

EARLY CUSTOMS OF WASHINGTON  
Rena Harding Davenport

*Sally's copy*  
"peepie"

"How dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood."

It is not often that a family is privileged to live in a town as long as mine has lived in Washington, and customs, traditions and facts about the town have been passed down to me and my children, who are the seventh generation to make Washington their home.

Most of what I shall tell you was told to me by my father, Edmund H. Harding. The time varies from before my father was born in 1890 until the time I was born in 1916.

My great, great, great grandfather, John Gray Blount, built the sixth house in the town and my great, great grandfather, James E. Hoyt, organized the Bank of Washington in 1850 and was its first president. My great, great, great grandfather, Capt. Nathan Keais, was one of the incorporators of the town in 1782.

Now that I have told you who I am, I will tell you about some of the early facts and customs of the town, its traditions and its ways of life.

Washington was always known as a hospitable town and there were always parties, dinations and big suppers when the Bishop, the Judge, or some famous soldier or person came to town.

The festive board set for guests could not have been surpassed by the very rich, few of whom lived in Washington, but the folks of Washington lived and ate like royalty.

A typical dination, as the big dinners were called, would include a six weeks old suckling pig, roasted with a red apple in its mouth, a roast turkey on one end of the table and a boiled turkey with a large bowl of egg dressing at the other.

There was always a smoked or corned ham and a fresh ham. In season scalloped oysters were served. In the winter there was a big dish of macaroni. It was poor taste to have macaroni in the summer.

For dessert there were coconut, lemon and orange puddings (now called pies), vanilla blanc mange and chocolate mange. The vanilla was served with grape preserves while the chocolate was served with grated coconut and crushed pineapple. Syllabub topped off the meal.

Coffee was never served at dinner in the middle of the day; only "poor bockerers" and negroes drank coffee at any time other than breakfast and supper.

About three o'clock everything was taken off the table and underneath the white damask cloth was a turkey red, checked cloth, and nuts and raisins were brought in which were eaten while the conversation often lasted until dark over a glass of scuppernong wine.

Fried chicken was never served in winter; they only had "spring chickens" in the Spring.

For wedding suppers a great feast was prepared. Not many folks in Washington had a table that would seat more than ten, so if fifty people were invited to the "wedding supper" it meant there must be five sittings, and the table replenished each time.

Great protocol was observed to see that people were fed according to their prominence. At the first table were always the bride and groom, the mothers and fathers of the bride and the groom, the preacher and his wife, the family doctor and his wife. Then came the bridal party and the others, and finally the children.

All the neighbors helped with the parties as they do today but there were plenty of servants to help. A good cook received \$1.50 a week and her meals, the house girls and nurses received \$1.25 a week. All were allowed to "tote" which meant they could carry home enough food to feed their families. The servants came before seven in the morning and were lucky to get away at night before nine.

People bought milk from anyone who happened to have a cow. One had to go for it and take a pitcher to bring it home in. When the first dairy was started, a pitcher was left at the front door with a milk ticket in it. Later milk was delivered in pint and quart tin cans. Henry N. Blount who ran San Souci Dairy (father of Mrs. Hugh Anderson and brother of Mrs. T. Harvey Myers) brought the first glass milk bottle to town.

Ice was brought to Washington in sailing vessels from the North where it was cut from frozen ponds in winter and stored in warehouses covered with saw dust and sold in summer. After we had an ice manufacturing plant, it did not run in winter, for who wanted ice when the weather was cold? The price of ice was ten pounds for five cents and few refrigerators in town held over ten pounds.

Some housewives, to supplement their income, would send their cooks around with a ten quart covered bucket of big hominy all cooked and hot. It sold for five cents a quart.

If the family cook was sick or for some reason did not come, the wife would not go in the kitchen to cook, for the kitchen was most likely off from the house and about the dirtiest place anyone could imagine. Ladies seldom went in their kitchens. Meals for the family were ordered from Jones Hotel. Jones Hotel was a negro hotel run by the Jones family were John Havens Moss now lives. The Joneses were good folks and they delivered good hot meals to your house for fifty cents each.

