's Row", doubtless in keeping with the actions of the inmates. Thus V.P.I. began with nothing but the inadequate Preston-Olin Building and limited ground (5 acres), with a faculty of three or four members, with constant changes of administration, practically no support from the state and discouraging political interference, yet by 1891 there had been provided a barracks building for housing the students, two academic buildings of brick, with a few lecture rooms and a poorly equipped laboratory for chemistry, a building for the experiment station, used for a horticultural building, with a small greenhouse attached, four houses for professors, with the old "Solitude" mansion refitted, a machine shop by the conversion of the old Preston and Olin Building, a large frame structure for assemblies, and a smaller frame house used as a shop. The planning and laying out of a campus had been started, and

an army officer had been secured as Commandant and military instructor. Thus the future of Blacksburg was assured and the growth of the town has been the result of the growth of the college.

The first bank of Blacksburg was in what is the old City Hall or Mayor's Office, opposite the National Bank. It closed during the Civil War then later opened in what is now the Colonial Inn or Old Brick House. After the War between the States, in 1891, a bank was opened by Dr. Conway and Mr. Hubbert. It was in the first drug store in Blacksburg now the Tech Studio Building. From there it was moved to its present location. Mr. Alex Black was the president for 46 years.

The largest Inn of old Blacksburg was on the property now belonging to the Norfolk and Western R.R. The building faced Main Street opposite the feed store. It was operated by Mr. John Peterman. Another old tavern inn and tavern were where Mr. Roop's house now is, the east side at the back of this house is said to be the original part of the building. It was once run by a man by the name of Joe Lester, who was so lawless that he ruled with a wicked hand and the citizens were afraid to report him to the authorities for fear of bodily harm. He was later shot by Joe Keister who was freed at his trial.

The building was later enlarged by Geo. Keister who ran it as a hotel and boarding house. He had a guest who would not pay his bill and when Mr. Keister rebelled after so long a time, he, the boarder, suggested that Mr. Keister rent his house to someone else and he would still occupy his room. In 1872 it was known as "Luster's Hotel" (not present Luster Family) and the students of the early years of V.P.I. took their meals there. The old mayor's office also was once operated as a hotel by Mr. Bodell and John Eakin.

In early Blacksburg there were several bar rooms and it was no unusual sight to see a drunken man and ladies did not walk the street.

There are few remaining of the old homes of the early year. They were all made of logs, generally of one story, without a floor and rarely a nail used in their construction. Among some of the old houses are the Dutch Inn, the Croy House, Joe Price's, the Walter Price, the Oakey's house and the Eoff's. The oldest part of "Solitude" was built in 1849.

The first Post office in Blacksburg was located opposite the N&W. property where the feed store is now. The second was in the old Lancaster house opposite Brown Bros. Store, it was then moved to the location now used as Blue Grass Meat Market, from there it was moved to the location that is the Greek restaurant, later to a store building by the William Preston Hotel, from there to side entrance of Rose's 5&10, thence to its present building.

The first Masonic Hall was on the site of the present Negro school. Then it was moved to the third story of Mr. Black's store and from there to its present location.

When we hear of the industries or early industries of Blacksburg we feel it was a much more enterprising place, than the Blacksburg we know. There have been at least 14 kinds of manufacturing done in Blacksburg. There were once three tanneries located here, one on the present site of the William Preston Hotel, owned by Mr. Grief Miller, the grandfather of Mr. Warren Miller. Mr. Miller was said to be witty and droll, often teased his wife by singing parodies of songs, and she being equally clever has as her favorite song for him "My grief and burden has been because I was not saved from him(sin)." Another tannery was located on the corner by Mrs. Pack's Inn, while the was where Mr. Tucker's home is now. The leader was tanned in read oak and chestnut bark. It took a year to tan a hide and one half of it paid for the work. There was also a saddle shop located on the Tucker yard. It was owned by Mr. John Spickard.

The hat makers shop was where Mr. Henry Argabrite's house is located. Mr. Joe Barton made fine felt hats for gentlemen which were almost indestructible. Mr. Black used to laugh about these hats, he said one could fight bumblebees with one all day without tearing it.

