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Travels in Virginia in Revolutionary Times

By A. J. MORRISON.

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On Bull Run and by the Banks of Occoquan.

No. 4.

In the year 1798 John Davis came to America. He had been very much of a traveler, had lived in the East Indies, had crossed the equator several times and doubled the Cape of Good Hope more than once. Davis came from Salisbury, in England. He deserves a place in the biographical dictionaries, but is not found there. He was a desultory man of letters, of considerable literature, who paid his way while in this country by potboiling for New York and Philadelphia booksellers and by teaching in South Carolina and Virginia. He brought with him across the Atlantic a library of 300 volumes, French, Latin and English. These books he read. For statistics, commerce, land speculations and all the rest that made up life in this country at that time Davis cared nothing whatever. He was an impressionist and not to be disregarded as a poet. His work, therefore, is distinct among these early travels which are usually records of fact, as fact and as such are extremely valuable. That is to say, the primrose by the river is material for botany, philosophy, romance and even chromatic journalism.

Thomas Jefferson, who was pleased to accept the dedication to him of this volume, supposed that it would be of a statistical sort. "Should you in your journeyings have been led to remark on the same objects on which I gave crude notes some years ago, I shall be happy to see them confirmed or corrected by a more accurate observer," wrote President Jefferson from Monticello.

Davis accepted the acceptance and published a book as little like the "Notes on Virginia" as any book could well be. The author had read Horace and believed as that poet did that his work was going to last. "That this volume will regale curiosity while man continues to be influenced by his senses and affections, I have little doubt," was the statement of John Davis in his preface. "It will be recurred to with equal interest on the banks of the Thames and those of the Ohio. There is no man who is not pleased in being told by another that he thought of the world and what the world thought of him." There is a good deal of truth in both the particular and the general observation. We have not yet taken the time to review our history with much care. Whenever that is done, John Davis, of Salisbury, citizen of the world, more or less, will find readers again after a hundred years.

Having translated for Bookseller Caritat, in New York (at Aaron Burr's suggestion), "The Campaign in Italy of General Buonaparte," and afterwards having spent a winter as tutor in the family of Mr. Drayton, of South Carolina, Davis came back to the North, wrote a novel called the "Wanderings of William," for Thompson, of Philadelphia, and, nevertheless, being in want of ready money, applied to Mr. Burr, now Vice-President, for a recommendation that might lead to government employment. The Vice-President very obligingly promised the indigent author a place in the Treasury Department. Davis set out for Washington, which at that time had only begun to emerge. The village of 1801 is thus described, as if by Goldsmith: "Washington on my second journey to it wore a very dreary aspect. The multitude had gone to their homes, and the inhabitants of the place were few. There were no objects to catch the eye but a forlorn pilgrim forcing his way through the grass that overruns the streets, or a cow ruminating on a bank, from whose neck depended a bell, that the animal might be found the more readily in the woods. I obtains accommodations at the Washington Tavern, which stands opposite the Treasury. There I found seven Cherokee chiefs. They came to be instructed in the mode of European agriculture." Presenting himself to Secretary Gallatin immediately after the Cherokee chiefs had descended the Treasury stairs, Davis was told by the Secretary that the Vice-President had made a mistake, and that there was no consulship or any other office to be had. Another instance of the startling difference between promise and fulfilment.

Davis repaired to Alexandria, the superior city near by, and found "elegant accommodations" at Gadesby's Hotel. "It is observable," he remarks, "that Gadesby keeps the best house of entertainment in the United States. The splendour of Gadesby's Hotel not suiting my finances, I removed to a public house kept by a Dutchman." At the end of a fortnight a message came from Occoquan, in answer to an advertisement, that Mr. Ellicott might want a tutor. "The next day I proceeded to Occoquan. On crossing a little bridge, I came within view of the settlement, which is romantic beyond conception. A beautiful river rolls its stream along mountains that rise abruptly from its bank, while on the opposite shore, which appears to have been formed by a volcano, are seen two mills enveloped in foam, and here and there a dwelling which has vast masses of stone for its foundation. The eye for some time is arrested by the uncommon scene; but it is soon relieved by a beautiful landscape that bounds the horizon. In a word, all the riches of nature are brought together in this spot, but without confusion. Our agreement was soon made. Quakers are men of few words. Friend Ellicott engaged me to educate his children for a quarter of a year. He wanted them taught reading, writing and arithmetic. Delightful task."