Fish carts started their rounds every morning except Sunday at five o'clock yelling "Fresh Fish." A bunch of butter fish was ten cents, and you could buy two and a half pounds of round steak delivered to your door by 7:00 A. M. for twenty-five cents. The ice wagons did not roll until eight o'clock, and the bread wagon from the baker shop passed by at 3:00 p. m. with hot bread at five cents a loaf.

That's enough about food and its customs.

#### WATER AND LIGHT AND HEATING

Before the War Between the States, James E. Hoyt and S. W. Merriam built a gas plant and most of the better homes in town were lighted by gas; the others used kerosene. There was a gas street light on all the important corners.

With the coming of the War, the gas plant was closed and Washington did not have a gas plant again until 1899 when the old gas plant was put in operation again.

The streets were lighted by kerosene and a Mr. Wynne with a hunchback son drove around each morning to put out the lights, trim the wicks, and each evening at dusk he lighted them again.

Daddy said it took fourteen kerosene lamps to light the Rectory, and it was a big job to fill them all each morning, trim the wicks and wash the chimneys. These lamps were kept on a shelf in the butler's pantry and it was not unusual to taste kerosene in the food.

When there was a reception or a party, folks borrowed standing brass lamps with crepe paper shades. Mrs. Tom Myers had one, my great grandmother Mrs. Kate L. Blount, Mrs. J. F. Randolph and Mrs. W. B. Morton also owned one. They were very handsome.

The water supply of the town came from a series of pumps that were mounted on bricked-in wells. Everybody took their buckets several times a day for water. There was the Wallace pump at the corner of Second and Harvey, the "Piscopal" pump on Main Street across from Lalla Bragaw's, the Court House Pump, the Academy Pump, the Lockyer Pump and several others.

Some of the richer folks in town had cisterns and used rain water. Mrs. Mary McDonald who lived on East Main Street had old Joe Jones, her carriage driver, turn the cistern wheel to force water in a gutter pipe through a hole in the weatherboarding to fill the bath tub. Mrs. McDonald had the first bath tub ever in Washington.

One day a man staggered in to Mr. Mallison's store and told Mr. Mallison he knew how to put down pumps. He had caught a ride on a sail boat from New York to Washington. His name was Dimmy Gautier, a Frenchman. He had graduated from Princeton at the head of his class and studied medicine but drink got him and he came to Washington as a bum. He married here, put down hundreds of pumps all over town and left descendants who have made good citizens.

#### BUSINESS CUSTOMS

Business houses in Washington in the long ago had long hours. The grocery stores and the butcher shops all opened at 5:00 A. M. The dry goods and clothing stores opened at 7:00 A. M. and closed at 9:00 P. M. During July and August the dry goods stores did close at 7:00 P. M. There was never a holiday except on Sunday. Drug Stores stayed open until 11:00 P. M., but on Saturday night everything kept open until midnight.

Being a seaport town, there <sup>were</sup> always many boats in the harbor at Washington. The seamen and boatmen had to have their liquor and when prohibition came in 1908, these bar rooms were in operation: A. J. Mitchell, Scot Bros., Bergeron Bros., John Mayo, O. B. Wynn, Smith Paul, Lockyer's Bar and Bill Bert's Bar in front of Hotel Louise.

A "short" was a small drink of locally made whiskey, and sold for five cents. A long was a larger drink and sold for ten cents.

Bergeron Brothers had a Government Distillery on the River Road next to where Louise Hawes Lives, ( and Steve Corson was the Government Tax Collector.)

The boatmen also had to have recreation and the most prominent recreation centers were operated by Bessie Bailey, Maud Martin, Dinks Rue, Myrtle Simpson, Addie Grant, and Lillian Gray. Lesser lights in this field were Nan McKeel, Sadie Doughty and the Castle Queen.

The ladies of town drove around back of town many times a day to see what they could see.