The tin shop was on our lot and was run by Mr. John Helm and Mr. Effinger. They made buckets, pans, cups and most anything constructed of tin as well as running a repair department.

The two cabinet shops were run by Mr. Monroe (James M.?) Evans and Mr. Robert Francisco. In connection with Mr. Evans' cabinet shop he ran an undertaking shop. Dora Mays said the jail was in front of the undertaking parlor and the Negroes quaked in their boots when they were sent to jail. Mr. Francisco was said to have been so strong he could pick up a mule and man and set them over a fence.

The wheelwright and wagon shop was owned by Crey Brothers and it was just below our house.

There were three blacksmith shops and in those days they did a good business and were very helpful to the public. Mr. Surface had the first shop. Then there were two run by Mr. Bess and Buck Argabrite. In the same building that is now Mr. Argabrite's garage.

There were two weaving shops in Blacksburg the principal one was below the colored Baptist church and was owned by John Camper. Mrs. Camper wove rugs, carpets and jeans cloth for mens suits.

The pottery shop was in the original part of Mrs. Will Lybrook's home (Mrs. McGhee's) the right side (3 rooms) and was run by Mr. David Bodell. He made bowls, crocks, jars and jugs for use here and shipped them elsewhere.

In 1865 Mr. Galloway had his shoe making shop where Mrs. Conner now lives. There were two or three other shops here about that time. Mr. Shaeff was a fine shoe maker here in the early days of local shoe making. A very elegant gentlemen visited Col. Preston and was attracted by the calf-skin boots worn by the men and had Mr. Shaeff to make him two pairs of boots. He complained that they did not fit. Mr. Shaeff said, "They fit your feet--but you want a hat instead of boots."

The brickyard was located on what is now known as "Faculty Row" and the bricks for the Academic buildings and Barracks No. 1 were made locally.

These products were sold here, people came from miles around to purchase them, then the surplus was hauled by wagons to Lynchburg, and these wagons loaded with merchandise for the stores of Blacksburg.

The early stores on Main street were on the Blacksburg Hardware location and Stanger's old store (where the Post Office is now). These merchants provided a stile on which the ladies might alight who had ridden in from a distance on horseback.

The early means of travel from town was by a stage or hacks and when the first railroad was completed in 1904 the citizens felt very proud of this asset. The stage coaches ran from Richmond to the Greenbrier White Sulphur Springs. They were very large and drawn by six horses with bells on their necks. All the villagers ran to the door to see them pass. The horses were watered and many a little Blacksburg boy had the pleasure of riding them to the watering trough. One day in the week the mail was brought from Christiansburg on horseback and it was marvelous when it came daily.

The town was well watered by springs and wells but pine wood pipes carried to the John Peterman Hotel.

The first telephone switchboard was installed by Professor Claudius Lee, L.H. Lancaster and by Kendall Weisiger, now assistant to the president of Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company at Atlanta. An ordinance for the operation of a telephone system in the town of Blacksburg was passed on March 3, 1898. The first operations were Miss Lenora Shafer, now Mrs. Charles L. Price, and Miss Hattie Shafer, now Mrs. John Anderson. It was known as the Montgomery Intelligence Company. It was succeeded in 1899, by the Virginia and Tennessee Telephone Company, an independent organization. The Chesapeake and Potomac acquired the property of this company in 1916. In 1874, a group of V.A.M.C., '75 and George Major, strung the first regular telegraph line in the state of Virginia. It went from the college grounds, at Blacksburg, six miles overland to Christiansburg. The nearest railroad center. The line worked perfectly when finished and remained in operation for many years. The first Western Union office was installed by the company, October, 1916, in the Field House (burned in 1923). The wire connection with Christiansburg there was a direct connection between the telephone line and the Western Union wire to Richmond. The office was installed later in a building back of Commerce Hall, then the Mess Hall. The present office building was erected in 1928.

<http://spec.lib.vt.edu/bicent/recoll/wingard.htm>

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<http://www.wvculture.org/history/collections/manuscripts/ms97-30.html>

<https://archive.org/details/transalleghenypi00hale>