At Accoquan (by the falls of the stream of that name), where mills had been established and a good back country and the river trade held out inducements, a town had been projected. Towns have grown with us so easily, it has often happened that mistaken plans have been drawn for them. It was so with Occoquan, and in 1801 there was little there but scenery, with an excellent tavern accessible. Alexandria was near, and the lot of the meditative man of the three R's was on the whole agreeable. "No place can be more romantic than the view of Occoquan to a stranger, after crossing the rustic bridge which has been constructed by the inhabitants across the stream. He contemplates a river urging its course along mountains that lose themselves among the clouds, he beholds vessels taking on board flour under the foam of the mills, and others deeply laden expanding their sails to the breeze; while every face wears contentment, every gale wafts health and echo from the rocks multiplies the voices of the waggoners calling to their teams. No walk could be more delightful than that from Occoquan to Colchester. After clambering over mountains (Davis was of Salisbury, which stands on a plain) you come to the junction of the Occoquan with the noble river of the Potomac, and behold a bridge whose semi-elliptical arches are scarcely inferior to those of London. And on the side of this bridge stands a tavern, where every luxury that money can purchase is to be obtained at a first summons, where the richest viands cover the table, and where ice cools the Madeira that has been thrice across the ocean. My description of the tavern at the mouth of the Occoquan partakes of no hyperbolical amplification. The apartments are numerous and at the same time spacious, carpets of delicate texture cover the floors, and glasses are suspended from the walls in which a Goliath might survey himself. It was my custom every Saturday to ride to Alexandria, where I read the Northern papers at the coffee-room, and at Thomas's bookstore regaled myself with the new publications imported from Philadelphia. But I sought in vain for the advertisement that was to announce the diffusion of the 'Wanderings of William.'"

How far away from the Potomac have our Indians receded within 100 years? Davis mentions that on the north bank of the Occoquan was a pile of stones, a cairn, indicating that a warrior was interred beneath. The Indians from the back settlements, in traveling to the northward, never failed to leave the main road and visit the grave of the departed hero. If a stone was out of place they religiously restored it. "A party of Indians, while I was at Occoquan, turned from the common road into the woods to visit this grave on the bank of the river. The party was composed of an elderly chief, twelve young war captains and a couple of squaws. The Indians being assembled round the grave, the old chief rose with a solemn mien, and knocking his war-club against the ground, pronounced an oration to the memory of the departed warrior. No orator of antiquity ever exceeded this savage chief in the force of his emphasis, and the propriety of his gesture. Indeed, the whole scene was highly dignified. The fierceness of his countenance, the flowing robe, elevated tone, naked arm and erect stature, with a circle of auditors seated on the ground and in the open air, could not but impress upon the mind a lively idea of the celebrated speakers of ancient Greece and Rome. Having ended his oration, the Indian struck his war-club with fury against the ground, and the whole party obeyed a signal by joining in a war dance. The dance took place by moonlight, and it was scarcely finished when the chief produced a keg of whiskey, and, having taken a draught, passed it around among his brethren. The squaws now moved the tomahawks into the woods and a scene of riot ensued." The spectator learned the meaning of the word Scuttawawhah—More-strong-drink.

John Davis spent three months at Occoquan. During his quarter there he heard Parson Weems preach at Pohick Church, and, contrary to prejudiced reports, was struck with that good man's sincerity of purpose. Davis returned to New York, collecting a few dollars at Philadelphia, due him from sales of "The Wanderings of William." In April, 1802, he was at Washington again, where Congress was in session. "I watched an opportunity to make the Vice-President my salutations as he came out of the Capitol. He demonstrated no little pleasure to see me; and, his chariot being at the steps, he took me home with him to dine." The House of Representatives was then sitting in a detached temporary building. Davis thought John Randolph the most eloquent in debate. After a few days in Washington, the itinerant passed on to Prince William county, where he had been engaged as rector by Mr. Ball at twenty-five pounds the quarter. At Frying Pan, in Prince William county, Davis inquired the way. "How far, my boy," said I, "is it to Frying Pan?" "You be in the Pan now," replied the boy.