The colored recreation center was run by Big Fat Soph who weighed over three hundred pounds. She lived at the corner of Bridge and Fourth Streets.

Washington was always known as a shopping center. No "lady" in town would wear a "ready made" dress or a store bought "hat". Silks, satins and cashmeres were brought to town by the bolt.

There were certain rich and important women in town who would not go into a store. Their carriages were driven up to the store door and the clerks brought out the merchandise to show them. The rich Short family were great on this practice. It was known as the carriage trade.

Very few of the negroes after they had been freed knew how to sew. Mrs. Caroline Wineberg, Ella Waters Pfau's great grandmother and a wonderful woman, had a store where Wm. Bragaw & Co. is now located and made calico dresses to see to these women. The dresses sold for \$1.25 or \$1.50 each, and calico was selling for four and five cents a yard.

#### PARADES AND SOCIAL EVENTS

Washington was always great on having a parade, but the greatest of all were torch light parades to celebrate some great political victory or to honor some celebrity.

Barrels of tar lined Main Street from the bridge to St. Peter's Church, and the marchers carried sticks on which was nailed a tin can filled with rags and kerosene and lighted.

Miss Mollie Vines' was the social center of Washington. Her store was where Tidewater Gas now is. She made taffy candy in three flavors - vanilla, strawberry and molasses. At the rear of the store was her ice cream parlor. This was partitioned off in small cubicles by bed sheets and the ice cream, mostly lemon custard, was sold in saucers at five and ten cents a saucer. If a fellow bought a girl a ten-cent saucer everybody in town knew he was in love. Cousin Sarah Tripp was her assistant. She never married either.

Mr. Charlie McKeel owner of McKeel's Pharmacy brought the first soda fountain to Washington. It was a small thing of gray marble and Miss Polly Ann Ellison said he was just selling sweetened wind.

One of the greatest socials of the town was the dancing of the German. The Halcyon Club organized by Mr. J. Havens and Mr. John H. Small in 1885 was the town's most exclusive club.

A man and his lady would arrive at the dance hall on foot, but each had a slipper bag in which their dancing shoes were carried. No one would dance in shoes in which they walked on the street. No man ever appeared on the street in evening clothes, even the hottest night in summer, without a top coat. It was considered vulgar. No man in town had a Tuxedo until after 1920.

Before the couple went to their respective dressing rooms upon arrival at the dance they stopped and spoke to all the chaperones. The chaperones were invited by the club and consisted of the most dignified, cultured and aristocratic ladies of the town.

The German was a lovely dance and everybody had to keep their minds on dancing. The music was furnished by an Italian Band secured from Norfolk or Richmond consisting of violin, flute and harp. First there was the Grand March with your partner. The leader must always have a new figure. Then came the waltz. In the first half of the evening the men asked the ladies to dance. After intermission the ladies asked the men who had "led them out" to dance. It was called "returning the lead". For a girl not to remember to return a man's lead was an insult. When the German was over, no couple left without saying good night to the chaperones. After the dance there were late suppers all over town, often lasting until 4:00 A.M. Some of these parties were quite formal and others were quite gay. There never was such food.

#### TRANSPORTATION

In the early days of Washington most everybody walked. A few had carriages and horses and many of the young ladies had saddle horses. The Shorts and McDonald's had pairs of horses hitched to their carriages. Mr. C. M. Brown had an old black horse named Pet and his carriage was painted tan. Everybody in town knew when Preacher Harding's old Josephine came puffing down the street. Josephine was wind broken. Fannie, the Bright's old horse, dragged one foot and "Miss Lizzie" Bryan always led the Prohibition Parade with her little pony named Joe.

Some did not have enough room on their lots for a stable so they boarded their horses. There were many livery stables in town: Harvey Carrow, George Hill, Howard Winfield, Tom Howard, J. E. Winslow, Joe Chauncey and Ben Susman. In 1900 the price for boarding a horse and having him delivered to your house whenever you wanted him was \$15.00 a month. By 1917 when the automobile was taking over, the price had gone up to \$30.00 a month.

