

Times in Toano



Volume 4 Issue 1

Spring 2023

Newsletter
of the
Toano
Historical
Society

A Letter from Jack Wray THS President



In the early 1900s, potatoes and barrels were a big part of Toano's economy. Potatoes were an important crop, and barrels were the necessary shipping containers.

C.C. Branch was a potato farmer and the man responsible for increasing the barrel making industry in Toano.

I interviewed the great nephew of C. C. Branch, George A. Marston in 2014. He was 92 years old. George A. referred to him as Uncle Cary. He was a young boy at the time the barrel factory was in decline but had some recollection of it. A farmer all his life, George A. told me about an old cooper's bench he had recovered from the barrel factory that he stored in his barn at Oakland Point for years, thinking that one day he might take up barrel making as a hobby. He told me if I ever got anything going in Toano he would give me the old cooper's bench. George A. passed away in 2016 at the age of 94. In December 2022, his son Arch Marston delivered the cooper's bench to me along with other miscellaneous barrel components including wooden hoops and staves.



Cooper's bench from Toano Barrel Factory

Remarkably, my Uncle Tom Martin, a contemporary and friend of George A.'s described in detail in a chapter of his book, *From Toano to Germany and Back*, his memory from childhood of a cooper's bench at the barrel factory on Church Lane. "The barrel maker or cooper had a semi circular jig in which he placed enough staves to form one half of the barrel, then he would add more staves and catch them with a rope which formed the circle with a round form which became the bottom. Then the hoops were put onto the outside of the barrel and fastened with small nails."

This authentic Toano barrel factory artifact, donated by the Marston family, is now on display by the Toano Historical Society in the window of the Martin & Farinholt Store building.

Best Regards,

Jack



Toanohistoricalsociety.org

Contact us at:

info@toanohistoricalsociety.org

(757) 741-5010

PO Box 433
Toano, Virginia 23168
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Spring Members Event A Sneak Peek at the Farinholt House Renovation



At the THS Spring Members Event, THS will present information about the ongoing renovation of the historic Farinholt house and provide guided tours of the house. This is an opportunity for THS members to view the work being done to restore and preserve one of Toano's historic homes.

Watch for more information on this upcoming event. This will be a members-only event, so if you are not a member (or if you haven't renewed your membership for 2023), you can ensure your invitation by joining now!



Become a Member of THS

Please consider becoming a member of THS to help us preserve and promote the history of Toano.

Annual Membership Cost:

\$25 Individual, \$35 Family, \$55 Business

Go to the [Membership Page](#) of the THS website to sign up and pay online, or sign up at the THS table at the Toano Open Air Market.

THS Membership Renewal

Current THS members have been notified to renew their memberships for 2023. We appreciate your continuing support of our mission and vision! Renewals can be done online, by mail, or in person at the Open Air Market. Don't miss out on our member events in the coming year!



Toano Village Green Saturdays, 9am-1pm

The Toano Open Air Market is open for the season! Vendors provide a wide variety of items for sale. You can find seasonal produce, delicious baked goods, Tasha's Own products, fresh seafood, and much more! Most weeks feature live music and a food truck.

The Toano Historical Society will be there with Toano merchandise and information on how it is working to preserve the history and character of our special town. Come out and support family farms and local agriculture and business!

Follow the market on Facebook to see what wonderful offerings will be provided in the coming weeks.



Toano History Spotlight: The Barrel Factory

By Fred Boelt, THS Historian

When tracks were being laid for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad to come through Burnt Ordinary in the 1880s, local farmers realized that they would have new markets for their truck crops (vegetables). Up to this point, crops had been shipped by boat to markets in Richmond, Norfolk, and even Baltimore, but spoilage had been a major problem.

Potatoes had already been a chief crop on the Peninsula. Christopher Cary Branch saw an opportunity, took advantage of improved shipping, and gradually planted many additional acres of potatoes. But the ever-increasing quantities of potatoes would require thousands of barrels which were the preferred shipping containers. Another local industry was born. We are fortunate to have numerous articles from the Virginia Gazette that chronicle this part of the story.



Toano potato field

A 1909 article stated that Richard H. Slater had been in the truck barrel business near Toano for sixteen years (from about 1893). Slater and his family moved to Newport News before the 1910 census was taken, and that factory seems to have disappeared after that.

Paul R. Driscoll moved his family from Louisa County to Toano around 1905. In 1908, it was announced that Driscoll would head up the new barrel factory, offering an improved product and adequate supply for the local demand. In April, Driscoll had “put

out samples of his new truck barrel which is being praised very highly by the farmers as an up to date, durable barrel.” In May, he already had a crew making barrels at his factory on the Parker’s Tavern tract, located to the west of the main entrance into the present-day Stonehouse community. The article went on to say that he would open his factory in town in short order.