"Frying Pan is composed of four log huts and a meeting-house. It took its name from a curious circumstance. Some Indians, having encamped on the run, missed their frying pan in the morning, and hence the name was conferred on the place. I did not stop at Frying Pan, but prosecuted my walk to Newgate, where in the piazza of the tavern I found a party of gentlemen from the neighboring plantations carousing over a bowl of toddy and smoking segars. No people could exceed these men in politeness. On my ascending the steps to the piazza every countenance seemed to say: This man has a double claim to our attention because he is a stranger. In a moment there was room made for me to sit down; a new bowl was called for, and every one who addressed me did so with a smile of conciliation. The higher Virginians seem to venerate themselves as men. Whatever may be advanced against Virginians, their good qualities will ever outweigh their defects; and when the effervescence of youth has abated, when reason asserts her empire, there is no man on earth who discovers more exalted sentiments, more contempt for baseness, more love of justice, more sensibility of feeling, than a Virginian. At Newgate my pilgrimage was nearly at an end, for Mr. Ball's plantation was only distant eight miles."

Beyond Newgate, Bull Run was to be crossed. Having passed that famous stream, the pedagogue and peripatetic, after a mile or two, came to the Ball plantation. An old negro showed him the way, who related, among many other things, that when he was a young buck he made as much as fifteen dollars one winter as capitation money—"Master, I don't tell you a word of a lie"—levied on the wolves of the region. At Mr. Ball's: "In my way through the garden I passed two young ladies gathering roses, who, however, immured in the woods, were clad with not less elegance than the most fashionable females of Europe. I asked them whether Mr. Ball was at home. They replied that their papa was in the parlour, and with much sweetness of manner directed me by the shortest path to the house. Mr. Ball received me with undissembled accents of joy. He said he had long expected my coming, and was gratified at last. I was not a little delighted with the suavity of his manners and the elegance of his conversation. I now opened what some called an Academy and others an Old Field School; and, however it may be thought that content was never felt within the walls of a seminary, I for my part experienced an exemption from care and was not such a fool as to measure the happiness of my condition by what others thought of it. Of the boys I cannot speak in very encomiastic terms. Of my female students there was none equal in capacity to Virginia. Geography was one of our favorite studies. I often addressed the rose of May in an appropriate ode."

To Virginia Looking Over a Map.

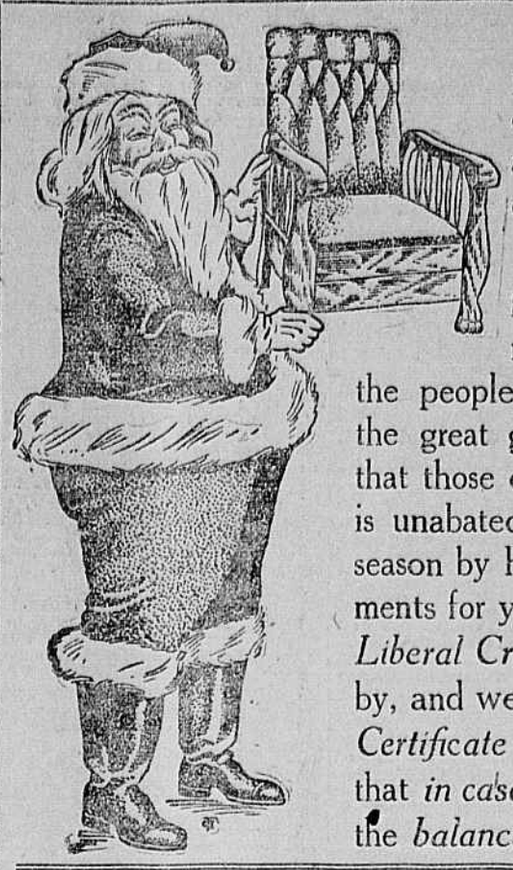
Powerful as the magic wand,
Displaying far each distant land,
Is that angel hand to me,
When it points each realm and sea.

Plac'd in geographic mood,
Smiling, shew the pictur'd flood,
Where along the Red Sea coast
Waves o'erwhelm'd the Egyptian host.

Again the imag'd scene survey
The rolling Hellespontic Sea,
Whence, the Persian from the shore
Proudly pass'd his millions o'er.