The two outstanding rigs in town were owned by Miss Pattie Baugham (Mrs. Harry McMullan) and Miss Bessie Short. Miss Baugham's was a yellow straw trap with yellow wheels, while the Short's outfit was a very high vehicle and known in town as the "Nearer My God To Thee."

If anyone had a pony or a cow it was tied in the front yard to eat the grass. All the yards grew up in weeds which were cut once a year. The John Fowles did have a lawn that Jacob Grimes kept cropt with a sicle. Daddy brought the first power lawn mower to Washington in 1935 to cut the grass at Sunnyside.

The town was full of drays. This was a man, white or colored, with an old horse and cart who paid the town \$1.00 a year for a license to operate. The fee charged to carry a load or a bundle was 10¢. There were dozens of transfers in town. These were horse-drawn surries driven by white men and the fare for a ride anywhere in town was 35¢. They met every train and every boat.

It was a great evening past-time for the man of the house to get the daily paper. The News and Observer came in on the Atlantic Coast Line train at 8:00 PM. It was usually late but it gave the man of the house a good excuse to go down town. It was a great event when a small boy was allowed to stay up and go to the post office with his "papa."

#### WEDDING CUSTOMS

Church weddings were much more of a show than today. At St. Peter's there was always a flower covered wedding bell hanging from the crystal chandelier, and a floral rope was draped to the four corners of the chancel.

At Bess Hatton's wedding (Bessie Conoley Bonner's mother) the bridesmaids carried parasols covered with pond lillies out of Bagatelle Pond, now Macswoods. At Mag Hoyt's wedding (Margaret Studdert's mother), Mrs. Annie Short, the dame of honor, drove the bridesmaids out of the vestry room down the center aisle to meet the bride using a harness of rose colored ribbons. When they reached the front door, they shed the harness and trotted back up the aisle with the bride. When Hannah Laughinghouse was married to Carl Richardson an arch was built all the way up the center aisle and covered with flowers. Martha Tripp was married the day before Thanksgiving and the church was decorated with fruit, pumpkins, corn stalks and collards.

Mary Hoyt had no money to buy flowers for her wedding so the church was decorated with great armfuls of snow balls. The Bridesmaids carried field daises and the flower girls carried buttercups. At Marjorie Hoyt's wedding (Mrs. Clay Carter III) there was such a crowd that Aunt Belle, the bride's mother, could not get in the front door so the ushers brought her in through the Vestry room.

One wedding in the Presbyterian Church that attracted a lot of attention was Mr. & Mrs. Frank Moss (John Havens Moss' father and mother). Cousin Bonner had for her bridesmaids the five wise and five foolish virgins. Mr. Moss had made a lover's knot (nearly sawed one finger off doing it) where the lighted candles carried by the bridesmaids were to be put. On the way up the aisle Miss Fannie Bryan's and Miss Annie Jarvis' lights went out, and they were nicknamed the "Foolish Virgins."

#### HEALTH AND SICKNESS

When sickness occurred everybody helped with the nursing. Members of one's church or Lodge would come and sit with the sick all night. The family nursed in the day time. Refreshments were always served at midnight. If someone was very ill signs were placed in front of the houses "Sickness - Quiet Please" and sawdust was put over the oyster shell streets to keep down the noise from the buggies and carts.

The first trained nurse ever to come to Washington was Miss Violet Meredith. She came here to nurse Mrs. John B. Respass who had typhoid fever. People who had Typhoid fever always died, but Mrs. Respass got well.

Everybody in town was scared to death when word got out that somebody had smallpox. The patient was removed at once to the Pest House, a wooden shack where Dan Smith's Packing House now is. There the patient stayed until he got well or died. Only the doctor went in and carried food.

On the first black beacon down the river below the Norfolk Southern Bridge there was a frightening yellow flag where all but local boats had to stop and anchor until the doctor who was Superintendent of Health went out in a row boat to see there was no smallpox or typhoid fever on board.

