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Blacksburg Was Established Back in 1798 When William Black Deeded Land to Town

by Mrs. W.D. Altman

In compiling brief histories of Draper's Meadow, Blacksburg and its environs, one encounters conflicting views as to exact dates and whether the first settlers were of German or Scotch-Irish ancestry, etc. However, all sources agree on the fact that Blacksburg was established in 1798 when William Black deed land on which the town was founded. By an act of the General Assembly in 1798, George and Edward Rutledge, John and William Black, and James and John Preston were made trustees.

The land was sold to the following persons: John Preston, Robert King, John McGee, Mrs. Lyons, Henry Price, Washington Dobyns, Samuel Black, John B. Helms, Harmon Gifford, Paris Smith, John Gardener, Mary S. Charlton, Adam Croy, John Surface, William E. and T. Rutledge, William Thomas, William Argabrite, John B. Goodrick, Andrew Croy, Elizabeth Stanger, William J. Barger, John Spikard, Wesley Argabrite, John Peterman and William Ronald.

These early land owners were required to "build a house not less than 70 feet square, fit to reside in with brick or stone chimney, in from two to five years; if not the title ceased."

The pioneer dwellings were made of logs, without floors and few nails were used in construction. In addition to the homes, one store, one log meeting house, blacksmith shop, one tannery and one tavern constituted the town. The store was owned by Col. John Preston and one barrel of sugar lasted the trade for a year.

Streets mentioned in one account included Main, Water, Roanoke, Tom's Creek, and "The Lower Street." Roanoke Street was wooded on both sides and primitive forests were still standing throughout the area.

The only method of travel was by horseback. As late as 1833 no light vehicle could be seen in or around Blacksburg. Not an uncommon occurrence was a trip to Richmond on horseback. Colonel John Preston owned the first carriage ever seen in early Blacksburg.

Religious services were held in the homes of the settlers. The first church erected in Blacksburg was the Methodist which was shared also by the Presbyterians. Instead of a church bell to toll the hour of the services, a large tin horn, blown by Adam Croy as he sat perched on a stool and poked the horn from the window of the meeting house, served to summon the people to worship.

In 1847 the Presbyterian began to build a brick church which was greatly admired and awakened commendable rivalry among the Methodists. Col. Robert Preston declared "the Methodists should build a church wider than the Presbyterian church and higher than the Presbyterian church." A new Methodist church was built and later the Baptist congregation also erected a brick church. The latter, however, went to ruins during the Civil War.

The earliest schools in the community were in the homes of large landowners. Often the instructors were capable, unmarried women who made their homes with various families, sometimes teaching more than one generation of children.

In the early 1840s the Blacksburg Female College was incorporated, the state having given some money for the building. It is believed that the building was the old red brick part of the school razed on Water Street in recent years. Robert Dawson taught French at this early school.

In 1850 there was organized a "Male Academy," of high school level. There were 24 pupils and the sessions ran for 10 months.

A boarding school was operated by the Pituman Sisters in the house now occupied by Mrs. Billy Gray, on Church Street. Although an excellent teacher, the elder Miss Pituman was called "peculiar." It is reputed that she "took the veil" after being disappointed in love. She wore a long, black veil which hung from her forehead and covered her face. She was never seen to remove the veil or leave the house until the sisters moved from Blacksburg.

Olin and Preston Institute, a Methodist school, was established in 1854 and later became part of the Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College. (The early history of these schools appears in an article elsewhere in this paper.)

Although numerous sources have been used as references in preparing this story of early Blacksburg, none has given the location of the first postoffice. James Mitchell was the first postmaster and was appointed in 1827. It is known that in the last half of the 19th century a postoffice was located on the southeast corner of Main and Washington Streets.

The first bank is believed to have been located in the corner room of a hotel owned by Mr. Amiss. Later this building was used as the City Hall and subsequently was torn down to make way for the National Bank of Blacksburg.

In 1909 Blacksburg had its first view of the cinema in a theatre located in the present G.W. Hill Store building. Silas R. Minter was a co-partner in this first local theatrical venture.

The Blacksburg cemetery was laid out on land given for the purpose by William Black. Of historical interest is the family cemetery at "Smithfield," the ancestral home of the Prestons of Virginia. Various private cemeteries, wherein were buried many of the pioneers of the community, included those of the Wall-Evans, Kipps-Linkous, Sibold-Schaeffer, Lybrook-Barger-Stanger.