And behold to nearer view,
Here thy own lov'd country too—
Virginia! which produc'd to me,
A pupil fair and bright like thee.

What with a horse, the artisanry of verse, a mild philosophy, and the business of his office, John Davis spent three months very agreeably on Bull Run, within sight of the Blue Ridge. Then a New Jersey farmer of the neighborhood discovered that his eldest boy wrote a better hand than the teacher. Davis resigned the academy to the carpenter of the plantation. "I now once more seized my staff and walked towards Baltimore. It was a killing circumstance to separate from Virginia (the student of geography), but who shall presume to contend against fate? Phyllida amo ante alias, nam me discedere flevit. I embarked August, 1802, in the good ship Olive, Captain Norman, lying at Baltimore, for Cowes, in the Isle of Wight."



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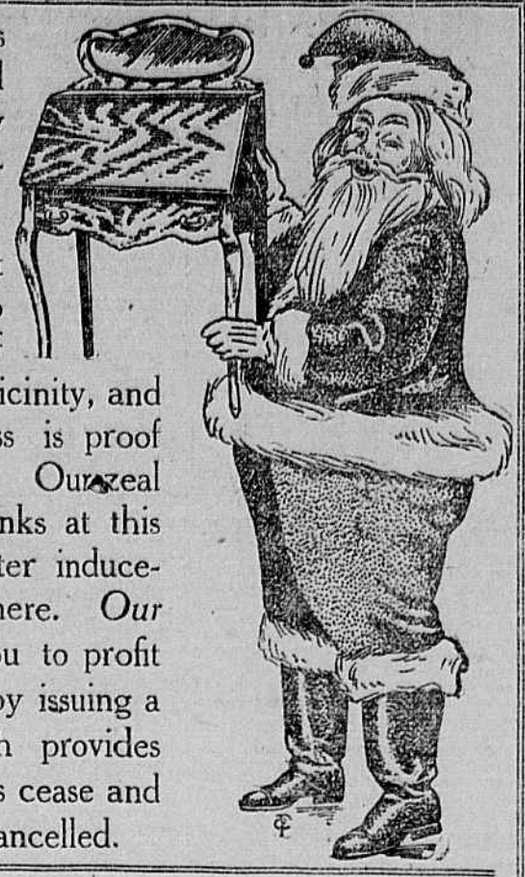

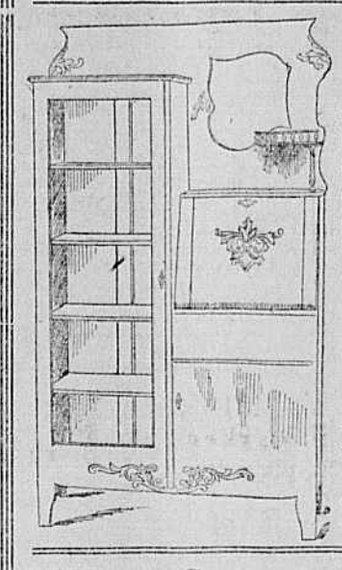

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Buys a Very Handsome Mahogany Bookcase and Desk; one that usually sells for $32.00.

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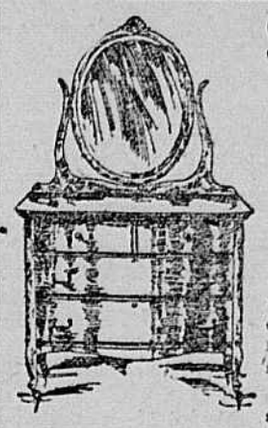

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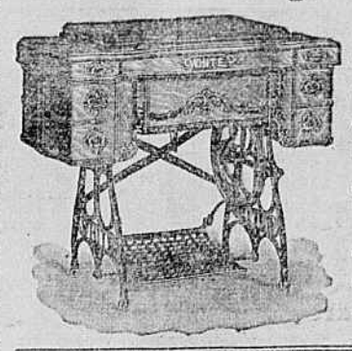

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State Normal Notes.

[Special to The Times-Dispatch.]

STATE NORMAL SCHOOL, FARMVILLE, VA., November 28.—J. C. Mattoon returned Tuesday morning from Atlanta, where he attended the Southern Industrial Conference as the delegate appointed by Governor Swanson.