#### FUNERALS

Funerals were a very special thing in the early days of Washington. Friends of the family always "shrouded" the dead. The only thing the undertaker did was to sell the coffin and rent you the hearse and the pallbearer wagon, which was really a surry with four seats. The body was always laid out on a bed and the sheet must not have a seam as this was an ill omen. The cost of the coffins was not high. Many coffins sold for \$25.00 and as late as 1915 the highest price casket sold in Washington was \$75.00.

When the funeral was in a church six pallbearers carried the coffin up the aisle and placed it on saw benches at the front of the church. All the women in the family of the deceased wore long black veils that reached the floor and the widow always had

black crepe on hers. As an expression of grief, the blinds of the room where the person died were tied from the outside with black crepe and left there until the weather caused it to rot and fall off, and then the period of mourning was over.

At a Grist funeral (my folks) there was much crying and screaming and at least two of the ladies would faint and have to be carried out.

Miss Marcia Rodman had a greenhouse and grew Sago palms. These she sold for \$1.00 for two, tied with a piece of purple ribbon. It was a mad rush to see who could send the palms. It was the greatest tribute one could pay the dead. Miss Mary Smallwood was Washington's first florist. She sold a sheaf of wheat tied with purple ribbon for \$1.00. She never sold but one sheaf for a funeral and the question was always asked "who sent the wheat?"

Flowers were sent to the residence of the deceased in great profusion from the flower gardens of friends. These flowers were sewn on a piece of cardboard about 8 x 10 inches and just before the funeral hour, two specially invited friends would tack these pieces on the wooden coffin. The undertaker did furnish the two tack hammers and the tacks.

In very hot weather disinfectant was put under the casket. It was always put in soup plates. Daddy says he never did like soup in those days.

Mrs. Joseph F. Tayloe (Lalla Clark) had the first white casket ever in Washington. She died in childbirth.

The funeral notice was a very special thing. A colored man in his Sunday clothes was given a notice of the funeral on white paper interlaced with black ribbon and placed on a silver waiter. He took this to the homes of those invited to the funeral. Sylvester Dibble, Andrew Brown and Dave Price were always used for this job.

#### NEIGHBORHOOD FUESSES

Neighborhood fusses were the order of the day. The Blounts and the Tayloe were always at odds and most of the time did not speak. The grown folks took up the children's quarrels and many fights occurred among the most prominent families. One of the greatest causes of these feuds was when some woman hired another woman's wash-woman or cook. A woman was perfectly welcome to another lady's husband but not so with her cook. The Brights and the Haughtons lived next door to each other did not speak for twenty years but they sang in the same church choir.

#### GARDEN HOUSES

The toilet facilities of a house were always placed in the back of the garden and hence called the Garden House. The size of these buildings depended on the size of the family. Some were nicely built and painted and some were even plastered. The one my father tells me about was built before the War Between the States by a Mr. Hanks who owned the house where Mr. & Mrs. Robin Hood live now - the house where my father was born. It was an eight-holer, four for grown folks, two for children and on the other side of a partition were two holes for the servant. A box of newspapers a keg of lime were regular equipment. Several men or several women would visit the facility at the same time, but never in mixed company. Bishop Watson brought the first roll of toilet tissue that my father ever saw.

## SCHOOLS

Before the War Between the States, The Academy was a private school at the corner of Bridge and Second Streets. During the Yankee occupation of Washington the Academy was used by the Yankees as headquarters and it was many years after the War that it was used as a school.

Washington people sent their children to Miss Weller at Sans Souci, The Thomas H. Blount home (where Beaufort County Hospital is now located) to Mrs. Dimmock, Mrs. DeMille, and Miss Mary Moules. Years later the town was full of private schools, as late as 1900. Miss Bettie Robinson taught in the Masonic Lodge and other private teachers were Miss Sarah Russell, Miss Annie Quinn, Miss Sallie Havens, Miss Kate Carroway and Miss Hattie Griffin.