In an "Early Blacksburg History," written by T. N. Conrad, the physician of the village was described as "Dr., or old Gov. Floyd, no less prominent as a physician than as a statesman, and as quaint as prominent." The doctor lived in a log house near "Solitude."

Blacksburg, which has been called the "Jamestown of the West," continued to grow as a result of the foresight, energy and public spirit of her citizens. By 1871, the year the town was incorporated, Blacksburg consisted of three churches, three hotels, four dry goods stores, one confectionary and grocery store, one pottery shop, two tan yards, two blacksmith shops, two wheelwright shops, one bank, one drug store, one wagon makers shop, one harness shop and three cabinet maker establishments. One lawyer, General Charles H. Ronald, displayed a shingle and two physicians, Dr. Harvey Black and Dr. T. J. Jackson, had offices in their respective residences.

Taken from a VPI student publication, "The Gray Jacket" of August, 1876, the following paragraph, in a facetious manner, given some insight into the improvements attempted by the citizenry of Blacksburg:

"Blacksburg still improves. Brick pavements are becoming quite fashionable on Main Street, to the comfort of walkers and the saving of shoe leather. We hope soon to see at least one side of this street paved with brick throughout its entire length, for, of all the disagreeable sensations experienced, that of a two inch plank rising as from the earth and carrying away in its ascent one side of your waxed moustache and the better half of your nose, is among the worst, nor does city stock rise in your estimation when some friend, with whom you are walking, treads on the far end of one of these planks just in time for your to get you No.7 under it, and then very politely snatches his foot up before you get yours out, causing said plank to act after the manner of shears right across you instep."

Samuel P. Withers, a Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College student of the mid-1870s described his arrival in Blacksburg in these words: "I shall never forget my first view of the old town and college. It was on a raw, cold day in February, and after having been jolted and beaten and hammered for more than three hours in what by courtesy was called a hack, we came to the top of a rise in the road, and looking down the long street, and over the roofs of the low, unpainted houses, I caught my first glimpse of the one building that constituted the Virginia A. & M. College, This was the old Preston and Olin Institute, and the architect who planned it must have been a genius for it was classic in its ugliness. While it was doubtless ugly. While it was doubtless meant to face the town it always gave me the impression that for some reason the building had become offended at the village and had deliberately turned its back upon it; and who could blame it? For, looking to the north, there is a scene of such ravishing beauty that it would seem that even insensate brick and mortar would be touched by it. Rolling away to the very furthest limit of the vision, range after range of the Alleghanies verdure-crowned to their summits, rise higher and higher, till imperceptibly their deep green melts into the blue of the heavens."

The late H. H. "Bunker" Hill stated that Sept 15, 1904 was the date the first train ran into Blacksburg. At that time the railroad was known as the Virginia Anthracite Railroad Company. V. C. Austin, now retired but still living in Blacksburg, was one of the first railroad stations agents. There were no electric lights and the agent held a big lamp aloft to light the train into the station. The name "Huckleberry" was given the train by a college character, named Bill Bland, who sold fruit to the students. Bland said the train ran so slowly that one could get off, pick huckleberries and catch the train before it reached town.

The first automobile seen in Blacksburg passed through the town on July 3, 1901. A message relayed from Christiansburg, had alerted the townspeople who lined the streets to view the "horseless buggy." The first trip by car from Blacksburg to Mountain Lake was made by the late John H. Schultz, VPI mess steward. The roads at the time were impassable, as well as impossible, and to the amusement of Mr. Schultz's friends, his car had to be pulled from ditches and ruts by horses on numerous occasions. Dean C. P. Miles recalls that one of Blacksburg's first cars was called "The Rambler" and was cranked from the side. He states, also, that gasoline at that time sold for nine cents a gallon and that the tanks were filled from one gallon cans which made fillin' her up an arduous task for the gasoline salesman.

Present day Blacksburg with its beautiful churches, excellent schools, modern homes and stores, new industries, numerous clubs and organizations and traffic-congested streets is indeed a contrast to the Blacksburg of long ago. Dr. W. B. Conway expressed the sentiment of many people about Blacksburg in an article printed Sept. 9, 1916, in "The Home News", Blacksburg newspaper, when he wrote: "Blacksburg was

in 1817, as always, the home of hospitable, kindly folks, intelligent and alert, loyal and true friends in happiness or distress. If I were asked to characterize the town in one phrase I would say: 'It is the place to which one always wishes to return.' "

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