Miss Lila London spent the week-end vacation at her home in Roanoke.

Misses Marjorie Thompson, Josie Keety, Ethel Brown, Florence Clayton and Lelia Robertson, spent the week-end at the Interdenominational Missionary Institute at the Second Presbyterian Church, Richmond.

Tuesday morning Dr. Kerlin gave an interesting talk on Stephen Phillips's drama "Herod."

Dr. Jarman, Dr. Keller, Dr. Messenger and Miss Porter spent Thanksgiving in Newport News, attending the Educational Conference.

Miss Ethel Jarrett spent Thanksgiving at Sweet Briar College, the guest of Miss Nora Fraser.

Several alumnae visited their Alma Mater for the Thanksgiving holiday. Among them were Miss Annie Lancaster, of Ashland; Miss Geraldine Fitzgerald, of Danville, and Misses Imogen Hutter, Beverly Andrews and Mary Horner, of Lynchburg.

Two new literary societies, the Athenian and the Pierian, have been organized during the past week, with forty charter members each, and ten more to be elected in each society. The Athenians elected the following officers: Miss Julia Johnson, president; Miss Catherine Taylor, vice-president; Miss Hattie Robertson, treasurer; Miss Kate Watkins, secretary; Miss Eugenia Reader, corresponding secretary; Miss Josie Warren, critic; Miss Eunice Watkins, censor, and Miss Myrtle Steele, reporter.

The Pierians will be governed the first term by the following staff: Miss Mary Perkins, president; Miss Mildred Davis, vice-president; Miss Hattie Chisman, corresponding secretary; Miss Frances Stoner, treasurer; Miss Katherine Pennybacker, critic; Miss Mary C. Pierce, censor, and Miss Sarah Johns, reporter.

An exciting match game of basket-ball between the Greens and the Reds took place Thanksgiving morning at 9:30 on the campus court. The opposing teams lined up as follows: The Greens—Virginia Tinsley, captain and batting centre; Carrie Hunter and Maggie Gilliam, side centres; Anne Rowe and Aline Gleaves, guards; Elaine Jones and Virginia Paulett, forwards. The Reds—Georgie Sinclair, captain, and Mary Anderson, guards; Ava Haskins, batting centre; Grace Freeman and Sallie Lovelace, side centres; Betty Wright and Bessie Paulett, forwards.

All the goals were thrown by the Greens—three by Miss Virginia Tinsley, one free and two from the field and one from the field by Miss Virginia Paulett. The Greens won by a score of 7 to 0.

Wytheville Social News.

[Special to The Times-Dispatch.]

WYTHEVILLE, VA., November 28.—Thanksgiving Day was observed here as a general holiday. The public schools closed until Monday morning. Thanksgiving services were held in most of the churches.

Miss Bland Dew was the hostess of the Five Hundred Club this week.

Misses Sarah Caldwell, of Roanoke; Elizabeth Baker and Catherine Christian, of Lynchburg, arrived Wednesday to attend Miss Lelia Davis's house party.

Miss Louisa Williams will entertain in their honor Thursday afternoon, and Miss Bettie Henser, Friday evening.

Mrs. Frank Heighly and little son are at home after a visit to relatives in Philadelphia.

Mrs. Thomas Boyd, of Nelson county; Mr. and Mrs. Henry Williams, of Martinsville, and Mrs. G. Woodville Smith, of Lynchburg, are the guests of Mrs. Stephen Putney, at "Ingleside."

Miss Virginia Gibboney left this week for New York, where she will visit her brother, Mr. Gatewood Gibboney.

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Withers have returned to their home in Pittsburg after a visit to friends here.

Boykins Social News.

[Special to The Times-Dispatch.]

BOYKINS, VA., November 28.—Mr. and Mrs. F. Carlton have been visiting in Norfolk.

Mrs. W. P. Gray is visiting friends in Emporia.

Dr. Bland, of King and Queen county, has come to Boykins to make his home.

Mr. Willie Edwards, of Pendleton, N. C., was here last Sunday.

Miss Grace Knight is visiting friends in Norfolk.

Mrs. Moore, of Charlottesville, is a guest of Mrs. Frank Stephens.

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