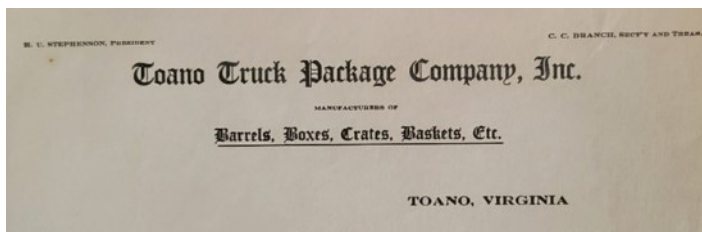
The August 22, 1908 edition of the Virginia Gazette noted, “Mr. P. R. Driscoll has started his barrel factory on Hankins tract. The location is an ideal one, as the site lies on the new C. & O. track.” This would place the new factory somewhere to the left of Depot Street as the Hankins land abutted D. W. Marston’s land near the (present day) railroad right of way. In October, it was announced that the barrel factory had “either bounced or been kicked around from place to place, but now seems to have settled down right near the depot.”

As early as July 1908, it was suggested that a stock company might be organized to put the barrel factory in a position to supply all of the barrels needed locally. It was estimated that over 100,000 barrels would be used for that season. The news broke on January 7, 1909, “The barrel factory of Driscoll and Banks has been purchased by a stock company composed of local capitalists. A charter has been applied for, and as soon as secured, the plant will be put into operation.” Another article in the same edition of the Virginia Gazette stated, “Dr. H. U. Stephenson, Mr. C. C. Branch and Mr. M. S. Warren have purchased the barrel factory.” This enterprise became known as Toano Truck Package Company, Inc., and the original letterhead listed Dr. Stephenson as President and Mr. Branch as Secretary/Treasurer.

(continued on page 4)

The Barrel Factory *(continued from page 3)*

Apparently, barrel demand outgrew possible production at the former Driscoll facility, for in 1916, C. C. Branch leased a portion of the original C. & O. Railroad right of way. On a portion of that tract, he erected a new factory building that measured eighty feet by two hundred feet. Mr. R. K. Taylor, a self-taught engineer, was instrumental in setting up the new factory and supervised operations throughout the 1920s. This factory was located along Church Lane, approximately behind the Toano Women's Club, and the back portion of the current fire station straddles the site.



Company letterhead with officers

Like so many other enterprises, product advancements alter demand. At some point, it was determined that the potatoes could be shipped in “grass” bags which were much cheaper to manufacture and easier to handle. And the contents arrived just as safely at their destinations. Lack of demand eventually caused the barrel factory to close down, and it became a storage shed before it was demolished in the 1960s.



Press Wilkinson and Tom Martin in their “potato scratching” days

“Potato Scratchers”

From the Ground to the Barrels

In his memoir, *From Toano to Germany and Back*, Tom Martin wrote about his short-lived job scratching potatoes.

One of the first things I ever did to earn money was to “scratch potatoes” with Press Wilkinson in a field farmed by Bubby and Harry Clay, up behind Mr. John Merrill Jennings’ house. This was in mid-summer. You would tell the man with the mule drawn plow how many rows you wanted and he would run the plow down the rows turning the potatoes up on the top of the ground. Then the diggers would “scratch” out the potatoes by hand and pitch them into piles between the rows.

As I recall, Press and I were about nine or ten years old, and we asked for four rows. It wasn't long before we wished we had asked for only two rows, as the work was harder and dirtier than anything we had ever done before, dark colored dirt caked under our fingernails. We worked until we finished our rows which was close to sundown. The next morning we got up at 4 am (the earliest ever for me) and went up to put our potatoes in barrels for the truck to pick up.

Several boys a few years older than Press and me, had jobs “heading up” the barrels, which was putting a piece of burlap on the top, then putting a hoop over it and nailing it on. I sure wished I was a “header upper” as the work was cleaner, easier, paid more, and looked like fun. We were paid by the barrel, right in the field when we had finished getting all the potatoes in barrels. I can't remember exactly how much we made, perhaps a couple of dollars, but I do remember how rich I felt for as long as that money lasted. I remember figuring up how many ice cream cones and cokes I could have bought all at one time if I had wanted to. Man, that was a really a thrill, but not so big a thrill that I ever wanted to scratch potatoes again.

Show your love for THS! Volunteers Needed

THS has many opportunities for interested volunteers throughout the year. You can choose the tasks and commitment level that best suit your interests and availability.

Check out the pictures to get a sampling of the ways you can help.

Thanks to all of our volunteers who have helped make the THS events successful!



Support the THS Board with planning events and helping to implement our vision.



Serve refreshments at a members event.



Work at the Christmas tree lighting



Help decorate the Martin Store for holiday seasons.



Be a parking lot attendant at the Summer Solstice



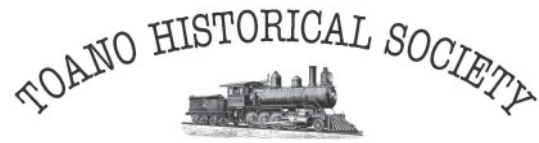
Take tickets at events



Staff the THS table at the Open Air Market

If you are interested in being a THS volunteer or would like to learn more about volunteer opportunities, please contact THS at info@toanohistoricalsociety.org.

So many ways to help!



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P.O. Box 433 • Toano, VA 23168