About 1895 Mr. W. C. Mallison, Mr. J. G. Bragaw and Mr. W. Z. Morton founded a free school and paid the teacher out of their own pockets. This little free school was on East Third Street between Bonner and Harvey. These men, however, sent their children to the private schools.

Efforts to establish a public free school for the town were always defeated by Judge Brown who had no children to send to school. There was no negro school in Washington until 1896. It took a long time after the War Between the States for the feeling to die down. Some people in town sympathized with the North; many of these fought with the Yankees and still more made money out of the Yankees. A Southern man who fought on the side of the North was called a Buffalo and a loyal Rebel never spoke to one of these for many a year. Miss Polly Ann Ellison would not go to church as long as Mr. Isaac Harrison rang the bell. He was a Buffalo. Nor would she eat any of Mr. Buck's pork sausage; he too was a buffalo. Aunt Bet Hoyt would not go to church when the United States flag was displayed in St. Peter's during World War I. She died a loyal Rebel and her casket was draped in a Confederate flag.

## RECREATION

In summer, moonlight excursions on the R. L. MYERS were popular. Churches used this means for making money. The old boat could carry about fifty people and the tickets for adults were 50¢ and children 25¢. Ice cream was served at 5¢ and 10¢ a saucer and cake at 5¢ a slice.

The boat went down the river about three miles and turned around. Old man Carty, the Engineer, was so bow-legged he had to be raised out of the engine room with a rope.

Once a year Babbitt's Soap "Magic Lantern Show" came to town advertising Babbitt's Soap and would show in the middle of Main Street.

The first Carnival ever to show in Washington used the whole of Main Street. The Knights of Pythias sponsored it. This was in 1901 and the show was the Hatch Adams Carnival.

Lawn parties were often held as benefits. The Morton's Yard (now the First Baptist Church) and Elmwood at the West end of Main Street were used. Japanese lanterns and home made lanterns made out of shoe boxes with lighted candles were used. When the candles burned out it was time to go home but many couples remained after the lights were out.



## CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS IN WASHINGTON

Christmas in Washington was always gay. All the stores in town remained open until ten o'clock from December 1st until Christmas. Mr. Scott Frizzell's Store was a great institution. All the things for Santa Claus came from either Scott Frizzell's Store or Willie Buckman's. Stores which sold fruit and candy had tables on the sidewalks. Mr. Archbell always ordered celery, parsnips and cranberries by the barrel for the Christmas trade.

Christmas parties and dances always came after Christmas.

Decorations at St. Peter's Church at Christmas were famous all over eastern Carolina. Church women met in the old Telfair kitchen in the Morton's yard and worked for a week to make the decorations. Everybody in the church who had a farm or a horse and wagon sent a load of evergreens. Hundred of wreaths were made and yards and yards of roping. Stringing long pine needles was the most tedious of the jobs.

Each Christmas John Kooners rode about town in a horse and buggy dressed in grotesque costumes and wearing masks. They sang and blew horns. Any house that gave them a drink would have good luck in the New Year. They always rode Christmas afternoon.

The Christmas trees were mostly dressed with home made ornaments and candles in little holders were put on the tree, but seldom lighted because of the danger of fire.

Big family dinner parties were held all over town.

My father borrowed Mr. Floyd Berry's dray to take us caroling on Christmas Eve night.

Christmas is a great time at our house and my father is very fussy about his Christmas tree. It must be the biggest one we can find and decorated with all the ornaments it will hold.

So at this Christmas time I bring you thoughts of Christmas and customs of Washington that have passed. I remind you of a new Washington that is taking the place of the old. Today Washington is becoming an up-to-date small city. New people have come to Washington and brought us new customs, new recipe~~s~~ and new thoughts for a new day, but let us not forget the past.

The Archives Building in our Nation's Capital is a noble building. Over the door are cut deeply in the stone these words: WHAT IS PAST IS PROLOGUE.

Let the past be a wonderful prologue to our Wonderful Washington of today.